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CONTENTS

BEYOND BURQAS, BOMBS, AND BOGEYMEN: AUSTRALIAN MUSLIMS AND THE MEDIA

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This article draws upon the personal and broader experience of living as an Australian Muslim in a climate of Islamophobia perpetuated by media and politics. From the personal context to the sociological drivers of stereotypes, media trends and rhetoric from politicians, this article examines multiple angles from which anti-Muslim discourse has often become codified patriotism. The impact of Islamophobia in terms of violence exacted on Australian Muslims is examined as a consequence of this. This article concludes that State culpability needs to be recognised, in order for appropriate responsibility to be taken to remedy the consequences of demonisation. Further, journalists who fuel hate speech with irresponsible and biased reporting must be held accountable. A recommendation is made for Australian Muslims to be given a platform in mainstream media in order to regularly convey their experiences, expressing an authentic narrative to counter the manufactured one.

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> Wrong information always shown by the media
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> Negative images is the main criteria
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> Infecting the young minds faster than bacteria
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> Kids wanna act like what they see in the cinema.[1]

A surge in racist ideology gaining traction in Western political discourse has triggered a spate of movements premised on aggressive patriotism in recent years. Central to its growth has been a shared apprehension about Muslim migration to the West and specifically the intersections of Islam and Western values. The effect of political gravitas that locates Muslims as "bogeymen" has culminated in a condition of Islamophobia — the rejection of and discrimination against Muslims.[2] Political momentum in Australia has occurred in tandem with media reportage that continues to reinforce an alleged clash of civilisations via divisive language, policy, and attitude. The media acting as a vehicle for such sentiments blurs the line between reportage and political agenda. This has produced dire consequences for Australian Muslims who must endure the collateral damage.

Several years ago, as the Chair of the Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights, I was being interviewed for a community newspaper in relation to the escalation of federal anti-terror legislation. I explained how these laws may further isolate women who experience a sense of over-surveillance by the State, forcing them to retreat further from accessing welfare and settlement services.

A photographer then arrived seemingly agitated about taking the perfect picture for the story. She zoomed in for an extraordinary number of close-ups, well in excess of the single frame needed. Feeling uncomfortable, I motioned to wrap up when she blurted out 'could you lift up your head scarf that's hanging around your neck and drape it across your face, just showing your eyes?' I was momentarily dumbstruck. Here I was attempting to represent the issue of Muslim women's disempowerment, only to have the visuals for my narrative fetishised by the media. I declined her suggestion upon realising the insidious impact of oriental stereotyping of Islam, Muslims, and Muslim women rooted in the

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[1] *Where is the love?* (The Black Eyed Peas, A&M Records/will.i.am Music Group, 2003) 3:13–3:24.

[2] Fernando Bravo López, 'Towards a definition of Islamophobia: approximations of the earliest twentieth century' (2010) 34(4) *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 56, 57.

mindset of mainstream media. This was an early incident marking my foray into Islamophobia — a hostile view of Muslims and Islam bent on fearful dogma.

How we see difference is framed in schemas or patterns of understanding "the other" is informed by our family, education, media, and life experiences. The combined effect of these factors contribute to how we shape and perceive the "Muslim other". These elements feed bias and misconceptions which give legitimacy to a swathe of rhetoric upon which Islamophobia relies.

While stereotypes have been found to assist us in making sense of groups of people in society, there is a tendency towards unconscious bias in which seemingly innocuous perceptions are underlined by discrimination.[3] These perceptions become prejudices when left unchallenged with a counter view. Even worse, these unchecked prejudices become legitimised movements of bigotry that hide behind "free speech". Such language borders on vilification and intent to harm, foraying into criminality. Examples include the Australian Defence League's attacks on Islamic groups over the past two years,[4] and a Queensland woman who was charged over online hate attacks against an Australian Muslim woman.[5]

For Muslims in the West, facts on the ground speak to a political expediency of an "us and them" dichotomy fed by media and, in particular, tabloid media rhetoric which thrives on stereotypic assessments. With the current Islamophobic climate, there has been an extraordinary amount of airtime allocated to Muslim related stories. In recent months, the opening news items on mainstream media outlets increasingly relate to incidents or political developments overseas and locally, that either covertly or overtly pertain to Muslims. These have included Islamic State, Charlie Hebdo, *American Sniper*, Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Palestine, Sharia, Halal Certification, refugees, burqas, mosque banning, and forced marriage. The hype is relentless.

