

**NEW FRONTIERS IN ISLAMIC FEMINISM: HOW ISLAMIC FEMINISM IS BEING SHAPED  
BY DIGITAL MEDIA**

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To Mama and Papa, Farzana and Farooq, for getting me started on the journey leading up to here,

To my better half, Yaser, for believing I'm destined for greater things that I thought possible,

To my firstborn daughter, Mahnoor, for being the reason to always keep going.

## Abstract

By examining how Muslim women bloggers ground their feminism in Islam, this research disrupts oppositional framings of Islam and feminism. This study looks at how Muslim women bloggers on the *Muslim Girl* website highlight the feminist bent of Islamic teachings. The project asks: 1) What are some sources that contemporary North American Muslim women bloggers draw upon to (re)claim religious authority for themselves and to support feminist interpretations of Islam? And 1.1) In the North American context, what factors shape the narratives of faith that Muslim women bloggers espouse and how so? Addressing question 1, Muslim women primarily draw on Quranic verses, Hadith (Prophetic sayings) and Sunnah (Prophetic practices) to reclaim religious authority and derive feminist interpretations of Islamic teachings. Other methods for rooting women's religious authority within Islamic precedence include referencing examples of Muslim women leaders and feminist icons, and highlighting the feminist organizational principles of early Muslim societies. As for question 1.1, Muslim women bloggers' engagement with narratives about Islam is shaped by various factors, including prevailing perceptions about the hijab, the intersecting effects of race, sexual orientation and other axes of identity, and the contours of digital platforms through which these discourses travel. Muslim women's lived realities are also shaped by dominant conceptualizations of masculinity and femininity, and by overarching nationalist narratives. In this terrain, Muslim women are resisting multiple interconnected systems of oppression, including patriarchy, Islamophobia, xenophobia, racism, imperialism and settler colonialism. Through their resistance, Muslim women call for transnational, intersectional and anti-racist feminism that prioritizes indigenous resistance, centers marginalized perspectives and emphasizes allyship. In other words, Muslim women foreground anti-imperialist and decolonial feminism that challenges hegemonic narratives about white saviourism and disrupts Eurocentric visions of women's empowerment. This research also illustrates that thinking of Islam as being invariably patriarchal ignores long-standing feminist resistance in Muslim communities, resistance that is often informed by Islamic teachings.

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## 1. Introduction

This thesis will shed light on how Muslim women are disrupting hegemonic perceptions of Islam and are reclaiming both Islam and feminism as integral parts of their identity, within the context of Islamophobia in the West and specifically as manifest in digital spaces. Here, hegemonic discourses are defined as “the pervasive, normalized, and institutionalized discourses that exist within North American society which create binaristic understandings of people, places and objects” (Khan & Mulé, 2021, p. 1145). Specifically, I aim to study how Muslim women in the North American context are mobilizing Islamic feminism online and under what conditions. In particular, I am interested in the roles that Muslim feminist bloggers are playing in advancing feminist claims rooted in Islam.

To explain the relevance of this research it is vital to pay attention to Muslim women’s experiences of Islam and feminism. A significant percentage of the world’s population grounds their beliefs, actions and understandings of themselves and the world in the Quran and in Islam (Ibrahim, 2020). Since Islam serves as an orienting framework for many on how to live their lives, it is crucial to understand its various, complex dimensions. What’s more, hegemonic narratives that pit feminism against Islam can be alienating for Muslim women and girls. In the face of such binaries, there is a dearth of narratives in mainstream media that contest these oppositional framings. This study addresses this very gap by foregrounding narratives about Muslim women as articulated by themselves on one digital platform. It is also essential to account for the agency that Muslim women enact in their specific, multi-layered and nuanced experiences of Islam and feminism (Khan & Kirmani, 2018). To this end, this research examines one specific example of Muslim women’s agency on one platform i.e. the *Muslim Girl* blogs.

At the outset of this study, it is worth noting that Muslim women are not a monolith; rather this term encapsulates women who represent a wide variety of ethnicities, nationalities, socio-economic statuses, sectarian and national affiliations, levels of education, and varying relationships with Islam and with feminism. Along all axes of identity, Muslim women form a

diverse group; this diversity begets a multiplicity in Islamic beliefs and practices as well as a variety in the feminist goals that Muslim women mobilize for. While this study seeks patterns within Muslim women's engagement with feminism in relation to Islam, it does not attempt to erase these differences between Muslim women. One notable example of this attention to differences within Muslim women is a section of chapter 4 that highlights how Black Muslim women's experiences underscore the intersections of racism, sexism and Islamophobia.

Moving on, there are several modern-day examples of how Muslim women are variably implicated in feminist discourses that seek to regulate their autonomy and assert restrictions over their bodies and their freedoms. From the protests in Iran against policing women's clothing to the opposition to Quebec's *Bill 21* to hijab bans to hijab mandates in various parts of the world, examples abound of attempts to control women's dressing. While some moves seek to outlaw various forms of veiling, others are making them mandatory. It goes without saying that both forms of control are flip sides of the same coin because they constrain women's ability to dress as they choose. To this end, as detailed in chapter 4, several *Muslim Girl* blogs directly address the hijab and the varying meanings that it can signify in relation to feminism, including not only oppression, but also empowerment, liberation and resistance. These debates are an important part of the context for this research because they demonstrate the current socio-political climate, which is reflected in the academic literature that I draw upon as well as the blogs that I study.

### **Overview of Theoretical and Methodological Framework**

This chapter begins with an orientation to the main source of data for this project i.e. the *Muslim Girl* platform, followed by an overview of the key contributions made by the findings of this research. Then, the theoretical framework section explores the current state of scholarship on prevalent themes that have informed this thesis. Firstly, I take a look at Islamic feminism, with a focus on the debates in this realm. In this context, the barriers that hinder Islamic feminist interventions are examined, along with a brief look at how some of these barriers also present in

other religions. Next up is a consideration of how Black and Indigenous feminist scholarship offer useful analytical tools for this study. Subsequently, I delve into how concepts like Muslima theology and pious femininity are relevant to this research. After that, I analyze how the contours of digitality and social media shape digital feminist activism. Following this is a consideration of the contributions that queer theory has made to this research. Next, I turn to the impact that narratives about Islam and nationhood have on constructions of womanhood, with an emphasis on how Muslim women figure into these discourses about citizenship and belonging.

The second half of this chapter focuses on the methodological framework of this project, articulating the main research objective, the primary research questions and the key argument being proposed. Then, I delineate the scope of this project and contextualize the *Muslim Girl* website, including a look at its target audience and other platforms that were considered for this study before arriving at *Muslim Girl*. Also included in the methodological framework is a description of the research steps I undertook, the ways in which different outlooks across the blogs were addressed, the caution with which the term feminism is approached and the limitations of this project's methodology. Subsequent sections take a deep dive into the various ethical dimensions of this project, such as the impact of researcher positionality, the adoption of an anti-positivist, self-reflexive research approach and the role of emotions in research. These reflections are followed by a consideration of how power dynamics in research demand humility along with the mobilization of research findings towards praxis and social justice advocacy beyond academia. Across these sections, Black and Indigenous feminist writing is drawn upon to underscore a decolonial perspective towards research. Finally, the importance of ensuring that research findings are contextualized and are not co-opted for untoward objectives brings this chapter to a close.

### **About Muslim Girl**

Since this research analyzes the blogs on the *Muslim Girl* website, this opening chapter

warrants an introduction to the website, its founder, its origin and purpose as well as its growth and expanding impact.

In response to widespread Islamophobia, Amani Al-Khatahtbeh, who was 17 when she started the website, was “looking to reclaim the narratives surrounding Muslim women” (Jhaish, 2019, para. 1). She decided to create such a platform herself and launched *Muslim Girl* to foster “a safe space to share her thoughts and to create a powerhouse for her fellow Muslim girls” (Jhaish, 2019, para. 2; Mokhtar, 2016a). To get the platform up and running, Al-Khatahtbeh’s family and friends from the local mosque offered their support (Henao, 2020). Importantly, it was the incessant portrayal of Muslim women “as helpless, voiceless individuals with no agency or power” that sparked Al-Khatahtbeh’s strong desire to create an online avenue for Muslim women to reclaim narratives about themselves (Jhaish, 2019; Mokhtar, 2016a, para. 3).

Born and raised in New Jersey and the daughter of first-generation immigrants from Palestine and Jordan, Al-Khatahtbeh’s exploration of her identity as a hijab-wearing Muslim girl took a turn during a childhood visit to her father’s home country, Jordan (Henao, 2020; Mokhtar, 2016a). There, she met Muslim women from various walks of life, who had much to share (Mokhtar, 2016a).

Post 9/11, which happened when she was nine years old, Al-Khatahtbeh recalls that “she was bullied. People threw eggs at her home and slashed her mother’s tires” (Henao, 2020, para. 7). In the aftermath of 9/11, her family temporarily relocated to Jordan where “she learned Arabic and appreciated Middle Eastern food and hospitality. When she returned to the U.S., she began to wear a headscarf as an act of defiance against a rising anti-Muslim tide” (Henao, 2020, para. 8). Al-Khatahtbeh shares how wearing the hijab meant that she experienced differential treatment but “she also became an ambassador for her faith. Students, even teachers, stopped her in school and asked about the Qur’an and Islam” (Henao, 2020, para. 9). Being seen as a representative of Islam inspired her to learn more about Islam in order to formulate intelligent responses to the questions she was being asked (Henao, 2020). This

inquisitiveness also motivated her to create *Muslim Girl* because “she concluded that if the people around her had those questions, so did many others” and this platform could help address these questions (Henaio, 2020, para. 11). Reflecting on the experiences of Muslim women who, like her, wear the hijab, Al-Khatahtbeh sees these women as:

the flag bearers of an entire religion — we’re on the frontline of being targeted, and we’re ambassadors representing Islam to people of other faiths. It’s a vulnerable and difficult position that veiled women are in, but it can also be very powerful. (Harvard, 2015b, para. 9)

Claiming to be the pioneer Muslim women’s blog in the US, in 2016 *Muslim Girl* became the “first Muslim company to ever make the Forbes 30 Under 30 list” (MG Staff, 2016a, para. 5). The platform’s success in enabling Muslim girls and women to advance counter-narratives has taken even its founder by surprise, who “never thought her self-made project would turn into the number one place for Muslim girls to talk back and stay fearless” (Jhaish, 2019, para. 2). Alluding to its success, two *Muslim Girl* blogs that look back on 2014 and 2019 both illuminate how the platform has grown exponentially and how it speaks to issues that matter to Muslim women (Jhaish, 2019; MG Staff, 2015). Additionally, addressing the impact of *Muslim Girl*, the comments of the director of Clark University’s Women and Gender Studies department, Denise Bebbington are insightful (Mokhtar, 2016a). Bebbington notes that:

*Muslim Girl* provides an important platform for young women to speak for themselves and to be heard in the public sphere without intermediation by the press or others. It is also a powerful counter force to the Islamophobia and ignorance that characterizes much of the media coverage of world events. (Mokhtar, 2016a, para. 8)

To add to this, Al-Khatahtbeh notes that the possibilities of what the *Muslim Girl* platform can achieve are endless, explaining “Now that we have been funded and we have economic empowerment, how limitless is it going to be in how far we can go from here?” (Jhaish, 2019; Mokhtar, 2016a, para. 12). Speaking to *Muslim Girl*’s illustrious trajectory thus far as well as the

vast potential that it holds, Al-Khatahtbeh reflects:

It's been a lot of hard work and there's still a lot left to do. The most important thing for us has been staying authentic to ourselves, our voices, and our experiences. When other publications don't want to publish articles by Muslim women because they don't fit the status quo, we give those voices a platform. Our growing number of readers proves that there's a real public interest in what we have to say. (Harvard, 2015b, para. 11)

Positioning itself as the first online media platform created by and for Muslim women, *Muslim Girl* expands media representations to be more diverse and inclusive (Mokhtar, 2016a). It highlights the various histories and stories that shape Muslim women as individuals, and that merit attention in mainstream media (Jhaish, 2019). Its goal is to “to write about topics that will help our audience grow, and not only relate to, but get inspired to become a part of a community that wants a change of the narrative surrounding Muslim women” (34, para. 3). *Muslim Girl* does so by dissecting lived experiences, confronting stereotypes and biases, encouraging personal growth and advocating for being comfortable in one's own skin (Jhaish, 2019; MG Staff, 2015). As Al-Khatahtbeh notes, this platform provides a vital space “to cultivate a presence for our voices in the media” in order to counter harmful narratives and prevent misconstrued narratives from informing policy-making (MG Staff, 2021a, para. 4). This impetus strikes at the heart of *Muslim Girl*, because its very creation was rooted in a desire to challenge the systemic suppression of Muslim women's voices and to instead use digital media to foreground their viewpoints (Harvard, 2015b).

*Muslim Girl* sheds light on the issues that Muslim women face in contemporary Western societies and it advocates for Muslim women around the world to reclaim discourses about themselves (Jhaish, 2019; Khatib, 2016; MG Staff, 2016a). It does so by ensuring that Muslim women are “telling the stories that the world needs to know from the very voices who truly understand and represent them” (Khatib, 2016, para. 2). This reclamation of narratives sends the message that Muslim women's voices are valuable and worthy of inclusion in discourses

that impact them (Mokhtar, 2016a). Notably, the *Muslim Girl* platform also cultivates and strengthens a sisterhood and a sense of community that has become a source of inspiration for many (Hamed, 2017b; MG Staff, 2015). For instance, one *Muslim Girl* blogger shares:

Thanks to being a writer for Muslim Girl, I belong to a fierce movement unleashing the hidden gems of Muslim women one story at a time. Our collective efforts are pushing back against the status quo. We will not give in to the discourses that have reinforced cultural, religious, and moral stereotypes of Islam and Muslims. We are countering the narratives, reclaiming our identities, and normalizing Muslims. (Mokhtar, 2017, para. 5)

This excerpt symbolizes the kind of non-judgmental support that Al-Khatahtbeh says is central to the platform (Jhaish, 2019; Mokhtar, 2016a). In fact, being welcoming is one strength of the platform that Al-Khatahtbeh prides over, stating that “Muslim Girl does a really great job of providing an inclusive space for women who might otherwise feel ostracized by our society” (Harvard, 2015b, para. 7).

Furthermore, *Muslim Girl* encourages audience members to collectively mobilize and challenge stereotypical depictions of Muslim women (Jhaish, 2019). This website has thus enabled Muslim women to enact agency and resist Islamophobic, colonial and imperialist tropes about Muslims (Mokhtar, 2017). Moreover, *Muslim Girl* takes a critical look at what is purported in the name of feminism and how narrowly defined gender norms feed into hegemonic masculinities and fortify stereotypes about Islam and Muslims (Mokhtar, 2017). In addition to challenging misconceptions perpetuated by traditional and new media, *Muslim Girl* tries to elevate the status of Muslim women (Mokhtar, 2016a). It does so in part by highlighting complexity in Muslim identities and normalizing diversity across Muslims (Mokhtar, 2017). To sum up, *Muslim Girl* notes that:

Although the name says Muslim Girl, the stories that we publish speak on behalf of many marginalized communities with diverse and intersectional identities where Muslim is one way of being. We write stories on the #BlackLivesMatter movement, the LGBTQI+

community, plus-size models, fashion and poetry. Our analytical perspectives encompass conservative and liberal thoughts, feminisms beyond equality for women, and hegemonic masculinities as toxic constructs of fixed gender roles. Our Islamic voices include minority Muslim groups such as Shia, Sufi, Yazidi, and Ahmadi. (Mokhtar, 2017, para. 6)

### ***Key Themes and Contributions***

Before diving into the theoretical framework of this project, this section provides a bird's eye view of the pertinent themes that surface in this thesis.

To begin with, *Muslim Girl* emphasizes that countless Muslim girls and women see their feminist inclinations and their social justice advocacy as not only aligned with, but also inextricably linked to their Islamic faith. *Muslim Girl* also highlights how Islamic teachings as per the Quran, Hadith (Prophetic sayings) and Sunnah (Prophetic practices) are variably understood, thus giving rise to multiple interpretations of these teachings. These varying interpretations enable Muslims to tailor timeless Islamic teachings to the particular circumstances of their era. This flexible application of Islamic doctrines to diverse societal contexts is a point made by *Muslim Girl* as well as by the scholarly literature that informs this project.

Also illustrating this overlap between the blogs and the academic literature that is referenced in this project, *Muslim Girl* draws upon the scholarly contributions of the likes of Amina Wadud, Sa'diyya Shaikh, Hina Azam, Leila Ahmed, Leila Abu-Lughod, Su'ad Khabeer, and Saba Mahmood, who I also cite to contextualize this study. *Muslim Girl's* utilization of these scholars' works suggests a broader readership of such literature beyond academic circles. This phenomenon underscores how academic scholarship can shape public narratives about feminism in relation to Islam, a possibility that is magnified by the global reach of digital platforms. The dissemination of such scholarly work through digital media reinforces how academic literature and public discourses inform each other and how this process is shaped by

digital media. In other words, *Muslim Girl's* incorporation of academic literature to support its arguments reflects the popularization of Islamic feminist scholarship within Anglophone North American contexts.

Another important theme throughout this thesis concerns the various techniques that *Muslim Girl* employs for interpreting Islam through a feminist lens. These strategies include drawing from sources such as the Quran, Hadith (Prophetic sayings) and Sunnah (Prophetic practices) as well as citing examples of past and present empowered Muslim women and feminist role models. In particular, *Muslim Girl's* positioning of influential Islamic figures like Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) (Peace Be Upon Him), Hazrat Khadija, Hazrat Aisha and others as embodying feminist principles holds immense potential for reclaiming feminist discourses in Muslim communities. Moreover, *Muslim Girl* emphasizes the importance of independently arriving at informed feminist interpretations of Islamic texts. To elaborate, *Muslim Girl* advocates for individualized and personalized approaches to understanding Islam; these approaches demand active engagement with scripture and with other reliable Islamic sources of knowledge in order to discern feminist Islamic tenets. On this front, *Muslim Girl* employs techniques that academia also references, like historical contextualization and intratextual reading, to explain how Quranic verses underscore feminist teachings.

Furthermore, *Muslim Girl* and academic writing both emphasize the agency of Muslim women as figures of Islamic leadership and interpretive authorities, even as both sources recognize that Muslim women still face hurdles to being fully accepted as Islamic leaders. Like academic scholars, *Muslim Girl* also sheds light on the gender-specific obstacles that Muslim women leaders face as well as their innovative navigation around these patriarchal obstacles, which speaks to the evolving landscape of Islamic authority.

In addition to highlighting these and other problematic dynamics within Muslim communities, *Muslim Girl* analyzes how various structures of oppression intersect. Specifically, *Muslim Girl* denounces colonial legacies, contemporary settler colonial ideologies and

imperialist logics that propagate racism and Islamophobia to the detriment of Muslim women who experience unique forms of gendered Islamophobia. By sharing the experiences of hijab-wearing Muslim women, *Muslim Girl* elucidates how prevailing narratives that portray the hijab as inherently oppressive often overlook some Muslim women's free will in veiling. Simultaneously, *Muslim Girl* critiques the exploitative use of the hijab to perpetuate victim-blaming narratives that put the onus on Muslim women to avoid harassment by veiling or dressing modestly. Additionally, *Muslim Girl* cautions against putting veiled Muslim women on a pedestal and imposing unrealistic expectations on them that ignore their humanity and fallibility.

As the above reflections indicate, criticism of patriarchal dynamics in and beyond Muslim communities is a recurrent theme in *Muslim Girl*. This critique is evident in *Muslim Girl's* calls for intra-communal accountability and resistance against oppression in both Muslim-majority settings and in broader society. Such critique and call for accountability is motivated by a desire to enhance Muslim communities, rather than merely to disparage them. Concurrently, *Muslim Girl* also illuminates the creative ways in which Muslim women confront pressures originating within and outside Muslims communities. *Muslim Girl* highlights how such resistance by Muslim women is a counterforce against Islamophobic narratives that dichotomize Muslims into overly-simplified categories of 'good' and 'bad'.

To add to this, *Muslim Girl* confronts imperialist forms of feminism that not only strengthen orientalist tropes about Muslim women but also expose racism and Eurocentrism within certain feminist spheres. In particular, *Muslim Girl* argues that Islamophobic attitudes are often perpetuated under the guise of feminism by portraying Muslim women as unequivocally oppressed by a patriarchal Islam and by universally misogynistic Muslim men. These narratives manipulate feminist discourses to propagate Islamophobia and end up marginalizing Muslim women in feminist spaces. Crucially, *Muslim Girl* denounces such Islamophobic manifestations of feminism while simultaneously challenging misogynistic practices within Muslim communities. This multifaceted critique underscores *Muslim Girl's* sensitivity to the multiple obstacles that

Muslim women face.

Moreover, ostracizing Muslim women in some feminist environments contributes to Muslims' cautionary approach towards the term "feminism", even amongst Muslims who advocate for gender equality. This hesitancy stems from an awareness of the historical and ongoing use of feminism to advance imperialist and colonial agendas under the guise of saving Muslim women, even as these interventions often exacerbate the challenges faced by Muslim women and communities. Therefore, Muslims' skepticism towards feminist terminology is not wholly illogical. However, rather than outrightly rejecting feminist labels, *Muslim Girl* advocates for broadening the concept of feminism to encompass a more inclusive range of perspectives.

Last but certainly not least, *Muslim Girl* consistently highlights the intersectionality of Muslim women's experiences by paying attention to how various facets of identity dynamically overlap to shape their realities. *Muslim Girl's* intersectional approach towards Muslim women's experiences tackles issues of race, queerness and toxic masculinity as they manifest in and outside of Muslim communities. On the topic of intersectionality, *Muslim Girl* also engages with the idea of nationhood and how Muslim women varyingly experience belonging to or exclusion from nationalist discourses. Additionally, *Muslim Girl* critically evaluates the role of social and digital media in shaping Muslim women's feminist activism, acknowledging both its liberatory potential and its particular pitfalls. Notably, *Muslim Girl* itself is entangled in the media landscape that it critiques, thus highlighting the complexities of challenging systemic oppression while simultaneously navigating capitalist structures.

Tying the above themes together, one of *Muslim Girl's* key contributions is to advocate for a redefined feminism that centers the voices and agency of Muslim women and that resists their homogenized depiction as universally oppressed. By championing a transnational, intersectional feminism that challenges hegemonic narratives and centers marginalized perspectives, *Muslim Girl* offers a compelling case for reimagining feminism to truly reflect the diverse experiences and aspirations of Muslim women. In this thesis, I examine the many ways

in which *Muslim Girl* makes this case for an expanded and ultimately more inclusive conceptualization of feminism.

### **Theoretical Framework: Islamic Feminism**

In this section, I discuss this project's theoretical framework and the key debates arising within this literature. To do so, I draw on concepts from the various bodies of scholarship that have informed my work, including feminism, Islamic theology, digital communications theories, Black and Indigenous feminist writing, and research on nationhood, citizenship and belonging. Drawing on this academic literature, this section highlights the broader discourses about Islam, Islamic feminism and Islamophobia that inform the context within which Muslim feminists operate. Specifically, this study looks at the intersection of Islamic feminist theories and the use of digital media by Muslim feminist women in order to better understand how Islamic feminism is being reformulated in digital spaces. The detailed examination below of Islamic feminisms and digital media landscapes, along with a consideration of queer theory and nationalism lays the groundwork for my project.

#### ***Islamic Feminist Interventions***

Historically contextualizing, defining and interpreting feminism from a wide variety of standpoints is a long standing feminist tradition (Dhamoon, 2013). Instead of being a set identity or a clearly delineated ideology, feminism is:

best conceived as an instrument in an intellectual and practical toolbox for improving women's conditions, one that can be used when required and put away when not. It is neither an all-encompassing identity nor a specific set of ideas to which all must adhere. (Cooke, 2001, as cited in Azam, 2018, p. 126)

Similarly, Dhamoon (2013, p. 88) notes that, "different historical and geopolitical genealogies indicate that there are many forms of feminism rather than one formation." Feminism, feminist principles and feminist research methods are thus understood in multiple ways (Dhamoon, 2013).

**Defining Islamic Feminisms.** In the same vein, “Islamic feminism is not so much a fixed set of ideas as a sensibility adaptable to one’s communicative context...Given its flexibility, women can deploy it differently depending on the context” (Azam, 2018, p. 126). Being adaptable allows Islamic feminism to be mobilized in diverse contexts, by varyingly positioned activists and towards multiple feminist ends.

Azam (2018, p. 127) adds that, “a dynamic engagement with feminism is particularly liberating in our current cultural, political, and media environment. Muslim women with a feminist sensibility must be able to speak multiply, critically, and defensively”. It is this adaptability of Islamic feminism that *Muslim Girl* also emphasizes to reclaim a feminist Islam. Given that not all Muslim feminists aspire to the same ideals, it is imperative to talk about multiple Islamic feminisms to capture the various streams of thought and practice that this term refers to (Navarro, 2016). Such dynamic understandings of this term position “Islamic feminism as a strategy rather than an identity” (cook, 1997, as cited in Azam, 2018, p. 128). Multiple conceptualizations of Islamic feminism also enable Muslim feminists to “criticize patriarchal aspects of Islamic discourse or practice in some settings and emphasize the tradition’s ideals of equality and justice in others” (Azam, 2018, p. 127). My study exemplifies these concurrent priorities of Muslim feminists, as is evident in *Muslim Girl’s* advocacy for feminist understandings of Islam even while it simultaneously challenges patriarchal attitudes amongst Muslim communities.

As a form of systemic male authority, patriarchy derives its ideological power from the masculine representation of God in religion, and from justifying gender inequalities on the basis of sexual/ biological differences in secular domains (Barlas, 2016). Contrarily, Islamic feminism opposes patriarchy while also resisting conservative Islamic narratives and challenging secular liberalism that disregards religion’s role in women’s agency (Abou Bakr, as cited in Navarro, 2016, p. 90). Contesting such dualisms, *Muslim Girl* highlights the shortcomings of both, Islamic

fundamentalism as well as feminism that fails to account for Islamically-rooted motivations for activism.

Next, a central tenet of Islamic feminism, and one that *Muslim Girl* also frequently emphasizes, is to shed light on the role that Muslim women have played in Islamic history and continue to play as producers of knowledge (Navarro, 2016). Muslim feminists, like *Muslim Girl*, consistently ask, “whose Islam; and how is that Islam constructed?” (Wadud, 2021, p. 496). In this way, *Muslim Girl* builds on a feminist tradition of constructing Islam; this is a tradition “that Muslim women have been more actively claiming since the 1990’s” (Shaikh, 2013, p. 26). Exhibiting a similar focus on feminist Muslim women’s scholarship, *Muslim Girl* draws on the work of several such scholars, including Fatima Mernissi, Leila Ahmed, Amina Wadud and others, to formulate its argument. My research builds on this Islamic feminist tradition of renewing and extending understandings of Islamic teachings to be gender-sensitive and inclusive. At the same time, this study advances another essential principle of Islamic feminism when it reinforces the need for adept Muslim women to be seen and accepted as knowledgeable religious authorities.

Moreover, taking a critical look at feminism as an academic discipline requires sustained interrogation of who this discipline is loyal to and in whose name feminism is mobilized (Mohanty, 2006). *Muslim Girl* similarly questions who is left out of the fold of feminism and it condemns exclusionary kinds of feminism that advance the Islamophobic trope of saving Muslim women. Such vigilance against the co-optation of feminism is also discernible in *Muslim Girl’s* opposition to colonial-minded, white supremacist feminist discourses (Mohanty, 2006). This critical examination of how liberal North American feminist discourse can be complicit in justifying imperialist domination is a prerequisite for cross-border, transnational forms of feminism (Mohanty, 2006). In turn, “it is this cross-border, transnational feminist understanding that makes alliances and solidarities possible” (Mohanty, 2006, p. 17). Additionally, this focus on anti-racist feminist allyship is noticeable in *Muslim Girl’s* contestation of Western invasions of

sovereign states and in its sustained analysis of feminist issues in but also beyond the platform's country of origin i.e. the US.

Looking ahead, Muslim feminists must remain accountable to the communities they serve and they must facilitate critical theoretical engagement with Islam while also maintaining momentum as activists (Hidayatullah, 2016). Accomplishing these goals requires balancing community priorities, forging new paths of feminist thinking and avoiding neocolonial co-optation (Hidayatullah, 2016). The content I analyze shows how North American Muslim feminist women bloggers balance these multiple responsibilities with the varying needs of the diverse communities they belong to, such as faith-based, national and ethnic communities, amongst others. This analysis also highlights the needs that these bloggers see as urgent and the strategies they use to resist being co-opted into discourses that do not serve them.

### **Barriers to Islamic Feminisms.**

This section outlines a number of tensions within Islamic feminism, with regards to the terminology of feminism, the various forms of oppression and alienating binaries that are propagated in the name of feminism and hegemonic feminist discourses that frame the West as liberated and Islam as universally oppressive. These tensions are described in detail below.

***Barrier #1: Ambiguity Regarding the Phrase Islamic Feminism.*** Feminist terminology has long been deployed for colonial ends and it continues to be manipulated to justify violent Western-led invasions on the supposed basis of saving helpless Muslim women from an invariably misogynistic Islam (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Hidayatullah, 2014). It is hardly surprising then that some Muslim gender justice-seeking interpreters and activists distance themselves from the term feminism (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Hidayatullah, 2014). As Navarro (2016, p. 86) points out, Islamic feminism is a loaded term and “some Muslim feminists are reluctant to come forward as ‘Islamic feminists’ because of the negative charge involved in many Muslim majority countries where feminism is identified with colonialism and belligerent atheism”. Reflecting this

ambivalence, some *Muslim Girl* bloggers are reluctant to identify as feminists even though they articulate egalitarian views on women's rights.

Scholars and activists may also disavow feminist terms to avoid their work being seen as un-Islamic, especially when they are engaging with Muslim communities that are wary of feminism's imperialist connotations; this is a wariness that *Muslim Girl* also exhibits (Hidayatullah, 2014). Such caution against inadvertently advancing imperialist rhetoric in the name of feminism prompts feminist exegetes to establish communal credibility by foregrounding their gender egalitarian interpretations of scripture as arising primarily from within Islam, rather than from feminist orientations (Hidayatullah, 2014). In other words, for Muslim feminists seeking buy-in from Muslim communities "appeals to precedent are important in legitimating egalitarian claims" (Lamprey, 2017, p. 29). In this environment, it can be a balancing act for Muslim feminists to espouse feminist ideologies without reinforcing imperialist binaries that call for liberation from an Islam that is perceived as antithetical to gender equality (Anjum, 2020). *Muslim Girl* expends considerable energy in positioning feminism as inherent to Islam and in concurrently refuting the imperialist undertones of some strands of feminism. However, this platform is not too concerned with disavowing feminism out of fear of being seen as un-Islamic. Arguably, this concern is diminished due to the democratization of Muslims' access to Islamic information, as enabled by the capabilities of digital media and by the heightened individualization of faith practices.

Despite these reservations about feminist labels, there is also a reclamation of the terminology of Islamic feminism, prompted by a desire to challenge the idea that Islam and feminism are mutually exclusive (Hidayatullah, 2014). This oscillation between ambivalence about and adoption of feminist labels is one of the many contemporary debates that illustrate the barriers within feminism, without negating feminism wholesale (Dhamoon, 2013). Refusing to surrender feminism as a Western ideology, Shaikh states that such surrender unfairly erases the long-standing histories of non-Western communities resisting patriarchy (as cited in

Hidayatullah, 2014). To this end, *Muslim Girl* presents several examples of indigenous feminist resistance, from Egypt to Palestine to Pakistan and elsewhere. Moreover, as Shaikh and other scholars note and as *Muslim Girl* reiterates, Islamic feminism sees Muslim women's commitment to gender egalitarianism as rooted in and complementary to their Islamic convictions (as cited in Hidayatullah, 2014). By its mere existence then, Islamic feminism challenges assumptions in dominant, Western-centric feminism about the role that Islam can play in activism for gender equality (Haqqani, 2016). This fusion of feminist and Islamic teachings is what *Muslim Girl* extensively argues for.

***Barrier #2: Navigating Binaries and Multiple Forms of Oppression.***

The double bind that Muslim women face is studied at length by *Muslim Girl* in its analysis of how Muslim women are frequently caught between victim-blaming discourses and expectations of perfection within Muslim communities on the one hand and Islamophobic narratives on the other. In this landscape, Zine (2004, p. 178) adds that Muslim feminists are also caught between a rock and a hard place because:

Racialized Muslim women, in attempting to rupture the authoritarian and patriarchal structures in their communities, are often reticent to expose their concerns within the pervasive context of racism and Islamophobia that already exists and gathers strength upon unseemly revelations. By exposing issues of sexism within their communities, Muslim feminists are immediately subject to the racism and Islamophobia that negatively essentialize these experiences as the defining referents of the Muslim community. (as cited in Eidoo, 2018)

Although *Muslim Girl* admits that this airing of dirty laundry may reinforce racist and Islamophobic tropes, it nevertheless prioritizes addressing the misogyny that Muslim women face over saving face. This dynamic is detailed further in chapter 5.

Another key challenge that Muslim activists face in fostering critical, Islamically-aware, anti-racist, feminist spaces is the restrictive stereotyping of Muslim women as helpless victims, a

topic that this thesis and *Muslim Girl* itself examine in considerable detail. Universalizing depictions of Muslim women's oppression ignore Muslim women's mobilization for justice and emancipation from the oppressive institutional forces shaping their lives (Abu-Lughod, 2013). Moreover, men and Muslim women who support patriarchy, along with other racist, colonial and Islamophobic forces in the secular realm are additional challenges that Muslim feminists face and that *Muslim Girl* is also mindful of (Hidayatullah, 2016). On top of that, the dynamics of gendered and racialized politics that *Muslim Girl* is attuned to, coupled with the divide between faith-based and secular forms of feminisms make the terrain of Islamic feminisms even more challenging (Zine, 2004).

Under these conditions, "Islamic feminists must persist in foregrounding and reconceiving humanising aspects of Islam and Muslim tradition, recovering hidden histories of gender justice and human equality" (Shaikh, 2013, p. 24). At the same time, "Islamic feminists need to steadfastly resist and critique the onslaught of 'empire' in its many faces" (Shaikh, 2013, p. 24). To elaborate, Islamic feminists are called on to launch a multiple critique that is "defined by an uncompromising resistance to injustice, whether such injustices are embodied by religious proponents of patriarchy or emissaries of empire who instrumentalise feminism as part of their ideological repertoire" (Shaikh, 2013, p. 25). These are lofty goals and the path to them is uphill, but *Muslim Girl* does not shy away from efforts on this front. Taking up this multi-pronged resistance, *Muslim Girl* bloggers are collectively attending to these multiple priorities.

To undo the aforementioned imperialist tendencies also requires questioning the purported dichotomies that essentialize complex identities and motivations for engaging in activism and that pit secularism against Islam and local actors against Western forces (Tadros & Khan, 2018). In the same vein, politicizing Islam and positioning it as opposed to feminism does no favors to Muslim feminists' efforts to disrupt binaristic framings of Islam and feminism (Hidayatullah, 2016). Shedding light on the lucrateness of such binaries, King (2003, p. 25) writes, "we trust easy oppositions. We are suspicious of complexities, distrustful of

contradictions, fearful of enigmas” (as cited in Charania, 2005, p. 33). Hearteningly though, the problematic binaries in which Muslim women are discursively framed are being contested by Islamically-oriented and secular Muslim feminists alike, and by *Muslim Girl* as well (Zine, 2006).

Combating the various challenges described above, Muslim women and *Muslim Girl* bloggers frequently engage with feminism; this engagement contests and reformulates both, fundamentalist and orientalist forms of subjugation (Zine, 2006). This nuanced feminist orientation is evident in Islamic feminist scholarship as well as in the *Muslim Girl* blogs since both critique inequalities within Muslim communities, advocate for justice and condemn Islamophobia, imperialism and overly simplistic perceptions of Islam (Shaikh, 2013). In particular, *Muslim Girl* routinely draws attention to the long-standing, multifaceted and tenacious resistance by Muslim women against various, intersecting forms of subjugation.

**Barrier #3: Countering Notions of the ‘West’ as Free and Islam as Unequivocally Patriarchal.** As *Muslim Girl* notes in several instances, feminism cannot be dismissed as having originated in the West, nor can it be conceived of as a singular, easily defined body of thought with clear cut boundaries. To pigeon-hole feminist endeavors like that universalizes the numerous iterations of feminist advocacy and ignores the diverse forms of indigenous resistance against patriarchy across the world (Hidayatullah, 2014). In this regard, *Muslim Girl* underscores multiply located, contextualized forms of feminist resistance. *Muslim Girl* also reminds its readers that a narrow, Eurocentric view of feminism further strengthens the misconception that Muslims are incapable of critiquing misogyny (Hidayatullah, 2014). In this context, Muslim feminists navigate treacherous territory between intra-communal dismissal of feminism and exclusionary mainstream feminism. Next, as Rahman (2010, p. 955) points out:

Not only is gender equality a relatively recent addition to our self-image as western, modern and democratic, but when we bring sexual diversity into the picture, the notion that such issues - particularly around homosexual identities and rights - are an accepted and secure part of contemporary western democratic values is clearly untenable, given

both the very recent progress of and the continuing controversies surrounding LGBT rights.

Therefore, paying attention to how Western paradigms only recently came to include gender equality as a human right and as a marker of modernity and democracy challenges the exclusive association of feminism with the West (Rahman, 2010). Rather, the recent gains and ongoing challenges in this realm exemplify how Western conceptualizations of rights, equality and justice are tenuous and ever changing, and that gender equality has not always been a part of such conceptualizations (Rahman, 2010).

Despite these challenges, Islamic feminism is advancing as a scholarly pursuit and with it, so are contestations of ideological constructions that paint Islam as being irrevocably patriarchal and unchanging (Hidayatullah, 2016; Shaikh, 2013). *Muslim Girl* also engages in this pursuit, given the platform's sustained emphasis on feminist interpretations of Islam. Like academic literature, the blogs I analyze disrupt the dichotomization of Islam and feminism. These blogs speak to the complex obstacles facing Muslim feminists and they exemplify creative solutions being devised to address these challenges. By highlighting the gender egalitarian principles articulated by *Muslim Girl* bloggers, this study challenges Eurocentric notions of the origins of feminism, questions presumptions about Islam's inherent misogyny and adds to the growing recognition of localized forms of feminisms.

**Common Feminist Struggles Across Religions.** Importantly, feminist interventions are confronted with an uphill battle across faiths, so much so that feminist antagonism to religion is not limited to Islam only. As a result, some of the aforementioned struggles that Muslim feminists deal with are also challenges that Christian, Jewish, Buddhist and other faith-based feminists face.

While patriarchal resistance to feminist interventions may be common across religions, what is unique is that Islam is often perceived as being exceptionally misogynistic and repressive. This phenomenon has been heightened post 9/11 and such discourses are then

used to justify imperialist invasions and interventions. This orientalist depiction of Islam in media, public discourses, political arenas and even feminist spaces distinguishes the critique levelled at Islam as compared to other religions. In turn, such depictions reinforce Islamophobic narratives and advance gendered Islamophobia. In this context, even though several Muslim feminists highlight feminist interpretations of Islamic teachings, such re-readings continue to come up against deeply rooted patriarchal biases that exclude Muslim women from positions of religious leadership and interpretive authority.

These hurdles are discussed in feminist scholarship on Islam, as well as Christianity and Judaism. Across these religions, interpretations of scripture have largely been male-dominated, yielding religious injunctions and beliefs that subjugate women and undermine their autonomy. Fighting against these dynamics, feminist scholars expose “the partiality and biases of any knowledge project that conflates the universal category of the human with the specific perspectives of some male humans” (Shaikh, 2013, p. 17).

**Drawing on Black and Indigenous Feminist Thought.** Learning from Black scholarship, activism, art and literature is pivotal for grasping how domination is perpetuated through heteropatriarchy, white supremacy and capitalism (Maynard & Simpson, 2020). The richness of Black scholarly and activist traditions is not lost on *Muslim Girl*, which emphasizes the intersecting forms of oppression that Black women face and draws attention to examples of inspiring Black leaders and social justice movements. In particular, Indigenous and Black mobilization efforts provide insights into how anti-Islamophobic activism can simultaneously reject white supremacy and combat anti-Black racism (Maynard & Simpson, 2020). As a result, I draw on Black and Indigenous feminist scholarship to analyze the *Muslim Girl* blogs from an anti-racist and decolonial perspective. Below I review how some prominent Black and Indigenous scholars’ contributions inform my work.

Historically, racialized and Indigenous women “have never been subjected to the protections of white womanhood” (Maynard & Simpson, 2020, p. 90). In light of this study’s

focus, Muslim women too are not privy to the privileges of white, middle-class, able-bodied and heterosexual womanhood. Therefore, Black and Indigenous feminisms shed much-needed light on how conceptualizations of womanhood are not only racialized but also narrowly defined along other dimensions such as religion, class, ability, sexuality and citizenship. These narrow definitions of womanhood exclude Muslim women based on their various axes of identity, including but not limited to their faith. In light of this exclusion, it can be empowering to reject these externally imposed discourses about gender and “to reclaim this *refusal to fit into norms*” (Maynard & Simpson, 2020, p. 91).

These narrow conceptualizations of womanhood also tend to leave Black Muslim women out of the fold. Overall, examining the connection between Islamophobia and anti-Blackness sheds light on the marginalized position of Black Muslims (Mugabo, 2016). Specifically, *Muslim Girl* describes how Black Muslim women’s experiences are shaped by the overlapping forces of anti-Black racism, sexism and Islamophobia. This analysis by *Muslim Girl* demonstrates the need for concurrently challenging these interlocking systems of domination.

The diversity amongst Muslim women also necessitates disrupting how Muslimness is equated with South Asian and Arab communities, thus excluding Black Muslims. To this end, tracing the history of Islamophobia from the historical perspective of enslaved Black people can disrupt the pigeon-holing of Muslims as only Arabs or South Asians (Mugabo, 2016). In this study, the integration of Black scholarship and the analysis of *Muslim Girl’s* reflections on Black Muslim women’s experiences challenges such assumptions about Muslims being primarily or exclusively from the Middle East or the Indian subcontinent. In this regard, Khabeer (2016) explores how Black American Muslims of various backgrounds build on the intersections of their identity, rather than pitting one aspect against the other. Understanding Islam from the perspectives of Black Muslims also highlights that Islamic injunctions do not necessarily translate into authoritarian models of social organization (Abdou, 2009). Such a disruptive

conceptualization of Islam can serve as an entry-point for new ideas and interpretations of Islamic tenets (Abdou, 2009).

Like the studies on citizenship and nationhood that are detailed later in this chapter, Black and Indigenous feminist literature not only elucidates how national, ethnic and religious identity formations overlap, it also disrupts simplistic assumptions about being racialized, Muslim and/or of a particular nationality (Khabeer, 2016). Similarly, *Muslim Girl* points to the dynamic ways in which multiple facets of one's identity overlap, as informed by the broader societal context. Here, intersectionality helps us understand the complex, sometimes unpredictable ways in which power operates in identity formation processes (King, 2015).

Moving on, narratives about the nation-state are also fundamentally implicated in Indigenous co-optation. In the North American context, state violence against Indigenous peoples includes the strategic legitimization of anti-Indigenous sentiment along with the systematic destruction of native communities (Bacchetta & Winant, 2019). This tension demonstrates how certain national narratives require systemic erasures to maintain their supposed legitimacy. *Muslim Girl* extends this critique by explaining how nationalist sentiment in the West, and particularly in the US excludes Muslims as citizens. In conceptualizations of nationhood in America and in other states with colonial histories, Muslims are not seen as belonging to the ideal nation-state.

In this context, perfunctory Indigenous involvement in state reconciliation efforts risks co-optation because it only offers superficial inclusion and surface-level recognition of Indigenous communities (Maynard & Simpson, 2020). Making matters worse, this tokenistic involvement obscures the need for "structural changes that disrupt colonial worlds" (Maynard & Simpson, 2020, p. 82). Applying this principle to my research focus, Muslims too are not exempt from the dangers of state-endorsed co-optation that not only reifies troublesome binaries of good/bad Muslims but also enlists Muslims to police these dualities, all without enacting meaningful change. Therefore, Indigenous teachings about interactions with the state provide

insights into how Muslims can avoid being co-opted into state-sponsored Islamophobic narratives that reinforce narrow definitions of good and bad Muslims.

Next, anti-Blackness not only compounds Islamophobic violence, it also problematically shows up in grassroots efforts against Islamophobia (Mugabo, 2016). Anti-Blackness thus demands closer interrogation due to its prevalence within coalition-based politics that prioritize citizenship, the nation-state and individual rights in exclusionary ways (Mugabo, 2016). In the Canadian context, efforts “to write the realities of Black folks in Canada into a larger, more global history and present of dispossession” underline the importance of historical contextualization (Maynard & Simpson, 2020, p. 77). This lens is relevant for studying Black Canadian Muslims’ experiences and for disrupting national narratives about Canadian innocence and benevolence, a point that is explored in more detail in chapter 2.

Contrary to this attunement towards systems of domination, “neoliberalism isolates personhood from the social and historical contexts that produce subjects and the crises within which they are embedded” (Vassallo, 2013, as cited in King, 2015, pp. 121–122). Resisting these individualizing narratives requires working towards vibrant Indigenous, Black and Muslim futures by advocating for community-building “without relying on appeals to whiteness or to the state” (Maynard & Simpson, 2020, p. 75). Indeed, the possibility of “brilliant alternatives to co-resistance without centring or bowing towards whiteness” is a key takeaway from Black and Indigenous literature for my analysis (Maynard & Simpson, 2020). Such solidarity and allyship is also discernible in *Muslim Girl’s* call to tackle anti-Black racism in mainstream society as well as in Muslim communities.

Another contribution of Black feminist writing to my research has been to legitimize paying attention to the personal testimonials that came up in some *Muslim Girl* blogs. As Clark et al. (1996, xii–xiii) argue:

“The use of these kinds of testimonies, individual narratives, and disclosures are legitimized by feminist scholars... to track the way in which institutional power works off

the record in ways that structure racism, sexism, ageism, and other forms of violence in the academy.” (as cited in King, 2015, pp. 116–117)

This examination of first-person narratives, personal accounts and off-the-record conversations that tend to go unnoticed or undocumented has been influential in reinforcing the validity of such data when it came up in the non-academic context of *Muslim Girl* (King, 2015). Therefore, where possible, I’ve foregrounded the *Muslim Girl* bloggers’ narratives in their own words.

Last but not least, Maynard’s approach towards activism deeply resonates with me (Maynard & Simpson, 2020). She articulates her orientation as one “that expresses my love for my communities and my appreciation for the brilliance of my ancestors and of freedom fighters today” (Maynard & Simpson, 2020, p. 77). Echoing a similar sentiment, this project draws attention to the examples of historical and contemporary Muslim women and feminists who inspire Muslims globally and who are highlighted in academic literature as well as in *Muslim Girl*.

**Muslima Theology.** Reclaiming positions of religious authority and leadership, as *Muslim Girl* bloggers do, speaks to how religion is constantly remade (Ali, 2019). This reclamation of constructing Islam is also evident in *Muslim Girl*’s assertion of the right to independently arrive at one’s own informed interpretations of Islamic injunctions. Echoing this stance, “debates among feminists demonstrate plurality and openness to further reflection, clarification, and inquiry” (Dhamoon, 2013, p. 88). Drawing on this flexibility, *Muslim Girl* bloggers are reimagining Islam and Muslim womanhood by foregrounding feminist interpretations of Islam and by asserting themselves as knowledgeable experts on Islam.

This project’s focus on the feminist bent of Islam speaks to Lamptey’s (201, p. 27) idea of “a *Muslima* theology that is constructive, theological, and comparative”. To explain further, “*Muslima theology* is comparative—carried out in critical conversation with other discourses on religion, women, and gender, especially those that women in other faith traditions articulate” (Lamptey, 2017, p. 38). In the context of Islamic feminisms, “*Muslima* theology provides a way to

faithfully, critically, and constructively engage the Islamic tradition, simultaneously stirring new possibilities and retaining deep (and thus provocative) connections” all while remaining within the folds of Islam (Lampzey, 2017, pp. 37–38).

Essentialized understandings of Muslim women ignore the diversity amongst them (Hunt et al., 2020). In response, Muslima theology challenges hegemonic feminisms which ignore the diversity in women’s lives (Lampzey, 2017). *Muslim Girl’s* stance on feminism is aligned with this Muslima theology because they both draw on Islamic teachings to contest not only exclusionary, mainstream feminism but also conservative, patriarchal interpretations of Islam.

Muslima theology arises in explicit critique of universal and hegemonic feminisms that portray women’s experience, concerns, and goals in a singular fashion. It foregrounds the existence of meaningful diversity, a desire for agency, and a recognition of the importance of self-definition. (Lampzey, 2017, p. 39)

Muslima theology, like *Muslim Girl*, prioritizes Muslim women’s right to define for themselves the futures they envision and the priorities they pursue in the name of feminist liberation and empowerment (Lampzey, 2017). In short, *Muslim Girl’s* orientation to feminism echoes many of the above defining features of Muslima theology.

**Pious Femininity.** Touching on both Islam and feminism, pious femininity is a useful concept for exploring how *Muslim Girl* bloggers’ and Muslim women’s engagement with Islam draws on gendered discourses of piety. In its usage in this thesis, pious femininity builds on Kloos’ (2021, p. 288) analysis of Muslim women preachers’ practices such that “by approaching their work as a set of professional skills and dispositions, they confront, creatively and productively, the mixed and emphatically gendered expectations of public performance and pious exemplarity”. Pious exemplarity is reflected in the professionalization and practices of Muslim women preachers, and it is characterized by an idealized form of modesty (Le Renard, as cited in Makboul, 2017). It denotes how “the public performances of women preachers reveal the agentive and embodied practices through which Muslim women, more generally, style

themselves” (Kloos, 2021, p. 281). This concept encapsulates how Muslim women preachers’ “public appearances and accompanying styles give shape to femininities that are pious and transformative” (Ahmad, 2017; Ahmed, 1992; Deeb, 2006, as cited in Kloos, 2021, p. 281). Hence, pious femininities hint towards “new approaches to, and conceptualizations of, the study of female Islamic authority, specifically, and the salience of gendered performances, more generally” (Kloos, 2021, p. 281).

While Kloos (2021) emphasizes Muslim women preachers' public performances, in this study I apply the term pious femininity more broadly to analyze Muslim women's presentation of themselves, as it manifests on *Muslim Girl*. In this study, I examine if the tenets of pious femininity discussed in this section apply to Muslim women who are also claiming Islamic interpretive authority, albeit primarily as activist bloggers, not as preachers. Put briefly, this project explores how Muslim women bloggers might be extending what pious femininity means. I am particularly interested in how these bloggers redefine acceptable forms of pious femininity through their advocacy for feminist interpretations of Islam. This study aims to fill the gap of research on pious femininity specifically as it manifests in the North American context, in relation to feminist discourses and as contextualized by the terrain of digital and social media.

Of particular relevance to this research are the ways in which pious femininity is mirrored in how educated, practicing Muslim women in contemporary contexts draw on embodied practices of modesty (Kloos, 2021). In the context of Muslim women preachers, “modesty framed as religion has the ability to alleviate tensions experienced by women as they enter professional spaces that have long been dominated by men” (Kloos, 2021, p. 289). Adopting such modesty allows women to traverse the male-dominated territory of public spheres and religious authority, while side-stepping claims of such initiatives being immodest (Kloos, 2021). Modesty is also central to pious femininity because “in the Muslim public sphere, women subjects bear ‘heavier semiotic burdens than male subjects’” (Jones, 2010, p. 624, as cited in Kloos, 2021, p. 281).

With that in mind, I sought to analyze whether the *Muslim Girl* content about the gendered experiences of practicing Islam disrupts the modesty-centric aspects of pious femininity. Specifically, I engage with the idea of pious femininity to examine what role modesty plays in it. I study whether the *Muslim Girl* bloggers are expanding what pious femininity can mean and whether modesty is as central to this expanded definition or if there are other characteristics that may be just as, if not more important to how pious femininity manifests in Muslim women's online presence. In this sense, the bloggers do not need to be engaged in pious femininity explicitly. In short, I explore how pious femininity applies to *Muslim Girl* bloggers' content, and how this application may broaden the definition of concept itself.

Finally, enacting a pious femininity is a way to position oneself in relation to globalized culture (Makboul, 2017). Here, the use of social media and platforms like *Muslim Girl* significantly shape how a pious femininity is formulated. Indeed, "social media have provided unparalleled opportunities for female preachers to both coordinate their activities and convey their message outside of their traditional circles, all in a timely and sophisticated way that manifests their relevance in contemporary 'global culture'" (Makboul, 2017, p. 321). This attunement to global culture is even more pronounced on digital avenues like *Muslim Girl*, given their worldwide reach. This consideration segues well into the next body of literature that informs this project, namely studies of digital media and their audiences.

### ***Digital Media***

Given the centrality of digitality and social media to this research, an exploration of digital media platforms like *Muslim Girl* is warranted. For this analysis, I draw on Clark-Parsons & Lingel's (2020) idea of counter-publics and countercultures. "The counter in 'counterpublic' and 'counterculture' signals a space or group with an explicitly antagonistic stance toward a more mainstream, dominant order, defined primarily through its opposition to established power structures" (Clark-Parsons & Lingel, 2020, p. 3). Subaltern counterpublics are defined as "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate

counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (Fraser, 1992, p. 67, as cited in Clark-Parsons & Lingel, 2020, p. 3). Counter-publics disrupt exclusionary, hegemonic discourses and instead foreground alternative, inclusive narratives which are then shared with mainstream audiences (Clark-Parsons & Lingel, 2020). Whereas “counterpublics connect through a shared marginalized identity and experience of subordination”, countercultures “come together through shared ideological opposition to mainstream norms, politics, and values” (Curran, 2012, Fox, 1987, as cited in Clark-Parsons & Lingel, 2020, p. 3).

However, positioning “the study of marginalized or activist media as forms of *counter* conduct is to position the work of resistance as fundamentally disempowered, and by extension, less legitimate or necessary than the institutions against which resistance works” (Clark-Parsons & Lingel, 2020, p. 1). In studies about media, it is thus important to ask, “when do oppositional categories of resistance and marginalization reify dominant power relations, and when do they illuminate meaningful power imbalances in productive ways?” (Clark-Parsons & Lingel, 2020, p. 1). Positioning publics and culture as counter or mainstream can also reinforce binaries, erase nuances and “romanticize resistance” (Abu-Lughod, 1990, p. 42, as cited in Clark-Parsons & Lingel, 2020, p. 3). Additionally, “applying terms like ‘counterpublic’ or ‘counterculture’ wholesale to a group of social media users can erase intersecting differences in identity” (see Squires, 2002, as cited in Clark-Parsons & Lingel, 2020, p. 3). To elaborate, “classifying an entire group as a singular counterpublic or culture can obscure differences in access to power, which are complicated by emerging digital metrics of influence” (Clark-Parsons & Lingel, 2020, p. 4). Furthermore, “when social media practices are labeled as purely alternative media, the complexity of this entanglement between resistance and hegemony is lost” (Clark-Parsons & Lingel, 2020, p. 4).

Particularly salient for this study is the shift in the distribution of media power such that “boundaries separating alternative from mainstream have grown murkier in the digital

environment, where activists and marginalized communities use corporate platforms to launch interventions and build movements” (Clark-Parsons & Lingel, 2020, p. 4). *Muslim Girl* is a prime example of how categorizing media as mainstream or alternative is no straightforward task, as platforms like this one often display some characteristics of each category. For instance, while the content on *Muslim Girl* may diverge from dominant narratives, the platform also does partner with some mainstream media channels like *Forbes* and *Teen Vogue*, amongst others. This partnership illustrates how the line between mainstream and alternative media is often hard to decipher.

Despite their ability to magnify silenced perspectives, build communal relationships and shed light on inequities, social media can also be manipulated to co-opt and monetize social justice movements, further harass oppressed groups, and advance the surveillance of activists (Clark-Parsons & Lingel, 2020). Such exploitation “may also constrain countercultural expression (Lingel & Golub, 2015) and leave members at risk of repression and harassment from state authorities and opponents” (Neumayer & Stald, 2014, Penney & Dadas, 2014, as cited in Clark-Parsons & Lingel, 2020, p. 3). These pitfalls reiterate the importance of remaining cautious about the potential that media like *Muslim Girl* offer for sparking change, given the capitalist environment that they operate in and the ease with which emancipatory messages and movements can be co-opted in ways that do not serve the communities that are mobilizing for justice. All in all, accounting for these considerations of digital spaces has attuned me to the unintended consequences of positioning the *Muslim Girl* content as alternative media. In particular, these nuances of digitality suggest that framing *Muslim Girl* solely as an alternative platform may be overly simplistic and all too universalizing.

### ***Queer Theory***

This section articulates some key tenets of queer theory that are relevant to this project. While queer theory encompasses a vast body of work, I am particularly interested in how some of its principles can be applied to my research in order to better understand the experiences of

Muslim women. Academic literature is also attuned to this topic, given the burgeoning scholarly work that studies queer Muslim women's experiences (Khan & Mulé, 2021). Setting the stage for the analysis below, a key contribution of queer theory to the study of gender, sexuality and feminism broadly, and to this study specifically has been its attention to power dynamics and its focus on resistance against hegemonic narratives about identity formation (Rahman, 2010).

First and foremost:

There is an affinity between intersectional perspectives and queer theories of identity, given that both have focused our attentions on marginalized identities. What queer theory can bring specifically to such explorations is its insistence on the relational nature of identity construction along those 'matrices of domination' that intersectional queer theory emphasizes. (Rahman, 2010, p. 956)

These factors that influence experiences of marginalization include sexuality, religion, race and gender (Kugle, 2014, Siraj, 2018, as cited in Khan & Mulé, 2021). Indeed, "research on LGBT Muslims often implicitly raises questions of intersectionality" (Khan & Mulé, 2021; Abraham, 2009, Habib, 2010, Rahman, 2008, Siraj, 2006, 2009, Yip, 2008a, 2008b, 2009, as cited in Rahman, 2010, p. 949). Moreover, the experiences of queer Muslims indicate that "cultures and identities are plural and overlap rather than being monolithic and mutually exclusive" (Rahman, 2010, p. 948). Therefore, a critically intersectional framework, like that adopted by *Muslim Girl*, is vital to understand religiosity in relation to gender and sexuality, especially as it manifests in LGBTQ Muslim women's and other queer folks' experiences (Khan & Mulé, 2021). *Muslim Girl's* use of an intersectional frame of analysis is evident in the attention it pays to the diversity amongst Muslim women and in its efforts to avoid homogenizing them. This sensitivity to the intersectionality of identities is also noticeable in *Muslim Girl's* recognition that Muslim women's realities are shaped by not only their faith and gender, but also by their ethnicity, nationality and other factors.

Secondly, queer theory has been pivotal in “centring attention on the dynamic of inclusion or exclusion necessary to arrive at dominant identity categories” (Rahman, 2010, p. 952). These dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in queer spaces are evident along the lines of ethnicity, socioeconomic status and geographical positioning (Bell & Valentine, 1995, Evans, 1993, Hennessey, 1995, 2000, as cited in Rahman, 2010). These dynamics demand paying attention to how identities are embedded in relations of inclusion and exclusion, and are defined as much by what they are not (Rahman, 2010). To this end, queer theory highlights that “dominant identity categories are, in actuality, ontologically incomplete and achieve their (incomplete) coherence *only* through the exclusion of ‘others’” (Rahman, 2010, p. 953). Queer theory’s emphasis on inclusion and exclusion is relevant to this study because *Muslim Girl* too delves into the various forms of exclusion that Muslim women face in white-centric feminist spaces, in traditionally male-dominated areas of Islamic authority and in hegemonic Western narratives of nationhood that extend only selective notions of citizenship and belonging. Put briefly, queer theory and intersectional theorizing both emphasize that identity-making is an always incomplete endeavor that is embedded in complex relations of power (Rahman, 2010, p. 956).

Below are some other contributions that queer theory has made to my project. For one queer theory has prompted paying attention to how gender and sexual orientation are approached in *Muslim Girl*. My research has examined the extent and manner in which queerness is addressed in these blogs. Given that prevalent concerns in feminist and queer scholarship overlap, it is only fitting that queer theory has made contributions to my research in other ways too.

Notably, despite their focus on equity, there are concerns about “the Anti-Blackness in LGBTQ Muslim support groups, and the privileging of White convert voices” (Khan & Mulé, 2021, p. 1157). Similarly, Yip (2009) argues that “the examination of the lived experiences of queer Muslims, particularly within the western context, would be more fruitful and informative if it

takes seriously the intersection between sexuality, ethnicity, and religion” (as cited in Rahman, 2010, p. 952). As a result, queer theory’s contribution to my work has also been to encourage interrogating the association of Muslimness with only particular ethnic communities like Arabs and South Asians while leaving Black Muslim communities out of the fold, a point that has been detailed in an earlier section of this chapter. In this regard, another notable overlap is between the anti-Black racism that Khan & Mulé (2021) denounce in queer spaces and *Muslim Girl’s* similar condemnation of some Muslim communities for being racist against Black Muslims.

On a related note, feminist and queer scholarship both address the tensions in identity formation endeavors. To elaborate, trying to present oneself “as respectable so as to be admitted to the category of those entitled rights, despite the provisional and tenuous nature of this status” is an exercise in negotiating power dynamics (Charania, 2005, p. 35). Such strategies for self-presentation highlight that there are only some “subjects who can make legitimate right claims” and that such liberal subjects are positioned as “civilized, meaning bourgeois and ‘racially white’” (Passavant, pp.115–118, as cited in Charania, 2005, p. 35). Such partial access to rights underscores the problematic ways in which “respectability is a claim for membership in dominant groups; attaining it, even one aspect of it, requires the subordination of Others” (Fellows & Razack, 1998, p. 352, as cited in Charania, 2005, p. 35). This negotiation of rights discourses is made even more complex when applied to queer Muslims’ experiences of attempting to subscribe to respectability while being pressured to subsume their inextricably linked Muslim and often racialized identities to their queerness (Charania, 2005).

The strategic maneuvering involved in positioning oneself as rights-worthy also begs the question as to whether this carefully curated self-presentation can not only inadvertently reify systems of oppression that need to be challenged but can also present as finished projects what are always ongoing processes of identity-making (Charania, 2005). Rooted in queer theory, these insights have enabled me to flesh out the theme of complicity within forms of activism that claim to be feminist but are caught up in imperialist, empire-building motives of supposedly

saving other, often Muslim and racialized women. In a similar manner, *Muslim Girl* also extensively challenges feminist activism that purports to be inclusive but that propagates orientalist tropes under the guise of women's empowerment. One example of such critique is *Muslim Girl's* condemnation of Western imperialist projects in Afghanistan and Iraq that were partially justified in the name of feminism but that added to local women's oppression while reinforcing white savior narratives.

Moving on, another tool that queer theory proposes which has benefitted my analysis is the expansion of who can be a source of religious knowledge (Khan & Mulé, 2021). Queer scholarship recognizes that "LBTQ Muslim women can be experts of their own lives, can be producers of religious knowledge and theology and creators of religious resistance" (Khan & Mulé, 2021, p. 1145). My research relies on a similar attunement to women's negotiations with power to better comprehend the efforts of Muslim women who are making claims to feminism as an Islamic teaching (Kugle, 2014, as cited in Khan & Mulé, 2021). In addition to these aforementioned observations, in chapter 4 I draw on other contributions from queer theory to analyze what *Muslim Girl* has to say about queerness in relation to Islam and feminism.

### ***Citizenship and Nationhood***

The writings of racialized women have yielded remarkable transnational, anti-imperialist, anti-racist feminist thought and theoretical propositions. This body of scholarship is relevant for my research because *Muslim Girl* offers commentary on specific socio-political conditions in the US, Canada and France, and broadly in North America, in the Western world, and beyond. Plus, this literature is pertinent to this project because *Muslim Girl* also sheds light on racialized Muslim women's feminist scholarship.

To begin with, feminists acknowledge how national identity in the context of colonialism, imperialist interventions and globalization varyingly shapes women's experiences (Hesse-Biber, 2012). The resulting diversity of such gendered experiences is also emphasized in *Muslim Girl*. Utilizing a post-colonial, anti-racist lens, feminist analyses like those propagated by *Muslim Girl*

offer useful insights into how religion, gender, race and sexuality intersect in the context of colonization as well as how these factors manifest in and influence contemporary war on terror discourses. As *Muslim Girl* demonstrates, Muslim women's narratives illustrate the intersecting influences shaping their gendered experiences of Islam. Therefore, paying attention to Muslim women's insights can help productively reconfigure discourses about feminism, Islam and citizenship. In essence, *Muslim Girl* centrally intervenes in these discourses by amplifying Muslim women's own voices and perspectives about their realities.

In thinking about nationhood and belonging, definitions of citizenship matter profoundly. Mohanty (2006, p. 13) defines citizenship as a "particular form of belonging to the nation/state that is based on rights, participation and obligations and anchored in historical geographies of racial and cultural identities". Therefore, it is vital that women's studies frame citizenship in ways that do not alienate some women for the sake of others (Mohanty, 2006). To this end, Mohanty (2006, p. 15) calls for "theorizing transnational and anti-capitalist citizenship for women across class, race, sexualities, nations" in ways that do not reduce citizenship to consumerism. These themes are also referenced by *Muslim Girl* blogs that expand claims to citizenship to include subjects across various ethnicities, socio-economic backgrounds, sexual orientations, nationalities and abilities. *Muslim Girl* bloggers are thus demanding the inclusion of Muslim women in narratives about nationhood.

In this era of globalization, to assume that people's lives as well as nation-states and systems of governance are not implicated in the experiences of other women is naive (Abu-Lughod, 2013). Recognizing this interconnectedness demands that women's studies center the citizenship and belonging experiences of poor women, women of color and immigrant women (Mohanty, 2006). Similar to this call for making citizenship more accessible, *Muslim Girl* urges that feminist agendas be expanded to account for the diverse priorities of Muslim women across the world. Such a feminist ethos would encompass various modern-day concerns, including anti-Muslim and anti-Black racism as well as issues like policing, surveillance, the

military state, imperialism and political subjugation (Rana & Daulatzai, 2018). In turn, this kind of comprehensive feminist framework requires familiarity with the deep-rooted histories and multiple trajectories of social justice movements (Rana & Daulatzai, 2018).

To summarize, discourses of nationhood and belonging have been integral in contextualizing the *Muslim Girl* blogs, many of which discuss the complex ways in which claims to citizenship and national belonging affect Muslim women's lives.

**The Relevance of Nationhood in this Study.** In this section, I briefly elucidate the rationale for weaving in literature on nationhood into this project's theoretical framework. For this purpose, below are some blog titles included in this study that centrally touch on nationhood, national identity and claims to citizenship in relation to feminism.

- "Feminism, Orientalism, Asra Nomani, and the Hijab: An Open Letter"
- "The #MeToo Moments Continue at Canada's Parliament Hill"
- "The Oppression of Women in Lower-Income Countries Must End"
- "How France is Hiding Islamophobia behind Opportunistic Feminism"
- "Here's How Pakistani Women are Reclaiming Their Power in the Aurat (i.e. Urdu word for women) March"

Since these and other *Muslim Girl* blogs refer to various nation-state contexts, drawing on theories of nationhood and citizenship is important for the below reasons.

Firstly, as *Muslim Girl* notes, Muslim women's experiences of and resistance against gendered Islamophobia, xenophobia, anti-Muslim racism and other systems of oppression are inextricably tied to the geographical and national contexts that they take place in. To elaborate:

The neoliberal focus on gendered disciplining could be attributed to the reality that women's public and personal lives are often intertwined with broader debates on modernity and nationhood; their bodies function as sites where material and spiritual registers construct the pious subject. (Das, 2007, Gokariksel & McLarney, 2010, Masquelier, 2009, Navaro-Yashin, 2002, Stivens, 2006, as cited in Jamil, 2016, p. 553)

“The struggle for women’s emancipation cuts across secular and religious states which are in fact united in patriarchy and the control of women” (Rehman et al., 2020, p. 5). One clear example of how nation-states shape feminist mobilization is that “the gendered racialisation of neoliberalism has meant not only that spaces for welfare and secular organizations have shrunk, but also that inequalities across gender lines have been exacerbated” (Rehman et al., 2020, 10). Since feminist activism is shaped by nation-states, it is imperative to integrate literature on nationhood into this study, even if tangentially (Makboul, 2017). On this note, *Muslim Girl’s* examination of the nation-specific narratives that influence feminist mobilization also displays a sensitivity to the impact of national and global contexts on narratives about gender.

Secondly, not only do nationalist discourses shape the terrain within which feminist activism takes place, nation-states also mobilize religious and other narratives to define citizenship and regulate citizens (Jamil, 2016). In particular, gender and religion have become critical flashpoints in political narratives and contestations about who belongs, who is a citizen and what constitutes national identity (Zine, 2009). Discourses about womanhood and women’s lived experiences are thus influenced by narratives of nationhood and who belongs to them (Jamil, 2016).

In this regard, *Muslim Girl* questions restrictive formulations of citizenship by highlighting the systemic discrimination that marginalized groups such as Muslim and Black communities face in their interactions with policing, the justice system and other societal structures. For marginalized communities, “having no ‘rightful’ place anywhere within the current global logics, living, as we largely do, in nation states premised on the expulsion of our humanity” necessitates challenging exclusionary conceptualizations of nationhood that perpetuate restricted forms of belonging (Maynard & Simpson, 2020, p. 84). Since *Muslim Girl* seeks to enhance Muslim women’s ability to claim belonging within narratives about the nation, it is vital to ground this research in academic literature regarding nationhood. Engaging with nationhood

studies illuminates how the nation imagines its ideal citizens, how it disciplines them accordingly and how Muslim women figure into these narratives.

Next, in the case of Canada, engaging with scholarship on nationhood provides a frame of reference when thinking about how the themes that *Muslim Girl* articulates apply to the Canadian context. Drawing on literature about nationhood is important for better understanding how Canadian Muslim women's experiences of citizenship and belonging are shaped by the national narratives that *Muslim Girl* alludes to. For instance, some themes that *Muslim Girl* tackles are particularly relevant in Canada, such as the hijab ban and Quebec's *Bill 21*. As this connection suggests, engaging with discourses on Canadian nationhood is warranted. Broadly, Canadian national narratives are relevant because a number of blogs reference Canadian themes and events, as described in depth in chapter 2. The significance of the Canadian context is further amplified in light of its personal relevance to me as a Canadian, and to this project being affiliated with a Canadian academic institution in the country's capital no less.

Furthermore, studying discourses of nationhood in the American context is warranted since *Muslim Girl*, although digital and hence global in its reach, did emerge from the US and continues to engage heavily with American news and politics. Not only was *Muslim Girl* started by an American blogger, the platform also puts forth a sustained critique of Islamophobia, xenophobia, white supremacy, racism and other forms of systemic oppression as they particularly manifest in the US. Therefore, American nationalism emerges as a notable theme in this study. The particular entanglements of American nationalist narratives with various systems of domination are also detailed in chapter 2.

Lastly, *Muslim Girl* points to some glaring examples of exclusion that hijab-wearing Muslim women face in France. A number of *Muslim Girl* blogs address how the hijab ban in some French settings is justified through the exploitative use of feminism, which in turn alienates Muslim women and reinforces imperialist ideas about saving oppressed Muslim women. Such logics fortify narrow perceptions of women's liberation while enhancing Muslim

women's vulnerability to gendered Islamophobic violence. *Muslim Girl's* examination of these examples from France also makes nationalist narratives pertinent to this study.

To recap, weaving in scholarship about nationalism overall and about Canadian, American and French nationhood specifically is appropriate because these themes emerge from the data for this study i.e. the *Muslim Girl* blogs. In other words, theories about nationhood enable an improved understanding of the national narratives at play in the *Muslim Girl* blogs that tackle feminism in the context of particular countries and nation-specific ideologies.

## **Methodology**

The sections below lay out the main objective of my research, including my specific research questions and the main argument that this project makes. Following this is a description of the project scope, the other platforms that were initially considered for this research and an examination of the methodological framework that has shaped this work. Then, I describe the type of data I gathered and how I collected and analyzed the data, along with a reflection on the limitations of this methodology. Finally, this chapter includes a detailed review of the research ethics that have guided my project.

## **Research Questions**

1. What are some sources that contemporary North American Muslim women bloggers draw upon to (re)claim religious authority for themselves and to support feminist interpretations of Islam?
  - 1.1. In the North American context, what factors shape the narratives of faith that Muslim women bloggers espouse and how so?

## **Main Research Objective**

To examine how North American Muslim women bloggers are enacting Islamic feminist activism online.

## **Main Argument**

Muslim women bloggers seek to expand conceptualizations of feminism by centering Islamic feminisms and reclaiming narratives about Muslim women. Their writing reiterates Muslim women's claims to belonging and full citizenship, and it challenges the assumptions about Muslim women's helplessness that undergird gendered Islamophobia.

### **Scope**

This project studies the blogs on the *Muslim Girl* website. Although the founder of *Muslim Girl* hails from the US and the website features some US-centric context, it also features much content that is applicable globally. This global nature of *Muslim Girl's* content illustrates how the digital realm complicates narrowing down the scope of this study to national or regional boundaries. This blog is primarily geared towards Muslims in a Muslim minority context, although a few blogs centrally critique the challenges that women and marginalized communities face in other parts of the world, including in Muslim majority countries. Given the context of this thesis, when analyzing the content on *Muslim Girl*, I also remain conscious of how Canadian nationhood and national discourses figure into the themes that emerge.

### **Website Context and Audience**

Amani Al-Khatahtbeh, the creator of *Muslim Girl* wanted to give millennial Muslim women a platform to express themselves (Henao, 2020). In her own words, for Al-Khatahtbeh, "Starting Muslim Girl was not only my response to the lack of accurate representation of Muslims in the media — it also became my way of asserting my narrative as an American Muslim to the public and reclaiming my identity" (Harvard, 2015b, para. 5).

The *Muslim Girl* website can be seen as a site of self-affirmation and reinvigoration for Muslim women. Arguably, it empowers Muslim women, particularly those in the West to reclaim narratives about them and then propagate these reclaimed narratives through their interactions with non-Muslims offline and in other online environments. Furthermore, by being featured in publications like *Forbes*, *Teen Vogue*, *Huffington Post* and the like, the messages that *Muslim*

*Girl* shares are being disseminated through other platforms that cater to non-Muslim audiences too.

As per the *Muslim Girl* website, the bloggers are writing for other Muslim women primarily, but also for other audiences (Muslim Girl: Muslim Women Talk Back, n.d.). As these snippets from the website note:

MuslimGirl.net was launched from the bedroom of a high school girl that was fed up with the misleading misconceptions surrounding Islam — the way the news coverage and media outlets kept skewing the image of Muslims into a nasty one; the mistrust, racism, and flat-out hatred that the inaccuracies flamed; the muting of young Muslim voices from mainstream society; and the resulting disillusionment that young Muslims suffer about their religion in the tornado of it all. We at Muslim Girl are taking back the narrative. We use our own voices to speak up for ourselves...We write articles that relate to young modern women all over the globe and kickstart an open **honest** dialogue about Islam in today's society. Here at Muslim Girl, we like to... bridge the gap between different religions through the spirit of sisterhood, and to host interfaith discussion to combat growing stereotypes within our society and tackle social issues that may otherwise be shielded away from. We are pioneering our own paths as Muslim women living in today's modern society, and ***this is our story***. (Muslim Girl: Muslim Women Talk Back, n.d., paras. 5–8)

Given the mention of inter-faith dialogue in the above excerpt, *Muslim Girl's* intended audience arguably includes Muslim women as well as audiences with other or no religious affiliations. As this excerpt implies, *Muslim Girl* emerged as a response to being othered in mainstream discourse. However, for some audiences, the *Muslim Girl* bloggers are not 'the other' but are women that they may have much in common with.

Next, the advocacy-focused nature of *Muslim Girl* can be gleaned from the below message on the website:

We are drawing awareness to the Qur'an's message of gender equality and Islam's principle of peace. We are paving the way towards a world in which every woman can raise her head without fear of being attacked for her gender or beliefs. (Muslim Girl: Muslim Women Talk Back, n.d., para. 6)

At its launch in 2009, *Muslim Girl* was run by a dedicated volunteer staff of Muslim women who continue to shape the website's content (MG Staff, 2015; Mokhtar, 2016a).

"Although the site pays a group of editors, most articles are written by Muslim women volunteers" (Henao, 2020, para. 12). To source content, *Muslim Girl* invites story pitches via email and those interested in contributing regularly can apply to become a volunteer writer (Jummanah, 2021b). *Muslim Girl* is also committed to nurturing the team's talent through various professional development opportunities. On this front, Al-Khatahtbeh explains:

We function like a mentorship since we work with girls and women of different ages and experiences. That's why we make sure to provide a lot of opportunities to get involved with the site. We also host writing and media workshops, not only to emphasize the importance of us engaging in journalism, but also to equip Muslim women with the knowledge and skills needed to navigate the field. (Harvard, 2015b, para. 12)

According to a *Global News* article, of the site's visitors, "an estimated 70 per cent are millennials and gen Z ages 15 to 32" (Henao, 2020, para. 23). Since some website visitors are girls, the name '*Muslim Girl*' may be appropriate. However, the full name of the website as it shows up in Google searches is '*Muslim Girl: Muslim Women Talk Back*'. Therefore, this full name does account for the age spectrum of the website's audience. The shortened version '*Muslim Girl*' has been used for shorthand in this writing, but this shorthand is not a general endorsement of using the word 'girls' to describe adult women, which infantilizes women and undermines their agency and freedom.

### ***Rationale for Choosing MuslimGirl.com***

This section gives an overview of how and why the *Muslim Girl* platform was chosen for this study.

**Other Platforms Considered.** Three other websites were considered alongside *Muslim Girl*; these platforms are described below, along with the reasons why they did not fit in well with this research project.

***Muslimah Bloggers.*** This online platform assists and encourages Muslim women from across the world as they pursue their blogging aspirations (Muslimah Bloggers, n.d.b). Some of the blog's main content categories include: Islamic reflection, lifestyle, crafts, reviews, blogging and parenting, which are not aligned with my project's focus on advocacy-oriented blogging (Muslimah Bloggers, n.d.a). Muslimah Bloggers supports Muslim women in blogging, but it is not specifically a space for activism-focused, equity-seeking blogging. Also, the blog is not searchable and so does not lend itself to searching for posts about particular topics, like feminism.

***Muslim Women Connect.***

"Muslim Women Connect (MWC) is a UK-wide organization that supports Muslim women to overcome personal, institutional and societal barriers to career success and fulfillment. Through community-building programmes, events, partnerships and research, Muslim Women Connect: encourages, inspires and up-skills Muslim women, provides a supportive network of Muslim women and informs and influences decision makers in education, workplaces and government." (Muslim Women Connect, n.d., paras. 1–2)

This blog is neither searchable nor is it sorted into categories. It is also not North-America focused, so it falls out of the geographical scope of this research. Moreover, this platform focuses on networking and professional development, which although important topics to address, are not the focus of my project.

