Representation of Muslim Women in Majority-Muslim Malaysia: An Echo of Orientalist Narratives from the West

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Abstract

This article investigates the persistent influence of Eurocentric perspectives and Orientalist frameworks on the intellectual traditions of indigenous peoples during the post-colonial era.These frameworks have fostered various challenges, notably Islamophobia, which identifies the perceived discrimination of Muslim women as a primary marker of difference between Islamic societies and the West.This study explores the under-researched phenomenon of Islamophobia within majority-Muslim Malaysia by examining the representation of Muslim women in selected English-language news articles through critical discourse analysis. Findings suggest that local media frequently echo negative Western narratives. The media's reinforcement of harmful stereotypes and Islamophobic tropes is particularly evident in two areas, including the supposed loss of female agency and the attribution of misogyny and oppression to Muslim society.This article advocates for a robust approach to media representation that respects the authenticity of Muslim women and reflects their diverse experiences.Ultimately, this research promotes a decolonial methodology to dismantle oppressive narratives and foster genuine understanding and solidarity across communities.

Keywords:
Decolonisation, gendered Islamophobia, Islamophobia, media representation, Orientalism.

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Introduction

One of the enduring perspectives resulting from the myth of the European Enlightenment is the belief in the superiority of the European value system and its rational and intellectual heritage over non-European and non-Western systems of thought. This is evident in the ways in which non-European cultures and peoples are discussed or depicted by Europeans, whether in the writings of Orientalists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, or in the speeches of diplomats and statesmen in parliaments and international fora across Europe today, a perspective further reinforced by global media. Islam and Muslims bear the brunt of this outlook, as Islam is the second-largest religion in Europe after Christianity, rendering Muslims a visible minority in many Western European countries.[1]

Until today, debates on the integration or assimilation of Muslims in Europe have largely focused on cultural aspects, particularly the question of the hijab, gender inequality, and other cultural or religious characteristics perceived as challenges to their "integration" and "assimilation." Scant attention, however, is paid to other factors hindering the social cohesion of Muslims in Western countries, such as discrimination in the labour market,[2] shorter average years of education compared to non-Muslims in most European countries, and their political underrepresentation in certain Western states, notably France and Britain.[3] Similarly, the framing of debates on the hijab or burqa for Muslim women appears to be centred on perceptions of extremism, thereby privileging political or cultural aspects of the discussion while disregarding other contexts. There is also an implicit assumption that the hijab and other values upheld by Muslim women are fundamentally at odds with the ideals and values of "enlightened" Europe.

One reason for this siloed discussion concerning Islam and Muslims is that emphasising the cultural and religious "otherness" of Muslims allows Europeans to assert the "superiority" of European Enlightenment values over the perceived backwardness of Muslims. This assumption can be traced to European pride in the Enlightenment, which is regarded as having subjected European culture to intense rational scrutiny and thus established Europe

1. Pamela Duncan, "Europeans Greatly Overestimate Muslim Population, Poll Shows," *The Guardian*, 13 December 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/society/datablog/2016/dec/13/europeans-massively-overestimate-muslim-population-poll-shows.
2. Samir Sweida-Metwally, "Does the Muslim Penalty in the British Labour Market Dissipate after Accounting for So-Called 'Sociocultural Attitudes'?" *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 45, no. 16 (2022): 359–88; and Phillip Connor and Matthias Koenig, "Explaining the Muslim Employment Gap in Western Europe: Individual-Level Effects and Ethno-Religious Penalties," *Social Science Research* 49 (2014): 191–201.
3. "Muslim Educational Attainment," *Pew Research Center*, 13 December 2016, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2016/12/13/muslim-educational-attainment.

as the "beacon of hope" for all "civilised" peoples in safeguarding personal liberty and equality. Consequently, there is a prevailing perception that gender inequality and oppression have been resolved within European culture but persist in Islam. As a result, Muslim women are predominantly portrayed as oppressed and in need of liberation.

The danger of these repeated narratives, which depict Muslims in isolation from other communities, lies in their potential to generate prejudice towards women, heighten emphasis on the perceived threats posed by the Muslim way of life, and intensify racism towards Muslims more generally—all of which constitute classic dimensions of Islamophobia.[4] Accordingly, greater scrutiny must be directed towards the dominant ways in which Muslim women are framed, in order to ensure that they are able to narrate their own lives and experiences accurately and justly, without the sympathetic or patronising attitudes of Orientalists who claim to "liberate" Muslim women from their oppressors.

Thus, this article seeks to expose the perception of a superior European intellectual and cultural tradition that disregards other spheres of knowledge and culture, by tracing its roots to the predecessor of contemporary European values and ethical frameworks, namely the Enlightenment. It then examines how this perception was transmitted to the Global South through imperialism and colonisation, thereby exposing the contradiction between Enlightenment ideals and the practices of European scholars and colonial officers in colonised lands. This provides the basis for the subsequent discussion of Islamophobia, in which the influence of Eurocentrism and Orientalist perspectives on media narratives is analysed, particularly with regard to the perpetuation of negative stereotypes and Islamophobic tropes in portrayals of Muslim women in Malaysia.

Methodology

To understand the context of Islamophobia in a non-Western setting, this article employed a historical research method to trace the formation of Eurocentric views in a Muslim-majority nation such as Malaysia.[5] In addition to drawing on the works of European scholars and colonial officers in Malaysia and other colonised regions, secondary works by sociologists, philosophers, and historians were utilised. Historical research and analysis were crucial in providing context for the complex problem of Islamophobia in majority-Muslim societies and in demonstrating how it manifested in media practices, thereby contributing to the persistence of stereotypical narratives.

