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Muslim Motherhood

This article explores the complexities and intersections of cultural, religious, and socioeconomic factors that shape Muslim motherhood and the resiliency of Muslim mothers while raising children in North America. I argue that Muslim mothers are marginalized in an intersectional manner. As Muslims, they are religious minority group members in the West, and the majority are members of racialized minority groups of colour. The concept of "killjoy" is explored as a means of representing the heaviness of maternal guilt felt by Muslim mothers raising resilient children in the West. I share my mothering journey and new perspectives on being a killjoy.

The National Poll on Children's Health ("Mom Shaming or Constructive Criticism", 2017) highlights that six in ten mothers have been criticized about how they parent their young children in Michigan (US). Racialized mothers are criticized more than white, privileged, middle-class, and heterosexual mothers (Aanerud). This article argues that Muslim mothers experience more surveillance and judgment than white mothers because Muslim motherhood is a multifaceted realm of a unique struggle. The intersections between religion, culture, and ethnicity not only portray the oppressive and unrealistic expectations imposed on Muslim mothers but also highlight the resilient forms of resistance that Muslim mothers employ (Abuzahra). The article seeks to clarify the complexities and intersections of cultural, religious, and socioeconomic factors shaping Muslim motherhood and the resiliency of Muslim mothers while raising children in North America. In exploring the Islamic teachings of motherhood and cultural expectations of mothering, this article discusses the Qur'anic example of breastfeeding. Islam gives rights that empower Muslim mothers; however, cultural expectations make Muslim mothers vulnerable (Ahmed and Gorey). The article examines the struggles, triumphs, and complexities of Muslim motherhood by exploring the concept of the "killjoy" (Ahmed S), the heaviness of maternal guilt, and how Muslim

mothers grapple with societal expectations while motivated to raise resilient children in North America.

Muslim mothers can be in triple-quadruple jeopardy of experiencing societal backlash and criticism in comparison to mothers in general. Their intersecting identities include several prevalently oppressed groups. As women, they remain marginalized; as Muslims, they are religious minority group members in the West, and the majority are members of racialized minority groups of colour, so they face cultural oppression (Ahmed and Gorey). Muslim mothering aligns with matricentric feminism in that mothering matters to mothers' lives. For Muslim mothers, mothering is a "significant, if not a defining dimension of their lives" (O'Reilly, "Matricentric Feminism" 14).

Muslim mothers face many intersecting barriers while raising their children in North America. Because Muslim society does not differentiate between religion and culture, Muslim mothers have to bear the consequences both culturally and religiously. Muslim mothers have societal and religious pressure to ensure their children have a solid understanding of the religion Islam; they must balance Islamic values and cultural traditions. Moreover, Muslim mothers who wear the hijab may be targeted, as they are easily identifiable (Litchmore and Safdar). Muslim mothers have to perform normative motherhood, which is oppressive because it is a social construction of motherhood that regulates mothers on how they mother. O'Reilly has introduced ten standards of normative motherhood: "essentialization, privatization, individualization, naturalization, normalization, idealization, biologicalization, expertization, intensification, and depoliticalization" ("Normative Motherhood" 494). These are considered the normative traits of good mothers, and mothers who do not achieve any of these can never be considered good. This default parameter of motherhood not only excludes all the mothers who are young, queer, single, racialized, trans, and nonbinary but also labels them bad mothers.

When Muslim mothers perform their normative mothering act, they also cannot achieve the good mother trophy regardless of their efforts to raise their children according to their religious teachings, such as reading every label to avoid pork or gelatine or finding time to answer the racist questions asked by their children's classmates about why their mothers cover themselves.

O'Reilly defines the normative construct of good mothers as nurturing, altruistic, patient, devoted, loving, and selfless. In this normative construct, mothers always put the needs of their children before their own and are available to them whenever needed. And if the mothers intend to work outside the home, their children rather than their employment should be at the centre of their lives. Mothers are ashamed not to love their children every minute, a requirement of normative motherhood. Sharon Hays's philosophy of intensive mothering "advise[s] mothers to expend a tremendous amount of time, energy

and money in raising children" (8). However, as Hays continues, "In a society where over half of all mothers with young children are now working outside the home, one might wonder why our culture pressures women to dedicate so much of themselves to child rearing" (x). These two contradictory expectations—raising children and working outside the home—are perfect interpretations of marginalized mothering in North America. These mothers do their best to provide their children with the time, effort, and resources they need. Like many cultures, the South Asian culture (my culture), however, expects them to be stay-at-home mothers who should not go out and work or go to school and should instead remain dependent on their husbands. No wonder mothers say, "I love my children, but I hate motherhood."

