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# The Pursuit of Justice in the Women's March: Toward an Islamic Liberatory Theology of Resistance

Etin Anwar 

Religious Studies Department, Hobart and William Smith Colleges, Geneva, NY 14456, USA; anwar@hws.edu

**Abstract:** The Women's March on 21 January 2017, opened a new social and political landscape for Muslim women to engage in Islamic liberatory activism. I locate Muslim women's participation in the marches following the 2017 'Muslim travel ban policy' as a site for discovering the link between the politics of resistance and the utility of Islam as a source for liberation. I argue that Muslim women living in minority and post-secular contexts resort to faith as a source of agentive liberation to address the political rhetoric of anti-Islamic sentiments and policies. The outcome of this research demonstrates (1) how Muslim women activists challenge the Western narratives of being oppressed and explore the ways they want to represent themselves; (2) how Islam serves as a catalyst for theological resistance and how this enhances the role of Muslim women as moral and spiritual agents in transforming their political and social conditions; (3) how the Islamic liberation in the US context historically intersects with Black churches' resistance toward White racism; and (4) how Muslim women's agency as spiritual beings is linked to the promotion of justice in the Western liberatory movements. Overall, the article shows how Muslim women resort to their spiritual journey and use such narratives to confront unjust political rhetoric and policies.

**Keywords:** Islamic liberation theology; agency; Women's March; Justice activism; Islamic feminist resistance



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## 1. Introduction

This article examines the link between the Women's March and Muslim women's pursuit of justice and its impact on the exploration of a renewed role of faith in shaping their identities in the United States. I argue that the 2017 Women's March afforded Muslim women a new social and political context for getting involved in Islamic liberatory activism. Together with other women's marches that ran concurrently in many cities in the United States and all over the world, participants made the case for equality, climate justice, and the rights of individuals across cultures regardless of racial, linguistic, and religious differences. Men, women, youth, and children marched to voice concerns not only for women and humanity but also for the planet. I witnessed the variety of march signs during the 2017 Women's March in Seneca Falls, NY, the birthplace of the 1848 Declaration of Sentiments. They showcased a broad range of themes contesting the systemic and repressive treatments of women's bodies, the earth, and minorities, like Muslims, LGBTQs, immigrants, and underrepresented groups. The Women's March also pointed to a new direction for the politics of resistance among feminist and liberatory activists as it entered an era of convergence in which social justice issues dominate the themes of marches.

I locate Muslim women's participation in the marches and demonstrations in American public spaces following the 2017 'Muslim travel ban policy' as sites for the discovery of the link between the politics of resistance and the utility of Islam as a source for liberation. Muslim women resort to Islam to cope with anti-Muslim and anti-Islam sentiments, which were on the rise during the 2016 election campaigns and following the issuance of the travel ban ([Timeline of the Muslim Ban 2020](#)). Although a direct connection between Islamic terrorism and the 'Muslim travel ban policy' was never acknowledged, it appears that such

a political move was directed toward Muslims, especially from seven countries, namely Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. This ban reinforced the assumption that Islam is a violent religion and that Muslims are violent people. The association of Islam with violence should not come as a surprise. Kunnummal argues that religion often appears as the default source of conflict, especially in Western contexts (Kunnummal 2002, p. 2).

In this study, I argue that the travel ban policy and the debates regarding Muslim women's agency should be contextualized in light of how the West positions Islam as a violent religion and Muslim women as inescapably oppressed subjects. Such positionality comes from the long history of Western and Islamic ideological and theological contestation as well as from the political and social climates in the post-September 11 era. I agree with Ali A. Mazrui's view of how the dual paradigm of thinking as reflected in the 'us/them' dichotomy comes from political culture and the earlier competition of monotheistic religions, namely Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (Mazrui 1990, p. 14). Although I posit the existing duality of the West and Islam, such duality is limited to Muslim countries or radical Islamist groups with assumed ideological and political conflicts with the US and the West.

While I acknowledge the impact of this duality between the West and Islam on the epistemological formulation of attaching violence to Islam and Muslims, I associate religion with conversion to the sacred (Novak 1978, p. 28). I borrow from Novak in his work, *Ascent of the Mountain, Flight of the Dove*, that religion can be used and abused depending on its utility. The abuse of religion comes from its political appropriation, whereas its meaningfulness derives from its conversion to the Divine, which is extraordinary and elevating. In the case of Muslim women, they attempt to resist the hostilities associated with the travel ban and other discriminatory policies against Muslims. In doing so, they use their agencies to explore their faith and make it relevant to their lives as a minority in the US context. I frame the link between Islam as a spiritual source of agency and Muslim women's involvement in marches and community building as a starting point to discuss Islamic liberation theology. I am particularly interested in agency that is rooted in the Islamic faith and its intersection with the ongoing public perception of Islam as a threat, the pursuit of justice in social movements, and Muslims' status as a minority in secular settings.

I make the case that the link between the American public's perception of Islam as a violent religion and ideological conflicts in foreign countries serves a site for the political treatment of Muslim Americans. Grewal in *Islam is a Foreign Country* points to the way in which US governmental policies criminalize Muslims using legal measures that "are applied to brown and black Muslim populations through incarceration, mass deportation, and denial of entry without due process of law" (Grewal 2014, p. 8). As a corollary, the imaginary accounts and biased stories about Muslim women are used to insist on the threat posed by Muslim men to the US and even the world. Riley calls such a motif transnational sexism, whereby Muslim women are imagined as victims in "need of rescue and saving from local patriarchy", in contrast to Western women with freedoms for sex, occupation, and cultural expression (Riley 2013, p. 2). This dualistic portrayal between Muslim women and Western women runs parallel with the way Muslim men are given images as primitive, brutal, and rigid, while "Western men are posited as liberal, free-thinking, and appreciative of every aspect of female liberation" (Riley 2013, p. 3).

I juxtapose the othering politics of Muslims and Muslim women through discriminatory narratives and policies with the social movements that seek to address oppression in US settings. My research investigates how Muslim women responded to the travel ban policy and the extent to which Islam has played a role in their attempts to deal with the challenges they face as a minority group in American post-secular society. I attempt to recount Muslim women's experiences in responding to discomfort and vulnerability brought forth by the travel ban policy and the rise of anti-Islamic and Muslim sentiments. This study starts by developing a framework to deal with Muslim women's responses to the travel ban, highlighting the intersectionality between agency, resistance, and the liberatory element of political theology in post-secular, societal settings. I then discuss efforts by

Muslim women to challenge Western narratives that reinforce their representation as others and explore the ways in which they want to represent themselves. I limit the use of Muslim women's self-representations as 'the other' to statements in which they explicitly want to be recognized in such a manner. Such recognition is consistent with Islamic feminist epistemology, which recognizes Muslim women as speaking subjects and with the feminist idea of the personal as the political. By recognizing Muslim women's experiences, I honor their voices in their pursuit of justice and resistance in their own terms. I then trace the link between the politics of liberation and Christian and Islamic resistance. This section explains how Islamic liberation theology intersects with Black churches' resistance toward White oppression against minorities, especially African Americans. As I discuss the use of Islam as a catalyst for theological resistance, I also address how Muslim women discover their role as moral and spiritual agents in transforming their political and social conditions. I finally elaborate on the relationship between women's agency as spiritual beings and the promotion of justice. I show how Muslim women resort to their spiritual journey and use such narratives to confront unjust political rhetoric and policies.

