

Muslims at the Australian periphery

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Abstract: The overt expression of anti-Muslim sentiment is a relatively new phenomenon in Australia. It builds upon racism embedded in history, “clash of civilisations” ideologies and constructs of border-terrorism. Denigration of Muslims, commonly termed Islamophobia, is overtly evident in the official sphere, media reporting and increasing popular rejection of Islamic amenities such as schools and mosques. Connected but more insidious is the Islamophobia of the ‘white savior rescue’ movement, in which Muslim men and Islam are positioned as perpetrators of oppression and harm toward Muslim women, requiring non-Muslim intervention. Varied forms of Islamophobia and their impacts are discussed.

Keywords: Islamophobia, borders, oppression of women, terror

Twenty years ago anti-Islam prejudice did not occupy public space...Mainstream Australians were largely indifferent towards Muslims although one-dimensional images persisted. The voices of prejudice that existed spoke mainly in whispers and were hidden out of sight. In general, the Australian media was uninvolved and the Australian public proved an uninterested, unmovable audience (Hanifa Deen 2010).

Introduction

This paper discusses how Muslims in Australia are increasingly being moved to the margins of society through a public campaign of misinformation and contempt, a paradox in an isolated nation that has prided itself on giving all a 'fair go'. We posit that a confluence of factors has created a nation that is threatened by the 'racialised other' and in doing so we point to collusion within politics and media to shape discourses.

As an explanatory framework we first provide an overview of a trilogy of influence: 'raced' history, border-terror reasoning and clash of values ideologies. We discuss how these converging factors exclude the racialised Muslim from Australian identity, which privileges Anglo-Saxon paradigms and Judeo-Christian schools of thought. We discuss two major Islamophobic discourses – that of the oppressed Muslim woman and that of the Muslim terrorist. These interlinking foundations segue into defining, shaming and criminalising Muslims, who are depicted as a threat to Australian society. In linking these sections, we draw on the work of Sherene Razack (2007) on the interconnection of the tropes of 'dangerous' Muslim men, imperilled Muslim women and the 'civilised' European.

The situation has changed markedly since the time that Deen refers to above. Now anti-Muslim sentiment pervades official discourse, the media and sections of the broader community, particularly on-line. Anti-Muslim fervor as it exists today would not be tolerated if such vitriol were targeted at other groups.

Contextualising Islamophobia

Commentators frequently revert to the colonial past to explain different racisms in Australia and how, in outpost Australia, there is a trajectory of locating new and othered enemies. The invasion of Australia was the defining moment that shaped what was to follow, with this settler colonial society not coming to terms with its colonising past despite a modicum of apologies and tokenism at official events. With a vast land, much of it substantially emptied of Indigenous occupants by brutality and disease and with slow emplacement by convicts and settlers, border anxiety emerged most robustly during the gold rush of 1851 that led to the arrival of Chinese in Australia. Once the gold boom subsided by the 1880s a scapegoat was needed and the Chinese

conveniently fitted as the demonised other with fears of an influx of ‘barbarians’ fuelling immigration restrictions (MacLeod 2006).

Legislating for White Australia (Immigration Restriction Act 1901) further defined the nation, setting in place regimes that had exclusionary consequences for waves of migrants despite the eventual demise of the policy and the advent of multiculturalism. This was not unique to Australia. Referring to the United States, Joseph Carens (2013, p. 176) points to the similar fears expressed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries toward Catholics and Jews from Europe and all immigrants from Asia. He says the same rhetoric occurred then about alien invasions, with Asians, Catholics and Jews portrayed as threatening and incapable of assimilating into the host society.

According to Taverna (2005, pp. 20-21), as inhabitants of a white, British colonial outpost in the Pacific, Australians in the early 1900s were ‘acutely conscious of their geographic distance from Britain, their dependence on imperial protection, and their cultural and racial difference from the countries that surrounded them’. Despite the multicultural nature of Australian society today, the sense of an isolated, white and somewhat British nation persists to the present, which contributes to anxieties about loss of homogeneity. This takes hold even though there has been a substantial shift away from British and European migration with Asian migration substantially increasing (Markus, Jupp and McDonald (2009).

