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Re/claiming our identities : thinking through Islamophobia, the veil, and "the Muslim woman" in Canadian cultural productions

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RE/CLAIMING OUR IDENTITIES:
THINKING THROUGH ISLAMOPHOBIA, THE VEIL, AND "THE MUSLIM WOMAN"
IN
CANADIAN CULTURAL PRODUCTIONS

by

Ameera Basmadji, BA, McMaster University, 2005

A Major Research Paper
presented to Ryerson University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in the Program of
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Master of Arts
Immigration and Settlement Studies
Ryerson University

ABSTRACT

Western, Islamophobic, and Islamic discourses have resulted in a contested terrain of representations through which the lives of Muslims have been debated and consumed. Post 9/11, Muslims assumed a hyper visibility evident in their being stigmatized in the West as terrorists, and as threats to national security, democratic values, and time-honoured cultural practices in Western societies. As such, the presence of Muslim communities in Western nations is raising questions about national identity and belonging, particularly in the Canadian context. An important concern is to identify and interrogate the points of conflict and tension between Muslims and non-Muslim Canadians, particularly in regard to issues of national identity and citizenship. By focusing specifically on recent cultural productions, including a film, a television sitcom, and a novel by female Muslim Canadians, the analysis will demonstrate the extent to which the voices of Muslim women intervene into dominant Western discourses about Islam and popular representations of Muslims in the West. Special attention will be given to the symbolism of the veil to show how it has become the central marker of “difference” and one of the main “problems” affecting Western perception of Muslim immigrants and these communities’ integration and assimilation into Canadian and Western societies.

Key Words: Islamophobia, the veil, “the Muslim woman,” multiculturalism

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For my mother and father

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Introduction

The 2001 census stated that there were roughly 579,600 Muslims in Canada, comprising approximately 2 percent of Canada's population (Rahnema, 2006, p. 24). Five years later, in 2006, census data estimated the Muslim population as numbering around 783,000, which is 2.5 percent of Canada's population, a significant jump from previous years (Jedwab, 2005). These numbers include Muslims of various nationalities and ethnicities whose language and cultural differences underscore the heterogeneity of Muslim Canadians. Immigration documents also reveal that the size of Muslim communities has been growing steadily. Muslim communities in Canada are comprised of newcomers in Canada from countries such as Egypt, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Pakistan, and Syria, as well as Canadian-born children of recent immigrants from these communities. Their numbers have been swelled by larger groups of refugees escaping wars in their home countries, particularly Iraq and Sudan. For these varied groups, Canada has become a site of refuge and presents an opportunity for immigrants to pursue a higher standard of living. The majority of Canadian Muslims are settled in Ontario, in cities such as Toronto, Mississauga, Ottawa, and Waterloo. Substantial numbers of Muslims are also residing in cities such as Montreal, Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, Winnipeg, and Halifax (Statistics Canada, 2001). Prior to 1967, there was a small sporadic inflow of Muslims to Canada. The first recorded presence of Muslims in Canada was in 1871. Muslims began to establish a permanent presence on the Canadian landscape in 1938 when the first Canadian mosque was constructed in Edmonton (Hamdani, 1996). After the Second World War, more immigrants from Muslim countries began arriving in Canada. However, the majority of immigrants did not begin moving to Canada until 1967, after Canada's implementation of an immigration policy that emphasizes individuals' skills and merit as opposed to race and

ethnicity. At the core of the revision to the immigration policy was the implementation of the points system. These regulations “instituted a nondiscriminatory but selective immigrant intake system, based on a points scheme that favours educational attainment, occupational skills and financial resources” (Kruger, 2004, p.74).

With the introduction of the points system, it seemed as if diverse peoples of Muslim background and faith would have as good a chance as any other group in moving to and settling in Canada as long as they met the requirements of the points system. However, Muslim communities’ migration to and settlement in Canada has encountered many obstacles. While the integration of Muslim immigrants into mainstream society in Canada and other Western nations did not always occur smoothly, it was in the aftermath of September 11, 2001 (9/11) events that diasporic Muslims assumed a hyper-visibility evident in their being stigmatized in the West as terrorists and a threat to national security, democratic values, and time-honoured cultural practices in North American and Western European societies. As such, more than ever since 9/11, the presence of Muslim communities in Western nations is raising questions about national identity and belonging and, particularly in the Canadian context, the extent to which multiculturalism should/could incorporate and accommodate cultural differences. These pressing questions will be fully articulated and responded to in this Major Research Paper. A main concern of this research paper is to identify and interrogate the points of conflict and tension between Muslims and non-Muslim Canadians, particularly in regard to issues of national identity and social citizenship. By focusing specifically on recent cultural productions, including a film, a television sitcom, and a novel by female Muslim Canadians, the analysis will demonstrate the extent to which the voices of Muslim women intervene into dominant Western and Canadian discourses about Islam and popular representations of Muslims in the West.

Special attention will be given to the symbolism of the veil to show how it has become the central marker of “difference” and one of the main “problems” affecting Western perception of Muslim immigrants and these communities’ integration and assimilation into Canadian and Western societies.

In setting the stage for a discussion of discourses of Islam and the role of the veil, it is necessary to chart the history of Muslim immigration into Canada and to link that history to the larger one of Islamophobia and Orientalist discourse. This will allow us to see how contemporary (i.e. post 9/11) responses to Islam and the Muslim diaspora are rooted in essentialist and racist constructs that gained legitimacy under Western colonialist and imperialist contact with the so-called East. As Kofi Annan, then UN Secretary General, pointed out in 2004 at the UN Seminar on “Confronting Islamophobia,” which was convened specifically in response to discriminatory policies and actions against Muslims in the West as well as the anti-Muslim rhetoric of the “War on Terror” post 9/11, the term “Islamophobia” is of fairly recent coinage (of the late 1980s/early 1990s) and points to the way in which Islam has been

distorted and taken out of context, with particular acts or practices being taken to represent or to symbolize a rich and complex faith. Some claim that Islam is incompatible with democracy, or irrevocably hostile to modernity and the rights of women...disparaging remarks about Muslims are allowed to pass without censure, with the result that prejudice acquires a veneer of acceptability...Any strategy to combat Islamophobia must depend heavily on education...so that myths and lies can be seen for what they are. (United Nations, 2004)

Jasmine Zine defines Islamophobia as a “fear or hatred of Islam and its adherents that translates into individual, ideological, and systemic forms of oppression and discrimination” (Zine, 2006, p.239). Such discrimination and oppressive acts are rooted in and justified by essentialist notions/beliefs that represent “Islam” and the “East” in one-dimensional terms: backward, uncivilized, outside the trajectory of modernity, oppressive to women, hostile to the West,

incompatible with Western democratic values, and most recently, as synonymous with terrorism. These ideas have gained currency throughout history and are reproduced in contemporary responses to and representations of Muslims.

The Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), the Gulf War (1990-1991) as well as the first bombing of the World Trade Centre in 1993 fuelled Islamophobic discourses and served to legitimize in both political and cultural spheres the idea that Islam is incompatible with the West. Samuel Huntington's The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order (1996) was an integral text in promoting the notions of incompatibility and active opposition, as the word "clash" in the title indicates. Pointing to the influence of works such as Huntington's, Arat-Koc argues:

It is interesting to observe how rapidly the notion of civilizational clash became the dominant framework in which political leaders and the media interpreted developments leading up to and following 11 September 2001. Columnists in mainstream media made constant references to how "they" – used in a very slippery way to refer sometimes to the terrorists and sometimes to the culture to which they belonged – hated "our" freedoms, democracy, human rights, and women's rights. (Arat-Koc, 2006, p. 228-229)

Arat-Koc continues, "As the 'clash of civilizations' thesis began to be employed daily to define 'us' and 'them,' the definition of 'Canada' and Canadian identity rapidly evolved into a transnational one emphasizing Canada's and its citizens' place in the 'Western civilization'" (229).

But it must also be emphasized that Islamophobic discourses did not begin with Huntington and pre-dated the events of the 1980s and 1990s, as Edward Said points out in his discussion in Orientalism (1979). A classic text in elucidating the origins of the nature of the relationship between "East" and "West," Said offers a critique of the West's historical, cultural, and political perceptions of the East, and places such perceptions within a context of Western colonial domination of the East. Speaking of the Orient, which also includes Islamic cultures of

the East, Said argues that the representation of such cultures as backward and uncivilized is “not an inert fact of nature,” but a production of the colonial Western gaze (Said, 1979, p.4). Said, referencing Vico, writes that

men make their own history, that what they can know is what they have made, and extend it to geography: as both geographical and cultural entities – to say nothing of historical entities – such locales, regions, geographical sectors as “Orient”...are man-made. Therefore as much as the West itself, the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West. (5)

Western/Europeans justified their invasion of the East in the name of civilizing Eastern cultures, and part of this civilizing mission was to rescue and liberate Muslim women from the patriarchy and religious and culturally sanctioned gendered oppression of Islam. These historical echoes are evident in contemporary Islamophobic discourse, for example in Laura Bush’s comment below, which justified the war in Afghanistan in terms of freeing Afghani women. Bush said, “Because of our recent military gains in much of Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned in their homes. They can listen to music and teach their daughters without fear of punishment. The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women” (Abu-Lughod, 2002, p.784). Laura Bush was echoing CNN and dominant media coverage in an attempt to show evidence of the threat Islam poses to and in the West.

Hyper-visibility makes it difficult for communities to blend and become part of the political and social landscape. Islamophobic discourse and the emphasis on the Muslim veil are intricately intertwined with questions about the place of Muslim communities in Western nations and whether such communities can “belong” and be made to feel “at home” in host countries such as Canada. Concerns about the immigration and settlement of Muslim communities in Canada have to engage with how communities are formed and how affiliations are forged between Muslims and non-Muslims. The negotiation of identity at the level of the nation among

Muslim Canadians is similar to the negotiation taking place in other immigrant communities, especially visible minority communities. For example, race is often a factor that prevents members of such communities from participating in the dominantly constructed Canadian identity, i.e. White, Christian/Secular and/or European. But although the majority of Muslims originate from non-white spaces, it is not always easy to visually determine who is Muslim and who is not, and so it becomes difficult for Islamophobic discourse to easily identify the “enemy” within “our” midst. Islamophobia has “solved” the problem of Muslim in/visibility by making a problematic conflation between Islamic identity and Arab ethnicity. To be Arab is to be Muslim and to be Muslim is to be Arab. Another way in which Islamophobia has rendered Islam visible in the West is to concentrate on the veil and its place as a symbol of Muslim women’s oppression. Therefore, one of the ways in which Muslim communities become hyper-visible is through women, and particularly women wearing the veil. One could argue that the veil has become metonymic of all that is “wrong” and unassimilable about Muslim communities in the West. As such, in this Major Research Paper, it is important to analyze responses to the Muslim veil in order to understand current manifestations of Islamophobia.

At the core of the problem of national belonging that Muslim communities encounter when they migrate and settle in Canada is the prevailing sense that they are the terrorist/enemies within our midst, and therefore cannot fully belong to the citizenry. This raises the question of whether Islam and the West will ever be compatible, and whether immigrants have to forfeit their own cultures to belong and to become Canadian. As well, there is the question: What is the responsibility that Muslim citizens have to the nation? One must ask whether the nomenclature “Muslim-Canadian” signifies the possibility of finding a harmonious balance between being Muslim and being Canadian or if the hyphenation signals a still unbridgeable gap between the

two identities. Even though Canada's Multicultural Act declares everyone to be equal regardless of race and/or ethnicity, Muslim immigrants are still marginalized within Canadian society.

Canada's Multiculturalism Act recognizes

the freedom of all members of Canadian society to preserve, enhance, and share their cultural heritage while promoting the full and equitable participation of individuals and communities of all origins in...all aspects of Canadian society. It seeks to ensure that all individuals receive equal treatment and equal protection under the law, while respecting and valuing their diversity. (Wayland, 1997, p.49)

However, according to Saeed Rahnema, "despite legal and institutional efforts, and the attention that was given to 'race relations' as a priority, multiculturalism has, in practice, failed to encounter racism in Canada" (Rahnema, 2006, p.29). Rahnema continues by pointing out that "the prevailing discriminatory attitudes and practices against Muslims exemplified, among other ways, in the employment and social exclusions...continue to be a source of grievance and anger among a section of the Muslim population in Canada" (35).

Multiculturalism in Canada has been critiqued by several scholars, including Himani Bannerji. In The Dark Side of the Nation (2000), Bannerji discusses "the paradox of diversity" and argues that

The concept of diversity simultaneously allows for an emptying out of actual social relations and suggests concreteness of cultural description, and through this process obscures any understanding of difference as a construction of power. Thus there is a construction of a collective cultural essence and a conflation of this, of what we are culturally supposed to be, and what we are ascribed with, in the context of social organization of inequality. (Bannerji, 2000, p.36)

Bannerji argues that in popular understanding and practice of multiculturalism, some immigrant groups become known through certain cultural identifiers that supposedly define them. It is these cultural markers that simultaneously allow for the superficial celebration of "cultural differences" and the glossing over of real political inequities members of these communities face. Arat-Koc also critiques multiculturalism when she states how Canada's multicultural

society ignores certain cultural practices that may exclude or oppress members of the community. She states that “celebrating, or at least uncritically accepting any practice, but not asking questions regarding the emergence or re-adoption of that practice, would politically mean that nothing would be done to address the problems that may lie at the root of such a practice” (Arat-Koc, 1999, p.176). Arat-Koc explains that we need to reject the simple characterizations of cultures, for example avoiding Orientalist perspectives that define Islam as traditional, backward, and oppressive towards women. Such practices of cultural reductionism only prevent us from addressing racism, which is “one of the major determinants unfavourably shaping the status and conditions of certain groups of immigrant or minority women in Canada” (176). As such, an effective anti-Orientalist approach, which is adopted in this research paper, is one that focuses less on “universal and mythical characteristics attributed to an ethnocultural ‘background,’ and more on the specific material, socioeconomic, and legal conditions that immigrants may face in the countries of settlement” (176).

The culturalist approach towards Islam has allowed the West to stigmatize Muslim communities, and to use such stigmatizing to justify the limits imposed on their integration into mainstream Canadian society and simultaneously heighten the level of racism these communities face. Sherene Razack addresses this issue through referencing Unni Wikan, and, although they focus on Norway, their observations ring true in the Canadian context. Unni Wikan criticizes the Norwegian government for being “too respectful of the cultural practices of Norway’s immigrants, and of its Muslim minorities in particular” (as cited in Razack, 2004, p. 141). Out of fear of being labeled racist, the government does not condemn certain patriarchal practices within some Muslim communities that may be harmful to members of those communities, particularly women. Wikan argues that such cultural tolerance and acceptance only provides the

opportunity for Norwegians to “imagine themselves as culturally superior as well as generous in saving the other” (145). This argument supports Bannerji’s and Arat-Koc’s because it illustrates how multiculturalism, by emphasizing and fixing difference through certain cultural markers and practices, functions to position members of visible minority and besieged communities as “other” and inferior to the dominant white cultures they come into contact with.

