

Multiculturalism: A Guise for Fear and Domination

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Inception

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In Canadian society, there is an interesting juxtaposition between a collective pride in a supposed "cultural mosaic" and a collective fear of the Islamic Other. Politicians espouse a history based on immigration with the same breath they use to create convoluted immigration legislation. A news flash about Folklorama, and then another about inappropriately dressed individuals declaring citizenship—mass media simultaneously produces pieces on the importance of diverse cultures being celebrated in Canada, as well as on how oppressive Islamic religious traditions must be annihilated. Though these concepts are presented as separate and unrelated, they are, in actuality, intrinsically connected. In fact, they rely on one another. Multiculturalism functions as a tool for anti-terror legislation by propagating white supremacy, cultural essentialism, and democratic racism. It also serves as this sort of tool by counteracting anti-racist programs. Canadian multiculturalism enables an Islamophobic anti-terror protocol and leaves human beings "out to dry" and abandoned.

The Government of Canada has introduced many anti-terror initiatives since September 11, 2001. According to Public Safety Canada,

Canada's counter-terrorism strategy "Building Resilience Against Terrorism" sets out the approach to tackle this global and domestic threat. This strategy reflects the ongoing and multifaceted activities of government departments and agencies that are involved in counter-terrorism. Its goal is "to counter domestic and international terrorism in order to protect Canada, Canadians and Canadian interests," and it operates through four mutually reinforcing elements: prevention, detection, denial, and response.¹ By analyzing this strategy, however, one must pose the question: What is terrorism? The Government of Canada's Department of Justice struggles to define the term. Section 83.01 of the *Canadian Criminal Code* defines terrorism as an act committed "in whole or in part for a political, religious or ideological purpose, objective or cause ... with the intention of intimidating the public ... with regard to its security, including its economic security, or compelling a person, a government or a domestic or an international organization to do or to refrain from doing any act."² National news sources, politicians and even the "Building Resilience Against Terrorism" strategy use "Islamic" as if it were a qualifier for terrorism. Many Canadian policies ignore the fact that so called "Canadian interests" are often Islamic interests. Recognition of these national ideological faults is the recognition that many anti-terror policies and protocols are based on Islamophobia.

Multiculturalism has multiple meanings and connotations. From a simplistic standpoint, it can refer to a society characterized by cultural heterogeneity or an ideal of equality among a population's ethnic or

¹ Government of Canada, "Building Resilience Against Terrorism: Canada's Counter-terrorism Strategy," *Public Safety Canada*, last modified 2014, <http://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrscs/pblctns/rslnc-gnst-trrrsm/index-eng.aspx>.

² Government of Canada, "Memorializing the Victims of Terrorism: Definitions of Terrorism and the Canadian Context," *Department of Justice*, last modified 2015, http://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/cj-jp/victim/rr09_6/p3.html.

cultural groups. In Canada, multiculturalism is intended as a sort of state controlled anti-racist endeavour. Policies implemented by the federal government in 1971 aimed to be inclusive and encouraged cultural harmony. Multiculturalism is seen as a marker of Canadian identity. However, many critiques of multiculturalism have emerged since its legal implementation. It has been criticized for its erasure of difference. Ignoring race, ethnicity, gender and the intersections between them creates inequality. Charles Taylor notes that difference-blindness is often promoted by the dominant culture, and consequently, the supposedly fair and difference-blind society is in an unconscious way, itself highly discriminatory.³ Power imbalances are maintained by multiculturalism because it fails to acknowledge difference as well as the Canadian history of inequality.

Multiculturalism serves as a tool for Canadian anti-terror protocol by propagating white supremacy. Multiculturalism celebrates culture from a Western imperial point of view. Using terms like “tolerance” and “sensitivity” imply that there is a norm against which difference is measured, this norm being “whiteness.” There is a dynamic created that poses “Canadian culture” against the “Other’s” culture. This is illustrated through hyphenated identities like Aboriginal-Canadian, African-Canadian, and Asian-Canadian. Meanwhile, White people in Canada or people of European decent are simply Canadian. Even liberal-minded academics working for change can fall victim (or perpetrator) to their Western points of view. Since the end of the second wave, many white feminists began to contribute to the already thriving field of critical race feminism. However, there remain struggles in acknowledging privilege and decentring white Western societies. Some white feminists, though sympathizing with the Islamic “Other,” still

³ Jean Burnet and Leo Driedger, “Multiculturalism,” *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, last modified September 10, 2014, <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/multiculturalism/>.

suggest that conflict between the East and West victimizes mainly the innocent West:

Placing the 9/11 injury to the U.S at the centre of the analysis enabled [Judith Butler] to make the surprising move of representing the world's only, and militarily unmatched, super power as equally vulnerable to violence as the impoverished societies that have been the victims of its colonial and imperial aggression.⁴