Fear of loss of identity and security are at the root of conflict within and between societies (Lawrence 2006) and this is played out in constructions of the Middle-Eastern Muslim migrant, particularly refugees arriving by boat. This fear was masterfully exploited by John Howard’s Liberal-led Coalition government in August 2001 when, facing possible electoral defeat, it sent the SAS Counter Terrorist Force onto the Norwegian freight ship *Tampa*, which had rescued asylum seekers just off Christmas Island. The ship’s captain was refused permission to enter Australian territory and threatened with prosecution as a people smuggler (Briskman, Latham and Goddard 2008).

After the September 11 terror attacks in the US the following month, the government conflated mainly Muslim asylum seekers, border control and terror. Howard’s declaration that the government would decide who came to Australia and the circumstances in which they came became his election mantra. Defence Minister Peter Reith stated in interviews on 13 September 2001 that ‘security and border protection go hand in hand’, with parliamentary secretary Peter Slipper declaring without evidence ‘there is an undeniable linkage between illegals and terrorists’ (Henderson, 2002).

But as even conservative commentator Gerard Henderson (2002) pointed out, terrorists by their nature try to keep a low profile and were hardly likely to choose to enter Australia via a route that would land them in mandatory immigration detention where they would undergo government scrutiny. Henderson declared the linkage of asylum seekers and terrorism as irresponsible, opportunistic scaremongering. Yet it was rewarded when the November 2001 election delivered a swing to the Liberals, despite them having trailed in the polls for most of the year.

The potency of border terror politics was a lesson learned by both the Liberals and the Labor Party, one capitalised on over a decade later by another Liberal Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, who made his pre-election mantra a promise to 'Stop the Boats'. Border terror has fervently taken hold.

Terrorism in general has also dominated much of the Australian political landscape since 2001. In the wake of September 11, Australia joined in the invasion of Afghanistan, then Iraq, and today continues to embrace the ongoing Western 'war on terror'. The focus of this 'war', Islamist extremism, is increasingly being conceptualised as stemming from a 'problem with Islam', and implicitly, all Muslims.

This conception is underpinned in Australia and other western countries by the 'clash of civilisations' theory (Lewis, 1990; Huntington, 1993), the idea that differences between 'the West' and 'Islam' are irreconcilable. Edward Said (2001), postulates that the personification of the enormous entities of 'the West' and of 'Islam' reduces complex matters of identity and culture to a cartoon-like world where 'Popeye and Bluto bash each other mercilessly, with one always more worthy pugilist getting the upper hand over his adversary'.

In the writings of 'clash' proponents, the West is invariably portrayed as superior in political sophistication. Sedgwick (2006, p. 205) argues that conflict between the West and Muslim countries is the result of history and politics, not religion, but that for many Westerners, the idea of a culture clash can be summarised as:

Muslims reject Western values, and so are determined to destroy them. Westerners also reject many Muslim values, of course, but are not determined to destroy the Muslim world, because Westerners are tolerant, and will work for peaceful change.

Another key strand to the 'clash' narrative is the superiority of gender relations in 'the West', an idea which Leila Ahmed (1992) terms 'colonial feminism'. She and others note that it has been used historically to justify Western intervention to help foreign women being oppressed by foreign men in countries including Egypt, India and Algeria (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Elia, 2006; Ho, 2007). Most recently it was used by US President George Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair to justify the invasion of Afghanistan. The wives of both leaders spoke publicly in support of the war, invoking the Taliban's poor treatment of women (Ward, 2001).

In 1998 academic Jon Stratton wrote *Race Daze* in which he argued that race has been a central concept in the formation of the Australian nation, a marker to exclude those considered ineligible to be members of it. Race has, he argues (p. 9) worked as a guarantor of a particular homogeneity, of language, culture and race. He debunks the myth of inclusive multiculturalism:

The policy of multiculturalism is organized according to a metaphorical spatial structure in which migrant, 'ethnic' cultures are peripheral to a core culture named these days as 'Anglo-Celtic', which is privileged (p. 10).

