
THE ROUTLEDGE COMPANION TO GENDER AND AFFECT

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Chapter 34

AFFECTIVE WITNESSING OF THE HIJAB

A Self-Inflicted Trauma

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Mona Abdel-Fadil

Infusing the Hijab with Affect

The hijab has been infused with affect for centuries on end. It is the perfect example of what Sara Ahmed calls a “sticky object” (2004, 89) through which affects move. Infused with desire, hijab has fueled orientalist fantasies of female harems and excited the (heteronormative) male gaze with the eroticized promise of the bodies that are “behind the veil.” Later, the hijab came to be imbued with disdain. In colonial discourse, hijab was perceived as backward, oppressive to women, and an obstacle to modernity and progress. It became “the white man’s burden” to “save” brown women. Ironically the very man at the forefront of “saving” Egyptian women from the alleged oppression of hijab was the president of *The National League Opposing Women’s Suffrage* in England (Ahmed 1993, 152–53). Suffice it to say, Lord Cromer’s engagement with gender equality was stunted at best. Decades later, emotional pleas to save the plight of women from hijab and backwardness, echoing colonial powers, were utilized, to back military invasions and wars in Afghanistan and elsewhere (Abu Lughod 2013, 46–47). These orientalist and colonial obsessions with hijab as a means of “saving” Muslim and/or brown women resurface in popular culture in Hollywood movies, in Disney productions, and through the massive production of books with titles like, “Behind the veil” (ibid.; Shaheen 2012). Berit Thorbjørnsrud (2005) brands them “the-truth-about-the-dreadful-life-behind-the-veil-books” and demonstrates how the genre both recycles orientalism and fabricates “truth.”

In contemporary Western Europe, hijab is no longer only a feature of the social imaginaries of a mythical far-away “Islamland” of deserts and female oppression (Abu Lughod 2013, 68–73.). Following the diversification of Western societies, the hijab is now visible up close. And its mere sighting is intensely emotionally triggering to certain social actors. Hijab is a sticky object so saturated with affect that scores of people rush to their keyboards to protest its mere sighting on their screens or streets. Frazzled, outraged, and provoked by the very existence of hijab in public space. Emotions run high and are continuously heightened and intensified. Antagonistic and highly emotional comments followed when Nadiya Husain, a hijab-adorning contestant participated and eventually won *The Great British Bake Off* in 2015. A near identical scenario unfolded in a Norwegian TV-cooking contest in 2019. Hell broke loose on social media in both cases. A similar outrage ensued in 2018 when 6,000

complaints were filed to the Norwegian Public Service vehemently protesting the broadcasting of a TV documentary about Faten Mahdi Al-Hussain, a hijabi woman, who is about to decide whom to vote for in the parliamentary elections. The harangue of protests ticked in long before the show had even aired.

What is it about the hijab, or more specifically, about the affects that move through the hijab that makes its mere sighting so intolerable? And, how do these “affects of awayness” tie into the affective appeal to save Muslim and brown women? In this chapter, I shall address these questions by zooming in on the emotional triggering processes and the ways in which certain social actors perform their affect and direct collectives away from the hijab, in a self-styled act of self-preservation. While this essay is largely conceptual, it is nonetheless empirically grounded in my extensive ethnographic study of the affective performance of anti-Muslim narratives in social media. Before turning to an analysis of the ways in which affects of awayness move through the hijab, I will briefly summarize my approach to affect.

Decolonizing Affect Theory

Emotions are political in the sense that they fuel everyday politics, and macro-politics.

