

4-2023

## Centring the Black Muslimah: Interrogating Gendered, Anti-Black Islamophobia

Rabiat Akande

*Osgoode Hall Law School of York University, rakande@osgoode.yorku.ca*

### Source Publication:

Systemic Islamophobia in Canada : a Research Agenda. Edited by Anver M. Emon, University of Toronto Press, 2023.

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.osgoode.yorku.ca/scholarly\\_works](https://digitalcommons.osgoode.yorku.ca/scholarly_works)



Part of the [Civil Rights and Discrimination Commons](#), [Human Rights Law Commons](#), [Law and Gender Commons](#), [Law and Race Commons](#), and the [Religion Law Commons](#)

---

### Repository Citation

Akande, Rabiat, "Centring the Black Muslimah: Interrogating Gendered, Anti-Black Islamophobia" (2023). *Articles & Book Chapters*. 3060.

[https://digitalcommons.osgoode.yorku.ca/scholarly\\_works/3060](https://digitalcommons.osgoode.yorku.ca/scholarly_works/3060)

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Scholarship at Osgoode Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articles & Book Chapters by an authorized administrator of Osgoode Digital Commons.

# **CENTERING THE BLACK MUSLIMAH: INTERROGATING GENDERED, ANTI- BLACK, ISLAMOPHOBIA**

**Rabiat Akande**

*Forthcoming in Anver Emon, ed. Systemic Islamophobia (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2023)*

Islamophobia is an everyday Muslim reality. It takes spectacular acts of violence, such as the brutal 2021 slaying of a London, Ontario Muslim family, to bring this common Muslim experience to public consciousness (Zardosky, 2021). Yet, extensive studies show that Islamophobia has a firm foothold in Canada as in much of the contemporary world (Allen; Bouchard and Taylor, 2007; Wilkins-Laflamme, 2018). For all the generality of the Muslim experience of discrimination, however, Islamophobia is like all forms of systemic oppression more acutely experienced at particular intersections. Perhaps the most palpable of these intersections is the meeting of the Muslim identity not only with gender but also specifically with race. If the body of the Muslim woman is constantly marked and othered, that of the black Muslim woman inhabits an even more precarious intersection. Studies of Islamophobia and the state's complicity in its systemic and structural forms, including those that pay attention to gender and those that interrogate Islamophobia as anti-Muslim racism, have, however, been inattentive to the precarity of the black Muslim woman. This essay tentatively interrogates how Islamophobia in its systemic forms encounters the black Muslim woman. This essay maps out what interrogation of this encounter might entail, the voices it will foreground, the forms of questions it might enable scholars and activists to ask, and its possible contributions to scholarly and policy debates.

I proceed in two parts. Part I considers what is elided by the pervasive tendency to homogenize the forms of oppression that Islamophobia engenders. Arising from the flawed understanding of Muslims as a monolith, the pervasive understanding of Islamophobia as a singular and undifferentiated form of oppression—and suffering—obscures the uniqueness of the suffering of differently positioned Muslim subjects. Moreover, it elides intra-Muslim forms of domination that foster the heightened vulnerability of discretely situated Muslims. I further argue that this inattention to unique realities, and specifically, intersectional ones, partly arises from the term Islamophobia's ostensible focus on "Islam," the religion. By understanding Islamophobia as a form of oppression directed at Islam, the term Islamophobia risks homogenizing the target of the

hostility, privileging the experience of dominant groups among them. Departing from this tendency, theorizing Islamophobia through the lens of intersectionality pays attention to the systemic and structural oppression that Muslims face while also paying attention to the particularities of Muslim experiences. Doing so helps to foreground both the intergroup differentiation and ultimately discrimination that instantiates and sustains Islamophobia, as well as the intragroup positioning that makes certain Muslims more vulnerable than others. Building on this foregrounding of the ‘particular,’ Part II then proceeds to map a specific intersection—the black Muslim woman. Black Muslimahs are intersectionals who easily fall through the cracks in the current discourse, which focuses on hegemonic Muslim representations—typically male, Middle Eastern and South Asian. In contrast to this approach, I attempt to center the figure of the black Muslimah, a marginalized experience, in interrogating Islamophobia. I conclude by arguing that intersectionalizing the study of Islamophobia illuminates the distributive effects of Islamophobia on differently situated Muslims while also nuancing our understanding of the shared Muslim experience of oppression.

