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The Negative Perceptions of Muslim Hijabi Women In the U.S.

The hijabs that Muslim women wear to veil their hair and body are seen by many Westerners, especially in the United States, as a tool of oppression. They also think that the Islamic laws abuse Muslim women's rights, which is false. In Islam, despite the fact that Muslim women are commanded and prohibited to do certain things with justifiable and rational reasons, they are also given many rights, such as the right of seeking education. Not only are all of these negative perception from the westerners misunderstood, but they also have a major negative impact on the Muslim Hijabi women's social and emotional lives in the United States. However, in my multimodal project, I translated this issue and argument in a mask and a photograph to put it in a multimodal form. In the mask I have used certain materials, words, colors, and object to illustrate my argument, whereas, in the photograph, I have used other materials as an explanation of the consequences of this issue.

To form my multimodal argument, I have intentionally chosen to use certain materials, colors, words, and objects in the mask and the photo to have a coherent argument with effective evidence. For instance, in the mask, I taped the words and the wires instead of writing or drawing them, because I want it to show that these perceptions could be removed if people in the U.S. truly understood that Muslim Hijabi women are not forced, oppressed, or imprisoned. These women are only veiling their body to be modest. I have also taped the line that divides the face and taped the descriptive words on the left side of the mask to make them appear as a removable

thing, by doing this, it shows that not all the descriptions apply on one Muslim woman, but rather it is a combination of descriptions about all Muslim women as a whole.

Furthermore, I have used many descriptive words on the right side of the mask as a representation of the stereotypical perception of Muslim women who wear hijab in the United States. For example, the stereotypical perception words I have written are “oppressed,” “forced,” “imprisoned,” “no rights,” and “has no roles in society.” In the United States, Muslim women are usually labeled as oppressed women, who are forced by their religion to veil their bodies, whereas Muslim women consider it completely different. They consider it a commandment from Allah to cover their body and lower their temptation as for their own goods, not to oppress them. Margaretha Van Es states in her article, “Muslim Women As Ambassador in Islam”, which explore how Muslim women are being impacted by these negative perceptions and how they are trying to break the “oppressed Muslim women” stereotype:

“[Muslim women] argued that a careful study of the Qur’an and the hadith would lead to women’s empowerment. Some women referred to Quranic verses about the equality of men and women before God. Others emphasized the right of women in Islam to seek education and develop their talents on the labour market. At the same time, many women argued that they felt respected in Islam not only as human beings but also as women, and argued for a moderate form of gender complementarity rather than full gender equality” (18).

Nevertheless, this emphasizes that Muslim women do not consider themselves as forced, oppressed women, or imprisoned by their faith, but rather they feel respected, obligated, faithful, moral, and modest. For this reason, I used these words on the left side of the mask to represent how Muslim women feel about themselves.

In addition to the chosen words I have on the mask, I have written some description of Muslim women in general on the left side of the mask. However, comparing the American culture and the Muslim culture, there are obviously many differences. One of the major differences is the perception of beauty and its standards. Many Americans believe that when women veil their body and their hair is hiding their beauty and being less attractive; whereas Muslim consider it as being modest by not letting their body presented for everyone to look at. Muslim women are also convinced that they will eventually marry only one man, who she can be unveiled to, so veiling her body from other men does not make her less attractive or less feminine. For this specific reason, I have used the words “unattractive” on the right side of the mask and “feminine” on the left side of the mask, as well as the red lipstick and the flecky eyebrows. Other words I used on the right side of the mask are “kind,” “friendly,” “caring,” “loyal,” “moral,” and “obligated.” The reason I used these certain words was to clarify that wearing hijab does not determine that Muslim Hijabi women could not be any of these description. Wearing hijab does not stop women having a sense of humor or being friendly. They are also not “isolated” as I mention on the right side of the mask, but instead they do communicates with others.

In terms of the photograph, the materials I used was mainly to represent the consequences of all of negative perceptions and how they negatively impact Muslim hijabi women emotionally and socially. The journalist Gabriella Canal explains this negative impact in his article:

two Muslim students were allegedly sent home from their Virginia high school for wearing hijabs without carrying signed notes from their parents...this is not the first instance where Muslim girls have been discriminated against for wearing hijabs at school. In fact, a 2015 study by the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR)

found that 27% of California high school students who wear a hijab reported being discriminated against by their teacher”(“Two Muslim students were sent home”).

For sure, not everyone could handle the discrimination and the criticism from others. The above situation has happened similarly to one of my friend’s cousin and she was emotionally abused and disturbed to the extent that she stopped wearing her hijab and did not want to go to school anymore. Moreover, in the photo, I have a Hijabi girl pulling her hijab off to represent these kind of consequences. I also choose to place her next to the left side of the mask, where all the description of the Muslim women are to show that she wants to be perceived better. Whereas, I placed the girl without hijab behind the side of the mask with the American flag to connect that she is American and criticizing the Hijabi girls and they are being annoyed and disturbed by that. Moreover, during the process of organize the composition of the photo, I was inspired by the photo composition of one of the army staff, Perry hopman where he was standing behind the table while placing the medicine on the table. I chose this specific photo essay because of how effective and clear his argument was to me as a viewer. For this reason, I decided to use the same idea of standing behind the table and placing my awards on it. I intentionally used an award and the graduation cap and gown to symbolize the word “successful” on the mask to emphasize the fact that Muslim Hijabi women, just like anyone else could be successful and have a role in society.

While translating the argument in a multimodal form to the mask and the photo, I was attentive to using ethos, pathos, and logos. Making sure that the argument has all three parts of the Aristotle’s rhetorical triangle makes it effective, clear, and organized to the viewer to understand it. In terms of logos, I decided to use limited elements in the photo and mask to not confuse my viewer. I have also created a visual hierarchy throughout the mask and the photo in order to

organize what the viewer should look at first. For instances, on the mask, I have placed the word “hijab” with a bigger font than the other words in the middle of the forehead to emphasize that the main topic on the mask is about hijab. For the viewer, to distinguish both sides, I placed the American flag behind the eye of the mask to represent that this is how hijabs are being seen in the United States. Then, I distributed descriptive words on both sides. The word “imprisoned” is in caps and positioned next to the black strips on the mouth with thick texture to catch the viewer’s eye as one of the most common misperception. The word “forced” was intentionally placed right in front of the word “obligated” to emphasize that Muslim women are not forced to wear hijab, but rather they are obligated to their faith. The lipstick was also used as a contrast to the word “unattractive” on the right side. Moreover, the obvious pathos in the mask was the smile on the left side of the mask, as well as the anger and the sad emotions of the girls in the photo. I would not say that I used any less obvious pathos in my project. Lastly, the ethos of the photo were the characters: the Muslim and non-Muslim girls in the photo. Also, I intentionally chose the setting of my photo to be a classroom because although religious discriminations could happen anywhere, discrimination between friends in schools and colleges mainly disturb Muslim student Hijabis. This happens because students spend a lot of time in school and college, so they are negatively impacted because they are being constantly criticized.

To conclude, the purpose of my multimodality project was to clarify that the negative perception of the Muslim hijabi women in the United States is a result from the misunderstanding about the Islamic perspective about hijab. Also, this impact the emotional and social life of Muslim women, because, indeed, they do not consider themselves as oppressed, forced, isolated, or imprisoned women. This is precisely what I translated in the mask and the photo in a multimodal form of argument. However, as there is freedom for women in the United

States to unveil their bodies, there should also be freedom for Muslim women to veil their bodies for the sake of modesty.

Work Cited

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The Photo



The Mask

