

Stereotypes of Islamic Dress and Appearance-Based Discrimination in America

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Today in America, media coverage and the education system lack factual information surrounding Islam and its identifiers, resulting in physical stereotypes towards Muslims and those who appear to be Muslim. Appearance-based discrimination has become such a prevalent issue in today's society, especially because of the recent presidential election. On January 20, 2017, Donald Trump was officially inaugurated as the President of the United States, and many of his viewpoints have heavily influenced America and its citizens. In a CBS interview with John Dickerson, Trump stated "I think profiling is something that we're going to have to start thinking about as a country...we have to look at it seriously" (Phillips). Because President Trump has publicly endorsed the idea of ethnic profiling in order to diminish the threat of terrorism, those who fit the stereotype of "terrorist" have been cruelly persecuted. Furthermore, Trump has specifically directed this stereotype towards Muslims, reinforcing misconceptions about the Islamic religion. On Fox Business, Trump discussed American conflict with Islam, stating, "we're having problems with the Muslims, and we're having problems with Muslims coming into the country" (Johnson and Hauslohn). Trump's statement endorses the idea that the Islamic religion is anti-American and threatening, furthermore introducing these false thoughts into the minds of the nation. Instead of knowing the true teachings of Islam, Americans are inaccurately educated by unreliable sources, such as those in the media. However, because profiling revolves around physical appearance, discrimination does not only affect Muslims, but also those who appear to be Muslim, especially through dress.

In order to understand the extremity of this discrimination and prevent it in the future, this essay will examine why the

turban and the hijab lead to persecution and what it suggests about other discrimination in American society. Poor education surrounding the Islamic religion has led to stereotypes about its clothing, and furthermore influences discrimination against Muslims and those who appear to be Muslim. This lack of religious education causes society to view Arab and Islamic dress as a threat because it defies the norms of Western culture, leading to misunderstandings about Muslims and those of Middle Eastern descent. Consequently, because poor education influences prejudice against physical qualities, it aids in explaining further appearance-based discrimination in America today, such as racism.

The Islamic Religion in American Society

The controversial history of Muslims in the United States has contributed to the poor education and Islamic stereotypes throughout society. On September 11, 2001, the Twin Towers in New York City fell under attack as two hijacked airplanes flew into their structures. This devastating event was one of terrorism and the perpetrators were associated with Islamic terrorist groups. Following the attacks, Muslims were immediately stereotyped as violent and threatening, resulting in discrimination. However, even years after 9/11, these stereotypes remained a part of American culture and are still present today. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life conducted surveys and found that “the percentage of survey participants claiming an ‘unfavorable’ view of ‘Muslims’ rose from 29% in 2002 to 35% in 2007” (Cashin 128). Furthermore, in 2009, a “Pew Forum survey showed that 58% of participants believed that Muslims are subject to “a lot of discrimination” (Cashin 128) compared to other religions. These statistics show that the negative viewpoints surrounding Islam are ongoing issues in American society and have survived for years following the attacks. Such issues still remain prominent today and helped give rise to the term Islamophobia, or “intense dislike or fear of Islam, esp. as a political force; hostility or prejudice towards Muslims” (“Islamophobia”). Consequently, because Islam holds a negative connotation in American society, stereotyped indicators of this

religion also fall susceptible to these viewpoints.

History of the Turban and Hijab

The turban and the hijab act as indicators for religious identification because they are often associated with Islam and its teachings. The hijab is a headpiece worn by Muslim women, while the turban is a common headpiece for males in Arab culture. However, in America, the turban is often stereotyped as solely an Islamic symbol. As a result, other religious groups and cultures have been misidentified and persecuted by American society because of similar dress.

In the Islamic religion, women are encouraged and sometimes mandated to wear the hijab, making it a prominent piece for religious identity. Because some women in Islamic societies “wear the *hijab* out of conviction, and not simply out of tradition” many Western cultures, including America, view “the *hijab* as a symbol of women’s oppression” (Galadari 116). However, Muslim women in America choose to wear their hijab to cover their bodies and show modesty (Galadari 115). In contrast, the turban is not of Muslim descent, but its Islamic common name “*kayife*” formed in “the Iraqi city of al-Kufa during the rise of Islam” (Malak 36). In fact, it was originally worn in Arabic nations to represent a fishing net, in hopes for a successful catch. Therefore, while Americans stereotype the turban as being a religious symbol for Islam, and even though the majority of Arabs are Muslim, they are not the same (Malak 36). Consequently, the true meaning behind the turban and the hijab are often unknown to many Americans due to the tendency for Western culture to overgeneralize Middle Eastern countries. Although the pieces have caused conflict in America for numerous years, there is a difference in the discriminatory acts before and after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. Nevertheless, in both time periods, discrimination has been based on physical dress because the turban and hijab represent a foreign image of Middle Eastern culture.

