

“I’m not going to let the patriarch stop me!”:
**Examining the Obsession with Muslim Women’s Bodies, Voices and Veils in
Cinema, Television & Popular Culture**

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

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Abstract

Historically, Muslim female bodies have been a key focus of attention in colonial and patriarchal discursive practices. This colonial and patriarchal desire to control Muslim women’s bodies – and, by extension, their voice – is rooted in Orientalism. Today, Orientalist modes of representation are sustained via consumer culture as well as the ways in which Muslim women are represented in mainstream media, cinema, and popular culture. Arguably, the need to control Muslim women’s bodies is none more evident than in the polemic over the hijab and veil, which are banned in countries such as France and enforced in states such as Iran and Saudi Arabia. Not only is this banishment and enforcement of the hijab inherently a sexist (and racist) policy that deprives Muslim women of autonomy, but this need to control Muslim women’s bodies may also be linked to the fear of female sexuality. This paper seeks to analyse the policing of the Muslim female body and dress through representations in the mainstream media, television, and cinema. In addition, this paper argues that this fascination with the Muslim female body as well as her voice and dress are rooted in Orientalist traditions, which are still perpetuated today. Lastly, referring to my own documentary – An-Nisaa (Women) – as a case study, I attempt to demonstrate how the film resists Orientalist tropes and traditions.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

From a young age, I was aware that there were different expectations for boys than girls. Due to this understanding, I rejected anything that I considered too feminine. I refused to wear dresses, play with dolls, or even learn to cook. I did so because it had always seemed as though boys had more (and better) opportunities than girls. It appeared to me that boys could be anything that they imagined while girls had to be anonymous, polite and choose a suitable, modest career that did not draw too much attention. I aspired to be a filmmaker. Though, it was implied that this was not a suitable career choice for a *good* Muslim girl. I wanted to be a *good* Muslim girl, but I also wanted to do what I loved. I feared that to be the ideal Muslim woman meant that I had to be confined to the kitchen with my worth extending to what family I married into. I believed this because it was the image that was presented to me when I was younger. Through the years, I became obsessed with trying to find an image of a Muslim woman that I could identify with. I desperately wanted to find representation that went beyond the scope of what I saw. I wanted proof that I could be exactly what I envisioned. After the events that took place on 11th September 2001, I found that my faith was being used interchangeably with terrorism. I clearly recall the rhetoric in the media changing and the villains in the movies suddenly had Arabic names that sounded similar to mine. The Islam in the mainstream media was not the version that I grew up with. Nevertheless, I wanted to get as far away from my Islamic faith as possible using film as my escape. As the years went on, I began to understand the power of film. Surely, if it could convince the world that Muslims were terrorists then it could also counter that narrative and convince the world otherwise? I realise now how romantic and innocent those thoughts were. I did not know it then, but it was those very thoughts that would spark an idea and ultimately materialise as my documentary, *An-Nisaa (Women)* (d/ Thaakirah Behardien 2021).

Throughout history, there has always appeared to be an obsession with Muslim female bodies, their behaviour and dress. Rooted in Orientalism, this fascination can be linked to the colonial fantasies of the harem (Carland 2017). Through the Orientalist gaze, Muslim women were seen as mysterious and alluring (ibid 2017). Presently, as Western views on sexuality change, Muslim women are seen as subjugated and backward. The veil is no longer “a form of enticement” (ibid 2017: 13) but rather a

symbol of suppression or a political act. This need to control Muslim women's bodies and – by extension – their voices are none more apparent than the polemic over the veil or hijab (when a Muslim woman covers her body except hands, feet, and face), which is either enforced upon women (such as in Iran and Saudi Arabia) or banned (such as in France). In *The Veil & the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* (1991), Moroccan feminist writer, Fatima Mernissi surveys a wealth of texts written on women, Islam, and the veil. She mentions a few peculiar observations by male writers offering Muslim women guidance on their behaviours. In discussing a book that had compiled a list of juridico-religious laws concerning women, she notes:

Hiding the female body seems to be an obsession in this book. One chapter details “the necessity to veil the face and the hands during prayer”; another asks, “Is a woman's prayer worthless when her hair is not covered?” Finally, still another chapter poses an economic dilemma that seems to have tormented the shaykh: “Should a woman who possesses 1,000 dirhams use it to make pilgrimage to Mecca or to buy a trousseau for her daughter? Of course, we find a chapter on “The Circumcision of Women,” which as I already stated, has nothing to do with Islam or with Arab culture! (Mernissi 1991: 99).

Evident from Mernissi's observations is that the Muslim female body is not only an obsession in the so-called 'West', but also has been a longstanding focal point of discussion by Islamic patriarchal systems. *Double colonialization* is a fitting term here to describe the challenges that Muslim women face. The term, which was coined by Kirsten Holst Peterson and Anna Rutherford “refers to the ways in which women have simultaneously experienced oppression of colonialism and patriarchy” (Tyagi 2014: 45). As classical Islamic law affords men and women equal rights regarding education, sexual satisfaction and financial independence, among many others (Carland 2017), it is important to understand exactly why there is a fixation with Muslim female bodies and the need to control them. Journalist and social commentator, Mona Elthahawy (2019) insists that this need to control Muslim women is due to the fear of female sexuality, while writer and academic, Asma Barlas (2002) boils this down to the lack of female interpretations of the holy Qur'an. She writes, “If we wish to ensure Muslim

women their rights, we not only need to contest readings of the Qur'an that justify the abuse and degradation of women: we also need to establish the legitimacy of liberatory readings" (2002:6). In addition, Haleh Afshar notes that, "The battle for taking charge of *tafsir*, interpretation, continues in face of strong opposition: not because it is illogical, but because feminist interpretations are feared to threaten the authority of men" (2008: 423). Whatever the reason may be or whatever challenges Muslim women face, they are still at the forefront of change and are insistent on offering their own interpretations to the global representations of them set out by the mainstream media, culture, and popular Hollywood cinema.

There are a wide range of documentaries dedicated to the subject of Muslim women, although most seem to fixate on Muslim women's bodies, what they are wearing and their behaviours. This is shown in documentaries such as *They call me Muslim* (d/ Diana Ferrero 2006), *Women and Islam: Islam Unveiled* (d/ Ruhi Hamid 2004) and *For Covered Girls* (d/ Baraa Ktiri 2020), to name but a few. Though there are more attempts at positive depictions of Muslim women in fictional series and movies, the portrayal often appears to be limited or inaccurate. This is shown in popular television series such as the Rob Lowe lead procedural drama, *9-1-1 Lone Star* (Fox Network 2020). I envisioned *An-Nisaa (Women)* as a counter to the limited or inaccurate portrayals of Muslim women onscreen. More so, I wanted *An-Nisaa (Women)* to be the antithesis of what Laura Mulvey (1989) deems the *male gaze* as well as resist the tropes set up by Orientalism.

The documentary follows three young Muslim women of 'Cape Malay' heritage in Cape Town, South Africa. As the women explore the complexities of balancing their Islamic identities in a secular democracy, they use their creative mediums to confront patriarchal traditions as well as the stereotypical image of Muslim women in the media. The women, Shakirah Dramat: a social entrepreneur, activist, and speaker; Rughshana Daniels: an aspiring comedian, and Rushda Deaney: a visual artist discuss taboo issues within their communities such a patriarchy, dating, mental health, and gentrification. As the filmmaker, I significantly refused to look at the Muslim female body in terms of how it is covered. If these topics arose in the film, then it was the choice of the film's participants. I chose not to touch on these issues because not only are there already a wealth of visual materials dedicated to the subject, but – as a Muslim woman – I can confidently say that I am exhausted by this discussion. I believe that many other Muslim women are too. It appears that mainstream media, cinema,

and popular culture are so concerned with Muslim women's bodies, their behaviours and dress, that understanding that Muslim women can exist beyond these tropes is neglected. Indeed, Muslim women are not a homogenous group. Though, having said that, I still am deeply fascinated with the obsession over Muslim women, their bodies, and the need to control them.

In exploring the representation of Muslim women's bodies, voices, and the veil in documentaries, popular television and films, this thesis argues that the fascination with Muslim women is rooted in Orientalism.

In Chapter Three, this thesis argues that the fascination with the Muslim female body – and by extension – her voice, is rooted in Orientalism. This is not only shown by the means through which images of Muslim women were used historically to sell Orientalist products, but also, at present, Muslim women's images are being used commercially to sell products – not so much as a means of acceptance but rather as a capitalist crusade. This chapter also explores how this commercialism extends to popular cinema, which continues the Orientalist traditions by stereotyping Muslim characters as the Other as seen in films such as *The English Patient* (d/ Anthony Minghella 1996) and *Sex and the City 2* (d/ Michael Patrick King 2010). Lastly, this chapter examines how the Muslim female body (and voice) is disciplined during performance (such as addressing an audience, dancing, or rapping on stage) and how this may link to the fear of female sexuality.