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[3] Annie Murphy Paul, *Where Bias Begins: The Truth About Stereotypes* (13 June 2012) Psychology Today <https://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/199805/where-bias-begins-the-truth-about-stereotypes>.
[4] Sean Rubinsztein-Dunlop, 'Tensions between Australian Defence League and Muslim community reach violent new heights', *ABC News* (online), 5 January 2015 <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-04-21/anti-islam-hate-campaign-raises-tensions-to-violent-new-heights/5402526>.
[5] Kim Stephens, 'Ipswich woman charged over Muslim hate attacks online', *The Brisbane Times* (online), 18 February 2015 <http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/queensland/ipswich-woman-charged-over-muslim-hate-attacks-online-20150217-13hamf.html>.

Across Australia's population of almost 24 million, approximately 50 per cent of citizens have one or both parents born overseas. This represents a significant culturally and linguistically diverse cohort. Sadly, a reflection of this diversity is severely lacking in mass media representations. For the almost 400 000 Muslims in this country, the depictions of them are largely negative and based on stereotypical perceptions of the Muslim "bogeyman". Research proves that the relationship between global events and domestic politics impacts strongly on the way Muslims and Islam are received by the media.[6]

Film archives have long provided ample material feeding into the Islamophobic narrative. In an in-depth study of over 900 Hollywood films, Reel Bad Arabs revealed that only 5 per cent of films depicted Arabs and Muslims in positive roles.[7] For the remaining 95 per cent, images and storylines were a testimony to xenophobia replete with clichés and distortions of people representing one or more characteristics including ignorant, violent, misogynistic, power hungry, corrupt, fanatical, or uncivilised men with complete charge over their subservient, oppressed women.

These archives in addition to the loaded media coverage at large, particularly since 9/11, have contributed significantly to a climate of fear surrounding Muslims. All too often, this material has informed both political language and policy direction of leadership, while the reverse relationship of politics informing theatre is just as evident. This has been the experience for Muslims in the West, felt both within Australia and beyond. A UK survey by charity group, *Islamic Relief* in 2014 revealed that the words people most associated with Muslims were 'terror, terrorism, and terrorist'.[8] Many Australian Muslims also tend to be brushed with a monolithic identity. Stereotypes and loaded words used by the media including 'Islamist', 'extremist', 'radical', and 'fundamentalist', to name but a few popular descriptors, do little to stem the tide of bias.

According to Mehdi Hasan, British Muslim citizens have been subjected to espionage, stop and search warrants, stripping of citizenship privileges, control orders, and detention

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[6] Shahram Akbarzadeh and Bianca Smith, 'The Representation of Islam and Muslims in the Media: (The Age and Herald Sun newspapers)' (Report, School of Political and Social Inquiry, Monash University, November 2005).

[7] Jack G Shaheen 'Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People' (2003) 588 *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 171.

[8] Evan Bartlett, 'These are the words Britons most associate with Muslims and Islam', *The Independent UK* (online), 15 June 2015 <http://i100.independent.co.uk/article/these-are-the-words-britons-most-associate-with-muslims-and-islam--Zyw7T0IwWg>.

without trial.[9] These stresses have been appended with a sense of condemnation and demonisation such that Muslims feel 'helpless, despondent, tired, worried, exasperated [and] anxious.'[10] British Prime Minister David Cameron notes that Britain's Muslim communities 'quietly condone [an ideology threatening their] common culture.'[11] Clearly, the culpability placed on persons who have no control over the actions of those acting outside the parameters of Islam is unreasonable. When such dogma emerges from the highest political office it lends tremendous weight to Islamophobes who feel justified in persecuting the perceived "enemy within". In the same vein, language used by Former Prime Minister Tony Abbott suggesting that the 'Death Cult'[12] are coming to get us, plays squarely into a fearful rhetoric that magnifies the reality of the threat far beyond reason. This entrenches a cultural divide between Muslims and the mainstream, feeding a belief that national security is the single greatest issue for Australia over and above any other issue of social, economic, and environmental concern.

For Australian Muslims who witness this rhetoric, often sensationalised and strewn with fear, the subliminal impact is high. Loaded language and imagery become tools for mainstream audiences who buy into the belief that there is no distinction between an atrocity committed overseas by a terrorist of Muslim faith, and the Australian Muslims living among them. In the UK, following the attacks of 7/7, the impact has been such that British novelist, Martin Amis, remarked 'the Muslim community will have to suffer until it gets its house in order... Discriminatory stuff, until it hurts the whole community.'[13]

Anecdotes of vilification against Muslims and Islamophobia represent a more recent evolution of how Islam is, at times, seen in this country. Assuredly, you will rarely, if at all, hear about success stories of a Muslim doctor, lawyer, activist, or academic in spite of them undertaking critical work for society. Within the media industry there are prominent and successful Muslims such as *MasterChef* cooks, *Amazing Race* contestants, journalists, authors, and news anchors. However, recognition is sparse and when the

