

## Article

# Navigating Triple Consciousness in the Diaspora: An Autoethnographic Account of an Ahmadi Muslim Woman in Canada

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**Abstract:** In 1974, the Pakistani Constitution was amended to declare Ahmadi Muslims as “non-Muslim”, initiating a systematic and hegemonic structural attempt to restrict Ahmadi Muslims from professing and practicing the Islamic faith in Pakistan. This state-sanctioned exclusion led to the mass migration of Ahmadi Muslims out of Pakistan into diasporic contexts. Using autoethnography, this article examines how being an Ahmadi Muslim woman in Canada remains rooted in deeply divisive politico-religious conflicts that transcend temporal and spatial boundaries and result in multiple layers of marginalities in the diaspora. I am conscious that my self-formation is racialized, gendered, and classed across three primary intersections: as a Pakistani/South Asian; as an Ahmadi Muslim; and as a woman. This “triple consciousness”, a term coined by Black feminist scholars and Afro-Latinx scholars in the United States to extend W. E. B. Du Bois’ “double consciousness”, produces a liminal and contradictory space of belonging—one that requires further reflection and analysis in the Canadian context where the racial continues to dominate our social world and proximity to Whiteness is privileged and rewarded.

**Keywords:** Ahmadiyya; Muslim women; triple consciousness; racialization; anti-Muslim racism; autoethnography; transnational feminism; subjectivities; diaspora studies; Canada



**Citation:** Mian Akram, Ayesha. 2022. Navigating Triple Consciousness in the Diaspora: An Autoethnographic Account of an Ahmadi Muslim Woman in Canada. *Religions* 13: 493. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13060493>

Academic Editors: Amina Jamal and Kayla Renée Wheeler

Received: 14 April 2022

Accepted: 25 May 2022

Published: 30 May 2022

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## 1. Introduction

The Ahmadiyya Muslim Community is a minority sect within Islam with tens of millions of believers spread across the continents. As members of a marginalized and persecuted community within Islam, Ahmadi Muslims’ subjectivities in the diaspora are formed and reformed at the nexus of varying intersecting categories including race, religion, gender, and class. Using autoethnography, I demonstrate that at the core of my subjectivity as a South Asian Ahmadi Muslim woman in Canada is the intergenerational reproduction of fears and anxieties surrounding disclosure, restraint, and vocality. By unpacking each of these nexuses, this paper contributes to the body of literature on transnational religious communities in the diaspora by investigating how being an Ahmadi Muslim woman in Canada remains rooted in deeply divisive politico-religious conflicts that transcend temporal and spatial boundaries and result in multiple layers of marginalities.

## 2. Background: Theory & Community

### 2.1. The Ahmadiyya Community and State-Sanctioned Persecution in Pakistan

The Ahmadiyya Muslim Community is a worldwide movement within Islam that originated in British-controlled India in the late 19th century.<sup>1</sup> Ahmadi Muslims believe in Mirza Ghulam Ahmad of Qadian<sup>2</sup> as the long-awaited *Mujaddid* (Reformer of the Age)<sup>3</sup> and *Messiah*.<sup>4</sup> Although the community originated in Qadian, after the Partition of India and creation of Pakistan in 1947, most Ahmadi Muslims migrated to Pakistan where they established a new headquarters in the city of Rabwah. Today, the community spans the global diaspora,

with its headquarters in Islamabad, Tilford, United Kingdom, and tens of millions of followers spread across the continents. In the diaspora, the community is multiracial, growing especially amongst Black and African populations (Ahmed 2008).

Although Ahmadi Muslims experienced persecution long before the creation of Pakistan, this state-sanctioned exclusion was formalized in post-Partition Pakistan in 1974 when the Pakistani Constitution was amended under Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto to declare Ahmadi Muslims as a non-Muslim minority (Gualteri 1989; Kamran 2019; Khan 2015; Qadir 2018; Rashid 2011; Sultana et al. 2015). This constitutional amendment prohibited Ahmadi Muslims from identifying as Muslim and also offered no protection to the community as religious minorities in Pakistan.<sup>5</sup> State-sanctioned exclusion of Ahmadi Muslims intensified through the introduction of Ordinance XX in 1984, known as the “Blasphemy Laws” (Qadir 2015, p. 170), which criminalize (with penalty of imprisonment) the actions of an Ahmadi

who directly or indirectly, poses himself as a Muslim, or calls, or refers to, his faith as Islam, or preaches or propagates his faith, or invites others to accept his faith, by words, either spoken or written, or by visible representations, or in any manner whatsoever outrages the religious feelings of Muslims. (as cited in Sultana et al. 2015, p. 6)