## 2. Exploring the Intersectionality between Agency, Resistance, and Political Theology

Studies on resistance to anti-Islamic and Muslim sentiments continue to grow. The latest works by Iftikhar and Elfenbein address the increase of anti-Islamic and Muslim sentiments in US settings and the global world and how to address them (Iftikhar 2021; Elfenbein 2021). Iftikhar points to the way the global narratives of the war on terror normalize anti-Muslim rhetoric and shows how such rhetoric is used to reproduce "all the traditional tropes of 'anti-Semitism' that white supremacists had used before" (Iftikhar 2021, p. 41). Elfenbein confirms that the growing trends of anti-Islamic sentiments cause Muslims in America to be subjected to hateful speech and behaviors that feed fear among Muslim communities (Elfenbein 2021, p. 11). Such anti-Islamic and Muslim sentiments have created an environment in which Islam is looked at as a threat and Muslims as enemies. These hostile environments place Muslims and Muslim women under constant social and political scrutiny. Such scrutiny increased with the election of President Trump and what ensued following the issuance of a travel ban policy directed toward selected Muslim countries during his presidency. For this reason, the discursive narratives of Muslim women's agency to resist the increased hostility and discrimination remain important to analyze.

Debating Muslim women's agency in post-secular society takes into consideration the intersection of religion and the public. Taylor in *A Secular Age* introduces the idea of a master story where the West became a model of secularization. This secularization project has resulted in placing religion under constant scrutiny (Taylor 2007, p. 423). Islam especially suffers from extra-scrutiny, as it is often viewed as promoting the inseparability of religion and politics and legitimizing the use of violence to maintain or achieve this union. The Western gaze on Islam as a violence-prone religion corresponds to how religion is defined. I borrow from Cavanaugh's idea of the myth that "religion causes-violence" (Cavanaugh 2009, pp. 13, 18). Such myth proliferates due to the assumption that religion is prone to being (1) absolutist, (2) divisive, and (3) insufficiently rational. This discourse of religion as the cause of violence views the secular as rational and modern. Islam happens to fit the narrative of religion that is absolutist, divisive, and irrational.

The duality of religion and secularity further legitimizes the discursive narrative of Islam as a "peculiar and abnormal religion because it 'mixes' politics with pure religion" (Cavanaugh 2009, p. 13). In this epistemic framework, Muslim women are often ensnared within Islam's irrational demand for veiling, domesticity, and total submission. The treatment of the Iranian and Taliban regimes over veiling directed toward Muslim women is taken as representative of the oppression in the rest of the Muslim world. The United States, for instance, has used the Taliban regime's oppression of women as an ideological justification for war. The radio address by Mrs. Laura Bush, the wife of former President George W. Bush, to the nation in 2001 called the Afghan war a struggle not only to combat terrorism but also to liberate Muslim women from the Taliban's oppression (St. John 2004,

pp. 29–32). She contrasted the irrationality of the Taliban regime with the rationality of “civilized” people (National Archives and Records Administration 2001). For this reason, the so-called war on terror was cast as a fight for women’s rights and dignity. As Abu-Lughod posed it, the United States seems to have given itself the responsibility of saving Muslim women (Abu-Lughod 2002).

Central to the US involvement in saving Muslim women and mitigating terrorist attacks is the marginalization of Muslim women’s agency. The epistemic formulation of agency comes from the assumed duality of the West and the rest. Such duality pre-determines how Muslim women’s agency should be defined and what their liberation within Western contexts should look like. Emirbayer and Mische define agency as (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, p. 970)

[the] temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments—the temporal relational contexts of action—which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations.

This definition is drawn from the Western conceptual development of agency and its empirical manifestation. Within such a framework, religion and its various dimensions, such as belief, practice, tradition, community, and meaning, play only a marginal role. In Western contexts, the relegation of religious tradition to individual experience affords agentive freedom to emerge within social settings (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, p. 970). In this epistemological formulation, the link between religion and agency only matters to people who subscribe to it. Emirbayer and Mische see this link as particularly important in millenarian movements that consider the relationship between past patterns of interaction and their projected outcomes in religion important to them (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, p. 992).

As the central role of religion is limited to people who believe in it, such attribution shapes how resistance is defined. Emirbayer and Mische perceive resistance as a social process that must resist and subvert “the logics and practices of the established order” (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, p. 1001). While this definition suits various contextual environments, it does not account for outside actors that impose agentive freedom on others. The cases in point are the military occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan that were carried out in the name of liberating Muslim women and promoting Western democracy. In these contexts, Muslim women were viewed as lacking agency to the extent that it was necessary for outsiders to impose liberation on them. While the outside imposition directed toward Muslim women’s agency fits what Emirbayer and Mische call “the temporal relational contexts of action”, such force removes freedom from Muslim women’s deliberation. In this case, the formulation of Western agency as defined by Emirbayer and Mische does not neatly fit our discussion of agency.

Even when religion appears to play a role in shaping gender identities, the difference in majority and minority status matters. For instance, a study by Bartkowski and Read compares Evangelical Protestantism and Islam and finds that “[w]ithin evangelicalism, women’s submission emerges as the core point of ideological dispute, and among Muslim elites, the meaning of hijab and the propriety of wearing it emerge as primary points of conflict” (Bartkowski and Read 2003, p. 76). Bartkowski and Read’s study draws attention not only to the remarkable degree of agency among devout evangelicals and Muslims but also to their abilities to resort to cultural resources in shaping their religious gender identities (Bartkowski and Read 2003, pp. 87–88). Such abilities afford women in Evangelical Protestantism and Islam the ability to navigate patriarchy while attempting to embody piety within their respective religions.

Bartkowski and Read credit Evangelical Protestant women for being capable of appropriating the traditionalism and non-traditionalism divide on the question of “wifely submission” to its virtues (Bartkowski and Read 2003, p. 89). While Muslim women find virtue in veiling, they also face marginality as a minority in Western contexts, as well as the

multicultural meanings of veiling ranging from ethnic identity, national origin, to religious affiliation. The diverging contexts of wifely submission in Evangelical Protestant women and veiling among Muslim women reveal more than differences in cultural meanings. The materiality of veiling signifies something beyond the worn fabric, as it includes a wide range of interpretations as well as historical debates about its relevance in colonial and post-colonial contexts. To compare the use of the veil to wifely submission ignores the Western historical biases toward veiling as backward and oppressive to Muslim women. In retrospect, the public harm carried out toward veiling obscures the way veiling is associated with piety and agency for Muslim women.

Bartkowski and Read are correct in considering Muslim women's positionality as a minority as a factor in how veiling is debated in public. This politics of location matters in practicing faith and defining identity. Roy argues that Islam in a minority context and post-secular society serves as a mere religion and a source of values. At the same time, deterritorialization delinks faith from politics (Roy 2004, pp. 25, 32, 40). As Islam experiences deterritorialization and gets secularized politically, it offers a renewed role for Muslims to function as a source for ethical and spiritual values (Roy 2004, p. 38). In this new epistemological formulation, Islam underlies the spiritual and ethical conversion to the Divine. Such ethical formulation brings back Bartkowski and Read's point that Evangelical Protestant women tend to frame submission in terms of virtue. To a certain degree, the emphasis on virtue in Islam, drawn from its function as a mere religion, identifies the performance of submission to God and veiling as representing virtuous behaviors.

When we frame religious behavior as virtue, it becomes easier to value Muslim women's responses to the travel ban policy as the embodiment of faith. As previously stated, religion is a matter of "a conversion to the sense of sacred" and to the Divine from "the standpoint of the profane" (Novak 1978, pp. 28, 32, 33). The positionality of Muslim women as transformers of mundane oppressive practices provides the context of the present study. I situate Muslim women's resistance toward the travel ban policy as a site for analysis. I question how Muslim women responded to the travel ban policy and how they have used Islam in their advocacy for justice. These questions stem from observing the Women's March on 21 January 2017, in Seneca Falls as well as Muslim women's involvements in other demonstrations in many parts of the United States. I was partly interested in finding responses from Muslim women who addressed the impacts of the travel ban policy within their communities. While it is difficult to find samples, I decided to interview Muslim women as respondents and ask them to tell the story of their life journeys, their activities, their responses to the travel ban policy, and their uses of Islam in their lives. The respondents' names came upon suggestions from people in the mosque's settings and from news media reports.

