Peer-Reviewed Article

Exploring the Narrated Experiences of Three International Muslim Students in a U.S. University

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the narrated lived experiences of three international Muslim students in a US university. The study took place at a northeastern public university in the USA and used a narrative research methodology in which the three participants were interviewed twice and asked to share materials and artifacts. The study has two main goals: First, it enriches our understanding of the participants' lived experiences. Second, it utilizes the participants' narrated experiences to develop pedagogical implications for programs and professors to empower minority students, such as the Muslim student population. The findings of this study reveal that the participants needed more support from their professors and departments to increase their visibility and empower them. Such support can come from means of critical pedagogy practices that challenge mainstream students' misconceptions and biases about their Muslim peers.

Keywords: Minority, Islam, Muslim students, identity, lived experiences.

INTRODUCTION

Muslim international students are prone to discrimination, exclusion, and violent behaviors in the western US environments (Ali, 2014; Allen, 2020; Bacchus, 2019; Choudhury & Beydoun, 2020; Green, 2019). Beshara (2019) argued that studying Muslims in the United States has political and moral

significance to Muslim students' political, religious, and national identities for the established well-being of imposed threats by non-Muslim persons. Muslim students in the United States are labeled and seen as individuals who belong to a suspicious community (Ali, 2014). In November 2016, the FBI Annual Hate 2015 Crime Report indicated that hate crimes against Muslims increased by 67%, a 19% increase that totaled 307 hate crimes in comparison to 257 in 2016 (FBI, 2017). However, from 2018 to 2021, a report noted a recent decline in hate crimes against Muslims (FBI, 2019). According to the August 2021 FBI Report, hate crimes against Muslims were 38%, with fewer cases in the US, FBI oversight. Regardless of the declining percentage, incidents against Muslims are still severe. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center (2017), from 2015 to 2016, the number of hate groups in the United States increased by 197% against Muslims. The Pew Research Center (2017) highlighted the primary religious affiliations in the US as Americans Judaism, Catholics, Protestants, Evangelical Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, Mormons, Atheists, and Islam ranking as the least welcomed and the least-favorite religion among the US population.

In 2015, there were 34 anti-Muslim hate groups; they surged to 101 in 2016. However, this number dropped in 2019 to 88 hate groups. The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) received 10,015 anti-Muslim hate crimes between 2014 until June 2019. Such incidents include harassment, vandalism, bullying, denial of service or access, issues with employment or promotion, inappropriate questioning or contact, and denial of religious accommodation, and these incidents soared in 2017 with Islamophobic propaganda (CAIR, 2020). In January 2017, former President Trump signed the Muslim Ban Executive Order that furthered racial profiling of Muslims. This narrative examination study, therefore, reports findings from three Muslim students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The anti-Muslim rhetoric is rooted in the Islamophobic discourse that rejects multiculturalism and fights against it. Green (2019) defines *Islamophobia* as "hostility toward Muslims and Islam that is driven by racism and manifested in acts of discrimination and violence" (p. 3). Sway (2005) argued that anti-religious ideologies such as Islamophobia and anti-Semitism are "rooted in xenophobic Eurocentrism, which fosters multicultural barriers in a "world not dominated by nationalism and national interests" (pp. 21-22); however, the paradigms to replace the rhetoric of vast destruction extends not only to Muslims but other marginalized groups where

attitudes of isolationist lead to the passing of laws that target these disparities (Cesari, 2010; Ekman, 2015; Fekete, 2009).

Bacchus (2019) argued that Muslims experience discrimination of socio-integration, which presents challenges and barriers to their religious beliefs, attire choices, and non-Western ethnic origins" (p. 1). Bacchus (2019) highlights that anti-Muslim media depictions have produced profiling policies within the Patriot Act, the Handschu Agreement, and the Muslim Ban. Additionally, examination of Islamophobic discourses in US societies is essential to the developmental senses of the marginalized student experiences. Bedi (2019) disputed that an Islamophobic individual is, indeed, a victim of their "unconscious shadow and struggle with symptoms of anxiety and fear and operates out of reptilian survival consciousness of fight, flight, or freeze" (p. 150). Schulzke (2011) claimed that the alleged war on terror promoted in the United States, the United Kingdom, and other Western European countries are one way of fighting multiculturalism. However, nationalistic utilization only strengthens arguments surrounding 9/11 as a failure in multiculturalism in the Euro-Western Counties (Allen & Nielsen, 2002; Choma et al., 2015; Eyssel et al., 2015; Fetzer & Soper, 2005; Stabac & Listhaug, 2008). The impact of representing Muslim people as a demographic threat removes their right to public spaces through symbolism designed to terminate Muslim people (Bakali, 2016).

