

**The Misrepresentation of Muslim Women in the U.S. Media and Popular Culture: Muslim  
Women Do Not Need Saving**

Samia Bouchagour

Department of Journalism, University of Colorado Boulder

Honors Thesis

Advisor: Professor Christine Larson

Committee Members: Angie Chuang and Nasim Surhio

April 7, 2023

**Part I: Muslim Women in U.S. Media and Popular Culture: A Scholarly Review**

**Chapter 1:** Introduction

**Chapter 2:** Literature Review: Misrepresentation of Muslim Women in U.S. Media and Popular Culture

**Part II: Creative Project**

**Chapter 3:** Personal Anecdote

Effects of misrepresentation on real Muslim women

Duality

The hijab

Young Muslim women and today's technology

Community

Education and Journalism

Making a change

## **Part I: Muslim Women in U.S. Media and Popular Culture: A Scholarly Review**

### **Chapter 1**

#### **Introduction**

Media representations of Muslim women tend to show them in two broad groups: 1) oppressed and forced into a religion and its values, and 2) women and teenage girls who try to rebel and run away from these so-called oppressive values and traditions. While these two groups are Americanized stereotypes, there *are* people that fit a gray area between these two extremes.

In this thesis, I will analyze sources that claim the misrepresentation of Muslim women stems from aspects of the socialization of Islam within the U.S. and internationally, and show how U.S. journalistic media rarely represents Muslim women and those representations are inaccurate. I will then show how these social constructs affect representation of Muslim women. Specifically, in my literature review and creative project, I will examine these research questions: Why is it that traditional media fails to portray American-Muslim women in a way that is not threatened, oppressed, or rebellious? What does it look like to report on women who don't fit those stereotypes? What does an average American-Muslim woman look like in today's society? In the paper that follows, I first review literature examining media representations of American-Muslim women, the present journalistic article profiling six American-Muslim women, exploring their thoughts on media representation and on their own experiences. These stories are crucial to understanding the current lives of American-Muslim women in today's society, and resolving current traditional media reflections.

#### **Justification of Approach**

As a Muslim woman, the decision to do this topic and put in the time to research and find women to interview wasn't the most difficult part. I was concerned about portraying these women in the way they wanted. I'm tired of seeing inaccurate depictions of my religion on television and in the news. I concentrated on popular culture and social media rather than conventional news media because that is where gaps in coverage are. I, for one, consume far more popular culture than traditional news sources, and this has an impact on me.

Many of the women I spoke with for my creative project were eager to discuss this subject with me, given that it has been ongoing and has become a norm in popular culture in the United States. Younger women I spoke with were already actively engaged in changing this representation, while older women thanked me for bringing to light something they had already forgotten about. The significance of my tackling this project is precisely what I intend to argue and demonstrate through research and my creative project: if Muslim women are to be covered by non-Muslims, sufficient research should be conducted to avoid misrepresentation.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review: Misrepresentation of Muslim Women in U.S. Media and Popular Culture

As mass media flourished, so did the misrepresentations of minority groups. The tragedy of 9/11 specifically affected the misrepresentations of Muslims. A lack of education in dominant cultures about Islam intertwined to create an extreme misrepresentation that affected social stereotypes. Not only that, but the misrepresentation of Muslim women in U.S. media has had a direct impact on Muslim women who consume that media. How does an average American-Muslim woman fit within this broad spectrum of oppressed or rebellious? I want to shine a light on the representation of the people who fall into that gray area and improve the accuracy of the portrayal. I will also ask whether such a representation even exists in today's popular culture.

### Post 9/11 representation and the growth of Muslim Americans

Post 9/11, Muslims faced an immense backlash and an influx of hateful behavior daily and on-screen. In a study issued by USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, researchers looked at over 200-top rated TV shows from 2018-2019, in the U.S., U.K., Australia, and New Zealand. They found that while Muslims represent 25% of the world population, they represent just 1% of “8,885 speaking characters on TV.” Of those representations, over 30% of 98 Muslim characters were portrayed as violent perpetrators, and the ratio of Muslim men to women in these shows was 174:1. After the tragedy of 9/11, it was evident that the fear of Islam created a sweeping generalization of all Muslims, and what their religion brings to the United States which was portrayed in TV shows. According to Doctor Goleen Samari, a researcher at Columbia University, in her article *Islamophobia and Public Health in the United States*, it was after the

Iranian Revolution in 1979 in which there was increasing negative U.S. media coverage of Muslims. This led to the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act in 1996, which led to investigations of Muslim Americans' social lives. In Samari's research, she found that

“In a poll taken directly after 9/11, 60% of Americans reported unfavorable attitudes toward Muslims. Many Americans associate Muslims with fear-related terms such as violence, fanatic, radical, war, and terrorism. Public opinion poll research, media coverage, and government crime data suggest that Islamophobic sentiment sharply rose after 9/11.”

Misrepresentations of Muslims became the depiction of terrorists and violence (especially post 9/11). Evelyn Alsultany, an American researcher at the University of Southern California, describes the effects of 9/11 on American Muslims,

“Stereotyping for over a century, given that 9/11 was such an opportune moment for further stereotyping, and given that the US government passed domestic and foreign policies that compromised the civil and human rights of Arabs and Muslims” (Alsultany, 2013, pp 126).

