Muslim Women in Denmark: Existing in the Third Space

MOUNA CHATT highlights the conflicting experiences of agency and repression that Muslim women face in Denmark

Muslim women sitting on the beach in Amager Strandpark, Copenhagen. *Image: Jens Cederskjold | Wikicommons*

Over the past four decades, Denmark has seen an increase in the number of Muslim immigrants (Razack 2004). Like the rest of Western Europe, the debate accompanying this has been inherently gendered and Orientalist essentialising the Middle Eastern, North African, and Asian societies as 'uncivilised' while rendering European societies as superior (Said 1978). These sentiments have permeated Danish public and political discourse, giving rise to Islamophobic attitudes and effectively restraining Muslim women's agency (Charsley and Liversage 2015). Throughout this essay, Davies' (1991) definition of agency will be utilised, understanding it as the capacity to construct and enact one's own identity, liberties, and political existence, particularly in relation to the ways in which Muslim women's agency in Denmark is restricted by contemporary political discourse.

This article will first explore how Muslim women have been infantilised and reduced to victims of 'Muslim patriarchy' in Danish political discourse. From there, it will shed a light on how Muslim women have simultaneously been constructed as agents of those perceived threats. The Muslim woman's body is therefore viewed as a paradox in the Danish socio-political context: both a victim and a threat. Finally, this article will examine how contemporary political branches of Islamism that serve as a countermovement to Danish Orientalist

sentiments also restrict Muslim women's agency by disallowing them political existence. Danish Muslim women exist in a 'third space,' wherein two opposite poles intersect to deny them their agency (Bhabha 1990, 220).

Muslim as a Category of Analysis

Prior to engaging in analysis, it is necessary to shed light on the term 'Muslim'—and whether 'muslim-ness' should be considered a stronger category of analysis (akin to the terminology for analysing black-ness). The term 'Muslim' has been criticised for being a rudimentary and unnuanced category, as it potentially reduces people of multiple races, ethnicities, and socioeconomic classes to simply being Muslim (Brubaker 2013; Khan 1998). While the risks of homogenising the experiences of Danish Muslim women are vital to acknowledge, it remains necessary for our purposes to engage analytically with 'Muslim' as a category due to the anti-Muslim sentiment that dominates Danish political discourse (Hassani 2022). In effect, it would be impossible to conceptualise the mechanisms of Islamophobia, as well as its effects on Muslim women's agency, without using 'Muslim' as an analytical category.

Islam and Denmark

The notion that there is a natural clash of cultures between the 'West' and Islam has dominated European political and public discourse for decades (Razack 2004). Muslims have been, and continue to be, essentialised in the West as a group adhering to pre-modern values—having no respect for, or commitment to, basic human rights, women, or democracy (Razack 2004). These narratives are products of colonial Orientalist discourse that fabricates the perception of Muslim societies as 'backwards' and implies a superiority of Western society (Said 1978). In Denmark, Islam has been described in political contexts as antithetical to arbitrary 'Danish values,' such as democracy and women's rights (Andreassen and Siim 2010). These Orientalist perceptions portray Islam an innately misogynistic religion, which is inherently in conflict with the constructed narrative of Western Europe as the 'defender' and 'promoter' of women's rights and liberties (Bilge 2010). The discourse surrounding Islam and Muslims in Denmark has therefore been gendered from its very beginning.

Muslim Women: Passive, Oppressed, and in Need of 'Saving'?

Muslim women, and particularly veiled Muslim women, have come to symbolise Islam's 'incompatibility' with modern Danish values (Andreassen and Siim 2010). In Danish political discourse, Muslim women are generally portrayed as inherently passive and oppressed objects, possessing limited to no agency. This perception has evoked the notion that Muslim women must be 'saved' from the presumed disempowerment and perils of Muslim culture and misogynistic Muslim men (Razack 2004). In Denmark, this has particularly been evident within integration policies that feature debates about veiling. While Denmark's integration policies have historically been underpinned by theories of assimilation, its adherence to Nordic welfare regimes have generally endowed it with a liberal perception of veiling (Andreassen and Siim 2010). In essence, Denmark has traditionally embraced the idea that people should be able to dress themselves and express their religious beliefs as they wish. Nevertheless, following France's ban of veiling in public institutions in 2004, the far-right Danish People's Party initiated Denmark's first parliamentary debate about veiling, proposing to follow in France's footsteps (Andreassen and Siim 2007; Abdelgadir and Vasiliki 2020). Louise Frevert, spokesperson of the party, described Muslim veiling as 'an expression of gendered force' and a 'signal of [Islam as] a male dominated instrument' (Andreassen and Siim 2010, 18). While a majority

of the parties in the Danish Parliament did not endorse the banning of the veil in public institutions, all parties agreed that Islam is inherently sexist and misogynistic (Andreassen and Siim 2010). Moreover, the majority of the parties agreed that veiling can be seen as a symbol of women's general oppression in Islam (Andreassen and Siim 2010). Although the policy to ban all veiling in public institutions never passed, full-face veils such as the niqab or burqa were banned in public in 2018, following similar arguments (Zempi 2019).