The blasphemy laws not only criminalized the act of an Ahmadi Muslim identifying as Muslim but also offered no formal protections to Ahmadis, inspiring and allowing perpetrators and politico-religious groups to commit vandalism, violence, and murder with little recourse—of mosques, homes, businesses, cemeteries, and persons identified as Ahmadi. Ahmadi Muslims were not safe or welcome in Pakistan, spurring the mass migration of community members into diasporic contexts.<sup>6</sup> This institutional persecution of the Ahmadiyya Community in Pakistan is widely recognized as a violation of the United Nations’ *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (Rashid 2011), designed to protect, amongst other fundamental human rights, the freedoms of religion, assembly, speech, and life.<sup>7</sup>

This decades-long state-sanctioned exclusion persists today as groups such as the *Khatme Nabuwwat* (Finality of Prophethood) party continue to promote the ideology that Ahmadis are *wajibul qatl*, meaning that “the streets need to be cleansed of Ahmadi Muslims” (as cited in Rashid 2011, p. 33). One of the deadliest terror attacks in recent history on two Ahmadi mosques in Lahore in 2010, which killed 90 Ahmadi Muslims and injured 108 others, including children, was a particularly horrific reminder that the extremist ideologies that cemented state-sanctioned persecution decades earlier still inspired—and justified—hatred, violence, and murder. News reports of the gruesome targeting of Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan continue to reach community members in the diaspora—a stark reminder of the violence they fled and their privilege to do so.

This is the story of my family. My mother’s family left Pakistan in 1976, arriving to what is now known as Canada as uninvited settlers on Indigenous lands. My mother tells me fondly how she could literally see the Atlantic Ocean from her kitchen window on Cape Breton Island. My grandparents’ stories—of Partition, of being coerced out of Pakistan after realizing that there was no longer a future for their family there, of arriving in a new country that promised them the freedom to practice their faith as they pleased—are all integral narratives from my childhood. I grew up in the Ahmadiyya community in Canada, regularly attending Friday prayers, children’s classes, Eid celebrations, and educational and sports competitions at our local mosque, gathering annually for conventions with tens of thousands of attendees from around the world, traveling to the community’s headquarters in the UK to meet with our Spiritual Head, and feeling a strong sense of unity and strength as Ahmadis.<sup>8</sup>

Even in the diaspora, the persistent persecution of our community was an essential part of our religious upbringing. The fear, the caution, the grief—we knew what our fellow community members had suffered and continued to suffer in Pakistan. The same privilege that removed us from being directly targeted in the homeland indirectly guided our day-to-

day interactions in the diaspora. It is the impact of this politico-religious persecution on the subjectivities of future generations of Ahmadis growing up in the diaspora that scholars (Botterill et al. 2020; Mohammad 2018; Nijhawan 2016) are beginning to investigate, and that I seek to contribute to with this body of work.

## 2.2. Subjectivities, Resistances, Mimicry, and Ambivalences

Sociological theories of subjectivities describe how the Self is formed not in isolation but through a relational and continuous process of construction, reconstruction, and renegotiation (Itzigsohn and Brown 2015). Subjectivities are “always ‘in-process’” (Hall 2000, p. 16) and thus a subject’s understanding of her Self is also always “in-process”. Bhabha (1984) describes two ways in which a postcolonial subject develops her relational subjectivity. One route is through “camouflage” (Bhabha 1984, p. 131) or mimicry. Through mimicry, subjects face “an internal conflict” between identifying with the dominant group or being exposed as a minority (Ram 2014, p. 736). Mimicry can also “become a subversive strategy that exposes how identities are constructed and stratified through power relations” (Ram 2014, p. 736). Another strategy is ambivalence, which Butler (1993, p. 125) defines as “being implicated in the regimes of power by which one is constituted and, hence, of being implicated in the very regimes of power that one opposes”. This simultaneous implication and opposition is both enabling and violating (Butler 1993). Facing an impossibility of choice, the subject goes back and forth at the ambivalent site of discursive formation, “which opens up the possibility of a reworking of the very terms by which subjectivation proceeds—and fails to proceed” (Butler 1993, p. 124). This space of ambivalence is open to negotiation, is a site of appropriation and subversion, and is a potential site of resistance. What mimicry and ambivalence suggest are that ties that bind subjects into their positioning can be the very means through which the political subject can resist her constructions as Other, albeit at great risk to her ontological understandings of Self.

## 2.3. Racialization of Muslims and Anti-Muslim Racism in the Diaspora

Racism is embedded in the history and present of what is now known as Canada (Satzewich and Liodakis 2017).<sup>9</sup> White Eurocentrism underlies our settler colonial history, cultural genocide, and continued oppression of Indigenous peoples, and racialized constructions of the Other that bubble to the surface at particular moments of nation-building (Dhamoon and Abu-Laban 2009). Cole (2020, p. 8) articulates how white supremacy functions through a racial hierarchy in Canada, with Whiteness at the top, Indigenous peoples occupying a lower rung, and Black people at the bottom as “Whiteness is constantly defined and reproduced through anti-Blackness”. Racialization, thus, is at the very core of our social world (Itzigsohn and Brown 2015).