Many researchers argue that the root of this misrepresentation stems from the dislike of Muslims post-9/11. Rochelle Terman, assistant professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Chicago argues,

“Generally speaking, Americans view Muslims much less favorably than other religious and racial minorities... The most common explanation for this disfavor centers on the perceived link between Muslims and terrorism, spurred in large part by the attacks of 9/11 and the subsequent War on Terror,” (Terman, 2017).

The problems surrounding these portrayals are evident within news representation. Post 9/11 the representation of Muslim men could be defined by one word: Terrorism. Because the 9/11

tragedy had a major impact on the representation of Muslim men in American media, the representation of Muslim women cannot be any better.

### **Misrepresentation in shows and popular culture**

Today, we *do* see positive examples in popular culture. These exceptions can be found in Netflix and Disney productions such as *Never Have I Ever* (produced by Mindy Kaling) and *Ms. Marvel* (produced by Kevin Feige). *Never Have I Ever* is an American-comedy drama series focusing on the life of an Indian-American teen who is seeking popularity at her high school, along with her friends. *Ms. Marvel*, a recent addition to the Marvel Universe, is about Kamala Khan, a straight A's student, gamer, and fan-fiction writer with an affinity for superheroes. Kamala struggles to fit in at home and school until she gets superpowers. These representations of Muslim teenage women reflect the gray areas missing from many TV shows and popular culture representations. Anmol Ifran, a Pakistani writer and freelance journalist, discusses the importance of the representation portrayed in *Never Have I Ever*, especially for South Asian Muslim girls. "We put so much pressure on representation for our community is so rare that it's easy to pin all our desires for relatability onto any brown girl we see on screen. But that has to change," (Ifan, 2022). When discussing the hit Netflix show, *Never Have I Ever*, Ifran mentions the importance of the only Muslim character 'Aneesa',

"Seeing her on screen felt so important because it was one of the only times I've seen a Muslim character be comfortable in their skin, without their Muslim-ness being the most important part of who they are. Aneesa isn't a "perfect Muslim" but she doesn't have to be, because that's unrealistic" (Ifan, 2022).

In “The Muslim Marvel Superhero” in Kashmir Observer, freelance journalist Neha Sheikh, describes how the show *Ms. Marvel* demonstrates advocacy around intersectionality growing in the media.

“It represents Muslims in a light that is not laced with prejudice and Islamophobia. The portrayal of day-to-day Islamic practices through the reading of du'as helps in normalizing the daily routines practiced by Muslims around the world that have otherwise been demonised,” (Sheikh, 2022).

Young Muslim girls who watch these shows may idolize the character who portrays them so well, but may be disappointed to find that the actresses in reality are not Muslim. When we turn to look into shows like *NCIS: Los Angeles*, a popular American ‘special agent’ TV show, the showrunners feature a Muslim-American hijab agent. Agent “Fatima Namazi” is an NCIS agent living in Los Angeles, working alongside other agents to solve cases that pertain to the U.S. government. While this representation is crucial for progress, the actress who plays her, Medalion Rahimi, is neither a hijabi nor a Muslim woman. This has been an ongoing dispute that exists among directors, authors, and writers in casting actors of similar race/background to the characters they will play. “Whitewashing” is the specific term used to identify when white actors play non-white roles. David Oh, a professor of communications at Ramapo College of New Jersey, writes in his book, *Whitewashing in the Movies*,

“Then as now, the stories are not simply harmless representations; they have material consequences. As post-cultural scholars have pointed out, discourse constructs social reality, and these worldviews, in turn, shape human relations,” (Oh, 2022).

In her thesis, “Blackface, Whitewashing, and Colorism: An Analytical Review of Race and Representation from Hollywood Film and Television to its use in Modern Times,” Ashley



Abrew, a graduate student from Morgan State University states that, “Beauty in America, and who gets to experience the privilege, is seen throughout Hollywood, film, and media. Any feature that is not Eurocentric is not seen as beautiful or worth depicting on screen,” (Abrew, 2021, pp 7).

Casting the proper people in these roles is important because otherwise Islam may be incorrectly reflected. Muslim women in the U.S. who watch, read, or consume any of this media are deeply offended by a character who does not define who they are or a religion that is their culture. This practice is an example of how mainstream media is not interested in the actual voices of the women they are representing. Perhaps they want the positive image that is perceived by having a seemingly diverse set of characters, but not the genuine experience.

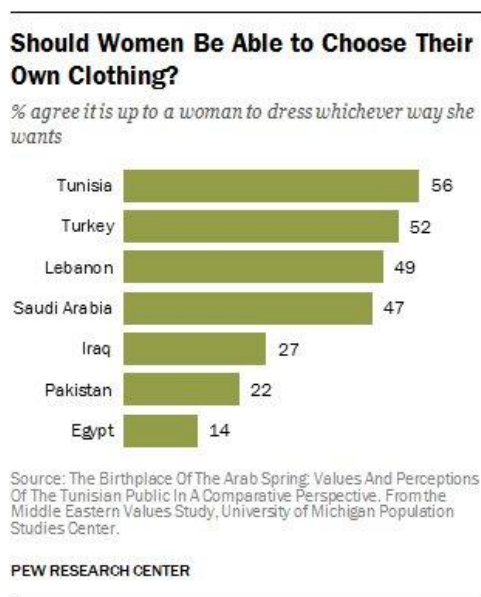
### **The symbol of the hijab**

When we look at literature, popular culture, television entertainment, and social media, the hijab is a symbol that speaks to Muslim women; often it is the only identifier of who they are. When looking at women who do choose to wear the hijab in real life, they face backlash, extreme stereotyping, and hate crimes. Ironically, the fashion industry has emphasized the introduction of hijab styles as ‘current fashion,’ while backlash for the usage of hijab for religious purposes still exists. It is important to ask why the hijab is the only symbol that points to Muslim women in popular culture. In reality, the hijab is not dictated by religion, but strictly a personal choice. Canadian human rights activist, Yasmine Mohammed describes,

“There is no verse in the Quran or edict in Hadith that mandates a woman to cover her hair in the way that is commonly described as hijab. These demands that women dress a certain

way- covering their hair, in some cases even covering their face- are all man-made ideas to control women. There is no religious justification” (Mohammed, 2022).