These and other issues and questions raised above will be addressed in more detail in the chapters that follow this introduction. The next two chapters will explore Muslim immigration and settlement within the Canadian landscape and address how Islamophobic discourse has challenged Muslim communities’ belonging within Canada. Chapter 1 will discuss the construction of Canada as a white settler nation and how Muslim communities challenge this idea. In addition, the institutional racism that Muslims experience as citizens in Canada will be addressed. Chapter 2 will be devoted to the construction of the veil, and its adaptation by Muslim women. The purpose of this chapter is to illustrate how “the Muslim woman” has been constructed and how history and religious discourses challenge the belief that “the Muslim woman” is passive. This chapter will set the stage for the one on cultural productions by female Muslim-Canadians, productions which intervene into and respond to Islamophobic discourses.

Through reading selected cultural productions by female Muslim-Canadians, this paper gives space/voice to members of Muslim communities in Canada, particularly the women who are perceived to be “vulnerable” and in need of rescuing, to speak about their own concerns and represent themselves instead of being spoken about and represented by others. Chapter 3 provides a close analysis of the response to Islamophobia and the mis/representations of the veil and “oppressed” Muslim women in three such productions. The first work analyzed is the 2005 film Sabah by Ruba Nadda, a Canadian Muslim woman of Syrian-Palestinian descent. Sabah

tells the story of a Muslim woman who falls in love with a non-Muslim, white Canadian man. Sabah, the central character, must negotiate between the expectations of her family and community and her desire to make certain cultural adjustments in her romantic relationship. Cast in the mode of a love story (the film is sub-titled “a love story”), Sabah deliberately sidesteps any mention of terrorism and the portrayal of Muslims as a security and cultural threat, opting instead to portray Muslim-Canadians as “just like everyone else” in their struggles with love and family. A main concern in the analysis of Sabah will be the extent to which Nadda’s refusal to engage with Islamophobic representations of Muslims as terrorists is successful in presenting an alternative portrait of Muslim-Canadians that function as a counter-discourse to negative perceptions of Muslims. Particular attention will be paid to Nadda’s treatment of the Muslim veil in the film.

The second section of Chapter 3 will provide a reading of the television sitcom Little Mosque on the Prairie by Zarqa Nawaz, who self-describes as “a Toronto Muslim girl in Saskatchewan” (Cole, 2007). The analysis here, as in the reading of Sabah, addresses the role that humour and comedy play in defusing hostilities and breaking down barriers between “The West” and “Islam.” The show centres on a small Muslim community in Mercy, Saskatchewan, and their experience of setting down roots in prairie Canada in a post-9/11 atmosphere. The analysis will penetrate Nawaz’s claim that the aim (and outcome) of presenting her show as a social comedy instead of as a political satire is to allow “people to know and like the characters in the little town of Mercy, Saskatchewan, even the ones they don’t agree with” (Cole, 2007). One of the questions the analysis of Little Mosque will attempt to answer is whether Nawaz’s emphasis on “making fun” of her characters and their situation implodes popular expectations of

how Muslims are “supposed” to be portrayed on screen. Nawaz’s making fun of the chauvinistic dogma surrounding Muslim women will be given special consideration.

The final section of Chapter 3 will be dedicated to the novel Stealing Nasreen by Farzana Doctor, a Muslim immigrant woman of Indian extraction in Toronto. The story centres on a Muslim couple from Mumbai who recently arrived in Toronto and are wrestling with the contradictions and challenges of diasporic life. Of particular interest in the analysis of this novel will be the way in which Doctor questions sexual stereotypes within and in relation to Muslim communities.

In concluding the research paper, the argument will reiterate not only the problems faced by Muslims in migrating and settling in Western nations such as Canada and the discourses that have prevailed in making their integration into Western societies and claims to national belonging in those places more difficult, but will balance that account by summarizing some of the responses to exclusionary discourse and practices from Muslims (particularly Muslim women) and the effectiveness of those responses. Overall, in pulling the analysis in this research paper together, the conclusion will point to recent developments in Muslim-Canadian communities towards publicly articulating self-identification and self-representation and will comment on both the political and social effect of these developments.

Chapter One: Alien/Nation: Contesting the Place of Muslims in Canada

Making Canada White

As W.E.B. Du Bois (cited in Winant 1997) brilliantly argues, race operates both to assign and to deny people their identities. Hours after the horrific events of 11 September 2001, Arab and Muslim Canadians found themselves racialized in new ways. No longer considered just “exotic” subjects or bearers of irrational traditional cultures, they were now the ‘enemy.’ (Arat-Koc, 2006, p. 219)

Concerns over the influx of foreign “others” and “undesirable” immigrants deemed unsuitable and unassimilable based on dominantly constructed ideas of what Canada should be in racial, ethnic, and cultural terms, have been publicly expressed at various points throughout Canada’s history, particularly when such unwelcome groups have sought entrance into Canada in significant numbers. The basis on which certain immigrant communities have been identified as “other” lies in a notion of Canada as a white, European settler colony. This has been enforced through immigration policies and regulations and in-country surveillance strategies designed to encourage and support white only, particularly Anglo-Saxon Protestant, and francophone Caucasian Catholic, migration and settlement in the borders of the emerging nation. Canada’s national identity as a white settler society was achieved through the erasure of the presence of indigenous Aboriginal/First Nations communities and the large scale restriction of the entry of non-white peoples, many of whom did not speak the same languages and/or observed the same cultural traditions as the members of Canada’s “two solitudes.” It is within this historical context of selective and exclusionary immigration practices, the racialization of communities, and the socio-political discourses about the goodness and rightness of “true” Canadians, and ingrained notions about the disruptiveness and potential threat of the “other” that the contestation over the presence of Muslim communities—who are predominately if not exclusively non-white, non-English or French speaking, and whose cultural practices are unfamiliar—in contemporary

Canada is best illuminated and understood. Furthermore, an argument will be made for seeing a connection between the racial immigration discourses and practices of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Canada and the colonialist/Orientalist discourses produced by Western travelers and statesmen (many of whom originated from countries that supplied Canada with the bulk of “suitable” immigrants) about Middle Eastern and other Islamic cultures.

Significant evidence of the “whitening” of Canada can be found in political and social documents of various periods. For example, according to the Immigration Act of 1910, the Governor in Council was charged with “prohibiting [from entering]...the land in Canada...immigrants belonging to any race deemed unsuited to the climates or requirements of Canada, or of immigrants of any specified class, occupation or character” (as cited in Kruger, 2004, p. 72). Carl Berger in his article “the true north strong and free” makes it clear that those races deemed unsuitable were non-whites. Canada was described as the “Young giant nation of the North”; such an image defined not only Canada’s landscape but also Canada’s racial character of “self reliance, strength, hardness” (Berger, 1966, p. 5). Thus, only races of the “North” were deemed suitable to be part of the “Canadian” identity, while people from the “South” who were also non-whites, “conjured up the image of enervation, of abundance stifling the Victorian values of self-help, work and thrift, of effeminacy, of voluptuous living and consequently of the decay and degeneration of character” (10). In Unhomely States, Himani Bannerji expands on Berger’s account of the significant role that official policies around race and the cultivation of a mono-ethnic culture played in the making of Canada by arguing that the “whiteness” pursued in immigration and settlement policies went beyond the privileging of phenotype to include certain expectations and assumptions about the origins and socialization of desirable and undesirable groups. Bannerji writes:

It [Canada] is obviously a construction, a set of representations, embodying certain types of political and cultural communities and their operations. These communities were themselves constructed in agreement with certain ideas regarding skin color, history, language, and other cultural signifiers – all of which may be subsumed under the ideological category “White.” (Bannerji, 2004, p. 290)

An inevitable consequence of constructing “whiteness” in Canada and proclaiming the nation as white is the racialization of non-white communities, resulting in a hierarchy of cultures and races in which white and (Western) European have bested all other possibilities. As Vic Satzewich points out, the concept of race has evolved over time from simply acting as a means of identifying a group of people with a common history to differentiating between groups of people based on biological and genetic categorizations in which assumptions are made about the inherent and essential characteristics of groups based on their physical appearance. Through the acknowledgement of the differences between groups of people, such as physical appearances, race eventually became a determinant of supposedly different levels of cultural development (Satzewich, 1998, p.27). The hierarchy of “us” versus “them” dictated how certain cultures were perceived and therefore treated. Within the context of Muslim immigration, because their traditions were deemed to be “backwards” and “uncivilized,” they were “naturally” defined as inferior, and therefore treated as outsiders to the nation.

Muslims faced and continue to face discrimination within Western societies partly because of nineteenth-century Orientalist discourses. As Said points out, “The general basis of Orientalist thought is an imaginative geography dividing the world into two unequal parts, the larger and “different” one called the Orient, the other, also known as our world, called the Occident or the West. Such divisions always take place when one society or culture thinks about another one as different from it” (Said, 1980, p.488). Such discourses emphasized the cultural

divide between the “West” and “Islam” and thus resulted in producing Islamic peoples as different from and alien to cultures of the West (i.e. English, Scottish, Irish, and French).

While members of “Western” cultures were being admitted to Canada for the purpose of nation building and ensuring white settlement in order to create the “True North,” members of Eastern cultures were prohibited from entering and taking part in the construction of the nation. Although there is not a great amount of literature about the history of Muslim immigration into Canada, statistics do reveal that the first federal census of 1871 recorded that there were 13 Muslims in total (Scholes, 2002, p. 413). The low number in Muslim migration into Canada has to do with an observation made by J.S. Woodsworth which, although he was speaking specifically about Syrians and Turks, still expresses an attitude of displeasure towards “races” from Eastern cultures where Islam is a dominant religion. Woodsworth describes “a most undesirable class” who, through force of habit, “lie most naturally and by preference, and only tell the truth when it suits their purpose” and whose “miserable physique and tendency to communicable disease...are a distinct menace to the health of the community” (as cited in Kelley and Trebilcock, 1998, p. 135). The comment by Woodsworth illustrates that people from Eastern cultures, including those from Muslim communities, were deemed “unsuitable” to settle in Canada and become part of the nation. However, post World War One, the number of European immigrants started to decrease and therefore the doors opened to immigrants from “other” countries. Thus, the number of Muslim immigrants increased, and in 1931, there were 645 Muslim residents in Canada (Abu-Laban, 1980, p.138).

Muslims in Canada: An Overview

After Christianity, Islam has become Canada’s second largest religion, and according to the 2001 census, Muslims form just over 2 percent of Canada’s population. Over 36 percent of

Muslims are from South Asia. Arabs constitute 21 percent of the Muslim population, followed by other West Asians, including Iranians. Black Muslims are also reported in the census. Canadian Muslims also come from South East Asia and the United States (Rahnema, 2006, p. 24). 86 percent of Muslims live in the six metropolitan areas of the country, and Metropolitan Toronto has the most Muslims (Hamdani, 1996). The rise in the number of immigrants from Muslim countries has compelled both the host society and members of Muslim communities to struggle with difficult questions concerning cultural exclusivity, assimilation, discrimination, and identity.

Muslims have settled throughout Canada across the ten provinces and the two territories. In the beginning of the twentieth century, most Muslims settled in the western provinces. They assisted with the cultivation of Alberta and Saskatchewan farmlands in preparation for mass settlement (of European whites) (Hamdani, 1996). Despite the steady inflow of Muslim immigrants, “nearly a century passed before these Muslims gave public expression to their presence and identity” (Hamdani, 1996). One could argue that their delay in publicly expressing their identity illustrates that Muslim communities may not have necessarily felt “at home” in Canada and proves that “[t]he uncertainties, self doubts, and social solecism, so pervasive in the early phases of settlement of a new community, lingered on for a long time” (Hamdani, 1996). The first visible sign of a Muslim community in Canada was erected in Edmonton, Alberta in 1938 when the Al-Rashid Mosque was established in an effort to put down Muslim roots in a new land (Hamdani, 1996). The mosque became the heart of the Muslim community and it is still a centre of connection for Muslims throughout Canada.

During the 1950s to 1960s, the Muslim population in Canada represented a small minority with a low rate of immigration, which did not pick up until after 1967 with the

implementation of the points system. In the 1980s and 1990s, there was an influx of Muslim migrants, and “of the total 415,800 immigrants in the country, over 275,000, or over 66% immigrated to Canada between 1991-2001” (Rahnema, 2006, p.24). Information on the experiences of Muslims in Canada is much more abundant during the period leading up to and around 9/11, when Muslims assumed a hyper- visibility that thrust them into the spotlight. Thus, for the remainder of this section, the discussion will focus on expressions of Islamophobia in Canada during this later period and the effect such expressions have had on members of Muslim diasporic communities.

Amita Handa argues that “immigrants who continue to hold on to cultural markers that are visibly distinct from dominant political, economic, and cultural systems are not given the same access to opportunities for success” (Handa, 2003, p.8). The reason for the many barriers that immigrants face has to do with discriminatory practices. According to a study by Daood Hamdani titled “Triple Jeopardy: Muslim Women’s Experience of Discrimination,” in the aftermath of 9/11 there were a number of hate crimes that targeted Muslims (Hamdani, 2005, p.iv). Hate crimes are “hostile acts (such as public insults, incitement of hatred, physical violence, and/or attacks against property) against an individual or a group based on a personal attribute and are infringements to the right to dignity, safety, integrity, and the peaceful enjoyment of property” (Helly, 2004). Hate crimes committed against Muslims in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 were most evident in hostile reactions towards women wearing the hijab, in the torching of mosques, and the institutionalization of Bill C-36. As one observer puts it, “Muslims feared attack owing to [their] religious and cultural practices (clothing, beard, head coverings), attending Muslim places of worship or schools, and taking leaves of absence during religious holidays” (Helly, 2004). The number of hate crimes post- 9/11 escalated according to the

Canadian Islamic Congress, which noted “a 1,600 percent increase in hate crimes against Muslim individuals or places between September 2001 and September 2002” (Helly, 2004). As well, the Canadian Council of Muslim Women reported “40 instances of threatening or insulting phone calls, insults on the streets, vandalism, and assault and battery” (Helly, 2004). However, it has been argued that many more hate crimes occurred, but victims were, and still are, too afraid to report their cases in fear of repercussions. The Canadian Council of Muslim Women suggests that “[t]his is more so the case for females due to social and cultural norms, and due to the perception of discrimination in the justice system.”