O'Reilly argues that "Motherhood is the unfinished business of feminism" ("Matricentric Feminism" 13). When feminists talk about the intersectionality and forms of oppression based on gender, religion, and authenticity, they ignore women's identity as mothers. Patriarchy oppresses women in general; however, mothers' experiences add overwhelming barriers due to this identity as just being a mother. Cultural portrayal and expectations of Muslim motherhood are oppressive. However, the experiences and expectations of Muslim mothers vary widely depending on cultural, social, and individual factors. Some may follow traditional gender roles and expectations, but many others actively challenge and redefine those roles, seeking to balance their faith with their personal and family goals. The cultural expectations for Muslim mothers may be seen as oppressive in one context and could be empowering in another. Normative ideas about Muslim mothering are often perpetuated by Muslim sheikhs (preachers) and because the majority of sheikhs are men, it is highly dominated by male vision of motherhood responsibilities. Researchers and academics often fail to distinguish between culture, religion, and oppression and mix cultural norms and religion as one (Esposito and Kalin). I distinguish between the religious concept of Islamic motherhood and cultural norms of Muslim motherhood because it is crucial to see Muslim normative mothering as oppressive.

Nursing Mothers in Islam

Breastfeeding in Islam is an example of the added barriers Muslim mothers face. Some controversial issues on breastfeeding arise because many cultural practices become confused with religious ones. Although Islam encourages mothers to breastfeed their children, and being breastfed is outlined as one of the child's rights, it also explains that it is the responsibility of both parents (not only mothers). Following the teachings of the Quran, Muslim mothers often breastfeed their babies until the age of two lunar years, approximately twenty-two days before the child's second birthday. In Quran (The holy book

for Muslims), Allah says in Surah al-Baqarah that "The mothers shall give suck to their children for two whole years, [that is] for those [parents] who desire to complete the term of suckling, but the father of the child shall bear the cost of the mother's food and clothing on a reasonable basis" (2:233). If the couple gets separated and the wife asks her husband for payment for breastfeeding her children, then he must pay her. In Quran, Allah says in al-Talaaq that "Then if they give suck to the children for you, give them their due payment" (65:6). The father must find an alternative milk source and pay compensation if the baby's mother does not breastfeed. If the father dies during the nursing period, the maintenance cost of the baby should be borne by his heirs (usually the baby's paternal grandfather).

Although the father's roles are clearly outlined in the Quran, in many Muslim cultures, the father does not follow the teachings or get involved. Huda argues that breastfeeding is recommended in Islam if the mother is able, and her hardship is acknowledged and appreciated. The Qur'an says, "His mother carried him with hardship and gave birth to him in hardship" (46:15). If the mother cannot breastfeed the child for any reason, the Quran orders the father to find a wet nurse or fostermother: "And if you decide on a foster-mother for your offspring, there is no blame on you, provided you pay [the fostermother] what you offered, on equitable terms" (2:233). Thus, in terms of a nursing mother's rights and responsibilities, there is no sign of oppression. However, the cultural and societal expectations of Muslim nursing mothers are to nurse the child no matter what, stay at home, and leave the workforce (regardless of their socioeconomic status). If mothers want to pursue a career, they should pause their studies because their children need them. If Muslim mothers choose to feed their babies formula and send their children to daycare, they are called out because the belief is that only mothers know what their children need. Muslim mothers have to perform normative mothering regardless of the rights given to them by their religion.

Both O'Reilly's list of normative mothering traits, including "biological-ization, in its emphasis on blood ties, positions the cisgender birthmother as the 'real' and authentic mother" and "expertization and intensification of motherhood—particularly as they are conveyed in what Sharon Hays has termed "intensive mothering" and what Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels call 'the new momism'—cause childrearing to be all consuming and expert driven" ("Normative Motherhood" 494). Muslim cultural expectations of good mothers are that they should be the primary caregivers of their children. In most cases, they have to take on the responsibilities of caregiving not only to their children but to the extended families as well because, in many cultures, their parents-in-law and their dependent children (sister-in-law, brother-in-law) live in the same household.