The transnational and diasporic breadth of the Muslim *ummah* means that Muslims navigate their religious subjectivities in varying sociopolitical contexts, many of which may actually restrict their religious practices due to a “public anxiety over Islam” (Graham 2012, p. 242). Presumptions of rigid secular–religious dichotomies constitute the Muslim subject as a “pre-modern subject, one who possesses a violent hatred of the West and who is not committed to the rule of law, respect for human rights and women’s rights or democracy” (Razack 2007, p. 19). Even second-generation Muslims are constructed as “internal dangerous foreigners,” legally entitled citizens who are deemed as outsiders from within (Dhamoon and Abu-Laban 2009). In this way, danger and fear are ontologized into Muslim subjectivities.

In a post-9/11 world following historical trajectories of Orientalism (Said 1979), many scholars used the term “Islamophobia” to describe the fear of the symbolic danger and threat of Muslims. As the field of critical Muslim studies continues to advance, scholars (Rana et al. 2020, p. 58) argue that the term “Islamophobia” suggests “a problem of individual bias or individual fear” which “obscures the structural and systemic production of anti-Muslim racism”. They instead argue for the use of “anti-Muslim racism” which allows anti-Muslim racism scholars and activists to engage with two important points of

intersection: (1) the connection of anti-Muslim racism to historical forms of race-making and white supremacy; and (2) the connection of anti-Muslim racism to other racisms including anti-immigrant, anti-Black, anti-Arab, anti-Latinx, and anti-Indigenous (Rana et al. 2020, p. 58).

Neo-Orientalist (Said 1979) discursive formations further detach the Muslim community from its religious roots and instead constitute it as a political community—as a race. Recent scholarship (Mian Akram 2018; Razack 2022; Thobani 2021) demonstrates how Muslims are racialized when “race” as a “floating signifier” is ready to assume a new “socio-historical or cultural definition” (Hall 1997, p. 8). In the contemporary context, race is discursively affixed onto “the Muslim race,” effectively constituting the believing subject as the political subject, the religious figure as the racial figure (Rana 2007, p. 150). Muslims exist, then, within an ambiguous liminal space between race and religion, as both adherents to a global community of believers and subject to political discourses tied to neoliberal state interests. Most problematically, this constructs the Muslim race as homogenous and oblivious to varying intersectionalities within Muslim communities, especially with regards to Black Muslims, who face layers of intersecting racisms based on their Blackness and their Muslimness (even within the Muslim community itself) (Massa 2020; Wheeler 2020). As Mugabo (2016, p. 165) writes, “the place of Muslim Blacks cannot be fully addressed in work that universalizes the Muslim subject”. This universality is a tool of the oppressor, a tool of the colonizer, and a tool to be subverted by the racialized Self.

#### 2.4. Navigating Muslim Women's Political Subjectivities in the Diaspora

Transnational feminist scholarship (Grewal 2005; Jamal 2005; Ku 2019; Mahmood 2016; Razack 2018; Zine 2004) investigates how gendered religious bodies in post-modern contexts navigate their political subjectivities and transform social relations tied to heteropatriarchies, racisms, colonialism, and capitalism. This scholarship is particularly useful for researchers studying Muslim women and the intersections between religion, secularity, cultural politics, sexuality, and feminist subjectivities (Jamal 2005; Mahmood 2016; Razack 2018; Thobani 2021; Zine 2004). Most specifically, transnational feminist analyses provide insights into the interconnectivity of global discourses of anti-Muslim racism and local subjectivities of Muslim women as they navigate their complicated and intersectional sociopolitical terrains.

Anti-Muslim racism is firmly ontologized in the bodies of Muslim women through the caricature of “The Muslimwoman” (Cooke 2007), signified as one word to reflect the simultaneous intertwining and erasure of religion and gender. The Muslimwoman is a universalized and static figure, either veiled or unveiled, constructed by the Western-centric imagination in contrast with the lived realities of diverse Muslim women (Razack 2018). This unidimensional discursive subject formation “denies these women the agency and political maturity to act as subjects of change on their own terms” (Zine 2004, p. 168). Muslim women's bodies are constant points of public debate, with national conversations and state policies obsessed with their condemnation and regulation (Mian Akram 2018). The Canadian Charter right to freedom of religion is routinely violated when Muslim women are pressured to sacrifice their religious practices to demonstrate their loyalty and belongingness.<sup>10</sup> These legislative decisions, based on the invisibility of Whiteness and “hyper-visibility” of racialized and immigrant women (Arat-Koç 2012, p. 9), serve to create the boundaries of citizenship in the diaspora.

