

UNPACKING 'ISLAMOPHOBIA' MEDIA, POSTCOLONIAL AFFECT AND THE RACISM OF LOW EXPECTATIONS

Maria Amir*

"Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else's opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation" – Oscar Wilde

Abstract

This paper examines how Islamophobia is produced and circulated through contemporary media by analysing it as a racialising process rather than solely as a form of religious prejudice. It unpacks how media representations, political discourse, and cultural narratives operate through affective and discursive mechanisms to deny Muslims complexity and agency in both U.S. and global contexts, while reproducing and cementing hierarchies shaped by colonial legacies, imperial governance, and neoliberal globalisation. Drawing on postcolonial theory and affect theory, the paper employs qualitative discourse analysis of news coverage, popular media, and political speech to trace how a "racism of low expectations" functions within these representational frames. Through this methodological approach, the paper demonstrates how Islamophobia is sustained through selective empathy and structural forms of violence and argues for the need to rethink dominant media framings of Muslim identities.

Keywords: *Islamophobia, Racism, Media Analysis, Identity*

Introduction

When I first arrived in the United States in 2017, there was a game I played with myself that involved a personal archiving of power with regards to race in a series of near daily micro-aggressions. Some of these were experienced while watching television and trying to keep track of how polarized and simplistic narrative construction was in US media with regards to conflicts involving 'other people' and the coverage of it, from CNN news bulletins to television shows such as *The*

* PhD Candidate, Department of Global Gender Studies, University of Buffalo, SUNY, USA. Email: mariaamir.83@gmail.com.

Looming Tower or *Homeland* that harkened back to imagery of how the Crusades framed the Muslim 'barbarian', the Turk and the *A-rab*.

From the way the media covered and continues to cover global events, especially those featuring Muslims as the quintessential 'other', it appeared that complexity was solely the purview of whiteness - it is not allowed or awarded to other races. This is why I find Samuel P Huntington's quote in his interview *Where is Raed* during the Baghdad bombings particularly telling, "The West won the world not by the superiority of its ideas or values or religion but rather by its superiority in applying organized violence. Westerners often forget this fact, non-Westerners never do."¹ This sentiment is particularly powerful in the context of Huntington's own polarizing opus *Clash of Civilizations*, which many 'non-Westerners' might now consider to be prescient despite it being met with great criticism post publication. My own experience of this otherising has served as a reflexive standpoint for unpacking the variety of discursive coding of Muslim representation that dominates media discourse. Steve Garner speaks to how this process contrasting all racial experience against whiteness is institutionalised and all other identities are rendered in contrast by showing that whiteness occupies an unmarked position of normality, allowing white subjects narrative flexibility and moral complexity, while racialized others are rendered hyper visible and stereotyped.

Racialization is thereby simultaneously a means of external framing and an internalized experience. Race matters because other people make it matter by classifying individuals based on their physicality more than anything else. Whatever is constructed by the dominant power class in a society as 'race' for those they wish to otherize, can actually become race given enough traction, even religion, and in many ways this has been the case with Muslims living in Western countries and by Western media's representation of those living in Muslim countries.

Being 'racialized', however, is particularly difficult to catalogue because it is experienced in what Victor Turner in his book *Ritual Affects: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969) terms 'communitas',² an underlying sense of connection binding groups during ritual liminal phases. Even though race is constructed differently for different people, the act of 'othering' is felt by all who experience it and thereby, I have developed a deep curiosity with regards to archiving stories of the marginalization of people of colour.

Here it is important to keep in mind Homi Bhabha's warning, "What does need to be questioned, however, is the mode of representation

¹ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 51.

² Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969), 94.

of otherness.”³ All of these stories are constructed differently because oppression comes in many colours (sic) i.e. the subjugation of indigenous peoples is distinct from that of African Americans or American Muslims that are each ‘othered’ in specific contexts using distinct tools. And yet, the stories themselves provide a context of power and marginalization that echoes in harrowing harmony and this is why it becomes essential to examine how this marginalization materialises in daily discourse, news bulletins and entertainment.

Present day social media feeds are constantly bombarded with images and messages linked to massacres of people of color in countries all over the world and it is the ‘mode of representation of otherness’ that negotiates how much empathy is allocated to people of colour and the live-televised ongoing genocide of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank for the past two years. On September 16, 2025, a UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory headed by Navi Pillay declared that Israel has in fact committed genocide against Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. The Gaza genocide is now a real-time archive of what Edward Said termed the reduction of Palestinians into ‘interruptions’ or ‘numbers on a list’. International media, especially media driven and controlled in the US and Europe, has been widely criticized for reproducing Israeli state framings that deny Palestinians their humanity and any subjectivity by foregrounding a Zionist security⁴ playbook instead. This situation is likely to get much worse with Israel’s 2025 large scale investments in social media platforms Google and TikTok.⁵

These incidents form a series of deaths and murders of Muslims in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria and Palestine for decades after 9/11 that are framed very differently by the West than the deaths of American soldiers or white lives lost anywhere in the world. This was observed during the early months of the Ukraine war, where a CNN Business article⁶ noted that Western media outlets described many Ukrainian victims and refugees as “white,” “Christians,” “middle-class,” “blond” and “blue-eyed” - in effect the chosen language underlined the perceived proximity of the victims to Western identity while implicitly contrasting them with refugees from non-European conflicts, thereby resting on racialisation as a means to invoke increasing empathy among its audiences. This contrast

³ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 113.

⁴ Fadhil Wafi and Maryolanda Zaini, “European Media Propaganda in Support of Israeli Genocide in Palestine 2024,” *Journal of Society and Media* 9, no. 1 (2024): 302–319.

