

THE IMPACT OF ISLAMOPHOBIA ON THE EDUCATION AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY OF MUSLIMS IN THE USA

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Abstract

The experience of Islamophobia among Muslims in Western countries, especially in the United States, escalated rapidly following the aftermath of 9/11. This study aims to investigate the impact of Islamophobia on American Muslims with a comprehensive perspective while also placing particular emphasis on their education and religious identity. In this study, a systematic literature review was employed to establish the research scope, identify keywords and studies, search databases, gather data based on inclusion criteria, and synthesize the studies. The thematic analysis method was undertaken to synthesize the studies. This research indicates that the challenges endured by Muslims not only complicated the reconciliation between their Muslim and American identities but also impeded the proper education of Muslim children. In the resurgence of Neo-racism, Muslims have experienced numerous adversities, ranging from hostile stares to the extent of being deported. Muslims have responded to this in various ways, such as by hiding their Muslim identities or educating themselves and non-Muslims about Islam. Muslim women have been subjected to unfortunate incidents, including staying indoors, removing their headscarves, and facing negative perceptions in the mainstream American media. Muslim children have encountered

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Etik Beyan: Bu çalışmanın hazırlanma sürecinde bilimsel ve etik ilkelere uyulduğu ve yararlanılan tüm çalışmaların kaynakçada belirtildiği beyan olunur. Makale en az iki hakem tarafından incelenmiş, Turnitin kullanılarak benzerlik raporu alınmış ve araştırma/yayın etiğine uygunluğu teyit edilmiştir.

Ethical Statement: It is declared that scientific and ethical principles have been followed while carrying out and writing this study and that all the sources used have been properly cited. The article was reviewed by at least two referees, a similarity report was obtained using Turnitin, and compliance with research/publication ethics was confirmed.

difficulties in their education due to misconceptions about Islam both in the media and in the school curriculum. It is suggested to conduct further qualitative research to understand better the role of Islamophobia in shaping the education and Muslim religious identity development of Muslims.

Keywords: Religious education, Islamophobia, Muslim students, American schools, Religious identity.

AMERİKA'DA İSLAMOFOBİ'NİN MÜSLÜMANLARIN EĞİTİMİNE VE DİNİ KİMLİĞİNE ETKİSİ

Öz

Müslümanların Batılı devletlerde, özellikle Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nde, yaşadıkları İslamofobi tecrübeleri 11 Eylül olaylarından sonra hızla artmaya başlamıştır. Bu çalışma kapsamlı bir bakış açısıyla İslamofobi'nin Amerikalı Müslümanların üzerindeki etkisini araştırmayı amaçlarken aynı zamanda onların eğitim ve dini kimliklerine özel dikkat çekmektedir. Bu makalede, araştırma kapsamını oluşturmak, anahtar kelimeleri ve çalışmaları tanımlamak, veri tabanlarını taramak, dahil etme kriterine göre veri toplamak ve çalışmaları sentezlemek için bir araştırma protokolü içeren sistematik literatür taramasına başvurulmuştur. Araştırmaları sentezlemek için tematik analiz yöntemi uygulanmıştır. Bu araştırma, Müslümanların karşılaştıkları olumsuzlukların yalnızca Müslüman ve Amerikan kimlikleri arasında uzlaştırmayı zorlaştırmakla kalmadığını, aynı zamanda Müslüman çocukların düzgün bir eğitim almasını engellediğini göstermektedir. Neo-ırkçılığın tekrar canlandığı bir dönemde, Müslümanlar Amerika'da düşmanca bakışlardan sınır dışı edilmeye kadar birçok olumsuz durumu tecrübe etmişlerdir. Müslümanlar bu olumsuzluklara Müslüman kimliklerini gizleme yahut kendilerini ve Müslüman olmayanları İslam hakkında eğitime gibi farklı biçimlerde tepkiler vermişlerdir. Müslüman kadınlar eve kapanma, başörtülerini çıkarma ve Amerikan ana akım medyasında olumsuz algılarla karşılaşma gibi talihsiz olaylara maruz kalmışlardır. Müslüman çocuklar ise gerek medyada gerekse okul müfredatındaki İslam'la alakalı yanlışlar yüzünden eğitim hayatında sıkıntılar yaşamışlardır. İslamofobi'nin Müslümanların eğitimini ve dini kimlik gelişimini şekillendirmedeki rolünü daha iyi anlamak için daha fazla nitel araştırmalar yapılması önerilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Din eğitimi, İslamofobi, Müslüman öğrenciler, Amerikan okulları, Dini kimlik.