In a move similar to the headscarf ban in France, Muslim students wearing hijabs to school in Montreal in 1994 were sent home because the hijab was deemed unacceptable clothing, and they were told that “unless they removed the hijab they could not attend school” (Tabassum, 2006, p.63). Right after 9/11, Muslim women made more visible by their headcovering, experience a similar rejection as the Montreal schoolgirls: “Muslim women who wore the *hijab* were afraid to go out of their homes; parents of children of colour are escorting the students to and from school because they felt they were not safe” (Khalema and Wannas-Jones, 2003, p. 28). In addition, many Muslim women face discrimination in the workplace as a result of wearing the hijab, and in many cases are not employed due to this “cultural difference” (Canadian Council of Muslim Women, 2007).

Mosques inside and outside of Canada have been vandalized in response to the fall of the Twin Towers. Newspaper headlines such as “Mosque vandalized after bomb-plot sweep” and “Toronto Mosque Vandalized after Terrorism Arrests” are tangible manifestations of Islamophobia in the largest Metropolitan Canadian centre for Muslim settlement post-9/11. These acts against mosques only reinforce the notion that Muslims and Islamic culture have no

place within Canadian space. The physical buildings of mosques symbolize the grounding/rootedness of Muslims in the Canadian landscape, and so the defacement and destruction of mosques symbolizes an attempt to uproot Muslims from the Canadian soil.

Bill C-36, the Anti-Terrorism Act which was implemented in December 2001, is also playing a role in preventing Muslims from leading comfortable and safe lives within the nation's borders. Bill C-36 challenges the basic civil liberties that Muslims are entitled to in Canada:

Bill C-36 gives local police forces, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, and CSIS new powers to increase surveillance of persons, suppression of protests, monitoring of email, and listservs, and spying on protestors and political activists during rallies, meetings, and conferences. One of the most significant implications of this legislation has been "criminalization of dissent" the creation of a climate in which even those who are not specifically targeted are still affected and are either silenced or silence themselves. (Arat-Koc, 2006, p.233)

The security measures that have been put in place post-9/11 in the name of national security only serve to further racialize Muslim communities. Muslim communities continue to experience racism and are the targets of racial profiling. Racial profiling is said to exist when:

Members of certain racial groups or ethnic groups become subject to greater levels of criminal justice surveillance than others. Racial profiling, therefore, is typically defined as a racial disparity in police stop and search practices, racial differences in Customs searches at airports and bordercrossings, increased police patrols in racial minority neighborhoods and undercover activities or sting operations which selectively target particular ethnic groups. (Wortley and Tanner, 2003, p. 69-70)

These forms of violence against Muslim communities have only helped bolster stereotypes about Muslims. Muslims have experienced practically every kind of violence from everyday racial harassment on the street to serious hate crimes that have affected all spheres of their lives.

However, despite the challenges Muslims have faced, there have been "unprecedented levels of mobilization among Arab and Muslim Canadians" (Arat-Koc, 2006, p.237). According to Raja Khoury, former president of the Canadian Arab Federation, "marginalization has forced some

people in the community to become more politicized and, ironically, has led them to be more integrated 'politically' (as cited in Arat-Koc, 2006, p.237).

Despite efforts to lobby for their rights, Muslims still encounter various barriers in areas such as employment and housing. Before discussing the barriers Muslims face in employment, it is important to discuss their education statistics; this will prove that obstacles to their finding jobs have to do with the discrimination they face because they are Muslim. The Muslim population tends to be described as backward and uneducated. However, 22% of the Muslim population 15 years of age and older attend school on a full-time basis, and this number is similar for both male and female Muslims. In regard to the level of education, "about 25% of Muslims 15 years of age and over have less than a high school education. However, over 28% have a university degree. Over 6.4% have a Master's degree, and over 6,000 of the Muslim population have earned doctorate degrees" (Rahnema, 2006, p.25). Yet, despite the high level of education,

Muslims in Canada have a very high level of unemployment, which is almost twice the national average of 7.4%. Of over 411,000 in the Muslim population 15 years and over, about 252,000 are in the labour force, over 215,000 are unemployed, and the rest or 36,000 are unemployed. The 14.3% Muslim unemployment level is much higher than the percentages of all other major religions. The unemployment rate of Muslim women, despite their relatively high level of education is 16.5%. (25)

In addition, the employment that Muslims are able to find is not a reflection of their levels of education and areas of expertise. For example, 32 percent of Iranians surveyed were in managerial or professional occupations before leaving their home countries, but upon arriving in Canada, only 16 percent have been able to find jobs at the same level in Canada. Thus, upon their transition to Canada, many middle-class immigrants experience a change in professional status and become blue collar workers in the host society. Several factors could account for the change. A common reason cited by employers is that recent immigrants lack "Canadian experience" in their fields. Also, many immigrants experience tremendous difficulty in getting

their credentials obtained in their countries of origin recognized in Canada. However, the major factor that contributes to limited employment possibilities for the Muslim population has to do with the biases against them, and consequently many Muslims face discrimination within the work force.

The problems Muslims face in relation to housing is most visible in the case of the Somali community. Somalis began arriving in Canada (in Toronto) in the mid 1950s and 1960s primarily because they were fleeing war in their home country (Murdie, 2003, p.187). In a study titled "Immigrants' Perceptions of Housing Discrimination in Toronto: The Housing New Canadians Project," Kenneth Dion states that in a study between Jamaicans, Poles, and Somalis, it was the Somali community that perceived greater personal and group discrimination within the rental housing sector (Dion, 2001, p.535). Thus, discrimination went beyond colour to include religious prejudice. Also, after conducting a study on Somalis' access to affordable housing, Murdie concluded that "for new immigrant groups such as the Somalis...there is a considerable distance to go before housing is the basis for successful social integration" (Murdie, 2003, p.195).

Shari'a Law: Contesting Islam in the West

One of the major points of contention within the Muslim community and between Muslims and non-Muslims in Canada was the plan to implement Shari'a law in Canada. Shari'a law is "a broad, abstract, umbrella concept covering several sources of Islamic faith, the Koran, Hadith (the Prophet's sayings and traditions), ijma' (consensus of the jurists), and for some qiyas (analogy), and for others aql (reason)" (Rahnema, 2006, p.30). Shari'a law controls everything within Muslim life and is based on the interpretations of the Qur'an, which vary from country to country (Cardona, 2006).

Conservative Muslims who push for Shari'a as the basis for community arbitration argue that Muslims in Canada have the right to govern their own affairs according to their religious and cultural traditions. They argue that this legal system incorporates the personal laws of Islam (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2005). The Ontario government initially granted Islamic leaders rights under the Arbitration Act, which allows for the use of religious laws in arbitration as Jewish and Catholic communities in Ontario already had those rights. However, in the public outcry that ensued, it was realized how this impacted women; at issue too was the concern that the vulnerability of Muslim women under Shari'a signaled serious breaches of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom which guarantees each human being equal protection under law. In addition, in a real democratic system, the line between State and Church must not be blurred, and laws of the land must be equally applied to all citizens (Rahnema, 2006, p.30). Thus in 2005, Ontario's Premier, Dalton McGuinty, ruled out the use of Shari'a law in Ontario and stated that he would ban all faith-based arbitrations. Said McGuinty: "There will be no Shari'a law in Ontario. There will be no religious arbitration in Ontario. There will be one law for all Ontarians" (CTV, 2005).

The possibility that Shari'a law could be implemented in Canada brought a lot of perceptions about Muslims to the forefront. The issue of Shari'a law is complex not only because there is disagreement between Muslims and non-Muslims, but because Shari'a also polarizes the members of Muslim communities. As Shahnaz Khan points out, "[m]aintaining that Muslims are 'one people' subscribing to one set of religious beliefs, practices, and values is extremely problematic, in part because Muslims come from geographically diverse countries, each with its own culture, economic status, language and political institutions" (Khan, 1993, p.56). In addition she argues that the implementation of Shari'a would only reinforce the high premium

placed on cultural “differences” within multicultural Canada, and would only serve to provide justification that Muslims are indeed different from the “rest of us” and are all the same no matter where they come from (62). In addition, the National Association of Women and the Law and the Canadian Council of Muslim Women joined their voices with those of various Muslim women to argue that, under Shari’a, men and women are not treated equally. But while such concerns were/are legitimate and it is important that members of affected communities speak out when they are aware of potential human rights violations, media coverage of the controversy around implementing Shari’a focused on the “oppressive hijab” and honour killings within Islam and so aided popular perceptions in the wider society of the danger that “Islam” presents to “Canadian values.”

In the end, Shari’a law was not formally implemented, but the perception of Muslim “difference” in the wider society still impacts on Muslim-Canadians’ experience of migration and settlement and their integration into Canadian society. Chapter 2 follows on from this discussion of Muslim “difference” and Shari’a law in addressing yet another visible sign of what is often seen as the oppositions between Muslim cultures and Western cultures: veiling among Muslim women.

Chapter Two: Veiling, Mis/Representation, and “the Muslim Woman”

“Wearing a uniform of oppression”; “Women’s legacy of pain”; “Lifting the veil of ignorance” (as cited in Tabassum, 2006, p.63). These are some examples of newspaper headlines that link the subjugation of Muslim women to veiling. In the Western imaginary, the body of the Muslim woman has come to be seen as “confined, mutilated, and sometimes murdered in the name of culture” (Razack, 2004, p.130). Similarly, David A. Bailey and Gilane Tawadros have argued that “[c]ultural battles are often fought through the bodies of women” (Bailey and Tawadros, 2003, p.18). Tabassum supports these assessments in her argument that Muslim women are presented as “others, members of a religion that does not promote ‘Canadian values,’ but rather, anti-Canadian values such as indiscriminate violence and gender oppression” (Tabassum, 2006, p.63). Such beliefs have reinforced the perception that the Muslim community is to be feared and justify the controlling, through surveillance, of these communities. Post-9/11, there has been an increase in Islamophobic rhetoric that casts Islam as anti-modern and portrays it as a religion that promotes the victimization of women. There was and continues to be a pervasive sense among Westerners of the need to “save” Muslim women from Muslim men. But, as several Muslim female critics have asked, “Do Muslim women really need saving?” This is one of the questions that will be addressed in this chapter, specifically in regard to veiling.

Immigrant Muslim women who wear the hijab are often the subject of negative stereotypes. Specific incidents involving students being sent home from schools, girls barred from playing certain sports, and women being called “terrorists” simply because they wear the veil have become common in Canada since 9/11. For instance, during a soccer tournament in Laval, Quebec, a referee asked a soccer player to either “remove her hijab or...sit on the bench” (Robertson, 2007, p.716). In addition, a set of guidelines for new immigrants prepared recently

by officials in the small town of Herouxville, Quebec and specifically targeting Muslims included a statement that, in Canada, “women were not to be publicly stoned or burned with acid, nor were they to face genital mutilation. And faces were to be uncovered except on Halloween” (717). Such statements reinforce existing stereotypes of the passive, vulnerable Muslim woman. Despite Canada’s claim to being a true multicultural society, Muslim women constantly face discrimination, and one reason for this state of affairs is that the hijab is very often responded to in public space in ways that ignore the cultural, religious, and historical contexts of veiling.

To begin, the desire to liberate and rescue “the Muslim woman” is connected to the desire to civilize and control communities of Muslims. In order to justify the colonization of Eastern societies, the West emphasized the difference between the East and West through the differences in the social arrangement of gender relations and the architecture of gendered space in these societies. As Meyda Yegenoglu has argued:

The social systems of the East and West are established on diametrically different principles. The pivotal difference is the difference in the position of woman. In the East society has always been based on the separation of the sexes and seclusion of women, limiting their sphere to the home...The West has not sharply differentiated between the world of women and that of men. Western society is built on the basis of unity, which may not mean equality, but which does not definitely place women in a sphere apart. (Yegenoglu, 1998, p.104)

Such gendered social arrangements have, since colonial times, helped fuel the belief that Muslim women are oppressed and are therefore in need of liberation, and because such practices originate within Muslim communities, the communities themselves are still seen as being in need of the “civilizing” influence of superior Western cultures. The veil became the visible sign of Muslim women’s oppression and their supposed exclusion from the public spheres of life, and this became evidence of the backwardness of Islamic culture.

Another important question addressed in this chapter is why it is that the veil/veiling has come in for such scrutiny. To begin answering this and the question posed earlier, it is necessary to discuss how veiling came to be seen as a barbaric and oppressive practice. With the expansion of European power and influence in Ottoman/Middle Eastern economies and politics, a large body of “scholarly” and travel accounts on the people in the region written by Westerners emerged. According to Yegenoglu, Western fascination with the “Orient” was “mediated by a desire to have access to the space of its women, to the body of its women, and to the truth of its women” (72). European male writers gave significant attention to veiling practices among the women because the veil was seen as a physical barrier to uncovering the secrets of Oriental life. As Yegenoglu puts it, the veil acted as a “barrier between the body of the Oriental woman and the Western gaze, the opaque, all-encompassing veil seem[ed] to place her body out of the reach of the Western gaze and desire” (39), resulting in an obsession with “lifting the veil.” The veil represented the hidden darkness and mystery of the East that the West could not have access to, causing the land and people to remain “unknown” and impenetrable to the Western (predominately male) gaze. In large part out of (political and personal) frustration, Western men re-presented veiling as a primitive practice and generalized about its oppressive function in Muslim women’s lives (Hoodfar, 2003, p.6). These beliefs still resonate in contemporary society, and the practice of veiling continues to cause a deep divide between East and West. “Common sense” knowledge based in the conclusions drawn by the frustrated colonizing male gaze both then and now suggests that in order to liberate the Muslim woman, the veil needs to be lifted. Even some early Muslim thinkers reproduced such colonialist discourse. Qassim Amin, who wrote The Liberation of Woman (1899), argued that “[t]he veil constituted a huge barrier between woman and her elevation, and consequently a barrier between the nation and its

advance” (as cited in Ahmed, 2003, p.47) and that it was not until the backward practice of veiling was cast off that Islamic societies could begin to move forward towards civilization (43).