⁵ Micheal Kwet, “How US Big Tech Supports Israel’s AI Powered Genocide and Apartheid,” *Al Jazeera*, May 12, 2024. <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2024/5/12>

⁶ CNN Business, *How the Ukraine War Exposed Western Media Bias*, March 4, 2022.

serves as a striking example of how appearance-based racialisation often shapes who is made visible as “human” in global media coverage. The two-year live streamed genocide of Palestinians has only highlighted this glaring empathy-gap further. According to Said:

How rich our mutability, how easily we change (and are changed) from one thing to another, how unstable our place – and all because of the missing foundation of our existence, the lost ground of our origin, the broken link with our land and our past. There are no Palestinians. Who are the Palestinians? ‘The inhabitants of Judea and Samaria.’ Non-Jews. Terrorists. Troublemakers. DPs. Refugees. Names on a card. Numbers on a list. Praised in speeches- el pueblo palestino, il popolo palestino, le people palestin- but treated as interruptions, intermittent presences.⁷

Such continuous framing of Muslims in the media as mere ‘interruptions’ and ‘intermittent presences’ is common, unless they are explicitly being framed as terrorists. And this very framing falls under the very ambiguous ambit of ‘Islamophobia’ where Muslim lives are consistently coded and exhibited as not only less valuable than others but as somehow intrinsically barbaric or conceptually different from other people. An underhanded necropolitics⁸ defines and drives the coverage and framing of Muslims in global discourse, especially entertainment and news media. This paper analyses media representation of Muslim subjects in global news and entertainment television by regarding Islamophobia as both a form of racism and a racialising process, insofar as it produces Muslims as a coherent and inferiorised group through cultural, political, and affective mechanisms.

The US, especially at present, has a unique ability to construct and reconstruct race in every social sphere, because it is by far, the first marker of identity that any non-white person experiences in the US. While living in America, I became deeply aware of my own race by being forced to recognize that my ability to overlook race before, back home, was its own kind of ingrained privilege.. This constant centering and re-centering of one’s own power in relation to one’s environment is an integral aspect of analysis that is too often overlooked in our examination of power structures. Rather than functioning as personal narrative, this reflexive

⁷ Edward Said, “Permission to Narrate,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 13, no. 3 (1986): 27–48.

⁸ Islamophobia doesn’t just operate discursively; it underwrites who can be surveilled, incarcerated, or drone-struck without due process and the term necropolitics coined by Achille Mbembe (2003) describes the ways in which sovereignty is exercised through the power to dictate who may live and who must die. This does not just relate to the direct act of killing but also about creating conditions where certain populations are rendered ‘killable’, ‘un-grievable’ and largely disposable. Necropolitics stratifies how life is regulated and relegated along racial, class, and colonial lines.

positioning operates as a standpoint methodology through which power relations are rendered visible and analytically legible as illustrated by Patricia Hill Collins,⁹ "Standpoint theory argues that groups who experience unequal power relations develop distinctive perspectives on social reality that are unavailable to those who are more privileged."

This paper attempts to unpack how the term 'Islamophobia' is coded and mapped along racial lines and how it operates as a racialising process within contemporary media representations. Some of the questions being examined here include how cultures and phobias directed at persons practicing a particular faith constitute racism? Is racism coded in biology or in treatment of persons and communities and how does the media respond to these categories of difference in its representations? What is considered 'barbaric' and who gets to decide the people that occupy that construct - who is a 'terrorist' and who is a 'drug dealer'? How does a racism of 'low expectations' operate in today's climate? The paper will apply a blend of Media and Affect Theory, Postcolonial Theory and standpoint methodologies to unpack questions and constructions of identity in the context of Islamophobia within a globalized milieu by examining what discursive and affective mechanisms are deployed to render Muslims legible as threats or culturally deficient subjects. Islamophobia is conceptualised here as a form of racism that is not reducible to biological notions of race but is produced through representation, governance, and affect. Methodologically, the paper employs qualitative discourse analysis and affect-oriented media analysis of US news coverage, political rhetoric, and popular media produced over the past decade.

Literature Review & Methodology

Who Makes Method?

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon writes that his philosophy professor once advised him, "Whenever you hear anyone abuse the Jews, pay attention, because he is talking about you." Following that interaction Fanon recognized that racism as an ideology was only peripherally attached to a set of beliefs about other bodies but rather that racism was "always susceptible to playing the same game with a new set of toys."¹⁰ This insight introduces an affective methodological approach that can be extended to Islamophobia not as a fixed ideology but as a mutable racialising practice that adapts to new historical and political contexts. The

⁹ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000).

¹⁰ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 95. (The 1967 Grove Press translation is the most commonly cited English edition; the French original is from 1952.)

ideological underpinnings of social behaviour that is regarded as Islamophobic, employs the application of exactly such 'new toys', the game itself is as old as time.

Rather than treating racism as a stable set of beliefs that produce predictable social outcomes, affect theory permits an understanding of racialisation as a dynamic process driven by emotion, power, and reinforcement. In his book *Religious Affects: Animality, Evolution and Power* Donovan Schaefer writes, "The linguistic fallacy presumes that racism is the byproduct of a gridlock discursive architecture, a set of beliefs about races producing a logically consistent matrix of behavioural outcomes. Affect theory opens up the parallel possibility that racialization can sometimes be understood as an affective machine - a particular menu preference when seated at the feast of difference."¹¹ Here Schaefer begins to outline an alternate approach to coding racism when its affect extends beyond the biological and even the sociological domain into the production of systemic difference. This perspective is particularly useful for analysing Islamophobia, where racial meaning is often produced less through explicit biological claims than through an ecology of suspicion and moral hierarchy. Reading affect theory alongside Howard Winant's 'racial formation process', whereby, "The main task facing racial theory today, in face, is no longer to critique the seemingly 'natural' or 'commonsense' concept of race - although that effort has not by any means been entirely completed. Rather, the central task is to focus attention on the continuing significance and changing meaning of race"¹² illuminates how race is continually reworked in response to shifting political contexts.

