



Beyond the Veil: Reimagining Muslim Women's Identities in the Global South

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Abstract— *When addressing the 'gender question,' a key concept that emerges is diversity, particularly within marginalised and underrepresented groups. One such group is Muslim women, whose experiences are often discussed in public and academic discourse, yet rarely centred. This paper seeks to examine the gender stereotypes faced by Muslim women, both within their communities and from external societal structures. It further explores how power dynamics and patriarchal frameworks influence the formation and negotiation of Muslim women's identities. Recognising the complexity of the term 'Muslim women', the paper will highlight the diversity and heterogeneity within this category, including women's lived experiences across different social, economic, and geographical contexts. Special attention will be given to the voices of both indigenous and migrant Muslim women, with a particular focus on the Global South. The study will engage with contemporary Muslim women writers and scholars contributing to a growing body of feminist Muslim scholarship, challenging dominant narratives and reclaiming space within both religious and feminist discourses. Ultimately, the paper aims to foreground the agency of Muslim women as they actively engage in the process of redefining and reclaiming their identities in the face of intersecting forms of marginalisation.*



Keywords— *Stereotypes, Identity, Muslimah, Gender, Voiceless, Diversity.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Muslim Woman is a highly contested topic. A simple definition would be a woman who believes in the teachings of the Quran and Hadith, thus follows Islam as her religion. Over the years, this term has become associated with multiple stereotypes that have become part of its definition, making it complex and contentious. Today, the term comes with multiple connotations. When we talk about Muslim women, we are not talking about a monolithic group but a mosaic of different cultures, traditions, colours, races and identities. That is the case with Muslims in general. Mohsin Hamid uses an interesting analogy to talk about this tendency to put Muslims, in general, and Muslim women, in particular, in a well-defined category. He says:

“I had just published a novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, and as I travelled I was struck by the large number of interviewers and of audience members at Q&As who spoke of Islam as a

monolithic thing, as if Islam referred to a self-contained and clearly defined world, a sort of Microsoft Windows, obviously different from, and considerably incompatible with the Apple OS X-like operating system of "the West".”

The Muslim world has a population exceeding one billion. In 2015, it was 1.8 billion with Muslims forming 24% of the world's population and being the second largest religion in the world after Christianity. Muslim women form a considerable part of the population. This population is spread across the globe. So categorising them as a rigid group is highly problematic. The women come from multiple backgrounds - social and economic – as well as multiple cultures and traditions. Their lived experiences are different in accordance with their conditions. Placing such a diverse group in one category is questionable. Some come from war-torn zones, some are refugees, some are uneducated, some are from First World countries, and some

are highly paid professionals. It is an eclectic group of women who come from diverse cultures, races, classes, and experiences.

The stereotypes, though, put them in a straitjacket, creating an image of an oppressed group of women lacking agency. Over the years, we have seen numerous books written about Muslim women or women in Islam. These works have either been written by men or by somebody from the West as an instruction manual for Muslim women. The patriarchal male writers have only talked about the role of women in the Quran and the status she has in Islam, but no work has been done about her lived reality as a woman. These books tell how the ideal Muslim woman should be, how she should behave and what her perspective should be. The West, on the other hand, has seen her as oppressed, a victim who needs to be saved or brainwashed with no agency of her own. Narratives from Western academia have also shown her in the same light. These works may have high value academically, but they do nothing for the women they talk about. Her individual experiences and struggles, her lived reality, were missing from the entire debate, of which she is the central character.

The term *Global South* refers to regions in Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East that have been historically marginalised by colonial domination, imperialism, and global capitalist systems. Within these regions, Muslim women occupy complex and often contested social spaces. Their identities are not fixed or monolithic but are shaped by an intricate web of intersecting factors, including race, gender, class, economic conditions, colonial histories, cultural traditions, religious beliefs, and the influence of global power structures. This complexity is best understood through the lens of *intersectionality*, a framework that examines how multiple forms of oppression and privilege interact to shape individual and collective experiences. For Muslim women in the Global South, identity formation is therefore a dynamic process influenced by both local traditions and global narratives, often involving the negotiation of power across cultural, religious, and geopolitical boundaries.