In Chapter Four, this thesis argues that the need for patriarchal and colonialist control of the Muslim female body (such as the banning and enforcement of the hijab in France and Iran) is not only due to the fear of female sexuality but are also, inherently, sexist policies embedded in racist ideology. Lastly, by using my own documentary *An-Nisaa (Women)* as a case study, I attempt to highlight that while the mainstream media, cinema and popular culture continue to perpetuate the stereotypical image of the oppressed Muslim women onscreen, it is often Muslim women who are at the forefront of change, taking charge of their own narratives and pushing back against tropes and traditions set up by Orientalism.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Throughout history, there appears to be a fascination with Muslim women. According to Susan Carland (2017), during the Victorian era when Western Christendom was championed, Muslim women were seen as the inverse to the Western ideal of womanhood. She explains that Muslim women were seen as “the lascivious, sex-hungry temptress. Her veil seen as a form of enticement” (2017: 13). Carland dates this fixation with Muslim women back to the *Harem* – the household separation between men and women – which she notes ignited the Western imagination of the Other (ibid 2017). Of course, this fascination with Muslim women is rooted in Orientalism. Edward Said notes that, “The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences” (1978: 18). He goes on to define Orientalism as:

...a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident." Thus a very large mass of writers, among whom are poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists, and imperial administrators, have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, "mind," destiny, and so on (Said 1978: 20).

Following Said’s definition of Orientalism, Haleh Afshar argues that the present-day rhetoric of the veil is a modern form of Orientalism. She elaborates, “The Orient was understood as being an inferior and uncivilized and the Oriental woman was assumed to be alluring, bewitching and extremely dangerous” (Stott 1992; Afshar 2008: 413). Afshar notes that this understanding of Muslim women were constructed by scholars and painters, who, having no access to the lives of women, projected these fantasies as what they imagined the Orient to be (ibid 2008: 413). She adds: “This otherizing (sic) in turn resulted in a deeply rooted belief that the Orientals could progress, within their limited abilities, only if they looked to the Occident” (ibid 2008: 413). Similar to Carland, Afshar highlights that Muslim women were the binary – the complete opposite

– to the ideal Western Christian woman. Also, Muslim women always appeared to be measured against a benchmark set by the Occident – a comparison still made in present day. These imaginings and comparisons were (and still are) dangerous as Gabeba Baderoon (2014) illustrates in her examinations of early depictions of Muslims in the Cape. Baderoon describes these early depictions as “exotic, submissive and static” (2014: 1). She explains that this exoticized image was problematic as it not only reduced Muslims to two-dimensional tropes, but it also completely disregarded the traumatic history of slavery in the Cape (ibid 2014). Ritu Tyagi argues that Said’s Orientalism gave little attention to female agency and writers (2014: 46), though, as Maryam Khalid reasons, it still “is essential to understanding official US ‘War on Terror’ discourse” (2017: 2). This discourse has influenced the present-day representations of Muslim women in the mainstream media, popular culture, and Hollywood cinema.

At present, the fascination with Muslim female bodies and how they dress often takes precedence over issues such as Islamophobia, which has gendered implications for Muslim women – particularly Muslim women who choose to veil or wear the hijab (Carland 2017). Ultimately, Muslim women are not only subjected to the oppressive powers of colonialism, but patriarchy too. This is what Tyagi calls “double colonialization” (2014: 45). Drawing on the term coined by Kirsten Holst Peterson and Anna Rutherford (ibid 2014), Tyagi defines *double colonialization* as resisting the control of the colonial power, “not only as a colonised subject, but also as a woman, in this oppression, her colonised brother is no longer her accomplice, but her oppressor” (2014: 45).

As current Western views of sexuality are changing, so are the views on Muslim women. Rather than a “lascivious, sex-hungry temptress” (Carland 2017: 13), Muslim women are now seen as being deprived of autonomy with the veil restricting her movement and, ironically, depriving her of her basic human rights (ibid 2017: 13). While the mainstream Western media and popular cinema continually perpetuate these images, it is important to understand how women are viewed in Islam. Classical Islamic law affords women the same rights as men regarding education, sexual satisfaction, and financial independence, among many others (Carland 2017). On discussing Muslim women’s rights in Islam, Fatima Mernissi writes of an occasion when one of the wives of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), Umm Salama (RA) asked: “Why are men mentioned in the Koran and why are we not?” (1991: 118). While

awaiting an answer, she heard the prophet recite as the latest Qur'anic verse had been revealed to him. She heard:

“O people! Allah has said in his book: ‘Men who surrender unto Allah, and women who surrender, and men who believe and women who believe’” (ibid 1991: 118).

In recounting the tale, Umm Salama (RA) mentions that the prophet continued in this vein ending the passage with: “Allah hath prepared for them forgiveness and a vast reward” (Ibid 1991: 118). Mernissi writes, “The answer of the Muslim God to Umm Salama was very clear: Allah spoke of two sexes in terms of total equality as believers, that is, members of the community. God identifies those who are part of his kingdom, those who have a right to his ‘vast reward’. And it is not sex that determines who earns his grace” (Ibid 1991: 19). Mernissi further states that it was not just Umm Salama (RA) who was concerned with the status of women in Islam. She elaborates that the Arab women at the time saw this revelation as freedom from pre-Islamic traditions. Mernissi writes:

They were so successful that a sura bears their name, sura 4, An-Nisa (“Women”), containing the new laws on inheritance, which deprived men of their privileges. Not only would a woman no longer be “inherited” like camels and palm trees, but she would herself inherit. She would enter into competition with men for the sharing of fortunes (Mernissi 1991: 20).

This elevated status of women in Islam is a considerable cry from what the mainstream media, popular culture and Hollywood cinema would have one believe. Admittedly, this raised status of women is also ignored by the patriarchal cultures and traditions of many Islamic nations. While women are elevated in Islam, at present it may seem that Muslim women can only exist between two extremes: the temptress, or an oppressed individual. Mona Elthahawy suggests that Muslim women are caught between two binaries that she calls the “rock and the hard place” (2019: 4). In this epitaph, ‘the rock’ are Islamophobes, and ‘the hard place’ are the very Muslim communities which are

“eager to defend Muslim men, and to that end try to silence us and shut down the ways we resist misogyny” (ibid, 2019: 4). She elaborates:

Both the rock and the hard place are more concerned with each other than they are with Muslim women. They speak over our heads literally and figuratively. Our bodies – what parts of them are covered or uncovered...It matters little what we women think (Elthahawy 2019: 4).

What Elthahawy deems the *rock and the hard place*, Carland refers to as “the double bind” (2017: 108). Carland describes the *double bind* as the dual challenge faced by Muslim women. In this *double bind*, Muslim women want to confront taboo issues within their communities, but simultaneously, they do not want to aid Islamophobes or be alienated from their communities (ibid: 108). Both Elthahawy and Carland’s theories draw similarities to W.E.D Du Bois’ notion of *double consciousness*. In using the term *double consciousness*, Bruce Dickson states that Du Bois referred to, “an internal conflict in the African American individual between what was “African” and what was “American” (Dickson 1992: 301). He further elaborates on this notion of internal conflict: “Double consciousness thus entailed a real opposition between the two consciousnesses confined within a single body” (ibid 1992: 304). In other words, it is as though one could only be the former or the latter but being “African” and “American” could not essentially exist within a single being.

This is noteworthy when understanding the representations of Muslim women throughout history. As previously mentioned, it appears that Muslim women could only exist between two binaries: the temptress or the oppressed individual. Interestingly, both Gabeba Baderoon (2014) and Nathan Lean (2012) highlight the concept of *double consciousness* when discussing being a Muslim in the United States or practicing Islam under colonialism in the Cape and apartheid respectively. Lean and Baderoon do not use the term *double consciousness* per se, but both draw on the idea of conflicting identities within a single being. This is demonstrated when Baderoon discusses Islam under colonial rule in the Cape. She notes that under colonialism, Islam became a refuge for many enslaved people, thus developing a creole slave and indigenous Muslim community (Baderoon 2014: 12-13). The term *Muslim* would, however, come to mean something entirely different under the 1950 Population

Registration Act whereby the apartheid government would classify people according to their race, namely: white, coloured, or native (ibid 2014). Baderoon notes that while Muslims fell into the racial category of coloured, there existed a danger in “retrospectively racializing and ethnicising Islam” (2014: 16). As Islam in the Cape was practiced by the creole slave community that was subjected to sexual violence through forced prostitution of female slaves at the slave lodge, “racial heterogeneity was structured around the experience of being Muslim and enslaved” (ibid 2014:16). Baderoon goes on to further elaborate:

Both colonial and apartheid-era accounts confirm Islam’s confounding effect on race due to racial heterogeneity and conversion, through which anyone could become “Malay” through professing adherence to the tenets of religion. During apartheid, the phenomenon of conversion highlighted the problem of drawing lines of race by means of religion, since whites who converted to Islam lost their whiteness (Posel 2001; Baderoon 2014: 16).