The frustration the West has felt about not being able to see behind the veil, which is synonymous with not being able to fully penetrate Muslim cultures, in some ways speaks to the power of the veil itself and of the women who wear it. Through the veil, Muslim women were/are able to remove themselves from the Western gaze. Veiled women are able to see without being seen. They are the observer and not the observed. Thus, as Lila Abu-Lughod points out, “[V]eiling itself must not be confused with, or made to stand for, lack of agency” (Abu-Lughod, 2002, p.786). Abu-Lughod continues, “[W]e need to work against the reductive interpretation of veiling as the quintessential sign of women’s unfreedom” (786). Veiling has been described as “portable seclusion” because it “enabled women to move out of segregated living spaces while still observing the moral requirements of separating and protecting women from unrelated men” (785). Arat-Koc supports this idea by stating that the veil can be “interpreted as a way for women to maintain public presence and active public lives, while avoiding sexual objectification of their bodies and sexual harassment in the public world” (Arat-Koc, 1999, p.175).

Although veiling is often taken as the most visible sign of the oppressiveness of Islam, Qur’anic verses on the veil do not support such an interpretation, as evident in the following:

O’Prophet! Tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to draw their cloaks (veils) all over their bodies (i.e. screen themselves completely except the eyes or one eye to see the way). That will be better, that they should be known (as free respectable women) as not to be annoyed. And Allah is Ever Oft-Forgiving, Most merciful. (Surah 33:59)

The Qur’an definitely encourages Muslim women to wear the veil but, contrary to Western perceptions, the religion of Islam does not promote the use of the veil to victimize women. In

fact, the Qur'an emphasizes the use of the veil as a means to protect women and guard their freedom. Therefore, it is problematic to make blanket statements supporting that Islam oppresses women through the veil. But, based on reports circulating in local and international media which reflect the way various countries—including Canada, the United States, France and Germany—are responding to veiling within the Muslim diaspora, the consensus seems to be that veiling makes many non-Muslims uncomfortable, to say the least, and is widely regarded as a symbol of the repression of Muslim women ("Harmless Custom or Threat", 2006).

This is not to say that the veil has not been used to oppress women. However, what needs to be acknowledged is the diversity within the practice of veiling. Reasons for wearing the veil vary according to the cultural, historical, and ideological context of a particular community/woman. Chandra Mohanty states that "to assume that the mere practice of veiling women...indicates the universal oppression of women...would...be analytically and theoretically reductive" (Mohanty, 1984, p.347). Mohanty discusses how feminist western discourses have constructed the monolithic "Third World Woman." This is important to address because Muslim women fall within this category. The "Third World Woman" is defined as "religious (read "not progressive"), family-oriented (read "traditional"), legal minors (read "they are still not conscious of their rights"), illiterate (read "ignorant"), domestic (read "backward") and sometimes revolutionary (read "their country is in a state of war they must fight!"). It is through such language that the difference of "Third World"/Muslim women and the notions about the stunted evolution of Eastern societies are produced (337). As well, such language is illustrative of the power dynamic between the West and the East; the West cannot maintain its superiority without constructing "Third World differences" and these differences are often played out, especially in regard to Muslim cultures, in the mis/representation of women. This

monolithic construction of the “Third World Woman” ignores the diversity that exists across Muslim communities. As such, “the Muslim woman” evokes certain fixed images in the Western imaginary, and therefore the various differences across Muslim communities, Muslim women in general, and Muslim women who wear the veil in particular have been erased in favour of creating a known entity identified as “the oppressed Muslim woman.”

Again, this is not to say that women in Muslim countries and communities in the diaspora and elsewhere do not experience oppression. Rather, the point is that it is problematic to generalize that all Muslim women are oppressed. It is also important to recognize that it is not Islam the religion that innately oppresses women but that female oppression is often the result of overzealous (male) leaders and others in positions of power who victimize women and incorrectly justify their acts and ideology of violence through Islam. Unfortunately, because Islam is depicted as a monolithic religion—and especially when such a one-dimensional, static representation is combined with “Third World differences” as produced through Western and Orientalist discourses—it is often the extreme or radical side of Islamic cultures that is presented to a mainstream, non-Muslim public. For example, in the documentary Beneath the Veil, which was broadcast repeatedly on CNN and BBC in the days immediately following 9/11, undercover journalist Saira Shah, herself wearing a burqa, “lifts the veil” to illustrate the horrible experiences of oppression and violence Afghani women suffer under the Taliban. This documentary helped fuel popular perceptions in the West that all women are oppressed under Islamic law. Although Shah pointed out in an interview on CNN that the oppressive practices of the Taliban are not in line with the fundamental beliefs and principles of Islam, her attempt to separate the oppressive behaviour of the violent Taliban regime from core principles of Islam did not register with the general public, and this is demonstrated through the following passage:

Many of the Taliban don't know much about Islam. Many are uneducated...It's a diverse group. For example, we met a woman who said that she was walking with her friend, and a group of Taliban came and beat her friend up because she was wearing white shoes, saying she'd dishonored their white flag. That's not Islam. Many things imposed by Taliban are against Islam. (CNN, 2007)

The desire to find out and expose what is "beneath the veil" has been, as mentioned earlier, an obsession of the West since the colonial period. So far, I have been arguing that the veil is a highly contested symbol of Islamic cultures and that its meanings and functions vary according to personal, geographical, social and political contexts. As demonstrated, in the aftermath of 9/11, just simply using the word "veil" or "hijab" in a public context has been enough to stir up heated feelings, sometimes with violent repercussions. Evidence abounds to indicate that colonialist/Orientalist perceptions about the "unbridgeable, alien, and terrifying" (Bailey and Tawadros, 2003, p.18) nature of Muslim cultures continue to have currency in contemporary times.

There are scholars such as Nawal El Saadawi and Fatima Mernissi who argue that "veiling represents, and is a result of, oppressive social hierarchies, and male domination" (as cited in Tabassum, 2006, p.61) and refuse to engage with the possibility that some women have found that their decision to wear the hijab "empowers them and grants them Muslim identities" (61). But it is true that the veil can actually, and has, functioned as a tool for empowering and giving Muslim women political agency within their communities (at the national level and within smaller political spheres) as well as leverage of all sorts in social and familial situations. In her work with focus groups made up of female Muslim-Canadians from diverse cultural backgrounds and professions, Ruby Tabassum examines how immigrant Muslim women perceive the veil (for the purposes of her study she uses the word hijab). Tabassum concludes that "Many Muslim women...claim that the hijab empowers them in numerous ways: making

their identities distinct; taking control of their bodies; and giving them a sense of belonging to a wider Muslim world” (54). Tabassum’s study acknowledges the diversity across Muslim-Canadian communities and takes into account the fact that “immigrant Muslim women perceive the hijab in a variety of ways and associate it with diverse meanings that range from covering of the head to modest behaviour” (54).

Despite the hyper-visibility that Muslim women experience upon wearing the hijab, according to Muslim women from varying backgrounds, their hijabs become a very powerful symbol and a positive reflection of their Muslim identities. As Tabassum points out, “It is a growing feeling on the part of Muslim women that they no longer wish to identify with the West...for these women, the issue is not that they *have* to dress traditionally, but that they *choose* to embrace the hijab as a marker of their Muslim identities” (60). She adds that

the concept of the hijab is not limited to personal identity; it has also become the symbol of the Muslim ummah, or community. An immigrant Muslim woman’s attempt to identify herself as a Muslim by wearing a headscarf is an acknowledgement of general support for the attitudes, values and beliefs, of Islam and her culture that links her to the broader community of believers.” (60)

The fact that Muslim women wear the hijab in order to identify and proclaim themselves as Muslim to the public echoes Yegenoglu’s discussion of how the act of veiling can be a show of resistance (Yegenoglu, 1998, p.142). Post 9/11, many Muslim women began to wear the hijab to demonstrate their commitment to the religion and to openly assert their solidarity with their Muslim communities (Hoodfar, 2003, p.39). The desire among some diasporic Muslim women to wear the hijab is not to demonstrate their anti-West sentiments. Rather, their appropriation of the veil has more to do with how the anti-Muslim sentiment in the West has fuelled strong religious and cultural identification among Muslims.

For such women, the hijab “is not a mark of oppression; rather it is a sign of liberation that protects them from a sexist society. The hijab allows Muslim women physical mobility because they feel free from the male gaze. Consequently, they move in the public sphere more comfortably” (Tabassum, 2006, p.62). By wearing the hijab, Muslim women believe they are undermining the myth of the submissive Muslim woman. Muslim women also wear the veil in order to challenge authoritative structures within their own communities. Homa Hoodfar argues that “The veil symbolizes women’s religiousity and commitment to Islamic mores, while allowing them to resist patriarchal values and cultural practices imposed in the name of Islam” (Hoodfar, 2003, p.39). For example, the act of veiling has been used by some women to counter the control of male and senior family members. These women are able to engage in activities within the public domain because their families see them wearing the veil. Thus, the veil is a clear statement that the women are not relinquishing Islamic beliefs in exchange for a more “Canadian” lifestyle; rather, family members see these women embracing their faith and culture in a very public way in diasporic spaces and as such feel less of a need to be strict in enforcing rules.

The idea that veiling and wearing the hijab can be empowering is not new, but that aspect of the history of veiling is not emphasized or well-known and powerful Muslim women throughout history, many of whom donned the veil, have been forgotten or are rarely mentioned. Another aspect of veiling that tends to be ignored is the fact that the veiling has been historically practiced by a wide variety of communities regardless of religion; however, it is Islamic communities that tend to be subjected to scrutiny. It is not widely known or acknowledged, for example, that the practice of veiling and seclusion of women is pre-Islamic and originated in non-Arab, Middle Eastern, and Mediterranean societies. The first reference to veiling dates to an

Assyrian legal text of the thirteenth century BC which restricted the act of veiling to “respectable” women; it was a sign of status, and it was practiced by the elite in the ancient Greco-Roman, pre-Islamic and Byzantine empires (6).

Throughout the history of Islam, there have been Muslim women who played active and central roles within their communities. For example, Khadija became the first to accept the message of Islam brought home by her husband around 610 CE. Aisha, who was the Prophet Mohamad’s last wife, proved to be very political within the Islamic community, specifically in the role she played in the first Islamic civil war. Muslim women have also been warriors, artists, scholars, teachers, and freedom fighters (20). Thus, to assume that Muslim women have always been excluded from public space is problematic. What needs to be understood is how political and social life in Islamic cultures have changed and evolved throughout time, and with these changes have come different interpretations of Islam. For example in Turkey in 1998 in a secular university, female students protested in favour of wearing their headscarves (Breu and Marchese, 2000, p.26). They used veiling to make a political statement that the public expressions of Islamic beliefs and values should not be suppressed in favour of adopting Westernized practices and values. To these women students, Islam was in need of defense; and they used the veil to mount such a defense.

Ongoing disagreements over interpretations of the Qur’an and controversies such as that around implementing Shari’a law are dominated by men, and too often Muslim women are shut out from the conversation, with the end result being erosion of their rights which are properly to be protected under Islam (Alvi, 2003, p.175). Thus, the argument here is not that Muslim women have never been oppressed or continue to be oppressed, but the argument is that Muslim women as a whole should not be seen as an oppressed and passive group, and that Islam as a

religious and cultural practice should not be misrepresented as innately scripted to victimize women.

In recent years, especially since 9/11, a number of books addressing the controversy over Islam have appeared. The bestselling book, The Trouble with Islam Today (2005), by Irshad Manji is one such book. Manji's book represents one very public voice, and a Muslim woman's at that, in current debates about Islam. In her book, Manji speaks out against the "imperialists within Islam" (Manji, 2005, p.2) and calls for the reformation of Islam, which she names Operation Ijtihad. Manji argues that Islam is incompatible with Western values of democracy, and suggests that the Muslim world needs to be democratized (190). Manji presents the Muslim world as discriminatory towards women, religious minorities, and assorted "others," such as gay people (202). She believes that it is Muslims in the West who are "poised to demonstrate the possibilities of reforming Islam...[as] We have the luxury of exercising civil liberties, especially free expression, to change tribal tendencies" (207). Manji's book has been criticized by some and commended by others, but whatever the response, it is clear that she does make sweeping generalizations about the backwardness of Islamic countries, especially in regard to the treatment of women. While she acknowledges that the culture of Islam is not static and can change, which is why she is calling for reforms, she does not acknowledge that "all Muslim countries have been gradually developing their legal and political structures and practices," that "[t]here have been active women's movements in most of the major Muslim nations" and that Muslim women have the vote and access to education in most Muslim nations" (McDonough, 2003, p.141).

It is important to engage, even briefly, with Irshad Manji's work because she is an example of the diversity that exists within Muslim communities. She is a lesbian (which is supposedly not permitted in Islam) who critiques the practice of Islam yet still self-identifies as a

Muslim. In an interview in the New York Times, Manji was asked why she does not wear the hijab and her response was, “Hijab, chador or veiling are obligations only for Prophet Muhammad’s wives. I’m not one of them. To meet the Koranic requirement for dressing modestly, I could wear a turtleneck and baseball cap” (The New York Times, 2007). Manji’s interpretation of how modesty in dress can be achieved is a reflection of her identity politics and location. Turtlenecks and baseball caps are Westernized fashions of dress and, some would argue, very masculine or androgynous—at least when worn together. Manji’s sexual orientation, the fact that she is so open about it—her location in the West allowing her a greater degree of openness—and her positioning of herself as an out lesbian Muslim speaking from the West about women’s place in Muslim societies outside Western parameters make her assessment of Islam today even more complex than would first appear. The place of same-sex (lesbian) sexuality in understanding and responding to representations of “the Muslim woman” will be taken up again in the analysis of Farzana Doctor’s novel Stealing Nasreen.

One positive element of Manji’s book is that she does highlight an important point, which is that Muslims should be actively engaged in public discussions about the practice of Islam. One example of Muslim women’s political engagement is the work being done by the Canadian Council of Muslim Women (CCMW), an organization that was established in 1982. A national organization, CCMW provides a forum for serious, well-informed, and scholarly discourse on the pressing issues confronting Muslim women and their families (Alvi, 2003, p.173).