Introduction

After 9/11, concerns about Muslims increased among Americans, causing Islamophobia and xenophobia to rise across the country (Panagopoulos, 2006). The Muslim community living in the United States of America is diverse, including mostly African Americans, South Asians, and Arabs (Peek, 2005). In addition, other ethnic groups such as Caucasians, Latinos, and Native Americans have recently converted to Islam (Smith, 2010). When 9/11 occurred in 2001, it affected not only Americans' lives but also Muslims' lives. According to Maira (2009, p. 29):

“The term ‘post-9/11’ has become shorthand to signify a range of issues: the War on Terror and national security regimes; the relation between the U.S. state and Muslim, Arab, and South Asian Americans; Islam and fundamentalism; and almost anything to do with Muslims and Arabs in the current moment.”

Muslims living in the United States particularly after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 have had to face numerous challenges, including the threat of deportation, racism, discrimination, and difficulties at school (Maira, 2009).

Islamophobia continues to have a significant role in Muslims in the USA, affecting both their education and their Muslim identity. Recent studies tend to focus separately on the issue of Islamophobia, which in turn prevents a comprehensive overview of the research topic. While some studies have concentrated solely on the reflections of Islamophobia in American schools, others have investigated Islamophobic expressions in the American media. This study seeks to explore the effect of Islamophobia on American Muslims by employing a systematic literature review with a holistic perspective.

1. Aim and Method

This study aims to explore the effects of post-9/11 and Islamophobia on Muslims living in the United States. In the international context, there was a lack of comprehensive perspective on how Islamophobia influences the lives of Muslims. Moreover, studies regarding Islamophobia in the USA and its effects on Muslims are very rare in Turkish literature. While most studies focused on Islamophobia in Europe (Aktaş, 2017; Aydın, 2008; Er & Ataman, 2008; Gedikoğlu, 2018; İlgaz, 2023), some studies (Arslan, 2019; Çınar, 2021; Tonga, 2023; Zaal, 2012) scrutinized the relationship between media and Islamophobia. Çorbacı (2023) investigated Islamophobia in Hollywood movies and its role as a non-formal religious education. Aslan (2021) explored theoretical approaches in Islamophobia studies within Turkish literature. Kılıç and Acar (2021) adapted the “Perceived Islamophobia Scale” developed by Kunst et al. (2013) into Turkish along with an analysis of its validity and reliability in Turkish. Thus, there was a knowledge gap in terms of Islamophobia and its effects on American Muslims' education and religious identity in the Turkish context.

Muslims' experiences of Islamophobia incidents directly and indirectly affect Muslims' religious identity and education in the USA. The effects of increasing Islamophobia were felt, especially by Muslim students in American schools. School education is not limited to classroom learning activities, and out-of-school events also affect students' experiences in a school environment. A successful education cannot be a matter of discussion in an environment where Muslim students are alienated due to the escalating effects of Islamophobia. Thus, taking a holistic approach, this study distinguishes itself by highlighting the adverse effects of rising Islamophobia, discrimination, and racism, with a special emphasis on the education and religious identity of Muslims in American schools.