Allen (2020a) acknowledges that the racial and cultural identity of the Islamic faith exposes Muslim persons to Islamophobia in the US. Beyond these physical acts of violence, Muslim individuals and families are frequent persons of interest in police investigations. Thus, further examination of the Muslims' lived experiences will provide parallels for analyzing Euro-Western countries. Choudhury and Beydoun (2020) asserted that Islamophobia's manifestations are often visible forms of violence. However, quotidian forms of discrimination are prevalent and less seen or observed. The worship places of Muslims (mosques) are frequently vandalized and attacked. Allen (2020a) reported that Muslim prayer places receive violent physical attacks, racist graffiti, smashed windows and break-ins, the desecration of sacred items, arson, and bombings. These attack on a specific group's place of worship attacks their identities. In Figure 1 below, we can see the attacks on Muslim prayer spaces (American Civil Liberties Union, 2020).

According to the American Civil Liberties Union, (2020), 67% of Muslims reported physical acts of violence at their local mosque. The ACLU noted many acts were initiated in the late hours, and impacted multiple marginalized communities. Additional reporting from the ACLU indicates the immigration status of many Muslims delayed reporting.

Figure 1
Nationwide Anti-Mosque Activity
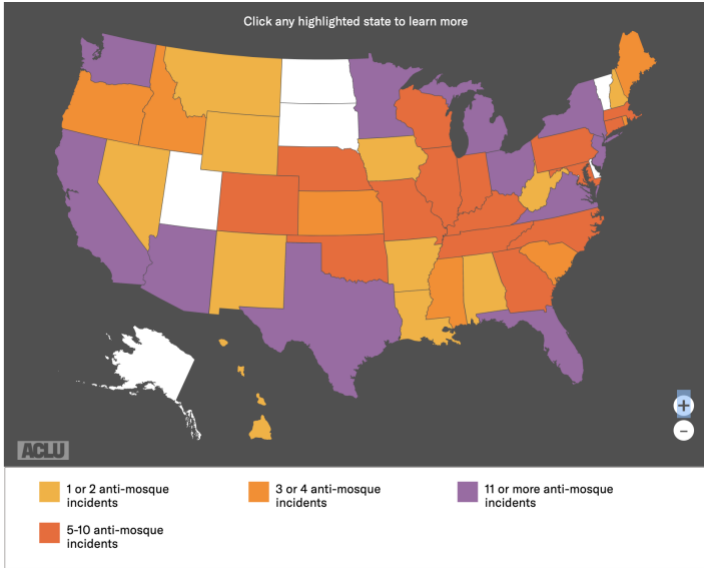
As information of three or more acts of violence directly indicated fear or concern for women and children determine the timeless of community reporting. Nonetheless, Muslim racial brutality extends to the college campus environments. CAIR (2017) highlights the cumulation of New York Universities' vandalism and hate speech with the former elected President, Donald Trump. University found the name "TRUMP" written on the door of the Islamic prayer room, the acronym "ISIS [Islamic State of Iraq and Syria], and a calling for Muslims to leave" in women's restrooms at the same university **(CAIR, 2017).** Also, other campuses experienced manifestations of Islamophobia, including the University of Michigan Ann Arbor and the University of Massachusetts Amherst, with similar anti-Muslim vandalism (CAIR, 2017).

Lost Privileges

Anti-Muslim rhetoric and sentiment can affect how Muslims are perceived (Ahmed et al., 2014; Mir, 2014; Rissanen, 2014). Yacoub (2017) developed a list of the lost privileges Muslim ESL University students desire to possess. Yacoub's list is a reflection on McIntosh's (1997) list of the White privileges (Table 1).

Table 1

McIntosh's (1997) Privileges of the White and Yacoub's (2017) Wished Privileges of Muslims*

White Privileges	Wished Privileges of Muslims
- I can be reasonably sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.	- When people know that I am a Muslim, they recognize that Islam is not monolithic but a diverse religion that houses 1.7 billion adherents.
- I can go shopping alone most of the time, fairly well assured that I will not be followed or harassed by store detectives.	- People do not consider me a part of the political conflict, because I represent myself and not any political entity; I am just a victim of a big political game
- I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely and positively represented.	- If I violate a rule, I deserve a penalty not because I want to ruin the system of the country but because I am not yet familiar with it.
- When I am told about our national heritage or about "civilization," I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.	- If I turn on the TV, I find my religion or culture represented in a good way.
- I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.	- If I turn on the TV, I see people of my religion or culture represented and their achievements highlighted.
- I can criticize our government and talk about how much I fear its policies and behavior without being seen as a cultural outsider.	- If I am assigned a group of classmates to work with, I am seen as normal as everyone else.
- I can choose to ignore developments in minority writing and minority activist programs, or disparage them, or learn from them, but in any case, I can find ways to be more or less protected from negative consequences of any of these choices.	- When I watch TV, I do not see any association between "terrorism" and "Islam."
	- If I look for Halal food, people do not think I hate their food or detest their religion.
	- If I am accompanying people of my religion or race, we are not looked down upon or thought we are plotting something.

Note: These are not the complete lists; these are only relevant examples.

