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## #MosqueMeToo: Islamic Feminism in the Twittersphere

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**Abstract:** In this paper I examine the impact of social media campaigns, using the trending hashtag #MosqueMeToo as an artifact to analyze the extent to which these visual codes (through their democratic modes of participation) provide Muslim women with an accessible way to share their lived experiences and claim space within a virtual forum. Through highlighting the widespread impact of the hashtag Islamic feminist movement, I argue for the benefits of having a carefully articulated and tentative convergence of contemporary feminism and religious belonging rather than a critical distance between the two.

At the threshold of the third millennium, the status of women in Muslim societies was caught in the crosshairs of bias against the Islamic faith, the racialized Muslim, and women's rights (Al-Sharmani 2014). In spite of the increasing integration of sexual, racial, class, and national difference within contemporary feminist theory, some Muslim women continue to be subjected to a dual problem linked to their gender belonging and their religious association and must consequently face distinct forms of discrimination and violence. In contrast to their male counterparts, they continue to be neglected by both Muslim civil rights advocacy organizations and women's rights organizations-rendered invisible under international eyes (Pasha 2014). Confronting this marginalization head-on, Islamic feminists have passionately sought to secure their roles in their societies on their own terms by increasing their visibility in the digital world and situating themselves at the virtual center of their concerns and discourses (Cooke 2000). As such, it is imperative to consider the effects that new communication technologies have on feminist debate and activism, specifically in exposing the violence

committed against Muslim women. Considering the fact that fourth-wave feminism focuses on online technology more so than previous feminist movements, the accessible and distributive nature of social media outlets such as Twitter not only provides a new mode of critique, but also a contemporary method of community building, namely through the sharing of collective experience. This intersection of online feminism and Islamic faith ultimately provides a grounding for the emergence of a new branch of feminist activism that not only expands on digital frontiers but also establishes an intersectional framework that accurately addresses the representation, treatment, and identities of Muslim women (Schenato 2017).

In this context, this article examines the nature and impact of social media campaigns that focus on empowering Muslim women, using the trending hashtag #MosqueMeToo as an artifact to analyze the extent to which these digital identifiers (through their democratic modes of participation) provide Muslim women with an accessible way to share their perspectives and lived experiences within a virtual forum. Advancing this conversation, I seek to address how the #MosqueMeToo Twitter feed reveals the intimate linkages between feminism, knowledge production, and networked community building in the new media era, offering an exemplary case of the cultural and social work that hashtag feminism does in both online and offline spaces. Drawing from sources such as Tara L. Conley and Kimberlé Crenshaw, I explore the ways in which the syntactical mode of tagging and categorizing through hashtags ruptures conventional forms of knowledge production and intersectional awareness by dismantling hierarchies solely based on gender and race. Here, I argue for the benefits of having a carefully articulated and tentative convergence of religion and feminism rather than maintaining a critical distance between the two; in doing so, this paper acknowledges the significance of including an intersectional interplay of both paradigms, especially in holding the potential to advance Muslim women's struggles for equality. Most importantly, it makes significant contributions to the current national debates regarding gender and Islam, race and ethnicity, and transnational feminist studies.

In a *Washington Post* opinion piece titled "What Happened When I Was Sexually Assaulted during the Hajj," Egyptian-American columnist and gender activist Mona Eltahawy discloses on a number of subject matters: the importance of ensuring the safety of female pilgrims, how she has come to reconsider her own fears, and the inspiration she gained from reading another woman's account of being sexually assaulted (2018). It is not entirely a personal anecdote, per se, but rather an optimistic

collage of ambitions, with occasional fabrics of rhetoric that serve to empower other victims of sexual violence to denounce the widespread issue of misconduct in religious settings. The article consists of a detailed description regarding Eltahawy's experience of having been sexually assaulted twice while performing the hajj-the annual pilgrimage to Islam's holiest site in Mecca-at the budding age of 15 (2018). She recounts having arrived with her family in Saudi Arabia, veiled from head to toe in the required clothing, and being subsequently groped by two men during the holy event. According to the columnist, it would take her several more years before she would publish her story, and eventually birth her own codified term-one that would encourage many other Muslim women to narrate their similar encounters under the slogan #MosqueMeToo (Eltahawy 2018).



Figure 1. A screenshot of the #MosqueMeToo hashtag feed.