In other words, under the apartheid regime it was impossible to be both Muslim and white. Comparably, Nathan Lean points out that many right-wing Americans view Islam as something that is foreign, believing that all Muslims are immigrants and that the “religion of Islam is not fluid or a borderless belief system, but rather originates from afar and has, with the relocation of populations from Morocco or Bahrain, invaded the United States” (2012: 5). Similar to the belief that whiteness and Islam cannot cohabit a single body under apartheid, there is the belief among conservative parties in the United States that one cannot simply be Muslim and American.

The Islamophobia, misogyny, and stereotypes that many Muslim women are branded with are fuelled further by the media (Lean 2012). After the Iranian revolution in the 1970s, September 11th 2001 and the 2005 London bombings, Islam and Muslims were tossed into the spotlight and more interest was being generated in a religion that was linked to terrorism. This negative view on Islam has only been incited further through public displays of terror by extremist organisations such as the Islamic State (ISIS) and Al-Shabab. Ebrahim Saleh suggests that the media may be the central source of information, but it is still ill-prepared for the role it plays (2009: 203).

In addition, religion can no longer control its own stories, symbols or how these religious ideologies surface (ibid 2009). Ultimately, this may lead to a clash of ideological systems that are only analysed on a surface level rather than a move toward a sincere engagement and understanding. It may be unsurprising then that the dominant image of the angry, bearded Muslim man or the covered, suppressed woman are all representations pushed forward by mainstream media and popular Hollywood cinema (Lean 2014). This constant rebuking of Muslims in the media is what Nathan Lean deems 'the Islamophobia industry', which he describes as bloggers, news networks, racist politicians, and religious leaders, among others, propagating an industry of hate (2012:10).

Under the current climate of negative or limited imagery of Muslim women in mainstream media and popular cinema, there are attempts to move toward a more inclusive environment. Nafisa Bakker states that in 2015, the Swedish clothing brand, *H&M*, launched a recycling campaign featuring a model sporting a hijab (2019: 49). Following suit, major fashion brands such as *Dolce & Gabbana* and *Nike* released ranges for Muslim women (ibid 2019). Though, Bakker argues that this sudden rise in representation may not be acceptance, but should rather be seen as a capitalist crusade and marketing ploy to generate sales (ibid 2019). She writes:

The use of a Muslim woman is seemingly dependent on what is being promoted or sold. When the Muslim woman is discussed in a political light or in reference to government strategy it seems that representations are synonymous with a burqa – or niqab-wearing woman. When it's fashion or beauty, she takes the form of hijabi-influencer (Bakker 2019: 46).

Bakker further asserts that these Muslim women represented in mass media campaigns are just extensions of the Eurocentric concepts of beauty. It may be near impossible to represent all Muslim women because Muslim women are not a homogenous group. However, Bakker questions the authenticity of these campaigns, stating that these marketing strategies may only be after the surface image of the Muslim woman and not necessarily what she may stand for (ibid 2019). Bakker eloquently drives home the point when she asks, "What is the point of being represented if only our image is invited to the table?" (Ibid 2019: 53).

Echoing Carland's (2017) and Baderoon's (2014) sentiments, Rubina Ramji notes that in early Hollywood cinema, the world of Islam is depicted as mysterious and exotic with bejewelled, veiled women and bearded sheikhs living in the desert surrounded by camels and palm trees (2009: 177). Ramji goes on to discuss Jean Baudrillard's theories of the 'Hyper-reality'. This is created when fiction is based on reality, making said reality more believable (2009: 178). Considering Carland's historical depiction of Muslim women, this idea of the "sex hungry temptress" (2017: 13) is even more credible, particularly when reinforced by popular Hollywood classics such as George Melford's *The Sheik* (1921). More recent examples include hit network television dramas such as *24* (Fox 2001), *Homeland* (Showtime 2011) and *Bodyguard* (Netflix 2018). In these television shows, Muslims are often portrayed as the antagonists – the frightening terrorist that not only encompasses a physical threat, but also a threat to Western values and ideals. These images of Muslims as terrorists are reinforced when it is reflected in the media such as the 2015 attack on the French satirical newspaper, *Charlie Hebdo*, or the more recent attack that took place in a New Zealand supermarket, where six people were stabbed in a knife attack by a Sri Lankan national who was inspired by ISIS (Frost 2021). These fictional depictions of Muslims onscreen may even promote fears of Muslim women wearing the hijab or the veil as exemplified in countries such as France. While the *Charlie Hebdo* and the New Zealand supermarket attacks are rare forms of Islamic radicalism, many Muslims who oppose such ideologies, may still be tarred with the same brush. This could result in Islamophobic attacks such as the 2019 mosque shootings in Christchurch, New Zealand (Ainge Roy 2020).

Karin van Nieuwkerk states that, "After the Danish cartoon affair in 2006, the general discourse with regard to freedom of speech and expression in Islam has been put in a negative light" (2011: 1). van Nieuwkerk elaborates that such cases (as well as the attack on *Charlie Hebdo*) have been under such media scrutiny to the extent that there exists a belief that representations of Islam and the performing arts are incompatible (ibid 2011). It is important to note that there exists a fine line between what is hate speech and freedom of speech. This is in no way a condoning of the heinous acts committed in the 'name of Islam', but many Muslims view their faith as a way of life and intrinsic to their being. Hence, to many Muslims around the world, the Danish cartoons as well as the *Charlie Hebdo* drawings were not seen as an act of

democracy, but rather a means to incite violent reactions from an already tense and withered relationship between 'Islam' and the 'West' (for a lack of a better term). van Nieuwkerk suggests that because it is believed that Muslims "lack creative freedom" (2011: 1) and because Islam and the performing arts are seen as incompatible, this firmly establishes the differences between Muslims and non-Muslims (ibid 2011: 1). To give an example, there is the widely held belief among Muslims that music, or certain forms thereof, are forbidden in Islam (Shareef 2018) and this becomes a marker of difference (van Nieuwkerk 2011). van Nieuwkerk goes on to further state that throughout the 1980s and 1990s, conservative Islam battled against playfulness and entertainment as it was widely upheld that partaking in such activities would lure the believer away from prayer and supplication (ibid 2011). She notes that it is the "uncontrolled character of fun and relaxation that worries puritans, because it not only disrupts the moral order, but more importantly, the doctrinal paradigm on which their power and authority is (sic) based" (van Nieuwkerk 2011: 8). Positively, van Nieuwkerk does note that, "At present, though, the tide within Islamist movements is changing and some strands of Islamists and piety movements embrace art and popular culture. Pious forms of art are created that cater to religious sensibilities and can be used to promote Islamic messages and lifestyles" (ibid 2011: 2). While there may be a movement toward a more positive relationship between Islamic authorities and the arts, the Muslim female body and voice – during performance – is still a major point of contention. van Nieuwkerk states:

The body, the pious body included, is highly gendered and an important matter of concern to religious authorities. The disciplining of the body according to religio-moral scripts, and controlling the way bodies embody piety, make pious productions central issues for cultural politics (van Nieuwkerk 2011: 5).

This need for patriarchal and colonialist control of Muslim women bodies is none more evident than in the polemic concerning the veil or hijab. According to Nina Hoel and Sa'diyya Shaikh, the veil has become a highly politicized symbol and a visible boundary marker between Islam and the 'West' (2007: 111). Also, this need to control women's bodies and the desire thereof is reminiscent of Laura Mulvey's concept of the *male gaze* (1989). As Mulvey states, "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance,

pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female” (1989: 62).

The present global obsession with Muslim female bodies, the need to control and depict them through a patriarchal and colonial lens, appears to continue the trends set up by Orientalism. While there have been attempts to accurately portray Muslim women on screen or be more inclusive in fashion, these depictions and inclusions are often still inaccurate stereotypical or limited and continues the traditions of Orientalism. This is shown by the rise in Islamic fashion as well as the representations of Muslims in the mainstream media and popular television. It appears that Muslim women are not only caught in a *double bind* or ‘between a rock and a hard place’ but also – as Du Bois’ notion of *double consciousness* highlights – they can be no more than two things: the exotic temptress or the suppressed women. Though there is a movement by conservative Islamic traditions to embrace art and popular culture, the Muslim female body still remains a point of contention. This is shown by the polemic over the veil or hijab. Ultimately, it is Muslim women – as my documentary *An-Nisaa (Women)* attempts to show – who are at the forefront of change and are taking charge of reclaiming their representation in mainstream media, popular culture, and cinema.

