

Taken Over by the West

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“HOW DO YOU WASH YOUR HAIR with that on?” She points at my hijab. “The same way you wash your hair when you wear a hat—by taking it off.” The hemp hand cream that I massaged into her left hand moments ago overwhelms my senses, and the oiliness of the smell mixes with the dryness of my mouth. While we stand there in silence, I scan her ivory foundation, and admire its clever name: number 020 Bali Vanilla. My fingers quiver as I struggle to tear her copy of the receipt. Suddenly, my customer releases a hearty laugh and I reciprocate with a nervous smile.

“How come she isn’t wearing one?” With her perfectly manicured fingers, the customer points at my co-worker Kim. Kim has a similar skin tone and facial features as me, but she is agnostic and a separate person. Kim bends down behind the counter and looks at me, her hands over her mouth holding in a laugh. I feel my cheeks start to burn red-hot.

“Because she isn’t Muslim.”

I stand there with glassy eyes while the customer scans her receipt, carefully dragging her finger across the paper and taking momentary glances at the products inside the bag.

“Well, everything looks good.”

She flashes us a crooked smile and walks away.

I pull into a parking space, my phone vibrates, and my mother’s picture stares at me from the screen. I quickly straighten the wheel, rushing to answer her call.

“Why didn’t you reply when I texted you?”

“I’m sorry, my phone was on silent.”

This is not a good enough excuse.

My mother tries to come off sounding stern over the phone, but I can hear the relief in her voice. “Why do you even have a phone then?” Pause. “I’m glad you’re safe.”

Parents commonly worry about their children when they’re away, but my mother’s fears are different. I am reminded of them every single day from the moment I wake up and check my newsfeed: “At Least 24 People Killed After Two Female Suicide Bombers Attack Nigerian Mosque,” “Muslim Woman Attacked Outside of Her Children’s School,” “Muslim in a Hijab Victim of Violent

Islamophobic Attack.” These headlines overcrowd my life and my mind. They are not just news stories, but warnings. After radical Muslims made themselves poster children for Islam, with their atrociously extremist actions, I have become one of the many people who put extra effort into my appearance and actions so that I may make others more comfortable with my presence. I am now constantly aware of whether or not I am smiling in public. I feel self-conscious wearing an all-black outfit, and deliberately avoid doing so. Instead I always wear something colorful that differentiates me from the extremists seen in the news.

“Don’t go terrorizing everything!” A man once yelled at me as I waited for the LRT at the university.

This is why my mother worries.

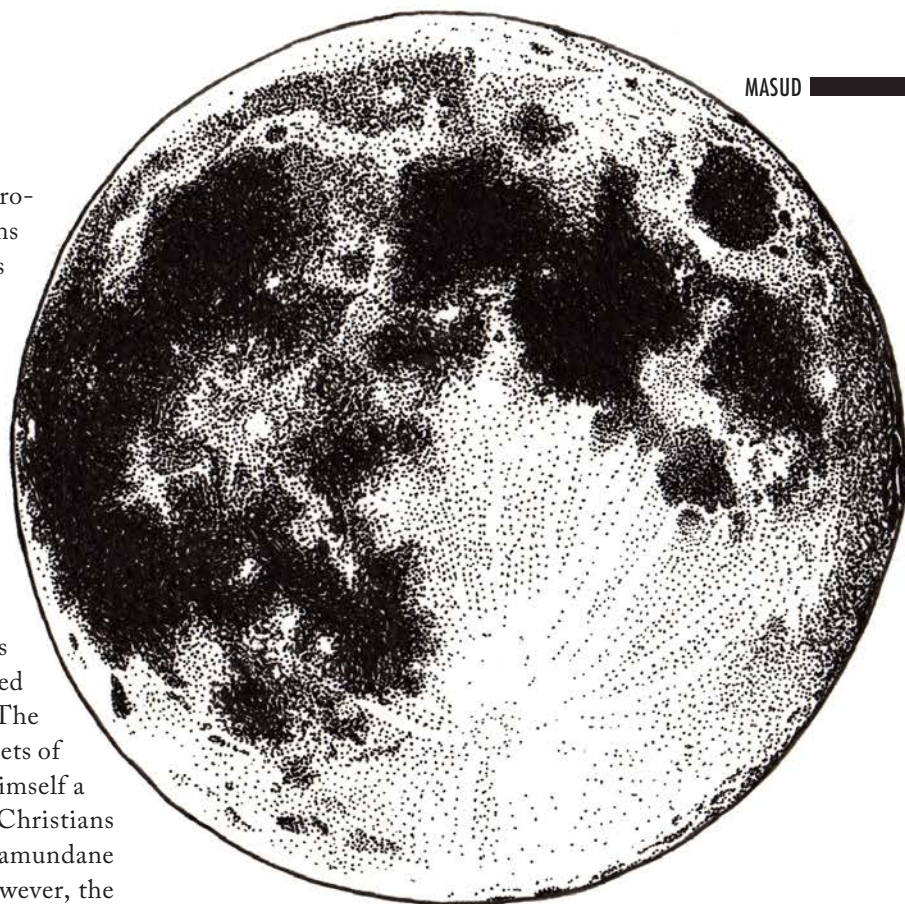
Islam and its community has become a prominent subject in recent years, with many members of the Western media trying to represent the religion and its people. In a social experiment conducted by the Australian current affairs program, *Today Tonight*, super model Rachel Finch donned a hijab for a day to experience life as a Muslim woman. When entering a mosque, she said, “There was a sense of peace and happiness,” and she praised the inviting and friendly nature of the Muslim community. The comments section of the piece congratulated Finch on her bravery, and commended her open-mindedness; one person said Finch inspired her to become more accepting of others. Although we hear this voice in the media, the rest of Western media seldom listens to the veiled Muslim women attempting to share their realities. Instead, media and society encourage and share the opinions of those from

other groups and cultures, those who then appropriate these experiences as their own. Investigations like these only emphasize orientalist depictions of religions such as Islam. Meanwhile some Muslim people go devastatingly unrepresented. How often do we hear from the mouths of the affected Muslims in Bosnia, the Philippines, or Côte d'Ivoire?