In addition to Yacoub's list above, some Muslims change their Arabic names to both avoid potential forms of discrimination and increase their chance of getting hired. In the movie *The Citizen*, a Lebanese Muslim immigrant suffering from discrimination and job rejections was advised by a Muslim peer to change their name to a more Americanized option to increase their chances of employment. With such anti-Muslim rhetoric and

Islamophobic discourses, few studies explored the experiences of Muslim students. Ali (2014) explored the life experiences of 24 Muslim US citizens enrolled as undergraduate students in four universities in Southern California. Over nine months, Ali investigated how those Muslim students understood their experiences to construct an identity as Muslims in America. The categorized research included three predominant themes in the participants' data analysis: Muslims as pre-modern people, a physical threat, and gendered figures.

The participants believed that the society around them viewed them as backward, illogical, or unwilling to participate in a democratic country and "extremists." (Ali, 2014, pp. 1251-1253). Additionally, the 24 participants in this study indicated they were often treated in ways that reflect the prevailing image of Muslims in America. One of the participants stated having to stop wearing the hijab to avoid being classified as a Muslim, or at least to reduce such categorization. Ali's (2014) findings concluded with more investigation on issues that can contribute to researching at-risk students in the school context. Dey's (2012) findings for the Muslim US citizen examined college students' construct of personal identity by living as Muslim citizens in the US and studying in its colleges. Dey's (2012) findings indicated four major identity dimensions: religion, citizenship, culture, and gender; they affect Muslim US-citizen-college students. Dey (2012) clarified that these dimensions resulted in unparalleled anti-Muslim verbiage in the United States. Dey (2012) concluded that with increased knowledge about the Muslim college student population, Muslim communities experienced increased "visibility" for enhanced knowledge of the different levels of accommodations that support Muslim college students, college programs, faculty, and staff for a whole society development (p. 19).

Muslim Women and College Campus

Mir (2014) investigated the struggle of transient Muslim American undergraduate women who wore hijabs on college campuses. Mir (2014) examined the imaged and perceived treatment in external and internal campus environments and found that participants, although all Americans with fluent American English abilities, suffered from being scrutinized. Participants suffered from the reductionist looks that associated them with a monolithic group. Additionally, the identities of the participants were diverse, varying from orthodox to contemporary Islamic practices with Muslim women's personal praying, dating, and fashion styles. Also, Ahmed et al.'s (2014) collection of fourteen published essays from Muslim American students, eight men, and six women, are memoirs and personal reflections on student

experiences. The fourteen grouped essays are divided into five parts on the struggle and diversity of Islamophobia, sexuality/relationships, piety, and family. These collected narratives of Muslim students dig into discovery for a sense of belonging and the Islamophobic discourse for perceived experiences. The current study is a continuation of such efforts to examine the lived and narrated experiences of Muslim students.

Research Questions

This study is committed to examining possible answers to the following questions:

RQ1: What are the narrated experiences of three international Muslim students in a US university?

RQ2: What do these reported experiences reveal about the participants' sense of belonging and identity negotiation?

METHOD

This study adopts narrative design. Labove (2006) defines a *narrative* as a chain of events told orally or in writing and ordered chronologically. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argued that narrative research works best for studies that explore how contextualized discourses form the participants' stories. Narrative studies are valuable because participants' stories include "language, social relations, communities, conventions, rules, beliefs and discourse of the individuals" (Hanauer, 2000, p.1) and they are discovered, explored, and valued in narrative-based studies. Therefore, the researcher's use of a narrative research design in this study is the most suitable as it empowers the participants to understand and interpret the stories they describe. While telling their stories, the participants can reflect upon their voices, comment on their experiences, and re-consider the story's context. The duality of the narrative research allows for "a dual layer of interpretation" where the participants interpret recounted stories, and the researcher "makes sense" of these interpretations, adding a layer of interpretation to the narratives (Riessman, 1993; Delve et al., 2020).

Data Collection and Analysis

This study occurred at a public university in the northeastern region of the United States. The researcher used a semi-structured interview style for collecting data. Following Riessman's (2008) and Rubin's (2012) semi-structured interview models, which argued that the researcher and the participants should create a dialogue until the researcher deeply comprehends

the participants' narratives. Data collection spanned over five months in two separate interviewing sessions. In the first interview, research participants were asked open-ended questions to encourage them to share their lived experiences as Muslim students on and off campus. In the second interview, participants were asked to reflect on their stories for further information, clarity, or to provide additional details. Narayan and George (2003) wrote that narratives require storying and re-storying. Therefore, this aspect was essential to the narrative research method as it allowed the participants time to hear back their stories.

Participants

After obtaining the Institutional Review Board protocol approval, the researcher sent invitations to potential participants using WhatsApp. Additionally, the researcher contacted some undergraduate instructors for assistance with disseminating invitations to all potential participants. Through these recruitment efforts, the researcher identified one female and two male participants who signed the consent form for participation in this research study. While the number of participants in quantitative studies is critical for sample representation and generalizable findings, qualitative analysis relies on a different examination that does not usually take numbers into account. In qualitative studies, an examination of the collected data's thickness, depth, and complexity focuses on the participants' narrated experiences and stories. Towards the concluding findings, the number of participants does not become an issue; however, what becomes an issue is the quality of the analysis and the interpretative depth. Qualitative research humanizes the participants; one participant's story is worth listening to and investigating since generalization is not the end goal, but understanding a human experience is. As this study aims to examine Muslim students' narrative experiences, the four inclusionary criteria consist of the following:

1. The participants must be 18 years old or above,
2. The participants must self-identify as Muslims,
3. The participants must be born outside of the USA and not hold a US citizenship, and
4. The participants must speak English as a second language.