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[9] Mehdi Hasan, 'Life for British Muslims since 7/7- abuse, suspicion and constant apologies', *The Guardian* (online), 6 July 2015 <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jul/05/british-muslims-7-july-london-bombings>.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Eric Tlozek, 'Tony Abbott says Islamic State 'coming after us' after spate of terror attacks overseas' *ABC News* (online), 27 June 2015 <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-06-27/abbott-condemns-spate-of-terror-attacks/6577786>.
[13] Hasan, above n 9.

acknowledgement is made, it is condescending for it is frequently couched in terms of their success being a normative exception.

Muslims are forging an uphill battle against the odds to be integrated. Minorities are being commanded to 'learn English or bugger off. Blend in, or butt out, stop being confronting, but also stop retreating, come forward, but only so far. By perpetually redefining parameters of what constitutes acceptable integration levels for "the other," the discourse has become farcical. Tragically, this farce becomes a source of anxiety when Australian born Muslim children express pride in being Australian but hesitancy in revealing their faith in case they lose friends. This is the ugly side of nationalism that undermines freedom of religion and beliefs supposedly upheld by the *Constitution*.[14]

To compound matters, stereotypes happen in tandem with questioning Australian Muslims' loyalty, demanding they condemn atrocities that actually have no connection to the core tenet of Islam. The subsequent vilification of communities has been justified by the belief that our Government endorses such actions. During an address on national security in June 2015, former Prime Minister Tony Abbott said 'I've often heard western leaders describe Islam as a religion of peace. I wish more Muslim leaders would say that more often, and mean it.'[15] Condemnations are made, ignored, then demanded again. A press release from over 90 institutions and over 60 Australian Muslim leaders criticised the failure of the Former Prime Minister's Office to acknowledge efforts in condemning violence.[16] A simple *Google* search of 'Muslims condemning ISIS' in mid-2015 revealed 6 140 000 sites. A secondary search of 'Muslims condemning terrorism' yielded 10 500 000 sites. At a cursory glance, it is evident that condemnations are being made both domestically and internationally but they continue to be ignored in deference to political expedience.

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[14] Australian Human Rights Commission, 'Freedom of Religion and Belief' (Human Rights Brief No 3, 2006).

[15] Shalailah Medhora, 'Tony Abbott urges Muslim groups to "get with the program" and condemn extremism', *The Guardian Australia* (online), 24 February 2015 <http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2015/feb/24/tony-abbott-urges-muslim-groups-to-get-with-the-program-and-condemn-extremism>.

[16] *Muslim Community Rejects Abbott Government's Demonisation and Condemns Moves to Silence Legitimate Critique* (19 February 2015) Islam in Australia <http://islaminaustralia.com/2015/02/19/muslim-community-rejects-abbott-governments-demonisation-and-condemns-moves-to-silence-legitimate-criticisms/>.

While counter-terrorism and border security rhetoric imbued with Islamophobia targets the idealised Muslim male in society, it is largely the Muslim women and children in our community who manifest the consequences of bigotry and vilification, as victims of hate crimes. According to the Islamophobia Register, abusive incidents to date include verbal abuse, rocks thrown at homes, coffee thrown through car windows, scarves pulled, women shoved to the ground, and physical assault on public transport.[17] In the last 12 months in Sydney alone, there are Muslim women who have been threatened with rape, beheading, and death by right wing extremist groups all in the name of "keeping Australia safe."

The experiences of Muslim women are vital to the Islamophobia debate because they represent a portion of society that is too often misrepresented. Predictably, much of Muslim women's airtime is consumed by either explaining the hijab, burqa, or advocating a woman's right to wear it. In effect, the presumed oppressiveness of head coverings has become a national obsession, reducing Muslim women to clothing ambassadors. Consequently, this allows men or non-Muslim feminists to monopolise the debate surrounding other issues affecting Muslim Australians. This compromises the authentic voice of Muslim women and oppresses them in ways Islam never has.[18]

As a Cross Cultural Consultant I am constantly exposed to environments that bring into question the how and why of cultural variance in our society. Specifically, the discussion about Islam and Muslims in Australia is frequently requested, likely owing to existing assumptions and apprehensions. In our current political climate, an escalation in the curiosity about all things Islam has been surpassed only by the vilification of these very things. Such attitudes have required an enormous investment of goodwill from a community that is continuously required to assert its "Australian-ness" at a time when, as a Muslim in this country, you are presumed 'guilty while practising.'[19]

