

## The Burden of Demonization: Muslim American Youth on the Marginalization Spectrum

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Muslim American students navigate educational spaces at a time when the 2016 Presidential Election has unleashed a rhetoric that is riddled with Islamophobia. Institutionalized oppression against Muslims ranges from microaggressions, microassaults, and microinvalidations to outright violence and blatant bigotry (Bonet 2011; Sue 2010). Being born or growing up in a country that seeks to avoid, ignore, invalidate, and demonize one's experiential narrative is akin to being shunned to a life of invisibility or consistent apologetics (Shields 2004; Sirin and Fine 2008).

Criminalized for the crimes of others, Muslim youth face repercussions in a society where they are consistently judged for not being American enough if the label of religion is tagged to them. Carrying the burden of guilt by association when acts of terror are perpetrated, these youth face experiences that are particular to their demographic. Suarez-Orozco argues that regardless of their differences based on language, culture, ethnic origin, etc., Muslim American youth are bracketed as “designated Others” due to their religious identity and made “targets of reflexive hatred” by the mainstream (Suarez-Orozco, as quoted in Sirin & Fine 2008, xiii). According to Sirin and Fine (2008), in the post 9/11 context, the “two cultural identities, “Muslim” and “American” were reinvented” (11). In light of the attacks on the Twin Towers, the possible multiplicity of identities for Muslim Americans was not only questioned but also sabotaged as they were demonized for their religious association. Each time there is a mass shooting or terrorist attack, the immediate concern of Muslim Americans is not where and how it occurred, but an internal plea that it's not a Muslim who perpetrated it, as that translates itself into a blanket demonization of everyone with that religious association.

Muslim American youth today continue to face a dilemma of twoness similar to that which Du Bois (1903) explicated more than a century ago in his discourse on race and national identity. This was a dilemma where being Black and being American were antithetical to each other and thus demanded a continuous effort on the part of the marginalized demographic to consistently prove how these two aspects of identity could be present in any one individual. The Muslim American experience similarly involves practicing a hyphenated identity that questions the legitimacy of nationality because of the religious guilt by association attached to it (McCloud 2010). How one can be truly American if they are Muslim as well is a question that faces this demographic because of the presumed exclusivity of these two titles.

The greater irony lies in a double marginalization that exists for Muslim American youth, as not only are they not considered American enough by the mainstream, but they are also just as often not considered Muslim enough within their own communities. Providing a space for recognizing the demonization that Muslim American youth experience as their lived reality is of paramount

importance, because on a spectrum of invalidation, this definition of terrorism tagged onto youth has perpetual ramifications. Carrying these burdens since birth of “guilt by association” is no easy task.

Muslim American students often find themselves in the perpetuated practice of being invalidated by others, or engaging in a self-invalidation by considering their own lived reality to be insignificant or irrelevant to the mainstream. For educators and mentors who work in settings where Muslim American students are present, the first step must always be one of recognizing and acknowledging their presence as it stands. It becomes equally important to check for explicit and implicit bias and stereotypical views that one may hold of Muslim American lived experiences. Muslim American youth are not a monolith and must therefore be allowed a space for expression without assumptions. In all my work with Muslim American youth, I cannot recount how often Muslim women are perceived to be oppressed, are expected to be used to being dismissed, and are reminded that this is America and therefore they need not be afraid. It is found surprising when they speak “without an accent,” or have an intelligent opinion, or do science, or play sports, or know popular culture. Microaggressions like these and blatant demonization of this demographic urges us to create safe spaces for Muslim American youth to just be themselves.

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