Chapter 3: Bodies, Voices & Muslim Women on Display

In her poem entitled *Women on Beaches*, Johannesburg based poet, Saaleha Idrees-Bamjee (2018) writes:

The female body is still contested territory. There are men defining these borders. A woman who is different is always dangerous (Idrees-Bamjee 2018: 22).

The poem examines the policing of women's bodies through the history of the bikini. Idrees-Bamjee writes that, "Policemen measured the length of bathing suits" (ibid 2018: 22) alluding to the controversy that the swimming costume may have garnered at its first inception. According to Audrey Stanton, "The history of the bikini is a classic tale of the patriarchy at work; suppression, objectification, and constant judgment" (2021: 1). She continues: "At the outset, bikinis were facing possible bans at beaches across European, Mediterranean, and Catholic nations, and even the Miss World Contest and pageants worldwide (which is wildly ironic today)" (ibid 2021: 1). Indeed, this is not only "wildly ironic" (ibid 2021:1), but also reminiscent of the current ban on the *burkini* (an amalgamation of the words *bikini* and *burqa*, which is a form of Islamic veiling). The burkini is a style of loose-fitting swimsuit that covers the full body including the head. It is a style that some Muslim women opt to wear to abide by the modest dress code set out by Islamic law. Presently, several cities in France have banned the burkini citing that the burkini is "liable to offend the religious convictions or (religious) non-convictions of other users on the beach" (Quinn 2016: 1). While the bikini is seen as scandalous and offensive for exposing the female body, the burkini is seen as offensive because it imposes on the religious or non-religious principles of other beachgoers. However, when French officers humiliated a Muslim woman by forcing her to undress on a beach in front of hundreds of people (ibid 2016), her religious ideologies and morals were ignored. Apart from being contradictory, this ban is simply racist. The need to control Muslim women's bodies echoes Ritu Tyagi's discussion of *double colonialization*, which they describe as the simultaneous experience of oppression of colonialism and patriarchy (2014: 45). Though reasons for forcing the Muslim woman to publicly undress were given, what was left unsaid remains significant: that Muslims – the Other – are

dangerous and must be controlled. This continues the Orientalist tradition that the East is “mystic, exotic and irrational” (Said 1978; Akman 2017: 103). Ultimately, it is equally as oppressive to force a woman to dress as it is to undress.

This chapter will examine the historical and present day obsession with Muslim female bodies, arguing that this fascination is not only rooted in Orientalism, but also is linked to the fear of female sexuality. In analysing scenes from popular films such as *The English Patient* and *Sex and the City 2*, this chapter will demonstrate how these films continue the Orientalist traditions by representing Muslim characters as the Other. Lastly, in examining the two short documentaries, *An-Nisaa (Women)* and *Hip Hop Hijabi's* (d/ Mette Reitzel 2015), this chapter attempts to understand why there is a need to silence or control the Muslim female body during performance, and furthermore, why it is such a cause for controversy.

In analysing Islam, feminism and popular culture, Sophia Rose Arjana (2018) notes that this fascination with Muslim female bodies can be historically linked to the harem, which was the household separation between men and women. She writes:

The harem has been a popular focus of Western anxiety – and fascination – since the beginning of Orientalism. The efforts to control colonized bodies were frustrated by the harem, which often hid Muslim girls and women from the eyes and hand of strangers...The sexual fantasies that white colonial agents imposed on the harem were in part, a response to the restricted access they had to these private spaces. I am not the first scholar to suggest that the interest in the harem is deeply imbedded in fantasies of sexual conquest and power (Arjana 2018: 29).

Arjana goes on to state that, historically, Muslim bodies were used to commodify Islamic culture and “make money for colonial powers” (2018: 2), which often took the form of Oriental products (ibid 2018). These products would – and arguably still does – use Muslim women and girls as part of the “visual arsenal” (ibid 2018: 3). Arjana further notes that the images of Muslim women and girls were used, “either as decorative devices or as objects associated with popular symbols of the Orient such as the desert or camel” (ibid 2018: 3). Interestingly, and at present, it seems that not much has

changed and it appears that Muslim women's bodies are still being used to sell products or be sold products to. Fashion journalist, Hafsa Lodi notes that the 'modest' fashion industry has exploded in the last five years (2020: 32). Also, taking into consideration that Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world, spending power has climbed so astronomically that the financial incentive cannot simply be ignored (ibid 2020). Though, Lodi forewarns:

These population projections and financial motives are no secret – it's widely recognized across the globe that international fashion labels' increasingly covered-up runway presentations are not paying homage to Middle Eastern cultures, but rather their deep pockets (Lodi 2019: 19-20).

Analysing it from all angles, it appears as though Muslim female bodies are objects to be looked at, policed, or used for consumerism. Historically, the exotic Muslim female body was not only doused in mystery, but also used as a commodity to sell Orientalist products. At present, Muslim female bodies are used to sell products or be sold products to and this may not be so much a means of acceptance or progress, but rather a capitalist crusade for financial gain (Bakker 2019). It should be no surprise that the bodies and images of Muslim women are controlled by colonial powers of the past and capitalism at present as this only follows on the traditions set up by Orientalism. As Edward Said notes, Orientalism was a "Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (1978: 20). Of course, this legacy of Orientalist domination can still be seen today in mainstream media, popular culture, and Hollywood cinema, which essentially is also a form of commercialism. Popular cinema from the *James Bond* franchise (1962 – 2021) to *Sex and the City 2* as well as award winning films such as *The English Patient* and *Lawrence of Arabia* (d/ David Lean 1962), to name but a few, have all upheld Orientalist tropes. In analysing how *The English Patient* continues the Orientalist tradition, Beyazit Akman notes:

In the movie the line between Eastern and Western cultures in terms of civilization is clearly drawn; the natives of North Africa and Egypt are as if characters taken from an exaggerated cartoon. They are depicted with definitive imagery foregrounding

the red fez, the beard and the turban, whereas the Europeans are shown as familiarly elegant, in their safari apparel in the desert, or in their tuxedos in the parties of the “International Sand Club” (Akman 2017: 103).

To continuously produce such stereotypical imagery is as offensive as it is dangerous. Yet, these images still persist in Hollywood at present. Haleh Afshar notes, the Orient – and essentially Islam – is seen as “separate and other without any common values with other cultures and as being essentially barbaric and sexist” (2008: 414). Arguably, even though there are attempts at positive depictions of Islam onscreen, the Muslim body is still othered as it exists as an opposition to the Western standard. Another example of this is shown in the popular HBO (Home Box Office) television show turned film, *Sex and the City 2* (2010). In the second instalment of the franchise, the four lead American women embark on a trip to Abu Dhabi (Esseghaier 2012). While walking through the marketplace, the women are ‘saved’ from Muslim men by a group of burqa-clad Muslim women (ibid 2012). The American women are taken to a hidden room in the bazaar. It is here that the Muslim women disrobe to reveal that they are wearing trendy and expensive couture. Mariam Esseghaier states that, “while this scene attempts to have Muslim and American women connect over fashion, it ultimately reinforces stereotypical understandings of Muslim women as foreign, silent and othered” (ibid 2012: 142).

My intention for *An-Nisaa (Women)* was to push against these Orientalist traditions that some of the above mentioned films uphold. The documentary purposefully never discusses typical issues such as Islam within the context of terrorism or a Muslim woman’s right (or choice) to wear the veil or not, among many other stereotypical issues that are continuously discussed in relation to Islam. In fact, *An-Nisaa (Women)* could be seen an antithesis to the *male gaze*. This is because the female participants in the film are active agents pushing forward their own narrative. This is not to say that the women do not face challenges relating to patriarchy and sexism, but they tackle these challenges in their own way. An idea of the harem is teased when Rushda is placing the finishing touches to her scarf installation, but ultimately it is Rushda who controls how she is portrayed. When asked if she can be filmed without her headscarf, she grants me (as the filmmaker) permission, but on

her own terms. In other words, I was allowed to film her without her hijab on, but I was not allowed to reveal her face as this went against her beliefs.