4. Şener Aktürk and Yury Katliarou, "Institutionalization of Ethnocultural Diversity and the Representation of European Muslims," *Perspectives on Politics* 19, no. 2 (2020): 1–18.
5. Zafar Iqbal, "Prejudice: An Antecedent or Manifestation of Islamophobia?" in *Islamophobia: History, Context and Deconstruction* (New Delhi: Thousand Oaks; California: Sage Publications, 2020), 129–157.

In conducting this study, qualitative textual analysis techniques were applied to articles concerning Islamisation published in *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini*. These platforms were selected due to their standing as two of Malaysia's leading English-language news portals—*The Star Online* representing a print-based mainstream outlet and *Malaysiakini* an independent online outlet—making them ideal case studies.[6] The initial search focused on general discussions of Islamisation, after which the scope was narrowed to the representation of Muslim women within those articles. All genres of articles were included, with no distinction made between news features, journalistic pieces, or opinion essays. This decision reflected the nature of online publication and the multiple ways in which articles reach readers, where genre boundaries are often blurred.

Using the internal search tool, all articles containing the keywords "Islamisation," "Islamising," "Islamise," and "women" were retrieved. To manage the extensive volume of material, analysis was restricted to articles published between January 2016 and October 2018, enabling a focused examination of reporting trends. A total of 71 articles from *The Star Online* and 126 from *Malaysiakini* were included, encompassing formats such as news reports, editorials, opinion columns, letters to the editor, and highlights of subscribers' comments. Subsequently, a critical discourse analysis of the selected articles was conducted. This entailed a close examination of narrative structures and linguistic choices to identify recurring meanings and underlying ideologies. Particular attention was paid to semantic relations between words, grammatical features, assumptions, metaphors, and collocations.[7] The analysis sought to demonstrate how discursive semiotic structures were deployed within ideological frameworks.[8]

The researchers adopted a reflexive approach by considering the "multiple interests and contradictions in the text producers, based on the evidence of the text and its contexts,"[9] whilst remaining mindful of our own biases to safeguard the integrity of the analysis.[10] Themes and categories were identified through a review of the literature and the coding of articles. Two prominent themes consistently emerged regarding the representation of Muslim women:

6. "Top 30 News Websites in Malaysia," *Media Pod*, https://www.mediapod.co/blog/top-news-websites-malaysia/, accessed 2 September 2025.
7. Oliver Boyd-Barrett, "Theory in Media Research," *The Media Book*, ed. Chris Newbold, Oliver Boyd-Barrett, and Hilde Van den Bulck (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 39.
8. Norman Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research* (London: Routledge, 2003), 39–42.
9. Thomas Huckin, Jennifer Andrus, and Jennifer Clary-Lemon, "Critical Discourse Analysis and Rhetoric and Composition," *College Composition and Communication* 64, no. 1 (2012): 107–129.
10. Martin Reisigel and Ruth Wodak, *Discourse and Discrimination: Rhetorics of Racism and Antisemitism* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 206–209.

(1) the loss of agency and (2) portrayals of misogynistic and oppressive Muslim societies. These themes mirrored the prevalent, often Islamophobic, narratives within the articles and offered insight into the construction of media discourse surrounding Muslim women in Malaysia.

Placing the "Enlightened" West Under a Microscope

The brief and simplified history of Europe's Enlightenment period is often detached from its concurrent history of imperialism and colonisation. It is typically portrayed as the era in which Europe began to emerge from the "darkness" of the medieval period, when freedom and wealth were reserved for the nobility, while the watchful clergy dictated moral values and norms. Inequalities abounded—whether in gender,[11] politics,[12] or the economy.[13] This began to change between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the alliance between the nobility or monarchs and the clergy was challenged, gradually giving rise to an independent class of thinkers no longer bound by these authorities. This intellectual transformation culminated in the eighteenth century in what is now known as the Enlightenment, a period that exalted the ideals of freedom, liberty, happiness, and the pursuit of useful knowledge for the advancement of humankind.

With economic power liberated from the zealous control of the noble class,[14] and knowledge no longer constrained by the rigid, Church-sanctioned Aristotelian–Thomist synthesis, men of science were free to pursue knowledge beyond the habitual theorising and abstract speculations of the Scholastics. This marked the beginning of a scientific tradition that emphasised reason alongside empirical practice to yield tangible benefits.[15] These revolutions were evident not only in the realm of empirical science but also in the evolving relationship

11. Christen Erlingsson and Petra Brysiewicz, "A Hands-on Guide to Doing Content Analysis," *African Journal of Emergency Medicine* 7, no. 3 (2018): 93–99.
12. Helen Jewell, *Women in Dark Age and Early Medieval Europe c. 500–1200* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2006). Chapter 2 of the book explores the prevailing attitudes towards women during the medieval period, examining them from cultural, social, and religious perspectives.
13. Stanley L. Engermann, "Slavery, Serfdom and Other Forms of Coerced Labour: Similarities and Differences," in *Serfdom and Slavery: Studies in Legal Bondage* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 18–41.
14. Guido Alfani, "Economic Inequality in Preindustrial Times: Europe and Beyond," *Journal of Economic Literature* 59, no. 1 (2021): 3–44. For discussions on gender-based wage inequality, see Alexandra Pleijt and Jan Luiten Zanden, "Two Worlds of Female Labour: Gender Wage Inequality in Western Europe, 1300–1800," *The Economic History Review* 74, no. 3 (2021): 611–638.
15. Margaret C. Jacob, *The Secular Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2019), 9. Economic historians have also noted the relation between Enlightenment ideals and mercantilism, see Lars Magnusson, *Mercantilism: The Shaping of an Economic Language* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 11; and Eli Heckscher, "Mercantilism," *The Later Mercantilists: Josiah Child (1603–1699) and John Locke (1632–1704)*, ed. Mark Blaug (Aldershot: E. Edgar Publication, 1991), 46.