I suggest there is a hierarchical framework the media employs when covering Muslim-related crime. To illustrate, when an Anglo Saxon Australian male commits a crime and it is reported in mainstream news the ethnicity, racial background, or faith of the offender

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[17] *Islamophobia Register Australia*, Islamaphobia Register Australia <http://www.islamophobia.com.au/>.
[18] Susan Carland, 'Islamophobia, fear of loss of freedom, and the Muslim woman' (2011) 22(4) *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 469.
[19] Gabriel Faimau, 'The Conflictual Model of Analysis in Studies on the Media Representation of Islam and Muslims: A Critical Review' (2015) 9(5) *Sociology Compass* 321, 335.

is almost never bought into question. This is logical given that these factors are not pertinent to the motivation or circumstances of the crime. However, if the same crime is carried out by an Arab or Muslim, one or both of these issues features in the description of the offender, as if being of Middle Eastern appearance were a factor integral to a crime. Equally, if a suspect is African or Indigenous, these descriptors are highlighted, denoting a causal link between crime and ethnicity. This double standard continues to plague tabloid media in particular, contributing to unfair stereotypical views of these communities while white rapists, murderers, and drug smugglers remain immune.

When the crime in question is an act of terror or perceived terror there is again a formulaic response to framing these stories so that they align with an "efficient" interpretation of facts. Namely, only Muslim and Arabs can be terrorists. White offenders, it seems, cannot be. To illustrate, a Cairns woman in April 2015 was arrested for allegedly planning an attack on HMAS barracks in Portsmith. Not only was this premeditated attack on a naval base barely covered by mainstream news outlets, the charges laid against the Anglo Saxon female suspect were 'intent to cause harm'.[20]

Further, when young white offenders commit such acts, the media calls in psychologists and behavioural analysts to review the person's life history, family issues, and educational record, thus availing the suspect to a degree of humanising reserved only for the privileged majority. When Dylann Roof was arrested in June this year, it was pointed out that:

> The media is unsure about what constitutes terrorism only when white people are the perpetrators. White men with guns are "lone wolves" or "mentally ill" or depraved criminals. Brown men with bombs are very obviously "terrorists".[21]

When seeking an explanation for the downing of the *Germanwings* Flight 9525, Dr Binoy Kampmark highlighted that the issue of terrorism was evaded. Instead, the pilot's

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[20] Shannon Power, 'A woman who recently moved to Cairns was allegedly planning to blow up the Cairns Navy base', *The Cairns Post* (online), 13 April 2015 <http://www.cairnspost.com.au/news/cairns/a-woman-who-recently-moved-to-cairns-was-allegedly-planning-to-blow-up-the-cairns-navy-base/story-fnpqrsxl-1227301288580>.

[21] Sean Illing, 'We must call him a terrorist: Dylann Roof, Fox News and the truth about why language matters' *Salon* (online), 22 June 2015 <http://www.salon.com/2015/06/21/we_must_call_him_a_terrorist_dylann_roof_fox_news_and_the_truth_about_why_language_matters/>.

character profile was rapidly psychologised — it was a 'case of mental illness and concealed depression.'[22] He went on to explain:

> If the individual had sported a capacious beard, a dark countenance, and a few other culturally cosmetic additions, that would have made for a different set of observations. The uncomfortable reality about designations matter for what, effectively, is the same outcome. Prosecutors in this case were quick to dispel suggestions of a terrorist cause, excluding any political or religious motive.[23]

Conversely, when a Muslim commits an act of violence, only terrorism experts are called in. In the aftermath of Man Haron Monis's infamous siege at Sydney's *Lindt Café* in December 2014, media pundits:

> Could not wait to throw him into the global whirlpool of terrorist indulgence – a 'lone wolf' feeding on the teat [sic] of Islamic fundamentalism. There was an abundance of evidence suggesting mental unhinging and plain old depression, but that did not stop the terrorist punditry from finding what they wanted to see: coherent ideology in absurdist tragedy.[24]

Such is the lament for Muslim actors in the public sphere who are perpetually viewed through a lens of "outsider" or "invader". It follows that any associated ramifications of his or her behaviour are shaped by the stereotypes that come with being the "Muslim Other"*.*

Interestingly, Dean Obeidallah points out that an FBI study revealed that of all the terrorism offences committed on home soil between 1980 and 2005, 94 per cent of offenders were non-Muslim.[25] Incidents where perpetrators were Caucasian include Virginia Tech (2007, 32 dead), Aurora Theatre (2012, 12 dead), Sandy Hook (2012, 27 dead), Washington D.C. (2013, 13 dead), Charleston (2015, 9 dead). None of these events were classified as a terrorist attack despite evidence of deliberation and the political