Going back to the issue of veiling, it is of course obvious that not all Muslim women choose to wear the hijab. Many non-wearers of headscarves see the hijab as inappropriate dress for Canada (Tabassum, 2006, p. 62). Some Muslim women feel that the hijab, as opposed to providing them with a means of demonstrating their modesty, only reinforces their visibility in

the public eye because they come under scrutiny for their “strange” dress (62). The divide between Muslim wearers and non-wearers of the hijab is further evidence of the diversity to be found across Muslim communities. There is also a great degree of variation in the way in which veiling is done and how the practice has changed over time to adapt to the demands of the moment or a specific context. The recent launch of a Cosmopolitan-type magazine called Muslim Girl is a case in point. Targeting young Muslim women in Canada, the magazine includes fashion spreads in which models sport cute and fashionable yet culturally appropriate outfits. The veils run the gamut from flimsy headscarves to tightly secured and more conservative-looking head coverings. Creating even more variation, some of the models are not veiled at all. Thus, the message to Muslim girls in Canada is that there is no pressure to cover their hair, but that if they choose to, they can wear their veil, however they conceive of it, without feeling left behind in a fashion conscious society and within their peer groups in the wider Canadian society. Muslim Girl reflects the diversity within Muslim communities through its use of girls from different backgrounds as models. This magazine is one of the new and exciting developments that speak to the issue of veiling among Muslim females in Canada; and it is an important development not only in its depiction of and lack of judgment on different veiling choices—or the choice not to veil—but its glossy fashion pages deconstruct the stereotypical image of the “terrifying” black cloak for both Muslims and non-Muslims.

Veiling among Muslim women has received a significant amount of attention in the media. Such singularity in the attention paid to Muslim women has meant that a number of important issues that affect Muslim women, such as teenage pregnancy, alcoholism, drug abuse, un/underemployment, and health problems do not receive the attention they deserve (Khan, 2002, p.18). The fact that these concerns are not addressed is evidence of the marginalization of

Muslim women within mainstream society, a marginalization so acute that it is not even a consideration that they might be encountering social problems similar to those faced by their non-Muslim counterparts. It is thus important to give Muslim women the opportunity to voice their own concerns and speak to issues that affect their community. In the readings of the cultural productions that follow, this Major Research Paper gives Muslim-Canadian women the space in which to do exactly that.

Chapter Three: Revealing the Cultural Productions of Female Muslim-Canadians

The Significance of Cultural Productions

The media and popular culture play a significant role in contemporary society. Scholars argue that “popular culture and media have become locations of public sphere debates” and that cultural productions “are used to influence public consciousness” (as cited in Mahon, 2000, p.471). Among them are those productions whose purpose is to avoid perpetuating images of politically marginalized people as being passive victims and to instead reveal them to be active agents. Such cultural productions “articulate the voices of the marginalized enabling them to formulate their own identities in opposition to hegemonic discourses that position them at the margins” (477). The three works under discussion in this chapter, Sabah, Little Mosque on the Prairie, and Stealing Nasreen, fall into this category. In these works, Muslim women address issues that are important to other Muslim women and to Muslim communities in general. Because cultural productions reach a diverse audience, these works create a space in which Muslims and non-Muslims can find a forum for discussion, with the possibility of effecting social transformation.

Un/Veiling the Muslim Woman: An Analysis of Ruba Nadda’s Sabah

In 2005, Ruba Nadda’s feature film Sabah played both locally and internationally and received rave reviews. Sabah has been shown at the Rotterdam International Film Festival, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and premiered at various film festivals across Canada. Sabah has been compared with films such as My Big Fat Greek Wedding and Bend it Like Beckham in which cross-ethnic love stories challenge the practices of traditional, and “back home” cultures. Film reviews have emphasized how Sabah is another example in an emerging genre which centres on stories about love between a member of an immigrant and a member of

the host society. Reviewers have agreed that the film is a heartwarming, non-threatening, and hopeful story of successful cross-cultural relationships. The Islamic website Qantara describes it as a film that illustrates how “love has the ability to transcend cultural barriers (Qantara, 2006), and Now magazine called it “a classic integration story” (Bailey, 2005).

Sabah is comparable to films such as My Big Fat Greek Wedding and Bend it Like Beckham in that the central storyline tells the tale of star-crossed attraction between two people who have to challenge barriers set up by their families. This love story is between Sabah, played by Arsinee Khanijan, and Stephen, played by Shawn Doyle. Sabah was raised in a conservative/traditional Arab Muslim family that had immigrated to Toronto several years before the story begins. Now an adult, Sabah is delegated the role of her mother’s caregiver. Stephen is a divorced man from the dominant host (white) culture who is non-Muslim. Though reviews have pronounced Sabah similar to other star-crossed love movies, Sabah is different in the respect that it centres on an immigrant community that is currently under siege both culturally and politically. The Muslim community has been the subject of controversy and the reason behind policy reforms both in Canada and Western societies across the globe. This significant difference provides the possibility that Sabah could be a film that exceeds the romantic storyline in order to provide a space to contest stereotypes that have monopolized headlines since 9/11. Rita Zekas of the Toronto Star states: “Nadda was interested in demystifying Arabs living in North America and bursting the stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims being inherently hostile to the values of the Western World. She wanted to show a side of the culture removed from terrorism, abuse or honour killing” (Azad Hye, 2006). In Now Magazine, Nadda was quoted as saying: “Part of the reason I started making films is I was so sick of the stereotypes that Arabs and Muslims are hounded with” (Bailey, 2005). Thus, Nadda’s lack of reference to 9/11 events in

the film was to avoid reproducing the very same stereotype in which Muslims must always be associated with as violence and terrorism. Instead, Nadda created the romantic comedy in order to portray to the public that Muslims are like “everyone else.”

Rita Zekas highlights a significant point about Nadda’s objective for this film, which is that Nadda consciously chose to focus on a love story and family relationships within the Muslim community as a response to 9/11 and Islamophobia. Through the form of romantic comedy, Nadda gives the audience the opportunity to see Muslims from a different perspective—one that does not portray Muslims as violent or as a national security threat. Instead, through the love story’s happy conclusion, Nadda illustrates how Muslims can integrate into Canadian society and ultimately feel a sense of belonging as opposed to living as “enemies” within Canada’s borders.

The media has played an influential role in depicting Muslims as terrorists and individuals who are incompatible with Western values. In the *New Perspective Quarterly*, Akbar Ahmed notes that

Hollywood has been at war with Islam for the last two decades. Major Hollywood blockbusters such as “True Lies,” “Executive Decision” and “The Siege,” with top stars headlining their casts, have perpetuated an “Islam equals terrorism” image. Films such as these have conditioned the American public to expect the worst from a civilization depicted as “terrorist,” “fundamentalist” and “fanatic.” (Ahmed, 2001)

Scholars have noted that “people who have been historically marginalized from institutional power create self-representations of their groups – both idealized and accurate – to counter widely disseminated negative images, the absence of images, and images produced by outsiders” (as cited in Mahon, 2000, p.470). Thus, Ruba Nadda, who is a Muslim-Canadian of Arab descent, intervenes into Western discourses by writing and directing Sabah, and her conscious decision not to engage in popular Western cinematic representations of Muslims as terrorists

illustrates her ability to counter negative images produced by the West. Even though Nadda's film differs from productions such as BBQ Muslims by Zarqa Nawaz or Being Osama by Mahmoud Kaabour, which comment on headline-grabbing Muslim topics, this does not mean that Sabah is not political—in the sense of addressing issues that are relevant to the experience of Muslim immigrants in Canada. In fact, the reading of this film insists that Nadda uses a non-threatening medium to raise questions about the place and responsibility of Muslims in Western societies and, in turn, Western states' obligation—specifically multicultural Canada's responsibility—to make reasonable accommodations for culturally “different” groups, ensure their full and equal participation in national life, and address the real problems of misrepresentation that members of Muslim communities face. In addition, the analysis will provide evidence to clarify whether or not Nadda's treatment of the veil both refutes or substantiates popular perceptions of Muslims, including the assumption that Muslim women are oppressed and passive; and that Muslim communities are inflexible, resistant to change, and have cultural values and experiences that are incompatible with those of the West.

Through Sabah, Nadda depicts the struggle that Muslims face in an effort to preserve their own values in Western societies. One of the ways in which Nadda highlights this difficulty is through her treatment of the veil. In the opening scene, the audience is introduced to Sabah at a bus stop. She is wearing a hijab (the word used in the film), and she is strategically positioned next to a woman who is wearing a strapless sundress. This juxtaposition seems to highlight the differences between the two women, and although their dress is the only physical difference the audience sees, the difference in dress serves to suggest that there are many other differences not immediately obvious. At this point in the film, and in later scenes, it appears that Nadda is reinforcing popular stereotypes of the veil. At the bus stop, Sabah is looking at the woman next

to her in a state of envy, and Sabah is presented as a woman who is sweating underneath her hijab and heavy, long cloak. Sabah's dress is not only physically oppressive to her body, but on a larger scale, her dress represents her cultural oppression. Sabah's instant need to remove her hijab and cloak upon entry into her private home also plays into how her hijab is something that is possibly forced upon her and limits her ability to lead the life she wishes. When she throws off her cloak, its fuschia lining foreshadows and symbolizes Sabah's inner desire to take control of her life.

Western discourses have portrayed Muslim women as oppressed and docile. At the beginning of the film, Sabah is a shy, passive woman who listens to her elder brother Majid. Majid is bent on preserving traditional Syrian-Muslim practices within the household. However, Nadda undercuts these stereotypes through Sabah's gradual evolvement into a woman who takes charge of her own life, and chooses to remain within a relationship that is deemed unacceptable within Islamic traditions. Her transformation into a more vocal woman is seen through the various adjustments Sabah's hijab goes through throughout the film. For example, at the beginning of the film, Sabah is tightly covered with her hijab, but the more she continues to see Stephen, the more Sabah changes the way she wears the hijab. Her hair, which is deemed to be "provocative" slowly becomes visible to the public and, of course, to Stephen. In addition, Sabah's trips to the swimming pool in which her hair is covered with a cap but her body is not fully covered illustrates Sabah's willingness to "bend the rules" in order to lead her own life. Other women in the plot, such as Sabah's mother, sister, and niece also wear the hijab. In the first scene of the movie when Sabah's family comes to her home to celebrate her birthday, her sister and niece are fully dressed in black, and upon their arrival into the private space, they take off their Islamic dress and reveal what is hidden underneath: "average" and "Western" clothing.

Sabah's sister-in-law, Amal, both in public and private does not wear anything remotely traditional. The distinction between the dress of Sabah, Sabah's mother, sister and niece and that of Amal lies in the fact that the women in Sabah's family present themselves as more conservative than Amal. Even though this is not discussed in the film, the fact that Amal is still learning Arabic could suggest that perhaps Amal is of second-generation Arab/Muslim descent and thus is not expected to dress in "traditional" ways. However, Sabah's niece, Souhaire, is also second-generation as she was born in Canada; and outside of her family's gaze, she also transgresses traditional boundaries of dress.

Sabah transgresses traditional boundaries when she develops her relationship with Stephen. Although Nadda empowers Sabah to make her own decisions and ultimately challenges stereotypes of passive Muslim women, the fact that Sabah found her voice only through her relationship with Stephen could suggest to the audience that her decision to acknowledge and exercise her right to choose was facilitated only by her relationship with a white, non-Muslim man. This reinforces Orientalist discourses that claim Muslim women can only obtain their personal power and rescue themselves from oppression by venturing outside the Muslim community and into the liberal White community. However, in an interview Nadda stated: "I didn't want the message to be that all Arab Muslim women need a white guy to liberate them" (Bailey, 2005). There is evidence in the film to support such an interpretation. Throughout the film it is Sabah who chooses and acts upon her decisions. Sabah chooses to go swimming, even though Majid says that "it is inappropriate for Muslim girls to go out half naked in public" (Nadda, 2005). Sabah chooses to meet Stephen at the diner; Sabah chooses to drink wine; Sabah chooses to dance for and sleep with Stephen. Thus, Sabah is the one who "liberates" herself. Stephen is cast in the role of someone who is sympathetic and supportive

rather than a knight who rescues her from her family. Stephen in fact wants to know more about Islam and is constantly asking Sabah about her religion. Upon knowing that their religions are not compatible, Stephen even makes the suggestion to convert to Islam and lovingly purchases a book about Islam. Therefore, Stephen is not a white man trying to civilize Islam, but rather he wishes to be a part of it, and even reminds Sabah that she should not abandon her family because he knows how much they mean to her. But even though Sabah does “liberate” herself, the way in which she wears the veil towards the end of the movie suggests that certain Muslim practices have to give way if Muslims want to find a footing in Western society.

Nadda’s use of the hijab shows how in fact the hijab can be a marker of cultural difference. For example, Sabah does not feel entirely comfortable in her hijab around Stephen, and the more she goes out with him, the more she shows her hair. In addition, when she goes to visit Stephen, the night she dances for him and sleeps with him, she goes to him in a revealing red dress and removes her hijab completely while stating, “I’m willing to make an exception” (Nadda, 2005). A significant part of this movie is devoted to illustrating how two cultures, which are seen as incompatible, can come together in a multicultural society. The film is not simply about the social intimacy between Sabah and Stephen, but their relationship is also a representation of the intimacy between the “Muslim” culture and the “Canadian” culture and if in fact they can mutually co-exist and, more so, find common ground and harmony.

But, in having Sabah completely remove her hijab in order to be intimate with Stephen, the suggestion is that these two cultures cannot come together unless some sacrifice or concession is made, and in this case, the concession is Sabah’s hijab. Even though Sabah continues to wear the hijab up until the end of the film, she still wears it in a fashion that shows a bit of her hair, and is not as obvious a part of her dress as it was at the beginning of the film.

Sabah's treatment of the veil as she becomes more intimate with Stephen echoes observations made by Charles Taylor. In the "Politics of Recognition," Charles Taylor discusses how liberalism's emphasis on every individual's entitlement to the same rights and opportunities has often been established at the expense of what Taylor defines as the "politics of difference", in which the uniqueness of each person is left unrecognized (Taylor, 1994, p.41). In addition, Taylor states how liberalism's commitment to "difference-blind" politics "negates identity by forcing people into a homogenous mold that is untrue to them" (43). Thus, upon contact with each other, different cultures are formed in relation to one another and undergo transformation. Therefore, what needs to be addressed is to what extent should cultures influence or change each other. In the context of Sabah, their traditional culture is influenced by the dominant Western culture, and the most obvious example in the film is the change in Sabah's dress to show more of her hair and body.

In the film, Majid is in a constant fear of the West's influence on their own culture, and continuously comments about the threat of the West, particularly in his reaction to Stephen. Majid's determination to hold on to their traditions indicates a fear of losing cultural ground. Majid's feelings are emphasized in a discussion with his mother when she questions why they became more traditional after their move to Canada. He replies that it was to hold on to their culture. One of the ways in which Majid chooses to hold on to their culture is to ensure that his niece, Souhaire, marries someone who is Arab and Muslim.