## **I: Intersectionalizing Islamophobia**

“Muslims, and in particular Arabo-Muslims are, with Blacks, the group hardest hit by various forms of discrimination.” (Bouchard and Taylor, 2008)

Islamophobia, as defined by the often-cited UK Runnymede Trust report, is “unfounded hostility towards Islam” having “practical consequences” in “unfair discrimination,” including the “exclusion of Muslims from “mainstream political and social affairs.”(Runnymede 4; Elahi and Khan 7) If the pervasive anti-Muslim discrimination informed the 1997 Runnymede inquiry into the subject, global Islamophobia has only proliferated exponentially since the publication, particularly in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 bombings and the Euro-America championed global war on terror that followed. Even as scholars and activists have grappled with the distant roots and recent iterations of anti-Muslim hate—a drive continuously renewed by frequent bursts of spectacular acts of Islamophobic violence—much continues to be elusive including the lived experiences of Muslims encountering Islamophobia. The term Islamophobia centers Islam as the subject of anti-Muslim vitriol, portraying anti-Muslim bias as arising from

hostility towards the religion of Islam itself. This foregrounding of Islam has paradoxically served to arm purveyors of anti-Muslim rhetoric who cite transnational liberal commitments to free speech and debate to defend anti-Muslim vitriol masked as a critique of Islam as an ideology (Islam 2018a). Anti-Muslim rhetoric is hardly an engagement with Islam as an ideology; yet, presenting anti-Muslim hate as a critique of Islam is possible precisely because of the essentialization of the Muslim at the center of Islamophobic discourse. That discourse is one that produces Muslims as a homogenous racial category, often relying on stereotypical tropes of the brown Arab or South Asian, typically male or male-dependent (Hill, 2015). By racializing Muslims as a homogenous category with essentialized cultural or social markers while attributing those differences to the natural difference of Muslims, Islamophobic discourse creates an essentialized and differentiated category while insisting that the hostility is directed at the ideology rather than the people.

This essentialization, paradoxically, finds a place in the discourse seeking to dismantle Islamophobia (Islam 2018a). Often, well-meaning advocates adopt the experience of the dominant Muslim prototype for understanding the Muslim experience of oppression, with the consequence that advocates respond to a relentless and homogenizing Islamophobic discourse with an equally homogenizing and essentializing representation. Such a response eclipses the stories of Muslims whose experience of oppression is conditioned by the unique interplay of various identities that heighten their vulnerability. The outcome is the displacement of these experiences to the periphery, intensifying the vulnerability of these intersectionals and ultimately undermining the project of dismantling anti-Muslim discrimination that these advocates pursue. By siloing anti-Muslim discrimination from other forms of oppression, the homogenizing discourse that continues to be popular in advocacy and policy reform discourse obscures the entrenched systemic and structural violence that sustains and perpetuates anti-Muslim oppression. Integral to that violence is the homogenization of ways of being Muslim and of the Muslim experience. De-marginalizing those experiences calls for theorizing the relations of power that produces, others and renders Muslims vulnerable in divergent ways (Abdul Khabeer; Alexander, 2017).

The marginalization of the experiences of non-dominant members of minority groups is hardly unique to the context of anti-Muslim discrimination. Critical race theorists have long interrogated this question in the context of racialized minorities, attempting to map the experience at the

“margins” by deploying the theory of intersectionality. The theory of intersectionality suggests that a focus on a single axis in interrogating the experience of discrimination and formulating legal and policy responses tends to privilege the experience of dominant members of minority groups, eliding the experience of persons at the margins. Far from arising from a single identity, this experience of marginalization is the culmination of the simultaneity of multiple minority identities. Consequently, no single-axis analysis can apprehend the experience of persons at the intersection of multiple minority identities. By viewing marginalized persons merely through the lens of a single identity, both the law that seeks to address discrimination and discourses of emancipations fail to account for the heightened vulnerability of intersectionals. This failure to engage with intersectional realities dooms the quest to remedy discrimination or achieve substantive equality. If the experience of working-class black women first inspired intersectional analysis, the theory has productively theorized the power relations and marginalization that speaks to a range of experiences, including indigeneity, disability, and religion, among others (Crenshaw 1990,139; Clutterbuck 51). Interrogating the experience of Muslims at the margins calls for intersectionalizing the Muslim experience of discrimination.