The (White) West is often, unintentionally, centered as the subject upon which an "Other" may affect. Similarly, arguments have been made that criticize Western media for excluding Eastern war dead. Judith Butler argues that these lives need visibility in order to be "grievable." This assertion only furthers the assumption of White centrality. Butler inadvertently argues that death is only "grievable" if White people are aware of it which lends also to the idea that only White society grieves at all.⁵

Other White feminist academics, such as Phyllis Chesler, frame Islam as a religion based on misogyny. In doing so, she essentializes an entire culture and furthers her own Western colonial agenda. Her work creates "the racialized fantasy of an eternal war of the 'civilized' West, defined as the Judeo-Christian world, against the forces of Islamic barbarianism."⁶ Chesler virtually unites all Western White religions and poses them against the Islamic Other to create a dichotomy of good and evil. Her focus on a Western and Eastern rivalry erases colonial histories and internal conflicts. Ignorance of these histories propels not only inequality internationally but also nationally by isolating Muslims.

⁴ Sunera Thobani, "White Innocence, Western Supremacy: The Role of Western Feminism in the 'War on Terror,'" in *States of Race: Critical Race Feminism for the 21st Century*, ed. Sherene Razack and Malinda Sharon Smith (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2010), 135.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 131.

Chesler acknowledges her privilege only to further demonize Islamic societies. It is imperative to recognize that anti-terror efforts are established largely to defend white privilege.⁷

Cultural essentialism is an incredibly aggressive form of symbolic violence. It organizes cultures into distinct groups but does not acknowledge the individual features within them. Professor Uma Narayan neatly illustrates cultural essentialism through what she calls, a “Package Picture of Culture”:

This view understands cultures on the model of neatly wrapped packages, sealed off from each other, possessing sharply defined edges or contours, and having distinctive contents that differ from those of other ‘cultural packages.’ I believe that those packages are more badly wrapped and their contents more jumbled than is often assumed and that there are a variety of political agendas that determine who and what are assigned places inside and outside a particular cultural package.⁸

The Package Picture of Culture ignores the reality that many of the labels used to characterize different cultures have an important historical context, and what they individuate as one culture may change over time. The Package Picture of Culture mistakes the centrality of particular values, traditions or practices to any particular culture as a given and thus eclipses the historical and political processes that have come to be deemed central components of a particular culture.⁹ Canadian media sources could be considered the experts of essentializing culture. They have managed to define Muslim culture by one symbol: the veil. In Western media, the veil has come to signify the mute, passive Muslim woman, which also functions as a counter sign

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Uma Narayan, “Undoing the ‘Package Picture’ of Cultures,” *Gender and Women’s Studies in Canada: Critical Terrain*, ed. Margaret Hobbs and Carla Rice (Toronto: Women’s Press, 2013), 232.

⁹ Ibid., 231.

for the liberated Western women. This symbol Others and victimizes Muslim women in particular and creates the illusion of patriarchal ideas being exclusively Islamic: "With the launch of the War on Terror, many white feminists publicly supported the invasion of Afghanistan, drawing a heightened attention to what they defined as the essential trait of the Taliban, an adherence to Islam and a misogynist hatred of women."¹⁰ The symbol of the veil not only essentializes a culture but suggests a negative relation to gender and power.

Western media also works to portray Muslim culture as divided as well as simplified. There are two distinct narratives created that counteract Western media and Muslim culture, yet the West remains subject to power:

The rebellious field slave forms one counterpart to the obedient and submissive house slave, yet both are contained within the representational construct of the slave as a subordinated object of possession. The figure of the 'jezebel' is the inverse of the mammy, but both are circumscribed within relations of power.¹¹

Equivalently, there is a division created between Muslims from the Middle East as well as from North America. Muslim "hybrids" from "over here" are seen as more like Western society and stereotypes are formed in order to neutralize the threat of race.¹² Essentializing each in a distinct way is the mechanism through which Western society can maintain comfort and dominance. These representations allow White Western culture to continue to Other Islamic societies. This Othering is necessary as Islamophobia is based on not only a rejection of difference but a rejection of resemblance. Cultural essentialism is

¹⁰ Thobani, "White Innocence, Western Supremacy," 129.

¹¹ Yasmin Jiwani, "Doubling Discourses and the Veiled Other: Mediations of Race and Gender in Canadian Media," *States of Race: Critical Race Feminism for the 21st Century*, ed. Sherene Razack, Malinda Sharon Smith, and Sunera Thobani (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2010), 31.

¹² Jiwani, "Doubling Discourses and the Veiled Other," 74.

reflected in anti-terror protocols and is necessary as a tool for the government in maintaining Canadian obedience.