between humankind and its natural surroundings.[16] The realisation that laws of nature governed all aspects of existence proved exhilarating for the learned men and women of the Enlightenment, greatly bolstering their confidence in human rationality. The Protestant Reformation further democratised the pursuit of knowledge among the laity, and this may be regarded as a precursor to the Enlightenment's celebration of equality, individual education, and freedom.

The transition of Europe's intellectual and cultural landscape from the medieval period to the Enlightenment provided the foundations for the Scientific and Industrial Revolutions. However, recent research has shown that Europe's scientific and cultural progress did not occur in a vacuum but was deeply embedded within its historical engagement with other civilisations. This is understandable, as the majority of ideas and innovations in a globalised world emerge through processes of cultural exchange and borrowing.[17] Unfortunately, Europe's engagement with the wider world also includes the dark legacy of imperialism and colonisation from the fifteenth century onwards, reflected in the subjugation of indigenous populations across the globe—from the Americas, following Columbus's arrival in the Bahamas in 1492, to the fall of Malacca in 1511 in Southeast Asia. This is the forgotten irony of the Enlightenment. Europe is said to have "moved away" from the darkness of the medieval period, in which freedom in all its forms was often constrained by those in power, into the Enlightenment era. Yet, when viewed from a global perspective, the Enlightenment simultaneously brought darkness to other parts of the world, as European powers denied political, religious, and cultural freedoms to the peoples of Africa, the Americas, and Asia, whom they encountered and subsequently subjugated or enslaved.

The Erasure of Indigenous Intellectual and Cultural Traditions through European Colonisation

Scholars of decolonial theory have highlighted the intertwined histories of European modernity on the one hand and subjugation and colonisation on the other. It was not only political and religious freedoms that were curtailed by the colonisers; European domination also gave rise to *epistemicide*—a term denoting the destruction of indigenous knowledge systems and cultures by colonial powers.[18] This process created a vacuum subsequently filled by European

16. Herbert Butterfield, *The Origins of Modern Science*, 1300–1800 (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1957) and Edwin Arthur Burtt, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Science* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1959), 77–78.

17. For an overview of the ways of thinking within the realm of sociology and politics in the Enlightenment period, see Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1951), 18–22.

18. James Poskett, *Horizons: The Global Origins of Modern Science* (New York: Mariner Books, 2022). See also Enrique Dussel, *Ethics of Liberation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press,

epistemic traditions and cultural paradigms. A striking example is the destruction of Aztec temples and relics by the Spanish forces led by Hernán Cortés in 1519, upon whose ruins a Spanish city was later erected. One of the accompanying conquistadors even recorded that the natives would eventually forget what the grand city of Tenochtitlan had once looked like.[19] Alongside these acts of physical devastation, the invaders also burned the codices that had preserved generations of Aztec intellectual heritage. This loss of accumulated knowledge proved far more detrimental in the long term, for it deprived the natives of the evidentiary foundation of their own intellectual and cultural achievements.

As Stuart Hall observes, our interpretation of the world depends upon systems of representation through which meaning is constructed. For people to understand concepts in a similar way, they must share a common conceptual framework and language.[20] Many postcolonial societies, having inherited the worldview and linguistic structures of their colonisers, continue to perceive the world through the same imposed lens. For instance, the phenomenon whereby the native internalises the mental framework of the coloniser—viewing his own people and culture as inferior—has been extensively analysed by postcolonial thinkers such as Frantz Fanon, Pramoedya Ananta Toer, and Syed Hussein Alatas. These scholars have observed that this condition is not confined to the works of Europeans or other Western writers; it also manifests among post-independence native intellectuals themselves. This internalisation of colonial hierarchies explains the persistence of Islamophobia, racism, and Eurocentric perspectives within non-Western societies.[21]

Eurocentrism—defined as a system that upholds European and Western perspectives as superior—remains pervasive even today, including within academic institutions. A recent instance illustrates this persistence: a researcher

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2013), 29–32, and Ramón Grosfoguel, "The Structure of Knowledge in Westernised Universities: Epistemic Racism/Sexism and the Four Genocides/Epistemicides," *Human Architecture: Journal of Sociology of Self-Knowledge* 1, no. 1 (2013): 73–90. For the contribution of African slaves to modern technology, see Jenny Bulstrode, "Black Metallurgists and the Making of the Industrial Revolution," *History and Technology* 39, no. 1 (2023): 1–41.

19. An excerpt by one of the conquistadores who accompanied Hernán Cortés, describing the grandeur of the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan, and its subsequent destruction by the Spanish forces, can be found in Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The True History of the Conquest of New Spain* (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1908), 70–75 and 99.