Discrimination Before 9/11

Discrimination towards those who wear hijabs and turbans

has been a prominent issue in America for numerous years, even before September 11, 2001. These articles of clothing have led to persecution because the concept of stereotyping has always been a seemingly inevitable part of society. In their article, Michelle Duguid and Melissa Thomas-Hunt examine a correlation between social norms and stereotyping by conducting six studies among different populations of people. One group of subjects were exposed to low prevalence messages (stereotyping is frequent in society), while another group of subjects were exposed to high prevalence messages (stereotyping is infrequent in society). Overall, the studies showed that those exposed to low prevalence messages rated other groups less stereotypically, proving the impact society has on both thoughts and action. In addition, it showed that many participants chose to follow the “norm” set for them, suggesting that many people in society are influenced by what their peers believe (347). The concept of “unconscious stereotyping” is also addressed as a result of “natural inclinations” (343), proposing that people may not even be aware that they are stereotyping because categorizing “the different” is an immediate response driven by human nature. This snap judgment consequently affects Muslims because their dress is evidently different from American culture.

In addition, it also extends to those who appear to be Muslim, such as Sikh men who wear turbans as a religious article. One victim is Vishavjit Singh, a Sikh man who wrote an article on his personal experiences of oppression in the United States as a result of his turban. Singh stated, that before 9/11, he was addressed as a “‘genie,’ ‘clown,’ and raghead’” (Singh) which was also accompanied with laughter at his appearance. The discrimination Singh experienced is an example of Orientalism, or “the representation of the Orient (esp. the Middle East) in Western academic writing, art, or literature; *spec.* this representation perceived as stereotyped or exoticizing and therefore embodying a colonialistic attitude” (“Orientalism”). Before 9/11, American society put those who express their religion through Middle Eastern dress in an “other” category, easily causing further stereotypes to be made based on orientalist thoughts. This general category extends to the idea that Islam represents the

regression to an ancestral time, “which suggests not only the threat of a return to the Middle ages but the destruction of what is regularly referred to as the democratic order in the western world” (qtd. in Altwaiji 317). This orientalist idea conveys that before 9/11, Muslims or those who appeared to be Muslim, were simply seen as different to Western culture and were tied to the chaotic nature of the Dark Ages and its history.

Discrimination After 9/11

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the turban and the hijab became stereotyped identifiers surrounding terrorism and violence. In fact, “some critics suggest that the year 2001 is a ‘year zero’ or a ‘transformative moment’ in the Arab-American relationship” (Altwaiji 313) where Americans began to see Arabs as violent instead of just different. For example, Vishavjit Singh states that after the 9/11 attacks, insults changed from “genie, clown and raghead” to terms like “‘Osama,’ even after bin Laden was killed” (Singh). Consequently, when people see the turban in America now, they link it to Middle Eastern conflict and terrorism against the United States. Similarly, the hijab has affected those who choose to wear it as a result of the negative connotation it holds in American society. An article by Ashraf Zahedi reveals the post 9/11 effects of the hijab through qualitative interviews with Muslim women as they explain their shaped religious identities and discriminatory experiences associated with terrorism, including illegal searches at airport security (190). These discriminatory acts relate back to the classic orientalist idea of “us” and “them,” this time shifting to “us” and “the terrorists.” As a result, the turban and the hijab are immediately generalized with the Islamic religion which is furthermore stereotyped as a religion of violence and terrorism.

Poor Education and Its Effects

The false stereotypes, misunderstandings, and lack of awareness surrounding the Islamic religion are a result of flaws within America’s education system. It is important for schools to teach factual information about Islam in order to diminish discrimination based on misconstrued opinion. However, most

curriculums fail to educate students about Islam, in fact, “the vast majority of American students can graduate from high school or college without taking a course in religion or discussing religious ideas” (Moore 143). Even when courses do address Islam, it is often “characterized by numerous stereotypes, distortions, omissions and textbook inaccuracies” (Moore 140). Because schools do not inform students about the Islamic religion through accurate teachings, “Americans receive their information from the popular media,” which also “often misrepresents Islamic beliefs and practices, and perpetuates myths, distortions and misconceptions” (Moore 143).

