(Dis)embodied intersectionality

The theological centrality of Muslim women resides in the foundational source codes of Islam – that is, the Qur’an, as God’s revealed text, and the Sunnah (example of Prophet Muhammad PBUH). As a 7th century revelation, and in response to a deeply patriarchal society, the Qur’an brought about far-reaching changes in relation to gender reform as regards marriage, divorce and inheritance (Esposito & DeLong-Bas, 2001). Like participants in other faiths, Muslim women are socialised into deeply embedded practices and traditions, which at times demonstrate commonalities, and, other times, distinguish them from other faiths. Within these practices are added layers and nuances as different interpretations yield different ways of being and acting – influenced and shaped by equally embedded cultural and contextual norms. How Muslim women dress and practice Islam is always influenced by the cultural milieu in which they are located (Davids, 2020a). As an illustration of the contestation surrounding Muslim women, particularly in liberal societies, Cooke et al (2008:
91) have constructed the neologism ‘Muslimwoman’ to illustrate how the veil, real or imagined, functions like race, a marker of essential difference, which Muslim women seemingly cannot escape.

The concern for Cooke et al. (2008) was to find a way to draw attention to the post-9/11 collapse of religion and gender into a singular and imposed political category. She wished to highlight the ways in which non-Muslims and Muslim religious extremists alike deploy this newly entwined religious and gendered identification that overlays national, ethnic, cultural, historical and even philosophical diversity in order to control Muslim women. ‘Muslimwoman’, explain Cooke et al. (2008: 91), draws attention to the emergence of a new, singular religious and gendered identification that overlays national, ethnic, cultural, historical and even philosophical diversity. Underscoring these re-configured and intersected identifications are conceptions and interpretations of cosmopolitanism, which according to Cooke et al. (2008: 92), are ‘at once unifying and diverse because the more people identify with and connect to each other, the more their identities will be hybrid and split among the multiple groups in which they act and want to belong’.

Implicit, therefore, in the theorising of intersectionality is that my experiences of the world, or rather, the world’s experiences of me, are not singular. Who I am, or what I embody, cannot be isolated or sequestered to disconnected nodes of identity. I am at once layered, complex in my multiplicities of being – female, ‘coloured’ and Muslim. The value of intersectionality is that it recognises that all identities and group identities do not enter and participate in the public sphere as equals. Some enter as individuals and are seen as such. Others, however, do not. And when they do not, the way they are seen and interpreted is never as an individual. That they are not seen as individuals is symptomatic of the accompanying presumptions, seldom couched in unbiased fairness. While the usefulness of intersectionality resides in its capacity to systematically expose the multiple structures of potential marginalisation and exclusion, it also confirms the multiple points of vulnerability and resistance which
have to be mediated by a body like mine. This mediation is not new. The profound ‘othering’ of Muslim women is as prominent in colonialist discourse as it is now. I have witnessed this ‘othering’ as subject and observer with both intellectual astonishment and emotional disgust. I am drenched into a marker of ‘Muslimwoman’, inscribed by stigmas of backward passivity – a living paradox, reduced to what I choose to wear, which, although symbolic of sexually constrained, fundamentalist domestication, seemingly equally capable of inflicting global terrorism.

‘Othered’ into humiliation

As had become my routine, after leaving work, I would pop into my local supermarket, about one minute from my home. The routine included a regular parking bay, a nod at the ‘parking attendant’, and an always warm greeting from the security guard, stationed at the entrance to the shop. I must have seen and greeted him a thousand times over – sometimes he would walk me to my car, patiently waiting for my trolley as I unloaded goods into my car, happy to delight me with stories of his day. Interacting with him was as much a part of my shopping experience as deciding what groceries to purchase. But then things changed. Things between the security guard and I, things between the world and me. It is funny when I phrase it in this way, it sounds almost ridiculous, but that is the way I remember it – the day I became aware of how the way he saw me had altered, or is it, in the way I was altered to be seen by him?

The afternoon had unfolded in a predictable way: I had left work and picked up my one-year-old son from my mother, who had been baby-sitting him. He had been fussing in the car, continuing as I unbuckled him from the car seat. My hands and arms were filled with my handbag, my son, car keys and his toy car. In my distracted rush into the entrance of the supermarket, I remembered to greet the security guard. But his face was not there to respond. Instead, he stepped towards me, without a smile, and instructed me to open my bag. I was
confused, taken aback by the absence of a smile on his face, and his no eye contact. Had I done something? Had something happened to him? I could not understand what he was asking of me. My confusion quickly swirlled as I realised that as he was waiting for me to open my bag, other shoppers were passing me by, uninterrupted by a similar instruction. I asked him why. He mumbled about following orders from management, still no eye contact. As I insisted on knowing why, he became more uncomfortable, finally meeting my gaze with a set of pleading eyes to not make his job difficult. What was his job, I wondered? What had changed over the past two days?