**Canadian Council of Muslim Women (CCMW).** Finally, the third platform that I considered was the position papers' section of the CCMW (Canadian Council of Muslim Women, n.d.a). CCMW seeks:

to affirm the identities of Canadian Muslim women and promote their lived experiences through community engagement, public policy, stakeholder engagement and amplified awareness of the social injustices that Muslim women and girls endure in Canada, while advocating for their diverse needs. (Canadian Council of Muslim Women, n.d.b, para. 1)

CCMW has position papers on topics like: diversity, religious accommodation, veiling, congregational prayers at schools, violence against women, polygamy and more (Canadian Council of Muslim Women, n.d.a). While this website does cater to the Canadian/North American context that I am interested in, my main concern is that its position papers come from an organization, rather than an individual blogger. The nature of position papers means that they go through greater vetting as well as more stringent gate-keeping and tone-policing than blogs that are associated with an individual, and so they may be more curtailed in the stance they take on various issues. These characteristics of CCMW make it a notably different environment than the *Muslim Girl* blogs. Nonetheless, my research is grounded in some of the topics that CCMW addresses. Therefore, my research findings may be of interest to researchers and staff associated with CCMW, who may find this analysis of North American Muslim women's experiences useful. This possible avenue for knowledge dissemination is further described in a subsequent section of this chapter which details the potential audiences for my research findings.

**Why MuslimGirl.com?** Having explored the above options, I chose *Muslim Girl* because of its wide reach and because it gives voice to a range of Muslim bloggers. Rather than being authored by a single person, *Muslim Girl* features several bloggers. This website was chosen partially because it hosts multiple bloggers whose writing attempts to enact advocacy that is frequently rooted in Islam. The *Muslim Girl* website is also suitable because it is written by

Muslim women, and largely for Muslim women. What remains unique about Muslim Girl is also that they have a strong social media presence but also a regularly updated website.

While countless other websites and social media accounts offer similar content, to ensure this project remained manageable, I focused on one website, more as a case study, rather than a comprehensive overview of digital content that falls in the same category. I adopted an internally comparative lens in my analysis, as the blogs on this platform were compared to each other for the narratives that they espouse. This approach sheds light on the commonalities and differences across the blogs, while holding all other variables in terms of the website type, its reach and its audience the same.

In addition to its blogs which are the focus of this study, *Muslim Girl* has a notable social media presence. As of June 26, 2023, it had 196,000 followers on Facebook, 42,900 on Twitter, 352,000 on Instagram, 98,100 on TikTok and 4,550 subscribers on YouTube. Indicating the global recognition that it has garnered, this website received over two million visits in 2019 alone (Henao, 2020). Its founder, Amani Al-Khatahtbeh claims that “the site ‘is the biggest English-language online platform for Muslim women voices’” (Henao, 2020, para. 5). *Muslim Girl’s* influence is also evident in its collaborations with note-worthy organizations like ORLY and the Malala Fund (Henao, 2020).

Furthermore, Al-Khatahtbeh’s achievements have been recognized by *Forbes*, as she was included in their “30 Under 30” list (Hamed, 2017c). Al-Khatahtbeh also wrote a book called *Muslim Girl: A Coming of Age* that was selected as a New York Times Editors' Choice in 2016 (Simon & Schuster, n.d.). In this book, she shares her personal experiences as a young Muslim woman in the post 9/11 climate, amidst ongoing war on terror discourses and in an era of casual racism that has been emboldened during and since the Trump administration (Simon & Schuster, n.d.). The book has received positive feedback, with a rating of 4.5 out of 5 on Amazon and 81% of Google users ‘liking’ the book (Simon & Schuster, n.d.). A significant portion of Al-Khatahtbeh’s propulsion to fame, as evidenced by her accomplishments listed

above, is attributable to her work on *Muslim Girl*. These aforementioned achievements are a testament to the wide-ranging influence and broad reach of the *Muslim Girl* platform, making it an appropriate platform to study for this project.

### ***Methodological Framework***

Examining the pros and cons of one's own research methods, and explaining how the pros outweigh the cons are hallmarks of quality research (King, 2010). Ensuring that one's ethical framework and considerations are transparent also helps improve feminist research overall (McCormick, 2012). With that in mind, the next several sections on the methodological framework describe my approach to research and the ethical nuances that shape this research. Then I articulate my positionality, including a reflection on my positioning within academia and in relation to the blogs that I analyze. After that, I take a closer look at the role of emotions in my research in light of how feminist objectivity disrupts positivistic notions of high quality research. Next, I explain why humility and reflexivity are central to my project. Subsequently, I share some insights on the necessity of an advocacy-oriented approach to research that is sensitive to power dynamics and that acknowledges the relationship between knowledge creation and activism. Finally, I address the need for accountability to researched communities and how such accountability is reflected in this project, for example by guarding against co-optation of research findings.

**Overall Approach.** I conducted a thematic analysis of certain blogs on the *Muslim Girl* website. First, I looked at all the blog titles that show up when searching for 'feminism' on this website. Then, all the 140 blogs in this search result were analyzed for the narratives and discourses that they partake in. Below are some of the top results in order of their appearance in the search results; this list is a small sampling of the titles of the blog posts that I analyzed:

- "Why White Feminism is Problematic for Muslim Women"
- "How Feminism and Sexual Politics are Weaponized Against the Muslim Community"
- "Muslim Women Don't Need Saving... Except from White Feminism"

- “Beyond Feminism: Women’s Rights in the Quran and Why I Chose to be a Muslim”
- “How France is Hiding Islamophobia Behind Opportunistic Feminism”
- “Here’s How I Found My Way to Feminism”
- “What Feminism Means to Me”
- “Check Out What the Muslim Girl Army Has to Say About Feminism”
- “Check Out This Conversation Between Muslim Girls on Modesty, Feminism, and Faith”
- “Feminism: I’m Not Your Stereotype”
- “The Problem with White Feminism in the Women’s March”
- “Muslim Women and the F-Word - Feminism”

The full list of blogs that were analyzed is detailed in the References section of this thesis.

After filtering the results by the keyword search ‘feminism’, I read all the blogs’ titles to determine if there are words that appear frequently across the titles. Reading the blogs’ titles at this stage provided early insights into the themes that may emerge when the blogs were analyzed. Once the titles were reviewed, I read through each blog one at a time and made a note of main themes that emerged and the key points that each blog made. This step was done for all 140 blogs that showed up in the search. After that, I reviewed the common themes that emerged in multiple blogs, in order to better understand how these themes are presented across blogs and for each theme, if there are similar arguments being made across the blogs.

To understand how the various blogs speak to each other, I examined how the same themes were sometimes addressed differently across the blogs. As I went through each blog individually, overarching themes began to emerge. At that point, I went back to the blogs that addressed common themes to do a deeper analysis of points of agreement and divergence and to study how the blogs build on each other’s arguments. After this reflection on the ways in which the blogs overlap and diverge, I wove in academic literature to understand how the blogs engage with, challenge or support scholarly research.

In other words, my content analysis adopted an inductive process that is entrenched in a grounded theory approach, which suggests that the data should inform the conclusions arrived at i.e. theories should be rooted in evidence (King, 2010). Aligned with this approach, data collection and early analysis took place in tandem (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009). In line with a grounded theory model, I began data analysis with open coding to first develop initial themes (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009). After this open coding, I coded in a more focused manner, by examining the initial themes generated and their relationship with each other, and by connecting these themes to existing feminist scholarship (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009).

My approach to data analysis stems from an understanding of digital texts like the *Muslim Girl* blogs as being embedded in and informing prevailing understandings of feminism, womanhood, piety, agency, and belonging. Rather than being isolated expressions of one's opinion, these texts are key sites for engaging with the narratives about Islam and feminism that are proliferated in feminist spaces, through state apparatus and in mainstream media. In this regard, critical discourse analysis enables a closer examination of the *Muslim Girl* blogs, along with a consideration of how this content is shared, for whom and for what purposes. Such an analytical framework positions *Muslim Girl* as not just a platform for feminist blogging, but also a discursive arena for contesting hegemonic discourses and power dynamics.

***A Critical Look at the Term Feminism.*** Given how the search was conducted, the results do not capture all the blogs that address gender equality i.e. the blogs that mention gender equality or similar words but not feminism would not be included. There are many adjectives like fairness, humanity, equality, equity, justice and others that allude to feminist principles. However, it was not methodologically possible to run searches for all these adjectives. Therefore, the focus was narrowed to "feminism" to make the study feasible for the time available. It would be ideal to analyze all the blogs for their engagement with feminist discourses, but given that there are about 4999 blogs on the site (as of May 22, 2025), this was

not realistic for this project. Although important, an exploration of how alternative discourses of gender equality are advanced by possibly using different terms fell out of the scope of this study.

Narrowing down the search results based on the word 'feminism' is an example of the strategic essentialism that was necessary for this work. Strategic essentialism argues that "in any specific analysis it is necessary to select a number of categories or establishing anchor points as a strategic choice" (McCall, 2005; Ludvig, 2006; Phoenix, 2006; Yuval-Davis, 2006, as cited in Christensen & Jensen, 2012, p. 112). Strategic essentialism is important because it "makes it possible to focus on the categories that are deemed most important for a specific research question at a specific time" (Christensen & Jensen, 2012, p. 112).

Searching for the word 'feminism' on *Muslim Girl* yielded blogs that engage with the term feminism, but are not all necessarily supportive of this term. This keyword search gave results that also critique and disavow the label of feminism, such as some of the blog titles below:

- "Why White Feminism is Problematic for Muslim Women"
- "How Feminism and Sexual Politics are Weaponized Against the Muslim Community"
- "Muslim Women Don't Need Saving... Except from White Feminism"
- "Beyond Feminism: Women's Rights in the Quran and Why I Chose to be a Muslim"
- "How France is Hiding Islamophobia Behind Opportunistic Feminism"
- "Feminism: I'm Not Your Stereotype"
- "The Problem with White Feminism in the Women's March"

In this way, the search results included blogs that tackle feminism as a concept, but not uncritically and not always supportively. These blogs illustrate how discourses about gender equality do not always adopt the term feminism, even when they interact with feminism as a concept. Indeed, the findings of this study include blogs which confront exclusionary forms of feminism, so it can be argued that the results adequately capture the dominant narratives about feminism on this platform, which include both support of and opposition to feminist language.

***Paying Attention to Different Perspectives Across the Blogs.*** There are two note-worthy areas of difference that emerged when analyzing the blogs: sectarian differences within Islam and anti-Muslim racism which is experienced differently depending on individual identity and ethnicity and within varying contexts of national sentiment and policies.

To address the former point regarding sectarian differences, I looked at literature that attends to the experiences of Muslim women from minority sects, such as Shia Muslim women. I drew on this body of scholarship in order to avoid erasing intra-religious differences or inadvertently painting the experiences of Muslim women from the majority Sunni sect as the standard. As indicated by blogs that attend to differences amongst Sunni, Shia and other sects, *Muslim Girl* is also sensitive to sectarian differences within Islam. In short, this project aimed to contest Sunni-as-default assumptions when studying Muslim communities.

As for anti-Muslim racism, there is a vast body of scholarly work on this topic and on Islamophobia that has guided my thinking on this front. Similarly, the blogs include the often-overlooked perspectives of Black Muslim women which has helped ensure that in this study, Muslim women's experiences are not universalized or associated with a particular ethnicity to the exclusion of others. This attention to the diversity in Muslim women's experiences has also ensured that the intersections of gender, race and Islam are taken into account. These intersecting influences are explored in greater detail later on in this writing.

**Research Steps.** This section explains the steps involved in my data collection, analysis and thesis compilation processes.

***Initial Data Collection.***

1. To begin the data collection, I first created a list in Excel that noted each blog's URL, title, date of publication and blog author.
2. Then I sorted the spreadsheet by date of publication, so the blogs were sorted from most to least recent.

3. Next, I gave each blog an article number. These article numbers allowed me to easily cite the blogs as I worked through the data collection, analysis and initial writing.
4. There were a small number of duplicate blogs which had the same content but had different titles and URLs. I removed these duplicates as they became apparent.
5. In my Excel sheet, I added a Notes section to make miscellaneous notes about the blogs. This section was rarely used but was helpful to include nonetheless.

This stage was fairly quick and was completed primarily in January 2023.

***Data Collection and Initial Data Analysis.***

1. First round of coding: I read each blog title, and then read each blog and made a note of the key points that stood out to me. This round was done for all 140 blogs.
2. Second round of coding: I read the key points I had noted down for each blog in the first round of coding and then pared down these points further to create more concise summaries.
3. Third round of coding: Next, I categorized and sorted the blog summaries into the overarching themes that they fit best under. This stage involved recognizing common themes across blogs and then naming and grouping related themes. Here, I created different documents for each broad theme that recurs across blogs. The initial themes that emerged, in increasing order of prevalence based on the approximate word count for each theme, were as follows:

- (a) *About Muslim Girl*
- (b) Queerness
- (c) Testimonials (from bloggers, contributors and interviewees)
- (d) Muslim masculinities
- (e) Race
- (f) Inspiring historical figures in Islam
- (g) Quran, Hadith and Sunnah

- (h) Islamophobia
- (i) Colonialism and imperialism
- (j) Feminism redefined
- (k) Islam reimagined
- (l) Muslim women's experiences
- (m) Media and representations
- (n) Hijab
- (o) Contemporary inspiring icons

Over the three rounds of coding, the initial codes were reviewed and subsequently sorted thematically. Coming up with and sorting blog summaries into these above-mentioned emerging themes illustrates how data collection and analysis overlapped during the third round of coding.

Even in the data collection stage, I had to constantly choose what sections to include from each blog, what to leave out, what was salient and what could be trimmed down. This process particularly sensitized me to the fact that there is no escaping some extent of individual choice and subjectivity in such research. This inevitability of selectiveness holds true for the data analysis as well as for how the chapters are written and organized, which is outlined at the end of this chapter. The data collection and initial analysis, including all three rounds of coding, took about three months, from February to April 2023.

***Data Analysis and Initial Writing.*** While themes started to emerge inductively during the data collection and initial analysis, it was at this stage that I paid closer attention to how these themes relate to my research questions. This stage began with me rewording the summaries into my own words based on my understanding of them. After data collection, I needed to sometimes go back to drafts from the first and second rounds of coding in order to confirm and verify quotes. For this reason, it was helpful to have older drafts saved.

Around blog # 85, I began to approach a point of saturation. At this point, repeated themes became more obvious, even as the particular details within each theme changed across blogs, sometimes based on the year of publication of the blogs. Since I was well past the half-way point i.e. more than half the blogs had been analyzed, it is not surprising that themes were becoming repetitive and that I was seeing patterns and consistencies across the blogs. Another turning point was from blog # 113 onwards, where I became even more closely attuned to themes that were emerging across multiple blogs, including the ways in which some blogs reinforced other blogs that spoke of the same theme. During this process, sub-themes and links between themes became evident as I became more familiar with the data. The initial analysis stage also involved using the research question as a way to structure and order the themes and the thesis itself. Since this stage involved rewriting much of the content, it took about four months, from May to August 2023.

### ***Writing and Editing.***

Overall, the writing and editing process began in September 2023 and ran till July 2024, with the first half of 2024 featuring major revisions and edits to the thesis based on feedback received on the first draft. Below is an overview of this stage, with the recognition that the writing and editing often overlapped.

1. Creating an Outline: As I began to consider potential outlines for how to organize my thesis, I went back to my research questions. There were the obvious sections that would be included i.e. the introduction, theory, methodology and conclusion. Based on the themes that emerged, I dedicated a chapter to the connection between Islamic feminism and *Muslim Girl*. Next, I included a chapter on the various strategies for arriving at feminist understandings of Islam, which centrally addresses my research question. To contextualize the responses to my research questions, I decided to add three more chapters. One chapter pays attention to the various intersecting factors shaping Muslim women's experiences. The next chapter examines the various forms of critique and

resistance that surface in *Muslim Girl*. Then, the penultimate chapter makes an argument for expanding conceptualizations of feminism to be more inclusive.

2. **Writing the Chapters:** To avoid feeling overwhelmed but also to remain accountable to myself, I listed out the chapters to be completed and gave myself a deadline of when to complete the entire first draft of the thesis. Then, I sorted the themes that emerged from the blogs' analysis into the chapters I envisioned writing. This categorization gave me an estimate of how much content I would need to work through for each chapter. Based on this estimate, I set deadlines for myself for completing each chapter. I also built in a buffer of a few days for each chapter, recognizing that it would be practically impossible for me to stick to the same schedule each day. In hindsight, this buffer was crucial because it meant I was not anxious or feeling burnt out if I was a few days behind on writing any of the chapters. The buffer of a few extra days also helped me manage other responsibilities, such as full-time work, teaching a course, being a teaching assistant and a research assistant, presenting at conferences, delivering lectures, personal and social commitments, traveling and taking some down-time.
4. **Revising Chapters:** I built in time to revise each chapter once I was done writing, as well as time to read through the entire first draft of the thesis once it was ready. As part of the revisions, I went back to my data files and noted how frequently each blog was referenced in the thesis. This process gave me an idea of which blogs were exceptionally central to my research, based on how often I drew on them for my analysis. This revision yielded the below blogs that were most frequently drawn upon in the first draft of this thesis, and the approximate number of times they have been referenced in this writing:
  - (a) "11 Female Icons From Islamic History" - 56 references
  - (b) "Check Out What the Muslim Girl Army Has to Say About Feminism" - 55 references

- (c) “10 Badass Reasons Muslim Women Are Superheroes” - 49 references
- (d) “18 Muslim Women to Watch in 2018” - 44 references
- (e) “A Much Needed Conversation on Islamophobia and Muslim Women” - 40 references
- (f) “Muslim Feminists Respond: The Hypocrisy of the Male-Centric Narrative” - 40 references
- (g) “Here's How We Are Redefining the F-Word” - 38 references
- (h) “What is Gendered Islamophobia? Sidrah Ahmad Explains” - 37 references
- (i) “Feminism, Orientalism, Asra Nomani, and the Hijab: An Open Letter” - 36 references

While this list features the most commonly cited blogs in this project, it offers only a sampling of some emergent themes in the data. Other *Muslim Girl* blogs, although not as frequently cited, nonetheless offer important commentary on key themes. On the other hand, there were about 14 blogs that were coded and analyzed but not included in the final writing. These blogs were not referenced because salient themes pertaining to the research questions did not emerge from their content.

**Limitations.** While coding, this research needed to adopt some measure of strategic essentialism, which entails taking up only a particular set of categories to analyze, to make one’s study manageable and realistic (Christensen & Jensen, 2012). Research suggests that strategic essentialism may be necessary when mobilizing for feminist aims (Hesse-Biber, 2012). Such strategic essentialism became particularly salient in subsequent stages of coding as I began to draw thematic connections across the blogs. Although necessary, strategic essentialism led to some limitations in this research that are noted below.

To begin with, strategic essentialism is also evident in that the blogs studied were not randomly chosen. The rationale for choosing the *Muslim Girl* platform, to the exclusion of other contenders, has been described in an earlier section of this chapter. Given that only one

platform has been examined, this study is not comparative in nature. Even during data analysis, the scope had to be limited to the content within the *Muslim Girl* webpage for each blog, to the exclusion of articles and material that were linked out to from the blogs. This restriction of the scope was a measure of strategic essentialism that facilitated a focus on the blog content itself (Christensen & Jensen, 2012).

Secondly, in order to get on with data collection and analysis, I had to freeze the results at one point. Specifically, I had to create a spreadsheet of the eligible blog title results that showed up at one point in time. Freezing the results in this way means that subsequent blogs that may show up for my criteria are not included. However, given that the latest blogs are from 2022, this limitation is somewhat mitigated by the relative newness of the content.

Another limiting yet required form of strategic essentialism has been that the videos and images associated with some blogs were not analyzed. For example, some blogs had embedded tweets from Muslim Women's Day. The videos and audios in these tweets were not studied, but the text was examined. Given that this omission occurred in just a few blogs since only a small number of blogs had notable audio-visual content and since even in those blogs, the textual content was analyzed, I am fairly confident that the research findings are representative of those blogs overall. Moreover, during the writing and revision process, three blogs' links were no longer live. To accommodate for these missing links, the content from these blogs were removed from the analysis.

Furthermore, the qualitative nature of this data analysis means that its findings have limited applicability to other contexts. While the findings are contingent on the context of this study and hence are not widely generalizable, they do offer an in-depth analysis of the *Muslim Girl* platform itself, including extensive anecdotal data that has been referenced throughout this writing. Instead of widespread applicability or comparability, the strength of this study lies in its comprehensive examination of and commentary on one particular platform and the narratives that it engages with. While the findings do not lend themselves to extrapolation, there is ample

opportunity to replicate the study in other contexts, such as through the analysis of other similar digital platforms.

Last but not least, another limitation of *Muslim Girl* is that it is in English only, with currently no option to translate the content to other languages. Consequently, despite its global reach, the platform does not resonate with Muslim girls and women who do not speak the language. Coupled with my own proficiency for academic writing being limited to English, the focus on English-speaking audiences in this research cannot be denied. However, given that this project foregrounds the experiences of North American Muslim women and since English is widely spoken in this region, limiting the study to a digital platform that is in English only is logical.

**Ethics.** Ethical responsibility and integrity are foundational to feminist research (McCormick, 2012). In order for research to be valid and trustworthy, it is important to take the researcher's ethical bearings into account (Hesse-Biber, 2012). Instead of seeing ethics as an item to check off, what's needed is a renewed understanding of ethics as methods itself (Clark-Parsons & Lingel, 2020). From planning the project to sharing results, all methodological choices made by a researcher have ethical implications (Clark-Parsons & Lingel, 2020). Therefore, research requires ethical checkpoints all along the way (Clark-Parsons & Lingel, 2020). Ethics thus remained an ongoing consideration throughout my research project as I sought to ensure that ethical checks and balances were integrated into every stage of my work, from data collection, to analysis, to future presentation of findings.

**Positionality.** Given the impact of their positionality on their work, researchers must honestly introspect their own motivations for studying particular topics (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009). I am a cis-gendered Muslim, Pakistani-Canadian woman, born and raised in the Middle East. Hailing from a middle class background, I was a second generation immigrant in the Middle East and am a first generation immigrant in Canada.

Articulating my positionality and investment in this research challenges the idea that research is wholly objective, rather it emerges from a particular viewpoint (Hesse-Biber, 2012). In fact, feminist theorists have long challenged assumptions that high quality scholarship demands objective distance or that such supposedly objective scholarship is intrinsically superior to the work of scholars who are theologically committed to what they study (Mubarak, 2021). Instead, feminist reflexivity encourages researchers to “explore how their theoretical positions and biographies shape what they choose to be studied and their approach to studying it” (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012, p. 560, as cited in Clark-Parsons & Lingel, 2020, p. 3; Pillow, 2003). In the context of scholarship on feminist Quranic interpretations and Islamic feminisms, questioning whether there is even a place in academia for scholars with a theological commitment to their areas of study can strengthen hegemonic assumptions about the apparent neutrality of academia (Mubarak, 2021). On the other hand, it is vital to interrogate motivations for scholarship that do not arise from one’s own investment in research findings and their implications (Mubarak, 2021).

By intentionally using and retaining Islamically grounded salutations and honorifics such as SAW and PBUH i.e. Peace Be Upon Him, Hazrat, which is meant to honor a person and SWT, which denotes reverence to Allah, I pay homage to my own investment in this research. Using these terms to denote certain Islamic figures is meant as a sign of respect and is an indication of my own religious beliefs too. This insider positioning means that my identity and lived experiences provide some intuition that shapes my interpretations and analysis (Bernal, 1998, as cited in Pillow, 2003). As a member of the community that I study, I come to this work with a personal connection and a desire to critique for the sake of improvement in a way that “cares for the subject” (Schuurman & Pratt, 2002, as cited in TallBear, 2014, p. 3). However, this insider status does not erase differences between myself and the bloggers whose work I study, so this research does not seek to collapse that distinction (Pillow, 2003). Having this close connection to the community I study also does not automatically mean that there is no risk of

misrepresentation, thus reinforcing the need for ethical checkpoints throughout the research process (Pillow, 2003).

Also on the topic of positionality, as a PhD student hoping to venture into academia, it is relevant to acknowledge the intersecting struggles that Muslim women scholars face as they navigate marginalization along with privilege as both, feminists and scholars (Hammer & Spielhaus, 2013; Pillow, 2003). These intersectional experiences illustrate how privilege is not an isolated status, rather it relies on complex systemic power imbalances for its existence (Vimalassery et al., 2016, as cited in Nath & Allen, 2022).

**Drawing on Black and Indigenous Feminist Literature.** Given the emancipatory focus of this project's topic, this research is broadly linked to Black and Indigenous activism, as has been alluded to earlier in the theoretical framework section of this chapter. One obvious connection between such scholarship and this research is the under-studied experiences of Black and Indigenous Muslims. Even beyond that though, feminist futures seek to not only dismantle heteropatriarchy and Islamophobia, but also white supremacy, capitalism, anti-Black racism and settler colonialism (Maynard & Simpson, 2020). As Simpson notes, "it is not either/or, it is *and*" when it comes to relational solidarity across communities that face systemic marginalization (Maynard & Simpson, 2020, p. 81). In this regard, it has been helpful to draw on Black and Indigenous feminist writing that pays attention to the commonalities but also the specificities of racism and settler colonialism. Furthermore, this body of literature provides insights on how the knowledge production and activism of marginalized communities can inform mobilization against Islamophobia.

In particular, this scholarship has facilitated scrutiny of how I am caught up in white settler colonial logics in Canada and in academia (Patel, 2022a). My experience as a racialized, Muslim immigrant woman demands a consideration of complicity and "horizontal placements in entanglements of various structures of violence" like settler colonialism (Patel, 2022a, p. 218). Being embedded in multiple, overlapping systems of domination speaks to how the complexity

of “social location (e.g., migration status, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, class, caste, education) mediates settler privileges and advantages” (Jafri, 2012, as cited in Nath & Allen, 2022, p. 212).

Indigenous and Black research methodologies have also informed my work because they underscore the importance of acknowledging positionality. As Smith (1999, p. 45) notes, “colonized peoples share a language of colonization, share knowledge about their colonizers, and, in terms of a political project, share the same struggle for decolonization” (as cited in Fisher, 2015, p. 467). Adding to this and drawing on bell hooks’ (1996) idea of the oppositional gaze, my stance in research aims to “return the gaze” (TallBear, 2014, p. 4). As hooks (1996) explains, the oppositional gaze is a form of defiance, rooted in the resistance of colonized black communities and in the desire to disrupt prevailing misconceptions and reductive representations. The oppositional gaze seeks to take back the narrative about oneself and one’s community, and to advance alternative, nuanced representations of those who have long been stereotyped (hooks, 1996). By confronting such caricatured depictions, the oppositional gaze enables historically marginalized groups to challenge the systems of domination that subjugate them (hooks, 1996). This notion of resisting and returning the gaze resonates with me, given the extensive scrutiny that Muslim women face in the media, in policy-making and in public sentiment (hooks, 1996).

**Decolonizing Academia.** The limitations of academia are evident in its dissonance with decolonizing temporalities and its inability to fundamentally reject settler colonialism (Nath & Allen, 2022). To elaborate, academic environments adhere to various aspects of settler colonial logics and relationality, such as:

hierarchical, siloed working environments and relationships; tightly controlled and “sanitized” communications; the anticipation of resistance, hence the self-policing of one’s work from being “too” disruptive; pressures of leadership-imposed timelines and political mandates; paternalistic relationships in front-line work; extractive engagement

and intentional absences of full consultation with Indigenous people; and a broader commitment to protect government from “risk”. (Nath & Allen, 2022, p. 215)

In my research, confronting settler logics in academia has looked like taking intentional pauses, acknowledging the feelings that arise when confronting individual and systemic complicity, remaining humble and open to learning, and foregrounding the various strategies of resistance employed by those facing systemic violence (Patel, 2022a). Such practices can be difficult and uncomfortable but are necessary and they make feminist research richer (Patel, 2022a).

Similarly, the blogs I study also critique colonial violence, thus opening up possibilities about allyship with Indigenous mobilization that has long been challenging white settler colonialism (Patel, 2022a). One particularly useful Indigenous concept is that:

“regenerative refusals” by Indigenous people “recognize violence and pain, but not to make that the center of indigenous identity; rather, these refusals highlight the importance of envisioning and enacting different futures that are suffused with more love, humor, connection, and freedom”. These regenerative refusals “allow for a blooming of desires beyond the strictures of settler colonialism that pretends to be eternal and unchangeable”. Love, humor, connections, freedom, working toward different futures than the ones settler state has written for them are all sovereign practices of refusal. (Arvin, 2019, p. 228, as cited in Patel, 2022a, p. 220)

This refusal of Indigenous communities to give in to pain-centered narratives that deny the vitality and diversity of their experiences offers a way to think about how Muslim women’s feminist articulations also similarly resist the discursive violence of uni-dimensional representations of their lives (Patel, 2022b). In this regard, the *Muslim Girl* blogs illustrate how “culture, norms, attitudes, and reward, recognition, and penalty – are not absolute”; they are challenged and can be undermined (Batliwala, 2013, as cited in Nath & Allen, 2022, p. 202). In

other words, these systems “are marked by spaces of ‘tension, resistance, subversion and sabotage” (Batiwala, 2013, p. 200, as cited in Nath & Allen, 2022, p. 202).

With that, the next section underscores how the qualitative bent of this study disrupts discourses in knowledge production that privilege quantitative research as being more accurate and scientific.

**Countering Positivism and Centering Emotions in Research.** While quantitative research is often more highly valued, pitting qualitative and quantitative research against each other ignores how both can collaboratively yield knowledge (Fraser & MacDougall, 2017). Feminist research challenges objectivity as an aspiration and questions the very possibility of being completely objective. The qualitative nature of my methods draws on this feminist tradition of disputing notions of neutrality, objectivity and universally applicable findings (TallBear, 2014). Instead, I draw upon the idea of a “feminist objectivity” which favors situated, relational knowledge and highlights the partiality of knowledge, its subjective nature and the power dynamics that inform knowledge production (Hesse-Biber, 2012, p. 11).

Similarly, feminist standpoint theory notes that “all forms of knowledge are socially, politically, and historically situated” (Collins, 2000, Haraway, 1988, Hartstock, 1990, Smith, 1990, as cited in Clark-Parsons & Lingel, 2020, p. 7). Researchers make subjective calls in the problems studied, the hypotheses and research designs formulated and the ways in which data is collected, analyzed and presented (Hesse-Biber, 2012). Being mindful of how subjectivity and personal investment is imbued in research milestones is another facet of qualitative research that has guided my study.

Illustrating the hegemonic prioritization of quantitative ways of knowing, emotions have long been viewed with skepticism in social research (Carroll, 2012). Knowledge rooted in emotionality is often positioned as being contrary to rationality, with the latter being accorded greater value (Carroll, 2012). However, “embodied, experiential and emotional ways of knowing pre-empt, coexist with and inform what is labelled ‘objective’ knowledge” (Stanley & Wise, 1983,

as cited in Carroll, 2012, p. 556). Indeed, research is more than just an intellectual endeavor, it is also felt deeply; feminist research and consciousness is thus guided by experience and feelings (Carroll, 2012; Dickson-Swift et al., 2009; Hesse-Biber, 2012).

The emotion-laden aspect of research has prompted me to remain attentive to my own emotional journey throughout the project. In practice, this has translated to rejecting the impulse to push emotions away or to see them as contaminating research. Conversely, I sat with and felt through the emotions that arose as I collected and analyzed data and wrote the thesis. At varying points, this included feelings of anger, hope, dejection, being overwhelmed, even crying and having to sometimes take unplanned breaks. Reflecting on these experiences has helped me understand what these emotions were trying to tell me and what that indicates about my own investments in this work.

Above all, this emotional journey has reiterated that this work matters to me on a personal and professional level and that it is crucial to combat the fear that feelings taint the work. Another way that emotions have been centered in this project is by retaining some testimonials from the blogs verbatim, which was an emotionally laden choice to make. Keeping some words in as is allowed the voices of not just the bloggers, but also the women and girls that they interviewed to shine through with limited mediation. Moreover, the qualitative nature of this study has yielded thick descriptions, rich data, in-depth reflections and comprehensive understandings of relevant narratives in ways that account for the complex, dynamic and overlapping factors shaping human behavior.

**Humility.** The varying positionalities that Muslim women and feminist scholars occupy underline complex power dynamics that demand humility and reflexivity when studying issues that impact Muslim women. Given that feminism “is a politically prescriptive project” that aims to emancipate and thus change the lives of those perceived as oppressed, it is vital to ask whether feminists seriously examine those ways of life that they seek to change and that are seen as

being oppressive in the first place (Mahmood, 2005, p. 197). As Mahmood (2005, pp. 196–197) eloquently asks:

Do my political visions ever run up against the responsibility that I incur for the destruction of life forms so that “unenlightened” women may be taught to live more freely? Do I even fully comprehend the forms of life that I want so passionately to remake? Would an intimate knowledge of lifeworlds distinct from mine ever lead me to question my own certainty about what I prescribe as a superior way of life for others?

Such questions indicate the necessity of being somewhat skeptical about one’s own socio-political commitments, especially when such commitments come up against a closer understanding of others who do not subscribe to the same values (Mahmood, 2005). Arguably, a better understanding of the lives that feminism seeks to change may challenge the assumption that these lives are inherently oppressed and require transformation (Mahmood, 2005). This introspection calls for a deeper analysis of how liberation and empowerment are defined in feminist discourses.

To reiterate, enacting the feminist concept of solidarity requires navigating complicated, sometimes uncomfortable encounters with those who are othered (Mahmood, 2005). Navigating this terrain successfully requires humility and an awareness of the power dynamics and privileges that shape such encounters. Instead of trying to master a complete understanding of the other, approaching those modes of living that are seen as less than with humility open up the possibility of seeing these lives as perhaps willingly chosen (Mahmood, 2005). Such receptivity can bring one closer to understanding life choices that may seem unfathomable otherwise (Mahmood, 2005).

**Reflexivity.** Several scholars emphasize reflexivity as integral to critical feminist research (Clark-Parsons & Lingel, 2020; Hesse-Biber, 2012; Hidayatullah, 2014; Nelson, 2005; Pillow, 2003). Reflexivity allows researchers to better understand how their personal and professional positionality, their social locations as feminists and researchers, and their lived

experiences, activist commitments and worldviews impact their research interests, methodologies and findings (Hesse-Biber, 2012; Pillow, 2003).

Having previously noted my positionality and investment in this work and the attendant implications of privilege and subjugation is one key way that I wove reflexivity and “positional validity” into my project (Macbeth, 2001, p. 38, as cited in Pillow, 2003, p. 179). Positional validity is practiced by researchers who attempt “analyzing their own writing, reflexively discussing how their own accounts have been constructed” (Burr, 1995, p. 160, as cited in Pillow, 2003, p. 179). Reflexivity complicates the research project because it challenges linear conceptualizations of a researcher’s identity as being set in stone (Pillow, 2003). Instead, reflexivity demands recognition that the issues I speak to as a researcher, the context within which my analysis occurs and my own identity are ever-changing (Pillow, 2003).

Another way that reflexivity factored into my research is through my cautionary approach to this study and its findings. A healthy amount of skepticism and self-scrutiny about one’s own ideas and assumptions is necessary (Mahmood, 2005, as cited in Nelson, 2005). Such self-scrutiny requires staying open to the possibility that one’s study may yield results that defy or trouble one’s understanding of and loyalty to dearly held beliefs about what women and societies should aspire for (Mahmood, 2005, p. xii, as cited in Nelson, 2005). In this way, reflexivity allows one to navigate research results that may not align with one’s perspectives. Furthermore, adopting a cautious approach to reflexivity itself helps avoid overly simplifying research findings because it foregrounds the messiness of real lives that can, at times, make research uncomfortable (Pillow, 2003).

Moving on, by shedding light on how Muslim women present themselves and challenge stereotypical misrepresentations about themselves, this research prioritizes subjugated forms of knowledge (Clark-Parsons & Lingel, 2020). Such an orientation to research calls for reflexivity on my part because reflexive approaches favor research that produces “*situated knowledges*” (Haraway, 1991, chap. 8) from the ‘standpoint’ of women, traditional cultures, and other

marginalized subjects” (as cited in TallBear, 2014, p. 3). In turn, this orientation towards research requires foregrounding political activism and guarding research findings against exploitative co-optation, a point that is addressed in a subsequent section of this chapter that tackles praxis and advocacy (Pillow, 2003).

Moreover, reflexivity pays attention to the political dimensions of knowledge production, especially the privileges and vested interests that are embedded in systems of knowledge creation and dissemination (Pillow, 2003). Paying attention to such power dynamics requires interrogating who does the research, who is researched and under what conditions (Pillow, 2003). However, even with a reflexive approach, knowledge production remains always contested and is influenced by the subjectivities of the researcher and the readers (Pillow, 2003). Therefore, although reflexivity is a useful strategy, it also merits caution lest it reproduce hegemonic forms of knowledge creation. This attention to the conditions of knowledge production segues neatly into issues of power dynamics in research, which are addressed below.

**Research and Power.** Feminist research requires a comprehensive critique of systemic power relations, along with an underlying ethos geared towards social justice and progressive change (Klostermann et al., 2020). In particular, “critical theory is especially cognizant of the role that power plays in producing hegemonic knowledge” (Hesse-Biber, 2012, p. 14). In addition to critical theory, postmodernist feminist scholarship offers a useful analytical framework too. Postmodernist research advances political objectives and practices that seek transformation and disrupt hegemonic knowledge production (Hesse-Biber, 2012). Specifically, such scholarship demands paying attention to how mainstream knowledge building can be exclusionary and how power differentials can reify current inequities in academia (Hesse-Biber, 2012). With that in mind, my research has attempted to contest dominant stereotypes that are projected onto Muslim women to instead shed light on how they seek to represent themselves.

Additionally, when marginalized subjects are studied, it is crucial to guard against adding to their oppression (Clark-Parsons & Lingel, 2020). Critical theory purports the same and seeks to build knowledge in ways that meaningfully advance the emancipation of oppressed groups and the creation of equitable communities (Hesse-Biber, 2012; Maynard & Simpson, 2020). My research has adopted this approach by being sensitive to how research findings can support the understandings of Islamic feminism that are propagated by the *Muslim Girl* bloggers. A sensitivity to power dynamics has also driven home that for many Muslim women, this research is about far more than theory because such discourses can have lasting impacts in and beyond academia (Hidayatullah, 2014).

**Praxis and Advocacy.** Tying together the various facets of research ethics discussed so far, I now turn to how research impacts advocacy and praxis. The reflections below are rooted in a feminist research orientation that foregrounds awareness raising and accountability for the ethical consequences of one's work (McCormick, 2012).

As Wadud notes, "an idea is only as good as your capacity to be able to put it into implementation" (Ali, 2019, p. 72). Even though analytical labor differs from socio-political advocacy, both undeniably influence each other (Mahmood, 2005). In other words, activism and research go hand in hand and should inform each (Klostermann et al., 2020). Such an outlook widens the definition of an activist, to include "ordinary people who strive to change the social relationships around them to achieve some modicum of justice" (Kugle, 2010, p. 3, as cited in Alipour, 2015, p. 1746).

Taking this notion of praxis further, in this project I examine how the inequities that *Muslim Girl* discusses can spark feminist mobilization and grassroots activism (Fraser & MacDougall, 2017). This analysis not only highlights the links between academic endeavors and social justice advocacy, it also disrupts the inaccessibility of the academic ivory tower by helping democratize access to knowledge. This drawing of connections between academia and activism is also discussed by one *Muslim Girl* blogger whose master's research sought to better

understand Islamophobic violence due to the blogger's personal connection with several Muslim women who had been subjected to such violence and had been subsequently silenced (Niqabae, 2018). This blog exemplifies how Muslim women's resilience and the opportunity to share their experiences can fuel a researcher's passion for their work (Niqabae, 2018). This motivation has been true in my case as well. While this blog sought to build community with and for Muslim women who have experienced gendered violence, my research aims to amplify Muslim women's narratives (Niqabae, 2018).

In terms of knowledge sharing, feminist research should attend to how findings are publicized and presented in and beyond academia, as well as how they are disseminated for policy-making and activist ends (Fraser & MacDougall, 2017). As a result, I put considerable thought into how my research findings could be shared effectively in non-academic formats, such as a presentation and a blog, as well as through social media like TikTok and Instagram (Fraser & MacDougall, 2017). These creative forms of research dissemination are also reflected in *Muslim Girl* where the aforementioned blogger's academic research culminates into resources like toolkits that are accessible to the broader community and especially to her research participants (Niqabae, 2018).

Last but certainly not least, in thinking about praxis and advocacy, it is vital to establish solidarity-based relationships with activists across various marginalized groups, including Black and Indigenous communities (Maynard & Simpson, 2020). If these relationships are built in ways that respect each community's autonomy, such interlinkages can foster mutually beneficial resource-sharing (Maynard & Simpson, 2020).

**Accountability.** Underlying my research is a recognition of the communities to whom my work is accountable and whose lives it seeks to impact (Maynard & Simpson, 2020). This orientation draws from Indigenous frameworks that focus on relational accountability (Nath & Allen, 2022). Relationality is a fundamental principle of Indigenous research "that begins 'with an awareness of our proper relationships with the world we inhabit, and is conducted with

respect, responsibility, generosity, obligation and reciprocity” (Moreton-Robinson, 2017, p. 71, as cited in Nath & Allen, 2022, p. 213). This relational approach is central to my research project, especially in terms of how research findings would be shared.

On a similar note, being accountable for the ethical implications of one’s research demands asking who the research audience is and whose interests it serves (Mubarak, 2021). In the context of my work, the research audience mainly includes Muslim women in North American Muslim-minority contexts who seek to integrate their Islamic beliefs with their feminist inclinations. The audience includes Muslim girls and women who are looking for contemporary and historical examples of Muslim women that are exemplary feminist icons. My research is also geared towards racialized Muslim women in North America who are first or second-generation immigrants and who may be struggling with forging their own identities as they navigate various cultures and multiple claims to nationalities.

A secondary audience for this work includes feminist advocates, policy-makers and influencers who may benefit from analytical resources that explore counter-narratives about and by Muslim women, as they pertain to the intersections of Islam and feminism. Specifically, I am thinking about organizations such as the Canadian Council of Muslim Women, which “is an organization dedicated to the empowerment, equality and equity of all Muslim women in Canada” and has been described earlier in this chapter (Canadian Council of Muslim Women, n.d.b, para. 1).

Another such organization that may find value in this work is the National Council of Canadian Muslims (NCCM).

“Built from within the Canadian Muslim community, NCCM is a leading voice for Muslim civic engagement and the promotion of human rights. Working in partnership with grassroots communities, NCCM engages in professional activism and develops strategies in anti-discrimination, community education & outreach, media relations and public advocacy. As a long standing Canadian organization, NCCM has an exemplary

record of defending rights and liberties, promoting active citizenship and upholding Canadian pluralism.” (National Council of Canadian Muslims, n.d., paras. 1–2)

Next, my research can inform programming for organizations across Canada, such as the Vancouver-based initiative called Voices of Muslim Women. “Voices of Muslim Women is a Muslim women led organization that empowers ALL women and girls to become connected and informed leaders through educational and professional development opportunities” (Voices of Muslim Women, n.d., para. 1). Another similar organization that may find this research useful is the Winnipeg-based non-profit organization termed Canadian Muslim Women’s Institute. This organization works “towards empowering women to become healthy and contributing members of Canadian Society. This is done by understanding and focusing on the unique needs of the women, be it, newcomer women or long-time residents” (Canadian Muslim Women’s Institute, n.d., para. 1). Similarly, the Canadian Muslim Lawyers Association is another avenue for sharing my research findings. This association advances Canadian Muslims’ interests through networking platforms, educational opportunities and peer support mechanisms (Canadian Muslim Lawyers Association, n.d.).

Additionally, there are folks in my personal and professional network with connections to organizations that advocate for Muslims and for Muslim women specifically. After the completion of this project, I would reach out to these contacts to propose setting up knowledge-sharing mechanisms, such as a webinar, a poster, a position paper or a presentation to disseminate research findings as frequently and to as broad an audience as possible. Such presentation of my research findings would seek to mitigate the ways in which Muslim women’s experiences and struggles are glossed over, misunderstood, universalized and stereotyped (Abu-Lughod, 2013). Finally, it would also be worthwhile to connect with the *Muslim Girl* team to discuss opportunities for sharing the findings of this research through their platform, including the blogs as well as their social media channels.

**Contextualizing Research and Interpretations of Research Findings.** My study examines the narratives that *Muslim Girl* propagates about Islam and Muslim women. As Thomas (2005, p. 244) notes, “storytelling creates space for the ‘Other,’ or voices that have been excluded or erased, to be included in the dominant discourse” (as cited in King, 2010, p. 280). Even though all stories and their interpretations are impacted by preconceived notions, values and worldviews, stories still hold immense value (King, 2010). *Muslim Girl* echoes this stance since multiple blogs recount personal stories and reflections.

Secondly, religious scholars and institutions as well as their respective audiences are influenced by the contexts that they operate in (Karam, 2018). Therefore, paying attention to multifaceted global and local power dynamics, historical trajectories and socio-political forces that inform women’s lives is crucial to avoid the trope of the West saving Muslim women (Abu-Lughod, 2013). To do so, throughout this research I have remained mindful of how my findings, especially those regarding Muslim feminists’ internal critique of Muslim communities, need to be guarded against colonial and imperialist imperatives that perpetuate Islamophobia and gendered Islamophobia. In fact, safeguarding research findings against co-optation is a theme that this thesis returns to in chapters 5 and 6.

Complicating matters further, feminist activists in both secular and religious states are affected by neoliberalism and gendered racialization, which has exacerbated inequities (Rehman et al., 2020). These complex forces inform feminist mobilization strategies, which frequently operate in hostile environments where activists are often vilified, their causes dismissed and their safety threatened and violated (Tadros & Khan, 2018). Within this backdrop, using the language of rights can be effective because it resonates with those affected and is in alignment with their concerns and values (Elsadda, 2018). Calling upon human rights is also impactful because it speaks to and is legible in the domains of international human rights legislation and discourses; this legibility is important in cases where unfavorable local contexts necessitate resisting state actors (Elsadda, 2018).

Linking this human rights framework to this project, and a paramount consideration to conclude this section on, interpretations of the Quran and of Islamic injunctions inform the rights agenda in many local and international Muslim contexts. As a key tool for Muslim feminists in Muslim communities, egalitarian Quranic and Islamic interpretations are more than just a scholarly pursuit or a theoretical exercise. These interpretations impact the lives of countless Muslim women, a factor which informs the mighty weight of responsibility that accompanies the interpretive aspect of this research.

To summarize, this chapter has provided a comprehensive examination of the *Muslim Girl* platform and the overarching themes emerging from the research findings. This chapter also discussed the theoretical framework that underpins this study, starting with an exploration of Islamic feminism and the debates and barriers within this realm. The relevance of Black and Indigenous feminist scholarship for this study was then highlighted. Concepts such as Muslima theology and pious femininity were also examined for their pertinence to this research, followed by an analysis of how digitality and social media influence digital feminist activism. Then, the contributions of queer theory were reviewed, along with a consideration of how narratives about Islam and nationhood impact constructions of Muslim womanhood. This analysis focused on the positioning of Muslim women within discourses of belonging and citizenship.

The latter half of this chapter spelled out the methodological framework, the primary research objective, the main research questions, and the central argument of this thesis. The scope of the project was delineated before introducing the *Muslim Girl* website, its target audience, and the rationale for its selection for this project. Detailed descriptions of the research steps were then provided, which segued into a reflection on the diverse perspectives across the *Muslim Girls* blogs. The next few sections explored the careful approach to the use of feminism as a label, followed by a review of the limitations of this research methodology. After that, the various ethical facets of this project were thoroughly examined, with a focus on accounting for positionality, centering a decolonial and anti-positivist analytical lens and creating space for

humility, reflexivity and emotions in the research process. Then, the power imbalances in research and the attendant need to use research for advocacy and praxis were emphasized. Throughout these sections, Black and Indigenous feminist literature offered an orienting framework. Wrapping up this chapter, the need for contextualizing research findings and ensuring that their interpretations are not misappropriated was reiterated.

Before moving on to the next chapter, a brief overview of the structure of this thesis is warranted. The presentation of findings make up the lion's share of chapters 2 to 6, with the conclusion presented in chapter 7. Specifically, chapter 2 sets the stage for the research findings by demonstrating how *Muslim Girl* exemplifies a form of Islamic feminism in action. Then, chapter 3 addresses the main research question regarding the sources that *Muslim Girl* bloggers draw upon to assert religious authority and foreground feminist understandings of Islamic teachings. After that, chapter 4 delves into the secondary research question pertaining to the factors that influence how *Muslim Girl* bloggers engage with discourses about Islam. Subsequently, chapters 5 and 6 feature extensive discussion about the research findings. In particular, chapter 5 focuses on *Muslim Girl's* critiques of and resistance against hegemonic narratives about Islam and feminism. Then, chapter 6 builds on this critique by articulating the defining features of revamped, expansive and inclusive forms of feminism that *Muslim Girl* advocates for. To wrap up this thesis, the conclusion detailed in chapter 7 recaps the key takeaways from this study and the emerging topics that can inform future research in this realm.

## 2. Muslim Girl: A Manifestation of Islamic Feminism

Beginning with an analysis of critical issues and debates within Islamic feminism, this chapter illuminates how the *Muslim Girl* platform extends feminist praxis to account for Muslim women's lived experiences. At its core, Islamic feminism challenges conventional narratives about feminism as a Western import by asserting that feminism can be inherently rooted in Islam itself. This assertion prompts a deeper examination of how Muslim women negotiate Islam and feminist principles, crafting a pious femininity that bridges spiritual devotion with gender equity. Then, this chapter highlights the importance of accounting for positionality i.e. the social, cultural and political locations of Muslim women which influences how they draw on Islam as a source of personal and communal strength. This chapter then delves into the complexities of sectarianism, the individualization of Islamic practices and the evolving understandings of Islamic teachings that contemporary Muslim religious figures navigate. Embedded within this analysis is a closer look at the factors shaping Muslim women's roles as preachers and religious leaders, including their adoption of professionalization practices and the link between women preachers and feminist preaching. Then, the next few sections discuss Muslim women's pioneering efforts in knowledge production and religious leadership across the ages and leading up to the present day.

Next, this chapter critically examines how the legacies of colonialism, imperialism and ongoing settler colonialism shape not only contemporary perceptions of Islam and Muslims but also the landscape in which Islamic feminism operates. This section probes into not only the gendered nature of Islamophobia but also how Islamophobia intersects with national narratives in countries like America and Canada, as put forth by *Muslim Girl*. Finally, this chapter wraps up with a deeper dive into the diverse manifestations of Islamophobia. By scrutinizing these interconnected themes, this chapter illuminates how *Muslim Girl* contributes to discourses about Islamic feminism – discourses that are shaped by broader socio-political forces.

### Relevant Issues and Debates in Islamic Feminism

Islamic feminism is inclusive of varying aspirations and it recognizes that for Muslim feminists, their identities as Muslims and feminists are inextricably interconnected (Hidayatullah, 2014). Even so, such integration of various aspects of one's identity "requires active struggle (p. 2), a struggle both within themselves and with their communities" (p. viii) and one that involves building alliances with other minority groups (Kugle, 2014, as cited in Alipour, 2015, p. 1746).

Importantly, Mohanty articulates "the ways in which 'hegemonic 'Western' feminisms' engage in 'discursive colonization' or the 'appropriation of [Third World women's] experiences and struggles in ways that foster a monolithic understanding of the category 'woman' and of her oppression" (1986, p. 333, as cited in Korteweg, 2017, p. 220). Alluding to this discursive colonization that makes it "especially difficult to exist at the crossroads of being both Muslim and a woman", *Muslim Girl* highlights that Muslim women face unique challenges at the intersection of Islamophobia and sexism, such as when they are derided for choosing to dress modestly (if this is seen as their choice at all) and for being supposedly unaware of their own oppression at the hands of Islam (Guest Blogger, 2018, para. 3).

Instead of such binaristic framings, Muslim women's struggles require more comprehensive analytical frameworks that do not simply "reduce the issues of our society to something as nuanced and as intricate as an entire religion" (Guest Blogger, 2018, para. 3). Such frameworks would recognize that the barriers that Muslim women face are rooted in systems of power that fail to account for their complex identities and the ways in which they engage with these multiple systems of power (Guest Blogger, 2018). As *Muslim Girl* puts it, this is "a problem of structure, of living in a world that does not ask for your genuine self to be celebrated" (Guest Blogger, 2018, para. 3). Islamic feminism, in its various articulations and through its focus on narratives and methodological frameworks arising from indigenous schools of thought, offers a counter-weight to the discursive colonization of feminist discourses (Al Sharmani, 2014).

Nonetheless, Islamic feminism has its own challenges too. One issue within Islamic feminism is that it can gloss over important differences across various forms of Islamic feminist activism and their attendant power dynamics (Al Sharmani, 2014). In other words, “too wide a range of different and divergent knowledge projects and activist efforts have been lumped together under this term” of Islamic feminism (Al Sharmani, 2014, p. 92). “While sometimes the heterogeneity of Islamic feminism may be meaningful, in other cases it arises from the lack of a clear and developed analysis of the nature, methodologies, and boundaries” of this discipline (Al Sharmani, 2014, p. 85). Despite these challenges, continuing to celebrate and reflect on the legacy of and advancements in feminist theology is necessary in order for it to continue flourishing (Hidayatullah, 2016).

### ***Feminism Rooted in Islam***

*Muslim Girl* argues that “it seems that everyone is stating the need for and impact of feminism on Muslim women while sidelining Muslim women themselves” (Guest Blogger, 2017a, para. 2). To counter this, *Muslim Girl* attempts to highlight Muslim women’s own “thoughts and opinions about feminism and take back the narrative” (Guest Blogger, 2017a, para. 2). While some Muslims see feminism as un-Islamic, *Muslim Girl* explains that Islamic principles themselves are intrinsically feminist because they combat oppression and advance equality; in other words, “practicing faith, embracing femininity, and promoting feminism are not separate entities” but can coexist (Leahvernon, 2017a; MG Staff, 2019, para. 12). In *Muslim Girl*, assertions of being a feminist Muslim woman contest common misperceptions that “feminism and Islam don’t go together” (Anumahmed, 2019, para. 12). Several blogs criticize this oppositional positioning of Islam and feminism, arguing instead that “feminism was a huge part of Islam” and that “Islamic history taught us feminism” (Anumahmed, 2019, para. 12; Awan, 2016; MG Staff, 2020b).

*Muslim Girl* adds that for Muslim feminists, Islam and feminism have “never seemed weird or contradictory, in fact, the two together always made sense” (Awan, 2016, para. 1; MG

Staff, 2020b). To see Islam and feminism as mutually exclusive is to buy into popular misinterpretations and misconceptions about Islam (MG Staff, 2020b). Muslim feminists connect their feminist activism to Islamic principles, stating that “in terms of female empowerment, Islam and feminism are on the same side” (Amani, 2016; Awan, 2016, para. 2). In light of this, pitting feminism against Islam can lead to Muslim women and feminists struggling with their faith (Hareem, 2013). Conversely, viewing Islam and feminism as mutually supportive of each other can reinvigorate both Islamic and feminist beliefs (Guest Blogger, 2017a). Muslim women’s feminist activism thus draws attention to “the connection between Islam, gender equality, gender equity, and feminism” (Kawetherinuwa, 2019, para. 14; Mokhtar, 2017).

Drawing feminist interpretations of Islam is also a source of comfort and empowerment for Muslim women who find solely secular feminist discourses alienating and dismissive of their experiences (Kawetherinuwa, 2019). Paying greater attention to how Islam frames women’s rights and responsibilities can help Muslim women realize that one “could not be a true Muslim *without* being a feminist” (Hareem, 2013, para. 2; Kawetherinuwa, 2019). Based on this understanding that Islam advocates for women’s equality and autonomy, Muslim women are reclaiming space in both feminist and Islamic arenas (Leahvernon, 2017a). Nonetheless, there is a long road ahead when it comes to combating misperceptions about Islam and feminism being incompatible (Guest Blogger, 2017a). Challenging this oppositional framing is also a key motivating factor for my interest in this research.

**Focusing on Praxis - Muslim Girl and Feminist Theory.** Foregrounding people’s lived realities, as *Muslim Girl* does, is crucial when interpreting scripture, a concept that Sa’diyya Shaikh succinctly describes as an “exegesis of praxis” (Ali, 2019, p. 72). Such a framework recognizes that religion is not an unchanging, monolithic entity; rather “the context of people’s lives takes precedence over text” and “religion being made by the people, as the people live it now...that’s actually the only religion that’s got authority” (Ali, 2019, pp. 72–78). Put differently, “the sacred order can be established by the people; in fact, that’s been the overwhelming history

of the growth of Islam” (Ali, 2019, p. 78). This focus on praxis is also a central tenet of Muslim feminist activists’ approach to preaching and community engagement, as detailed further in this chapter. Specifically, the examples below illustrate how Islamically-rooted feminism sparks social justice advocacy.

One prime example of such praxis being mobilized is from India, which “has witnessed the expression of a variety of new non-conformist religious practices performed by Muslim women” (Jones, 2020, p. 40). These activists aim “to question or renovate existing structures of everyday Islamic practice, and to appoint women into positions of religious leadership usually reserved for men” (Jones, 2020, p. 42). For example, in India “a range of vibrant campaigns has been pioneered by Muslim women’s associations, asserting women’s claims to hold and lead congregational prayers, enter and manage mosques, visit shrines, officiate Muslim marriages, and issue *shari’ah*-based legal decisions” (Jones, 2020, p. 40). On top of that, by advocating for women’s right to serve as religious leaders and experts, activists “combine campaigns for women’s socio-economic and legal rights with simultaneous demands for their rights within everyday religious praxis” (Jones, 2020, p. 49; Nas, 2022). In these ways, Muslim women activists are reconfiguring religious praxis in “often-hostile local environments that are regulated according to male-led religious hierarchies” (Jones, 2020, p. 44).

On this topic, a *Muslim Girl* blogger shares, “being a Muslim woman became the torch of my autonomy and vigor. Most importantly, it gave me the courage and passion to connect with the larger network of Muslim women to celebrate our unions and negotiate our differences” (Mokhtar, 2017, para. 4). This view of sisterhood ascribes to the belief that, Muslim women:

uplift one another, and the communities that surround us. We put ourselves on the line for justice and peace...Through our sisterhood and our activism, we are spreading that light and that power throughout our community, and out into the world. (Hamed, 2017a, para. 1)

In this context, *Muslim Girl's* advice to “live your faith and spirituality every day, through both work and play, and that will bring you even closer to your religion and to Allah” sees faith as being meaningfully integrated into all facets of life (Leahvernon, 2016a, para. 19). Seeing Islam as amenable to all aspects of life invites reflection on how spirituality can foster progressive change, resilience, community-building and personal fulfillment (Syjil, 2015). One specific example of such a worldview is articulated by Sana Saeed, journalist and an interviewee in one *Muslim Girl* blog, as follows:

Pray often. It was prescribed to us for our own good. And, yes, it is often a struggle to remain steadfast in our prayers, but the soul needs nourishment, and you are only as good to your communities as your soul is nourished. (Syjil, 2015, para. 13)

Viewing Islam in this holistic manner also drives home the importance for Muslims to: operationalize the Qur'an's messages of gender equity and Islam's code of ethics not only to challenge gendered xenophobia and injustice, but also to critique misogynistic ideologies that perpetuate and justify all types of violence against Muslim women in the name of God and Islam. (Mokhtar, 2017, para. 6; Syjil, 2015)

In short, academic writing and *Muslim Girl* both speak to how Muslim women's mobilization draws on Islam as a source of women's empowerment in all arenas of life (Jones, 2020). Illuminating the diversity of such mobilization efforts, some efforts “seek to expand space for women's religious participation without necessarily disrupting existing structures of Islamic life”, while other “activists have attempted to inaugurate wholesale overhauls of Islamic norms in order to directly challenge the patriarchal hierarchies embedded in Muslim society” (Jones, 2020, p. 71). These nuances also show up in the *Muslim Girl* blogs that draw on Islam to encourage activism on issues ranging from Islamophobia to anti-Black racism to xenophobia and much more.

**Crafting a Pious Femininity.** Attending to how feminism can be rooted in Islam also demands examining how pious femininity is constructed.

***Muslim Girl's Take on Pious Femininity.*** Through its emphasis on Muslim women's narratives as voiced by themselves, *Muslim Girl* expands the concept of pious femininity. By reclaiming their own stories, asserting interpretive authority over Islamic teachings and refusing to dismiss femininity as being inferior, the *Muslim Girl* blogs are giving rise to a defiant form of pious femininity. Such reclamation confronts assumptions about pious femininity as being quiet, unobtrusive or universally conservative.

Conversely, pious femininity as it is exhibited in *Muslim Girl* prioritizes taking up space, literally and metaphorically. *Muslim Girl's* brand of pious femininity is like the Islamic feminism that it advances; both are unabashed and unapologetic. These characteristics are evident across the *Muslim Girl* blogs, be it through Al-Khatahtbeh's modest yet flamboyant dressing or the assertive tone of the blogs or strongly worded blog titles such as "Why Quitting Ain't an Option for the Muslimah Rebel", "10 Badass Reasons Muslim Women Are Superheroes", "Feminism: I'm Not Your Stereotype" and the like.

Through its assertion of more conspicuous forms of pious femininity, *Muslim Girl* rejects restrictive notions of piety and femininity that exclusively idolize reticence and timidity in the embodied practices of Muslim women. *Muslim Girl* illustrates that pious femininity as embodied by Muslim girls and women can be bold, loud, attention-grabbing and confident in how it manifests, all without negating quieter, more subtle and bashful forms of pious femininity. In refusing to see pious femininity as always introverted or self-effacing, *Muslim Girl* intervenes in broader discourses about piety and femininity.

***Pious Femininity and Consumerism.*** In this context, "women contend with, and unsettle, potentially dichotomising systems of piety and materialism by constructing virtue through, rather than external to, their consumption practices" (Jones, 2010, Meneley, 2007, Pink, 2009, as cited in Jamil, 2016, p. 547). For instance, in Saudi Arabia, women preachers recognize that the ability to conform to a:

“consumerist femininity”, through the possession of international top brands and the ability to look “stylish”, is an important aspect of self-presentation among young women. The cultivation of global femininity is so prominent that even preachers wear make-up and conform to a “Westernized” dress code. By conforming to consumerist femininity, they assert their relevancy in contemporary Saudi female society at the same time as they seek to maintain the acceptable space of this self-presentation (Le Renard, 2014, pp. 131–137, as cited in Makboul, 2017, p. 324).

***Pious Femininity and Religious Leadership.*** On a related note, the below example shows how pious femininity is constructed amongst Malaysian Muslim women preachers. Given that all mass media spaces having a mixed-gender audience by default and in light of the stricter standards that they are held to compared to their male counterparts, for Muslim women preachers:

their space to entertain, to “dazzle” and be “exuberant,” is much more limited, especially in front of mixed-gender audiences. They develop, instead, a more sober approach to their preaching and a style that is considered accessible, “service-oriented,” and decidedly feminine. (Kloos, 2021, p. 281)

Such restrictions apply because “for women speaking to mixed-gender audiences, only a thin line separates ‘persuasion’ from ‘seduction’” (Kloos, 2021, p. 285). As a result, women preachers “need to be contained, more conscious in terms of the place they occupy on a stage, of the bodily positions they assume, of eye contact, of the way they play the audience” (Kloos, 2021, p. 285).

In this context, *Muslim Girl* cautions against categorizing only specific women as pious lest this reinforces essentialist ideas about Islam and women by overlooking “the ‘messiness’ of identities as they are practiced in everyday life” (Bangstad, 2011, Zia, 2009, as cited in Khan & Kirmani, 2018, p. 164). “By labelling only particular women ‘pious’ or religiously-motivated, namely those who hold conservative views with regards to Islam” one also runs the risk of

problematically “reaffirming the notion that only those who hold conservative positions are truly ‘Islamic’ and hence have a right to define the realm of religion” (Khan & Kirmani, 2018, p. 164). In this regard *Muslim Girl* offers a key intervention in how pious femininity can be conceptualized more inclusively. Building on this discussion, the next few sections show how the pious femininity that Muslim Girl espouses draws on Islam as a source of empowerment and reasserts one’s right to practice Islam in individualized ways.

### ***Accounting for Positionality***

Having examined how Islamic feminism informs activism and notions of pious femininity, next up is a consideration of how positionality reiterates the need for humility and reflexivity during academic research. As was referenced in the previous chapter’s section on methodology, a researcher’s own positionality influences their research (Durham, 1998, as cited in Jiwani, 2005). Accounting for Muslim women’s and scholars’ positionality requires foregrounding spirituality and ethical values along with intellectual integrity, all while remaining mindful of the trap of fame in academic domains and beyond (Hidayatullah, 2014). This reflexive stance is also evident in Wadud’s (2006, p. 814) treatment of scholarship “about Islam and women with a hermeneutics of suspicion” that asks “who is doing the discourse; who is the audience; and who is depicted?” Such an orientation helps guard against the co-optation, commodification and appropriation of Muslim feminists’ efforts (Hidayatullah, 2014).

Just as the positionality of Muslim women and scholars is relevant, so is that of the *Muslim Girl* bloggers. For instance, the positionality of one *Muslim Girl* blogger is evident when her blog ends with the words that are most often uttered by Muslims when anyone passes i.e. “Inna lillahi wa inna ilaihi raji’oon”, which means “Indeed, to Allah we belong and to Allah we shall return”. In doing so, this blogger hints towards their own Muslim identity. This positionality impacts feminist interpretations of Islam because a believer’s faith-based approach translates to “reading the Qur’an as *scripture* rather than merely as a text” (Ibrahim, 2020; Nguyen, 2021, p. 199). In this context, being mindful of one’s positionality means taking into account, “to whom

are we speaking and what interests does our scholarship serve? Without asking these questions of ourselves, we risk the possibility of becoming entangled in the very structures of power that we critique” (Mubarak, 2021). The positionality of the bloggers as Muslim women impacts how they approach Islam and what role it plays in their individual and communal lives, a point that is detailed below.

**Islam as a Source of Personal and Communal Strength.** *Muslim Girl* reminds readers that:

as a fundamental underpinning to guide a way of life as opposed to just ‘a religion’, Islam is a lens that guides how we view the world; it plays a pronounced, active, and relevant role in our relationship with the world around us. (Qamar, 2016a, para. 5)

For Muslims, practicing Islam is a life-long and self-reflexive “journey of self-acceptance and spiritual growth” (Hareem, 2013; Mokhtar, 2017, para. 4). The *Muslim Girl* blogs also discuss that spirituality is neither constant nor stable and that one experiences highs and lows in this realm (Leahvernon, 2017d). This fluctuating nature of spirituality highlights the importance of individual accountability in terms of staying committed to one’s beliefs and trusting divine guidance (Leahvernon, 2017d). Contrary to some conservative understandings of Islam, this perspective emphasizes the idea of a compassionate, not punitive God and it prioritizes individual effort over results (Leahvernon, 2017d). Such an understanding of Islam empowers believers to fully trust God’s will and timing, without detracting from individual and collective responsibility and effort (MG Staff, 2017a). This utilization of Islam as a source of perseverance is rooted in the positionality of the bloggers as Muslims.

*Muslim Girl* elaborates further, advising Muslims that “in *your* heart, you must remind yourself that your struggle is for Allah (SWT), and that even in difficult times, you are being rewarded for your dedication and determination” (Hareem, 2013, para. 10). This belief can strengthen one’s resilience against Islamophobia, racism, sexism and other structures of

oppression. In a nutshell, Islamic principles, as propagated through the Quran and Hadith, offer a source of spiritual and psychological comfort for Muslims (Guest Blogger, 2017a).

Concurrently, in the face of relentless, systemic violence, seeking solace in Islam does not deny the range of “incredibly valid and human feelings” including “grief, fear, anger, confusion, or emotional paralysis” as responses to such violence (Mohsenian-Rahman, 2017a, para. 1). However *Muslim Girl* claims that despite these emotions, “we can not remain silent, as this directly upholds and actively perpetuates white supremacy and violence conducted under its name” (Mohsenian-Rahman, 2017a, para. 2). Indeed, there are several Islamically-rooted ways through which individuals and communities can stand up for justice, such as engaging in communal activities, participating in peaceful protests, attending vigils and interfaith meetings, and championing justice-seeking causes and campaigns (Mohsenian-Rahman, 2017a). These are some of the ways in which Islamic convictions can bolster believers’ tenacity and support communal advocacy for social justice. Also highlighting the diversity in how Islam is drawn upon by believers, the next section on sectarianism illustrates how interpretations of Islam evolve over time and across space.

**Sectarianism.** Building on the earlier discussion about positionality, it is vital to account for sectarian differences within Islam and how these differences shape Muslims’ lived experiences. To inform my analysis of how *Muslim Girl* addresses sectarian differences, academic literature that speaks to the experiences of Shia Muslim women has been particularly useful. Prefacing this discussion, I recognize that although there are two major sects in Islam (Sunni and Shia), there are others as well. Including Shia perspectives here does not mean that all sectarian viewpoints are included, rather it serves to illustrate differences across Muslims.

Some *Muslim Girl* blogs address sectarian differences head on. These blogs recognize that sectarianism manifests in Muslim communities, including in the form of the privilege that is accrued to the Sunni majority (Al-Khatahtbeh et al., 2014; Raja, 2015). Also alluding to sectarianism, *Muslim Girl* reminds Muslims that “Your family will inspire you and teach you, but

they cannot control your inner beliefs and values. They cannot control how you see Islam, or what it is about Islam that you value and hold dear” (Hareem, 2013, para. 7). Hence, *Muslim Girl* points out the importance of allowing people to knowledgeably choose their sect based on what resonates most with them, even if it differs from what those around them believe in (Hareem, 2013).

Exemplifying this diversity within Islamic beliefs and practices, research also tells us that “Shia women are actively researching, self-reflecting, questioning, and proposing a new approach to Islamic gender norms” (Dayerizadeh, 2018, p. v). This multiplicity in interpretations of Islamic tenets is also noticeable in “how Islamic feminists advocate for gender justice by reinterpreting sacred texts in terms of their social circumstances and challenging the validity of patriarchal norms” (Dayerizadeh, 2020, p. 324). In this way, “these empowered Shia women are willfully paving a new path for more progressive Islamic gender norms centered on gender justice” (Dayerizadeh, 2018, p. v). Their lived experiences bear testimony to their agency in interpreting Islam and in “forming new identities” (Dayerizadeh, 2020, p. 333). This active role in applying Islamic teachings is supported by *Muslim Girl*, particularly when it argues that Muslims ought to be free to practice Islam and draw educated interpretations from the Quran as they see fit, as long as these efforts are in earnest and are not rooted in ulterior motives (Hareem, 2013).

Additionally, drawing on their knowledge of how women’s societal status and rights are negotiated, Shia women “are actively researching and debating and finding progressive Islamic interpretations to follow and teach the next generation” (Dayerizadeh, 2018, p. 1). In occupying “a discursive space between Islamic gender complementarity (balance between the genders) and liberal gender equality norms”, Muslim American Shia women “are simultaneously challenging both traditional Islamic gender norms that are outdated and culturally biased; and liberal gender norms, advocated by Western powers and the UN, as imperialistic, and that do not incorporate or value their Islamic beliefs” (Dayerizadeh, 2018, p. 1, 2020, p. 325). Thus, as “norm entrepreneurs” these women are “creating an alternative path which is neither purely

liberal nor Islamic” (Dayerizadeh, 2018, p. v). This reconfiguration of norms is also evident in American Shia mosques that foster ongoing critical engagement so that “new meanings are exchanged amongst practicing Muslims” (Dayerizadeh, 2020, p. 325).

Such an agentic, reflexive stance regarding sectarianism is also echoed in a *Muslim Girl* blog that explores how “Sufism is a controversial topic amongst scholars” (Hareem, 2013, para. 3). This blog similarly illustrates many of the above principles of seeking Islamic knowledge, challenging oppositional framings, disrupting deep-seated assumptions and co-existing peacefully (Hareem, 2013). Specifically, this blog contests the assumption that Sufism:

is a form of innovation, and that one who practices Sufism is a deviant. This assumption is flawed, for it assumes that those who practice Sufism must practice it without taking into account the teachings of the Qu’ran and Sunnah. (Hareem, 2013, para. 3)

Instead, *Muslim Girl* presents an alternative viewpoint that “as long as you heed the Qu’ran and Sunnah, and do not disobey it, or manipulate it to create new forms of ‘worship’, it is not wrong to follow Sufism” (Hareem, 2013, para. 3). Notably this blogger remains humble in their assertions by not assuming this stance to be indisputable (Hareem, 2013). Such humility is evident in the blogger’s careful deference that eventually “Allah (SWT) knows best” (Hareem, 2013, para. 4). In summary, this *Muslim Girl* blog reiterates the need for respecting sectarian differences within Islam and it offers a much-needed reminder that across all sects, believers are Muslim (Hareem, 2013).

### ***Evolving Understandings of Islamic Practices***

Foregrounding this very “heterogeneity of Muslim practices and interpretations as expressions of Islam”, Boe (2020, p. 11) argues that even iterations of Islam that are well-established come under scrutiny when they ignore this heterogeneity (Boe, 2020, p. 11). Indeed, history attests to the communal inclination to “break out of the mold of a repetition of certain forms of religious authority and institutions that did not nurture the lived realities of the diversity of people that existed” across various eras (Ali, 2019, p. 78). By arguing that “everyone

manifests their religion and spirituality in different ways”, *Muslim Girl* also hints towards this malleability of Islam, which allows it to fit vastly differing life circumstances (Leahvernon, 2016a, para. 23). The complexity of Muslims’ lived experiences necessitates paying attention to the past and present socio-political contexts that shape understandings of Islam (Abu-Lughod, 2013). Paying closer attention to these factors challenges assumptions about the incompatibility of faith-based movements with progressive mobilizing. In particular, “Islamic political movements are not always fundamentalist or conservative; sometimes...they can be progressive and liberal, especially inspired by social strategies of modern causes” (Kugle, 2014, as cited in Alipour, 2015, p. 1749).

Advancing this age-old tradition of re-interpreting Islam based on contemporary realities, Muslim women and feminist activists today are claiming spaces (sometimes literally, in mosques and shrines, and when leading prayers or religious congregations) that have historically been closed off to them, while also creating new spaces for themselves. Part of such reclamation is expanded access to digital spaces that disseminate renewed, feminist understandings of Islamic teachings, as *Muslim Girl* does. Contextualized within this landscape, my study demonstrates how *Muslim Girl* bloggers are reclaiming religious interpretive authority for themselves.

**Individualization and Personalization of Islam.** The rationales that *Muslim Girl* bloggers put forth for reclaiming religious authority and supporting feminist interpretations of Islam exemplify a key trend. Namely, these rationales speak to “an individualistic and self-reflexive approach to religion that resonates with larger trends towards individualization in Western contexts” (Mesaric, 2020; Nyhagen, 2019, p. 6). Practicing Muslim women adopt diverse approaches to religion in that they “engage with different Islamic actors and discourses, negotiate relationships with Islamic authority for different purposes and in different situated encounters”, all in a bid to discerningly implement Islamic teachings that best fit with the stage of life they are in (Mesaric, 2020, p. 23). “In addition to direct personal study of authoritative textual sources, secondary literature usually found on the internet, such as YouTube videos,

constitutes a prime source for constructing visions of Islam” (Minganti, 2016, p. 42, as cited in Liebmann & Galal, 2020, p. 273). Mesaric (2020, p. 25) explains:

The pluralization of Islamic authority is often linked to the individualization or personalization of faith, where an individual believer makes her own choices regarding which authoritative opinions to acknowledge or perhaps engages with authoritative texts and the divine directly, circumventing institutionalized religious hierarchies altogether.

In this paradigm, claims to religious authority are rooted in understandings of the Quran, Hadith and Sunnah as well as Islamic literature, which collectively represent “an authenticated, ‘real’ Islam” (Liebmann & Galal, 2020, pp. 265–268). Muslim women’s self-ascription of religious authority requires “demonstrating their mastery of Islamic literature and tradition, namely the Quran and the Sunnah” (Liebmann & Galal, 2020, pp. 268–274).

Returning to primary sources such as the Quran, Hadith and Sunnah is also a prominent theme in the data, as numerous *Muslim Girl* blogs draw on these sources to extract feminist ideals that are rooted in Islam. Reflecting this personalization of Islam, the *Muslim Girl* platform argues that for each Muslim girl and woman, “her faith is hers and hers alone...It’s between you and Allah” (Leahvernon, 2016a, para. 22). This individualization of Islam is a central theme in this research because it foregrounds agency in interpreting Islamic teachings towards egalitarian ends. Through introspection and active meaning-making, believers are poised to make sense of Islam in ways that advance feminist objectives.

**Contemporary Muslim Religious Figures of Authority.** Individualization of Islamic practices and the accompanying decentralization of religious authority means that women can more centrally occupy this traditionally male-dominated role. This influx of women as religious figures of authority reflects reformulated contemporary understandings of and relationships with religious authorities. Muslim women claiming the authority to interpret religious texts independently indicates that “authority to select and reinterpret Islamic scripture and practice is thus given to the individual, and conventional authorities, such as theological scholars, men,

and parents, are sidestepped” (Minganti, 2016, p. 48, as cited in Liebmann & Galal, 2020, p. 270). This reclamation of religious authority by women is not a new phenomenon. Rather, there is an enduring historical tradition in which Muslim women have long served as religious leaders.

Today, religious leaders’ authority is changing in complex ways, as are the obstacles that contemporary Muslim women religious leaders face. Despite this changing relationship with religious authority, “institutional and individual actors of authority nevertheless remain a key node in pious Muslims’ engagement with Islam”, mediating how Muslims understand and practice Islam (Mesaric, 2020, p. 25). Likewise, even though *Muslim Girl* encourages knowledgeably interpreting Islam for oneself, it also draws attention to reliable learning sources and credible Islamic scholars who can guide religious learning (Ramlan, 2022). Since religious figures of authority do hold some sway and are increasingly seeing women join their ranks, this trend merits a consideration of the expectations from Muslim women who are religious figures of authority. Recognizing that men and women fare differently when it comes to establishing Islamic authority, some of the conditions shaping the experiences of Muslim women as religious leaders are described below.