An analysis of how the 'meaning of race' changes when applied to Islamophobia begs the question of whether the marginalization of Muslim communities is actually contributing to formulating Muslims as a 'race' rather than a religion. This process has been widely theorised as the racialisation of Muslims, whereby religious identity becomes a proxy for race within systems of governance and surveillance.¹³ In this case the notion of 'shared oppression' giving birth to a new formulation of race can be observed where arbitrary physical markers in lieu of 'beards and burqas' are treated as stand-ins for race and leading to discrimination faced by those individuals. This is not a metaphorical use of race, but an active racialising process through which Muslims are collectively positioned as a coherent and governable population. Sometimes categories can be reified by the reaction against them, and by singling out physical

¹¹ Donovan O. Schaefer, *Religious Affects: Animality, Evolution, and Power* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 143.

¹² Howard Winant, "Race and Race Theory," *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000): 181.

¹³ Steve Garner and Saher Selod, "The Racialization of Muslims: Empirical Studies of Islamophobia," *Critical Sociology* 41, no. 1 (2015): 9–19.

markers representing 'faith' to serve as the starting point of discrimination that manifests itself in travel bans and prolonged incarcerations, one can create a sociological component of race.

This is powerfully inscribed in John Bodley's work *Victims of Progress*,¹⁴ where the author takes on perspectives of a community that is quintessentially 'otherized', 'heathenized' or 'savagized'. The same treatment is meted out through Islamophobia, whereby Muslims as a whole are demonized as terrorists or barbarians and yet the machinations of Globalisation and corporate power still recognise the importance of Islamic countries as sites for investment and trade, especially a country such as Saudi Arabia where the government's prior authoritarian and sexist policies formed little to no impediment towards it being framed as a US 'ally' because of its immense wealth. This contradiction reveals how moral judgments in global politics are unevenly applied through strategic interests rather than any principled concern for civilian life. The double-bind and hypocrisy of such an alliance became even more glaring during the Gaza genocide, when US officials condemned Palestinian resistance as 'terrorism' but expanded sales to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, labelling them 'stability partners'.¹⁵ Such asymmetries reflect a model of imperial governance in which selective empathy is mobilised to legitimise some forms of violence while rendering others invisible within dominant media and policy discourse.

Analysis

It appears Islamophobia is inherently selective in its present day incarnation - Muslim countries that do not offer the US or other Western powers sufficient financial incentives and opportunities are 'terrorist countries' and the ones that do are 'key allies.' This interplay was clearly on display during the 2025 Indo-Pak border conflict which offers a keen parallel to such selectivity. Western media instantly framed Pakistan as the 'aggressor' despite India's role in escalating airstrikes in Kashmir. This was documented by media analysts who noted a disproportionate emphasis on Indian security narratives and a relative absence of reporting on Pakistani civilian casualties (BBC Media Monitoring; Human Rights Watch). Analysis revealed that casualty figures from Pakistani civilians received minimal international coverage compared to India's military

¹⁴ John Bodley, *Victims of Progress: Indigenous Peoples and Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

¹⁵ This has been documented in U.S. State Department arms transfer announcements and defence cooperation agreements that describe Saudi Arabia and the UAE as key regional "stability partners," despite ongoing human rights violations (SIPRI; Human Rights Watch). Human Rights Watch, "U.S. Arms Sales and Middle East Human Rights Abuses," Report, February 2024

narratives of 'counterterrorism'.¹⁶ This disparity reflects selective racialisation, whereby violence committed by a Muslim-majority state was more readily framed as inherently suspect or terroristic, rather than as a contextual political conflict. However, following Pakistan's return strikes and downing of Indian aircraft, the international media conversation around Pakistan became sympathetic and India began to be framed as an unreasonable and unreliable US partner. Such shifts in framing align with longer histories of imperial governance, in which strategic alliance formation determines whose violence is legitimised and whose is racialised as a civilisational threat. The need to shape media discourse to mirror these hierarchies is demonstrated in reiterating connections between terms like 'terrorism' with Muslims, regardless of evidence.

With regards to coding Islamophobia, it is therefore useful to reverse the commonly accepted Western formatting of knowledge production whereby a 'top-down' approach that elaborates a theory in abstract terms and then provides examples to illustrate it is consistently employed. Young introduces a subversive postcolonial methodology in his *Introduction to Postcolonialism* where narrative is told 'from below'.¹⁷ A situation or contemporary injustice is employed at the heart of analysis and theory that emerges out of it. This paper adopts this "from below" orientation as a methodological choice, using contemporary media controversies as entry points for analysis to examine how racialisation and power operate in practice rather than in abstraction. Such reversal elaborates the politics of the subaltern and resists academic framings of occupation. This framing was particularly powerful when applied to the media storm created around New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's response to the Christchurch Mosque attack in March, 2019. Global media posited Ardern's empathy as a 'historic' event precisely because it was directed at Muslims and served as a 'Western antidote' to Islamophobia. Media analyses of the Christchurch attacks widely noted how Ardern's response was framed as exceptional within Western political leadership, particularly in contrast to dominant security-oriented responses to Muslim suffering (BBC; The Guardian; NYT). Yet, the coverage and silence around Gaza, serves as a stark contrast to any such claims of an 'antidote', as images of Palestinian women cradling their dead children rarely receive front page treatment, if anything the entire social media landscape is maneuvered to re-write algorithms on X and Instagram

¹⁶ Ayesha Jalal, "Framing the Indo-Pak Border War of 2025," *South Asia Journal* 42, no. 2 (2025): 55-73

¹⁷ Robert J.C. Young, *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 1.

to decrease the visibility of such posts coming out of Gaza.¹⁸ The framing of Ardern as uniquely compassionate indirectly underscores the expectation that Muslims themselves cannot embody or inspire such empathy.¹⁹ This power dynamic where white culture forms the baseline for ideas and indeed civilization, is inherently powered in a manner that disallows for alternative stories and the languages in which they are told to forever occupy a central space in global narratives. Together, these contrasting framings illustrate selective empathy as an affective regime through which compassion is selectively distributed.