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The portrayal of Muslim veiling in Denmark as inherently oppressive for Muslim women reflects the colonial vision of 'white men saving brown women from brown men' (Spivak 1994, 92). In effect, Orientalism has historically fueled the idea of Europeans as civilised saviors that must, and will, 'liberate' Muslim women from dangerous Muslim men (Said 1978; Khan 1998). Thus, the political discourse surrounding veiling illustrates an attempt by the Danish state to colonise the body and agency of Muslim women, effectively robbing them of their own articulation of what veiling means. As such, Muslim women's capacity to express their own identity and religiosity has effectively been stripped from them. This is particularly the case for veiling, as it serves as an expression of agency for Muslim women in and of itself. Mernissi (1987) points out that, beyond being a religion, Islam also serves as tool used by Muslims to empower themselves in the face of obstacles. Thus, veiling is not only an act of religious piety or modesty for Danish Muslim women, but it also can act as an expression of identity and source of strength (Chapman 2015; Abu-Lughod 2002). Veiling as a way of asserting agency subverts mainstream notions of Western liberal feminism, through which agency is understood as secularised and distinct from religious adherence (Nyhagen 2019). Due to this difference in understanding, Danish secularisation remains at odds with Islamic feminism.

The Paradox of the Muslim Woman's Body

In Danish political and public discourse, Muslim women are not only portrayed as victims of Islam's apparent misogyny; they are also constructed as agents of the 'threats' accompanying Islam. Accordingly, the Muslim woman's body becomes a paradoxical entity, unifying two contrasting points of misinterpretation. For example, whilst the ban of full-face veiling in 2018 was partly based on arguments of gender equality and preventing women's oppression, it was also established upon the idea of the Muslim full-face veil as a representation of the alleged terrorist threat Denmark is under (Zempi, 2019). Notably, no recent terrorist attacks have been carried out in Denmark by individuals bearing a Muslim full-face veil (McDonald 2018). Rashid (2016) argues that the construction of Muslim women as 'veiled threats' reflects how Muslim women's agency in Europe is limited. In public and in political discourse, Muslim women can only embody identities of either a victim or a threat, neither of which is an empowering position. White middle-class women, in contrast, are still oppressed by patriarchal structures, but they can define and shift between different parts of their identities with ease (Rashid, 2016). It is due to their specific positionality that Muslim women in Denmark are denied their agency.

What makes this phenomenon even more noteworthy is that it stands in contrast to Denmark's claims to liberate Muslim women from the denial of agency and liberties by reproducing a similar negation of agency. As the essentialisation of Muslim women as victims or threats in Denmark weakens their ability to define their own sociopolitical identity, it highlights the irony through which these

claims operate.

Muslim Women in the 'Third Space'

In opposition to the colonial Orientalist discourse that has constructed these narratives of Danish Muslim women, Islamism has emerged as an anti-colonial and anti-Orientalist movement (Khan, 1998). In its contemporary form, Islamism denotes a religious ideology based on selective interpretations of ancient Islamic scripture (Mozaffari 2007). Its core objective is to spread Islamic might globally by all and any means necessary (Mozaffari 2007). Thus, Islamism does not reject violence or coercion. Yet, similarly to the gendered political interpretation of Islam by the Danish, politicised Islamism also centers its politics around women and exerts social, political, and sexual control over them (Khan 1998; Moghadam 1991). For example, in political Islamism, women's primary role is building and sustaining a healthy family to help the spread of Islam globally (Hatem 2002). Furthermore, Islamist social roles of men and women differ, in the sense that women are relegated to the private sphere while men are endowed a social, political, and economic presence in the public sphere (Badran 2013).

As such, Danish Muslim women find themselves negotiating their identities and existence between two opposite nodes of oppression, or what Bhabha (1990) refers to as the 'third space.' On one hand, the Orientalist discourse of saving Danish Muslim women positions them in the political landscape and gives them a political presence—this presence, however, is inherently negative, oppressive, and dangerous (Khan 1998). On the other hand, Islamist movements address Muslim women's needs through Islamic scripture and aim to find solutions that align with them—and yet, they strictly define roles for women and do not respect their sociopolitical existence or sexual desires (Khan 1998). As such, whilst the two poles stand in opposition to one another, they both arrive at the same endpoint. They both reinforce the oppression of Muslim women, and therefore effectively rob them of their agency. The third space presents itself as a space of contradiction and complicates the topic of Muslim women's agency, as the limitations at play are at once inflicted by colonial Orientalist visions seen through Danish political discourse and by Islamism.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the agency of Muslim women in Denmark is restricted by Danish political discourse that reflects colonial Orientalism and renders Muslim women's bodies paradoxical entities. In effect, Muslim women are viewed simultaneously as both victims of Muslim patriarchy and also as agents of the alleged threats Islam poses to Western Europe. They are simultaneously depicted as passive objects in need of saving by 'civilised' Europeans, and as potential terror threats. Whilst political Islamism has emerged as a response to the colonial Orientalist discourse regarding Islam in Europe, it too serves to oppress Muslim women in Denmark by disallowing them a political existence. As such, Muslim women in Denmark exist in a third space, wherein opposing nodes of oppression intersect to disallow Muslim women their autonomy. This is problematic and dangerous, as it renders Danish Muslim women second-class citizens that cannot act with subjecthood in a democratic society. More thorough analyses of the third space Muslim women find themselves in (in Denmark and elsewhere) can help shed a light onto their lived experiences. Thus, extending academic analysis of how Muslim women's agency is limited is crucial to understanding the dynamics of neo-colonial Orientalism at play in Denmark and beyond.

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