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MyStory: Scary Head...

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Abstract

This work is an example of critical autoethnographic study of the writer's personal experiences. In this particular study, I share my experiences while wearing a headscarf in Turkey, and my desire to settle down in United States in order to pursue my academic career. Due to the political changes in Turkey and United States, my experiences while wearing a headscarf in academia and social environments triggered me to write a reflection about them. In this article, my goal is to deconstruct the symbolic meanings of the Muslim headscarf in social spaces. In addition, the piece will show my "double consciousness" feelings of the societies in which I live in.

Keywords

Critical Autoethnography, Headscarf, Muslim Women

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MyStory: Scary Head...

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This work is an example of critical autoethnographic study of the writer's personal experiences. In this particular study, I share my experiences while wearing a headscarf in Turkey, and my desire to settle down in United States in order to pursue my academic career. Due to the political changes in Turkey and United States, my experiences while wearing a headscarf in academia and social environments triggered me to write a reflection about them. In this article, my goal is to deconstruct the symbolic meanings of the Muslim headscarf in social spaces. In addition, the piece will show my "double consciousness" feelings of the societies in which I live in. Keywords: Autoethnography, Headscarf, Muslim Woman

Introduction

Searching for my freedom, that's what I was doing. I was tired of wearing the stupid wig so that I could have the education I desired. The wig is not me. That's just not me.

My own soil, my birthplace, my dear Turkey. Being discriminated by the people from your own blood? Living in a so-called 99% Muslim country, but not being able to practice your beliefs freely. Because if you are practicing your religion, you are not worthy of education. Since you are backward-minded already.

I want to be a professor of Educational Psychology, without swaying too far from my English education major. That's my goal. I want to inspire people; I want to be the inspiration for my own children and my future students.

and youuuuuu tell me I can't do that while wearing my headscarf?

Then I'll find another way--far away from my own land, in the country of freedom, searching for trust and respect *just because* I am human just like them. That's what brought me here, to this unknown soil, to go after my own American dream.

I am new to being "randomly selected person" in the airport. Although, how random can this be if I am always the one being picked? Oh, and why do you give me the pat down even though I was scanned already and everything looked clear?

I guess I'll be writing my own 9/11 tragedy, the tragedy of my soul. Maybe, starting my dream in a small town in Mississippi was not the best decision to begin with. Because, the look in the eyes of the people scares me in this deep southern U.S. town.

College environment is good. People are not looking at me, but their phones, so they are usually distracted to even notice me. Except the awkward moments I spend in the elevators. I know, people greet each other when someone walks in the elevator. I am not a talker, and I find those seconds awkward; the ones I am expected to talk with the people I do not know. So, I smile, and unless someone else talks to me, I do not engage in small talk. I don't want the people to be scared of me, so I smile; I hold the doors for them. Anything I can do to prove that I am a regular person just like they are.

I see some other Muslim students in their headscarves on campus. They are rare. I don't see any covered women in my department. And believe me, it is not a new thing for me. Back

in elementary school in Turkey, I was the only covered student in the whole school. An outcast. When I was in college, I was the only covered student in my class for the whole class year, and I stopped caring after that. Still an outcast. And you couldn't always tell if I was covered in daily life, because, remember, I had that stupid wig. I only had to wear it in the classrooms though. We were allowed to keep our headscarves on while we were on campus. I just needed to take it off when I walk in the classroom. But I was always in a rush. I would run to my department's building, take the stairs to second floor and run to the restroom before I see any professors. Because they shouldn't know. I don't want them to see me in my headscarf and risk the chance of failing a class; because, now my professor is biased. Because they would think that I am backward-minded. That I don't deserve this education. Even though, Hacettepe University was the third best university in the country in my major and I proved that I was successful enough to be there. I earned the right to be there. So, they should not know about my headscarf.