In recognition of this insight that “intergroup discrimination” can be “based on intragroup difference,”(Aziz 2015, 391) studies of anti-Muslim discrimination are increasingly illuminating the ways particularly situated Muslims more keenly experience Islamophobic oppression (Aziz 2014, 2015; Islam 2018a; Runnymede . This shift has led to calls to foreground the experience of Muslim women, racialized groups, and those with non-dominant ethnic-national origins. Nevertheless, this emerging attention to intersectionality in understanding Islamophobia continues to ignore certain intersections. Perhaps no elided intersection carries a more heightened precarity than that of the black Muslim woman.

## **II: Centering the Black Muslimah**

“Solidarity is centering the most affected” (Islam 2018b)

The figure of the Muslim woman is an object of intense scrutiny. Long an object of occidental fascination and exoticization, Muslim women are “caught in the crosshairs of bias at the

intersection of religion, gender, and race or ethnicity.”(Aziz 2015). Popular discourse, therefore, continues to foreground the ostensible need to emancipate Muslim women, invoking age-long tropes of the Muslim woman’s subordination by her male counterparts and calling for liberation through the state’s regulation of the Muslim woman’s body. Indeed, what Muslim women wear or uncover continues to be hotly contested and the subject of a social, political, and legal discourse that often elides the agency of Muslim women, foreclosing their participation in the ostensibly democratic liberal discourse that is supposed to emancipate them. As Faiza Hijri states, “the obsession with Muslim women's bodies--whether they are covered, how they are covered, what those bodies are capable of--never seems to go out of style, as it were, and the obsession is held by many different groups that feel they should control these bodies in some way” (Hirji 80). At the same time, however, the vision of the meek, docile, and repressed female on which this first representation of the Muslim woman relies has long collided with the post 9/11 view of the Muslim woman as a vector of dangerous ideologies, disloyal terrorist, or, at least, an enabler of her terrorist male counterpart. As a result, Muslim Women are simultaneously stereotyped as meek, passive, and docile while also portrayed as aggressive and violent. This representation of Muslim women, itself based on the stereotypes of Muslim men in a post 9/11 global war on terror context, genders Islamophobia (Zine 2004). Gendered Islamophobia culminates in Muslim women’s heightened vulnerability in employment, education, law enforcement, and political participation—especially when the Muslim woman adorns a visible religious marker such as the hijab (Aziz 2014, 2015).

The vulnerability is heightened in the case of the black Muslim woman. The added axis of blackness compounds the black Muslim woman’s experience of anti-Muslim oppression—and marginalization. Anti-black racism conditions the black Muslimah to an entrenched system of racial oppression that has treated black persons as second-class humans and in not a few jurisdictions, as chattel, to be transported abroad or brutally colonized at home. This long history of colonization, slavery, and socio-economic and cultural exploitation does not only survive through black memories haunted by intergenerational trauma. It also lives on in stark socio-economic disparities, in the continuing brutalization and decimation of black bodies by forms of state-sponsored and state-enabled violence. Everyday violence, sometimes life-ending, remains the global experience of black people. Despite claims to multi-culturalism, Canada is far from an exception (Maynard, 2017; Backhouse, 1999).

For the black Muslim woman, the simultaneity of bias along the multiple axes of race, gender, and religion arises from a complex relation of power between these uniquely situated Muslim intersectionals and non-Muslims, and between these intersectionals and differently situated Muslims. That intergroup relation of power is instantiated by the casting of Muslims as an ‘other’ to world civilization and global progress. While Islamophobia invents a homogenized notion of a Muslim and sustains its othering through that homogenization, Islamophobia is perpetuated and thrives through its interconnection with other forms of oppression. Those forms of oppression are not absent from Muslim inter-group relations. The outcome is the uneven distribution of Islamophobia among differently positioned Muslims. It is by mapping that distribution that scholarship can unveil Muslim women’s heightened burden of Islamophobic oppression.

