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(W)Rapping the hijab: The question of agency and freedom in Mona Haydar's hijabi

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Abstract

This article presents a brief reflection on Mona Haydar's song "Hijabi" and situates it within the contemporary cultural debates regarding the hijab in the West. More specifically, I focus on how the song, through the mode of rap music that has had a long association with cultural protest and voicing the angst of minority ethnic communities, problematises the commonly held perceptions and stereotypes associated with the particular piece of attire. Further, this article discusses how the song calls for a broader feminist understanding of individual female agency and not locate it simply within the reductive binary of oppression and victimhood.

Keywords: Hijab, rap, feminism, agency, islam, women

Introduction

In recent times, the "hijab" has frequently been at the centre of heated controversies and debates in the West. From the call to ban the hijab in offices and public institutions to the recent presidential electoral campaigns in countries like France, Germany, and the USA, the hijab has persistently recurred in newspaper headlines as a contentious issue. On the one hand, the conservative right-wing political rhetoric propagates the hijab as a symbolic representation of Islamism that is conservative and fundamentalist to the core and embodies a threat not only to Christianity but also to Western cultural values at large. On the other hand, liberal humanist discourses in the West, as Saba Mahmood has observed, continue to represent the act of wearing the hijab "through simplistic registers of submission and patriarchy" (6). In both Western academia and popular imagination, the hijab is frequently perceived as a marker of "backwardness" and the woman wearing it as "tradition-bound," "submissive," "repressed," and "victimised." This short essay wishes to examine how Mona Haydar's rap song titled "Hijabi," named one of the best protest anthems of the year by *Billboard* in 2017 (Garcia-Navarro), attempts to problematise and challenge the dominant modes of perceiving both the act of wearing the hijab and the woman wearing it to critique the stereotypical assertions and associations regarding the hijab in Western society and popular culture.

Rapping as a medium of artistic expression in popular culture is fraught with contradictions. On the one hand, rapping has served as a means of articulating political dissent through music across the world. In the West and, mainly, in the USA, rapping has frequently emerged as a mode of voicing the angst for socially marginalised people of colour. On the other hand, many rappers, including many of the so-called artists practising what has come to be referred to as "gangsta rap," have been accused of promoting misogyny and violence against women. Despite the debates and controversies surrounding rap music and its influence on society, it can hardly be denied that it has emerged not only as a global industry raking in millions of dollars in profit but also as an immensely popular and influential mode of cultural production. Mona Haydar, a Syrian-American singer, poet, and activist, has used her rap music to highlight the experiences of Muslim women in America, including the discrimination as well as the condescension Muslim women wearing hijabs have to endure frequently. In this sense, Haydar builds on the tradition of rap music and its capacity to subvert the hegemonic racial politics that marginalise minority groups to mount a poignant criticism of the prevalent attitudes towards hijab and women who wear it in the United States.

From the moment of its release, Mona Haydar's "Hijabi" has sparked debates and

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discussions among people belonging to a wide range of ideological positions on both news and social media. In plain but powerful language, the song expresses a spirit of resistance against socio-cultural prejudices associated with wearing the hijab. As is evident from its lyrics, the song urges all Muslim women in the West willing to wear the hijab to do it with pride and to defy the power that imposes prohibitions on it either explicitly or implicitly. In the process, the song highlights the question of individual agency. It opens with a series of questions that a woman in hijab frequently faces, such as if her hair feels itchy or makes her sweat too much (Haydar). The first verse also highlights how women in hijabs are readily stereotyped as “Oriental”, which facilitates, in effect, the woman being readily subsumed within a rhetoric of racialised and gendered otherness. The hijab, therefore, transforms the body of a woman into a “racialised body.” Eileen Boris’s argument that “bodies stand as both physical and symbolic sites” and “they serve as a central arena for the playing out of racialised gender in class society” stands as particularly relevant in this context (10-11).