According to Kahn et al., "a systematic review is a research article that identifies relevant studies, appraises their quality and summarizes their results using a scientific methodology" (2011, p. 1). For the purpose of the study, a systematic literature review approach was adopted, since there was a need to "make sense of a body of existing literature through the aggregation, interpretation, explanation, or integration of existing research" (Xiao & Watson, 2019, p. 94). Building on that, this review protocol involved formulating research queries and scope, identifying keywords, studies and databases, conducting a comprehensive literature search, extracting data based on inclusion criteria, and synthesizing the studies (Jesson et al., 2011).

This study aimed specifically at American Muslims' Islamophobia experiences and its impact on their education and religious identity. The keywords "American Muslims", "Islamophobia", "racism", "discrimination" and "exclusion in American schools", were searched across Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and Dergipark. By including the relevant studies related to Islamophobia, discrimination, post-9/11, Muslim religious identity, and Muslim education in the USA, and excluding the irrelevant studies such as Islamophobia and public health in the United States, the remaining literature was examined. To synthesize the studies, the thematic analysis method was employed by coding the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The codes were organized into broader themes and sub-themes. One notable theme, Neo-racism, surfaced from the sources that explored the relationship between racism and Islamophobia as well as instances of racism against Muslims in recent years. As a result, several themes, namely Neo-racism theory, Muslims' experiences of Islamophobia in the USA, the attitude of the USA towards Islam and Muslims, Islamophobia against Muslims in American schools, and Muslim-American identity were found.

2. Neo-Racism

Neo-racism has recently emerged and refers to a type of discrimination against people based on their origin. This term was initially introduced by Martin Barker in 1981 in his study of the 'English way of life' (Hervik, 2013). For Barker, "neo-racism is a re-emphasis of cultural discrimination flowing from the ideas of natural cultural boundaries and

protection of a way of life, concepts often used to promote restrictive immigration” (Lee & Rice, 2007, p. 389). According to Spears (1999, p. 2), neo-racism could be defined as:

“racism in that it functions to maintain racial hierarchies of oppression. Its new ideological focus on culture has the same function and provides a vast new field to mine for supposed causes of the lower achievement of groups of color based on dysfunctional attitudes, values, and orientations.”

The neo-racism differs from traditional racism by segregating people based on their cultural and national characteristics rather than their biological characteristics (Spears, 1999). In other words, the oppressed group is discriminated against not only because of their physical characteristics but also due to their cultural differences or national origin by the dominant group (Lee & Rice, 2007). Thus, neo-racism is a different reflection of biological racism, encouraging exclusion based on the origin of the oppressed group (Lee & Rice, 2007).

Hervik claims that discriminatory ideas such as neo-racism and neo-nationalism have become widespread in social movements to stop Islamization in many societies (Hervik, 2013). This type of discrimination appeals to nationalist instincts, but it is in fact the oppressed group’s justification of national supremacy for assimilating other groups (Lee & Rice, 2007).

Neo-racism could take place against foreigners in various processes, including traveling, schooling, applying to universities, etc. (Lee & Rice, 2007). Discrimination could be experienced also in educational settings and take the form of biased staff being subjective against international students and Islamophobic policies, which might negatively affect students’ educational experiences (McVickar, 2023).

3. Muslims’ Experiences of Islamophobia in the USA

The appearance of Muslim identity in the USA has gradually increased until today, and the Muslim population has reached nearly five million (Reagan, 2020). Even though being Muslim was perceived as normal in the USA before the 21st century, the events of 9/11 intensified negative experiences for Muslims, including stigmatization, isolation, and various forms of harassment such as physical and verbal abuse (Barkdull et al., 2011). Muslims experienced the incidents of 9/11 as a “double whammy”, signifying that while they were coping with the shock and grief of those who perished in the World Trade Center, they were simultaneously thrust into a position of being deemed guilty for this situation (Barkdull et al., 2011).