20. Stuart Hall, ed., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage Publications, 1997), 4.

21. Franz Fanon *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 1986) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963). Pramoedya Ananta Toer illustrates the colonised mind through the portrayal of the protagonist in his Buru Quartet, particularly in the first novel, *Bumi Manusia* (Jakarta: Lentera Dipantara, 2005). The work is translated into English as *This Earth of Mankind,* trans. Max Lane (London: Penguin Books, 1996). Syed Hussein Alatas has also written extensively on these phenomena, which he terms "intellectual imperialism" or "the captive mind." Among his writings where this is discussed is "Intellectual Imperialism: Definition, Traits and Problems," *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* 28, no. 1, (2000): 23–45.

faced considerable backlash for publishing an article which, supported by archival evidence, demonstrated that descendants of African slaves in the Caribbean could be the true pioneers of a particular innovation in ironmaking, rather than the British inventor who later patented the technique.[22] The controversy prompted the journal's editor to issue an editorial in defence of the study.[23] A similar Eurocentric attitude persists in discussions concerning Islam, despite Edward Said's *Orientalism*, published over four decades ago, having urged Western academia to approach non-Western religions and cultures with greater sensitivity and without the air of superiority reminiscent of scholarship produced at the height of colonialism.

In Malaysia and Indonesia, such attitudes can be observed in the writings of Orientalists and scholar-officers. The noted Malaysian sociologist Syed Hussein Alatas documented these tendencies among English, Dutch, and Spanish scholar-officers who wrote about the Malays, Javanese, and Filipinos under their administration.[24] To these Europeans, the natives of Southeast Asia were portrayed as inherently lazy, deceitful, and intellectually inferior to Europeans—perceptions that served to justify colonisation on the grounds that the natives were incapable of self-governance. Thomas Stamford Raffles, a British colonial official, is often remembered positively for abolishing traditional slavery in the Malay Archipelago; however, it has been argued that his motivations were economic rather than moral, as he replaced slavery with debt bondage.[25] In justifying his acquisition and colonisation of native lands, as well as forced population transfers, the abolition of slavery was frequently cited as the principal rationale. Yet, Alatas contended that Raffles's system of debt bondage was no more humane than traditional slavery and, in fact, proved even more restrictive and debilitating for the local population.[26]

Despite this evident exploitation of native labour, Raffles framed his actions in humanitarian terms and believed that the English colonial project was justified, since the natives of the archipelago were, in his view, "habitually mischievous, given to thieving, lazy, and intractable," as well as afflicted by "petty wars, backwardness, and political anarchy."[27] Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, the Dutch Orientalist and adviser to the Dutch East India Company, similarly believed that in order to bring "civilisation" to Aceh and modernise its people,

22. See footnote 19; Bulstrode, "Black Metallurgists," 1–41.
23. Amy E. Slaton and Tiago Saraiva, "Editorial," *History and Technology* 39, no. 2 (2023): 127–136.
24. Syed Hussein Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native: A Study of the Image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th Century and Its Function in the Ideology of Colonial Capitalism* (New York: Routledge, 2013).
25. Idem, *Thomas Stamford Raffles: Schemer or Reformer?* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2020), 93.
26. Ibid., 96.
27. Ibid., 28.

the influence of Islam on the local legal and political framework had to be weakened—particularly the concept of *jihād*.[28] There was a refusal to regard the Acehnese struggle as a legitimate act of resistance against foreign invasion. Instead, educated scholars such as Snouck Hurgronje perceived a hostile people animated by a violent religion that had failed to modernise and adapt to the modern world. While it was indeed the *ulama* who predominantly led anti-colonial resistance, a more sympathetic narrative would recognise Islam as a positive moral force advocating individual freedom and the equality of humankind against the subjugation of foreign powers—the very ideals celebrated by the Enlightenment thinkers themselves.

The conflation of political grievances—legitimate or otherwise—with an inherent tendency towards violence in Islam remains a recurring theme in Western foreign policy towards the Muslim world, particularly in the post-9/11 era. Snouck Hurgronje himself regarded Islam with such disdain as a civilising force that he ascribed even its cosmopolitan rituals and beliefs, such as the Hajj, to remnants of pagan Arab traditions. It is worth noting that both Raffles and Snouck Hurgronje operated after the supposed reforms in British and Dutch public policy, which had aimed to redress the horrors and atrocities perpetrated by the East India Company against colonial subjects. Yet, despite these reforms, the policies they promoted continued to perpetuate systems of oppression and violence against the peoples of the Indonesian archipelago.

This attitude was not confined to colonial officers alone but extended to their wives and other adventurous European women who travelled to the region during the colonial period.[29] Despite their own encounters with, and at times resistance against, the debilitating yoke of patriarchy, many of these women writers failed to perceive or sympathise with the oppression inflicted upon the natives by foreign powers. This, together with the examples of Raffles and Snouck Hurgronje, illustrates the deep contradictions inherent within the European Enlightenment: what is deemed positive within its intellectual and moral project applies only to a limited subset of society.

Despite these contradictions, it cannot be denied that the values championed by Enlightenment thinkers—such as liberty, equality, tolerance, the pursuit of happiness, and holistic education—remain essential in shaping a just and civilised society. From the theories and aspirations articulated by thinkers like Adam Smith, Thomas Hobbes, and David Hume, along with the *philosophes* of France, emerged the intellectual foundations that inspired European nations to form political and economic unions which have since mitigated conflicts and

28. Dietrich Jung, "Islam as a Problem: Dutch Religious Politics in the East Indies," *Review of Religious Research* 51, no. 3 (2010): 288–301.