Even as I pushed the only answer from my thoughts, I knew there could be no other. It was the day after 9/11. I turned away, headed towards my car, face flushed, my body filled with anger, humiliation, vows never to return to a very conveniently located and stocked supermarket. It took me a while to settle down, to process my feelings, to understand what had transpired on an otherwise nondescript afternoon. What had changed between the security guard and me? Nothing, except the world around us. He had been instructed to no longer see me as just a shopper. The request to search my bag was a message that I represented a potential threat, in need of surveillance and scrutiny – a procedure not without degradation. For me, the interaction with the security guard would signal the beginning of a new narrative, one in which my hijab would have a starring role, both locally and internationally. Intersectional ‘othering’, as Mirza (2013: 7) details, arises at unique historical moments – that is ‘when the category “Muslim woman” is invested with a particular affective and linguistic meaning’, and is (re)organised into systematic social relations and practices.

Typically, we conceive of humiliation as demonstrative of the power of one person over another; the capacity to humiliate another is often framed in hierarchical relationships of power – as in teachers and learners, a parent and child, an employer and worker. But humiliation can also manifest in ways outside of these frames, as in the case of a security guard and a shopper, where the presumption or
adage that the customer is always right is trumped when the shopper is deemed to act in a devious way (such as stealing an item), or in my case, deemed to present a threat by virtue of my dress code. The humiliation emanates from an emotional experience of an unjust action. In being singled out and asked to open my bag, I suffered an injustice. I left the shop, feeling wronged, unsure of how I could return my body as a Muslim woman to the site of my humiliation.

I know that the horror of 9/11 is not the source of the suspicion and antagonism my hijab evidently attracts. I know that my narrative slots into a long-standing historical preoccupation with the veil (hijab), its orientalist allure, its symbolic entrapment with oppression, sexual repression and backwardness, its incongruency with the West, and since 9/11, its heightened provocation of suspicion, hostility and fear. Often described as ‘the day that changed everything’ (Morgan, 2009), 9/11 signalled my entry into a world much more comfortable in its disdain of Islam and its followers. My encounter with the security guard on 12 September 2001 would become an unwelcome, repetitive template in my life. Airports are the obvious sites of my greatest discomfort – with my visit through Warsaw Chopin airport deserving a special mention.

In full view of other travellers, I was ordered to stretch out my arms for a search, which included an over-zealous ground-staff member, shoving her hands beneath my hijab, urgently feeling for whatever explosives, while simultaneously reassuring me that this disgraceful intrusion onto my body was ‘merely routine’. In situations, like these, I have learnt that there is no room for resistance or questions. I have learnt that, the softer my compliance, the greater the likelihood of the imposition coming to an end. My husband, who had been travelling with me, was waiting on the other side, his face a contortion of disgust and pity at witnessing my disgraceful violation. It is hard writing about this moment, not because I cannot recall every uninvited touch up and down my body, but because I am returned to a time of powerlessness, a victimisation, captured in a capsule over which I have no control. I could only co-operate, staring
ahead, as the rest of the airport went about its business around me – with none of its occupants being too distracted at witnessing a security guard running her hands under my hijab. I can confirm that there was nothing ‘routine’ about my humiliation, or about my presence on the streets of Warsaw while attending the 15th Annual International Network of Philosophers Education (INPE) conference at the university of Warsaw in 2016 – serendipitously entitled, ‘Philosophy as Translation and the Understanding of Other Cultures’.