Indeed, Muslim women faced problems at universities even before September 11 due to their headscarves and Muslim attire (Bevis, 2002; Lee & Rice, 2007). Muslim women have displayed various reactions to these negative experiences of 9/11. Some women, for security reasons, either ceased going outside or abandoned wearing garments that

resembled Muslim attire, such as headscarves (Barkdull et al., 2011). This “social isolation” was caused not only by external negative conditions but also by Muslim family members (Peek, 2003). According to Peek, family members, especially parents, and male members, were concerned about safety issues outside and urged the women and children to stay at home or alter their Muslim semblances (Peek, 2003). Muslims also experienced some challenges in the workplace, including job loss, discrimination during interviews, isolation from colleagues, and the termination of business agreements with non-Muslims (Barkdull et al., 2011). Some Muslims opted to display American symbols such as American flags on their homes and vehicles or took down posters featuring Arabic script, which signifies Muslim and Arab identities, from their homes and stores as a measure to protect their safety (Peek, 2003).

The post-9/11 resulted in the strengthening of interest and commitment to Islam among some Muslims, fostering a sense of solidarity within the Muslim community (Barkdull et al., 2011). According to Peek, these Muslims saw this as an opportunity to ameliorate the adverse effects of these unfortunate events and to inform others about Islam (Peek, 2003). Therefore, they chose to educate both themselves and non-Muslims about Islam (Barkdull et al., 2011). The intense scrutiny of Islam and the constant questioning by non-Muslims particularly motivated Muslim students to delve deeper into researching Islam and enlightening others about it (Peek, 2003).

Muslim children living in the USA have been the most adversely affected group by 9/11. Maira explored how South Asian Muslim immigrant children in the USA experienced the negative impacts of 9/11 (Maira, 2009). In her study examining the construction of national belonging among Muslim children in the USA, Maira discovered that the aftermath of 9/11 and its negative impacts posed difficulties for children in developing a sense of belonging to American citizenship. She reported that Muslim children expressed concerns about deportation, racism, surveillance, civil and immigrant rights, employment, impeachment, and the challenges of schooling in another language. Just as civilians are harmed in every conflict, innocent Muslims are also negatively affected in America’s war against terrorism.

4. The Attitude of the USA towards Islam and Muslims

4.1. The Response of American Community after 9/11

The perceptions and attitudes of the American community towards Muslims and Islam have drawn the attention of numerous researchers after 9/11. There are distinctions in how the American community behaves toward Muslims. Some held negative sentiments such as prejudice, resentment, disappointment, and belittlement towards Muslims, whereas others exhibited more positive behaviors such as courtesy and friendship (Barkdull et al., 2011; Peek, 2003).

Panagopoulos conducted a study examining the opinions of the American community toward Islam and Muslims (Panagopoulos, 2006). As per the findings of this study, half of the participants considered close monitoring of Muslims to be a right infringement, and nearly half of them viewed this favorably. The study also revealed that the American community lacks significant knowledge about the basic principles of Islam and tends to perceive these principles as incompatible with Western civilization, such as tolerance and courtesy. Many Muslims attribute a large portion of the negative reactions to the ignorance prevalent within the American community (Peek, 2003). As stated before, these negative reactions can manifest in various forms, including staring, physical and verbal attacks, threats, or simply ignoring (Barkdull et al., 2011; Peek, 2003).

Nevertheless, it is also worth noting the presence of Americans who treat Muslims kindly and offer them support. The studies demonstrated that some Americans were supportive of Muslims by “standing up for them” and “random acts of kindness” (Barkdull et al., 2011; Peek, 2003). For instance, a non-Muslim neighbor offered to let a Muslim family stay in their home if they felt scared (Barkdull et al., 2011).

4.2. The Coverage of Islam and Muslims in the American Media

Many studies indicated that Western media plays a significant role in the discrimination against, hatred towards, and demonization of Muslims (Alsultany, 2013; Barkdull et al., 2011; Peek, 2003; Umamaheswar, 2015). As mentioned before, the American community has limited information about Islam and Muslims. The Western media exacerbates this ignorance by perpetuating incorrect, incomplete, or overly generalized information about Muslims, leading to their alienation.