Who is a Muslim woman? On the surface, this may appear to be a simple question, but the image it evokes is burdened with deeply embedded connotations. Media representations, political discourse, and global narratives have produced and perpetuated a host of stereotypes that obscure the lived realities of Muslim women across different regions and cultures. The term "Muslim woman" has, over time, become a stereotype in itself—one that often conjures an image of a voiceless, oppressed, burqa-clad figure in need of saving. This reductive portrayal is deeply problematic and stands in stark contrast to the way other religious identities, such as

"Hindu woman," are perceived more neutrally—as descriptors of belief rather than markers of victimhood. The dominant image of the Muslim woman erases the diversity, agency, and complexity of millions of women who identify as Muslim but do not conform to this narrow and imposed identity. It is an unjust and gross misrepresentation that denies these women their individuality, lived experiences, and accomplishments. There is far more to being a Muslim woman than the stereotype allows, and challenging this monolithic portrayal is essential to recognising their full humanity.

The image of the oppressed woman clad in a black burqa has become a dominant and oversimplified symbol often associated with the term "Muslim woman." But is this representation justified? The veiled Muslim woman has evolved into a visual shorthand for Islam itself, frequently deployed in media, films, literature, and political discourse to evoke a sense of victimhood, passivity, or even threat. This symbol is not neutral—it carries ideological weight and is used to support particular narratives, often to portray Islam as inherently regressive or patriarchal. Yet, millions of Muslim women across the world do not relate to this image; in fact, many feel suffocated by it. The stereotype flattens an incredibly diverse group, erasing differences in geography, culture, personal belief, and lived experience.

Another prevailing stereotype is that Muslim women are inherently oppressed or universally subjected to discrimination. While it is true that many Muslim women face oppression, this reality is not exclusive to Islam. Gender-based oppression is a global phenomenon that transcends religious, racial, and national boundaries. The challenges faced by Muslim women must be contextualised within broader social, political, and economic structures, not reduced to their faith alone. To single out Islam as the root cause of women's oppression is both inaccurate and intellectually dishonest. Muslim women's experiences, like those of all women, are shaped by multiple, intersecting factors and deserve to be understood in their full complexity.

An in-depth analysis of Muslim women and their surroundings will bring to light the fact that oppression, wherever it is present, is not religious but patriarchal or cultural and often related to issues like poverty and illiteracy. It is also related to power politics. Patriarchy and those in power use religion as a means to justify their actions and maintain control. As we see in Tehmina Durrani's work, *My Feudal Lord*, Mustafa Khar uses religion to control his wife and maintain an upper hand. Lila Abu Lughod, in the Introduction to her seminal work, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, talks about an Egyptian woman named Zainab who is shocked to learn that the

world believes Islam is oppressing her and other Muslim women. She believes it is the government, from her experiences and lived reality. The experiences of most Muslim women are as varied as these two women.

The distinction between culture and religion is often blurred, leading to widespread misconceptions about Muslim practices and beliefs. Many customs labelled as "Islamic" — such as female genital mutilation (FGM) or the practice of triple talaq — are rooted in cultural traditions rather than religious doctrine. When such practices are attributed solely to Islam, it reinforces harmful stereotypes and obscures the nuanced realities of Muslim women's lives. These generalisations can only be challenged by foregrounding the diversity that exists among Muslim women. They are not a homogenous group defined by veiling or victimhood; they are mothers, educators, doctors, scientists, politicians, athletes, artists, and more, contributing meaningfully to every facet of society across the globe.

Lamia Ben Youssef Zayzafoon, in her influential work *The Production of the Muslim Woman: Negotiating Text, History and Ideology*, argues that the category of the "Muslim woman" is an ideological construction, an 'invention' produced through both Western and Eastern discourses. She contends that this category is often instrumentalised to serve specific political and ideological purposes, stripping Muslim women of their individuality and context. Zayzafoon emphasises that Muslim women form a heterogeneous group shaped by differences in race, class, geography, and education, and must be recognised as such (Zayzafoon, 3). This perspective highlights the urgent need to move beyond monolithic representations and engage with the lived experiences of Muslim women in their full diversity.

For far too long, Muslim women have been excluded from the debates and discussions that concern their own identities and lived realities. To understand the true diversity of their experiences, Muslim women must be given platforms to speak for themselves and represent their narratives. The first step toward achieving gender equality is ensuring that women are included in the discourse, not merely spoken about, but actively speaking. Muslim women are far more complex and multidimensional than the preconceived notions and stereotypes that often define them in public and academic discourses.