#### 2.5. Double and Triple Consciousness as Analytical Tools

W. E. B. Du Bois, “a theorist of racialized modernity” (Itzigsohn and Brown 2015, p. 246), established the colour line, or racialization, as the primary marker of social differentiation in transnational and diasporic contexts.<sup>11</sup> In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois ([1903] 2007, p. 8) poignantly explicates the double consciousness faced by Black Americans:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a

world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

Du Bois articulates three elements within double consciousness: (1) a veil, or a colour line that separates the races; (2) an internal sense of twoness, or positioning within two different worlds; and (3) a second sight, whereby racialized bodies see themselves through the White world. Double consciousness “crucially situates the racialised self-other relationship within racial and social hierarchies” (Bibi 2020, p. 3), offering linguistic and analytical tools to explore and articulate tensions between self-identification and external exclusions from those identifications. Key to Du Bois’ work is the veil as “an intangible boundary that affects the perceptions of and relations between racializing and racialized subjects” (Itzigsohn and Brown 2015, p. 235). Most importantly, Du Bois provides insight into the inherent tension between one’s subjectivity and resistance, between surviving within “the oppressiveness of the racialized world and the constant striving of racialized subjects to shape their world” (Itzigsohn and Brown 2015, p. 238). Researchers exploring multiply marginalized communities, particularly diasporic Muslim communities (Abdel-Fattah 2017; Bibi 2020; Islam 2020; Soyer and Soyer 2017), employ double consciousness to investigate and articulate the contradictions of “two ideals embodied in one” (Soyer and Soyer 2017, p. 3357). In particular, the visibility of the veil and its parallel to *hijab* and *niqab* as a symbol of separation is not lost on Muslim scholars using double consciousness as an analytical tool (Bibi 2020).

To attend to Du Bois’ lack of gendered analysis of structures of White heteropatriarchies, Welang (2018) describes how triple consciousness theory (TCT) incorporates a critical third intersection, of womanhood, in addition to Blackness and America. Racial and gendered identities, then, are analyzed within the intersections of White patriarchy, Black hypermasculinity, and the privileging of White women’s voices and interests in feminist spaces (Welang 2018). This trifold analysis provides a “process of confronting and unpacking the messy contradictions of conflicting identities in order to produce new liberated identities” (Welang 2018, p. 298). Other scholars have extended Du Bois’ double consciousness so that the problems of the colour line are now “multiplied in number and directionality” (Flores 2005, p. 83). For example, Flores (2005) investigates the omission of Afro-Latinos from “Black” categories and the label of “Hispanic” as “a construct that is decidedly nonblack and in significant ways discursively antiblack” (Flores 2005, p. 81; Flores and Román 2009).

Muslim scholars in the diaspora (Ahmed 2008; Mohamed 2017) have also used the language of triple consciousness to describe the internal angsts, tensions, and contradictions faced by multiply marginalized communities. Ahmed (2008, p. 57), exploring the experiences of Black Muslims in America, uses triple consciousness to “acknowledge the significance of Islam in an overall matrix of negotiation that continues to shape Black identity in the United States”. Key to triple consciousness is a sense of historicity, or a “reaching back” (Ahmed 2008, p. 63) to the homeland for a sociopolitical and historical contextualization of contemporary struggles and tensions. This encourages future generations of Muslims to reach back to the stories told by elders and use those as starting points for making sense of present-day complexities. Mohamed (2017) also uses triple consciousness to explore the diasporic lived experiences and understandings of identity amongst Black Muslim women in Canada. This is to understand their racial and gendered formations as settlers in a nation in which the racial hierarchy exists to privilege those in proximity to Whiteness.<sup>12</sup>

With these analytical tools in hand, I embark on a journey of critical reflexivity, historicity, and discomfort with the objective of studying the impact of politico-religious persecution on the subjectivities of Ahmadi Muslim women in the diaspora.



### 3. Autoethnography as Methodology

Autoethnography is a qualitative reflexive methodology that uses a researcher's experiences and reflections as data (Ellis et al. 2011) to make sense of lived experiences in sociopolitical contexts. It is evocative as a method (Soyer and Soyer 2017), bringing power into an analysis of lived experiences and moments of personal crises and offering a critical strategy for relating the personal with the political. This is a methodology that provides academic rigour but also flexibility and creativity to explore uncharted research areas (Kaur-Bring 2020). Autoethnography is a particularly useful research methodology for researchers aspiring to fill gaps in academic literature around the experiences of multiply marginalized communities (Kaur-Bring 2020; Ku 2019). At the core of autoethnography is the spiral of critical researcher reflexivity, which is a "critical consciousness that is constant and dynamic in a complex spiral-like process starting within our own experiences as racialized, gendered, and classed beings embedded in particular sociopolitical contexts" (Mao et al. 2016, p. 1). Autoethnography is a methodological strategy advanced by Du Bois himself (Itzigsohn and Brown 2015): using biography to theorize racialization in the social world.