As the academic literature highlights the existing and perceived forms of discrimination towards Muslim US citizens, the barriers within the US educational system may pose additional challenges for academic studies. The reason that the researcher focused on non-US Muslim students is that they

"may lack a feeling of ownership, awareness of their legal rights; they may not have mastery of the English language; or they may not have a feeling of living amongst the margins (Yacoub, 2017, p. 409). However, it does not imply that Muslim international students are ill-equipped for the vigor of a US academic program; however, it does infer that Muslim US citizens may have received more attention within the college support structure.

FINDINGS

The findings for this research include three narrative experiences from the participants.
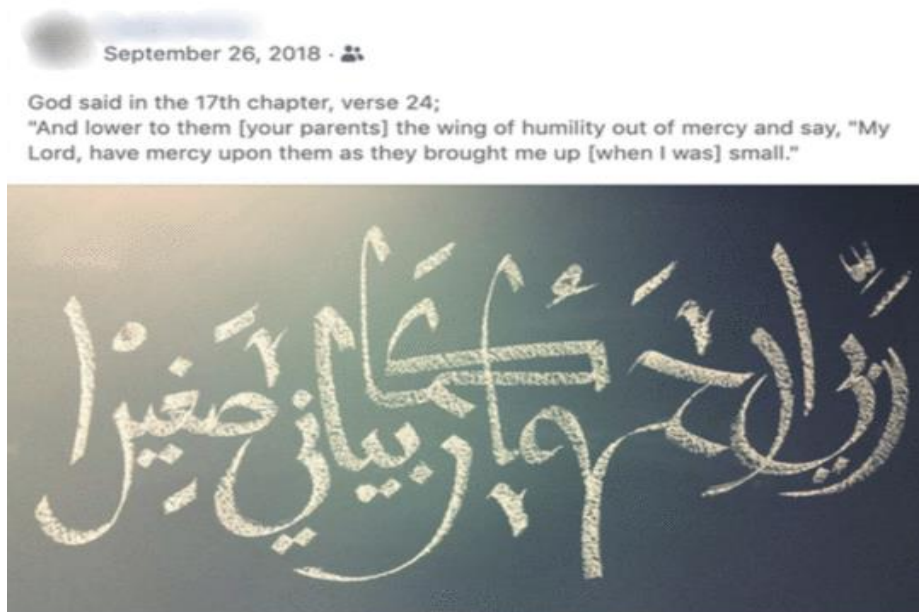
Khalaf's Young Religious Identity

Khalaf was born in Egypt but came to the United States with his family when he was four years old because his father was enrolled in a Ph.D. program in English linguistics. When his father graduated, Khalaf, then 11 or 12 years of age, returned home with his family to Egypt. After finishing high school, Khalaf returned to the United States and studied Bachelor's in English. Khalaf's Muslim identity started to develop early in his life. In his fourth grade in the United States, Khalaf's parents asked him if he was interested in fasting during Ramadan, and he enthusiastically agreed. He said, the school accommodated him and another Muslim classmate who was also fasting." Khalaf said," at a very young age, I was developing this identity of what it means "to be a Muslim." He continued by saying "that to be a Muslim means to be a humble person, to sympathize with everyone else, to fast the month of Ramadan so that we can feel those in needy who cannot afford food on a daily basis, so I became a generous person." Khalaf said, "All of that is because I understand what it means to be a Muslim." Khalaf's religious identity was enforced by visiting Egypt. Khalaf said that it was a completely different experience for him when he returned to Egypt. From an Islamic point of view, Khalaf said, "it was amazing, I would hear the beautiful call for the Azan [call for prayer] in the microphones of the many mosques, and you would see many people, children, and adults, go to the mosque."

Khalaf as an Adult Muslim in the USA

Today, as a 23-year-old individual, Khalaf shared some pictures and screenshots from his Facebook social media account. Khalaf feels empowered by using social media. He said, "on social media, I have a lot of American non-Muslim friends, and I can defend my religion and speak well things about my religion on social media."

Figure 2
A picture about parents in Islam

God said in the 17th chapter, verse 24;
"And lower to them [your parents] the wing of humility out of mercy and say, "My Lord, have mercy upon them as they brought me up [when I was] small."