Grasping the black Muslim woman’s encounter with Islamophobia calls for interrogating both intergroup and intragroup relations of power. Examining the stereotypes attached to the black, female, Muslim intersection is one productive way to apprehend marginalization of the black Muslim woman. Stereotyping is itself an act of power. When the black Muslimah’s blackness meets her gender, she is subject to the age-long stereotype of the angry black woman. Economic assumptions also travel with this stereotypical portrayal of a black woman; the black woman is imagined to be poor and dependent on social welfare. On the one hand, the conditions that overdetermine the black woman’s subjugation are also implicated in the economic conditions that make her economic advancement impossible absent of radical reform. At the same time, however, any denunciations of the system that conditions her oppression and advocacy for reform only reinstate the *a priori* conclusion that rage defines the black woman. These self-perpetuating, and therefore irrefutable, presumptions about the black woman’s rage are only intensified when the black woman is Muslim. The post 9/11 understanding of the Muslim woman as aggressive, disloyal, and violent only heightens when it encounters a black and stereotypically portrayed angry woman. At the same time, however, agency-eliding occidental presumptions of the meek, docile, and submissive Muslim woman persist with these stereotypes and serves not to neutralize the stereotypes of aggression but instead, peculiarly coexists with it. The simultaneity of these identities and the experiences that follow them culminates in a more increased psychological burden for black Muslim women.

An agenda to center the black Muslim woman requires interrogating the experience at that unique intersection. That storytelling, to be deployed in projects to reform state institutions, foregrounded in possible societal reconciliation and remediation projects, and conceivably in corrective litigations, cannot merely rely on archives of formal encounter with legal and bureaucratic institutions. Those archives, including of the police where black bodies have always been a target of violence; in national security where Muslims continue to be scapegoated; of the workplace where the labor of black women continue to be exploited; and of the family where both black and Muslim women continue to be governed by the overreaching hands of the state while also battling entrenched patriarchy, will be useful for what they reveal of the precarity of the black Muslim woman. However, apprehending this experience will call for far more than a voyage into state and institutional archives. Scrutinizing this elided intersection will call for live histories and forms of storytelling that keep mediation of these accounts at a minimum. If this paper's attempt to account for the experiences of black Muslim women spotlights the vulnerability of these intersectionals, the storytelling it calls for resists domination by centering the self-told narrative of the black Muslimah experience.

## **Conclusion**

Anti-Muslim hate and discrimination is unevenly distributed among Muslims. The continued legacy of western colonialism, slavery, anti-blackness, patriarchy, the war on terror, and several other global events have culminated in relations of power that heightens the black Muslim woman's vulnerability to Islamophobia. This essay has therefore made a case for demarginalizing the intersection of race, gender, and religion that accounts for the black Muslim woman's experience. To intersectionalize the study of Islamophobia is to pay attention to the unique vulnerabilities that arise from multiple and interconnected systems of oppression. Such a study will not only map the intra-Muslim and external relations of power that heightens the vulnerability of the black Muslim woman. Mapping the margin inhabited by the black Muslim woman will also illuminate, not occlude, the general Muslim experience of oppression. For one, the intersection of race, gender, and religion that culminates in the black Muslim woman's experience may implicate other identities, including class, immigration, and the intergenerational inheritance of western



colonization. Interrogating the vulnerability of the black Muslimah will call for paying attention to these other identities with the consequence that centering the story of the black Muslimah will therefore foreground the experience of differently-positioned Muslims. For all its attention to particularity, however, this focus on the unique realities of differently positioned Muslims does not discount the structural context within which Islamophobia emerges and in which it thrives. Because that context is one that has always insisted on homogenizing Muslims even while its consequences lead to uneven distributive effects among adherents of the Islamic faith, a critical intersectional analysis of Islamophobia necessitates attunement to that structural context linking the experience of differently situated Muslims. In sum, mapping the margin inhabited by the black Muslimah coheres with spotlighting the shared Muslim experience of oppression.

#### Work-Cited Page:

Abdul Khabeer, Su'ad. "Islamophobia is Racism: Resource for Teaching & Learning about anti-Muslim Racism in the United States." Online: <https://islamophobiaistracism.wordpress.com> (accessed March 29, 2022).

