

## **Alienation, Recognition and the Question of Muslim Identity in the US**

**Abstract:** The identity of being a Muslim often gets marked with cultural and political backwardness along with the suspicion of terrorism in the mainstream western narrative. Although otherizing Muslims along with other immigrant groups is not new, especially since the American hostage crisis during the Iranian revolution of 1979, and after the notorious 9/11 attacks, many view Muslims as threats to national security in the US. Islamophobic rhetoric, aided by politicians and interest groups in the country perpetuates the theme of securitizing the Muslim identity as mainstream political agenda. Trump administration's Muslim ban, neo-conservative fear-mongering about Muslim groups and different federal and local surveillance mechanisms on Muslim communities have exploited the preexisting notion of Muslims as the "other", and fueled a xenophobic perception that "they do not belong here" in recent years. Fanon detailed the process of alienation of the colonized individuals in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) in which the ideals imposed by the colonizers deviate the self-development of the colonized leading to their inferiority complex. The internalization of cultural superiority continues in the modern context where educated individuals too suffer from inferiority complex and adopt unexamined western lens (Dabashi 2007). How does the Fanonian process of alienation shape the formation and recognition of the Muslim identity in the twenty first century? How does the inferiority complex develop in Muslim communities? Drawing from Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), I argue that the making of Muslim identity and ideals in the US continue to impose alienation on Muslim communities through political rhetoric and policies. In doing so, I analyze the framing of Islamophobic rhetoric from different political elites and institutions in the US to support my argument. I also contend that such recognitions of Muslims as the "other" lead to internalization of alienation in constructing Muslim identity, and development of inferiority complex in Muslim communities in the US and elsewhere. Surroundings matter in making of the soul (Appiah 2005), and such otherization leading to "us versus them" lens vis-à-vis Muslim community has far-reaching social and political consequences in the US and beyond.

**Introduction:**

“Hey, I watched when the World Trade Center came tumbling down. And I watched in Jersey City, New Jersey, where thousands and thousands of people were cheering as that building was coming down, where you have large Arab populations. Thousands of people were cheering. Not good.”- Donald Trump, in an interview with ABC’s “This Week” program on November 22, 2015 (Kessler, 2015).

“If the person who speaks to a man of color or an Arab in pidgin does not see that there is a flaw or a defect in his behavior, then he has never paused to reflect”- Frantz Fanon (Fanon [1952] 2008, 15).

Donald Trump’s false claim that he witnessed thousands of Arab people cheering as the twin towers of the World Trade Center were collapsing, insinuating that Muslims have been supporters of the 9/11 attacks, was not an isolated incident. His administration’s controversial “Muslim ban” of 2017, that put restrictions for individuals to enter into the US from seven Muslim countries was officially named as “Executive Order 13769 (Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States)” (White House, 2017). There is a long history of anti-Muslim political rhetoric and policies in the United States. Islamophobic statements, remarks, policies are parts of the US mainstream political culture where Muslims are viewed as the dangerous “other” who must repeatedly prove their worth as American citizens and demonstrate their loyalty to the country. The fact that Donald Trump became president of the United States despite his repeated false claims and threats against Muslims in 2016, and despite several harsh anti-Muslim policies of his administration, he secured more than 74 million votes in 2020 signify that for a large number of people in the country, Muslims as a group are expendable, and that Islamophobia has a solid place in the mainstream politics.

The anti-Muslim rhetoric and categorization of Muslims as the ‘other’ have been embedded in the American political arena in multi-faceted ways. Islam as a religion and its followers have been touted as confrontational with the American values. Presidents, policy makers of different kinds and politicians from different levels have contributed to the perception that Muslims as a group need to be “watched”. The implied message of their anti-Muslim stances is that Muslims are not American enough and that they need to be monitored so that they follow western ideals and be true Americans.

This process of alienating Muslim individuals and communities from the mainstream by an imposition of cultural values is not different from how Frantz Fanon illustrated the process of alienation of the French colonial subjects by the colonial power in his first book *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). He also discusses the invisible divide that the colonized communities feel in face of exclusionary rhetoric and policies in his famous book *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). While it is true that Muslim communities in the US are not directly colonized as Fanon described the nations and communities facing exploitation of the colonial suppression in his books, however, as Dabashi (2011) shows that the logic of alienating certain groups and imposing values on them, and subsequent development of inferiority complex can be applied elsewhere, not just in colonizer-colonized framework. The paper offers new application of Fanon’s framework to explicate that process of alienation of the Muslim population vis-à-vis the American statist points of view.

Critics may argue that Fanon’s arguments regarding alienation and recognition suit the context specifically for the colonizers and the colonized nations. Also, a subsequent question may arise regarding the applicability of Fanon’s framework in case of Muslim groups in the US as they are citizens of a free country. I contend that the otherization of Muslims in the US has similarities

of the exploited groups in Fanon's texts. I defend my argument borrowing from Fanon himself as he writes that,

“All forms of exploitation are alike.. All forms of exploitation are identical, since they apply to the same “object”: man. By considering the structure of such and such an exploitation from an abstract point of view we are closing our eyes to the fundamentally important problem of restoring man to his rightful place” (Fanon [1952] 2008, 69)

Therefore, I draw attention of readers to consider the exploitation of Muslims in the US through Fanonian theorization of alienation and subsequent development of inferiority complex. In this paper, I argue that the making of Muslim identity and ideals in the US continue to impose alienation on Muslim communities through political rhetoric and policies. In doing so, I analyze the framing of Islamophobic rhetoric from different political elites and institutions in the US to support my argument. I also contend that such recognitions of Muslims as the “other” lead to internalization of alienation in constructing Muslim identity, and development of inferiority complex in Muslim communities in the US and elsewhere. In doing so, I first discuss the Fanonian analysis of alienation and recognition to show how this dehumanizes the marginalized communities. Then I analyze the origin and extent of anti-Islamic rhetoric in the US. I also shed light upon how different political elites and institutions have deteriorated the process of alienation over years. To validate Fanon's theoretical claims, I explain how this otherization impacts the identity of the Muslim population and makes them feel stigmatized.