رَبِّ ارْحَمْهُمَا كَمَا رَبَّيَانِي صَغِيرًا

This shared picture from Khalaf's Facebook account is an example of memorable experiences, particularly the Islamic religion and how he is being kind to his parents—which he feels proud of. He thinks it extends love to the two people that cared about him the most. Juxtapositionally, he said that it makes him sad to see his old neighbors alone and their children come to visit them once a week or once a month, or even rarely. He wonders how much time, money, and love these old neighbors spent on their children when they were young, and now these old people are left lonely by their children. "They can experience strokes or can even die, and their children will be last to know," Khalaf said. Khalaf's identity seems to have been influenced and shaped by the teachings of the Quran. "The Quran, on the other side, tells those kids to be loving and caring to their parents and to never let them down," Khalaf said. He thinks that such posts could help his non-Muslim friends understand the essence of Islam and what it promotes.

Khalaf associates his Muslim identity with sharing Islamic posts on Facebook, writing Arabic on his textbooks, visiting the mosque, and praying congregational prayers with his fellow Muslim brothers. Khalaf's connection between his religious childhood and adulthood is manifested by such posts.

He is proud of his religious identity and shares verses from the Holy Book on his page.

Experiencing Campus Life as a Muslim

Khalaf keeps his religious identity on campus by representing Muslims in positive Islamic acts toward others. Khalaf is aware of anti-Muslim sentiment and rhetoric and tries to push against such rhetoric by inviting others to know about Islam. He said, "there is a lot of 'negativities' against Muslims in the media." However, he always engages people who find excuses to hate Muslims. When asked about these excuses, he said, "those people who think negatively of Muslims and Islam do not have first-hand experiences with Muslims but that they have been fed hatred from anti-Muslim media." However, Khalaf does not feel comfortable praying in open spaces on campus. When asked if he ever prayed on campus, he said he always prayed in the prayer room in the library. However, sometimes Khalaf needs more time to cross buildings and pray in that room, so he prays in an empty classroom. "One day," he said, "people have walked in on me while I am praying. I didn't stop, and once I finished, I would not even wait for them to ask me. I ask them, do you have any questions about prayer?"

Khalaf stated that although he has a sense of fear when practicing his religion openly, this apprehension is not too strong to stop him from practicing his religion on campus. Khalaf initiates conversation and takes steps forward to help others to learn about Islam. He tries to correct these distorted images as an active Muslim Student Association (MSA) member. Khalaf operates as a member and an officer holding the position of organizational secretary, planning events that invite Muslim scholars to speak on his campus about Islam, Muslim people, and the many misinterpretations about the Islamic religion. In Figure 3, Refreshments Offered by the MSA, Khalaf shows his commitment to the MSA by participating in 2 to 3-hour library events that bring students Arabic coffee and refreshments and books in walks between classes for refreshments, conversation, questions, and answers about Islam.

When asked if he is afraid to be accused of preaching Islam on campus by helping organize MSA events, Khalaf said, "it is not preaching; it is teaching and informing others about something they do not know about Islam." He said that they don't ask people to convert to Islam but ask people to get educated about it. Such events are also powerful because Khalaf can talk to students about Islam so that other students who missed the event can learn about and discuss the goals of such activities. As Khalaf's stories unfold,

he seems to have a good mix of his extrovert social and religious identities. It is not a problem for him to look different.

Figure 3
Refreshments offered by the MSA

He said, "My skin tone looks completely different from everyone else. For the most part, most of the students are White, except for two classes, there were two black girls." His different look makes him even more willing to share who he is and his identity. He thinks of himself as an asset to his non-Muslim classmates. Khalaf said, "I can share my personal existence with people so that they can have a reference whenever they hear Islam or Muslims." Khalaf considers himself a reference for his classmates about Islam so that they can relate to him whenever they hear something about Islam. He knows that anything he does with people, or his classmates would probably relate to Islam, not his behavior. Khalaf said, "when they [his classmates] talked to me, they are not only talking to a man, they are also talking to a Muslim person."

Shahd's Religious Identity

Unlike Khalaf, who left the United States when he was about 11 years old, Shahd, arrived in the United States at age 12 from Saudi Arabia with her parents, who were also Ph.D. students. She started the 7th grade when she arrived in the United States and knew some English but needed more to continue a conversation or pass a class. Shahd started to develop a religious identity from a young age. Her religious choices were primarily affected by the decisions of her parents. While in grade seven, her parents asked her to

start wearing the hijab (Muslim headscarf). Shahd stated, "it was that it was difficult to wear the hijab because everyone has already seen [her] without the hijab in the first semester." With this decision, Shahd struggled with her identity and body as a Muslim girl. She said, "it was difficult to go to school with this new identity, this new version of myself, but no one questioned it." Shahd cites the reason for this ease, stating, "there were other girls who were already wearing the hijab at my school. So, it was more of an internal struggle than external."

The Impact of Shahd's Parents on her Identity

Having two educated parents impacted Shahd's understanding of her identity and who she is as a Muslim woman. Specifically, having a Muslim mother who also wears the hijab and is also a student at the same university, Shahd said, helped her understand what she goes through as a student and as a Muslim woman wearing the hijab. She said, "my parents helped in developing an academic personality." Shahd said," in high school, she always got high grades, honors, and a high-grade point average (GPA), and had "a lot of that was due to [her] upbringing."