I thought I blended in, with my wig, but this particular professor figured it out. First, when we were in Speaking class, he wanted to see my ear. He told me if he doesn't see my ear that means I do not have one. So, what was I doing in Speaking class? So, I showed him that I have an ear as stupid as it sounds. I never knew how to behave in his class after that, I would pray that he doesn't realize that I am in the classroom. And honestly, I was really puzzled, because my pronunciation was really good. I was really good in that class. He even had a nickname for me because of that. He would call me Golden Girl. It did not help at all. And after that one incident during finals, I lost it. He gave me the exam paper, leaned in, and said "What if I told you that I would rip that wig from your head right now? What would you do?" I started shaking and looked at him, questioning my existence. Why am I here? Why am I putting up with this? Nobody said anything. Even my friends who were sitting next to me. Then he started laughing, and said he was joking. But that did it. He wanted me to fail that exam. I managed to pass, and I never took another class from him.

In my senior year, the regulations changed. We were not allowed to wear headscarf in any official building on campus anymore. Library, dormitories, university's dining hall. Wherever you go, except the cafeteria and the health center, I had to take my headscarf off. So absurd, but so real. The ironic thing is though, I was feeling lucky. What if I had to take my headscarf off when we entered the campus? Then I would had to do it in the bus. As soon as we entered the campus limits, before the security comes and checks my ID, I would have to do it. So after all, I was lucky enough. This new definition of freedom on campus had to be enough.

Things got better in Turkey a few years after I graduated and moved to Mississippi. With the new law, you can wear your headscarf almost anywhere. If you are a teacher, you can wear it in the classroom. If you are a doctor, you can wear your headscarf and still do your profession. Headscarves are one less thing to worry about for covered women in Turkey now. They have more serious issues to worry about now. Laws change, regulations change, politics change, but the mentality? How do we change that? How do we change the practicing, head covering Muslim women image in people's mind?

So, yes. It doesn't really matter if I don't have a covered Muslim classmate here in Mississippi. I didn't have much friends with headscarves in Turkey anyways. It didn't really matter. At least, I can wear my headscarf freely and exist here. I can knock on my professor's office door, chat with them, even invite them over to my house for dinner. This is a big change. This is freedom.

After a few weeks of class, one of my classmates and I walked in the elevator after the class. We barely talked to each other before that moment. She said

I always thought Muslim women did not have dreams, let alone be interested in education. And here you are, in another country, speaking my language, and

walking in the same graduate class with me. I guess this proves Fox News wrong.

I just smiled at her. Then she said, “Keep doing what you’re doing girl.” She cannot even imagine what she just said meant for me. It was approval, acknowledgement, and acceptance. I thanked her with teary eyes.

Most of the problem starts when I am outside of the campus. That’s when the uneasy feeling rushes in. I know I look different, but do you have to stare at me every time I walk in the store? After all, you saw me in this store for the past 3 months right? It’s not like I have too many stores to choose from. And I cannot ignore anymore, the fact that you are staring. You are making me feel much more different than I am. You are alienating me, when I am trying to blend in.

My situation is what Du Bois would have called as “double consciousness”. Double consciousness is, in his terms, “the sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of the other” (Du Bois, 1903, p. 3). He refers to it as two ideals in one body, for African Americans specifically. Being American and being Black is two norms that people of color fight to fit in. It is not much different than how I feel about myself. Muslim and living in United States, two ideals embodied in one.

When I walk around the store, or some other place, I can feel people saying, “you are different, you don’t fit in.” And the different we do not know is not safe, right? I’ll tell you what. When you make it so obvious that I am different, the battle between my two identities becomes more tangled. For example, I am aware of the “ideal” image of a modern woman in the society’s conscious. And my subconscious is always at work, pushing these “ideals” on me. Because they are wanted, and they are optimal. So the battle follows as this: Should I continue to be covered and hold my religious ideals, or should I oblige and become the modern image that is being imposed on me? When I look inside of me, my headscarf is a part of my identity, and I feel strong and accomplished with it. But when I walk out of myself, and look at me with other people’s lenses, all I see is a label. With just one look, you can make up your mind about me and move on. Or you can stop and ask me a question like, “Hey, how are you?”

And trust me, I do not want your pity. I just want you to understand me.