My most recent clash with airport officials occurred on 21 March 2021. The date is important as it signals the celebration of Human Rights Day in South Africa – an irony certainly not lost in the events I am about to share. Upon walking through the ‘control’ gates at OR Tambo airport in Johannesburg, South Africa, I was approached by a security guard, hands outstretched, wanting to ‘feel’ my headscarf. I was taken aback and refused to be touched by her for two reasons: she had no basis for wanting to ‘feel’ my headscarf, and Covid regulations demanded a 1.5 m social distance between us. She persisted, drawing the attention of an Airports Company South Africa (ACSA) employee, who informed me that it was ‘protocol’ to ‘check all headgear’. The security guard informed me that if she could not ‘feel’ my hijab, I would have to remove it, so that she could see my hair. I refused. She explained that all hats needed to be removed. I pointed out that wearing a hat is not the same as wearing a hijab – the one is a clothing or fashion accessory, I wear my hijab as a religious obligation. I requested to speak to her manager. She arrived promptly and informed me that it was ACSA’s policy and protocol to ‘check all headgear’, including braids and cornrows. She could not, however, provide me with a copy of the policy or protocol. I could also not find any mention of this on ACSA’s website. After maintaining my refusal to co-operate, the manager explained that she could not see what was beneath my scarf, hence the need to check. I pointed out to her that she also could not see beneath my dress, yet she was not asking me to remove any other item of clothing. She replied that that would be a ‘criminal offence’. Following her logic, it is a ‘criminal offence’
to ask someone to remove his/her dress or clothing, but it is not a ‘criminal offence’ to ask Muslim women to remove their scarves.

Realising my disbelief in her argument, the manager then went on to claim that there were ‘many cases’ in which women with dreadlocks and scarves had smuggled drugs through the airport. I assumed she was referring to the case of a South African, woman, Nolubabalo Nobanda, who smuggled 1.5kg of cocaine in her dreadlocks, through Suvarnabhumi Airport in Bangkok in 2011. I could not, however, recall any other cases. And I could neither recall, nor find any cases (when I conducted a subsequent online search), involving hijab-wearing Muslim women smuggling drugs, or any other kind of paraphernalia under their scarves. Throughout our exchange, we had a full view of the control gates through which I had just passed. During this time, at least three hijab-wearing Muslim women had passed through the gates – all of whom were subjected to a security guard ‘feeling’ their scarves, blatantly disregarding social distancing and not sanitising between the touching of the women. However, ‘black’ women with heavily braided hair-dos, as well as two wearing head scarves, passed through the gates without any interference. None of these women were stopped to have their braids or scarves checked. The manager witnessed this with me, and when I pointed out that it is clear that the ‘protocol’ is reserved for Muslim women, she replied that the officials should have stopped the other women.

Admittedly, I would not have adopted my combative position had this incident taken place at an airport outside of South Africa. While my confidence derived from being on home soil, the encounter left me feeling disappointed and humiliated. Disappointed to witness and experience that South Africa is following dominant trends in the profiling and criminalising of hijab-wearing Muslim women and humiliated in yet again being subjected to practices of discrimination and marginalisation. I wrote to ACSA the next day, complaining about the treatment to which I had been subjected and requested a copy of the policy dictating the ‘searching of all headgear’. I received an automated response that provided me with a reference number.
and an assurance: ‘We will attend to your query in the next Business Day’. At the time of writing (about seven months later), I had still not received any correspondence from ACSA. My complaint to the South African Human Rights Commission has still not yielded any action or intervention, nearly a year later, despite numerous assurances.

Other highlights include heavily paused delays at the gates of Heathrow, JF Kennedy, O’Hare and Rome–Fiumicino – involving very limited verbal exchanges, but a protracted examination of my passport and all other supporting documents for the apparent audacity of my visit. My birth country is no different, even when it involves inter-provincial flights – with ground-staff often at pains trying to explain why my identity document requires checking at the check-in counter, the baggage counter, and again just before I board the actual plane. These kinds of checks have become a normal part of any trip. It requires more emotional perseverance and gritted teeth than any congested long-haul flight. Muslim colleagues and friends advise me to simply remove my hijab and spare myself all the ‘unnecessary drama and stress’. While I understand this advice, and have seriously considered it, I am not convinced that travelling or any other endeavour ought to involve a change in how I choose to enact my identity as a Muslim woman – not if doing so has nothing to do with my safety or the safety of others.

While slightly more manageable and without the threat of being turned away at airports, my encounters in other settings have not been any more forgiving. Except for two occasions, I have consistently found myself in professional environments in which I fall into a minority group category – both in terms of race and religion. And, might I add, even when women constitute the majority in terms of numbers, male dominance continues to hold sway. I have been questioned a number of times on why I wear a hijab. While some are genuinely interested in my response, others prefer to hold on to their own opinions, usually of the sort that I am probably forced to do so by a domineering spouse or my rigid faith. Even when my own version is accepted, there is a comeback of ‘yes, but other Muslim women don’t
wear it’. I do not know why other Muslim women wear a hijab, or in fact, why they do not wear a hijab – such discussions seldom come up among my circles of friends or family, it is simply not an issue. I am always amused by how random strangers lay claim to understanding the dynamics and imperatives of group and individual identities. One of the things that comes to mind during these encounters is the familiarity that some assume in asking the question in the first place. I do not necessarily feel it is my business to ask others about their faiths, or how they choose to practise them. There seems to be a particular kind of objectification of Muslim women’s bodies which allows for uninhibited practices of examination and scrutiny.