Donald Trump's repeated demonisation of Muslims has been supported by voter statistics of a white, middle-aged, Republican population that generally held an unfavourable view of Muslims.²⁰ According to Mona Chalabi in *The Guardian* (2015), "hostility toward Muslims in America exists alongside a lack of familiarity with Muslims."²¹ Survey data from YouGov shows that a large majority of respondents reported having no Muslim colleagues or friends, and most had never entered a mosque. Such attitudes enable the erasure of historical knowledge production associated with Muslim societies, particularly the contributions of Islamic scholars to science, medicine, and philosophy between the eighth and fourteenth centuries. It denies acknowledging Islam's central role and the role of scholars such as Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and Ibn Rushd (Averroes) in preserving, translating and disseminating the philosophical works of Aristotle, Plato and Socrates at times when the Christian crusaders were burning down libraries and archives. Rather than reflecting a civilisational absence, this erasure operates epistemically, denying Islam and its practitioners recognition as historical agents of knowledge.

The same bias extends to denying Islam and its practitioners the complexity that is allowed to Jews and Christians in religious framing. This dynamic was solidified during the protests and reactions following the publication of Salman Rushdie's controversial novel *The Satanic Verses* in 1988 that is described by Homi K. Bhabha in these terms:

The conflict of cultures and community around *The Satanic Verses* has been mainly represented in spatial terms and binary geopolitical

¹⁸ Human rights organisation reports on content moderation and visibility of Gaza-related posts—e.g. Human Rights Watch; Amnesty International; Access Now.)

¹⁹ Laleh Khalili, "Empathy and the Limits of Liberal Recognition," *Middle East Report* 310 (2024): 12–19

²⁰ Pew Research Center, *U.S. Muslims Concerned About Their Place in Society, but Continue to Believe in the American Dream* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2017)

²¹ Mona Chalabi, "How Anti-Muslim Are Americans? Data Points to Extent of Islamophobia," *The Guardian*, December 8, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/dec/08>

polarities – Islamic fundamentalists vs Western literary modernists, the quarrel of the ancient (ascriptive) migrants and modern (iconic) metropolitans. This obscures the anxiety of the irresolvable, borderline culture of hybridity that articulates its problems of identification and its diasporic aesthetic in an uncanny, disjunctive temporality that is, at once, the time of cultural displacement, and the space of the ‘untranslatable’.²²

It is precisely such ‘geopolitical polarities’ that inform and drive the discourse surrounding how Muslims are framed today, where there is an unspoken agreement on the framing that while ‘all Muslims may not be terrorists, all terrorists are most definitely Muslim’. This framing reflects a form of racialised securitisation, in which political violence associated with Muslim actors is pre-emptively read through the language of terrorism, regardless of context or scale.²³ The 2025 Indo-Pak war reveals a similar polarity, where Indian state violence was repeatedly classified as ‘counterinsurgency’ while any military retaliation was globally coded as ‘Islamic terrorism’. Pakistan’s defense of Kashmiri civilians rarely ever entered Western coverage, reflecting a persistent denial of the narrative of Muslim majority states in this context.²⁴ This framing is designed to only ascribe the marker of ‘terrorism’ with violence committed by practitioners of a specific faith, whereby if a white man shoots up a school or drives onto the sidewalk running down dozens of people this act is treated as an ‘isolated’ incident underpinned by mental illness not violence.

Many news agencies today cover terrorism and crimes allegedly committed by Muslims in an excessive and statistically uneven manner. This on the one hand inflates the actual overall threatening feeling of a looming and incoming terrorist attack to unrealistic proportions. On the other hand it creates an alarmist reaction from people that can become Islamophobic. News agencies like *Fox*, *The Sun*, and famous columnists from *The Independent* and *The Guardian* have been known to spew Islamophobic spins on stories.

The same media also ensures that when an African American man commits a crime it is ascribed to ‘gang’ violence that is considered ubiquitous where ‘blackness’ is framed. Why is violence and terrorism here not linked to ‘whiteness’ or ‘maleness’ both identity groups that commit violence as often if not more often than Muslims, especially where the United States is concerned? The reason rests in the fact that whiteness has never been ‘othered’ the same way as other racialised identities are and have been on a daily basis. Whiteness is never framed as barbaric. This is why acts of violence themselves are coded differently, not by the

²² Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 219.

²³ Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 90.

²⁴ Hafsa Kanjwal, “Kashmir and the Politics of Terror Labels,” *Foreign Policy* (January 2025)

numbers of casualties that result from them but rather by who commits them.

American drone attacks on Afghan and Pakistani soil are considered a justified retaliation for the attack of 9/11 and in his first year in office President Barack Obama carried out 563 drone strikes in Somalia, Afghanistan and Pakistan compared to the 57 strikes carried out during the entire Bush administration. Many of the 807 people killed in that first year of drone strikes were civilians deemed 'necessary' collateral damage in the War on Terror.²⁵ A similar logic has been applied to Gaza, where Israeli bombing campaigns from 2023 to 2025 have killed over 60,000 civilians but are repeatedly framed by US officials as a 'necessary tragedy' or a needed response to eliminate Hamas. Civilian deaths in Rafah and Khan Younis have also been dismissed in a similar vein, echoing Obama's language on drone killings during his presidential term.²⁶ However, President Obama's conduct and grace in office ensures that even most liberal Americans refuse to unearth these atrocities. This response can be understood as the effect of moral authority and political affect, which mediates how state violence is remembered, questioned, or rendered permissible within liberal publics. The very naming of the 'War on Terror' allowed for those waging the war to determine who does and does not come under the category of causing 'terror.' The way American violence around the world is often framed is shrouded and obfuscated through language of 'democratisation' or 'human rights' that is somehow considered by most US governments to be the naturalised role of a nation that has invaded over 70 countries since 1776 but gets to frame everyone else as the 'other'.²⁷

This otherness is often systemic as well as framed - where communities of colour are racialised along economic and political lines and live in gentrified neighbourhoods that often ensure that many white, middle-class and wealthy families never have to actively interact with people of colour if they choose to avoid them.