Alexander, Claire. "Raceing Islamophobia." In *Islamophobia: Still a Challenge for Us All*. Edited by Farah Elahi and Omar Khan. 13-17. Runnymede Trust, 2017.

Allen, Chris. *Islamophobia*. Routledge, 2016.

Aziz, Sahar. 2012. "From the Oppressed to the Terrorist: Muslim American Women Caught in the Crosshairs of Intersectionality." *Hastings Race & Poverty Law Journal*, vol. 9, no. 1 (2012): :191–264.

Aziz, Sahar 2014. "Coercive Assimilationism: The Perils of Muslim Women's Identity Performance in the Workplace." *Michigan Journal of Race and Law*, vol. 2 (2014): 1-64.

Aziz, Sahar. 2015. "Coercing Assimilationism: The Case of Muslim Women of Color." *Transnational and Law and Contemporary Problems* vo.. 24 (2015): 341-351; *Journal of Race, Gender and Justice*, vol. 18, no. 2 (2015): 389-399.

Backhouse, Constance. *Colour-coded: A legal history of racism in Canada, 1900-1950*. University of Toronto Press, 1999.

Bouchard, Gérard, and Taylor, Charles. *Building the future: A time for reconciliation*. Commission de consultation sur les pratiques d'accommodement reliées aux différences culturelles, 2008.

Clutterbuck, Alyssa. "Rethinking Baker: A critical race feminist theory of disability." *Appeal: Review of Current Law & Legal Reform*, vol. 20 (2015): 51-70.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1989. "Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, no. 1 (1989): 139-167.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1990. "Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color." *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43 (1990): 1241-1299.

Elahi, Farah and Khan, Omer. "Introduction: What is Islamophobia?" In *Islamophobia: Still A Challenge for Us All*. Runnymede Trust, 2017.

Hammer, J. "Center Stage: Gendered Islamophobia and Muslim Women." In *Islamophobia in America: The Anatomy of Intolerance*. Edited by C.W. Ernst. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Hill, Margari "[Blog] What's in a Name? Using Muslim as a Cultural Category Erases and Stereotypes." Margariaziza.com, 23 March 2015. Online: <https://margariaziza.com/2015/03/23/whats-in-a-name-using-muslim-as-a-cultural-category-erases-and-stereotypes/> (accessed March 29, 2022).

Hirji, Faiza. "Claiming our Space: Muslim Women, Activism, and Social Media." *Islamophobia Studies Journal*, vol.6, no. 1 (2021): 78-92.

Islam, Namira. 2018a. "Soft Islamophobia." *Religions* vol. 9, no. 9 (2018): 280-296.

Islam, Namira. 2018b. "[Blog] Modifying Silk Ring Theory for Allyship." *Medium.com*. 16 April 2018. Online: <https://medium.com/@namira.islam/modifying-silk-ring-theory-for-allyship-c7ae4963912d> (accessed March 29, 2022).

Maynard, Robyn. *Policing Black lives: State violence in Canada from slavery to the present*. Fernwood Publishing, 2017.

Runnymede Trust. *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All*. Runnymede Trust, 1997.

Wilkins-Laflamme, Sarah "Islamophobia in Canada: Measuring the Realities of Negative Attitudes Towards Muslims and Religious Discrimination." *Canadian Review of Sociology*, vol. 55, no. 1 (2018): 86-110.

Zardosky, Justin and Thompson, Matt.. 'Police say driver 'intentionally' crashed into Muslim family in London, Ont., killing 4.' *CTV News*, 6 June 2021. Online: <https://london.ctvnews.ca/police-say-driver-intentionally-crashed-into-muslim-family-in-london-ont-killing-4-1.5458887> (accessed March 29, 2022).

Zempi, I. and N. Chakraborti. *Islamophobia, Victimisation and the Veil*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

Zine, Jasmin. 2004. "Anti-Islamophobia education as transformative pedagogy: Reflections from the educational front lines." *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, vol. 21, no. 3 (2004): 110-119.

Zine, Jasmin. 2006. "Unveiled Sentiments: Gendered Islamophobia and Experiences of Veiling among Muslim Girls in a Canadian Islamic School." *Equity & Excellence in Education*, vol. 39, no. 3 (2006): 239– 52.