**Frantz Fanon, Alienation and the Muslim Question:**

Frantz Fanon critically demonstrated the development of inferiority complex in the minds of the colonized people using psychoanalytical explanation. It happens through certain exclusionary actions of the outside structure of the world dominated by the colonizers. It translates into one ideal vision: that the oppressed groups cannot be themselves, they have to follow others. Then the objective of the black individual, according to Fanon, is not to envision a future of their own, as he writes that, “as painful as it is for us to have to say this: there is but one destiny for the black man. And it is white” (Fanon [1952] 2008, xiv). This becomes the reality of the alienated communities who cannot imagine a future without adopting that of others. It is as if there is something wrong in their own identity. The process of alienation takes place in different ways.

In explaining the process of alienation, Fanon mentions clearly that individuals can be left alienated from the society through the process of “internalization or rather epidermalization of this inferiority” (Fanon [1952] 2008, xiv). It is at that point they do not feel like being a part of the whole. In the beginning of the book *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Fanon quotes A. Césaire from “Discourse on Colonialism” to make the point more illustrious: “*I am talking about millions of men whom they have knowingly instilled with fear and a complex of inferiority, whom they have infused with despair and trained to tremble, to kneel and behave like flunkys*” (Fanon [1952] 2008, xi). These individuals who are infused with despair are victims of phobia of the society. They must be on guard to behave properly.

This also translates into the expectation that the inferiorized need to follow the mainstream dominant group to be recognized as worthy human beings, otherwise they need to be watched. Fanon writes that “the more the black Antillean assimilates the French language, the whiter he gets—i.e., the closer he comes to becoming a true human being” (Fanon [1952] 2008, 2). He is

talking about the colonized subjects upon whom the French colony imposed cultural and linguistic values. If one does not speak French well from their colonies, one is not civilized enough. One does not follow French cultural ideals; one is not considered as a dignified human being. Inseparably, the underlying assumption is that those people are not good with their own ideals and cultural values. The marginalized are otherwise living in darkness as Fanon writes that “the more the colonized has assimilated the cultural values of the metropolis, the more he will have escaped the bush” (Fanon [1952] 2008, 2). Likewise, society in the modern context expects that those who are not in the mainstream need to adopt the cultural values of the mainstream to come out of their “bush”. They are not capable of assimilating with others being who they are, they need to be taught lessons about proper culture. We can incorporate Marx to further establish the connection between alienation and otherization. Egan notes that “for Marx, alienation represents the systematic denial of species-being, our fundamental nature as social beings that produce the material and social conditions of our existence” (Egan 2007, 143).

Fanon wrote in the context of the French colonial expression in the twentieth century that he personally experienced as an individual born in a French colony, and as a black man. He is right in stating that “society, unlike biochemical processes, does not escape human influence” (Fanon [1952] 2008, xv). How the politicians and policy makers cultivate, and fuel rhetoric has direct consequences on individuals and groups. Let us have a look at the following interaction that Fanon describes in his *Black Skin, White Masks*:

“Consulting physicians know this. Twenty European patients come and go:

“Please have a seat. Now what’s the trouble? What can I do for you today?”

In comes a black man or an Arab: “Sit down, old fellow. Not feeling well?

Where’s it hurting?” When it’s not: “You not good?” (Fanon [1952] 2008, 15)

The interaction demonstrates that the otherization of certain groups have multidimensional manifestations. The atmosphere itself is structured in a way that the inferiorized others are made to feel constantly that they are the “other”. In regular day to day life, how white European patients are dealt with and how the behavior reverses when it’s someone who is black or an Arab may be a small incident, but it has larger significance in illustrating that the presence of domineering narratives is felt everywhere.

He also gives us another relevant example where the alienated individuals feel that they cannot escape the feeling no matter where they are:

“I can’t go to the movies without encountering myself. I wait for myself. Just before the film starts, I wait for myself. Those in front of me look at me, spy on me, wait for me. A black bellhop is going to appear. My aching heart makes my head spin” (Fanon [1952] 2008, 119)

Again, we notice how the black man is visible in a different way, as if his presence is unexpected and unwelcome. Society does not like his presence in certain places, at least not on equal footing with the dominant groups. Fanon analyzes the feelings of such individuals, and he unravels the ontological aspect of those who go through such alienating moments who understand the social cultural impositions that in order to get equal treatment, they have to be like the dominant groups: “if he is overcome to such a degree by a desire to be white, it’s because he lives in a society that makes his inferiority complex possible, in a society that draws its strength by maintaining this complex, in a society that proclaims the superiority of one race over another; it is to the extent that society creates difficulties for him that he finds himself positioned in a neurotic situation” (Fanon [1952] 2008, 80).