Fortress Australia is an insecure nation – no longer truly British, not fully Americanised and not identifying as Asian despite its proximity. Emerging right-wing groups, particularly anti-Muslim organisations such as Reclaim Australia, assert Australian values based on a Christian-Judeo heritage and the exclusion of Muslims. The work of British sociologist Frank Furedi (2006, p. vii) on the culture of fear provides some insights. He sees fear as beyond an emotion or a response to the perception of threat. Rather it has become a cultural idiom through which we signal a sense of growing unease about our place in the world. Fear of ‘desperate Middle Eastern terrorists plotting our downfall’ (pp. ix-x) he says do not necessarily emerge from personal experience. They are dangers we cannot directly confront, but passive fear is prominent.

The highly visible terror acts of September 11 2001 and of the so-called Islamic State since 2014 have brought to life the stereotype of the violent Muslim male that was previously present, but latent, in the Western imagination. Over the same period, popular literature detailing stories of brutality against Muslim women have become best-sellers. These stereotypes of Muslim men and women each add to the other and both are reinforced by ‘ex-Muslims and anti-Muslims’ (Jabreal, 2005), the best known of whom is Ayaan Hirsi Ali, assuring us that such acts are not exceptional, but actually integral to ‘Islam.’

The oppressed Muslim woman

When academic Tahmina Rashid gave a talk in Australia about violence toward South Asian women, she was unprepared for reaction that followed,

a woman rushed forward to give me a hug and congratulate me for being able to ‘run away’ from horrific violence that women face ‘there’. Instantly, I became the object of the affection of a woman protector (Rashid 2010, p. 110).

The trope that Muslim women’s lives are unrelentingly miserable, and that those who manage to ‘break free’ and enter the liberated (Western) world by leaving their communities are both victim and hero, is one encouraged both by popular literature and conservative ideologues.

Memoirs by girls and women who have escaped the harsh repression of Islamic fundamentalism are so prolific they have become a genre themselves. And there is often a disturbing, prurient element to the memoirs – these are stories of women who have been burnt, stoned, incarcerated, shot, starved and tortured (Dempsey, 2016).

More damaging though, is public commentary by those who claim these tales are not as exceptional as the stories of horror and exploitation that also occur in the West. When these commentators come from the religion they are criticising, people who have little first-hand knowledge of Muslims see them as credible. That generalisations about over 500 million women from different ethnic, national, economic and social

backgrounds have any credibility is an illustration of how ‘othered’ Muslims are in the West.

The Muslim veil in particular is seen as ‘a visual embodiment of gender oppression, self-segregation and the existence of parallel communities’ as well as a practice ‘synonymous with religious fundamentalism and, as such, one which fosters political extremism’ (Zempi and Chakraborti 2015, p. 44). The position of Muslim women is both essentialised and also seen as totally resistant to change.

Ayaan Hirsi Ali has played a significant role in promoting these notions in her decade plus career of best-selling books, newspaper articles, media appearances and speaking tours. Rising to prominence after September 11, Hirsi Ali has modelled herself as a cultural interpreter, explaining to Western audiences how terrorism and Muslim women’s oppression can both be blamed on the singular factor Islam. Having served as a conservative in the Dutch parliament and being supported by right-wing think tanks in the US, she has been afforded platforms to promote a message she recognises as more potent when delivered by her (2010, pp. 97-98):

I was to be the face of the Muslim woman who had sought and found freedom in Holland. Unlike white commentators, who were hamstrung by the fear that they would be labelled racists, I could voice my criticisms.

After interviewing her, Rogier van Bakel said, ‘It was a shock and a revelation to see a young, black, Muslim woman championing causes previously associated with middle-aged white male pundits who had often been dismissed as racists or Islamophobes’ (2007). Her promotion of these causes has seen her characterised as brave and won her accolades across the political spectrum, *Time* magazine in 2005 declaring her one of the world’s 100 most influential people.

