Unveiled Muslim Women and Intersectionality Within Windsor's Muslim Community

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Abstract
Previous academic research suggests that dominant Islamic discourses about gender police Muslim women to dress modestly by veiling, lowering their gaze in front of men, being obedient, chaste, and sexually pure. However, Islamic discourses are not always performed and embodied in the same ways, especially in terms of veiling and dress code. In fact, it has been found that Muslim women who do not veil are often marginalized because it is assumed they are rejecting their Islamic duty to veil, especially those living in the West. This has been linked to growing rates of Islamophobia within Western countries and the ways in which minority Muslim communities have have become more guarded and conservative in order to openly mark their religious affiliation (McGuinty, 2014). Based on this information, I expected to find similar experiences in my population of Muslim women in Windsor, Ontario. The following qualitative research study examines the intersectional experiences of unveiled Muslim women within the minority Muslim community in Windsor, Ontario. Through semi-structured interviews, this study collected data from 5 unveiled and identifying Muslim women participants attending University of Windsor who were between the ages of 20-30. The importance of this qualitative study lies in uncovering the real lived experiences of these women through an intersectional feminist approach which addresses gender, race, and religious identity. By using the feminist methods of excavation and inclusion, this study analyzes those experiences of unveiled Muslim women in hopes of revealing a better understanding of what normative femininity looks like within Windsor’s Muslim community, and to produce data that will encourage political and social changes that benefit these women.
This qualitative study gives women a voice to talk about their experiences through the standpoint theory of Patricia Hill Collins’ Black Feminist Epistemology. Feminist epistemology reaches truth through the character and biography of the participants in this study, as well as the creation of knowledge through their stories, experiences, and dialogue. According to Joey Sprague’s article “Feminist Methodologies for Critical Researchers: Bridging Differences”, “Patricia Hill Collins argues that anyone who reflects on his or her practical experience is an intellectual, a creator of knowledge” (Sprague, 2005, p.45). Thus, as an unveiled Muslim woman and a researcher conducting a study on other unveiled Muslim women, I used Collins’ approach by giving marginalized women a voice to speak about their experiences and their wisdom, which is developed through their everyday experiences as a minority Muslim group. Furthermore, as stated by Sprague, “Knowledge, in this perspective, is not the vision of individuals. It is rather a form of communication and connection, a search for harmony in a community” (Sprague, 2005, p.46). In hopes of promoting social justice objectives for equality, this study will reveal experiences and accounts of unveiled Muslim women which often become universalized with veiled Muslim women’s experiences. Simply because they are the dominant Muslim group who are easily identified in Western society. This qualitative study report will include a literature review of academic and non-academic knowledge, a thorough discussion and analysis of the semi-structured interviews conducted during this study, and finally a conclusion.

**Literature Review**

The knowledge contributed to understanding normative femininity in minority Muslim communities uncovers gender normative behaviours such as veiling, modestly, a lowered gaze, obedience, and sexual purity. The literature review on this topic suggests that Muslim women
who do not adhere to Islamic gender norms specifically unveiled Muslim women, feel socially
excluded from the Muslim community. This is due to the assumption that these women have
openly rejected their Islamic duty to veil, and adopted in full Western principles and morals.
Moreover, minority Muslim communities in the West are becoming more conservative because
of dominant hegemonic views about Muslims. That is to say, Muslims in the West have become
more guarded and conservative in order to openly mark their religious affiliation. As a result, this
has created a social barrier for second-generation Muslim women who do not veil in the West. It
is assumed that they do not want to associate with the Muslim community because of outside
social pressures to conform to Western ideals of femininity. Among the most important
contributions to this topic was Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism and its historical role in
understanding the relationship between the East, or ‘orient’, and the West. This theory also helps
to deconstruct why minority Muslim communities in the West are experiencing higher rates of
Islamophobia; and, thus have become ultra-conservative. This section of the report will discuss
the most useful theories and themes which contributed to this qualitative research study.
Specifically, the concept of Orientalism and ‘White’ feminism, family honour in Muslim
communities, dominant knowledge about unveiled Muslim women produced by veiled women or
Muslim men, and the personal narratives of unveiled Muslim women living in the United States
which suggest a sense of aversion from the greater Muslim community.