Another instance that disproves the hijab's association with Muslim women's modesty in representation and stereotypes is the distinction to be made between culture versus religion. Islam is the second largest religion in the world with 1.09 billion followers and as such, it is viewed and practiced differently among countries. One poll by The Pew Research Center, found that within several countries, many minorities believe it is acceptable for a woman to refrain from covering her hair in public. Many countries also believe it is a woman’s choice how to dress.



The representation of the hijab is important. The limit of that representation is that it doesn’t encapsulate all Muslim women. The hijab is a crucial religious symbol, but not one that defines Islam on screen.

### **TikTok and international influence**

The most visible example of the complex relationship between the hijab and the media has been the death of an Iranian woman, Mahsa Amini. Amini was killed by Iranian police after she wore her hijab ‘incorrectly’. How a woman wears her hijab in any sense, should not threaten their livelihood, but as we can see through Islamic extremist states like Iran and Afghanistan, they punish women for not following the set of “ill-defined” Islamic rules that these governments enforce. Historically, Iran had been a liberal state before the revolution in 1978-79. The death of Amini created a huge outbreak of protests and backlash against the Iranian government. Women all over the world cut their hair in protest and posted their opinions all over platforms like TikTok educating the world on why this is wrong. Popular TikTok user, Bervian Beria, posted a video on October 4th, 2022 of a protest for Amini in Finland. This video got over 30 million views and portrayed men and women cutting their hair in protest. TikTok is one of the most recent and popular platforms in today’s digital age, with people from all over the world having the ability to create their influencer platform, and even become “TikTok famous.” According to Dr. Farid Shirazi, a professor at Toronto Metropolitan University, the introduction of the internet to Iran created an entirely new environment for these women to share their experiences with the world.

“Iranian women have used this medium not only as a means of accessing and disseminating information but also as the means of voicing their concerns about discriminatory laws and participating in public discourse. In Iran, the Internet provided a voice to repressed and marginalized groups, particularly young people and educated women" (Shirazi, 2012).

TikTok played a significant role in spreading the news of the tragedy of Mahsa Amini’s death. Any harm or misrepresentation of Muslim women that trends on social media show the

traditional media's shortfallings, and that popular social media platforms overall reflect better representations.

### **Journalistic representation**

In terms of how the media covered Mahsa Amini's death, it was simply not enough. There is a clear inconsistency in what the traditional news media chooses to represent and when they choose to represent it. Most of the news representation about Muslims included the War on Terror, wars in Syria and Iraq, and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and continues to be a negative representation at that. Representation in journalism comes down to international conflicts and Muslim women outside of America. These platforms need to focus on representing what the average American-Muslim woman looks like, and that these women are just like any other American woman, with traditions and values that they cherish and aren't trying to run from. They could also potentially not even be hijabi women, and still haven't made their choice on such a crucial decision in their religious lives.

In "Our Women on the Ground" by Zahra Hankir, a Lebanese-British journalist and editor, 19 Arab women share their stories about reporting the conflicts that occur in their own backyard. The book goes into the challenges and obstacles that these journalists experienced while reporting on conflict, political instability, and societal issues in the Arab world in a male-dominated industry.

Hannah Allam is one of the journalists who shares her story about covering the Iraq War and the women she met along the way. Allam starts the chapter noting: "When I speak before Western audiences about my years covering the war in Iraq as a journalist for McClathy Newspapers, someone inevitably asks, 'What was it like to be a woman over there?'" (Allam, pp. 21, 2019).

She continues throughout her story to describe the multiple encounters with Iraqi women that she had when covering the war. Allam recounts the constant fear of bombs and kidnappings, as well as the emotional toll that the job imposes on journalists who witness and report on war's horrors. Despite these dangers, she speaks to the value of journalism in giving a voice to the voiceless and bringing light on the reality of conflict. She also recognizes the distinct perspective that her Arab-American ethnicity gives to her reporting, allowing her to better understand and relate to the people she covers.

In the same book, investigative journalist Lina Attalah shares her story uncovering the truth about the killing of a woman named Mariam in Egypt. Attalah attributes her great success to her father. She describes how her education led her to access the Western world.

“Later as I began working as a journalist in Egypt, I ascribed a more articulate political meaning to my attitude. Women in Egypt, as well as in any other Arab and Middle Eastern countries, are often depicted by the Western world as nothing but victims of patriarchy,” (Attalah, pp. 51, 2019).

Attalah describes the challenges of this particular story because of the great restrictions from the Egyptian government. Nonetheless she persists and uncovers the truth behind the murder, pointing to the value of journalism in holding those in authority accountable and shining a light on injustices. Ultimately, all of these women highlight an inequity in Arab representation in the Middle East. The persistence of conflict and the inaccurate portrayal of Muslims in Western media does not speak to the authenticity of reporting; sharing the truth with the world. Several of these journalists tell stories of the women who are the cornerstone of existence in these war-torn countries noting the significance of having an influential voice to speak up for the powerless.