Terrorism as Media Affect

In such a placement, religion, and its racial underpinnings emerge as a hybrid system... a set of embodied practices that produce affects in

²⁵ The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, "Obama's Covert Drone War in Numbers: Ten Times More Strikes Than Bush," January 17, 2017, <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2017-01-17/>

²⁶ Amnesty International, "Damning Evidence of War Crimes as Israeli Attacks Wipe Out Entire Families in Gaza," Amnesty International, February 5, 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/02/israel-opt-new>

²⁷ David Vine, *The United States of War: A Global History of America's Endless Conflicts, from Columbus to the Islamic State* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020)

how they are viewed and how religious bodies are treated. According to Schaefer:

Islamophobia presents itself as a patient, reasoned critique. But as the primatological perspective shows, the production of religious identities emerges out of an eminently animal affective matrix. The mobilisation of social boundaries is part of the erotics of racism, a set of meaning making technologies embedded in bodies that flow through us and coalesce into religious forms. At the same time, the counter manoeuvres that travel to borderlines and demilitarise them are also part of an animal heritage. Religious machines are built out of complex confluences of these compulsory affective technologies, circulating within a complex of heterogeneous historical economies that shape on-the-ground embodied responses. Ideology, especially racialised ideology, is a technology for the production of affects – a uniquely human technology but no less animal for it.²⁸

Schaefer here provides a blueprint for theorizing affect as these very ‘heterogeneous historical economies’ that are framed by US and Western media with regards to Islam and Muslims post 9/11 ensure that over a billion Muslims around the world are denied complexity in how they are framed, either as ‘silent moderates’ or ‘rabid terrorists’, polarities that are put in place by a framing that is not just Western but also rooted in deep fear of the other. The Gaza war again highlights a situation where Palestinian civilians are rendered either invisible or where even toddlers are coded as potential extremists while Israeli grief and hurt feelings over being blamed for the genocide is amplified as antisemitism. Such selective affective economy is central in propagating a form of Islamophobia that inherently places Palestinian Muslims as lesser beings than Israelis.

For this reason, the application of Affect theory in conjunction with Postcolonial praxis serves as the ideal blend to examine how Muslims are being framed in public consciousness in the present moment. In her chapter on ‘Covering War’ in *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death*, Susan Moeller cites Lemkin insisting “to treat genocide as a crime that only concerns an individual nation makes no sense because by its very nature the author is either the state itself or powerful groups backed by the state; by its legal, moral and human nature, genocide must be regarded as an international crime.”²⁹ Moeller goes on to cite how the genocide in Rwanda was dismissed by the US State Department in these terms, “Acts of genocide may have occurred. As a responsible government, you don’t just go around hollering ‘genocide’.”

²⁸ Donovan O. Schaefer, *Religious Affects: Animality, Evolution, and Power* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 45.

²⁹ Susan D. Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 214.

The sheer guile of framing one's own government as 'responsible' for not acknowledging its role in perpetuating genocide is a common feature of US media coverage that directly maps on to how the US media covered the devastation of Aleppo and the war on Syria, as if US intervention in Iraq in no way perpetuated or framed the present conflict. The villains were 'ISIS' alone, not the state that destabilised the region and created a context and space for terrorist groups to operate in the first place. Coverage on Gaza mirrors the Rwandan precedent, as US officials and CNN and BBC repeatedly refuse to use the word 'genocide', continuing to call it a 'conflict and escalation', despite independent outlets, UN rapporteurs and genocide experts labelling Gaza as a genocide.³⁰

Media coverage of the 'Muslim Bomber' is not just limited to news coverage, it ranges from televised episodes of US tv shows such as *Homeland*, where a 'mistaken' drone bombing carried out by the lead character affectionately dubbed 'the Drone Queen' by her colleagues to the protagonist played in Hulu's *The Looming Tower* released in 2018 where Aaron Sorkin's character, an embattled FBI agent, has long 'emotive' talks with his Muslim protégé to try and understand where all this 'hatred of America' comes from. Every explanation offered is rooted in a 'misunderstanding' or 'misreading' of the Quran but never the exploitative conduct of the US military in dozens of Muslim countries.

The ensuing scavenger hunt to catch Osama Bin Laden around the world is framed as a modern crusade but no mention is made of the US initially funding, arming and training the Afghan mujahideen to fight Soviets under Operation Cyclone in the 1980s. In all media framings of Islamophobia, the West perpetually emerges as a blindsided and naïve victim of barbarous hatred that is always painted as an 'Us v Them' battle rather than a complex 'technology' of powered historical events leading up to a confrontation. However, an acknowledgement of such a double standard is by no means an excuse or justification for the conduct of terrorists and should never be mistaken as 'terrorist sympathising' but rather a call for a more honest retelling of history that shows how imperialist interests, and present policies have driven discourse in the past and continue to shape reactions around the globe today. Young touches upon this production of difference as an 'aesthetic' paradigm applied consistently in Western canon:

Meanwhile, westerners carry on going to the theatre. Art and politics don't mix, they always say. The very division of the world on which aesthetics rests is a product of the Manichean, or dualistic, colonial, patriarchal mentality isolated by the revolutionary psychologist Frantz Fanon at the opening of his *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). Through their 'aesthetic expressions

³⁰ United Nations Special Rapporteur on Palestine, "Annual Report to the Human Rights Council," March 2025.

of respect for the established order', says Fanon, 'in the capitalist countries a multitude of moral teachers, professors, counsellors and 'disorientators' separate the exploited from those in power. As an intellectual, an artist, a consumer or producer of culture, you either collude with the aestheticised structure that enforces apartness, or you contest it – by turning the theatre into a site of resistance, for example.³¹

One such 'disorientator' to have emerged in the international limelight is British Muslim actor and rapper Riz Ahmed. Ahmed has taken on mainstream Hollywood roles in *Star Wars Rogue One*, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, British 'terrorism comedy' *The Four Lions* and HBO's *The Night Of*, where he has taken on the 'Muslim terrorist' stereotype and spun it in a manner that calls out those who label him rather than himself. A *New York Times* profile (2018) of him titled *Riz Ahmed Acts his Way Out of Every Cultural Pigeonhole* reads³²:

'We' and 'I' changes and shifts constantly," he conceded when I asked him about it. "That was my biggest experience going to Merchant Taylors'. Extreme code switching. The most confusing conversation is to have to talk about the colonisation of our continents." We laughed a little at the ridiculousness of sentences like "we colonised us," or "we took us into slavery." But then his face turned serious. "That's what we are. We are the inheritors of the scars of Empire, but also the spoils of Empire. And that kind of inside/outside state is totally ingrained in us. Which is why, at a time like now, where everybody's being asked to pick a side, everything is binary, it's a confusing time to be us.