My approach to affect is shaped by my training in anthropology, feminist scholarship, and counseling. I also draw on the embodied experience of inhabiting a body of mixed ethnicities which in and of itself triggers affective reactions to my very existence. In addition, my academic research in the field of media, religion, and culture also shapes my understanding of affect. Following in the footsteps of feminist, queer, and postcolonial scholars (Abu-Lughod 1986; Ahmed 2004; Lutz & White 1986; Rosaldo 1984), I do not operate with a clear distinction between affect and emotions. An increasing number of scholars discuss the benefits of merging scholarship on affect and emotion—myself included (Abdel-Fadil 2019; Boler & Davis 2018; Pedwell & Whitehead 2012; Reeser & Gottzén 2018; Skoggard & Waterston 2015). I value the attention to detail in the decades of distinguishing between different emotions, and what “they do” in scholarship on emotion (Ahmed 2004). Firmly footed in Sara Ahmed’s theorization of the politics of emotion, I have continued to develop my analysis of affect based on “the stickiness of objects.” And much like Pedwell & Whitehead (2012, 123–24), I do not see this stickiness as randomly attaching itself to objects. Rather, affects stick to certain types of objects and subjects and are often gendered and racialized. I am particularly interested in the performance of affect in social media and the process of triggering *others* into affective states, to bind or divide collectives—what I call “the politics of affect” (Abdel-Fadil 2019). The politics of affect framework sets up a roadmap for how to pay attention to *which* emotions are in motion, their directionality, intensity and, *for* whom affect is performed. Consequently, my own theorizing on affect has centered on paying greater attention to how emotions move through sticky objects signaling “awayness” or “towardness.” I am particularly interested in the way in which the intensification and heightening of emotion leads to “affective truths,” blind spots and “truthisms.” Intentional emotional triggers and “political orchestration” direct collectives away or toward sticky object and subjects. Affect binds and divides collectives and has a performative component. Therefore, we must consider who the imagined audiences are, and what the various affects in motion are set out to “do.” Here, I continue to theorize affect, following in Sara Ahmed’s footsteps, focusing on how affects of awayness move through the hijab.

Metanarratives of Awayness: Targeting Muslim Men Via Muslim Women

Negative affects travel through hijab in an attempt to stir up antipathies toward Muslims.

Such narratives about hijab are constructed to trigger strong antipathies, intensify emotional engagement and reproduce and sanctify the idea that there are insurmountable cultural differences between “us” and “the Muslim other.” The strong emotions that travel through the hijab signal underpinning antipathies toward both Muslim women and Muslim men, who are considered the oppressed, and the oppressors, respectively. The emotions that move through the hijab in these metanarratives trigger pitying Muslim women and loathing Muslim men, among other affects. As Lila Abu-Lughod (2013) has demonstrated, the quest to “save Muslim women” has colonial roots but is now framed within a human rights discourse. Muslim women’s freedom is envisioned as being at the mercy of a relentless religion with Muslim men as custodians.

The hijab is held to hold Muslim women to archaic and barbaric gender roles. Muslim men are perceived as the ones who force women to veil. When Muslim women challenge this notion, they are deemed as not fully understanding the chackles of the hijab. Often the claim is that Muslim women are unaware of how they have been brainwashed into believing and feeling that wearing the hijab was “their choice.” This dismissal of Muslim women’s agency is particularly interesting when combined with the fact that these social actors’ affective engagement with the hijab allegedly started as part of their attempts to “save Muslim women” (ibid.). Against that backdrop, rendering Muslim women’s own thoughts and feelings utterly irrelevant is bewildering at best. Perhaps Muslim women aren’t the ones who need to be salvaged after all?

The Stickiness of Emblematic Symbols and Triggering “Religious Emotion”

The obsessive focus on hijab-I venture—has to do with its stickiness, but it also has to do with its emblematic symbolism (Abdel-Fadil & Liebmann 2018, 290–92; Lövheim & Lied 2018, 68). Emblematic symbols are in effect sticky objects that come to stand for something or someone, for example: a religion, a people, a nation, or an ideology. The hijab is an example of a sticky object associated with Islam. Emotions of towardness such as love, pride, comfort, and happiness, can move through the hijab with a variety of intensities, depending on the feeler’s attachment to both Islam and the hijab. Yet, for those segments of society that hammer furiously on their keyboard at the mere sighting of the hijab, it is an entirely different set of affects that move through it. Emotions signaling awyness such as outrage, anger, indignation, provocation, and sadness flare up and move through the hijab. And the hijab is likely to be imbued with intensified emotion that directs others away from it. The hijab is well-suited to flare up emotions and anti-Islamic sentiment both due to its stickiness and emblematic status. In a sense, the hijab is an example of an object so sticky that it can immediately trigger an emotional intensity akin to “religious emotion” (Peterson 2012; Riis & Woodhead, 2012).

Certain sticky objects are so saturated with affect that they are perceived as to live or die for. “Caring deeply” to borrow from Baumgartner (2013, 59–60) signals a strong affective attachment to an object. Religious emotion is social, in that it is intensified by collectives of people who either share the sentiment or the intensity of *feeling one’s way* into politics. Religious emotion is also invariably *about* something or someone.