***Factors Shaping Muslim Women’s Experiences as Preachers and Religious Leaders.*** First and foremost, the acceptability of Muslim women as religious leaders depends significantly on institutional certification and on “careful negotiations and challenges of established gender norms embedded in local customs, state ideologies and institutions, and (local formulations of) Islamic law” (Kloos & Künkler, 2016, p. 481). Indeed, “formal training – the rise in self-proclaimed preachers notwithstanding – still functions in most contexts as an entry point: charisma alone is not sufficient” to establish religious authority (Kloos & Künkler, 2016, p. 483). Drawing on formal qualifications is especially salient when women seek to establish religious authority with mixed-gender audiences and when trying to change gendered social norms that have come to be ascribed to Islam (Kloos & Künkler, 2016).

However, “studies of religious authority must not be limited to formal settings” because this top-down approach does not account for “how religious authority takes shape in informal settings” like “local study groups, the work floor or the family” where Muslim women religious leaders can preach and expand their circles of influence more freely, in contrast to the formalized religious settings that are often male-dominated (Kloos & Künkler, 2016, pp. 482–485). Existing research indicates that “Muslim women who could serve as religious scholars, government officials and leaders of women-only mosques were less concerned about access to formal religious structures” because their relative absence from such public-facing religious structures does not diminish their community engagement efforts and impact (van Doorn-Harder, 2006, Aryanti, 2013, as cited in Jamil, 2016, p. 557). However, the presence of Muslim women as authorities solely in informal religious settings “does raise further questions related to the extent to which they alter the boundaries and form of hegemonic masculine formal religious education” (Jamil, 2016, p. 557).

Yet, formal religious education is far from the only condition for Muslim women religious leaders to gain credibility and access to formal religious spaces (Kloos & Künkler, 2016). In addition to broader socio-cultural discourse about gendered roles, other salient factors include male preachers’ influence and women preachers’ ability to build community-based authority, as well as their access to specific social networks and their family background i.e. being “the daughters or sisters of influential preachers, teachers and Islamic school principals” (Kloos & Künkler, 2016, p. 483). To elaborate, “the social and cultural background of male religious leaders may influence their acceptance” of Muslim women religious preachers (Ismah, 2016, p. 503). In other words, “men who engage in educational and religious institutions, such as husbands and close relatives, play an important role in providing strong impetus and opportunities for women to develop their knowledge and clerical capabilities” (Azra, 2002, p. xxxiv, as cited in Ismah, 2016, p. 504). Therefore, even though women religious authorities have agency, “their legitimacy is tied in complex ways to that of male scholars, who often dominate

the management or boards of mosques and Islamic institutions, and the audiences and communities with whom they engage” (Liberatore, 2019, p. 6). On this front, Hammer & Spielhaus (2013, p. 288) perceive “women’s authority, male authority over women, and other authoritative relationalities as negotiated, debated, and as politicized”.

Even as Muslim women preachers’ certification, their endorsement by male counterparts and supportive state ideologies are essential for validating their religious authority, getting buy-in at the community level can be just as crucial (Kloos & Künkler, 2016). By “leading the community, solving religious and social problems by providing guidance and advice”, engaging with various stakeholders, and shedding light on gender egalitarian interpretations of scripture, Muslim women preachers “can play significant roles in handling women’s issues, such as discrimination, violence against women, and biased interpretation of religious textual resources” (Ismah, 2016, pp. 501–503; Kloos & Künkler, 2016). To reiterate, “community-based authority is particularly important for women, who often need to be more proactive, for example in terms of addressing local needs and concerns, to see their formal qualifications translated into practical authority” (Ismah, 2016, as cited in Kloos & Künkler, 2016, p. 485). This reliance on community-based authority puts demands on women preachers to be experts in scripture, well-versed in leadership, recognized for their piety and charisma, and well-connected to Islamic learning institutions (Ismah, 2016).

***Adopting Professionalization.*** In light of these shifts, one notable change in how Muslim women religious leaders present themselves is their adoption of professionalization. Professionalization of religious authority is evident in how religious leaders’ performances feature “outward appearances, comportments, and senses of vocation more commonly associated with nonreligious professional occupations” (Kloos, 2021, p. 280).

For example, the professionalization of Muslim women’s religious authority is evident in Turkey, which is characterized by “a state attempt to standardise and control female religious engagement” (Maritato, 2017, p. 530). The Turkish state plays an active role in “hiring religious

personnel, supervising the activities carried out in mosques...and elaborating a Turkish 'true' understanding of Islamic knowledge" (Maritato, 2017, p. 531). As more women religious authorities are employed by the Turkish government, women are entering and becoming more prominent in the previously, sometimes exclusively male-controlled sphere of regulated Islamic preaching (Maritato, 2017). Here, "women's inclusion within the official preaching workforce 'signifies a transformation of hitherto predominantly private forms of women's religiosity into a public affair subject to state regulation'" (Hassan, 2012, p. 452, as cited in Maritato, 2017, p. 540). This example from Turkey demonstrates how state control of Islamic preaching significantly influences the content and method of preaching.

Another manifestation of professionalization is in Singapore, where "the rising pervasiveness of commodification and consumerism has prompted female religious authorities in Singapore to model themselves simultaneously as successful career women and also pious believers" (Kloos & Künkler, 2016, p. 484). In this context, some have had success as businesswomen, merging classes on Islamic teachings with lessons on how to integrate spirituality with worldly priorities (Hoesterey, 2015, as cited in Kloos & Künkler, 2016). Such enterprises, often in the form of religious self-help workshops, are grounded "within the context of state disciplining of race and religion that has intensified Muslim women's desire to occupy and perform specific identities" and to implement innovative interpretations of Islam (Ong, 1990, as cited in Jamil, 2016, p. 547). This example is relevant because Singaporean Muslim women's formulation of new Islamic and entrepreneurial practices illustrates creativity that is also evident in *Muslim Girl's* analysis of how Muslim women navigate their complex identities.

***Women Preachers and Feminist Preaching.*** On this topic, a word of caution is warranted against equating the mere presence of Muslim women preachers with the advancement of feminist understandings of Islam, because women preachers and religious leaders do not necessarily espouse feminist objectives (Ahmed, 1992, Badran, 2009, Moghadam, 2002, Mohanty, 1988, Wadud, 2006, as cited in Maritato, 2017). The analysis below

briefly draws on some examples from academic literature that demonstrate how simply having more Muslim women as preachers does not automatically amplify feminist interpretations of Islam.

In the first example, Turkish women preachers' foremost aim is to share Islamic knowledge and advance nationalist sentiment; they "do not speak about resisting patriarchal interpretations or forms of authority and do not seek to reinterpret the texts by adopting feminist or human rights analytical tools" (Mir-Hosseini et al. 2015, Wadud 2006, as cited in Liberatore, 2019, p. 13; Tütüncü, 2010, p. 61, as cited in Maritato, 2017). Similarly, Malaysian women preachers also "uphold relatively conservative interpretations of Islamic values and scriptural norms with regard to the roles and rights of women" (Kloos, 2021, p. 288). In the same vein, women religious leaders belonging to the Salafi sect of Islam "can be 'trusted to endorse official messages and never question rulings on women' from their male counterparts" (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p. 258, as cited in Nielsen, 2020, p. 54). In this context, "female preachers enter the public sphere only as women preaching to other women, thus creating a parallel yet structurally inferior space for women in order to preserve overall male dominance" (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p. 248, as cited in Nielsen, 2020, p. 55).

These examples demonstrate that some women preachers "draw from within the Islamic tradition and distance themselves from liberal discourses of empowerment", thus disavowing feminist methods that reinterpret religious texts to excavate egalitarian principles (Liberatore, 2019, p. 13). Many such women preachers are "neither imitators nor competitors of male counterparts" (Kloos, 2021, p. 282). Instead, they aspire to a femininity that is "attuned both to the conservative values of the Islamic revival and the demands of a publicly visible professional disposition" (Kloos, 2021, p. 282).

Even in the case of Muslim women who challenge and imaginatively utilize the limited resources they may be accorded in patriarchal Islamic movements, the question remains "will men retain control of women's preaching, harnessing it to reach new audiences when it suits

their interests and clamping down if it threatens the movement's gender ideology?" (Nielsen, 2020, p. 64). To explain further, "women authorities help patriarchal movements by making persuasive, identity-based arguments in favor of patriarchy that men cannot, and by reaching new audiences that men cannot" (Nielsen, 2020, p. 52). Hence, "movement leaders may allow women increased authority to convince new members that the movement is not overly patriarchal, while selecting female authorities who support continued patriarchy" (Nielsen, 2020, p. 54). In this way, "conservative spaces can allow a significant degree of authority to female religious leaders, even if this ultimately remains circumscribed by male authority" (Mesaric, 2020, p. 22). In short, these above instances of Muslim women preachers' experiences across the world exemplify *Muslim Girl's* critique of not only the male domination of Islamic authority and exegesis, but also the anti-feminist narratives that can be espoused by Muslim women.

To summarize the key themes thus far, there are multiple, intersecting factors that influence Muslim women religious scholars' credibility and that give rise to the various mobilization and outreach strategies that they use. These diverse strategies illustrate the adaptability and innovation that Muslim women religious leaders must display in order to successfully navigate the complex, shifting terrain of Islamic preaching. This terrain is influenced by dynamic understandings of pious femininity and the individualization of Islamic practices. In turn, these factors inform how Muslim women articulate feminist understandings of Islam, navigate sectarian and other differences, and draw on Islam to invigorate praxis-focused activism. Grounded in this context, there is a long-standing tradition of Muslim women as religious leaders and figures of interpretive authority, as detailed in the next section.

### ***Muslim Women as Religious Leaders and Knowledge Creators Across the World***

To better understand the current landscape shaping Muslim women's Islamically-informed feminist activism, this section presents some examples from across the world to illustrate the long history of Muslim women preachers, thus debunking the myth that this is a new development.

In the first example, Muslim women's Islamic education and community engagement has an enduring history in Morocco, where women preachers draw on multiple sources of Islamic knowledge, assert claims to religious authority and leave a legacy for future Muslim women scholars to advance (Ahmed, 2016). This tradition reinforces a key argument that *Muslim Girl* also makes, namely that Muslim women have long played an active and innovative role in Islamic preaching and they continue to do so (Ahmed, 2016).

Also demonstrating the deep-rooted precedents of Muslim women's religious activism is the next example from Burkina Faso, where "Muslim women progressively organized themselves into neighborhood groups in order to read and understand the Qur'an, as well as to learn religious practices together" (Gomez-Perez, 2016, p. 48). These women then "became integrated into a network of community associations and gained recognition for their religious expertise. They also began preaching to larger, mixed (male and female) groups" (Gomez-Perez, 2016, p. 48). This development was followed by "the restructuring and modernization of the country's madrasas i.e. religious academic institutions (establishing grade levels, updating programmes and teaching materials)", which opened the door for women preachers' advanced theological education (Gomez-Perez, 2016, p. 48). Next:

A certain number of female preachers returned from studies abroad, where they had been perfecting their knowledge of Islam. These women also became integrated into an international network that encompassed both Islamic organizations that financed educational initiatives...and Western Islamic organizations that ensured greater visibility for efforts to promote women's rights. (Gomez-Perez, 2016, pp. 50–51)

Finally, "the presence of female preachers on the airwaves, thanks to the creation of two private Islamic radio stations...and to a private television station" translated into "an opportunity for women to widely spread their own message regarding the status of women, when only men had addressed the subject before" (Gomez-Perez, 2016, p. 51).

Despite these advances, the male-dominated nature of exegesis and religious authority has meant that feminist interpretations of the Quran still face significant resistance (Hidayatullah, 2014). Such resistance calls upon “a ‘real’ Islam, invoking the past to construct an orthodox center of Islam” that then negates both, new interpretations of the text and contemporary Islamic practices (Hidayatullah, 2014, p. 179). Nonetheless, as the above examples of Muslim women’s religious leadership suggest, the rise in feminist interpretations of the Quran and in Muslim women’s preaching has undermined male religious scholars’ singular hold on legitimizing Islamic knowledge (Hidayatullah, 2014). “The ‘monopoly’ of the ulama (an elite class of religious scholars often viewed as the custodians of Islamic tradition) on the production of authoritative religious knowledge” is thus increasingly being called into question (Hidayatullah, 2014, p. 2).

**Muslim Women’s Role in Knowledge Production in Early Islamic History.** Reflecting this reclamation by women of their right to preach and shape Islamic interpretations, *Muslim Girl* examines how over the centuries, notable Muslim women played a crucial role as Islamic leaders and sources of interpretive authority. Starting from the very early days of Islam, this legacy has included women like:

**Hazrat Aisha.** Hazrat Aisha, considered a reliable narrator of Hadith, “is lauded as a major legal authority through her issuing of important fatwas (decisions), many of which focused upon women’s religious conduct and rights” (Jones, 2020, p. 64). This understanding of Hazrat Aisha’s pivotal role as a scholar is also recognized in *Muslim Girl* as follows:

Married to Muhammad (PBUH), Aisha was known for her intelligence, wittiness, and charm. She was a scholar, and extremely intelligent with a wealth of knowledge. The Prophet even said that half of the faith could be learned just from her. She was a great leader, and trained and taught the women of the community. She even used to lecture large groups which included men. Even after the Prophet’s death, his companions would come to her when they faced a question or confusion. (Bhatti, 2018, para. 7).

**Sayeda Zaynab.** As *Muslim Girl* explains:

Zaynab bint Ali was the daughter of the fourth caliph, Ali and of Hadhrat Fatima; she was also the granddaughter of the Prophet (PBUH), and was known for her strong character and actions. Zaynab accompanied her brother, Imam Hussein, during the battle of Karbala. It was during this time that she became known as the heroine of Karbala. (Bhatti, 2018, para. 16; Jaber, 2022)

To this day, a portion of what primarily but not exclusively Shia Muslims recall and recognize during Ashura (i.e. 10th of Muharram, the first month in the Islamic calendar) “is the sermon delivered by Zainab” (Jaber, 2022, para. 1). Speaking to its influence, this sermon also continues to be “studied by many today on the topics of Feminism, Gender Studies, and Women’s Rights” (Jaber, 2022, para. 10).

Also of note here is an incident where Hazrat Fatima is forewarned by her father, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), about the forthcoming attacks on Muslims and the impending death of her son, Hussein (Jaber, 2022). Upon hearing this, Hazrat Fatima asked:

“Oh Father, who will be there to mourn his death when we are gone?” With that, our Prophet said, “Oh Fatima, the women of my nation will cry over the women of my household, and the men of my nation will cry over the men of my household. And mourning will occur every year [ . . . ] and we will lead those who have shed tears over the Believers to Paradise”. (Jaber, 2022, para. 8)

Fulfilling this prophecy, today it is by way of Sayeda Zaynab’s legacy that “the stories, and messages of the tragic events of Karbala” in Iraq continue to be remembered (Jaber, 2022, para. 8). These tales are recalled annually by millions of Muslims, “not just Shias, who rush to mosques around the world, and to Karbala” (Jaber, 2022, para. 13). In this way, Muslims’ struggles at the battle of Karbala and “their stories, struggles, grief, love, and resilience are felt, heard, and seen” and kept alive in part due to Sayeda Zaynab (Jaber, 2022, para. 13). Her

efforts are also widely recognized for having “ignited the flame of women’s rights” (Jaber, 2022, para. 7).

**Muslim Women’s Role in Knowledge Production Through the Ages.** The above two examples are of Muslim women from early Islamic history, whose lives overlapped with the lifespan of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Following in their footsteps, Muslim women who came after them continued to advocate for various social justice causes, such as access to education and decolonization. *Muslim Girl* highlights their examples, as listed below, to shed light on the persistence with which Muslim women have participated in public life over the centuries. Some examples of such women include:

***Fatima al Fihri.*** *Muslim Girl* states:

Fatima was the daughter of a very wealthy merchant and used her inheritance money on her quest and love for knowledge and strengthened spirituality. A well-educated lady herself, she founded the first university in Fez, Morocco which is now known as Al Quaraouiyine, which still operates and gives degrees. The original institution was actually a mosque, which Fatima wanted to build for her community, that ultimately developed into an educational institution. According to UNESCO and the Guinness Book of World Records, it is the oldest institution to award degrees, and effectively the first and oldest university. (Bhatti, 2018, para. 14)

***Nana Asma’u.*** *Muslim Girl* draws on the intersectional activism of this Black Muslim woman as follows:

It is an ongoing rant that we have as Muslim women that the only thing Muslim women need saving from is white feminism. There are few figures who stand as witness to this more completely than Nana Asma’u. Nana Asma’u was a teacher and leader in West Africa who established a system of education for women that lasted hundreds of years. Highly trained in education and highly learned, she was a part of the great African system of women’s education which predated colonialism. She stands as a witness to

the extensive rights and freedoms enjoyed by African women in Islam prior to the invasion of Europeans and the destruction of African culture. (Sarahmohr, 2021, para. 5)

***Lubna of Cordoba.*** *Muslim Girl* notes:

A mathematician and intellectual, Lubna was the palace secretary in the Umayyad Caliphate in Cordoba...she was in charge of the royal library, and her duties included writing and translating manuscripts. She was a writer, poet, and scientist and played a key role in the creation of Al-Andalus' Medina Azahara library. (Bhatti, 2018, para. 15)

**Muslim Women's Role in Knowledge Production Today.** Given the rich history of Muslim women's involvement in knowledge production that has been outlined above, there is a desire "to see a woman scholar educate and lecture the Ummah (i.e. the Muslim community) on issues" and more broadly, to witness a revitalization of Muslim women's participation in Islamic scholarship and religious leadership (Adina, 2017, para. 2). To ignite this revitalization, *Muslim Girl* encourages readers to do research about modern-day Muslim women who are Islamic scholars and to "Check out their lectures. Read their books" in an effort to engage with and further disseminate their work (Adina, 2017, para. 10). Shedding light on Muslim women's academic writing reinforces that Muslim women's voices are vital for a thriving body of Islamic scholarship and for advancing knowledge more broadly (Adina, 2017). This attention to Muslim women scholars serves as a reminder that "they are just as important, just as knowledgeable as their male counterparts" (Adina, 2017, para. 10). Putting this principle into action, *Muslim Girl* promotes the work of several contemporary Muslim women scholars, especially those who operate at the intersection of Islam and feminism, as listed below (Adina, 2017).

***Ustadha leasha.*** Ustadha leasha is "an educator and the founder of Barakah Inc., which aims to educate women and youth through Islamic education" (Hamed, 2017a, para. 29). She strives "to empower Muslim women through a knowledge of fiqh and aqeedah (studies of Islamic jurisprudence and faith)" (Hamed, 2017a, para. 28). Continuing the legacy of her namesake, Hazrat Aisha who is discussed above, Ustadha leasha has also extensively

“immersed herself in a pursuit of Islamic knowledge” (Hamed, 2017a, para. 28). Her work “continues a tradition of education and activism that began with the mothers of Islam” (Hamed, 2017a, para. 29).

***Fatima Mernissi.*** Moroccan author and sociologist, Fatima Mernissi is “remembered as a bold and brilliant mother of modern Islamic feminism” (Qamar, 2015a, para. 11). She “leaves behind a brilliant legacy that both spawned and spearheaded the 20th century reconciliation of Islam and feminism” (Qamar, 2015a, para. 1). “Mernissi remained confident and intelligent in her quest to establish, both within and beyond religious contexts, women’s equality and empowerment — which she viewed as nothing more than core, genuine ideals of Islam” (Qamar, 2015a, para. 5). Her inspiring legacy includes advocacy for democratic rights, human rights and reclaiming women’s right to “an Islam made, too, for women” (Qamar, 2015a, para. 11).

“Mernissi dedicated her life to analyzing work by some of Islam’s most compelling philosophers who frequently happened to, in fact, exclude women from their interpretations” (Qamar, 2015a, para. 6). Addressing this gap, Mernissi’s efforts were geared towards equipping women with the ability to lay claim to Islam and to define it for themselves (Qamar, 2015a). Mernissi’s “most renowned book, ‘Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society’, written in 1975, examines a holistic scope of traditional Islamic texts and religious rulings — all before shattering their biases and reconsidering them through a feminist lens” (Qamar, 2015a, para. 2). Mernissi was a staunch supporter of empowering women to “embrace Islam for its overarching backbone underscoring rights and justice” (Qamar, 2015a, para. 9). Her contributions lay the foundation for expanding interpretations of Islam in ways that are supportive of women’s rights and freedoms (Qamar, 2015a). Moreover:

She once wrote in “Dreams of Trespass” that “pessimism is the luxury of the powerful.”

“Writing,” Mernissi said, “is one of the most ancient forms of prayer. To write is to believe

communication is possible, that other people are good, that you can awaken their generosity and their desire to do better.” (Qamar, 2015a, para. 10)

In writing this thesis and analyzing the content on *Muslim Girl*, these words by Mernissi have truly been a guiding force.

**Leila Ahmed.** “A renowned writer on Islamic feminism and an academic”, Ahmed states that “there are two quite different Islams, an Islam that is in some sense a women’s Islam and an official, textual Islam, a ‘men’s’ Islam” (Halimah, 2016, paras. 2–10). *Muslim Girl* adds that, “Ahmed’s distinction of men and women’s Islam still resonates today as Muslim women grapple to assert themselves in largely patriarchal societies” (Halimah, 2016, para. 10).

In her book *A Border Passage: From Cairo to America — A Women’s Journey*, Ahmed “dedicates an entire chapter to the influential women who shaped her life” and the symbolic sisterhood they shared, “a sisterhood that uplifts and heals — a transgenerational bond that isn’t exclusive to any time or culture” (Halimah, 2016, paras. 7–8). Within this backdrop, Ahmed delves into how her mother and aunts in Egypt as well as her college acquaintances in England would reflect on their lived experiences with each other respectively (Halimah, 2016). “Yet, the talk of her loved ones was deemed ‘idle gossip’ and the work of her colleagues was deemed honorable” (Halimah, 2016, para. 11). Such selective, biased views of the legitimacy of some women’s lived realities but not others “speaks to the colonial power structure where White Western women disparage non-Western women, although they both engage in the same activities just in different situations” (Halimah, 2016, para. 11).

**Nawal El Saadawi.** El Saadawi was an eminent feminist whose legacy contemporary feminist activists extend by drawing on her work to advance intersectional feminism (Hassanein, 2021). “She fought against patriarchy by calling out the West and the ultra-religious figures in the Arab world that attempted to oppress women further” (Hassanein, 2021, para. 9). Her advocacy included challenging oppressive marital norms in Egypt along with a refusal “to profit significantly off her success in a radical stance against capitalism” (Hassanein, 2021, para. 9).

El Saadawi also “advocated against female genital mutilation (something she had been a victim of) and was blunt in her advocacy to allow Arab and Muslim women to express their sexuality without a culture of shame, blame, and rape culture” (Hassanein, 2021, para. 9). Her activism “reiterated to women that our rights were inherently our own. That our sexuality was ours to own. That our worth was in our power and not in the hands of others” (Hassanein, 2021, para. 10).

**Amina Wadud.** Wadud, the first-ever Muslim woman to have led mixed-gender prayers in modern times, has also “authored several literary pieces including *Qur’an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective*, (Oxford, 1999) and *Inside the Gender Jihad: Reform in Islam* (OneWorld, 2006)” (Adina, 2017, para. 4). She is a prominent figure in academia and has been frequently cited in this thesis. As of the time that this *Muslim Girl* blog was published:

Dr. Wadud is Professor Emeritus of Islamic Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, V.A., visiting scholar at the Starr King School for the Ministry in California, as well as visiting consultant on Islam and gender at the International Centre for Islam and Pluralism in Indonesia (Adina, 2017, para. 3).

**Sa’diyya Shaikh.** Associate Professor in University of Cape Town’s Department of Religious Studies, Dr. Shaikh is also a well-versed academic writer (Adina, 2017). “She wrote many texts, one of which is *A Tafsir of Praxis: Gender, Marital Violence, and Resistance in a South African Muslim Community* where she tackles modes of understanding Quranic teachings” and reiterates that men and women are equal in the agency accorded to them (Adina, 2017, para. 9). In this writing, she articulates that:

“The notions that believing men and women provide friendship and mutual protection for one another, that they equally undertake moral agency in the world, that human beings strive to live in a state of tranquility with their spouses, that marital relationships are to be

approached as the embodiment of divine love and mercy, collectively reflect the Islamic ideal of gender relations to many such committed Muslims.” (Adina, 2017, para. 9)

**Ziba Mir-Hosseini.** *Muslim Girl* describes Mir-Hosseini as follows:

Dr. Hosseini is an Iranian legal anthropologist who specializes in Islamic law, gender and development. She is currently a Professorial Research Associate at the Centre for Middle Eastern and Islamic Law, University of London. Between founding organizations like Musawah, a Global Movement for Equality and Justice in the Muslim Family, and educating, she writes literary publications on Islam and gender. (Adina, 2017, para. 7)

**Hina Azam.** *Muslim Girl* notes:

Dr. Azam is currently an Associate Professor of Middle Eastern Studies at The University of Texas at Austin. She has authored *Sexual Violence in Islamic Law: Substance, Evidence, and Procedure*...Hina Azam is also known as an activist and advocate for the pro-choice movement. (Adina, 2017, para. 6)

Several of the Muslim women who are listed above and mentioned in *Muslim Girl* are also scholars whose works inform this research project, thus illustrating a clear tie between the *Muslim Girl* blogs and the academic literature within which the blogs' analysis is contextualized.

### **Colonialism, Imperialism and Islamophobia**

Moving on, Muslim women's experiences are shaped by settler colonialism, imperialism and Islamophobia. This section delves into how settler colonialism manifests, how it ignites decolonial thinking and how Islamophobia manifests in the West, and in the US and Canada specifically. In particular, *Muslim Girl* draws on concepts like Islamophobia, xenophobia, colonialism, imperialism, capitalism and neoliberal ideologies to better understand Muslim women's experiences of belonging. Moreover, this section explores how constructions of nationhood and racialization in relation to Islam, along with narratives about multiculturalism give rise to exclusionary forms of citizenship that are then challenged by Muslim women's demands for legal, political and discursive inclusion as citizens. Since this project pays

particular attention to Muslim women's experiences, an exploration of gendered Islamophobia is also warranted, as below. In subsequent sections, the examination of gendered Islamophobia also addresses the symbolic role of the hijab in this context, including the experiences of hijab-wearing Muslim women, the stereotypes they battle and the role of agency in these discourses.

### **Settler Colonialism**

To frame this discussion, in a White settler society, critical scholars face multiple challenges (Razack, 2013). This multiplicity of obstacles reinforces that "scholarship must be at the outset anti-racist and anti-colonial" (Razack, 2013, p. 198). On this front, a central challenge is "to make *colonizers* visible and to explain why they do what they do *in order that they are held to account*, both at the individual and collective levels" (Razack, 2013, p. 198). With that in mind, the next few sections shed light on how colonial logics systemically reinforce Islamophobia, thus demonstrating how structures of oppression intersect.

When grappling with the complexity of settler society, critical scholars can struggle to "hold all the repressed truths of settler society in mind" (Razack, 2013, p. 206). Critical scholars' sometimes simplistic analyses "end up privileging one set of claims over the other and claiming innocence in the oppression of others" (Razack, 2013, p. 206). In this context, "when each woman claimed her own marginality as the worst one, she raced to innocence" (Razack, 2013, p. 207). Such desires to claim outright innocence can be divisive and are blind to complex manifestations of complicity. Yet, accounting for complicity requires much more than a simple recognition of differences because even though "exposing the different experiences of marginalized groups reveals repressive mechanisms, it does not help us to understand difference as relationally constituted" (Scott, 1992, p. 25, as cited in Charania, 2005, p. 34). In light of this, the following analysis of how colonialism is interlinked with Islamophobia pays attention to how complicity plays out in this regard.

The female “oppressed Muslim body” is mobilized in ways that are similar to the tropes of the “suffering Black body” and the “dying Indian”, all motifs that “belong to the same white settler colonial and racial archive” (Patel, 2022a, p. 227). In this context, it is vital to interrogate “are racialized groups implicated in settler colonialism, as are Whites? Are people of color settlers?...Are all non-Blacks implicated in the subordination of Blacks? How are Blacks implicated in the colonial project?” (Razack, 2013, p. 206). Such important questions underscore the risk that critical scholars face of losing their political compass when they “are unable to explore the multiple logics of White settler society as they operate in and through each other” (Razack, 2013, p. 206). These questions are also relevant considerations for this project because some *Muslim Girl* blogs shed light on how racialization shapes Muslim women’s realities, including the experiences of Black Muslim women specifically.

Decolonial and anti-racist feminist scholars explain how religion, gender, race, and sexuality are shaped by colonization, and how these forces influence “war on terror” narratives. This attunement to the ongoing impact of settler colonialism on Muslims is evident in academia and in *Muslim Girl*. One prime example is when *Muslim Girl* points out “the foundation of racial inequality that still paints the experiences of so many BIPOC (Black Indigenous People of Color)” and that has been central to the formation of the US, and other settler colonial states (Eman, 2017, para. 8). Critiquing the systemic violence embedded in such states from their very origins, *Muslim Girl* points out that “the foundation of this country was built on the genocide of Indigenous people and on the backs of Black (many of whom were Muslim) slaves” (Hodakatebi, 2016b, para. 17). While *Muslim Girl* largely speaks about the American context, this critique is applicable to Canada as well.

This critique of settler colonialism by *Muslim Girl* and by academic scholars reinforces the need for decolonial thinking. “Settler colonialism can delimit imaginations, and what is perceived as already existing, possible or impossible” (Nath & Allen, 2022, p. 221). However, “challenging the colonial world order does not necessarily lead to decolonization if Indigenous

peoples' conceptions of land, lives, and their futurities are not centered" (Patel, 2022a, p. 212). Rather, decolonial thinking requires challenging the ways in which settler colonial socialization seeks to restrict "imagining and acting outside of these logics and the asserted authority and jurisdiction of settler governments" (Nath & Allen, 2022, p. 213). Disrupting colonial thinking also calls for broadening the definition of violence to encompass "systemic neglect and its implications for 'access to shelter, food, healthcare, well-being and identity' as a form of 'state sanctioned violence'" (Nath & Allen, 2022, p. 217).

Applying a similar decolonial perspective to the study of gender, *Muslim Girl* argues that "when considering decolonial discourse, the categories of gender, men and women, become exposed as colonial constructions" (Sarahmohr, 2022, para. 9). Therefore, "it is important to include the acknowledgment of the colonial construction of gender itself when discussing gender justice in decolonial terms" (Sarahmohr, 2022, para. 9). *Muslim Girl* adds that "Muslim histories tell a different story of the genealogies of gender-based discrimination as colonial legacies" (Sarahmohr, 2022, para. 9).

Additionally, a decolonial outlook emphasizes the interlocking nature of systems of domination in which individuals and communities are subjugated while also being complicit in oppressing others (Razack, 2013). Such systems are not distinct; rather, they overlap, "producing us in varying relations of dominance and marginality" (Razack, 2013, p. 207). Razack (2013, p. 207) purports that "we must name our oppression in order to challenge it" and that challenging individualistic and binaristic understandings of systems of power necessitates seeing others' oppression as interconnected with one's own marginalization. Being attuned to the historical and ongoing impact of settler colonialism thus offers a useful entrypoint to think about the intersecting nature of systems of domination.

**Settler Colonialism and Islamophobia in the West.** *Muslim Girl* talks about Islamophobia at length, so this section takes a closer look at how settler colonialism and

Islamophobia are addressed across the blogs and how these themes come up in various sections throughout this thesis. To begin with, *Muslim Girl* reiterates that:

Muslims make up 1.8 billion people and Islam is currently the fastest growing religion on Earth... Muslims come from every walk of life, every culture, and every country on the planet. Thus, it is undeniably impossible to attribute an act to “the Muslim World” as a whole. (Amani, 2016, para. 8)

Reflecting this diversity amongst Muslims, Islam itself is interpreted in diverse, sometimes contradictory ways. This diversity in how Islam is understood and practiced speaks to Wadud’s simple but powerful articulation that “Islam belongs to us. It belongs to all of us, and we make it as we live it” (Ali, 2019, p. 79). Focusing on lived experience draws attention to how interpretations of Islam are actively constructed, constantly negotiated and frequently contested, all within specific socio-political, geographic and historical contexts. In light of these factors, “identifying Islam as something ahistorical and monolithic leads to essentialist approaches” and overly simplistic understandings of the varied ways in which the religion is practiced (Navarro, 2008, as cited in Navarro, 2016, p. 86).

Despite the aforementioned diversity amongst Muslims, Islamophobia can strengthen narrow, exclusionary perceptions about what Muslims look like and who they are (MG Staff, 2020a). This erasure of the diversity amongst Muslims and their homogenization as an undifferentiated monolith is crucial for the propagation of Islamophobia. This universalization of Muslims ignores the complex nuances of identity and social positioning that shapes Muslims’ varying realities across the world (Raja, 2015). To homogenize such a huge and diverse Muslim population is to also dehumanize them and reduce them to a single form of representation (Amani, 2016). Such homogenization reflects settler colonial socialization, which is characterized by settler innocence, dehumanization and exploitation (Nath & Allen, 2022).

In turn, such flattened depictions of Muslims find their way into political narratives that have been reified post 9/11 through war on terror discourses and exclusionary

conceptualizations of nationhood. *Muslim Girl* explains that “Muslims have suffered an alienating form of discrimination after 9/11” (Berhe, 2015, para. 2). To understand this systemic marginalization better, one must consider how discussions about war often dehumanize the perceived enemy while employing stark black-and-white divisions to present a narrative that appears logical to the masses (Cooke & Woollacott, 1993, as cited in Jiwani, 2005). In the aftermath of 9/11, these narratives “assumed a heightened Orientalist mantle, coloured by the geographic, religious and cultural nature of the perceived enemy” (Jiwani, 2005, p. 15). After 9/11, mainstream narratives changed in drastic and convoluted ways such that “Muslims became public enemy number one” (MG Staff, 2020a, para. 3). Such narratives about Islam question “how safe and malleable the faith and its adherents are, deliberately for an ill-regarded scapegoating of faith” (Berhe, 2015, para. 5). These framings are especially evident in the ways in which terrorist violence continues to be linked to fundamentalist interpretations of Islam, even though such violence “completely contradicts every fundamental principle of Islam” (MG Staff, 2019, para. 9). This association of terrorism with Islam and with Muslims as a whole advances Islamophobic logics.

Islamophobia denotes “the long-standing system of discrimination that is enshrined in law and policy to specifically target those who practice the Islamic faith” (Islam, 2018, p. 280). Islamophobic violence takes the form of prejudice, discrimination, slurs, microaggressions, street harassment, physical assault and various types of anti-Muslim hate crimes. Underpinning Islamophobia is the assumption that Islam and Muslims are uncivilized, irrational, backwards and irrevocably misogynist (Rahman, 2010). Central to Islamophobia is this notion of Muslims as needlessly emotional, angry, inherently barbaric and wholly at odds with Western values of progress, enlightenment and liberty (Rahman, 2010). These presumptions about Muslims also reinforce good/bad, liberal/conservative and moderate/extreme binaries (Riley, 2009) Such logics are then mobilized to justify alienating Muslims and painting them as outsiders and always foreign in Western settings.

These stereotypes about Muslims are particularly evident in the ways in which gendered violence amongst Arabs and South Asians is seen as exceptionally vile and intrinsically different from similarly prevalent violence in broader society and in non-racialized communities. As Razack (2021) argues, such differentiated perceptions of violence across communities is most noticeable in narratives about honor killings that apply this term almost exclusively to Muslim, South Asian and Arab communities. These stereotypes are manipulated to seemingly justify comprehensive spying and surveillance of Muslims, Muslim communities and Muslim gathering places, recording of private phone conversations, banning of Muslims congregations in some countries and the proliferation of dangerously misinformed public debates about the place of Muslims in the Western world overall (Berhe, 2015; Harvard, 2015a; Sarahmohr, 2020). This policing and positioning of Muslims as incompatible with Western ethos is done in the name of supposedly delineating and safeguarding an idealized Western society (Berhe, 2015).

However, looking at the increasing prevalence of Islamophobic violence tells a different story. *Muslim Girl* reports “over the past several years since 2001, attacks on Muslims and even those perceived to be Muslim (mainly Sikhs and Hindus) have skyrocketed by at least 500%, though many acts of aggression don’t get investigated as hate crimes” (Berhe, 2015, para. 5). Furthermore, “almost 90% of identifiable mass shooters have been White men, predominantly of a Christian background” (Berhe, 2015, para. 2). In other words, while they experience disproportionate violence, “Muslims continue to be underrepresented in demographics relating to violence” (Berhe, 2015, para. 2). Despite widespread outcries about the incompatibility of Islam with “Western” ideologies, the above statistics paint a different picture (Berhe, 2015).

In spite of this, Muslims continue to be seen as irredeemably violent, uncontrollable and fundamentally dangerous (Berhe, 2015). Such stereotypes are worsened by underlying biases in news coverage and media representations that persistently and problematically question “if Islam, in its very ideological core is compatible with the Western world” (Berhe, 2015, para. 2). There is a strong undercurrent of Islam and Muslims’ implied inferiority in Western media which

is often seen “branding Islam as a terrorist religion and Muslims as born and bred misogynists incapable of achieving democracy” (Hamed, 2017c, para. 22). Such discourses that alienate Muslims and view them as inherently suspicious and violence-prone exemplify settler colonialism’s perpetuation of “historical, social and political conditions that render some sufferings and injustices permissible and habitual” (Zembylas, 2020, p. 323, as cited in Nath & Allen, 2022, p. 217).

### ***Islamophobia in Relation to National Narratives***

Multiple *Muslim Girl* blogs allude to how Islamophobia can marginalize Muslims and expose the fragile ways in which belonging to the nation works (Latif, 2015; Syjil, 2015). Indeed, nation-states are a key arena where Islamophobic rationales play out and are codified into legislation, legal frameworks, national policies and immigration procedures. At an ideological level, Islamophobia promotes exclusionary narratives about who does and does not belong to the nation, with Muslims falling outside the category of the desired citizen. Nationhood is also a notable theme in *Muslim Girl*, especially as it pertains to the US, Canada and France. Attuned to the complex ways in which Islamophobic narratives engage with stories of nationhood, *Muslim Girl* demonstrates an awareness of how its writing about Islam and feminism is couched within broader discourses that implicate nation-states and other structures of power.

Especially post 9/11 and in Western nations, there has been a disillusionment with conditional forms of citizenship whose “so-called privileges can be taken away from you just because your skin isn’t the right color or you don’t believe the right things” (Syjil, 2015, para. 8). This disenchantment is accompanied by a heightened awareness that marginalized individuals are seen as disposable and their rights are not inviolable (Syjil, 2015). Speaking to the conditional nature of such citizenship, being Muslim in a North American context is to be seen “as antithetical to a wide range of Western values” (Rahman, 2010, p. 944). Such binaries reinforce exclusionary forms of citizenship and leave Muslims grappling with identities that straddle divides (Latif, 2015). *Muslim Girl* succinctly encapsulates this sentiment by noting:

We Muslims are left to deal with the distortion of our identities. We are stereotyped and generalized to be uniformly Arab, violent, radical and incompatible with American values. So, to be Muslim in America is to be a political symbol; it is to choose between apologist and isolationist, a sellout or a traitor. To be Muslim in America is to allow the ignorance of a majority to paint a caricature of Islam. To be Muslim in America is to be a walking contradiction with no claim to patriotism or citizenship. (Latif, 2015, para. 8)

Broadly, Islamophobic narratives are also deployed in service of nationalism to seemingly justify colonial-minded and imperialist foreign invasions by countries like America and Canada of nations like Afghanistan, Iraq and Yemen (Harvard, 2015a; Sarahmohr, 2020). Islamophobia is mobilized to not only occupy sovereign states and spark war in other places, but also to garner acceptance for state-endorsed violence against Muslims within a country's borders (Harvard, 2015a; Sarahmohr, 2020). These conditions demand taking a closer look at how Islamophobia shapes and is shaped by the narratives of nationhood, particularly in America and Canada.

**Islamophobia in America.** Exploring how national narratives about America advance Islamophobia, *Muslim Girl* draws on Jasbir Puar's work in *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* to explain that:

The general public has become mobilized against Islam through claims of U.S. exceptionalism around sexual politics, and has engaged in its own forms of self-condoned violence that never become questioned, or investigated, as they are enshrined in the veils of patriotism and resistance to violence, claims that never take into account historical populations of racial minorities, or Indigenous peoples who have been the victims of the unquestioned violence perpetrated by white supremacy. (Sarahmohr, 2020, para. 14)

American Muslims are automatically politicized and are seen as oxymorons who must choose between Islam and nationalism (Latif, 2015). This oppositional framing strengthens

stereotypical assumptions about all Muslims as inherently barbaric extremists (Latif, 2015). Muslims in America, and arguably elsewhere, are thus faced with caricatured depictions of themselves and are systematically excluded from narratives of belonging and citizenship (Latif, 2015).

Islamophobic rhetoric is particularly prevalent in the US and serves to instigate multiple forms of state-sanctioned violence against Muslims and people of color (Chowdhury, 2016). *Muslim Girl* relays several American examples of Islamophobia, including discriminatory immigration policies that have been proposed as well as the racist and Islamophobic attacks during the rallies against Trump and in the post-2016 election period (Chowdhury, 2016). Such policies and public sentiment fuel anti-Muslim hatred that then lead to hijabs being ripped off of Muslim women and families being split apart as a result of inhumane detention and deportation systems, amongst other forms of state-endorsed violence (Chowdhury, 2016). Another example from *Muslim Girl* of Islamophobia playing out within the American law enforcement system is when police officers attempted to remove the hijabs of racialized activists Linda Sarsour and Faiza Ali who were arrested while protesting social injustices (Matan, 2018b). *Muslim Girl's* extensive engagement with American nationhood and its Islamophobic undertones is also exemplified by its critique of the disapproval that was meted out to one American school that observed a Muslim holiday, even though major holidays from other religions are coded into the country's public holidays (Muslim Girl, 2015a).

Below are two salient instances from *Muslim Girl* that also illustrate Islamophobic narratives in the US. The first example is of America's then Republican presidential candidate, Ben Carson who "was quoted saying he 'would not advocate that we put a Muslim in charge of this nation'" (Latif, 2015, para. 3). Statements like the above imply that Islam is inherently oppressive and misogynistic and that Muslims are not truly citizens who belong in America (Latif, 2015). What's even more worrisome is that such Islamophobic rants have currency today (Latif, 2015). The buy-in that Islamophobia has is discernible in the after-effects of Carson's

statements, which included him rising in polls and raising more than a million dollars within 24 hours of making these claims (Latif, 2015). The popularity that Islamophobic stances accrue to political figures is not lost on them (Latif, 2015). Unsurprisingly then, many political figures and aspirants, including “Donald Trump, Mike Huckabee, Ted Cruz, Sarah Palin, John McCain, Mitt Romney...have been joining the fear-mongering and ‘Othering’ rhetoric, knowing that the market for such comments is growing” (Latif, 2015, para. 6).

The next example that *Muslim Girl* describes is the work of Asra Nomani, an American author and journalist who sheds light on religious narratives that perpetrate violence (Hodakatebi, 2016a). *Muslim Girl* critiques Nomani’s analysis of violence in the name of religion for its lack of contextualization within “the messy political, economic, and social situations that Western powers have caused with their imperial and colonial projects—ones that work to create spaces and situations in which oppressive power structures and their inherent violence thrive” (Hodakatebi, 2016a, para. 8). Highlighting what’s missing from Nomani’s work, *Muslim Girl* argues that discussions about fundamentalist groups who lay claim to Islam must be historically nuanced (Hodakatebi, 2016a). Exemplifying such a historically aware approach in the American context, *Muslim Girl* calls for a consideration of how, for instance, American invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq have “worked to destroy and destabilize the region” and have had long-lasting impacts, including the rise of religiously-oriented terrorist factions (Hodakatebi, 2016a, para. 8). Together, these examples from *Muslim Girl* illustrate how anti-Muslim political discourses play out in the US.

In light of these alienating conditions, *Muslim Girl* tells a cautionary tale that “with the right ingredients any society, no matter how ‘holier-than-thou’, can be crushed under religious extremism and patriarchal terrorism” (Hamed, 2017c, para. 22). *Muslim Girl* argues that these are the very circumstances which the US finds itself in, thus making the country fertile ground for extremism in the name of religion (Hamed, 2017c). Namely, these conditions include rampant attacks on women’s liberties, pervasive anti-Black racism along with systemic racism,

extensive xenophobia and homophobia justified as freedom of religion (Hamed, 2017c). Other factors that strengthen religious extremism and other forms of structural oppression include widespread police brutality with limited accountability, the entrenchment of systems of domination, dubious attempts at secularism and exposing children to religious propaganda and false information (Hamed, 2017c). *Muslim Girl* also warns that “increased surveillance, targeted policing and everyday assault on American Muslims will only strengthen ‘Islamic extremism’” (Chowdhury, 2016, para. 5). This reflection insinuates that the persistent persecution of various minorities is not only inherently troublesome but can also fuel extremist ideologies.

All in all, as the above examples illustrate, *Muslim Girl* extensively critiques American national narratives for the state-sponsored violence they support and the discriminatory policies and practices that are justified in the name of nationhood. Additionally, *Muslim Girl* decries the white supremacist, Islamophobic underpinnings of such nationalist ideology and it contests the normalization of extensive surveillance and policing of racialized communities in the name of such an ideology. As these critiques demonstrate, *Muslim Girl* pays significant attention to the theme of American nationhood. Specifically, 25% of all *Muslim Girl* blogs reference American discourses of nationhood. Put together, these 35 blogs are referenced a whopping 588 times in this thesis. This vast number of references not only highlights *Muslim Girl's* position as an American-made digital media platform, it also sheds light on the discourses that American Muslims and arguably Muslims in other Western nations, including Canada, are caught up in.

**Canadian Nationhood and Multiculturalism in the Context of Islamophobia.** Moving on to the experiences of Muslims north of the US-Canada border, practicing Islam in Canada and within the context of modern liberalism puts one at the complex intersection of several socio-political and economic forces (Khan, 2009). “Histories of colonization shape the politics of migration and diversity in the Global North, where settler colonies such as Canada simultaneously have a historical relationship to colonizing power(s) and where all immigrants occupy indigenous land” (Veracini, 2011, as cited in Korteweg, 2017, p. 216; Thobani, 2007).

Given its existence as a settler-colony, an exploration of how Canadian immigration, citizenship and multiculturalism policies and narratives play out is warranted (Abu-Laban & Nath, 2020). Examining these policies requires an intersectional analysis that recognizes the influences of race, racialization, heteropatriarchy and settler-colonialism (Abu-Laban & Nath, 2020). Remaining attuned to this complexity, this section takes a look at the complex discourses of Canadian multiculturalism, including its positioning in relation to narratives of American nationhood. After that is a consideration of the multifaceted ways in which Canadian national and multicultural discourses intersect with Islamophobia.

Studying Canadian multiculturalism and how it is positioned in relation to American nationalism demands a close examination of “how the histories of race and coloniality feature in the contemporary formation of the west” (Thobani, 2018, p. 161). A comparative analysis of the current national political scene in Canada and US sheds light on “the divergence and convergence in their delineation of their identity and values” (Thobani, 2018, p. 161). Specifically, “if the Canadian self-image is one of tolerance and nonracism, the US self-image is that of a benevolent, ‘civilized’ white paternal nation bringing democracy to the rest of the world” (Mohanty, 2006, p. 10). Indeed, “on the international stage, Canada is renowned for its multicultural ethos, its peacekeeping reputation, and its moderate politics *vis-a`-vis* the United States” (Jiwani, 2009, p. 728). In other words, America and Canada “are most often defined as antithetical, with the latter confirming that western society has transcended its originary racial/colonial politics” (Thobani, 2018, p. 161). On this front, Thobani (2018, p. 161) explains that:

Although the white supremacist discourse that presently constitutes US nationalism is at variance with the multi-culturalism that shapes Canadian identity, these discourses can be defined as twin aspects of the racial/colonial politics that continue to give meaning to the idea of the west.

Research suggests that Islamophobic sentiment persists despite Canada's well-known framing as being multicultural, diverse and welcoming. Moreover, "racial exclusion is built into the Canadian story of multiculturalism" (Razack, 2013, p. 197). Although Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms is a key guiding force and despite the fact that narratives of Canadian multiculturalism reign supreme, the country's democratic principles are under threat by worsening xenophobia and Islamophobic violence (Ahmad, 2017). In 2022 itself (at the time of this writing), the attack on a mosque in Mississauga, ON and the xenophobic and deadly attack on a family in London, ON are two of several examples of rising Islamophobic violence. *Muslim Girl* also pays attention to this increase in anti-Muslim violence and hate crimes in Canada, explaining that "a 2015 report on hate crimes in Canada released by Statistics Canada noted 224 police-reported crimes against Muslims in 2015, and noted that 'Muslim populations had the highest percentage of hate crime victims who were female'" (Niqabae, 2018, para. 6).

In this climate, *Muslim Girl* denounces Islamophobic narratives that have been espoused by multiple Canadian political leaders (Muslim Girl, 2015a). For example, *Muslim Girl* calls out Canada's then Defence Minister and, ironically, Multicultural Minister, Jason Kenney, for implying that niqab-wearing Muslim women are inherently oppressed and representative of Islamic fundamentalism, an incident that came to light on International Women's Day no less (Muslim Girl, 2015a).

By underscoring the prevalence of such Islamophobic sentiment in Canada, *Muslim Girl* blogs like the one titled "The #MeToo Moments Continue at Canada's Parliament Hill" shed light on problematic issues in the Canadian landscape (Jhaish, 2018; Niqabae, 2018). In total, four blogs centrally engage with the Canadian context, and collectively there are around 60 references to these blogs in this thesis. Therefore, Canadian nationhood in relation to discourses about gender, Islam and Muslim women's agency and well-being emerges as a noteworthy theme in this research. As was mentioned in the previous chapter, some potential audiences for the findings of this research include Canadian organizations such as the

Canadian Council of Muslim Women, the National Council of Canadian Muslims, Voices for Muslim Women, Canadian Muslim Women's Institute and Canadian Muslim Lawyers' Association. In light of these possible research audiences, *Muslim Girl's* examination of Canadian narratives of nationalism become all the more relevant.

Drilling down further into the issue of anti-Muslim violence in Canada, gendered Islamophobia surfaces as another prominent theme and one towards which this thesis will turn next. Riley (2013, p. 1) argues that Muslim girls and women in Canada experience various forms of violence in "families, ethnocultural communities, the wider Canadian society, schools, the healthcare system, the immigration system, and the workforce". For example, Quebec has been on the receiving end of global media scrutiny and activists' condemnation for its restrictions on religious symbols in public spaces (Mugabo, 2016). Challenging widespread depictions of Canadian benevolence, an examination of this rise of Quebec's secularism narrative reveals how it seeks to reshape national boundaries along the lines of gender, race and sexuality (Benhadjoudja, 2017). Crucially, "these discourses put forward the idea of a secular, feminist and pro-LGBTQI 'Us' that it opposes to a Muslim, homophobic and misogynist 'Them'", thus alienating Quebecois Muslims (Benhadjoudja, 2017, p. 272).

As the above examples illustrate, even "as Canada continues to brand itself a leader in multi-culturalism and equality, the climate remains thick with anti-Muslim misogyny" (Hunt et al., 2020, p. 359). The hostility that Muslims face is based on assumptions "that somehow Muslims do not or cannot share the same values as their non-Muslim Canadian neighbors" (Ahmad, 2017, p. 262). Such discriminatory presumptions alienate Muslims, for whom "the hope of receiving any form of care (whether solidarity, alliance, friendship) is miniscule outside of our small circle of friends, kin, and other community members" (Patel, 2022b, para. 9).

However, the above analysis does not imply that Canadian Muslims do not or cannot feel a sense of belonging to the Canadian nation-state. Instead I am suggesting that being seen as desired citizens is impacted in complex and not easily predictable ways by one's belonging to a

minority group, whether that is on the basis of religion, race, class or another facet of identity, or a combination of these facets. Thus, the above tensions indicate that Canadian Muslims can experience allegiance to, but also a sense of dissonance from narratives of nationhood in which they are only accepted conditionally and tenuously.

### ***Gendered Islamophobia***

Turning towards the gendered nature of Islamophobia, this section delves into Muslim women's experiences with Islamophobia, as narrated by *Muslim Girl*. To begin with, Muslim women see the rise in Islamophobia as one of the long-lasting impacts of 9/11 on their lives (MG Staff, 2019). Here, gender is an important category of analysis because "it underpins, informs and shapes the discourses of war" (Jiwani, 2005, p. 15). In turn, these narratives generate a unique form of terror that has varying consequences for men and women (Jiwani, 2005).

*Muslim Girl* argues that gendered Islamophobia is a form of institutionalized violence, defining it as "a term used to describe the specific forms of Islamophobic stereotypes and discrimination that Muslim women face" (Niqabae, 2018, para. 5). For Muslim women, the risk of patriarchal violence that all women face is compounded by their vulnerability to Islamophobic violence too (MG Staff, 2020a). In other words, "Islamophobic violence against Muslim women is both racist violence and gender-based violence" (Niqabae, 2018, para. 6).

Although "the plight of Muslim women is arguably the most popular choice of debate...they are never spoken for through the authentic lens of their own voices" (MG Staff, 2019, para. 9). This silencing of Muslim women's voices advances particular forms of gendered Islamophobia that perpetuate caricatured depictions of Muslim women, ranging "from forced veils to victims of violence to jihadi brides", despite the fact that gendered violence is not a Muslim-only problem (MG Staff, 2019, para. 9). Gendered Islamophobia includes such stereotypes wherein "Muslim women are portrayed as weak, oppressed, repressed, and as helpless victims" who "simply don't know how to fight back" (MG Staff, 2020a, para. 6; Niqabae, 2018, para. 5). Muslim women, by their presumed lack of resistance, are also seen as being

responsible for gendered violence in the form of honor killings, acid attacks and the like (Mokhtar, 2017). Additionally, Western liberal ideologies disempower Muslim women by positioning them as either helpless victims waiting to be rescued or as being responsible for 9/11 and all subsequent acts of terrorism (Mokhtar, 2017).

Such framings “make Muslim women more vulnerable to gender-based violence” because they “are thought to be ‘easy targets’, and so this heightens the likelihood of violence being perpetrated against them” (MG Staff, 2020a; Niqabae, 2018, para. 6). This amplification of Islamophobia has made Muslim women increasingly afraid for their safety and increasingly concerned about the intensified surveillance by Western forces of Muslim individuals and communities (MG Staff, 2019). Muslim women’s mere presence in public can be seen as inviting verbal harassment, eve-teasing and other forms of street harassment, such as “catcalling, wolf whistling, and being followed” (MG Staff, 2020a, para. 5). Reiterating “that the majority of anti-Muslim hate crimes are directed at Muslim women”, *Muslim Girl* highlights this globally heightened prevalence of gendered Islamophobia by citing several studies, as below:

In a study by the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, they found that in 15 countries in the European Union, there was a common pattern of visibly Muslim women being attacked (Meer and Modood, 2009). An American study on Islamophobia found that “a significantly larger proportion of women (86.3%) than men (54.9%) had experienced hate crime” (Abu-Ras and Suarez, 2009). A British-based study found that the majority of victims of Islamophobic violence were women, particularly visibly Muslim women. (Hopkins, 2016, as cited in Niqabae, 2018, para. 6)

Other *Muslim Girl* blogs echo these findings, adding that Muslim women in the US are particularly vulnerable to “a stark number of Islamophobic hate crimes that seem to be growing by the day” (MG Staff, 2020a, para. 2). Another *Muslim Girl* blog that reiterates the above research, notes that “data from the UK found that hate crimes increased by 275 percent, where the main targets were Muslim women” (Raja, 2015, para. 3).

In addition to manifesting as violence against Muslim women, gendered Islamophobia also appears in policies like hijab bans, in negative attitudes towards women's right to veil, and in the all too common trope of saving Muslim women that reinforces hegemonic, unidimensional representations of Muslim women and erases their agency and autonomy. Beyond the more easily recognizable forms of violence outlined above, Muslim women's experiences of Islamophobic sentiment also include being subjected to vitriol and being made painfully aware that they do not belong and are considered outsiders, "despite knowing no other home" (Guest Blogger, 2018, para. 5).

Muslim women's vulnerability to gendered Islamophobic violence not only alienates them, it also fosters a lack of belonging (Raja, 2015). In fact, Muslim women's lack of belonging is a salient theme that emerges in *Muslim Girl*. To elaborate, Muslim women in Western societies face exclusion when they are made to feel that in order to belong to the community, they must either change themselves or blend in – for example by giving up visual identifiers of their Muslim identities, such as the hijab (Jahangiri, 2022; MG Staff, 2021d). *Muslim Girl* puts this succinctly by asking "how can you feel accepted by a community that wants you to change yourself to fit in?" (Jahangiri, 2022, para. 16). At the same time, feeling out of place is something that Muslim women also grapple with in Muslim-majority countries, including those where they are citizens or where their ethnicity is rooted (Mokhtar, 2017).

Despite its prevalence, gendered Islamophobia frequently goes unaccounted for. *Muslim Girl* notes that "Islamophobia is legally considered a hate crime, and street harassment has now been deemed a genuine form of gender-based violence, but the intersections between the two are almost never part of our discussions on how to end both issues" (MG Staff, 2020a, para. 5). This gap reveals a tendency "to turn a blind eye on how racial and religious oppression can also interact with sexism" leading to intersecting forms of oppression (MG Staff, 2020a, para. 5). In this climate, Muslim women face not only patriarchy but also persecution for "belonging to a faith that seems to be hated and attacked by both 'friends' and politicians alike" (MG Staff,

2020a, para. 3). Hegemonic narratives that paint Muslims as intrinsically misogynistic and Muslim women as inferior, simple-minded beings compound the discrimination that Muslim women face (Mokhtar, 2017).

Making matters worse, when Muslim women seek support, they frequently face racist and Islamophobic undercurrents in supposedly feminist spaces. Explaining how Islamophobic forms of feminism marginalize Muslim women, *Muslim Girl* notes that “anti-racism, anti-Islamophobia, and feminism should go hand in hand, but this isn’t always the case, leaving Muslim women unsure of who exactly to turn to in their times of need” (MG Staff, 2020a, para. 5). *Muslim Girl* extensively critiques Islamophobia in feminist spaces, which is rooted in presumptions about the incompatibility of Islam and feminism. Such white savior-oriented, Islamophobic feminism deters meaningful partnerships and allyship within feminist movements.

Particularly, *Muslim Girl* argues that feminists’ failure to call out the gendered Islamophobia in “the hate crime at Chapel Hill that resulted in the execution of three Muslims, which occurred because the Muslim women murdered wore a hijab” exemplifies the exclusionary dynamics of feminism (Berhe, 2015; Raja, 2015, para. 3). Other examples that *Muslim Girl* references are the alienation that Muslim women experience within the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements where Islamophobic forms of feminism have been drawn upon. Thus, gendered Islamophobia not only affects Muslim women’s experiences at the intersection of anti-Muslim sentiment and misogyny, but it also raises questions about the lack of inclusivity in some feminist arenas. These multiple forms of exclusion shed light on the overlapping nature of misogynistic, white supremacist and Islamophobic agendas and their influence on lived experiences (MG Staff, 2020a).

These exclusionary dynamics are evident on social media as well, where Muslim women are told to “go back home now” and that they neither belong to nor are welcome in the US specifically, and in the West generally (Mokhtar, 2017, para. 1). The digital terrain’s impact on Muslim women’s feminist activism is a key theme in this project and is analyzed in detail in

chapter 4. In this context, *Muslim Girl* offers specific examples of digital gendered Islamophobia, that are detailed later in this thesis.

Last but certainly not least, *Muslim Girl* calls for “a deeper examination of the multiple forms of structural violence Muslim women experience, such as anti-Black racism, anti-Muslim violence, patriarchy, classism, ableism, gender-based violence, war, imperialism, poverty, and how these forms of state violence, alongside others, intersect” (Raja, 2015, para. 10). The intersecting nature of these systems of power is particularly discernible in the experiences of those who face multiple oppressive forces at once, such as Black Muslim women. Hence, gendered Islamophobia affects Muslim women uniquely, based on their location in terms of gender, religion, race and other axes of identity (Hunt et al., 2020).

**Islamophobia and the Hijab.** The above exploration of gendered Islamophobia segues well into a consideration of how Muslim women who veil are affected by such anti-Muslim sentiment. To preface this discussion, the violence experienced by Muslim women who do and do not wear the hijab and niqab both require due consideration (Raja, 2015). That being said, while it is becoming alarmingly more common for Muslim women overall to be victimized by Islamophobic prejudice, hate crimes, assault and racial discrimination, *Muslim Girl* argues that “bigots do indeed target the bodies of Muslim women, visibly identifiable because of the headscarf” (Raja, 2015, para. 3). Veiled Muslim women are subjected to Islamophobia along with the hypersexualization and objectification that women experience overall. Jointly, these conditions position veiled Muslim women as being universally subjugated because they are hiding what is considered as their most prized possession through a patriarchal lens i.e. their appearance.

To elaborate, “hijab wearing women are more physically distinguishable, thus particularly vulnerable over their male counterparts in experiencing Islamophobic sentiments, ranging from obscure microaggressions to full on assault” (Berhe, 2015, para. 4; MG Staff, 2020d; Raja, 2015). Such attacks range “from acid attacks to violently ripping off someone’s hijabs” to other

forms of violence, highlighting the need for an intersectional understanding of the specific forms of violence experienced by Muslim women (MG Staff, 2020d, para. 5). In another example, one *Muslim Girl* blogger shares her personal experience of having her hijab forcibly pulled after she declined a request to show her hair (Muslim Girl, 2018c). However, these assaults and the fear they perpetuate are not going unchallenged. For example, at a university guest lecture by Amani Al-Khatahtbeh, one of the attendees articulates the need to empower young hijab-wearing Muslim women who are dealing with “feelings of insecurity and wanting to stop wearing their hijab so as not to be identified as Muslims” (Mokhtar, 2016a, para. 11).

Given the current amplification of Islamophobia around the world, it is dangerous to view the hijab as archaic, invariably repressive, and “as the cause and effect of women’s oppression around the world” (Hodakatebi, 2016a, para. 6). Such dangerous narratives “only contribute to amplifying surveillance and racial profiling in Muslim communities, and perpetuate hate and violence towards hijab-wearing Muslim women” (Hodakatebi, 2016a, para. 12). This one-dimensional view of the hijab as universally oppressive is not only incorrect, it is also co-opted to legitimize Islamophobia in the name of feminism (Hodakatebi, 2016a). Moreover, this stereotype about the hijab being forced on Muslim women problematically erases the agency and autonomy of “Muslim women who *choose everyday* to wear the hijab” (Hodakatebi, 2016a, para. 20).

Throughout this chapter, the complex terrain of Islamic feminism as evident in *Muslim Girl* and in academic literature has come to light. Having examined pertinent issues within Islamic feminism, this chapter demonstrated how *Muslim Girl* speaks to a redefined feminist praxis and reimagined pious femininity, characterized by the assertion that feminism can authentically arise from within Islam itself rather than being imposed as a Western construct. Another key theme in this chapter has been the significance of accounting for Muslim women’s positionality, including how they draw strength from Islam to navigate through personal and communal challenges. Next was an examination of sectarianism within Islam, the

personalization of Islamic practices, the connection between women preachers and feminist preaching, and the changing role of present-day Muslim religious figures amidst the rise of professionalization. Contextualized within this backdrop, this chapter detailed the contributions of historical and contemporary Muslim scholars and religious leaders.

Moreover, this chapter critically examined the enduring impacts of colonialism, imperialism, and settler colonialism on narratives about Muslims and Islam. It studied how Islamophobia intersects with settler colonialism and with American and Canadian national narratives to shape Muslim women's realities and their experiences of veiling. Next up was a consideration of how gendered Islamophobia along with Islamophobic forms of feminism put Muslim women between a rock and a hard place. Included here was an examination of the kinds of violence that Islamophobia and gendered Islamophobia foster. By connecting these threads, this chapter has illuminated how the *Muslim Girl* website addresses Islamic feminism, in light of broader socio-political discourses.

### 3. Strategies for Deriving Feminist Interpretations of Islam

This chapter explores the various approaches that feminist scholars and activists use to arrive at gender-equitable interpretations of Islamic texts and teachings. Firstly, this chapter argues that such feminist interventions in interpretations of Islamic guidance are a long-standing tradition. This argument foregrounds how feminist interventions reclaim interpretive authority by drawing on the concept of *tawhid* i.e. the oneness of God and by highlighting the difference between *fiqh* (jurisprudence) and *Sharia* (Islamic law). Next, this chapter reflects on how these interpretive strategies give rise to a feminist Islam, an Islam that advocates for women's rights and promotes social justice through the redistribution of wealth.

Then this chapter asserts that understanding primary Islamic sources through historical contextualization and intratextual reading is a key strategy for deriving feminist interpretations of Islam. The Islamic sources that are interpreted through these lenses include the Quran and Prophetic sayings (Hadith) and practices (Sunnah). To build on this argument, this chapter illustrates how *Muslim Girl* highlights specific Quranic verses about activism, anti-violence and equitable gender relations as a way to elucidate Islam's egalitarian principles. Included in this analysis is a feminist re-interpretation of Quranic verse 4:34 through historical contextualization and intratextual reading strategies, as well as a consideration of the importance of interpretive responsibility. Subsequently, this chapter sheds light on the attention that *Muslim Girl* pays to specific Hadith and Sunnah that reiterate Islam's commitment to women's rights and social justice.

Then, this chapter argues that highlighting Muslim women who are mentioned in Islamic scripture and throughout early Islamic history and who are seen as feminist icons is another notable strategy for arriving at feminist understandings of Islam. On this front, *Muslim Girl* draws attention to the example of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), including his marriage to Hazrat Khadija bint Khuwaylid, who *Muslim Girl* claims is a feminist icon herself. Building on this legacy, this chapter illuminates the contemporary contributions of Muslim women across various

domains, including sports, fashion, law, healthcare, arts, media, activism, nonprofit work and politics. Through their achievements, these Muslim women personify Islamic feminism in action. Finally, this chapter examines the commonalities amongst the strategies of resistance that feminist interpreters deploy across religious traditions.

### **Feminist Interventions in Religious Interpretation - An Enduring Tradition**

By confronting clichéd assumptions about Islam, feminist interventions highlight “the larger context and power structures existing within the religious tradition of Islam” as well as the diversity in how Islam is understood and practiced (Boe, 2020, p. 661). These interventions remind us that Islam is relatively flexible, which has made it adaptable and widely applicable over time and across the world (Berhe, 2015). In light of these feminist interventions, this section begins by exploring the history and present trajectory of interpretive authority, including prevalent concerns and tensions in relation to feminism. Then, the next section examines how feminist interpretive authority draws on Islamic principles.

#### ***Interpretive Authority***

Ahmed (1986, p. 671) explains:

A significant portion of the accounts of the Prophet and his times (a literature forming the core of the Islamic corpus revered as the authentic annals of early Islam and looked to as a model for Muslim conduct and a source for Muslim law) was recounted on the authority of women, that is, traced itself back to a woman of the Prophet's generation as the first teller, and usually to a woman who was a Companion of the Prophet, generally a wife or daughter. Women therefore (and 'Aisha most particularly) have had an important part in the authoring of the official history of Islam, and in creating that literature that established the normative practices of Islamic society. This in itself is an indication that the first generation of Muslims...and their immediate heirs, had no difficulty in accepting women as authorities.

Similar dynamics are evident in feminist interventions in Christianity, where scholars have highlighted the significance of Mary Magdalene as a symbol of women's religious authority in the early days of Christianity. This commonality indicates that Islam and Christianity both challenge patriarchal readings of religion by foregrounding the foundational and long-standing role that women have played in shaping religious history, practices and knowledge. Such examples enable contemporary feminist and theological scholars to claim historical precedent when arguing for women's right to be religious leaders and figures of interpretive authority.

Building on this tradition of women's Islamic religious authority, Wadud (2021, p. 2) and other feminist scholars argue that "to include women's lived realities in Qur'anic analysis challenges the dominant and prolific model of centering analysis of the sacred text and religious practices around men and men's experience as if universal". Despite this recognized need for decentering male-centric interpretations of Islam, "the female voice within Islamic scholarship of today is not heard enough" (Issa, 2016, para. 25). On this front, *Muslim Girl* also expresses concern regarding "the lack of discussions that involved religion in classes and the lack of Muslim women's representation" in these settings (Khatib, 2016, para. 17).

Addressing the male domination of interpretive authority, *Muslim Girl* reminds readers that "the vast majority of Islamic jurisprudence produced in the last 1400 years was submitted and ratified by human men who interpreted the verses they read through the lens of the society and culture they grew up in" (Amaneisa, 2016b, para. 8). Failing to recognize this would mean taking on "the risk of claiming that a group of human men have the same omniscient power of the divine to deliver immutable decrees" (Amaneisa, 2016b, para. 11). Making matters worse, male interpreters are often blind to the ways in which historically specific ideas about gender inform their exegesis (Hidayatullah, 2014). This blindness to evolving conceptualizations of gender and gendered roles can be further aggravated given that interpretive authority "is also established through its self-referential, repetitive, and cumulative tendencies" (Hidayatullah, 2014, p. 27). To clarify, the authority of patriarchal Quranic interpretations is gathered partly by

reaffirming and building on previous, historic interpretations that were also detrimental to women, and that, by virtue of their historicity rather than their independent merit, have come to be canonized as indisputable (Hidayatullah, 2014). Hidayatullah (2014, pp. 79–80) goes on to argue that:

The overall effect of such reasoning has been to lock readings of the Qur'an into particular historical contexts without acknowledging their historicity; this in turn has impeded the process of distilling historical biases from exegetical meanings and developing interpretations of the Qur'an in line with new historical contexts.

Wadud (2021, p. 2) puts forth a similar argument, explaining that “classical Islamic intellectual traditions operated within a well entrenched patriarchal model, taking for granted that men were the ideal agents and that they were superior to women...Men were in charge and women were here to support men’s movement toward the divine”. Furthermore, “women’s subjective knowledge was deemed incongruent with truth or orthodoxy, while men apparently had no subjectivity and their knowledge was canonized as if sacred or divine” (Wadud, 2021, pp. 3–4).

Over time, these patriarchal Islamic intellectual paradigms have exacerbated the problematic puritanical approach of “interpreting the meaning of Quranic verses by interpreting them literally — and cherry-picking verses” that purport a particular worldview (Ramlan, 2022, para. 26). *Muslim Girl* notes that in some instances “families, faith leaders and authoritarian governments cherry pick verses or ideas and force them down the throats of an impressionable audience, nurturing a society of bigotry and discrimination”, all without looking at the overall context of Quranic verses and without considering other abrogating verses (Guest Blogger, 2017b, para. 3). *Muslim Girl* also argues that unfortunately Muslims and non-Muslims both misconstrue Quranic verses to imply that the Quran does not challenge misogyny (Imaanasim, 2019).

In this context, it is unsurprising that Muslim women's active involvement in and reclamation of the right to knowledgeably devise Islamic interpretations can seem alarming to some (Leahvernon, 2017b). Such reclamation can seem threatening because it empowers Muslim girls and women to side-step men or religious intermediaries who have long been seen as necessary to the practice of Islam (Leahvernon, 2017b). Such individualistic approaches to Islam can counter women's oppression by equipping women with "the power to make their own decisions about religion, free of constraints" which then "makes them uncontrollable" (Leahvernon, 2017b, para. 17). In other words, this autonomy makes it harder to manipulate Islamic teachings to control women's behavior for patriarchal purposes (Leahvernon, 2017b, para. 17).

**Drawing on Tawhid.** The contemporary male domination of Islamic interpretive authority notwithstanding, drawing egalitarian interpretations of the Quran builds on a long-standing feminist tradition of disrupting hegemonic male control over Islamic knowledge production. Here, the tawhidic paradigm is a useful analytical framework to unpack the narratives espoused by *Muslim Girl*.

By way of explanation, the fundamental Islamic notion of tawhid refers to "the doctrine of God's unity and incomparability" (Hidayatullah, 2014, p. 110). The idea of tawhid negates gender inequality because "designating men as the superiors of women or attributing maleness to God constitute acts of *shirk*" which is a type of idolatry and hence is un-Islamic (Hidayatullah, 2014, p. 111). "Instead, women and men must occupy a relationship of horizontal reciprocity, maintaining the highest place for God" (Wadud, as cited in Hidayatullah, 2014, p. 113). Furthermore, "'reducing Allah to the patriarchal contextual articulation [of Allah]' is 'a kind of shirk (violation of *tawhid*),' since it reduces Allah to a human construct" (Wadud, 2006, as cited in Hidayatullah, 2014, p. 121). This stance is also echoed in *Muslim Girl*, where one blogger sheds light on Wadud's argument in *Islam Beyond Patriarchy Through Gender Inclusive Qur'anic Analysis*, that "'patriarchy is a kind of shirk (ultimate violation of divine unity) because it

denies the equality of all Allah's creation. Patriarchy rests on the Satanic notion of *istikbar* (thinking of oneself as better than another)" (as cited in Adina, 2017, para. 5).

Conceptualizing God as masculine goes against *tawhid* and:

"Masculinizing God is the first step in positing a hierarchy in which males situate themselves beneath God and above women, implying that there is a symbolic (and sometimes literal) continuum between God's Rule over humans and male rule over women." (Barlas, 2002, as cited in Hidayatullah, 2014, p. 114)

A relevant critique of the *tawhidic* paradigm is that even though it indicates that God is above both men and women, in relation to each other, men and women may still be differently positioned (Hidayatullah, 2014). Even so, the Quran's caution against "misrepresenting God as father, son, husband, or male" and its insistence that none of the Prophets are to be sacralized as fathers is an indication of its anti-patriarchal stance in relation to the concept of *tawhid* (Barlas, 2002, as cited in Hidayatullah, 2014, p. 115). In fact, God is deliberately described as being beyond comparison and cannot be assigned a gender (Hidayatullah, 2014). Rather, "among the many flaws of human language are its androcentric tendencies and its inability to express concepts that transcend gender" (Hidayatullah, 2014, p. 120). In light of this, "masculinized references to God in human language must not be understood as an 'epistemological claim about God's Being'", but as a limitation of the human language and a linguistic convention to avoid (Barlas, 2002, as cited in Hidayatullah, 2014, p. 116).

Additionally, as the *tawhidic* paradigm suggests that perfection is attributable to only God, "one can never pronounce a final interpretation of the Quran, since to do so would be to claim to have God's knowledge and to place oneself in the role of God" (Hidayatullah, 2014, p. 110). Wadud and Barlas both reiterate this argument, pointing out, "all interpretations are subject to the limitations of human error" (El Younssi, 2018; Hidayatullah, 2014, p. 117). Indeed, "Islamic feminist reforms have returned all interpreters to their status as mere humans struggling to understand and to implement divine mandates" (Wadud, 2021, p. 4). In much the same way,

*Muslim Girl* clarifies that since “the very essence of human fallibility lies in the inability of our perception and conscious awareness to exist outside the parochial societal frameworks we grew up in”, interpreters too are unable to form perceptions without being influenced by their own situated viewpoints (Amaneisa, 2016b, para. 11). As a result, “we cannot remain firmly married to the same rules promoted by fallible men in a different cultural context out of a misguided fear we’re not smart enough to accommodate societal changes with our faith in God” (Amaneisa, 2016b, para. 18). As this reflection from *Muslim Girl* insinuates, the tawhidic paradigm supports feminist interpretive interventions by underscoring the situated, contested and ultimately fallible nature of interpretive authority.

#### **Differentiating Between Fiqh and Sharia, and Emphasizing Religious Education.**

The above section explored how foregrounding the context-based, value-informed nature of knowledge construction is vital for reclaiming feminist interpretations and reshaping Islamic knowledge (Hidayatullah, 2014). Also paying such close attention to the construction of Islamic knowledge, *Muslim Girl* states that “Muslims often confuse Islamic Sharia with fiqh, as if the two were interchangeable, and fiqh itself as Divine revelation” (Amaneisa, 2016b, para. 8). In fact, “Sharia is the body of Divine Islamic laws themselves” and “fiqh is the methodology that was developed by human men to extract interpretations of the Quran and hadiths—men who lived in vastly different cultural, scientific and technological circumstances than we do today” (Amaneisa, 2016b, para. 9). Fiqh is the interpretation and application of Sharia, and it deals with all aspects of life, including family ties, business, social and gender relations as well as societal governance and law and order. Experts of fiqh study the Quran, Hadith and Sunnah to arrive at interpretations of Sharia, using methods such as independent reasoning, scholarly consensus and analogical inferences.

*Muslim Girl* explains that “throughout the history of Islamic jurisprudence, Islamic jurors never agreed on the same form of fiqh, and thereby our understanding of Sharia—the divine and immutable laws—have always differed” (Amaneisa, 2016b, para. 9). Any interpretation of

Sharia is thus limited by the constraints of interpreters' worldviews (Amaneisa, 2016b). *Muslim Girl* makes the case that, "while Sharia itself is considered immutable, the interpretation of Sharia derived from fiqh can and MUST be challenged to help us better understand the Quran and hadiths" (Amaneisa, 2016b, para. 10). By highlighting its human-driven and hence fallible and contextual nature, *Muslim Girl* argues that feminist interventions in fiqh can yield more egalitarian interpretations of Islamic principles. This critical engagement arises from a desire to reclaim fiqh, not dismiss it. Such feminist reclamation of fiqh demands disrupting male normativity in knowledge creation by accounting for women's experiences when deriving interpretations of Islamic tenets. Undergirding such endeavours is the understanding that fiqh itself is not inherently patriarchal, but has been moulded by patriarchal norms over the centuries — norms that can be challenged and upended.

In other words, fiqh is not universally applicable and must keep changing to keep up with societal advancements (Amaneisa, 2016b). Therefore, *Muslim Girl* suggests that:

Developing a sincere relationship with Allah where you interpret sacred texts with the honest intention of trying to become a moral agent within the specific cultural context of the society you grew up in is a far more honest engagement with spirituality than blindly following the fiqh developed by someone who is also fallible. (Amaneisa, 2016b, para. 12)

Last but not least, *Muslim Girl* also interrogates Islamic interpretive authority by underlining the gravity of such authority and arguing that acquiring this authority requires detailed research and extensive education. Put differently, the importance of doing thorough research before drawing Quranic interpretations cannot be overstated. *Muslim Girl* makes this point as follows:

A real Muslim scholar devotes years of his or her life pursuing the path of knowledge, and studying Quranic exegesis to understand the Quran. That is why as a Muslim, it is

essential to gain knowledge on the Quranic exegesis or tafsir when reciting the Quran as to not misinterpret the message.

*Muslim Girl's* above reflection on interpretive authority as well as interpretive maneuvers used by feminist Quranic exegetes suggest that “no text stands isolated; rather, texts are always embedded in the textual systems—reinforced through collective memory and narrative relations—within which they interact and through which they are read” (Fischbach, 2021, p. 211). In other words, “a religious community constitutes itself by means of its collective memory, the past that it recalls and emulates” (Gross, 1993, as cited in Shaikh, 2013, p. 27).