For example, fundamentalism circulates through our Western media and has now incorrectly become a defining characteristic of the entire Muslim world. This word, coined by American Baptist pastor Curtis Lee Laws in the 1920s, refers to *The Fundamentals*, a series of essays published between 1910 and 1916, which established the core principles of proper Christian faith. The essays declared one of the most fundamental tenets of Christianity as the belief in God. Laws called himself a fundamentalist to set himself apart from the Christians who interpreted some of the Bible's more extramundane notions to fit with their modern ideologies. However, the idea of fundamentalism spread beyond identifying core doctrinal beliefs and has now become a linking word. When Western media talks about Islamic fundamentalism, it characterizes the religion as a mass inflexible movement. This all-encompassing word, developed from a North American Christian milieu, has been used to define Islam, and the West has adopted and accepted these notions as various media figures use it "rather indiscriminately to refer to various tendencies and trends among Muslims. The result today has been a confusion of different definitions, often mutually exclusive or contradictory," writes Muslim scholar Khalid Yahya Blankinship in *Fundamentalism: Perspectives on a Contested History*.

This leaves people like me, who have the ability to speak up, in the same position as those who are unable to come forth with their opinions—silenced by the omnipresent nature of ignorance.

It is 12:35 a.m. on a cloudless night in Detroit in 2013. As I lay beside my younger brother, Alif, singing him the theme song to *Barney & Friends*, I notice the luminescence of the moon outside the window. The leaves on the trees surrounding our home are just as still as the air. It is autumn, but the darkness conceals all colour, except that pearlescent glow the moon emits. It chokes me with its brightness. It never seemed so close. We were waiting for my father to come home. He worked evening shifts at Doug's Coin Laundry downtown, so his late arrivals were nothing out of the ordinary. But he would always call my mother to inform her of his lateness. My mother and I worried about



him a lot. General Motors and Ford had closed down more of their Detroit assembly plants six months back. Around 80,000 workers were in jeopardy and 50,000 were guaranteed unemployment. The citizens of Detroit blamed the only thing they could: immigrants. Their powerlessness during this economic bust sent the rate of hate crimes soaring. Every night I heard ambulance sirens from our living-room window. My mother and father would try to cover up their blaring cries by playing the soundtrack to *Grease* on our CD player. The nightly local news reports festered with investigations of murders and fights, many of them in our neighborhood. We weren't living here by choice.

My father had recently been admitted into Wayne State University. Having finished his PhD, he was working with a team of civil engineers to discover a way to process waste into renewable energy. They had dreams of winning a Nobel Prize with their innovation. Our family always stuck together, so when he told us of this opportunity, the glimmer in his eyes cast aside all our hesitations, and two months later we moved into a little apartment near downtown. The laundromat job was perfect for my father, and the nightshift was a dream for him. Almost no one came in at 11 p.m. to do their laundry, so my father took this time to finish his assignments. The only downside: he would always be alone. This concerned my mother, but my father continuously assured her there were cameras everywhere and the security glass-encased office he stayed in was more than enough protection. ▶

At 1:07 a.m., my mother calls Doug at the laundromat. “Mohammed left two hours ago,” he says.

We lived ten minutes away.

I can see tears rolling down her cheeks and I sit upright on the couch, my back facing her, looking out the window. I see every car pass except his.

At 1:30 a.m., Doug calls my mother. The conversation ends. She drops the phone on her foot, but does not move a muscle. She unties her hairband and her black curls fall onto her shoulders, the ringlets hug her expressionless face. Her tears darken patches of the carpet as they fall.

“He’s in the hospital. He’s badly hurt.”

As she tells me this, I can’t breathe. Was the moon trying to tell me something?

“I think Islam hates us,” mused Donald Trump during a pre-election CNN interview with Anderson Cooper. The focus on Islamic extremism has now turned into a prejudice against anything and everyone related to the religion. In an interview, talk-show host Samantha Bee talked with a group of Trump supporters. When asked why they supported him, a young man replied, “He’s got sort of a simplistic but evocative language that I think speaks to a lot of people at almost a limbic or primal level.” Is this why a man—yelling, “Trump! Trump! Trump!”—beat two Wichita State University students (one who

looked Muslim and the other “Hispanic”) at a Trump rally in South Carolina: because Donald Trump’s straightforward thinking resonated with him? At another rally, in the same state, Rose Hamid, a silent Muslim protestor, was escorted out of a Trump rally for standing up in disapproval when Trump suggested that Syrian refugees were associated with Islamic terrorist groups, and thus there should be a temporary ban on Muslims entering the United States. Hamid was booed out of the auditorium, where a supporter was heard chanting, “You have a bomb! You have a bomb!”

I run to my room and put on my hijab. My mother carries Alif, still asleep, to the car. In silence, we drive to the hospital. My mother rushes into the ER while Alif and I are told to stay in the waiting room. I can still see the moon from the hospital window. It looks optimistic. It won’t let anything bad happen to us. Alif wakes up and I calmly tell him we are here because “Dad got a little cut.” He’s five, so he can’t read faces. My mother comes to the waiting room. She wraps her arms around Alif and me, and in between howls of anguish, she tells us he was attacked from behind. A customer, who called the cops from the laundromat, heard the attacker screaming a racial and religious slur that my mother refuses to tell me. Five days later my father passed away and the only motivation we were given for his attack was hatred. 🐼

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