Upon interviewing them, I learned that all respondents have migrated to the US or were born into immigrant families. Understanding these familial backgrounds is important in understanding their reaction to the travel ban policy. I analyzed the data using discourse analysis and systematized them by identifying common themes. I narrowed down my use of discourse analysis to what Hjelm considers to be the most important thing to consider in religious studies research: (1) how religion functions for respondents in navigating their lives and addressing challenges, and (2) how it shapes their religious identities (Hjelm 2014, p. 144).

I identify three emerging themes from the interviews and show how they have shaped the discussion of this study. Firstly, Muslim women point to the need for recognizing their agency as speaking subjects in the context of living as a marginalized minority and subjected to discriminatory practices. While not all Muslim women living in Western minority contexts experience discrimination and marginalization, our respondents can relate to how they are represented as the oppressed. They shared a common concern about addressing the political narrative of Muslim women as oppressed. While such focus reveals unpleasant experiences and difficult topics to talk about, it honors Muslim women's experiences and their voices as speaking subjects. Central to the effort of dismantling the



assumptions that Muslim women are oppressed is the need for a new epistemology of agency that considers their experiences, knowledge, and contexts.

Secondly, Muslim women's respondents in this study frame their responses to the travel ban policy by tying faith to resistance. They explored resistance within the context of addressing the way Muslims are treated in the post-September 11 world and the impacts of national security policies on them. The perceived oppressive measures shape how Muslims and Muslim women engage with the challenges they face. Such responses come from the belief that Islam teaches Muslims to be just and to seek justice. This demand for justice is equally expected of men and women. The embodiment of such calling manifests through a wide range of activities, ranging from advocating the fair treatment of Muslims, promoting the rights of minorities, to helping Muslims cope with American life as immigrants. These women did not talk about engaging resistance inside faith, but they directed their resistance to hostile behavior in the American public. This type of resistance differs from what Mihelich and Storrs describe. Their work pertains to the way members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) resist religious ideology, such as motherhood, to pursue higher education. They conclude that the pursuit of education and the virtue of good women within faith "constitute resistance, but resistance conducted in a manner that simultaneously supports the hegemonic structure and exerts pressure on it to change and adapt" (Mihelich and Storrs 2003, p. 419). This type of resistance is certainly not unique to Christian women, as it exists in any religion with patriarchal tendencies. At the same time, Muslim women, just like their Christian sisters, navigate their relationship to Islam by instilling equality within faith. Ahmed argues that the ethical vision of egalitarianism produces tension with the hierarchical relations between the sexes, especially in marriage structures and familial patronage in Muslim cultures (Ahmed 1992, p. 64). While marriage and familial patronage could become sites for inequality, the Quran also requires justice, compassion, and kindness as the ethical foundation of such relationships. This egalitarian ethic creates opportunities for Muslim women to engage with communal affairs.

Finally, as Islamic ethics encourages the pursuit of justice, such values undergird the respondents' political resistance and theological liberation. Their resistance against injustice in minority settings and post-secular society comes from faith, but it also intersects with other social and intellectual movements. Kunnummal confirms that the elaboration of the "relationship between Islamic liberation theology and other theories, strategies, tools, and approaches to liberation, including decolonial theories, postcolonial studies, critical Muslim studies, and Islamic feminism studies", allows for advancing marginalized preferential options and choices (Kunnummal 2002, p. 3). Central to the Islamic liberation theology drawn from Muslim women's experiences is their agency to address forms of injustice inherited from the past, like slavery, patriarchy, sexism, etc., as well as its contemporary forms, like Islamophobia, xenophobia, racism, and others that directly impact them and their social milieus. Such agency affords Muslim women the ability to enact change within their own settings and on their own terms. For this purpose, understanding Muslim women's resistance and their agentive pursuit of justice needs to consider them as speaking subjects.

### 3. Representing Muslim Women: The Personal as the Political

The discursive narrative of Muslim women as oppressed hinges on the politics of representation. Efforts to dissect Muslim women's representation take into consideration the underlying assumptions on which such representation is based. I locate the politics of Muslim women's representation as a site where feminist objectivity is debated. Feminist objectivity refers to efforts to bridge the demarcation between the subject and object of study so that it reflects the positionality of women as speaking subjects. It also encompasses any endeavors to navigate the power relation between the researcher and the research as co-producers of knowledge. Doucet and Mauthner note that the relationship between the researcher and the research "has moved on from the question of whether there are power inequalities between researchers and respondents to consider how power influences

knowledge production and construction processes” (Doucet and Mauthner 2006, p. 40). This feminist objectivity, in Haraway’s eyes, stems from “a limited and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and the splitting of subject and object” (Haraway 2010, p. 373). In this section, I locate my research within the pursuit of feminist objectivity. In this framework, I treat Muslim women as speaking subjects and ends in themselves.

Muslim women’s representation as oppressed is tied into the Western assumptions of Muslims as violent people. As previously mentioned, Muslim women are depicted as victims of violent Muslim men and need to be saved. While this imagined portrayal of Muslim women is often substantiated through media and literary narratives, its perception stems from a series of terrorist acts enacted in the name of Islam. Muslim terrorists desecrated Islam with attacks on US soil, such as the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, the 2001 Al-Qaida attacks, the 2013 Boston Marathon Bombing, the 2015 attack on a Navy reserve facility, the 2015 attack in San Bernardino, California, and a few others (Cable News Network 2013). Such attacks caused the deaths of innocent people and the suffering of their families. Families of terrorists and the broader Muslim community found themselves entangled in investigations and counter-terrorist policies. The social and political responses to these attacks had adverse effects on Muslims living in the United States and abroad.

Muslim women experience more detrimental effects as they are subjected to the liberation project. The discursive narrative of Muslim women’s liberation is tied to civilizational, political, geographical, and religious differences. The colonial legacy of liberation, for instance, has seeped into Western consciousness discursively and non-discursively. Ahmed argues that the genealogical origin of the Western discontent over Islam’s treatment of Muslim women rests on the assumption that Western civilization is superior to the Islamic one (Ahmed 1992, p. 152). Western feminism has repeatedly reiterated the different treatment of women in the West and the East, insisting on a civilizational gap. Freedman argues that the debate over colonial liberation has been selective. Historically, the focus on Sati in India and female genital mutilation in Kenya as sites of oppression demonstrates how feminist causes have been dominated by Western colonialist ideology (Freedman 2002, p. 97). As women’s liberation is cast in conjunction with imperialist violence, it imposes Western superiority and emphasizes Islamic inferiority. Such portrayal is ultimately inseparable from how Muslim women are defined in relation to Western women.

The relationship between women’s liberation and imperial violence should not come as a surprise. Mohanty argues that the Western representation of so-called Third-World women ignores “the formulation of autonomous, geographically, historically, and culturally grounded feminist concerns and strategies” (Mohanty 1991, p. 51). Such an approach shapes how liberation is perceived, formulated, and used. The epistemological formulation of liberation appears to be applicable exclusively to Muslim women outside the United States. With this approach in mind, American Muslim women who suffer from the assumed positionality of the oppressed have their suffering unaccounted for as the imagined oppression occurs in places beyond the United States. If we take the example of the overturning of abortion rights in the US, we understand that such a policy oppresses women who need access to them. However, the image of oppression denotes otherness: the foreign or the non-Western. Such exclusionary practice is rooted in the sense of otherness that often gets expressed through the accentuation of the geographical separateness between America and ‘foreign places.’ Slurs, such as “go back to your country”, “why are you here?” or “why did you come to America?” are often uttered in the public space to mark Muslim women’s otherness (CAIR 2017). While not all Muslim women are subjected to this othering politics, respondents in this research felt otherwise.