In such an economy of fear packed in binaries, it becomes essential to constantly recognise and deconstruct how image and affect are being negotiated by media and within knowledge production itself. We must ask what affects do and what bodies do for affects? The first frames affect as a tool for escalating belief structures and ideologies and the second offers a more complicated field.

Sara Ahmed's explanation of how 'fear' operates is particularly helpful in this context, "manufacturing 'surfaces' of individuals and collectives by attaching negative affects to other bodies and positive affects to a collective identified as 'us'. Fear 'does something'... it re-establishes distance between bodies whose difference is read off the surface, as a reading that produced the surface."³³ In a perverse sense, this

³¹ Robert J.C. Young, *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 80.

³² Jon Caramanica, "Riz Ahmed Acts His Way Out of Every Cultural Pigeonhole," *New York Times*, September 6, 2018.

³³ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 63.

kind of confirmation bias when it comes to racialising religion ensures a looped production of pointed fingers and othering that Schaefer touches upon, "racialization is not just about race, then, but any attempt to disdain an outsider – national, religious, class – as a savage."³⁴

Such racialization by no means occurs in a vacuum, instead it is coded in Ahmed's term 'Economies of Hate':

Racism, in these moments, is a by-product of a regime of affects that operate transversally to economic and linguistic determinations. Economies of hate are motivated by clusters surging through bodies in ways that are not necessarily thoughtful, useful, or even tactical – but no less desirable, contagious, or addictive. This non-economic variety of racism is, I would argue, on full display in contemporary American Islamophobia.³⁵

A display that even extends to popular reboots of sitcoms such as *Roseanne*, where in an episode titled 'Go Cubs',³⁶ Roseanne Barr is terrified that her Yemeni neighbours are terrorists and plotting an attack. She says "That's how they make bombs. What if this is a sleeper cell full of terrorists getting ready to blow up our neighbourhood?" She also refers to the country her Muslim neighbours are probably from as "Talibanjistan."

Such constructions of savage Muslims run through the bulk of modern-day storytelling in the US.

The introduction to Omi, Michael and Howard Winant's 'Racial Formation in the United States' reads "persistent racial inequality and difference are rendered illegible in US popular political discourse. Many people in the US believe that the goals of the civil rights movement have been substantially achieved, that racial discrimination is a thing of the past, and that we are rapidly evolving into a truly colourblind society. 'Race thinking', it is argued, no longer significantly informs our perceptions, shapes our attitudes, and influences our individual, collective and institutional practices. Indeed, it is said that the most effective anti-racist consciousness, policy and practice is simply to ignore race."³⁷ It is precisely the promulgation of this myth that America is somehow 'post racial' that leads to the systematic marginalization of people of colour and the carte blanche to demonize difference whether ideological or social from a multitude of platforms. This problem is compounded when one takes into consideration the sheer power wielded by the US media in a global context. Few countries, if any, have the aesthetic, industrial and economic tools at their disposal to monopolize global perception the way America

³⁴ Donovan O. Schaefer, *Religious Affects: Animality, Evolution, and Power*.

³⁵ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 119–120.

³⁶ *Roseanne*, Season 10, Episode 7, "Go Cubs," May 1, 2018, on ABC Television Network.

³⁷ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2014)

does, and this establishes its own particular brand of hegemony over global narrative. America's story as told through Hollywood films and television productions allows for the rest of the world to view it in multiple frames with films and television showcasing: superheroes, the government, doctors, lawyers, specific cities and sexual orientations. However, the opposite is true of the Muslim world, where only one story is told of dozens of countries to and by the United States; a story that American left icon Ayn Rand framed by saying "in any war between the civilized man and the savage, support the civilized man. Support Israel. Defeat Jihad."³⁸

In his treatise 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed,' Paulo Freire calls for a historic retelling that is rooted in acknowledging the dehumanization of the other. He states, "This, then, is the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well. The oppressors, who oppress, exploit and rape by virtue of their power, cannot find in this power the strength to liberate either the oppressed or themselves. Only power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both. Any attempt to 'soften' the power of the oppressor in deference to the weakness of the oppressed almost always manifests itself in the form of false generosity; indeed, the attempt never goes beyond this."³⁹ This 'false generosity' is what several scholars are presently calling out for denoting a new strain of racism, extended towards Muslims termed 'the racism of low expectations.'⁴⁰

Racism of Low Expectations

If racism is recognized as forms of prejudice that are powered by actions and institutional structures then one must acknowledge some manifestation of all such elements in contemporary xenophobic and anti-Muslim rhetoric. Many anti-Muslim bigots often try to escape this problematization of Islamophobia as racism by claiming that Islam is not a race. This is undeniably true, as Muslims form an extremely diverse group located across the globe but this does not preclude them from being

³⁸ The quote "In any war between the civilized man and the savage, support the civilized man. Support Israel. Defeat Jihad" is attributed to Ayn Rand, a Russian-American philosopher and novelist. She expressed this sentiment in a 1974 Ford Hall Forum lecture, where she discussed her support for Israel during the Yom Kippur War of 1973.

³⁹ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos, 30th anniversary ed. (New York: Continuum, 2000), 72.