In Western popular imagination, Faegheh Shirazi argues, the hijab has become “the trademark of the wanton woman who finds pleasure in her subjugation...” and its conventional representations function as “...visual nexus between Western fantasies about the Orient and Middle Eastern reality” (44-45). The construction of the Orient as the cultural other to the Western world, an “otherness” which is at once a source of “desire and derision” (Bhabha 96), is maintained by a complex matrix of discourses operating in the collective unconscious through popular culture and media. Hence, the line “You need to get yo life,” once again, serves as a rude but necessary reminder of the condescending Woke liberal attitude a woman wearing a hijab has to encounter often as she is necessarily seen as a passive and oppressed victim of patriarchy in the domains of her home, family, and community. It is precisely this attitude that the song challenges and throws open the possibility that the act of wearing the hijab may not necessarily be a result of her loss of agency in the face of patriarchal oppression but the very opposite, which is to say, the assertion of her agency to hold on to a cultural and religious marker with pride in a country where racial strife and Islamophobia have been rampant since 9/11. “In this way,” Lamiae Aidi argues, “Hijabi” reverses a Western paradigm of difference and brings to light the fact that stereotypes limit the growth of a more profound feminist exchange and growth of knowledge” (Lamiae). For that reason, the song effectively functions as a call for resistance to social judgement where women in hijabs remain passive objects to be inscribed in different ideologies without a voice of their own. The final line of the second verse serves as a bold reminder that women, wearing a hijab or not, should not be taken for granted (Haydar).

When a woman voluntarily chooses to wear the hijab without any form of coercion, it exposes the fissures within the dominant liberal-feminist politics that portrays the woman wearing a hijab as a passive victim of patriarchy and lacking an agency for self-representation--projecting her in effect as an antithesis to the image of the “free woman” in the first world. It is no longer possible to essentialise her intensely personal, subjective agency that had prompted her to wear the hijab, especially from a cultural position which is not only external but is also mediated by its own

ideological underpinnings. Hence, the act of voluntarily wearing the hijab, despite it being a symbol of patriarchal oppression, is often misunderstood and misappropriated as a manifestation of “hegemony” in the Gramscian sense, where consent of women wearing hijabs to the condition of their own oppression is manufactured through ideological means. This dominant tendency in liberal humanist discourses of structuring its arguments based on its universalised assumptions that completely subsume and appropriate the racialised and gendered agency of the individual Muslim woman has been critiqued by thinkers like Saba Mahmood and Faegheh Shirazi. Mahmood recognises that the act of voluntarily wearing the hijab poses a problem for Western feminist scholarship since it fails to understand why women would willingly accept a token that marks their own submission to patriarchy. From this perspective, Mona Haydar’s song has been criticised by some secular-liberal feminists as regressive, and the way women belonging to different racial groups are depicted flaunting their hijabs in the music video has been attacked by some as an alternate form of essentialism to counter the essentialised stereotypical representations of the ‘muhajabah’ in the West. As Lulu Garcia-Navarro and Denise Guerra note, “Haydar has drawn criticism before for being proudly pious while also being critical of religion. She has been called too Muslim by some and not Muslim *enough* by others” (Garcia-Navarro). However, such criticism appears to have been based on the assumption that the hijab is necessarily an imposition on women, and it invariably functions as an instrument that re-inscribes and reinforces the conditions of patriarchal oppression.

On the other hand, Saba Mahmood, in her seminal book *The Politics of Piety*, argues that neither can ‘womanhood’ be conceptualised as a homogeneous, universal category nor can the notion of freedom be understood only in absolute and monolithic terms. Awareness of one’s agency and its expression, even within the existing social constraints, can be considered an assertion of freedom, and the contingent moments of active disruption in the patriarchal order are also moments of resistance. Therefore, Saba Mahmood repeatedly reiterates the necessity of locating “agency in the political and moral autonomy of the subject” (Mahmood 7). The act of wearing the hijab without either legal or ideological coercion by the women depicted in Mona Haydar’s “Hijabi” might be interpreted as a subversive act precisely because they accept the hijab as an exercise of their individual, subjective agencies and autonomous will. It does not only embody a symbolic rebellion against the tendency to represent the hijab only through a language of cultural prejudices and stereotypes, branding it as essentially antithetical to Western modernity, but also an expression of freedom from cultural dictates in the West and of control over one’s own body, attire, and identity. In this respect, “Hijabi” serves as a powerful affirmation of women’s freedom and agency and an assertion of resistance to their stereotyping as passive victims of patriarchal oppression.

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