Other Intersecting Barriers

Muslim mothers face more barriers if they are immigrant mothers. The birth countries of these mothers might have some privileges, such as family, friends, peers, and other relatives (grandparents of children) because the nuclear family does not exist in many Muslim cultures. They might also benefit from the traditions of the male as breadwinners and women as stay-at-home mothers. However, when they migrate to North America or European countries, raising children becomes complex. They not only have to achieve socially constructed traits of being good mothers but are also expected to help their husbands because they cannot bear the expense of having a good life for children alone, so now women suffer the negative consequences of capitalism. Mothers must also perform reproductive labour, such as domestic work, childcare, cooking, cleaning, and other duties.

Amina Wadud argues that because mothering is assumed a natural trait in Muslim communities, many mothers report that their suffering is often ignored, which makes them invisible. Muslim mothers' status as invisible is not discussed here to gain pity or sympathy for mothers but to emphasize the privilege that Muslim men hold as breadwinners. It gets more complicated for Muslim mothers because Muslim men are not expected to wear any significant attire, but the hijab (headscarves), which is easily identifiable, makes Muslim women targets for racism. In addition, Muslim culture enforces that mothering is an inherent trait of all women. O'Reilly argues that "naturalization assumes that maternity is natural to women—that is, all women naturally know how to mother—and that the work of mothering is driven by instinct rather than intelligence and developed by habit rather than skill" ("Normative Motherhood" 494). Motherhood in Muslim communities is also seen as natural to women and assumes that all women want to be mothers.

Muslim cultural norms create expectations and naturalize forms of unpaid labour and then encourage women to accept them, such as taking care of in-laws or extended family members (though Islam does not encourage that). Added layers for Muslim mothers raising their children in North America would be that they are expected to raise them according to the teachings of Islam. Oh (2009) explains that in Islam, a Muslim mother's responsibility is to educate her children on faithfulness and instill Islamic values and good behavioural and moral values. If their children do not fulfill the requirements, Muslim mothers who did not send their children to Islamic schools (regardless of how expensive that is) and who cared about their career or education may be blamed more than their kids. I would argue that oppression is imposed on Muslim women by cultural norms and expectations, not by religion.

My Muslim Mothering Struggles

Although both parents are important in Islam and are given great responsibilities, mothers are given a special place in Islam. They are expected to raise their children in a righteous way (Akin). The Prophet (ﷺ peace be upon him)'s hadith on mothers says the following: "Be good to your mother, Paradise under her feet." I am not competent to write a religious text on motherhood, gender, and Islam. What I am qualified to do is to write about my own experience. O'Reilly explains that "essentialization positions maternity as the basis of female identity" ("Normative Motherhood" 494). My identity as a mother allowed me to fulfill my goal of being a heterosexual woman, and I was proud of it, but giving birth was not easy. Society creates the boundaries of the bodies as male and female. I was placed within a gender binary that defines me as female, which I grew up with happily. I was given a good education and a comfortable lifestyle, as my father was a professor in Pakistan. He taught me to perform my role in society as a good daughter, Muslim, and person.

My upbringing teaches me that by being a heterosexual person, I have to produce babies because society expects me, as a woman, to be a good mother. When I arrived in Canada, I found another Pakistani community with which I thought I would be comfortable interacting, but I was not able to get any support from the community. I was a stranger in a completely different world, struggling with employment, racism, and Islamophobia. I was alone with my four-year-old daughter, struggling and trying to learn about my new country, its society, its norms, and the language. My life was consumed by work, and my daughter spent her life in daycare.

My faith in Islam and my cultural identity as Pakistani became entangled, violating my basic rights and preventing me from living a normal life. Having babies was part of my role as a heterosexual woman. I did not know my pregnancy could be that difficult, and I had morning sickness for all nine months. I was not able to cook because the smell of food made me nauseous, and I could not afford to eat at restaurants, nor did I have anybody who could cook for me. Thus, I survived only on liquid food. I was the only caregiver for my child, and I needed paid work while performing my role as a mother. I kept working for my survival.

