

The Women's March that Welcomed the Hijab as a Sign of Dissidence: Pink, Rainbows, and an American-flag Hijab

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Women's March poster depicting a woman wearing American-flag-styled hijab



We The People by Shepard Fairey | Courtesy of the artist and The Amplifier Foundation

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Perhaps a historical moment as poignant as the 2017 Women's March has never before so collectively aligned the agendas of Western women and feminists with that of Muslim women. The Women's March taking place on the 12th of January 2017 had globally and almost spontaneously become a protest against President Trump's contentious agenda. Photographs and videos of participants holding the *We The People* poster of a Muslim woman wearing the American flag as hijab – or headscarf – (Fairey 2017) were abundant in the media coverage of the Women's March. The poster was popular in protests held worldwide, adopted as a sign of protest by Muslim and non-Muslim, straight and gay participants of both genders. Furthermore, some women participants mirrored the poster by actually using the American flag as a headscarf (as in Loos's image of 2017). This article presents a viewpoint on the powerful imagery of Fairey's poster as an emblem of protest, irrespective of the feminist and political discourses surrounding the hijab, and regardless of a pro/against hijab perspective. It rather communicates the activist urgency for inclusion as symbolised by the collective embrace of the Muslim woman in an American-flag hijab.

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The Women's March in Berlin



A woman wearing a USA flag as a headscarf by Steffi Loos | Courtesy of the artist and Getty images

To the participants of the March carrying Fairey's poster, the image was not meant to signify difference or controversy; it was rather embraced as a sign of collective activism against a newly elected president, seen by many as divisive and autocratic. Although the politics of dress concerning Muslim women, who wear the hijab or other religious identifiers, has been particularly problematic of late, the recent Women's March embraced its hijab-wearing women as part of a defiant inclusive collective. According to Munira Ahmed, the woman whose portrait was the basis for Fairey's poster, the picture "represents empowerment, it represents inclusion, it represents America" (BBC, 2017). The blend of pink "pussy hats", rainbow flags, and the different-coloured hijabs delivered a united narrative subversive to that of Trump: Despite

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our differences, we unite to defend each other's existence and rights. The Women's March converted the individual markers of "otherness" into signifiers of affinity in a protest against all forms of injustice.

Women's March Embrace



Twitter screenshot posted at Cheri Berens blog

Amongst others and in varying degrees, Muslims and women have been the subject of derogatory comments that have steadily fed into a biased discourse popularised by a salacious campaign for American political power. In many of his speeches in the run up to the presidency, President Trump connoted Islam as a threat to the American nation. His rhetoric culminated in an Executive Order on immigration, dubbed as the "Muslim ban", banning individuals from seven mainly Muslim countries from entering the U.S. Although the Executive Order is, thus far, being suspended by a court order, Mr Trump's discourse on Muslims continues to frame them as the Other to the American nation. In the same antagonistic manner, women were

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referred to as ‘bimbo’s, who should be “punished” for choosing abortion, and whom he would “grab by the pussy” (Cohen, 2017). Trump’s blatant sexism was certainly employed as a strategy to gain political advantages over his rival, Hillary Clinton. However, the problematic, typically ‘unacceptable’ sexist attitude and language used by Trump stretch beyond appeasing to the male chauvinist electors, and inseminate the ideological resurrection of Othering women in society. In such rhetoric, the Muslim American woman is rendered doubly Othered; an alien whose hijab visibly marks her quite possibly as ‘un-American’.

This state of double-Otherness engulfing Muslim American women is not new. The aftermath of the tragic attacks of 9/11 saw collective and indiscriminate blame being cast on Muslims. A new “Middle Eastern, Arab, or Muslim” category was created to denote exclusion from the American national Self and imply “foreigner, or enemy alien, or terrorist” in its fold (Volpp, 2002: 579). Assuming that this new category was unselective and genderless is a mistake, however. Louise Calkins notes in *Homeland Insecurity*: “As it turns out, post- 9/11 repercussions for Arab and Muslim Americans were quite gendered, with men positioned as the security threat managed largely by the government and women as the cultural threat dealt with by the public” (2011: 6). In other words, the blame and consequent suspicion and incrimination of Muslims was gendered: the male was considered a threat to the public sphere of the nation, while the female represented an incongruous cultural sign that needs to be privately contained. Accordingly, the national security institutions handled the national threat of the Muslim male, while the mission of assimilating or “Americanising” the Muslim female became that of the American public and its cultural institutions.

Yet, this cultural management operated differently on Muslim American women based

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on their dress code. Muslim women wearing the hijab became particularly visible in the post 9/11 turmoil, and were the primary target of hate crimes directed at women associated with Arabness and Islam (Cainkar, 2011: 6). Cainkar postulates that the hijab marked the Muslim woman as an Other, who is different, and in defiance of the American concept of freedom (2011: 6). It became a performative sign of a religion associated with the 9/11 attacks, and therefore a symbol of cultural enmity. On the other hand, Muslim women who did not wear the hijab were considered “Americanised”, embraced as converts to an American culture that liberated them from their oppressive religious and patriarchal homeland culture. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad contends that

the hijab is viewed by Americans – as a symbol of cultural difference (and thus inferiority), a threat to secularity, or simply as a personal expression of religiosity – it frames the female body as an icon of the “clash of civilisations” and has far-reaching political and social implications (2011: 39).