In addition, the media is a primary source for all news concerning political controversies and viewpoints. Since the recent presidential election, the media has focused the nation’s attention on Muslims through discriminatory remarks, creating false stereotypes and influencing Islamophobia. President Trump has enforced this fear by voicing his opinions through the media and his own work. For example, Trump generalized all Muslim people as scornful through a CNN interview, stating “I think Islam hates us. We have to get to the bottom of it.... There is an unbelievable hatred of us – anybody” (“CAIR, Muslim Leaders to Demand that Donald Trump Apologize for ‘Islam Hates Us’ Claim”). This statement ignores the true beliefs and teachings of Islam and categorizes the religion as anti-American, influencing fear towards Muslims and those who appear to be Muslim. Trump has also created negative perspectives surrounding Islam through his executive order which bans travelers “from six Muslim nations as long [as] the person has no ‘bona fide relationship with a person or entity in the United States’” (Obeidallah). Because a bona fide relationship only qualifies parents and children, Trump’s order does not only affect Muslims from other countries, but within the United States as well. Evidently, the President has a high influence on the nation and banning travelers from Muslim countries leads to Islamophobia throughout America. This influence can be seen through a “CBS News’ South Carolina primary exit poll” which found that “75 percent of Trump voters supported a total ban on Muslims entering the country” (Obeidallah). Additionally, a “2016 Pew poll

found that 64 percent of Trump supporters believe American Muslims should have less constitutional rights and be subject to more scrutiny" (Obeidallah) simply because of their faith. Clearly, because Americans educate themselves about the Islamic religion through biased media sources and not factual information, Muslims are viewed with negative connotations.

However, Islam should not be a symbol for terrorism because many of its teachings contradict violence in general. In fact, the Qur'an and Islamic teachings emphasize peace, patience and whole heartedness (Ul Hassan 220). Because American society is so uneducated about this religion, many do not know that "the greatest figures in Islamic history were known for their forbearance and self-restraint than for their fierceness" and that "Islam prefers forgiveness over revenge" (Ul Hassan 220). According to the Qur'an, Muslims are taught to "never hurt anyone by tongue, by gun, or by hand. Not to lie, steal, and harm is true Islam" (Ul Hassan 221). Evidently, while the American society falsely portrays Islam as violent, it is actually a religion of peace.

Misunderstandings of the Turban and Sikhs

One frequent example of poor education surrounding Islamic culture is the misidentification of Sikh men as being Muslim because of the turban. In Sikhism, one of the articles of faith is to not cut one's hair, therefore, "for Sikh men, the uncut *kes* [hair] is tied in a *joora* (a topknot) and covered with a turban" (Ahluwalia and Pellettiere 304). However, the "negative stereotyping of Arab and Muslims" has become so overgeneralized "that Sikhs become targets because of the lack of cultural competence by those unfamiliar with Sikhs and their culture" (Ahluwalia and Pellettiere 303). Consequently, this "mistaken association of Sikh cultural implements with terrorism" has led to devastating effects including "verbal and physical attacks against Sikhs, and even murder" (Ahluwalia and Pellettiere 304). In a qualitative interview study, five Sikh men were questioned on their personal experiences in America after 9/11, and all participants stated that "they are mistaken for being Muslim, Arab, or a person of Middle Eastern descent" (Ahluwalia and Pellet-

tiere 308). In addition, many “indicated that people assumed that they were anti-American” even though “they all identified themselves as proud Americans and valuable citizens of American society” (Ahluwalia and Pellettiere 308). The turban therefore represents the poor education surrounding religion and its practices because not only are Sikh men wrongly accused of being a religion or culture they are not, but this misidentification has also led them to be stereotyped as terrorists.