Unless articles are covered by Arab/Muslim journalists, U.S. journalism still lacks representation of Muslim women, which speaks to the values of having a Muslim voice to articulate the wrongs and rights of media coverage. A rare exception is an article by journalist and deputy editor Allie Shah, a reporter for the Star Tribune, which profiles the story of two young Muslim-Somali women. This piece focuses on how these women balance the dual life of being an American teen, and Muslim in the U.S.

“America, with its melting pot, equal rights, and obsession with sex and youth, beckons them at every turn. These new values collide with traditional Somali values that call for clear roles for men and women, respect for authority, and an identity based on family, not self,” (Shah, pp. 1, 2000). Muslim American women have to maintain a duality of life, in which their culture and religion intersects with American lifestyles. This further proves the complexity of a Muslim American woman, and how they should be represented in the media.

The correct representation of Muslim women is possible and it educates audiences about the complexity of being a Muslim-American woman. But as misrepresentation continues, there are over-sexualized examples of Muslim women as well, because of American culture and the idolized idea of women covering their faces and hair, and only revealing that forbidden part of them to men. Shah goes on to describe the dual worlds these sisters live in: Nimco Ahmed, 18, she writes,

“Has learned how to live both in water and on land. At home and at Roosevelt...But for the transparent scarf wrapped snugly around her hair, Nimco looks like other American students. Same Mudd jeans and platform shoes. Multiple earrings on each lobe. A giant blue hair claw to keep loose strands in place beneath her scarf. She loves American fashions,” (Shah, pp. 2, 2000).

Nimco is an accurate description of a teenage Muslim girl in the U.S. She not only adapts to American popular culture but continues to play the role of a Muslim woman by wearing the hijab and obeying her Somali culture and familial rules.

“These days, she wears the hijab when she feels like it. She does it to let everyone know she's Somali, and so she can get used to the feel of the fabric tugging at her hairline, reminding her who she is, what she is. Somali. Muslim. Woman,” (Shah, pp. 2, 2000).

Fartun Nur, 17, is the other young Somali woman Shah profiles in this story. Unlike Nimco, she wears a larger hijabi covering, the *jalaabiib*.

“There are times, however, when she is laughing with her school friends or hanging out at the Mall of America when she feels American, Fartun concedes. But when she is home with her brother and sisters, playing a game of "Remember when ..." she feels a gulf between herself and her classmates that's wider than the continent she left behind,” (Shah, pp. 5, 2000).

The cultural clash for Fartun is harder to fight when remembering her life in Kenya, where she grew up. For Fartun, adapting to these new cultures head on is much different than being born in the U.S. and knowing the trends and values throughout childhood. This story is important because it brings a new perspective to the table: Muslim women fight a cultural battle in the U.S. every day. It's a challenge to be a proper Muslim while understanding what American cultures are safe to partake in.

The respect society has on a religion is a reflection of how the society represents said religion. There is a misrepresentation of Islam because there is fear, simply because it is so different from Westernized ideals and it becomes a matter of teaching the right ideas through these mediums that everyone today uses. Why can't we present the correct image of an individual who respects their culture while also assimilating Westernized thoughts and ideas? Journalism has not

included Muslim women enough in their portrayals, which deflects what journalism stands for, showing the truth and reflecting on the people of society, *all* the people of society.

## **Conclusion**

Accurate representation in traditional media is lacking. Popular social media platforms create an environment that allows people internationally to form their own opinions and representations. The hijab is not the only accurate symbol of a Muslim woman, and representation in TV shows and films is crucial to the identity of an American Muslim woman. This coverage also does not depict the everyday lives of American-Muslim women. This is significant because representation fosters social comfort, which is especially important in American society, where Islam is widely viewed negatively.



## References

- Abrew, A. (2021). *Blackface, whitewashing, and colorism: An analytical review of race and representation from Hollywood film and television to its use in modern times*. Retrieved from <https://colorado.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/blackface-whitewashing-colorism-analytical-review/docview/2546081358/se-2>
- Alsultany, E. (2013). Arabs and Muslims in the Media after 9/11: Representational Strategies for a “Postrace” Era. *American Quarterly*.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41809552>
- Amanpour, C. et al. (2020). *Our Women on the Ground Essays by Arab Women Reporting from the Arab World*. Vintage.
- Beria, B. [berivan\_beria]. (2022, October 4). #mahsaamini #freedom #helsinkiFinland #freedomforwomen [Video]. Tiktok.  
[https://www.tiktok.com/@berivan\\_beria/video/7150729302303231238?is\\_from\\_webapp=1&sender\\_device=pc&web\\_id=7176427839234000389](https://www.tiktok.com/@berivan_beria/video/7150729302303231238?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7176427839234000389)
- Eltantawy, N. M. A. (2007). US Newspaper Representation of Muslim and Arab Women Post 9/11.
- Goehring, D. L. (2019). Muslim Women on the Internet: Social Media as Sites of Identity Formation. *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.33428/jsoutasiamideas.42.3.0020>
- Ifraan, A. (2022, August 15). The messy representation in TV’s never have I ever is crucial for muslim women. *The Independent (Daily Edition)* Retrieved from <https://colorado.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/messy-representation-tv-s-never-have-i-ever-is/docview/2701976854/se-2>
- Jackson, L. (2010, February 17). *Images of Islam in US media and their educational implications*. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00131940903480217>
- Khan, A. B. et al (2022, September). Erased or Extremists: The Stereotypical View of Muslims in Popular Episodic Series. Retrieved from <https://assets.uscannenberg.org/docs/aii-study-muslim-erased-or-extremists-20220901.pdf>