### ***A Feminist Islam***

Framed within this well-established tradition of feminist Islamic interpretations, this section turns to specific examples from *Muslim Girl* that illustrate the feminist orientation of Islam. To begin with, *Muslim Girl* is mindful of the binaristic framings of Islam and feminism. Due to such oppositional positioning, “in some conservative Muslim communities, the idea of being a ‘Muslim feminist’ is challenged”, regardless of Islam’s inherently feminist viewpoints (Birk, 2021, para. 1). Disrupting this false binary, *Muslim Girl* asserts that advocacy for social justice, gender equality, moral uprightness and the dismantling of oppressive power structures are central feminist tenets of Islam (Guest Blogger, 2017a; Kit, 2014; Muslim Girl, 2014). Several testimonials from *Muslim Girl* speak to this theme of a feminist Islam; relevant snippets from a few of these testimonials are listed below:

- Islam is such a just religion in the way Allah prescribed for all people to act, like being modest and doing righteous deeds (Guest Blogger, 2017a, para. 6).
- Feminism and Islam are not mutually exclusive: without Islam I wouldn’t be the feminist I am today, and without feminism I wouldn’t be a good Muslim. Equal and just treatment of women and dismantling of toxic patriarchal structures was the aim of early Islam: to destroy the anti-woman culture of Jahaliyya, the days of ignorance (Guest Blogger, 2017a, para. 17).

- As a Muslim woman, I understand feminisms to be the fight for political, economic, social, educational, and social rights and equality for women against patriarchal oppression and all forms of violence...I want to find my “feminism” through the Qur’an and Hadith. This is where my heart and mind find comfort (Guest Blogger, 2017a, paras. 19–22).
- As a Muslim woman and a feminist, I choose to acknowledge the intersectionality between my two identities and help create more equitable institutions in my community and beyond...By my choice to identify as a Muslim feminist, I generally believe that the principles that I have chosen to interpret and abide by in Islam are defined by my way of feminism (Guest Blogger, 2017a, paras. 26–28).

As these excerpts suggest, “feminism is about fighting, challenging, and criticizing structures of dominance that maintain the status quo — an important part of Islam” (Kit, 2014, para. 4). This emphasis within Islam on justice, ethics and empowerment is aligned with feminist goals of equity and fairness. There are two main themes within *Muslim Girl’s* argument that Islam has been a feminist religion from its earliest days; namely, a) that Islam has advocated for women’s rights from day one, and b) that Islam has long called for equitable redistribution of wealth in societies, in line with feminist values. Both these themes are described in the next two sections.

**Giving Women Their Rights.** From its very beginning, Islam’s feminist underpinnings are evident in its critique of the anti-feminist ethos of the time and society that the Quran was first revealed in (Guest Blogger, 2017a). Islam’s feminist interventions can be traced back to its origins because “Islam emphasized that rudimentary human rights are inclusive to both genders at a time where women and girls were treated like objects” (Kawetherinuwa, 2019, para. 7). *Muslim Girl* argues that Islam secured numerous rights for women, including basic universal human rights for all as well as women’s right “to vote, receive an education, own property, be leaders and be politically active, have a career and use their income whichever way they see fit”

(Guest Blogger, 2017a; Kawetherinuwa, 2019, para. 7). Islam advocates for women's independence as well as their "marital rights, property rights, divorce rights, equal opportunity rights, education rights" (MG Staff, 2020b). The provision and safeguarding of these rights meant that, even in early Islamic history, women were "taking on roles based on what they felt was required to fulfill themselves or provide for their families" (Muslim Girl, 2018b, para. 1).

Like feminist discourses, the Quran also lists the many ways in which women contribute in public and private spheres of life (Muslim Girl, 2014). At the same time, Islamic scripture avoids suggesting that women's value lies solely in their mothering or home-making abilities (Muslim Girl, 2014). In this way, the Quran's careful approach towards women's roles is summed up by *Muslim Girl's* articulation that "Islam has always offered women the option to choose their path" (Muslim Girl, 2014, 2018b, para. 4).

Next, *Muslim Girl* reaffirms that "Islam never promotes any violence, injustice, and discrimination of gender" and that Islamic interventions contest harmful patriarchal practices, instead calling for women's equality (Guest Blogger, 2017a; Ramlan, 2022, para. 22). A prime example of such an Islamic intervention is that "before Islam, the sickening practice of burying female infants alive was commonplace, because even the thought of having a daughter was something to be ashamed of. This practice was vehemently prohibited when Islam was revealed" (Guest Blogger, 2017a; Kawetherinuwa, 2019, para. 7; Kit, 2014; Ramlan, 2022). In addition to female infanticide, "discrimination against women, as well as inheritance were all part of the cultural norm before Islam was introduced; Islam banned all of these things" (Ramlan, 2022, para. 24).

These examples signify Islam's feminist essence and an Islamic history that "is rich with ways to ensure an equal and equitable society, both economically and socially" (Hassanein, 2020, para. 30). Drawing on the above examples, several male and female Muslim leaders have emphasized that Islam is in fact feminist, given its legacy of empowering women and its progressive, equitable conceptualization of gender roles (Kit, 2014). It is no surprise then that

Muslim feminists often centralize the role of Islam when defining what feminism means to them (Guest Blogger, 2017a).

**Advocating for the Redistribution of Wealth.** Islam's time-honored feminist teachings on how to organize society equitably were also evident in the structure of Medina, "the first Islamic state" (Hassanein, 2020, para. 16). *Muslim Girl* states that there is much to be learnt "from how Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) drafted the Constitution of Medina" (Hassanein, 2020, para. 16). Not only did Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) "ensure that everyone had equal representation, but he placed responsibility on everyone to look after one another like any community-building society should" (Hassanein, 2020, para. 17). Other feminist founding principles of this first Islamic society included "religious freedom to all, taxes to support basic needs (especially when there is a crisis or conflict), women's rights, a ban on violence and weapons" and other measures (Hassanein, 2020, para. 18).

As the first Muslim Caliph (leader) after the Prophet's time, the Prophet's closest friend and father-in-law, Hazrat Abu Bakr "guaranteed universal income to everyone - men, women, and their children" in order to prevent oppressive wealth inequities (Hassanein, 2020, para. 19). Guaranteed universal income and its underlying ethos of wealth redistribution drove home the "Islamic teachings that everyone has the right to financially support themselves regardless of the labor they produce" because people's value is not tied only to their productivity and everyone deserves to have their basic needs met (Hassanein, 2020, para. 20). Following this precedent, "Omar ibn al-Khattab, regarded by Sunni Muslims as the second Muslim Caliph extended social welfare rights by creating child benefits, pensions, benefits for the elderly and disabled, and unemployment benefits for the community" (Hassanein, 2020, para. 23).

Another notable example of Islamic interventions that support wealth redistribution is the mandatory, annual donation that all capable Muslims must make by giving away 2.5% of their wealth in charity to support those who need it most (Hassanein, 2020). This donation, called Zakat, is "one of the five pillars of Islam" and "is a form of community building at its finest"

(Hassanein, 2020, paras. 25–26). Yet another example of Islam’s equitable financial principles is that “Muslims are forbidden under Islamic law to charge interest” on the money they lend (Hassanein, 2020, para. 28). *Muslim Girl* explains that “this protects people from allowing big financial institutions to rip them off. Interest payments on top of original prices continue to put people in unnecessary debt, and financial hardship” (Hassanein, 2020, para. 29). In short, Islam put these measures in place to ensure that wealth is fairly redistributed across society and to prevent massive economic disparities (Hassanein, 2020). These measures align with feminist objectives of ensuring equitable access to resources for all, thus illustrating the feminist bent of Islamic teachings.

### **Drawing on Primary Sources**

The next few sections elaborate on how the argument for a feminist Islam is made and the sources that are drawn upon to do so. In particular, these sections discuss methods like returning to primary sources such as the Quran, Hadith and Sunnah as well as drawing on feminist examples and icons from Islamic history in order to arrive at renewed understandings of Islam.

Academic scholarship alludes to this return to original Islamic sources of knowledge, as exemplified by young Danish Muslim women’s engagement with religiosity (Liebmann & Galal, 2020). These women argue that a true Islam “can be derived directly from the Quran and the Sunnah, as opposed to localized, ethno-cultural beliefs, customs, and practices” (Liebmann & Galal, 2020, p. 265; Nyhagen, 2019). Here, socio-cultural norms are seen as potentially obscuring the universal teachings of Islam (Liebmann & Galal, 2020). In contrast, genuine Islamic doctrines are seen “as allowing, providing for, and in some instances even urging room for, gender mobility (both figuratively and physically) and, thus, as essentially conveying gender-equality concerns” (Liebmann & Galal, 2020, p. 268). This perspective sees Islam “as a religious tradition that has distanced itself historically from gender suppression and continues to theologically break with it” (Liebmann & Galal, 2020, p. 268).

Adopting a similar lens, Spanish Muslim youth are also keen “to transform themselves from ‘consumers’ of an Islam proposed by others to ‘producers’ of an Islam characterized by being young, Muslim, Spanish, and European” (Madonia, 2018, as cited in Madonia & Planet Contreras, 2019, p. 3). This eagerness for such a transformation speaks to “their need to experience and think about their religious identification in light of their day-to-day experiences and in their immediate sociocultural environment” (Madonia & Planet Contreras, 2019, p. 9). These youth “seem to have left behind the pre-established models for how to be and appear Muslim in Spanish society (if, indeed, they ever followed them), in order to begin to construct their own religiosity” (Madonia & Planet Contreras, 2019, p. 11).

These examples of Muslim Danish women and Spanish youth symbolize Muslims’ attempts to better understand Islamic injunctions by side-stepping intermediaries, returning to original sources and arriving at interpretations independently and knowledgeably. This desire to bypass mediated interpretations and instead draw one’s own conclusions by directly accessing scripture and Prophetic traditions is also evident in Muslim women’s preaching strategies as well as in the narratives espoused by *Muslim Girl*. With this in mind, next up is an exploration of how the Quran, Hadith and Sunnah centrally support feminist interpretations of Islam (Guest Blogger, 2017a; Muslim Girl, 2019c).

### ***Drawing Feminist Interpretations from the Quran and Prophetic Example***

The most obvious way of returning to primary sources is to go back to scripture i.e. the Quran. Given the Quran’s inalterability, Muslim feminist exegetes deploy interpretive tools that extract emancipatory interpretations from the Quran, without questioning the text or finding flaws in it (Hidayatullah, 2014). These interventions rely on independent reasoning to support the various ways in which the Quran can be understood as advancing feminist principles (Hidayatullah, 2014). Enacting this “desire to ‘return to the text’ in a way that frees it from layers of ‘ossified’ tradition” is a key method of feminist Quranic interpretation (Hidayatullah, 2014, as cited in Dakake, 2015, p. 58). In other words, foregrounding individual agency and women’s

ability and right to form a direct relationship with the Quran, without human (often male) authorities as intermediaries, is a vital strategy (Hidayatullah, 2014).

This approach is reflected in *Muslim Girl* too since several blogs discuss going back to the Quran and utilizing online resources to enhance one's understanding of Islam (MG Staff, 2020b). As an example, for one *Muslim Girl* blogger, learning about Islam in this way has led to the realization that Islam and Muslims do promote feminism and that Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and the Quran have a feminist leaning (MG Staff, 2020b). Likewise, another *Muslim Girl* blogger shares:

You cannot imagine my surprise when I read the Quran and discovered the radical inclusivity of the Quran's ayahs (verses) on women. So many of them named men and women equally, and so many stated the complete equality of women with men. (Muslim Girl, 2019c, para. 4)

In this context, to argue that Quranic verses are anti-feminist can expose one's own fear and insecurity that gender equality may somehow lessen one's own rights and freedom (Muslim Girl, 2019d).

Referencing the Quran to foreground gender equality within Islam is a prevalent theme throughout *Muslim Girl*, as multiple blogs note that "the Qur'an places women and men as equals in everyday life and within our responsibilities" (Akhali, 2016b, para. 15; Ashanti, 2017; Issa, 2016; Kawetherinuwa, 2019; Muslim Girl, 2014, 2019c). Drawing on the Quran is vital for challenging the notion that Islam purports a gender hierarchy, because "the Qur'an not only highlights spiritual equality between the sexes, but it also reiterates the significance of affording women their elementary, intrinsic rights" (Kawetherinuwa, 2019, para. 11). *Muslim Girl* adds that:

Muslim women's feminism revolves around the functional role of women in society and women's rights in society, not on arguing that women have intrinsic value because the fact that women have value was never questioned in Islam. It's all over the Quran, and you can't miss it. (Muslim Girl, 2019c, para. 8)

All in all, “according to the Qur’an, Sunnah, and the Maqasid al-Shari’ah (i.e. the higher ethical objectives of Islam), abuse and violence against women are religiously impermissible” (Al-Khatahtbeh et al., 2014, para. 32; Mergaliyev et al., 2021). Rather, “The nuances orchestrated in the Quran and hadith are viewed from the lens of mercy and compassion, bringing glad tidings to all; not making it more difficult for other people” (Ramlan, 2022, para. 25).

In this context, asserting that “the issue is in the incorrect interpretations of the Qur’an” is a common way of arguing that Islam supports and actively advocates for gender justice (Al-Khatahtbeh et al., 2014, para. 29). Another claim that is often made in this regard is that even though the Quran and Sunnah offer solutions to today’s problems, including patriarchy, “the real issue is committing to following these examples” (Ashanti, 2017, para. 5).

Having touched on the prevalence of referencing the Quran, Hadith and Sunnah to assert Islam’s feminist leaning, what follows is a deeper dive into two specific interpretive strategies that are used to arrive at feminist Quranic interpretations, namely historical contextualization and intra-textual reading. Analyzing these interpretive methods will set the stage for a subsequent analysis of the specific Quranic verses, Hadith and Sunnah that are drawn upon by *Muslim Girl* to highlight feminist values within Islam.

**Historical Contextualization.** As per feminist exegetes, historically contextualized interpretations of the Quran yield more accurate meanings and are necessary for the Quran to be applicable beyond its immediate context of revelation (Fischbach, 2021; Hidayatullah, 2014). In particular, Fazlur Rahman’s model for Quranic interpretations describes this method well and has been drawn upon extensively by feminist exegetes “when using the historical contextualization method to reread the Qur’an” (as cited in Hidayatullah, 2014, p. 69). “Rahman’s ‘twofold movement’ model for distilling the intent and universal principles of the Qur’an” can be described as follows:

“First one must move from the concrete case treatments of the Qur’an—taking the necessary and relevant social conditions of that time into account—to the general principles upon which the entire teaching converges.” Second, that general meaning is then applied to one’s present socio-historical context of understanding. (Rahman, 1984, as cited in Hidayatullah, 2014, pp. 69–70)

Hidayatullah (2014, p. 70) adds:

This “double movement” of interpretation involves reading the Qur’an in light of its specific historical context in order to carefully understand its intent; then this intent is applied to the specific historical circumstances of the current context in order to understand its meaning in the present.

Applying this method, feminist scholars reread many Quranic statements that speak to women’s issues by:

distinguishing between descriptive and prescriptive verses of the Qur’an (i.e., differentiating between verses that are describing the practices of the seventh-century Arabian audience to which it was directly addressed, and verses that are prescribing practices to all audiences); (and) distinguishing between universal and particular verses (i.e., differentiating between verses that apply only to specific historical situations and those that apply to human beings generally). (Hidayatullah, 2014, p. 65)

Drawing on this differentiation between prescriptive versus descriptive verses, Wadud asserts that since “the immediate context of the Qur’an’s revelation was a patriarchal and sexist society”, the Quran “may refer to situations that are degrading to women, but that does not mean it is *prescribing* those circumstances for its readers” (1992, as cited in Hidayatullah, 2014, pp. 70–71). In other words, “recognizing the existence of a patriarchy, or addressing one, is not the same as advocating it” (Barlas, 2004, as cited in Hidayatullah, 2014, p. 71). In fact, “some of the greatest restrictions on women, causing them much harm, have resulted from interpreting

Qur'anic solutions for particular problems as if they were universal principles" (Wadud, 1992, as cited in Hidayatullah, 2014, p. 70).

Furthermore, the historical contextualization method argues that "demeaning and patriarchal interpretations of the Qur'an reflect the 'misogyny' of the era in which the most definitive works of exegesis were authored", rather than being indicative of Quranic pronouncements (Barlas, 2004, as cited in Hidayatullah, 2014, p. 80). By the same token, the interpretive maneuvers that contemporary feminist exegetes make to derive egalitarian meanings from the Quran also arise from their own socially, politically and historically specific sense of gender equality (Hidayatullah, 2014). Just as the Quran's content is shaped by its first audience and its context of revelation, so too are current feminist interpretations informed by the historical context that exegetes are situated in (Hidayatullah, 2014). Hence, part of the struggle in reconciling Quranic verses that may seem out of touch with the present definition of social justice is recognizing that contemporary conceptualizations of gender equality are also temporally specific and are informed by current socio-political conditions (Hidayatullah, 2014).

**Intratextual Reading.** Keeping the Quran's textual holism in mind, this next approach denotes:

the feminist interpretive method of reading the Qur'an intratextually — by comparing verses and terms of the Qur'an to one another instead of reading them in isolation, as well as by reading verses in light of what the exegetes have identified as the Qur'an's overall aim of advocating justice and equality for all human beings. (Hidayatullah, 2014, p. 87)

To practice intratextual reading:

Wadud calls for the development of an organized exegetical system for comparing different parts of the Qur'an with each other: studying recurring terms, linguistic structures, and themes in tandem to derive a broader and more unified picture of Qur'anic meaning and intent. (1992, as cited in Hidayatullah, 2014, pp. 89–90)

This holistic approach is effective because, as Ibn Taymiyah notes, “what the Qur’an alludes to at one place is explained at the other, and what it says in brief on one occasion is elaborated upon at the other” (as cited in Hidayatullah, 2014, p. 88).

Intratextual reading includes recognizing that the Quran displays “a gradual approach toward social change” (Wadud, 1992, as cited in Hidayatullah, 2014, p. 96). To explain further, “although in some instances the Qur’an proposed immediate abolition of certain ill practices, most of the time it advocated gradual reform” (Wadud, 1992, as cited in Hidayatullah, 2014, p. 96). In this regard, al-Hibri and other exegetes argue that “the Qur’anic philosophy of gradualism is predicated upon the fact that fundamental changes in human consciousness do not usually occur overnight. Instead, they require a period of individual or even social gestation” (2000, as cited in Hidayatullah, 2014, p. 96). In turn, “this gradual approach to change helps to ensure the effectiveness and longevity of reform” because “gradual change meets with less resistance and is therefore more successful in the long run” (Hidayatullah, 2014, p. 96).

### ***Quranic Verses***

Intratextual reading foregrounds:

the feminist exegetical arguments that no sound interpretation of the Qur’an may contradict the Qur’an’s overarching principles of male-female equality and marital harmony, and that all verses should be read in light of the Qur’an’s overall trajectory toward justice and social transformation. (Hidayatullah, 2014, p. 87)

Exhibiting such a holistic orientation to Quranic interpretations, Wadud “has a three-tiered approach to analyzing a particular verse; in each case, she considers the context of revelation of the verse, its grammatical composition, and the verse in light of the worldview of the Qur’an as a whole” (1999, as cited in Dunn & Kellison, 2010, pp. 21–22).

Like the academic scholarship outlined above, *Muslim Girl* also draws attention towards various Sunnah and “many Quranic verses and hadith promoting gender equality and feminism” (Ramlan, 2022, para. 31). Below is an analysis of the specific Quranic verses that *Muslim Girl*

references to highlight feminist teachings within Islam. *Muslim Girl* draws on these Quranic verses to “change the perspective of sexists and oppressors out there on the importance of treating everyone, regardless of gender; equally” as well as to correct misperceptions about Islam (Ramlan, 2022, para. 31). Detailed below are the Quranic verses that are referenced for this purpose across *Muslim Girl*; in this writing, these verses are organized thematically, with the recognition that these themes speak to each other.

**Verses on Activism and Anti-violence.** To begin with, in the Quran, Verse 135 of Surah Al Nisa, or The Verse for Women most strongly articulates that Muslims must fight oppression, including gender-based violence, regardless of who it is that must be held accountable (Al-Khatahtbeh et al., 2014). This verse states:

O ye who believe! Stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to Allah, even against yourselves, or your parents, or your kin and whether it be (against) rich or poor: for Allah can best protect both. Follow not the lusts (of your hearts), lest ye swerve, and if ye distort (justice) or decline to do justice, verily Allah is well acquainted with all that ye do. (Al-Khatahtbeh et al., 2014, para. 35)

Furthermore, “the Qur’an says, ‘Whoever goes out seeking knowledge, then he is in Allah’s cause until he returns’” (Ashanti, 2017, para. 3). On this note, another *Muslim Girl* blogger expresses that feminism for her “means that the first word in the Qur’an, ‘Iqra,’ (meaning ‘read/recite’) is said by all who utter the word, including women, and we should seek, spread, and retain knowledge” (Guest Blogger, 2017a, para. 12). In this way, Quranic verses can provide the impetus for advancing women’s access to formal and informal education (Guest Blogger, 2017a).

**Verses on Gender Relations and Equality in Islam.** *Muslim Girl* also cites Quranic verses to underscore the egalitarian gender relations espoused within Islam and the equality of men and women as believers. Here is one verse that addresses this particular theme, “The believers, both men and women, are guardians of one another [Quran 9:71]” (Ramlan, 2022,

para. 32). Another blog reiterates this verse as follows, “And the believers, both men and women — they are friends and protectors of one another; they enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid the doing of what is wrong (9:71)” (Muslim Girl, 2014, para. 17). “The Quran also clearly states the egalitarian, equitable values between the sexes in Surah al-Bakrah: ‘And for women are rights over men similar to those of men over women’ (Qur’an, 2:228)” (Muslim Girl, 2019d, para. 8). Together, these verses not only foreground companionship, camaraderie and mutual support, they also reiterate the mutuality of rights over each other, negating assumptions about men having rights over women but not vice-versa.

Similarly, another verse states, “I shall not lose sight of the labor of any of you who labors in My way, be it man or woman; each of you is equal to the other (3:195)” (Muslim Girl, 2014, para. 15). “And again in Surah Al-Imran: “Their Lord responded to them ‘I never fail to reward any worker among you for any work you do, be you male or female – you are equal to one another’ (Qur’an, 3:195)” (Muslim Girl, 2019d, para. 9). Furthermore, *Muslim Girl* reiterates that:

One of the most famous verses in the Quran states the full equality of women so clearly, “O humanity, We have created you from a male and a female, and made you into races and tribes, so that you may identify one another. Surely the noblest of you, in Allah’s sight, is the one who is most pious of you. Surely Allah is All-Knowing, All-Aware” (Surah Al Hujurat 49:13). (Muslim Girl, 2019c, para. 5)

These verses reinforce that piety alone differentiates Muslims from each other, not their gender.

Next, in the verse, “Your spouses are a garment for you as you are for them [Quran 2:187]”, the metaphorical use of a garment evokes the idea of covering each other’s humane flaws and shortcomings (Ramlan, 2022, para. 33). On this front, *Muslim Girl* also calls attention to Wadud’s argument that patriarchy is at odds with the Quran’s envisioning of marital relationships (Adina, 2017). To support this argument, Wadud argues that patriarchy:

contradicts the Qur’anic vision of the equal and reciprocal moral relationships and responsibilities of women and men, as laid out in verse Al-Ahzab 33:35. It also contradicts the vision of the relationship between husband and wife, as reflected in verse Al-Room 30:21, which talks not of domination and competition but partnership, cooperation and affection. (Adina, 2017, para. 5)

Finally, the verse “Tell the believing men to lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that is more purifying for them. Surely Allah is aware of what they do (Surat an-Nur 24:30-31)” illustrates that Islam puts the onus on men as well to behave modestly (Al-Khatahtbeh et al., 2014, para. 30). This distinction is important because some verses in the Quran are interpreted as placing the responsibility of modest behavior and dressing solely on women, a theme that this thesis returns to later on.

***Using Historical Contextualization and Intratextual Reading to Analyze the Quranic Verse 4:34.*** A number of previous sections have reviewed two key methods of interpreting Quranic verses as amenable to feminism i.e. historical contextualization and intra-textual reading. This section will examine how these two aforementioned interpretive strategies can be used to arrive at feminist interpretations of the Quranic verse 4:34 in particular. This verse has been the subject of much critique, controversy and heated debates about feminism in relation to Islam. As noted in one *Muslim Girl* blog, this verse is as follows:

Men are the caretakers of women, as men have been provisioned by Allah over women and tasked with supporting them financially. And righteous women are devoutly obedient and, when alone, protective of what Allah has entrusted them with. And if you sense ill-conduct from your women, advise them [first], [if they persist,] do not share their beds, [but if they still persist,] then discipline them [gently]. But if they change their ways, do not be unjust to them. Surely Allah is Most High, All-Great. [Quran 4:34] (Ramlan, 2022, para. 34)

There are widespread “misinterpretations of Verse 4:34 to justify domestic violence” (Al-Khatahtbeh et al., 2014, para. 33). In contrast, Mernissi presents one eminent interpretation of this verse, which first recognizes that “there is ambiguity in the verse and that the traditionalist interpretation is not the only one” (1987, as cited in Dunn & Kellison, 2010, p. 20). “Thus, Mernissi’s feminist approach is also reformist, as she is willing to criticize earlier interpretations in the tradition” (Dunn & Kellison, 2010, p. 20). Drawing on the intratextual reading method, “Mernissi compares 4:34 to other verses in the Qur’an. She notes that Qur’an 33:35 establishes a basic equality between the genders” (as cited in Dunn & Kellison, 2010, p. 20). Then, mobilizing historical contextualization, Mernissi studies “the history of the Islamic community in which the verse was revealed. Mernissi’s major source for this history is prophetic hadith” (as cited in Dunn & Kellison, 2010, p. 20).

Specifically, one of multiple interpretations of a portion of this verse is that “men are in charge of women” (Dunn & Kellison, 2010, p. 15). Paying attention to how this portion of the verse is interpreted can have massive consequences, because “if men are understood as unequivocally dominant over women, it would seem they have greater license in their treatment of women” (Dunn & Kellison, 2010, p. 15). However, there are various interpretations of this portion of the verse, ranging “from men being the guardians of women to their being dominant over women to their being the financial providers for women” and others variations (Dunn & Kellison, 2010, p. 15).

Two such notable interpretations come from Wadud and al-Tabari; both see the verse as highlighting men’s responsibilities as providers in light of “men’s financial advantage, which is accompanied by certain responsibilities and privileges” that are accrued to them in a patriarchal society (as cited in Dunn & Kellison, 2010, p. 17). Wadud adds that the verse delineates only some men as providers, “which is much different than a categorical or essentialist definition of men as better than women” (2006, as cited in Dunn & Kellison, 2010, p. 22). Al-Hibri extends this argument by explaining that for a man to be seen as a provider, he must be the financial

breadwinner and “the male must also possess qualities (such as financial acumen, real estate expertise, etc.) that the advised woman needs to reach a particular decision but lacks (at that point)” (2000, as cited in Hidayatullah, 2014, p. 73). If a man does not possess these qualities, he is not by default the provider for women or his family (Hidayatullah, 2014). This interpretation also means that men are not necessarily providers for women who are financially independent and educated (Hidayatullah, 2014). In this way, feminist interpretations emphasize the criteria that this verse puts in place for men to be seen as providers, as well as the “restrictions on men’s presumed entitlement” to this role (Hidayatullah, 2014, p. 73).

Speaking to this idea of provision by men, Wadud clarifies that this potential role that some men (i.e. men that meet the the above conditions) may fulfill as providers allows them to contribute to child-rearing, “seeing to it that the woman is not burdened with additional responsibilities [in the context of childbearing]” (1992, as cited in Hidayatullah, 2014, p. 72). Similarly, al-Hibri contextualizes men’s role as economic providers, noting that “because the Qur’an was revealed in a world that was and continues to be highly patriarchal, it engaged in affirmative action to protect women” by offering them additional financial security in this way (2000, as cited in Hidayatullah, 2014, p. 73). Furthermore, as al-Hibri notes, men are providers in “an advisory role; under specific conditions, a man is entitled to offer advice to his wife (regardless of whether she chooses to follow it)”; in other words, this role is not an inviolable authority that men possess over women (2000, as cited in Hidayatullah, 2014, p. 73). Mobilizing historical contextualization, both al-Hibri and Wadud also draw on the difference between prescriptive and descriptive verses to explain that although this verse acknowledges and responds to women’s financial disadvantage in a patriarchal society that undermines their value, the verse does not endorse this patriarchal context itself, but merely describes it (as cited in Hidayatullah, 2014).

Another point of contention in this verse’s interpretation is the section where it advises men on how to approach women that they fear may rebel; here, rebellion itself has also been

interpreted in many different ways, ranging from marital discord to a wife's disobedience and many meanings in between (Dunn & Kellison, 2010). Wadud disagrees with equating rebellion in this context with wifely disobedience, "interpreting it instead to refer to disharmony in the relationship between the spouses" (1999, as cited in Dunn & Kellison, 2010, p. 22). Importantly, if this latter interpretation of marital disharmony is foregrounded, then the next section of the verse, which advises on how to address the rebellion, presents "options for couples to use together rather than for the husband alone, reflecting 'the general Qur'anic principle of mutual consultation'" (1999, as cited in Dunn & Kellison, 2010, p. 22).

This nuance has significant implications because one proposed interpretation of how this verse recommends addressing rebellion is through physical chastisement, which is seen as being legitimated to various degrees. It is obvious why these interpretations that have sometimes been taken to justify violence against women are staunchly opposed by feminists. In addition to feminist interventions in Quranic interpretations, another way in which feminist exegetes negate that this verse permits violence against women is by drawing on Hadith to highlight that Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), who "represents a perfect embodiment of Qur'anic principles" "never hit his wives" (Dunn & Kellison, 2010, pp. 21–23). This approach reflects that "the best of these interpretations... would be the one which most closely mirrors the actions of the Prophet as the living interpretation of the Qur'anic message" (Sillers, 2006, as cited in Dunn & Kellison, 2010, p. 24).

Given the controversies surrounding it, many notable interpreters "have implied discomfort with the verse by employing strategies to mollify the text or to limit its application" (Dunn & Kellison, 2010, p. 13). Like academic scholars, *Muslim Girl* also privileges egalitarian interpretations of the verse and reinforces the need for informed understandings of it (Al-Khatahtbeh et al., 2014, para. 33). Certainly, "there is no consensus on the 'correct' interpretation of Qur'an 4:34, or even on whether one such single interpretation was intended" (Dunn & Kellison, 2010, p. 24). This "possibility of multiple interpretations", along with

accounting for “the needs of the community receiving this sacred text” form key strategies for re-interpreting this verse, and others, to arrive at feminist readings (Silvers, 2006, as cited in Dunn & Kellison, 2010, pp. 23–24).

**Interpretive Responsibility.** The above reflection on the various methods used to devise feminist understandings of Quranic verses drives home the point that interpretation matters profoundly (Ashanti, 2017). Hidayatullah (2014) concedes that the historical contextualization and intratextual reading methods highlighted above are indeed highly subjective endeavors in that they require “privileging qur’anic verses that establish the mutuality of genders and dismissing the hierarchical implication of others” (as cited in Dakake, 2015, p. 58). It can be argued that highlighting convenient Quranic verses that speak to gender equality while undermining the verses that seem patriarchal by explaining the latter away as historically particular and thus not applicable to present day realities is a methodological flaw that can delegitimize the field of feminist Quranic interpretations (Haqqani, 2016).

In response, feminist Quranic interpreters have leaned into this critique by reclaiming the right and responsibility to highlight the most egalitarian verses and to choose the best possible meanings of these verses (Dunn & Kellison, 2010). To elaborate, Silvers explains that “the Qur’an has to be ambiguous; were it too simple, it would leave no room for human responsibility” in making meaning from the text, a responsibility that comes with serious moral consequences (2006, as cited in Dunn & Kellison, 2010, p. 23). Given the freedom to choose, opting for the best and most just interpretation of the Quran, and one that mirrors Prophetic tradition, is where true morality lies (Dunn & Kellison, 2010). In other words, as Wadud clarifies, “*We are the makers of textual meaning*” (2006, as cited in Dunn & Kellison, 2010, p. 23). Amongst various interpretations of scripture, “which interpretation will gain ground and be endorsed remains a question of religious legitimacy that again can be dependent on a number of external factors, such as gender, class, educational background, geography and religious proximity” as well as socio-political and religious conditions, historical context and the

demographics of the audience that the interpretations speak to (Boe, 2020, p. 9; Wadud, 2021). Hence, this responsibility to find the most equitable interpretations of the Quran and to carefully weigh the options when searching for such meaning is paramount.

Such an orientation to interpretation is beautifully worded by Abou El Fadl, as follows:

If there is the glimmer of beauty to be pursued, then my mind will search for the subtleties of what has been said. If I have a shadow of doubt, then I will run to the refuge of the beautiful. (2001, as cited in Dunn & Kellison, 2010, p. 19)

Similarly, “Ali proposes that exegetes ‘accept responsibility for acts of interpretation’ and ‘acknowledge that they *are* interpretive choices’ rather than purely self-evident in the text” (2006, as cited in Hidayatullah, 2014, p. 142). *Muslim Girl* agrees with this stance when it argues that Islamic interpretations must account for the fact that “the internal mechanisms that establish any society constantly change with more scientific information garnered, technological innovations achieved, and within new cultural exchanges between different societies” (Amaneisa, 2016b, para. 20). In other words, interpretations are not meant to be immutable, but instead should evolve to be able to provide relevant moral guidance in light of changing societal norms, and to reflect the diversity of Muslims across the world because “one cannot presume that the lives and experiences of Muslim women—and men—worldwide are one and the same” (El Younssi, 2018, p. 316; Hidayatullah, 2014). In short, “as human experience changes and evolves over time, our understanding of religious texts should follow suit” (El Younssi, 2018, p. 321).

Therefore, human agency in interpreting the Quran to yield justice cannot be overstated (Hidayatullah, 2014). Such interpretive responsibility demands acknowledging that feminist interpretations do prioritize Quranic verses that support gender equality (Hidayatullah, 2014). Indeed, “to defer to verses that lean more towards reciprocity and equality is a matter of simple choice” because meaning is actively derived from the text (Hidayatullah, 2014; Wadud, 2021, p. 10). Instead of trying to prove that interpretations are self-evident, accepting the role of choice in

interpretation builds on the work of feminist scholars who “have astutely pointed out that knowledge in any one discipline or field is neither neutral nor innocent, but deeply imbricated in hegemonic modes of power, in this instance patriarchal power” (Castelli, 2001, as cited in Shaikh, 2013, p. 16). Such feminist interventions thus offer a widely applicable reminder that “there is no scholarship that is apolitical” (Vasilaki, 2016, p. 117, as cited in Tadros & Khan, 2018, p. 18).

### ***Hadith***

Having studied how and which Quranic verses are brought up to underscore feminist Islamic principles, it is time to turn to other Islamic sources i.e. Hadith (Prophetic sayings) and then Sunnah (Prophetic practices) for an examination of how these sources are also interpreted as championing feminist objectives. This section details the numerous Hadith that are cited in *Muslim Girl* as being supportive of women’s rights.

**Hadith on the Treatment of Women.** Illustrating the elevated status of mothers, “one of the most beloved quotes by Prophet Muhammad was when he was asked ‘Where do you find Paradise?’ His reply? ‘Paradise lies at the feet of the mother’” (Vanessaelshamy, 2018a, para. 3). Similarly:

Abu Hurairah (May Allah be pleased with him) reported: “A man came to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and said, ‘O Messenger of God! Who among the people is the most worthy of my fine treatment? The Prophet (PBUH) said: Your mother. The man said, ‘Then who?’ The Prophet (PBUH) said: Then your mother. The man further asked, ‘Then who?’ The Prophet (PBUH) said: Then your mother. The man asked again, ‘Then who?’ The Prophet (PBUH) said: Then your father.” (Abdul-Kareem, 2016, para. 13; Muslim Girl, 2019d)

These Hadith indicate that Muslims “know the status of women is one of utmost importance — and the honor and responsibility of being a mother takes it to a whole other level” (Abdul-Kareem, 2016, para. 11; Muslim Girl, 2019d).

In another Hadith, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) “was reported as saying, ‘The best of you is he who is best to his family’” (Ramlan, 2022, para. 38). Similarly, another Hadith notes that “The most complete of the believers in faith are those with the most excellent character, and the best of you are the best in behavior to their women” (Muslim Girl, 2018a, para. 1). Finally, in his last sermon, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said “It is true that you have certain rights in regard to your women, but they also have rights over you” (Muslim Girl, 2018a, para. 9). This mutuality of rights over each other is a common thread across Quranic verses and the Hadith. In sum, these various Hadith point to the importance of treating women well.

**Hadith on Activism.** Next up are examples of Hadith that call for social justice advocacy. One prominent Hadith states:

“Whoever among you sees an evil action, let them change it with their hand [by taking action]; if they cannot, then with their tongue [by speaking out]; and if they cannot, then with their heart [by at least hating it and believing that it is wrong], and that is the weakest of faith.” (Ayub, 2017; Muslim Girl, 2019a, para. 3)

Along similar lines, in another Hadith, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said:

“Help your brother, whether he is an oppressor or he is an oppressed one. People asked, ‘O Allah’s Messenger (PBUH)! It is all right to help him if he is oppressed, but how should we help him if he is an oppressor?’ The Prophet (PBUH) said, ‘By preventing him from oppressing others.’” (Muslim Girl, 2018a, para. 18)

These Hadith underscore the importance of advocating for justice in whatever capacity one can. They drive home the point that in the fight for justice, each person’s contribution can vary but what matters is taking action based on one’s abilities, individually and communally. Bringing this section to a close, the Prophet’s (PBUH) last sermon served as a reminder for equality of all, as he said:

“All mankind is from Adam and Eve; an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab, nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab. Also, a White has no superiority over a

Black, nor a Black has any superiority over White except by piety and good action.”

(Vanessa elshamy, 2018a, para. 8)

Similar to the mutuality of the rights that men and women have over each other, this idea of equality amongst all humans is also found in the Quranic verses as well as the Hadith. This similarity hints towards the complementary nature of the Quran and Hadith.

### **Sunnah**

This harmony between the Quranic verses and Hadith segues into this section on how similar principles are also reinforced by the Sunnah i.e. “the body of established customs and beliefs that make up Islamic tradition based on the life of Prophet Mohammed (PBUH)” and that form a core component of Islamic teachings (Mokhtar, 2016b, para. 16; Sarahmohr, 2020).

Contextualizing this discussion:

There is a lot of conversation about gender justice, feminism, and sexual politics driven by a large number of forces, voices, and agendas. Some of these are friendly to Islam. They aim to reclaim the tradition of Islam from patriarchy and misogyny that contradict the sunnah. (Mokhtar, 2016b; Sarahmohr, 2020, para. 1)

Historically, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) frequently sought women’s input in communal decisions (MG Staff, 2020b). In fact, in Medina, the first Muslim society that took shape under the guidance of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), it was common for women to serve as appointed political leaders, scholars, teachers and community figureheads (MG Staff, 2020b). Such an ethos was also reflected in Prophet Muhammad’s (PBUH) personal life (Mokhtar, 2016b). For example, Muslim men who do not partake equitably in household duties are contradicting Sunnah, as is evident in the following narration:

Aisha, the wife of the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH), was asked, “What did the Prophet used to do in his house?” She replied, “He used to keep himself busy serving his family...and when it was the time for prayer, he would go for it.” (Mokhtar, 2016b, para.

17)

Furthermore, “Aisha is reported to have said, ‘He did what one of you would do in his house. He mended sandals and patched garments and sewed’” (Mokhtar, 2016b, para. 18). In light of this Prophetic example, *Muslim Girl* asks the Muslim community “how did we end up associating household chores with women and femininity? And if a man tries to practice the sunnah, why is he ridiculed, mocked, and marginalized?” (Mokhtar, 2016b, para. 19).

Reiterating the arguments made in this section, a few sections later, this thesis details the many ways in which Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was a feminist.

To sum up, it is evident that Quranic verses, Hadith and Sunnah are key primary sources that academic scholars as well as multiple *Muslim Girl* blogs reference to demonstrate how Islamic teachings lend themselves well to feminist objectives. The last few sections looked at the interpretive methods that Muslim feminists use to root their claims of gender equity within Islamic sources. These strategies are deployed to articulate renewed, feminist interpretations of the Quran and of Prophetic practices in order to establish gender equity as an Islamic tradition.

### **Drawing on Feminist Icons Associated With Islam**

Another strategy that Muslim feminists wield for extracting feminist understandings of Islam is to call on past precedence by highlighting historical and contemporary examples of Muslim feminists, including inspiring Muslim women. Specifically, shedding light on feminist icons who are referenced in Islamic history is a key way in which contemporary North American Muslim women bloggers lay claim to a feminist Islam. This strategy is detailed in the following section.

### ***Feminist Icons in Islamic History***

In addition to citing Quranic verses, Hadith and Sunnah as described above, referencing widely acclaimed women in Islamic history is another form of returning to primary sources to formulate one’s own understanding of feminism in relation to Islam. As per *Muslim Girl*, Islamic history demonstrates that “there are many examples of strong Muslim women who contributed a great deal to society and became feminist icons” even though some of them remain “unsung

feminist heroes in their own right” (Bhatti, 2018, para. 4; Birk, 2021, para. 1). Drawing attention to these feminist icons, *Muslim Girl* cites the examples of Hazrat Khadija, Hazrat Aisha, Umm 'Umara, Virgin Mary and many others as proof that “Islam is inherently a feminist religion” (Birk, 2021, para. 1; MG Staff, 2020b). These examples draw attention to the many influential women in Islamic history who went against the grain (MG Staff, 2020b). In particular, considerable attention is paid to the “stories of the Prophet’s wives, and their activism” as a way to claim that women’s rights are embedded in Islam and that Islamic history indicates that feminism is central to Islam (Anumahmed, 2019, para. 12).

In the same vein, citing “different role models from the time of the Prophet”, including but not limited to his wives, is a key practice amongst Muslim women preachers and religious leaders, who call upon such historical figures to illustrate that women’s education and their participation in public life is a deeply-embedded tradition in Islamic history (interview with Tania, March 2010, as cited in Gomez-Perez, 2016, pp. 53–54). Referring to “long-term historical precedents in Islamic thought” regarding female Islamic figureheads is common amongst Muslim women preachers as well as amongst activists who advocate for women’s access to authority especially in controversial domains, such as being leaders of women’s mosques and serving as judges (Jones, 2020, p. 55). Indeed, drawing on pivotal female figures from Islamic history is a tactic informed by the needs of the community that women preachers address, where aligning oneself with “historically contingent discursive traditions in which they [were] located” is important for getting buy-in (Mahmood, 2005, p. 32, as cited in Gomez-Perez, 2016, p. 54).

In addition to referencing the women mentioned in Islamic history *Muslim Girl* also cites other sources that uncover elements of feminist organization of early Muslim societies. For example, one *Muslim Girl* blogger cites Reza Aslan’s *No God but God*, which notes:

“[The feminist’s] Medina is a society in which Muhammad [SAW] designated women like Umm Waraqa as spiritual guides for the Ummah ... in which women prayed and fought

alongside men; in which women like Aisha [RA] and Umm Salamah acted not only as religious but also as political — and on at least one occasion military — leaders; and in which the call to gather for prayer, bellowed from the rooftop of Prophet Muhammad’s house, brought men and women together to kneel side by side and be blessed as a single undivided community.” (Muslim Girl, 2014, para. 6)

**Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).** *Muslim Girl* states that “history would suggest that Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him) was the first Muslim feminist and, through revelation, he championed women’s rights to safety, education, equal status, and other opportunities in both the private and public sphere” (Awan, 2016, para. 3; Bhatti, 2018; Muslim Girl, 2014; Vanessaeshamy, 2018a). Indeed, Muslims “know that Islam and the teachings of Allah (SWT) as told to us by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) emphasize many values central to women’s liberation and feminism” (Akhilil, 2016b, para. 14; Muslim Girl, 2019c). There is no evidence “from Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him), the role model of Islamic conduct, that women are not on an equal societal footing with men”; on the contrary, he “promoted the rights of women” (Muslim Girl, 2014, para. 7, 2019d, para. 7).

As “the ultimate feminist icon”, “Prophet Muhammad revealed ideals of gender equality that were considered revolutionarily feminist in the historical context of his time” (Bhatti, 2018, para. 5; Vanessaeshamy, 2018a, para. 5). *Muslim Girl* argues that, “Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) brought women out from the shadows...knowing they were the source for peace and stability commanding that she be given honor, respect and equal rights” (Bhatti, 2018, para. 5). In terms of marital rights, “Prophet Muhammad instructed that a woman had the right to reject a marriage proposal, allowed her to seek divorce regardless of the reasons, and ensured her right to inheritance” (Bhatti, 2018, para. 5; Vanessaeshamy, 2018a). Additionally, “he admonished men to be kind to their wives as an Islamic injunction” (Bhatti, 2018, para. 5). On this front, “he also argued that all dowry that was given to a girl’s family before her marriage should go straight to her, not to be used by the family” (Vanessaeshamy, 2018a, para. 5). Moreover, his argument

that “a woman could keep her own money and could own property in an era where she herself was considered as property” was revolutionary for its time (Bhatti, 2018, para. 5).

Furthermore, in a society where “women were treated as property, baby girls faced infanticide, and females were viewed as a burden, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) changed all of that through his example and his words” (Bhatti, 2018, para. 5). He not only preached but also set an example that countered all these injustices (Bhatti, 2018). On this front, “he spent much of his life protesting against female infanticide” (Vanessaeshamy, 2018a, para. 5). One way he did so was by “telling other fathers that having daughters was a blessing and that if their daughters spoke well of them on the Day of Judgement, their word alone would be enough to get them into Paradise” (Bhatti, 2018; Vanessaeshamy, 2018a, para. 5). Similarly, “the Prophet said that he whose first child is a daughter, is blessed” (Bhatti, 2018, para. 5).

On a similar note, the trajectory of Prophet Muhammad’s (PBUH) life from the very beginning alludes to racial equality, which is a central tenet of feminism. *Muslim Girl* explains:

The first person to hold him when he was born was a Black Muslim woman by the name of Umm Ayman, and she continued to be part of his life for as long as he was alive.

Umm Ayman’s influence might have impacted Prophet Muhammad’s decision to elect a formerly enslaved Black man named Bilal to perform the call to prayer, and later to adopt a former slave as his son. He assisted a Black man by the name of Zayd ibn Haritha to marry an affluent Arab woman, Zaynab bint Jahsh — something that wasn’t known to happen during his time. While others wanted different races to remain segregated and for people to marry only within their race and class, Prophet Muhammad used interracial marriage as one way to eradicate ignorance and bigotry. (Vanessaeshamy, 2018a, para. 7)

In a similar fashion, he taught Muslims “that nothing makes one Muslim better than another than his or her good deeds, which helped him gain the trust of people who were subject to sexism, racism, and class-based oppression” (Vanessaeshamy, 2018a, para. 6). *Muslim Girl*

reiterates that such “examples of the Prophet Muhammad engaging in intersectional feminism come into play when we discuss his actions against social oppression” (VanessaElshamy, 2018a, para. 6). *Muslim Girl* also proposes that one key way of drawing on Islam to mobilize for feminism and social justice is by ensuring that “our pursuit of peace and justice is unequivocally modeled by the Prophet (PBUH)”, who modeled compassionate and empathetic behavior and who strove to build and sustain community ties (Mohsenian-Rahman, 2017a, p. 2, para. 3). The argument here is that in order to follow such Prophetic practices, one must show up for their community by advocating for more inclusive, equitable and feminist futures (Mohsenian-Rahman, 2017a).

To sum up this section, “the legacy of Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him) inspired generations of powerful and influential Muslim women throughout history and continues to motivate Muslim women today” in their efforts to advance Islamically-rooted feminism (Awan, 2016, para. 4). Exemplifying this sentiment and seeking to continue this legacy, one *Muslim Girl* blogger shares:

The only reason I want to raise my son as a Muslim feminist, rather than any other feminist, is because I want his commitment to women’s rights, gender equality, and social justice to be drawn from our faith and from the example of Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him). (Awan, 2016, para. 2)

***Reconceptualizing Marriage and Masculinity in light of the Prophet’s (PBUH)***

***Marriage with his First Wife.*** Building on this Prophetic legacy of feminism, Prophet Muhammad’s (PBUH) marriage to Hazrat Khadija is a testament of his commitment to feminist ideals (Bhatti, 2018). In line with feminist principles, “he married Hadhrat Khadija not caring about her age, wealth, or previous marriages but her character and good nature” (Bhatti, 2018, para. 5). Paying attention to this harmonious marriage of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and Hazrat Khadija, his first wife, reveals much about their marriage and “about Muhammad’s *masculinity*; namely, that he was comfortable and secure within this (at least in terms of our

current twenty-first-century sensibilities) non hegemonic marital arrangement” (Rahemtulla & Ababneh, 2021, p. 84).

Firstly, “the example of Khadija paints an alternative prophetic practice/masculinity: she was a powerful business woman fifteen years Muhammad’s senior, and their monogamous marriage lasted twenty-five years” until the demise of Hazrat Khadija (Rahemtulla & Ababneh, 2021, p. 83). “What we have in their example is a non patriarchal—indeed, acutely matriarchal—relation of power” (Rahemtulla & Ababneh, 2021, p. 87). “In addition to being the initiator of the marriage, Khadija was (and remained) the economic foundation of their union. For one, they had a *matrilocal* relationship, not a *patrilocal* one; that is, Muhammad moved into Khadija’s house and not vice versa” (Rahemtulla & Ababneh, 2021, p. 92). Moreover, “Khadija was a critical source of both emotional and economic support throughout the early history of Islam, until her death” as is evidenced by “the level of sacrifice that Khadija made for Islam; she did not simply use her wealth for the service of the faith, she lost it” (Rahemtulla & Ababneh, 2021, p. 99). Evidently, much about this marriage contradicts modern gender and marital norms (Rahemtulla & Ababneh, 2021). Moreover:

this remarkable (and admittedly unrepresentative) historical moment provides us with a critical prophetic resource, an alternative and yet authoritative archive—this is a marriage, after all, that lasted twenty-five years—with which to begin the project of reconstructing Muslim marriage, in our own times, as an egalitarian partnership of equals. (Rahemtulla & Ababneh, 2021 p. 87).

Another way that the Prophet’s (PBUH) domestic life disrupts patriarchal expectations is “that one of the current pillars of patriarchy, of hegemonic masculinity—specifically, fathering sons—is strikingly absent in the Prophet’s life” (Rahemtulla & Ababneh, 2021, p. 95). It is commonly believed that none of the Prophet’s sons survived into adulthood. Rahemtulla & Ababneh (2021, p. 95) argue that “this reality provides us with a critical biographical counter narrative to challenge the patriarchal imaginaries of our own times, in which to be a ‘real’ man is

often directly connected to fathering sons” to carry on one’s name. Attending to the broader possible theological implications of this reality, Barlas articulates that the fact that the Prophet’s (PBUH) lineage continues only through his daughters may imply “that God, in His/Her/Its infinite justice and wisdom, sought ultimately to unsettle patriarchy”, especially “at a time and in a place when people view girls as a curse” and sons were strongly preferred (2002, p. 121, as cited in Rahemtulla & Ababneh, 2021, p. 95).

To summarize, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and Hazrat Khadija’s marriage offers an alternative, reliable model and Prophetic tradition that can “reconceptualize Islamic marriage, in our own times, as an egalitarian partnership of equals”, founded on principles of gender equality (Rahemtulla & Ababneh, 2021, p. 85). However, even though this union “has become a central reference point for Muslim feminists”, it “has been strikingly absent when constructing normative narratives/histories of Islamic marriage” such that Hazrat Khadija’s “long relationship to the Prophet did not become a marital model that Muslims across time and place sought to replicate” (Rahemtulla & Ababneh, 2021, pp. 87–100).

**Hazrat Khadija bint Khuwaylid.** Having discussed how the Prophet (PBUH) and his marriage to Hazrat Khadija symbolize feminist principles, it is an opportune time to examine how Hazrat Khadija bint Khuwaylid herself was a feminist icon. As was noted above, she was a highly educated “successful business woman — twice widowed — and an independent, single mother” before her marriage to the Prophet (Ashanti, 2017; Bhatti, 2018, para. 6). “She took over her father’s business after his passing” and came to be known for her intelligence, honesty and strong work ethic (Bhatti, 2018, para. 6). Running trade caravans across the region, Hazrat Khadija was the primary earner for her family who expertly ran a business in a male-dominated environment (Bhatti, 2018; MG Staff, 2020b). “She married a man much younger than her based solely on his honesty and good moral character – the Holy Prophet (PBUH), and was firm in not caving to societal pressure” (Bhatti, 2018, para. 6).

Hazrat Khadija offers an important example from early Islamic history that reinforces feminist orientations to life overall and to marriage in particular. Indeed, her legacy inspires Muslim women to date. Shedding light on Hazrat Khadija's impact on the Muslim women who followed her, one *Muslim Girl* blogger roots her own feminist activism in Hazrat Khadija's example, noting that "the first Muslim woman shattered the glass ceiling for me over a thousand years ago and I'm following in her footsteps" (Ayub, 2017, para. 8).

### ***Highlighting the Women Mentioned in the Quran and in Early Islamic History***

Continuing with this line of thought, "the significance of the contributions from women like Khadijah, Fatima, and Aisha that literally and ideologically gave birth to Islam" are frequently drawn upon to demonstrate Islam's feminist leanings (Kit, 2014, para. 3). *Muslim Girl* underscores how the actions and depictions of these women and others like them portray feminist inclinations. By analyzing all the references in the Quran that pertain to women, Ibrahim (2020, p. 2) also points to "their diversity of character; there is not one standard archetypal woman or girl" in the Quran. In this way, the Quran demonstrates:

that there is no one set of characteristics that defines a woman, that there are no stereotypical roles that a proper Muslim woman must play, and that there is a diversity of ways of being a Muslim woman in the Qur'an. (Musa, 2021, p. 192)

Even as "the Qur'an extols certain female figures and rebukes others for their moral comportment; it regularly depicts women and girls with agency and power" (Fischbach, 2021; Ibrahim, 2020, p. 2). "In their breaches and virtues, numerous women serve as exemplars for developing moral character and navigating human struggles" (Ibrahim, 2020, p. 2). All in all, "the Qur'an presents women in their human complexity, although it contains overall more positive than negative female examples" (Fischbach, 2021, p. 209).

Moreover, Quranic narratives about women set new precedents for gender relations and reiterate "that the Qur'anic discourse is decidedly responsive to women's concerns" (Fischbach, 2021; Ibrahim, 2020, p. 140). These narratives insinuate that the Quran, and by virtue of it being

divinely authored, “God regularly intervenes to remedy social situations that are unfavorable to vulnerable or oppressed women” (Ibrahim, 2020, p. 148). In particular:

On nearly a dozen occasions, the direct cause (*sabab*) of particular Qur’anic verses is an action, request, or specific need of a woman; several of these “occasions of revelation” (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) have axiomatic bearing on subsequent communal and ethical norms. (Ibrahim, 2020, p. 6)

Overall, “the Qur’an celebrates the aptitudes and competencies of women in the realms of spirituality and piety, in political maneuvering, and in the work of protecting family relations” (Ibrahim, 2020, p. 146). In a similar manner, *Muslim Girl* also presents several examples of women who are referenced in the Quran and in Islamic history for their various accomplishments, as detailed below.

**Hazrat Fatima.** Hazrat Fatima, the youngest daughter of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH): was a loyal follower of her father and stood up for him and supported him throughout his mission. Despite the hardships and persecution she faced, she remained strong. Patient and courageous, she was also known as Fatima al-Zahra, which meant “Fatima the shining one”. (Bhatti, 2018, para. 8)

**Umm Salamah.** “A wife of the Holy Prophet (SAW), Umm Salamah was a great confidant and trusted advisor to her husband”, including at times of political negotiations and upheaval (Bhatti, 2018, para. 13).

**Umm ‘Ammara.** Nusayba bint Ka’b Al-Ansariyah, also known as Umm ‘Ammara was: was the first female soldier in Islam. She was one of the first converts from Medina, and a companion of the Prophet. She participated in the Battle of Uhud and fought with zeal, even using her own body as a physical barrier to protect the Holy Prophet from attacks which she took the hit for to the point where she fell unconscious. However, all she cared about when she regained consciousness was the wellbeing of Muhammad (PBUH), and

immediately asked if he was alright. (Bhatti, 2018, para. 12; MG Staff, 2020b; Muslim Girl, 2014)

Umm ‘Ammara was also involved in political negotiations besides the Prophet (PBUH) (Bhatti, 2018; MG Staff, 2020b). She was praised for her unmatched bravery and Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) would frequently recount to his followers that “On the day of Uhud, I never looked right or left without seeing Umm Imara fighting to defend me” (MG Staff, 2020b; Muslim Girl, 2014, para. 10).

**Sumayyah bint Khayyat.** Sumayyah bint Khayyat, “the first martyr in Islam’s history”, was killed for accepting Islam (Bhatti, 2018, para. 11; Muslim Girl, 2014). Despite being tortured and whipped for a prolonged time at the hands of Abu Jahal, a sworn enemy of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), Sumayyah and her family remained steadfast (Bhatti, 2018). Even with her dying breath, she was asked “if she would give up her faith now” (Bhatti, 2018, para. 11). She refused to do so “and declared ‘*La illa ha illala Muhammadur rasoolulah*’ (There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is His servant and His messenger) and passed away” (Bhatti, 2018, para. 11).

**Rufaida Al-Aslamia.** *Muslim Girl* shares that:

We may think of Florence Nightingale as the founder of modern nursing. However, Rufaida Al-Aslamia brought the advent of nursing some 1,200 years before. A companion and follower of the Prophet (PBUH), Rufaida had received her nursing and medical training from her father, who was a healer. She gave first aid and water to wounded soldiers during the early battles of Islam. She also trained other women and girls, and had a team go out on the battlefield with her. It is even said that after the conflicts were over that she requested the Prophet of Islam to have a tent inside Masjid an-Nabawi (Nabwi mosque) in Medina where nursing care would be offered, as well as training future nurses. The Aga Khan University School of Nursing in Karachi, Pakistan is

named after her. The University of Bahrain gives the Rufaida Al-Aslamia Prize in Nursing every year. (Bhatti, 2018, para. 10)

**Khawla bint Al Azwar.** “Warrior and fighter, Khawla bint Al Azwar was known as a fierce and fearless soldier so strong that many did not realize she wasn’t a man under all of her gear”; so much so that one of the *Muslim Girl* blogs refers to her as “essentially the Muslim version of Mulan” (Bhatti, 2018, para. 9; Issa, 2016, para. 15). *Muslim Girl* explains:

Fighting under the leadership of famed Muslim general Khālid ibn al-Walīd, Khawla was famously known for fighting the Byzantines at the Battle of Yarmouk in 636. She was captured in battle and taken to the leader’s tent where he planned to rape her. However, Khawla had other plans. While in captivity with other female prisoners, she riled up enough of them to fight back and break out of captivity. (Bhatti, 2018, para. 9)

Another testament to Khawla bint Al Azwar’s bravery is as follows:

Khoulā bint Al-Azwar was a feminist bad ass who believed in her heart and listened to no one. She didn’t ask for permission to don the outfit of a commanding officer, so that she could ride into battle to rescue her brother. She just did it, and received great respect from the soldiers and their general. (Anumahmed, 2019, para. 12)

**Bilqis.** Bilqis, the Queen of Ethiopia’s:

presence in the Quran is cited by Amina Wadud in her groundbreaking work *Women and the Quran* as evidence that the hadith about the dangers of women leading has little basis in Islamic history. Bilqis is discussed in the Quran as a highly competent leader, who converts to Islam. (Sarahmohr, 2021, para. 2)

*Muslim Girl’s* presentation of this example of a Black Muslim woman also draws attention to the long lineage of Black Muslims’ activism and leadership throughout Islamic history.

**Khawla bint Tha’laba.** The fact that amongst other women, Khawla bint Tha’laba too “was directly spoken to in the Holy Qur’an” is referenced by *Muslim Girl* to reiterate that men and women are equal in front of Allah (Issa, 2016, para. 19).

**Virgin Mary.** Similarly, the reference to Virgin Mary in the Quran demonstrates that God addresses men and women both (MG Staff, 2020b).

In summary, *Muslim Girl* presents the above examples as feminist symbols of Muslim women's agency, authority, strength and bravery, as indicated by their socio-political activism and their participation in the public domain, all of which expand restrictive notions of pious femininity.

### ***Contemporary Muslim Feminist Icons***

Emerging from the aforementioned time-honored legacy of Muslim women's multifaceted participation in the public sphere, in religious leadership and in knowledge dissemination, Muslim women today continue to embody feminist values in ways that are amenable to Islam. In particular, "it has become a trend among Muslims to share stories of powerful women from our *herstory* that have been, up till now, fairly unknown" (Issa, 2016, para. 14, emphasis added). Examples of such women include "Um al Dardaa, a jurist from the 7th century, Noor Inayat Khan, the Indian 'Spy Princess'" and others (Issa, 2016, para. 14). These examples symbolize the empowerment of Muslim women and their long overdue recognition as "strong, independent, trailblazers"; a legacy that continues to date (Issa, 2016, para. 15; MG Staff, 2017b). Adding to this legacy, *Muslim Girl* sheds light on several modern-day Muslim "women of strength, knowledge and conviction" such as "Olympian Ibtihaj Muhammad, AJ+ Producer Sana Saeed, 14-year-old veiled Muslim convert and professional ballerina Stephanie Kurlow and...the first Somali-American Muslim State Legislator Ilhan Omar" amongst others (Khatib, 2016, para. 1). Adding to this list, below are some more examples of present-day Muslim women who are seen as icons across various industries, as described in *Muslim Girl*.

#### **Muslim Women In Sports.**

***Ibtihaj Muhammad.*** Hijab-wearing fencing Olympian, Muhammad who won bronze in fencing for the United States and also runs a fashion business, is touted as a trailblazer symbolizing strength and freedom (Bhatti, 2018; Issa, 2016; Khatib, 2016). "Renowned as the

first American Olympian to compete wearing hijab”, she is a pioneer in her own right (Bhatti, 2018; MG Staff, 2017b, p. 4, para. 1). She is a role model for Muslim women across the world, as she “is vocally open about wearing her faith on her sleeve while being open about the experience of being Black, Muslim, female and American” (Bhatti, 2018, para. 3). Her achievements go a long way in actualizing “the yearning Muslim women have to break out of the heavy burden of stereotype and restriction” that are perpetuated by Muslims and non-Muslims alike (Issa, 2016, para. 15). As per *Muslim Girl*, Muhammad’s “success is what feminism is all about” as she overcomes barriers like sexism and racism (Issa, 2016, para. 16). Her influence reaches far and wide; an example of this widespread impact being Mattel’s decision to release “its first hijabi Barbie, modeled after the fencer herself. Her doll was one in the series of ‘Sheroes’” (Bhatti, 2018; MG Staff, 2017b, p. 4, para. 1).

**Zahra Lari.** Another Muslim woman athlete who is challenging stereotypes is Zahra Lari (MG Staff, 2017b). “From the United Arab Emirates, Zahra Lari...became both the first skater from the Persian Gulf to participate in international figure skating and the first international figure skater to compete with a headscarf” (MG Staff, 2017b, p. 11, para. 1). Lari participated in the 2018 Winter Olympics on UAE’s team (MG Staff, 2017b). “She also appeared in Nike’s 2017 online campaign, ‘What Will They Say About You?’” which has helped diversify the representation of Muslim women in digital media (MG Staff, 2017b, p. 11, para. 1).

### **Muslim Women In Fashion.**

**Yasmeen Mjalli.** “As an Arab feminist and clothing brand entrepreneur, Yasmeen Mjalli wanted to show Muslims how feminism and Islam can co-exist. She believes there is no one approach to feminism; rather every culture and society has its own feminism” (Jahangiri, 2021, paras. 16–17). Mjalli also critiques how “mainstream feminism leaves Palestinian women out despite the gender discrimination and sexual assault they face” (Jahangiri, 2021, para. 17).

**Ayana Ife.** “Modest fashion designer Ayana Ife competed in Project Runway for its 16th season and came in second place” (MG Staff, 2017b, p. 10, para. 1). Speaking to the power of

visibility, “her representation as a hijabi proved to be empowering for many” (MG Staff, 2017b, p. 10, para. 1). The often exclusionary dynamics of both fashion and TV industries make her presence in this space even more salient.

**Eman Bare.** “Eman proves that fashion can be beautiful, ethical, and environmentally sound” (Hamed, 2017a, para. 25). Through her work, “Bare at once honors her ancestors and future generations of women who are empowered by the modest clothing line’s firm ethical stance” (Hamed, 2017a, para. 25). Muslim girl argues that “THIS is fashion forward redefined; forward into environmental consciousness, forward into wage equality for women, forward into fashion that is art, femininity, and culture, curated” (Hamed, 2017a, para. 26). Bare’s historically nuanced approach in her business contests hyper-capitalistic motives of prioritizing short-term gains at the expense of people and the environment, and instead adopts a longer-term focus that aims to leave behind a legacy to be proud of (Hamed, 2017a).

**Halima Aden.** As *Muslim Girl* explains:

Halima Aden gained national media attention in 2016 after competing in the Miss Minnesota USA pageant, becoming the first contestant to wear a hijab and burkini. Born in a refugee camp in Kenya, she now works for IMG Models and became the first hijabi model to make the cover of Vogue Arabia...and Allure Magazine. She debuted at the New York City Fashion Week...and was featured in Rihanna’s Fenty Beauty Campaign. (MG Staff, 2017b, p. 8, para. 1)

**Najwa Umran.** “Umran is the founder of Female Muslim Creatives, a non-profit in the greater London area that seeks to support and amplify the voices of Muslim female artists” (MG Staff, 2017b, p. 14, para. 1). Additionally:

Umran created the hashtag #BlackMuslimahExcellence as a campaign in reaction to the underrepresentation of Black models at Dubai Modest Fashion Week. “Everybody is complaining that the modest fashion industry excludes Black Muslim bloggers so why

don't we support and value our own ourselves?" she asked. (MG Staff, 2017b, p. 14, para. 1)

### **Muslim Women In the Legal Field.**

**Zahra Billoo.** "Zahra Billoo is a civil rights attorney and the executive director for CAIR (Council on American-Islamic Relations) in the San Francisco Bay Area. She came to the defense of victims in many cases of anti-Muslim hate crimes and incidents" (Hamed, 2017a; MG Staff, 2017b, p. 9, para. 1). In her role:

Billoo works in the trenches, fighting Islamophobia in court rooms and on camera.

Whether she's suing 45, speaking at MSA's (Muslim Student Associations) and college lecture halls on the dangers of xenophobia, or teaching seminars on how to preserve and exercise your constitutional rights in the face of FBI or police questioning, Zahra is in deep, utilizing constitutional law to protect justice and democracy. Billoo also spoke at the Women's March on Washington D.C. (Hamed, 2017a, para. 18)

Moreover, "Billoo has represented and protected Muslims targeted by persecution, also leading interfaith efforts and speaking out on Black Lives Matter and the continuing genocide of Native Americans" (Hamed, 2017a, para. 19).

**Tahanie Aboushi.** In a similar vein, civil rights attorney Tahanie Aboushi "has worked on several high-profile cases, including cases involving Muslims being detained at the John F. Kennedy Airport during President Trump's Muslim ban" (Jahangiri, 2021, para. 14).

**Azadeh Shahshahani.** As per *Muslim Girl*:

Azadeh Shahshahani is an Iranian American...human rights attorney who works to protect immigrants and individuals from Middle Eastern, South Asian and Muslim communities. She was awarded the 2017 Human Rights Movement Builder Award by the U.S. Human Rights Network. (MG Staff, 2017b, p. 7, para. 1)

### **Muslim Women In Healthcare.**

**Alaa Murabit.** According to *Muslim Girl*:

As a medical doctor and UN High-Level Commissioner on Health Employment & Economic Growth, Murabit advises governments on children and women's health issues, strives to involve women in peace processes (and) creates national and international initiatives to further protections for women and children...In an incredible TED talk she gave in 2015, Murabit stated: "Every day I work to amplify the voices of women, and to highlight their experiences and their participation in peace processes and conflict resolution. And because of my work, I recognize that the only way to ensure the full participation of women globally is by reclaiming religion". (Hamed, 2017a, para. 9)

*Muslim Girl* adds that:

Murabit's power and success, her drive to ensure the health of the world, runs counter to the mainstream media narrative on Islam, Muslims, and Muslim women. It also runs counter to the hijacking of our truly feminist religion by patriarchal structures within Muslim communities. Murabit is not only a healer in the medical and political sense, Alaa Murabit is a cultural and religious healer, bringing Islam and Muslim women back to the power and grace of our first leaders, our first healers, like Khadija (RA). (Hamed, 2017a, para. 10)

**Blair Imani.** A fierce advocate for social justice issues, "Imani is the founder and executive director at Equality for Her, and press officer for Planned Parenthood" (Hamed, 2017a, para. 13). Despite having once been arrested at a Black Lives Matter protest, Imani remains "unafraid of putting her beliefs and her body on the line for truth and for equality" (Hamed, 2017a, para. 14). In fact:

The arrest only seemed to embolden Imani's convictions and her pursuit of justice for Muslims, women, and Black people. Ever busy, Imani is always hosting feminist-positive events that center around the narratives of marginalized communities, or speaking on diversity and adversity at colleges across the nation. (Hamed, 2017a, para. 15)

**Muslim Women In Art and Media.**

Contesting the biased and incorrect representations of Muslim women that dominate mainstream media, the artists listed below “decided to take matters into their own hands in order to change this inaccurate vision, and present their own reality on Muslim women through their art” (MG Staff, 2021c, para. 2).

***Su’ad Khabeer.*** *Muslim Girl* elaborates as follows:

Su’ad Khabeer is the author of *Muslim Cool: Race, Religion and HipHop in the United States* and founding director and senior editor for Sapelo Square, an online resource on Black Muslims in the United States. Its content seeks to center Black Muslims in the United States by exploring Black America through politics, culture, arts and Islam. (MG Staff, 2017b, p. 18, para. 1)

Furthermore, Sapelo Square has collaborated with partners “to launch a project that documents the photos and stories of the Black Muslim community” (MG Staff, 2017b, p. 18, para. 1). In fact, Khabeer’s Sapelo Square is making waves, having “won the Academy of Muslim Achievement’s Golden Minaret Award for Best in Media” (MG Staff, 2017b, p. 18, para. 1).

***Shadi Ghadirian.*** Iranian photographer, Ghadirian:

gained worldwide recognition with her “Qajar” series, where she mixes contemporary elements with the traditional lives of women in Iran. The series consists of arranged portraits of women...with the addition of “forbidden objects” in Iran, such as boomboxes, censored books, beer cans, and a bicycle. The series portrays the paradoxical life of young Iranian women — how they live in public and how they live behind closed doors. Shadi makes sure to demonstrate the confidence expressed by the girls in her pictures. According to the curator Rose Issa, who represents Shadi’s work, the girls “are not shy, they are not those victimized young women that people think the Muslim world is. They decide for their lives. They take risks. They use the things that are forbidden. They are not embarrassed”. (MG Staff, 2021c, paras. 7–8)

**Yumna Al-Arashi.** “Yumna Al-Arashi is a self-taught documentary photographer” (MG Staff, 2021c, para. 17). This Yemeni-American artist’s “work revolves around women, feminism, human rights and nature” (MG Staff, 2021c, para. 17). In particular, “she explores the use of the hijab by Yemeni women” (MG Staff, 2021c, para. 18). Reflecting on the meaning of her art, “Yumna recognizes how Muslim women are often seen as powerless and with no proper identity simply because of their hijab. But she explains that the hijab is actually a tool of feminism” (MG Staff, 2021c, para. 19). Speaking of the Yemeni women who wear the hijab, she explains that “they’re strong, powerful, graceful and beautiful, the boss of their house, their family and their land” (MG Staff, 2021c, para. 18).

**Shamsia Hassani:** Listing her many accomplishments, *Muslim Girl* explains:

Shamsia is an Afghan graffiti artist, as well as a fine arts lecturer and associate professor of Drawing and Anatomy Drawing at the Kabul University. She uses her art as an instrument to fight for women’s rights, especially in Afghanistan. (MG Staff, 2021c, para. 14)

Hassani represents “covered women as forceful figures, far from the Taliban stereotypes” (MG Staff, 2021c, para. 16). She notes, “people think that women in burqas are powerless and uneducated, without ideas of their own. They think it is a limitation” (MG Staff, 2021c, para. 16). Like other artists mentioned in this section, her work disrupts such stereotypes about veiled women (MG Staff, 2021c).

**Maysoon Zayid.** “Maysoon Zayid is a disability rights activist and comedian” (Jahangiri, 2021, para. 10). Zayid is breaking many barriers, such as being “the first comedian to perform a stand-up routine in Jordan and Palestine” (Jahangiri, 2021, para. 11). In addition to “a successful career in comedy as ‘America’s first Muslim woman comedian’” she is also a captivating speaker (Jahangiri, 2021, para. 11). Her popularity is evident given that “Her Ted Talk ‘I got 99 problems, palsy is just one’ received over 11 million views, making it the most viewed TedTalk” of that year (Jahangiri, 2021, para. 12).

**Mona Haydar.** “Mona Haydar is a Syrian-American hijabi rapper, poet and activist” (MG Staff, 2017b, p. 13, para. 1). A well-known artist, “she was interviewed by Glamour, People and Marie Claire, among other publications, and her work was widely shared on social media outlets” (MG Staff, 2017b, p. 13, para. 1). Through her art and activism, Haydar has done much work to normalize wearing the hijab at a time “when Muslim women were being increasingly targeted for their appearance” (MG Staff, 2017b, p. 13, para. 1).

**Boushra Almutawakel.** *Muslim Girl* describes Almutawakel as below:

Boushra Almutawakel is a Yemeni photographer, whose work revolves on the portrayal of the Arab/Muslim woman as well as their clothing, particularly from an international point of view. Witnessing the misrepresentation of Islam in the news after September 11, she shifted her focus on the western perception of Arabs and Muslims. She gained international recognition for “The Hijab” series, where she challenges the many stereotypes about the hijab and the women who wear it. She wanted to demonstrate the different aspects of the hijab through her photography, and “undemonize” it as a symbol of oppression. (MG Staff, 2021c, paras. 3–4)

**Helen Zughuib.** “Helen Zughuib is a Lebanese-born painter and multimedia artist” (MG Staff, 2021c, para. 9). In her *Changing Perceptions* series, she seeks “to change the misunderstood image that the West has of the abaya, by mixing elements of both West and East” (MG Staff, 2021c, para. 10). By way of explanation, the abaya is a type of loose, usually black robe, that Muslim women wear as a form of modest dressing; it is most commonly found in the Middle East. Zughuib’s artwork *Abaya with a Flag Pin* is also “her way of saying that Arab Americans are just as patriotic as any other American citizen” (MG Staff, 2021c, para. 11).

**Lalla Essayadi.** “Lalla Essayadi is a Moroccan photographer and painter” (MG Staff, 2021c, para. 12). Essayadi says “I invite viewers to resist stereotypes” as they engage with her art, which features “the portrayal of Arab women covered in hand-painted Arabic calligraphy in henna” (MG Staff, 2021c, para. 12).

***Ikhlaas Saleem.*** “Ikhlaas Saleem is a BuzzFeed contributor and is making waves as the creator and co-host of ‘Identity Politics,’ a podcast centered on race, gender and Muslims in the United States” (MG Staff, 2017b, p. 12, para. 1). Through this platform, Saleem discusses “how there’s nothing regular about being Black and Muslim in America” in light of the various intersecting factors that shape such experiences (MG Staff, 2017b, p. 12, para. 1).

***Amani Al-Khatahtbeh.*** Shedding light on Al-Khatahtbeh’s success, *Muslim Girl* shares: MuslimGirl.com founder and wunderkind Amani Al-Khatahtbeh is all about shifting paradigms and challenging the reality set forth by mainstream media regarding Muslim women. Named to Forbes “30 Under 30,” she’s rung the Nasdaq bell, sparred with Bill Clinton, been invited to the White House by Michelle Obama, written a book, and created a growing multimedia platform where “*Muslim women talk back.*” (Hamed, 2017a, para. 21)

#### **Muslim Women In Activist and Non-Profit Spaces.**

***Malala Yousafzai.*** Nobel Peace Prize winner Yousafzai is a prolific “advocate for girls’ and women’s education” (Bhatti, 2018; Hamed, 2017a, para. 3). Hailing from Pakistan, “Malala was nearly killed after having gained attention for her efforts promoting education” (Hamed, 2017a, para. 3). In response to her near-death experience:

Pakistan overwhelmingly came out in support of women’s rights and the fight for girls’ education. Protests erupted throughout the country, and over 2 million people signed a petition that led the National Assembly creating Pakistan’s Right to Free and Compulsory Education Bill. (Hamed, 2017a, para. 3)

In this way, “Malala emboldened and empowered an entire nation to fight for women against the forces of terrorism” and her bravery has inspired many others across the world (Hamed, 2017a, para. 4).

***Linda Sarsour.*** “American political activist and vocal advocate for the Arab, Palestinian and larger Muslim community, Linda Sarsour made headlines after being one of the five

organizers of the Women’s March” in 2017, which occurred right after the swearing in of Donald Trump as president, a march that “turned out to be the biggest march in U.S. history and spread to major cities across the globe” (Hamed, 2017a; MG Staff, 2017b, p. 2, para. 1). Sarsour has also served as “executive director of the Arab American Association of New York and founder of MPower Change” (Hamed, 2017a, para. 6). Importantly, “while marching for Black Lives, while fighting for Palestinian freedom, while marching for women, while protesting 45, Linda strives to be inclusive and intersectional, always” (Hamed, 2017a, para. 6). This attention to intersectionality is evident in her speech at the Women’s March in Washington D.C, where she said, “I ask you to stand and continue to keep your voices loud for black women, for native women, for undocumented women, for our LGBTQIA communities, for people with disabilities” (Hamed, 2017a, para. 6). Such an intersectional and inclusive approach is also discernible in Sarsour’s advocacy for and with the various marginalized groups that she mentions above (Hamed, 2017a).

***Dalia Mogahed.*** Distinguished speaker and scholar, Mogahed is well-versed with activism for and alongside American Muslims and has even been interviewed by *NPR* (MG Staff, 2017b). She also “launched ‘Islamophobia: A Threat to All,’ a project that seeks to unearth the impact of Islamophobia and offer solutions through research” (MG Staff, 2017b, p. 15, para. 1).