Misconceptions of the Hijab

Similarly to the turban, the hijab also falls susceptible to misunderstandings and discrimination, often a result of the media. For example, “in the American media, images of Muslim women who wear the hijab are often paired with images of terrorism and oppression” (Ali, et al. 147). The hijab is worn to show respect for religion and modesty, and does not symbolize terrorism and oppression. In fact, research “suggests that women with higher social status are choosing to wear the hijab as a symbol of their religious commitment” (Ali, et al. 154). This relates to another misconception as a result of poor education, the belief that the hijab is only worn by “less educated, poor women who are not empowered” (Ali, et al. 147). However, those who are knowledgeable about Islam and its beliefs, might understand why “there is quite a bit of research to suggest that Muslim women view wearing the hijab as a symbol of modernity and as an empowered choice for highly educated women” (Ali, et al. 147). Unfortunately, Muslim women are often assaulted by an uneducated American society for wearing their hijab, including participants from one study who “reported that assailants often invoked stereotypes about the association between the hijab as the symbol of Muslim identity and terrorism as the reasons for these attacks” (Ali, et al. 148). Evidently, the hijab is wrongly tied to stereotypes of oppression and violence, which serves as another example of the poor education in America.

Poor Education and Snap Judgements

In modern America, Islamic dress is immediately categorized as a threat because it seemingly defies Western cultural

norms. This categorization of Muslim clothing is often due to a general naiveté concerning Eastern culture within American populations. Before 9/11, this resulted in orientalism, but after 9/11 possible explanations for current discrimination are associated with “neo-Orientalism” (Altwaiji 317). While this idea suggests that terrorism has become “the most available term for labeling this group of people [Arab Americans]” (Altwaiji 314) because their differences are wrongly tied to the 9/11 attacks, it also reveals how American society stereotypes the “unknown.” As a result, because Americans see Islam as being unusual and are not educated about the religion, Muslims and those who appear to be Muslim are stereotyped as supporters of terrorist attacks. This “terrorist” propagation has become a label for “all Arab Muslims, if not all Arabs including the Christian Arabs” (Altwaiji 314). Therefore, Arabs and Muslims are generalized as the same and further stereotyped as being non-American, resulting in discrimination towards those who wear turbans. In addition, while many Americans have seen a turban, they are not knowledgeable of “the exact nature and history of a real turban or its true cultural signification for a particular group” (Cass 191). Society only knows “of the turban in the *imagined* worlds of Oriental Otherness” (Cass 191). As a result, perceptions of the turban surrounding terrorism do not “connote something actual or real (e.g., is it Indian, North African, Persian, Turkish?);” rather, these judgements contribute to “a Western conceptualization of the ‘East’” (Cass 191). Discrimination towards turbans and those who wear them occurs because of an immediate response for Americans to generalize Arabs and Muslims as a possible threat to the United States. Similarly, the hijab and its wearers have also faced discrimination because of the same neo-Orientalist reasoning. When a Muslim woman is “covered by the veil, [it] serves as context for Otherization” (Zahedi 187) because the hijab is immediately associated with Islam, leading to society categorizing it as a symbol of terrorism. This negative perception has “overshadowed the racial, ethnic, national and cultural diversity of Muslim women” and “their entire existence has been reduced to their public attire” (Zahedi 192).

The Extension of Poor Education to Racial Profiling

Poor education has led to stereotypes based on physical characteristics and therefore suggests further appearance-based discrimination surrounding Arab culture in America today. While even though the U.S census classifies Arab Americans as Caucasian (Tamer 108), their "'race' has been socially constructed as equivalent to 'terrorist' rather than being associated with the positive attributes often coupled with the social constructiveness of whiteness" (Tamer 116). Therefore, skin color serves as another possible attribute that signals discrimination against Islamic and Arabic communities.

In American society, the effects of having an Arab race are compared to the effects of being African American; consequently, "Arab Americans have been 'socially constructed as black' with the negative legal connotations historically attributed to that designation" (qtd. in Tamer 115). For example, "while black people fear 'DWB' or 'driving while black' Arab Americans fear 'FWA' or 'flying while Arab'" (Tamer 117). One participant in a qualitative interview study is a "naturalized citizen who immigrated from England—but is of Sudanese parentage" and "encountered racial profiling while traveling" (Jadallah and el-Khoury 227) for his job. Additionally, because "he was 'inspected' every time he flew or even transited through American airports" (Jadallah and el-Khoury 227), he stated, "'my company stopped flying me. This ruined my career'" (qtd. In Jadallah and el-Khoury 227).

Like the turban and the hijab, the discrimination against race extends beyond airport security and affects Muslims and those who appear to be Muslim every day. For example, "an Iraqi professor claimed he was denied tenure because of his 'Arabian race' even though he was officially classified as white" (Tamer 108). The United States government documented him as white, yet his physical appearance has controlled how others perceive and treat him. Because Islamic dress has been a large factor contributing to the persecution of Muslims and those who appear to be Muslim, the effects of this dress suggest that discriminatory acts due to physical characteristics also occur in America, and race is evidently another contributor.

