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My issue with Kiwis being encouraged to wear headscarves in solidarity

Mehrbano Malik 15:37, Mar 21 2019



DAVID WALKER/STUFF

"The choice is not whether to not veil, rather the choice is to veil."

OPINION: I am a Muslim woman. I am from Pakistan. I am almost 22 years old.

I saw that there has been a movement for Kiwis to wear headscarves on Friday in solidarity with the Muslim community. I am deeply touched by the sentiment, and by the endless love and support that not only my community, but I personally, have received.

I do, however, take issue with #headscarfforharmony, which (while meant with the kindest of intentions) reflects Orientalist ideologies. Orientalism is a way in which the Western world has constructed its understanding of non-Western countries by defining the Eastern world by what the Western world is 'not' rather than what the Eastern world is.

An entire group of people is overlooked in Western media, and this reflects implicit Orientalism, even among groups who claim to oppose it.

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There are many, many Muslim women who do not veil. We do not wear a hijab, a burka, a niqab, a chador – not because we have chosen actively to unveil, or because we or our families have been influenced by Western culture, but because veiling is not an inherent part of Islam. It is not mentioned anywhere in the Quran. The choice is therefore not whether to not veil, rather the choice is to veil.

These women do not fit into the Orientalist narrative of Islam, being neither Westernised, and therefore “liberated from their oppressive religion”, nor shrouded beneath a veil or headscarf. They are entirely overlooked – they are not mentioned in any literature that I could find, not by Muslim or non-Muslim writers.

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The only thing that the Quran says about dress is that everyone should dress modestly, and basically that we should not be checking each other out constantly. What we define as “modesty” is left largely to personal interpretation. Some Muslim women choose to cover their hair in public; that is their interpretation of modesty, which is completely valid and legitimate.



SUPPLIED

Mehrbano Malik wants Kiwis to understand that wearing a veil or headscarf is not representative of Muslim women as a whole.

Why, then, is the narrative of the veiled Muslim woman so prevalent in Western thought? The answer, again, lies in Orientalism.

When an entire group of people are defined by what the Western world “isn't”, the perception of these people will shift with Western identity and idea of self. Like the Orient was constructed as the antithesis of the West, Muslim women represent what Western women are not.

In earlier times, Muslim women were depicted as sexually active and exotic, when Western women were meant to be demure and pious. Now Western women are meant to be liberated and sexually free, Muslim women are portrayed as repressed and ignorant; the termagant has been swapped for a slave.

Women who veil bear the brunt of Islamophobia, with 60 per cent of attacks on Muslim-perceived people in London between July 2014 and July 2015 being against veiled women.

Wear a headscarf in solidarity with the women who have been attacked for showing their religious and cultural identity, but understand that that is not representative of Muslim women as a whole.

Mehrbano Malik is a political science graduate from the University of Otago.

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