It is important to note that caring deeply is not just about affection, it is also about strong antipathies. It is the intensity of affect that betrays religious emotion toward or away from an object. The stickier the object, the more likely it is to trigger religious emotion. Hijab is an example of an object so saturated with affect that it can be perceived as to live or die for. When social actors are part of a collective where affects are constantly heightened and intensified—signaling aversion, anger, loathing, fear, indignation, sorrow, and other feelings

of awayness—an eruption is bound to happen. These affects move through the hijab but are simultaneously suspended “in tension” (Ahmed 2004, 10). When emotions vibrate with tension, they can be intensified and heightened to the point where the mere witnessing of a hijab is experienced as a symbolic death. To those invested in this worldview, it provides the moral justification for turning *against* the hijab and Muslims in a desperate attempt to “save oneself” from a perceived threat of demise. This perception of the threat is crucial. It is a defining element of all their affective output.

Politically Orchestrating Affective Publics Away from the Hijab

Social media users throw out emotive cues and triggers directed at specific audiences real or imagined, with the goal of driving the debates about hijab and Islam in a hostile direction. The extensive use of emotional cues and trigger themes serves to strengthen the intensification of religious emotion away from the hijab. Sticky objects such as the hijab are easily instrumentalized and twinned with identity politics to spark strong emotions, with the intent of intensifying and heightening emotions. The performance of affect serves to trigger like-minded people into a heightened state of affect and increases the emotional stakes. In a sense watching others’ public display of suffering due to the sighting of a hijab is as affectively triggering as the hijab itself. Thus, such performances of affect trigger collectives and direct strong antipathies at the hijab, Muslims, and Islam. Within such collectives, conspiracy theories, fabrications, and post-truths intermingle and serve to strengthen the emotional tension, and swell up the intensity of emotion. These processes of affectively triggering others, serve as examples of what Berlant calls “politically orchestrated collective emotion” (Berlant & Greenwald 2012, 72).

The stronger the emotional intensity, the more likely that individuals and collectives will buy into the metanarrative. Dialing up the affective engagement with the hijab to the level of religious emotion or caring deeply is the goal. The more people who are triggered into action and heightened emotion or religious emotion, the easier it is to ignite and direct them away from a sticky object like the hijab, or to intensify their affects. Intensified emotion connects and binds people together in heightened, collective affect. Thus, the swelling of emotions and the mobilization of intensified affects signaling awayness from hijab is not coincidental, it is intentional and politically orchestrated.

Existential Anxieties and “Truthiness”

A number of the affects that move through the hijab betray the existential anxieties of a Muslim takeover that will render Christians obsolete or at best irrelevant. Thus, affects (such as fear, distress, hatred, outrage, indignation, sorrow, and disdain for the Muslim other) may move through the hijab. Moreover, these affects are intermingled with existential anxieties of a loss of self, which feed into a nostalgic social imaginary of Christian heritage, which must be preserved. And, there is a sense of urgency. One must act before it is too late. The fact that this sense of urgency has lasted for decades (as has the looming threat of the implementation of sharia in Europe) is ignored. Or perhaps, more accurately, time is affectively experienced. The performativity of affect is always firmly placed in the present, and the worst-case-scenarios are ever impending.

One thing that many researchers have grappled with is how to make sense of collectives embracing “fabricated truths,” as if they were true. My own empirical and theoretical engagement with this issue suggests that debunking myths is very difficult once actors have immersed themselves into a bubble of heightened and intensified affect. While actors may be repeatedly

exposed to both counter-narratives and attempts at myth-debunking, these do not stick. In fact, they appear to slide right off. Heightened and intensified affective responses to a sticky object thus prevails as the main mode de operandi irrespective of attempts to debunk myths. By withstanding counternarratives their affective state remains unaltered, and vice versa. In a sense, they are in so deep that there seems to be nowhere else to go. The bubble of imagined reality stays intact, and represents what Brian Massumi (2010) calls an “affective fact”:

Whether the danger was existent or not, the menace was felt in the form of fear. What is not actually real can be felt into being. Threat does have an actual mode of existence: fear, as foreshadowing. Threat has an impending reality in the present. This actual reality is affective.