On a broader scale, intersectionality, as an analytic frame that embraces multiple axes of inequality, emerged during the 1960s and 1970s from the efforts of feminist and civil rights movements (Zimmerman 2017). The key insight of intersectional feminism emphasized the idea that multiple socially constructed identities and categories of difference cannot be understood simply as distinct terms; rather, the categories of race, social class, gender, sexuality have to be considered as factors that interact simultaneously within society to produce a range of hierarchies and inequalities (Zimmerman 2017). Yet to what extent the original body of work is of current relevance beyond its original context is disputable. Recently, some critics have questioned the limits of intersectionality and its tendency to conflate intragroup differences. As evinced in the outpour of testimonies from other Muslim women around the world, it is critical to note here that the visibility of Eltahawy's effort bears a significant amount of credence to another iteration of feminist work that originated in the Twittersphere. #MosqueMeToo intentionally rearticulated the #MeToo movement created by black feminist Tarana Burke, which initially showed solidarity with survivors of sexual violence. However, it was only when actresses began to adopt it within the context of the film industry that the phrase gained international exposure. This oversight highlights a common concern about the ways that the contributions of women of color can be sidelined, only to have the same ideas lauded when they are presented by women in higher-privileged communities. For Eltahawy, this sourced her inspiration to

expand on a movement which she viewed as being “very privileged, very white,” adding that there exists a hierarchy which dictates who gets attention, when in reality #MeToo has to be available to all people (Barron 2018, Par. 6). Through the creation of her viral hashtag, Eltahawy managed to subvert the power dynamics of a mainstream movement by asserting a focus of her own choosing. By simply adding the term “Mosque” to the equation, she was able to broaden the confines of the #MeToo discussion to encompass the real-life experiences and views of Muslim women altogether.

With respect to identity, critical legal theorists like Kimberlé Crenshaw have explicitly located the problematic nature of a Western-centric feminist ideology in its failure to include non-privileged women within this context. Consequently, I draw on the insights provided by Crenshaw and the notion of multiple oppressions to illustrate the backlash that arose in response to the #MosqueMeToo movement, and to further question intersectionality’s ostensibly all-encompassing, all-inclusive character—specifically in its relative absence of religion. As outlined in the article “Intersectionality” (2016), Cooper notes that Crenshaw first coined the term to discuss the relationship between “structural intersectionality” and “political intersectionality,” drawing on the notion of the vulgarized social construction thesis to illustrate the necessity of identity politics (3). This assumption, as she states, has been used to legitimize movements for affirmative action by dismantling the claim that one’s identity is the only source of one’s political perspective on the world. Rather than assuming a universality of that perspective, Crenshaw espouses that it is vital that we take on an intersectional lens to understand the full extent of identity categories and to view them as potential coalitions as opposed to distinct political interests (Cooper 2016). One crucial problem that Crenshaw’s critique reveals is the tendency for categories of oppression to be defined in terms of their “apparent” intersectional experiences, resulting in the false universalizations of members associated with a specific subgroup. Significantly, this structure of affiliation can fragment identities and render multiple oppressed groups vulnerable to anti-women rhetoric and claims of theocratic patriarchy—as displayed in the varied responses to the #MosqueMeToo movement.

In the subsequent aftermath of her story’s publication release, Eltahawy was met with brash and aggressive comments from within her own community, with some refusing to believe that such abuse could take place. Meanwhile, other critics, namely anti-Muslim xenophobes, took to hijacking the #MosqueMeToo hashtag to validate their stereotypes of all Muslims. When asked if this was something she considered before

sharing her story, Eltahawy replied, “I am very aware that Muslim women are caught between a rock and a hard place: Islamophobes/racists who demonize all Muslim men and our community that defends all Muslim men. Neither side cares about Muslim women” (Ismail 2018). Here, Eltahawy alludes to the double bind of gender and religious discrimination that Muslim women face, even within feminist social justice movements. This lack of recognition of differences among women has in some instances, though not always, worked to function as modes of exclusion through a process of cultural translation whereby ideas and experiences among geographic, cultural, and religious spaces are not being taken into account (Fenton 2016). Considering that “the discursive construction of the ‘other’ as homogeneous and disempowered is similar to the construction of religious women as suffering from being uniformly and automatically oppressed” (Salem 2013, 21), Muslim women are thus susceptible of being clustered as individuals with contrasting agendas: either rejecting feminist values or religious beliefs (Abdallah 2012). This ruptured perception is amplified due to the already-prevalent construction of their belonging to a unique classification as being victims of an oppressive and patriarchal set of values (Fenton 2016). One way to dismantle such silencing effects and reconcile agency with religion is to reconceptualize the discussion that revolves around feminism and religion, namely by approaching our engagements with digital texts in a way that is predicated on creating a new framework of understanding that embodies multiple perspectives. This would ultimately represent a turning point in which Muslim women can reclaim their agencies to mobilize new modes of feminist and religious critique.