The concept of Orientalism prescribes a power-based socially constructed notion of a
Muslim society and its women as primitive, uncivilized, and the inferior ‘other’, in order to
secure Western domination over the East. In the literature review, Orientalism provided a
historical background which sheds light on contemporary dominant discourses which depict
Muslims as uncivilized communities that oppress their women. In “Orientalism and Middle East Feminist Studies”, Lila Abu-Lughod states that gender and sexuality should serve as the main focus of why the East is depicted as inferior to the West (Abu-Lughod, 2001, p.101). Abu-Lughod’s findings are important to the research study because Orientalist discourse dictates and sets a precedent for Muslim women’s oppression and marginalization in the West. Thus, as long as the West is writing about the East, they are positioning themselves as the authority by making the East seem inferior, unknown, and different. In addition, it is important to note Susan Darraj’s personal narrative “It’s Not an Oxymoron”, where she states that mainstream White feminism has exploited Orientalist discourses about Muslim women. To illustrate, White feminists wanted to save Muslim women from “…the burden of their families, and their religion, but not from the war, hunger, unemployment, political persecution, and oppression that mark their daily lives and that left them with only their families and religion as sole sources of comfort (Darraj, 2002, p. 298). Thus, analyzing the historical context of Muslim women’s assumed oppression was useful in understanding their current status on the hierarchy of race that dominant White society has created. Thus, as illustrated by Patricia Hill Collins, giving Muslim women a voice to speak their truth will challenge the hierarchal control and organization of knowledge by the elite, by validating their truth because they are the everyday social actors (Sprague, 2005, p.46).

The notion of honour in the Muslim family and broader community sheds light on the restrictive gender norms prescribed on to women in order to protect the family honour and reputation. This was useful in understanding the stereotypes and social exclusion that is experienced by Muslim women who do not adhere to these strict codes of behaviour. In Imtoual and Hussein’s qualitative research article “Challenging the Myth of the Happy Celibate: Muslim
Women Negotiating Contemporary Relationships”, the authors argue that Muslim women must be cautious not the present themselves as “…too sexy, too stylish, or too beautiful” in order to avoid suspicion that they are seeking sexual attention, or worse are lesbian or not celibate” (Imtoual and Hussein, 2009, p.38). Here, Muslim women are expected to protect the family honour and reputation by adhering to heteronormative Islamic practices of femininity such as modesty, sexual purity, and obedience. Moreover, Muslim women who do not veil or engage in premarital sexual relations are not only shamed by the community, but their families must endure the same ridicule because it is assumed that their parents went wrong in raising them, specifically, the mothers. Through a feminist analysis, such restrictive codes of behaviour strip women of agency, identity, and mobility, even in the West. These ideas are important to the research study because communal shaming and exclusion by the Muslim community is also used when discussing the experiences of unveiled Muslim women.

In order to find out what has been ignored in the mainstream production of knowledge, either by White feminists or privileged men, feminist inquiry uses a qualitative research approach to give women an opportunity to voice their concerns about mainstream society. With this in mind, it is important to understand that dominant knowledge about unveiled Muslim women has primarily been produced by veiled Muslim women or Muslim men. To illustrate, in “In Defence of Non-Hijabi Sisters”, author Summana Siddiqui tells a story about an unveiled Muslim woman who went to the mosque to pray, but her hair was showing through her veil. The young woman was approached after prayer by other veiled Muslim women and was told her prayers were not accepted and that she should not come back until she is dressed appropriately for the mosque. Siddiqui, a veiled Muslim woman, states that unveiled Muslim women either
come from non-practicing families or households that despise the religion. “This reality indicated there is a seed of faith that needs to be nurtured and encouraged (Siddiqui, 2012, p.1). Moreover, Siddiqui indicates that such hard judgements could lead some Muslim women to become alienated from the community and lose their Islamic practice (Siddiqui, 2012, p.2). Such narratives indicate that hijab shaming is a reality within the Muslim community, and the voices of unveiled Muslim women are important to understanding in order to reach social justice and equality in these communities.

Even though Orientalist discourse has shaped the West’s view of Muslims and influenced the rise of Islamophobia and racism against Muslims, some veiled women expressed a sense of empowerment and belonging through veiling. As illustrated in Anna McGinty’s “Emotional Geographies of Veiling: The Meanings of The Hijab for Five Palestinian American Muslim Women”, veiled women in the study did not identify a sense of oppression from mainstream society but found a sense of empowerment through their social justice activism that combats stereotypes about Muslims. However, this was not the case for unveiled Muslim women in the study. One participant, Leila states that “…Muslimness without the hijab is highly critical to the religious discourse praising the veiled woman” (McGinty, 2014, p.692). Leila identified a social pressure and consequence of not veiling, and states that her activism encompassed proving her Muslimness to both Muslims and non-Muslims. Moreover, this literature shed light on the marginalized experiences of unveiled Muslim women within Muslim communities.