In the field of social psychology, a *stereotype* is typically defined as an overgeneralized belief about a particular group of people. The term has Greek etymological roots: *stereos*, meaning solid, and *typos*, meaning impression, suggesting a fixed, unchanging image. The concept gained prominence in modern psychology through the work of

American journalist Walter Lippmann, who, in his influential book *Public Opinion* (1922), explored how stereotypes shape our understanding of the world. Lippmann argued that "the subtlest and most pervasive of all influences are those which create and maintain the repertory of stereotypes. We are told about the world before we see it. We imagine most things before we experience them. And those pre-conceptions, unless education has made them acutely aware, govern deeply the whole process of perception" (Lippmann, 89–90). This insight helps explain why the image of the "oppressed Muslim woman" persists so strongly—it is a deeply embedded mental construct, reinforced over time by education, media, and political discourse, often without direct engagement with real Muslim women's voices or experiences.

Similarly, society harbours a set of pre-conceived notions about Muslim women, regardless of whether individuals have personally interacted with them. These assumptions shape and often limit people's perceptions. A stereotype never exists in isolation; it typically leads to prejudice and categorisation. By definition, a stereotype is an expectation imposed on a group's traits, personalities, or abilities. Mike Cardwell defines it as "a fixed, over-generalised belief about a particular group or class of people" (Cardwell, 1996). In the case of Muslim women, the stereotype of the oppressed, veiled woman is an over-generalisation that erases the diversity and individuality within the group. This stereotyping often extends to Muslim men as well, who are frequently portrayed as villains, misogynists, oppressors, or terrorists.

Despite these pervasive stereotypes, many inspiring Muslim women are actively dismantling these false narratives through various media—literature, fashion, social media, traditional media, and politics. While it is true that women face oppression globally, this oppression is not unique to Islam nor limited to Muslim women. Inequality affects women across all religions and cultures. Feminism, as a movement, emerged to challenge this universal inequality, transcending divisions of class, creed, and religion. To truly understand Muslim women, we must move beyond religious stereotypes and see them as individuals with diverse experiences and voices.

In this context, globalisation has played a positive role by providing Muslim women with vast platforms to express who they are and share their stories. Literature, media, social media, art, fashion, and the internet have become powerful tools through which Muslim women challenge misrepresentations and celebrate their diversity. We are witnessing a new wave of activism where Muslim women embrace their multiplicity and use their narratives to highlight their varied realities.

II. CASE STUDIES

To better understand the complexities of Muslim women's identities and agency, it is helpful to examine case studies from around the world that highlight their diverse experiences and the ways they actively shape their narratives.

Case Study 1: Malala Yousafzai – Reclaiming Voice, Redefining Identity

Malala Yousafzai, a Pakistani education activist and the youngest Nobel Peace Prize laureate, offers a powerful case study in challenging the stereotypical image of the voiceless, oppressed Muslim woman. Growing up in the Swat Valley under Taliban influence, Malala defied threats to advocate for girls' education. In 2012, she was shot by the Taliban for her activism, an attack that sparked global outrage — but more importantly, it amplified her voice on an international scale.

Malala's story is often framed in Western media as a narrative of “rescue”—but such portrayals miss the point. Her activism did not begin after the shooting; rather, she had already been blogging under a pseudonym for the BBC and speaking publicly within her community. Her agency existed before she became a global symbol. What makes Malala's journey significant is not just her resilience, but her consistent commitment to advocating from within her faith and cultural context, not outside of it. In her speeches and her memoir, *I Am Malala*, she emphasizes that Islam, contrary to its misrepresentation, advocates for women's rights and education.

Malala challenges both local patriarchal structures and Western feminist assumptions that Muslim women are inherently oppressed or passive. She represents a new generation of Muslim women who assert their voices on global platforms, all while remaining rooted in their cultural and religious identities. Her activism speaks not only to the right to education but to the broader fight for narrative control — the right of Muslim women to define themselves, rather than be defined by others.

Case Study 2: Iranian Women and the Mahsa Amini Protests — Reclaiming Agency Amid Oppression

The mass protests sparked by the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini in September 2022 marked a watershed moment in the struggle for women's rights in Iran. Amini died in police custody after being arrested by Iran's “morality police” for allegedly violating the country's strict hijab laws. Her death ignited nationwide and international protests, led prominently by Iranian women who took to the streets, many of them removing or burning their hijabs in public acts of defiance. The slogan “Woman, Life, Freedom” (*Zan, Zendegi, Azadi*) became a rallying cry not

just against the compulsory veil, but against a broader system of political repression and gender-based control.