If not for commercial gain, then it seems that the Muslim female body is a cause for political controversy. Andrew N. Weintraub (2008) looks at body politics, faith, and popular music in Indonesia. Using famous Indonesian pop singer, Inul Daratista (known only as Inul), as a case study, he writes: “In February 2003, a woman’s body became the focal point for public debate about religious authority, freedom of expression, women’s rights and the future of Indonesia’s political leadership” (Weintraub 2008: 367). Weintraub elaborates that, “Inul’s stage shows, and performative discourse emphasise a style of dancing she calls *goyang* (the ‘drilling dance’), ‘gyration of the hips at break-neck speed that some people have likened to a tornado” (Asmarani 2003; Weintraub 2008: 368). In Indonesia, this form of dancing was described as pornographic and “therefore haram, *forbidden in Islam*” (Weintraub 2008: 368). While Indonesia is a secular state, the majority of Indonesian citizens practice Islam. This could mean that a large part of Indonesian culture is influenced by Islam or Islamic practices. Islam encourages modesty as a means “to promote a certain veil of privacy between men and woman” (Lodi 2020: 21). Hence, gyrating her hips on stage to music (which is also arguably discouraged in Islam) is seen as quite offensive and by no means supported. In fact, Inul’s dancing was shocking enough that the Indonesian Council of Ulama – Indonesia’s religious authority – “declared that her dancing and costume were circumscribed by its fatwa (edict) against pornography” (2008: 368) and local police were urged to block her performances (ibid 2008). Weintraub poses the question: “What was potentially so dangerous about a woman’s body that led to its censure?” (Ibid 2008: 369).

To answer Weintraub’s question, Mona Elthahawy (2019) likens this policing of women’s bodies to the fear of female sexuality. The need to control female bodies is then – in essence – the control or domination of female sexuality. Arguably, it may not take the gyrating of hips on stage to music to cause controversy over the Muslim female body. The polemic over the veil is a prime example of this. The veil is enforced in Islamic states such as Iran, where dressing modestly is obligatory for all citizens and tourists (Lodi 2020). Arjana notes that Islamic patriarchal states “often articulate a form of patriarchy that restricts girls and women from exerting agency. Sexual politics in Islam is very complicated” (ibid 2018: 27).

They may not be dancing scandalously on stage, but the women in *An-Nisaa (Women)* do perform on various platforms. This is exemplified when Rughshana – the comedian – physically gets up on stage to present her comedy to an audience while Rushda – the fine artist – sets up an exhibition using her own personal headscarves as part of an art performance. In one of the opening scenes of the documentary, social entrepreneur, speaker and activist, Shakirah Dramat, relays how she had been invited to speak at the Claremont Main Road mosque to give the pre-khutbah (pre-sermon) lecture. It is important to note that the Claremont Main Road mosque, situated in the Southern suburbs of Cape Town, has a liberal and progressive reputation in the Cape Town Muslim community. To give an example, the mosque was actively involved in the anti-apartheid struggle where, during the 1980s, Imam Rashied Omar, “continued giving political and critical matters priority in his Friday sermons” (Gamielien 2004: 1). Most famously, the mosque caused some controversy when it hosted Muslim feminist scholar Dr Amina Wadud, who gave the pre-khutbah lecture in 1994 (Gamielien 2004; Hoel 2013).

Shakirah was invited to give her lecture during an incredibly strained time in the Bo-Kaap in which the city-based neighbourhood was involved in protests opposing mass development and gentrification in the area. Shakirah had gained notoriety from a viral video in which she spoke out against the gentrification of the Bo-Kaap and the Cape Town tourism industry. The Claremont mosque had reached out to Shakirah as a means of showing support for the cause and offered her a platform to speak to their community. Upon receiving this request, Shakirah reached out to her Bo-Kaap community as a courtesy to relay any messages that the community may have. Instead, Shakirah was met with severe distain with some residents being appalled that a woman had been invited to speak at a mosque – even though it was only the pre-Khutbah lecture.

While not the same case, Shakirah’s story does bear some similarities to the women-led Friday prayer that took place in New York in 2005. The Friday prayer that was led by Dr Amina Wadud, was widely publicised and hotly debated among Muslims around the world (Hammer 2009). Furthermore, the prayer mixed genders rather than separate the men from the women as is required by Islamic law (ibid 2009). Juliane Hammer notes that “traditionally only men are required to attend Friday prayers”

(2009: 93). She goes on to further explain that “In addition to the ritual prayer itself, a Friday prayer ceremony includes a sermon called *Khutbah* offered to the congregation by the prayer leader or *imam* of the prayer. The requirements and legal regulations associated with the prayer are, like many other aspects of Muslim worship, modelled after the practices of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)” (ibid 2009: 93). Though women are not prohibited from attending Friday prayers, to have a woman speak or lead a prayer differs from the “established Muslim practices” (ibid 2009: 93). Hammer notes that these differences that went against the norm became an “embodied performance of gender justice in the eyes of the organisers and participants” (ibid 2009: 93).

To many, Shakirah’s invitation to speak at the mosque did indeed go against “established Muslim practices” (Hammer 2009: 93). While Shakirah’s intentions may have differed from the women-led prayer in New York, it still was an embodied performance of gender justice. Her *performance* – while not gyrating her hips on stage but rather speaking to a majority male audience at the mosque – was still deemed controversial as it challenged what is understood to be established gender norms. Despite the backlash that Shakirah experienced from her willingness to speak, she ends the scene by triumphantly punching her fist in the air while stating: “I ended up doing it anyways. I’m not going to let the patriarch stop me!”

While Shakirah’s activism may not constantly draw her to address crowds, Rughshana’s comedy almost always does. Rughshana’s soft spoken, quirky nature would make one disbelieve that she performs comedy – as she states – “by weekend”. Through deadpan and self-deprecating humour, Rughshana’s comedy takes the form of a personal diary entry that she shares with the audience. Importantly, Rughshana notes that she always felt welcomed in the Cape Town comedy scene and never felt out of place on stage. She has always been aware that she was playing to a mixed audience of both men and women as well as talking about dating – a concept not permissible in Islam. It is jarring to see a Muslim woman in hijab talking about being in the friendzone; the modern version of unrequited love, if you will. She discusses the trials and errors of dating and how, at one point, it led her to *Minder*, or rather *Muslim Tinder*. Rughshana is framed in a medium long shot, the camera then turns to face the audience, who laugh hysterically (and perhaps somewhat uncomfortably) at her mention of *Minder*. To the so-called ‘West’ discussing dating publicly or joking about topics of intimacy may not seem controversial, but many Muslim conservatives may

find this offensive. Rughshana wears hijab, dresses modestly and does not use profanity in her comedy, but her jokes may be seen as quite radical to an older generation who sees dating (or mixing among the opposite sex) as taboo. In contrast to Shakirah, Rughshana's experience is refreshing to watch. Apart from going against what the mainstream media may think a Muslim woman is, Rughshana's comedy is relatable, not just to young Muslims, but all youth seeking love.

In her discussion surrounding Muslim female fashion (or 'modest') influencers, Hafsa Lodi notes:

In Islam, modesty is encouraged to promote a certain veil of privacy between men and women. But where's the privacy in sharing selfies – albeit conservatively dressed ones – on Instagram to billions of strangers? If women are using apps like Instagram to show their skin covering outfits, are they still embodying the Islamic ideal of modesty? (Lodi 2020: 21).

Similar to addressing a crowd or performing on stage, placing oneself on social media is perhaps another form of putting oneself on display. As modesty is encouraged in Islam, to present oneself on stage in front of an audience – like Rughshana – or in Shakirah's case – go into a mosque and speak to a majority male audience, may be interpreted as being immodest. Throughout *An-Nisaa (Women)*, Shakirah not only uses social media for work related matters, but she utilises it for personal and political reasons. This is shown when she visits the Olive Grove in Bo-Kaap, addressing her experiences with trans-generational trauma as well as in the viral video condemning the city of Cape Town for its gentrification and exploitation of the Bo-Kaap as a tourist destination. Similarly, Rughshana utilises social media as an extension of her onstage comedy persona. Shakirah's and Rughshana's online presence is in no way promiscuous, though it may still seem quite shocking to conservative Muslims or religious authorities to see Muslim women openly discussing political or religious issues as well as stories relating to intimacy onstage and online. In the case of Shakirah, it could be argued that this disciplining of the body – the way in which some Bo-Kaap community members tried to stop her from speaking – was a means of stifling her voice and her right to speak. In other words, this disciplining of Shakirah's body

was also a disciplining of her voice. Shakirah, furthermore, found herself in what Susan Carland (2017) deems the *double bind* or Du Bois' *double consciousness*. In other words, Shakirah wanted to raise awareness on an important issue within her community but, simultaneously, did not want to besmirch them.