I argue that such processes of alienation extend beyond the colonizer-colonized dichotomy. In fact, Fanon also mentioned about the suppression of the Jewish and Arab people and how attacks on them have larger psychoanalytic and ontological consequences. In explaining the attacks on the Jewish people, Fanon writes that “the Jew is attacked in his religious identity, his history, his race, and his relations with his ancestors and descendants; every time a Jew is sterilized, the bloodline is cut; every time a Jew is persecuted, it is the whole race that is persecuted through him” (Fanon [1952] 2008, pp. 141-142). Attacks of any kind to Jewish individuals for their religious identity are not isolated incidents, they have a larger significance of indicting their religion and race and existence. By such attacks, they are made to feel alienated and inferior.

Now let us have a look at the conditions of Muslims in the United States. Despite the rhetoric of the United States being the ‘melting pot’ or ideal example of ‘ethnic mosaic’, the political elites and institutions continue to depict Muslims as feared ‘other’. I mentioned the explicit anti-Muslim rhetoric of Donald Trump in the beginning of the paper, but his categorization of Muslims as supporters of terrorism depicts only the tip of an iceberg of deeper structural issues regarding the construction of Muslim identity in the US. It is an acceptable view for many in the mainstream that the Muslims are the groups to be alienated, they have to adopt western cultural values, they need to be watched, they have to get rid of their own ideals which are contradictory to American values and that they need to prove their loyalty and worth as American citizens. Such voices are amplified enthusiastically by the media as Dabashi (2011) writes that “this assumption of collective Muslim guilt is a common staple of the American mass media” (Dabashi 2011, 03). However, for the scope of my paper, I engage with the rhetoric of political elites and institutions mostly in actively reproducing the process of alienating the Muslims.



Dabashi (2011) engaged with the colonized and orientalist minds in this regard extensively in his book *Brown Skin, White Masks*. Drawing from Fanon, he asserts that “Fanon anticipates a future point when the Arab will emerge as the new African, the Muslim as the new Jew, and brown as the new black” (Dabashi 2011, 34). The narrow assumptions associated with the expectations of what it means to be a true American depicts non-white and non-Christians as falling behind in line to be loyal citizens. Fanon talks about the linkage between the processes of narrow-minded nationalisms and alienation in his book *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). We find similarities with the modern American context of the twenty first century where lofty ideals of assimilation obscure the dark realities of the marginalized groups like Muslim communities on the ground.

Dabashi criticizes the mainstream narratives of the US in this regard and states that “this empire thrives on the stories it tells itself about liberty and democracy, or about "the end of history" or "the clash of civilizations" (Dabashi 2011, 128). Despite the rhetoric of individual liberty and freedom, surveillance mechanisms continue to run for Muslims under different administrations. Huntington’s ‘clash of civilizations’ thesis directly posits Islamic values as confrontational with the Western values and is rather celebrated among political elites and institutions. This has adverse consequences for common Muslims as if they are somehow accomplices for any terrorist attack perpetrated by extremists here or elsewhere. Fanon writes about collective guilt of the colonized individuals in *The Wretched of the Earth*:

“The colonized subject is constantly on his guard: Confused by the myriad signs of the colonial world he never knows whether he is out of line. Confronted with a world configured by the colonizer, the colonized subject is always presumed guilty. The colonized does not accept his guilt, but rather considers it a kind of curse, a sword of Damocles” (Fanon [1961] 2004, 16)

Many Muslims in the US likewise feel that they must be on constant guard for actions of deviant terrorists elsewhere. Many from the mainstream social structure rather views Muslims as burden rather than addressing the alienation. Hence surveillance continues. It is not a surprise therefore that Donald Trump mentioned in a tv interview in 2015 that “you're going to have to watch and study the mosques, because a lot of talk is going on at the mosques.. it's something that you're going to have to strongly consider because some of the ideas and some of the hatred, the absolute hatred, is coming from these areas” (Byrnes, 2015).

It is evident that where a presidential candidate can insinuate that the worship places of Muslims the US are probable places where terror plots are made, such societies tend to be less tolerant to accept Muslims as they are. The mainstream wants others to be like them, otherwise the process of alienation continues. As we can see, in modern context, confluence of classic orientalist views, and imperialist stance of the United States abroad perpetuates the anti-Muslim rhetoric in the country. I explain the role of this in constructing Muslim identity in more in detail in the next section.

### **Construction of Muslim Identity as the Other:**

The construction of Muslim identity in the US mainstream narrative cannot be disassociated from threat perception of them as somewhat dangerous and at odds with American ideals. They are otherized through a perceived association with backwardness and terrorism. Like Fanon’s colonized subjects, they are seen as holding on to backward ideals and un-American values. In contemporary times, an essential dimension of how the identity of Muslims is portrayed in the US is that they are made to feel guilty for anti-western stances of people elsewhere. Dabashi states that,

“The most important regional factors contributing to the perception of Islam and Islamism as the *bête noire* of the West were the 1977-79 Islamic revolution in Iran, the formation of Hezbollah in the aftermath of the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the emergence of Hamas in Palestine after the commencement of the First Intifada in 1987, and the emergence of Groupe Islamique Arme in Algeria after the country's military government annulled the victory of the Islamic Salvation Front in the 1992 general elections” (Dabashi 2011, 11).