My presence at my university is not without some uneasiness. In addition to supervising postgraduate students, I teach two postgraduate programmes: philosophy of education to students registered for the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE), and BEd (Hons) educational leadership and management. For many of the PGCE students, of whom the majority are ‘white’, I represent their first encounter with a hijab-wearing Muslim academic. Most of them would probably have gone through their entire schooling career being taught by only ‘white’ teachers. Over the years I have witnessed a significant shift in how students respond to me. Most simply see me as their lecturer or supervisor. A few, however, struggle to reconcile the way I present with their image of a teacher – not only in terms of race, but also in terms of religion and culture. While some approach this struggle through questions and dialogues, others come to me enveloped in years of socialised resistance to anyone who is ‘other’ to them. While one student concluded his academic year with me by sending me a very lengthy email about his stereotypical views and ‘hatred’ of all Muslims – which thankfully shifted over the course of the year – another sent me a YouTube video on Muslims who were ‘saved’ by converting to Christianity. I have learnt to accept these kinds of responses and actions as part of my own educational moments.
Muslim women as paradox

What is it about the hijab that makes it so off-putting? Why does it elicit the kinds of responses or commentary that it does? It seems that for as long as I have written on this topic, the more urgent and troubling the questions have become. The liberal democratic landscape is flooded with regulations and prohibitions pertaining to the hijab in the public sector, prescribing not only how Muslim women ought to dress, but deliberately defining the hijab as an item irreconcilable with ‘democratic’ norms. Significantly, laws governing the prohibition of the hijab coincide with the Western ‘War on Terror’ narrative, which has ensured increasing discrimination against Muslim minority groups in the United States and Europe (Wing & Smith, 2006). Evidently, the ‘War on Terror’ extends onto certain bodies, irrespective of any political or ‘terrorist links.’ Ahmed (2003: 392) elaborates on the idea that particular signs are associated with particular bodies; anybody who looks Muslim or Arab ‘could be terrorists’, and hence, deserving of a ‘war’. Interestingly, one of the most common questions directed at me, whenever I visit the United States, whether from taxi drivers or conference attendees, is whether I am Arab. My responses that I am in fact South African, are met with disbelief, and followed by repeat questions of where I am from ‘originally’. Seemingly, my hijab re-inscribes me onto another nationality – one which more easily aligns with a ‘terrorist look’ and ‘war’. It is a troubling re-inscription in that it deliberately misrecognises me into a predetermined, homogenised box, not only in terms of geopolitical context, but in terms of somehow legitimising the stereotype that all Arabs are terrorists. The prospective narrative of a South African national presents a disturbance to the homogenisation of Muslims as an errant group of terrorists, and of Muslim women as being without agency.

Seemingly, at the heart of the desire of liberal democracies to de-veil Muslim women, is to not only ‘liberate’ them from the symbolic oppression of the hijab, but also to curb terrorism, and
enhance the assimilation of the migrant population (Abdelgadir & Fouka, 2020). Binary constructions of hijab-wearing Muslim women as a priori oppressed are crucial to the narrative of the West as liberator. Consequently, while Muslim women are ‘sexually constrained’; ‘ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition bound, religious, domesticated, family-orientated, victimised’, Western women are constructed as ‘educated, modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions’ (Mohanty, 1988: 65). To Hargreaves (2000: 53), the veil operates as a symbol of cultural difference; it represents the ‘Otherness’ of Islam and is ‘condemned in the West as a constricting mode of dress, a form of social control, and a religious sanctioning of women’s invisibility and subordinate socio-political status’. In sum, instead of regarding ‘non-Western’ customs as symbolic of cultural diversity, differences are reduced to a clash of values (Mancini, 2012), with the veil being (mis)used as a literal barrier that not only prevents the integration of the female Muslim body into Western society, but marks her for social and economic exclusion, stigmatisation and criminalisation (Petzen, 2012). Kirmani (2009) observes that the scholarly interest in Muslim women has its foundations in the orientalist fascination with the veil and the harem, which helped to construct a picture of Muslim women as symbols of the brutishness of colonised peoples and the symbolic ‘other’ to Europe’s rational civilization. Fundamentally, the veil is constructed as a rejection of ‘our way of life’ (Khiabany & Williamson, 2008).