I think Paul was right. I understand him now. Once he said, people will be scared of me thinking I might be carrying a bomb under my scarf. Just to be clear, it is my hair people, my hair tied in a bun, and I love my long hair. Paul, my dear colleague, it makes sense now. At first, I didn’t quite understand how people stared at you when you walked into that restaurant. I didn’t understand the feeling. You are born and raised American. However, they still stared at you, because you are African American. They alienated you because of your skin color. They stared at you, because that restaurant was a White dominated place and you didn’t fit. But I’ll tell you, it makes perfect sense. Every conversation we had in the department’s laboratory about me being different makes sense.

After all, I never wanted to come to Mississippi. I didn’t know this place at all. I have been to New Jersey and New York and some other states that people were nice and accepting, and that’s where I wanted to be. I wanted to feel that I belonged here. I wanted to feel that people will see me beyond my physical appearance, beyond my clothes and yeah, my headscarf.

That did not happen here.

But God always has a plan, right? There was a reason why we ended up here. This is where Mehmet and I started our PhD journeys together. This is where we got department assistantships among the twenty applications Mehmet submitted. This is my American dream. But if only I felt a little more comfortable, like I thought I would be, maybe I could focus on

my education more. Because, again, the reason I am here: being able to practice my religion and get my education. Freely.

This headscarf is not “just” a cover for my hair, it is more than that. It is a way of life, part of my social identity, and the rope that I hold onto. My childhood and my culture.

It is the reason why I am here, why I am brave enough to sacrifice the time that I could spend with my family, beloved friends and relatives. If you think about it, I can’t even go out and sit at a random restaurant to eat. Because not every restaurant carries “halal” or “kosher” meal options. If anything bad happens to my family members, I can’t get on a bus and be with them as soon as possible. I am thousands of miles away from my home. But I am willing to sacrifice all that so I can be me. With the way I look, the way I dress, and the way I believe, the total package.

I agree, I really should not care what people say to my face or behind me anymore. Or when they keep staring, even though it is the gazillionth time we saw each other. Whenever I say, “I get mad when I see people staring at me,” my husband says, “If you don’t look at them, you won’t see them staring at you.” Ignorance is bliss. But that’s not really helping.

My reality is what I feel, and I feel broken.

When Mehmet first mentioned about Mississippi to Damon, his colleague from Texas, Damon openly asked him if he was really sure that he wants to go there. Damon knew the possibilities, but Mehmet never thought our experience would be like this. It’s hard to tell when the Muslim person is a man, so the experience might be different. But for covered women, it is inevitable.

Good things happen in Mississippi, as well. I have become friends with some of Mehmet’s colleagues. Also, there is a small Turkish community in this town, we have several other friends in Jackson, Mississippi. Occasionally, we have Turkish get-togethers. And that day, when the hell broke, was one of those happy days.

That day, we heard about the pastor from Florida encouraging people to burn our Holy book, the Quran, and how terrifying this is. But I never see it coming, that I would experience it first-hand. On our way home, we saw a man, probably in his fifties, driving his motorcycle. Braids falling under his helmet, wearing leather jacket, jeans and cowboy boots. Up until here, everything is normal. He is a Southern man. But there was some other detail about him. I didn’t see that first. When we got closer to him, I realized what he was doing. This man on his bike somehow managed to tie a Quran with a rope to his motorcycle. Our Holy book just hangs there under his feet, while he rides his bike. Proud.

Do you really have to show your hatred?

My brain was burning, like, how could this even happen? I tried to open the car’s window, but my husband already locked it from the driver’s side. I told Mehmet to open the locks, but he said no. There, I was screaming my lungs out in the car; hoping this biker would hear how I cursed him while Mehmet switched lanes to pass him.

Mehmet couldn’t have gone faster to avoid this unwanted and unexpected encounter. With the hit of the brake, our car swung a little bit since my husband was trying to calm me down and continue to drive at the same time. I can’t remember the rest. My body shut down, I had a panic attack. It was too much to experience. God, I was just recently recovering my anxiety, now my attacks came back with all their power. The despair my husband lived, struggling to save me from the pain I went through. He had the same feelings but just needed to step back for a second and pull me back to reality. Now that I think about this incident, what that biker did was a total provocation and I should have held onto my horses. I shouldn’t have let that dude enjoy my moments of suffering.