29. Farish A. Noor, "Innocents Abroad? The Erasure of the Question of Race and Power in Contemporary Feminist and 'Nostalgic' Travelogues," *Southeast Asia Research* 5, no. 1 (1997): 57–88.

fostered continental solidarity. The precursor to the United Nations, the League of Nations, was likewise founded upon the Enlightenment ideal of perpetual peace and mutual tolerance. Similarly, the women's suffrage movement in Britain and beyond can trace its lineage to these same ideals of liberty and equality. Mary Wollstonecraft, among the earliest feminist writers to advocate for proper and equal educational opportunities for women, was profoundly influenced by the works of John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau.[30]

A closer examination of the works of Enlightenment thinkers reveals that many of the contradictions inherent in their philosophy were already perceived by the thinkers themselves. While they extolled the virtues of tolerance and equality, these principles were seldom extended to women. Wollstonecraft drew attention to this in her critique of Rousseau, censuring his call for the reform of education and the cultivation of virtue that was directed exclusively towards boys, while neglecting girls altogether.[31] The paradox of the Enlightenment, then, lies in this very inconsistency: the values it proclaimed and practised were unable to escape the deep-seated Eurocentrism and Islamophobia—or more broadly, xenophobia—pervasive within European societies. It would take the trenchant critiques and introspective analyses of non-European intellectuals such as Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, and Syed Hussein Alatas to expose both the overt and subtle condescension embedded within Enlightenment thought and its modern successors. Figures like Raffles and Snouck Hurgronje went on to establish colleges and institutes of Malay studies, endowing them with their own Eurocentric frameworks, which were presented as the objective scientific method. This, in turn, produced native scholars who studied their own traditions through a European lens. This methodological bias was later interrogated by local scholars such as Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, who questioned the presumed objectivity of European historiography and its disregard for indigenous sources—such as Muslim or Arabic genealogical records (*silsilah*) and the evolution of the Jawi language—as vital materials for reconstructing the region's history, particularly concerning the coming of Islam to the Malay Archipelago.[32] Dutch orientalists like Bertram Schrieke, for instance, rationalised events in the archipelago by centring the Christian European encounter, suggesting that competition with Christian missionaries was the primary reason for Islam's rapid expansion in the sixteenth century.[33] By contrast, through the study of royal genealogies and corroboration with tombstone inscriptions, al-

30. Elisabete M. De Sousa, "Wollstonecraft, An Enlightened Reader," in *Questioning the Oneness of Philosophy*, ed. Jose Miranda Justo, Paulo Alexandre Lima, and Fernando M. F. Silva (Lisbon: Center for Philosophy at the University of Lisbon, 2018), 157–170.

31. Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 12–13.

32. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Historical Fact and Fiction* (Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit UTM Press, 2011).

33. Ibid., 144.

Attas demonstrated that Christianity was not a significant factor for the Malay Muslims of that period and that the proliferation of Islam in the region had in fact begun much earlier, between the late seventh and tenth centuries.[34]

The works of al-Attas demonstrate not only that it is possible to produce a historical interpretation grounded in the worldview of the local Muslim Malays, but also that such an endeavour is essential in shaping the historical consciousness of the people beyond what is prescribed by European scholarship. Likewise, the values championed by Enlightenment thinkers are neither exclusive to nor unique within the Western intellectual and cultural tradition, for comparable ethical and moral frameworks have long existed within the Muslim world, though manifested differently. A woman who wears the hijab, for instance, should not be presumed to reject the principles of justice and freedom; rather, her religious worldview interprets these principles in accordance with her spiritual understanding of existence. The history of the Islamic intellectual tradition illustrates that the principles of equality in education for both men and women, as well as justice in the distribution of wealth—two values also upheld by Enlightenment thinkers such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Adam Smith—have existed not only historically but continue to thrive in contemporary Muslim societies.[35] However, such perspectives often face erasure due to the pervasive influence of the Western worldview in shaping the epistemologies of other civilisations, leaving its imprint upon formerly colonised nations long after the imperial powers have departed.

Islamophobia and Post-colonial Condition in Malaysia

The dominance of the Western worldview has inflicted profound suffering and injustices upon indigenous populations across the world through its monopoly over the definition of key concepts to the exclusion of all others. Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud observes that

> the linear and evolutionary conception of history and human progress from the Western centre would tolerate no dissenting and contesting notions from others, without these notions being either dismissed as reactionary, anti-modern, anachronistic, traditional, unreasonable, radical, anti-human, or packaged into idioms and categories that are acceptable to the dominant views and interests of the centre.[36]

34. Ibid., 145.
35. Minako Sakai and Samina Yasmeen, "Narratives of Muslim womanhood and women's agency," in *Narratives of Muslim Womanhood and Women's Agency* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 1–7.
36. Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud, *Islamization of Contemporary Knowledge and The Role of University in the Context of Dewesternization and Decolonization* (Kuala Lumpur: UTM Press, 2013).

Post-colonial theorists likewise contend that the pervasive influence of the Western framework has led to the marginalisation of alternative worldviews on the basis of their perceived incompatibility with Western rationality.[37] This presumption of irreconcilable difference, in turn, has created fertile ground for the persistence and proliferation of Islamophobia.