The 2017 PEW research justifies the trends of othering among a certain population of Muslim women. It highlights how Muslim women are more likely than men to find living in America more challenging (57% vs. 43%) (Gecewicz 2017). Muslim women are also more likely to be discriminated against because of their appearance (83% vs. 68%). One of our respondents confirms that

Muslim women specifically are having difficulty because of the headdress that many of them wear. Many Muslim women are targeted because they wear headscarf. Many people who discriminate against Muslims feel that it is okay for them to say negative and derogatory things to people. This behavior has been seen more frequently lately especially since the Trump administration has come to office.<sup>1</sup>

Even if veiled Muslim women do not experience discriminatory practices, they are likely to know other women who have been subjected to verbal and nonverbal harassment due to veiling. With this in mind, the oppression of Muslim women happens not only in 'foreign Muslim countries,' but also in the United States.

The travel ban policy exacerbated the fear among Muslim women as they understood the negative impacts of such a policy, especially for refugees. This reality has caused a major concern for our respondents. One of the respondents is of Somali origin and came to the US as a refugee. She perceived her migration as a lifetime opportunity. Settling in Upstate New York, she recalled her experience moving from camps to camps before finally coming to the United States. She has never had a home other than in the United States. She was born on a truck on the way to Uganda and lived in the refugee camps for fifteen years before she migrated to the US with her parents. She considers America her only home and the home of her three US-born children. She expresses her disappointment with the travel ban policy, as she fears for her life and that of her children. She laments, "We are not terrorists. We are abiding lawful citizens. America is an immigrant country".<sup>2</sup> She points out that refugees have carried the burden of hostility due to violence committed by the few. She gives an example of a knife attack by a refugee from her ethnic background (Dickrell 2016; Williams et al. 2016). In the aftermath, the whole Somali community was cast as terrorists. For her, the attribution of the term 'terrorist' to Muslims is a personal issue, yet it affects the politics of her living conditions in the United States and refugees living in camps in the Middle East and Africa where she once lived. She is disappointed by the fact that the America she knew when she came as a refugee has now changed. In her mind, America had given the promise of a better life to people who had lost hope in refugee camps and violent conflicts.

Other refugee communities also felt the heat of the anti-immigration rhetoric pursued by former President Trump. On two occasions, the candidate, Trump, candidly shared his opinion on Muslims (Johnson and Hauslohner 2017). In his campaign town hall meeting in New Hampshire on 15 September 2015, a man in the audience shouted out, "We have a problem in this country; it's called Muslims. We know our current president is one." The man mentioned Muslim "training camps" and asked: "When can we get rid of them?" The candidate Trump responded: "We're going to be looking at a lot of different things". In the following week, while campaigning in Keene, New Hampshire, on 30 September 2015, he said that he would "kick all Syrian refugees—most of whom are Muslim—out of the country, as they might be a secret army. They could be ISIS, I don't know [...] This could be one of the great tactical ploys of all time. A 200,000-man army, maybe" (Johnson 2015). For an Afghan refugee, this kind of rhetoric is dangerous as it could fuel fear against Muslims. She explained:<sup>3</sup>

With all the negative attention from the media and with the new President and his administration, Muslims and other minorities have been more targeted. This has not only portrayed us in a negative light but has also put a lot of stresses on us because people assume that we are bad and violent people. We are the opposite. Every group has a small number of people who do things that are out of the ordinary and cruel but that does mean that their religion has motivated them to do so, it just means that they have other underlying conditions.

The above statement shows that the attribution of the terrorist label to Muslims and Muslim women not only homogenizes Muslims but also induces fear in Muslim communities. It reinforces the exclusionary rhetoric that Muslims are not "us" and are not welcome in the United States.



While some Muslim women activists would directly address the impact of this terrorist attribution, others, like Daisy Khan, the executive director of the Women's Islamic Initiative for Spirituality and Equality, call for eradicating what feeds such portrayal in the first place, especially within Muslim communities.<sup>4</sup> Khan identifies what she considers to be the real problem for Muslims and the world. She argues that the persistent problem for Muslim communities, law enforcement, and policymakers is the rise of Islamic extremism. She points to the emergence of ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) and al-Qaeda, their power in attracting members, their destructive impacts all over the world, as well as the need to address such an ideological threat (Khan 2017, p. 3).

As the political threat of ISIS and al-Qaida seeped into public debates, it reinforced security policies to deal with the violence perpetrated by Muslim terrorists domestically and internationally. While the Obama administration did not publicly name Islam as the factor in the increase of terrorism, media pundits and politicians of both political spectrums readily called Islam the problem. They appear to use anti-Islamic sentiments and invoke fear of Islam and Muslims to garner sympathy from their constituents and the American public. The April 2017 PEW research showed that Republicans and White Evangelical Protestants have more reservations about Islam and Muslims (Pew Research Center 2017). Both groups are likely to perceive Islam as a violent religion (63% and 63%, respectively), and consider that a great number of Muslims are terrorists (56% and 51%, respectively). Consequently, they perceive that Islam is not part of the American mainstream (68% and 67%, respectively).

The rise of anti-Islam and anti-Muslim sentiments was further amplified during the Women's March because such protests involved Muslims as organizers and participants. Linda Sarsour, the US-born American-Palestinian, is especially important to mention for her role as co-organizer of Washington, DCs march. She was also much more noticeable to supporters and opponents of the 'travel ban' policy due to her Islamic background as well as her choice of donning a hijab (Przybyla and Schouten 2017). Her involvement drew media coverage as her political statement on Islam stirred controversy. She was called the 'sharia advocate' and was accused of being anti-Semitic and a jihadist. She was also linked to a terrorist group in Palestine (Lenarz 2017; see also, Ross 2017; Valle 2017). The prejudicial attitude directed toward Sarsour highlights how Islam is juxtaposed with terrorism and Muslim women with terrorist/jihadist labels.

The othering politics of Sarsour demonstrate the marginalization of Muslim women's agency. In the aftermath of the historic Women's March on 21 January 2017 in DC, where Sarsour delivered her powerful five-minute speech, right-wingers and anti-Muslim sites, such as *The Daily Caller*, *FrontPageMag*, *The American Thinker*, *The Gateway Pundit*, and others, discredited her as a supporter of terrorism (Mathias and Kuruvilla 2017). By linking Sarsour to terrorism, the media not only cast Islam as a violent religion but also warned the American public of the dangers of Muslim men and women. Sarsour, by this account, earns the political label of a Muslim terrorist. The emphasis on Sarsour's religion as a marker of her participatory engagement in public signaled that Islam by default causes violence. At the same time, such discriminatory practice denies Sarsour's major contribution as a peaceful and non-violent leader championing the opposition to the travel ban policy. For this reason, attempts to address the politics of othering demand recognition of the agent's positionality.

Muslim women's positionality as activists reiterates their agency as speaking subjects. Their involvement interrupts the hegemonic narrative of the oppressed victim and the outsider. This interruption was on display during the protest at the Reagan National Airport that was led by a Washington, DC-based activist and writer. This #NoMuslimBan protest on February 1st drew a crowd of 2000 people.<sup>5</sup> Such protests show female leadership in demonstration as resistance against Islamophobia and ultra-nationalist actions. One of the respondents explains the importance of Muslims representing themselves and lending their voices to change the social and political conditions of their place of living for the better.