Apart from that, the notorious 9/11 attacks brought disastrous consequences for Muslims in the United States as if they were the perpetrators and/or accomplices. The 9/11 attacks deteriorated the perception with direct consequences on lives of common Muslims. Islamic ideals were again seen as associational with terrorism. This is not surprising given how the scare was normalized in the mainstream. The discourse that terrorism and Islam is not entirely separate and isolated as Dabashi explains: “the recodification of racism in North America whereby the Jew became the Muslim and the black the brown (or Arab, in a color-coded register) was predicated on a fundamental logical flaw, whereby the criminal acts of a band of militant Muslim adventurers was politicized, identified as definitive to a world religion, and called "Islamic terrorism" (Dabashi 2011, 125).

However, it would be incomprehensive to think of the spread of anti-Islamic rhetoric after 2001 without taking into account myriad ways in which Islam and Muslims have been vilified in the country. Islamophobia has its roots in the US history as Beydoun (2018) writes that,

“Islamophobia is a modern extension and articulation of an old system that branded Muslims as inherently suspicious and unassimilable and cast Islam as a rival ideology at odds with American values, society, and national identity.

Centuries before the current era of Islamophobia, and ‘long before 9/11 and the war on terrorism, U.S. courts painted Islam as more than merely a foreign religion, but rather as a rival ideology and ‘enemy race’” Beydoun (2018, 13).

In fact, starting right from the foundation of the state, Islamic values and ideals were seen as oppositional with the American idea. Wright analyzes that “the earliest and most prominent of these appeared in the form of an American evangelical re-figuring of an English Protestant polemical tradition.. Islam (paired frequently with Catholicism) was portrayed variously as the product of imposture, violent enthusiasm, and political opportunism” (Wright 2016, 51). The exclusionary nature of immigration laws did not help the integration of Muslims either. “In line with the demonization of entire bloc of immigrants, the courts prohibited Muslim immigrants from becoming naturalized citizens from 1790 to 1944”, during the period in which again “Muslim identity, by law, was viewed as contradictory with American citizenship” (Beydoun 2018, 46-47). The following point that Beydoun makes has direct similarities with how Fanon described the French colonial subjects in *Black Skin, White Masks*: “the Naturalization Act of 1790 persuaded many Muslims considering emigrating to the United States to stay home, while those who did travel across the Atlantic for the promise of a better life were largely destined to become lifelong aliens in a new land, restricted from becoming naturalized citizens on account of their Muslim identity” (Beydoun 2018, 48).

We can observe legal and structural issues that depicted Muslims as incompatible with true American identity throughout history. This got further perpetuated by an orientalist lens. Edward Said theorized the orientalist gaze in his book *Orientalism* (1978) where he explains the problematic production of knowledge that depicts Islam as a distinctly incompatible ideology vis-à-vis the west. Dabashi sees an essential role of orientalism in deepening anti-Muslim rhetoric as he states that “the

principal achievement of the Orientalist project is the false binary opposition between Islam and the West which has made this particularly oppositional "Islam" definitive to the cultures in which it is embedded” (Dabashi 2011, 85). The problematic categorization continues to manifest in American social and political lives. In the mainstream political arena, “the presumption is that Islam is inherently violent, alien, and unassimilable, a presumption driven by the belief that expressions of Muslim identity correlate with a propensity for terrorism” (Beydoun 2018, 28)

In modern context, a multiplicity of institutions perpetuate the anti-Muslim rhetoric. Pratt and Woodlock (2016) analyze this with the following figure which shows active interactions between different influential actors and factors that affect Muslims negatively in the US:

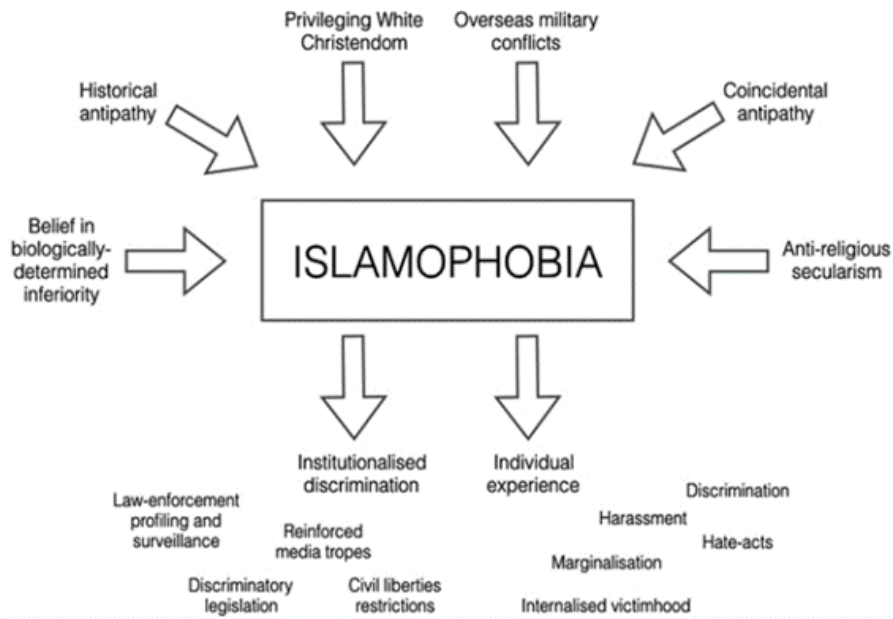


Figure: How Islamophobia is produced and how it impacts communities (Pratt and Woodlock 2016, 11)

The self-explanatory figure nicely captures how intermingling structures of political elites and institutions fuel anti-Muslim rhetoric and how that affects the Muslims in general. Historical legacy, white supremacy, racism, and religious superiority get diluted together to construct the identification of Muslims as the other. The consequences are also evident in the figure as such actions lead to Fanonian sense of alienation and inferiority through infringement of rights, discrimination and hate crimes. Beydoun summarizes it succinctly saying that “it is a system that redeploys stereotypes of Muslims deeply rooted in the collective American imagination and endorsed by formative case law, foundational policy on immigration and citizenship, and the writings and rhetoric of this nation’s founding fathers” (Beydoun 2018, 13).