There are numerous definitions of Islamophobia, but Jasmin Zine, a leading scholar in Islamophobia studies, describes it as "a fear of Islam or its adherents that is translated into individual, ideological, and systemic forms of oppression."[38] Other scholars have further elaborated on its manifestations as a discriminatory practice against what is perceived as "civilisational backwardness," which is "amplified and strengthened by the constant humiliation of Muslims and the Muslim way of life in the media and social media, even within Muslim-majority countries."[39]

Zine further explains gendered Islamophobia as a specific form of discrimination directed at Muslim women, rooted in historically contextualised negative stereotypes that shape and sustain the structural conditions of domination. This form of Islamophobia often centres on "Muslim women's bodies as signifiers of difference."[40] The origins of gendered Islamophobia can be traced to feminist Orientalism, defined as "a rhetorical strategy (and a form of thought) by which a speaker or writer neutralises the threat inherent in feminist demands and renders them palatable to an audience that wishes to affirm its Occidental superiority."[41] For instance, Wollstonecraft criticised Western subjugation of women while simultaneously perpetuating Orientalist stereotypes about the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) and his teachings when she wrote:

> Books of instruction, written by men of genius, have had the same tendency as more frivolous productions; and that, in the true style of Mahometanism, they are treated as a kind of subordinate beings, and not as a part of the human species when improvable reason is allowed to be the dignified distinction which raises men above the brute creation, and puts a natural sceptre in a feeble hand.[42]

37. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks;* Edward Said, *Covering Islam: How Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (New York: Vantage House, 1997); and Syed Hussein Alatas, "Intellectual Imperialism: Definitions, Traits and Problems," *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* 28, no. 1 (2008): 23–45.
38. Jasmin Zine, "Anti-Islamophobia Education as Transformative Pedagogy: Reflections from the Educational Front Lines," *American Journal of Islam and Society* 21, no. 3 (2004): 110–119.
39. Enes Bayraklı and Farid Hafez, *Islamophobia in Muslim Majority Societies* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 5–21.
40. Ibid.
41. Joyce Zonana, "The Sultan and the Slave: Feminist Orientalism and the Structure of 'Jane Eyre'," *Signs* 18, no. 3 (1993): 592–617.
42. Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 2.

The same rhetorical strategy remains pervasive today, as evidenced in British journalist Julia Hartley-Brewer's recent outburst during an interview with Mustafa Barghouti, a Palestinian politician, on *TalkTV*. In the exchange, Barghouti criticised Netanyahu for Israel's war on Gaza, which Hartley-Brewer defended as Israel's legitimate response to the reported attacks by Hamas.[43] While political discourse often involves moments of intensity—particularly concerning such a deeply polarising issue—Hartley-Brewer departed from the bounds of civil debate by resorting to overtly racist and Islamophobic remarks. She repeatedly interrupted her guest, and when Barghouti calmly attempted to articulate his position, she raised her voice and exclaimed: "Oh my God. For the love of God, let me finish a sentence, man. Maybe you are not used to women talking, I do not know, but I would like to finish a sentence."[44] Implicit in her exasperation is the presumption that Barghouti's interruptions stem from an ingrained misogyny and patriarchal disposition, themselves imagined as products of his "unenlightened" Arab culture. Hartley-Brewer's reaction epitomises a deeply embedded feminist Orientalist mindset—one that constructs Muslim women as submissive and servile beings oppressed by their supposedly barbaric men.

There is a prevailing assumption that Islamophobia is most prevalent in Western societies where Muslims constitute a minority. However, Islamophobic tendencies also persist within Muslim-majority countries, although this remains a neglected area of scholarly inquiry. The significance of this article lies in its examination of the phenomenon of Islamophobia in Malaysia, as manifested through media representations—particularly of Muslim women. Many English-language media outlets in Malaysia reproduce Orientalist narratives, a tendency that may be traced to the nation's colonial history under British rule. Syed Hussein Alatas observed that Malaysians, like other formerly colonised peoples, suffer from various post-colonial effects, among them intellectual imperialism, which he defined as "the monopoly of, and dominance in, the affairs of science and wisdom."[45] This observation is supported by our findings, which reveal that media portrayals of Muslim women in majority-Muslim Malaysia often reflect the same sentiments and biases found in Western discourse.

Representation of Muslim Women in Majority-Muslim Malaysia

The representation of Muslims and Islam in global media has increased exponentially since the September 11 attacks in 2001.[46] Unfortunately, the

43. "British Journalist Slammed for 'Racist' Interview with Palestinian Politician," *Arab News*, 7 January 2024, https://www.arabnews.com/node/2437396/media.
44. Ibid.
45. Alatas, *Intellectual Imperialism*, 26.
46. Kerry Moore, Paul Mason, and Justin Matthew Wren Lewis, *Images of Islam in the UK: The*

repetitive and unoriginal narratives surrounding Muslims that originate from the West have been uncritically echoed across the world. Although Malaysia attained independence from British colonial rule on 31 August 1957, media discourses concerning Muslim women continue to display striking similarities to those prevalent in the Western world.[47] This tendency is evident in *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini*'s portrayals of Islamisation. The term Islamisation has undoubtedly become contentious, as supported by a study conducted by Murni Wan Mohd Nor et al., which found that media narratives surrounding Islamisation are generally negative.[48]