Canadian society may not be perceived as overtly racist, however, there are systemic ways in which Canadian racism is sustained. Democratic racism for example, can be defined as:

An ideology in which two conflicting sets of values are made congruent to each other. Commitments to democratic principles such as justice, equality, and fairness conflict but coexist with attitudes and behaviours that include negative feelings about minority groups, differential treatment, and discrimination against them.¹³

Multiculturalism functions in this very way and therefore authorizes democratic racism. Multiculturalism enables a political discourse that relies on ideas of cultural differences rather than the historical and political constructions of differences amidst a racial hierarchy. Indigenous people and immigrants of colour are set apart from each other and apart from “mainstream” Canadian culture. In this way, multiculturalism rests on posing “Canadian culture” against “Other” cultures with whiteness marking the difference between the core culture and the others.¹⁴ Multiculturalism also enables democratic racism by commodifying culture through its emphasis on the distinction between Canadian culture and Other cultures. Encouraging people to retain their “traditional” cultures essentializes those cultures in an often romantic fashion. It must also be noted that the celebration of different food, clothing and ceremonies are the sole form of “traditional” culture being “tolerated” by the dominant culture. The “eating of the other,” as bell hooks says, has the simultaneous effect of confirming the tolerance of the consumer and the essential difference of the Other. None of this

¹³ Lisa Comeau, “Social Exclusion, Social Justice and Racism,” *Pursuing Justice*, ed. Margot Hurlbert (Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2011), 114.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 116.

demands any acknowledgement that these “traditional” ethnicities are themselves constructs of colonial, Orientalist and racist discourses.¹⁵ The West implies an idea of authenticity in culture wherein “authentic” cultures are static and incapable of evolving. Only this idea of a simplified stagnant culture can fit within Canadian multicultural society. Multiculturalism disguises the operation of power, reducing racism to an individual intolerance of cultural diversity, which, in turn, maintains democratic and other forms of systemic racism. This racism is the basis for an Islamophobic anti-terror protocol, and multiculturalism is the justification for national apathy, inaction, and twisted pride.

Multiculturalism functions as a tool for anti-terror by counteracting anti-racist protocols. Enakshi Dua defines anti-racist feminist thought as a body of writing that attempts to integrate the way race and gender function together in structuring social inequality.¹⁶ Though there are discrepancies in where and how to concentrate anti-racist works, there is a universal emphasis on intersectionality. Intersectionality could be considered the axis upon which any endeavour for equality functions. It can be defined as “signifying the complex, irreducible, varied and variable effects which ensue when multiple axes of differentiation, economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential, intersect in historically specific contexts.”¹⁷ Acknowledging intersections is recognizing how power and inequality function, which is the basis for anti-racist movements. Some Canadian anti-racist initiatives include:

¹⁵ Ibid., 117.

¹⁶ Enakshi Dua, “Canadian Anti-Racist Feminist Thought: Scratching the Surface of Racism,” *Scratching the Surface: Canadian Anti-Racist Feminist Thought* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars’ Press and Women’s Press, 1999), ProQuest, 8.

¹⁷ “Activist Insight: Sojourner Truth (1797-1883),” *Gender and Women’s Studies in Canada: Critical Terrain*, ed. Margaret Hobbs and Carla Rice (Toronto: Women’s Press, 2013), 46.

challenging the racism of the police, challenging discriminatory immigration policies (especially towards domestic workers), organizing those sectors in which women of colour were concentrated, challenging racism within the women's movement, creating a shelter movement to provide women of colour with a safe space from both male violence and racism, and challenging what [Gayatri Chakravorty] Spivak has called epistemic violence.¹⁸

In a settler colonial country such as Canada, which struggles to acknowledge its internal racism, anti-racist protocol is a necessity that is not very prevalent. Somewhat unconsciously the Canadian government countered these anti-racist initiatives with their multicultural policy. Because multiculturalism poses as the ultimate anti-racist endeavour, it reduces the appearance of necessity for anti-racist programming. Multiculturalism produces different forms of racism and removes anti-racist protocol. This anti-racist protocol is necessary in combating Islamophobic policies such as the various anti-terror acts that the government of Canada has implemented.

Canadian multiculturalism shelters Islamophobic anti-terror protocols and leaves human beings "out to dry." Multiculturalism functions as a tool for anti-terror legislation by propagating white supremacy, cultural essentialism, and democratic racism. It also serves as a tool for anti-terror by counteracting anti-racist programs. In Canadian society, there is an interesting juxtaposition between a collective pride for a supposed "cultural mosaic" and a collective fear of the Islamic Other. The Government of Canada can be caught mongering this fear in their most recently proposed anti-terror bill, C-51. Unlike other legislation, however, this bill is being opposed by much of the Canadian population. There is a substantial effort to have this bill reformulated. These acts of rebellion against the government's most recent proposition could be

¹⁸ Dua, "Canadian Anti-Racist Feminist Thought," 11.

considered more anti-racist than multicultural. This form of national action is worthy of pride and relates only to fear in its rise against it.

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