Feeling Different

As someone who started wearing the hijab very young, Shahd always feels different. She is different in her US school because she is Muslim and wears a hijab. She is also seen differently in her home country because she is seen as westernized. Shahd shared some pictures, and she said that they relate to her experience. In Figure 4, her images were captured; however, these are not her original creation.

As seen in the caricature picture above, Shahd said, "It describes me throughout my whole life. I have always been an advocate for what I believe in no matter how small the issue was; it is always related to a bigger issue." When analyzing the picture, Shahd relates to it, stating,

> I can see two groups: a majority and a minority. First, the minority tried to join the majority and be among them, but they were rejected because they looked different. Consequently, the minority decided to create their place, but then they were blamed for doing so by the majority.

Shahd is an optimistic person; a person that never loses hope. Within a small minority Shahd perceives herself to be living in, she always fights for her cause and for who she is. She wears the hijab, she prays, and she opens discussions with her classmates and writes about women and Islam in her

assignments because she sees herself as a hopeful person, a person who looks at the good thing. She talked about how she was related to a sign that promotes love between neighbors and that she took a picture of it.

Figure 4
A comic figure shared by Shahd
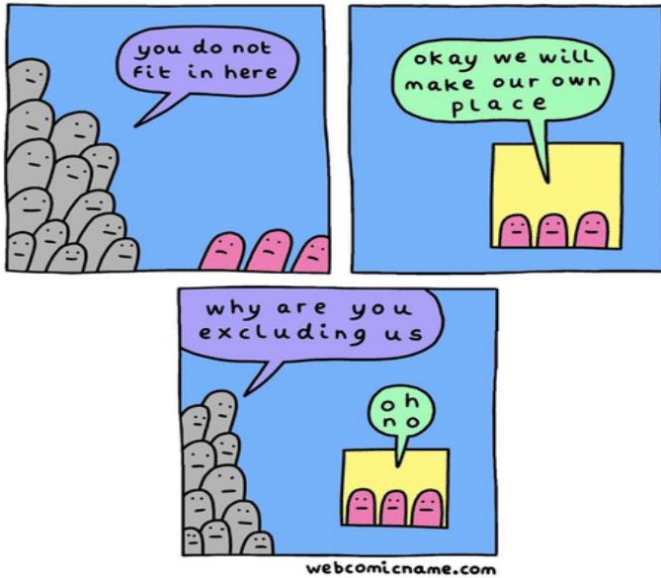
Figure 5
A Sign Picture Shared by Shahd

This picture is taken from a sign that promotes love to neighbors regardless of their color, religion, or immigration status. It promotes love for the sake of love. Shahd relates to this picture and says,

> It agrees with verses in the Holy Quran that promote love, especially among neighbors….Quran verses that promote love among neighbors but also the prophetic teachings. She felt a sense of belonging and attachment to such a sign that partially represented her religion.

Experiencing Campus as a Muslim Woman

As a Muslim woman, Shahd became used to getting undesired looks. She said, when I'm walking …people give me strange looks or things like that all the time or were afraid to approach me. Like, I look a certain way, like I'm different." Such looks make her afraid to pray on campus, and she feels too fragile to do it. When I asked her if she could pray on campus, she said, "I get a little nervous 'cause I don't know what they're going to do or say or anything like that but it does not stop me from praying." Such feelings increased with the New Zealand attack on Muslims. Shad said about this incident, "it did make me really scared. Like I've always like been a little scared to like to perform my religious beliefs in public because of how the community is different, but like that increased my fear."

Like Khalaf, Shahd thinks that Islam is portrayed unfavorably in the media and that she feels" a responsibility to improve the picture given about Muslims." She said, "its's really important for me to show Islam in a better light than what is shown in the media or how it is portrayed, or things like that."

Shahd can share her opinions and empower her voice in class, especially in English classes. Such a distorted picture of Muslims and how she feels perceived affects her belonging. For Shahd, to belong meant "when fear disappears" and when a person becomes "approachable with no worries." Like Khalaf, who gave excuses to people who do not favor Muslims, Shahd stated, "it's just harder for people to, especially here in this town, in this campus, to understand issues of diversity that people are different from them. And I think they sometimes like to ignore those ideas or just stay away."

Experiencing Courses as a Muslim Woman

Since graduating from high school in the United States, Shahd's language proficiency has advanced. Shahd was empowered by having a supportive teacher. Shahd voiced that having a teacher that is willing to accept her position on different matters and give feedback that does not suppress her opinion is the most important for her. Talking about educational feedback she

receives from her teacher, Shahd voiced that, "I was more comfortable sharing my controversial opinions cause I knew like she knows what I mean and kind of felt or been through some of the things I been through." As an empowered student, Shahd integrates topics of race and diversity in her writings. Shahd voiced that, "issues of diversity and race and things like that are very important to me. So, I try to integrate that into most of my writing. An example, I   would say, I wrote about Muslim women in the Middle East."