- Oh , D. (2022). *Whitewashing the movies*. Retrieved from [https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=SMREEAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PT7&dq=whitewashing%2Bin%2Bfilms%2B&ots=DbDoW5aqRv&sig=Ol6ktOL\\_8iwaOm5XJ6OJDcUoHh8#v=onepage&q=whitewashing%20in%20films&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=SMREEAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PT7&dq=whitewashing%2Bin%2Bfilms%2B&ots=DbDoW5aqRv&sig=Ol6ktOL_8iwaOm5XJ6OJDcUoHh8#v=onepage&q=whitewashing%20in%20films&f=false)
- Poushter, J. (2020, September 10). *How people in Muslim countries prefer women to dress in public*. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/01/08/what-is-appropriate-attire-for-women-in-muslim-countries/>
- Sheikh, N. (2022, June 18). The Muslim Marvel Superhero. Retrieved from <https://kashmirobsrver.net/2022/06/18/the-muslim-marvel-superhero/>
- Sinha, V. (2022, February 10). Hijab is the flag of Islamists: Yasmine Mohammed. Retrieved from <https://advance-lexis-com.colorado.idm.oclc.org/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:64SS-D441-DXMP-K3FB-00000-00&context=1516831>.
- Shirazi, F. (2012). Information and communication technology and women empowerment in Iran. *Telematics and Informatics*.
- Somari, G. (2016, November). Islamophobia and Public Health in the United States. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5055770/>
- Sotsky, J. (2013, October 30). They Call me Muslim: Muslim women in the media through and beyond the veil. *Feminist Media Studies*, Retrieved from <https://doi-org.colorado.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/14680777.2013.838359>
- Terman, R. (2017, September 3). “Islamophobia and Media Portrayals of Muslim Women: A Computational Text Analysis of US News Coverage.” *International Studies Quarterly*. <https://doi-org.colorado.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/isq/sqx051>
- Tsioulcas, A. (2022, September 7). *There are barely any Muslims on popular TV series, a new study says*. NPR. Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/2022/09/07/1121511404/muslims-tv-series-study>

## **Part II: Creative Project**

### **Introduction to Creative Project**

The following section is a collection of interviews done with six Muslim women living in Colorado. I begin the piece with a personal anecdote of a situation that came up recently while working on this project. Because I wanted to profile the wide spectrum that is the Muslim-American woman, the remainder of the journalistic piece is a mix of a feature story and an op-ed. The article is divided into sections based on the subjects discussed with the women I interviewed. The most important takeaway from this creative project is the diversity of these women, the differences in their goals and attitudes, the differences in their priorities, and how they all agree on the misrepresentation of Muslim women.

### Chapter 3

#### Personal Anecdote

Being a Muslim woman in today's world should be simple, right? With so many materials available to people today, I shouldn't have to explain the wrongs and rights of the world's second largest religion with 1.9 billion followers throughout the world.

Yet, I still do.

Currently, as an intern at 303Magazine's fashion desk, I pitch stories to my editor and write them for the upcoming month. I recently pitched a piece about young Muslim women's personal fashion trends and how their religion (Islam) influences them.

I collaborated with the photographer to find Muslim models, and this is when I hit my first roadblock.

"Is it okay if they're Iranian/Arabic?" the photographer asked.

"Race and ethnicity don't matter as long as they're Muslim," I responded.

A few days later, she asked again, "does desi work?" Desi is a person of South Asian birth or descent. I responded the same way I had before to which she responded: "I just feel so weird asking them if they're Muslim when they've already offered to model."

This statement surprised me; why would it be strange to inquire about someone's religion? Is it simply because they're Muslim, or would that be the same for any other religion?

I reacted by emphasizing that the entire idea of the article was the significance of being a Muslim, and that if they went ahead with the photoshoot and I discovered that one or none of the models are Muslim, it would be a bigger issue. Nonetheless, she found three models and had the photoshoot. A couple days later I received the photos.

All of the photos were beautiful, but as I was scrolling through I was shocked and in disbelief. One of the models was in a hijab, and was wearing a sheer, completely see through, black dress and a bodysuit underneath. Revealing all of her chest and legs.

My first thought was this honors thesis project I'm working on: the misrepresentation of Muslim women in popular culture. I've done the research about it, I've spoken to people about it, and now it's actually happening to me, I'm part of it.

If she hadn't been wearing the headscarf, I would have figured it was just her personal style, which would have been OK. That was the entire premise of the article: there are many different types of Muslim women and everyone has their own sense of style, whether or not it is affected by religion.

If I published this article and this model is disrespectfully wearing a headscarf with a revealing dress, I would be contributing to the problem. I would become a part of popular culture's and media's miseducation and stereotyping of Muslim women.

### **Effects of representation on real Muslim women**

Muslim women in the United States have long been misrepresented in the media and popular culture, contributing to negative stereotypes and biases. The portrayal of Muslim women as oppressed, powerless and obedient has been a persistent and harmful narrative for decades. This misconception not only has an impact on the lives of Muslim women in the United States, but it also adds to societal issues such as Islamophobia and discrimination.

Many Muslim women in the United States are frustrated and misunderstood by how the media portrays them. One of them is Saida Aissi.