***M. Hasna Maznavi.*** As per *Muslim Girl*:

The Women’s Mosque of America opened in Los Angeles in 2015, creating a safe and sacred space in which Muslim women could worship. Despite cries that this move would divide the community, that mosques and khutbahs (sermons) MUST be led by men (cough cough, not true) M. Hasna Maznavi, founder and president, persisted in cultivating a space not only centered around Islamic study and worship, but around celebrating Muslim sisterhood. With a diverse lineup of knowledgeable and influential khateebas (female sermon-givers), The Women’s Mosque addresses elements of the

Mosque experience and the experience of Muslim women that many find are ignored in male-centric masajid (mosques). In creating a safe space for Muslim women to congregate, heal, and engage with their faith, Maznavi essentially created a space in which the next generation of Muslim women can flourish. With a center that promotes sisterhood, provides sacred knowledge, encourages worship and activism, and removes patriarchy from the Mosque experience, Muslim women are encouraged to turn to Islam, and to each other, for strength. (Hamed, 2017a, para. 34)

***Shamima Shaikh.*** *Muslim Girl* states:

Shamima Shaikh was a South African Muslim feminist, human rights activist, and journalist who promoted Islamic feminism. During her studies, Shaikh was involved in the promotion of a white-owned business boycott in Durban during the South African apartheid regime as a member of the Muslim Students Association of South Africa. After graduation, Shamima started writing for al-Qalam, a Muslim community newspaper, where she heavily questioned the status of women in the Muslim world. In 1994, a group of female activists led by Shamima Shaikh attempted to offer tarawih prayers at a Johannesburg Mosque against the will of men who attended the prayers, which resulted in a clash between some of the men and the women's rights activists. (Birk, 2021, paras. 12–13)

As an activist all her life, “she fought for reforms necessary for equality among men and women within the Muslim world. She wrote numerous books and essays on the position of women in Islam using a feminist lens to interpret Islam” (Birk, 2021, para. 14).

***Zainab Salbi.*** As *Muslim Girl* articulates:

When the Yugoslav Wars started in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Zainab Salbi decided to help the women affected, and founded the Women for Women International (WWI). Her goal was to provide women with access to education and resources necessary for personal development and growth. With hundreds of millions of dollars in direct aid and

micro-loans, WWI provided war-affected women across the world with the means to improve their lives. (Birk, 2021, para. 11)

**Salma Sobhan.** Muslim girl describes Sobhan as follows:

As the leader and one of the founders of '*Ain O Shalish Kendra*' a human rights organization focused on labor and women's rights, Salma Sobhan worked to expose violations of human and workers rights in Bangladesh. Dismissing the prospect of a lucrative legal practice, Salma was relentless in her fight for equality and improvement of the position of women in Bangladesh. (Birk, 2021, para. 9)

**Kameelah Rashad.** Bringing with her an academic background in clinical psychology, Rashad is "the Fellow for Spirituality, Wellness and Social Justice at the University of Pennsylvania, where she also advises Penn Sapelo, the first Black Muslim student organization" (MG Staff, 2017b, p. 16, para. 1). Moreover, as "founder and president of the Muslim Wellness Foundation, Kameelah Rashad spearheaded the Black Muslim Psychology Conference with co-founder and spouse Qasim Rashad" (MG Staff, 2017b, p. 16, para. 1).

### **Muslim Women In Politics.**

**Ilhan Omar.** Omar made history as "the first Somali-American Muslim woman being elected to a state legislature" in the US (Khatib, 2016; MG Staff, 2017b, 2019, para. 10). She also "made the cover of TIME Magazine as one of 45 women breaking barriers" (MG Staff, 2017b, p. 3, para. 1). As a hijab-wearing public figure herself, "Omar stands as a complete refutation of the pervasive Orientalist stereotypes of passive submissive Muslim women" (Sarahmohr, 2021, para. 7). On the contrary, "standing as a testament to the political and social engagement that characterizes Muslim women, Ilhan Omar destroys the stereotype of the oppressed and silent Muslim women in hijab" (Sarahmohr, 2021, para. 7). *Muslim Girl* describes Omar as "outspoken, fierce, pro-LGBTQ+, progressive, radical" and overall a revolutionary force to be reckoned with (MG Staff, 2019; Sarahmohr, 2021, para. 7). In these ways, "Ilhan continues

to serve as a role model to Muslim Americans, as well as Muslim women globally” (MG Staff, 2017b, p. 3, para. 1).

**Huda Sha’arawi.** *Muslim Girl* presents:

the story of Egyptian revolutionary, writer, and philanthropist Huda Sha’arawi. She was awarded status in the Order of Virtues, which is an Egyptian order of knighthood for women. Her contribution to the improvement of Muslim women’s status in Egypt and beyond involved more than just leading protests and awareness-raising campaigns. She founded the Egyptian Feminist Union, and fought to make academic education accessible to girls instead of limiting their education within the confines of patriarchal gender roles. Huda organized Egyptian women to lead the revolution against British colonialism and demanded the release of men who were arrested for opposing colonialism and demanding their freedom. (Birk, 2021, para. 3)

**Noor Al-Hussein.** “Noor Al-Hussein was the Queen of Jordan from 1978 to 1999” and has many other achievements to her name as well (Birk, 2021, para. 4). Namely, “she is the leader of numerous human rights organizations and initiatives including International Commission on Missing Persons, United World Colleges, King Hussein Foundation International, International Arab Youth Congress, and many others” (Birk, 2021, para. 6).

**Bushra Amiwala.** Amiwala, who ran for office at only 19 years of age went on to become:

the youngest Muslim elected official in the United States and offers a very unique perspective on leadership as a young woman of color in politics. She said, “What gives me hope is the same thing that motivates me – it is seeing the amount of work done, the amount of progress that we are achieving collectively in unison”. (MG Staff, 2017b; Tasnim, 2021, para. 4)

Her views reiterate that “community-building has been an essential tool of social and systemic change” (Tasnim, 2021, para. 4).

Recapping the last few sections, this list of exemplary Muslim women in numerous fields and across large swathes of time and space is detailed but by no means all-inclusive. Instead, this list of role models that *Muslim Girl* discusses illustrates that Muslim women's empowerment today is rooted in a centuries-spanning history of Muslim women's extensive and dynamic involvement and leadership in public life. The Muslim women described above embody feminist characteristics such as confronting stereotypes, engaging with their communities and implementing creative solutions to the problems they face. In their endeavors, these women illustrate qualities like intelligence, loyalty, integrity, bravery, confidence, perseverance and a thirst for knowledge, all without negating their human fallibility.

These women passionately advocate for the various causes they are involved with and they actively participate in public life, often taking on leadership positions, including in male-dominated spheres. Collectively, the Muslim women referenced above support women's rights to safety, education, employment and equality in all aspects of life. At the same time, these women also argue for women's right to define freedom for themselves and not only in comparison to masculine gender norms or Western understandings of feminism. Overall, these pioneering women advocate for gender justice and equity in marital relations, in families and in every aspect of social life, which includes recognizing that women's contributions in the private domain are just as valuable as their achievements in professional arenas.

Moreover, the Muslim women whose examples are detailed above unilaterally reject patriarchy as being rooted in Islam and they dismantle reductive assumptions about Muslim women's oppression and their universal coercion. In mobilizing for gender egalitarian societies, these women root their feminism in Islam and in opposition to hegemonic, orientalist forms of feminism. Furthermore, they highlight how various systems of oppression intersect, thus reinforcing the need for anti-racist, anti-Islamophobic, anti-xenophobic and intersectional feminism. In practice, the often faith-centric activism of these aforementioned women is grounded in a decolonial, anti-imperialist orientation that prioritizes indigenous knowledge

formulation. Concurrently, these women critique fundamentalist conceptualizations of Islam and they encourage women to seek Islamic knowledge in order to reclaim Islam for themselves.

The examples above indicate that from athletes, models, artists, media personalities and journalists to businesswomen, activists, healthcare professionals, lawyers and politicians, Muslim women are emerging as trailblazers in all industries. These women's achievements build on a long-standing legacy of leadership that their forerunners set in motion. Simultaneously, their accomplishments pave the way for future generations of Muslim women who can see themselves represented positively in an ever-expanding range of roles. The overarching point being driven home across several of the previous sections in this chapter is that these historical and contemporary inspirational figures should motivate Muslims "to lead by example, develop a moral compass, and uphold the high ethical standards of our prophets and Muslim women role models" that are rooted in and reflective of Islamic ideals (Guest Blogger, 2017a, para. 25).

### ***Common Feminist Strategies Across Religions***

This chapter has underscored various strategies for arriving at feminist readings of Islamic injunctions. Without erasing theological and ritualistic differences across religions, there are significant overlaps in the strategies of resistance that Muslim, Christian and Jewish feminists draw on. In a nutshell, these mechanisms include bypassing intermediating interpreters to access scripture directly and to read scripture while keeping historical context in mind. Other common feminist strategies include drawing attention to women who were key figures in religious history and foregrounding individual agency in how religious texts are understood.

First and foremost, feminist scholarship across faiths calls for direct engagement with scripture, thus enabling feminist re-readings of religious texts. For instance, *Muslim Girl* bloggers frequently draw on the Quran, Hadith and Sunnah to prioritize themes of equity, justice and compassion in Islamic tenets. Likewise, Jewish feminists make the case for reading the Torah and Talmud in light of women's lived realities (Plaskow, 1991). Similarly, Christian

feminists draw attention to the leadership enacted by women in early Christianity (Fiorenza, 1983; Ruether, 1983). Feminists across these religions engage with scripture not to abandon it, but to reclaim it as an arguably feminist text.

To facilitate such feminist interpretations, scholars across the traditions have long called for intra-textual and historically contextualized readings of religious texts. To elaborate, the extensive history of Muslim women and feminist interpreters' involvement with Quranic interpretations indicates that "critical and constructive contemporary feminist readings are part of an ongoing tradition of creating and producing Islam" (Shaikh, 2013, p. 26). In a similar vein, Christian and Jewish feminist scholarship also advocates for contextualizing interpretations. Such methods recognize the historical and cultural context within which misogynistic biblical norms emerge and they challenge the positioning of inequality as divine command (Plaskow, 1991, Ruether, 1983).

Another point of convergence is the emphasis on women who played an important role in religious history as a way to assert women's claims to religious authority. This thesis has demonstrated how *Muslim Girl* bloggers draw on figures from early Islamic history, such as Hazrat Khadija, Hazrat Aisha, Hazrat Fatima, Sayeda Zaynab and others as walking embodiments of feminist values like financial independence, public leadership and the pursuit of knowledge. These women, and others like them, demonstrate that gender equity is a deeply rooted tradition in Islamic history. *Muslim Girl* refers to these examples of women's political activism and spiritual leadership in the early days of Islam in a bid to resist contemporary conservative understandings of women's role as delineated by Islam. On a similar note, Jewish feminists shed light on biblical women and female saints for the same purpose. Across religions, feminist exegetes call for foregrounding women's autonomy, paying attention to women's presence in scripture and excavating suppressed motifs of gender egalitarianism in religious history.

Next, feminist writers across the three religions emphasize that individual believers have agency in their relationship with higher powers and with scripture. This approach is evident in Christian and Jewish traditions too, where believers' lived realities and meaning-making endeavours have been key to dismantling male-dominated, hierarchical gate-keeping of religious authority (Castelli & Rodman, 2001; Shaikh, 2005).

Furthermore, in the Canadian context, it can be argued that Catholic feminists in Quebec have historically faced similar struggles to those that present-day Muslim feminists confront. Specifically, Quebecois feminists played a prominent role in "challenging the traditional social norms dictated by the Catholic Church, thereby promoting women's autonomy in both the public and private spheres" (Jacquet, 2017, as cited in Taher & Zoghalmi, 2025, p. 2). In this way, Catholic feminists have a "significant legacy within the feminist movement in Quebec" (Taher & Zoghalmi, 2025, p. 8). Therefore, parallels can be drawn between how Catholic feminists of yesteryears and modern-day Muslim feminists seek feminist re-interpretations without negating religion wholesale. These dynamics signify that feminist scholars across religions refuse to give in to portrayals of religion as being inherently patriarchal. Instead, these scholars highlight how power relations and institutional control over religious knowledge production have led to the marginalization of women.

While the interpretive mechanisms that Muslim feminists employ to resist patriarchal readings of Islam are similar to those used by Christian and Jewish feminists, there are some notable differences as well. The particularities of Islam give rise to the concept of tawhid and the focus on human responsibility in deriving meaning from scripture, both of which have been discussed earlier in this writing. These interpretive methods suggest that Muslim feminists are responding to the specific context that they operate in.

Nonetheless, there is significant cross-fertilization and overlap in feminist strategies across faiths. These similarities are the intended result of a joint effort to reclaim religion from the clutches of patriarchal domination. Feminist scholars, activists and theologians across

religions are reaffirming their claim to faith and feminism while also reasserting their right to interpretive authority and religious leadership. The convergences in these feminist interpretive strategies demonstrate that feminist interventions are a time-honored tradition across religions. It is these overarching, inter-faith narratives about feminism that *Muslim Girl* contributes to.

In summary, this chapter took a look at the diverse strategies employed by scholars and activists to derive feminist understandings of Islam. By reclaiming interpretive authority through the lens of tawhid and by distinguishing between fiqh and sharia, Muslim feminists advocate for a reimagined Islam that champions gender equity and social justice. Another pivotal strategy discussed in this chapter is to interpret primary Islamic sources, such as the Quran, Hadith and Sunnah through historical contextualization and intratextual reading methods. This analysis took a deep dive into specific Quranic verses related to activism, anti-violence, and gender relations, alongside a re-interpretation of verse 4:34. Moreover, this chapter highlighted the importance of elevating feminist icons who are referenced in the Quran, those from early Islamic history and the women who followed in their footsteps in the years to come. The partnership between Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and Hazrat Khadija, and their individual lives also emerged as key examples of feminist principles within Islamic sources of knowledge. Then, this chapter discussed how the achievements of Muslim feminist icons across various industries exemplify Islamic feminism in practice. Last but not least, this chapter wrapped up with a comparative overview of how feminists use similar strategies to dismantle patriarchal barriers across religions.

In conclusion, the strategies explored in this chapter offer a path forward for foregrounding feminist interpretations of Islam. By continuing to amplify the voices of Muslim women and feminist icons, and by prioritizing egalitarian interpretations of primary Islamic sources, it is possible to not only foster gender egalitarian interpretations of Islam but also to reshape feminist discourses to be more inclusive of Muslim women's perspectives.

#### 4. Factors Shaping Muslim Women's Gendered Experiences of Islam

This chapter starts off by elaborating on Muslim women's varying relationships with the hijab and the attendant implications in terms of representation, belonging and women's empowerment. This analysis begins with a look at Muslim women's experiences of wearing the hijab, including their nuanced critique of some of the narratives associated with the hijab. Following these sections, some examples elucidate how belonging and exclusion work, as illustrated by Muslim women's experiences in France. These examples demonstrate how problematic, universalized associations of the hijab with oppression feed into the gendered Islamophobia that Muslim women face. It is these stereotypes about the hijab, more so than the hijab itself, that subjugate Muslim women. These conditions make it necessary to study how narratives of agency and choice can set up double standards for Muslim women. The next section expands on how liberation and feminist empowerment are defined, particularly in relation to the hijab.

Then, this chapter moves on to an intersectional analysis of how other identity factors, including race in the context of settler colonialism and post 9/11 war on terror discourses impact Muslim women's lived realities. Grounded in this analysis is a call to spotlight the feminist activism of racialized women and to decentralize whiteness in feminist discourses. Another key intervention that emerges from this chapter is the need to foreground Black Muslim women's experiences which signify the nexus of sexism, racism and Islamophobia. Staying with the theme of identities at intersections, this chapter then sheds light on the nuanced approach evident in the *Muslim Girl* blogs when addressing queerness in relation to Islam. Included in this section is a consideration of how Islamophobia is manipulatively deployed for the sake of combating homophobia. Next, this chapter takes a closer look at formulations of Muslim masculinities, the toxic elements of such masculinities and how feminist masculinities are rooted in Islamic precedence.

Another salient factor shaping Muslim women's experiences is the proliferation of digital and social media. Therefore, this chapter analyzes how the digital terrain and the media representations that this landscape cultivates depict and affect Muslim women. This analysis is followed by an examination of the opportunities that social media offers for feminist mobilization and for expanding Muslim women's reach as religious figures of authority. On the flip side, an exploration of the common drawbacks of digital media, including its propensity for over-simplification, click-bait content and uni-dimensional portrayals of Muslims brings this chapter to a close.

### **Experiences with the Hijab**

I deliberately begin this section on this note because I wanted to foreground what Muslim women themselves are saying about their experiences, before delving into the broader discourses on what is said about Muslim women who wear the hijab.

*Muslim Girl* points out that "Islam is a pluralistic religion with a myriad of interpretations, understandings, and practices. Not all Muslim women wear the hijab, and not all who wear the hijab do so for similar reasons" (Hodakatebi, 2016a, para. 25). Rather, "there are numerous opinions regarding the donning of the headscarf for Muslim women based on Islamic theology" (Raja, 2015, para. 1). Even amongst women who do wear the hijab, "the way in which a person observes the veil is based on quranic interpretation, Islamic sect, culture, current country location, personal choice" to name only a few influencing factors (Hamed, 2017b, para. 10). Therefore, the "hijab is much more than just a way of dress; symbolically, it is the idea of modesty, of autonomy over oneself. Never was it meant to just be enforced on women" (MG Staff, 2015, para. 13).

### ***Muslim Women's Connections to the Hijab***

*Muslim Girl* outlines Muslim women's varying experiences with the hijab through thoughtful personal reflections. For instance, one blogger reiterates the beauty of hijab, while also recognizing that deciding to wear the hijab and understanding its significance can be a

journey in itself (BreonnaColon, 2018). For this particular blogger, that journey included “buying books on Muslim feminism and reading blogs by women who wore hijab” (BreonnaColon, 2018, para. 8). This *Muslim Girl* blogger adds that wearing the hijab not only combats the hyper-sexualization of women but also humbles its wearer (BreonnaColon, 2018). In this manner, the hijab can empower Muslim women by drawing attention away from physical attributes towards one’s personality traits (BreonnaColon, 2018).

Here, it is worth noting that while the hijab may impart humility, it can also be a fashion statement. This duality is perhaps best exemplified by modest fashion influencers who reign supreme on Instagram and on other social media, and by modest wear clothing brands, including the niche of modest swimwear, which are gaining traction amongst Muslim and non-Muslim consumers. To give an example, at her wedding in 2023, Sophie Richie (American model and social media influencer, and daughter of famous musician, Lionel Richie) was widely praised for her wedding dress for its relative modesty and elegance. The popularity of her dress exemplifies how modest clothing is becoming mainstream amongst non-Muslim women too. At the same time, this shift raises interesting questions about the acceptability of modest clothing for Islamic reasons as compared to when it is propagated by other, non-Muslim women. In either case, wearing the hijab can signify both humility as well as fashionability. Arguably, this merging of fashion with the hijab draws on Islamic teachings about maintaining personal upkeep and taking care of one’s appearance alongside Islamic injunctions about veiling.

Pondering over what the hijab signifies, another *Muslim Girl* blogger articulates that “the hijab simply means to veil — to cover oneself — but honestly it’s SO much more than that” (Abour, 2015, para. 3). It is about representing Islam beautifully and educating those who have not met hijab-wearing Muslim women before that they too can be educated, opinionated women (Abour, 2015). *Muslim Girl* thus argues that the hijab as well as the niqab can empower its wearer when it is worn by choice and with pride and conviction (Mokhtar, 2015, 2017).

Without detracting from these positive associations with the hijab, *Muslim Girl* also critiques some of the problematic discourses that are projected onto the hijab and the women who wear it. Two of these criticisms are highlighted below, as they each appear across multiple blogs.

**Expectations of Being Perfect Representatives of Islam.** As a visible marker of identity, the hijab can motivate those who wear it to put their best foot forward as Muslim women (Abour, 2015). Since they are more easily identifiable as Muslims, hijab-wearing Muslim women can be perceived as representing the Muslim community, and hence may be motivated “to always strive to become a better Muslimah” (Abour, 2015, para. 4).

On the other hand, hijab-wearing Muslim women also feel the burden of constantly being seen as symbols of Islam (Hodakatebi, 2016a). Such projections mean that any human failing or error on their part can have broader ramifications than it would for those who are not forced into such roles of representation. This sentiment is captured succinctly by one hijab-wearing Muslim woman’s reflection that “I didn’t think I was going to go through the struggles of being a hijabi AND represent the entire Muslim population and their actions” (Hamed, 2017b, para. 21). On top of that, hijab-wearing Muslim women often face extensive “scrutiny by people who believe they wear hijab better or are better without hijab” (Hamed, 2017b, para. 2). On the topic of chastising hijab-wearing Muslim girls women, *Muslim Girl* adds that “when someone of authority, especially a man, tells young girls who are trying their hardest to do what’s right, they are doing it wrong...it breaks their spirit” (Hamed, 2017b, para. 24).

Countering such narratives, *Muslim Girl* clarifies that “the amount of coverage cannot dictate a person’s level of iman” (i.e. faith) and that “the tighter the hijab doesn’t mean the closer to god” (Hamed, 2017b, paras. 6–9). In this way, *Muslim Girl* argues that the hijab is not a universal indicator of one’s spirituality, and it goes on to question “why did hijab become a tool with which to shame women?” (Hamed, 2017b, para. 3). Also challenging the assumption that only hijab-wearing Muslim women represent Islam, *Muslim Girl* reminds readers that there are

countless pious Muslim women who do not wear the hijab and who are doing excellent work for the Muslim community (Hamed, 2017b).

Nonetheless, the stereotypes about hijab-wearing Muslim women have taken a turn for the worse since 9/11. One of the blog's interviewees, journalist Sana Saeed who was a teenager during 9/11 shares:

I was 14 when the events took place, and immediately I was put on the defensive. I had to become a sort of ambassador of my faith, especially since I wore the hijab for 13, almost 14, years. I had to answer questions I didn't even know the answers to; I had to continue being a strong Muslim in the face of spiritual weaknesses I was trying to mend. (Syjil, 2015, para. 8)

This account speaks to the external pressures that put hijab-wearing Muslim women on a pedestal and that negate their spiritual struggles.

**Appropriating Hijab for Victim-Blaming and Fending Off the Male Gaze.** Narratives about the hijab are also critiqued for having been co-opted to advance victim-blaming. *Muslim Girl* points out that “the idea that Muslim women — and in particular hijab-wearing women — are somehow exempt from unwanted sexual attention is a lie that needs to be challenged because it is clearly untrue” (Al-Khatahtbeh et al., 2014; MG Staff, 2020a, para. 7). Such false assumptions reify “the dangerous myth that Muslim women who abide by ‘modest’ dress codes don’t really experience sexual violence at the same rate that ‘less modest’ women do” and that women who dress modestly are more respectable than others (Al-Khatahtbeh et al., 2014, para. 11). On the contrary, women who dress modestly are subjected to harassment as well as “exoticism, fetishization and outright racial abuse”, all of which demand urgent attention (MG Staff, 2020a, para. 7). Disrupting such troubling body policing requires uprooting rape culture, challenging the male gaze and contesting body shaming (Hamed, 2017b).

Opposing this problematic view of the hijab as a safeguard against gendered violence, *Muslim Girl* “cites the Quran and the Prophet PBUH to prove that the hijab is not a protection

against sexual harassment” (MG Staff, 2015, para. 7). *Muslim Girl* adds that “hijab is not worn for men; to keep their illicit desires in check, that is their own responsibility” (MG Staff, 2015, para. 7). The point being made here is that the hijab should not be misappropriated “to serve as a foundation for victim blaming”, including in cases of rape and sexual assault (MG Staff, 2015, para. 9). Driving home this point, *Muslim Girl* reiterates that dressing a certain way is not an invitation for harassment; rather, such arguments only end up “chastising women for violence that is mainly perpetrated by men” and the responsibility for which rests squarely on the harasser’s shoulders (Al-Khatahtbeh et al., 2014, para. 3; MG Staff, 2015). In this regard, Muslim women are reclaiming their reasons for wearing the hijab, as is articulated by one *Muslim Girl* blogger who says, “I cover *from* men, but not *for* men. When I wear my hijab, I don’t do it to control the thoughts of men who see me; I do it for myself” (Al-Khatahtbeh et al., 2014; MG Staff, 2015, para. 9).

### ***The Case of France***

Contextualized within and at times exemplifying the above discourses about the hijab, one theme that comes up in multiple *Muslim Girl* blogs is Islamophobia in France (Jahangiri, 2022; Muslim Girl, 2019b). In this thesis, France and French policies are studied in six *Muslim Girl* blogs, and together they are referenced around 123 times in this writing. Collectively, these blogs address various issues that affect Muslim women, including the hijab ban, Islamophobia and feeling unsafe as a Muslim woman, as well as critiques of opportunistic feminism, orientalist tropes and hegemonic Western narratives about women’s empowerment.

To begin with, “France’s colonial roots combined with the rise of terror attacks in the last few years all have contributed to the rise of Islamophobia in the country” along with heightened xenophobic sentiment and newer forms of institutionalized racism (Jahangiri, 2022, para. 9; Muslim Girl, 2019b). As *Muslim Girl* explains:

France’s obsession with the hijab and controlling it can be traced back through history to its imperialist roots. In 1830, France invaded Algeria and established a colonial state

marred by a violent genocide. France would offer Algerian natives' citizenship only if they renounced their religion, took off their veil, and adopted French culture. During Algeria's War of Independence, many Muslim Algerian women had their veils forcibly removed by French women in public unveiling ceremonies. They claimed they were "freeing oppressed Muslim women." Algerian natives who fought against the French kept their veils, and it became a symbol of resistance against colonialism. (Jahangiri, 2022, paras. 6–8; *Muslim Girl*, 2021)

This analysis by *Muslim Girl* is in line with France's historically antagonistic relationship with religion. For context, French history features "a series of politico-religious traumas at the hands of an organized religion that are ever-present in the conscience of 21st century France" (McNeal, 2023, p. 6). This historical context has yielded a long-standing wariness about organized religion (McNeal, 2023, p. 6).

By way of explanation, Enlightenment ideas coupled with economic and political upheaval paved the way for the 1789 French Revolution which drastically reduced the control of the Catholic Church, led to the monarchy being abolished and gave rise to the French First Republic of 1792 (McNeal, 2023, p. 5). Skeptical of the closeness of state and religion, the French Revolution sparked a keenness to rid the public domain of religion (Turner, 2017, p. 6). This apprehension towards the Catholic Church was a result of the institution's involvement in financial exploitation and its "tradition of inequality based on privilege" (Turner, 2017, p. 6). In its initial stages, secularism thus developed as a hostile ideology against Catholicism and against religion broadly (Picardo, 2019, p. 7).

Even so, like religion, secularism is shaped by its particular cultural and historical context (Picardo, 2019, p. 5). Secularism is neither neutral nor blind to race, rather it has "developed in a 'white' context" (Picardo, 2019, p. 5). Although it initially represented "the denouncement of the Roman Catholic Church as an oppressive institution entrenched in ignorance, corruption, and superstition", secularism as a concept has evolved over time (Turner, 2017, p. 6). As Asad

(2003) notes, secularism is not just about separating religion and government, rather “it presupposes new concepts of religion, ethics, and politics; as well as the new imperatives associated with them, and is closely linked to the emergence of the modern nation-state” (Sabet, 2006, p. 112). In the case of France, secularism has transformed into a measure of allegiance to the state, so much so that multiculturalism and community-based solidarities are seen as threatening to the state (Picardo, 2019, p. 7).

Couched in this landscape, “as Islam is a more recently established religion in France, France’s apprehension towards organized religion is hyperfixated on Islam” especially in light of the notable ways in which Islam manifests in public spaces (McNeal, 2023, p. 6). Therefore, the critical scrutiny that Islam and Muslims in France receive is in part due to France’s historically rocky relationship with religion, particularly Catholicism (McNeal, 2023, p. 6). Today, French secularism and Muslims are seen as fundamentally incompatible with each other (Picardo, 2019, p. 6).

Reflecting this historical context, it is clear that “history is repeating itself” (Jahangiri, 2022, para. 17). Through the years, “France’s colonial ideology has persisted in the form of neoconservative political ideologies that run campaigns off of fear mongering and a fake sense of nationalism” (Jahangiri, 2022, para. 17). Overall, “in France and across the world, the public opinion on Islam and Muslims is usually negative. The Muslim community and the religion of Islam are associated with the oppression of women” (Muslim Girl, 2021, para. 6). Unsurprisingly then, “since 2004, women in France are not allowed to wear a hijab, niqabs are forbidden, and you can get fined or go to jail for wearing one” (Muslim Girl, 2021, para. 6). Advancing this attack on Muslim women’s rights, the ban has been extended to “the wearing of conspicuous religious symbols [...] in sports events and sports competitions organized by sports federations and affiliated associations” (Jahangiri, 2022; MG Staff, 2021d, para. 5).

France’s hijab ban is enforced under the guise that “these laws help promote secularism and protect women’s rights. This rhetoric claims that overt displays of religions are not in line

with ‘French values’” (Jahangiri, 2022, para. 4). To make matters worse, the justification for such bans problematically claims to be “promoting feminism and is protecting women’s rights. This is ironic because feminism is about giving women equal opportunities and choices” (Jahangiri, 2022, para. 12; MG Staff, 2021d). Indeed, it is deeply troubling that such “French values require you to strip your culture, religion, and identity to adopt that of the country’s majority” (Jahangiri, 2022, para. 16). Rather than being inclusive, such restrictions further marginalize hijab-wearing Muslim women as they “are faced with the dilemma of ‘Do I take off my hijab so I can go to school, play sports, or take public transportation? Or do I keep my hijab and try to navigate my way through society?’” (Jahangiri, 2022, para. 14; MG Staff, 2021d). For such legislation to claim to be advancing women’s rights is a hoax, because “every woman should have the right to choose how they want to dress. Every woman should have the right to choose what to do with their body. This is bodily autonomy and agency; both values that feminism promotes” (Jahangiri, 2022, para. 13).

Challenging the exclusionary dynamics that France’s hijab ban puts in place, *Muslim Girl* engages with the nationalist undertones of this discourse by arguing that French values of freedom, equity and solidarity would in fact be opposed to Islamophobia, xenophobia and racial discrimination (Muslim Girl, 2019b). Responding to such discriminatory attitudes with a call for women to be able to participate in sports regardless of their clothing, “Ibtihaj Muhammad, U.S Olympic medalist, wrote in an Instagram caption ‘Every woman should have the choice to wear what she wants and the opportunity to play sport, regardless of her faith’” (MG Staff, 2021d, para. 14). In a similar manner, *Muslim Girl* founder, Amani Al-Khatahtbeh views “France’s burkini ban as the Western equivalency of controlling a woman’s body and choices” (Mohsenian-Rahman, 2017b, para. 2). It comes as no surprise then that France has gotten extensive news coverage and critique for restricting religious symbols and certain forms of modest dressing in public areas (Mugabo, 2016).

Epitomizing such ostracizing narratives about Muslim women, another notable example of Islamophobic sentiment in France is the quick and harsh response to the release of an athletic hijab by a French athletic equipment company, Decathlon, which “is a very strong brand in their native land” (Muslim Girl, 2019b, para. 1). “One part of France was completely fine with this long-needed product that promised inclusion, while the other was appalled, and decried it as an affront to French values” (Muslim Girl, 2019b, para. 4). “By calling Decathlon out for producing an article of clothing that allows women to run as they please, the sexist and racist pages of France’s history are brought to the forefront” (Muslim Girl, 2019b, para. 13). In particular, one *Muslim Girl* blogger who is a Catholic woman contests the supposedly feminist argument that the Decathlon sports hijab goes against French values (Muslim Girl, 2019b). She says, “being Catholic doesn’t keep me away from anything that I wish to do, and it should be the same for my Muslim sisters who wish to wear the hijab while killing it at their sport of choice” (Muslim Girl, 2019b, para. 7). In this way, *Muslim Girl* calls out the hypocrisy and Islamophobia underlying the argument of “every pseudo-feminist who claims that Decathlon launching a sports hijab is sexist” (Muslim Girl, 2019b, para. 6).

In summary, from its hijab ban to the condemnation meted out to Decathlon’s sports hijab to the forced unveiling of Algerian women during France’s colonial period, *Muslim Girl* presents multiple examples that illuminate how French nationalist narratives have long excluded Muslim women. Such bans and the narratives associated with them indicate the dire need for “a coordinated and organized unique feminism, free of labels; a feminism where the secular and the religious are imbricating, a feminism built collectively, that will fully celebrate inclusivity” (Muslim Girl, 2021, para. 10).

### ***Problematic Associations of the Hijab with Oppression***

Extending the above critique, *Muslim Girl* also questions widespread stereotypes about the hijab and about the Muslim women who wear it. Some of these stereotypes associated with hijab-wearing Muslim women are that they are extremists and religious fundamentalists or that

their male relatives force them to cover (Hareem, 2013). As *Muslim Girl* puts it, “veiled Muslim women are subjugated to the problematic white savior complex messaging that they are all oppressed by Muslim men, with the headscarf being the symbol of said oppression” (Abour, 2015; Harvard, 2015a, para. 1; Mohsenian-Rahman, 2016; Nida, 2013). Veiled Muslim women also grapple with assumptions “that if you cover your hair — you must be so conservative. You don’t have a voice, and you can’t have opinions” (Mohsenian-Rahman, 2016, para. 25). It should go without saying that if a “woman herself wishes to cover her head, she is not oppressed” (Nida, 2013, para. 5). In fact, “extending this idea of a forced hijab to encapsulate every single one of the 1.6 billion practicing Muslims in the world is a glaring logical fallacy” (Hodakatebi, 2016a, para. 18).

**Double Standards for Muslim Women.** In various parts of the world, women’s right to choose how they dress, including their right to wear the hijab or not, continues to be only partially protected. This section explores this double standard that Muslim women face when it comes to being forced to veil in some places and being forced to unveil in others, as well as the uneven feminist resistance to some but not other forms of such patriarchal control.

Echoing the earlier discussion about barriers to hijab-wearing Muslim women’s access to sports in France, the policing of women’s outfits is evident in other parts of Europe too. As an example, *Muslim Girl* shares that the Norwegian women’s beach handball team was at one time fined €1500 by the European Handball Federation “for resisting the typical uniform of bikini bottoms” (MG Staff, 2021d, para. 2). The team ultimately won the right to wear shorts instead and were seen as having “been liberated from the oppression brought by being forced to wear revealing clothes” (MG Staff, 2021d, para. 3). However, *Muslim Girl* points out that in contrast to this example, “ridicule still arises towards Muslim women who choose to wear the hijab” (MG Staff, 2021d, para. 4). This example signifies how “one group of women receives praise for wanting to cover up, while the others were villainized for it” (MG Staff, 2021d, para. 7). The hypocrisy in celebrating and applauding white women’s advocacy for their choice to wear more

covered clothing whilst simultaneously shaming and alienating Muslim women for choosing to veil or dress modestly merits contestation (MG Staff, 2021d). Rather, “women should have the right to their bodies and the clothes they wear”, including when women’s choice to dress modestly is rooted in their Islamic beliefs (MG Staff, 2021d, para. 17).

To this point, *Muslim Girl* argues that “as much discourse exists on the coercion of women into hijab, there should be the same resistance towards women being forced out of it” (Berhe, 2015, para. 8). The former cause is exemplified by the mass public mobilization against enforcement of the hijab, such as the 2022-2023 protests in Iran and in support of Iranian women’s right to choose how they dress. The much-needed advocacy towards this end garnered significant news coverage and media attention. However, the relative silence when it comes to mobilizing for women’s right to be able to wear the hijab in other places is troubling, especially in the face of hijab bans across the world, including in some spaces in Quebec on the home front. Importantly, *Muslim Girl* also denounces the pseudo-feminism espoused by some Muslim women wherein “the ‘only’ valid struggle worth providing solidarity towards Muslim women includes Muslim women who choose to take the headscarf off in order to resist patriarchy in their specific context”, to the exclusion of also advocating for women who do choose to veil (Raja, 2015, para. 1). Contrary to such one-sided activism, *Muslim Girl* states that “‘let women wear what they want’ should be extended to Muslim women who choose to wear the hijab or dress modestly” (MG Staff, 2021d, para. 17).

Ironically, the resistance to Muslim women’s veiling is often framed as being feminist, even though it contradicts the idea that “women’s liberation is for all women regardless of faith” and instead advances gendered Islamophobia (MG Staff, 2021d, para. 15). Notably, Muslim women’s agency is inhibited just as much by “Islamophobes who terrorize, ban, and police Muslim women for wearing the hijab” as it is by fundamentalist conceptualizations of religion (Raja, 2015, para. 8). Implying that it is only ultra-conservative interpretations of Islam that hinder women’s bodily autonomy incorrectly suggests that “policing women’s bodies is a tool of

repression that is mainly found in Muslim majority societies” and not elsewhere (Raja, 2015, para. 7).

*Muslim Girl* points out that:

France and Saudi Arabia, for example, both either require the wearing or restriction of wearing a particular form of dress, and therefore both are examples of patriarchal rulings ordering women to dress a certain way—either in the name of secularism or “Islam”.

(Hodakatebi, 2016a, para. 5)

Both these instances are “symptomatic of the patriarchal societies in which we live, manifest through different ways in different cultures” (Amani, 2016, para. 4; Hodakatebi, 2016a). On both sides of the coin, these restrictions exemplify a patriarchal desire for control over women’s bodies and negate the feminist principle of agency that enables “women to freely interpret and choose what they feel is personally liberating to them” (Hodakatebi, 2016a, para. 24). Recognizing both instances as attempts to ultimately limit women’s autonomy not only helps negate hierarchical binaries of us and them, it also challenges orientalist perceptions of a misogynistic Islam and disrupts the “dominant narrative of what liberation should look like” (Amani, 2016, para. 12). All in all, the problem lies not in enforcing or banning the hijab, but “in robbing women of their agency and control over women’s bodies” (Raja, 2015, para. 7).

**Agency, Choice and Liberation.** Discourses about the hijab and oppression often draw on the notion of liberating women by respecting their agency and the choices that they make. This section unpacks and critiques some connotations of these concepts. “According to the neoliberal mindset, freedom of choice is connected to the number of layers a woman decides to put on” (Mokhtar, 2015, para. 5). *Muslim Girl* posits that in Western conceptualizations, “nudity is the prerequisite for liberty” (Abour, 2015; MG Staff, 2021d; Mokhtar, 2015, para. 5). However, “the culture of nudity equating liberation for women further feeds the male gaze and patriarchy” (MG Staff, 2021d, para. 9). In these narratives, the freedom of choice that is held up as a symbol of Western civilization does not extend to Muslim women because “modesty in the way

Muslims practice is seen as oppressive” (Abour, 2015; MG Staff, 2021d, para. 9). Indeed, “these dehumanizing binaries between ‘oppressed’ and ‘empowered’ due to the scarf is felt mainly by the majority of Muslim women” (Raja, 2015, para. 9). In such binaristic framings, “the more a woman covers her skin and dresses in accordance with such widely-held interpretations of Islamic faith, the more ‘backwards’ and ‘submissive’ she is consequently depicted” (Hodakatebi, 2016a, para. 14). In particular, “Western media strongly associates Islamic clothing—more precisely the women’s hijab—as an oppressive instrument designed to render women as submissive beings” (Hodakatebi, 2016a, para. 14).

The marginalization that hijab-wearing Muslim women experience appears in the form of “backlash from both men and women — many of whom claim to be feminists” (MG Staff, 2021d, para. 8). This surface-level societal acceptance of diversity and the lack of meaningful inclusivity that it tries to obscure is evident when Muslim women are asked if they are compelled to wear the hijab (Muslim Girl, 2018c). Although seemingly innocuous, such questions imply that no Muslim woman would freely choose to don the hijab (Muslim Girl, 2018c). Questioning why Muslim women wear the hijab is entrenched in “notions misrepresenting the choice to cover one’s hair with oppression”, thus invalidating the agency enacted by some Muslim women through their veiling practices (Mohsenian-Rahman, 2017b, para. 2). This sentiment is summed up succinctly by the title of one *Muslim Girl* blog, which says “Don’t ask us why we wear the hijab; don’t ask us why we don’t wear the hijab” (Manalmoazzam, 2019).

Furthermore, assumptions about Muslim women’s universal oppression, as supposedly indicated by their veiling, get manipulated to justify saving Muslim women (Hodakatebi, 2016a). These savior logics are mobilized to legitimize colonial-minded, destructive and exploitative projects of invasions and imperialist violence that wreak havoc in sovereign nations and invoke extensive sexual violence in their wake (Hodakatebi, 2016a). “Saba Mahmood calls this a sort of **colonial feminism**: Using the veil as the symbol of ultimate oppression, and therefore requiring a Western colonial and imperial project of liberation” (Hodakatebi, 2016a, para. 15).

Several *Muslim Girl* blogs confront such unidimensional assumptions about the hijab. The emphasis that *Muslim Girl* places on such contestations is also evident in that founder Amani al-Khatahtbeh herself rebukes the assumption that the hijab is always oppressive, sharing that “as a Muslim woman, my hijab is my feminism; both in asserting my authority over my body as well as defying post-9/11 Islamophobia, racism and stereotypical expectations” (Mohsenian-Rahman, 2017b; Muslim Girl, 2015b, para. 3).

Rather than assuming that the hijab and by extension, Islam is universally oppressive and that Muslim women who choose to veil deserve condemnation, Muslim women’s empowerment and freedom actually lies in recognizing that “pieces of fabric aren’t keeping us from liberation, it’s dehumanizing systems” (Abour, 2015; Raja, 2015, para. 11). Indeed, “the struggles Muslim women experience cannot solely be defined by what they choose or do not choose to wear” (Raja, 2015, para. 1). Such a “reductionist analysis of Muslim women’s struggles as confined to the scarf, hijab, and dupatta (another form of veiling) plays into the dehumanization of Muslim women” (Raja, 2015, para. 7). This dehumanization perpetuates imperialist feminism “that posits that Western forms of patriarchy are more civilized and uniquely different than ‘third-world’ patriarchy” (Raja, 2015, para. 7). On this front, *Muslim Girl* argues that “rather than competing between our various struggles and dangerously arguing that we have ‘one’ valid struggle, the world needs to recognize that Muslim women are resisting multiple systems of violence” (Raja, 2015, para. 9)

Hearteningly, “Muslim women are growing impatient with Western stereotyping and bias in defining freedom of religious choices” (Mokhtar, 2015, para. 12). Challenging the limiting narratives imposed on them, Muslim women are reiterating that some of them freely choose to wear the hijab and “it’s part of their activism and feminism more often than anything else. It’s their option, and not oppression in any way” (Mohsenian-Rahman, 2016, para. 26). Such reclamation of narratives around the hijab counters dominant orientalist and Islamophobic narratives that assume Muslim women need saving (Hodakatebi, 2016a).

Overarchingly, *Muslim Girl* emphasizes that women ought to be able to define freedom for themselves, including how they choose to adorn their bodies (Hodakatebi, 2016a). Within these discourses there is a strong reclamation of the hijab, as expressed by the following excerpt from *Muslim Girl*:

Every morning, countless Muslim women around the world wake up and make the choice to tie a scarf around our heads. And guess what? We find liberation in that choice. We find not only a spiritual connection with God, but a beautiful bond with one another. (Hodakatebi, 2016a, para. 31; Mohsenian-Rahman, 2016)

Reinforcing the importance of choice, one *Muslim Girl* blogger shares, “I neither wear the *niqab* nor advocate for it, but I still believe it is every woman’s right — Muslim or not — to choose a garment that makes her feel comfortable” (Mokhtar, 2015, para. 6). Foregrounding this agency with which some Muslim women veil also challenges the idea that initiatives claiming to save Muslim women while disregarding their lived experiences are feminist at all (Hodakatebi, 2016a). By calling out such pseudo-feminist claims, *Muslim Girl* cautions against the weaponization of feminism that can manifest as “resistance to hijab at the level of legal bans and prohibitions, believing that this somehow liberates or protects Muslim women” and also as “justifying bans against burkinis or modest swimwear in public places, again erroneously believing that this somehow frees women” (Sarahmohr, 2020, para. 12).

Countering this oppositional positioning of modest Islamic dressing and feminist liberation, for Muslim women, their feminism can be grounded in Islam and “it is about time that the west accepts those choices” (Abour, 2015; Mokhtar, 2015, para. 12). The point being driven home here is that women of all faiths as well as no faith can claim feminism for themselves and can legitimately arrive at varying understandings of empowerment (MG Staff, 2021d). This argument draws on a central feminist tenet, namely that “feminism is about the freedom for women to wear what they want, and the empowerment to do what they choose” (Abour, 2015; Jahangiri, 2022; MG Staff, 2021d; Muslim Girl, 2019b, para. 6).

***A Word About the Niqab in Canada.*** Having examined how agency factors into the choice to veil, how Muslim women are reclaiming the narratives associated with the hijab and how feminism is implicated in these discourses sets the stage for this section, featuring a specific example of how these debates come into play in Canada, as noted in both *Muslim Girl* and in scholarly work. In the Canadian landscape, the niqab debate brings these issues to the fore (Mokhtar, 2015). Speaking to the controversy surrounding the niqab, *Muslim Girl* shares:

Paula Simons commented in the “Edmonton Journal” on the Canadian niqab controversy, stating that as a secular feminist, the historical symbolism of the niqab makes her deeply uncomfortable. But she admitted that “telling women to undress, to strip, to expose themselves, to betray their faith and shame themselves, simply for our cultural comfort, is grossly disrespectful. It’s a violation of their personal dignity as well as of their freedom of religion.” (Mokhtar, 2015, para. 8)

Likewise, such careful handling of the niqab issue is also evident in academic literature. In particular, drawing on the Canadian examples of “three judicial decisions in three different jurisdictions involving niqab-wearing women in courtrooms”, Bakht (2015, p. 419) argues “that serious consideration must be given to the multiple rights of Muslim women”. Bakht (2015, p. 419) adds:

Some judges in these cases attempt to be inclusive of niqab-wearing women in accordance with policies of multiculturalism, yet they do not go far enough in protecting Muslim women's rights. Other judges refuse to accommodate the niqab entirely. This troubling analysis parallels attempts made to exclude niqab-wearing women from public spaces in Canada and permits dubious objections that certain requests for accommodation have gone too far.

As such tensions demonstrate, national narratives of inclusivity and multiculturalism within Canada are being tested in courtrooms and beyond. Furthermore, Muslim women’s multifaceted and dynamic experiences with the hijab impact and are impacted by complex

narratives about feminism, imperialism, Islam, nationhood and the internal dynamics of Muslim communities. The entanglement of these varying discourses points to the richness and diversity of factors that shape Muslim women's experiences; experiences that are also informed by race, queerness and narratives of masculinity, which are explored in greater detail next.

### **Identities at Intersections**

To begin with, it is unwise to homogenize a diverse Muslim population of 1.6 billion as all being the same (Hodakatebi, 2016a). Multiple *Muslim Girl* blogs highlight that "Muslim women are not a homogenous group", pointing out their diversity in terms of race, religious and sectarian orientation, class, community connections, life experiences and other factors (Amaneisa, 2016a; Berhe, 2015, para. 8; Mohsenian-Rahman, 2016). Such diversity calls for caution against universalizing Muslim women's feminist priorities and socio-political goals (Berhe, 2015). Instead, feminist initiatives must take into account that "women aren't a monolithic group whose concerns and issues are uniform" if they are to effectively advocate for improving women's quality of life (Amaneisa, 2016a, para. 15). Otherwise, "mainstream feminism will only serve as an alternate form of marginalization to Muslim women" (Berhe, 2015, para. 8).

Exemplifying this diversity amongst Muslims across generations, one *Muslim Girl* blogger reflects, "While I am, like my parents, Muslim down to the marrow of my bones, my beliefs about Islam don't always correspond to my parents' beliefs. I believe this is true for many, many Muslims" (Hareem, 2013, para. 6). The dynamics of first and second-generation immigrant parents' and children's immersion in different societies often mean that their respective experiences of religiosity can differ (Hareem, 2013). Specifically, when children have access to value systems and ideological frames, like feminism, that their parents may not have had, their understandings of Islam and Islamic teachings are likely to differ (Hareem, 2013).

To contextualize this discussion about intersectional aspects of identity-making, it is helpful to think about Muslim women's experiences of traversing what feels like identity

boundaries. As one *Muslim Girl* blogger shares, “It took me a very long time to make peace with myself and my multiple identities...I felt like I couldn’t be myself and also have my faith” (Leahvernon, 2016a, paras. 17–18). Such sentiments suggest that reconciling seemingly contradictory aspects of one’s identity can be a struggle (Leahvernon, 2016a). For those who do not fit the mold of the stereotypical Muslim woman, and for women who are outspoken, edgy, flamboyant and witty, this struggle can be magnified (Leahvernon, 2016a). In fact, this is a struggle that one does not face alone; other Muslim women deal with it too, albeit in varying degrees and forms (Leahvernon, 2016a). All in all, Muslim women’s creative negotiation of dynamic, interconnected identity factors centrally informs their experience of Islam. It is some of these axes of identity, namely race, queerness and dominant discourses about masculinity, that the next few sections examine.

### **Race**

Racialization, along with “varied and tangled discourses of hegemonic othering, androcentrism, and patriarchy directly affect Muslim women, both in their lived realities and in their quests to voice diverse interpretations of the Islamic tradition” (Lampsey, 2017, p. 28). “Race, class and women’s issues are intimately inter-related, and improvements or deterioration for one demographic directly correlates to the welfare of the other two” (Amanisa, 2016a, para. 29). This interconnectedness underscores how globally, anti-Muslim racism is a gendered experience (Korkman & Razack, 2021).

As articulated in chapter 2, the overlapping forces of nationalism and sexism also yield gendered experiences that are complicated by notions of selective belonging and citizenship along racist, ableist, class-based and heterosexist lines; this intersectionality must be accounted for in feminist analyses. This theme of intersecting systems of power is captured by one *Muslim Girl* blogger who reflects, “I wasn’t quite...Muslim enough, and I definitely wasn’t Western enough” (Leahvernon, 2016a, para. 18). This dualistic isolation speaks to the significance of

scholarship and activism that is being led by those at the forefront of fighting anti-Muslim racism (Rana & Daulatzai, 2018).

With that in mind, the below section analyzes the content on *Muslim Girl* for how it reflects and engages with what academic literature says about gendered experiences of anti-Muslim racism. This analysis is informed by an extensive body of academic writing on anti-Muslim racism that has been key to informing my understanding of the experiences of racialization that are articulated in *Muslim Girl*. Much of this academic literature is outlined in chapter 1.

To set the stage here, this section is grounded in the recognition that there is a tendency to construct the racialization of Muslims as being South Asian or Arab in ways “that do not acknowledge the specific position of the Muslim Black subject” (Mugabo, 2016, p. 160). On the contrary, the *Muslim Girl* blogs that discuss feminism also speak about white privilege and supremacy, intersectionality, inclusivity within and in the name of Islam, cultural appropriation, the #BlackLivesMatter movement and other relevant issues. In particular, *Muslim Girl* is attuned to the impact of race as well as anti-Black racism specifically as it manifests in and influences Muslim communities.

**Racism in the Post 9/11 Settler Colonial Era.** Any discussion of racism in the North American context must be attuned to its entanglement with settler colonialism. Within this setting, “racial entitlement, fuelled by a devaluing of the lives of the colonized, must be continually performed if colonizers are to know themselves as owners *and if they are to actually become owners*” (Razack, 2013, p. 200). In light of this dynamic, “to talk about racial injustice in Canada without speaking to the ongoing structure of settler colonialism is something that is neither ethical nor accurate” (Maynard & Simpson, 2020, p. 79). The struggles of both racialized and Indigenous communities are against global systems that deny their humanity and that are fundamentally built on their exclusion (Maynard & Simpson, 2020). The similar yet distinct forms of systemic oppression that various marginalized communities face illustrates that “today’s

unequal economic histories have long and racialized legacies” and that “so much violence has been geared toward controlling sexuality and gender roles; that has been a result of European colonialism around the world” (Maynard & Simpson, 2020, p. 86–89). In turn, this control has been central to the propagation of white supremacist narratives about nation formation (Maynard & Simpson, 2020).

Today, anti-Muslim racism continues this centuries-old, white supremacist legacy, which is a dominant and potent force that is vested in maintaining systemic bias (Rana & Daulatzai, 2018). The long-standing history and present manifestations of anti-Muslim racism merit a consideration of “global circuits of power as they travel and shape local contexts in which anti-Muslim racism operates, including contexts in which Muslims are the majority” (Korkman & Razack, 2021, p. 261). An attunement to global systems of domination also makes it “necessary to theorize the role that race plays in the making of the nation’s psyche, constituting some citizens as within the national community and others as threats to it” (Razack, 2013, p. 198).

Within this landscape, it is useful to adopt a transnational perspective on the concept of raciality that takes into account local nuances while also examining the ways in which ideas about race transcend national boundaries (Bacchetta & Winant, 2019). Such a perspective demands “an understanding of anti-Muslim racism as transnational, proliferating, and linked to other racisms and projects of rule” (Korkman & Razack, 2021, p. 261). Moreover, the intriguing evolution of the term Muslim into a racial category sheds light on “the racialization of the Muslim and the modern history of the race concept in relation to Islam” (Rana, 2011, p. 25). In particular, “as a historical pattern and process, the racialization of the Muslim reveals important details in the expanding and flexible concept of race” (Rana, 2011, p. 25). This ever-changing nature of race, racialization and racism means that “today, many different strands of scholarship are grappling with planetary configurations of power, including racial power” (Bacchetta & Winant, 2019, p. 3).

If race is a malleable concept, then it is not too much of a stretch to think that whiteness may be in flux too. Sure enough, “critical race and feminist theorists have long defined ‘whiteness’ as a form of subjectivity that is socially constructed, historically contextual, and inherently unstable” (Thobani, 2007, p. 169). “These theorists have also noted that the economic and political power of the West has enabled white subjects to exalt themselves even as they have sought to define the nature of the Other” (Thobani, 2007, p. 169).

On top of that, “the War on Terror is reconfiguring the practices that constitute whiteness through its definition of the West as endangered by the hatred and violence of its Islamist Other” (Thobani, 2007, p. 169). However, even pre-9/11, white supremacy was violently hostile towards Muslims and Islam (Rana & Daulatzai, 2018). This trend has only intensified following 9/11, as the global war on terror continues to depict Muslims and Islam in ways that increasingly reinforce imperialist and racist discourses (Rana & Daulatzai, 2018). In the North American context, “discourses of advancement and technological superiority, anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim sentiments dovetail with ideologies of patriotism, and faith-based initiatives and ideologies to justify the war at home and the war abroad” (Mohanty, 2006, p. 12). Notably, feminist interventions can play a key role in deconstructing whiteness as they “engage with the hegemonic discourse of the War on Terror and its (re)constitution of whiteness” (Thobani, 2007, p. 169).

**Centering the Voices of Women of Color.** Informed by and reflecting these historical influences and contemporary realities, what follows is a closer look at how *Muslim Girl* addresses Muslim women’s experiences of racialization. To this end, *Muslim Girl* draws on social justice advocacy efforts being led by racialized women, along with testimonials from feminist activists and attendees of women’s marches who also articulate the need for anti-racist feminism. Displaying a historically and systematically aware stance, *Muslim Girl* critiques forms of anti-racist mobilization that ignore how “some races face barriers systemically specific to their race” (Abdul-Kareem, 2018, para. 20). A sensitivity to race and racialization is also evident in

*Muslim Girl's* assertion that “racial equity isn’t about giving marginalized groups what White people have. It’s about achieving a condition in which racial identity no longer predicts, in a statistical sense, how one fares” (Abdul-Kareem, 2018, para. 29).

In and beyond feminist spaces, racialized Muslim women are often called upon to articulate their lived realities (Hodakatebi, 2016a). Foregrounding racialized Muslim women’s voices is crucial for challenging the frequent misrepresentations of their experiences and identities and the all-too-common dismissal of their opinions as hysterical and unreasonably angry (Hodakatebi, 2016a).

Tying into this theme of creating space for racialized Muslim women’s voices, another motif that comes up in *Muslim Girl* is the wealth of experience that racialized women bring when it comes to social justice advocacy. In feminist circles as well as in other avenues of activism, social justice movements and political mobilization, “women of color have always led change” (Tasnim, 2021; Vanessa elshamy, 2018b, para. 1). As aptly articulated by Linda Sarsour, a Muslim American activist who is cited in multiple *Muslim Girl* blogs:

“We have been saying that for many decades. Follow women of color. Just stop for a second and follow women of color. Women of color, we know what we are doing; we know what justice is; we know how to organize; we know how to mobilize; we understand specifically what the solutions are for our communities; we don’t just complain about what the problem is, but we actually know what the solutions are. The solutions come from the communities where we come from.” (Tasnim, 2021, para. 9)

Sarsour goes on to say that:

“Women of color are everywhere, we are in every industry, we are leading on the front line of the climate justice movement, the immigrant rights movement, gender justice, reproductive rights movement. Wherever there is an industry that’s succeeding, or you see that there is progress, trust me when I tell you that there is a woman of color.” (Tasnim, 2021, para. 11)

Given the crucial role that racialized women play in social justice mobilization, *Muslim Girl's* critique of feminism that is not racially-sensitive or diverse becomes even more important. Just as pivotal is a critical examination of how white-dominated feminist platforms can be futile and patronizing, given their tendency to disregard racialized women's ability to advocate for themselves (Harvard, 2015a; Vanessaalshamy, 2018b). Reflecting a white-centric approach, "the origin of the movement (or first wave feminism as it's called), didn't offer intersectionality and particularly excluded People of Color" (Anumahmed, 2019, para. 7). Recognizing these "fallacies of the origin of the movement to value the contribution of those who were negated to what's such an important movement now" can, to this day, make one question whether contemporary forms of feminism have truly become more inclusive (Anumahmed, 2019, para. 7).

To foster meaningful inclusivity, the very first step is "to actively educate ourselves on the modern manifestations of white supremacy and the historical context which has allowed the continued oppression of people of races, faiths, gender expression, and sexual identity that do not align with it"; only then is it possible to move towards comprehensive solutions to these issues (Mohsenian-Rahman, 2017a, p. 2). The onus lies on each one of us "to stay informed and *demonstrably* critical of the actions and actors upholding these systems of violence" (Mohsenian-Rahman, 2017a, p. 2).

***Moving From White Feminism to Allyship.*** This need to disrupt the white-centric focus of some forms of feminism is referenced in multiple *Muslim Girl* blogs. The white-supremacist and racist origins of feminism can discourage women of color from identifying themselves as feminists (Anumahmed, 2019). *Muslim Girl* also alludes to the need to expand one's own understanding of feminism which includes "researching the history of feminism, learning that the movement was not intersectional at all and excluded women of color from its conversations" (Anumahmed, 2019, para. 13). This historically nuanced awareness of feminism's origins calls for contemporary feminist agendas that reflect not only the diversity amongst women but also

the resulting diversity in what women see as urgent feminist concerns. In drawing attention to this diversity, *Muslim Girl* challenges feminism that caters only to the needs of middle-class, able-bodied, heterosexual, white women.

One salient example that underscores the need for racially-diverse and intersectional understandings of feminism is *Muslim Girl's* critique of “pussy hats” (Ali, 2018, para. 1). The critique here is that these hats propagate exclusionary forms of feminism, despite popular claims of “being representative of all women” (Ali, 2018, para. 2). For one, “the hats exclude trans women and/or non-binary people who do not have the genitalia represented by the hats” (Ali, 2018, para. 4). For another, in centering white-centric depictions of genitalia these hats also exclude racialized communities (Ali, 2018). “The hats were clearly created, even if subconsciously, with only white cis-women in mind and represent a larger gap in the feminist movement” (Ali, 2018, para. 8). In these ways, “the hats embody a culture of White-focused Eurocentrism, and are further pushing the agenda of ‘exclusionary White feminism’” (Ali, 2018, para. 6). Thus, “the pussy hats are a reminder that we are far from including all races and genders in the pro-feminist conversation” (Ali, 2018, para. 8).

Yet another example of white-centric feminism in its initial days is the Woman’s March which “reeked of white feminism in its earlier stages” (Iman, 2017, para. 3). *Muslim Girl* explains that:

The original co-chairs, all white, co-opted the name of the Million Woman March held in 1997 by and for black women. Only after some protest, did the co-chairs change the name and invite Tamika Mallory, Linda Sarsour, and Carmen Perez, all celebrated activists and women of color, to join the board. (Iman, 2017, para. 3)

*Muslim Girl* adds that “despite the diversity of the march’s board and their efforts to make the event as inclusive as possible, the Woman’s March was still tinged with white feminism” (Iman, 2017, para. 4). Also illustrating how racialized women face unique challenges as feminist activists, the Woman’s March’s:

Co-founder Breanne Butler tells MuslimGirl.com that she has witnessed racial profiling herself, “getting arrested with Linda Sarsour and Faiza Ali and seeing the NYPD try to make them take their hijabs off.” She states, as a co-founder and leader of the movement, that while she is incredibly proud of the progression of such an important movement for the intersectional rights of women, she also understands the frustration from people of color who have been leading this same kind of movement for so long with little credit. (Matan, 2018b, para. 10)

On this note, *Muslim Girl* asks an important question:

While the solidarity shown by those attending the (women’s) march was encouraging, the question must be asked: would as many people, specifically white women, who attended the march by the thousands, show up — had it been connected to any other social justice issue, like racial equality? (Iman, 2017, para. 1; Matan, 2018b)

By reflecting on this question, “the Woman’s March can be a starting point for many white women on their path to becoming a social justice advocate and a better ally to other causes” (Iman, 2017, para. 6). Here, authentic allyship asks can look like taking pride in attending such marches while recognizing “that there is more work to be done” (Iman, 2017, para. 6). To be a better ally, it is essential for “each white woman to recognize their privilege, begin educating themselves, and start using their platform to advance the standing of all women” (Iman, 2017, para. 7). Instead of choosing sides, allyship demands “a deeper self-examination of the systems of power that marginalize us” (Raja, 2015, para. 11). Such sustained reflection is required of all who claim to be feminist allies, especially at a time when the need for allyship has never been greater (Vanessaalshamy, 2018b).

On a similar note, *Muslim Girl* asks, “what can Muslims and non-Muslim allies do to empower Muslim women, whether they consider themselves to be feminists or not?” (Guest Blogger, 2017a, para. 3). Likewise, on the topic of solidarity, one *Muslim Girl* blogger shares:

I, as a white woman, cannot possibly even begin to understand this struggle that Black womxn have been going through for centuries. My job is to be an ally to Black womxn...to step back and allow Black womxn their voice, their space, and their platform, and to educate myself as well as other people on these issues that Black womxn face every single day. (Vanessaelshamy, 2018b, para. 4)

This consideration of what allyship with Muslim women and with Black women can manifest as segues into another noteworthy theme; namely the gendered and racialized experiences of Black Muslim women and the multiple, overlapping forms of marginalization that they tackle.

**At the Intersection of Racism, Sexism and Islamophobia - Black Muslim Women's Experiences.** To preface this discussion, it is worth noting that Muslims come from all parts of the world and hail from countless different racial and ethnic backgrounds (Abour, 2015; Guest Blogger, 2017a). This diversity amongst Muslims is recognized in the Quran itself (Docmanov, 2015). Even so, Muslim communities continue “denying the intersections of being both Muslim and Black” such that Black Muslims “are subjected to anti-Black sentiment within the Muslim community as well as outside of it, while simultaneously being subjected to Islamophobia” (Docmanov, 2015, para. 1).

This issue is addressed in multiple *Muslim Girl* blogs that are penned by Black Muslim women bloggers who, in articulating that “I am Black and I am Muslim, and my identities exist together” draw attention to how this intersectionality can result in overlapping and heightened forms of oppression (Docmanov, 2015, para. 7; Leahvernon, 2016b). As one *Muslim Girl* blogger puts it:

I am Black. I am a woman. I am a Muslim. I am a triple minority. So I get it. Trust me. I have been picked over and belittled and mistreated because of one or all three of the above. A lot of us have. (Leahvernon, 2016b, para. 14)

This Black Muslim woman blogger adds, “Ever since I was a young, Black Muslimah, I’ve felt displaced. No matter how hard I tried to outwardly appear Muslim and fit in, it was never enough” (Leahvernon, 2017c, para. 5). As a non-Arab Muslim, this blogger remembers feeling left out by Arab Muslims, as signaled by a pattern where she says, “they wouldn’t give me *salaams* (greeting) even though I’d offer it first or embrace me like they would other Arabs” (Leahvernon, 2017c, para. 5). Another first-hand account from *Muslim Girl* of how anti-Black racism is experienced and even normalized Muslim communities is noted below:

I never thought much of the anti-Black comments that would come from my non-Black peers at the mosque. I didn’t question why our mosques in Boston were segregated by ethnic and racial backgrounds. The casual throwing around of the N-word from Desi (colloquial for South Asian) and Arab teens did not bother me. The stories that my Desi and Arab friends told me when we giggled about future husbands, when they’d casually say, “My family would never allow me to marry a Black person” — none of these experiences really fazed me. (Docmanov, 2015, para. 3)

As these excerpts indicate, “even if Muslims are forbidden from blatantly discriminating, there still remains the reality that non-Black Muslims continue to be completely ignorant of the reality of the unique Black Muslim experience” (Docmanov, 2015, para. 6). Black Muslims are thus saddled with the expectation of making other Muslims realize their privilege (Docmanov, 2015). This burden can put Black Muslims in a difficult position, such as when having to call for Muslims’ allyship across races while simultaneously having to educate non-Black Muslims on how to not co-opt Black social justice movements (Docmanov, 2015). In this context, women who continue to speak up about anti-Black racism find themselves facing heightened racism and resistance, including that which is meted out by Muslims (Docmanov, 2015).

As the above accounts imply, “colorism is prevalent in our Desi (South Asian)/Arab majority communities” (Khan, 2017, para. 18). Yet Muslims are quick to dismiss claims of racism (Khan, 2017). This disregard often draws on examples of prominent, widely-respected Black

Muslims, like Malcom X or Hazrat Bilal, a Black Muslim companion of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and one of the first Muslims, who was appointed as the first person to perform the call to prayers and was treated well overall (Docmanov, 2015; Khan, 2017). In Muslim settings, “Black people and our experiences are brought up only when it is convenient to get a point across, but our voices are silenced when advocating for our own stories of existence within the Muslim community” (Docmanov, 2015, para. 5).

The hypocrisy of this selective focus on cherry-picked examples and experiences is evident when taking into consideration that in Muslim-majority settings “rarely did we acknowledge Black Lives Matter, police brutality, existing racism, etc. Dedication to justice never included Black Lives Matter or anything outside of preserving their Desi/Arab Muslim identities” (Khan, 2017, para. 19). In Muslim settings, “when a Black person would come, they would suddenly be treated as ‘outsiders’ and a minority within a minority” (Khan, 2017, para. 20). These dynamics shed light on the problematic association of Muslims with particular ethnic identities, namely Arabs or South Asians, to the exclusion of others, a point that is made in academic literature too (Khan, 2017). This epistemic violence disregards the diversity of Black Muslims’ experiences and struggles, and it ignores the activism that they enact from their specific standpoints (Docmanov, 2015).

For Black Muslim women in particular, the aforementioned experiences of anti-Black discrimination within Muslim spaces are coupled with fear of hate crimes and police brutality, especially for those who wear the hijab (Docmanov, 2015). Black Muslim women’s exposure to violence is particularly concerning, because such violence can be rooted in Islamophobia, racism, sexism or a combination of these (Docmanov, 2015). Elaborating on this phenomenon, one hijab-wearing Black Muslim woman blogger shares, “As a visibly Muslim woman growing up, I endured the stares of commuters on the train in the mornings, the random frisking at airports and the questioning of my feminism”, as if to imply that this is not what feminism looks like embodied (Docmanov, 2015, para. 2). Upon choosing to remove her hijab, this blogger

adds, “I came to realize that while discrimination based on my Muslim identity was no longer as prominent, the sight of police officers would still make my skin crawl, and the uncomfortable stares persisted” (Docmanov, 2015, para. 4). The intricacies of such multidimensional forms of oppression reinforce that:

Research that addresses anti-Muslim violence should attend to the intersectionalities of those forms of violence, to take into account not just gender, but sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, class and other crucial identities that might moderate or exacerbate the risk of violence. (Perry, 2014, p. 87)

Having outlined various examples of anti-Black racism within and beyond Muslim communities, below is a consideration of what resistance against these multiple forms of oppression can look like. As far as alienation in religious domains goes, a Black Muslim women blogger notes that navigating this terrain can sometimes require believing “that being Muslim comes before everything else” (Docmanov, 2015, para. 3). However, completely separating Muslim and racialized aspects of one’s identity is neither possible nor desirable. Another tactic of resistance to anti-Black racism is to remind oneself that in Islam everyone is equal, even if this Islamic tenet is only imperfectly practiced in Muslim communities (Docmanov, 2015). Another important path to resistance is to empower Black Muslims in ways that “allow us to tell our stories without being forced to choose one over the other” (Docmanov, 2015, para. 6). To this end, social justice movements like Black Lives Matter offer one such platform for grappling with racial identity with all its attendant complexity (Docmanov, 2015).

In this regard, *Muslim Girl* presents the Black Women’s Blueprint website as a good example of how social justice movements can model intersectionality and meaningful allyship (Vanessaalshamy, 2018b). This website acknowledges the diversity amongst Black women and the various struggles that they face at the intersections of race, gender and other axes of identity (Vanessaalshamy, 2018b). This website puts forth a historically nuanced and politically motivated understanding of feminism, as is evident in the below paragraph from the site:

“We cannot allow an isolationist impulse to dictate our movement strategy given the political urgency of now. As various communities of Black womxn, we have always faced innumerable personal, and unspeakable brutalities. We cannot allow the travesties that have affirmed disregard for our existence to continue to flourish while we wither away with resentment and stew in our own rage. Continue to act to eradicate oppression whenever it shows up. This has been our inherited tradition for centuries, practiced in diverse ways around the world, in both peaceful protest and in righteous anger in the face of indignities and in the face of dehumanization.” (Vanessaelshamy, 2018b, para. 3)

Decentering whiteness, this orientation towards feminism reiterates that “Black womxn want to be free, not equal to white womxn” (Vanessaelshamy, 2018b, 8). To elaborate on this point:

By thinking that Black womxn want to gain the same rights that white womxn hold by being white, you are still reducing Black womxn down to be lesser than white womxn, as well as suggesting that Black womxn need help to be brought up to the level that white womxn are at, as if being a white womxn is some sort of standard they need to meet in order to not have to protest any longer. (Vanessaelshamy, 2018b, para. 8)

Instead, it is crucial to make feminist communities truly inclusive because currently, when Black women “try to speak up in feminist circles and communities that are supposed to be uplifting, they aren’t exactly able to because a lot of times non-Black womxn feel threatened by all-Black ideas and movements” (Vanessaelshamy, 2018b, para. 5).

Overall, this kind of feminist framework directly confronts “the phenomenon known as ‘White feminism’ and how it sometimes leaves out women of other less privileged backgrounds, predominantly Black women” (Vanessaelshamy, 2018a, para. 1). Furthermore, the Black Women’s Blueprint website is especially effective as a manifesto because it foregrounds that “the March for Black Women is specifically for BLACK WOMXN to attest to the daily struggles they face because they happen to be Black AND female” (Vanessaelshamy, 2018b, para. 6). It is also a suitable note to conclude this section on, because many of the core principles and

assertions made on this website can serve as tools of resistance against Islamophobia, racism and sexism that can be used by Black and racialized Muslim women and their allies.

To sum up, the above few sections have explained how race factors into Muslim women's gendered experiences of Islam, as informed by legacies of settler colonialism and by discourses of the war on terror. The next section was a consideration of what feminism stands to gain by amplifying the voices of racialized women. Next was an analysis of how Black Muslim women's experiences speak to intersecting forms of marginalization, followed by a look at creative forms of resistance to such oppression. This detailed discussion of race in relation to gendered experiences of Islam will now be followed by an examination of the ways in which other identity axes, such as queerness and narratives of masculinity also shape how Muslim women engage with Islam.

### ***Islam and Queerness***

“Lesbian, bisexual, trans and queer (LBTQ) Muslim women living out intersectional identities (sexuality, race, religion, spirituality and gender identity and expression) in the Global North may experience challenges between their many communities of belonging” (Kugle, 2014; Siraj, 2018, as cited in Khan & Mulé, 2021, p. 1144). To elaborate, in Muslim communities “sexually and gender diverse Muslim women are often constructed as sexually deviant and morally bankrupt” and simultaneously they are also sidelined in racist LGBTQ+ spaces (Alipour, 2015; Habib, 2007, as cited in Khan & Mulé, 2021, p. 1146). Plus, LGBTQ+ Muslims in Muslim majority contexts likely face other obstacles to being able to fully embrace their identity and garner community acceptance (Alipour, 2015).

Under these conditions, for queer Muslim women, “living out LGBTQ intersectional identities required constant negotiations with the many systems of belonging (family, community, positional aspects)” (Khan & Mulé, 2021, p. 1157). In other words, queer Muslim women's religious experiences are multidimensional and incompatible with simple oppositions and hegemonic discourses, thus underlining the need to account for complex, intricate and

sometimes contradictory lived experiences (King, as cited in Charania, 2005; Khan & Mulé, 2021).

In this context, *Muslim Girl* does not mince words or try to deny the prevalence of homophobia overall, including in Muslim communities (Sarahmohr, 2022). It argues that when it comes to addressing queerness in Islam, often:

there is personal prejudice stemming from a place of fear or ignorance, or even a lack of personal interaction with any LGBTQ+ Muslims. Not to mention, skewed interpretations of the Quran or Shariah and the refusal to move away from what early Islamic scholars spoke of on the topic that also play a role. (Guest Blogger, 2017b, para. 6)

Academic writing shares similar findings in that:

LGBTQ Muslims contend with cultural pressures toward heterosexual marriage (Siraj, 2009, 2012), tend to remain closeted about sexuality and gender identities (Siraj, 2012, 2018), and can face violence and marginalization at the hands of normative communities and the nation state in the Global North. (Kahn, 2015, as cited in Khan & Mulé, 2021, p. 1144)

Broadly, *Muslim Girl* recognizes that “the subject of LGBTQ+ presence in Muslim communities is an incredibly complex issue and one that is still studied extensively by Islamic scholars around the world” (Guest Blogger, 2017b, para. 1). As an example, one *Muslim Girl* blog states “that the concept that acting on homosexuality is a sin is widely accepted in Islam” (Sarahmohr, 2020, para. 13). On the other hand, another *Muslim Girl* blog articulates that “the Quran does not explicitly mention the word homosexuality (as sexuality is a modern concept), but does acknowledge sexual diversity...without condemning it” (Guest Blogger, 2017b, para. 2). This latter blog cites the Quran, namely Surah Al-Nur’s verses 24:31 to 24:33 to support this argument (Guest Blogger, 2017b, para. 2). This blog also investigates the story of Prophet Lut (PBUH) which is commonly referenced when condemning homosexuality from an Islamic perspective (Guest Blogger, 2017b). Contrary to common interpretations of this story, this blog

states that “Islamic scholars have found that the story of Lut and the people of Sodom is one that condemns greed and rape, while promoting the value of hospitality and kindness” (Guest Blogger, 2017b, para. 3). The same blog points out that:

Along with the Quran, Muslims often turn to the life lessons and stories (Hadith) about the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) for guidance on how to lead fulfilling lives and to discuss issues like homosexuality and faith with historical context. However, there is no record of the Prophet (PBUH) discriminating against or condemning sexual diversity, nor is there any indication of the Prophet (PBUH) describing homosexuality as a crime to be punished for. (Guest Blogger, 2017b, para. 4)

Since many Muslims seek to follow the Prophet’s (PBUH) example in all matters, the above argument is a notable intervention (Guest Blogger, 2017b).

In terms of *Muslim Girl’s* overall approach towards queerness in Islam, this platform is cognizant of the multiple intersecting forms of exclusion that queer Muslims face and it acknowledges that queer Muslims’ “visibility is something that has yet to be acknowledged” (Guest Blogger, 2017b, para. 9). Calling for such recognition, *Muslim Girl* invokes the idea of Muslims as a family to champion inclusivity and it highlights that “queer Muslims have always been a part of the ummah (community of followers of Islam)” (Guest Blogger, 2017b, para. 9). Like academic scholarship on the topic, *Muslim Girl* clarifies that queer Muslims are able to harmoniously align their belief in Islam with their sexual orientation and gender identity, thus negating the oppositional framing of Islam and queerness (Guest Blogger, 2017b). Similarly, Kugle (2014, p. 2) reiterates that queer Muslims “can reconcile their sexual orientation and gender identity with Islam” (as cited in Alipour, 2015, p. 1746; Al-Sayyad, 2010, Shah, 2016, Yip, 2008, Yip & Khalid, 2010, as cited in Khan & Mulé, 2021). This reclamation of Islam is important, given “the supportive role religion and spirituality can play in the lives of LGBTQ Muslims” (McMichael, 2002, as cited in Khan & Mulé, 2021, p. 1160).

Addressing homophobia and transphobia that is advanced in the name of Islam, *Muslim Girl* states that “to claim religious justification for the discrimination or persecution of diversity is not an expression of faith, it’s blasphemy” (Guest Blogger, 2017b, para. 8). In this regard, *Muslim Girl* reminds its audience that “Islam celebrates diversity, whether it is referring to religion or sexuality. The core values of Islam and the principles of Shariah look to uphold justice, civil liberties, kindness and human rights” (Guest Blogger, 2017b, para. 12). *Muslim Girl’s* stance symbolizes that “contesting the religious basis of homophobia is important and many Islamic writers are engaged in this task” (Habib, 2010, Murray & Roscoe, 1997, as cited in Rahman, 2010, p. 956). Even as *Muslim Girl* critiques that “in some parts of our community, we still fail to provide charity to a community of people due to their sexual orientation or gender identity”, it also reiterates that, despite popular depictions of Islam as being homophobic, there is work being done to address the ostracism that queer Muslims face (Guest Blogger, 2017a, para. 30). Reflecting the effectiveness of such initiatives, research suggests that “norms and attitudes may be shifting within normative Muslim communities”, partly due to the increasing popularity of pluralistic understandings of Islam (Khan & Mulé, 2021, p. 1146).

Drawing on such pluralistic interpretations of Islam, “LBTQ Muslim women resisted hegemonic norms by mapping out alternative paths grounded in Islam, and in living out lives in LGBTQ communities” (Khan & Mulé, 2021, p. 1144). Queer Muslim women’s religious experiences indicate that “being Muslim is a complicated set of religious and cultural processes” (Charania, 2005, p. 31). Disrupting the erasure of plurality in Islam and amongst Muslims, *Muslim Girl* acknowledges that queer Muslims have been long rendered invisible and argues that they should instead be accepted (Guest Blogger, 2017b; Khan & Mulé, 2021).