Many Muslim researchers employ autoethnography to explore their lived experiences of marginality, racialization, and gendering in the diaspora (Abdel-Fattah 2017; Elbelazi and Alharbi 2020; Hamdan 2012, Javaid 2019; Martin-Anatias 2019; Soyer and Soyer 2017; Zempi and Awan 2017). For example, Elbelazi and Alharbi (2020, p. 662) use "poetic autoethnography" to analyze their experiences as non-White academics who experience "hijabophobia" at a White higher education institution in the United States. Zempi and Awan (2017) advance an autoethnographic analysis that contributes to criminological ethnography by exploring the intersections of victimization and Islamophobia in the UK. Martin-Anatias (2019) uses autoethnography as a means of challenging hegemonic constructions of the "good" Muslim woman. These are just a few examples of the diverse and creative analyses advanced by Muslim scholars using autoethnography.

Autoethnography requires vulnerability, candor, and a willingness to engage in critical reflexivity no matter how challenging it can become. In reaching back to the histories and lived realities of trauma, pain, and displacement (Javaid 2019), a researcher can uncover emotions of guilt, angst, and regret. Furthermore, Hamdan (2009) describes "the reflexivity of discomfort" where the researcher straddles the uncomfortable and potentially contradictory role of an insider-outsider, a researcher-community member. This is a difficult space (Zempi and Awan 2017), as a researcher delicately balances raising awareness about the injustices and challenges faced by the community but also enacting an ethics of care that demonstrates responsibility and respect for the community.

In this analysis, I reflect back on four poignant "autoethnographic moments" (Ku 2019) to understand my triple consciousness as a South Asian Ahmadi Muslim woman in Canada. I embark on this journey recognizing that temporality is at once fluid and fixed. My recollections and subsequent analyses are rooted in a liminal space between when they occurred and the space in which I presently exist, informed primarily by my criticality at this moment of writing. This analysis is premised on the notion that history, experience, and subjectivity are continuously under negotiation.

### 4. Autoethnographic Moments

#### 4.1. Research Assistantship with Muslim Communities Project

I have always loved school. After graduating with my undergraduate degree in elementary education, I knew that I did not want to be a classroom teacher. I was not done with being a student myself. Upon recommendation from a professor in the department, I applied and was admitted to a master's program in Educational Policy Studies. Right away, I was offered an opportunity to be a research assistant on a team working to better understand the needs of and challenges within diverse Muslim communities in our city. I felt so privileged to be part of such an important project working with a lead scholar in the field especially as I had just begun my graduate studies. I disclosed right away to the principal investigator that I was an Ahmadi Muslim and not only did I feel accepted but this

affiliation was seen as an asset to building stronger relationships between diverse Muslim communities. I worked for a few months on the project to conduct literature reviews, liaise with community leaders, and schedule consultations.

However, as the project evolved and we started working more directly with Muslim leaders and community members, fears began to set in. I began to feel the weight of the history of persecution of my community. My parents, who were so supportive of my pursuit of higher education, of research, and of academia, warned, “be careful”—a painful reminder of the traumatic experiences that they and other community members had experienced from some other Muslims. Even though there was no concrete threat, this reminder was enough for me to resign as a research assistant on the project. I had internalized fears of violence and persecution, deciding it best to step away rather than publicize myself at potential risk to myself and my family.

#### 4.2. *The Line between Public and Private: Poster Presentation at Academic Conference*

In my first semester of graduate studies, I was tasked with creating a research poster for our department’s research day based on a research question of our choice. When I went to my professor during office hours, entirely perplexed about where to start, she, a White woman, said, “Why don’t you research yourself and your community?” Never before had I been encouraged or felt like I had the option of doing research on Muslim women, on *hijab*, on my identity, or my community. My Muslimness and membership in the Ahmadiyya community had always been an integral part of my identity and yet I had always separated these aspects from my academic work (or so I thought in that moment).

I put my heart into preparing an academic poster using feminist theories to examine the blurred lines between the public and the private in the experiences of Muslim women who practice *hijab*. I presented this poster at a national education conference in Toronto, excited for the opportunity to share what was so personal to me at such a public platform. I was soon approached by a White woman professor who identified herself as a feminist and asked, “I just can’t understand, why do you women wear that thing? Why do you practice a religion that is so oppressive towards women? You’re here in Canada now”.

To her, being a feminist and being a Muslim woman were irreconcilable. To her, my brown skin and visible demonstration of Muslimness were irreconcilable with being a Canadian. In this one moment, I was simultaneously racialized as un-Canadian. Through White privilege, she could disembodify herself from her racialization, speak for the dominant public body, and make apparent my marginalities. I, however, was not afforded this same privilege. In this moment, I was made acutely aware that I was a racialized woman and that my body was marked by others in ways that are in conflict with how I mark myself.