Hirsi Ali has taken advantage of her fame, actively seeking to influence Western political leaders on foreign policy. She voted for the Iraq War when a member of the Dutch parliament, asserting that one mistake Western forces made was not staying ‘for at least fifty years or a hundred years’ and another not attacking Iran first (Whitney, 2007).

She has also contributed to the demonisation of Muslims living in Western countries. Dutch historian Geert Mak in 2005 warned that Hirsi Ali had helped create a tone in debate about Dutch Muslims similar to anti-Semitic rhetoric a century earlier. He said she was ‘turning the language of feminism and the Enlightenment inside out’ and legitimising ‘hatreds and prejudices that would previously have been considered out of bounds’ (Scroggins, 2012, p. 315).

The modern incarnation of what Ahmed termed ‘colonial feminism’ is exemplified by Western campaigns against Female Genital Cutting (FGC) and child marriage. Both practices are widely characterised in the West as Islamic, despite their prevalence across religions and cultures and their strong association with poverty and insecurity. For Razack (p. 88) ‘feminist arguments are part of the conceptual arsenal underpinning the permanent stigmatization of community’.

Western campaigns to save Muslim women overseas from these practices have encouraged Western women to support social media campaigns, talk to Western politicians and donate to Western charities to help their supposedly helpless ‘sisters.’ Even the official World Health Organisation (WHO) and other UN agency literature on addressing issues including FGC and child marriage presupposes the need for Western driven education, enlightenment or empowerment campaigns (Latham, 2016).

Despite evidence that child marriage almost tripled among Syrians in Jordan displaced by war in early 2014 (UNICEF, 2014) and that Iraqi women’s position declined dramatically after the West declared war on Saddam Hussein (Pina, 2006), the Western popular discourse has little interest in causes other than Islam for Muslim women’s problems. As Henry Louis Gates asked (1994):

Is it, after all, unreasonable to be suspicious of Westerners who are exercised over female circumcision, but whose eyes glaze over when the same women are merely facing starvation?

These campaigns have recently been reconfigured by overtly bigoted groups such as Reclaim Australia who have railed about the threat the importation of such practices through migration poses to Western societies. On-line anti-Muslim forums frequently include comments like the one below by an anti-mosque campaigner, which was accompanied by a photo of children undergoing FGC:

Oh, we could have this here too? Would you like your f**ny sliced off... I’m opposed to female genital mutilation, child brides, inequality, women beating, all part of Quran, read it.¹

These sort of depictions essentialise all Muslim women as victims and all Muslim men as violent. Both fall victim to a form of hate crime, Islamophobic victimisation, which is frightening and distressing for those targeted by it (Zempi and Chakroborti 2015).

In 2016 *The Age* newspaper ran a series of brief interviews with Muslims telling of what it is like to live in Australia. Responses ranged from the passing of judgment on a young woman who wears a scarf, people refusing to ‘pair up’ for group work in schools, another was told that the only good Muslim was a dead Muslim. A highly qualified professional spoke of racist and hurtful comments by colleagues. ‘It’s like being an outcast’, one woman proclaimed; another spoke of ‘feeling isolated, harassed, always looked down on’. Concern was expressed by parents for the futures of their children: ‘I have not spoken to my daughter about extremism because she is too young to understand hate. She only understands love’ (Donnelly, 2016).

The public arena

¹ AUSTRALIA: Fearless Councillor has her Twitter account suspended after she tweeted graphic Islamic female genital mutilation (FGM) photos to a supporter of a controversial mosque. (2015). *Bare Naked Islam*. <http://www.barenakedislam.com/2015/02/28/australia-fearless-councillor-has-her-twitter-account-suspended-after-she-tweeted-graphic-islamic-female-genital-mutilation-fgm-photos-to-a-supporter-of-a-controversial-mosque/>, 22 June 2016

Sherene Razack (2007, p. 7) speaks of a culture of exception that underpins eviction of increasing numbers of people from political community. There are a variety of ways in which this plays out in Australia. These include directing of resources toward increased counter-terrorism measures and the bolstering of airport security. As a new 'preventative panacea', there is a raft of de-radicalisation programs aimed at young Muslims, despite an inability to show that these have any efficacy.