For an unsuspecting observer, the hypocrisy of indicting Muslims in the US for terrorist attacks perpetrated by Muslims elsewhere may not catch attention easily. One may argue that it was not unexpected that there would be anti-Muslim attacks since 9/11 attacks were perpetrated by some deviant radical Islamists. However, the manifestation of vilifying Muslims gets clarified by the fact that when the attackers are Muslims, the entire communities come under question. However, not all attacks are carried by them, and when it is not carried by a Muslim, the patterns of questions are different. The attackers motives’ are investigated and rightfully their entire race and religion do not come under attack, however, the same is often not reflected when the attacker is a follower of Islam. Their ideals, race, religion and ideals come under question with renewed calls of surveillance and monitoring. Beydoun (2018) recalls the reactions in the immediate aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombings of 1995: “minutes after the Oklahoma City attack, and well before a formal investigation into the bombing had commenced, the mainstream media, the majority of the American public, and soon after, the state ruled that “Middle Eastern terrorists” were the culprits, focusing the collective rage on Muslims at large” (Beydoun 2018, 73).

This is where the colonial gaze over Muslim identity gets manifested again. The real attacker was a US born white citizen, and yet the presumption from the mainstream was that this attack must have been carried out by a Muslim from the middle east. The attacker's race and religion would not come to a question when it is not a Muslim. Contrarily, let us now look at what happened after the 9/11 attacks and how Muslims were brought under racialized surveillance. The Bush administration established a massive surveillance structure named the National Security Entry-Exit Registration System (NSEERS) in 2002 which required "men from twenty-three Muslim-majority countries, as well as from North Korea, to register with the US government" and according to data provided by the Department of Homeland Security, "between September 11, 2002, and June 1, 2003, almost 128,000 Arab and Muslim men were registered at their US port of entry, while approximately 83,000 Arabs and Muslims already residing in the United States were registered" (Green 2015, 270). When Obama administration came to power, they "expanded the surveillance state and "localized" state scrutiny of Muslim subjects by enabling local law enforcement to monitor "homegrown radicalization"" (Beydoun 2018, 38). When Trump administration came to power, anti-Muslim rhetoric mixed with xenophobia was unleashed officially leading to further alienation of Muslims as a group. The underlying presumptions in these measures is that Muslims need to be watched, they are not fully integrated as Americans, and that they constitute threats to the ideals and security of the country.

These measures effectively posit Muslims as the other, as the feared enemy, like Fanon depicted the fate of the colonized individuals in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and colonized nations in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). Anderson helps us explain this further: "race, class, status in the empire are not merely labels, they are positions in universal antagonisms and existential conflicts" (Anderson 2018, 490). The racialization of Muslim groups makes them

appear as the enemy of the state who are not to be assimilated, rather alienated. The intersectional mix of race and religion complicates it further. Beydoun states that “African American Muslims comprise 24 percent of the Muslim American population, followed by South Asian and Arab American Muslims, at 23 and 22 percent respectively, and the Latinx American Muslim community is estimated to comprise 6 percent” (Beydoun 2018, 20). Given the problematic history of race relations of the United States since its founding, for Muslims, the combination of being mostly non-white and adhering to the religion of Islam comes with greater challenges of assimilation. Facing the process of alienation is normalized for them.

As a consequence, the mainstream American gaze makes Muslim be on alert and feel collective guilt. They are made to feel inferior to others. Problematic construction of Muslim identity as the feared other is thus “propagated by law and perpetuated by policy, policy that fluidly communicates damaging stereotypes and misrepresentations about Muslims to the broader polity, which has the effect of endorsing popular views and misconceptions, and at the extreme, emboldening hate and violence directed at Muslims and individuals incorrectly perceived as Muslims” (Beydoun 2018, 28). Instead of addressing this otherization, the US political elites rather continue to cultivate the rhetoric. Muslim identity continues to be attacked and victimized. Cultural imposition of ideals on them does not cease to pour on them. In the next section, I explain how political elites perpetuate the rhetoric of otherizing and alienating Muslims more explicitly and how this has become rather normalized in the mainstream.

### **The Anti-Muslim Rhetoric and the Process of Alienation:**

"If you want Islam and Sharia law, you stay over there in the Middle East. You stay there, and you go to Mecca and do all your thing. And, you know what, you can have a whole bunch of wives, or goats, or sheep, or whatever you want. You stay



over there. But in America, see, we've made it this great, great country. We don't want it messed up."- Marjorie Taylor Greene, GOP Congresswoman-elect in 2020 from Georgia's 14<sup>th</sup> Congressional district (Mutnick and Zanona, 2020).