The relationship between Souhaire and her suitor, Mustapha, is a subplot to the main story. From the beginning of the film, Souhaire expresses her desire to marry according to her own choice. However, Majid tells Souhaire that "Muslim girls marry who their fathers or uncles tell them to marry" (Nadda, 2005). Thus, Majid presents Mustapha, who is described to

Souhaire as a “progressive” Muslim who wants a marriage that is “50/50.” The scene in which Souhaire meets Mustapha for the first time is an important part within the film, because it portrays to the audience a stereotype about Muslim cultures, that is, that all marriages are arranged. Souhaire greets Mustapha in a black hijab and cloak in which only her face is revealed. This is surprising to her family considering Souhaire is very liberal in terms of what she wears. The fact that Souhaire chooses to disguise herself in traditional Islamic dress with the intention of scaring away her suitor might be taken as evidence that Nadda portrays the veil as a threat and a marker of “difference.” In addition, Souhaire’s refusal to succumb to her uncle’s wishes could also be read as her way of removing herself from traditional Muslim practices, and her need to disassociate herself from the marriage set up could also be seen as a statement that certain Muslim practices are not meant to be practiced in the West. Ironically enough, Souhaire bumps into Mustapha outside a nightclub, and of course she is in “Western” clothing, and it is not until they were outside of traditional Muslim practices was she able to soften towards Mustapha. This suggests that Souhaire may be oppressed by certain cultural practices and that she needs to be in a Western setting in order to feel liberated and agree to a relationship with Mustapha. In addition, Mustapha does not have a long beard nor does he look threatening as many Muslims in the media do. In his Westernized dress Souhaire’s suitor’s Muslim identity is no longer a threat to Souhaire’s freedom.

Nadda’s intention was to create a film “about this woman who decides one day to take control of her life. It’s not about this woman who falls in love and walks away from culture” (“Sabah: A Film by Ruba Nadda”, 2007). So, despite the fact that Nadda has her characters become more influenced by the West, Nadda still wishes to reveal to audiences how traditions can be adapted to Western life. Nadda’s intention is not to reject her culture but to create a film

about a woman who takes control of her life. Sabah takes a stand and decides for herself how best to negotiate cultural differences. "There is often the choice between accepting Western values and preserving cultural traditions. Everyone has to make judgments about how they make their own personal set of values fit with those of the societies around them, regardless of cultural background. Most people make exceptions from time to time. Making exceptions is not the same as giving up your culture. It is simply a part of living in a multicultural society like Canada" ("Sabah: A Film by Ruba Nadda", 2007).

Sabah must negotiate between her family that represents what Western discourses would classify as a "backwards" culture (i.e. Majid playing the "typical" dominant male figure and trying to control his family) and her desire to lead an independent life. Sabah lives in an in-between space. The in-between space tends to be interpreted as a space of vulnerability and confusion, but according to cultural theorists such as Homi K. Bhabha, the state of in-betweenness or third space is a site of empowerment in which one can challenge previously fixed notions of identity and engage in negotiation (Bhabha, 1994, p.148). Sabah takes on a hyphenated Muslim-Canadian identity in the film, which is reflected in the way she maintains her hijab while continuing to date a "foreign" man. Despite her relationship with Stephen, Sabah still participates in the Islamic faith, thus allowing her to be a part of both cultures and create her own identity. Thus, it is important to remember that Sabah and Souhaire do not negate their Muslim identity, but they do revise what it means to be a Muslim by allowing certain "Western" practices into their lives.

Nadda's portrayal of a strong Muslim woman who decides to take control of her life illustrates the way in which Nadda intervenes and revises Western discourses of Muslim women. Cultural theorists such as Stuart Hall argue that cultural identity is not static and cultures are in

constant transformation. He states that cultural identity should be looked at as a production. Hall states, "Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think instead of identity as a 'production' which is never complete and always in process" (Hall, 1994, p.392). Thus, this film is a cultural production that is able to illustrate how identities are in constant transformation, and that stereotypes can be deconstructed and new identities can be produced. Sabah's identity in this film illustrates how Muslim identities are not fixed but are flexible and do evolve. Sabah and Souhaire are members of the Muslim diaspora, and they represent multiple identities that challenge the homogenous and monolithic image of Muslim communities.

Nadda's film is used to contest stereotypes that have labeled Muslim communities as backwards, uncivilized, patriarchal, and terrorists. Nadda also uses the diasporic space to empower Muslim women and illustrate how they can revise the boundaries (if there are any) of what a Muslim woman is expected to be and do, and so ultimately challenging Western discourses. Nadda's mission to question negative representations and bridge cultural divides through a romantic comedy illustrates an effective intervention into Western discourses. Sabah's and Stephen's happy ending provides the hope that different cultures can come together within a multicultural society.

Rooted in the Soil: Canadian Muslims on the Prairies

"Little Mosque on the Prairie gets lots of Buzz" (The Globe and Mail, 2007)! This headline captures the initial reaction to this television sitcom that premiered in the winter of 2007 on CBC, the major Canadian television station. Newspapers, news shows, and magazines helped make this sitcom a success through the mass media hype around it even prior to its debut in January 2007. The first season of eight episodes has even been broadcast on international

networks such as Canal Plus, a French Pay television service. Canal Plus intends to air the show in France as well as French-speaking regions in Switzerland and Africa. Canal Plus is the first international network to purchase this television series, but according to the show's producer, the United States as well as other nations in Europe are looking into this series (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2007). When the first episode premiered, 2.1 million viewers tuned in to watch the show making it a runaway hit, and according to CBC, the network had not had a show that drew so much attention in ten years (International Herald Tribune, 2007). The popularity surrounding Little Mosque on the Prairie made it competitive with top television shows such as Desperate Housewives, which according to CTV, drew in only 1.64 million viewers (CTV, 2004).

Thus, the question that comes to our mind is: Why is Little Mosque on the Prairie receiving so much attention? The show's concept focuses on a group of Muslims and their lives around the local mosque in the small fictional town of Mercy in Saskatchewan. Why would this topic be of such great interest to Canadian viewers, and why would it draw so much commentary from both Muslims and non-Muslims alike in Canada and internationally? To address this question, it is important to point out events occurring around or close to the time of the sitcom's release. For one, this show was created in a post 9/11 atmosphere. Many other events, which were for the most part a response to 9/11, ignited controversy surrounding Muslim communities across the globe. For example, the caricature cartoons of the Prophet Mohamed that were published in September 2005 in a best-selling Danish newspaper had a significant impact around the world, resulting in riots and causing death and destruction (BBC, 2006). In addition, the show aired in the wake of the London suicide bombings in which Islamic extremists who were also British killed 52 commuters. Just months before the show's release, Canada arrested its first

group of “homegrown” terrorists. Given these events, it is probably because a comedy about rural Canadian Muslims seems out of place with the prevailing images and tone of public discourses about Muslims that audiences were interested in the show. In an interview on MSNBC, Rabiya Ahmad from the Council on Islamic Relations speaks to whether this series is funny or infuriating. Ahmad states that popular culture is the way to go when trying to change perceptions of Muslims in Islam because comedy humanizes the “other.” While the situations characters in the series find themselves in are not funny in reality the scenes do showcase the absurdities of the prejudices Muslims face in a post 9/11 climate, and it is best to address these issues in a non-confrontational, non-political way. She continues to discuss how the comedic approach is the reason behind the show’s popularity, and that is because it is an untapped resource for Muslim communities and that now through this series, Muslims are part of an entertainment field (MSNBC, 2007).

Nawaz consciously chose to use comedy in order to dispel stereotypes of Muslims, and this is indicated by her own comments. Talking about her show, Nawaz, a Muslim of Pakistani origin who was born in Liverpool, grew up in Toronto, and relocated to Saskatchewan with her Muslim husband, said: “Comedy is a language that we all speak and comedy brings together universal themes of relationships that every faith community has regardless of its ideological bent. I think it is also a way to heal the wounds and differences” (Cole, 2007). Through comedy, Nawaz’s goal is to have viewers understand her underlying message, which is one of tolerance; and she hopes that “people [will come] to like the characters in the little town of Mercy, Saskatchewan, even the ones they don’t agree with” (Cole, 2007).

Nawaz insists that political commentary within this sitcom are secondary despite the fact that several of the episodes address a wide range of pressing topics such as terrorism, racism,

clash of traditions, religious beliefs and, though Nawaz does not specifically address the veil as Nadda does for Sabah, female Muslim dress and modesty are issues on the show. “I’m not really a political person; I don’t argue Mideast politics,” Nawaz said in one interview. “We want the people to be talking about the characters on the show” (Cole, 2007). In another interview she reiterated: “It’s not really a show that deals with the politics of what’s going on internationally. It deals with the foibles of everyday life, the relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims, and the comedy of everyday material that we deal with in life” (ABC News, 2006).

Though Nawaz does not see herself as a political person, she also created BBQ Muslims in 1995, which proved to be a hit at the Toronto International Film Festival in 1996. In the wake of the Timothy McVeigh bombing in Oklahoma City in 1995, in which Muslims were initially blamed for the act, Nawaz wanted to address how although most Muslims are not perpetrators, they are still accused of being harmful and/or violent simply because of how they are perceived by mainstream society. Nawaz attempts to address the stereotype that all Muslims are terrorists through this political satire. Despite Nawaz’s desire to portray her sitcom simply as a strategy to bridge the cultural divide and show how Muslims and non-Muslims can live together, the series has the potential to make a political impact on society. Both Nadda and Nawaz, through their work, give meaning to the phrase: “the personal is political” (i.e. the experiences of personal lives are defined by a broader political and social setting). Like Nadda, Nawaz addresses issues that are important and relevant to Muslims among themselves and in their relationships with non-Muslim citizens through engaging with the details of the everyday lives of Muslims and pointing out how they are just like everyone else. By making the personal the political, both Nadda and Nawaz are able to reach a wider and more diverse audience and find new ways of looking at politically charged issues.

Mainstream Hollywood cinematic and television depictions of Muslims have presented members of Muslim communities as all the same and have ignored the complexity and multiplicity of Muslim identities. In popular Western culture, Muslim women are either sexualized or oppressed, and Muslim men are controlling and terrorists. Very rarely are they seen as simply wives, husbands, mothers, sisters, brothers, fathers, teachers, or doctors. The point is that Muslims are never seen as individuals who are familiar; rather, they are portrayed as different and threatening. Through this sitcom, Nawaz wishes to reassure audiences that Muslims are just like everyone else.

It is the merging of the personal with the political through humour that makes Nawaz's achievement with Little Mosque on the Prairie a distinctive addition to popular culture. Unlike, other media attempts that portray Muslims in a light-hearted way, such as films like American Dreamz (2006) and Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World (2005), Nawaz's humour does not come at the expense of her Muslim characters, nor does she debunk ideological positions that make up Islam. Rather, by putting her characters into sometimes extreme situations and situations of conflict, Nawaz is then able to reveal the absurdities of mainstream prejudices. Nawaz states: "It rests on my shoulders to get the balance right between entertainment and representing the community in a reasonable way...You have to push the boundaries so you can grow and evolve as a community" (The New York Times, 2006). Thus, by placing these characters in sometimes exaggerated situations, she is able to draw attention to important issues, such as the misrepresentation of Muslims. In the analysis of the series which follows, I will demonstrate how Nawaz uses humour to intervene into the current political climate surrounding Muslims and how she presents alternative images of members of Muslim communities.

Nawaz's deliberate choice to work in the genre of a situation comedy goes beyond the reason of using the universal language of laughter in order to bring people together. Nawaz specifically uses a genre that originated in North American/Western cultures to show that Muslims are not incompatible with the cultures of the West. In an interview, Nawaz discussed how Muslims are not known to be funny or a comic people. Thus, by focusing on comedy in a show about Muslims, Nawaz shatters stereotypes of Muslims and shows that they too can be funny and entertaining (Breaking Down Stereotypes of Fundamentalist Muslims, 2007). While the genre of the situation comedy is present in various cultures, it originated in the West and still has special resonance for North Americans and it remains part of their culture. "Two-thirds of the top rated shows in the history of television have been sitcoms" (Streisand, 1999). Sitcoms from I Love Lucy in the 1950s to Seinfeld and Friends in the 1990s-2000s, have penetrated millions of households, and the reason why they are so popular is that they are "capable of speaking to different viewers on different levels about the same trying circumstances of everyday life" (Streisand, 1999). Thus, Nawaz by portraying the Muslim characters like everyone else in the West who have to deal with family and friends suggests to her audience that it is possible to integrate two "different" cultures. Similar to Nadda's use of the romance story, Nawaz uses situation comedy to suggest the possibility of intimacy and communication between "Muslim" and "Canadian."

In situation comedies such as Seinfeld and Friends, episodes centre on the experiences of a cast of returning characters whose lives find a central point of connection, such as "The Restaurant" in Seinfeld, and "Central Perk" in Friends. Little Mosque on the Prairie follows this basic formula and the central point of connection for her characters is the mosque. Even though this sitcom is based on Nawaz's own experiences living in the Prairies, the fact that it does take

place within the vast landscape of the Canadian West is more than a case of life imitating art. The choice of location also has political implications. By constructing the mosque on Canadian territory; Nawaz is clearly countering claims that Muslims and their culture and institutions have no place in Canadian social and political space. In addition, the choice of using the Prairies creates a more powerful message than if Nawaz were to have the show in Toronto or Montreal, which are self-defined cosmopolitan centers.

Canada has been referred to as the “True North,” the land of white European settlers, a place in which only those from Northern climates can feel comfortable and put down real roots. Nawaz disrupts this image by placing her non-Northern-looking Muslims in the middle of the wide open territory of western Canada which has come to be seen as symbolic of the spirit of Canada. In the wake of 9/11, reactions to mosques have not been positive both inside and outside of Canada. For example, in September 2006, CTV reported vandalism that desecrated a mosque in Winnipeg (CTV, 2006). According to CAIR-CAN, there were fifteen documented acts of desecrations against Islamic mosques/institutions since 9/11 (International Religious Freedom Report, 2004). The acts of vandalism against mosques contest the right of Muslims to practice full citizenship within the host country. “Being a citizen or practicing citizenship means having a stake in the fate of polity to which one wants to belong and imprinting an identity on that space” (Isin and Siemiatycki, 2002, p.208). Many of the heated conflicts between immigrant groups and the dominant Anglo-Saxon groups have risen over the attempts of Muslims to establish collective cultural expressions of their identity, such as places of worship (197).