These interpretations are seemingly irreconcilable with Muslim women’s actual motivations for wearing the hijab or veil. Reasons for wearing the veil include religious compliance, personal piety, family and societal pressure, symbols of identity or cultural or political assertion, and resistance to sexual oppression and objectification (Kirmani, 2009; Golnaraghi & Dye, 2016). Despite particular Qur’anic verses, which call upon Muslim women not to display their beauty, and to draw their veils (verse 24: 31; verse 33:59), there are various, often contesting, interpretations as to whether the veil is indeed an
obligatory garment, or whether it should best be understood in terms of particular historical, sociological, or political contexts. To Hussain (1984) and Mernissi (1991), the Qur’an’s reference to veiling can be understood as a metaphorical or physical barrier, it does not explicitly address women’s clothing. Similarly, Ahmed (1992) argues that there is no direct Qur’anic exhortation that women should veil themselves; rather that the injunction pertains to the need for modesty on the part of both men and women. Other views, like those espoused by Al-Qaradawi (1982), hold that Muslim women are under obligation to cover their whole body, except their face and hands, when in the presence of strange men. In sum, there is as much disagreement on whether the veil is obligatory or not within the community, as there is among Muslim women’s motivation for wearing it. What connects the varied views, however, is the idea of the veil as a manifestation of a particular kind of identity – whether as social, religious or political expression (Davids, 2020a).

In turn, experiences of Muslim women in liberal democracies stand in stark contrast to those of women in Indonesia (a Muslim-majority country), where veiling has been shown to increase as a result of the expansion of female participation in the formal sector that is shaped by the prevailing culture of gender relations and might therefore be a sign of economic modernisation (Shofia, 2020). Shofia (2020) asserts that unlike common depictions in liberal democracies, women who veil in Indonesia do not seem to signify low social status or lack of education. If anything, says Shofia (2020), the probability of donning the veil is significantly and positively predicted by education, suggesting that veiling might be a cultural strategy used by Muslim women in weathering gender-related social norms, which generally locate women in domestic roles and responsibilities. Similar trends were found among Muslim women in Egypt, who opted to wear the veil because it opened socio-economic opportunities (Mahmood, 2005).

Notably, in singling out Muslim women for scrutiny and (re)dress, liberal democracies fall into the same domain of which patriarchal
Islam stands accused – namely, that Muslim women are without autonomy and agency, and are compelled to succumb to patriarchal norms, which include veiling. Stated differently, if Muslim women are presumably wearing their hijabs because they are forced to do so by a patriarchal religion, then how should one describe the actions of liberal democracies, when they, too, force Muslim women to alter their dress code? Both positions and arguments construe Muslim women as without agency, without voice, and in need of being spoken for and acted on behalf of. More worrying is the unashamed mobilisation of integration through forceful assimilation, and states Mancini (2012: 411), ‘cultural homogenisation which aims at anchoring European identity in secularised Christianity, while at the same time reinforcing the systemic nature of gender oppression’. Not only have private reasons for veiling become the content of public debates and lawmaking, but Muslim women occupy a deeply paradoxical space, cast simultaneously as victims of patriarchal oppression, and a threat to Western modernity. Being veiled, explains Mancini (2012), is likely to be perceived as a woman’s refusal to engage in what are taken to be the ‘normal’ (Western) protocols of interaction with members of the opposite sex and thus, as a violation of the notions of gender hierarchies established within Western social structure.

Confronting the intolerance of liberal democracies

Murad (2020: 24) poses the question: ‘If we must be intolerant of intolerance, then can liberalism tolerate anything other than itself?’ Although the discourse of integration relies on claims of openness to others, there seems little to suggest that liberalism is interested in any other identity that does not resemble itself (Murad, 2020). Quite evidently, if one looks at the dominant trends pertaining to the treatment of Muslim women, the implicit expectation is that the ‘other’ needs to adopt the dominant ways of the West.