#### 4.3. *I Am Not a Problem, I Am Canadian: My Master’s Thesis*

Expanding upon the research question formulated for my poster presentation, I constructed a master’s research project examining the experiences of Canadian-born Muslim women who practice *hijab* (Mian 2012). I was fascinated with the novelty and importance of working with other Muslim women like me, who were born and raised in Canada and chose to visibly identify themselves as Muslim through *hijab* in a sociopolitical climate that was so markedly anti-Muslim. I designed an anti-racist feminist narrative inquiry to explore the question, “what does it mean to “be Canadian” for Canadian-born Muslim women who practice *hijab*?” This master’s research was instrumental for me to find my voice as an academic, as a feminist, and as a Canadian Muslim woman. My supervisor, to whom I am grateful for her mentorship and friendship, was an ardent feminist scholar and community activist who pushed me to explore my feminism and supported me in ways that I had never been supported before academically.

Yet, although I worked so closely with the research participants, I do not recall disclosing that I was an Ahmadi Muslim or asking questions about intersecting differences within Islam. Although the women and I touched on many details of our personal lives throughout the course of our meetings, I recall feeling the need to keep my identity as an

Ahmadi Muslim private—another self-imposed restraint.<sup>13</sup> One of the participants, Amal,<sup>14</sup> was a Sudanese Muslim woman who spoke about being doubly discriminated against for being both Black and Muslim, but I did not probe that intersection with her much. The women disclosed that they found their Muslimness and Canadianness to be compatible but that this was not recognized in their day-to-day experiences, and that these perceptions contributed to a climate of racism in Canadian society. However, even in this analysis, I did not interrogate the exclusionary nature of “Canadianness”. Why all these analytical omissions?

#### 4.4. Targeted Anti-Muslim Racism

In early 2021, two colleagues and I published an article in *The Conversation* entitled “Canadian universities: 10 years of anti-racist reports but little action” (Delia Deckard et al. 2021). This piece stemmed from our advocacy work in a grassroots group of racialized students, faculty, and staff tackling anti-Black racism and other forms of racism on our campus. Shortly after its publication, the three of us received an email. The author of the email (whose name sounded very much like a White man), wrote, “I trust that you will join me in exposing and publicly condemning systemic racism, wherever it raises its ugly head” and went on to list unsubstantiated references to racism in seminal Islamic texts. Our piece in *The Conversation* spoke about anti-racism initiatives broadly. Yet, my colleagues and I inferred that because of my name and public profile picture with *hijab*, we had all received this email. In an email to my colleagues after the incident, I wrote,

I have to be honest, when I first read it and shared it with [my family], I was scared. As a woman, I have a lot of fears for my safety. As a Muslim woman, those fears grow exponentially. And as an Ahmadi Muslim woman, [ . . . ] it’s amazing that I even open my mouth publicly to speak much less put myself out there in some sort of public activist-y role. These fears are something that I struggle with every day.

These fears were too eerily reminiscent of the fears I had experienced eleven years earlier that prompted me to resign from my research assistantship. Even after all that time had passed, I remained rooted in intergenerational reproductions of fears and anxieties.

I realized that I needed to critically explore in what ways these intergenerational fears and anxieties around disclosure, restraint, and vocality impacted my work as a researcher and Ahmadi Muslim woman in Canada. In the next section, I unpack these multiple and complicated layers through an analysis of my triple consciousness as a South Asian Ahmadi Muslim woman in Canada.

### 5. The Triple Consciousness of an Ahmadi Muslim Woman in Canada

Triple consciousness is “a constant repositioning of identity that becomes an ongoing movement and shifting between at least three major focal points” (Ahmed 2008, p. 63). Engaging in this autoethnographic exercise has uncovered powerful lived experiences that explicate how my subjectivity is a result of multiple intersections of marginalization and resistance. I begin by questioning, why did I select these particular moments? What ties them together? These moments demonstrate the precarity and risk of being an Ahmadi Muslim and Pakistani/South Asian; an Ahmadi Muslim and Muslim; and, an Ahmadi Muslim and a woman in Canada. To mitigate that risk, I realize that I sought a broader identity, that of being Canadian, as a space of safety and security just as many decades earlier, Canadian citizenship brought my family a sense of peace and refuge. Yet, my present critical anti-racist lens has uncovered my previous lack of problematization of “Canadianness” and its complicated and torturous implications in settler colonialism and White heteropatriarchal supremacy. Understanding that the journey between the past, present, and future is non-linear and that subjectivities are always in process, I embark on this analysis of how I navigated “three souls, three thoughts, three un-reconciled strivings; three warring ideals in one dark body” (Flores 2005, p. 84).