Upon the most insightful studied was Danielle Zimmerman’s quantitative report which indicated a sense of lost identity among veiled Muslim women due to family and community pressures to veil. In Zimmerman’s “Young Arab Muslim Women’s Agency Challenging Western
Feminism”, veiled Muslim women expressed that the main reason for agreeing to veil despite personal hesitation - or disagreement - would be the desire to respect parents’ and community’s will (Zimmerman, 2015, p.154). The personal narratives of veiled Muslim women in Zimmerman’s study provide context for the experiences of unveiled Muslim women in my qualitative research study simply because veiled women adhere to religious discourses to veil and gain acceptance. However, unveiled Muslim women who express a sense of agency and mobility by rejecting the veil, are socially excluded and shamed by the community elders and religious institutions. In fact, Zimmerman explains that the consequences of rejecting the veil in Muslim communities “…would isolate them from their own core values, without necessarily ensuring better integration in mainstream society (Zimmerman, 2015, p.154). Furthermore, it is evident that being a Muslim, especially in the West, strips women of agency and decision-making because their families have already decided their fate.

In the beginning stages of this qualitative study, I hoped to unravel the parallel experiences of unveiled Muslim women in Western society, who reject veiling due to social pressures to conform to images of the ‘ideal’ woman portrayed in mainstream media. However, while conducting the study, none of the participants expressed a sense of pressure to conform to the West’s ideal image of femininity. Therefore, the literature review of studies on Western discourses of gender normative behaviour in White culture did not benefit this study. In addition, none of the literature and studies thoroughly investigated the experiences of unveiled Muslim women in the West. The dominant ideas in the academic literature engaged in the intersectional experiences of veiled Muslim women living in North America or Western Europe. These gaps in the literature paved the way for this research study because it sheds light on the marginalized
experiences and voices of Muslim women who are not easily identified as ‘Muslim’, who are in fact practicing Muslims who adhere to many Islamic principles. With this in mind, the following section will elaborate on the qualitative research study on unveiled Muslim women’s experiences within the minority Muslim community of Windsor, Ontario. Finally, the above literature sheds light on the history of Muslim identity in the West, by use of Orientalism, normative femininity within Muslim communities, and personal narratives of veiled Muslim women. However, it lacks an analysis of unveiled Muslim women who identify as practicing Muslims, and their experiences and identities within the Muslim community.

Data and Method

The data in this qualitative research study is collected from 5 unveiled Muslim women attending the University of Windsor and living in Windsor, Ontario. Participants A through E are between the ages of twenty to thirty. All of the participants were selected based on the availability of the researcher. Participant A is a twenty-nine year old Pakistani-American living in Windsor who is an unveiled practicing Muslim woman, and attending the University of Windsor as a mature student. Participant B is a twenty-two-year-old Syrian-Canadian unveiled woman living in Windsor and attending the University of Windsor. Participant C is a twenty-eight year old Lebanese-born Canadian who is an unveiled practicing Muslim woman attending the University of Windsor. Participant D is a twenty-two-year-old Yemeni-Ethiopian Canadian who is a practicing unveiled Muslim woman and attending the University of Windsor. Finally, Participant E is a twenty-year-old Jordanian-Canadian unveiled Muslim woman attending the University of Windsor. All of the participants were chosen based on their identities as unveiled practicing Muslim women, as well as their interest in the research study.
The method of inquiry that is used in this study is semi-structured interviews, which included a set of fifteen questions which were prepared well in advance. The interviews were conducted at coffee shops. Semi-structured interviews allow the participants an open space to introduce new ideas, themes, and experiences pertaining to the topic. The interviews took a span of approximately fifteen minutes, the shortest being 7 minutes because participant E was in a rush. All of the interviews were audio recorded with the consent of the participants. The interview questions asked about the participants’ experiences within the Muslim community as unveiled women. However, the number of questions fluctuated based on the participant’s comfort with providing details and examples about their experiences. Many of the interview questions focused on the impacts that these experiences may have had on their identities and the sense of inclusion or exclusion they felt from the broader Muslim community in Windsor.