However, my worries do not leave me alone. If it’s not the people in the store, it is some other person. My professors at the University of North Texas are very nice and supportive, though. I have not felt any different from my colleagues. I have good relationships with my

professors and friends. Again, the campus environment is acting as a protective environment for me due to its diversity. I worked as a Teaching Assistant since I transferred here back in Fall 2011, until the spring of 2014. In my last semester as a teaching assistant, I was assigned an undergraduate class, Human Development Across the Lifespan, to teach in the university. You would think having a sense of authority would make me feel comfortable. After all, I am the instructor of the class.

The first day of class, I'm scared and shaking. I do not know what kind of reaction I am going to receive from my students. So far, we have emailed back and forth with a couple of them, but they did not see me. What if my appearance makes a difference for them? What if my value and knowledge is summed to zero after they see me? Teaching the subject is easy and enjoyable at this point, but I need to get over the stress first. I walk in the classroom with my notes and attendance list, introduce myself, and start chatting with students. At the end of the class, I feel really relieved. The class is dismissed. Once the introduction part was over, once I started talking about that first day's topic, the fear is gone. I even asked my students to correct me if I mispronounce a word, made a couple of jokes, and assigned the reading for next week. Overall, I had a really good experience, and according to my performance report at the end of the semester, the students enjoyed the class as well.

From not being able to walk into the university classroom with a headscarf back in Turkey to teaching a class in an American university with a headscarf. I am proud of this accomplishment.

We spent so much time reading feminist theory, but I wonder if feminists ever spend a moment thinking about this problem.

Can they see the world through my eyes?

Or am I just an "issue" that needs liberation in a third world country?

Am I even a sociological issue to consider?

Most of these questions have found their answers within the past two years. Muslims in United States have been going through a tough time since 9/11. People are openly showing their hatred, and the terrorist attacks from so-called "Muslim" terrorist groups are making it hard for us to construct the real Muslim image. Moreover, the rhetoric that has been used for the 2016 U.S. Presidential election season was the cherry on top. I remember sitting down and talking to my husband and our friends what we would do if things go bad here in United States. "Canada is always an option" was the main idea of those conversations since going back to Turkey is not an actual option anymore. The months following the attempted coup back in Turkey on July 15, 2016, Turkey took a big step back towards the old days. Authoritarianism has been taking over my homeland and with the recent referendum, Turkey has accepted to be under one man's power. And unfortunately, for me, wearing a headscarf in Turkey was a symbol of exercising my freedom. But right now, it has become, yet again, a symbol of political oppression.

A few days after the U.S. presidential inauguration, the President signed an executive order for banning Muslims from entering U.S. soil. The sense of security and freedom I have felt before is now diminished. We have been living in Dallas for the past six years, and now I am scared to go out in public, I keep checking my back when I am outside alone, just in case someone comes after me. I avoid going to new places to shop or hang out, but even then, people feel free to "indulge" me in with their "love" towards Muslims.

I am at a store that I frequently visit, and it happened after I finished shopping and was walking out of the store. I am on the pedestrian crossing, pushing my cart towards my car. A white man is driving his white truck towards me, ignoring the stop sign for the pedestrians. He came too close without stopping and I stopped in the middle of crosswalk raising my hand for him to stop. I am yelling him "You need to stop, don't you see I am on the crosswalk? You

need to wait for me to pass safely.” And he gestures his hand showing my headscarf, like he is taking it off with this mad, hateful face. He says “Get out! Fuck you!” I am shaking, I am really upset about this encounter, but I managed to scream back, “Fuck YOU!” I wish I had my phone in my hand and think fast enough to record this encounter, write down his car’s plate number and call the police. I saw him clearly, I could identify him. I could find where he parked and report him to the police. I don’t even know if the police would be able to do anything about it, but I would at least show him what his hatred cost me and himself. I only told my husband what happened after I partly got over it, and I didn’t share it with anybody else until now. Why? I honestly do not know why. I just couldn’t do it. Maybe I didn’t want my “picture perfect life” to be shattered; married with two lovely kids, studying and following my passion in United States, like I planned, like I prayed for it to happen. And no drama, please.