Aissi is a 41-year-old Moroccan woman living in Aurora, Colorado, with a bachelor's degree in economics from Morocco, where she grew up. She has taken and continues to take business classes in the United States since then.

We discussed what representation she and possibly other Muslim women would like to see, and Aissi mentioned that it would be beneficial to report on and see more of Muslim women that are in power.

“So we have Ilhan Omar. She’s a hijabi U.S. representative from Minnesota, and on the other side we have Rashida Tlaib I think her name was, and she’s a U.S. representative from Michigan who doesn’t wear the headscarf. They’re both Muslims, and I like those ladies to be honest, and sometimes you see an inequality of representation or the way they’re treated because one of them wears the hijab,” Aissi says.

We also had a lengthy discussion about the importance of Muslim women's negative portrayal, and when I asked Aissi if she had ever felt misrepresented or stereotyped by US media or popular culture, like TV shows or movies specifically, Aissi, despite having not watched a lot of American TV describes this:

“I’ve watched a little bit of it, of course. Unfortunately, people don’t do the hard work of researching to get to know what a religion is really about. People are mostly stereotyped and that creates Islamophobia, and this is of course the wrong meaning of Islam,” she said, “they think that women are treated poorly by Muslim men, and that is something wrong, and to continuously explain that is draining. Don’t believe everything you watch, don’t believe everything you hear. Do some research about real Muslim women, as a Muslim woman, yes absolutely most of the time I feel misrepresented.”

The media has been important in spreading poor perceptions of Muslim women. News outlets frequently portray Muslim women as oppressed and forced to wear the hijab, while movies and television shows present them as submissive and powerless. This representation undermines Muslim women's different experiences and their agency in choosing to wear the hijab or other

kinds of modest dress. It supports the notion that Muslim women must be rescued by Western feminism, a perception that further marginalized them. The media's representation of Muslim women is often one-dimensional, promoting stereotypes of oppressed and submissive women that do not truly reflect the different perspectives and experiences of Muslim women. These experiences can be crucial to casting real Muslim women and having people educate about Islam, and Aissi couldn't agree more.

"Especially if they're [American audiences] not working with Muslim women, and they're not really interacting with Muslim women, of course they're going to believe everything they watch and hear, and they will apply that. And fortunately I've never experienced that, probably because I don't wear the hijab (headscarf), and they will judge you based on whatever they see you're wearing."

### **Duality**

Aissi moved to the United States to join her husband in 2007, almost 15 years ago. She came to a place where she believes all races and religions have equal opportunity. I asked her whether religion and culture have had a large influence on her life in the United States.

"Well, I made it affect my life here because I took my culture and my faith with me, so I had to continue with it," Aissi said. She continues on to describe a life of working with people that weren't Muslim and integrating with them, to coming home, praying and feeding and teaching her kids.



The significance of duality among many Muslim women who not only immigrate here, but also raise their children here, is critical to understanding how these women live double lives.

Journalist Allie Shah captured this problem in a profile of two young Muslim-Somali women in 2000. In this story, we see two different perspectives of Somali-Muslim girls, Nimco and Fartun. One feels more connected to her “Islamic roots,” while the other blends in more with the American culture of her high school. Both girls, however, deal with the duality of still being Muslim, and coming home to an entirely different environment than that of their daily lives at school.

Hanane Ghiwane, a Moroccan woman living in Denver, Colorado, is a hijabi Muslim woman. Ghiwane is a youth services coordinator for refugee families at ECDC African Community Center of Denver. She works with many different religions, cultures and ethnicities and is extremely open to learning about others— but she is often frustrated that they won’t do the same for her.

“You have to figure out a way of life, integrating into the community, and at the same time keep your beliefs and your culture. Sometimes you feel like you have to make sure you do not lose that identity. We are Moroccan Muslim women trying to practice religion and trying to keep our culture, and at the same time learning about different cultures and religions,” Ghiwane mentioned.

Amal Eljazouli is a 23 year old Muslim-Moroccan woman. Eljazouli recently graduated from the University of Colorado Denver with a Bachelor's Degree. She believes that living in the U.S.

she's had a mix of an identity crisis, and a hard time learning where she fits in. The duality of living here and going to school creates a boundary between Muslim women and Western culture.

### **The hijab**

The hijab has long been associated with the "ideal" Muslim woman. It's the identifier of a Muslim woman the same way that the cross can be associated with Christians and Catholics.

The only difference is, every Muslim woman you see does not have to wear the hijab, and if they do, it makes them no different than the women who choose not to wear it. Educating people about the significance of the hijab, and the importance of that choice, is one reason that the hijab should not be the symbol of a Muslim woman.

Ghiwane is a hijabi woman who has experienced the micro-aggressions of living in the U.S. as a Muslim. Like many of the women I interviewed, she is thankful their experiences haven't been as bad as the stories she's heard.

"There are sometimes ignorant people that will say go back to your country, you know? But then sometimes all you can do is let it go because you cannot change people and change what they believe, and this country has given me more than that so I just let it go," Ghiwane said.

Immigrants internationally travel to the U.S. the land of "opportunities, education, and the American dream." In turn, they often receive highly detrimental treatment because of what Americans choose to believe based on media representation.