Loss of Agency

It is observed that articles critiquing the government's Islamisation policy frequently referred to the position of Muslim women. Dominant narratives often centred on the practice of wearing the headscarf, associating it with the suppression of women's intellect, the restriction of fundamental freedoms, and perceived subjugation—frequently drawing comparisons between Malaysian Muslim women and their Afghan, Iranian, and Saudi counterparts living under "repressive" regimes. For instance, *Malaysiakini* published an article ostensibly critiquing the Malaysian education system, yet the headline itself—"Who Is at Fault for the Malay Schools Problem?"—betrayed the writer's disdain towards a particular ethnic group.[49] Rather than focusing on the weaknesses of existing educational policies, the article heavily criticised the dress code of Malaysian Muslim girls, asserting that "Malay girls in school are brainwashed and strongly encouraged to wear the *tudung*." Although the writer conceded that the tudung (Malay term for headscarf) is encouraged rather than imposed, the autonomy of Malay—and by extension, Muslim—girls in choosing to wear it was entirely denied. The criticism extended beyond education to claim that "some independent-minded women have been 'tudungnised.'" This narrative is repeatedly echoed across numerous media outlets. Although it is widely acknowledged that the Federal Government maintains a policy of non-compulsion regarding the wearing of the headscarf, one writer in *Free Malaysia*

Representation of British Muslims in the National Print News Media 2000–2008 (Cardiff: Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, 2008), 40–65.

47. Murni Wan Mohd Nor and Peter Gale, "Growing Fear of Islamization: Representation of Online Media in Malaysia," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 41, no. 1 (2021): 17–33.

48. Murni Wan Mohd Nor et al., "Perceptions of Reporting on Islamization by Malaysia's Popular Alternative Media: An Accurate Representation?" *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 42, no. 2 (2022): 1–16.

49. "Who Is at Fault for the 'Malay Schools' Problem?" *Malaysiakini*, 18 March 2016, https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/334283.

Today dismissed the voluntary nature of Muslim women's choice, asserting that "social pressure has made them wear it anyway."[50]

It is worth noting that even in articles that do not explicitly employ negative stereotypes and attempt to present both sides of an issue—such as "Being Consistent on Religious Issues that Matter"—the accompanying image chosen by the news portal is, predictably, that of a Muslim woman in hijab.[51] This tendency persists even in articles unrelated to the subject of the hijab. For instance, in a letter from a reader using the moniker 'The Rational Orangutan' published in *Malaysiakini*, which discusses so-called "Islamic radicalism," the image featured depicts school-going Muslim girls wearing the hijab, their hands clasped in prayer.[52] The use of such imagery in articles addressing radicalism—particularly when Islamophobic tropes are invoked—may implicitly suggest to readers that the hijab is emblematic of radicalism. This reveals that the media's preoccupation with the veiled Muslim woman and her supposed oppression is not only entrenched in Western discourse but also discernible within Malaysian media narratives.

Oppressive and Mysogynistic Muslim Society

These narratives surrounding Muslim women are strikingly similar to findings reported in numerous studies, which identify recurring themes in Western media—all of which tend to centre on the veil as the ultimate symbol of subjugation. This tendency is exemplified in an article published by *The Star Online,* which argues for the separation of religion from the State.[53] The writer employed strong, emotive language and sweeping generalisations, claiming that "Malay-Muslims in the country became obsessed with rituals and other humanistic aspects of religion were discarded."[54] He further cited the hijab as evidence of the adverse effects of Islamisation.[55] Other *The Star Online* articles similarly propagated negative generalisations about Muslim society, with statements such as "so religiously judgmental that the sight of a woman without head-cover is practically blasphemous," and "Malay society is insular

50. Jason Thomas, "Peer Pressure Makes Tudungs the Norm in Schools," *Free Malaysia Today*, 9 February 2021, https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2021/02/09/peer-pressure-makes-tudungs-the-norm-in-schools/.
51. Nathaniel Tan, "Being Consistent on Religious Issues That Matter," *Malaysiakini*, 14 November 2017, https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/401932.
52. The Rational Orangutan, "The Need to Talk about Islamism in Malaysia," *Malaysiakini*, 4 November 2017, https://www.malaysiakini.com/letters/400742.
53. Ahmad Mustapha Hassan, "When State and Religion Were Separate," *The Star*, 26 February 2016, https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2016/02/26/when-state-and-religion-were-separate-during-the-early-days-of-independence-faith-was-a-private-matt .
54. Ibid.
55. Ibid.

and superstitious and cannot compete in the modern world."[56] In a separate article published by *Malaysiakini*, the writer liberally employed derogatory labels to describe religious Muslims and religious institutions, implying that pious individuals seek to control and oppress women: "The religious men are desperate to control her, and turn her into a stay-at-home mum and a breeding machine."[57] Another article warned of the erosion of fundamental liberties through statements such as, "Today, it is the tudung, but tomorrow, you may find that Muslim women will be forced to give up another hard-won liberty, like going to work, having an education, or driving a car."[58]

Interestingly, the names of the writers of the *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini* articles suggest that they are Muslims. Such unfavourable representations of Muslim women by both Muslim and non-Muslim writers have become increasingly commonplace within Malaysian media today, mirroring the prevalent stereotypes of Muslim women in Western discourse. This tendency is echoed in Carland's study on Muslim women's roles in countering Islamophobia in Australia, in which one informant observed,

> There are so many misconceptions about [Muslim] women, and just, sadly, that can be a huge blockage for people to understand and appreciate Islam... The fact that they think they're oppressed, that they're looked down on, they don't have any rights. Honestly, I would say at least 90% of non-Muslims think that Muslim women are disadvantaged or oppressed.[59]

The experiences of Muslim women struggling to be understood and appreciated in Australia are, in many ways, similar to the challenges faced by Muslim women in Malaysia—highlighting the persistence of Islamophobia even within Muslim-majority contexts.