As Muslim women speak for themselves in resisting the politics of othering, they place their agency at the center of their social and political endeavors. The link between agency and resistance, according to Bell Hooks, a feminist activist, is necessary to address discrimination in personal attitudes or public policies (Hooks [1984] 2010, p. 52).<sup>6</sup> The efforts to change oppressive social conditions constitute political. For this political cause to succeed, Muslim women have actively defined what is challenging to them and have taken important steps to address it. Indeed, knowing the problem locally and globally allows Muslim women to avoid falling into the political narrative that they are oppressed and in need of saving. This self-knowledge distributes the responsibility of addressing the politics of exclusion to everyone involved. At the same time, Muslim women can represent themselves and speak for themselves in dealing with their problems and finding solutions. Arendt argues that women's ability to enact their politics through speech and action allows for "the disclosure of the agents" (Arendt 1998, p. 114). Muslim women's endeavors to challenge oppressive social and political conditions can be considered a manifestation of Islamic theological liberation. In the following section, I will highlight the link between the need to address oppressive social and political conditions and liberatory theology as a common strategy in both Islam and Christianity.

#### 4. The Linkage between Injustice and Liberatory Theology

The link between the Women's March and liberation theology revolves around the urgency of addressing injustice in American settings. Muslim women's use of Islam in marches and their criticism of injustice can be framed in terms of a liberatory theology of resistance. The use of liberatory theology as a framework certainly raises an epistemic question. Ralston warns of the limitations of translating and transplanting the discourse and discipline of political theology rooted in the Christian and post-Christian origins of the Latin West into Arabic, Christian, and Islamic intellectual traditions (Ralston 2018, p. 549). He argues that the epistemological discussion of political theology within the Christian West and the Islamic Middle East is not only a matter of translation but also involves "significant differences over the place of theology, law, and power in the political imaginary of many people in the region" (Ralston 2018, p. 550). While there is a need to account for the phenomenon of political theology in the contexts of Islam and Christianity in a congruent manner, the location where theology encounters politics is historically and socially specific. In American contexts, the link between the Christian and Islamic theology of liberation is established through the common response against discriminatory practices. In this section, I will showcase how the link between black churches and Islamic resistance in addressing unjust social and political conditions in a US setting serves as a catalyst that shapes the emergence of liberation theology among Muslim minority community.

The discursive narrative of political theology emerged in the context of addressing social injustice. Within the Western contexts, Shelley explains in his "Introduction" to *Political Theology* that the political and social problems, such as "the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, American involvement in Vietnam, [and] economic discrimination in West Germany" (Shelley 1974, p. viii) drove Dorothee Sölle, a German liberatory theologian, to pioneer a working group and explore the diverse ways through which faith and praxis can act in union. The group originally initiated conversations about social and political problems, providing detailed analysis of the issues, reading from relevant scriptures, addressing each other's concerns and reflection, performing prayer, and ending with a discussion of "what can we do" to address such issues (Shelley, Introduction). This practice was spread around Germany and Switzerland and reaffirmed the need for a theological framework to address unjust world problems.

Sölle defines political theology as "theological hermeneutic, which, as distinct from a theology that interprets reality from an ontological or existentialist point of view, holds open an horizon of interpretation in which politics is understood as the comprehensive and decisive sphere in which Christian truth should become praxis" (Sölle 1974, p. 59). Sölle's epistemic formulation of political theology suggests a correlation between social

transformation, the potential it has for individuals, and the role of Christianity in it. This correlation is possible only if there is a modified understanding regarding the role of faith (the gospel) in liberation. It is “the liberation of all [...] that concerned with the oppressed, the poor, and those who mourn” (Sölle 1974, p. 67). In this sense, political theology addresses oppressive social conditions, traces the roots of their oppression, and shapes the transformation of individuals within their own geo-political locations by using faith.

The citation of the emerging discourses of political theology in Germany is significant to mention as they have some parallels to the development of theological frameworks in the United States. Cone, in his *Black Theology and Black Power* (published in 1969), describes how “American theology is predominantly ‘footnotes on the Germans’ [and] is largely an intellectual game unrelated to the issue of life and death” (Cone 2018, p. 96). While Cone admires German theologians, especially Karl Barth, he argues that American theology needs to cut its ties to its European models in order for the Church to function as a site in which the Gospel may speak to the economic, political, and social conditions in America (Cone 2018, p. 99). He writes that “[f]ew American theologians have made that identification with the poor blacks in America but have themselves contributed to the system that enslaves black people” (Cone 2018, p. 96). He holds that Karl Barth’s theological perspective, which differentiated God’s Words and Action from human ones when he responded to Hitler’s campaign against Jews leading up to the Holocaust, is an appropriate model of liberation (Cone 2018, p. 98). Within US contexts, Cone sees the possibility of separating God from the oppressive system produced by the Christian “white” man. Cone writes: (Cone 2018, p. 102)

The black church was born in slavery. Its existence symbolizes a people who were completely stripped of their African heritage as they were enslaved by the Christian “white” man. The white masters forbade the slaves from any remembrance of his homeland. The mobility created by the slave trade, the destruction of the family, and the prohibition of African languages served to destroy the social cohesion of the African slaves. The slave was a nothing in the eyes of the master, who did everything possible to instill this sense of nothingness in the mentality of the slave. The slave was rewarded and punished according to his adherence to the view of himself defined exclusively by the master.

Given the history of Black African America that was oppressed and marginalized, Cone proposes a Black Theology that aims at analyzing “the black man’s condition in the light of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ with the purpose of creating a new understanding of black dignity among black people and providing the necessary soul in that people to destroy white racism” (Cone 2018, p. 123). By assigning the importance of Jesus Christ in black people’s lives, Cone differentiates white American Christianity, which was born in heresy, from Black theological power, which affirms “the essential worth of blackness” at the heart of Christianity (Cone 2018, pp. 116, 9).

In his “Preface to the 1989 edition” of *Black Theology and Black Power*, Cone reframes what he considers “black freedom movements” by pointing to the “complete blindness to the problem of sexism”, the reliance on “the Western theological perspective” as the source for black freedom and emancipation, and the failure to link the African-American struggle for liberation in the United States with similar struggles in the Third World” (Cone 2018, pp. xxviii, xxix, xxx). Cone makes special mention of the importance of Malcolm X’s liberation theology, which reminded him of his own theological complacency (Cone 2018, p. xxv). Prior to preaching, Malcolm X lived the life of a hustler. He embraced Islam by following the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, the founder of the Nation of Islam, while he was in prison (Malcolm 2015, pp. 153, 159). Elijah Muhammad preached that black people were the original creation and considered “[t]he white man [as] the devil” (Malcolm 2015, pp. 178, 187). Malcolm X adopted such rhetoric and worked toward the liberation of the blacks against the whites. His contribution to the liberation of black people lies in his recognition of whiteness as an oppressive system.

Cone concurs with Malcolm's "cogent *cultural* critique of Christianity as it was taught and practiced in black and white churches" (Cone 2018, p. xxvi). Malcolm viewed Christianity as a white man's religion that brainwashed black people (Malcolm 2015, pp. 166, 205). He perceived whiteness as a system that is oppressive to blacks because they are inescapably the victims of American society, which treats them as inferiors (Malcolm 2015, pp. 93, 220, 279, 280). Malcom saw that white culture and the system it produced affected his own self-perception (Malcolm 2015, pp. 276, 293). Prior to his self-discovery about equality for all people during his pilgrimage in Mecca, he considered himself to be the angriest negro, a racist, and an anti-white (Malcolm 2015, pp. 340, 373).