All this time, all these experiences, made me realize even freedom has boundaries. If my freedom is violating your freedom, then it’s not freedom, it is privilege. Your rights end where mine begins. And now I know, I am not alone in this. I am not fighting this alone. There has always been a group of people, whose rights have been violated, who have been oppressed and discriminated, and we are in this together. The Women’s March, which was the day after the presidential inauguration of 2017, was a clear sign of that. All the social media posts I have read this past year, were a sign of that. Non-Muslim women wearing headscarves to show solidarity with women like me, were a sign of that. I will be hopeful. I am teaching my daughter her rights and her capabilities. I am teaching my son “no, boys will not be boys”. I am teaching them compassion and caring. I am hopeful, and I will be hopeful for their future.

In the meantime, when I face hatred, when I face violence, I will try to explain myself as much as I can. When people look at me, they will not be afraid that I am a terrorist who’s come here to rip them apart. They will see me as I see myself.

A human, nothing more or less than that.

And it is clear, with this new era of politics, my story will not end here. Rather, this is just the beginning.

Critical Autoethnography and Methodology

The decision to write this autoethnography has not been very easy. At the end, these experiences are very personal, which means that while writing I am going through the same experiences over and over again. However, with all the misunderstanding going on in the media and underestimating the potential traumatic effects of the words consumed by each hateful person, I felt that I am compelled to share my side of events. Show the audience how it feels to be me. Writing these experiences means that I need to face my vulnerabilities, and share my insecurities. So, I am hoping that the readers will find a piece of themselves in this story, covered or not covered, same faith or not, my story will be relatable. After all, it’s a part of human nature, we seek to be understood and validated by others.

The data in this study, on the surface, covers around 8 years of the time I have lived in United States. However, at times it goes way back to my college years in Turkey, and even to my childhood when I first covered, to make connections with my young-self and present-self. Therefore, like Bartleet’s (2009) narrative style, I have chosen my “crisis moments” that reflect the culture and practices of the life that I came from and the new life that I am trying to blend in. I have been actively keeping journals since 4th grade, so almost all of the data is derived from my journals. In addition, I referred back to the people who were physically present during some of these experiences to make sure the stories match and they make sense. I utilize writing as a way to express my feelings, understand and cope with any issue that I come across, and sometimes to hold on to those moments that I might otherwise forget. Since the political environment became more and more heated, I have read and listened so many stories just like

mine. It only made sense to address these crucial moments, which highlight the ongoing struggle of women with headscarves nowadays, not only in United States but also in societies in which we are the minority. Underrepresented, underestimated, and misunderstood. But, we deserve to be heard.

This study has attempted to be an example of critical autoethnography. Autoethnography is an evocative research method, which lets the researcher to provide an interpretation of the world through his/her own lens for the reader (Ellis, 2004). Also, it creates a social context that provides meaningful, and relatable research that gives the audience more than an interpretation of numbers (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). On the other hand, critical autoethnography brings power struggle point of view to the story. As Potter (2015) states, naming an autoethnographic project as “critical” not only helps explain how power and personal experiences clash or blend together, but also it attempts to deconstruct the power structure that is uncovered. For example, I have observed more and more bigotry and open hatred in today’s sociopolitical environment than the previous administration. Muslims in the United States have been exposed to various kinds of violence since 9/11, and these are not an anomaly; they have become a part of daily life with the current administration. The individuals get their power from the rhetoric they have been exposed to from the media and current administration, to discriminate and dismiss Muslims like me. President Trump issues a Muslim ban, and blocks a number of countries’ citizens to cross borders and build a new life here in United States. The president and the administration constitute the power, and its power to intervene the daily life of an ordinary Muslim woman with a headscarf gets exposed through my experiences. While the government uses its power to refer to me as a potential threat to this country, I use my power to express the truth behind what is being portrayed. Therefore, critical autoethnography enables the researcher and the reader to look at the bigger picture, starting with small personal experiences and building up on what the power structure of the system is capable of.

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