The remarks made by the GOP Congresswoman-elect from Georgia are not qualitatively different from what Fanon described about the colonized subjects in his texts. She does not hide the orientalist depiction of Islam, Arabs, Muslims and the Middle East in her frank viewpoints. It is obvious that the existence of Muslims in the United States is unwanted to her and that she thinks that presence of Muslims would "mess up" the greatness of the United States. Despite repeated Islamophobic remarks in the mainstream like this, "it has become rather conventional to dismiss many of the individuals and groups that comprise the Islamophobia industry as lunatics, fringe actors or aggravators who occupy merely peripheral spaces" (Lean 2017, 123). However, such remarks cannot be discarded as mere fringe comments by someone who is not prominent. A major political party has endorsed her nomination to be a lawmaker in the United States and she has won by securing an overwhelming 74.6% votes in her seat in the 2020 congressional election (Georgia election results, 2020). She is soon going to be an elected representative of people in the US Congress. In the age of social media and online news sites, her remarks do not get confined to the people of her constituency only. She gets cheered in her party for her magnificent victory and she does not have to face any consequences for suggesting Muslims to "stay over there in Middle East".

This depicts a dark reality of how the identity of Muslims has become disposable in the mainstream US political arena. The hatred, phobia, portrayal of Islam and Muslims as equivalent with backwardness are normalized in the mainstream narrative. The message gets repeated that Muslims are unwanted, their presence is unwarranted and that they cannot be assimilated, rather

they should be alienated, otherized and kept marginalized and isolated. In fact, this portrayal has become so common and so normalized that many prominent political elites have no troubles in establishing their career despite such remarks. Rubin (2020) found instances where “Dr. Ben Carson called Islam “inconsistent” with the American Constitution” and “Ted Cruz echoed Trump’s call for an immigration ban on Muslims” (Rubin 2020, 115). Both of them are big names in the Republican Party with huge followings and established political ties in the mainstream.

However, these do not seem to be of surprise when one looks at the history of different administration’s stance on Muslims over years. Fawaz Gerges (2012) finds that administrations under Clinton, Carter, Reagan and Bush in some way or the other kept alienating the Muslims. He mentions an interview of president-elect Reagan in the Time magazine in 1980 where he stated that “lately we have seen the possibilities of, literally, a religious war – the Muslims returning to the idea that the way to heaven is to lose your life fighting the Christians or the Jews” (Gerges 2012, 59). We again notice the overgeneralizations of Muslims as fighting against Christians and Jews. The Muslims are savages, they are not compatible with the modern times. As Kundnani notes that “the vocabulary of ‘terrorism’, ‘extremism’ and ‘radicalization’ is selectively applied in order to systematically associate Muslims with fanatical violence” (Kundnani 2017, 35).

When we look at rhetoric of Obama, Bush and Trump and analyze their remarks about Islam and Muslims while talking about the threats of terrorism, the arguments become clearer.

<i>President</i>	<i>No. of speeches on terrorism that mention tolerance toward Muslims (pct of total)</i>	<i>No. of speeches on terrorism that do not mention tolerance toward Muslims (pct of total)</i>
Trump, 2017–Feb. 2019	4 (5%)	78 (95%)
Obama, 2009–2016	39 (29%)	96 (71%)
Bush, Sept. 2001–Jan. 2009	60 (13.5%)	386 (86.5%)

Figure: Islam and terrorism in presidential speeches (Rubin 2020, 118)

Rubin (2020) conducted a study of the presidential speeches of Bush, Obama and Trump on terrorism and found that most of the time, there is no mention of tolerance towards Muslims in discussing the terrorist threats, as depicted above in the chart. The author points out that “the war on terrorism would represent an ideological battle between civilization and “evil” (Rubin 2020, 61). The rhetorical narrative of Bush administration contributed to the worsening image of Muslim countries to be in clash with western values. This effectively reinforced the “worldview that casts Islam as the civilizational antithesis of the West and that is built upon the core stereotypes and baseline distortions of Islam and Muslims embedded in American institutions and the popular imagination by Orientalist theory, narratives, and law” (Beydoun 2018, 28-29)

One can understand the extent of such portrayals from the following examples. Former New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani, in an attempt to attack his political opponents regarding ‘softness on terrorism’ “complained that they “never mentioned the word ‘Islamic terrorist,’ ‘Islamic extremist,’ ‘Islamic fascist,’ ‘terrorist,’ whatever combination of those words you want to use, [the] words never came up” (Cole 2011, 136). He specifically wanted a portrayal of Islam with terrorism. We do not see the calls to associate other religion with terrorism per se in the US, but the problem specifically lies with Islam in the rhetoric of political elites. At a campaign rally

in 2015, presidential candidate Donald Trump released a statement where he urged for “a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until our country’s representatives can figure out what the hell is going on” (Berenson, 2015). Thus the process of alienation gets repeated to otherize Muslims. It is normalized, and targeting Muslims does not have effective negative consequences. Political elites are not required to apologize for offending the Muslims, rather can be rewarded by electoral victories as evident through wins of several Islamophobic candidates in the elections.

Fanon acknowledged the domestic risks and costs associated with imperial wars abroad. When a country wages wars abroad, people at home can suffer consequences. He writes that “imperialism, which today is waging war against a genuine struggle for human liberation, sows seeds of decay here and there that must be mercilessly rooted out from our land and from our minds” (Fanon [1961] 2004, 181). We observe a decay in terms of dehumanizing the other, which does not only take place for people abroad, but also for people at home. It affects the dignity of individuals and diminishes them to nothingness. Sympathizing with the psychoanalytic woes of such individuals, he writes that,

“May man never be instrumentalized. May the subjugation of man by man—that is to say, of me by another—cease. May I be allowed to discover and desire man wherever he may be” (Fanon [1952] 2008, 206).