As Malcom framed his theology of liberation as an opposition against a white-instituted oppressive system, he promoted black separation by encouraging black Muslims to develop their economies, schools, and health facilities. He even proposed the creation of an independent country, or migration (Malcolm 2015, pp. 260, 271, 280). Central to his political theology of liberation is his pilgrimage to Mecca. Malcolm's trip to Mecca for the hajj ritual (pilgrimage) transformed his theology of liberation. He linked the liberation of black people in America to the oppression of all post-colonial peoples. During the pilgrimage, he also discovered the equality of all races in practice (Malcolm 2015, p. 345). He shifted his liberation theology from attacking whiteness as an oppressive system to promoting respect for black people and advocating equality for all (Malcolm 2015, pp. 369, 383). What underpins Malcolm's new liberation theology is the teaching of Islam that promotes equality of human beings before God (Malcolm 2015, pp. 330, 338).

I draw from Malcolm's existential interiorization of suffering and his encounter with Islam as a site for the development of a political theology of liberation in the US context. The term 'Islam' itself is loaded, depending on who defines it. It entails a reflective interiorization of moral reformation, a voluntary surrender to God's Mercy and Grace, and the cultivation of humility with respect to others. The term 'Islam' also refers to external submission as recognized in historical and social contexts. Islam as a religion reflects the practices of Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad, who are models for those who surrender to God's will (The Qur'an, Āl Imrān, 3: 189).

The continual process of becoming Muslim takes place between people and with people. As the ethical dimension of Islam encompasses human relationships with God, humans, and nature, the underpinning of Islam is about being with people. In this sense, embodied Islam serves as a creative power to undergird efforts to better oneself in response to life challenges, including political oppression. In conceptualizing Islam as a meaning-making system within the constellation of political theology, Muslims value their religion as a catalyst to defend their dignity as human beings. The conditional constellation here involves a host of factors, contexts, or sites that shape the relationship between Muslims' existential religiosity and community making.

Islam, within the constellation of political theology, serves as a mechanism to carry out personal and civic responsibility. Islam as a religion is best described as a tripartite unity of faith (*imān*), experience (*islām*), and virtue (*iḥsān*). The word faith (*imān*) has been reified as the belief in God, His angels, His revelations, His messengers, and the Day of Judgment. At the practical level, the term *imān* demands an act of becoming moral, as it is the site for "the sphere of positive moral properties" and "the real fountain-head of all Islamic virtue." (Izutsu 2002, p. 184) The concept of *imān* involves pious acts (al-A'rāf, 7:2–4), such as engaging in charity and social work, repentance, worship, remembrance, fasting, bowing, prostration, enjoining the good, and forbidding the evil (At-Ṭawbah, 9: 112–3) (Izutsu 2002, pp. 141, 186).

Muslim women perceive their political theology of resistance as an embodiment of faith. They attempt to enact the call of enjoining "what is good" (*ma'rūf*), forbidding what is evil (*munkar*), and competing with one another in good works (*khayrāt*) (See verse 3; 109–10 and 113–14). See also (Izutsu 2002, p. 204)). The notion of "what is good" (*ma'rūf*) is especially important in the Euro-American contexts since it connotes the practice of what is "traditionally known and (approved)", or as Bayḍāwī puts it, "in compliance with the



legal provision and according to what is acknowledged by the law of humanity” (Izutsu 2002, pp. 214–15). Included in this good practice are civic responsibility, tolerance, and respect for pluralism within various social contexts. Even when Muslims are subjected to oppressive measures such as the travel ban policy or other discriminatory measures, they must respect the law and the people. With this in mind, we can associate Muslim women’s action to change the oppressive social condition through marches or other means as an embodiment of enjoining “what is good” (*ma’rūf*), forbidding “what is evil” (*munkar*), and competing with one another in good works (*khayrāt*).

This enactment of faith and praxis in addressing unjust social and political conditions constitutes a liberation theology of resistance. Such resistance is rooted in faith and social activism to address exclusionary practices. For Muslim women in minority setting, attempts to address injustice constitute a perpetual struggle because they, like Muslims in general, constantly face existential challenges. A 2018 study by Sides and Mogahed demonstrates how Muslims are more prone to negative stereotyping. Americans perceive Muslims in a more negative light than their perceptions of Christians. They view Muslims as being incapable of cultural integration. Muslims also do not want to be part of this country and have no respect for its institutions and laws. The report also depicts the perception of Muslims as having outdated views of women and believing in a false religion (Sides and Mogahed 2018, p. 10). As this study was conducted a year after the travel ban’s policy, it should not surprise us that it reflects the existing prejudice against Muslims. It is to this injustice that Muslim women respond and attempt to claim their own positionality. By addressing the unjust treatment of Muslims and Muslim women, they affirm their own agency in shaping their own identities.

## 5. The Making of Agency and the Pursuit of Justice

The link between the pursuit of justice and resistance takes us to a deeper understanding of Muslim women’s agency. In this section, I bring to attention the definition of agency within the Islamic framework. I borrow Rinaldo’s definition of agency as “living to pious ideals and actively creating themselves as religious subject” (Rinaldo 2013, p. 17). This definition overlaps with feminist agency in that agency comes from the freedom to act and to resist oppression. However, the freedom to act in Islam comes from embodying Islam and performing it daily. Rinaldo divides agency into two types: (1) pious critical agency, which refers to “the capacity to engage critically and publicly with the interpretation of religious texts”, and (2) pious activating agency, which refers to “the capacity to use the interpretation of religious texts to mobilize the public sphere” (Rinaldo 2013, p. 19). This distinction of agency reiterates a different way of performing action, whether through critical analysis or through the enactment of sacred texts. However, both types of agencies point to the significance of faith as a point of reference in addressing political and social issues. The reiteration of agency as a religious manifestation is reflected in the statements of the respondents to this study.

Muslim women’s enactment of agency as a minority in US context intersects with their social and political conditions. The agency of Muslim women in US context is often defined based on similarity. One way to define women’s sameness is by collapsing all women into one homogenous group. As previously discussed, the sameness of Muslim women is constructed based on the epistemic formulation of otherness: wearing the veil, being oppressed, and coming from overseas. Such discursive narratives of Muslim women as the other derive from a Western model of women’s agency and from the assumed sameness of Muslim women across cultures and societies (Mohanty 1991, p. 66). The assumed sameness of Muslim women’s agency also comes from the use of the term ‘Muslim.’ This term in the West is used as an ethnic category of the non-white to signify all attributes embodied in such distinction. At the heart of this othering is the lack of respect for Muslims as human beings with dignity and equal moral agency.

Agency for Muslim women, as much as for Western women, is produced through experience and meaning. For instance, Mahmood examines agency based on her obser-



vation of the Muslim women’s mosque movements in Egypt. She makes the connection between Muslim women’s repeated bodily practices that are oriented toward God and the creation of a pious self (Mahmood 2005, p. 126). This finding coheres with the overall aims of Islam in that the attainment of a noble character is constitutive of individual agency. The embodiment of faith aims at generating what the philosopher Ibn Miskawayh (d. 1030) calls the “acquisition of a noble character” (Ibn Miskawayh 2002, p. 5). He argues that each person strives for his or her own perfection that is essential, good, real, and appropriate (Ibn Miskawayh 2002, p. 10). While behavioral perfection differs from one person to the next, it seeks what the soul considers to be perfect and unique to itself. Each human being strives for his/her own happiness. Happiness refers to what is good relative to the possessor of such happiness. Such good is the ultimate end that is shared by those who possess it.

Central to happiness is the complete and perfect performance of human actions in accordance with discernment and reflection (Ibn Miskawayh 2002, p. 13). As human beings are naturally social beings, their happiness and virtue are embodied in their actions and in social engagement (Ibn Miskawayh 2002, pp. 25–26). Their enactment of faith and devotional practice could generate a noble character by embodying the virtues of wisdom, temperance, courage, and justice. Since Muslim women’s experiences of religious beliefs and practices aim at acquiring virtue, their virtuous actions and behaviors shape their pious selves. The making of such piety undergirds personal and societal good. In this manner, Muslim men and women, as ethical agents, could partake in and enrich the creation of the public good wherever they are, including living as a minority in the United States.