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[22] Binoy Kampmark*, Germanwings Flight 9525: Depression, Motivation and the Language of Terrorism* (29 March 2015) Global Research <http://www.globalresearch.ca/germanwings-flight-9525-depression-motivation-and-the-language-of-terrorism/5439312>.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Dean Obeidallah, 'Are All Terrorists Muslims? It's Not Even Close', *The Daily Beast* (online), 14 January 2015 <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/01/14/are-all-terrorists-muslims-it-s-not-even-close.html>.

motivations underpinning some of these incidents.[26]Reality speaks to over surveillance, securitisation, and profiling of Muslim communities while acts of violence conducted by mainstream perpetrators, motivated by political agendas, continue to be reported with comparative impunity.

Such political distinctions afforded to one ethnic group over another are not lost on Muslims in the West. The selective application of the term 'terrorism' to Muslim and Arab perpetrators in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary smacks of injustice and what can only be perceived as an Islamophobic agenda. Put simply, it sells.

In the public discourse, automatic assumptions suggest that terrorism equals Islam, equals fear, equals Muslim, equals asylum seekers, equals illegal, equals stop the boats, equals Shariah law, equals reclaim Australia, equals ratings, equals votes. This skewed logic, repeated often enough with impunity by leaders, has spawned a movement of right wing extremism in this country whose creed of dogmatic patriotism is affirmed by political conjecture.[27]

Resolving this dilemma requires an urgent engagement with media and political leadership — the correlation between their poor handling and exploitation of these positions of power are evident. Conversations about journalistic and political values are integral to shifting the status quo of Islamophobic stereotypes. There is a dire need to close the gap between the grassroots lived realities of Australian Muslims and the covertly Islamophobic propaganda that comes from national leadership. At the very least, this calls for scrutiny of language that is loaded and leads to instant demonisation. Lazy journalism that resorts to using fear-inducing images of armed men and burqa-clad women for any Muslim related story — as if it symbolises Australia's Muslim population — must also be called out. These stereotypes have as much merit as Fred Nile representing the face of progressive Christianity.

Australian Muslims have earned the right to question divisive language, scare tactics, and call out the grassroots implications of hate campaigns that place women and children at

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[26] Los Angeles Times Staff, 'Deadliest U.S. mass shootings 1984-2015', *Los Angeles Times* (online), 18 June 2015 <http://timelines.latimes.com/deadliest-shooting-rampages/>.
[27] Adrian Cherney and Kristina Murphy, 'Being a "suspect community" in a post 9/11 world – The impact of the war on terror on Muslim communities in Australia' (2015) *Australia & New Zealand Journal of Criminology.*

the receiving end of brutal behaviours that are triggered by point scoring politics and ratings-driven tabloids. Such behaviour is an affront to a nation's collective intelligence. It undermines the integrity of a fair and judicial system of governance in which government is responsible for protecting all citizens with equality. Sadly, too many Muslims in this climate feel like second-class citizens in their own country. This country knows better than to play the national security card in order to fan the flames of racial vilification. How about balance? How about context? The relentless victim blaming, demonisation, and demands to perpetually re-assert one's "Australian-ness" are exhausting. However, complacency is not an option when the cost at a social justice level is so high.

A cyclical pattern of media-feeding-politics-feeding-media has sustained a manufactured reality serving a higher agenda. However, irrespective of whose agenda is being served, endless Islamophobic reportage ensures an experience of daily hostilities for Australian Muslims. In addition, the media's racialising and pathologising of the Muslim actor compared to the humanising assessment of their mainstream counterpart is disingenuous at best and vilification at worst. Ultimately, the effects of Islamophobic coverage through media are intensely damaging. The implementation of state-funded remedial efforts such as psychosocial counselling and re-engagement strategies with Muslim communities is required. Further, culpability must be mandated for journalists and media pundits who create impetus for Islamophobic acts of aggression. The buck must stop with sub-editors and shock jocks whose domain in tabloid media has demonstrated a consistent link to right wing groups manifesting Islamophobic vitriol and violence.

That history is written by the winners means context and nuance have become negotiable commodities. For Australian Muslims, there are few things more disempowering than to be constantly spoken about but never spoken to. In order for the State to circumvent the costs associated with remedial efforts, a more balanced approach to media analysis, which gives Australian Muslims a platform to participate and narrate their experiences, is necessary. So too is a genuine grassroots engagement from government with Australian Muslims, including women and youth leaders. Perhaps it is time to invert a reality in which the criticised Muslim becomes the critical one.

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