Hence, by choosing to make the mosque a focal point of her situation comedy, Nawaz is making not so subtle comments about the contestation over the presence of Muslims in Canada. In Episode 1, the audience is introduced to the Muslim community of Mercy, and the fact that

the community is overjoyed that they finally have their own mosque. According to Baber, the previous Imam in Mercy, there is no longer any need to “shop around for a basement” (Nawaz, 2007). The comment that they were looking for basements to house their mosque speaks to the struggles that Muslims have faced and continue to face in regard to setting down roots and legitimizing their cultural presence in Canada.

One of the ways in which Nawaz uses humour to address the topic of the mosque is the fact that the mosque is situated within a Christian church. On one level, it would seem like Nawaz is again indicating how difficult it is for Muslims to find their own space within Western territories and how, despite multiculturalism and the celebration of diversity, at the end of the day minorities must still conform to Judeo-Christian ideals and values. But like Nadda, who has Sabah become intimate with a Western man, who ironically is a carpenter and makes crosses for churches, Nawaz uses the mosque-church arrangement to suggest a possible mutual coexistence and understanding between two religions that are seen as polar opposites. In Episode 6 when the Archdeacon stops by to make sure the Church is flourishing, the faltering Christian congregation is aided by members of the Muslim community who come to their rescue by pretending to be a part of the Church’s congregation. The scene is a perfect example of the show’s promotion of cultural exchange and mutual co-existence.

Nawaz uses humour to address many other potential conflicts, misunderstandings, and stereotypes. A main element within this sitcom is the constant references to 9/11. Since 9/11, aviation security has been a major preoccupation of Western governments. Bill C-36, which became a law in just three months after the attacks on the World Trade Centre, “allows for ‘preventive arrest’; police can hold suspects for up to 72 hours without charge and without any crime having been committed. Police now have wider powers to spy on Canadians and to seize

the property and assets of suspected terrorists” (“Under Suspicion”, 2003). Furthermore, “there is a climate of suspicion that follows people around – not just Arabs or Muslims, but anyone who falls into generic Middle Eastern stereotypes” (Mourtada, 2004, p.24). In Episode 1, audiences are introduced to Amaar, the future Imam of Mercy, in a scene at the airport in which he is held by airport security who fear that he is a terrorist. During this scene, Amaar is speaking on the cell phone to his mother and tells her: “If Dad thinks that’s suicide so be it.” He continues with, “This is Allah’s plan for me” (Nawaz, 2007). This scene echoes events in real life such as when “six imams were hauled off a US Airways plane in Minnesota in November after apparently spooking at least one fellow passenger by murmuring prayers that included the word Allah” (The New York Times, 2006). As serious as such accusations are, Nawaz finds humour in Amaar’s dilemma. At one point Amaar asks: “What is the charge – flying while Muslim?” At another point he asks one of the officers, “Will you deport me to Syria?” and the airport security agent replies, “You don’t get to choose where you’re deported to” (Nawaz, 2007). This exchange really highlights the absurdities of stereotyping and racial profiling of Muslims and is one of the many examples from the series in which Nawaz uses humour to draw attention to serious issues. (A side note to this is how Nawaz deliberately chose a handsome young man to play Amaar to illustrate how not all Imams are Osama Bin-Laden look-alikes.)

The differences in religious beliefs and cultural practices across Muslim communities are depicted in the choice of characters for the show. One such difference is demonstrated in the tug-of-war between Baber, who is the “typical” Muslim religious extremist and Amaar, who is, as Rayaana puts it, a progressive Muslim. Rayaana is a medical doctor and a very outspoken Muslim woman throughout the series. Episode 2 introduces a pressing issue within Muslim communities in Canada and elsewhere. In the episode, Baber wishes to construct a barrier to separate the men

from the women during prayer. Rayaana argues against the barrier by reminding the community that during the life of the Prophet, men and women were able to pray together, and that even women had the opportunity to speak up in the mosque. Rayaana's reminder of how the practice of Islam during the Prophet's time was different from what Barber is proposing, picks up on comments made in the earlier sections of this paper about the way in which Islam is sometimes practiced according to various cultural traditions that are not necessarily a reflection of Islam, but are only passed on because they are entrenched within specific cultural traditions. In an earlier documentary work titled Me and the Mosque (2005), Nawaz took up the issue of the separation of men and women during worship in the mosque more fully. Comedy ensues when Nawaz extends the conflict around the barrier in the mosque to the disagreement between Sarah, the White Muslim convert, and her husband Yasir, who loses his bed partner (briefly) because he does not go against the idea of the barrier.

At the resolution of the conflict in the episode, Amaar states that the barrier has no theological validity. However, despite not having validity through the Qur'an, Amaar agrees to keep the barrier but only partially. Amaar says that the women can choose whether to sit behind the barrier or not, which proves to be a satisfactory ending because it speaks to the needs of the different perspectives within Muslim communities and the right of Muslims to practice Islam as they choose. This episode makes two important points: one is that within Muslim communities, differences in beliefs and practice do exist; the other is that women do in fact have a voice in Islam. A self-styled feminist Muslim, Rayaana's voice is dominant throughout the series

The series episodes poke fun at fundamentalism and extremism in both Muslim and non-Muslim spaces through the character of Barber. He preaches that the West is a threat and that "liquor", American Idol, and Canadian idol are traps designed to seduce Muslims into "evil"

practices, and that the enemy is within the kitchen (Nawaz, 2007), a humorous take on how Western governments started using slogans such as “enemies/strangers within our gates” and “axis of evil” to further marginalize Muslim immigrants post-9/11. Baber’s fear-mongering comes out of his fear for his own teenage daughter. In one episode she approaches him in a revealing outfit she plans to wear in a marathon. Baber responds to this by saying she looks “like a Protestant” (Nawaz, 2007). In this scene and others, the debate over what constitutes modest dress is central to the series. For example, at one point Fatima and Rayaana are set on swimming in the public pool and discuss the possibility of recruiting a female instructor. When they fail to secure a female instructor, Fatima, out of an attempt to observe modesty, wears an Islamic swimsuit that covers her from scalp to ankle, which in the episode is humorously identified as a “burqini” (as in “burqa” plus “bikini”). The fact that it is the two women who are most vocal in this series who are seen attempting to negotiate matters of dress, modesty, and the possibility that they could extend their range of physical pursuits to engage in activities not traditionally sanctioned for Muslim women, indicates that the show is making powerful statements about the way in which women can still don “traditional” wear and remain politically active in their communities.

Despite Nawaz’s use of humour as a way to dispel stereotypes and encourage dialogue between “Muslims” and “Canadians,” the show has received negative criticism from both non-Muslims and Muslims. In the article, “The little Mosque that couldn’t,” Mark Steyn dismisses the series as “Canadophobic” and claims that it “operates to white stereotypes” (Steyn, 2007). Steyn’s observation does not seem all that credible in light of the fact that Nawaz makes extra effort in all the episodes to exaggerate the foibles of her characters. It then becomes questionable for a critic to look for direct connections between caricatures and real people. For example, the

scene from Episode 1 in which the hick who comes across Muslims praying and immediately dials the “terrorist hotline” to report what he saw demonstrates the way in which Nawaz exaggerates situations and characters to bring her point home to her audience. Muslims, such as Tarek Fatah, who is founder of the Muslim Canadian Congress and host of the television show “Muslim Chronicles,” argues that Little Mosque on the Prairie presents “a completely false picture of the Muslim community” and that “CBC has validated the image painted by Islamist groups that Muslim lives revolve around mosques – nothing else” (Fatah and Hassan, 2007). Fatah goes on to argue that Nawaz’s use of exaggerated comedy in order to challenge Muslim stereotypes is simply not sufficient. He states that if “CBC was sincerely trying to be inclusive in bringing Canada’s Muslims into the picture, then we suggest they include Muslim characters in their regular sitcoms or shows, not make a farce of our community and present it as an act of generosity” (Fatah and Hassan, 2007). Fatah, similar to Bannerji, critiques multiculturalism. Fatah discusses how the celebration of one group or the focus on one group only further isolates them from the rest of society. Thus, the conclusion is that by focusing on the Muslim community, and placing emphasis on their lives in a post 9/11 world, Nawaz is only highlighting the differences between non-Muslim and Muslims even more. Several points can be made to counter this argument. Nawaz’s choice of using the medium of a situation comedy is in fact to illustrate how Muslims and non-Muslims are similar. In addition, Nawaz focuses on Muslim experiences in the Prairies to illustrate the absurdities that exist within our current society, and thus she uses her show as a mechanism to possibly promote political audiences and bring about social change.

Beyond the Veil: An Alternative Vision of Muslim Female Sexuality

Most Muslim novelists, whether they are from India, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, or Sudan, have written novels about Islam's encounter with the West. Whether the stories take place at home or in the host country, they always centre around identity crises and cultural survival (Majid, 2002, p.B11). As I have been arguing, Sabah and Little Mosque on the Prairie intervene into Islamophobic and Western discourses and challenge Western representations of Muslim communities through romantic comedy and situation comedy. These cultural productions also illustrate how "Muslims" and "Canadians" can coexist in a multicultural Canada; and their characters experience identity and cultural struggles as a result of contact with the West. In a shift from the emphasis in Ruba Nadda's and Zārqa Nawaz's work, Farzana Doctor, who is an Indo-Muslim-Canadian, does not speak to issues of Islamophobia or representations of the Muslim communities post 9/11 in her novel; rather, she takes an unlikely standpoint and focuses on the theme of sexuality through her portrayal of the experience of her main characters.

An important reason to include Doctor's cultural production within this paper is to acknowledge an emerging literary tradition of Muslim fiction in English. Amin Malak describes the establishment of Muslim fiction in English as a "belated self-representation...and this applies...to practically almost all colonized, 'third worldists'" (Malak, 1997, p.19). Even though Canada's second largest religion is Islam, there is no significant fiction published writing by Muslim-Canadian novelists that has emerged in the body of works labeled immigrant fiction. Thus, Stealing Nasreen is groundbreaking. The incorporation of this novel into the analysis can also serve as a way of making space for openness and diversity and giving voice to individuals who are usually silenced and spoken for, even by members within own marginalized

communities. As Doctor puts it, “I want to write stories about people who are new to this country, about South Asian lesbians, about marginalized people because they don’t get a lot of space in literature” (Davis, 2007).

As stated in the Introduction, a major goal of to this paper is to provide a space in which Muslim women can vocalize their thoughts and experiences and challenge what they believe needs to be addressed. Though Doctor does not challenge Islamophobic discourses, she does intervene to a certain extent into representations of Muslim women, specifically in regard to popular perceptions of Muslim female sexuality within both the West and Islam. In addition, in not focusing on the divide between “Muslim” and “Canadian” post 9/11, Doctor is also hinting that Muslim identity is not just about international headlines of violence and terrorism. Similar to Sabah, Stealing Nasreen illustrates how Muslim women do have sexual agency, even though aspects of religious tradition and Western perceptions may stifle their expressions of their desires.

Nineteenth century colonial discourses have observed and read the veiled woman’s body through “fantasies of sexual possession or through evocations of hidden beauty and desirability” (MacDonald , 2006, p.20). Spaces such as the harem were both fascinating and repelling to the West. The harem presented a space in which men could fantasize about seduction and ground their sexual fantasies, but it also represented an uncivilized and barbaric space which limited women’s freedom to interchange with men. Therefore, women’s segregation from men was seen as evidence that women were meant to be passive and silent. The harem and the practice of veiling both became symbols of Muslim women’s oppression, a fact that, ironically, made them more desirable and fixed them as objects of the Western gaze.

Current post-feminist discourses argue that female sexual agency is equated with visibility and openness of the body. For example, a show such as Sex and the City in which four females who are glamorous, whose body parts are usually visible, and who openly discuss their sexual desires is hailed as a liberating show that demonstrates how far women have come in embracing their sexuality. Hence, “[w]ithin Western traditions that read both sexual availability and (more recently) sexual self-expression against displays of the body, veiling has operated as a primary signifier of the widely publicised suppression of female Muslim sexuality” (13). For example, in Beneath the Veil when Saira Shah goes to Taliban-controlled Afghanistan and enters the underground beauty parlor, she comments: “I’ve entered a world where I’m no longer allowed to paint my nails, to fly a kite, or to go to the cinema, where women have become invisible,” she was emphasizing that Muslim women have to keep their beauty hidden; and she makes a connection between hidden beauty and repressed or controlled sexuality (Harrison, 2001). She thus sets up an opposition between the West’s liberal woman, who is able to express her beauty and act upon her desires and Islam’s suppressed woman, who must hide her beauty and contain her desires. As mentioned in previous chapters, the “problems” that the West has identified with Islam do not necessarily exist in the “true” practice of Islam. Previous chapters have noted that certain traditions and patriarchal cultures have reinterpreted Islam to suit their own needs.

According to feminist Muslim critics such as Nawal El Saadawi, Islam, at least in its Qur’anic origins, stresses the appropriateness of sexual fulfillment for both sexes (Salti, 1997, p.200). It is in certain practices of Shari’a law that Muslim women’s sexualities are controlled because of patriarchal structures that dictate what happens in daily life. As Myra Macdonald has argued:

Western assumptions about the female body and sexuality conscript Muslim women into two potential forms of sexual silencing. Denied sexual agency in the “shroud-like” representations of their veiled state, their “natural,” unveiled bodies are also circumscribed by codes of modesty that confirm their apparent exclusion from post-feminist forms of sexual liberation. (Macdonald, 2006, p.13)

But in Stealing Nasreen, Farzana Doctor intervenes into this practice of silencing, and particularly through her depiction of the experiences of a young Muslim woman who is a lesbian, challenges fixed ideas about Muslim women’s sexuality.

Islam acknowledges sexuality, and the presence of homosexuality; however, the extent to which open dialogue on sexuality in public, multi-gendered spaces is allowed is minimal compared to what has recently become possible in Western societies. The main reason is that sex is considered to be a taboo subject, and such topics have been deemed private or are suppressed in Islamic societies, specifically in Arab countries, and especially in regard to homosexuality. “Certain Islamic laws and readings of the Qur’an have attempted to demonize and criminalize homosexuality...all Arab countries, with the exception of Lebanon – the only country that is not ruled by shari’ah – criminalize homosexual acts though in varying degrees and different ways” (Salti, 1997, p.155). However, much of what determines the extent of persecution of homosexuals depends on the way in which Quran’ic passages and hadith excerpts have been interpreted, and also how interpretations are shaped by economic, political, religious, and social realities” (155). Thus, given how mainstream societies react towards homosexuality it would seem impossible to reconcile Islam and homosexuality. However, there are revisionists who have discussed ways in which to find a positive space for homosexuality within the Qur’an. Revisionists do not dispute the Qur’an but rather reread it, and consequently, they open up the gates to new interpretations of sexuality in Islamic discourses. For example, Nawal El-Saadawi

emphasizes that lesbianism is not even mentioned in the Qur'an and therefore it cannot be punished (200).