To foster such widespread acceptance, Muslims and non-Muslims alike are called upon to “learn more about Islam as a whole, and educate yourself on the intersectionality within both Islam’s many sects/spheres of belief as well as within the queer Muslim community” (Guest Blogger, 2017b, para. 10). For this purpose, applying Islamic injunctions to the diverse

experiences of queer Muslims requires attending to unconventional applications of Islamic principles as well as proactively consulting multiple sources of knowledge, including but not limited to “formal madrassa (Islamic academic institution) training and university education” (Kugle, 2014, p. 54, as cited in Alipour, 2015, p. 1747; Rahman & Valliani, 2016, Siraj, 2016a, as cited in Khan & Mulé, 2021).

On this front, queer Muslims also draw on “the Islamic principles of *tawhid* and *jihad*” which respectively denote the oneness of Allah and personal struggle against one’s baser desires (Khan & Mulé, 2021, p. 1156). These principles are referenced as a way to enact agency, resist dominant narratives, interpret scripture differently and all in all, cultivate a personal relationship with God (Khan & Mulé, 2021). The use of such strategies by queer Muslims exemplifies how Islamic teachings can be actively and ethically molded to fit present societies, while remaining true to their underlying principles (Guest Blogger, 2017b). This emphasis by *Muslim Girl* on the adaptability of Islamic teachings reinforces that historical context matters and that “faith and discussions of faith are constantly evolving” (Guest Blogger, 2017b, para. 9).

This agency in expanding interpretations of Islam exemplifies “Jamal’s (2015, p. 57) notion of ‘transgression’” which positions queer Muslim “women’s transgressive agency as a possibility of action *within* [emphasis added] rather than against Islamic tradition” (as cited in Khan & Mulé, 2021, p. 1158). This kind of transgression indicates that “living out life as a LGBTQ Muslim is possible within the Islamicate tradition when Islam is understood within the lenses of plurality and diversity” (Kugle, 2014, as cited in Khan & Mulé, 2021, p. 1161). Indeed, this type of intervention is also made when drawing feminist interpretations of Islamic teachings as they pertain to the treatment of women more generally.

The use of such transgressive strategies signifies “LBTQ Muslim women’s agency and resistance alongside their experiences of othering, racism and Islamophobia” (Khan & Mulé, 2021, p. 1157). Queer Muslims’ strategies of resistance can also be applicable to Muslim

women who are seeking to reclaim feminism while remaining grounded in Islam, thus challenging discourses that pit one against the other. Such a framework is useful for Muslim women not only because it disrupts essentialized perceptions of Islam and of Muslims, but also because it offers a widely applicable roadmap for resisting hegemonic discourses in both religious and queer contexts (Khan & Mulé, 2021).

**Justifying Islamophobia in the Name of Fighting Homophobia.** Having looked at queer Muslims' experiences in light of the sometimes exclusionary dynamics of Muslim communities, it is also important to analyze how queerness in relation to Islam "is highlighted in the conversation about LGBTQ+ communities in a way that marginalizes Muslim values in the interest of undermining the dialogue before it even begins" (Sarahmohr, 2020, para. 13). In particular, *Muslim Girl* critiques:

prioritizing the discussion about LGBTQ+ incessantly in Muslim communities and with Muslims with the implicit assumption that Muslims need to explain away our apparent homophobia in a way that singles us out as the identified "other" in the conversation about sexual politics. (Sarahmohr, 2020, para. 12)

As activism by, for and with queer communities has picked up steam, it has also come to demonstrate the ways in which rights are selectively accorded to people, as informed by discourses that see only some privileged subjects as humans (Passavant, as cited in Charania, 2005).

Mobilizing such logics, "one widely reported example is the Israeli government's deployment of pinkwashing to justify the oppression of Palestinians" (Sarahmohr, 2022, para. 8). Similarly, "multiple queer theorists, both Muslim and non-Muslim have commented on the great lengths to which the US military in particular has taken alleged Muslim homophobia as a justification for violence" against Muslims (Sarahmohr, 2022, para. 10). *Muslim Girl* points out that, "the case of Abu Ghraib is a prominent and well-known example of the violence done to Muslims due to alleged Muslim homophobia, but there are many others" (Sarahmohr, 2022,

para. 11). These instances demonstrate how queer Muslims “illustrate this nexus of oppression, caught between cultural and political Islamophobia and homophobia” (Rahman, 2010, p. 946). These examples also indicate that “the possibility of becoming and being recognized as a subject with rights or a subject who knows is constituted through discourses of reason, morality, decency and civility” that construct some subjects as worthy of rights, but not others (Dehli, 2003, p. 136. as cited in Charania, 2005).

Another prime example of justifying Islamophobia in the name of tackling homophobia is the positioning of Qatar during the 2022 World Cup (Sarahmohr, 2022). Here, *Muslim Girl* points out that “to aggressively profile Qatar for homophobia and transphobia when other countries are also guilty is hypocritical” (Sarahmohr, 2022, para. 4). Such a framing of Qatar speaks to “the ambiguous operations of power as a disciplinary force in the construction of identities” (Rahman, 2010, p. 952). In this instance, the pinpointing of a Middle Eastern, Muslim nation may be warranted; but to do so exclusively reinforces orientalist tropes and fuels Islamophobia that are then manipulated to justify violence against Muslims (Sarahmohr, 2022). In contrast, *Muslim Girl* argues a more constructive analysis would underscore that “Qatar is a microcosm of an increasingly homophobic and transphobic world” (Sarahmohr, 2022, para. 12). The West is no exception to this phenomenon either, given that “in the US we’ve seen more than 300 anti-LGBTQ+ bills introduced in states across the country” (Sarahmohr, 2022, para. 12). Therefore, it would be astute to remember that homophobia and transphobia may be prevalent in Muslim communities, highlighting a need for dialogue and change, but also that this issue is far from being a Muslim only problem.

Indeed, academic literature also points to the need for subverting the dominant, Western conceptualization of queerness that “serves to exclude non-western versions of sexuality and reifies the categories of sexual orientation as ontologically coherent and exclusive” (Sweibel, 2009, Waites, 2009, as cited in Rahman, 2010, p. 953–954). Such expansion of queerness that decouples it from the West also mounts a challenge against homonationalism which denotes

“the normalization of specific ways of being a sexual subject in the Global North that promoted certain expressions of LGBTQ-ness constructed as ‘normal’, while simultaneously making deviant alternative ways of performing this identity” (Puar, 2007, as cited in Khan & Mulé, 2021, p. 1145). In such Eurocentric narratives, “identity categories of ‘Muslim’ and ‘LGBTQ’ are often perceived by mainstream LGBTQ communities as mutually exclusive, which replicates false dichotomies that erase nuanced understandings of intersectional identities” (Rahman & Valliani, 2016, as cited in Khan & Mulé, 2021, p. 1145). Fuelling such hegemonic discourses that erase queer Muslims’ experiences and that frame Islam and queerness as binaries, “homonationalism serves to position the Global North as morally superior to other regions due to ‘progressive’ and ‘tolerant’ sexual and gender politics, irrespective of how inequitable such politics actually are in practice” (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2014, as cited in Khan & Mulé, 2021, p. 1145). Resistance to homonationalism then demands a consideration of the ways in which “the resistance to homosexuality is a wider issue, interpellated to serve resistance to perceived westernization across distinct national cultures” (Rahman, 2010, p. 956).

Building on the above critique, *Muslim Girl* also questions exclusionary forms of feminism that are transphobic and homophobic. Specifically, *Muslim Girl* states that “we’ve got to stop equating feminism to female biological functions” because this “is exclusionary to trans females and males that are participating in the movement” (Shannon, 2015a, para. 5). Rather, *Muslim Girl* argues that “if we aren’t including everyone in our strides towards change, then we aren’t actually practicing feminist ideology” (Shannon, 2015a, para. 4). Given these internal shortcomings of feminist narratives, feminist contestations of homophobia in Muslim communities may not only seem hypocritical but can also be weaponized to further alienate Muslim communities, as is evident in the above examples of Palestine and Abu Ghraib (Sarahmohr, 2020, 2022).

To conclude, this section drew on queer theory along with *Muslim Girl’s* handling of the topic to analyze how queer Muslims and specifically queer Muslim women navigate and

challenge hegemonic discourses in queer, Muslim and feminist circles. This analysis included a consideration of what queer Muslim women's resistance can offer to feminist struggles broadly, as well as an examination of the strategies that *Muslim Girl* proposes for resisting homophobia in Muslim communities, and finally, a critical look at particular forms of LGBTQ+ activism. With this understanding of how lived experience is shaped by interlocking forms of oppression and domination, the next few sections study how constructions of masculinity also inform Muslim women and men's gendered experiences of Islam.

### ***Men and Masculinity***

Prefacing the discussion below, it is crucial to shed light on:

the realities of how Muslim men are perceived by the Western White Feminism. Muslims as a whole are a largely visible, racialized group. Orientalist myths about gender relations within the Orient are tightly wrapped within the fabric of Western popular culture. Muslim women and men are the Othered Bonnie and Clyde, or rather the Beauty and the Beast. Bigoted screenplays have Muslim men as violent, cruel, raging and sinister oppressors of their communities, while Muslim women are assumed helpless or gullible. (Muslim Girl, 2018a, para. 20)

Such depictions are detrimental all around and so, caution is warranted when shedding light on problematic masculinities within Muslim communities, lest this critique reinforce such orientalist tropes (Muslim Girl, 2018a). However, this thorny terrain does not negate the prevalence of problematic constructions of masculinity generally, and amongst Muslim communities specifically. To this end, *Muslim Girl* argues that "we cannot resolve issues of inequality, injustice, and violence unless we address the social construction of Muslim masculinity and femininity with special emphasis on perceptions of masculinity" (Mokhtar, 2016b, para. 11).

With that in mind, below is a probe into how toxic forms of masculinity emerge and are sustained, including an example of how such masculinity manifests in Muslim settings.

Subsequently, there is an examination of strategies for deconstructing problematic manifestations of masculinity, along with proposed mechanisms for supporting men who also suffer at the hands of hegemonic masculinities.

**Toxic Masculinities.** First and foremost, the problem of toxic masculinities “is not a ‘Muslim’ dilemma” alone (Mokhtar, 2016b, para. 13). Driving home this point, one *Muslim Girl* blog references *The Mask You Live In*, a documentary that “explores and exposes the harmful notions of masculinity in American culture” (Mokhtar, 2016b, para. 13). Another widespread manifestation of toxic masculinity is the men’s rights activists movement that has been gathering steam of late and that is characterized by the tired tale of supposedly freeing men from feminism (Muslim Girl, 2019d). Troublingly, this trend is being adopted by various communities and across various cultures (Muslim Girl, 2019d).

Addressing toxic masculinities in relation to Islam, *Muslim Girl* argues that narrowly-defined, strict gender roles within Muslim communities are not only harmful, but also un-Islamic (Mokhtar, 2016b). Despite not being rooted in Islamic tenets, “the predominant conception of Islamic masculinity — the one being promoted in conflict-ridden areas — is of the man who is harsh and violent instead of loving” (Mokhtar, 2016b, para. 20). In turn, such hegemonic understandings of Muslim masculinities play a role in “domestic abuse becoming a severe problem in the Muslim community due to wrong ideas about what it means to be a man” (Mokhtar, 2016b, para. 24–25).

Another notable trait of damaging masculinity is that it is threatened by feminist claims (Imaanasim, 2019). In Muslim communities, this rhetoric is evident in the form of male relatives and religious figures of authority who take a dim view of initiatives advancing women’s rights (Muslim Girl, 2019d). On this note, *Muslim Girl* points out that:

Men, in public and private spaces, online and in masjid (mosques), also comment on women’s dress, while forgetting that men are also expected to conform to Islamic

standards of modesty, and that humility and the absence of judgment for another's actions are encouraged in Islam. (Hamed, 2017b, para. 2)

In Muslim-majority settings, such worrisome conceptualizations of masculinity are also evident in “a dangerous trend of Muslim men speaking on behalf of women and chastising women for violence that is mainly perpetrated by men” (Al-Khatahtbeh et al., 2014, para. 3). *Muslim Girl* elaborates on this point, noting that “even as women seek to take the mantle to speak to their experiences, men have silenced us, refused to listen to us, and have taken the mantle to do the speaking for us” (Al-Khatahtbeh et al., 2014, para. 24). Such hijacking of Muslim women's voices underscores the need for introspection within Muslim communities, including a careful consideration of what these conditions convey “about Muslim men, Islam, and the treatment of women by Muslims” (Al-Khatahtbeh et al., 2014, para. 5).

***The Case of the Wallah Bro - A Manifestation of Toxic Masculinity.*** Personifying one form of toxic masculinity, there is a term associated with men's rights activists in Muslim circles; they are called “Wallah Bros” (Muslim Girl, 2019d, para. 6). Wallah means ‘by god’. Wallah Bros are described as Muslim men who “offer Quranic verses and Prophetic hadiths as justification for their misogynistic beliefs. These men have selfishly co-opted the beautiful language of the Quran and hadiths to serve their unjust ends” (Muslim Girl, 2019d, para. 6). Exemplifying such co-optation, the Wallah Bro “holds himself to the most liberal of Islamic interpretations, but enforces the most conservative interpretations on women” (Kit, 2015, para. 5).

Despite his veneer of progressive thinking, the Wallah Bro does not actually support women's bodily autonomy, as is evident “from his use of lollipop and oyster metaphors to represent hijab and a woman's worth”, implying that the more covered women are, the purer and cleaner (Kit, 2015, para. 7). Not only is he prone to overly criticizing Muslim women's clothing and actions, including those who wear the hijab, he also ironically claims “I don't need feminism because Islam inherently gives women rights” (Kit, 2015, para. 5). Furthermore, he is convinced that the hijab is the way to avoid catcalling and street harassment (Kit, 2015). Such

convictions problematically place the burden on women to solve an issue that they are actually the victim of. In fact, the Wallah Bro is convinced that it is the inadequate modesty of Muslim women, hijab-wearing and otherwise, in real life and online, that is the primary problem within the Muslim community, an attitude that undermines:

the existence of racially segregated Muslim communities in the West, Muslims killing other Muslims in Syria, Muslim-governed countries funding the occupation of Palestine and holy sites, countries capitalizing and commercializing off of Mecca, Muslims employed by the NYPD racially profiling and incarcerating Black youth, or dozens of other political and humanitarian issues plaguing Muslims around the world today. (Kit, 2015, para. 9)

In addition to ignoring these systemic issues, the Wallah Bro will also:

reduce the depth and necessity of anti-racist work by pointing to Qur'anic texts that state how Allah creates humanity as equal, while at the same time using slurs in another language and justifying the deaths of unarmed Black teenagers with racist rhetoric. (Kit, 2015, para. 5)

To the Wallah Bro, problems with women's attire supersede these and other structural forms of violence (Kit, 2015). However, it is not all doom and gloom. The anti-feminist manipulation of Quranic verses by the likes of Wallah Bro does not eclipse the ways in which Quranic verses are also conversely deployed to support women's right to equality and to knowledge seeking (Ashanti, 2017). This refusal to succumb to patriarchal Quranic interpretations offers insights on ways of dismantling toxic masculinity and moving towards progressive masculinity, a topic that is explored in more detail below.

**The Way Forward: Feminist Men and Feminist Masculinities.** Across several blogs, *Muslim Girl* frequently argues that feminism and Islam are compatible; this compatibility is presented as a central reason for Muslim men to practice feminism and cultivate a healthier masculinity (Ashanti, 2017). As with most forms of change, "it is no simple task to challenge and

reform structures that support violent masculinities, but we need to start somewhere” (Mokhtar, 2016b, para. 28).

To begin with, the call for Muslim men to imbibe healthy masculinity is primarily rooted in the practices of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and in his simple gestures “such as when he took his beloved wife’s cup and drank from where her lips made contact” (Al-Khatahtbeh et al., 2014; Mokhtar, 2016b, para. 29). Also meriting greater recognition and emulation within Muslim communities is the fact that “the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) did domestic chores, including childrearing, alongside his wives. He (PBUH) also took seriously his wives’ roles in politics and education” (Mokhtar, 2016b, para. 23; Muslim Girl, 2018a). Additionally, “if we look at the life of our Prophet (PBUH), he wasn’t abusive or controlling towards women or his family in the household” (Al-Khatahtbeh et al., 2014, para. 33). Another often cited example is the following saying by Prophet Muhammad (PBUH): “None but a noble man treats women in an honorable manner. And none but a dishonorable man treats women disgracefully” (Al-Khatahtbeh et al., 2014, para. 33). In light of such Prophetic examples, “Islam does offer a positive model of masculinity, and we cannot argue that men can use Islam to justify the abuse and maltreatment of women”(Al-Khatahtbeh et al., 2014, para. 34). Moreover, drawing on Islam to advocate for positive masculinities demonstrates “how religious actors play an important role in defining and reshaping peaceful masculinities” (Mokhtar, 2016b, para. 27).

Yet, present-day Muslim communities do not quite reflect the aforementioned exemplary Prophetic practices. Despite Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) being seen as the penultimate model for Muslims to shape their lives after, his example has not yet changed dominant conceptualizations of Muslim masculinity. Drawing on Prophetic examples to disrupt problematic contemporary Muslim masculinity, *Muslim Girl* adds that “the Prophet (PBUH) participated in childrearing and household labour now associated and belittled as a solely feminine domain by the Muslim community” (Muslim Girl, 2018a, para. 19). This evolution in perception and its dissonance with the egalitarian bent of the Prophetic practices detailed earlier indicate how far

removed from Islam the currently dominant and troubling manifestations of Muslim masculinity are (Mokhtar, 2016b). More frequent uptake of Prophetic practices, like those mentioned above, would help address “the toxicity and crisis of modern masculinity” in Muslim communities (Muslim Girl, 2018a, para. 19).

In addition to the examples of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), Quranic verses like “Your wives are a garment for you, and you are a garment for them (Qur’an 2:187)” are also drawn upon to contest toxic masculinities and to encourage Muslim men to adopt healthier models of masculinity instead (Ashanti, 2017, para. 3; Muslim Girl, 2019d). In a nutshell, “the search to define a healthy, constructive masculinity identity, in part, starts with Quranic principles, examples, *Hadith* and a holistic political understanding of intersectional feminism. These ideas and ideals are not contradictory” (Muslim Girl, 2018a, para. 11).

Addressing what healthy masculinities look like, *Muslim Girl* highlights that feminist orientations are integral to progressive masculinities (Muslim Girl, 2018a). Such feminist orientations are embodied by men who seek to better themselves, who use their privilege to advocate with and for women and who treat women with respect and kindness (Aishasaleh, 2018a; Muslim Girl, 2018a). Positive masculinities also encourage self-reflection about how men can drive change for the better, be a part of the solution and set an example by how they treat the women in their lives (Imaanasim, 2019). Furthermore, men who enact healthy masculinity not only recognize women’s freedom and autonomy, they are also “affording women respect as human beings on no other basis such as their relationship to a man” (Muslim Girl, 2018a, para. 12). These types of constructive masculinities respect that:

Women have ownership of their own bodies. They are not the warded objects of fathers, brothers or husbands. Their fathers, brothers or husbands do certainly have a duty of responsibility towards them as loved ones, but not over them like chattel. (Muslim Girl, 2018a, para. 12)

Additionally, healthier kinds of masculinity are not threatened when women demand their rights and autonomy (Imaanasim, 2019). Such masculinities recognize that feminist mobilization will be deterred by neither inertia to change the status quo, nor by the deep internalization of misogynistic beliefs (Imaanasim, 2019). Applying these tenets of healthy masculinity, *Muslim Girl* argues that:

Muslim men must allow Muslim women to define their own empowerment and stop dictating to us a male-centric definition. Rather than serving as a barrier to progress, Muslim men need to be allies and use their access and power in Islamic institutions to affirm women's rights. Otherwise, Muslim men are preventing Muslim women from playing a critical role in shaping this global movement and benefitting from it.

(Al-Khatahtbeh et al., 2014, para. 38)

Hampering feminist activism in Muslim communities can have serious consequences for how the intra-communal status of Muslim women is perceived (Al-Khatahtbeh et al., 2014). Namely, such hindrances can reinforce Islamophobic, orientalist discourses about misogynistic violence being unique to Muslim communities. To contest such tropes, it is all the more critical to foster constructive forms of Muslim masculinity.

Last but certainly not least, healthy, feminist-oriented masculinity benefits not only Muslim women, but Muslim men as well (Muslim Girl, 2018a). This discussion would be incomplete without recognizing how both, toxic masculinities as well as narrow definitions of feminism adversely impact men. This perspective is evident in *Muslim Girl* when it asks, "in our focus to liberate women from their long history of being silenced and abused, have we forsaken our brothers to a lifetime of silence and shame that they are never allowed to speak of?"

(Aishasaleh, 2018b, para. 2). In particular:

The silencing of men who have endured sexual violence goes far beyond the personal shame that toxic masculinity forces them to feel, and well into the political institutions

and public discourse that belittles just how much sexual violence a man can endure before he is taken seriously. (Aishasaleh, 2018b, para. 2)

Such dangerous narratives show up as “jokes about prison rape, the notion that ‘real men’ can protect themselves, and the fallacy that gay male victims likely ‘asked for it’”, all of which can collectively discourage male victims from speaking up and getting the help they need (Aishasaleh, 2018b, para. 8).

While “feminism has driven society such a long way and developed a discourse surrounding the woman’s experience that takes into consideration all forms of violence that were previously not taken seriously or implied to be the woman’s fault”, *Muslim Girl* notes that “for men, a similar discourse has not been developed” (Aishasaleh, 2018b, para. 8). Without taking away from the advances that movements like #MeToo have led to and without undermining the prevalence of gender-based violence against women, *Muslim Girl* states that:

In order for us to truly help the men who have suffered their own #MeToo Moments, we have to **change the public discourse** surrounding sexual violence against men, we have to **advocate for changes in the legal language** in order to make sure that sexual assault against men is included in their scope, and we have to **advocate for a complete overhaul of data collection biases** so that sexual violence against men *in every corner of our society* is reported upon and addressed. (Aishasaleh, 2018b, para. 12)

Discussing the #MeToo movement, *Muslim Girl* adds that:

For all of the empowerment that this movement has provided for women, for all of the platforms that it has offered survivors, we are now faced with a new responsibility, and that new responsibility reveals the question, ‘How do we make sure that men are included in these conversations so that they too can survive beyond, and thrive in spite of, their own traumatic histories?’” (Aishasaleh, 2018b, para. 5)

These shifts demand changing understandings of masculinity and driving home the countless benefits of positive, healthy conceptualizations of masculinity.

To sum up, this section began by briefly critiquing stereotypical representations of Muslim men as universally misogynistic. Next was a reflection on some of the defining traits of toxic masculinity and its manifestation in Muslim communities, as exemplified by the Wallah Bro. The next section detailed how Prophetic practices and Quranic verses are called upon to invoke healthy forms of Muslim masculinity, followed by an examination of the key characteristics of such masculinity and the benefits that positive masculinity offers to men and women alike. All in all, this examination of the narratives about masculinity builds on the earlier discussions regarding race and queerness, in order to demonstrate that Muslim women's experiences of Islam are shaped by their location at the intersection of these identities and by the dominant discourses pertaining to these themes. Building on this analysis, the next section delves into how Muslim women's engagement with Islam in the digital sphere is shaped by the strengths and limitations of online media and by the contours of digitality overall.

### **Media, Representation and Digitality**

“A critical part of history writing is that certain historical moments/narratives are silenced and rendered invisible” (Rahemtulla & Ababneh, 2021, p. 85). Digital media opens up the possibility of rewriting history and foregrounding traditionally marginalized voices. In this context, accounting for digitality and the politics of visibility in fostering particular narratives about Muslim women is of prime importance. In particular, the next few sections analyze how multifaceted digital environments, with their varying strengths and limitations, give rise to the discursive environments that shape how Muslim women are perceived. This analysis also delves into how the various, complex facets of social media and digital platforms shape the feminist activism of *Muslim Girl* bloggers.

To frame this discussion, Azad's (2017, p. 123) definition of digitality as “a coherent mode of being and thinking that emerges as a result of our living and being *through* digital media and technologies” is helpful. Digitality merits consideration in this thesis because its contours affect the content that is created. In studying the *Muslim Girl* content, I took a deep

dive into how the narratives that it articulates come up against the conditions of digitality. In particular, this research explores how *Muslim Girl* repackages Islam and navigates the pressures to do so, while also disrupting the exclusionary dynamics of digitality.

Another aspect of digitality is that understandings of the self and of interpersonal connections have been significantly altered by mobile phones and the internet (Elccessor, 2011). At the communal, national and international levels, various forms of media “play a pivotal role in shaping the ‘imagined community’” (Anderson, 1983, as cited in Jiwani, 2005, p. 15). For instance, not only does the media shape collective identity-making in nation-states, it is also “highly influential in shaping policy towards immigrants and cultural minority groups in the provincial and national landscape” (Fleras & Kunz, 2001, as cited in Jiwani, 2005, p. 15). Furthermore, their widespread influence demands paying attention to the multifaceted role that media and technology play in building and sustaining social circles, cultivating a sense of community, fostering relationships and nurturing existing bonds in our day-to-day lives (Elccessor, 2011).

From a theoretical perspective, Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA) offers a useful “analytic technique for the investigation of Internet and digital phenomena, artifacts, and culture” (Brock, 2018, p. 1012). Drawing on cultural theory, CTDA illustrates the intricate web of connections that mold how certain meanings and beliefs come to be associated with information and communication technologies (ICTs) (Brock, 2018). “CTDA requires the incorporation of critical theory—critical race, feminism, queer theory, and so on” to better understand users’ engagement with ICTs (Brock, 2018, p. 1012). This analytical lens is relevant here because *Muslim Girl’s* reflections on the positive and negative aspects of digital media, as detailed below, display a similar attunement to how the use of and attitude towards digital platforms and digital content is shaped by one’s own positionality.

As far as theoretical frameworks go, it is also worth noting that “the expanding engagement at the intersection of feminist scholarship and science and technology studies

(STS) has enriched both fields immeasurably” (Wajcman, 2010, p. 143). In both fields, “current approaches focus on the mutual shaping of gender and technology, in which technology is conceptualized as both a source and consequence of gender relations” (Wajcman, 2010, p. 143). Demonstrating a similar approach, the *Muslim Girl* blogs that address how Muslim women engage with and are represented in digital media show an awareness of this intersection of gender and technology. By steering clear of both gender essentialism and rigid technological determinism, *Muslim Girl’s* analysis underscores “that the gender-technology relationship is fluid and situated” (Wajcman, 2010, p. 143). Given this interdependency, “processes of technical change can influence gender power relations” (Wajcman, 2010, p. 143). As Wajcman (2010, p. 143) argues, “a feminist politics of technology is thus key to achieving gender equality”. *Muslim Girl* deploys this feminist analytical lens to scrutinize how and when digital platforms help or hinder Muslim women’s feminist activism, as explained below.

For all of these reasons above, along with this study’s overarching focus on how the digital environment impacts the ways in which Muslim women present themselves and the advocacy strategies they use, an examination of the online context and the possibilities and restrictions it offers is warranted.

### ***Opportunities Afforded by Social Media***

First and foremost, *Muslim Girl* claims that, “we need a lot more Muslim women telling their stories” in their own voices, rather than being hijacked by others (Mohsenian-Rahman, 2016, para. 35; Muslim Girl, 2018c). By increasing their online visibility in recent years, Muslim women effectively participate in what Weber (2016) calls the “politics of visibility” (as cited in Nas, 2022, p. 1166). Within this “politics of visibility” framework, “the power struggle in the digital space, in particular, is considered to be the struggle for visibility and is characterized by the amount of visual capital possessed by Muslim women” (Nas, 2022, p. 1166). This online activism “allows Muslim women to deconstruct the dominant understanding of themselves, against Islamophobic inclinations and patriarchal oppression within the Muslim habitus” (Nas,

2022, p. 1166).

In the same vein, *Muslim Girl* exemplifies how Muslim women are confronting stereotypes about themselves in the digital realm. As Ibtihaj Muhammad, the American, hijab-wearing Olympian notes, “it’s important to have Muslim women be shown in a different light” (Manalmoazzam, 2019, para. 22). To this end, there is immense potential in taking advantage of the possibilities that digital media offers for “telling the stories that the world needs to know from the very voices who truly understand and represent them” (Khatib, 2016, para. 2). Similarly, Amani Al-Khatahtbeh stresses the central role of the internet and social media in facilitating resistance against biased representations of Muslim women (Mokhtar, 2016a).

Addressing the origins of *Muslim Girl*, Al-Khatahtbeh explains:

The goal was to use the media and resources at our fingertips to capture our identity, portray ourselves, and reclaim the narrative. As Muslim women, having these resources and living in an open society, I felt it was our obligation to use them to the best of our ability. Our prerogative was to fight back using nothing but the internet, social media and a blog. (Mokhtar, 2016a, para. 4)

In this regard, the digital terrain enables visibility of the experiences of hijab and non-hijab wearing Muslim women, of those who work in the formal economy and those who don’t and broadly, of Muslim women from all walks of life. In this way, digital platforms enable the representation of Muslim women with diverse lived realities.

Another positive dimension of social media is that multiple people can “offer their own instant and constant primary accounts, as opposed to the often sensationalized work by removed journalists” (Qamar, 2015b, para. 10). This democratization of access not only diminishes gate-keeping, it also underscores “the importance social media plays in voicing the traditionally trivialized and massively marginalized” (Qamar, 2015b, para. 40). This broadening of access also means that more and more Muslims can claim religious authority for themselves by using social media to spread their message to a bigger network. In these ways, social media,

with its global accessibility, can widen the reach of narratives that have historically been ignored by traditional media or that may otherwise be easily overlooked (Qamar, 2015b). Moreover, “for online spaces, ‘the lack of physical presence, anonymity, and disinhibition can foster more open communication and feelings of safety’” (Morahan-Martin, 2000, p. 686, as cited in Vera-Gray, 2017, p. 65).

On the whole, digital environments offer potential “for fostering feminist networks, solidarities, and new political subjectivities by challenging patriarchal power dynamics in media, culture, and politics” (Hester Baer, 2016, p. 18, as cited in Nas, 2022, p. 1165). The disruptive potential of the digital sphere is also evident by the ways in which “women’s increasing participation in the digital environment signaled the emergence of diverse voices within the feminist movement in local and global contexts” (Nas, 2022, p. 1165). Grounded in this context, this study illustrates how a particular digital space i.e. the *Muslim Girl* blogs demonstrate this heightened multiplicity of voices in digital feminist spaces. This diversity of perspectives is apparent in the multiple examples from *Muslim Girl* that illuminate the emancipatory potential of digital media; these examples are examined in greater detail below.

**Examples of How Social Media Supports Feminist Activism.** This section features several examples of how digital spaces not only support Muslim women’s reclamation of their representations and their right to religious authority but also facilitate feminist solidarity, community building and constructive critique. These examples signify how:

Digital spaces, along with their opportunities and limitations, facilitate a crucial field of resistance to hegemonic patriarchal culture and politics in the form of feminist “safe spaces” (Rosemary Clark-Parsons 2018) or “counter-publics”. (Dustin Harp, Jaime Loke, and Ingrid Bachmann 2012, as cited in Nas, 2022, p. 1165)

**#LifeofAMuslimFeminist.** To begin with, both *Muslim Girl* and Sadar (2014, para. 7) refers to the Twitter hashtag #lifeofamuslimfeminist to expertly illustrate “the growing popularity of online Muslim feminism”. The hashtag’s creator, Twitter user Noorulann Shahid:

started the hashtag because she wanted to explain the frustration of being a Muslim feminist “navigating between Muslims telling you that you don’t need feminism and mainstream feminism rejecting you.” Shahid argued, “when this happens, there is nowhere you can position yourself comfortably.” (Sadar, 2014, para. 7)

This hashtag demonstrates how Muslim feminists harness digital spaces to amplify their voices and articulate the unique obstacles they face as well as the various aspirations they hold. *Muslim Girl* applauds this hashtag, explaining that it “picked up momentum by gathering voices of Muslim Women from around the world. The tweets intersected a variety of issues that reflect the diversity of the Muslim women identity” (Kit, 2014, para. 1). Not only does this hashtag highlight the struggles that Muslim women have in common with each other, but it also amplifies “how desperately the voices of Muslim women need to be directly heard by Muslims and non-Muslims, men and women alike” (Kit, 2014, para. 1).

***Teen Vogue.*** Secondly, in an “unprecedented inclusion of veiled Muslim women in a glossy U.S. magazine, our MuslimGirl founder Amani Al-Khatahtbeh is among several young women leaders featured in *Teen Vogue’s* February 2015 cover story” (MG Staff, 2016a, para. 1). This story, “which went viral online and made the ‘Top .com Stories’ section” marks “the first time veiled Muslim women are shown in a full-feature *Teen Vogue* print story” (MG Staff, 2016a, para. 3). The much-needed visibility of Muslim women is also articulated by Al-Khatahtbeh in the feature itself, where she asserts, “by reclaiming our narrative, we hope to empower Muslim women, combat negative stereotypes, and influence policies that impact us” (MG Staff, 2016a, para. 4).

***Comic Characters.*** Next, it is heartening to see greater diversity amongst both comic writers and comic characters, as exemplified by *Ms. Marvel’s* Kamala Khan, who is Muslim and Pakistani and offers a nuanced representation of both (Lynn, 2016). In this regard, another comic called *The Burka Avenger*, Pakistan’s first-ever animated superheroine also does a good job of contradicting the all-too-common trite representations of Muslim women (Fatima, 2013).

Some see this fictional character as being “inspired by 15-year-old activist Malala Yousafzai, who was the victim of one of the many attacks on hundreds of schools in northwest Pakistan - simply due to the fact that Taliban militants oppose girls’ education” (Fatima, 2013, para. 2). Importantly, in possibly being inspired by Yousafzai, “this cartoon makes it obvious that many citizens in Pakistan do not agree with the extremist ideas and fear that the Taliban instills” (Fatima, 2013, para. 6).

Moreover, in contrast to the Western clothing that female superheroes are usually clad in, *The Burka Avenger* wears a black burka i.e. a long, loose, robe-like piece of modest clothing (Fatima, 2013). Her dressing challenges dominant perceptions of veils as a tool of women’s subjugation, and positions it instead as a signifier of freedom and agency (Fatima, 2013). Speaking of the burka, Haroon Rashid, the show’s creator, reiterates “it’s not a sign of oppression. She is using the burka to hide her identity like other superheroes” (Fatima, 2013, para. 4). This reframing of the burka and its wearer disrupts imperialist, Eurocentric framings of Muslim women as lacking free will and needing to be rescued, framings that are often reinforced by “the presumptions under which imperial feminism operates because of how Muslim women are often portrayed in the media and through Western feminist groups” (Fatima, 2013, para. 7).

Instead, in *The Burka Avenger* “Muslim Pakistani women are empowered to take matters into their own hands” such that they can define feminism for themselves and mobilize for progressive change (Fatima, 2013, para. 7). In this way *The Burka Avenger* “dismantles this notion of a foreign savior or intervention being needed” to save Muslim women (Fatima, 2013, para. 7). Also, for this cartoon:

The targeted audience is not a Western one but specifically Muslim...and mainly Pakistani. This refusal to cater to the Western gaze makes this show unique as it is meant to inspire and encourage Pakistani youth, especially young girls to fight for what they believe in and their education. (Fatima, 2013, para. 6)

**Muslim Women's Day.** Social media's community-building capabilities are also evident in the trajectory through which the first Muslim Women's Day in 2017 "raised the bar to a whole new level of nuanced mainstream representation for Muslim women" (MG Staff, 2017b; Qamar, 2017, para. 2). Launched by Amani Al-Khatahtbeh to challenge the American travel ban against Muslims that was in place at the time and "as a way to center Muslim women and our stories", Muslim Women's Day is observed on March 27 (Huffington PostMG Staff, 2021b, para. 1, 2017a; Qamar, 2017). Topics addressed by this campaign include: feminism, ethnicity, Muslim womanhood, representation of women in hijab, inspiring Muslim women and LGBTQ+ inclusive Muslim spaces (Qamar, 2017).

According to *Muslim Girl*, "the #MuslimWomensDay global campaign has grown to become the biggest media day of the year centering the voices and stories of Muslim women" (MG Staff, 2021a, para. 1). It seeks to elevate Muslim women's perspectives and to diversify their representation in mainstream media (MG Staff, 2021b, 2017a; Qamar, 2017). Muslim Women's Day made its way onto several popular platforms, such as *Huffington Post*, *MTV*, *Allure*, *Refinery 29*, *Teen Vogue*, *Bustle* and *Women's Health*, amongst others (Qamar, 2017). In the digital domain, the campaign's hashtag, #MuslimWomensDay went viral and was trending on Twitter, amply magnifying Muslim women's achievements and narratives in the process (MG Staff, 2017b; Mokhtar, 2017). This "massive flood of support from lots of communities and institutions honoring Muslim women" was inspiring (Mokhtar, 2017, para. 7). Keeping the online momentum going the following year, in 2018 *Muslim Girl's* social media followers were invited to share their reasons for marching at the annual women's march (Khan, 2018).

**Refinery29.** Another related example is that of *Refinery29*, which is seen as a trend-setting online media platform that is leading remarkable projects (Rhiannabeaumont, 2018). *Refinery29* has supported *Muslim Girl's* #MuslimWomensDay right from day one, thus centrally contributing to the success of this initiative. Another progressive initiative by *Refinery29* is *Strong Opinions Loosely Held*, a podcast on feminism and popular culture

(Rhiannabeaumont, 2018). This podcast addresses various topics, including how Islam engages with and is supportive of feminism (Rhiannabeaumont, 2018).

***Evolution of Religious Authority in the Context of Digitality.*** A prime example of the potential that social media offers is the mixed-gender prayer led by feminist Islamic scholar Amina Wadud in New York in 2005; it is argued that “without media exposure the 2005 prayer would not have achieved the high symbolic value that it did” (Nyhagen, 2019; Petersen, 2019, p. 3). This example demonstrates how digitality is profoundly reshaping Islamic scholars’ authority in unprecedented ways (Azad, 2017). Indeed, “authority/knowledge within the interactive spaces of Web 2.0 is dissected, reconfigured and reassembled as another kind of knowledge” (Azad, 2017, pp. 122–123). More specifically:

Digitality is challenging various branches of Islam (whether Shia, Sunni, Wahhabi, or what have you), when it comes to their authority, not least because traditional Islamic authorities have to now—consciously and unconsciously—comport themselves and their message to the logic of digitality. (Azad, 2017, p. 123)

To analyze this development from a gender-sensitive perspective, “the Internet has made possible the rupture with the traditional Islamic leadership, and many collectives (like women), who could not make them heard before, can now access first-hand sources that can help them to empower themselves” (Navarro, 2016, p. 91). In addition to “diversifying modes of authority, the combination of social change, initiatives to educate women and technological innovation has led to new options for religious careers” for Muslim women (Kloos & Künkler, 2016, p. 484). In other words, the widespread availability and use of social media and the internet, coupled with access to education, were prerequisites “for women’s engagement in the public sphere and from which the female preacher could obtain the necessary intellectual and religious capital” required to be legitimized as a religious authority (Kloos, 2021; Makboul, 2017, p. 305).

In this digital landscape, Muslim women who are religious figures of authority leverage

new media and draw on “international movements with the aim of claiming a new social identity for their sisters in Islam, establishing greater equality between men and women in the religion” (Gomez-Perez, 2016, p. 45). To elaborate, social media has enabled women religious leaders to expand their audience and “cut across traditional gender segregation”, allowing “even the more ultra-orthodox and peripheral preachers to engage in discussions where the potential public consists of both women and men” (Makboul, 2017, pp. 320–321). In this way, new media can enable such preachers to digitally reach audiences “in ways that are difficult or impossible within the (generally male-dominated) confines of physical religious spaces” (Hefner and Jamil; Le Renard, 2012; Piela, 2012; Sanyal, 2015 as cited in Kloos & Künkler, 2016, p. 485).

On top of that, “professionalization is a feature of the development of female Islamic authority across social classes” (Kloos & Künkler, 2016, p. 485). In this realm, digitality influences various aspects of the professionalization of Muslim women’s religious authority. For instance, modern-day professionalism, coupled with the opportunities offered by digital platforms, enables Muslim women religious leaders to reach audiences that “vary in terms of age or socioeconomic background” as well as education levels (Kloos, 2021, p. 280). Additionally, the configuration and public nature of digital spaces impacts the narratives of modesty that are leveled at Muslim women. In response to such narratives, “women Islamic popular preachers navigate, and to some extent obviate, this tension between publicity and modesty by cultivating a professional style” (Kloos, 2021, p. 278).

Demonstrating how the digital sphere and professionalization both impact religious authorities’ practices, “popular preachers combine mass media—from radio to Instagram—with clever business models to proselytize, move, or entertain their audiences, and/or challenge authorities and institutions relying on more-traditional forms and technologies of Islamic pedagogy” (Beekers 2015, Hoesterey 2015, Millie 2017, Moll 2010, Schulz 2006, Slama 2017b, Thomas & Lee 2012, as cited in Kloos, 2021, p. 281). Moreover, innovative community-building tools like online platforms “provide female religious leaders with opportunities to engage in

activities and religious debates” (Hefner and Jamil; Le Renard, 2012; Piela, 2012; Sanyal, 2015 as cited in Kloos & Künkler, 2016, p. 485). Analyzing digitality thus provides insights into how digital avenues influence Muslim women’s experiences as both religious authorities and consumers of media.

Echoing the above academic research, *Muslim Girl* indicates how digital media can empower Muslim women to draw on religious authority for themselves and towards feminist ends. For example, *Muslim Girl* draws attention to how religious “physical spaces directly create platforms and foster environments that determine whether female leaders, speakers and participation in general are also being encouraged in a community” (Qamar, 2015b, para. 40). “Such introspection and epiphanies have given rise to recent movements within Muslim communities, such as #addfemalespeakers and #NoAllMalePanels, to encourage the voices of women throughout the Ummah” i.e. the Muslim community (Qamar, 2015b, para. 40).

In another similar example, *Muslim Girl* utilizes social media to shed light on how “the majority of mosques in America today are set up under a physical space that intrinsically prioritizes the respect of men, often at the cost of leaving women by the wayside” (Qamar, 2015b, para. 38). In this example, a Tumblr blog titled *Side Entrance* “publishes submissions by women around the globe who photographically compare the men’s sections of their mosques with the women’s (given, of course, the latter even exists)” (Qamar, 2015b, para. 38). This curation’s goal “is listed so eloquently as, ‘Photos from mosques around the world, showcasing women’s sacred spaces, in relation to men’s spaces. We show the beautiful, the adequate and the pathetic’” (Qamar, 2015b, para. 39).

To sum up, this section has argued that the digital age has led “to a certain degree of leveling, or democratization of Islamic authority” (Azad, 2017, p. 124). However, “as with the widespread problem of fake news, where anyone and everyone can write and opine on issues as they see fit and without any regulation”, this democratization of religious authority as facilitated by digital media also raises concerns about the authenticity and reliability of the

information circulating in digital spaces (Azad, 2017, p. 124). Even though it has undoubtedly transformed women's ability to be religious leaders, the risk of echo chambers is also amplified in digital spaces because "participants in social media platforms often tend to remain within their own field by following like-minded people and thus re-produce the milieu that they already belong to" rather than being exposed to the broad range of worldviews that exist (Makboul, 2017, p. 321). This critique hints at some of the limitations of digital environments that also require a close examination, as detailed in the next section.

### ***Pitfalls of Digital Media***

"While Muslim women use online spaces to verbalize their positions against hegemonic expectations, this space, too, is not without threats and misrepresentations which they resist on a daily basis" (Farokhi, 2019, p. 1196). For instance, questions abound about whether online interactions can genuinely convey warmth and intimacy, and whether individuals tend to be forthright about their true selves in the digital realm (Elccessor, 2011). Moreover, any study of digital media must account for the ways such media leaves out large swathes of the population who cannot access these channels or cannot do so on a regular basis. The digital divide thus merits due consideration for who gets left out of the fold and how this divide impacts the diversity of viewpoints that are shared through digital media. Put simply, while digital platforms enable the dissemination of a wide variety of perspectives, it is important to remain mindful of narratives that still remain excluded due to lack of access to digital media. Addressing these concerns demands a deep understanding of the inherent characteristics of how "both the nature of the media and the needs and desires of the users shape the meaning and utility of a given medium at a given time" (Elccessor, 2011, para. 9).

Even from the outset, there is a discernible "need for a critical interrogation of the internet in terms of trolling, misogyny, and hate speech" (Nas, 2022, p. 1165). Without disregarding the numerous benefits that digital spaces offer, a profound examination of these darker aspects of the internet and their "detrimental effects on women's mobilization" is

warranted (Emma A. Jane 2016, 287, as cited in Nas, 2022, p. 1165). With that in mind, this section highlights the key drawbacks of digital channels and social media when it comes to Muslim women's feminist mobilization.

**Over-Simplified Representations.** First and foremost, *Muslim Girl* addresses how unidimensional media representations of women and of Muslims advance unduly flattened narratives. Put simply, social and digital media can make nuanced dialogue difficult. This tendency towards reductive representations is worsened by the fact that “the attention of the consuming and reading user is only too limited” (Qamar, 2016b, para. 6). Given that “attention is the currency of the internet”, “the phrase ‘perception is reality’ could not apply more” (Qamar, 2016b, para. 6). In other words, equating perception with reality eclipses the complex analyses and in-depth information that the internet offers on various issues (Qamar, 2016b). As Azad (2017, p. 130) argues, “digitality is responsible for rendering *incomprehensible* more nuanced policies and arguments”. Furthermore “while media/propaganda has arguably always tended towards simplification, which has always tended towards binary propositions, which has always tended towards populism, digitality is now taking those tendencies to their logical extremes” (Azad, 2017, pp. 130–131). To elaborate:

Digitality necessitates opinions that are more fanciful than they are true, for the fundamental reason that the economy of the digital realm depends on clickable content which needs to be more and more slanted towards falsehood. Truth in the digital sphere is less click-worthy. (Azad, 2017, p. 131)

In this context, *Muslim Girl's* critique of stereotypical media representations not only displays an awareness of the dangers of oversimplification, it also exemplifies resistance against the imperative to irredeemably pare down complicated issues.

For instance, *Muslim Girl* argues that, “Hollywood filmmakers don't exactly have the best track record in nuanced, 3-dimensional portrayals of contemporary Muslims and their lives” (Matan, 2018a, para. 1). Given this lack of authenticity and depth in how they are represented,

“it’s understandable that most Muslims approach any representation of themselves in Hollywood with skepticism and hesitance” (Matan, 2018a, para. 1). Calling out such alienating, monolithic representations of Muslims and Muslim women especially in the American context, *Muslim Girl* points out that:

Every time you see a Muslim woman in media, she covers her hair and has an accent like she’s from another country. On the other side of it, Muslim women who choose not to cover her hair are really not represented at all. (Mohsenian-Rahman, 2016, para. 8)

In media depictions, there is barely any representation of the nuances of being Muslim and American (and possibly other forms of hyphenated identity) (Mohsenian-Rahman, 2016). It is only recently that this notion of a hyphenated identity is being showcased (Mohsenian-Rahman, 2016).

In terms of specific examples, *Muslim Girl* critiques a problematic TV series made by the Clintons to exemplify how televised depictions can co-opt feminism for ulterior, opportunistic and self-serving motives (Jummanah, 2021a). Similarly, even in comics the depiction of Muslim women continues to be starkly stereotypical for the most part (Lynn, 2016). In this space too, Muslim women’s representation has long been “reduced to poorly researched propaganda pieces, or sloppily inserted mascots for inclusivity” (Lynn, 2016, para. 21). Epitomizing the suppressed Muslim woman, *Muslim Girl* critiques *Sooraya Qadir*, a comic character who “is fashioned as a stand-in for the mythic **Oppressed Muslim Woman** necessary to drive forward the image of American forces as liberators” (Lynn, 2016, para. 14). This trope is also echoed in modern, popular comic characters such as *Monet St. Croix* (Lynn, 2016). *Croix*:

is often written with an assumed inner conflict between her confident, outspoken nature and her (read: conservative, oppressive) Muslim faith. Monet is written in a way that’s sort of Muslim-when-convenient. Her faith is only brought up when addressing the perceived conflict between Islam and empowerment, or when her faith is used as a violent nod to inclusivity. (Lynn, 2016, paras. 19–20)

Such simplistic representations gather steam because “the pitfall that comic writers fell into for so many years with Muslim characters is the assumption that there are no Muslims in the audience” (Lynn, 2016, para. 17). Such portrayals reveal that, “the perceived conflict of ‘Yes, I’m Muslim AND I’m a feminist’ is only because the writer assumes that *being Muslim* and *being empowered* are contradictory” (Lynn, 2016, para. 19). These examples stand in stark contrast to more progressive comic characters, such as *The Burka Avenger* and *Ms. Marvel’s* Kamala Khan, which are detailed above.

All in all, “Muslim women are commonly misrepresented in the media. This is often due to the fact that we have no input on how we should be represented” (MG Staff, 2021c, para. 1; Mohsenian-Rahman, 2016). As with the earlier critique of Hollywood depictions, across all digital channels “elevating the voices of those who own or live a topic is absolutely pivotal” (Jummanah, 2021a; Qamar, 2016b, para. 7). Rather than having stories co-opted by Hollywood or other forces, there is a need for sustained and meaningful partnerships with the people whose stories are being told in order to empower them to share their narratives in ways that they choose (Jummanah, 2021a). While stereotypical representations are inherently worrying, they also speak to the broader issue of how certain groups are reduced to clichés to then justify their subjugation. The next pitfall discussed below is this othering of Muslims and Muslim women and its exacerbation through digital media.

**Islamophobia and Othering.** Digital spaces, despite all their potential for liberation, concurrently enable digital forms of Islamophobia. Azad (2017, p. 131) explains that, “the provenance of digitality is a West rooted in assumptions about its own superiority, and, if anything, it is re-doubling its efforts in asserting its identity in opposition to ‘the rest’ of the world, most notably ‘the Muslim world’”. Worsening these exclusionary tendencies of the digital sphere, post 9/11, “Western mainstream media have become obsessed with Islam, often sensationalizing Muslims as inherently violent, barbaric, and as undesirable Others” (Farokhi & Jiwani, 2021, p. 11). These conditions indicate how “digitality is geared towards the creation of

people who belong to 'humanity' as opposed to those who do not. And Muslims—as far as digitality *writ large*—are considered less and less human” (Azad, 2017, p. 132). Exemplifying this divide:

Muslims have been complaining for some years that terrorist attacks in Muslim countries do not provoke the creation of Facebook “filters” as the “we are all Paris” filter following the Paris attacks on November 13, 2015, for example, and other similar filters.” (Azad, 2017, p. 132)

These hegemonic power dynamics in online spaces are also evident in how “the Internet has stripped Muslim bodies of any complexity thereby internalizing, legitimizing, and normalizing the dehumanization and criminalization of their bodies, albeit in more subtle and invisible ways” (Farokhi, 2019, p. 1196). In recent times, this dehumanization is noticeable in the dramatic surge in the utilization of social media and digital channels to articulate “anger, hatred, and even to make death threats towards Muslims” (Farokhi & Jiwani, 2021, p. 11). These developments speak to “the heightened state of anti-Muslim sentiment in the current digital landscape, in North America and beyond” (Farokhi & Jiwani, 2021, p. 11).

Adding fuel to this fire, another stumbling block of the current social media terrain is that it “collapses boundaries between different speaking and writing situations and flattens distinctions between more and less credible sources” (Azam, 2018, p. 125). Additionally, “the speed at which misinformation and distortion is spread is unprecedented, facilitated by online organizations established for the specific purpose of undermining Muslim voices and impeding nuanced discussions about Islam” (Azam, 2018, p. 125). In effect, this social and digital media landscape makes it even easier to manipulate and misappropriate Islamic teachings to supplement Islamophobic discourses online (Azam, 2018). These pitfalls of social and digital platforms reinforce the need to “document and make visible in the face of ‘fake news’ and misinformation the various instances of ongoing and virulent Islamophobia and their different transnational itineraries and impacts” (Farokhi & Jiwani, 2021, p. 11).

Moreover, “the violence, scale, and power of anti-Muslim narratives circulated on the internet and elsewhere continue to have considerable impact on feminist anti-violence initiatives” (Razack, 2021, p. 31). Similarly, *Muslim Girl* is cognizant of the barriers that feminist endeavors face in digital spaces, as evidenced by blogs which recognize that since 9/11 there has been an escalation of “anti-Muslim ideology in a way that oppresses Muslim women even further” (Amani, 2016, para. 7). One example of such anti-Muslim attitudes that *Muslim Girl* describes is in relation to as the aforementioned hashtag #lifeofamuslimfeminist (Kit, 2014). To no one’s surprise, there was intense resistance to this hashtag by Islamophobic keyboard warriors who are convinced that Muslim women are brainwashed and hence cannot see how their problems exist solely because of Islam (Amani, 2016; Kit, 2014, para. 1).

Underlying such viewpoints is the white savior complex that mistakenly assumes “Muslim women have just now begun to resist the structures working against them” (Kit, 2014, para. 2). Such perspectives ignore how Muslim women have long been disrupting orientalist, white supremacist discourses that homogenize and overly simplify their diverse identities, motivations and desires (Kit, 2014). Despite this resistance by Muslim women, Western media continue to display “an institutionalized effort to attribute societal issues to the Islamic religion, which is today’s Islamophobia cloaked in the noble guise of women’s empowerment” (Amani, 2016, para. 7).

On this front, it is also important to acknowledge that declarations of Islamophobia are not meant to be weaponized to shut down all discussion of religious fundamentalism in Muslim communities. Instead, the point is to partake in such discussions in ways that do not reinforce racist or Islamophobic tropes (Matan, 2018a). Demonstrating this kind of refined analytical approach, *Muslim Girl* puts forward a unique and nuanced critique of stereotypical representations of Muslim women on TV. This critique draws on the example of *Bodyguard*, a miniseries by BBC which “came to a conclusion with a stunning twist: A mild-mannered character named Nadia Ali revealed herself to be a terrorist mastermind, implicated with her

husband in an attempted bombing” (MG Staff, 2018, para. 1). Without minimizing the extensive criticism by critics who “came out to protest what they perceived as yet another Muslim stereotype being shoved down our throats”, this series also underscores how it is unwise “to minimize the role women play in terrorist activities” (MG Staff, 2018, paras. 2–3). *Muslim Girl* explains:

If we look beyond the semantics for just a moment, we might focus on a problem that security experts have long warned us about: The role of female extremists acting on impulses of their own, rather than due to coercion by male terrorists. More often than not, female terrorists are not innocent, misguided victims of evil men. They are self-aware agents acting of their own accord. (MG Staff, 2018, paras. 3–4)

*Muslim Girl* also argues that:

To ignore the agency of women like the character of Nadia Ali in *Bodyguard*, to dismiss it as yet another toxic stereotype, overlooks the very real threat of vulnerable women opting to engage their agency through acts of terrorism because they feel a sense of disconnect and disenfranchisement. (MG Staff, 2018, para. 5)

In this analysis, *Muslim Girl* does not try to pigeonhole such entertainment-oriented and fictionalized media representations of autonomous female Muslim terrorists as being universally Islamophobic (MG Staff, 2018). This point is also reiterated by scholarly writing, namely that while Muslim grievances are not to be undermined, Muslims must also recognize the growing influence of extremism (Khan, 2009). *Muslim Girl* similarly argues that this phenomenon deserves attention, and it does so without detracting from the simultaneous need for caution against “the misuse of the term ‘jihadi’ to stoke images of a war waged” (MG Staff, 2018, para. 5). *Muslim Girl*’s analysis of this miniseries signifies how “despite the fact that discourse about terrorism is usually laced with vicious Islamophobia, it is possible to have discussions about extremism, radicalization, and terrorism without being inherently Islamophobic or racist” (Matan, 2018a, para. 9).

Framed by these dynamic discourses, “Muslim digital feminism exists in a complicated relationship to ‘visual capital’ because visual regimes are marked by a dominant gaze that targets Islam and Muslim women as ‘other’” (Weber, 2016, p. 107 as cited in Nas, 2022, p. 1166). As *Muslim Girl* states, “it’s hard to tell your own story to a broad audience, when you have been deemed ‘other’ from birth” (Laurel, 2015, para. 4). As some stories become normative and are universalized, “we should consider the stories we might be silencing” (Laurel, 2015, para. 9). This call for normative, universal stories belies “an appeal for something ‘more like us’” (Laurel, 2015, para. 9).

However, “the definition of ‘universal’ is owned by those whose stories have already been told—and told with complexity” (Laurel, 2015, para. 8). Since there are only some whose stories are seen as universal, there are inevitably others whose stories are not seen as normative (Laurel, 2015). Those whose stories are not considered universal “are pressured to adopt the same stories, the same language, used and approved by others” (Laurel, 2015, para. 9). This erasure means that those “who have never seen themselves reflected back are expected to continue not existing” (Laurel, 2015, para. 9). Such expectations to bow down to the pressure for universal stories “only makes our stories narrower, but using it as an opportunity to explore the lives of others, so unlike our own, takes back the term and gives it the meaning it’s meant to have” such that the universal becomes more inclusive of a wide array of perspectives, including those that have been historically overlooked and othered (Laurel, 2015, para. 9).

Having looked at the ways in which the digital media landscape impacts how Muslims are stereotyped in media and how they resist such externally-imposed representations, next up is a brief examination of how social media can also aggravate internal issues with Muslim communities. In this domain, a notable pitfall of digital media is its tendency to cultivate self-policing and a sense of perfectionism (Leahvernon, 2017d). Reflecting this propensity, one *Muslim Girl* blogger shares “I allowed the Muslim community to dictate what I shared on my timeline” (Leahvernon, 2017d, para. 8). The digital terrain can make it easy to get “so caught up

in the false perfections of social media” which can give way to the labeling of those who deviate from said perfectionism as being provocative and rebellious (Leahvernon, 2017d, para. 7). Amongst the Muslim community, such policing can look like being shamed for talking about taboo topics or being seen as “too risqué for certain Muslims” (Leahvernon, 2017c, para. 9).

Interestingly, digital media exacerbates the stricter standard of decency and modesty that Muslim women are held to, whereas “men are judged on an entirely different level” (Leahvernon, 2017c, para. 9). One example of how social media has worsened patriarchal discourses amongst Muslims is through the sharing of an image which “depicts women as lollipops, showing the one packaged as good and clean, and the unwrapped surrounded by flies, dirty” in a misguided effort to argue that veiled women are pure and clean, and that those who do not cover are impure and unworthy (Issa, 2016, para. 29).

To summarize, the predisposition of online environments for over-simplification, reductive depictions, sensationalization and false binaries means that digital spaces tend to heighten Islamophobia. In addition to the contours of digital media itself, hegemonic Western media narratives further extend the reach of Islamophobic narratives and media representations, as described in more detail below.

**Representations of Muslims in the News.** Building on the above review of the dangers of digital media, the below instances of news reporting, as noted in *Muslim Girl* exemplify these aforementioned weaknesses of online media. Specifically, the drawbacks of online news include a lack of in-depth analysis, a tendency to buy into binaristic framings and a likelihood to reinforce stereotypes about Muslims as being terrorism-prone. This analysis is followed by a consideration of how certain news articles engage with discourses about nationhood in the context of Canada, America and France specifically.

For this section, I draw primarily on two *Muslim Girl* blogs that have a running hashtag called #MuslimGirlProbs (Muslim Girl, 2015a, 2015b). #MuslimGirlProbs is defined as *Muslim Girl's* “weekly link roundup of headlines, stories, events, and situations” that paint Muslims in a

negative light (Muslim Girl, 2015a, para. 1, 2015b para. 1). These news pieces are featured below, along with commentary regarding the narratives that such news espouses.

To begin with, news articles that unduly depict Muslims as prone to acts of terrorism are denounced by *Muslim Girl*. Such news coverage is then exploited to limit the freedom of Muslims in the name of security. Exemplifying this purported rationale, a news article notes that “China bans a Muslim group from holding meetings, reporting allegations that the group may have links with ISIL, because of some leaflets with the ‘Allah is my God, Muhammad is my Messenger’ symbol that all Muslims identify with” (Muslim Girl, 2015b, para. 5). Similarly, another news article asks “Was the co-pilot Muslim? Why did he want to kill all those people” (Muslim Girl, 2015b, para. 6). Likewise, yet another news piece discusses “the advertising of anti-Muslim ads on 84 buses, with the headline ‘Jew Hatred: It’s in the Quran’” (Muslim Girl, 2015b, para. 9). *Muslim Girl* weighs in here, noting that these ads intensified anti-Muslim hatred and led to assault, harassment and killings (Muslim Girl, 2015b). Together, these examples signify how Islamophobic rhetoric systemically positions Muslims as inherently violent and how such rhetoric makes Muslims more likely to face discursive, material and in some cases lethal violence.

*Muslim Girl* then critiques how one news “article seems to challenge the idea that there can be Muslim feminism” (Muslim Girl, 2015a, para. 5). The problematic underlying assumption here is that Islam is inherently anti-feminist, which then implies that Muslim women cannot reconcile Islam with their feminist values. Confronting such assumptions about Muslim women’s universal oppression at the hands of Islam, *Muslim Girl* also denounces Ayaan Hirsi Ali being called “a hero of our time” (Muslim Girl, 2015b, para. 2). According to *Muslim Girl*, Ali is known for “stereotyping Islam based on a culture she was raised in” and “riding on the dark horse of Islamophobia to promote her books” as well as “infantilizing Muslim women” and “releasing false statistics to increase hatred towards the Muslim community” (Muslim Girl, 2015b, para. 2).

Next, the news that an Australian Muslim woman was “traumatized by an online, abusive international hate campaign led by (surprise, surprise!) white US supremacists” not only epitomizes gendered Islamophobic violence in the digital realm but it also points towards how such violence manifests across countries (Muslim Girl, 2015a, para. 7). This example segues into the following consideration of how particular national narratives engage with Islam and Muslims.

Specifically in the Canadian context, *Muslim Girl* cites a news article where Canada’s then Prime Minister, Stephen Harper said “that the niqab is ‘rooted in a culture that is anti-women’” (Muslim Girl, 2015a, para. 2). In the same vein, Canada’s then Defence Minister, Jason Kennedy, “felt compelled on International Women’s Day to tweet pictures of Muslim women covered in niqabs, being led off by chains, as an attack on ISIS” (Muslim Girl, 2015a, para. 4). For one, *Muslim Girl* points out the irony that Kennedy was also Canada’s Multicultural Minister at the time (Muslim Girl, 2015a). For another, both the above examples illuminate the complex ways in which Canadian narratives of progress, multiculturalism and diversity come up against Islamophobic discourses and stereotypes about Muslim women, a deeper analysis of which is presented elsewhere in chapter 2.

This critique by *Muslim Girl* about Canada’s inclination to stereotype Muslim women as unequivocally oppressed also shows up in scholarly research. For example, “post-9/11, the Canadian press followed the US media in casting Afghan women as abject victims who could be rescued only by what Iris Marion Young has aptly called the ‘knights of civilization’” (Jiwani, 2009, p. 728). This critical perspective is also evident in *Muslim Girl* when it argues that:

Over the past several decades we’ve seen multiple examples of Muslim women making their way on the page—often in poorly researched or abjectly stereotypical portrayals—created rather transparently in support of U.S. military involvement in the Middle East and Central Asia. (Lynn, 2016, para. 5)

In this context, *Muslim Girl* reminds its readers that “the invasion of– and increasing military presence in– Afghanistan was often supported and even encouraged by Western feminist celebrities and organizations in the cause of liberating Afghani women” (Lynn, 2016, para. 14). Such imperialist invasions rely on and reinforce “the Orientalist construction of Islam as a homogeneous and monolithic faith and its representation as an essentialized patriarchal force” (Jiwani, 2009, p. 728). Furthermore, the contrasting framing of Afghan Canadian women as compared to Afghan women in Afghanistan draws on oppositional representations of the two groups “with respect to issues of agency, victimhood, and Canadian benevolence” (Jiwani, 2009, p. 728). Ultimately, such news “coverage reinforces and legitimates an imagined community that is reflective of Canada as a white, settler colony” (Jiwani, 2009, p. 728).

Moving on, in the American context, *Muslim Girl* draws on a news article where Paul Sperry, the author of a book “on ‘Muslim spies’ infiltrating the White House, questions the dramatic rise in Muslim newcomers from war-torn, ‘dangerous’ countries, and calls for in-depth screening or a complete blockade” (Muslim Girl, 2015b, para. 7). Here, *Muslim Girl* decries the Islamophobia, racism, imperialism and xenophobia implied in Sperry’s outlook (Muslim Girl, 2015b). Furthermore, news articles like “a Georgia terrorist plants a Quran bomb, framing Muslims” underscore that some want “to create Islamophobic hatred by any means necessary” (Muslim Girl, 2015b, para. 4). These articles also illuminate how easily and unquestioningly the purported connection between Muslims and terrorism is accepted.

Finally, two examples of how anti-Muslim persecution manifests in France are relevant here. These examples build on an earlier section of this chapter that delves into France’s historic and ongoing alienation of Muslims. The first news article states that “a pregnant Muslim woman was attacked in Toulouse, France by Islamophobic terrorists who pulled her hijab and hair while exclaiming ‘none of that here’” (Muslim Girl, 2015b, para. 8). Highlighting the prevalence of this kind of Islamophobic violence, *Muslim Girl* notes that “this attack is one among hundreds since the Charlie Hebdo shootings” (Muslim Girl, 2015b, para. 8). The second

news piece states that “a Muslim woman sues for being asked to remove her jacket, unnecessarily and humiliatingly, at a French airport” (Muslim Girl, 2015a, para. 6). These articles exemplify the targeting of Muslim women and the permissibility of their harassment across institutions.

*Muslim Girl's* above critique of biased news reporting and stereotypical representations of Muslims aims to resist clichéd depictions of Muslims across media channels. Combating such reductive narratives, *Muslim Girl* points out that American media, and arguably Western media outlets broadly, lack nuanced commentaries about “the raw tension in the dramatic, complex socio-political situations that gave rise to the War on Terror” (Matan, 2018a, para. 2). Conversely, analytical frameworks that do take these complexities into consideration can offer “antidotes and modes of resistance to the on and offline hate directed toward Muslims across the globe” (Farokhi & Jiwani, 2021, p. 13).

Furthermore, these reductive tendencies of digital media illuminate the capitalist environment that they operate in, where soundbytes, short attention spans and catchy headlines reign supreme. Illustrating this tension, even for digital media like *Muslim Girl* that are inclined towards anti-capitalist forms of feminism, there is no escaping that such digital platforms must simultaneously seek the validation of capitalism too. For instance, *Muslim Girl* draws attention to the fact that “it became the first Muslim company to ever make the Forbes 30 Under 30 list”, which is a prime example of appeals to capitalist standards of recognition (Hamed, 2017a; MG Staff, 2016a, para. 5). Hence, even for platforms like *Muslim Girl* that critique capitalism, it may not be possible to fully escape the validity and legitimacy that capitalistic achievements beget. Therefore, is it vital to account for the complex ways in which capitalism and other prevailing influences affect the use of digital media for social justice purposes.

To this end, scholarly work that engages with capitalism, digital Islamophobia and transnational feminisms offers deeper insights into “how the confluences of race, gender, and religion become transmuted through digital platforms and racist, nationalist, and other violent

and lethal Islamophobic ideologies” (Farokhi & Jiwani, 2021, p. 11). To put it briefly, several of the above sections sought to illuminate the dynamic and sometimes contradictory ways in which digital media platforms and the broader context of capitalism shape Muslim feminist mobilization.

In conclusion, this chapter has traced the numerous factors that inform Muslim women’s gendered experiences of Islam. It began with a critical engagement with prevailing narratives about the hijab to better understand how these narratives affect Muslim women’s perceptions of identity and agency. Central to this analysis were examples illustrating the dynamics of belonging and exclusion, particularly evident in the experiences of Muslim women in France. These examples underscored how universalized presumptions about the subjugation of hijab-wearing Muslim women perpetuate gendered Islamophobia, add to Muslim women’s marginalization and overshadow the diverse realities of Muslim women. To counter these narratives, this chapter interrogated the complexities of agency and choice, highlighting the double standards imposed on Muslim women within feminist discourses.

Adopting an intersectional lens, this chapter then examined how racialization, racism and Islamophobia multiply impact Muslim women’s realities in settler colonial states and in the post 9/11 era. This focus on race highlighted the need to challenge exclusionary, white-centric understandings of feminism by centering the perspectives of racialized women, and particularly Black Muslim women and feminists. This chapter also explored queerness within Islamic contexts as addressed by *Muslim Girl*, including a critique of advancing Islamophobia under the guise of fighting homophobia. Then, this chapter examined the construction of Muslim masculinities and toxic masculinities, followed by a consideration of how feminist Muslim masculinities are rooted in Islamic principles of equity and respect.

Last but not least, this chapter paid attention to how the widespread use of digital and social media shape Muslim women’s experiences and feminist activism. In this realm, the potential that social media holds for enhancing feminist advocacy and extending Muslim women

religious leaders' audience and influence was articulated. Contrarily, the challenges inherent in digital media were also considered, such as its tendency towards binaristic representations and its inability to convey nuance. From the diverse narratives about the hijab, to the intersecting effects of race, queerness and other identity factors to the particularities of the digital landscape, Muslim women's experiences of belonging are shaped by various influences. This analysis of Muslim women's lived realities sets the stage for the next chapter of this thesis, which examines *Muslim Girl's* critique of both, oppressive dynamics in Muslim communities and exclusionary forms of mainstream feminism.

## 5. Muslim Girl's Critique of Islamic and Feminist Discourses

Much of this thesis thus far has focused on how *Muslim Girl* seeks to illustrate that Islam is feminist in its beliefs and teachings. However, interpreting Islam as feminist does not nullify the need for intra-communal reflection and honest critique about the problems present in some Muslim-majority spaces. As a result, this chapter takes a critical, introspective look at some prevalent challenges within Muslim communities, including the need for intra-communal introspection, institutional oversight, accountability of leaders and the problematic male domination of religious authority. This chapter also examines how victim-blaming narratives intersect with Islamophobia to exacerbate the marginalization of Muslim women. Next up is a deeper dive into the various forms of exclusion that Muslim women face within Muslim communities. Following this is a reflection on the purpose of such critique, including the role of critical analysis in building more inclusive futures.

After detailing the multiple forms of resistance that Muslim women and their allies are mounting against the aforementioned challenges in Muslim communities, this chapter contests the ways in which mainstream feminist narratives further subjugate Muslim women. Specifically, this critique disrupts stereotypes about saving Muslim women that advance imperialist and Islamophobic rhetoric in the name of feminism. Finally, this chapter turns to the exclusionary and at times Islamophobic dynamics of feminism, followed by an examination of how these alienating conditions give rise to ambivalence about the term feminism itself.

### Taking a Critical Look at Internal Issues

Muslim women tackle pervasive forms of patriarchy that necessitate feminist mobilization and “fighting, challenging, and criticizing structures of dominance that enable and maintain the status quo” (Kit, 2014, para. 4). Such patriarchal injustices include “female genital mutilation, forced marriage, sexual harassment, gender-based violence” as well as “the blatant sexism in Islamic scholarship that is prevalent today” (Issa, 2016, para. 26). Muslim women’s oppression also includes “the sheer brutality that Muslim women face in Muslim-majority countries, which is

compounded by state violence, war, occupations, and civil unrest” that impact both men and women (Al-Khatahtbeh et al., 2014, para. 11).

In addition to highlighting these systemic issues within Muslim communities, *Muslim Girl* also sheds light on individual experiences of sexism that are perpetuated in the name of Islam. For instance, *Muslim Girl* critiques the “stereotypical, rigid cultural expectations of gender roles” with regards to what marriageable Muslim women are to be like (Mokhtar, 2016b, para. 3). As *Muslim Girl* puts it:

To qualify as “marriage-friendly” material, a Muslim woman is expected to be: Martha Stewart in the kitchen, a combination of Hoover feather duster and mop in cleanness, Scarlett Johansson in sex appeal, Virgin Mary in modesty, Mother Teresa in devotion, Malala Yousafzai in activism and literacy – only for bragging purposes, octomom in making an army of kids, and Wonder Woman in putting up with the in-laws. (Mokhtar, 2016b, para. 1)

Such rigorous demands are not made of Muslim men to be considered ready for marriage, thus reflecting the casual sexism that is prevalent in Muslim communities and that “can be shockingly mainstream particularly on social media” (Issa, 2016, para. 29).

On this front, another *Muslim Girl* blogger shares her experience of growing up in the Middle East as follows, “The first things I learned in life about being a young girl, and later a woman, were through the patriarchal religious interpretation of family members and school education” (Khatib, 2016, para. 7). She adds, “At school, textbooks and teachers taught me that Islam for women meant that I am obliged to cover my face, adhere to harsh rules, and be a good Muslim wife - and that’s it” (Khatib, 2016, para. 9). The same blogger reflects that “things have changed a lot for the generations to follow, yet misogynistic ideologies still linger within the social fabric and system” (Khatib, 2016, para. 10).

These two excerpts from *Muslim Girl* speak to a broader unfortunate trend, namely that as far as women’s rights go, “over time, the rights granted by Islam 1400 years ago have been

largely ignored and eroded by patriarchal cultural practices” (Awan, 2016, para. 4).

Consequently, “certain cultures within the Muslim community endorse outdated ideals of the paradigm of conventional femininity and masculinity, and that is passed on to individuals within the society as Islam, when it’s not” (Kawetherinuwa, 2019, para. 13). Such restrictive notions of gender roles in Islam rely on exploitive interpretations of Islam and Quranic verses that ignore “the essence and spirit of Islam as being supportive of women’s empowerment, and instead allow patriarchal and misogynistic interpretations” to proliferate (Al-Khatahtbeh et al., 2014, para. 27; Khatib, 2016). Through such tactics, Islamic teachings are manipulated “to perpetuate patriarchal, oppressive social practices and beliefs against women” (Khatib, 2016, para. 20).

At the same time, in a bid to contest how misogynistic misinterpretations of Islam are co-opted to advance Islamophobia, *Muslim Girl* points out that “practices such as domestic and sexual violence, discrimination, unequal opportunity and the objectification of women are certainly not ‘Muslim problems,’ as they are diseases from which no country is immune” (Awan, 2016, para. 4).

### ***Muslim Women: Caught Between Islamophobia and Victim-Blaming***

“Misogyny exists ubiquitously, inside and outside of the Muslim community, in different forms and stages” (Muslim Girl, 2018a, para. 21). Even so, the context of Islamophobia undeniably shapes how Islamic practices can be constructively critiqued, and to what ends. Islamophobia makes it difficult to level authentic criticisms of problematic practices within Muslim communities. Although necessary for revitalizing the religion, productive critique of Islam runs the risk of “arming anti-Muslim ideologues, who use such criticisms to present Islam as barbaric, misogynist, and incompatible with modernity and who seek on that basis to eject Muslims and Islam from the nation” (Azam, 2018, pp. 124–125). The danger in advancing even well-intentioned critique is that “Islamophobes may co-opt that material as ‘proof’ that ‘Islam’ is always and permanently patriarchal and misogynist” (Azam, 2018, p. 125). Moreover, legitimate critique can be closed off by calling it Islamophobic. These conditions make accountability

challenging because even valid criticism of interpretations of Islamic injunctions and problematic practices in Muslim communities are all too easily labeled as being Islamophobic (El Younssi, 2018). Within this context:

Muslim feminists and activists must engage with the dual oppressions of 'gendered Islamophobia' (Zine, 2004a), that has revitalized Orientalist tropes and representations of backward, oppressed and politically immature women in need of liberation and rescue through imperialist interventions as well as the challenge of religious extremism and puritan discourses that authorize equally limiting narratives of Islamic womanhood and compromise their human rights and liberty. (as cited in Zine, 2006, p. 1)

These troubling discourses that are hoisted at Muslim women are especially problematic because such narratives are largely regulated by those who are not Muslim women (Zine, 2006). On the one hand, Muslim feminists who shed light on patriarchy in Muslim contexts can inadvertently reinforce essentialized perceptions "that cast colonial Muslim women as backward, oppressed victims of misogynist societies" (Zine, 2006, p. 240, as cited in Eidoo, 2018, p. 525). In turn, this critique of patriarchy in Muslim settings is used to justify colonial logics of "white men saving brown women from brown men" (Spivak, 1988, p. 297, as cited in Shaikh, 2013, p. 20). On the other hand, in an effort to present a united Muslim community to an outside world that is ridden with misrepresentations of Muslims, gendered issues that are rampant within Muslim spheres and that legitimately merit consideration may be inadvertently overshadowed (Shannon, 2015b).

As a consequence, Muslim women who have experienced violence find themselves between a rock and a hard place. From the viewpoint of Muslim women, "in the 'outside' world, we face gendered Islamophobia. If we talk about violence that happens in our homes in the 'outside' world, we are often met with racism and Islamophobia, and we are told that our community is barbaric" (Niqabae, 2018, para. 13). Unsurprisingly then:

There's a reason Muslim women don't confide in most feminist spaces. When we talk about the oppression we face, the first response is not to hold the perpetrators accountable; instead, usually it is bashing our Muslim identity and our religion. (Niqabae, 2018, para. 2)

Conversely, in Muslim-majority settings, if Muslim women “talk about the gendered Islamophobic violence we face in the ‘outside’ world, sometimes we get blamed instead of supported” (Niqabae, 2018, para. 14). Indeed, Muslim women who voice their experiences of gendered violence are often met with victim-blaming and such “blame can take subtle forms” (Niqabae, 2018, para. 16). One *Muslim Girl* blog exemplifies this as follows:

For example, if a Muslim woman is yelled at on the subway late at night on the way home, someone may ask her, “Well, why were you out that late to begin with?” This reaction is wrong. It puts the blame on the Muslim woman, and makes it seem like it's her fault for being yelled at – it implies that she shouldn't have been out to begin with, and being out is what “caused” the incident of verbal violence. But controlling and limiting Muslim women's behavior is not the solution to gendered violence. (Niqabae, 2018, para. 16)

Victim-blaming is also perpetuated by policing what Muslim women wear and by problematic assumptions “in which a woman's faith and value in a Muslim community is directly correlated to whether she wears the hijab” (Qamar, 2015b, para. 51). This latter phenomenon, which one *Muslim Girl* blog terms the “hijab asymptote” exemplifies how purity myths are strengthened in Muslim communities and to Muslim women's detriment (Qamar, 2015b). Such discourses troublingly imply that it is Muslim women's responsibility to eradicate the gendered violence that they face, by changing their behavior (Niqabae, 2018). It is especially problematic when such rationale is used to excuse sexual violence, which can cause long-lasting damage to victims, including the internalization of blame (Niqabae, 2018). *Muslim Girl* drives home this point as follows:

It's especially important to avoid this kind of blame when it come to sexual violence. If a Muslim woman is sexually assaulted, there needs to be zero blame placed on her...Sexual assault is a form of violence, and there is nothing a Muslim woman can do that makes that violence her fault. (Niqabae, 2018, para. 17)

On the whole, these dynamics yield slim choices in terms of “safe spaces for Muslim women to come forward with all of our complexity, and our full stories about the violence we’ve lived through, and be believed, supported, and heard” without reinforcing orientalist stereotypes (Niqabae, 2018, para. 13). Muslim women’s silence is thus partially rooted in the fact that they can be penalized no matter what (Niqabae, 2018). Put differently, “Muslim women know what it is to be alienated at the hands of their own” communities and beyond them too (Muslim Girl, 2018a, para. 21).