### 5.1. Pakistani/South Asian in Canada

In the diaspora, I am officially categorized as “South Asian”.<sup>15</sup> When I complete the Canada Census or other institutional surveys, the only applicable category to identify my race is “South Asian”. My brown skin, my family’s Pakistani (and pre-Partition Indian) heritage, and other cultural markers of identity related to dress, food, and language identify me as “South Asian”. Yet, this is the same Pakistani heritage that did not allow my family and community to freely and without impunity practice their faith. It was this same nationality that declared my family as non-Muslims. As not worthy of state protections. As unrecognized, unsafe, and unwanted. Why would I want to wear this label? Why would I choose to purposely identify with a heritage that pushed my ancestors to the margins and eventually out of the margins? In this tension, I experience the Du Boisian veil that “prevents the full recognition of the humanity of racialized groups” (Itzigsohn and Brown 2015, p. 237) and considers those that live behind and beyond the veil to be invisible and inhuman. The upholding of the blasphemy laws to this day legitimizes the continuation of state-sanctioned exclusion, an extension of the postcolonial project seeking to protect the interests of the core Self by denigrating the Other. Considering the hostility and violence with which my family and other community members were dispossessed from Pakistan, I continue to debate public disclosure of my Ahmadi identity in South Asian spaces, fearing similar sentiments are deeply embedded in diasporic South Asian mindsets. This is just one of the ways that intergenerational legacies and anxieties surrounding South Asian religious politics in the diaspora (Nijhawan 2016) shape my politics as a feminist, educator, and researcher.

Furthermore, the questioning and misrecognition of my Canadianness, although I am a Canadian citizen by birth, reveals an element of “twoness” within my body. In the instances of the professor accosting me at the conference or the racist email in response to my article, it is apparent that when they see my racialized body, I am not “Canadian”. When I see myself “through the eyes of others” (Du Bois [1903] 2007, p. 8), I realize that the “colour line” has been very clearly drawn to demarcate the separation between my body and the White Eurocentric body. Yet, what surprises me upon reflection is my keenness during my master’s study to want to (re)claim that label of “Canadian”. I sincerely wanted to explore how Muslim women converge their Muslimness and Canadianness. I sincerely engaged in that analysis without critical probing of the problematics of “Canadianness” as an exclusionary ideal founded on settler colonialism, Eurocentric Whiteness, and the marginalization of “visible minorities”. As an Other, I was attempting to mimic the Self. This is indicative of Du Bois’ tension of “twoness” in which the racialized body tries to reconcile the contradictory elements of the brown and White worlds. My desire to demonstrate my Canadianness was also indicative of an internationalization of gratitude to the nation that continued to provide refuge to my community. In other words, my reclamation of the label “Canadian” was encouraged through my socialization as an Ahmadi Muslim growing up in Canada. Ahmadi youth have described this as “being taught to be grateful and to reciprocate everything given [ . . . ] with loyalty and submission” (Nijhawan 2016, p. 239). My trajectory paralleled that of Abdel-Fattah (2017, p. 399):

In the Self-Other dialectic relationship in a society based on white normativity and domination, I fell into the trap of seeking liberation through recognition, what Fanon speaks about in terms of the dialectics of recognition, whereby racialised people are caught up in a logic that props up the white majority as the standard of human value.

I realize that one of the ways in which I was socialized towards a proximity to Whiteness or Canadianness was through the attainment of higher education. My parents, highly educated professionals, encouraged me to do the same as for racialized immigrants, continued upward mobility through higher education and careers in professional sectors provides necessary multilayered security, not only in the material and financial sense but also in the symbolic and ontological sense, a security that could potentially transgress and transcend the fears and anxieties around persecution as an Ahmadi Muslim.

Triple consciousness encourages an articulation of existence at nodes of ambivalent subjectivity and provides the introspection required to diverge from the desire to define myself in accordance with internalized images of White Eurocentric subjectivities, instead reworking those definitions to compliment my specific threeness. This is an ongoing project, no doubt.

## 5.2. Ahmadi Muslim in the Diaspora

In the diasporic context, I am racialized as Muslim, not Ahmadi Muslim, as Canadians are generally unfamiliar with the Ahmadiyya community and the vast differences in beliefs and practices within the Muslim *ummah*. When I am targeted at an academic conference or through a racist email, this is because I am seen as “the Muslimwoman” (Cooke 2007) in the diaspora. Associated with that label is the drawing of “the colour line” between Muslims and non-Muslims, or Canadians. Correspondingly, the boundaries of who constitutes a Muslim and non-Muslim are also clearly demarcated through state-sanctioned exclusion in Pakistan which declares Ahmadis as non-Muslim. This construction is rooted in theological distinctions created by the state and fuelled through populist support. Again, a line is firmly drawn to demarcate the boundaries between Muslim and non-Muslim. Upon reflection of these various lines and boundaries, I realize that I exist in the overlaps, liminalities, and ambivalences between these labels, constantly navigating misrecognition of my Self by others.