What makes this movement particularly significant is that it cannot be reduced to a rejection of Islam. Many of the women protesting are Muslim themselves, and for them, the issue is not the hijab as a religious symbol, but the coercion behind it. They were resisting state-imposed interpretations of religion that strip them of personal choice and agency. By reclaiming control over their bodies and identities, these women directly challenge both domestic authoritarianism and Western stereotypes that portray Muslim women as universally submissive. Instead, they show that resistance and faith are not mutually exclusive. The Iranian women's movement demonstrates the diversity of Muslim women's experiences and the importance of situating their struggles within specific social, political, and cultural contexts, rather than reducing them to simplistic narratives of either oppression or liberation.

Case Study 3: Huda Sha'arawi — Pioneer of Feminist Reform in Postcolonial Egypt

Huda Sha'arawi (1879–1947) stands as one of the earliest and most influential Muslim feminist pioneers in the Global South. Living during Egypt's transition from Ottoman to British colonial rule, Sha'arawi confronted both colonial domination and patriarchal traditions. She is famously remembered for publicly removing her veil in 1923—a bold act of defiance against the social expectations imposed on women and a symbolic gesture of reclaiming autonomy. Yet, her activism was nuanced; she did not reject Islam, but rather sought to reinterpret religious and cultural practices to promote women's rights within her society.

Sha'arawi founded the Egyptian Feminist Union in 1923, focusing on education, legal reforms, and social welfare, and she was vocal in advocating for women's suffrage and equality. Her efforts illustrate the complexity of Muslim women's identities as they negotiate between tradition, religion, and modernity. Far from the passive victim portrayed in many contemporary stereotypes, Sha'arawi's life exemplifies how Muslim women have long been agents of change, shaping their societies and challenging colonial and patriarchal narratives alike. Her legacy continues to inspire feminist movements in Egypt and across the Global South, reminding us that Muslim women's struggles and aspirations must be understood within their specific historical and cultural contexts.

The Veil Debate: Choice or Coercion

A common misconception is to equate Muslim women solely with the veil—that is, to view those wearing the hijab or niqab as the only “authentic” Muslim women. Conversely, women who do not wear a veil are often questioned about their identity because they “don't look

Muslim.” This narrow representation sidelines the diversity within Muslim communities and reduces a multicultural group to a singular visual stereotype. As a result, many Muslim women who do not conform to this limited image remain invisible in public discourse.

Muslim women across the globe are increasingly raising their voices against discrimination and making their mark in diverse fields such as sports, fashion, politics, business, and the arts. They are proving their mettle and carving out spaces for themselves, challenging the narrow narratives imposed on them. So, how can a single image—a black burqa-clad, ‘oppressed’ woman—be seen as representative of such a vast and diverse group? She cannot. The Muslim woman of the 21st century possesses a voice and demands to be heard, just like women everywhere.

The veil has become one of the most contentious symbols associated with Muslim women. Often portrayed as a sign of oppression, the hijab's significance is far more complex. It is fundamentally a woman's right to choose whether or not to wear the hijab, as part of the freedom to practice one's religion. This debate intensified globally following France's ban on certain forms of veiling, turning what should be a personal choice into a political controversy. The reasons behind wearing the hijab are as varied as the styles in which it is worn. An important contribution to this conversation is *It's Not About the Burqa*, an anthology edited by Miriam Khan, which highlights the everyday experiences and challenges Muslim women face, pushing back against simplistic narratives.

Many misconceptions about Muslim women revolve around the assumption that they lack agency, whether in education, marriage, or freedom in general. These assumptions stem largely from the distorted image of the Muslim woman widely portrayed in the media and popular culture. Stereotypes tend to paint a negative and overly generalised picture, ignoring the individuality of each woman. It is essential to understand Muslim women in their totality, taking into account their unique experiences, economic circumstances, social conditions, cultures, and traditions.

Moreover, much of the oppression attributed to Islam is rooted in local customs, traditions, and misinterpretations rather than the religion itself. The status Islam originally granted women is often overshadowed by these factors, a reality that is rarely acknowledged in dominant discourses shaped by media, literature, and film.