This “clash of civilisation” has been continually prescribed on Muslim women’s bodies since 9/11 to the current rise of the so-called Islamic State (IS). Whether wearing the hijab, the burqa or the burqini, Muslim women have been incessantly penalised for their gender and religion. Yet again as women, their bodies became property of the public domain who prescribe their veiling/unveiling. The indiscriminate demonisation of Muslims in Trump’s speeches made Muslim women, who wear the hijab, an easily identifiable target to his fanatic followers. The day after President Trump’s election, American Muslim women were reporting being attacked, and voicing fears over wearing the hijab (Hamze, 2017).

Muslim American women became the bearers of cultural Otherness; unwitting

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participants in ideological wars. Their politics of dress was considered evidence of their un-Americanism, and their bodies the offender and trespasser. The narrative of women's bodies being used as a pawn in service of patriarchal agendas is noted in Laurie Penny "Thinly Veiled Misogyny": "Wars have always been fought by men over the bodies of women. Today, Islamic women in particular find themselves in the unenviable position of understanding their bodies as an ideological battleground, whether they live in Southend or Saudi Arabia" (Penny, 2010).

The powerful imagery of a Muslim woman wearing the American flag as hijab in the Women's March symbolises a double-edged defiance against the Trumpian discourse. By appropriating the ultimate signifier of national patriotism, the American flag, as a signifier of religious identity that is visibly female; those Muslim women reclaimed their gender and religious identity as decidedly American. That stars-and-stripes hijab is a political statement denoting that these women's Muslim identity is not at odds with their American identity, nor are their bodies an offense to the national body. While at different historical junctions, Muslim women have often fought similar battles solitarily, the Women's March extracted those Muslim women out of their isolation, made them part of a whole, and globally denounced their ostracization. Suroor Raheemullah, a Muslim American woman who participated in the Women's March in Washington contended:

We were in D.C. With 55 people from Muslim Women's Alliance. Feeling like a celebrity- literally every person we saw told us they loved us, they are with us and then thanked us for being there with them and showing up! The reason we went is because we have to first show up to stand up. The goodwill that was created with our unapologetically Muslim women signs is unsurpassed. (cited

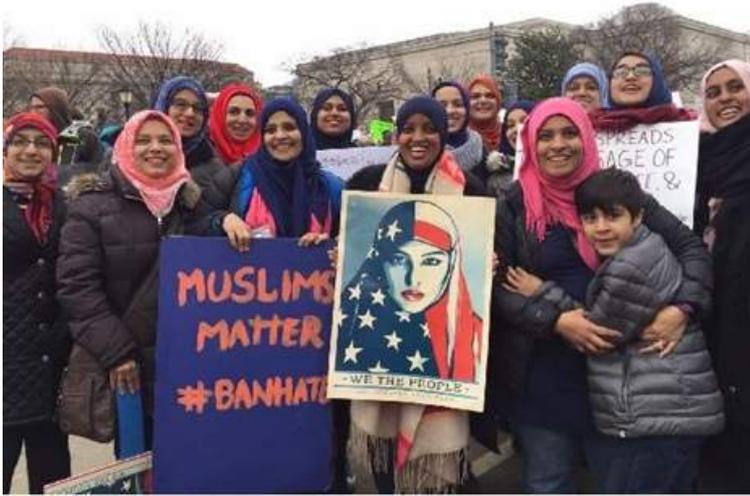
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Ali, 2017)

Muslim Women participating in the Women's March in D.C.



Courtesy of (Ali 2017)

The negative visibility, which Muslim women experienced through past hate crimes and discrimination, was transformed into a positive visibility. Their “showing” up altered their position from passive bearers of the Trumpian discourse, to active agents of a political message communicated by their choice of wearing the hijab. By owning this cultural sign, they have converted its meaning from a marker of oppression and marginalisation to an apparatus of empowerment. In her interview with the BBC, Munira Ahmed expressed what the poster meant: “Even if I didn’t know that that was me, I think I would have still felt proud that a Muslim woman is being depicted so positively. It’s necessary for a lot of people to see. At that moment, I was like ‘things might not be so bad after all’” (BBC, 2017).

The celebratory reception of these Muslim women by members of different political alliances made this Women’s March especially momentous. Ahmed comments on the global

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appeal of this powerful imagery with a jubilant surprise: “Every shade and every gender using this as their protest image. They could have used so many other protest images, and they decided to use this all over the world” (BBC, 2017). The poster of the woman wearing the American flag as hijab symbolised at once the marrying of two ideologies, purported to be agnostic by Trump; those of Americanism and Islam. It was a call for a de-Othering inclusive diversity. The Muslim women collective embodied in *We The People* poster, as well as the Muslim women marchers were not only participants in the global women's agenda, but were effectively one of its symbols. By actively, visibly and consciously proclaiming their body, national and religious rights, they were hoping to subvert the divisive discourse, which framed them as irreconcilably Other. By steadily, unhesitatingly, and publicly embracing the poster and the women it represents, the People of the Women's March rendered that hope a reality, even if just for the day.

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