**Moving from Victim-Blaming Towards Accountability of Religious Leaders and Institutions.** Building on the previous section, the likelihood of victim-blaming is heightened when allegations of abuse are directed towards religious leaders and organizations. Calling out this tendency, *Muslim Girl* reiterates that preachers, religious scholars and “those in power should be held accountable” (MG Staff, 2017b; Mohsenian-Rahman, 2017a; Niqabae, 2017, para. 3). By way of background, the pervasiveness of Islamophobic discourse and legislation means that Muslim communities:

can get stuck in survival mode, and cling to leaders that have “done good for the community” in the past....So if anyone comes forward with allegations of abuse against them, the community chooses the perceived savior instead of the survivor of abuse. (Niqabae, 2018, paras. 20–21)

This mentality can make it hard to engage in self-critique and hold Islamic leaders to higher standards, especially when such leaders are seen as ambassadors of Islam to the broader community (Niqabae, 2018). As *Muslim Girl* notes, “there’s a high cost to speaking up in so many spaces” (Niqabae, 2018, para. 14). Nonetheless, this reluctance to ‘air dirty laundry’ for

fear of reinforcing Islamophobic narratives is problematic because it silences victims and perpetuates a culture of abuse (Niqabae, 2018). Additionally, “the history of minority communities susceptible to assimilation to whiteness” in the West is reason enough to stay vigilant lest Muslim leadership is co-opted and “becomes entrenched in the establishment and its institutions” in ways that counter the interests of Muslims at large (Syjil, 2015, para. 4).

Dismantling how taboo this topic is, *Muslim Girl* sheds light on two particular instances of abuse at the hands of religious figures of authority. In the first example, one *Muslim Girl* blogger reflects on her experience of talking about the sexual abuse she faced as a child by an Imam (a Muslim figure of religious authority) (Akhilil, 2016a). This *Muslim Girl* blogger notes that upon sharing her story:

It was such a relief to receive an enormous amount of support, encouragement and love. I also received many messages by women who shared their stories of being sexually abused when they were young. Many were surprised that a religious leader would commit such a horrendous act and thanked me for raising awareness to such an important topic. (Akhilil, 2016a, para. 1)

To be sure, there are far too many instances of this kind, even in the Muslim community (Akhilil, 2016a). In sharing her own experience, this blogger states, “I truly hope we take this issue seriously in our community and stop making it a taboo topic” (Akhilil, 2016a, para. 6). She demands that it is crucial to talk about this concern openly and to implement effective measures to address it (Akhilil, 2016a). In a similar vein, another *Muslim Girl* blog cites a 2015 incident in which:

A highly conservative Imam of a Chicago-area Masjid (mosque) was charged with sexual assault by an employee of his former place of work, the boarding school “Institute of Islamic Education” — an accusation his community was obstinate to believe, that is, until three other women spoke out too. (Qamar, 2015b, para. 42)

In this example, the problematic refusal to even consider the accusations plausible is evident in the statement released by the Council of Islamic Organization of Greater Chicago's chairman. This statement, which was published in the *Chicago Tribune* says, "this person has been a religious leader and scholar and adviser to many people. For a person like that to be alleged to have done things like that, it was a big shock for everybody" (Qamar, 2015b, para. 44).

In this climate, *Muslim Girl* asserts that it is crucial to provide "essential support to victims of different forms of sexual exploitation, harassment, abuse and violence" along with the reassurance that their complaints will not be disregarded or automatically disbelieved, simply because they may question the reputation of influential figures (Niqabae, 2017, para. 3). In such cases, Muslim argues that "the service someone has contributed to their community is not an indicator of their innocence, nor a reason to withhold support for the victims" (Niqabae, 2017, para. 6). Instead, *Muslim Girl* calls for supporting survivors of gendered violence "by believing them, being there for them as a support system, asking them what they need, and connecting them to resources in the community" that offer qualified, culturally-sensitive professional help (Niqabae, 2018, para. 18).

To do so, "it is critical to shatter the 'classic rape narrative'" wherein women "suffer from perilous purity myths, slut-shaming, lack of women's representation" and other obstacles (Qamar, 2015b, paras. 50–51). Challenging such problematic narratives requires moving from victim-blaming cultures to creating safe spaces for Muslim women to come forth with their experiences of harassment and abuse, without fear of repercussions (MG Staff, 2017b). Cultivating this culture of accountability also demands resisting the tendency to "centralize the feelings of the oppressor" (Mohsenian-Rahman, 2017a, p. 4).

Here, a key stumbling block is that "too often, particularly in religious contexts, forgiveness is used as a bandage to hide injustices that should otherwise go challenged" (Mohsenian-Rahman, 2017a, p. 4). Such exploitation of forgiveness as an Islamic virtue can

look like victims of physical intimidation, psychological abuse and sexual violence being asked to stay silent and ‘be the bigger person’ (Mohsenian-Rahman, 2017a). This exploitative maneuvering and minimization of abuse is utterly un-Islamic and highly troubling (Niqabae, 2018). In stark opposition to this, *Muslim Girl* states:

Our duty as Muslims is to protect those who are being oppressed. Muslim women and girls in our community who are suffering violence at the hands of our community leaders are being oppressed, and so we need to make a clear decision to prioritize their needs over our desire to hang on to leaders that we think are giving our community power and security. Power and security come from Allah, and from doing the right thing, not from any human leaders. (Niqabae, 2018, para. 21)

Along with holding individual leaders accountable, religious institutions such as Islamic schools also must be held to high standards. While Islamic schools offer great potential and some are indeed inclusive, forward-thinking institutions, others can house toxic environments. Exemplifying the latter, one *Muslim Girl* blogger and Islamic school alum reflects on her schooling experience, sharing that, “we were essentially told that feminism isn’t something that should be our ‘fight’ because Islam already guarantees equal rights to both men and women” (Khan, 2017, para. 15). *Muslim Girl* critiques this stance as follows:

Islam may guarantee equal rights for the sexes, but those rights many times go unenforced. As a result, women are still fighting to earn all their rights. So, yes, Muslim women are part of this “fight” because we are a part of this society and the only way to fix this issue is by coming together with other women and calling for change. (Khan, 2017, para. 16)

### **Questioning the Contemporary Absence of Muslim Women as Religious**

**Authorities.** In addition to the aforementioned danger of impunity for some Islamic leaders and organizations, there is another concerning trend in Islamic leadership; namely that of Muslim women’s conspicuous absence as figures of religious authority. As was detailed in chapters 2

and 3, Muslim women's Islamically-rooted feminist activism is a long-standing tradition across the word. Nonetheless, as this section demonstrates below, Muslim women still come up against notable hurdles in being perceived as legitimate religious figures of authority.

First and foremost, in most Muslim states today, women rarely serve as religious authorities, and where they do, often "their role is confined to women's issues" (Kloos & Künkler, 2016, p. 479). Women preachers continue to face obstacles:

ranging from the impediments placed on women's access to the highest levels of religious education (Hefner and Kloos), to the "extra" effort required in order to be recognised as religious leaders (Ismah), to the reduction of women to "advisory" roles. (Cieślewska, as cited in Kloos & Künkler, 2016, p. 486)

These additional barriers that Muslim women preachers face stand "in contrast to the overwhelming consensus among experts of Islamic law" that women can fully occupy roles of religious authority (Kloos & Künkler, 2016, p. 479). Some of these hurdles are rooted in narrow understandings of pious femininity that see pious Muslim women as belonging to the private sphere and that hence delegitimize the authority of Muslim women as preachers in the public domain. Such narratives problematically reify narrow perceptions of pious femininity as being shy and receding.

The present dearth of Muslim women religious leaders not only goes against the expansive understanding of pious femininity that *Muslim Girl* advocates for, it also contradicts the fact that "Islamic history features hundreds of examples of women providing legal opinions" (Abou el-Fadl, 2012, Bauer, 2010, Schneider, 1997, as cited in Kloos & Künkler, 2016, p. 481). Yet today, when it comes to enacting Islamic authority, "it remains difficult for women to enter and influence institutional spheres controlled by men" (Kloos & Künkler, 2016, p. 486). To make matters worse:

The significant role of women in participating in, and shaping, Islamic scholarly traditions through the centuries is still hardly reflected in either scholarly or public perceptions.

Nearly all classic accounts of religious authority in Islam proceed from the assumption that this authority is male. (Hallaq, 2001, Humphreys, 1991, Keddie, 1972, Krämer & Schmidtke, 2006, Zaman, 2002, as cited in Kloos & Künkler, 2016, p. 479)

One contemporary example of male domination of religious authority comes from Indonesia, where issuing religious guidance rooted in Islamic jurisprudence is still largely the domain of male religious leaders; “this is despite the fact that a number of issues they discuss...are closely related to the lives and experiences of Muslim women” (Ismah, 2016, p. 491). Indonesian women preachers are barely tolerated in this male-dominated domain, often facing challenges to their authority and being “questioned about their qualifications, virtue and abilities”, along with a general distrust about the presence and agency of women in public spheres (Ismah, 2016, p. 501). Similarly, state-appointed Turkish women preachers are also subject to contestation from both “men who negatively regard women’s ability to gather together in mosques but also women engaged in religious communities” (Maritato, 2017, pp. 535–536).

These experiences of Indonesian and Turkish Muslim women preachers exemplify the gender-specific challenges to their authority and credibility and the narrow understandings of pious femininity that Muslim women face in preaching and in other professional domains.

*Muslim Girl* extends this line of thought by critiquing how Muslim women’s countless accomplishments in various fields tend to either be subsumed by the trope of the ‘oppressed Muslim woman’ or be seen as examples of Muslim women’s tenacity against a restrictive Islam, both of which are problematic assumptions to make.

Collectively, these conditions have meant that when it comes to Islamic expertise, Muslim “female preachers have had to show a significant degree of flexibility in order to acquire and share this knowledge” (Gomez-Perez, 2016, p. 58). Facing the uphill battle that the above-mentioned barriers pose, Muslim women religious leaders are expected to embody pious femininity and meet multiple criteria to be considered legitimate religious authorities; specifically, they must “be seen as knowledgeable about religious texts and capable of assuming leadership

positions, be known for personal piety and connections with centers of Islamic learning, and exhibit personal charisma” (Ismah, 2016, p. 501). To secure credence, Muslim women religious leaders must also creatively negotiate societal norms and “build their relationships with the community in order to establish their authority, especially where they cannot draw on a long history of cultural assumptions about the legitimacy of men’s leadership” (Ismah, 2016, p. 501). On the other hand, male religious leaders who may not check off some of these boxes “can still draw on centuries of tradition that affirms men’s religious authority and links them with institutional and collective authority. This is not the case for women” (Ismah, 2016, p. 501).

Likewise, *Muslim Girl* concurs that Muslim women scholars face more stern critique as compared to their male counterparts, putting forth the argument that “students of knowledge can and should be called out when they slip up, but could we all just take a step back and think about why we seem much more comfortable doing this to a female student of knowledge?” (Issa, 2017, p. 22). This disparity demonstrates that “explaining differences in roles and prestige between male and female religious authority requires a consideration of dominant (and often place-specific) gender norms and ideologies”, including assumptions about how pious femininity manifests (Kloos & Künkler, 2016, p. 486). Simultaneously it is also important “to take into account factors other than gender, such as class or local contingencies” when trying to explain the differential treatment that men and women face as religious leaders (Ortner, 1996, as cited in Kloos & Künkler, 2016, p. 486). As these vast, gender-based differences in Muslim religious leaders’ experiences imply, “the real challenge, as far as specialized Islamic authority is concerned, lies in changing societal attitudes” in order for women to be accepted in this role as widely as men are (Kloos & Künkler, 2016, p. 488).

### ***Exclusionary Dynamics***

Even as Muslim women face ostracism in male-dominated spheres of religious authority, they can also experience estrangement from and by other Muslim women. Despite the vast potential it holds, one *Muslim Girl* blogger shares that, “sisterhood in Islam is not this big united

conglomerate of awesomeness like I first imagined. Instead we've separated ourselves into these specialty groups" that judge and shame each other (Shannon, 2015b, para. 3). As one revert shares on *Muslim Girl*, "between struggling to learn the faith which has levels inside its levels and struggling to live up to the expectations of my sisters as well as hiding from their frequent shame parties, Islam has become exhausting" (Shannon, 2015b, para. 10). The same *Muslim Girl* blogger adds, "it's bad enough that non-Muslims are waiting for me to fail in my faith but some of my own sisters stand upon their self righteous pedestals and dole out scorn for things like a lack of knowledge" (Shannon, 2015b, para. 7). As *Muslim Girl* puts it, "the biggest poison infiltrating the sisterhood: sister shaming" can include being criticized for one's appearance and being made to "feel bad for not being 'Muslim enough' or covered enough" (Shannon, 2015b, para. 5; Leahvernon, 2017c).

Exclusionary practices in Muslim communities also show up as policing which Muslim voices are welcomed in community dialogue, initiatives and events, and which are not (Leahvernon, 2017c). For instance, one *Muslim Girl* blogger shares her experience of being shunned by the broader Muslim community, save a few Muslim women, because of the way she dresses and the taboo topics she tackles (Leahvernon, 2017c). Such reproach, especially of Muslim women's outward appearances relies on stereotypical assumptions about what the embodiment of pious femininity can and cannot look like. Specifically, such criticism is couched in rationales that see only a very narrow form of modest dressing as indicative of Muslim women's pious femininity. Finally, the overly critical scrutiny that Muslim women face is amplified when these women advocate for feminism, because such activism equips women with "the power to make their own decisions about religion, free of constraints" which signals a departure from conventional views on pious femininity (Leahvernon, 2017b, para. 17).

For Muslim women seeking solidarity with their peers in fighting for feminist objectives, a divided sisterhood and limiting views on pious femininity can be demotivating (Shannon, 2015b). This holier-than-thou approach can also feed into a vicious ill treatment of others (Al-Khatahtbeh

et al., 2014; Shannon, 2015b). In turn, this internal “unending good Muslim/bad Muslim trial” only adds to the troubles facing Muslims (Shannon, 2015b, para. 8).

### ***From Critique to Correction***

Thus far, this section has looked at several issues within Muslim-majority settings that negatively impact Muslim women. Importantly, this critique by *Muslim Girl* is leveled for the sake of improving Muslim communities; it is not simply critique for the sake of critique. This sentiment mirrors a thought-provoking statement that Indigenous scholar TallBear (2014, p. 3) makes, clarifying that “I care about making indigenous lives and institutions better. I critique towards that end.” Framed by such an ethos, in addition to the critique it presents, *Muslim Girl* also recommends corrective measures, some of which are noted below, to rectify the shortcomings detailed above.

Despite its support of women’s rights, Islam can “be used to justify violence against women and shame victims into silence” as well as to support restrictive interpretations of pious femininity that then become dominant (Al-Khatahtbeh et al., 2014, para. 27). Thus, *Muslim Girl* argues that, “we cannot continue to put forth that our religion respects women while perpetuating such sexist and deeply misogynistic attitudes that support perpetrators and negatively impact the quality of life for women and girls” and give rise to constrained conceptualizations of pious femininity (Al-Khatahtbeh et al., 2014, para. 5). Simply saying that Islam is feminist does not negate the ongoing violence and inequality that Muslim women face, some of which is perpetuated as being justified in the name of Islam (Al-Khatahtbeh et al., 2014; Khan, 2017). As far as gender justice is concerned, “just because it is clear in Islamic teaching, does not mean it is implemented” (Issa, 2016, para. 38). As *Muslim Girl* shares, this is an unpleasant coming-of-age realization that some Muslim women have; namely that while Islamophobic media narratives and public discourse need to be challenged and while Islamic teachings may indeed be feminist, some Muslim individuals and communities are complicit in Muslim women’s subjugation through their endorsement of sexist views about Muslim women’s

inferiority and their narrow understandings of pious femininity (Guest Blogger, 2017a; MG Staff, 2020b).

To address this misappropriation of Islamic teachings and “to re-establish the level of equality Islam teaches”, it is vital to have “the conversation as to why Muslim women have been left behind” in order to then correct this long-standing oversight of Muslim women’s experiences (Issa, 2016, para. 37). These conversations would also help expand understandings of pious femininity to be more reflective of the diversity of Muslim women’s lived realities. Therefore, accounting for Muslim women’s perspectives is of the essence in order to mitigate injustices by and towards Muslims (Issa, 2016).

Moreover, *Muslim Girl* calls out the hypocrisy in berating feminism while simultaneously claiming that Islam is feminist (Anumahmed, 2019). To believe in a feminist Islam or to argue “that identifying as a Muslim feminist is inherently redundant because of Islam’s history that revolutionized gender roles and expectations and granted privileges to women” is not enough - it is just as vital to implement feminist Islamic teachings by advocating for women’s rights and challenging widespread inequality, including as it manifests in Muslim households, mosques, communities and countries (Issa, 2016; Kit, 2014, para. 3). Walking this walk of a feminist Islam demands sustained internal reflection and critique of forms of violence which are prevalent in, although not unique to Muslim contexts (Issa, 2016).

Underlining the need for such introspection, *Muslim Girl* says that “we, Muslim men and women, need to start with holding ourselves accountable. We are constantly taught to be critical of everything else in the world except ourselves” (Guest Blogger, 2017a, para. 25). Such internal accountability is key for Muslim women’s liberation and for arriving at more inclusive conceptualizations of pious femininity (Guest Blogger, 2017a). To get started on this front, *Muslim Girl* draws attention to the necessity of “the Muslim community recognizing its faults and where it can progress while simultaneously taking a public position on items that can affect the lives of Muslim women” (Guest Blogger, 2017a, para. 30). Such inward-facing examination can

fulfill the “need to develop tolerance, respect, empathy, and constructive dialogues” (Guest Blogger, 2017a, para. 25). Speaking of Muslim communities, *Muslim Girl* admits that:

We must acknowledge what we have been doing that may have suppressed any woman, and that means reassessing global practices, the conversations in the masjids (mosques), and the conversations we have yet to have on the issues we still don’t want to speak on. (Guest Blogger, 2017a, para. 30)

Sincerely striving to address these shortcomings can help make mosques and other religious avenues more inclusive and egalitarian platforms that are “critically engaged with anti-oppressive work” (Guest Blogger, 2017a; Mohsenian-Rahman, 2017a, p. 3, para. 2).

In turn, intra-communal accountability demands feminist, gender-sensitive analyses of how interpretations of Islam and piety dynamically shape “the construction of masculinities and femininities”, and how these forces inform experiences of gender and gendered violence (Khatib, 2016, para. 20). Such analyses can empower Muslim women to not only demand inclusion, equality and access to leadership opportunities but also to ground these demands as arising from Islam, which can be an important form of legitimacy in religious and traditionally male-dominated spheres (MG Staff, 2020b). In doing so, Muslim women can advance women’s empowerment while also dismantling deeply embedded assumptions about Muslim women’s inherent subservience and the supposed docility of pious femininity (MG Staff, 2020b).

Nonetheless, such intra-communal reflection and critique does not come without risks. Given the prevalence of racism, Islamophobia, imperialism, settler colonialism, sexism and other forms of structural domination, which have been discussed at length in this writing, it is easy to only point fingers at others (Guest Blogger, 2017a). However, as *Muslim Girl* notes, “the name calling and Western-ideology shaming gets us nowhere” (Guest Blogger, 2017a, para. 30). On this front, *Muslim Girl* also argues that externally imposed forms of discrimination neither eclipse the need to “to rid our narrative of the baggage acquired from years of misogyny that has,

unfortunately, crept into mainstream Muslim culture” and nor do they undermine the necessity of addressing how Islam is sometimes misappropriated towards sexist ends (Issa, 2016, para. 33).

While the fear of bolstering Islamophobic narratives is real, it nonetheless ought not to hinder critical conversations within Muslim communities about the prevalence of patriarchal practices and beliefs amongst Muslims, including but not limited to assumptions about the submissiveness of pious femininity (Muslim Girl, 2018a). As *Muslim Girl* puts it, “what’s so incredibly frustrating is how conversation about oppressive patriarchal norms in the Muslim community are usually inhibited by fear of proving bigots right” (Muslim Girl, 2018a, para. 21). Even so, the need of the hour is a fine balance of productively critiquing hegemonic Western narratives without playing the blame game and crediting all the problems facing the Muslim world to those narratives (Issa, 2016). Paving the path here, “there is a long history of Muslim feminists such as Fatima Mernissi who have challenged the patriarchy and violence within Muslim communities without furthering imperialistic, Islamophobic, and white supremacist agendas” (Raja, 2015, para. 1).

In addition to this, moving towards a more egalitarian societal ethos within Muslim communities requires destigmatizing abuse and supporting Muslim women (Qamar, 2016a). Proposing one way forward, *Muslim Girl* states that “it’s completely beyond necessary to foster more dialogue about sex ed, and provide our Muslim youth with quality sexual education” (Qamar, 2016a, para. 17). *Muslim Girl* adds that for Muslim women, “it’s our right to be educated, and it’s our right to be sexually educated” (Qamar, 2016a, para. 31). Such knowledge-sharing can help make sexual abuse less taboo, which can in turn mitigate victim-blaming tendencies and the lack of accountability that have been discussed earlier in this chapter.

*Muslim Girl* goes on to present examples of some ongoing initiatives to address such concerns. For instance, one blog refers to global collaborations that involve “working with religious leaders such as imams to change culture and policy around these issues and to

reduce stigma” (Akhilil, 2016b, para. 22). One such example is the Voices for Health project, which advocates for family planning and operates in partnership with an Imam and another Muslim community leader (Akhilil, 2016b). Another example referenced is that of an interfaith alliance where religious leaders “take part in training sessions centered around the need for family planning and the role of community leaders in breaking down stigma” (Akhilil, 2016b, para. 23). These examples not only give insight into how some gaps in Muslim communities are being met but they also offer a roadmap of possibilities for future initiatives.

Having critiqued a number of troubling issues within some Muslim communities, the next section delves into critiques that are leveled against problematic dynamics in mainstream feminist discourses and spaces.

### **Critiques of Feminism**

“Feminism as a tool of colonialism and imperialism is centuries old” (Sarahmohr, 2020, para. 13). Continuing this legacy, contemporary Eurocentric white supremacist feminism runs contradictory to the very essence of feminism because it adds to women’s exclusion and oppression and it prioritizes “the gains of the white woman at the expense of the brown woman’s voice” (Aishasaleh, 2018a; MG Staff, 2019). Such rhetoric allows white liberal feminist actors “to feel pity for the Muslim woman and to remind their self-righteous self they’re exceptional in comparison” (Harvard, 2015a, para. 9).

As a result “regardless of being so popular and diverse in number, Muslim women are still fighting to be heard in a chorus of white feminists” (MG Staff, 2019, para. 10). Meanwhile, supposedly feminist and often white liberal interventions that try to speak for Muslim women instead further marginalize them by co-opting their voices (Amani, 2016; Harvard, 2015a). This savior orientation reinforces unwanted and inaccurate ideas through which non-Muslim white women can “disempower Muslim women even further by speaking on their behalf” (Amani, 2016, para. 9). In this way, white savior feminism is frequently and creatively drawn upon to intensify the same Muslim women’s subjugation that it claims to rectify (Sarahmohr, 2020).

In short, white savior-ridden feminism encapsulates the “countless ways that women’s rights movements have been used to oppress Muslim women” (Sarahmohr, 2020, para. 2). This propensity of feminism for co-optation “has been one of the staunchest critiques of the mainstream feminist movement and social justice movements” (Raja, 2015, para. 5). “While this critique of Western feminism has been leveled abundantly by Muslim women, it is also present in the writing of non-Muslim women who object to the use of feminism to oppress Muslim women” (Sarahmohr, 2020, para. 4). Contextualized within this landscape, the next few sections delve into the particular critiques of hegemonic feminism that emerge from *Muslim Girl* and the resulting impact on the buy-in that the term feminism has amongst Muslims.

### ***Problematic Discourses About “Saving Muslim Women”***

As Razack (2007, p. 3) explains:

The normative figure in Western feminism remains the liberal autonomous individual of modernity. ‘Other’ women are those who have their freedom to choose restricted.

Typically, ‘other’ women are those burdened by culture and hindered by their communities from entering modernity.

Within such narratives there is an underlying condescension in the premise that Western feminism is transported to non-Western countries to liberate women there, especially racialized women (Amani, 2016; Nida, 2013). This narrow-minded and patronizing attitude is nestled in the assumption that women of and in the West “are ‘free’, and the rest of the world is not” (Nida, 2013, para. 6). This critique of white-savior feminism is echoed in the works of Edward Said, Palestinian scholar and author of the book *Orientalism* who argues that Western literature “creates and perpetuates the archetype of a docile and submissive Muslim woman due to her religious leanings, and renders Islam as a homogeneous, controlling, and backwards institution” (Hodakatebi, 2016a, para. 15).

Despite their diversity, Muslim women continue to be only “portrayed as victims, and presented as having a deficit of rights due to Islam” such that their apparent liberation from

Islam is seen as “the ultimate feminist victory” (Abour, 2015, para. 2; MG Staff, 2019, para. 10). Assumptions about Islam being anti-feminist are thus bolstered by “the perception that Muslim women are oppressed, dominated, and bound by the laws set by the patriarchs of their family”, which then strengthens narratives about saving Muslim women (Anumahmed, 2019, para. 3). Presenting Islam as misogynistic, alien and irreconcilable with modernity reinforces a “problematic narrative: that Muslim women are in need of rescue—and moreover, incapable of ‘rescuing’ themselves—from the oppression of Islam, in general, and of Muslim men, in particular” (Lampsey, 2017, p. 29). These depictions of Muslim women as being universally oppressed have also been strengthened “by the increasing use of cultural explanations of patriarchy, which posit gender inequalities in Muslim communities as simply being a result of Muslim cultures and religion” (Nagra, 2018, p. 263).

These assumptions rely on broad generalizations about violence as being inherent to Islam while also downplaying the systemic nature of gendered violence in the West. These logics then reinforce savior-focused tropes of freeing Muslim women from the persecution that they are supposedly subjected to at the hands of extremist, barbaric Muslim men (Abour, 2015). Making matters worse, these stereotypical and limiting assumptions about Muslim women demonstrate:

the way the West has treated the conversation around Muslim women for at least the greater part of the last decade and a half since 9/11: Like it is an expert in topics surrounding their oppression, all the while being complacent in it and absolving itself of the responsibility. (Amani, 2016, para. 6)

In the same vein, Muslim women are frequently seen as being worthy of sympathy and as non-threatening entities, but only when they are positioned as victims of Islam or as ‘moderate’ i.e. capitalism- and liberalism-friendly believers (Patel, 2022b). Such narrow conceptualizations reinforce dominant Western stereotypes about Muslim women that advance their dehumanization, sexual objectification and exoticization (Harvard, 2015a). Anything that

dehumanizes women cannot be feminist because it opposes the feminist aim “to empower women and to simultaneously celebrate womanhood” (MG Staff, 2019, para. 8; Muslim Girl, 2019c). Even as Muslim women attempt to rectify stereotypical depictions about themselves, their voices are often drowned out by non-Muslim, white women who advance ill-informed discourses about “saving Muslim women” that are actually antithetical to their empowerment (Abour, 2015; Amani, 2016).

Indeed, scholars have long pointed out the shortcomings of stereotypes where “Muslim women are imagined to be victims of traditional and oppressive cultures, and not as active agents working to substantiate their rights as individuals” (Jiwani, 2005, as cited in Nagra, 2018, p. 266). Moreover, “misperceptions of Muslim women as being passive and oppressed victims of Islam have become rampant in Canadian society with these stereotypes being reinforced through the ongoing ‘War on Terror’ and cultural explanations of patriarchy” (Nagra, 2018, p. 276). This stereotype of the subjugated Muslim woman persists despite extensive research which demonstrates that such mischaracterization of Muslim women “works to marginalize and increasingly ‘other’ them in mainstream Canadian society” (Nagra, 2018, p. 263). Even beyond Canada, such oversimplification “leads to essentialist approaches that are not only conditioned by racist and sexist prejudices, but also are reductionist and does not help to understand the enormous complexity of social movements” that Muslim women are involved in (Navarro, 2008, as cited in Navarro, 2016, p. 86).

Finally, these problematic, uni-dimensional representations of Muslims reinforce “the Islamophobic arguments that reduce all Muslims to a monolithic and homogenous identity” (Raja, 2015, para. 5). In a similarly universalizing move, in public discourse “it is implicitly assumed that ‘Islam’ has a unique meaning; and few people wonder what dimension of Islam they are referring (a social, political or spiritual dimension), or at what point in history and where in they are talking about” (Navarro, 2016, p. 86).

To sum up, *Muslim Girl* succinctly frames the trope of saving Muslim women as below:

Muslim women, over the past several years have been at the end of an erroneous and exploitative relationship with the imperial gaze. Much Islamophobic rhetoric relies on a tired claim that misogyny in Muslim communities is particularly depraved and unique, thus incomparable to other demographics and worthy of speculation, detached from greater social and economical contexts. Such a fallacy, along with others relating to terrorism, have been cited as the cause of unjust expansionist initiatives, horrendous occupations and debilitating foreign policies. (Berhe, 2015, para. 6)

**Advancing Imperialist, Islamophobic Rhetoric in the Name of Feminism.** Critiquing the narrative that Muslim women need rescuing, *Muslim Girl* draws on Judith Butler's argument in *Frames of War* (2016) that "feminism and sexual politics have been used to justify war, state-sponsored violence, and anti-immigration policies that have targeted Muslims" (Harvard, 2015a; as cited in Sarahmohr, 2020, para. 3). Exemplifying white-savior feminism in action, *Muslim Girl* also sheds light on the work of feminist activist and scholar, Lila Abu-Lughod who "follows the trajectory of feminist organizations and activist projects throughout the Western world that aim to save Muslim women" (MG Staff, 2021e, para. 4). Such initiatives draw on tired claims about how misogyny manifests in exceptionally brutal and unparalleled ways in Muslim societies, thus framing Muslims as an unrecognizable other while overlooking how Muslim men and women are endangered through Western-led "occupation, state-sponsored terrorism, and government surveillance" (Berhe, 2015; Harvard, 2015a, para. 6).

This heightened surveillance of Muslims surfaces as a theme in academic research too (Khan & Mulé, 2021). In *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Jasbir K. Puar explains that overlooking feminism's ties to colonial and imperialist logics enables linking "the oppression of Muslims with the issues of women's rights against misogyny in a bizarre justification of killing people to save them" (Sarahmohr, 2020, para. 16). Due to these apparently well-intentioned interventions, Muslim women "have been killed, left destitute, made to outlive their children and lost all their worldly possessions" (Berhe, 2015, para. 6).

*Muslim Girl* notes that a prominent example of this rhetoric coming into play in recent times “is the invasion of Afghanistan, where the U.S. government justified military intervention that was in the interest of U.S. oil companies and military agendas with the false front of helping Afghan women” (Sarahmohr, 2020, para. 2). Such imperialist measures advance the legacy of colonialism which has frequently been “justified by what Europeans claimed was the inferior treatment of Muslim women relative to the status of women in Europe” (Sarahmohr, 2020, para. 3). In addition to Afghanistan, *Muslim Girl* presents another example of imperialist encroachment, stating that “since the invasion of Iraq, 1-2 million women have been widowed either by direct imperial violence or occupation-instigated sectarian conflict, which has undoubtedly jeopardized their economic security and psychological well being” (Berhe, 2015, para. 6). In this case, *Muslim Girl* points out that an Iraqi city “continues to witness staggering birth defects and child mortality due to US’ deposits of radioactive elements” (Berhe, 2015, para. 6). Another example from *Muslim Girl* that speaks to orientalist logics is “in rural Yemen where drone strikes remain, PTSD ranges as high as 99% of the child population” (Berhe, 2015, para. 6). Citing these examples, *Muslim Girl* reiterates that “Muslim women residing domestically and abroad, bear the brunt of various forms of damage due to post 9/11 initiatives” (Berhe, 2015, para. 6).

One much-needed critique of such foreign interventions, especially those espoused in the name of supposedly feminist claims of saving Muslim women, is that the purported rationale behind them disregards broader socio-economic contexts, political conditions and historical trajectories (Berhe, 2015). Abu-Lughod critiques “that Western responses to phenomena in distant lands are understood through a widely simplified lens in which the consideration of underlying factors is often neglected” (MG Staff, 2021e, para. 4). Likewise, Razack (2007, p. 3) notes:

If we remain in the terrain of thinking about women as vulnerable or imperilled, and some women as particularly imperilled, as we generally do of Muslim women, we remain

squarely within the framework of patriarchy understood as abstracted from all other systems.

This failure to look at the bigger picture allows narratives about Muslim women's subjugation to be co-opted to legitimize imperialist invasions, occupations of sovereign states and meddling in the affairs of other nation-states, such as those examples highlighted above (Berhe, 2015). These invasions, occupations and interventions rely on paternalistic assumptions that claim to expertly understand Muslim women's oppression, without accounting for the complicity of Western forces in creating and heightening such oppression (Amani, 2016). Such Eurocentric frameworks rely on white-centric pseudo feminist narratives, Islamophobic rhetoric and orientalist logics "in order to contort the facts to satisfy an already predetermined assumption" (Amani, 2016, para. 7).

To counter such abstractions, it is imperative to account for the specificities of environments in which particular forms of patriarchy emerge and take hold (Sarahmohr, 2022). In other words:

To place gender and culture back into context, to see Muslim women less as sisters awaiting our help into modernity and more as subjects whose lives are profoundly affected by the West's bid for empire, Western feminists will need to be deeply aware of the historical record. (Razack, 2005, p. 28)

This attention to historical background and broader contextual factors does not aim to undermine Muslim women's ongoing struggles in different parts of the world (Berhe, 2015). Women's oppression in Muslim majority countries does merit recognition, such as "forced veiling for women in Afghanistan, women's right to drive in Saudi Arabia, and the FGM practices embedded in African culture" (Harvard, 2015a, para. 9). However, the problem is "that white liberal feminists are silent when it comes to the Western occupation and U.S.-sponsored funding to the very same authoritarian regimes responsible for making life for Muslim women hellish on this earth" (Harvard, 2015a, para. 9).

Additionally, a tactic that draws on imperialist rhetoric and that is frequently used to silence Muslim women is to say something akin to “as a Muslim woman, you shouldn’t be speaking about violence against you in the West, because at least it’s not as bad as how your people treat you in the Muslim world!” (Amani, 2016, para. 1). In response, *Muslim Girl* argues that:

It is unfair, illogical, and utterly biased to expect Western Muslim women to speak on oppression experienced by Muslim women elsewhere, or to only be allowed to speak on the violence they experience in the West if they also talk about oppression in Muslim-majority countries. (Amani, 2016, para. 11)

Failing to call out such silencing mechanisms can reinforce “the Orientalist notion that Muslim women should be grateful for any aid in liberating us from sexist oppression courtesy of Western feminism” (Muslim Girl, 2019c, para. 12). The underlying expectation here, as expressed by one *Muslim Girl* blogger, is that Muslim women “should sit down, shut up, and be grateful for whatever treatment we receive here, because at least it’s superior to those brown countries over there” (Amani, 2016, para. 11).

To recap, *Muslim Girl* presents several examples that shed light on the limitations of white-centric, exploitative forms of feminism. These examples include critiques of the trope of saving Muslim women and the contestation of Western imperialist invasions of sovereign states like Afghanistan, Iraq and Yemen that are apparently justified through white-savior logics yet leave unfathomable destruction in their wake. These exclusionary, white-centric feminist narratives advance alienating imperialist and Islamophobic discourses even within seemingly inclusive spaces of social justice activism. The next section critically analyzes this very conundrum of Islamophobia in apparently feminist environments.

### ***Islamophobia in Feminist Spaces***

In dominant Western ideologies, feminism and Islam are seen as diametric opposites (Muslim Girl, 2021). Muslim women are questioned for laying claim to feminism because

dominant rhetoric pits feminism and Islam as neat, mutually exclusive categories – a move which disregards the messiness of lived experiences (Latif, 2015). These binaristic framings of Islam in opposition to feminism alienate Muslim women in feminist spaces (Muslim Girl, 2021; Niqabae, 2018).

It is especially problematic that such exclusionary attitudes are "often not only adopted by bigots and some nationalist conservatives, but also by white feminists who claim women's empowerment to be their prerogative" (Amani, 2016, para. 1). *Muslim Girl* shares a prime example of the impact of such attitudes from 2015, when "headlines were rocked by the gruesome murders of Syrian-American Deah Barakat, 23, his wife Yusor Abu-Salha, 21, and her younger sister, Razan, 19, in Chapel Hill, North Carolina" (Berhe, 2015, para. 1). Keeping in mind that the two female victims were hijab-wearing Muslim women, "this tragedy has generated a much needed introspective conversation about Islamophobia, anti-Arab racism, and how it bodes devastating real-life effects for those on the wrong side of prejudice" (Berhe, 2015, para. 2). However:

Since these brutal killings, there has been a disappointing, yet expected lack of fervor from those who claim to champion for the rights and safety of women. This says to Muslim women that our narratives are only relevant when used to proliferate Islamophobia, but not to combat it. (Berhe, 2015, para. 7)

In short, when Muslim women are brutalized by non-Muslim perpetrators of violence, they cannot count on the same feminist solidarity that emerges when Muslim women experience intra-communal violence (Berhe, 2015). The devastating ramifications of such crimes are multi-fold. As one *Muslim Girl* blogger shares, in the aftermath of the attacks:

I've had young women tell me in confidence that they aren't comfortable wearing the hijab anymore and seriously contemplate taking it off, for fear of harassment, assault or worse. In no context should a woman be left with such a daunting choice. In any matter

she is, it is a feminist urgency. There's no justification besides personal bias that the endangerment of hijab observing women is not a top priority. (Berhe, 2015, para. 7)

*Muslim Girl* expands on this double standard that Muslim women face in feminist discourses as follows:

Human and women's rights organizations, media reports, feminists and activists are always concerned for the "wellbeing" of Muslim women. They criticize Muslim communities for misogynistic practices and the lack of support or justice for women. But then when a Muslim woman freely and willingly chooses to exercise her rights in a Western society, the same people who advocate for her rights campaign against her and criticize and condemn her choices. (Mokhtar, 2015, para. 7)

In the same vein, weaponized feminism is evident when:

prioritizing attention to honor killings, despite the fact that three women a day are murdered as a result of domestic violence in the United States alone. Keep in mind that the **true statistics regarding domestic violence are likely higher**, due to survivors being afraid to report it. (Sarahmohr, 2020, para. 12)

Despite the prevalence of domestic violence across society, honor killings are often selectively highlighted to wrongfully suggest that gendered violence is particularly common in Muslim communities, including in South Asian and Arab cultures. To assume honor killings are a distinct form of barbaric violence predominantly present in Muslim contexts not only troublingly paints Islam and Muslims as universally misogynistic, but it also undermines the widespread nature of gendered violence everywhere (Sarahmohr, 2020). To mitigate this, Razack (2021) cautions against an over-reliance on culture as a marker of difference in relation to violence and honor killings. Razack (2021, p. 31) argues that such narratives of cultural difference:

are part of a pedagogy that conveys a message of the racial and cultural superiority of the dominant society and a corresponding inferiority of Muslim cultures. We should therefore always talk culture with the greatest of restraint lest the racism that

accompanies culture talk inhibit our understanding of the violence and limit our capacity to respond to it.

As the above examples illustrate, there is a marked dissonance between feminism's articulated inclusivity and Muslim women's lived experiences. This discord is amplified given that "Western society does not like to tolerate Muslim women's voices without hearing us denouncing the religious identities that distinguish us in the first place" (Amani, 2016, para. 12). Thus, Muslim women are only deemed worthy of inclusion when they adhere to hegemonic narratives that conceptualize freedom in narrow, Eurocentric ways (Amani, 2016).

Contesting this selective, convenient and exploitive inclusion of some Muslim women's voices, *Muslim Girl* emphasizes that freedom can be interpreted in a wide variety of ways and that "the West has no right to go around dictating that definition to women who already deem themselves liberated" (Nida, 2013, para. 7). In such universalized definitions of freedom, "'free will' is stripped away every time one of these so-called feminists hold feminism to a Western standard" (Nida, 2013, para. 7). *Muslim Girl's* underlying argument here is that "just because one's feminism is not the same as another's, it doesn't necessarily imply internalized misogyny, and it's important to realize the complex dynamics of feminism as a public discourse" (Anumahmed, 2019, para. 7).

For example, narrow understandings of freedom perpetuate ignorant ideas where "a woman covering her head for religious purposes (such as wearing the hijab) is thought to be 'oppressed'" regardless of whether she chooses to do so freely (Nida, 2013, para. 5). In this case, Muslim women's veiling is seen as always non-consensual, a move that forces hijab-wearing Muslim women to "question if I and my veil were included when it came to talking about feminism" (Anumahmed, 2019, para. 4). In hegemonic feminist frameworks, veiling has long been associated with oppression. One notable example of this rationale is relayed by a *Muslim Girl* blogger as follows, "imagine my grandmother being told by Western women that

covering her hair is oppressive, such as during the French colonial ceremonies of forced unveiling perpetrated in Algeria by white female colonizers” (Muslim Girl, 2021, para. 7).

These narratives are not only intrinsically problematic, they also trivialize actual oppression by enabling the common and unexamined use of this term (Nida, 2013). As *Muslim Girl* puts it, “oppression is a drastic accusation, and sometimes the label is just the product of ignorance” (Nida, 2013, para. 7). Instead, the demand that Muslim women assimilate into dominant narratives about feminism “by far has been Western Muslim women’s utmost oppression” (Amani, 2016, para. 12).

Indeed, “in an unfortunate irony mainstream feminists have in the past, and currently espouse Islamophobic sentiments” by mobilizing the pseudo-feminist claims of liberating Muslim women that have been discussed earlier in this chapter (Berhe, 2015, para. 4). Such motives are evident when “misquoting Quranic verses to expose textual misogyny” and “caricaturing Islamic traditions and attire to promote a demonization of religious customs, in the name of women’s liberation” (Berhe, 2015, para. 4). Another example of the marginalization that Muslim women experience in some feminist spaces is articulated by Toronto-based scholar, writer and community activist Sidrah Ahmad who argues that:

“As a visibly Muslim woman, navigating viral support systems like the #MeToo movement and #TimesUp is frustrating, because as a community, we have not prioritized the safety of Muslim women who have survived abuse and trauma at the hands of both Muslim and non-Muslim men.” (Niqabae, 2018, para. 1)

To make feminist arenas more inclusive, *Muslim Girl* suggests that feminists who have “utilized anti-Muslim jargon should critically examine their own complicity in a culture that instigates violent acts against marginalized subjects” (Berhe, 2015, para. 7). This introspection is crucial because “if we talk about gender justice, we need to make sure that our ideas and ideals are not subverted to oppress people, or endorse acts of violence against them at any level — personal, communal, or political” (Sarahmohr, 2020, para. 10).

To sum up, *Muslim Girl* criticizes various manifestations of white-centric feminism, such as seeing veiling as universally oppressive, understanding freedom only through Eurocentric frameworks, and propagating exploitative interpretations of Quranic verses in order to reinforce the association between Islam and patriarchy. From calling out the exclusion that Muslim women face in social justice movements like #MeToo and #TimesUp to condemning the silence of feminists in the North Carolina murders of two hijab-wearing Muslim women and a Muslim man, *Muslim Girl* is replete with examples that challenge racist and Islamophobic undertones in feminist spaces. In fact, *Muslim Girl's* critique of white-centric feminism spans centuries, from its denunciation of the unveiling of Algerian women during the French colonial era to its questioning of the modern-day pathologization of misogynistic violence in South Asian and Arab communities, with the latter being evident in discourses about honor killings that fail to acknowledge the systemic nature of such violence across communities.

In essence, this section highlights what many Muslim women have long been arguing for i.e. the “need to continue to come together as Muslims to speak out for gender justice and against the appropriation of feminist and sexual politics by Islamophobic voices and forces who use them against Islam and against Muslims” (Sarahmohr, 2020, para. 18). Rooted in Islam and squarely anti-colonial, this approach that prioritizes Muslims’:

belief in women’s rights, so central to the sunnah of our Prophet (PBUH) and the resistance to neo-colonial themes of the misogynistic Muslim “other” as weapons of war, can unite us, in spite of, over and above, our different opinions of what gender justice, the politicization of sexual politics at the level of law and society, and women’s rights should look in practice in the Muslim community around the world. (Sarahmohr, 2020, para. 18)

### ***Ambivalence about the Terminology of Feminism***

Given the troubling discourses of saving Muslim women and the multiple aforementioned ways in which feminism has been implicated in imperialist and Islamophobic projects, Muslim

women are sometimes understandably ambivalent about adopting feminism as a label. In light of the dire need for women's equality in all aspects, feminism can seem like an inherently commendable framework (Anumahmed, 2019). Yet, "feminism is a word that has spurred controversy since its very inception; a word that has empowered many, yet has somehow caused others to feel marginalized" (Al-Khatahtbeh et al., 2014, para. 21; Kawetherinuwa, 2019). Speaking of feminism, *Muslim Girl* reflects that "as the movement and society evolved the aims and definitions of feminism splintered and has arguably lost focus. In more recent years, the word has come to be viewed through a more flippant yet damning lens" (Issa, 2016, para. 12). As a result, feminism is now "a word that is commonly used as an insult on social media platforms especially in heated comment thread debates where people use it as a way of shutting a woman down" (Issa, 2016, para. 3).

On top of that, some Muslims are hesitant to adopt the label of feminism because mainstream "feminist dialogue and narrative is still predominantly held by Western women", to the exclusion of other women's voices (Kit, 2014; *Muslim Girl*, 2021, para. 7). The historical and ongoing manipulation of feminism by Western forces that seek to dictate what freedom means also deters Muslim women from taking up feminist terminology (*Muslim Girl*, 2021). In fact, "Western feminism has harmed the lives of both Muslim women and men...which can to an extent justify the stigma associated with the word feminism and why Muslims are reluctant to embrace it" (Kit, 2014, para. 6). Specifically, some Muslims resist the label of feminism because of its misuse for legitimizing violent Western-led invasions and occupations of Muslim countries and the ensuing violence that these interventions inflict (Kit, 2014). This wary approach towards the use of feminism as a label is also echoed in academic literature. Displaying such caution, scholar Asma Barlas "is uncomfortable with the term 'Islamic feminism' because she rejects 'feminism' as an intellectual tradition that is inescapably entangled with the history of Western colonialism and the othering of non-western Muslim women" (Barlas, 2008, as cited in Al Sharmani, 2014, p. 84).

Muslim women's hesitance to adopt feminist labels is also rooted in the fact that "feminism in Islam is considered by most in the West as an oxymoron. Islam is perceived as a religion completely contradictory to women's rights" (Muslim Girl, 2021, para. 6). As one *Muslim Girl* blogger notes, "when people today tell me, from either side, that I can only be a Muslim OR a feminist, it makes me realize how much work there is to be done" (Guest Blogger, 2017a, para. 17). In this context, caution about feminist terminology also stems from Muslim women's inclination to ground their worldviews and their comprehension of women's rights in Islamic principles (Kawetherinuwa, 2019). For some Muslim women, their feminist viewpoints are nourished by their belief in an Islam that supports women's empowerment, protects and honors women, condemns gendered violence and sexism, and in which "there is no disparity in worth from one human being to another, regardless of race, gender, or the social constructs that divide us" (Hareem, 2013; Kawetherinuwa, 2019, para. 4). As one *Muslim Girl* blogger reflects, "I have personally found solace in seeking and understanding feminism within my faith, and I think many Muslims who have struggled with the topic of feminism, like I have, can relate" (Kawetherinuwa, 2019, para. 11). Echoing such an ethos, Barlas also "sees her project of producing new, gender-sensitive religious knowledge not as engaging in feminism, but as fulfilling her obligation to God as a believing woman" (Al Sharmani, 2014, p. 84). Therefore, this inclination to locate one's scholarship and gender equity-seeking advocacy within Islam is notable in *Muslim Girl* as well as academic writing (Al Sharmani, 2014; Kawetherinuwa, 2019).

Adding another layer of complexity here, "as feminism becomes more popular with each celebrity's endorsement, more and more people are willing to call themselves feminists without working towards feminism's ultimate goal, equality for all women" (Iman, 2017, para. 5). Another similar critique of the term feminism is that sometimes it is employed so liberally that it begs questioning "if someone who identifies as a feminist truly understands what it means for all women and not just oneself" (Guest Blogger, 2017a, para. 27). Reflecting such uncertainty, *Muslim Girl* reiterates that although Islam advocates for gender equality, some Muslim women

are hesitant to identify as feminists (Kawetherinuwa, 2019). As one testimonial from *Muslim Girl* articulates:

For some reason, I still wasn't comfortable enough with saying those words: "I'm a feminist." I would be lying if I said that I didn't feel guilty, because the way I saw it, how could I be a young woman and not be a feminist? (Kawetherinuwa, 2019, para. 5)

Similarly, another testimonial from *Muslim Girl* notes:

Now, I am more open to discussing feminism, but I hesitate to say that I am a feminist because there are so many layers and so many histories attached to the movement, I question whether modern day feminism has space for women like me. (Anumahmed, 2019, para. 13).

Additionally, one *Muslim Girl* blogger addresses the need for Muslim women to balance making inroads in feminist circles with focusing on intersectional priorities as follows, "I understand the concept of building a seat to sit on when no seat is offered, but for now my focus lies with promoting the idea of equity between all people" (Anumahmed, 2019, para. 13).

Without negating the insights that feminism offers, another insightful testimonial from *Muslim Girl* foregrounds the desire to mobilize in ways that align with one's own experiences as below:

I appreciate the learning that feminisms and feminists offered me, but I don't want to speak someone else's language...Yes, we can work with others and learn from them, but we should never let their priorities and their ideas displace our own. (Guest Blogger, 2017a, paras. 22–23)

Furthermore, *Muslim Girl* argues that probing the relationship between gender equality, feminism and Islam can invite deeper contemplation as well as an acceptance that there may be neither easy solutions to tough issues nor simple answers to complex questions (Kawetherinuwa, 2019). Such reflection can prompt de-centering the terminology of feminism and focusing on its outcomes instead, as shared by one *Muslim Girl* blogger below:

I have come to the conclusion that perhaps, all this time, I have been too concerned with the label “feminist” itself, rather than what it implies. What I do know, is that I will continue to endeavor that all women and girls are afforded the opportunity to enjoy their inborn rights. I will continue to raise my voice against gender-based discrimination and gender-based violence. And I will stand in solidarity with my sisters who do the same. (Kawetherinuwa, 2019, para. 15)

Evidently, not all efforts to advance gender equity and social justice draw on feminist terminology. Therefore, it is vital to widen the field of analysis to include gender equality projects that are grounded in Islam and that simultaneously contest the terminology of feminism.

Nonetheless, these points of criticism do not erase the experiences of those who eagerly identify with the label of feminism (Kawetherinuwa, 2019). *Muslim Girl* explains that such keenness can be rooted in not only equating feminism with one’s womanhood but also in the belief that not identifying as a feminist amounts to “a betrayal to the millions of women and girls around the globe who face insurmountable trials and tribulations on a daily basis due to the paucity of gender equality within their homes, communities, workplaces, and schools” (Kawetherinuwa, 2019, para. 2).

To summarize, some of the reasons that the terminology of feminism may or may not have buy-in with certain audiences have been highlighted above. In light of the dynamic conditions outlined above, coupled with the complex histories and global trajectories shaping international relations and feminist discourses:

It becomes difficult to distinguish how much of Muslims’ issues with feminism has to do with the mainstream feminist movement not being relatable to Muslim women, its justification of occupying and invading Muslim lands and lives, or whether the stigma’s root is a sexist fear of the process of women’s liberation itself. Whether the stigma comes from feminism’s agenda or the injustices that part of the movement is responsible for, it is up to Muslim women themselves to decide whether they want to reshape the

movement or create their own. Regardless of which they choose, their decision must be respected, and never must their voices be dismissed or silenced in the name of Islam. (Kit, 2014, paras. 6–7)

In summary, this chapter has reiterated that interpreting Islamic guidance as inherently feminist does not absolve the need for Muslim communities to take stock of intra-communal issues and the barriers that Muslim women face in Muslim-majority settings. Included here was a rigorous examination of the systemic barriers that hinder gender equity within Muslim communities, as articulated by *Muslim Girl*. In turn, this examination highlights the need for honest critique, holding institutions and religious leaders accountable and dismantling the obstacles that qualified Muslim women face in accessing positions of religious authority. Furthermore, this analysis shed light on how Muslim women who share experiences of marginalization face victim-blaming narratives in Muslim communities as well as Islamophobic logics in mainstream society. Notably, this chapter has underscored that such intra-communal critique is meant to foster dialogue and collective action, and not to fuel imperialist, Islamophobic narratives about Muslims.

Moreover, this chapter documented the myriad ways in which Muslim women and their allies are overcoming intra-communal obstacles while also challenging dominant feminist discourses that perpetuate stereotypes and imperialist agendas under the guise of saving Muslim women. In particular, this critique revealed how the trope of saving Muslim women is weaponized to reinforce Islamophobic and paternalistic attitudes within feminist discourses. Lastly, this chapter scrutinized how such exclusionary dynamics in feminist spaces can heighten the ambivalence that some Muslim women feel about embracing the term feminism. These critical reflections pave the way for redefining feminism to ensure that all women, including Muslim women, are empowered in ways that align with their worldviews and feminist priorities.

## 6. Characteristics of Islamic Feminism as Evident in *Muslim Girl*

Building on the inward-oriented and outward-facing critique detailed in the previous chapter, this chapter explores the innovative and multifaceted activism of Muslim women and feminists. Specifically, this chapter explores how Muslim women are resisting the prejudices they face internally in Muslim communities and externally in broader society. Drawing on *Muslim Girl* as well as academic literature, the strategies deployed for such resistance include creative negotiation and faith-based objections as well as grounding feminism in Islam and prioritizing activism against not only misogyny but also Islamophobia. In describing these strategies, this chapter demonstrates how Muslim women are resisting oppressive pseudo-feminist narratives, patriarchal religious interpretations and stereotypical representations of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Muslims.

Following this review of Muslim women’s multi-pronged feminist activism, this chapter closely examines how narratives espoused on the *Muslim Girl* platform are redefining feminism by expanding which women are accounted for in feminist discourses. This expansion of whose interests feminism caters to draws on transnational, anti-imperialist and intersectional understandings of feminism, as detailed in this chapter. Such inclusive feminist orientations are evident in two distinct examples that *Muslim Girl* presents; namely feminist home-makers and stay-at-home moms, and the resistance of Palestinian women against a plethora of oppressive forces. In the first case, the discussion regarding feminist mothers and home-makers alludes to how feminism can reflect women’s diverse desires and aspirations, and how adopting traditionally feminine roles and being a feminist are not mutually exclusive. As for the second example noted above, Palestinian women’s feminist resistance demonstrates that feminism must reject imperialist and colonial projects, and that feminist solidarity requires contesting multiple intersecting systems of domination, including patriarchy, occupation and state-sponsored violence.

### Forms of Resistance

Even as Muslims are frequently silenced and maligned in service of insidious political motives, they continue to “reclaim the narrative” (MG Staff, 2019; Mokhtar, 2016a, para. 4). Unsurprisingly, such reclamation can be threatening to those who stand to lose power, such as white supremacists, misogynistic Muslim men and women and conservative Islamic community leaders (Leahvernon, 2017b). Resisting these hostile conditions, Muslim women are reclaiming not only the right to authentically formulate their own identities, but also the right “to speak for themselves and to be heard in the public sphere without intermediation by the press or others” (Leahvernon, 2017b; Mokhtar, 2016a, paras. 4–8). Despite the widespread hostility towards Muslim women’s activism and their role in public spheres, hope prevails as Muslim women continue to demand representation in all walks of life and “are JUST finding their seats at the table” (Issa, 2017, para. 14). There is a recognition that, in spite of the opposition, “things are changing” (Issa, 2017, para. 14).

### ***Resistance to Internal Pressures***

This section examines two forms of resistance that are geared primarily towards tackling internal concerns within Muslim communities, including those highlighted in the previous chapter. To set the stage, *Muslim Girl* underscores Muslim women’s feminist resistance against intra-communal pressures as follows:

It's not like Muslim women in Muslim-majority countries need anyone to speak for them, either. There is not a single gender issue unfolding within their societies that is not being tackled by the powerful women directly impacted by it. They don't need non-Muslim white women from the other side of the world to pity them, rescue them, or, worse, use their issues to justify Western, often state-sanctioned, violence against Muslim women in non-Muslim countries. (Amani, 2016, para. 9)

**Creative Negotiation.** Firstly, Muslim women who enact or aspire to religious leadership must creatively negotiate power dynamics and stereotypes about the qualities inherent to pious femininity. Such creative negotiations offer conceptual tools for understanding Muslim women’s

resistance more broadly. To elaborate, in the public domain women preachers' engagement with Islam "is restricted by the official interpretation of Islam, which only allows women to engage in issues presumed to be "feminine"" (Makboul, 2017, p. 303). However, as Makboul (2017, p. 327) states when addressing the conditions that Saudi women preachers operate in, "failing to give adequate attention to the dynamics of the official interpretation of religion that both affects and is affected by the context" can mistakenly suggest that women preachers invariably reinforce male domination. Such simplistic conclusions overlook how women preachers can extend applications of pious femininity and "adapt to new situations by advocating solutions that allow for female participation in the public sphere and at the same time safeguard the interests of conservative women living according to an envisioned pious lifestyle that is increasingly being challenged" (Makboul, 2017, p. 305). Reflecting "a desire to avoid any direct confrontations with male power" while also being limited in their ability to directly confront unfair gender norms, women preachers in this case instead "focus on the shared responsibilities of men and women" as a way to emphasize complementarity between genders as an Islamic viewpoint and to creatively navigate the limitations of patriarchy (Bertho, 2012, p. 113, as cited in Gomez-Perez, 2016, p. 55).

In the next example from Turkey, "the professionalization of female preaching could lead one to suppose a standardization of the preachers' practices" wherein sacred texts are referred to only in ways that adhere to the official, state-sponsored representation of Islam (Maritato, 2017, p. 537). However, even in this highly regulated context, Muslim women religious leaders express agency and innovation in their preaching by embodying "a standardized female religiosity that, while being compliant to the institution dogma, negotiates spaces and authority within a hybrid and multifaceted religious landscape" (Maritato, 2017, p. 535).

Another example of such creative negotiation is that of "a new publicly visible generation of female Islamic authorities in the UK and the ways in which they make sense of what it means to be a female authority within largely male-dominated structures of knowledge production"

(Liberatore, 2019, p. 1). “In the UK, female authorities are a diverse group in terms of their age, traditional Islamic training, Islamic school of thought, secular education and ethnic and socio-economic background” (Liberatore, 2019, p. 2). Despite these differences amongst them, across the board, “they are distancing themselves from the sectarian Islamic identities” (Liberatore, 2019, p. 5). These British Muslim women preachers are “creatively engaging with the Islamic tradition by drawing selectively on different gendered ideals embedded within it and problematising a singular and monolithic notion of ‘feminine piety’ (or) ‘Muslim womanhood’” (Liberatore, 2019, p. 14). In other words, these women are actively expanding understandings of pious femininity (Liberatore, 2019). To do so, these British women religious leaders deploy multiple strategies, from challenging and diversifying gendered norms to foregrounding traditionally feminine aspects of religious authority, such as caring for, being empathetic towards and offering guidance to young women (Liberatore, 2019). Specifically, “they draw predominantly from notions and role models taken from the Islamic tradition, but also draw inspiration from national and global discourses on women and leadership and structural critiques of patriarchy and weave these back into the tradition” (Liberatore, 2019, p. 14). As these examples from academic research in Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the UK suggest, creative negotiation in Muslim women’s engagement with Islam takes many different forms across the world. These examples offer analytical frameworks to examine how Muslim women innovatively navigate discourses about pious femininity, Islam and gender roles within Islam, which are all themes that have emerged prominently in *Muslim Girl* as well.

Expanding on this concept of creative negotiation and applying it to more hostile conditions, the rise of women religious preachers within patriarchal movements raises important questions about how “movements that aggressively enforce traditional gender roles for participants can nevertheless increase female authority for pragmatic political reasons” (Nielsen, 2020, p. 52). This apparent contradiction merits studying whether women’s preaching in patriarchal contexts makes room for women’s religious authority (Nielsen, 2020). In the context

of this thesis, examining Muslim women preachers' utilization of the agency, however limited, that religious movements' leaders have strategically given them is of vital importance (Nielsen, 2020). Paying attention to this dynamic can reveal if women preachers in such environments destabilize inequitable gender relations and narrow understandings of pious femininity or if their presence in fact reinforces misogynistic ideologies and helps patriarchal movements further widen their reach (Nielsen, 2020). In a nutshell, while creative negotiation has its limits, it is nonetheless a popular form of resistance that Muslim women religious leaders are diversely deploying across the world in order to cultivate renewed understandings of Islam, Islamic authority and pious femininity.

**Faith-Based Objections.** Faith-based objections are another way that Muslim feminists combat misogynistic interpretations of Islam. "Faith-based objection" is a last resort "in the event of a reader's crisis of conscience resulting from a moral impasse in the Qur'anic text" that troubles their conscience and that "seems to go against everything that he or she believes about God" (Abou El Fadl as cited in Hidayatullah, 2014, p. 140). This idea can be applied to interpretations of Islamic injunctions that one struggles with from an ethical standpoint. Key to such faith-based objection is:

"to pause. . . not to simply dismiss the text . . . but to reflect and investigate [it] further."

One must engage in earnest investigation, "suspending judgment until such study is complete." If the conflict between the text and one's conscience remains unresolved after seeking "all the possible avenues," Abou El Fadl notes, "Islamic theology requires that a person abide by the dictates of his or her conscience." (Abou El Fadl as cited in Hidayatullah, 2014, p. 140)

Abou El Fadl (2004, p. 30) adds that "our primary moral responsibility on earth is the vindication of the rights of human beings" and "a commitment in favor of human rights is a commitment in favor of God's creation and, ultimately, a commitment in favor of God" (as cited in El Younssi, 2018, p. 325). This notion is reinforced by Kecia Ali (2006), when she adds that

“God does not demand that Muslims act contrary to the dictates of conscience” or make decisions that are unfair or unethical (as cited in Hidayatullah, 2014, p. 140). This sentiment is also prevalent in Wadud’s (2006) work, where she admits to the persistent struggle to shine a feminist light on how some Quranic verses, like the verse 4:34 are interpreted, even as she advocates for “*an intervention opposing literal application*” of verses that are interpreted in misogynistic ways (as cited in Hidayatullah, 2014, p. 139). These interpretive tactics have been previously detailed in chapter 3. Here, the key takeaway is that along with creative negotiation, faith-based objections are another form of internally-oriented critique of and resistance against patriarchal interpretations of Islamic decrees.

### ***Resistance to External Pressures***

Having looked at the ways in which Muslim women are tackling internal issues within Muslim communities, the sections below draw attention to the multiple forms of outward-facing resistance that Muslim women and feminists are mounting against external pressures and hegemonic narratives.

**Activism Rooted in Islam.** In North America, Islamic communities play an integral albeit complex role in the lives of Muslims (Syjil, 2015). The importance of such communities lies in the fact that “to know more Muslims, more communities, more perspectives” is to expose oneself to the diverse ways of being Muslim, at the individual and collective levels (Syjil, 2015, para. 3). This wide-ranging exposure can strengthen as well as challenge one’s faith (Syjil, 2015). Either way, this sense of community is a mediating factor in how one experiences Islam.

Exemplifying activism that is rooted in Islam, one *Muslim Girl* blogger states “It is time to reclaim the ownership of our identities...and our rights to both faith and patriotism” (Latif, 2015, para. 10). Muslim women are thus actively taking ownership of their identities, situated as they are within broader discourses about Islam, feminism, nationhood and pious femininity (Latif, 2015). As this American *Muslim Girl* blogger puts it, “I am going to own my complexity, my love of America, and my love of the religion that has been a guiding buoyancy in the toughest of

times” (Latif, 2015, para. 11). Similarly, in the Canadian context too, “since 9/11 Muslim women have played a critical role in unsettling and reconfiguring the boundaries of citizenship and belonging in the Canadian national imaginary” (Zine, 2009, p. 146). In doing so, “Muslim women have been at the center of several contemporary debates in Muslim cultural politics in Canada” (Zine, 2009, p. 146).

Moreover, research demonstrates that Muslims’ ethical uprightness and virtue is seen as rooted in Islam (Chen & Dorairajoo, 2020). This connection exemplifies how one’s ethical bearing can be closely tied to their faith. Speaking to this trend, Muslim women are increasingly connecting Islam to their feminist orientations (Guest Blogger, 2017a). Their Islamically-grounded orientation towards social justice shapes Muslim women’s feminist activism, including their efforts to dismantle hegemonic framings of pious femininity (Guest Blogger, 2017a). Exhibiting this Islamically-oriented lens, Muslim women’s activism can be encapsulated in the following reflection:

As a Muslim, I know my existence in this world is temporary and I am destined to have tests and tribulations in whatever form or shape...I shall be resurrected and questioned on Judgement Day for deeds and choices I made in this world, and only then will absolute and divine justice prevail. This...adds a different dimension to discussions surrounding rights, justice, and equality, and I have yet to find a space in feminists’ circles where I can address these issues and bridge the gap. (Guest Blogger, 2017a, para. 21)

Therefore, the perspective noted above alters how one perceives issues of social justice, human rights, equality and fairness (Guest Blogger, 2017a). The above reflection also indicates that feminist spaces are yet to foster environments where such Islamic orientations can meaningfully inform feminist approaches, knowledge creation and progressive views about pious femininity (Guest Blogger, 2017a). Feminist spaces that address this gap are crucial because for Muslim women and feminists, their faith and feminist inclinations intersect and

inform their approach to social justice advocacy (Guest Blogger, 2017a). This recognition of how Islam reinforces their feminist inclinations enables Muslim women to resist not only limiting perceptions about pious femininity but also Islamophobic narratives that are all too common in the West and that pit Islam and feminism against each other (Guest Blogger, 2017a). In turn, this segues neatly into the various ways in which Muslim women and communities are resisting Islamophobic discourses, which the next section gets into.

**Resisting Islamophobia.** Rampant Islamophobia stimulates internal reflection as Muslims draw inspiration from Islam to reclaim the narratives being espoused about them (MG Staff, 2020a). This reclamation of narratives about Muslims from the clutches of Islamophobia necessitates explaining the tenets of Islam to a broader audience (Khan, 2009). Specifically, it requires applying an Islamically-informed analytical lens to topics like terrorism, extremism, Islamic jurisprudence, human rights in the aftermath of 9/11 and gendered issues such as women's rights and the significance of the hijab (Khan, 2009). Such initiatives that explain what Islam does and does not stand for can bridge gaps in knowledge by correcting misconceptions and stereotypes about Islam and Muslims.

Concurrently, it is important to underscore the toll that persistent Islamophobia and for Muslim women, gendered Islamophobia can take. Mindful of these conditions, *Muslim Girl* explains that one common way to ignore women's rightful exasperation due to their lived experiences is to have their responses "constantly dismissed as angry and emotional" (Hodakatebi, 2016a, para. 1). This misleading strategy paints marginalized communities as needlessly emotional and downplays the need for social justice activism on multiple fronts (Hodakatebi, 2016a). *Muslim Girl* argues that "this is a common tactic used by Islamophobes, racists, and Orientalists alike to characterize particular minority groups—especially Muslims, Middle Easterners/Western Asians, Latinx people and Black people" as irrational (Hodakatebi, 2016a, para. 27). Resisting such dismissive portrayals, *Muslim Girl* reclaims the right to be angry because "anger is righteous. Anger is powerful. Anger is valid" and perhaps even effective

for fuelling activism (Hodakatebi, 2016a, para. 28). This anger is justified because it arises from being consistently mistreated individually and collectively, including being frequently subjected to Islamophobic slurs and being exploited for capitalist ends (Hodakatebi, 2016a).

Within this terrain, Muslims' perseverance against Islamophobia does not negate that feelings of agony, frustration and bewilderment "are all incredibly valid and human feelings in response to such perpetual and targeted violence against marginalized communities" (Mohsenian-Rahman, 2017a, para. 1). Nonetheless, resistance efforts are vital because despondency "directly upholds and actively perpetuates white supremacy and violence conducted under its name" (Mohsenian-Rahman, 2017a, para. 2). To resist these oppressive structures and the distress they cause, *Muslim Girl* suggests, "take care of yourself during this difficult time, whatever that needs to look like for you" (Mohsenian-Rahman, 2017a, para. 2). However, along with self care, it is necessary to "not use your pain or fear to stay away from actively engaging with the issue at hand" (Mohsenian-Rahman, 2017a, para. 2). While it is important to hold space for the plethora of emotions that accompany persistent subjugation and that mark resilience against such oppression, it is equally important to keep forging ahead in advocacy efforts. Indeed, this call to action is being answered by communities across Europe and North America that are mobilizing against the rising tide of Islamophobic violence and policies (Mugabo, 2016).

***Challenging Narratives of 'Good' and 'Bad' Muslims.*** The previous section explored the multifaceted resistance strategies being deployed against dismissive, Islamophobic narratives. Staying with this theme, one key way that Muslims are resisting Islamophobia is by challenging dichotomous categorizations of themselves as "either suspicious and criminal, or 'victims too' and heroes" (MG Staff, 2017a, para. 3). In turn, "these flashpoints have galvanized debates about the 'limits of multiculturalism', the boundaries of nation and citizenship and 'good' versus 'bad' immigrants" (Zine, 2009, p. 146). Applying this point to the Canadian context, certain prominent Canadian Muslims who self-identify as 'progressive' or 'moderate' exemplify

“attempts to increase one’s claims to national belonging through a reification of tropes that designate many Muslims as fanatical, scary and a threat to the Canadian nation” (Riley, 2009, p. 57).

There are three avenues through which such stereotypes are fortified (Riley, 2009). These tactics include the “portrayals of the ‘good’ Muslim as a patriotic Canadian, as an object of threat from other Muslims and as a protector of oppressed Muslim women” (Riley, 2009, p. 57). Such restrictions on who counts as a ‘good’ (read palatable) Muslim strengthen racist and colonial logics by reinforcing the otherness of Islam (Patel, 2022b). Riley (2009, p. 57) adds:

In a context marked by rampant Islamophobia throughout Canadian society, these nationalist practices may do more to produce further racialisation of and violence towards those that they positioned as “bad” Muslims than to ensure any lasting claims to national belonging for those who assert themselves to be representative of the “good” Muslims.

In a similar manner, Muslims are also impacted by narrow definitions of acceptable religiosity such that “in order to appear sympathetic, it is required that we (Muslims) shed Islam as a way of life from our lives” and “dilute any religion-based practices into neoliberal capitalist narratives” (Patel, 2022b, para. 13). In other words, only certain, severely restricted Islamic practices are seen as acceptable, namely surface-level expressions of religion, such as celebrating religious holidays and enjoying Islamic art, literature, media and architecture (Patel, 2022b). “Islam is to be tolerated only when reduced to culture in which the dominant-caste or white friend can joyously celebrate Muslim festivities, visit Muslim friends and restaurants for biryani...or post Sufi songs on their social media” (Patel, 2022b, para. 8). On the other hand, the “figure of the (religious) Muslim has consistently been one of the most loathed and villainized figures”, painting them as radical and antithetical to liberal ideals and hence, undeserving of collective solidarity or empathy (Patel, 2022b, para. 10).

Echoing these findings from academia, *Muslim Girl* also squarely critiques “the

bad/good, liberal/conservative and moderate/extreme Muslim binaries that the media, global political rhetoric and government policy has created” (MG Staff, 2017a, para. 4). *Muslim Girl* adds that these loaded binaries do not accurately portray Muslims, perhaps with the exception of those who have “allowed the state to co-opt them to its own ends – primarily the vilification and policing of Muslims” (MG Staff, 2017a, para. 5). *Muslim Girl* further states that “it’s just as dehumanizing to only ever be recognised when you contribute something deemed ‘valuable’ to society, and to only ever be applauded when you’re publicly condemning and proving you’re ‘against’ the ‘Bad Muslims” (MG Staff, 2017a, para. 3). Additionally, *Muslim Girl* argues that such binaries of good/bad, moderate/fundamentalist, liberal/conservative are not only dehumanizing, they also erase “all the nuances of life” (MG Staff, 2017a, para. 3).

Disrupting such binaristic narratives requires alternative representations that resist dominant dichotomies of good Muslim/bad Muslim and that “escape the paradigm and terms set by the mainstream narrative” (MG Staff, 2017a, para. 9). Instead, what’s greatly needed are progressive narratives that question such ultimately meaningless dichotomies and that reveal how “‘good’ and ‘bad’ are meaningless terms that work for and to the agenda of the state” (MG Staff, 2017a, para. 9). *Muslim Girl* suggests that change in this direction is imminent because “there’s plenty of alternative narratives being told especially at the grassroots. Muslim organizations and young people in particular are telling their own stories, making their own platforms and connections” (MG Staff, 2017a, para. 9). Hence, dialogue and writing are emerging as strategies for continuing to expose “the falsity of the current narrative” (MG Staff, 2017a, para. 10). Such consistent interrogation of hegemonic discourses can provoke reflection and *Muslim Girl* argues “provocation is a great way to make people reconsider their beliefs” (MG Staff, 2017a, para. 10). At the same time, *Muslim Girl* also cautions that:

There are more immediate things that need to be done for Muslims...and whilst changing the narrative is part of that, if the mainstream refuses to listen then we can’t

waste time and energy on shouting into the void, we also have to build for our own futures and make justice happen for people. (MG Staff, 2017a, para. 10)

All in all, as these multiple forms of resistance to internal-facing and externally imposed concerns suggest, hope persists. Despite the ubiquitous presence of Islamophobia and other challenges, *Muslim Girl* highlights the persistent resilience of and resistance by Muslims who continue to strive for progress and who hold on to their identities with pride, as evident in the following articulation by a *Muslim Girl* blogger, “I see the will in my community to fight to uphold both who we are and what we’d like to stand for” (Guest Blogger, 2018, para. 6). On this front, inspiring Muslim women are galvanizing these efforts to reclaim Muslims’ authority to tell their own stories (Guest Blogger, 2018). Simultaneously, this palpable sense of better things to come is accompanied by the recognition that “there is so much progress before us, so much left to accomplish” (Guest Blogger, 2018, para. 10). Part of this work entails taking a critical look at what is currently missing from feminist discourses and how feminism can expand to genuinely account for the concerns, desires and priorities of Muslim women. Tackling this issue, the next section presents the various ways in which Muslim feminists are mobilizing to broaden feminist objectives to reflect diverse perspectives, including those of Muslim women.

### **Redefining Feminism**

Thus far, this thesis has looked at the critique and resistance that Muslim women and their allies are raising against various forms of oppression. These mobilization efforts collectively exemplify a brave political orientation in Muslim communities “that imagines another world in line with struggles for social justice, decolonial liberation, and global solidarity” (Rana & Daulatzai, 2018, p. x). Such an orientation demands asking “what is a revolutionary politics in which resistant forms of Muslimness imagine another world?” (Korkman & Razack, 2021, p. 261). This section considers how such alternative feminist futures require redefining feminism itself.

As detailed in the previous chapter on the ambivalence about the use of feminism as a label, feminism is “a word loaded with history and cultural baggage” including in Muslim

communities, where its invocation can easily ruffle feathers (Issa, 2016, para. 3). Recognizing these intricacies of feminist terminology, *Muslim Girl* acknowledges that “the word feminism, loosely defined as having equality amongst the sexes, has held different meaning depending on who’s asked” (Anumahmed, 2019, para. 4; Guest Blogger, 2017a). Even Muslim women who embrace the label of feminism demand the autonomy to define what the term means to them (Guest Blogger, 2017a). Therefore, “it would be more accurate to use feminism(s), because a singular implies that there is a unified, coherent definition to the term that everyone agrees on when it actually means different things to different individuals and movements” (Guest Blogger, 2017a, para. 18). Indeed, “feminism has a long history throughout the world and, like most socio-political labels, is entirely contextual; the word’s meaning is always evolving alongside our culture and society” (Anumahmed, 2019; Issa, 2016, para. 6; Qamar, 2015b). Thus, feminism is “a broad concept — one that encompasses many schools of thought and gives way to even more interpretations” (Al-Khatahtbeh et al., 2014, para. 21; Anumahmed, 2019; Kawetherinuwa, 2019).

Despite some of the problematic connotations of feminism that were noted in chapter 5, it is prudent to discern imperialist and orientalist forms of feminism from other, progressive versions of it (Kit, 2014). To this end, *Muslim Girl* argues:

To dismiss feminism because of the injustices done in its name — especially to Muslims — such as imperialism, torture, and orientalism, is a form of harmful stereotyping that stems from the same ignorance and lack of critical thinking generated as Islamophobia due to the injustices done in the name of Islam. (Kit, 2014, para. 6)

Without undermining the issues with feminism as a label, *Muslim Girl* asks that when it comes to feminist terminology, “if the definition is so fluid, why can’t we redefine it for our own agenda?” in order to potentially unite the Muslim community in service of gender justice, a concept which is central to Islam (Issa, 2016, para. 34). Exhibiting this diversity in its connotations, *Muslim Girl’s* contributors’ responses when asked how they define feminism

illustrate varying relationships with the word feminism (Anumahmed, 2019). “Some are concerned that it’s grounded in exclusivity, leaving little room for women like us, while others argue that that’s a trope of the past, and that the movement is much more welcoming now” (Anumahmed, 2019, para. 15)

In other words, “feminists come in different shades just as Muslims do” (Issa, 2016, para. 35). This fluidity in defining feminism means it can be reclaimed by Muslim women to define it for themselves (Issa, 2016). All in all, in spite of the previously described and arguably reasonable reservations about the term feminism, there is a reclamation of it by Muslim women, as further detailed below.