There are two pressing concerns arising from this perceived clash between Muslim women and liberal democracies. The first pertains
to the construction of the hijab as irreconcilable with gender equality, as defined by Western feminism. This exceeds external manifestations of dress regulations. It speaks to an interference in how Muslim women live in their faith and how they choose to enact it. The template of a Western normative reflects the implied inherent universalism of Western feminism. Mohanty (1988) draws critical attention to the ways in which Western feminism has used universal categories to understand women’s experiences and gender relations. These categories, however, are derived from their own experiential frameworks, not from women rendered to the category of ‘third world’, which of course includes Muslim women, and who are seen as objects, rather than subjects of knowledge.

Ahmed (1997: 30) explains that the ‘third world woman’ is ‘interpreted in terms of a Western understanding of gender oppression: the representation of her as a victim of a universal patriarchy positions the Western feminist subject as an authority, while taking the West as a reference point for understanding different forms of power relations.’ The way out of this dichotomous construction between ‘Western’ and ‘third world’ women, underscored by a politics of universal judgement, argue both Mohanty (1988) and Ahmed (1997), is a sensitive and contextualised approach to cultural specificity and difference, towards a politics where judgements are made possible only through specific engagement. It is only through engagement that one gets to understand the perspective of the other. This is not only a matter of unlearning the violence of universalism, maintains Ahmed (1997: 31); it is also about ‘enabling a different kind of ethical relation between subjects (differently and unequally positioned by the international division of labour) which is based on a more mutual engagement’.

The second concern moves from a universalist understanding of ‘third world’ women, and relates to the presumption by liberal democracies that they have enough insights into the lived experiences of Muslim women that allows them to make decisions on their behalf, not only in terms of how they should dress, but how
they should be and act. The intrusive actions of wanting to regulate the dress code of Muslim women assume a right to ‘get inside the skin of the other’ and close enough to ‘the truth of the other’s (well) Being’, states Ahmed (1997: 32). There are inherent presumptions of intimate knowledge of the Muslim woman as object. Her presumed backwardness, oppression and subservience have been used by Western feminism in liberal democracies to think and act on her behalf. The Muslim woman cannot be presumed to have a voice or agency, since this would denounce her need for re-presentation. The construction of the Muslim woman as an-already-known object readily justifies the irrelevance of engagement with and knowledge \textit{from} her. There is no need to speak to a Muslim woman, there is no need to understand why she does what she does, and why she wears what she does. There is only knowledge of the self, which is seemingly sufficient to disregard other kinds of selves and their knowledge.

By assuming that one already knows the other and their difference, explains Ahmed (1997), the self and other relations are held in place. To Ahmed (1997: 32), ‘Such a politics, whereby the Western feminist simply refuses engagement with the other, hence does not move the Western feminist into unlearning (beyond the unlearning of her right to speak), nor does it move the other from its position as always already the other’. It is immensely difficult, therefore, for Muslim women to break from a theoretical script, which continues to construct Muslim women as nothing else but a victim or a villain, an empty symbol of undesirable cultural ‘otherness’. Of all the assigned signifiers, the one which is probably most critical to the Western theorisation is that of Muslim women as oppressed. What this signifier secures is a negation of agency. The negation of agency is painfully central to a scaffolding argument that unfolds like this: Muslim women are oppressed, and hence, do not have agency. Because they do not have agency, they cannot have the capacity to freely choose to wear the veil. Supporting the hijab, therefore, is akin to supporting oppression. More importantly, however, the negation of agency feeds into the theory, which not only designates Western
feminism as the saviour of Muslim women as ‘third world’ women but appoints Western feminism as the agent of Muslim women.

Consequently, before I can even get to the point of (re)claiming my own agency, I have to disprove my oppression by proving that my own account is worth writing and telling. I have to show that normative accounts of who holds agency can and should be disrupted. I have to be careful in how I traverse this setting because, in addition to being a priori oppressed, any articulation from my side is paradoxically interpreted as resistant to Western norms, and hence, inflated to a threat. This is the unequal positioning of my identity as a Muslim woman, which continually forces me into ‘knowing my place’, being careful not to say too much, but also not to say too little, but forces me to say something if the unethical discourse which exists about me is to be disrupted. Hence, inasmuch as I have no desire to speak on behalf of other Muslim women, I also recognise the unequivocal importance of not only representation, but representation with voice. When I confront that which seeks to mark, box, marginalise, exclude and criminalise me, I do so with the weight of knowing that I am not alone in my experiences, and that it matters that I speak out – not only against those who position me as ‘other’ to them, but also against those who share my religious identity. This is a discussion I turn to in the next chapter.