In reality, Muslims continue to be subjugated heavily in the US. As evident through different instances in the paper, they are not considered as civilized groups, or as people with true American identity. This has significant impact on the feelings of those who belong to the alienated identity. Fanon illustrates it nicely, “because it is a systematized negation of the other, a frenzied determination to deny the other any attribute of humanity, colonialism forces the colonized to

constantly ask the question: “Who am I in reality?” (Fanon [1961] 2004, 182). I argue that the constant negation of Muslims in the US by implying that their ideals are not compatible with western values, by keeping them under surveillance, by reinforcing the processes of alienation in different ways, their identity is kept hyphenated politically and socially and thus they cannot but consider themselves as inferiors. I explain the overall impact of the process of alienation and problematic recognition on Muslims in the next section.

### **The Inferiorized Identity of Muslims:**

“Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter round it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? they say, I know an excellent colored man in my town; or, I fought at Mechanicsville; or, Do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil? At these I smile, or am interested, or reduce the boiling to a simmer, as the occasion may require. To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word.” (Du Bois, [1903] 2014, 4)

The obvious impact on the identity of Muslims in the US is the portrayal that for many, holding a Muslim sense of identification in the US is a *problem*. Green notes that “Islamophobia includes both what people feel toward Muslims (hostility, fear) and how those feelings are translated into concrete actions against Muslims (discrimination, exclusion)” (Green 2015, 267). This gets manifested in several ways. Green (2015) cites FBI reports that recorded “481 incidents of hate crimes against Muslims and Muslim “look-alikes” (that is, non-Muslim Arabs, Sikhs, and others mistaken as Muslims by the perpetrator) in 2001” (Green 2015, 270).

This also had a gendered dimension as “veiled Muslim women faced an increased risk of abuse and hostility by virtue of the visibility of their Muslim identity” (Zempi and Chakraborti 2019, 48). The situation continued to worsen in subsequent years. Beydoun (2018) mentions studies that reported a staggering 584 per cent increase of private targeting of Muslim Americans from 2014 to 2016; seventy-eight attacks on US mosques in 2015; and 2213 anti-Muslim hate incidents in 2015 (Beydoun 2018, 33-34).

I have used the numbers of recorded aggression against Muslims to give a sense of the seriousness of the situation about overall scenario of Muslims in the US, especially after 9/11. Such incidents of hate crimes had obvious impact on the identification of Muslims. In his book titled *The Ethics of Identity* (2005), Kwame Anthony Appiah describes different aspects of soul making and asserts that our surroundings have a role in the making of our souls. Likewise, what Muslims face in the day to day life influences them to rethink their dignity in the society. Let us recall Fanon who illustrated the feelings of disalienation among colonized groups:

“We cannot go resolutely forward unless we first realize our alienation. We have taken everything from the other side. Yet the other side has given us nothing except to sway us in its direction through a thousand twists, except lure us, seduce us, and imprison us by ten thousand devices, by a hundred thousand tricks” (Fanon [1961] 2004, 163)

Sedique (2020) studied stigma consciousness among American Muslims which she defined as “the process wherein people are explicitly aware that they are being targeted because of an identity that is devalued in a specific social context” (Sedique 2020, 674). Her findings demonstrate that “Muslims with higher levels of stigma consciousness are less likely to identify as American” and as “being American is synonymous with whiteness, Muslims distance

themselves from that identity when they have higher levels of stigma consciousness” (Sedique 2020, 677). The process of alienation thus succeeds in otherizing Muslims in the US. Beydoun also asserts that “because Muslim and American identities are constructed as opposable, any performance of Americanness requires downplaying Muslim identity” (Beydoun 2018, 121). Studies of other scholars also confirm the development of identity crisis among Muslims in the US, including the youth (Muna 2018; Kabir 2012; Zaal, Salah and Fine 2007).

The sense of being inferior, being dehumanized among Muslims is not a surprise in the context that “if a terrorist attack is perpetrated by a Muslim American, it seemingly justifies blaming Muslims in these communities either for “failing to adequately spy” on their community members or for “enabling” the attack by not reporting relevant information to law enforcement authorities” (Shams 2020, 104). The cycle to otherize continues. They feel hyphenated, separated, alienated and are made to feel inferior. Multidimensional interactions of different factors contribute to the alienated formation of identity as “the psychological texture of the hyphen is informed by history, the media, surveillance, politics, nation of origin, gender, biography, longings, imagination, and loss” (Sirin and Fine 2008, 195).

If we recall Fanon in this regard, he mentions that “all colonized people—in other words, people in whom an inferiority complex has taken root, whose local cultural originality has been committed to the grave—position themselves in relation to the civilizing language: i.e., the metropolitan culture” (Fanon [1952] 2008, 02). The colonized people, in Fanon’s framework, are bound to adopt the civilizing cultural ideals, they are not free to hold on to their values. They need to change who they are to be accepted. They have to lose their own identity to be integrated.

The Muslims in the US are likewise seen as communities whose distinctiveness of identity is sent to the grave. A 2017 survey of the Pew Research found that 75% of Muslims in the US feel

that they are discriminated against based on their religious identity, about half of them feel that being Muslim the US has become more difficult in recent years, and only 62% feel that Islam is not part of the mainstream American society (Pew Research, 2017). They feel stigmatized for their identity, they are made to feel inferior, they are hyphenated, isolated and alienated. They carry the burden of proving their worth to be true Americans. The idea of being American does not include their identity. They suffer from discrimination, they face hate crimes, they are bullied by political elites, their mosques are under attack, they are under surveillance, and yet they are unwanted. The “us versus them” rhetoric thus affects them leading to feelings of inferiority. Even the young generation of Muslims, many of whom know only one country, in which they were born, are made to feel excluded by the constant cultivation of rhetoric against them.