I situate Muslim women’s agency in feminist resistance within the pursuit of the public good. Efforts to use Islamic political theology to frame women’s agency in feminist resistance have a dual character. The first is to address injustice across local and global communities, and the second is to show how the invocation of Islamic teachings in social settings provides new meaning. Women’s marches constitute an ideal site in which both characters of the Islamic theological-political framework operate. In her speech to the half-million crowd in Washington, DC, Sarsour called for people of all races to unite and address injustices directed against them and against humanity. In another speech at the annual Islamic Society of North America conference, she invited people to stand up against injustice, stating that (Spellings 2017)

I hope that [...] when we stand up to those who oppress our communities, that Allah accepts from us that as a form of *jihād*, that we are struggling against tyrants and rulers not only abroad in the Middle East or on the other side of the world, but here in these United States of America, where you have fascists and white supremacists and Islamophobes reigning in the White House.

The use of *jihād* certainly caused outrage among groups that associate the term with violence. Here, Sarsour invoked the concept of *jihād* to mean “exerting effort”, resisting injustices, and pursuing the good in the broader United States’ contexts. The use of *jihād* in this context shows how a religious concept is used as a framework to deal with the dehumanization of Muslims and to invoke solidarity with others who share a similar vision.

Along a similar line, one of the respondents is passionate about promoting justice and the value of all human life.<sup>7</sup> She finds that the unjust treatment of Muslims brought forth by the travel ban policy has torn families apart, isolated Muslims from their communities, kept the youth from education and professional opportunities, and, in some cases, led to death due to the lack of medical help. Her passion for justice motivates her to make the US and the world a better place by actively participating in the anti-war and anti-Islamophobia movements, campaigning for justice in Palestine, fighting against sexual assaults on college campuses, and contributing to the public good. In her own words, she said<sup>8</sup>

I responded to the travel ban by organizing a rally [...] It was important to me that the rally included a broad range of voices—Muslims, queer activists, survivors of Japanese internment, Jewish Americans, congress people, clergy members, students, scholars, legal experts, and more. I also attended similar

rallies at other venues, participated in the founding of the DC Justice for Muslims Coalition, and did some individual-level work with my community in New York.

Her leadership in resisting the unjust treatment of Muslims and other victims of aggression, whether due to war or sexual violence, constitutes the political theology of liberation. Such a liberatory framework sees the oppression of Muslims as a form of xenophobia. Within this framework, the struggle against injustice has a personal basis but is also politically connected to the problems that humanity is currently facing, namely xenophobia and racism.

The link between Muslim women's activism and the unjust treatment of Muslims and minorities within US contexts and those affected by US policies, especially the travel ban policy, provides the context for the exercise of agency. Within the realm of Islamic faith, Muslim men and women take God as a source of justice and mercy. As faith correlates to action, the embodiment of God's mercy underpins two simultaneous parallel efforts: (1) addressing political, environmental, and social injustice, and (2) cultivating good characters. While Muslims striving for justice regard their faith as an ethical system of meaning, the focus of their work addresses what dehumanizes Muslims and other oppressed groups.

As the embodiment of Islam is reflected in living a meaningful life, it orients Muslims to foster justice and equality through various means that are compatible within their localities. In this sense, Islamic liberation theology links the performance of spiritual life and civic responsibility toward the public good. In the context of Muslim women, they rose to resist the travel ban policy and the systemic marginalization of vulnerable groups, such as immigrants, people of color, and LGBTQ people. They engage in resistance by using an Islamic lens. Such resistance offers them liberatory agency to address how Islam, Muslims, and Muslim women are negatively perceived and how they may resist such portrayals. It also provides a framework for how religion can offer moral responses to political and social issues.

## 6. Promoting Justice as an Act of Faith

The use of Islamic political theology to address unjust problems shows how the particularity and the universality of Islam are deployed. The particularity of Islam refers to specific historical doctrines and practices that are rooted in the Quran, Prophetic Traditions (*ḥadīth*), the first generations of earlier companions (*al-ṣaḥābah*), and righteous predecessors (*al-salaf aṣ-ṣāliḥ*), whereas the universality of Islam refers to the ethics drawn from Islamic teachings that are universally applicable beyond the boundaries of historical specificity. Situating the particularity and universality of Islam as a framework is useful in leading a meaningful life as well as in making Islam relevant to current conditions. The recurring urgency to interpret Islam in every situation demonstrates that faith is important to Muslims, even within secular American contexts. One of the respondents, for instance, admits that she does not subscribe to Islamic rituals, but she uses Islam as her identity marker. As faith provides the basis for addressing temporal challenges in Muslims' lives, it plays a major role in the ways Muslim men and women solve their problems. Most women I interviewed resort to Islam as a paradigm to respond to political and social challenges. Through this paradigm, they find coherence and meaning in life. As Islam speaks to them in terms of what is meaningful, it agonizes them to have it cast as a religion of terror. This perception does not reflect their lived experiences as Muslim women. In this section, I will discuss the link between Muslim women's perception of faith as the foundation for action and their reliance on it as a site for restorative justice, self-will, and self-knowledge.

To understand the role of religion in the formation of self-will and self-knowledge, Kinnvall has suggested that we consider the relationship between identity-making and its challenges in the past, present, and foreseeable future.<sup>9</sup> In the cases of adult foreign-born Muslims, their identity formation depends on the sense of security and insecurity stemming from religion and their sentiments toward the country of origin and ethnicity. These factors make them feel either attached to or detached from their social environment. Emirbayer and Mische consider these external factors as the conditional structures that shape the internal

processes of agents in considering what is iterated, projected, and evaluated (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, p. 970). While this approach is useful in examining Muslim attachment to the United States, it does not show the importance of enacting religion in one's life.

In Muslim contexts, the interiorization of the Islamic identity within a specific ethnic group and beyond is shaped by variations in faith, ethnicity, and country of origin. Immigrant Muslims find comfort in the various languages they speak, the food traditions they enjoy, and the clothing they find to be comfortable and beautiful. The formative process of ethnic Muslims' identity becomes more defined as they encounter a variety of different people in each mosque with diverse languages, dresses, and ethnicities. Beyond the mosque settings, Muslims also encounter people from across races, ethnicities, faiths, and nations. These encounters allow them to externalize their cultural traditions and internalize what the US public has to offer. While Muslims' appropriation of their assimilation process is tied to the American attitudes and policies directed at them, it is important to recognize that Muslims' attachment to their own cultures gives them a framework to choose and act accordingly. Such contexts provide respondents in this study with the opportunity to enact faith as a platform for action and a broader pursuit of justice.

Efforts to take back Islam from the American hegemonic narratives of Islam as a violent religion and Muslims as violent people have inspired Muslim women. One of our respondents, Khan, as previously mentioned, describes her social justice work as being motivated by the desire to improve society and create more harmony. She locates the September 11 attack in the US soil as the site that motivated her to engage in dialogue. Along with her husband, Imam Abdur Rauf, she was at the heart of the controversial plan for building what is dubbed the "Ground Zero mosque." This challenge motivated her to address the question of Islam from local and global perspectives and to promote women's equality within her organization, the Women's Islamic Initiative for Spirituality and Equality. She does not call herself an activist, yet she does. She describes what she does as a spiritual journey. She believes that everything she does is tied to her spirituality. Her concern for justice is also informed by her spiritual life. She cites a prophetic saying that "[w]hoever among you sees an evil action, let him change it with his hand (by taking action); if he cannot, then with his tongue (by speaking out); and if he cannot, then with his heart (by hating it and feeling it is wrong), and that is the weakest of faith" (Muslim bin al-Hajjaj 2007, p. 143). In her view, changing unjust conditions and promoting justice is one step toward building a just community.