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As Massumi argues, people can experience a threat as affectively real. Applied to this example, social actors' with heightened emotional reaction sense that the hijab poses a threat. Using Massumi's concept, an impending Muslim-takeover is an “affective truth.” The feelings that are triggered spring from being in an emotional state of this being a real impending reality, a reality that is interpreted as catastrophic. No amount of debunking will debase affective realities. The affective reality of a looming Muslim takeover serves to divide collectives, and triggers intensified feelings of fear, anger, uproar, exasperation, and indignation, to name a few.

It is against that backdrop that the hijab as society's demise has a certain “truthiness” to it (Boler & Davis 2018, 275). Truthiness, a term originally coined by satirist Stephen Colbert was used to demonstrate, the sentiment of: if it *rings* true, it is true (ibid.). To those who are already affectively mobilized away from the hijab, the threat of hijab is *experienced as real*. And the heightened affective response is a direct consequence of this truthiness. Against this backdrop, it does not matter that perceiving the hijab as an overarching threat is the result of *imagined scenarios*. The intensified affective states are in response to envisioning such scenarios as real. Affective truths are thus key to understanding how emotions can continue to swell and intensify, long after a myth has been debunked or challenged.

Social actors are unable to temper their feelings once they are intensified and heightened. When social actors are fully immersed in an affective reality, attempts at debunking myths that burst their affective bubble seem futile. Instead, emotions are in tension and inch closer to an eruption. Immersion is key. When fully immersed in this balloon of intensified affects of awayness, very little else seeps in. By zooming in on the sticky object and the affects it triggers, it is as if nothing else matters. Thus, exposure to counter-narratives do not stick nor do they burst the bubble of intensified affects. Intriguingly, counter-narratives can have the opposite effect, triggering social actors all the more.

An emotional outburst is triggered when the hijab is not imbued with the appropriate affective response and level of disdain and awayness. Then, feelings intensify, and attempts to emotionally trigger others multiply. Caring deeply about the hijab leads to intensified religious emotion and makes for an affective performance of awayness. Caring deeply is what gives vibrant life to an affective performance of awayness from the hijab. And the stronger the emotional investment, the more intense the antipathies. Caring very intensely about the hijab (or any sticky object), is entwined with certain vulnerabilities (Abdel-Fadil 2019, building on Lagerkvist 2017). Still, I do not intend to argue that these all-encapsulating hijab-antipathies are *warranted*. Rather, I wish to shed light on how this sensation of a symbolic death comes into being, and how it is to a large extent, self-ignited.

Affective Witnessing and Self-Inflicted Suffering

A glimpse of a hijab is enough to trigger and provoke an avalanche of affects in certain communities. The concept “affective witnessing” attempts to grasp the intricate affective dynamics that arise. I use this term to demonstrate how the mere act of watching and witnessing the hijab is in and of itself affectively triggering. “Relational affective witnessing” to borrow from Richardson & Schankweiler (2020) signals that witnessing each other’s affective state, heightens the stakes, and increase the emotional intensity of the affective witnessing of the hijab. It also signals an affective witnessing community’s attachment to certain ethical or moralistic or normative standpoints: such as the hijab-wearing being immoral or an unethical practice or simply an atrocity toward women (Boler & Davis 2018). An affective witnessing community is formed when the hijab witnessing triggers the same set of emotions. It also pinpoints the inter-relational aspects of affective witnessing. As eloquently put by Richardson & Schankweiler (2020, 247): “Affective witnessing is tied to affective politics: affective witnessing finds fertile ground in epistemic communities in which shared feeling takes precedence of agreed facts.” As is the case with hijab, certain affective truths lay the groundwork for the further eruption of emotions and serve to bind social actors together in an affective witnessing community that deems witnessing the hijab a traumatic experience.

At the level of the individual, the affective witnessing is experienced as an unbearable burst of affect against the hijab, for which an eruption of emotion is the only outlet. Yet, the eruption is in a sense continuous and contagious. Thus, rather than function as an emotional release, it serves as a triggering mechanism that heightens and intensifies the eruption of affects and pulls other social actors into a heightened emotional state of awayness from the hijab. This self-triggering functions as a ritualized cycle of self-harm, which exasperates rather than numbs the sensations. And much like other forms of self-harm, there may be an addictive aspect to self-induced affective witnessing of the hijab. Lamenting about the perils of the hijab is experienced as a matter of life or death. At the same time, the affective witnessing of the hijab is experienced so intensely as a form of suffering, and a loss of one’s footing, which may *feel* like a symbolic death.