This need to control Muslim women's voices can also be seen in the short documentary, *Hip Hop Hijabi's*. The documentary follows Muslim female Hip Hop duo, Poetic Pilgrimage, as they embark on tour around the United Kingdom. In preparing for their *Malcom X* tour, the tour manager requests that they do their performance without music. In other words, they are asked to do spoken word performances. The same request is not made to the male performers who are also on tour with Poetic Pilgrimage. When one of the group member's, Sukina, mentions that she does not think that this is fair, the tour organiser responds: "I can tell you very clearly where the sensitivity is in Bradford. It's around female performance. It is. I'm telling you straight." Later in a voiceover, Sukina notes:

People feel that a woman being on stage is kind of exposing herself. The voice of the women, they say, is part of her private parts that should not be seen by the public.

Ultimately, Poetic Pilgrimage perform, but without music. The audience is silent. This is a stark contrast to the male performers, who had the majority Muslim crowd (of men and women) bobbing their heads and waving along to the music. Aware of the audience's disapproval of them being on stage, Sukina relays: "Our argument is that if our voices are not heard then somebody will speak for us." By 'our' and 'us', Sukina refers to Muslim women. She then goes onto perform a piece on women in Islam and their right to speak and be heard. What stands out in this scene, is that Poetic Pilgrimage – the only female duo on the tour – are asked to refrain from using music in their performance. If the Muslim community in Bradford felt that music was not permissible in Islam, then surely the men on tour would also have to omit music and do spoken word performances too? Rather, it is only the women who have to comply with this request. It is clear that the problem is not the music, but women performing on stage.

On discussing the similarities between modest dressing in Islam and Mormonism, Lodi notes that: “These faiths place God as the ultimate judge, yet humans are quick to ostracize those who fall outside the lines of culturally accepted appearances” (2020: 14). While there is a fascination with Muslim female bodies, there also appears to be an anger toward them – particularly when they are on display. This fascination is rooted in Orientalism, but this need to control and silence Muslim women’s bodies and voices are also linked to the fear of female sexuality. However, as disheartening this may be, it is quite inspiring to see women – like Shakirah, Rushda and Rughshana – challenge stereotypes and gender norms regardless of the status quo.

Chapter 4: Veils on Display in Popular Films, Television & Documentary

During her TED talk entitled, *I'm bored of talking about Muslim Women* (2017), poet Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan questioned why there appeared to be an obsession with Muslim women. She stated:

I'm frustrated. Why is it that women like me – in the West – have to always talk about being Muslim women. Is it really the most valuable use of our time?

First, Manzoor-Khan notes that when it comes to Muslim women, there are three main issues that are always discussed: what they wear, their bodies and their behaviour. Secondly, she states that she would deliberately not be discussing these stereotypical issues surrounding Muslim women. Manzoor-Khan significantly points out that society “picks and chooses” issues when discussing Muslim women such as female genital mutilation, forced marriages and honour killings, among others. Due to a deep focus on these issues, society tends to neglect other issues, such as Islamophobia and how it affects Muslim women daily. The dangerous assumption is that all problems facing Muslim women are because of Muslim men and Islam. While the issues that Manzoor-Khan highlight are wholly important and, indeed, should be discussed, it should be noted that these are not *just* Muslim women issues but are issues that affect all women. Additionally, when these issues are continually tied to Muslim women in the media, it sets up a dangerous narrative. It should not be difficult to imagine that there may be other Muslim women, like Manzoor-Khan, who are tired of discussing what they wear, their bodies and their behaviour. Yet, as the European Union's top court recently ruled that Muslim women can be banned from wearing the hijab in the workplace (Ray 2021), Muslim women could be pressed into a discussion that they are exhausted of having or defending. In *An-Nisaa (Women)*, as a filmmaker and Muslim woman who believes that one is not defined by dress, I purposefully chose not to outwardly discuss the hijab and veiling. Instead, if a participant preferred to discuss it, they were encouraged, but it was never the focus of the documentary. Considering the global obsession with this material piece of clothing and the link to controlling Muslim women's bodies, this subject could not be ignored. The idea that clothing could prove threatening or liberating is deeply fascinating and, in some ways, truly bizarre.

This chapter will examine the deep fascination with the hijab and veil, arguing that the captivation with this item of dress is too imbedded in Orientalism. This chapter will not only define what the hijab and veil means Islamically, but also will argue that to ban or enforce the hijab and veil is not only sexist but, inherently, racist too. To continue the argument set up in Chapter Three, this chapter will further demonstrate how the desire to control the hijab is linked to the fear of female sexuality. Lastly, in analysing popular television shows such as *9-1-1 Lone Star*, this chapter will show how the representation of the hijab continues the Orientalist tradition of situating Muslims as the Other.

Unsurprisingly, the fascination with the hijab and veil are tied to Orientalist fantasies of the harem (Arjana 2018). Sophia Rose Arjana states:

The harem and the veil are among the most popular tropes of Islam in the West. In a variety of places including travel narratives, paintings, novels, and films, they work together to frame Muslim women as subjugated. As part of the legacy of Orientalism, these images are so common that disentangling discussions about Islam from gender is challenging. As scholars have noted, the focus on Muslim female bodies is a fixation, seen in the legislative efforts in Europe and North America to control sartorial choices; the growth in the number of assaults on women wearing the veil; and the use of the veil as a symbol of Muslim cruelty and deprivation, often displayed visually in Western publications and in media productions focused on the abuse of girls and women. The veil functions as the most powerful symbol of Islam (Arjana 2018: 29).

The fascination with where the hijab originated and its subsequent power in the present is important to understand. Today, while the hijab has come to be seen as a political statement or an attestation of faith, it is also important to understand what hijab means Islamically. Arjana notes that to many Muslim women, the hijab is not just an item of dress but a veil that “protects the inner secrets of mystical contemplation” (2018: XIX).

According to Afia Ahmed, the hijab and veiling are “terms often used interchangeably and excessively by people who either observe neither or have negligible ‘association’ with them” (2019: 66). To wear the hijab or veil is not a practice among all Muslim women. There are, in fact, various forms of veiling and there are, as Arjana writes, “practices determined by numerous factors including local culture, ethnic or regional style, politics, colonialism and socioeconomic status” (2018: 30). Noting that there are multiple means of veiling, I will mostly be referring to the hijab, which is a simple covering of the head (not the face) and is usually coupled with a modest dress sense. According to Arjana:

Hijab, the Arabic word that literally means “partition,” is used colloquially to refer to a head covering. Girls and women who wear the veil are often called *muhajibat*, but in Muslim slang, the word *hijabi* is often used, as well as numerous other words in local language...The power attached to the veil often overshadows the achievements of Muslim girls and women, both historically and currently (Arjana 2018: 31).

Indeed, the power attached to the hijab and veil do overshadow the achievements of Muslim girls and women. The prohibiting of the hijab in France to the enforcement of wearing it in countries such as Iran and Saudi Arabia are, in fact, deeply rooted sexist policies that could also be imbedded in racist ideology. Historically, and at present, it appears that the fascination with the hijab is still ongoing and may not disappear in the foreseeable future. Arguably, the colonial fantasiser of the past has become the policy maker at present who not only wants to see what is behind the veil but control the Muslim woman beneath it.

In comparing the banning of the hijab in France to the enforcement of wearing it in Iran, Nina Hoel and Sa’diyya Shaikh (2007) note that in both cases women are being deprived of autonomy. On discussing the prohibition of veiling in France, they state: “In a typical colonial manner, Muslim women's views and voices were not considered. Public discourses both in form and content reflected prejudices and patronising cultural stereotypes against Muslims” (2007: 114). Alternatively, Arjana points out that “the veil can also support Islamic systems of domination” (2018: 32).

She goes on to further state: “Under the Taliban, women were beaten in public for violating the dress code and subject to daily indignities and abuses, which included public floggings and executions. Several scholars have argued that these impositions on women’s dress are efforts to “negate the fear of female sexuality”” (2018: 32). Concerning the fear of female sexuality in the ‘East’ and the need to liberate Muslim women in the ‘West’, it appears that Muslim women are caught between two impossible binaries. The reality cannot be denied that in some Muslim majority countries, the treatment of women is utterly despicable. Simultaneously, it is dangerous to assume that all Muslim women living in majority Muslim nations are treated the same. It is this very rhetoric that may have led some to assume that the removal of the hijab is tantamount to liberation.

The removal of the hijab has become synonymous with the idea of being liberated. In countries where the hijab is banned, it may appear that this prohibition is the first step to freeing Muslim women. This issue appears to take precedence over protecting Muslim women against Islamophobia or giving them the freedom of choice. As Haleh Afshar states:

With the rapid rise of a virulent new form of Islamophobia, women who cover find themselves at the heart of the hatred and are targeted both in the media and in the public domain at large. According to one estimate after September 11 there was an average of 3.8 attacks a day on Muslims, mainly women (The Guardian 8 December 2001) (Afshar 2008: 419).