However, according to mainstream Muslim society, homosexuality is not permitted within Islam. The Qur'an states,

And (remember) Lut (Lot), when he said to his people: "Do you commit the worst sin such as none preceding you has committed in the Alamin (mankind and jinn)? Verily, you practice your lusts on men instead of women. Nay, but you are a people transgressing beyond bounds (by committing great sins)." Then We saved him and his family, except his wife; she was of those who remained behind (in the torment). And We rained down on them a rain (of stones). Then see what was the end of the Mujrimun (criminals, polytheists, sinners). (Surah 7:80-84)

Muslims who are homosexual state that it is not entirely clear if the passage above indicates whether homosexuality is permitted within Islam or not. There are progressive Muslims who contend that the Qur'an does not explicitly portray a strong negative attitude against homosexual acts. Many Muslims challenge the authenticity of passages that ban homosexuality and claim that interpretations vary and that because the exact truth is not known, homosexuality must not be condemned (Minwalla et al., 2005, p.119).

The debate surrounding homosexuality in Islam is complex. Most Imams state that homosexuality is a sin in the Qur'an, while other Imams state that as long as it is kept within the private realm it is permitted (Hekma, 2002, p.237). The issue of sexuality, whether it be heterosexual or homosexual, is commonly considered a private topic, and therefore not to be discussed in public, and certainly not to be displayed. Female sexualities have often been suppressed due to the belief that women's bodies and beauty are great temptations that only weaken the power of men. Thus, female sexuality is suppressed (Leo, 2005, p.135). In addition, because Islamic societies are generally patriarchal, men follow their own interpretations of the Qur'an, and in some cases it is only the men who are allowed to have sexual rights over women,

and only men who are allowed to experience the pleasure of their sexualities (136). Despite the revisionists who are reclaiming sexuality in Islam and contesting patriarchal norms, contemporary Islamic attitudes and Western discourses still seem to ignore the sexual desires of Muslim women (Abukhalil, 1997).

In Stealing Nasreen, Doctor touches upon themes of displacement, desire, assimilation, and belonging. Quill and Quire describes the novel as a “riveting read” and “complex by adding sex and desire to the angst-filled immigrant experience” (Lee, 2007). Shaffiq and Salma are an immigrant couple who move to Toronto from Mumbai and must struggle with adjusting to “Canadian” life. Both Shaffiq and Salma encounter barriers in terms of getting employment. Shaffiq, who was an accountant in India, now works the night shift as a janitor, and Salma, who was a teacher, cannot teach in Canada until she upgrades her teaching credentials. However, for the remainder of this section, the emphasis will be placed on the novel’s treatment of Salma’s and Nasreen’s (who is an Indo-Canadian Muslim lesbian) sexualities and how their identities and relationships contravene popular Western and Islamic knowledge about Muslims and their attitudes toward sex and sexual expression.

As mentioned above, Islamic societies condemn practices of homosexuality, and in many situations, Muslim refugees flee their home countries because of the threat they face for practicing homosexuality (Cardona, 2006). Thus, this reinforces the idea that Muslims must not reveal their sexual identities in public, especially their homosexual identities. Such codes of conduct may portray to the Western world that Muslims are sexually repressed, especially the women. The fact that many countries in the Middle East still do not accept homosexuality, illustrates a way in which there is a clash between the West and Islam, wherein individuals in the West practice “full” freedom, while in Islam individuals must repress certain sexual identities.

By having Salma and Nasreen, two Muslim women, engage in lesbian acts within Canada, Doctor challenges Western and Islamic perceptions of what a “Muslim woman” represents, and thus challenges the common sense opposition between the “liberated” Western woman and the “oppressed” Muslim woman. However, Doctor also reinforces certain perceptions of sexuality within this novel.

The popular perception of “the Muslim woman” is that she is very meticulous about observing modesty and chastity, but that does not necessarily mean she is asexual. Nawal El-Saadawi reminds readers that sexual desire is appropriate for both males and females within Islam (Salti, 1997, 200). The practice of veiling illustrates how a woman’s sexuality, according to Islam, is sacred, and even their lives within the harem was meant for their protection and their security – not as a repressive measure. As mentioned above, certain Islamic patriarchal practices have suppressed female sexuality in an effort to make sure females do not tempt their counterparts; and in some cultures, genital mutilation has been used in an effort to limit sexual pleasures. Unfortunately, such practices are the ones that get broadcast in the West, validating assumptions are that all Muslim women are oppressed and are in need of sexual liberation.

During their Gujarati lessons, Salma, who is the wife of Shaffiq, becomes attracted to her student, Nasreen, who is a psychologist. The book centres around an impulsive kiss that Salma and Nasreen share. This very kiss contravenes the idea that Muslim women should not express their sexual desires, especially homosexual desire. Though Salma is married to Shaffiq, she still feels an attraction to Nasreen that reminds her of her past lesbian relationship in India. The fact that Salma ended her past relationship because of the restrictions she and her lover had to face reestablishes the cultural expectations that are prevalent in day-to-day life in patriarchal societies. In a conversation with Nasreen, Salma expresses her desire for Raj, who was her

girlfriend in India, but states that it was not possible for them to resume their relationship. Salma states, "Well, we did care about each other, but we both knew that it was only temporary, that it wouldn't last long, or couldn't last very long" (Doctor, 2007, p.156). Salma continues, "I made the decision to put a stop to it based on what the reality was then" (157). Thus, while living in India, Salma could not continue her relationship with Raj. For example, Salma had to constantly lie to her family about her relationship and in many situations she rejected potential suitors because of her sexual orientation. Her marriage to Shaffiq does not make her less of a lesbian; however, in order to conform to traditional expectations, Salma was expected to be in a heterosexual relationship.

Salma is able to rekindle her attraction to women when she is in Canada because she is able to disregard the traditionalist constraints of her home country. For example, in the scene where Salma and Nasreen kiss, it is Salma who initiates the kiss. "She [Salma] reaches out to touch Nasreen's cheek and without thinking, without looking for Nasreen's startled reaction, presses her mouth against her soft lips" (157). Thus, Salma breaks loose and is able to take hold of her desires but only in Canada, and only with a "Canadianized" woman.

Common Western perceptions have constructed the sexually liberated woman as visible to the eye and not oppressed, and thus in Western countries women are believed to have sexual agency. Angel, who is Ravi's (Shaffiq's friend) girlfriend, portrays a liberal "Western" woman of Italian background. Angel and Ravi sleep together, and are able to express their desires within public space. For example, when Angel and Ravi are visiting Salma and Shaffiq, Shaffiq complains that Angel and Ravi are displaying too much public affection and that their behaviour is inappropriate. "He [Ravi] reaches over and takes Angie's hand in his, rubbing her fingers with his palm, as though the apartment is too cold for them. She leans over and gives him a quick kiss

on his lips...He [Shaffiq] wonders if his daughters should be watching the display of affection” (Doctor, 2007, p.107). Such a scene makes it clear that it is the Western culture that “allows” sexual expression. Even though Ravi is a recent immigrant himself from India, the fact that he is with a “Western” woman, allows him to become part of that sexual liberation.

Nasreen’s character also comes from a Muslim background and yet still discusses her desire to be in a lesbian relationship. Doctor truly transgresses the common perception of the “Muslim woman” identity through Nasreen’s character. For example, the love scene between Nasreen and her ex-girlfriend in her apartment is sexually charged:

She feels strong arms pulling her, hot breath on her neck and then soft lips on her cheek, forehead, and mouth. Nasreen becomes uprooted, Connie, the gale force wind snatching her up. Caught in this tornado, there is only motion now, the force of legs and arms, the crush of eager lips and hungry mouths, the whoosh of clothing being unzipped, unbuttoned and discarded. (137)

This passage encompasses the release of Nasreen’s sexual desires. She is very comfortable with her identity as a lesbian, and refuses to be with someone who would not be as comfortable as she is, which is one of the reasons why she never pursued a relationship with Salma. Nasreen also explores her sexual desires by meeting different women at gay nightclubs. Thus, Nasreen becomes very visible in terms of her sexual identity. In addition, by being a lesbian, she challenges the common Muslim perception that women are a distraction for men, and therefore must be suppressed. For example, Shaffiq’s obsession with Nasreen is neither romantic nor sexual. The fact that Nasreen is also “Canadianized” illustrates her ability to express her sexuality in ways that Salma could not.

Doctor does maintain certain Western discourses on Muslim sexuality, but she does to a certain extent intervene within these discourses. By even acknowledging and letting these characters express their sexual desires is a way to open up the dialogue towards sexuality within

Islam. In addition, Salma's and Nasreen's homosexuality suggests that there are Muslims who redefine the conceptualization of what it means to be a "Muslim woman." Thus, through Stealing Nasreen, Doctor intervenes into popular Western and Islamic discourses by challenging the notion that the "Muslim woman" and Muslim identity do not have space for issues of sexuality and are not sexually liberated.

Conclusion

It has been discussed how Islam and the Muslim population continue to evoke images of the barbaric and uncivilized in the Western imagination and furthermore that Muslim women are targeted as subjects that must be liberated from a hostile religion that only oppresses its women. These portrayals and perceptions originated in colonial times, but they continue to have currency in contemporary times despite the fact that Muslim communities have undergone and are undergoing constant transformation and are heterogeneous. Orientalist/colonialist perspectives/discourses that lumped Muslim communities in Western countries together as a “single, monolithic religious immigrant community with few class and race differences (Khan, 2002, p.17) are now reproduced in Islamophobic discourse. The stereotypes of the oppressed Muslim woman behind the veil have resulted in the idea that Islam is the cause of all problems Muslims face (13). The construction of Muslims as a homogeneous, unchanging group in society has only reinforced their “difference” from the “norm” in the so-called Canadian multicultural society and has played a significant role in the erection of barriers to their integration into Canada.

Muslim women are often spoken for, and rarely have they had the opportunity to speak for themselves. The media and prevailing social discourses have often stifled the voices of many of these women, and voices within Muslim communities at large. Thus, by introducing the cultural productions of Muslim women, the goal has been to demonstrate the ways in which Muslim women express themselves and contest stereotypical portrayals of the “Muslim” identity.

This Major Research Paper has explored the history of Muslim migration to and settlement experiences in Canada. Specifically, in a post-9/11 Islamophobic climate, the presence of Muslims in Canada has been questioned and mainstream media portray Muslims to

be enemies/strangers within “our” gates. Consequently, many Muslims have been targeted for hate crimes. Muslim women, especially immediately after 9/11, have lived in fear because of their visibility through the hijabs, and could not safely go about their day-to-day lives. Mosques across the country were vandalized and an increase in surveillance led many Muslims to be questioned for security reasons. Religious and/or cultural practices of Muslim communities have now been interpreted as threats to Canada’s national security, and, Shari’a law, specifically, was decried as an example of Islamic cultural practices that posed a threat to the rights enshrined in Canada’s Charter of Rights and Freedoms. News headlines in newspapers around the world questioned the place of Muslims in Western societies, and associated Muslims with “backward,” “undemocratic” and “violent” traditions that would only threaten the Western nations that have become host to Muslim communities.

Because the backwardness of many Muslim societies is explained through the treatment of Muslim women, it is important to provide a space that shows how Muslim women are not all “oppressed” and in fact do have voices that can challenge dominant discourses. Edward Said argues that “To the extent that Islam is known about today, it is known principally in the form given it by the mass media: not only radio, films and TV, but also textbooks, magazines and best-selling, high quality novels” (Said, 1980, p.490). Hence, the decision to highlight specific cultural productions by Muslim women marks an attempt to illustrate how they can intervene into the dominant discourses that have prevailed so far in Western media.

Thus, this Major Research Paper has showcased a film, a television sitcom, and a novel that are meant to give voice to a community that has been underrepresented, and allows members of this community to take a stand on negative portrayals of Muslims in Western societies. Through engaging in the discussion about the constructions of Islamophobia, the veil, and “the

Muslim Woman,” the vast and diverse realities of Muslims come to the forefront, and it is through these voices that the opportunity arises to start deconstructing stereotypes and possibly begin to bridge the cultural and “civilizational” divide articulated by Samuel Huntington. In addition, by drawing attention to the voices of Muslim women, and by presenting their work, this Major Research Paper potentially advances the role these women have within the realm of Canadian popular culture and literature. Their works now redefine the national corpus of Canadian film/television and Canadian fiction and thus Muslim women are truly becoming active members within Canadian multicultural society. This Major Research Paper focused on productions by Ruba Nadda, Zarqa Nawaz, and Farzana Doctor. In each of their own unique ways they have successfully challenged issues of Islamophobia, the veil, and the construction of “the Muslim woman’s” sexuality.

In Sabah, Nadda sidesteps the common portrayal of Muslims as terrorists by successfully portraying a more familial side to Muslim communities. Through the mode of a love story, Nadda empowers the lead character, Sabah, by having her take control of her own life and pursue her desires despite but also within the traditions of her Muslim family. In a telling paradox, Sabah’s transgression of dominant “Muslim” boundaries is represented through her re-appropriation of the veil. In Little Mosque on the Prairie, Nawaz uses humour and comedy to diffuse hostilities and break down barriers between the “West” and “Islam.” Unlike Nadda, Nawaz does make references to 9/11 and the experiences Muslims face in a post 9/11 climate; however, Nawaz uses these experiences, and even exaggerates these experiences, in order to reveal the absurdities of the prejudices against Muslims and hopefully her comedic turn will allow audiences to stop and think seriously about prejudice and racism against Muslims. Farzana Doctor’s contribution within this field is to bring a topic that is usually suppressed to the

forefront through her novel that addresses sexuality and desire within the Muslim community. Although the story focuses on a few Muslims, the idea of this novel is to question the sexual stereotypes that have been ascribed to Muslims, specifically Muslim women, and challenge the common depiction of the “passive” Muslim woman.

Cultural productions have the power to begin social transformations. Thus, through their work, Muslim women have the opportunity to initiate change and allow the public to hear their voices. In Sabah, Little Mosque on the Prairie, and Stealing Nasreen, mainstream society has the opportunity to rethink stereotypes that have been perpetuated by the media politicians and other sources. In addition, these cultural productions by female Muslim Canadians have become ways in which Muslims have the chance to publicly self-represent their diverse identities and comment on both political and social issues affecting/important to Muslim communities. Through these initiatives, Muslims are creating their own place within Canada, and are consequently becoming part of the Canadian national identity and social and political landscape.

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