In such communities, affective witnessing of the hijab, particularly on national TV, is perceived as an unbearable form of suffering. It is likened to witnessing one’s nation’s demise. Muslims, national broadcasters, and politicians are perceived as those to blame for this trauma and bruised sense of self and nationhood. I, on the other hand, view this process of suffering as self-inflicted trauma. It is also a performance of affect, which includes the heightening and intensification of affects such as anger, frustration, sadness, fear, outrage, indignation, and an attempt to trigger similar affective responses—and suffering—in others. Thus, the trauma of affective witnessing the hijab is self-inflicted at both the level of the individual and the collective. Individuals ignite the trauma not only within themselves, but also within others, as an invitation to a shared, collective self-inflicted suffering. In this sense, the trauma binds a collective while also dividing and drawing a boundary with “the Muslim other.” The affective witnessing community strengthens their internal affective bond, while simultaneously setting up an affective barricade against Muslims, and anyone willing to speak in favor of, or even neutrally, about the hijab. How, then, does affective witnessing of the hijab translate into “saving” Muslim women—if at all?

Refashioned White Saviors?

Suffering the dire consequences of the hijab appears to come in many shapes and forms.

While the initial affective arguments against hijab may have started out as a more classic “white savior complex” of wishing to “save” Muslim women from Muslim men. Through

affective witnessing, it becomes evident that perhaps the *real* victims of the hijab aren't Muslim women, after all.

Within these affective witnessing communities, Muslim women may still be perceived as victims and Muslim men as the perpetrators of the symbolic violence of hijab. Still, the *real* tragedy and emotional burden of hijab are for those who must witness it. Thus, the affective focus shifts and the affects that move through the hijab trigger “the real victims” who have to bear witness to hijab. Building on Pedwell's (2012) understanding of “neoliberal empathy,” Muslim women who wear the hijab are fixed in time and space as “the distant Muslim other,” as voiceless victims of gender oppression. In consequence, hijab's oppression is dictated by Islam (construed as an oppressive religion) and enforced by Muslim men (the custodians of said oppression). Thus, the conceptualization of the distant Muslim other, echoes orientalist fantasies, of the oppressed, silenced women—who are ruled by a backward and oppressive religion—and the erratic men who facilitate Muslim women's oppression by enforcing the hijab. But rather than “feel for” the “distant Muslim other,” the affective witnesses feel for *themselves*. In consequence, Muslim women ought not to wear the hijab, not so much to “save Muslim women,” but to save their white saviors from the self-triggering and self-inflicted trauma of affective witnessing of the hijab. Thus, the *real* victims are the affective witnessing communities who have to bear witness to the hijab, here and now.

Conclusion: Affective Witnessing as Self-Harm

The mere mention of a word or sticky object can be a powerful emotional trigger and bring the onset of an avalanche of affects that either divide or bind collectives. This essay builds on my theoretical framework of “the politics of affect” (Abdel-Fadil 2019), which equips scholars with a roadmap of how to observe and analyze the intricate ways in which affects fuel and shape polemic debates. Acknowledging that affect is performed *for* someone and paying attention to *who* the imagined audience is, is key to understanding the role of affect. We must also pay greater attention to how affects can be intensified, heightened, and intentionally directed toward or away from sticky objects. In certain contexts, affective witnessing, can function as a self-inflicted trauma, in which individuals or collectives are perpetually stuck in a cycle of intensified and heightened emotion.

Understanding the complexity of the politics of affect and the role affective witnessing can play as a form of self-harm is particularly important in the present moment in which there are many global polemic discourses on pandemics, wars, religion, populism, and national politics. It only takes a word or a gaze to set emotions ablaze. Often, truthiness overshadows truth. Yet, researchers have struggled to make sense of this. The politics of affect framework is one way of gaining a greater understanding of how that which is untrue *feels* so real, and how fabricated truths gain a hold on collectives. Further studies that build on this framework and approach will take us closer to understanding how to successfully move collectives beyond affective truths.

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