Conclusion

This article has explored the limitations of the Western secular worldview, which has long been regarded as the "superior" framework in comparison with those practised by other communities, thereby disregarding their value and knowledge

56. Siti Kasim, "The Real Malay Dilemma," *The Star*, 26 August 2018, https://www.thestar.com.my/opinion/columnists/siti-kasim-thots/2018/08/26/the-real-malay-dilemma-the-issue-is-whether-any-of-the-malay-leadership-would-be-willing-to-change-i/.
57. Mariam Mokhtar, "A Symbol of Liberation or Subjugation?" *Malaysiakini*, 19 December 2016, https://www.malaysiakini.com/columns/366532.
58. Ibid.
59. Susan Carland, "'We're Islam in Their Eyes': Using an Interpellation Framework to Understand Why Being a Woman Matters When Countering Islamophobia," *Religions* 14, no. 5 (2023): 654.

systems altogether.[60] Numerous problems arise when only Western conceptions are employed to define what constitutes the "right" epistemology, modernity, and progress, as well as to determine—often arbitrarily—the future of all peoples. Orientalist discourse, for instance, has profoundly influenced media narratives that portray Muslim women as pitiable, brainwashed individuals in need of liberation from the constraints of an oppressive "Islamic" society. This is reflected in our findings, which reveal that negative media representations of Muslim women in Malaysia often focus on (1) the loss of their agency and (2) the perceived misogyny and oppression within their societies.

We fully support the pursuit of gender justice, which we believe can be realised through a harmonious balance between knowledge and action—each directed towards placing things in their proper places.[61] We also do not deny that misogyny and oppression may exist within Muslim societies, just as they do in others, including those of the West. However, the problem of misogyny and oppression in Muslim contexts is too often attributed to Islam and its adherents, whereas other communities and their respective faiths are rarely portrayed in such stereotypical terms. Moreover, an excessive focus on negative portrayals of Muslim women may give rise to a form of Islamophobia that specifically targets the female gender. This phenomenon mirrors the experiences of Muslim women in countries such as Australia, the United Kingdom, Western Europe, and the United States. Through Carland's interviews with thirty-one Muslim women across Australia, she observed that her informants reported being negatively represented, noting that "they are not seen as individual and diverse subjects but as a cypher, an archetypal representative that embodies Islamophobic stereotypes."[62]

The gendered epistemology imposed to define Muslim women without adequately understanding them has resulted in the erasure of nuance within diverse systems of knowledge and the deprivation of meaning for the population concerned.[63] The danger of such a framework lies in its potential to silence the voices of Muslim women who have chosen the middle ground—those who do not conform neatly to Western-centric feminist ideals nor to "Islamic" conservatism.[64] Spivak is among the many scholars who have argued against the universal application of feminist orientalist ideals. She observed that when

60. Budd L. Hall and Rajesh Tandon, "Decolonization of Knowledge, Epistemicide, Participatory Research and Higher Education," *Research for All* 1, no. 1 (2017): 6–19.

61. Al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islām: An Exposition of the Fundamental Elements of the Worldview of Islām* (Kuala Lumpur: UTM Press, 2014), 33.

62. Carland, "'We're Islam in Their Eyes'," 654.

63. Farhana Rahman, "The Merits and Limits of a Gendered Epistemology: Muslim Women and the Politics of Knowledge Production," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 19, no. 1 (2018): 20–33.

64. Nadiah Ridzuan, "Women, Islam and feminism in postcolonial Malaysia and Singapore," Master's thesis, National University of Singapore, 2011.

the history, culture, struggles, and unique conditions of women in third-world countries are disregarded, the consequence is often the silencing of these women by replacing their lived experiences with Western feminist constructions of "what should be."[65] Moreover, what is perhaps absent from many intersectional feminist critiques, including Spivak's, is the recognition of religion as a lived reality for Muslim women, wherein the spiritual lens and the Islamic tradition serve as essential frameworks through which they navigate their lives.

It is certainly well-acknowledged that feminist discourse in both the West and Malaysia may be well-intentioned in its advocacy for women's rights. However, adopting a narrow approach can prove counterproductive to the feminist movement, particularly when it operates on assumptions such as the perceived need to emancipate women from "religious conservatism," wherein Islam is frequently portrayed as the problem. Such an approach may further exacerbate discrimination against Muslim women, who already endure considerable scrutiny and social marginalisation for being both Muslim and perceived as belonging to the "weaker" sex. In this regard, it is necessary to offer a more accurate representation of Muslim women, one that recognises their position in relation to a fundamental aspect of their identity—their Islamic faith. To achieve this, caution must be exercised against employing a dominant secular worldview in interpreting the realities of Muslim women, so that they may be represented with justice. When the intricate intersections of religion, culture, and gender are duly considered, a more just and equitable portrayal of Muslim women may emerge—one that respects their agency and the diversity of their lived experiences. In so doing, we move towards a more inclusive and empathetic discourse that seeks genuinely to understand and embrace the complexities of Muslim women's lives across the world.

65. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg* (London: Macmillan, 1988), 271–313.

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