## **Young Muslim Women and today's Technology**

Despite widespread American ignorance of Islam and the ill-treatment Muslim women often received, many Muslim women pride themselves in teaching their children and others the real meaning of being a Muslim. Meryem Badr-El Kadmiri is a 28 year old Muslim woman living in Denver. El Kadmiri feels that she breaks barriers put against Muslim women everyday. Being recently remarried to someone outside of her culture was a huge step to El Kadmiri in the right direction. She stresses the importance of teaching her three young kids what Islam is really about, and that a Muslim is a Muslim, regardless of culture.

“Living in a predominantly non-Muslim society, all I can try to do is teach my kids the basics of Islam. We try to do fun things for the kids, like little gifts and events in Ramadan for example. We want to teach them that Islam is not strict, it's an open and loving religion, so they can go out and teach that to everyone else,” El Kadmiri says.

Fear is the result of an absence of education, and it is dangerous in American society. With outlets for younger generations to go out and educate others about what Islam truly is, it's possible to create an accurate representation of Muslims. That's why Muslim women all around the U.S. are teaching the essential parts of Islam, and shielding their kids from the dangers of stereotypes and misrepresentation.

“Because both of my kids are younger, they still sometimes see things on TV or on their phones on social media about Muslims that they get confused about. They don't get angry or upset, they get confused, they usually ask me ‘why are these people lying about Islam?’ or ‘that's wrong’

and I just have to explain to them that a lot of people don't know their religion like they do." For this reason El Kadmiri continues to teach her children the reality of the world they live in, but shields them from the dangers of stereotypes.

Younger generations grow more and more curious as to why such a simple idea of taking the time to understand a religion has become so difficult for Islam. We live in a country where we take two weeks off for Christmas, Hanukkah and other major Christian, Catholic, and Jewish holidays, while in Ramadan, a holy month of fasting in Islam, Muslims all around the world share stories about barely getting out of class or work to get a chance to break their fast. Muslims adapt to American cultures and other religion's values, but being the second largest religion, the treatment is not reciprocated.

Because younger generations of Muslim women and Muslim women who are born here are more attentive to what U.S. media produces, many of these examples go on to further prove that the misrepresentation of Muslim women in these TV shows harms the meaning of Islam. When I asked Eljazouli if she's ever felt misrepresented by media as a Muslim women, here's what she had to say,

"The first thing that comes to mind is the Netflix series 'Elite' when a Muslim-Palestinian girl wearing the hijab meets this boy and she ends up taking off her hijab, and distancing herself from Islam. And they portrayed it as a way that Islam was holding her back and holding her away from all the 'fun' when in reality, the hijab is supposed to protect her from those types of situations."

Poor representation of Islam, and the idea that women are oppressed under a 'strict' religion, can be harmful not only to those that are non-Muslim, but to Muslims who are struggling with their identity. It can create a dangerous space and lead people astray from their faith and beliefs because the world is so influenced by what they see and believe on TV or on their phones. Recently, however, young Muslim women have turned to social media platforms like 'TikTok' to share their voice and their lives with the world. Eljazouli believes it's a step in the right direction.

"I think now with TikTok, Muslim women have the power to represent themselves in popular culture. Sharing their days that include praying, going to work, fashion and much more."

Platforms like TikTok, are a growing environment for real voices to be shared all over the world. It does what traditional media doesn't, it gives real life perspectives, opinions, and education about all things, not just Islam. And that's why younger generations are relying on these platforms which traditional media hasn't done.

## **Community**

Maha Noorzai is a 22 year old psychology and business student at the University of Colorado Boulder. Noorzai's mom is Moroccan and her father is from Afghanistan. She plans on graduating in the spring as a first-generation student. Noorzai's story of microaggressions and discrimination are a good example of how small stereotypes can affect lives largely.

“The elementary middle and high schools I attended were primarily white , and I was always one of the few Muslims or brown people at school. I would be called a terrorist and all of that often. Kids and surprisingly teachers would belittle my mom for wearing the hijab. They would also tell me about how their parents hate Muslims because they think we’re scary,” Noorzai said.

Noorzai also mentioned having to feel like she was compensating for being different. She felt that she would always have to get good grades, and be at the top of her class in order to make up for feeling discriminated against by her own classmates. A sense of community among these women is important to guide Muslims to know that they are not alone, and understand that the lives they live are shared among many other women.

“What I feel helps me balance my American life with my Muslim and Moroccan life is staying connected with other women like me. I am so incredibly blessed to have other Moroccan Muslim girlfriends in my life. Even though we are not actually related, I’ve genuinely convinced myself that they’re my family because to me, those relationships are so pure. I know we have the same faith and the same beliefs which guide the way we treat each other,” Noorzai said.

Ghiwane also agreed. “Being able to talk to other Moroccan women, we talk on the phone, we plan parties and dinners to see each other on the weekends. And we share all of our experiences with each other, to teach each other the norms of the U.S.”

### **Education and Journalism**

Rania Al Namar, a PhD student at the University of Colorado Boulder, is a Muslim-Palestinian woman who recently moved to Boulder in late August with her two girls from Palestine. Al

Namar had lived here 15 years ago to pursue a bachelor's degree and when it came to moving to the U.S., she had one priority in mind.

“For me, education is the number one priority when it came to deciding to leave come and come to a place like the U.S., and now I'm returning with two girls so I think it's also a good opportunity for them to join schools in the U.S. and be exposed to new cultures, and learn a new language,” Al Namar says.

Al Namar, a hijabi woman, emphasized how different the cultural setting of the hijab has become in the United States today compared to 15 years ago. She described that 15 years ago, hijabi women would get more hate, and more discrimination out on the streets or in grocery stores. Because of the growth of Islam, it's not as common, but the stereotypes are still there. Women who wear the hijab are representatives of Islam, but can still also be targeted to stereotypes and hate.