⁴⁰ The term refers to a systemic form of racism which often manifests in subtle ways, whereby people from marginalised racial and/or ethnic groups are expected to have lower potential, intellect or capability. This form of racism operates along the 'concern' or 'benevolence' of those in power, akin to the colonial 'white man's burden'. It is patronising and paternalistic because it reinforces stereotypes about the capability of racial groups.

racialised. The response that Islam is not a race overlooks that Islam is practiced by people and the Islamophobia industry does not solely attack faith or theology but also Muslim people. Islamophobic encounters aren't exchanges of ideas confronting and countering other ideas, these are interactions where physical markers such as 'beards' and 'burqas' are used to call out practitioners of the faith and label them.

In *Identity and Violence*, Amartya Sen touches upon this very paradox by stating "Given our inescapably plural identities, we have to decide on the relative importance of our different associations and affiliations in any particular context. Central to leading a human life, therefore, are the responsibilities of choice and reasoning. In contrast, violence is promoted by the cultivation of a sense of inevitability about some allegedly unique – often belligerent – identity that we are supposed to have which apparently makes extensive demands on us. The imposition of an allegedly unique identity is often a crucial component of the 'martial art' of fomenting sectarian confrontation."⁴¹ It is precisely this plurality and complexity that is often denied to non-white groups in both narrative formation and dissemination.

The polarization of such opinion completely dismisses any complexity to Muslims, that rests in identities that people value other than religion involving an interplay of class, gender, profession, language, science, morals, politics, art and several other frames. To view identity as exclusively racial or religious denies individuals who occupy such identities any agency within them. The very framing demands that those individuals identify as 'Muslim' rather than a myriad of other things they may value alongside their faith. White people do not face such framings and are therefore allowed the agency to compose a blend of identity markers and degrees of involvement with those markers. Such bigotry allows for Islamophobia to become institutionalized, whereby the attitudes extend to all Muslims, rather than violent groups because the response of 'otherizing' or 'marginalizing' is directed at all Muslims in different ways. This equivocation is illustrated by Umer Mahmood in his 'Islamophobia Research and Documentation Project,' "It seems Muslims being victimized is not newsworthy but Muslims allegedly committing crimes is, at least from the media's point of view. In the case of the Miami shooting, the perpetrator's ethnicity and affiliation to Islam were focused on and held responsible, but the story largely died once it was discovered the killer had psychological issues and was HIV positive, and suffered from a sexual identity crisis."⁴² The racism directed at Muslims takes on its own

⁴¹ Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), 5–6.

⁴² Umer Mahmood, "Islamophobia Research and Documentation Project," University of California, Berkeley, <https://crg.berkeley.edu/research/research-initiatives/>

binary and extremes, where they are only ever represented in media as either extremists and violent or so culturally conservative that they are never part of the American middle class mainstream that goes to parties and shops at Target.

This back-and-forth discourse on Islamophobia is called out by activist Majid Nawaz as 'soft bigotry' that is still just as racist in its desperate attempt not to be because it demarcates an 'other'. Nawaz says "...It's what I call the racism of low expectations: to lower those standards when looking at a brown person if a brown person happens to express a level of misogyny, chauvinism, bigotry, or anti-Semitism, and yet hold other white people to universal liberal standards. The real victim of that double standard are the minority communities themselves because by doing so we limit their horizons; we limit their own ceiling and expectations as to what they aspire to be; we're judging them as somehow that their culture is inherently less civilized; and, of course, we are tolerating bigotry within communities, and the first victims of that bigotry happen to be those who are weakest from among those communities."⁴³ This same operational 'racism of low expectations' also refuses to acknowledge so-called 'moderate' Muslims as authentic Muslims, where Muslims who are lesbian, gay, artists or academics are viewed as minorities within Islam that have been efficiently 'Westernized'. Such framing assumes that of the bulk of over a billion Muslims, the majority are terrorists and moderates are a minority, rather than the other way around.

The other extreme of the spectrum, of course, is much more vocal. Right wing Christian and Zionist groups that presume Muslims as a homogenized entity to which they readily ascribe whatever markers of violence they see fit. Deepa Kumar lists four types of Islamophobes: "There are four interconnected groups of people that have come together to project the image of a vicious and menacing 'Muslim enemy' and to generate fear and hatred. They include members of the neocon camp who have devoted themselves to ferreting out the 'Islamic Terrorist'; Zionists whose goal of policing criticism of Israel dovetails neatly with the logic of Islamophobia; the Christian right, which has joined the ranks of the Islamophobic warriors; and a group of former Muslims (and Christians) from the Middle East and South Asia, that have profited from Islam bashing."⁴⁴ Each of these groups has gotten louder over the years and this attitude is reflected consistently in increasingly draconian policies applied towards Muslim communities and especially Muslim immigrants fleeing conflict zones such as Syrian refugees.

⁴³ Maajid Nawaz, "The Racism of Low Expectations," *Big Think*, accessed October 4, 2025, <https://bigthink.com/videos/maajid-nawaz-on-islamic-reform/>.

⁴⁴ Deepa Kumar, *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012)

However, none of this, is contrived to take away from the fact that Islam and those who practice it are facing a crisis at present. There is no denying the upsurge of Wahabi and Salafi, militant ideologies taking root in many Muslim countries all over the world, and peace-loving Muslims are usually the first victims of the violence that results from terrorism. However, the framing of violence and terrorism as an exclusively Islamic phenomenon, rooted in religious practice turns a blind eye to the systematic invasions and violence meted out through imperialist policies exported from Western nations, via colonialism and more presently in the name of 'liberalising' or 'freeing' Islamic countries from themselves. The idea that 'terrorism' has a race, and religion allows governments and policy makers to ignore acts of terrorism carried out by groups and individuals that they do not have a vested interest in sidelining, namely white, men.