While working, I had to practise being a Muslim mother. I never thought that there would come a day when I would have to look at labels on food or ask for the ingredients at a restaurant, or regularly check my children's school lunch menu to see if it was halal. Likewise, I never assumed that explaining to my daughter why I wore a Hijab would be this difficult when she shared that she was teased and laughed at for her mother wearing a skirt or shirt on her head. I never assumed that after 9/11 happened, I would have to tell my

daughter to hide her identity as a Muslim in her new school. While telling her the story of why I stopped wearing the hijab, I encouraged her to introduce herself as "Faith" (the English word for the name "Imaan") because I was worried for her safety in school. An unattainable ideal of a good and ideal Muslim mother was exhausting because I had to keep the balance of good motherhood as well as practise Islamic rituals of motherhood. I had to become a role model—five times praying and reciting the Quran—so my daughter could follow me. As it says in our tradition, "A mother's lap is the first school."

My Maternal Regret and Guilt

The role of a mother is both challenging and rewarding, and when it is woven into the fabric of Muslim identity, it takes on a unique tone. Maternal regrets are taboo in Muslim cultures. O'Reilly defines motherhood as the following: "The term motherhood refers to the patriarchal institute of motherhood which is male defined and controlled and is equally oppressive to the women" ("Maternal Regret" 586). I found motherhood oppressive in many ways. The journey of Muslim motherhood often begins masked by cultural expectations and societal norms. From the moment a woman becomes a mother, she is confronted with the obligations of perfection. In short, motherhood is an institute dictating how one behaves and responds according to the social construction. However, mothering is a unique experience. Unattainable versions of motherhood are oppressive, dictating how mothers are to live their lives. They not only must feel unconditional love for their children, but they should also exhibit that to the world as well. Mothers are expected to put their self, their pain, and their needs on the side. They are also expected to deny their emotional realities.

I experienced maternal regret and guilt in my journey as a mother, starting with delivery, particularly with my son. Mothers experience many difficulties in their mothering roles, including difficulty in delivering the baby, breastfeeding that baby, and entering unpaid motherhood work where the job is 24/7 with no vacation. My baby grew big, about twelve pounds in my womb, and I did not have a husband with me at that time. I had no other adult to help make decisions on my behalf. I wanted a female gynecologist, but she was not available when I was in labour. When it was time, I was induced by the nurses while the doctor was on her way. I had a difficult delivery, and when my baby came into this world, I was exhausted. When the nurse put my child close to my face, the smell of blood and my feelings of exhaustion were overwhelming. I asked the nurse to please take him away, and the doctor had a look of disappointment. Susan Maushart has exposed the romantic myths of motherhood, about the realities of childbirth that can be unbearably painful, full of gore and contain "volcanic eruptions" (297). When I came back to my

senses, the baby was cleaned up. I showed my love. I showed more love and compassion than I felt because I was afraid they might call the Children's Aid Society, assuming that I was not a good mother. This guilt followed me for years. I was so embarrassed that I never shared this with anyone. I watched many YouTube videos to prepare myself for delivery. In the videos, every mother showed love and compassion to her newborn, but I did not, and that feeling of guilt followed me.

Maushart also deconstructs the "breast is best" myth because the nipples, the breast, can hurt when mothers decide to breastfeed. Sometimes there is not enough milk for the baby, and they chew on the nipple as if they are chewing gum. I was frustrated after giving birth. My back hurt. My neck hurt. I never got enough sleep. The baby always cried, and I felt half-insane. But I did love my son. Looking at him while he was sleeping peacefully, smiling sometimes in his dreams made me smile, and I felt so proud of my creation and decision to be a mother. However, the frustration of exhaustion was there. But I masked my feelings. By hiding the exhaustion and following the dictates of normative motherhood, I wore the mask, where I always showed how satisfied and available I was for motherhood.