Shahd's justification for integrating diversity issues in her English assignments is due to her perception of her American classmates. She said, "it is difficult for Americans to distinguish between what is Islamic and what is cultural." Shahd said she would talk to her classmates in discussions or group work about her culture of Saudi Arabia and how things that her classmates think religious are, indeed, cultural." When I asked her to give an example, she mentioned, "women driving cars and covering faces." This highlights how Shahd reconciles her Muslim identity by speaking up and expressing who she is, what her culture is, and what her religion teaches. Shahd voiced, "this helps my classmates to understand my point of view because most of my classmates … don't know much about diversity or diverse issues, and I think my input really matters or like any Muslim." The overall experience of Shad's class experience is positive and empowering.

Joining a Local Muslim Community

Malek is an introverted individual. He voiced that he came to the United States with a specific goal: To complete his studies and travel back to his country where he could find a better job. However, he feels isolated. One of his friends who used to go to the Islamic center (mosque) suggested that he should start going there, too, and would never regret the idea. After multiple attempts of persuasion from his friend, Malek finally agreed to go to the Islamic center to pray and start making some more friends but on a small level. He said, "It was a good timing because it was Ramadan, and the Islamic center was looking for volunteers to set up the Iftar [breaking the fast at sunset] during the holy month of Ramadan and to keep the mosque clean." Malek said that it was good for him to go and start expanding his circle of friends "a little bit more."

At the mosque, Malek started to join the community by attending the prayers and offering help. He liked the idea of volunteering and started liking the people there who got together for no reason but to volunteer and set the mosque up for the fasting Muslims to come and break their fast and pray together. Malek said, "this spirit is unforgettable and made me change my shy personality a little bit."

Figure 6.1 and 6.2
Muslim Community Breaking Their Fast in Ramadan.

Malek said, "Such Ramadan gatherings and food sharing made me feel that I belonged to this Muslim community and helped me make more friends with the people who frequently go to the mosque." Malek's images provided in Figures 6.1 and 6.2 display something about identity. Malek states, "I started to love sharing and to help others." His volunteer work at the Mosque during Ramadan made him change from an introverted person to a more social person. However, he was not as active on campus as in the Muslim community he joined.

Experiencing Courses as a Muslim

Malek expressed some anxiety that affected his experience. Malek said that for him, "belong" means "being part of something and being involved in something important....to belong when you feel part of something." Having anxiety, less engagement, and less belonging in taking courses with American classmates, Malek says taking courses with American classmates is a good "opportunity to learn about American students and their culture, and also … for them to learn about us." Malek's Muslim identity was challenged in a composition course. He narrated that one time the topic of religion was part of an open discussion, and his American classmates said it was "OK to have people from other religions in our country, but it is not OK to call for … any religion other than Christianity because America is a Christian country." He said he did not have a problem with that, but only some students said some religions promote violence, "I felt like they were talking about Islam, and that did not make me feel comfortable at all."

Malek's Muslim name was a challenge for him. He shared a situation when one of his classmates used to call him when they worked together in a

group, "you, whatever your name is." Malek said that this happened to him more than once, and when he decided to resist and ask her why she does not call him by his name, she said, "sorry, I cannot pronounce your name; it is hard." He said, "she should ask me how to pronounce it, but calling me "you, whatever your name is' is racist, in my opinion."

Malek is aware of the anti-Muslim rhetoric, so he would not pray on campus to not trigger such negative sentiment and rhetoric. He said, "...would not feel comfortable praying in front of people, and that would make him attract the attention of the other students, the thing that does not make him comfortable, and fear of unwanted or dangerous reactions. Malek's fears increased when the New Zealand massacre happened. He shared with me that when the incident happened, he was at Walmart and saw two people murmuring racist words against Muslims and gloating over the incident. Juxtaposed with the anti-Muslim rhetoric and Islamophobic discourse, Malek thinks the topics covered in the composition courses are off and do not address such important social issues. Malek's teacher wanted the class to write about a certain topic, but Malek thought that he was not interested in the topic. Malek said, "I was not interested in this topic; I wanted a more valuable topic, especially because I am not taking a creative writing class." When I told him that maybe in other classes in his major, such important topics are discussed, Malek said, "English class is not like any other class like our major classes. Other classes in my major, it is you, the teacher, and the material. There is not much interaction with students or chances to discuss important like topics."

DISCUSSION

What the participants expressed uncovered some anti-Muslim rhetoric and sentiment in the USA. This anti-Muslim sentiment is characterized by Islamophobia, which Sayyid (2014) defined as an ideology that aims to undermine Muslim individuals' presence. There has been an investment in this sentiment (Sayyid, 2014). Sayyid categorized some anti-Muslim and Islamophobic acts such as attacks on persons perceived to be Muslims, attacks on Islamic premises, acts of intimidation, attacks on individuals perceived to be Muslims, and acts of unfavorable treatment. Media majorly inspires these acts. Jamieson and Cappella (2008) argued that media could and does create specific images and then reinforce them to their agreeing viewers. However, teachers can challenge such images with creative reinforcements through media.