It is crucial to understand what the hijab means to Muslim women and why two women sharing the same faith might view it differently. While negotiating these contradictions, one might ask: why do some women remove their veils in protest against oppression and patriarchal constraints, while

others choose to don them voluntarily? There are multiple reasons behind wearing the hijab. For some, it is a divine commandment, a manifestation of their spiritual self, or an act of honouring the Quran. Others wear it as an identity marker to visibly affirm their Muslim faith. Some feel that covering up offers safety and the freedom to navigate public spaces without unwanted attention. Others believe that veiling downplays physical beauty and allows them to be valued for their intellect rather than their appearance. As long as it is a choice, women are free to decide their reasons. However, for some, wearing the hijab is not voluntary, and this lack of choice is problematic. Today, the hijab often serves as a marker of Islamic identity rather than simply a symbol of patriarchal control or religious fundamentalism.

In psychology, identity encompasses the qualities, beliefs, personality, and expressions that constitute an individual's self-concept (self-identity) or group affiliation (social identity). A strong sense of identity is essential for mental health, self-esteem, and confidence. Identity is socially and historically constructed; we develop our personal and social identities through interactions with family, friends, and communities. Identity shapes how we perceive ourselves and how we express our place in the world. Cultural identity reflects a sense of belonging to a particular social group defined by religion, caste, class, ethnicity, or other shared traits.

For Muslim women, understanding how they see themselves is vital. While patriarchy and Western narratives often impose limiting identities, the question remains: who is she, and how does she perceive herself? She may see herself as a Muslim, a feminist, and an ordinary woman capable of achieving her goals. She may embrace her identity as a citizen, regardless of whether her country is Muslim-majority or not. For her, there may be no conflict between collective and individual identities; she balances both. But can the wider world accept this complexity? Too often, Muslim women are portrayed simplistically—as oppressed victims or radicalised villains. This external perception clashes sharply with their multifaceted self-identities.

Her identity is composed of many facets, yet society often reduces it to a one-dimensional label: Muslim and oppressed. This echoes Julia Kristeva's concept of the politics of identity, where collective identities are imposed over individual ones, erasing diversity within the group. Identity is, fundamentally, who a person is—their values, traits, and sense of self, which evolves over a lifetime. It includes both personal identity and social identity, which often overlap.

Sigmund Freud theorised that identity is shaped by the ego, which mediates between the id and superego, blending

instincts, morality, and desires into a unified self. Erik Erikson expanded on this with the idea of 'ego identity,' proposing that individuals face crises at various stages of development, and how they resolve these crises shapes their identity. Meanwhile, collective identity is formed through membership in social groups—race, religion, gender, class, politics, family—and comes with the psychological distinction of 'in-groups' and 'out-groups,' or 'us' versus 'them.' This social categorisation can lead to prejudices and stereotyping.

Understanding Muslim women through these psychological lenses is essential. Stereotypes arise from social categorisation and often lead to prejudice and discrimination. To truly appreciate Muslim women's identities, we must acknowledge their personal and collective identities beyond simplistic religious labels and stereotypes.

III. CONCLUSION

The identity of Muslim women in the Global South cannot be understood through simplistic or monolithic lenses. It is shaped by a complex interplay of religion, culture, gender, class, history, and global power dynamics. Yet, dominant narratives—especially in Western media and political discourse—often reduce Muslim women to a singular image of oppression, most commonly represented by the veiled, silent figure. This stereotype not only misrepresents millions of women but also silences their voices, erases their diversity, and denies their agency.

As this essay has argued, such representations ignore the rich heterogeneity of Muslim women's lives, beliefs, and experiences. From resisting state-mandated dress codes in Iran to advocating for girls' education in Pakistan, Muslim women are not passive recipients of oppression but active agents of change. They are scientists, activists, artists, leaders, and thinkers—defying the imposed binaries of oppressed vs. liberated, traditional vs. modern, East vs. West. Scholars like Lamia Ben Youssef Zayzafoon have emphasised that the category of the "Muslim woman" is not a fixed identity but a discursive invention shaped by ideological and political forces.

To truly understand and engage with the lives of Muslim women, especially in the Global South, we must move beyond stereotypes and allow them to speak for themselves. Listening to their voices, honouring their contexts, and recognising their multiplicity is not only an academic necessity—it is a moral and political imperative.

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