Maushart confronts the cultural construction of motherhood, as it "glorifies the ideal of motherhood but takes for granted the work of motherhood and ignores the experience of motherhood" (280). The cultural expectations of motherhood in Muslim families are oppressive. Having grown up in a Muslim patriarchal society, I was taught one thing clearly—that I have to be a brave mother who will protect her children no matter how old they are. This kind of mothering was modelled by my mother. I was given examples of helpless birds who make a nest and save their children, feed them, and take care of them (although the part was exempt from the story when the mother bird forcefully kicks the babies out because she wants them to fly). My cultural belief was that the mother is responsible for everything that her children do, and it was considered normal. When a woman becomes a mother, her whole life is transformed in terms of relationships, professional identity, and her sense of self. She puts on a show of normative or intensive motherhood, which she keeps pretending to be successful at but constantly struggles to fulfill the never-ending demands of motherhood.

My Journey as a Killjoy and an Empowered Mother

Maushart argues that "social masks are an indispensable accessory in our emotional wardrobe" (279). She calls a motherhood mask "an assemblage of fronts—mostly brave, serene, and all-knowing—that we use to disguise the chaos and complexity of our lived experience" (586). The mask of motherhood becomes an attempt to appear in control. The juggling act of working mothers

becomes a never-ending road of frustration and weariness, and these mothers end up feeling overwhelmed and even facing mental health challenges. The motherhood mask oppresses women; they deny their true feelings under the pressure of normative motherhood and mask their struggles and challenges under the notion of being good mothers. As a racialized Muslim mother in North America, I had to live a life that was full of struggle. I had to resist classism and racism in every aspect of my life, and I had to put on a mask of an empowered mother not because I had much of a choice. I was not brave, but I always wore the mask of a nurturing, altruistic, patient, devoted, loving, and selfless mother.

O'Reilly stresses the importance of giving voice to maternal regrets because openly being a regretful mother speaks to patriarchal power and social construction in a way that shows the mother's agency. Voicing their experiences with their style of motherhood allows mothers to not only showcase empowering mothering as a counternarrative but also to resist and reform patriarchal, socially constructed motherhood. The empowered mothering narrative shifts the power from institutional motherhood to mothers themselves. I believe that motherhood is culturally woven into normative motherhood norms. My culture believes that all women are born to become mothers. Before I became a mother, I was labelled as damaged and incomplete; I was told to actively find a cure for my "disease" of not having a child. So, when I had children, society assured my completeness. The feeling faded quickly when I had to perform many roles and had to wear the motherhood mask to hide the pain and struggles of mothering. Maternal regrets never fade, even after transitioning into motherhood. This assumption denies the severity of the issue because these regrets never get addressed, as it is assumed they are fixed over time.

To be masked, Maushart continues, is "to deny and repress what we experience, to misrepresent it, even to ourselves" (270). Like many other mothers, I hate the mother role and its expectations, but I do love my children. O'Reilly argues that maternal regret plays an essential role in establishing mothering. I realize that validating my motherhood experiences is important because I will remain a mother even if I regret my motherhood experiences. While working on this article, I travelled in a time machine, reflecting upon the past, but this time, I found myself thinking about being an empowering and revolutionary mother. This time, I did not just recall all the embarrassing moments when I could not perform my role properly or fulfill the requirements of normative motherhood. This time, I could see myself as an authentic mother who makes her own decisions based on her cultural, and religious norms which challenge the dominant norms of normative motherhood (O'Reilly, "Normative Motherhood"). Moreover, I learned that by voicing and validating my experiences of maternal regrets, I was able to feel the authenticity of my

mothering struggles. By learning from their own lived experiences, mothers can expose the normative dictation of "essentialization, naturalization, and idealization, as well as the oppressive societal conditions of patriarchal motherhood that regulate and restrain women's mothering" (O'Reilly, "Maternal Regrets" 592).

A feminist killjoy is someone who is not only uncomfortable with the status quo established by racism, misogyny, and patriarchy but also struggles to make changes in society by speaking up or changing their perceptions (Ahmed, 2017). The bitter experiences of my life made me challenge my thinking about myself and others around me. Ahmed argues that a feminist killjoy becomes a problem while identifying the problem; somehow, it makes her the killer of another person's joy. Naming someone a "killjoy" inhibits feminism and questions the changing social norms that are unfair or unjust in favour of the status quo. Thus, all feminists are killjoys because they are critical of happiness derived from domination. By questioning the social construction of Muslim motherhood, I felt a killjoy of the normative construction of Muslim motherhood because it is layered socially and culturally, not Islamically. Some Muslim mothers might not agree with this, as for them, mothering is something that comes from love only. I respect that, but motherhood is constructed. To survive, mothers need to support one another so that they can share their experiences, difficulties, and killjoy moments (Ahmed 2017).