Afshar further notes that because it is assumed that wearing the hijab or veiling is a practice enforced on Muslim women globally by Islam or Muslim men rather than a choice, feminists are, “urged to step forward to ‘save’ the Muslim woman from her plight (ibid 2008: 420). This narrative of ‘saving’ Muslim women was not only one of the many reasons for the United States’ invasion of Afghanistan (Lodi 2020; Mariam Khalid 2017), but it has also filtered down into popular cinema, documentaries, and television.

According to Arjana, “Today, Muslim women are almost always portrayed in Western media as veiled. When they are unveiled, it is a consequence of Western

political liberation, suggesting once again that Muslim women have no personal agency and that their lives can only be improved by outside intervention” (2018: 27). In *9-1-1: Lone Star* (2020) – a Fox procedural drama that centres around a New York firefighter (played by Rob Lowe) who relocates to Austin, Texas to take over a fire station – was criticised for its portrayal of a Muslim woman. Actress Natacha Karam portrays a female firefighter and devout Muslim, Marjan Marwani. While it is exciting to see more Muslim female characters onscreen, what is upsetting is the inaccuracy of said portrayal (Salvi 2020). This is shown by how the series showcases Marjan wearing her hijab as well as her during prayer. Both instances have been slated due to its inaccuracies. During a rescue mission, Marjan’s hijab falls off. In a deeply dramatic fashion, Marjan’s all male colleagues rush to her aid to cover and protect her from being seen without her hijab. Some viewers found the moment charming, while some mocked the show, with one Twitter user stating: “Wow and as usual the west comes to the “rescue” to “protect” the honour and their dignity of Muslim women...(sic) I wish I had the power to brainwash people the way media does” (Shaira Karimi 2020). It should be noted that the moment may have been inspired by a similar incidence where a Muslim female footballer’s hijab fell off during a soccer match while tackling an opponent. The opposing team quickly gathered around the woman while she placed her hijab back on (Tribune Express Online 2020). This is a true show of sportsmanship, but this cannot be compared to the instance that took place in *9-1-1 Lone Star*. As Nadia Mousa writes:

Was this moment a bit touching? Sure. Was it at all accurate? Hell no! Hijabs do not just fly off so easily. There are Muslim women athletes who run, swim, box, fence — you name it — while wearing a hijab. Not once has their veil magically slipped off. In fact, there is a whole industry devoted to producing pins and magnets that secure a hijab in place! Sadly, the directors favored (sic) creating “a moment” instead of devoting screen time to accurate representation (2020: 1).

Acts of kindness do happen, but there may be nothing quite so dramatic about a Muslim woman’s hijab falling off. Furthermore, this sequence is an example of how modern day television still enforces Orientalist tropes. In other words, Marjan’s hijab

essentially is symbolic of the harem and her separation from the West. When her hijab is removed to reveal luscious and shiny locks, the mystery of what lies beneath or behind the veil is revealed. Not only is she othered, but is susceptible to the *male gaze* as her male colleagues watch her before coming to her aid. What makes this narrative more dangerous is that later, when Marjan attends mosque, her supposed lack of modesty is vilified and she is asked to complete her prayers elsewhere. So, while her Western male colleagues 'saved' her from humiliation when her hijab fell off, her own Muslim community rejected her. As well as depicting the Muslim community negatively, this may also signal an inaccurate message that even a slight transgression (and one that is out of her control) will ultimately see her banished from her own community.

While fictional series and movies appear to have a long road to tread, there are plenty of documentaries exploring the practice of hijab and veiling. This can be seen in documentaries such as *They call me Muslim*, *For Covered Girls* and *Women and Islam: Islam Unveiled*, among many others. *Women and Islam: Islam Unveiled* follows presenter Samira Ahmed as she travels from London to West Africa, the Middle East and South East Asia to understand the role of women in Islam – particularly focusing on the hijab and veil. At first, she cannot fathom why a younger generation of Muslim Londoners are opting to wear the hijab, but through her journey, finds an understanding. The documentary eloquently balances discussions of wearing the hijab by Muslim women. As Ahmed travels from border to border, the common thread becomes clear: women are not given a choice. When the means to control women's dress becomes state policy or an act of defiance against the state, as Ahmed expresses: "the result is reactionary or progressive". Apart from showing the diverse cultures and traditions that influence Islam, Ahmed gently insinuates that perhaps the biggest issue is the lack of Islamic education or rather female interpretations of the Qur'an, thus echoing Asma Barlas' sentiments. Due to this, both Muslim men and women are caught between religion and politics. The documentary beautifully concludes, however, that it is astounding to see that Muslim women are at the forefront of change – no matter what nation they reside in. As one interviewee significantly says: "You cannot conduct politics as though women do not exist."

In *An-Nisaa (Women)*, the hijab is not necessarily a main focal point. In fact, debates around the hijab were purposefully never raised but rather grew organically if any participant in the film chose to discuss it. This discussion was never raised by me – as the filmmaker – as there are already many documentaries, films and texts dedicated to this debate. As a Muslim female filmmaker, I also believe that a Muslim woman is not defined by her dress nor do I assume that the manner in which a Muslim woman dresses is an indication of her level of religious participation. As the concept has been explored so vigorously, I wanted to set a different tone in *An-Nisaa (Women)*. One could say that each participant in the documentary is in various stages of dress. In other words, Rughshana (the comedian) chooses to wear the hijab, while Shakirah (the social entrepreneur & activist), does not. Rushda (the fine artist), on the other hand, sometimes opts to wear the hijab and other times chooses not to. During the final set up of her mock art installation, the camera watches Rushda through a floral veil as her tendrils of curls spills wildly over her shoulders. In a medium close-up, Rushda stretches across to hang a veil on the wall. As the camera comes into focus, I (as the filmmaker) can be heard off screen inquiring whether I can continue to film Rushda without her hijab on. She responds:

Chill. You can blur and edit to your liking. I am just too hot.

For a moment, I contemplated just how to proceed, worried that if I cannot film her face, then how will an audience be able to connect with her? I also immediately understood that my mere presence in her space with my camera, altered her behaviour. In other words, Rushda considered that it was not just me watching her, but an audience too and because of this she chose not to be seen without her hijab as this is how she presents herself publicly. Once the mock installation is complete, Rushda excitedly opens a door to reveal the final piece. The camera slowly tracks forward but then dissolves into a fast jump cut sequence where Rushda – framed in a close-up – wears an array of hijabs. As one hijab morphs into the other, Rushda begins to describe what her hijab means to her. She narrates:

Each scarf has a meaning, holds memories. It holds more than one memory, I believe. Like we are at a *jananzah* (funeral). So, it holds a memorable link to the person that passed away and I

can wear the same scarf again to a wedding. And then it's a different meaning. So, a scarf to me is not just something that I put on my head.

What is interesting about Rushda's view on the hijab is there seems to be no political meaning. Rather, she views her hijab as something that is deeply personal. To her, the hijab is an item that represents memories that are written, compiled, and then stored in the threads of the material of every hijab. These memories are altered or rewritten depending on the occasion she chooses to wear it to.

While never directly commenting on why she chooses to wear hijab, Rughshana does comment on what it feels like to wear hijab during a performance on stage. She states:

I'm very fortunate that I was able to enter the space, or the comedic space when I did. I think it was very welcoming, and everybody offered a sort of mentorship role when they listened to my comedy, and they would give me feedback. And it never felt, or I never felt like an anomaly or an outcast when I did my gigs as a Muslim woman, you know representing myself and my religion – in full hijab – standing on stage. So, being comfortable with my image and who I was, I was able to translate that into my comedy.

While Rushda's installation sees a series of hijabs on display, Rughshana – dressed in hijab – is the one on display when performing her comedy. Rughshana's choice of words is interesting. She says that she "never felt like an outcast or an anomaly" while performing in hijab. This not only indicates that she is aware of the global perception of Muslim women in the media, but also that they may not necessarily be seen as belonging on stage performing comedy in traditional Islamic dress. It is a rare sight to see Muslim women in such roles – not because they do not exist, but because mainstream media rarely do portray them as such. Later, Rughshana notes:

I think going up on stage, 'cause (sic) I know that you are playing to a mixed audience, you know, there are men and women in

these spaces. I think it is an opportunity to represent Islam and if you are able to educate somebody...And Muslim women, we take any form, but you are more than your appearance and Islam teaches us that. It empowers you and liberates you, so it never felt like I was transgressing in anyway because I never compromised who I was.