According to Barkdull et al., the language used in media tends to target Muslims more, for instance, rather than labeling 9/11 as an international issue, it is often framed as a Muslim problem (Barkdull et al., 2011). Students in a study undertaken by Peek complained about the misinformation regarding some Islamic elements in the US media, such as *jihad* (Peek, 2003). In addition, Muslim women are often portrayed as oppressed individuals without the right to choose, relegated to secondary status compared to male family members in the media (Peek, 2003).

Based on Alsultany’s analysis of American films and TV shows through the lens of the “simplified complex representation” strategy, illustrating Muslim and Arab characters in a sympathetic or positive light actually fuels discrimination against Muslims (Alsultany, 2013). According to this strategy, in American movies, Arabs and Muslims play various roles, such as assisting the American government in the war against terrorism or being victims of terrorism. Moreover, successful and educated Muslim women engage in propaganda by criticizing Islam with the argument that it oppresses women. Thus, “rather than demonize all Arabs and Muslims, having sympathy for some of them reflects an

enlightened culture that can distinguish between the "good" and "bad" ones" (Alsultany, 2013, p. 168).

The studies showed that the portrayal of Muslims in the US media could be improved through educational programs on Islam, objective portrayal of Islam, depicting Muslims as ordinary American citizens, avoiding attributing the crimes by a few individuals to the entire Muslim community, accurate representation of Muslim women, establishment of alternative media channels, and increased the visibility of moderate Muslim perspectives (Barkdull et al., 2011; Peek, 2003).

5. The Islamophobia against Muslims in American Schools

Islamophobia has been defined as "the hatred or fear of Islam or Muslims" and has escalated, especially after the events of September 11 (Brooks, 2019). Researchers found that Islamophobic incidents increasingly continued in American schools (Brooks, 2019; Eraqi, 2015; Maira, 2009). And school staff and curriculum could not respond to these incidents and promote religious diversity (Ramarajan & Runell, 2007). These incidents occur as stereotypes and misconceptions of Muslims in the textbooks (Brooks, 2019; Eraqi, 2015), xenophobic and racist statements of other students towards Muslim students, and restrictions of Muslim students' space and religious life by principals (Shirazi & Jaffe-Walter, 2021).

The prejudicial and erroneous information regarding one's own belief system in textbooks can mislead students in the process of religious identity development (Saleem & Thomas, 2011). Muslim students are less likely to expose their religious identity in front of other students to refrain from social isolation, stigmatization, or disapproval when their faith is associated with extremism and fundamentalism (Saleem & Thomas, 2011). Eraqi (2015) found that American history textbooks ignored the contributions and achievements of Arabs and Muslims and did not make a clear distinction between Islam and terrorism.

Research shows that Muslim students also experienced exclusion from school administrators and their classmates. Shirazi and Jaffe-Walter's research demonstrated that Muslim students in American schools were exposed to segregation in different locations such as classrooms, and lunchrooms (Shirazi & Jaffe-Walter, 2021). Muslim students' experiences also included the slighting of their Islamic religious identity, the suspension of MSA (Muslim Student Association) by the principal, and the imposition of American nationalism (Shirazi & Jaffe-Walter, 2021).

Hossain proposed four strategies to combat Islamophobia in American schools, including the concept of historical roots, the concept of contributions, the concept of diversity, and the concept of similarities (Hossain, 2017). The concept of historical roots refers to the idea that Muslims are not new to America and that their existence dates back to the discovery of Columbus. The concept of contributions relates to the contributions of

Muslim scholars to science and knowledge. The concept of diversity indicates that Islam has an internal diversity, and this may elicit stereotypes and overgeneralizations of Muslims. The concept of similarities is regarded as three major religions - Christianity, Islam, and Judaism - have Abrahamic roots; thus, there are many similarities among the followers of these religions in terms of prayer, belief and morality.