Resisting injustice for Muslims is an act of faith. This politics of resistance starts with oneself. Khan is inspired by the Quran, citing chapter Ar-Rad, 13:11, which states that "Allah does not change a people's lot unless they change what is in their hearts" (The Quranic Arabic Corpus—Translation n.d.). Khan believes that one needs to engage in self-criticism and expand this process to one's community. She adds that "if one sees flaws in one's community and what is going on is not consistent with what Islam stands for, it needs to be addressed".<sup>10</sup> Khan encourages Muslims to ask questions and think strategically to address their problem(s) in the communities where they reside. For her, she sees problems that need to be addressed locally and globally. Within US contexts, she focuses on community outreach to Muslim leaders and law enforcement, especially to address Islamic extremism and promote interfaith dialogue. Globally, her foundation, Women's Islamic Initiative for Spirituality and Equality, actively addresses various issues, including genital mutilation, child marriage, imam (mosque's leader) leadership, and other pressing topics. Khan is adamant about promoting justice and addressing injustice through knowledge. Her organization attempts to provide a platform for Muslims to be more informed about their roles in creating a better community.

Such passionate expression of Islam in pursuing justice is shared by one of our respondents, who immigrated from Afghanistan as a refugee and now serves as a community leader. She credits Islam as a source of strength and hope in her life. She came to the US after spending her childhood years in a camp on the outskirts of Pakistan due to her parents escaping the Russian invasion. She says that she is blessed and fortunate to have

received an immigration visa to live in the United States when she was in high school. She is now married with three children. She is currently working toward her degree in social work. She has seamlessly put her skills to work, as she is passionate about helping others, especially refugees. She says, "I was once in their shoes I am able to better understand their needs and help them adjust".<sup>11</sup> She credits Islam as a source of strength and hope. She attests that Islam, as a religion, not only promotes peace but also teaches kindness and generosity. She cites a famous Islamic saying stating that "smiling is a simple act of giving." In such a small statement, she says, "I can tell that helping people to settle down and gain better lives is not only promoted in our religion but is also dear to me as I love doing such activities from the bottom of my heart".<sup>12</sup>

The use of Islam as a reference for meaning-making is common among many Muslims. One of our respondents believes that her faith has helped her in times of trial. She laments that Islam is often judged negatively. One person does a bad thing; all Muslims get charged for the crime that they did not commit. She says that "Islam for me is about love, about helping, about giving".<sup>13</sup> Although she feels that she does not get the respect she deserves as a human being, she believes that she needs to stay true to the teachings of Islam as a mercy to the world. The Quranic verse 21:1–7 states that "And We have not sent you, [O Muhammad], except as a mercy to the worlds". Citing al-Anbiya, 21:107, is a common practice among Muslims, especially when they want to show that mercy is an important component of Islam. Central to Muslims is the desire to enact the Quran by imitating the Prophet Muhammad, who provides the most perfect model for living a meaningful life. For this Somali refugee, the Prophet Muhammad provides an example of how to embody mercy in everyday life. Giving and helping is an act of worship (*ibādah*).

From these Muslim women's narratives, we learn that justice activism and spiritual life are linked. I consider the link between faith and justice activism a manifestation of Islamic liberation theology. This liberation theology allows Muslim women to internalize Islamic teaching as a response to temporary conditions that challenge their sense of justice and externalize it through bodily performance and activism. Such self-interiorization shapes the creation of an autonomous agency that has the will to resist selective US hegemonic practices and policies that the public perceives to be oppressive to Muslims. Through their spiritual lives, Muslim women create meaning in their activism. For Khan, her activism comes from her deep commitment to justice and from her aspiration to contribute to the peaceful elimination of injustice. For one respondent, she finds motivation in transforming the community from within through Islamic teachings and civic engagements, such as interfaith dialogue and domestic violence prevention groups. For the other respondent, her spiritual life helps her cope with the challenges she faces, especially in assisting other refugees to integrate into the United States. What motivates these women in their pursuit of justice is the belief that their faith is a source of strength and hope for a better future.

## 7. Conclusions

This study has examined the link between Muslim women's agency in the Women's March and the role of Islamic faith in pursuing justice. It has been shown that this link is useful in framing the formulation of the Islamic liberation theology of resistance. Central to the epistemic discourse of Islamic liberation theology, as displayed in Muslim women's activism, is the enactment of Islam as a spiritual force and the role of women as speaking subjects. Islamic liberation theology provides a foundational discourse on how to respond to unjust situations through the convergent enactment of faith, action, and virtue. The dimension of faith undergirds the relevance of God to oneself, his/her community, and humanity. It serves as the pivot of an individual, God, and community triangle. The enactment of faith in everyday life shows how God exists through the individual's commitment to promote the good and address oppression. In this sense, any responses to unjust social and political conditions require self-will and a commitment to change social and political situation. However, the process by which such change occurs involves efforts to bring God's words into action.

This study also reiterates the need to address Muslim women’s pursuit of justice using an Islamic lens. I developed the premise that the positionality of Muslim women as a minority and marginalized group in the US requires an epistemology of agency and liberation theology beyond the Western framework. This approach intends to bring Muslim women’s voices into dialogue with scholarship from a Western framework. Such a dialogue allows for the recognition of Muslim women as speaking subjects and as partners in the production of knowledge. As Smith reminds us, it is important to recognize “that [we] have a different tradition, one that frames the way we see the world, the way we organize ourselves in it, the questions we ask, and the solutions that we seek” (Smith 2022, p. 190). While Smith’s analysis pertains to Māori’s culture in New Zealand, her framework speaks to the subject of our study. Thus, I have argued for an epistemological formulation of Muslim women’s agency and their pursuit of justice by using an Islamic framework.

I have also acknowledged the situatedness of Muslim women’s activism and the corresponding factors that led to the exploration of faith in their endeavor to promote justice. However, it should be noted that this study is limited to a few Muslim women and does not claim to represent all Muslim women in the United States. I have defined the scope and methodology of my inquiry to demonstrate how Muslim women responded to the travel ban policy and how they used their faith to address it. My work contributes to the importance of considering Muslim women’s positionality, experiences, identities, social and political settings, and religiosity in defining their agency, resistance, and liberation. This work will pave the way for future studies on Muslim women’s agency in many branches of Islam, such as law, history, philosophy, or Quranic interpretation.

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**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study which is in accordance with the federal research guidelines.

**Data Availability Statement:** Data is unavailable to the public due to privacy and ethical restrictions.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Interview with one of the respondents (H), 4 November 2017.

<sup>2</sup> See note 1 above.

<sup>3</sup> E-mail interview with one of the respondents (O), 12 November 2017.

<sup>4</sup> A phone interview with Daisy Khan, 11 November 2017. I share ideas from my interview with Khan because she is a prominent figure who is known to the public, and her book is quoted for the purpose of this writing. She also gave permission to share her name.

<sup>5</sup> CODE PINK press release received via e-mail on 2 April 2017. See also the following information, (Hand 2017).

<sup>6</sup> E-mail interview with one of the respondents (A), 18 November 2017.

<sup>7</sup> See note 6 above.

<sup>8</sup> Please see the note 7 above.

<sup>9</sup> I have adopted Kinnvall’s approach to the formation of identity using psychological analysis. In this introduction, I substitute the use of nationalism by a sentiment toward one’s country of origin. See (Kinnvall 2004, p. 721).

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Daisy Khan, 11 November 2017

<sup>11</sup> Please see the note 3 above.

<sup>12</sup> Please see the note 11 above.

<sup>13</sup> Please see the note 2 above.



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