### ***Reconceptualizing Feminism***

Overarchingly, *Muslim Girl* calls for a feminism wherein “we continue to respect one another’s agency, root for each other’s happiness, and help create opportunities for all women to thrive” (Anumahmed, 2019, para. 15; Guest Blogger, 2017a). *Muslim Girl* defines feminism as “the never-ending fight for equal rights and equal treatment in a world that denigrates and abuses women” (Anumahmed, 2019; Guest Blogger, 2017a, para. 14). Feminism calls for recognizing the diverse injustices that women encounter, in order to be able to correct them (Guest Blogger, 2017a). “Feminism, as author and feminist bell hooks put it, is ‘a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression’” (Guest Blogger, 2017a, para. 5). The epicenter of feminism thus lies in “the promotion of the full humanity of women” and all people (Al-Khatahtbeh et al., 2014; Anumahmed, 2019; Muslim Girl, 2019c, para. 3). *Muslim Girl* also poetically articulates feminism as follows:

Feminism is art and action, history and future...Feminism is anger and love, ambition and patience...Feminism is bold and brash, calm and thoughtful. Feminism is black and brown, powerful and resilient. Feminism is poetry and practicality. Feminism is ancestral and prophetic. (Aishasaleh, 2018a)

Across the wide variety of its interpretations, “the foundation of what it means to be a

feminist is to construct a more equitable society that respects all individuals” (Guest Blogger, 2017a, para. 27). At its core, “the feminist fight is all about fighting for equal access to resources, so that we may all rise to our true potential” (Anumahmed, 2019, para. 10). Such a solidarity-based feminism demands “empowering others to strive for excellence, to pass the mic, to offer them that ladder for true equity, and to understand how there is power in numbers” (Guest Blogger, 2017a, para. 10). Such iterations of feminism welcome all while remaining potent and action-oriented (Aishasaleh, 2018a). Additionally, this kind of inclusive feminism cultivates space to celebrate the innumerable ways in which “women are changing the world, making their mark, making history” (Anumahmed, 2019, para. 11).

Feminism is also a multifaceted concept “that captures how women relate to one another” (Anumahmed, 2019, para. 6). *Muslim Girl* proposes that “feminism, ideally, would inspire each woman to do what she sees fit for her life” (Anumahmed, 2019, para. 6). In short, feminist ideologies seek to empower all women while recognizing that “feminism can mean different things to different people” (Aishasaleh, 2018a; Anumahmed, 2019, para. 12). Another key tenet of feminism is that women build each other up; this solidarity is duly recognized by the likes of well-known activist Linda Sarsour, when she recognizes that “I am here because another woman pulled me up, someone embraced me” (Tasnim, 2021, para. 9).

Indeed, “feminism is about celebrating and uplifting women, not creating and defining flat, monolithic meanings and symbols for millions of women” (Hodakatebi, 2016a, para. 24). In this regard, feminism foregrounds the need “to end backbiting and shaming within our own sisterhood first” (Guest Blogger, 2017a, para. 10). To address such divisions, it is important that the womanhood that women pride themselves on being part of fosters a sense of community and stands united (Guest Blogger, 2017a; Mokhtar, 2017). On this note, *Muslim Girl* reinforces the need to support “women everywhere standing up for what they believe in no matter what the circumstances” (Anumahmed, 2019, para. 11). Put differently:

Feminism is about respecting, supporting and encouraging your fellow women

regardless of your beliefs or how you choose to dress. Feminism is about standing up for your sisters when injustices occur. Feminism is having a sister's back, period. Feminism is about loving and respecting your gender. (Abour, 2015, para. 8; Al-Khatahtbeh et al., 2014)

Finally, feminism is “not an easy fight, but so long as we are relentless in speaking up for those whose voices need elevation, we are certain to march on in the right direction” (Anumahmed, 2019, para. 10). In this regard, *Muslim Girl* cautions that it is vital to hold oneself accountable for “how impactful we can be through the choices we make, our ability to be humble, our persistence to fight against injustice, and our perseverance to carry on when our legs feel weak” (Guest Blogger, 2017a, para. 13). As *Muslim Girl* reminds readers, “feminism shouldn't just come at convenient times” and such relentless advocacy will help ensure feminist progress in the long run (Anumahmed, 2019, para. 11).

**Feminist Mothers and Home-Makers.** Symbolizing an inclusive form of feminism, *Muslim Girl* presents two examples of how feminism prioritizes solidarity and freedom of choice. In the first example, *Muslim Girl* cites an incident where “a well-known and relatively popular politician from a predominantly Muslim country suggested that feminism has degraded the role of the mother” (Muslim Girl, 2018b, para. 2). Critiquing this politician's statement, *Muslim Girl* notes:

The suggestion that one can't be a feminist as well as a dedicated mother is ludicrous! On the flipside, the suggestion that a woman who chooses not to take on the lofty responsibility of motherhood, for whatever reason, is any less of a woman is just as toxic. Stripping a woman of her agency in either of these manners is absurd and reeks of ulterior motives sprouting from cultural constraints rather than religious. (Muslim Girl, 2018b, para. 2)

Responding to this head of state's anti-feminist address, another *Muslim Girl* blog reiterates that feminism prioritizes respecting women's choices (MG Staff, 2015). In light of this

example, *Muslim Girl* offers a timely reminder that the fundamental principle of feminism is to give women the autonomy to chart their own course in life and make their own choices without repercussions (Anumahmed, 2019). Written as an open letter, *Muslim Girl's* response to this politician's speech focuses on:

defining feminism in clear terms: "Feminism is equating the importance of motherhood to the importance of fatherhood. Feminism is allowing our children, regardless of gender, to dream of fitting into the mold of any position in society... It's to create a society in which men can be generals and presidents and doctors and judges in the same way that women can be any and all of those things — with the same opportunity and with the same respect." (MG Staff, 2015, para. 8; Muslim Girl, 2014)

Put succinctly, "feminism is creating an atmosphere where men can be stay at home dads in the same way that women can be stay at home moms", all without judgment or condescension (MG Staff, 2015; Muslim Girl, 2014, para. 5). As *Muslim Girl's* critique indicates, feminism emphasizes the liberty to fully express oneself and make life choices freely, without the shackles of gendered expectations (Anumahmed, 2019). This response by *Muslim Girl* highlights that "the feminist movement advocates for equality and agency across the board", so one can be feminist while still choosing traditionally feminine roles, like motherhood (MG Staff, 2015; Muslim Girl, 2014, 2018b, para. 2).

While Muslim Girl rightfully calls for the inclusion of diverse aspirations and life choices to fall within the purview of feminism, the conditions that enable some choices to be made, and not others, demand closer scrutiny. An interrogation of how heteropatriarchy, capitalism and settler colonialism shape the choices that are available to women is thus warranted (Brown, 2006; Mahmood, 2005). The categorization of some life choices as feminist and others as not also needs examining because language normalizes particular gender ideologies and legitimizes certain manifestations of empowerment and liberation (Fairclough, 2013).

Having looked at feminist understandings of motherhood above, *Muslim Girl* also

addresses how home-makers are positioned in feminist discourses. Muslim women and home-makers often struggle with the “social stigma that comes with being a ‘simple housewife’ that a woman is not exercising her equal role in society” (Nida, 2013, para. 8). While the freedom to engage in public life and professional pursuits is essential, the flip side of this feminist gain may have been the unwitting stigmatization of women who choose to be housewives or stay at home mothers (Nida, 2013). If women freely choose the latter options, they are not necessarily victimized but are enacting their agency and free will (Nida, 2013).

Illustrating this dynamic, one *Muslim Girl* blogger shares, “I’ve never viewed myself as one of ‘those’ feminists, but I always thought of myself as an empowered Muslim woman” (Salwakhan, 2018, para. 1). She further explains that with time, her “definition of success has slowly steered away from career achievements to caretaking” (Salwakhan, 2018, para. 8).

Alluding to the sometimes narrowly-defined perceptions of feminism, one *Muslim Girl* blogger questions:

I can’t possibly be a feminist and enjoy making chai (tea) for my husband, right? How can I claim to be a part of bringing down the patriarchy and enjoy cooking traditional Pakistani cuisine for my family in my kitchen in the suburbs? (Salwakhan, 2018, para. 8)

This introspection demonstrates that seeing feminism and traditionally feminine roles as mutually exclusive is problematic because it results in externally imposed as well as internalized “shame in enjoying being a traditional mom and wife” (Salwakhan, 2018, para. 10). Seeing traditionally feminine roles as anti-feminist incorrectly and dubiously paints feminism as being only concerned with sameness and proximity to traditional masculinity (Salwakhan, 2018).

The above reflection sheds light on how feminist framings of success can sometimes negate the labour of caring in ways that reinforce neoliberal logics. At the same time, while domestic and care work can be an individual choice, it has also long been an expectation from women, and especially racialized women (hooks, 1984; Glenn, 1992). Such expectations are a prime example of how “racism and sexism diminish life choices for women of color” (Ahmed,

2010, p. 68). These tensions indicate the need for disrupting narrow definitions of empowerment in feminist discourses.

Nonetheless, feminist wins have supported an “amazing new generation of female entrepreneurs, and of diverse women in fashion, technology, and the media” (Salwakhani, 2018, para. 10). However, this begs the question that “in an effort to encourage women to go beyond ‘the norm,’ are we excluding the women who have actively chosen ‘the norm?’” (Salwakhani, 2018, para. 10). Women who find themselves in this predicament recognize that “familial successes have increasingly become uncool and the quest to ‘have it all’ in the classic sense remains” (Salwakhani, 2018, para. 11). Such ‘you can do it all’ perspectives also problematically trivialize the extensive labor that care-giving and domestic upkeep require (Salwakhani, 2018).

Also relevant to this discussion is the fluidity of the roles that women embrace across different life stages, depending on their particular circumstances. For instance, some women choose to stay at home temporarily during the early years of their children’s lives, and then return to work once kids are of school-going age or older. Others work part-time, take up flexible work options such as contracting or consulting, or open up their own businesses. For most women then, working in the formal economy and staying at home are stage-specific choices, and both are aligned with feminist values. On this front, Muslim women’s proven and ongoing ability to “figure out how to empower our sisters no matter what paths we choose” is commendable (Salwakhani, 2018, para. 11). This solidarity challenges stereotypes about who feminists are, by including housewives, stay at home mothers and home-makers as feminists too (Amanisa, 2016b).

Concurrently, it is important to adopt a critical analytical lens which recognizes that choices do not take shape in a vacuum as implied by liberal, Western-centric notions of individual agency (Goeman, 2008; Simpson, 2017). Rather, choices are shaped by the material and ideological contexts that make certain realities desirable and achievable for some, and not for others (Collins, 2000; Simpson, 2017; Simpson, 2007). Choices are also shaped by varying

conceptualizations of kinship, relationality, familial ties and home-making; these concepts vary based on social, cultural, geographical and historical context (Goeman, 2008; Simpson, 2017). Furthermore settler colonial formulations of productivity along with societal norms, economic realities and overarching narratives about gender and family relations influence the choices that people arrive at. Put briefly, “choices are engineered and limited by social location” (Browne, 2015, p. 15). Given these complexities and limitations of individual autonomy and agency, the analysis by *Muslim Girl* could benefit from a more sustained interrogation of how power dynamics limit the choices that are available or even worth aspiring to.

To sum up, the last few sections have described how Muslim feminists are redefining feminism. Taking a deeper dive into this topic, the next section explores how Muslim feminists are centering transnational, anti-imperialist forms of feminism.

### ***Transnational, Anti-Imperialist Feminism***

Chapter 5 and earlier sections of this chapter have reviewed the shortcomings of white-centric liberal feminism and its “refusal to acknowledge that women of color are capable of empowering themselves” (Harvard, 2015a, para. 1). Such savior-oriented feminism overlooks the “numerous Muslim feminists leaving behind a blazing trail of progress for women’s rights”, thus bolstering the need for alternative and adaptable types of feminism that are “more inclusive of narratives from communities that aren’t cis, white, and able-bodied” (Anumahmed, 2019, para. 4; Harvard, 2015a, para. 6). To be sure, “it’s not up to white liberal feminism — or Muslim men — to speak on behalf of Muslim women” (Harvard, 2015a, para. 6).

As a counterweight to this homogenization, anti-imperialist forms of feminism resist the universalization of Muslim women’s experiences as an undifferentiated swath. Resisting the co-optation and hijacking of their voices, there are several progressive Muslim feminists who are empowering women “and for white liberal feminists to diminish those efforts by enacting through their own privilege would do a great disservice to the Muslim women they attempt to ‘save’” (Harvard, 2015a, para. 6). Instead, “it is up to Muslim women who are resisting and organizing

against the systemic forms of violence within their respective contexts to determine how others can show solidarity with them” (Raja, 2015, para. 3). Muslim women’s feminist efforts offer a stark reminder that, as the highly regarded Egyptian feminist Nawal El Saadawi said, “feminism is not a Western invention. Feminism is not invented by American women, as many people think. No, feminism is embedded in culture and in the struggle of all women all over the world” (Hassanein, 2021, para. 1). *Muslim Girl* not only problematizes Western-centric conceptualizations of mainstream feminism, it also underlines the need for “learning about the colonization of knowledge(s) and decolonization of Muslim intellectualism” (Guest Blogger, 2017a, para. 22).

Building on this critique of narrow, Eurocentric definitions, Abu-Lughod in her work *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* asks “what does freedom mean if we accept the fundamental premise that humans are social beings, raised in certain social and historical contexts and belonging to particular communities that shape their desires and understandings of the world?” (MG Staff, 2021e, para. 1). As Abu-Lughod adds, “these contexts are shaped by global politics, international capital, and modern state institutions, with their changing impacts on family and community” (MG Staff, 2021e, para. 4).

In another instance, *Muslim Girl* references Leela Fernandes’ book about transnational feminism in America to argue that “feminist efforts to invoke global or transnational perspectives are continually challenged by the nation-centered narratives and visions of the world” (MG Staff, 2021e, para. 38; *Muslim Girl*, 2020). To address this, feminist research needs methodological frameworks that account for the complexities and contradictions of people’s experiences (MG Staff, 2021e). Taking the intricacies of lived realities into consideration can mitigate this gap wherein “transnational lenses attempt to view the world from within the cultural context, yet lack the ability to delve even further to understand the differences that exist inside individual communities” (MG Staff, 2021e, para. 46). As an example, in the context of this study, accounting for socio-cultural distinctions in views towards gender can help combat “feminism’s

generalization of what liberties and freedoms symbolize” (MG Staff, 2021e, para. 3).

Not only does transnational and anti-imperialist feminism complicate understandings of freedom, such feminist perspectives also interrogate overly-simplified notions about women’s oppression. In particular, transnational and anti-imperialist feminism tackles how women can be complicit in each other’s oppression (Aishasaleh, 2018a). Speaking of her own positionality as an American woman in relation to her aunt being a Palestinian woman, one *Muslim Girl* blogger offers an example of such complicity as below:

As a taxpaying American, many of my privileges are paid for by my participation in a political economy which funds and fuels the very military occupation that oppress these women and forces them to carve out a new social movement that reconciles the occupation with their conservative culture. (Amaneisa, 2016b, para. 7)

As this example indicates, some women are systemically implicated in the oppression of other women, through foreign policies and military interventions that pit countries and its inhabitants against each other (Amaneisa, 2016b). This possibility of complicity necessitates accounting for the specific positionality of feminist actors, as shaped by their varying dimensions of privilege and oppression in relation to others. Also illuminating the importance of privilege, journalist Sana Saeed, an interviewee in one *Muslim Girl* blog, shares how being attuned to the privileges within feminism is conducive to developing a critical understanding of feminism itself (Syjil, 2015). Regardless of whether one subscribes to feminist terminology or not, this awareness of positionality and its attendant privileges can enhance and refine one’s understanding of feminist scholarship (Syjil, 2015).

Moreover, privileged Muslim women must resist the temptation to “exploit their privilege and speak on behalf of ALL Muslim women as if our oppression can be narrowed to anecdotes of one individual’s experience” (Raja, 2015, para. 6). Being attuned to positionality and privilege not only mitigates the tendency to speak for all Muslim women, it also opens up opportunities for seeing differing views on feminism in relation to Islam as “valid for their respective contexts”

because “humans don’t grow up in an ideological vacuum where their opinions and worldview are separate from the experiences, culture and socio-economic and political environment they grew up in” (Amaneisa, 2016b, paras. 3–7).

To add to this, for Western feminists to remain mindful of their own positionality and privilege and for them to genuinely show solidarity with Muslim women and feminists globally, it is essential to “listen and share the work of these fearless trailblazers breaking down the stereotypes and injustices they didn’t make” (Guest Blogger, 2017a; Harvard, 2015a, para. 7). Meaningfully allying with Muslim women requires dismantling the perceived divide between modernity and premodernity “that functions as a colour line, marking the difference between the modern, enlightened West, and tribal, religious Muslims” (Razack, 2007, p. 3). On this front, disrupting discourses about “the rescue mission of civilizing powers” is also central to manifesting feminist futures (Mohanty, 2006, p. 11). Together, these strategies are crucial “for building transnational solidarity among Muslim women and with allies, rather than engaging in oppression olympics” (Raja, 2015, para. 9). Specifically, such solidarity requires “moving from talking about allyship to sharing concrete steps and actions to show up, support and *perform* allyship” (Hodakatebi, 2016b, para. 2). To be a meaningful ally is to recognize that “undertaking an analysis of Muslim women and our experiences, activism, and feminism is an arduous task, considering our diversity and variables such as geography, class, ethnicity, and other factors”, but to take up this necessary task anyway (Muslim Girl, 2021, para. 9).

In a nutshell, as Judith Butler in *Frames of War* (2016) outlines, anti-imperialist and transnational feminism calls for:

a coalition that draws together those who oppose wars and violence and those who believe in gender justice is possible. This coalition would draw together a diverse group of people with a variety of beliefs about gender justice and sexual politics in unified resistance to the appropriation of issues of gender and sexuality as a justification for violence, particularly state-sponsored violence. The diversity of the beliefs of this

coalition would itself be a sign of its radical democratic values, and its loyalty to people and human rights in general, over and against totalitarianism, neo-colonialism, fascism, and imperialism. (Sarahmohr, 2020, para. 9)

Importantly, this type of collaboration can unify allies with differing understandings of feminism and women's empowerment in Muslim communities and elsewhere (Sarahmohr, 2020). Underlying such comprehensive feminist projects is the recognition that, "the struggle for the equality of women is neither holistic nor effective if it does not take into account that all systems of oppression are interconnected. Institutions like racism, xenophobia, ableism, homophobia, and classism all play into sexism" (Al-Khatahtbeh et al., 2014, para. 22).

In sum, transnational, anti-imperialist feminism resists the trope of saving Muslim women and instead advocates for inclusive and adaptive forms of feminism that remain attuned to differences in power and privilege. This type of feminism acknowledges the variety of meanings that are associated with freedom and it recognizes the interconnected nature of women's oppression. It also critiques the co-optation of feminist discourses in service of imperialist interventions and instead champions the localized, indigenous forms of activism that are being led by Muslim women and their allies. Many of these themes are exemplified by the feminist mobilization of Palestinian women, which the next section delves into.

**Palestinian Women's Resistance.** Exemplifying anti-imperialist feminism, Palestinian women's resistance is referenced in two *Muslim Girl* blogs, one of which further cites two more *Muslim Girl* blogs on the topic, titled "An Open Letter to Wall Street Journal from a Palestinian Woman" and "Rasmea Odeh and the Vilification of Brown Women's Bodies" (Amaneisa, 2016b; MG Staff, 2015). These blogs shed light on the oppressive invasion and military occupation that Palestinian women and other defenseless civilians survive under (MG Staff, 2015). Specifically, *Muslim Girl's*:

article on Rasmea Odeh's lessons of justice, the reclamation of womanhood, liberation, individualism and spirituality in her trial, states "Rasmea taught us that the resistance

movement is a never-ending one; she has taught us to liberate our minds, our love for one another, our spirits, our bodies, and eventually, to liberate lands.” (MG Staff, 2015, para. 6)

As this description suggests, the Palestinian fight for liberation demands not only land back, but also holistically recovering from the fetters of systemic domination (MG Staff, 2015). In particular, a key part of Palestinians’ social justice mobilization focuses on challenging “faithwashing” (MG Staff, 2015; Syjil, 2015, para. 1). Crafted by Sana Saeed, an interviewee in one *Muslim Girl* blog, this term denotes “the tactic of painting the Israeli-Palestinian issue as a religious conflict to distract from it being a colonial one” (Syjil, 2015, para. 1).

Moreover, Palestinian women’s mobilization symbolizes feminist and social justice activism that requires advocates to forego neither Islam nor their diversity (MG Staff, 2015). Exemplifying this stance, one *Muslim Girl* blogger reflects on her Palestinian aunt’s organized activism alongside other local women, as follows:

A married woman from a conservative Sunni family, my aunt was an active member of a local women’s committee group composed of female anti-occupation activists who also advocated for a specific type of feminism which sought equality between the sexes, but an organic form that grew from the grassroots of the Middle East’s various cultural milieus. This feminism outright rejected what the members called “Western feminist colonialism,” and envisioned gender equality as a demand that both men and women receive equal treatment within the framework of whatever cultural foundations undergirded their respective society. (Amaneisa, 2016b, para. 5)

Contrary to common perceptions about activism being exclusively under the purview of liberalism, this excerpt demonstrates that feminist mobilization is also enacted by those hailing from conservative Muslim families (Amaneisa, 2016b). In the same example, this *Muslim Girl* blogger adds:

The feminism of my aunt’s women’s committee is a grassroots movement born from the

struggles of native Palestinian women who were both Freedom Fighters and housewives, political prisoners and Muslim mothers. The Islam that underlies their vision of gender equality is interpreted within this framework of political resistance. (Amaneisa, 2016b, para. 7)

As this example indicates, Palestinian women's localized feminism disrupts white-centric feminist narratives by prioritizing culturally-informed notions of gender justice (Amaneisa, 2016b). Such a dynamic feminist framework is vital for Palestinian women who "operate under a traditional and conservative culture dominated by patriarchy, but simultaneously have to grapple with the socio-economic and political turbulence wrought by Israeli persecution" (Amaneisa, 2016b, para. 7). To unpack this statement, Palestinian women's multifaceted struggles mean that they are not only fighting to be able to work and study, but also to have equal access to opportunities in local governance (Amaneisa, 2016b). Palestinian feminist activists prioritize representation in leadership roles because "women who entered the public sphere as fellow participants in governance would exert more power and influence in enforcing socio-cultural norms, thereby neutralizing the pernicious effect patriarchal power had on women in society" (Amaneisa, 2016b, para. 6).

Especially in light of Palestinian women's long-standing and multi-dimensional resistance, *Muslim Girl* critiques Western media's erasure of Palestinians' struggle, including the loss of life they face and the emotional toll that this takes on the loved ones left behind (MG Staff, 2015). Prevailing injustice coupled with this ongoing silence from the rest of the world exposes "exactly where Palestinian activism stands. Brutally alone. But passionately free, fervently truthful, and, most of all, vehemently *ours*" says *Muslim Girl* (MG Staff, 2015, para. 6). Palestinian women's mobilization takes shape within this historical and ongoing context of long-standing systemic oppression. As a result, their activism offers a prime example of how anti-imperialism is integral to feminism.

### ***Intersectional Feminism***

Thus far, this thesis has taken a detailed look at how feminism can be redefined and expanded to centrally incorporate transnational and anti-imperialist frameworks. Such frameworks are built on the recognition that intersectional feminism “is a movement to end all systems of oppression because they are all tied into each other” (Guest Blogger, 2017a, para. 5). An intersectional approach to feminism is necessary not only because women’s experiences of their multiply located gendered identities are shaped by complex geo-political and socio-historical contexts, but also because “women’s overlapping identities — like race, class, religion, sexual orientation, and ethnicity — all come together to affect the way they experience oppression and discrimination” (N, 2017; Vanessa elshamy, 2018a, para. 1; Shaikh, 2013). Intersectional feminism demands accounting for the interconnected ways in which these above-listed factors, as well as others such as disability and immigration status shape lived experiences (Abdul-Kareem, 2018; Riley, 2013). To effectively and comprehensively account for these factors, “feminism also needs to be intersectional, trans-positive, and inclusive of all classes and cultures, or it isn’t true feminism” (Guest Blogger, 2017a, para. 16).

*Muslim Girl* further posits that “you can’t reasonably be against structures of inequality — structures that perpetuate racism, ableism, class warfare, ethnic bigotry, Islamophobia, and sectarianism (Sunni privilege, for example) — and then fall short of criticizing structures of inequality that perpetuate sexism” (Al-Khatahtbeh et al., 2014, para. 23; Raja, 2015). Such holistic forms of feminism demand organized and sustained collaboration with “Black, secular, faith-based feminisms and activisms” (Muslim Girl, 2021, para. 10). These types of feminist alliances would challenge the stability of feminist labels and would yield feminisms that are collaboratively generated, radically inclusive and cognizant of how secular and religious domains are intertwined (Muslim Girl, 2021).

On the other hand, in feminist discourses that are blind to intersectionality:

We see a push for equality that assumes all women are White women. We’re not. We are varied, as are our obstacles and should be addressed accordingly. This equality

push also assumes that everything men have women want. We don't. (Abdul-Kareem, 2018, para. 15)

Demonstrating a blindness to intersectionality, monolithic interpretations of equality propose generalized rather than customized solutions which are rooted in the false assumption that all people "start at the same place with the same privileges, history, and problems. It assumes that all people face the same barriers" (Abdul-Kareem, 2018, para. 20). Within intersectional feminism, equity rather than equality is the goal because "pursuing equity identifies the problems specific to people/groups and addresses it accordingly" (Abdul-Kareem, 2018, para. 33).

In one example, *Muslim Girl* references an author and blogger who speaks to the importance of intersectionality as follows:

Glennon Doyle Melton takes on the issue of oppression, addressing white women. She says she understands that white women are feeling fear and degradation but they must realize they are only experiencing an ounce of what people of color, religious minorities, LGBTQ+, the poor, and other marginalized groups have felt for far too long. (Sadler, 2017, para. 1)

Melton adds that:

"We cannot show up for the movement and say 'here we are' until we say 'we are so damn sorry it took us so long.'" She also reminds everyone that the fight cannot be just against misogyny but must also take on homophobia, transphobia, classism, and poverty. (as cited in Sadler, 2017, para. 2)

Furthermore, Melton:

cautions against taking the role of White Savior and instead allowing for the real leaders-women of color-to take control and show you how to help. Her final message is to learn about and get to know the work of strong women like Maya Angelou, Linda Sarsour, and Carmen Perez and fight like they are fighting because "if our White

feminism doesn't become intersectional, it will become nothing." (Sadler, 2017, para. 3)

In another example, a *Muslim Girl* blog titled "Muslim Feminists Respond: The Hypocrisy of the Male-Centric Narrative" also addresses this need for intersectional feminism (MG Staff, 2015). Written as a critique of another online article and co-authored by five Muslim activists, this *Muslim Girl* blog notes that for feminists:

The demands of equality aren't only about dress; they are about asking for a radical transformation of power as distributed by gender. They are about restructuring society to reflect equality across gender — and, when applying intersectionality, across all identities and their expressions. The demands for equality are about asking for an end to the global devaluation and dehumanization of women, which begins the moment the fetus is designated female and lasts throughout a woman's lifetime. (MG Staff, 2015, para. 4)

Both the above examples speak to the importance of adopting an intersectional lens to better understand women's lived experiences and to formulate more comprehensive understandings of key feminist concepts, like equality and freedom.

Given that "feminism is the advocacy for social, political and economic equality", it is important to ask "what do we consider social, political, or economic equality for women? What do we mean by 'equal,' and 'equal' to whom?" (Al-Khatahtbeh et al., 2014, paras. 21–22). Addressing this issue, *Muslim Girl* "investigates the fallacy that there is only one way to perform free will" (Jhaish, 2019, para. 14). Here, intersectional feminism offers a key intervention by advocating for women's agency in defining liberation for themselves and by recognizing that often women's "choices are the result of their own decisions, desires, and understandings" (Hodakatebi, 2016a, para. 18; N, 2017). Such agency in determining what empowerment means to them can allow feminist mobilization to resonate with all women "regardless of race, religion, or any other social factor" (Khan, 2016, para. 9).

Turning to Muslim women specifically, *Muslim Girl* argues that "Muslim women's

liberation is intersectional. It isn't rooted in competing between our struggles and arguing for instituting an hierarchy of oppression" (Raja, 2015, para. 10). Muslim women's feminist efforts are not geared towards a singular, unified struggle (Raja, 2015). Instead, their diverse experiences require feminist analytical frameworks that acknowledge the multiple, intersecting forms of systemic violence that Muslim women face (Raja, 2015). *Muslim Girl* adds that such intersectional oppression means that "as Muslim women, we also need to build with each other and reject the ways systems of violence enlist us to commit violence against each other" (Raja, 2015, para. 9). Therefore, an intersectional feminist lens is essential for Muslim women because "everyone who wants to empower Muslim women needs to work actively to remove the systems that put us at a disadvantage" (Guest Blogger, 2017a, para. 7). Such intersectional feminist mobilization is an essential component of "working towards building more equal platforms and sustainable initiatives to ensure a more fair and impartial society and community" (Guest Blogger, 2017a, para. 30).

**Why Muslim Women March.** An intersectional approach to feminism is evident in the reasons that Muslim women articulate for their feminist activism. This outlook is exemplified by the testimonials of some attendees of the 2017 and 2018 Women's Marches in Washington, DC in which they describe their reasons for marching, as detailed below (Ayub, 2017; Khan, 2018).

Reflecting intersectional understandings of feminism, one attendee says "we can come together and fight for the rights of Muslims, Black people, Hispanic people, the disabled, immigrants and more" (Ayub, 2017, para. 5). Similarly, other attendees share "I march for my fellow minorities — Blacks, Hispanics, Muslims and immigrants" and "I march for ALL women. I march for Palestinian women and black women and Latina women and Muslim women and indigenous women and all other women" (Ayub, 2017, para. 2; Khan, 2018, para. 8). Another attendee directly calls upon the concept of intersectionality in saying that "I march because all feminism should be intersectional...I march for equality, diversity, real intersectional feminism, sisterhood, and unity" (Ayub, 2017, para. 8).

As the above testimonials indicate, attendees march in solidarity with various marginalized groups who are disproportionately impacted by oppressive ideologies and national narratives that erase and homogenize their experiences (Ayub, 2017). This sentiment is echoed in one attendee's testimonial that "I march for every minority who has been affected by the way our 'leaders' have so easily disregarded and discredited our experiences and stories to elevate themselves" (Ayub, 2017, para. 8). In the same vein, attendees of the marches draw attention to those girls and women who may be forgotten about in mainstream feminist discourses (Ayub, 2017). As one attendee articulates:

My main reason for marching is really to honor girls: Young girls who started working to support their families; transgender girls who are shunned by their families; dark girls who are told that their worth is equivalent to the shade of their skin; hijabi girls who are expected to apologize for things they have no part in; the undocumented girls with big dreams, and all other girls who continue to live each day in a society that refuses to appreciate their worth. (Ayub, 2017, para. 6)

This intersectional feminist perspective is also evident in the attendees' historically nuanced understanding of how anti-racist activism today builds on racialized communities' long-standing legacy of mobilizing for human rights (Ayub, 2017). Specifically, one attendee reflects, "part of me marched because I knew my grandparents didn't survive British colonialism, a civil war, and the Civil Rights Movement just so I could deal with the same oppression they faced day in and day out for at least 50 years" (Ayub, 2017, para. 6).

Displaying a similarly intersectional understanding of contemporary feminism, the marches' participants not only point out that "Muslims have witnessed the highest spike in hate crimes since late 2015" as a reason for their activism, but they also shed light on the Black Lives Matter movement, the fact that "people of color are still fighting for their respect; women's reproductive rights have been challenged", the inaccessibility of clean water in some communities and other systemic issues that demand mobilization (Ayub, 2017, para. 4). These

reflections draw connections between several interrelated issues that affect diverse Muslim communities directly and indirectly. Also demonstrating how intersectional oppression manifests, participants of the marches draw attention to the widespread fear that imbues marginalized communities' experiences. For instance, one attendee shares that she marched "because I was fed up with being afraid, told not to walk around at night, to be careful what I say in airports, to restrict myself because not everyone is ready for a loud, brown Muslim girl" (Ayub, 2017, para. 6). On the whole, these articulations drive home the point that feminism must account for the complex needs and diverse experiences of those facing intersecting forms of oppression (Ayub, 2017).

In the context of these marches, some attendees ground their feminist activism in Islam, a theme that has come up earlier in this thesis too. Such an Islamically-rooted orientation towards feminism is exemplified by testimonials like "I march because I'm unapologetically Muslim" and "I marched today #WomensMarch to show feminism and equal rights come in all different dress codes including mine: the nikab" (Ayub, 2017, para. 8; Khan, 2018, para. 7). This Islamically-grounded framing of feminism is embedded in the understanding that for Muslims, all worldly struggles must be understood in relation to not only democratic principles but also through the lens of an Islamically rooted moral obligation to advocate for justice, especially in the face of persistent subjugation (Ayub, 2017). For example, one attendee links her feminist activism to a Hadith, noting that:

I heard the Messenger of Allah (PBUH) say, 'Whosoever of you sees an evil, let him change it with his hand; and if he is not able to do so, then [let him change it] with his tongue; and if he is not able to do so, then with his heart — and that is the weakest of faith'... I march because I see an evil, and I'm going to do everything in my power to change it. (Ayub, 2017, paras. 7–8)

Likewise, Muslim activists also draw inspiration from “stories in the Qur’an that teach us not only what we must do in the name of Allah (SWT), but what we can do for the sake of all humankind, and what our character is like in the face of adversity” (Ayub, 2017, para. 4).

Across these testimonials from the Women’s Marches participants, it is evident that Muslim women are mobilizing to ensure that their calls for gender equality are heard without being co-opted by others (Ayub, 2017; Khan, 2018). This desire to take back the narrative is evident in testimonials like “I march because I prefer to speak for myself”, “I march because I don’t want others speaking up for me” and “I march for the women who are tired of being labeled” (Ayub, 2017, paras. 4–5; Khan, 2018, para. 4). Such activism also arises from a desire to change the status quo and the limitations that it places on women, on Muslims and especially on Muslim women (Ayub, 2017).

Lastly, testimonials like “I marched because I felt the need to align myself with my community...I marched to stand in solidarity with people and to take comfort in others standing in solidarity with me” and “I march for those who are scared, I march for those who can’t march anymore” foreground the need for allyship and community-building (Ayub, 2017, para. 3; Khan, 2018, para. 5). Also demonstrating this communal orientation to social justice advocacy, other attendees share, “I march for my mother and my sisters — sisters through biology, faith, and friendship” and “I march for people who look like me and for the ones that don’t, the ones with similar beliefs and the ones with different beliefs” (Ayub, 2017, para. 5; Khan, 2018, para. 3).

In short, through the testimonials of Women’s Marches’ attendees as well as the examples of Palestinian women’s resistance and women’s reclamation of narratives about home-makers, this section articulates how *Muslim Girl* is reconceptualizing feminism to be more inclusive. Towards this end, intersectional analytical frameworks, transnational perspectives and anti-imperialist orientations are crucial for expanding what and who feminism caters to.

To summarize, this chapter has illuminated Muslim women and feminists’ dynamic activism to address both the internal biases within their communities and the external

stereotypes projected onto them. Referencing several examples from *Muslim Girl* and from academic writing, this chapter showcased the diverse forms of Muslim women's resistance. This resistance ranges from creative negotiation and faith-based objections to rooting feminist mobilization in Islamic principles and promoting a dual focus on combating patriarchy and Islamophobia simultaneously. These are some of the ways in which Muslim women are challenging misogynistic interpretations of Islamic teachings, contesting Islamophobic narratives about an inherently oppressive Islam and disrupting simplistic categorizations of Muslims as either "good" or "bad".

Then, this chapter analyzed how the *Muslim Girl* blogs are reshaping feminist discourses and extending the boundaries of feminism to include diverse voices and experiences, including those of Muslim women. This analysis emphasized the importance of transnational, anti-imperialist and intersectional feminist frameworks. The inclusive nature of such feminist orientations was then exemplified through *Muslim Girl's* reflections on feminist homemakers and on Palestinian women's mobilization against various forms of systemic oppression. In a nutshell, *Muslim Girl* advocates for reshaping the contours of feminism by centering marginalized voices, challenging hegemonic narratives and forging meaningful alliances to advance gender justice and social equity in the hopes of building more inclusive and just futures for all.

## 7. Conclusion

In various ways this thesis has demonstrated that feminist mobilization strategies are heavily informed by local contexts (Tadros & Khan, 2018). Multiple examples from *Muslim Girl* have illustrated how feminist activists balance strategic goals of women's liberation with the need for practical advancements and on-the-ground gains for women from all walks of life (Jones, 2020). This project looked specifically at how these tensions manifest in North American-based Muslim women bloggers' digital activism, as exemplified by feminist writing on one popular, well-trafficked platform i.e. the *Muslim Girl* blogs.

This chapter briefly recaps the context of this study, the research questions it aimed to address, the methods it used to do so and the answers it yielded. Next is an outline of the key themes that emerged and the main findings that were discovered. Finally, the concluding sections feature some recommendations regarding future research topics in this domain.

By way of background, Muslim women often find themselves caught between narratives that position Islam and feminism as incompatible with each other. This binaristic framing puts Muslim women in a difficult position when they attempt to root their feminist activism in Islamic teachings. Seeking to undo such dualities, this study examined how Muslim women utilize digital media like blogs to highlight the feminist bent of Islam tenets. In particular, this study looked at how Muslim women bloggers on the *Muslim Girl* platform mobilize discourses about feminism and about Islam to challenge oppositional framings of the two. This project specifically asked:

1. What are some sources that contemporary North American Muslim women bloggers draw upon to (re)claim religious authority for themselves and to support feminist interpretations of Islam?
  - 1.1. In the North American context, what factors shape the narratives of faith that Muslim women bloggers espouse and how so?

To address these questions, this study conducted a thorough and rigorous qualitative content analysis of the *Muslim Girl* blogs that show up when searching for the term ‘feminism’ on this platform. Broadly, the answers to question 1 above revealed that Muslim women bloggers heavily draw on Quranic verses, Prophetic sayings (Hadith) and practices (Sunnah) as well as examples of feminist icons from early Islamic history, through the ages and in contemporary times. Hence, Muslim women reference multiple sources to advance feminist interpretations of Islamic principles. To this end, *Muslim Girl* bloggers also excavate the long history of Muslim women as religious leaders, in order to root their claims to interpretive authority and leadership within Islamic precedent.

As for question 1.1. above, there are multiple overlapping factors that impact how Muslim women bloggers engage with narratives about faith. In addition to patriarchy and the attendant oppressive constructions of femininity and masculinity, Muslim women also come up against national narratives that systemically seek to exclude them. In the North American context, Muslim women are simultaneously caught up in settler colonial logics that advance systemic racism. Based on their individual and collective positionality, they are also implicated in structures of domination like gendered Islamophobia, which in turn fuels problematic perceptions about Muslim women, especially those who veil, as being universally oppressed. Simultaneously, Muslim women are battling imperialist and orientalist tropes that paint them as helpless victims waiting to be rescued by the West generally, and in feminist discourses, by their sisters in the West specifically.

Embroiled within and resisting these various hegemonic discourses and systems of oppression, Muslim women are dynamically engaging with Islamic feminism. Specifically, by foregrounding the personalization of faith, Muslim women, feminists and religious preachers are laying claim to Islamic leadership and interpretive authority. This personalized approach to faith is echoed in academic literature that addresses the individualization of faith-based practices. At the same time, the *Muslim Girl* bloggers are harnessing the various opportunities and navigating

the drawbacks that characterize digital and social media platforms, grounded as these technologies are within neoliberal, capitalist ideologies.

The overarching takeaway from this study is that Muslim women are resisting both oppressive internal dynamics within Muslim communities as well as external dynamics in mainstream society that marginalize them through the systemic oppression of racism, sexism, Islamophobia and xenophobia. The findings of this study also disrupt the stereotype of saving Muslim women, and instead showcase their agency and autonomy.

Moreover, *Muslim Girl* bloggers call out Islamophobic narratives in some feminist spaces, which yields ambivalence within Muslim audiences regarding the use of feminist terminology. Building on this critique, Muslim women are reconceptualizing feminism to be more inclusive, equitable, expansive and reflective of diversity. In doing so, Muslim women and activists prioritize transnational, intersectional feminist frameworks that contest not only patriarchy, but also imperialism, racism, settler colonialism and other systems of subjugation. Following the above encapsulation of this project's findings, the next two sections take a deeper dive into the key themes that emerge from the *Muslim Girl* blogs that were studied.

### **A Unified Voice Across Muslim Girl**

This thesis took a deep dive into the content of the *Muslim Girl* blogs, which are written by several different authors, as evidenced in the bibliography. Below is an overview of the key issues that are addressed by multiple *Muslim Girl* blogs. Several blogs explore similar concepts and make similar arguments, as indicated by the multiple blogs that are often concurrently cited when making claims throughout this thesis. Before getting into the overarching themes that present across blogs, here are a few examples where *Muslim Girl* blogs directly reference each other.

Firstly, one blog that provides a recap of the previous year's web content references multiple other blogs that are also studied in this project (Al-Khatahtbeh et al., 2014; Jhaish, 2019; Kit, 2014; MG Staff, 2015; Muslim Girl, 2014). Similarly, another blog reviews the most

impactful blogs of the previous decade and in doing so, it cites yet another blog that is included in this study (Jhaish, 2019; Nida, 2013). These two round-up blogs suggest that *Muslim Girl* bloggers are attuned to what their peers are writing about and are actively engaging with other writers' work on this platform. Indeed, quite a few blogs address content from other blogs and speak to similar themes.

Notably, several blogs with titles like "5 Muslim Feminist Icons You Should Know", "11 Female Icons From Islamic History", "5 Women Scholars in Islam You Should Know" and others reference historical and contemporary examples of inspiring Muslim women and feminists who epitomize the gender egalitarian principles of Islam (Adina, 2017; Bhatti, 2018; Birk, 2021; Hamed, 2017a; Hassanein, 2021; Jahangiri, 2021; MG Staff, 2017a, 2017b, 2021c; Qamar, 2015a). These examples include artists, poets, activists, scholars and professionals from various industries who are highlighted as icons to look up to (Adina, 2017; Bhatti, 2018; Birk, 2021; Hamed, 2017a; Hassanein, 2021; Jahangiri, 2021; MG Staff, 2017a, 2017b, 2021c; Qamar, 2015a).

Secondly, several *Muslim Girl* blogs discuss initiatives that originate from the platform, such as Muslim Women's Day and the idea of a sisterhood informally called the Muslim Girl Army (Ayub, 2017; Guest Blogger, 2017a; Khan, 2018; Manalmoazzam, 2019; MG Staff, 2021a, 2021b; Mokhtar, 2016a, 2017; N, 2017; Qamar, 2017; Tasnim, 2021). These blogs address topics like "The Muslim Girl Army Reminds Us Why We March", "What the First #MuslimWomensDay Meant to Me", "Check Out What the Muslim Girl Army Has to Say About Feminism", "This #MuslimWomensDay, We Sounded Off on Politics and Identity", "5 #ThrowBackThursday Moments from Past Muslim Women's Day Campaigns" amongst others (Ayub, 2017; Guest Blogger, 2017a; Khan, 2018; Manalmoazzam, 2019; MG Staff, 2021a, 2021b; Mokhtar, 2016a, 2017; N, 2017; Qamar, 2017; Tasnim, 2021). Building on International Women's Day, Muslim Women's Day pinpoints the specific feminist goals of Muslim women. Muslim Girl Army refers to those who consider themselves closely associated with *Muslim Girl*,

whether they be content consumers, contributors or like-minded activists. These blogs allude to the sense of community and belonging that Muslim Women's Day and Muslim Girl Army seek to inspire amongst the readers and writers of *Muslim Girl* (Ayub, 2017; Guest Blogger, 2017a; Khan, 2018; Manalmoazzam, 2019; MG Staff, 2021a, 2021b; Mokhtar, 2016a, 2017; N, 2017; Qamar, 2017; Tasnim, 2021).

Of course, feminism is squarely tackled in many blogs and is indirectly addressed in several others. In the blogs that discuss feminism head-on, there is an awareness of how privilege and positionality intersect with prevailing Islamophobic narratives to impact gendered experiences and perceptions of feminism (Aishasaleh, 2018a; Kawetherinuwa, 2019; Leahvernon, 2017a; MG Staff, 2016b, 2021e; Sarahmohr, 2020; Shannon, 2015a). This attunement to privilege indicates that the bloggers resist universalizing Muslim women's lived realities and instead are sensitive to power imbalances across Muslim women. This awareness is particularly evident in blogs like "Privilege, Power, and Patriarchy: An Anthropological Review of Feminist Discourse", "Feminism: I'm Not Your Stereotype" and "How Feminism and Sexual Politics are Weaponized Against the Muslim Community". Furthermore, blogs such as "Here's How I Found My Way to Feminism" and "What Feminism Means to Me" resist reductive stereotypes about Muslim women and they prioritize personalized interpretations of feminism (Aishasaleh, 2018a; Kawetherinuwa, 2019; Leahvernon, 2017a; MG Staff, 2016b, 2021e; Sarahmohr, 2020; Shannon, 2015a).

Also alluding to this need to make definitions of feminism less restrictive, blogs like "I'm a Feminist Who Secretly Loves Being a Homemaker" and "It's Okay If Your Career Goal Is to Be a Good Wife and Mother" underscore the importance of choice in feminist conceptualizations of empowerment (Abdul-Kareem, 2016; Salwakhan, 2018). These blogs argue that, in feminist circles, the idea of choice must be expanded so that women's voluntary adoption of traditionally feminine roles are also seen as feminist enactments of agency (Abdul-Kareem, 2016; Salwakhan, 2018). As these blogs indicate, the feminism that *Muslim Girl* advocates for is one

where women are free to make life choices, whether that be being a home-maker and stay-at-home mother or being on the front line of public life in any industry they choose, or both. In this way, the feminism that *Muslim Girl* espouses seeks to free women from the shackles of gendered expectations of femininity as well as from perceiving traditionally masculine roles as the only standard worth aspiring to.

In a similar fashion, multiple blogs confront and critique exclusionary forms of feminism (Ali, 2018; Harvard, 2015a; Hodakatebi, 2016a; Iman, 2017; MG Staff, 2019, 2021d ; Mohsenian-Rahman, 2017a; Mokhtar, 2015; Nida, 2013; Sadler, 2017). For instance, several blogs tackle issues like “Why White Feminism is Problematic for Muslim Women”, “Muslim Women Don't Need Saving...Except from White Feminism” and “The Problem With White Feminism in the Women's March” to name a few. Many blogs also challenge the white savior trope in some types of feminism, which reinforces white supremacy and dismisses the perspectives of racialized women when determining feminist priorities (Ali, 2018; Harvard, 2015a; Hodakatebi, 2016a; Iman, 2017; MG Staff, 2019, 2021d; Mohsenian-Rahman, 2017a; Mokhtar, 2015; Nida, 2013; Sadler, 2017). These blogs reiterate the need for anti-racist, anti-imperialist feminism that accounts for localized contexts and disrupts hegemonic, Eurocentric visions of women’s empowerment and liberation (Ali, 2018; Harvard, 2015a; Hodakatebi, 2016a; Iman, 2017; MG Staff, 2019, 2021d; Mohsenian-Rahman, 2017a; Mokhtar, 2015; Nida, 2013; Sadler, 2017). In this regard, *Muslim Girl's* critique of exclusionary forms of feminism reflects much of the critical commentary that feminist scholarship also features on this topic.

Next, several blogs shed light on feminism’s interaction with Islam, on the emergence of Islamic feminisms and on the ways in which many Muslim women’s feminist mobilization is invigorated by their Islamic beliefs, also a theme that academic literature addresses extensively (Hamed, 2017b; Issa, 2016; Kit, 2014, MG Staff, 2016a, 2020b; Muslim Girl, 2018b, 2019c; Raja, 2015). By tackling issues like “What Does a Muslim Feminist Look Like?”,

“#lifeofamuslimfeminist and the Legitimacy of ‘Muslim Feminists’”, “Muslim Feminists Respond: On Headscarves and Interfaith Solidarity”, “Muslim Women and the F-Word - Feminism” and “The Fallacy of an Anti-Feminist Islam”, these blogs drive home the feminist underpinnings of Islam and they challenge binaristic views of Islam and feminism that see the two as mutually exclusive (Hamed, 2017b; Issa, 2016; Kit, 2014, MG Staff, 2016a, 2020b; Muslim Girl, 2018b, 2019c; Raja, 2015). Conversely, presenting feminism and Islam as mutually reinforcing is a motif that comes up in several *Muslim Girl* blogs, and is one of the key points that this thesis seeks to make.

Additionally, the theme of Muslim masculinities and the feminist example of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in this context comes up fairly frequently (Al-Khatahtbeh et al., 2014; Ashanti, 2017; Awan, 2016; Kit, 2015; Mokhtar, 2016b; Muslim Girl, 2018a, 2019d; Vanessaeshamy, 2018a). A number of blogs denounce toxic masculinities, call for men’s involvement as feminists and emphasize the intersectional nature of the feminism practiced by Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) (Al-Khatahtbeh et al., 2014; Ashanti, 2017; Awan, 2016; Kit, 2015; Mokhtar, 2016b; Muslim Girl, 2018a, 2019d; Vanessaeshamy, 2018a). These blogs put forth arguments like “Prophet Muhammed Was An Intersectional Feminist”, “Prophet Mohammad Would Have Seriously Hated Men's Rights Activists”, “How to be a Feminist if You're a Muslim Man and Why It's Required” and “Let's Talk About the Problem With Masculinity in the Muslim Community”. These blogs examine toxic forms of masculinities, including those that emerge amongst Muslim men. Following this critique, *Muslim Girl* demonstrates how feminism extends conceptualizations of masculinity and femininity to be more inclusive. In this way, feminist interventions offer an antidote against problematic masculinities that are themselves a manifestation of patriarchy.

Speaking to the theme of intersectionality, a handful of blogs draw attention to Black Muslim women’s experiences and to Black community leaders (Docmanov, 2015; Leahvernon, 2016b; Matan, 2018a; Sarahmohr, 2021; Vanessaeshamy, 2018b). In foregrounding certain

aspects of activism, like “The March for Black Women and Why We Need It” and “6 Powerful Black Leaders You Should Know About”, these blogs reiterate the importance of attending to the diversity amongst women along the lines of not only religion, but also race and other identity parameters (Docmanov, 2015; Leahvernon, 2016b; Matan, 2018a; Sarahmohr, 2021; Vanessaelshamy, 2018b). These blogs also foreground the need for mobilization against Islamophobia to be anti-racist and inclusive of those experiencing multiple, intersectional forms of oppression, such as Black Muslim women who face racism, sexism and anti-Muslim sentiment in tandem (Docmanov, 2015; Leahvernon, 2016b; Matan, 2018a; Sarahmohr, 2021; Vanessaelshamy, 2018b). *Muslim Girl* thus sheds light on the understudied intersection of being Black, Muslim and a woman that merits far more attention in activist and academic domains.

Moreover, a number of blogs interrogate stereotypical media representations and skewed news headlines (Fatima, 2013; Jummanah, 2021a; Laurel, 2015; Lynn, 2016; MG Staff, 2018; Mohsenian-Rahman, 2017b; Muslim Girl, 2015a, 2015b, 2020; Syjil, 2015). From disturbing TV shows and troubling quotes by media personalities to reductive comic characters and one-sided news coverage, *Muslim Girl* does not shy away from critiquing hegemonic narratives that are propagated through media (Fatima, 2013; Jummanah, 2021a; Laurel, 2015; Lynn, 2016; MG Staff, 2018; Mohsenian-Rahman, 2017b; Muslim Girl, 2015a, 2015b, 2020; Syjil, 2015). This critique manifests in blogs such as “ABC’S ‘Fresh Off the Boat’ is a Compromised Narrative”, “Here’s Why Everyone is Talking About BBC’s Controversial ‘Bodyguard’ Miniseries Right Now” and “Dust and The Veil: Muslim Marvel’s Problematic Faves”. On the flip side, *Muslim Girl* blogs also praise well-researched and nuanced media depictions that avoid oversimplified, distorted representations, as exemplified by the blog on “The New Pakistani Cartoon ‘The Burka Avenger’: Denying the Western Gaze” (Fatima, 2013; Jummanah, 2021a; Laurel, 2015; Lynn, 2016; MG Staff, 2018; Mohsenian-Rahman, 2017b; Muslim Girl, 2015a, 2015b, 2020; Syjil, 2015). Through this analysis, *Muslim Girl* illuminates how digital and social media platforms can both support nuanced portrayals of

under-represented groups as well as perpetuate caricatured depictions of communities that have long been ignored or vilified in mainstream media. By way of the above examples, *Muslim Girl* highlights the potential that new media offers as well as the risks that it exacerbates.

Furthermore, a significant number of *Muslim Girl* blogs engage with national narratives (Amani, 2016; Berhe, 2015; Bhatti, 2018; Chowdhury, 2016; Eman, 2017; Halimah, 2016; Hamed, 2017c, 2017c; Harvard, 2015a; Hassanein, 2021; Hodakatebi, 2016a; Issa, 2016; Jahangiri, 2022; Jhaish, 2018; Khatib, 2016; Latif, 2015; Lynn, 2016; Manalmoazzam, 2019; Matan, 2018a; MG Staff, 2017b, 2019, 2020a, 2021c, 2021d, 2021e; Mohsenian-Rahman, 2016; Mokhtar, 2016b, 2017; Muslim Girl, 2015a, 2015b, 2019b, 2020, 2021; Niqabae, 2018; Qamar, 2015b; Sarahmohr, 2020, 2022; Syjil, 2015; Tasnim, 2021; Vanessaeshamy, 2018b). Specifically, narratives about the nation as it pertains to the US, Canada and France crop up multiple times in *Muslim Girl*. In decreasing order of frequency, this focus on nationhood by *Muslim Girl* applies to the US (addressed by about 35 blogs), then France (addressed by around 6 blogs) and then Canada (addressed by approximately 4 blogs). American nationhood is interrogated in blogs like “How Street Harassment and Islamophobia Create an Unsafe Environment for Muslim Women” and “How Feminism and Sexual Politics are Weaponized Against the Muslim Community”. French nationalist ideologies are examined in blogs such as “Here’s How Obsessed France is with the Hijab Ban”, “Why I Fled France as a Muslim Woman” and “How France is Hiding Islamophobia Behind Opportunistic Feminism”. Discourses about Canadian nation-building are prominent in blogs like “The #MeToo Moments Continue at Canada’s Parliament Hill”.

*Muslim Girl’s* thorough engagement with narratives about nation-states is also evident in blogs like “Should Muslim Women Feel Lucky to Live in Western Countries?”, “Reclaiming Our Rights to Faith and Patriotism” and “A Much Needed Conversation on Islamophobia and Muslim Women”. These blogs allude to the concept of nationhood and how nationalist discourses shape Muslim women’s inclusion or exclusion from claims to citizenship in light of nation-specific

sexual politics and particular formulations of gendered Islamophobia (Amani, 2016; Berhe, 2015; Bhatti, 2018; Chowdhury, 2016; Eman, 2017; Halimah, 2016; Hamed, 2017c, 2017c; Harvard, 2015a; Hassanein, 2021; Hodakatebi, 2016a; Issa, 2016; Jahangiri, 2022; Jhaish, 2018; Khatib, 2016; Latif, 2015; Lynn, 2016; Manalmoazzam, 2019; Matan, 2018a; MG Staff, 2017b, 2019, 2020a, 2021c, 2021d, 2021e; Mohsenian-Rahman, 2016; Mokhtar, 2016b, 2017; Muslim Girl, 2015a, 2015b, 2019b, 2020, 2021; Niqabae, 2018; Qamar, 2015b; Sarahmohr, 2020, 2022; Syjil, 2015; Tasnim, 2021; Vanessaelshamy, 2018b). To elaborate, these blogs question the deployment of feminist logics to justify hijab bans in some countries and they broadly challenge the orientalist perception that Muslim women in the West all have greater freedoms than those in Muslim-majority settings (Amani, 2016; Berhe, 2015; Bhatti, 2018; Chowdhury, 2016; Eman, 2017; Halimah, 2016; Hamed, 2017c, 2017c; Harvard, 2015a; Hassanein, 2021; Hodakatebi, 2016a; Issa, 2016; Jahangiri, 2022; Jhaish, 2018; Khatib, 2016; Latif, 2015; Lynn, 2016; Manalmoazzam, 2019; Matan, 2018a; MG Staff, 2017b, 2019, 2020a, 2021c, 2021d, 2021e; Mohsenian-Rahman, 2016; Mokhtar, 2016b, 2017; Muslim Girl, 2015a, 2015b, 2019b, 2020, 2021; Niqabae, 2018; Qamar, 2015b; Sarahmohr, 2020, 2022; Syjil, 2015; Tasnim, 2021; Vanessaelshamy, 2018b). *Muslim Girl* blogs that address nationhood also tackle issues like discrimination in legal systems, cultural appropriation and dynamic processes of identity formation (Amani, 2016; Berhe, 2015; Bhatti, 2018; Chowdhury, 2016; Eman, 2017; Halimah, 2016; Hamed, 2017c, 2017c; Harvard, 2015a; Hassanein, 2021; Hodakatebi, 2016a; Issa, 2016; Jahangiri, 2022; Jhaish, 2018; Khatib, 2016; Latif, 2015; Lynn, 2016; Manalmoazzam, 2019; Matan, 2018a; MG Staff, 2017b, 2019, 2020a, 2021c, 2021d, 2021e; Mohsenian-Rahman, 2016; Mokhtar, 2016b, 2017; Muslim Girl, 2015a, 2015b, 2019b, 2020, 2021; Niqabae, 2018; Qamar, 2015b; Sarahmohr, 2020, 2022; Syjil, 2015; Tasnim, 2021; Vanessaelshamy, 2018b). By attending to how narratives of nationhood and belonging intersect with current legislation, histories of colonization and the framing of non-Western countries as

inferior, *Muslim Girl* displays a comprehensive understanding of how national narratives currently manifest.

Last but certainly not least, topics such as sexual abuse and harassment as well as Islam's engagement with queerness are addressed across some blogs like "How Women Can Help Men Who Have Suffered #MeToo Moments", "Another World Cup Double Standard: LGBTQ+ Rights" and "3 Things Muslims & Non-Muslims Should Know About LGBTQ+ Presence in Islam" (Aishasaleh, 2018b; Guest Blogger, 2017b; Jhaish, 2018; Sarahmohr, 2022). Attention towards these themes indicates that *Muslim Girl* adopts a holistic approach to feminism by tackling a wide variety of issues that fall under its purview.

As this section has demonstrated, an extensive number of *Muslim Girl* blogs address common themes. For the blogs that do make claims on a stand-alone basis, this may partially be because the blogs have different authors, so each blogger may not always be familiar with other bloggers' writing. Even so, this examination of the frequency with which particular topics are addressed indicates which issues are seen as most attention-worthy and suitable for the *Muslim Girl* platform. Building on these insights, the next section sketches out the main topics that *Muslim Girl* tackles in depth.

### **Key Takeaways**

Several noteworthy themes have emerged in this study. Below is a recap of important takeaways from this analysis, all of which have been explored in detail in previous chapters.

First and foremost, *Muslim Girl* draws on the academic works of several Muslim women scholars like Amina Wadud, Sa'diyya Shaikh, Hina Azam, Leila Ahmed, Leila Abu-Lughod, Su'ad Khabeer and Saba Mahmood, amongst others. I also draw on these scholars' writing for my analysis of the blogs. It has been a fortuitous overlap that the academic scholars whose literature has informed this project's theoretical framework are also centrally referenced in the object of study itself i.e. the *Muslim Girl* blogs. This overlap suggests that such scholarship is being read and discussed far beyond academia. This popularization of academic scholarship

hints towards its vast potential for shaping popular discourses about Islam and feminism in and beyond digital spaces. This widespread dissemination of scholarly work on Islam and feminism exemplifies not only the interplay between academic theorizing and public narratives but also the possibilities that digital media offers for extending the reach of scholarly research to contexts far removed from academia. Further research is warranted to examine how this engagement with scholarship can or does inform praxis and more direct forms of feminist mobilization in other parts of the world.

Secondly, *Muslim Girl* emphasizes various strategies for drawing feminist interpretations of Islam. As briefly noted earlier in this chapter, these strategies include citing the Quran, Hadith and Sunnah, highlighting the feminist organizational principles of early Muslim societies and presenting historical and contemporary examples of Muslim women and icons who embody feminist principles of liberty and empowerment. In this regard, the mention of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), Hazrat Khadija and Hazrat Aisha, along with the women referenced in the Quran is of particular salience because seeing such influential Islamic figures as feminists can greatly impact how and to what degree Muslims claim feminism as an integral part of Islam.

Next, by examining how interpretive authority works and by articulating the need for Muslims to discerningly consult scripture and other credible sources of Islamic knowledge, *Muslim Girl* presents actively educating oneself about Islam as one way to arrive at the feminist underpinnings of Islam. These interventions encourage engaging with Islamic scripture and primary sources directly, thus mitigating the influence of intermediary authorities that can reinforce patriarchal interpretations of these sources. Maintaining a focus on interpretive mechanisms, *Muslim Girl's* analysis of Quranic verses uses techniques like historical contextualization and intratextual reading to highlight feminist teachings within Islam. Indicating another overlap between *Muslim Girl* and feminist scholarship, these techniques are discussed in academic literature too. Another related theme that is recognizable throughout this thesis is the emergence of individualized and personalized understandings of Islam that allow its

followers to adapt timeless injunctions to their specific societal and temporal context. This flexibility in how Islamic teachings can and should be molded to fit different societies is a point also made resoundingly by academic literature on this topic.

*Muslim Girl* drives home the point that for many Muslim women, their feminist leanings as well as their mobilization for broader social justice are invigorated by their Islamic beliefs. To reiterate, interpreting Islamic teachings as feminist, arriving at such interpretations independently and underscoring the adaptability of Islamic tenets offer emancipatory potential by enabling Muslim women to formulate their own understandings of Islam.

In addition to reclaiming interpretive authority, Muslim women are also shedding light on a time-honored historical tradition of their predecessors serving as religious experts and community leaders. In asserting that Muslim women can make capable Islamic leaders, *Muslim Girl* draws on and extends notions of pious femininity. Specifically, this redefinition and expansion of pious femininity decouples its association with shyness and reticence. This more inclusive conceptualization of pious femininity can enable more Muslim women to lay claim to such a femininity because it no longer equates boldness with a lack of piety.

Beyond restrictive understandings of pious femininity, *Muslim Girl* draws attention to the other gender-specific barriers that Muslim women experience as Islamic leaders. These barriers include unwarranted suspicion about their credibility, hindrances to their entry into the profession and having to go the extra mile to prove themselves in ways that are not asked of male Islamic leaders. To overcome these challenges and to balance out the long-standing male domination of Islamic authority, Muslim women religious leaders implement creative practices such as adopting professionalization and drawing on their personal and professional networks to advance their perceived legitimacy as Islamic leaders. By detailing the resistance that Muslim women mount against the gendered obstacles they face as Islamic leaders, this research offers broadly applicable tools for disrupting male domination in various Islamic settings, be it the

male-centric arrangement of mosques, the lack of opportunities for female Muslim speakers in religious spaces, or the perpetuation of patriarchal interpretations of Islam.

Alongside this criticism of problematic dynamics within Muslim-majority settings, *Muslim Girl* launches a commendable, intersectional critique of various overlapping systems of domination. To be specific, *Muslim Girl* condemns colonial legacies, present-day settler colonial logics and imperialist rationales that advance Islamophobia and racism to the detriment of Muslim women. In particular, *Muslim Girl* underscores the prevalence of gendered Islamophobia, especially as it is experienced by veiled and hence identifiably Muslim women. *Muslim Girl* argues that popular narratives about the hijab as being unequivocally oppressive illustrate how discourses about agency, empowerment and freedom are sometimes hypocritically applied in ways that dismiss some Muslim women's legitimate, uncoerced choice to veil. Concurrently, *Muslim Girl* is critical of how the hijab is misappropriated to advance victim-blaming, such as by expecting Muslim women to veil as a deterrent against unwanted male attention. Along similar lines, *Muslim Girl* condemns how Muslim women who veil are put up on a pedestal and expected to perfectly represent Islam, so much so that they are not allowed to err. This nuanced critique of the narratives projected onto hijab-wearing Muslim women is particularly relevant today, as visibly identifiable Muslim women find themselves at greater risk of gendered Islamophobic violence along with more and more legislative maneuvers that make it difficult for them to veil in public.

Across the board, *Muslim Girl* remains sensitive to how intersecting aspects of identity shape individual and communal experiences. For example, *Muslim Girl's* attention to intersectionality is evident in its analysis of Black Muslim women's experiences of anti-Black racism, Islamophobia and sexism. Similarly, *Muslim Girl's* examination of queerness in relation to Islam and its exploration of queer Muslims' experiences at the intersections of homophobia, transphobia and Islamophobia also exhibits this attunement towards intersectionality. By addressing how race, sexual orientation and gender identity shape lived realities, *Muslim Girl*

resists the temptation to homogenize Muslims' experiences and instead underscores how forms of oppression intersect and overlap.

Furthermore, this project considered how social and digital media inform Muslim women's feminist activism. In this regard, *Muslim Girl* displays a nuanced understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of digital media. On the one hand, *Muslim Girl* shares several applaudable examples of how media portrayals can strengthen feminist mobilization and deter stereotypical representations of Muslim women. These positive examples are detailed earlier in chapter 4. On the other hand, *Muslim Girl* also lists how digital spaces come with their own shortcomings. These failings include digital media's consistently narrow and negative depictions of Muslims in the news and in entertainment media. Other drawbacks of digital and social media that *Muslim Girl* illuminates are its preference for sound-bytes and its tendency to advance us/them binaries that reinforce Islamophobia.

Importantly, *Muslim Girl* itself as a digital platform is not immune to these weaknesses of the digital domain. To elaborate, in order to remain functioning in the capitalist system that it operates within, even *Muslim Girl* must remain financially viable and thus produce flashy content that captures media users' ever-shortening attention spans. This paradox draws attention to how the *Muslim Girl* platform is also caught up in the power structures that it critiques. Nonetheless, the opportunities of digital media that *Muslim Girl* highlights indicate that such platforms can play an important role in challenging the hegemonic narratives and uni-dimensional representations of Muslims that are espoused by mainstream media. On this front, future research could examine how various newer media platforms advance or restrict the dissemination of alternative narratives.

Moving on, *Muslim Girl* denounces Muslim communities that fail to challenge patriarchy in its various manifestations. In particular, *Muslim Girl* condemns sectarian divides, victim-blaming narratives that penalize Muslim women for speaking up against injustices, and the exclusionary behavior that some Muslim women exhibit towards their sisters in faith. This

critique of Muslim-majority settings demands intra-communal accountability, which is the need of the hour. On this point, *Muslim Girl's* focus on Islamic feminism does not deter it from simultaneously pointing out the troublesome dynamics in some Muslim settings. However, it is important to note that such criticism is rooted in a desire to better the communities that are being critiqued, and not for the sake of solely denouncing them. This distinction is important because it then deters the co-optation of such critique for justifying imperialist, orientalist and Islamophobic tropes. Alongside this critique, *Muslim Girl* sheds light on the innovative strategies that Muslim women deploy to resist pressures from within and beyond Muslim communities. For example, *Muslim Girl* underscores Muslim women's resistance to Islamophobic narratives that divisively categorize 'good' and 'bad' Muslims against each other. In disrupting such overly-simplified discourses about Muslims, Muslim women are putting forth alternative narratives that account for the full complexity of their identities.

Indeed, critique of the various challenges that Muslim women combat is a pivotal theme across *Muslim Girl*. Exemplifying this critical outlook, *Muslim Girl* disrupts imperialist forms of feminism that advance the trope of saving Muslim women and that see Muslim women as all being universally oppressed. This challenge to orientalist feminism squarely confronts racism and white supremacy in feminist spaces. Furthermore, *Muslim Girl* argues that Islamophobic sentiment is often problematically advanced in the name of feminism by painting Islam as a patriarchal religion that Muslim women need rescuing from. Such logics not only exploit feminism to advance Islamophobia, they also alienate Muslim women from discourses of feminism. In this context, the critique by *Muslim Girl* can make feminist circles more inclusive for Muslim women and can foster meaningful solidarity across various social justice movements. Importantly, *Muslim Girl* advances this critique of Islamophobic feminism while also taking issue with misogynistic practices within Muslim communities, as discussed above. This duality of critique suggests that *Muslim Girl* is cognizant of the varying pressures that Muslim women face, within their faith communities and beyond that too. These multiple pressures necessitate the

multi-pronged approach that is evident in Muslim women's resistance against the prevailing challenges that they are up against.

The afore-mentioned estrangement that Muslim women experience in exclusionary feminist spaces is one reason why some Muslims are hesitant to label their activism towards gender egalitarianism as feminism. This wariness of feminism as a term is rooted in an awareness of how colonial and imperialist projects have often been perpetuated in the name of saving Muslim women, even though such interventions have time and again made things worse for Muslim women and for Muslim communities overall. Presenting contemporary examples of such imperialist invasions, *Muslim Girl* condemns how white-supremacist pseudo-feminist logics have troublingly supported American invasions of Afghanistan, Iraq and other countries in the Middle East, yet such interventions have largely worsened the material conditions of the Muslim women that they claim to be liberating. Keeping this context in mind, *Muslim Girl* explains how Muslims' ambivalence about feminist terminology is understandable. Yet, *Muslim Girl* argues that instead of abandoning feminist terminology wholesale, it may be preferable to redefine and expand what feminism means and who it caters to. This reclamation of feminist terminology by Muslims can foster more productive feminist discourses that account for women's diverse lived experiences and that directly confront racist and Islamophobic logics in feminist spaces.

Building on its critique of racist, Islamophobic forms of feminism, *Muslim Girl* consistently calls for redefining feminism to be more inclusive, especially of Muslim women. *Muslim Girl* demands that feminist objectives and activist priorities must account for Muslim women's desires and goals, as articulated by themselves. This emphasis on Muslim women speaking for themselves is at the core of *Muslim Girl*. In this way, *Muslim Girl* is a powerful example of Muslim women utilizing digital media to create space for their voices when they find themselves sidelined in traditional media.

In a nutshell, *Muslim Girl* champions transnational, intersectional forms of feminism that decentre a white-centric focus in feminist spaces and that emphasize authentic, sustained

allyship amongst feminists and activists in ways that empower multiple mobilization efforts. This type of inclusive feminism recognizes the enduring nature of indigenous feminist resistance and it foregrounds the long-undermined expertise of racialized women in disrupting the very foundations of multiple, intersecting systems of power. These revamped feminist orientations that *Muslim Girl* advances can expand the scope of feminist efforts and can extend the reach of feminist movements by opening up possibilities for purposeful collaboration across various equity-seeking communities. Ultimately, it is this fundamental reconceptualization of feminism to meaningfully include the perspectives of historically marginalized groups, like Muslim women, that *Muslim Girl* makes a strong case for.

### ***Areas for Further Study***

Approaching this thesis' conclusion, it is worthwhile to articulate potential areas for further study that have emerged from this project, as described below. In essence, these suggestions for future research touch on how Muslim women's religious authority as Islamic leaders is formulated, how feminist interpretive methods as applied to the Quran can be strengthened, and how translation shapes and is shaped by interpretive maneuvers. Other recommendations for future research projects are to study how a non-English platform may yield similar or different results compared to this thesis, as well as how various national narratives influence Muslim women's engagement with Islamic feminism across the world.

First and foremost, as the number and influence of Muslim women preachers increases, new research on women as Islamic figures of authority and on the relevance of gender to their authority is needed (Kloos, 2021). This gap suggests that further scholarly analysis may benefit from "according attention to authoritative figures' legitimizing citational practices, and how leaders affirm their connection to orthodoxy and mobilize tradition to carve out custodial roles for themselves" (Kalmbach, 2012, Zaman, 2007, as cited in Jamil, 2016, p. 546). Such academic endeavors necessitate being mindful of how religious authority is conceptualized along gendered lines (Jamil, 2016). Another related area for future study would be to examine how

“technologically mediated shifts in religious authority complicate gender roles within spheres of religious education” (see Anderson, 1999, Piela, 2014, as cited in Jamil, 2016, p. 558). Indeed, the intersection of social media and religious authority remains understudied, especially in light of changing discourses about gender (Jamil, 2016). On a similar note, further research is needed on how feminist Muslim women preachers engage with patriarchal discourses that are championed by other Muslim women preachers whose ideologies may not be feminist.

Secondly, a significant portion of this thesis argued that feminist scholars draw egalitarian interpretations of gender equality from the Quran. However, there are a few critiques of the interpretive methods that have come to the fore. One such critique of feminist Quranic exegesis is that gender is not clearly defined and is often used synonymously with women, thus ignoring gender queering (Hidayatullah, 2014). This critique highlights the need for future research that disrupts heteronormative understandings of gender in Islamic sources and that challenges the gender binary in this context. In other words, feminist Quranic interpretations along with “Muslim scholarship must seriously consider questions around gender being on a spectrum and other sexualities” (Musa, 2021, p. 192). On top of that, another critique that feminist exegetes make of patriarchal Quranic interpretations, namely that such interpretations claim to be the truest, can be directed back towards feminist interpretations too (Rhouni, 2010, as cited in Hidayatullah, 2014). To address this conundrum, future research on this topic could centrally engage with the philosophical question of how claims to the truth are made and what conditions legitimize such claims.

Next, translation is a complex, nuanced and ambiguous process where the end product i.e. the translated text is often disputed (Aly, 2018). Since translations can be manipulated to present only certain interpretations as valid, it is vital to examine how power dynamics varyingly influence translation processes (Aly, 2018). Such maneuvers in translation can have far-reaching impact, given that for the countless readers of the Quran who do not speak the particular version of Arabic that it was revealed in, “the Qur’ān translation, rather than the Arabic

text of the Qur'ān, becomes their primary mode of access to the divine Truth" (Aly, 2018, p. 14). Hence, further research on how interpretations of the Quran interact with its translations and how "translation itself is a form of interpretation" is greatly needed (Aly, 2018, p. 16).

Future research could also explore how dual language speakers who understand Arabic along with a second language approach translations of the Quran. It would be of interest to also explore how familiarity with Quranic Arabic influences individual and collective understandings of Quranic translations. Knowing the language of the scripture may reduce or eliminate the need for translation, while also allowing Arabic-speaking readers to gauge the accuracy of interpretations and translations, which in turn can provide insights into the ideological frameworks underlying these processes of meaning-making. Either way, these considerations merit further scholarly exploration.

Another potential research project that also speaks to language as a form of mediation would be to replicate this study by focusing on a non-English media platform. Such research would not only address the limitation of this study given its restriction to an English media platform, it would also be highly relevant given the swathes of Muslims who may not speak English, whose first language is not English and even English-speaking Muslims who consume media in other languages. Such studies would bring much-needed diversity in the scholarship on this topic, thus helping expand research findings beyond those that pertain solely to the North American context. Importantly, research projects that focus on non-English media platforms would also challenge the Eurocentric tendency to universalize findings from Western settings, and so would facilitate greater depth, richness and variety in literature on this subject. Personally, I can speak Urdu fluently and can read and write it adequately but not at an academic level. Hence, any future work I take on would be limited to English unless it is in collaboration with researchers with competency in Urdu or other languages.

Last but not least, subsequent research on Muslim women's engagement with and feminist interpretations of Islam would benefit from a greater emphasis on the role of nationhood

in this context. Specifically, it would be valuable to study how national narratives about citizenship and belonging centrally shape framings of Muslim women within these discourses and how these framings vary across countries. To drill down further, focusing on narratives of nationhood and integrating a recognition of historical as well as ongoing colonial and imperial realities would generate useful insights about how Muslim women are dynamically impacted by intersecting discourses about gender, race, Islam and nationalism.

As for future projects I would want to take on, there are several topics in this realm that are of interest to me. In particular, I would like to take a deep dive into the experiences of Canadian Muslim women as religious leaders, including those that espouse feminist as well as anti-feminist ideologies. It would also be interesting to study how Muslim women who are figures of religious authority are using social media like Instagram and TikTok to widen their audience. These are some topics that I would be keen to study, depending on available grants and other funding sources, such as post-doctoral opportunities.

### **Closing Remarks**

To conclude, this chapter reiterated the context of this study, the research questions that it posed, the research methods that it employed and the primary arguments that it put forth. Then, the key takeaways and major themes from this thesis were summarized. Finally, this chapter wrapped up with a number of suggestions for future research topics in this field.

Overall, this study illustrated the overarching narratives, specific contextual factors and diverse priorities that shape the reflections and feminist motivations of Muslim women bloggers, as exemplified through *Muslim Girl*. By attending to the Islamic sources that these bloggers call upon and their feminist interpretations of these sources, this research offered insights into the discourses that are mobilized about Islam in relation to feminism. This project also interrogated narratives about multiculturalism and diversity for what they present, hide and obscure, which can go some way in disrupting Islamophobia (Islam, 2018). Notably, there is scant albeit

growing literature on Muslim women's experiences of gendered Islamophobia, especially in the North American context (Perry, 2014). The digital content I analyzed sought to address this gap.

In summary, this research aimed to demonstrate that to see Islam as invariably patriarchal is to ignore history (Muhibbu-Din, 2019). By paying attention to the ways in which Muslim women bloggers are grounding their activism for gender equality within Islam, this research sought to expand conceptualizations of gender justice. Such comprehensive understandings of gender relations reiterate that "a broader view of human rights, not necessarily Eurocentric, must be entertained to grasp universal embodiment of human rights based on societies and peculiarities" (Muhibbu-Din, 2019, p. 50).

To wrap up, this research builds on the tradition of seeing Islam primarily as: a revolution that transformed its society in its every aspect, ethically, religiously, and socially, and that initiated a new society centered on ideas of moral and social responsibility and justice. Therefore, the undertaking of reforms, even of revolution, in the furtherance of those ideal - rather than merely adherence to the letter of the law - would constitute the truer continuation of the process Islam initiated, and would more accurately realize its message. (Ahmed, 1986, p. 677)

In foregrounding the voices of Muslim women and feminists, this work pays homage to and extends these rich legacies of feminist resistance that is rooted in Islamic teachings and that is being revitalized in Muslim communities today.

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## Appendix

Of all the *Muslim Girl* bloggers whose blogs are analyzed in this thesis, only two bloggers have descriptions in their profile on the platform. These bloggers and their profiles are listed below:

**Blogger Name:** sarahmohr

**Blogger Profile:** Sarah is a social worker and certified alcohol and drug counselor in the San Francisco Bay Area, the traditional land of the Ohlone people. She likes to paint, drum, sing, and spend quality time with her family and God.

**Blogger Name:** Jummanah

**Blogger Profile:** Hi, friends! This is Jummanah, better known as MG's 25-year-old Arab auntie and editor. When off-duty, I set my wholehearted side of mine aside, laugh, practice empathy, and reflect on the essence of life. But listen, if you have an interesting pitch or article in mind, drop an email.