6. Muslim-American Identity

Identity is constructed by “drawing boundaries and investing meaning in the spaces inside and outside the boundaries” (M. A. M. Khan, 2000, p. 87). Religion plays a crucial role in the development of group identity and solidarity among immigrants (Peek, 2005). For Muslim-Americans, the religious identity construction process involves identifying themselves with their home culture and host culture (Sirin et al., 2008). Both individual and collective factors contribute to the religious identity construction process (M. A. M. Khan, 2000). According to Sirin et al., while Islam has a role in the formation of Muslim identity, the effects of 9/11 such as ‘discrimination-related stress’ contribute to American identity (Sirin et al., 2008). Thus, the Muslim-American identity construction process is influenced not only by the religious practices and ethnic origins of Muslims but also by the emergent reactions and experiences after September 11, which leads to a dual identity (Jilani, 2015).

Several studies were conducted to explore Muslim-American identity in educational settings. Peek investigated ‘the religious identity formation’ process among Muslim students at American universities (Peek, 2005). Peek found that religious identity develops in three stages among Muslim-American university students: a) religion as an ascribed identity b) religion as a chosen identity and c) religion as a declared identity (Peek, 2005). In the ‘religion as ascribed identity’ stage, Muslim-Americans saw religion as a part of their individual identities, and it could be rejected. During the second stage, Muslims started to develop an awareness of their religious identity, and they willingly accepted their Muslim identity with the support of their fellows. In the final stage, which emerged after 9/11, Muslims decided to consolidate their religious identity in order to “retain positive self-perception and correct public misconceptions” (Peek, 2005, p. 236). This affirms Sirin et al.’s (2008) study in terms of the effects of 9/11 on Muslim-American identity formation.

Jilani examined the Muslim-American identity formation of Muslim students in American high schools (Jilani, 2015). According to this study, Muslim students who had ‘supportive home environments’ and ‘prior Islamic schooling’ felt more confident about their religious identity in a school environment. Although some Muslim students did not hesitate to hide their Muslim identity, other Muslim students, despite their strong faith, tended to conceal their Muslim identity to be involved in a broader school environment (Jilani, 2015). Balkaya et al. (2019) investigated the Muslim and American identities as mediating roles in Muslim adolescents’ internalizing and externalizing problems both at individual and

group levels. In this study, it was found that the Muslim adolescents demonstrated “hyphenated identities” by vigorously associating themselves with both their Muslim and American identities. According to the study, a strong attachment to Muslim identity might alleviate the negative effects of discrimination, whereas the Islamophobia experienced by Muslim adolescents at individual and group levels has varying impacts on their religious identities. In other words, when Islamophobia is perceived as low at group level, individual level discrimination adversely affects the sense of belonging to American identity, whereas when Islamophobia is perceived as high at group level, individual level discrimination actually strengthens American identity.

Conclusion

This study sought to shed light on the negative experiences of Muslim students in American schools due to Islamophobia in the era of neo-racism. In this study, it was shown that although Muslims in general suffer from Islamophobia, discrimination, extreme nationalism, and racism, it is women and children who are disproportionately affected by these circumstances. The adverse effects not only disrupt Muslim students’ education in schools but also exacerbate their struggle to reconcile their Muslim and American identities.

The unfavorable outcomes of Islamophobia are primarily triggered by the ignorance of the American community about Islam, biased and accusatory media coverage, and the dissemination of misinformation about Islam both in school curricula and among school staff in the United States. One crucial approach to mitigating Islamophobia is by educating both Muslims and non-Muslims about Islam. This objective could be pursued through a range of avenues, such as educational programs about Islam in the media, elevating the voices of informed Muslims, rectifying misinformation about Islam in school curricula, and fostering greater awareness of Islam among Americans. Further studies regarding the role of Islamophobia experiences in Muslim education and Muslim religious identity should be undertaken to shed more light on this matter.

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