Rughshana strongly ties her identity to her hijab. To Rughshana, her hijab is not only a means to educate people, but an attestation to her faith. To remove her hijab, would mean stripping her of her identity. Interestingly, Rughshana also uses her hijab in her comedy. Not necessarily commenting on it directly, but she is aware that her performing onstage in hijab – in front of men and women – may be a strange occurrence, one that she appears to more than happily challenge. Ultimately, one could argue that, using her performance as a means to educate her audiences could mean that Rughshana may affiliate her hijab with the political. In other words, Rughshana utilises her performances to not only entertain but to educate and, perhaps, inadvertently demonstrates what can be achieved when Muslim women take autonomy and the freedom of choice to dress as they choose.

Rooted in Orientalism, this historical fascination with the hijab has continued into the present. This is seen in popular television shows such as *9-1-1 Lone Star*. Furthermore, it is true that politics cannot be conducted as though Muslim women do not exist and so, the banishment and enforcement of the hijab and veil are not only sexist but racist policies too. This obsession with the hijab is also exemplified in the many documentaries discussing this topic and, for that reason, I opted not to have the hijab as a main focal point in *An-Nisaa (Women)*. In this way, *An-Nisaa (Women)* acts against the Orientalist fantasies set up by the mainstream media, cinema, and popular culture, but also significantly shows that Muslim women do exist beyond these tropes.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The making of *An-Nisaa (Women)* was a deeply exhausting yet rewarding journey. What started with thirty-five research participants was (with great difficulty) narrowed down to three innovative, talented, and independent young women. During the final process of making the film, I sent it to various test audiences for feedback. In the process of waiting, I was incredibly nervous. I did not necessarily fear that anyone would dislike the film, but rather I feared that there would be an indifference to it. In making this documentary, my intention was to present an alternative narrative – one that I (and many other Muslim women) could relate to. I hesitated often on this journey wondering if I had said too much or done too little, knowing that I too was caught in a *double bind*. In other words, I was acutely aware that some of the topics discussed in *An-Nisaa (Women)* may be seen as controversial to some conservative Muslims in my community (even to some of my own family members), but I was compelled to not only speak out against the stereotypical and limited representations of Muslim women onscreen, but also speak out against societal power structures such as patriarchy. To not speak out meant that I was not only complicit, but it also meant that I was inherently accepting the global perception of Muslim women – and that was something I was not willing to remain silent about. I wanted this documentary to start discussions, debates and be used as an instrument for learning and, more importantly, unlearning. I envisioned *An-Nisaa (Women)* as a tool for education and a means to move away from the Orientalist tropes and limited representations set up by the mainstream media, cinema, and popular culture. As Muslim women's bodies are under constant scrutiny, it is a bold and brave step to put oneself on a platform and speak out. Just as Shakirah, Rughshana and Rushda do in *An-Nisaa (Women)*.

Chapter Three of this thesis notes that the Muslim female body is under constant scrutiny. There appears to be a constant need to police and discipline the Muslim female body, which extends to her voice. This need to control Muslim women's bodies and dress is not only rooted in Orientalism but has been linked to the fear of female sexuality. The Muslim female body was often used to sell Orientalist products for colonial powers (Arjana 2018). Arguably, these Orientalist traditions have continued into present day. As Islam is one of the fastest growing religions in the world, the financial incentive cannot be ignored (Lodi 2020). This is shown by the means through which well-known fashion labels have incorporated modest dress into their

ranges. Though, as Hafsa Lodi forewarns, this may not necessarily be a means of acceptance but rather a chance at financial gain (ibid 2020). This consumerist and Orientalist traditions are further demonstrated by how Muslim women are portrayed in popular Hollywood cinema. This is shown in award winning films such as *The English Patient* as well as popular franchises like the *Sex and the City* film instalments – particularly *Sex and the City 2*, which takes place in Abu Dhabi. If not for consumerism, then it appears that the Muslim female body is at the centre of political controversy. This is seen in the case of Indonesian pop star, Inul, whose dancing and performing on stage led to Indonesia's religious body issuing a fatwa (edict) against the performer while likening her dancing to pornography. Though, it does not take dancing on stage for a Muslim woman to cause a fuss. This can be seen in *An-Nisaa (Women)*, where Rughshana discusses dating on stage (a concept that is forbidden in Islam). While Rughshana has a positive experience, Shakirah does not. This can be seen in the opening scenes of the documentary where Shakirah discusses speaking in front of the Claremont Main Road mosque during Friday prayers. In choosing to speak, Shakirah was met with distain from her own Bo-Kaap community, who were protesting against the city of Cape Town. Ultimately, this opposition to Shakirah speaking was also a means of stifling her voice. As women do not usually speak in a mosque before or during Friday prayers, this was seen as straying from the gender norm and “established Muslim practices” (Hammer 2009: 93). This disciplining of the body also extends to the voice. This is seen in the short documentary, *Hip Hop Hijabi's*. The all-female rap duo, Poetic Pilgrimage, are excluded from performing on stage with music. When the same is not asked of the male performers, it becomes clear that the problem is not with the music, but rather the female performers on stage.

These examples are not only reminiscent of Carland's concept of the *double bind* or Du Bois' *double consciousness*, but also of *double colonization*, whereby women have to contend with both colonialist and patriarchal power structures (Tyagi 2014).

Continuing the discussion, Chapter Four notes that the control over the Muslim female body is none more evident than the polemic over the hijab and veil. This bizarre fascination with this item of dress is also rooted in Orientalism. Though, the hijab and veil differs from country to culture and tradition, it is important to understand what the hijab means Islamically, which is not only dressing modestly in accordance with Islamic tradition, but also extends to a woman's “inner secrets of mystical

contemplation” (Arjana 2018: 30). In other words, it is not just a physical covering but a spiritual one too – an attestation of faith. Thus, when Muslim women are banned from wearing the hijab, they may view this as a violation to their freedom of religious expression. Alternatively, enforcing women to wear the hijab is equally a violation of their rights, and significantly, it appears that controlling what Muslim women wear takes precedence over protecting them from Islamophobia or giving them the freedom to choose. Both the enforcement and banning of the hijab are sexist (and racist) policies put in place to control women. Yet, the mainstream media continues to juxtapose the removal of the hijab with liberation. This can be seen in the popular procedural drama *9-1-1 Lone Star*. Though, the show attempts to offer a positive portrayal of the Muslim female, it not only falls prey to Orientalist tropes, but also upholds fantasies of the *male gaze* (Mulvey 1989). As there are already various documentaries covering the subject of the hijab, I purposefully chose not to discuss this subject in *An-Nisaa (Women)*. Those choosing to discuss the hijab in *An-Nisaa (Women)* did so out of their own free will, but even so, their approaches were not typical of what is usually seen in a documentary. In other words, Rushda saw her hijab as personal collection of memories that adjusted or evolved every time that she wore it. Thus, making her experience with the hijab a deeply personal one. Alternatively, Rughshana used her hijab as part of her comedic performance. She never discusses it directly but recognises that it is not what one would imagine a comedian to look like. Noting that being on stage is also a means to educate, Rughshana’s hijab – arguably – not only has a personal meaning but a political one too. Interestingly, Shakirah never discusses the hijab at all, which in many ways counters the stereotypical narratives set out by the mainstream media and pushes against Orientalist tropes.

Ultimately, Muslim women are stripped of autonomy when their right to choose is taken away. This control over women’s bodies becomes easier when there is a lack of Islamic education or little to no female interpretations of the holy Qur’an (Barlas 2002). Yet, in the fog of negative or limited depictions of Muslim women, the need to control them, save them or stifle their voices, it is those very Muslim women at the forefront of change. In a call to action, Afia Ahmed unabashedly writes:

Contrary to what we are presented with, there is not one type of Muslim woman. There are millions of us occupying our own spaces, changing our own worlds in our own small ways,

contributing to what we believe to be the greater good. Fighting for the rights of the minorities and seeking representation in industries that value us for more than how we look. And to those who wish to include Muslim women, a word of advice: if you want to make us feel included, stop singling us out. If you truly believe it is not about the burqa, prove it and stop talking about it. It is not the duty of Muslim women to have to educate entire nations about boundaries, choices, and representation, and neither is it our duty to justify what we choose to wear (Ahmed 2019: 76).

Ahmed makes a significant point, but arguably, Muslim women cannot remain static or hope to be included accurately when it comes to their own representation. If this is the case, then these Orientalist tropes and modern day interpretations thereof will only continue. This is because the onscreen representation needs to also be reflected off screen by Muslim women filmmakers, writers, poets, and artists. Only when this onscreen representation is mirrored offscreen will Muslim women, and all women, no longer be just passive agents in their representation. Ultimately, this is what *An-Nisaa (Women)* attempts to represent. It is not only the reclamation of representation, but also an unapologetic display of what it means to be a Muslim woman today.

(13 708 words)

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