Figure 2. A screenshot of Mona Eltahawy's twitter post regarding the backlash and defensiveness in

*response to #MosqueMeToo.*

While there is no denying that digital platforms can sometimes serve as hostile and unwelcoming places for its users, they may also have the unexpected effect of strengthening an online group's self-definition as a community. Hashtag activism proposes the pursuit of disruption through acts of counter-narratives and resistance, and in doing so, encourages countercultural learning and awareness-raising for improved conditions. In theory, hashtag feminism-or the digital practice of activism in the form of Twitter hashtags-has been widely adopted within the burgeoning sphere of online feminism (Gunn 2015). This is most notably attributed to the fact that the Internet provides a space where victims of inequality can be brought together in a manner that acknowledges their pain, narrative, and isolation. Tara L. Conley (2017) has written extensively on the discursive power of hashtags in her article "Decoding Black Feminist Hashtags as Becoming," documenting how online feminist spaces have served to foster communities of validation and support, education and empowerment, as well as radicalization and contention. She closely examines the stories and conversations attached to four prominent campaigns that trended nationally in the United States (#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen, #BlackPowerIsForBlackMen, #WhyIStayed, and #YouOkSis) in order to illustrate how their rhizomatic approaches enable them to "connect to other stories, events, encounters, and desires, and form new(er) articulations of lived experience" (Conley 2017, 30). As Conley proposes, these campaigns reflect a contemporary vernacular that was created and proliferated by Black women as part of a goal to transcend platforms into both public and private spaces. In other words, they share a common language that speaks to disrupt and challenge previously held beliefs about Black women, their experiences, and their roles in their communities (Conley 2017). By mapping prominent Black feminist hashtags from their origins to their development, Conley illustrates how movements like #YouOkSis transformed the way that networked technologies were being leveraged in order to accommodate and propagate meaningful and necessary critical dialogues on race, feminism, and online representation. In similar fashion, #MosqueMeToo was created in an effort to reposition the discourses of both gender and religious dynamics, for it was precisely the impassioned online discussions around the movement that revealed a disturbing revelation surrounding the precariousness of women's lives in religious sites. Likewise, the proliferation of retweets that appeared in less than 24 hours opened up important opportunities for feminists to disclose their narratives of sexual harassment and interrogate the abuse of power that lurks inside the walls of mosques and other Muslim spaces (Sykes 2018). Despite occurring in different cultural and social contexts, both projects nonetheless demonstrate the extent to which hashtag

activism is able to promote feminist politics and reclaim public space by making visible women's lived experiences.

Because today's feminists, in contrast to their antecedents from previous movements, heavily focus on and make use of online technology, social media outlets such as Twitter provide a unique prospective for enabling a more fluid forum for debate and activism (Zimmerman 2017). Indeed, the very public nature of Twitter plays a large role in insisting on intersectional feminist frameworks, necessitating a rejection of conceiving identity in terms of binary thinking (Zimmerman 2017). This refusal to give into the fabricated binary between both realms is reminiscent of the micropolitical work that hashtag activism does, partly because it does not fall exclusively into the models of traditional public engagement. The very public nature of sites like Twitter further plays a large role in offering those who are marginalized and disenfranchised a substantial space to find commonalities amongst each other and politically organize themselves on their own terms (Eagle 2015). For instance, hashtags-as personalized catchphrases that can be easily coined, searched, and linked-have the potential to engage concerned citizens and policymakers in wider conversations (Dadas 2017). The participatory qualities and circulatory potential of these codified terms is contingent on the notion that the more interaction and intersection among user-generated content there is, the stronger the resulting communities are. This explains why Twitter is invaluable in raising consciousness about ideas, movements, and information in real time. The digital practice of hashtagging, which exists and thrives on the basis of duplication, carves out a unique space where participants can recognize the transnational pervasiveness of an issue by simply assessing a repeated catchphrase mentioned in other tweets (Dadas 2017). Most significantly, the embeddedness of social media technologies in everyday life allows for more personal feminist politics than ever before, enabling women to express their shared affinities without relying on mainstream media (Lane 2015). Instead of resorting to traditional methods of broadcasting, a woman can instantaneously communicate her experience by including a hyperlink, such as #MosqueMeToo, to connect her frustration to a larger movement.



*Figure 3. A screenshot of a twitter post by a user sharing their story of being inappropriately touched in crowds during the Hajj pilgrimage.*

As #MeToo has shown, hashtags can prove to serve as valuable resources through their ability to raise awareness on social causes; at the same time, they also run the risk of oversimplification by neglecting underrepresented intersectional nuances. The risks of this activism should not dissuade participants from using hashtags to bring publicity to their cause, however. The structures of hashtags have provided opportunities for women to define their actions of feminism by forming collective communities, especially for those seeking to express their beliefs, globally, with other women who share in their social identity (Golbeck, Ash and Cabrera 2017). Using the language of assemblages, these rhetorical interventions are visually powerful, working to establish an opportunity for participants to immediately position themselves within a larger visual body of work across the globe, both online and offline. Like other movements that were spawned in the Twittersphere, #MosqueMeToo indexes one way that people perform feminist activism via new media technologies and social media networks of creation and sharing, paving the way for the convergence of both physical and virtual activism. The popularity and polarizing effect of the movement underscores the feminist need for an online platform like Twitter because it serves as a valuable, activist tool amenable to the inclusion of social categories that are beyond intersectionality's theoretical reach. #MosqueMeToo is more than a simple hashtag: it is a statement of justice, a demand for both intervention and visibility, and beyond that, a reminder that there is, in fact, strength in numbers.

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