To bolster and justify these formal measures, inflammatory language has been used by politicians. For former Prime Minister Tony Abbott, so fond of holding press conferences in front of multiple flags that how many could be squeezed in became a running joke on social media, 'death cult' and 'Team Australia' were among his favourites. As Anne Aly states, 'this rhetoric begs the question of who was on the team and who wasn't. It left the impression the government believed there was an "us" and "them", with Australian Muslims cast as "them"' (cited in Secombe 2015).

Policing and surveillance practices are one of the strongest examples of public Islamophobia. Federal and state police regularly interrogate and arrest young Muslims with significant media reportage that exacerbates community fear. The perception of Muslim terrorist threat in Australia is in keeping with Cohen's (2002) concept of moral panic. One of the most tragic examples of police action and associated media attention was the 2014 death of 18 year old Numan Haider in Melbourne (AAP 2014), who had come to the notice of security authorities. When he met with two anti-terrorism police as requested, he attacked them with a small knife and was shot dead.

In its quest, governments have willing recruits in the media, in new political alliances and anti-Muslim demonstrators. Immigration officials are also at work, questioning people arriving and departing from Australian airports who arouse suspicion. In an act of clear ethnic profiling, visitors to Mecca for Hajj in 2015 were warned about Australian airport border requirements. In the same breath, the government missive proclaimed it does not discriminate on grounds of religion and ethnicity.²

Criminalisation of asylum seekers by Australia through the establishment of offshore detention camps in Nauru and Papua New Guineas creates a convenient segue into the homily of the menacing Muslim. Despite extensive criticism of these sites by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR 2016) and human rights bodies such as Amnesty International (2016), the threat factor has enabled these camps to become entrenched, and with overall community acceptance.

Harsh treatment of asylum seekers and refugees is increasingly globalised. In recent years the actions of the so-called Islamic State, both in causing millions to flee Iraq and Syria, and in raising the profile of terrorism, as well as the increasing appeal of right-wing parties, have contributed to the adoption of severe measures against refugees in Europe, including containment and removal. Betts (2016) states that 'the elephant in the room is an underlying Islamophobia' and that 'European member states don't really want to welcome Muslim migrants'. She points to how explicit this has been in

² <http://newsroom.border.gov.au/channels/Corporate/releases/hajj-pilgrims-urged-to-know-their-rights-and-responsibilities-at-the-border>, 21 November 2016

countries with vocal far right parties and in central European countries with Christian nationalist governments, with the change in acceptance of refugees since Islam became 'politically toxic'. This phenomenon is replicated in Australia with far right groups of all persuasions decrying Muslim immigration (illustrated below) and with the government acceding by providing preference to settling non-Muslims fleeing Syria (Henderson and Uhlmann 2015).

Anti-Muslim political parties are gaining ground globally, the effect of which is to further normalise Islamophobia in Western societies. In Australia, the most sophisticated is the internationally connected, well-resourced Australian Liberty Alliance (ALA), which was launched in October 2015 by anti-Muslim Dutch politician Geert Wilders. Pauline Hanson and her One Nation Party, originally anti-Asian, have rebranded as anti-Muslim and revived in the political sphere. The brand of the flamboyant Hanson and the magnet she creates for media contributed to her party's success in having four senators elected to Federal Parliament in the 2016 election.