“Fact: some Whites consider themselves superior to Blacks.

Another fact: some Blacks want to prove at all costs to the Whites the wealth of the black man’s intellect and equal intelligence” (Fanon [1952] 2008, xiv)

Like Fanon’s statements mentioned above, facing constant rhetoric of otherization, Muslim Americans feel that they need to prove their worth as human beings. More often than not, the worth of Muslim refugees or immigrants need to be showcased to make the case that they are not terrorists. They are not free, they are subservient to the narratives that they are not deserving American citizens. Political elites and institutions repeat the narratives. Muslims are seen as omnipresent threats which is normalized. This has worsened in recent times as Shams asserts, “the spate of ISIS terrorist attacks across the globe, the contentious national debates surrounding President Trump’s “Muslim ban,” and the mass media’s coverage of Muslim-related conflicts depicting Islam as being directly opposed to Western, Christian ideologies have all added to the



hypervisibility of this minority as a “threat” in American society” (Shams 2020, 103). The burden of proof falls on the shoulders of Muslims to show that they are not threats.

Thus the identity of being a Muslim comes with many baggage in the US. Indeed, “from even a cursory look at attempts to ascertain the sources of anti-Muslim bigotry in the United States, it becomes clear that there does not appear to be a single basis for anti-Muslim attitudes; rather anti-Muslim attitudes are complex and multifaceted” ( GhaneaBassiri 2015, 56). The systematic processes of alienation, structural otherization, recognition of Muslims as threat aided by Islamophobic rhetoric and orientalist gaze, the identity of Muslims is inferiorized. They are the wretched groups in the United States, they are expendable, and victimizing them does not matter often in the mainstream as they are dehumanized. Fanon’s psychoanalytic framework of alienation thus helps us understand the imposition of cultural ideals and values and subsequent plight of Muslims and problematic construction of Muslim identity in the US.

### **Concluding Remarks:**

“Not responsible for my acts, at the crossroads between Nothingness and Infinity, I began to weep” (Fanon [1952] 2008, 119)

Fanon comprehensively theorized the psychoanalytic aspect of the development of inferiority complex of the oppressed that take place through external imposition of the process of alienation. The colonized, oppressed and the marginalized lose own sense of identity in the process. The process adversely impacts the dignity of identity for individuals and groups. They cannot but feel isolated if they do not adopt dominant ideals and values. The above mentioned sections in the paper argue that the identity of Muslims in the US faces Fanonian process of alienation from the mainstream through different anti-Muslim

rhetoric of the political elites and institutions which leads to the development of isolated and alienated identity of being Muslims in the US.

When groups are targeted for their religious affiliation specifically, when they feel unwanted and when it becomes normalized by the mainstream political culture, it signifies that the state is not facilitating the process of inclusion for them. Fanon questions the countries when they alienate the oppressed groups systematically: “if you think you can perfectly govern a country without involving the people, if you think that by their very presence the people confuse the issue, that they are a hindrance or, through their inherent unconsciousness, an undermining factor, then there should be no hesitation: The people must be excluded” (Fanon [1961] 2004, 131). The impact of this hyphenated sense of identity can be far reaching. Fanon quotes Baruk and writes that “we shall only be free of hate complexes once mankind has learned to repudiate the complex of the scapegoat.” (Fanon [1952] 2008, 161). We have seen in the previous sections how Muslims have been made scapegoat on several cases and the pattern continues. As scapegoating of Muslims continue, the hate complex against them also perpetuates.

If the propagated ideals of being American are to be materialized, Muslims as a group should not be left out and alienated because of their religious affiliation. Fanon reminds us that “genuine disalienation will have been achieved only when things, in the most materialist sense, have resumed their rightful place” (Fanon [1952] 2008, xv). Critics may say that it is the responsibility of Muslims to reach out to political elites and make themselves more visible and acceptable. However, echoing Fanon, I write that “let us have the courage to say: *It is the racist who creates the inferiorized*” (Fanon [1952] 2008, 73). The American political elites and institutions need to have the discussion for how long they

will facilitate Islamophobia in the mainstream. Especially given how large portion of even young Muslim Americans feels that they face an identity crisis for being Muslims in the US (Muna 2018; Kabir 2012; Zaal, Salah and Fine 2007), it is imperative that the state offers a more inclusive future for them and others. The work to build trust and integrate the alienated Muslims can start from now.

That said, this does not mean that Muslims as a group should continue to feel subjugated, alienated and inferiorized and do nothing to alleviate the sufferings. Fanon suggests that “it is through self-consciousness and renunciation, through a permanent tension of his freedom, that man can create the ideal conditions of existence for a human world” (Fanon [1952] 2008, 206). Muslims as a group should strive to achieve freedom from their alienation through a developing sense of consciousness. He also reminds us that “self-awareness does not mean closing the door on communication” (Fanon [1961] 2004, 179). Communication cannot take place one-sided though and the American political elites and institutions should initiate open ended dialogues and take meaningful actions to eradicate the threat perception of Muslims as the feared other and integrate them with Americanness rather than alienating them.

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