O'Reilly emphasizes matricentric feminism that focuses on empowering mothering, and it denies or challenges the oppressive nature of patriarchal motherhood and its construction. As she has said, "I have sought to do feminism as a mother and do mothering as a feminist" ("Matricentric Feminism" 26). I like to elaborate on this idea because empowered motherhood encourages mothers to focus on living a life of true authenticity, embracing imperfect moments and trusting themselves.

Matricentric feminism also provides a gender analysis that not only helps the reader understand maternal oppression and resistance but also puts mothering at its centre because it focuses on mothers and mothering. Having my son inside me made me so strong that I never asked for help from anyone around me, but there was no one to ask for help. My feminist killjoy life experience informs how I understand the concepts of right and wrong, and what it means for people in different situations. Ahmed (2017) argues that a feminist "heart beats the wrong way" (246). A person's feelings and emotions can make their judgments wrong and right. For example, what is right for one person may be wrong for another. My concept of right was becoming a feminist mother and a killjoy to others and I understand if it is wrong for some others.

Feminists become killjoys because of their situation, but they keep doing it as a way to survive and make sense of and transform their situation (Ahmed

and Gorey). This is how my situation made me a killjoy, and now I cannot stop being a killjoy in instances where I see the happiness of others derived from the exploitation of women. I refuse to be involved in the community and their events because I cannot forget that when I needed them, they were not there.

Ahmed ends her book with two delectable tools: a killjoy survival kit, which helps to uphold one's feminism, and a killjoy manifesto, a kind of mission statement for intersectional feminism. In my survival kit, I have my emotions, my struggles, my fragile life, and the joy I fought for, and as a tool, I have my children and my sense of mothering. For marginalized mothers, there is not much choice other than just practising empowering mothering, embracing the imperfect moments in their lives, and trusting their mothering style. O Reilly stresses the importance of not labelling motherhood but modelling it instead of mentoring motherhood.

Marginalized mothers raise their children according to what they have been taught through modelling by their mothers, before that their grandmothers and so on. Since these mothering traditions and norms are true to their values and beliefs, marginalized mothers resist the ideal norms of intensive or normative mothering. However, there might be consequences for these mothers or their children because the resistance depends on their positionality (Rolfe). For example, privileged, white, middle-class women may get away with feminist mothering or empowered mothering, but for marginalized mothers, the consequences are different. Marginalized mothers showcase their resistance and agency to reform patriarchal, socially constructed motherhood. The empowered mothering narrative shifts the power from institutional motherhood to mothers themselves. Rich calls these mothers "courageous." I was also a courageous mother, and I cannot stop being one.

The pressure of being an empowered mother can also oppress mothers. I cannot imagine myself being a super mom, doing it all, and still feeling empowered because the expectations are oppressive. I question myself, asking if I am a feminist mother or an empowered mother. Do I perform a normative mother character when in society or play an intensive mothering role when working harder than I need to be to fulfill the needs of my children? I struggled to explain my mothering experiences. I was hesitant to explain my regrets and guilt about mothering. I thought it aloud before I attempted to put it on the page. I cried and smiled. I felt weak, and I felt empowered at the same time. It was challenging to read and write my own story, but I did it. I showcased my agency and resistance. I unmasked my motherhood. I mothered against motherhood (O'Reilly, "Empowered and Feminist Mothering" 624). Maushart argues: "The struggle to unmask motherhood is the first step in reconciling reproductive power with social rights and responsibilities—a peculiarly female challenge with repercussions for all humanity" (300). I am raising my daughter as a future young mother who can unmask motherhood and its challenges

while not worrying constantly about the social stigma of bad mothering. I taught her that it is okay if she chooses not to be a mother or to be one. It is okay for her to discuss how she feels about her decision to be a mother, even if that includes negative feelings. It is okay to validate those concerns and feelings because she will always have my support as I am still in the normative motherhood loop of being a supportive and good mother but in an empowered and empowering way.

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