Elections are a time when populist causes emerge. Many people held their breath during the 2016 Austrian election. In a close call the losing presidential candidate, Norbert Hofer, was a strident opponent of immigration and one of the authors of the Freedom Party manifesto that is regarded as xenophobic (Strobl 2016). On the other side of the world President-elect Trump has opened doors to a more overt and mainstreamed Islamophobia than has ever been seen before. The US-based Bridge Initiative (2016) team makes the following point as it documents anti-Muslim statements from a variety of politicians:

...it's not just talking about Islam that's the problem, but rather the degree to which that talk can veer off in the direction of prejudice and fear-mongering.³

In Australia, this normalisation of Islamophobia within the political system takes various twists and extends into community reactions. The condemnation of simplistic notions of Sharia Law has reached into street and online movements that condemn the presence of mosques, halal food and head covering for women. Rhetoric goes to absurd extremes as Shakira Hussein (2015, p. 97) proclaims: 'stealth jihad' and the smuggling of 'Muslim' food into the bellies of unsuspecting Australian non-Muslims. But more insidiously, normalisation extends into institutionalisation. Ismail (2007, p. 84) refers to this transition in the United States through for example racial profiling, 'open season' on expressions of hate for Islam and its institutions, and rising respectability for obnoxious Islamophobes'.

Arguably social media has immense power in the discord of hate. In Australia, almost 21,000 people 'liked' the Stop the Mosque in Bendigo facebook page and dozens of other anti-Muslim pages attracting hundreds of thousands of 'likes' between them. In his book on the Islamophobia industry, Nathan Lean reminds us that purveyors of Islamophobia harness the power of the internet to expand small networks into national and international organisations (Lean 2012).

³ <http://bridge.georgetown.edu/islamophobia-and-the-2016-elections/>, 21 November 2016

Mainstream media, which is a source of information for large sections of the population, frequently expounds anti-Muslim sentiment. This includes the broadsheet national News Corp newspaper, *The Australian*, which has an educated readership. During 2015 it rolled out what it described as an ‘unflinching series of articles examining Muslim Australia’ (*The Australian* 2015), producing opinion pieces that were hostile to Islam and Muslims. It is owned by Rupert Murdoch, known as an owner who likes his opinions reflected in his media outlets (Hosenball & Holton, 2011). After the *Charlie Hebdo* terror attacks in France, Murdoch declared to his 770,000 Twitter followers, ‘Maybe most Moslems are peaceful, but until they recognize and destroy their growing jihadist cancer they must be held responsible’⁴

Overcoming hatred and bigotry

Olgier (2016) speaks of a BBC interview with a Syrian woman who explained her understandings of Western freedoms of expression, association and media, who then went on to explain that she did not want to have to jettison her religion. Olgier suggests (2016, p. 9): ‘Perhaps we’ll know that success on integration is approaching when she no longer feels that we think that she should’.

Nathan Lean speaks of how the Islamophobia industry manufactures fear (2012). As Jonathan Lyons (2012) states, rarely have the central themes of anti-Islam discourses faced serious scrutiny or nuanced analysis. They operate silently in the background as they shape statements about Islam and Muslims.

Programs currently in place to combat racism and to foster interfaith dialogue will be ineffective unless we get perspective. The terrorism discourse has taken such hold that it is going to be a herculean task to eliminate. Lean (2012) asks us to consider that in the nine years after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and 2010, Muslim Americans killed 33 people in terrorist attacks in the United States. In the same period, America experienced 150,000 murders unrelated to what is described as terrorism. The disproportionate fear about Muslims is also reflected in the preposterous notion that two per cent of the population is Islamicising Australia.

That significant numbers of Westerners are concerned about, if not outright fearful of Muslims, is a measure of the success those promoting Islamophobia have had in recent times. These fears actually make all of us less safe, by encouraging harmful acts of exclusion against Muslims that reinforce the message of groups like ISIL, as Waleed Aly so eloquently argued in his viral video message attacking those demonising Muslims.⁵ They also make us less safe by distracting our attention from the violence within our society - domestic, criminal and of inequality and deprivation - violence that we can actually have some impact on and that actually harms many more people.

⁴ <https://twitter.com/rupertmurdoch/status/553734788881076225?lang=en>, 9 January 2015

⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/theprojecttv/videos/10153243154568441/>, 21 November 2016

Until we turn the spotlight from Muslims onto exactly who is promoting prejudiced, inaccurate portrayals of one quarter of humanity, and what they gain from doing so, we cannot begin to effectively combat this injustice.

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