“You know, the issue with the hijab, especially in the Middle East, people sometimes wear it or decide to be Muslims because of the overall culture or because everyone in their family wears it. But if a Muslim woman is wearing it in a place like in the U.S., then it's a personal choice. So keep this strength, stay in power, speak up, and stand up for yourself because no one else will do that,” Al Namar says to other hijabi women in the U.S.

Al Namar and I discussed further about the importance of the voices behind the representation. Al Namar being a student herself, and understanding the rules and regulations of journalism, we both came to the conclusion that journalistic representation of Muslim women is lacking.

Journalists are taught throughout their careers to preserve impartiality and truthfulness when covering topics. When it comes to the journalists and the media reporting Middle Eastern or Muslim topics, this does not appear to be the case unless stories are covered by Arab/Muslim journalists. In “Our Women on the Ground,” a compilation of essays written by Arab/Muslim female journalists (and curated by Zahra Hankir), we see the genuine impact of Muslim women in war-torn countries, and how they are the foundation for keeping lives steady throughout the Middle East. These stories might not have been heard if it hadn't been for the coverage and voices of these women. That is why it is critical to have Muslim/Arab journalists, actors, editors, and others to offer a voice to the powerless and those being misrepresented.

“I think journalism overemphasizes the worth of objectivity and the truth. Part of the research I’m doing is to challenge those notions of objectivity because, you know, objectivity tends to serve those in power more than those who have less power. It’s unequal,” Al Namar said, “and when it comes to Palestinian representation, Palestine is not even recognized here as a country. What I’m trying to say is that people on the national level tend to be more empathetic and helpful. But when it comes to news representation, let’s think about what kind of images, for example, come out of Palestine,” Al Namar emphasizes.

I asked Al Namar if there were any recent positive representations of Muslims in the media and we spoke more about recent coverage of the Middle East.



“I think that even with the World Cup happening in Qatar for example, we were all hoping for nice profiles from the Middle East for this beautiful country that put a lot of effort into building stadiums and hosting this large number of people,” Al Namar said, “so I would have imagined profiles coming out about the culture of Muslims, more stories about Islam and even more Muslim women because it’s them showing a status of power and we want Muslim women to talk from that, you know, powerful position to show that we are not oppressed, we’re not excluded.” Al Namar noted that much of the global media coverage of the World Cup focused on negative aspects of the event such as accusations of human rights violations.

When the FIFA World Cup was hosted by Qatar, a small country on the Arabian Peninsula, many Arabs and Muslims rejoiced at the fact that such a huge event would be hosted in an Islamic country. When news spread to Western platforms, they were outraged at the fact that women had to dress more modestly, and that the stadiums wouldn’t be serving alcohol during the matches. When that news subdued, and Morocco, a North African country made it to the semi-finals, European media didn’t celebrate the news of the first Muslim country to make it so far, instead there were articles that even went out as far as to compare the players and their mothers (when dancing to celebrate a win) to monkeys, and criticize the Islamic prayers that players made after the games. A Dutch paper published a cartoon depicting two Moroccans on a motorcycle, stealing the World Cup trophy for FIFA President Gianni Infantino. Linking Moroccans to crime and depicting them as thieves instead of celebrating the historic wins they had made in the World Cup.

### **Making a Change**

Regarding my own journalistic dilemma, I figured the best thing to do was to reach out to the model directly and speak to her about her outfit choice. I contacted her through the number that the photographer gave me, and decided to ask her some questions.

The biggest thing I wanted to know was if she really identified as Muslim.

She responded to me within the hour. Desiree Pare, the model, turned out to be a “Nominal Muslim,” meaning she is non-practicing and identifies with Islam because of her family’s background. That’s when it all started to make more sense. The hijab she wore in the photoshoot was purely for aesthetic purposes and did not mean to disrespect the religion or hijab in any way. With that being said, when I started to write the article I made it a point to show that Muslim women are on a broad spectrum. They are all *different*, they dress differently, they look different, and most importantly what they practice and how they practice their religion is a personal affair. I had the ability to recognize that because I know the wrongs and rights of the religion, and I don’t want to misrepresent it. I wanted to stress the importance of how different the three women that modeled were, and how that further emphasizes my point that representing these women correctly, will destroy a stigma behind the stereotypes of being a Muslim-American woman.

The majority of these Muslim women I spoke to see the United States as a place of greater opportunity, education, and rights than their home countries. These women want to see a positive shift in how Muslims are portrayed around the world. The most essential thing we can do is continue to utilize our voices to speak out against any misrepresentation while educating our peers and acquaintances on what Islam truly is. Muslim women in positions of power have the authority to do the same, to utilize their voices to speak out against misrepresentation, which

contributes to misconceptions across the country. To avoid inaccurate facts, claims, and depictions, Muslim women should be placed in roles or incorporated into productions that include or discuss Islam. The answer is acceptance, and being open to all religions and cultures. That's what the U.S. is; a melting pot.

“I would tell other little girls who are in the same boat that I was in to never get discouraged or feel like they need to distance themselves from their identity for any type of acceptance,” Noorzai said, “the United States is diverse in cultures, behaviors, and ideas, so build yourself up however feels right to you, but don’t let anyone make you think that your roots in islam are not important...I’m really proud of you for bringing this topic into discussion, you’re pioneering an area that has been neglected for a really long time.”