Confronting such frameworks of imperialist power is extremely difficult given the global export of neoliberal economic policies around the world and the systematizing and standardization of such power mechanisms in multiple contexts. According to Arundhati Roy in 'Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire' "When we speak of confronting Empire, we need to identify what Empire means. Does it mean the US government (and its European satellites), the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Trade Organization (WTO), and multinational corporations? Or is it something more than that? In many countries, Empire has sprouted other subsidiary heads, some dangerous by-products – nationalism, religious bigotry, fascism and, of course, terrorism. All these march arm in arm with the project of corporate globalization."⁴⁵ This near-omnipotent structural marginalization paints a dim picture for our ability to confront Islamophobia in its many manifestations, or even to confront racism for that matter.

Islam as the 'Other'

According to Ian Hacking "Race is a way of 'making up people',"⁴⁶ and if that is the case than Islamophobia involves a clumping of religious, ethnic, and cultural prejudices together in one toxic constellation. Even though there are now consistent calls on the part of academics to decouple religion from culture, given that most manifestations of religion are increasingly disconnected from the cultures in which they are embedded, the globalized political discourse seldom allows for such remapping. Islamophobia has become a cryptic articulation of racism and the religion itself has been reduced to racial and cultural dimensions by both its adherents and critics alike. In his 1962 treatise 'Gharbzadegi' or

⁴⁵ Arundhati Roy, *An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2004), 3.

⁴⁶ (Hacking, 1999)

'Westoxification', Jalal Al-e-Ahmad asked "What brought on this era? What happened that other people, ignoring us completely while they changed and developed their machines, built, carried out plans, and moved in and out of our midst and we woke to find every oil derrick a spike impaling the land? Why did we end up Westoxified? Let's go back to history."⁴⁷ The only thing that has changed now is that no one is ignoring Muslims, if anything, a hyper-vigilance is deployed towards Islamic symbolism and practice without any need to comprehend or critique it. This hyper-vigilance and hyper-visibility carries its own complications, where Muslim Americans are simply never considered 'American enough' to not be 'Muslim' first and foremost. Throughout this paper, Islamophobia is understood as a racialising form of racism, one that operates through cultural, religious, and affective coding rather than biological essentialism and this is continually codified in new ways.

Nowhere is the politics of difference more prominent in the Western framing of the veil, which has at various points in history been used to symbolise a multitude of meanings from early European framing of it to represent the 'erotic mysteries of the East' to present day fear of what lurks beneath it. Conversely, for Muslims, the veil originally symbolized class and status but for many today, it symbolizes resistance in the face of imperialist attacks on identity. According to Young "today, depending on who you are, the veil symbolizes control or defiance, oppression or autonomy, patriarchy or non-western communal values. How can we understand the veil, catch its meanings, and at the same time take hold of and interrogate or own automated responses? No one can read the veil from a neutral, disinterested space."⁴⁸ In many ways, this analysis lends itself rather conveniently to deconstructing Islamophobia itself, since the Muslim is framed as somehow inherently 'Eastern' and consequently in opposition to the 'West', there are very few 'neutral' framings of Muslims in today's cultural climate. Even though Muslims come in all shapes, sizes and ethnicities, Islam being the second largest religion in the world, the framing is solely fixated on their 'brown-ness', South Asians and people from the Middle East clad in burqas or donning beards. Fanon himself has emphasized this 'historic dynamism' of the veil and the ways it can be employed as a strategic device depending on the circumstances in which it is deployed and who observes it. "This woman who sees without being seen frustrates the colonizer,' he states and Young builds upon this "she asserts a resisting refusal of knowledge comparable only to the impenetrability of the Casbah, the fortress in whose steep, narrow alleyways the ambivalent veiled woman is often pictured. The

⁴⁷ Jalal Al-e Ahmad, *Gharbzadegi (Occidentosis: A Plague from the West)*, trans. Robert Campbell (Berkeley, CA: Mizan Press, 1984), 25.

⁴⁸ Robert J.C. Young, *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 80.

nature of the western response to the veil is to demand and desire its removal, so that strategies of liberation in the name of saving women supposedly forced to wear the veil coincide uncomfortably with the colonial violence of the veil's forcible removal." This 'forced removal' harkens back to strategies employed under Andrew Jackson's forces in 1830s towards Native Americans, what he termed as 'Indian Removal', where a similar systemic assimilation strategy was deployed in indigenous peoples to colonize them; i.e. cutting their hair, forcing them to stop speaking their languages and removing all indigenous clothing. The same practice continues today, when office workers throughout the US can randomly pressure and force female employees to remove their headscarves. Even more problematic is when such practices are incorrectly framed under 'feminism' or 'liberation', the idea that all women are forced to veil is just as ludicrous as presuming that all women in the West are forced to put their bodies on display. If feminism allows for a critique of veiling practices because modesty is exclusively mapped here onto the female form, then the same feminist practices must also recognize the institutional coercion of the fashion, entertainment, and beauty product industries that capitalize on branding and selling the female form. By combining qualitative discourse analysis with affect theory and postcolonial critique, this paper has traced how Islamophobia is produced across media, policy language, and cultural representation. Understanding Islamophobia as a racialising affective regime clarifies why representational reforms alone are insufficient, and why confronting imperial governance, media economies, and selective empathy remains central to any anti-racist project.

Conclusion

Ultimately, any unpacking of Islamophobia requires understanding that this racist practice is never carried out in a vacuum. The stripping of individual and social complexity here is an institutionalized practice that allows us to observe and mourn the loss of certain lives and condemn others for their own deaths. This framing is one that follows everyone who is racialized under Islamophobia whether they themselves identify with Islam or not. The idea that Muslims can overwhelmingly be treated as terrorists even as they oppose terrorism in all its manifestations and are usually the first victims to suffer from it, implies that it is the duty of those being oppressed to constantly educate and excuse their oppressors. In some ways, George W Bush, laid down the gauntlet following 9/11 where he framed the polarity in which contemporary Islamophobia roots itself 'You are either with us or you are with the terrorists'. And this particular 'Us v Them' framing for the modern world, continues to follow race discourse all over the globe.