Counter

Even though profiling based on appearance has led to the discrimination and conviction of many peaceful and innocent American citizens, some believe that it is necessary in order to improve national security. Following the 9/11 attacks, the government in particular put this thought into action. The Department of Justice set up guidelines for profiling and while even though they state that “racial profiling is ‘wrong’ and ‘stereotyping certain races as having greater propensity to commit crimes is absolutely prohibited’” they also argued that “‘efforts to defend and safeguard against threat to the national security or integrity of the Nation’s borders’ are exempt from racial profiling prohibitions” (Ryder and Turksen 313). Thus, “while the government declares that racial profiling is wrong and immoral, in the same breath it asserts that the war on terror justifies the use of race and ethnicity” (Ryder and Turksen 313) resulting in others following this same set of beliefs. However, there has not been much research to prove that this profiling is necessarily effective; rather members of the American media have voiced their potentially harmful opinions through biased articles. One article argues that “there is a logic to ethnic profiling, more properly designated as anti-terrorism profiling” and expresses that profiling in airports is “a necessary evil, a fundamental security precaution that airline passengers and crews really deserve” (Ascherman and Sprinzak). The article even states that it is Muslims who need to change, arguing that “if the Muslim and Arab community honestly and forcefully comes out against all forms of extremism and terrorism it may not be long before men and women of Middle Eastern descent are not stopped at airports and other public places” (Ascherman and Sprinzak). These claims suggest that the turban, the hijab and race may all be used as indicators for a possible threat to the nation and should immediately bring American society to question what motives lay beyond these characteristics of physical appearance. However, it is more reasonable and safe to not profile based on “ethnicity, national origin and religion” because it may “lead law-enforcement agents to miss a range of potential terrorists who do not fit the respective profile” (Ryder

and Turksen 314). Profiling can harm national security, making physical characteristics “inaccurate indicators because the initial premise on which they are based, namely, that Muslims, Arabs or persons of Middle Eastern appearance are particularly likely to be involved in terrorist activities, is highly doubtful” (Ryder and Turksen 314). The profiling of the turban, the hijab and Arabic race has led many American citizens to be stereotyped, misidentified, and wrongly discriminated against. In addition, while many believe that it is necessary in order to protect against terrorism, it brings focus away from other travelers who might actually be threatening. Consequently, not only does this profiling have negative effects on Muslims and those who appear to be Muslim, it can even damage America’s national security.

Solution

Stereotypes surrounding Islamic dress evidently lead to prominent issues in modern America because they result in profiling and explain further appearance-based discrimination. Such issues are especially relevant in today’s society as a consequence of the recent presidential election, which has influenced America’s politics and viewpoints heavily. While many support the profiling that has been recently endorsed, it is often due to lack of knowledge and seldom leads to success. In order to understand the impact of discrimination, it is important to review why it happens and what can be done to create an accepting future. The lack of factual information regarding Islam and its dress in the education system and media coverage result in stereotypes and discrimination because of avoidable misconceptions. In addition, the ignorance American society has towards understanding Islam and Middle Eastern culture has caused Islamic dress to be immediately labeled as threatening because of its differences to Western norms. Furthermore, since poor education leads to discrimination based on physical characteristics, it extends to racism towards Arabs and those of Middle Eastern descent.

In order to exterminate the negative connotations surrounding Islam and its dress, Americans must be educated about this

religion and its identifiers. Adequate education can be achieved in numerous ways, collectively and individually. Nationally, secondary schools should establish a religions course which includes factual information regarding Islamic and other religious teachings as a requirement for high school graduation. If this was enforced, society would be well informed about the true meaning behind Islam and sources of religious knowledge would not be based on opinionated media coverage. Furthermore, an increase in religious education throughout society may cause media sources to display accurate information in order to maintain credibility with their audiences. In addition, individuals could easily educate themselves by reading the Qur'an itself, communicating with practicing Muslims or attending ceremonies in Mosques or Islamic communities. Not only will this lead Muslims and those who appear as Muslim to not be seen as a "threatening other," it may also result in a decline of discriminatory acts based on appearance. While it is difficult to shape the mindsets of an entire nation, more education surrounding the Islamic religion might shift American society from profiling and fear to acceptance and unity.

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