According to these research findings, teachers have a significant impact in empowering their students, as in the case of Shahd, whose teacher empowered her by allowing and encouraging her to write about and discuss

women in Saudi Arabia. Institutional programs should invest in training teachers who can teach minority students. Additionally, professors overseeing programs should organize workshops to discuss empowerment to support a minority student population. These research findings direct the following implications for empowered minority students, including the Muslim student population.

Valorizing Critical Pedagogy Practices

Critical pedagogy is an educational philosophy that uses critical social theory to examine and explore how schools are structured to reproduce injustice and inequality (Beck, 2005). Critical pedagogy can involve asking students to critique and examine different texts (Beck, 2005). During this study, participants shared a need for more critical pedagogy practices in the curriculum. The researcher asked participants 1) if they talked or wrote about topics that can push them out of their comfort zone or 2) what topics problematize beliefs they initially held about groups of people (topics such as race, diversity, ethnicity, discrimination, racism, religious plurality, etc.). Shahd replied, "Issues of diversity and race and things like that are very important to me. So, I try to integrate that into most of my writing." It seems that Shahd, as a Muslim felt that she needed to integrate assignments topics with Muslim or Islamic beliefs even if she was not asked to do so. Malek, who experienced a situation when some of his classmates thought it was unacceptable to promote any religion in America, said, "unfortunately, the teacher did not give us another chance to discuss religion or beliefs or free speech. I hope that English classes give opportunities for such conversations about free speech and brotherhood instead of leaving students think what they think." Khalaf shares Shahd's views that initiating discussions and discussing religion with his friends can support content integration in assignments.

Cultivating Narrative Assignments

Through this study, I came to learn that narratives are one way that students can get empowered by having their voices heard through sharing their stories and narratives. Such stories and narratives can open up opportunities for further discussions and conversations and open up venues for rhetorical listening. Krista Ratcliffe (2005) asks: Why is it difficult to listen to each other? She then answers that our debates are almost always based on and aiming at the arguments: "I'm right" vs. "No, you're wrong." This leads to a status of non-identification in cross-cultural communication or reiterates the status of disidentification. The two statuses drain blood from the veins of understanding. Understanding, as Ratcliffe (2005) defines it, means

listening not for intent but with intent to understand not just the arguments, not just the cultural logics within which the claims function, but the rhetorical negotiations of understanding as well.

Encouraging Students to Write About Their Own Biases

None of us is bias-free is a statement that can be a good introduction in a composition classroom where the teacher can encourage her/his students to explore their possible biases and write about that. The teacher can provide students with a set of questions (something like an inventory) through which students can be introduced to their own biases so that they can explore these biases and write about possible ways of educating themselves to be less biased.

Exploring the Unknown by the Means of Research

Many students perceive the composition class traditionally; i.e., they think that they have to agree with an opinion and refute the counterargument. However, it is essential that the teacher introduces to their students that we do research to explore things we don't know. Students are then encouraged to act upon what they find because we do research to know what we didn't know and if we become aware of what we did not know, we then should act upon our findings.

Reaching Out to Minority Places.

Almost every city and town in the United States of America has some type of minority that could be reached. These minority places could be mosques, churches, synagogues, stores, clubs, etc. The teacher should encourage their students and ask them, especially the domestic ones, to explore the place and write about it. In one of my classes, I asked my domestic L1 students to reach out to any minority group and write about their experiences. This was not a major assignment. I didn't feel confident enough to make it a major assignment. I wanted to try it out first on a small scale, a low-stakes assignment. The challenge I found with my students was that some of them did not digest the objective of the assignment and asked if there was another option for the assignment. Some of them ended up asking if it was possible to reach out to a student organization instead of going off campus since they did not have cars. This was a brilliant idea since there are many student organizations that represent minorities on campus. Another idea is the virtual visit. Some students visited the webpages or Facebook pages of minority groups and wrote about them. Such practice and other critical

pedagogy practices not only challenge students' biases but also boost their engagement.

Limitations And Delimitations

The study, however, is delimited to research parameters: the narrative research design, the number of participants, the lived experiences of the participants, and the location of the university from which data was collected. The study is also limited to potential weaknesses that are not within my control. The sample I have worked with might not be representative, and the participants' experiences might not necessarily speak to the experiences that other Muslim students face. The study is also limited to my positionality as a Muslim researcher and my understanding of the discrimination and racism that Muslims face in the West. Overall, while these delimitations and limitations might have influenced the study findings, this is an opportunity for other researchers to expand on this study and consider more participants and different research designs to investigate the identity of Muslim students in the West, in general, and in the United States, in particular.

CONCLUSION

In the conclusion, this study co-constructs knowledge and fills an important gap in our understanding of the narrated experiences of international Muslim students in the United States by exploring their narratives. Understanding the narrated experiences of minority students is critical; seeing what students see, listening to their voices, and understanding their perceptions can improve institutions and program policies and can improve students' overall college experience. Specifically, having an in-depth understanding of Muslim students' experiences in a US higher education institution can help resist anti-Muslim rhetoric and sentiment. More research is recommended to expand these findings and explore more lived experiences of Muslim students from different countries around the world.

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