The method of analysis used in this research study is conducted through an analysis of themes collected through semi-structured interviews. The purpose of this study is to find out if unveiled Muslim women feel a sense of social exclusion from the Muslim community in Windsor. The questions asked consist of finding out the participants’ religious identity, definitions of modesty in Islam, their sense of belonging in the broader Western culture, their identity building and sense of belonging within the Muslim community, experiences of social inclusion or exclusion from the Muslim community, and experiences of stereotyping by community elders and family members as a result of their decisions not to veil.

**Significant Findings**

All of the participants stated a spiritual definition of what Islam meant to them. The most common theme in the answers is having faith in a greater being, treating others with respect, and
respecting one’s self. The participants’ definitions of modesty were also personal and embodied in different ways. All of the participants defined modesty through behaviour, good intentions, and being a good example to other women. However, the participants expressed a sense of exclusion because of their non-normative forms of practicing Islam. Particularly among veiled Muslim women, participant B states that “I find that with girls who do wear it, they’re very judgmental, they make you seem as if you’re not religious, even though you are” (1). Thus, the exclusion experienced by participant B comes from other veiled Muslim women who police her decision not to veil.

One of the interview questions asked, “Do you think that your decision to be unveiled has hindered your ability to integrate into the Muslim community?”. All of the participants except for participant B answered “Yes”, and have feelings of being the ‘black sheep’ in the community, being stared at, and feeling left out of social gatherings and social groups, experienced “hijabi-bullying”. Participant A was very vocal about her experiences within the Muslim community and states “It is the minority Muslim community that says you are not marriage material if you do not wear a scarf, to them it is a superficial concept, even though it is supposed to be a symbol of modesty” (Participant A, 3). Participant A was not the only one who expressed this sense of social exclusion and stereotyping. All of the participants, at some point, had, at least, one negative experience of being judged for not veiling. Participant B states “I’ve heard some people worry that I am not doing this part of Islam and that I might slowly mitigate away from Islam as a whole” (Participant B, 4). The experiences of the women interviewed in this study are linked to negative stereotypes of unveiled Muslim women as being ‘not religious’, ‘too Westernized’, ‘not respectful’, and ‘promiscuous’.
The literature review suggests that minority Muslim communities adopt ultra-conservative values in the West because of their social exclusion from the broader Western society. In addition, Imtoual and Hussein’s study explains that Muslim parents attempt to match their sons with girls from the ‘home country’ because “Second-generation daughters are often considered inadequate…they are often thought of as too ‘Westernized’” (Imtoual and Hussein, 2009, p.28). Considering this, all of the participants in this study indicated that Western ideals of femininity and dominant images in mainstream Western media did not influence their identities, nor did they feel a sense of social pressure to conform to these ideals. Therefore, the marginalization experienced by unveiled Muslim women by elder veiled Muslim women in the community can be concluded to be based on false assumptions.

On the other hand, 2 of the participants stated that they choose not veil in order to be able to integrate into Western society. Specifically, to be able to find a job and assimilate better within the hegemonic culture. Participant B told an interesting story about her experiences job hunting in Windsor after she obtained a dental hygiene diploma from St. Clair College. To elaborate, she says “I sent my resume to a dentist office that was hiring, and the manager called me, she asked what high school I went to - and when told that I went to a high school with a predominantly Arab student body - she knew I was Muslim and I said ‘I hope you don’t wear the scarf because my patients don't really like that’”. Thus, participant B states that she does not veil for reasons like this, not only because she embodies modesty differently, but because she is aware that Western views of Islam and veiling are quite negative. Moreover, giving women like participant B a voice to speak about her experiences allows for a better understanding of her intersectional identity as an unveiled Muslim woman living in the West. Her experiences are complex and
rooted in many systems of oppression. However, studies such as this will allow other feminists and scholars to understand these identities in hopes of creating opportunities for social change.

Interestingly, aside from participant B, many participants felt a sense of social exclusion from the Muslim community, but not from Western culture and society. In addition, when asked “Can you explain if being a part of the Windsor Muslim community has helped you to establish your identity in Windsor?” all of the participants answered “No”. Participant D said “I am not reached out to by veiled Muslim women to be a part of their social groups…I went to the mosque from a young age and veiled women made me feel uncomfortable, I felt centred out, and there were indirect hints thrown at me about the veil, and about girls who show too much skin”. Thus, this form of social exclusion, even though it is done indirectly, caused participant D to feel uncomfortable and out of place in an institution where all faiths are supposed to be welcomed. In addition, participant D expressed the biggest stressor of being an unveiled Muslim woman is being told that she will not find a husband unless she wears the veil. To explain, she is told “…if a guy were to choose between a veiled and unveiled woman he's going to choose the girl that covers” and she has been told “No man wants you, they want you now, but not for the future to get married to” (Participant 2). That is to say, unveiled Muslim women are going against normative Islamic femininity and are being shamed by the community. However, the dialogue suggests that it is not problematic if Muslim men seek sexual relations and engage in premarital sex. Furthermore, proving that even though Islamic teachings prescribe modesty to both men and women, it is not enforced the same among the genders. It is evident that Muslim women, especially unveiled Muslim women, are policed heavily because they do not veil, and due to a fear that they will engage in behaviours that will shame the family reputation and honour.
Through a feminist perspective, these stereotypes limit women’s mobility, agency, and sense of identity. However, by giving women a platform to speak their truth, and discuss their experiences of marginalization within the Muslim community, this study is producing knowledge about dominant hierarchies of power, and the ways in which they limit women in society. The participants expressed feelings of exclusion and isolation among the Muslim community because they embodied modesty differently. Similar to the findings in Zimmerman’s study, it is found that dominant Islamic definitions of femininity and modesty outcasts unveiled Muslim women, resulting in their having to prove their ‘Muslimness’ to Muslims and non-Muslims. As illustrated by participant D, “I have to go out of my way to say, yes I’m Muslim… I don’t drink, I pray, I fast. Because when they see a veiled woman, it is assumed that she prays, fasts, is a virgin and does everything good. No one questions her, but I have to prove myself because I am automatically seen as rebellious” (Participant 3). Moreover, participant D also states that because of her unveiled identity, others think that she is brainwashed, doesn't know her culture or religion.

Finally, through creating this dialogue and form of self-reflection, the participants become creators of knowledge. This knowledge is used in this particular study, however, what other feminist scholars do with this knowledge may determine if there are social changes towards equality for these women or not. Through the characters and biographies provided by the women in this study, their personal accounts legitimize the purpose of the research question posed for this study and by evaluating their sense of marginalization within the Muslim community. Thus, as mentioned by Patricia Hill Collins, reaching truth through dialogue and consensus building is
exactly what this research study aims to establish. The intersectional experiences of the women in this study pose a complex reality of their oppressed positions within the Muslim community.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, this qualitative research study indicates a sense of social exclusion and isolation of unveiled Muslim women by the broader minority Muslim community of Windsor, Ontario. Unveiled Muslim women embody modesty differently - however, it is assumed by the Muslim community that they are openly rejecting Islam’s duty to veil and accepting Western ideals of femininity. The participants indicated a non-normative form of modesty and spiritual identity within Islam. Many of them defined modesty as not material, but through actions, behaviours, and the treatment of others. In 3 of the 5 interviews, participants expressed that the minority Muslim community in Windsor did not help them establish their identity as Muslim women. In addition, all of the participants said they were not influenced by the extreme, and sometimes objectifying images of women within the mainstream Western culture. The participants in this study identified negative experiences within the Muslim community in Windsor. Specifically due to negative stereotypes about their decisions not to veil, such as not being religious enough, not marriage material, being promiscuous, and not respectful women. The women also expressed feelings of being the ‘black sheep’, unfulfilled religious duties, being stared at, and left out of social groups and gatherings. All of which is done by other veiled Muslim women in the community. Where one participant identified this as “hijabi-bullying”, these feelings of social exclusion weigh heavily on many of the participants because they felt a sense of exclusion from their own religion and culture. This research study sheds light on the sometimes ignored experiences of unveiled Muslim women since the dominant
knowledge that is produced about Muslims usually pertains to veiled Muslim women in the
West. Some of the possible limitation of this study are the small sample number of participants,
which can be a barrier in justifying this form of social exclusion and marginalization to
generalize that all unveiled Muslim women feel this way. However, through a feminist
methodological approach, this study is an addition to the research conducted on Muslim women,
as it uses personal narratives to reveal experiences and accounts which often become
universalized with veiled Muslim women’s experiences. This research study reveals a better
understanding of what normative femininity looks like within the Muslim community, and what
this means for these women’s identities.