This veil that defines the boundaries between Self and Other has fundamental consequences on the diasporic subject. So deeply internalized were the intergenerational fears of persecution (Nijhawan 2016) that they significantly affected my comfort with working with local Muslim communities who had expressed only warmth and welcome towards me. This self-imposed restraint is reflective of intergenerational anxieties for Ahmadi youth, or “residues of intergenerational trauma [that] are felt emotionally and subsequently actioned” (Botterill et al. 2020, p. 1147), actioned through difficult decisions around dualities of restraint and vocality, privacy, and advocacy. In describing the twoness of a subject, Du Bois ([1903] 2007) articulates the tensions of the duality of oppression and agency within the subject. I want to speak out about my community. I want to be active in challenging anti-Muslim and anti-Ahmadi sentiments. This resistance is rooted in my very subjectivity. Yet, when I speak out, resist, and challenge, the fears become too real. I wrote to my colleagues after receiving the racist email:

For already precarious communities, when you speak out as an individual, you’re sort of put into this even more precarious position that, in a sense, you can be accused of bringing onto yourself (which I have been accused of before too—why bring all this attention to yourself?).

This is the internal struggle between balancing responsibilities towards our communities and responsibilities to ourselves, between speaking out publicly to challenge injustices and voluntarily putting ourselves into risky positions.

Researchers have only begun to examine the complicated intergenerational effects of trauma and dispossession on Ahmadi youth in the diaspora (Botterill et al. 2020; Mohammad 2018; Nijhawan 2016). Nijhawan (2016, p. 238) explores these tensions in the subjectivities of Ahmadi youth in Canada, who “while trying to make sense of their otherness as Ahmadi Muslims and racialized subjects in the Canadian context, . . . are simultaneously confronted by the sense of heretic otherness that pervades Muslim diasporic politics”. This precaritization of religious minority status in the diaspora and the resultant intergenerational anxieties are reflective of “postmemory,” which “describes the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that are nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right” (Hirsch, as cited in Nijhawan 2016, p. 244). Botterill et al.’s (2020, p. 1139) study, which included Ahmadi youth in Scotland, investigated families as sites of ontological security and intergenerational geopolitics, suggesting that “parental experience of racism, violence and trauma generate a strong sense of justice among young

people and a commitment to political engagement”. For myself and other generations of Ahmadi Muslims in the diaspora, our shared history is inescapable and a foundational part of our triple consciousness. It shapes distinctions between how we see ourselves and how others see us, it shapes our agency and decision making, and ultimately it shapes our ongoing connections with our community in the diaspora (Mohammad 2018), a means of finding security despite the precarity of our subjectivities.

### 5.3. *Woman in a Heteropatriarchal Society*

In the diasporic context, key to an intersectional analysis of Ahmadi Muslim women’s subjectivities is an exploration of the impact of structures of White heteropatriarchy. Gender is the line that intersects with all other markers of social identity and areas of consciousness, informing a particular experience for women that are racialized and multiply Othered. Muslim women in the diaspora continue to be caught in the liberal dichotomy of “secular individualism-feminism-state versus pious woman-community” (Jamal 2015, p. 56), which separates a woman’s religious subjectivity from her everyday sociopolitical subjectivity. This demarcation is severely lacking in its attention to the challenges and contradictions faced by post-modern religious subjects in the diaspora whose subjectivities are much more fluid, messy, and contradictory than these hegemonic discourses would have us believe.

Most notably, a gendered analysis is required to understand divergences within feminisms and how these divergences shape individual subjectivities and agencies. When I was targeted by the professor, a self-proclaimed feminist, for practicing my religion in Canada, she felt emboldened to neglect and supersede my feminism with her White liberal Eurocentric construction of feminism. Although the “twoness” or duality of oppression and agency prevented me from articulating a response in that moment, I have since used this event in my research, reflexivity, and activism. This reflects how Muslim women, whose “ambivalent positioning within religion, society and politics, and family and nation” is fraught with contradictions, are subverting these contradictions into powerful possibilities for appropriation and assertion (Jamal 2006, p. 283), particularly through a reclamation of “diasporic agency” inspired by faith and community (Ahmed-Ghosh 2004).

Ahmed-Ghosh (2004, p. 77) questions, “is it possible to combine a sense of the spiritual with feminist sensibilities?” particularly “given the inevitability of patriarchy” in all institutions, structures, and societies. Through her research with Ahmadi women in Southern California, Ahmed-Ghosh (2004, p. 77) found that complacency with gender hierarchies in belief systems “may provide the emotional, spiritual and material sustenance that these women are seeking in their attempt to cope with alienation in North America”. For many Ahmadi women, who are doubly persecuted (Noor 2015; Sultana et al. 2015) as targets of systemic heteropatriarchal and religious discrimination, “their religious affiliation is their only recourse and resort in times of need” (Ahmed-Ghosh 2004, p. 88). Paradoxically, the proclamation that Ahmadi Muslims are not Muslim has led to a community-wide loyalty and devotion in the diaspora rooted in unity, support, and sisterhood.

My supervisor, another ardent feminist scholar and community activist, responded to the racist email writing, “Ayesha, use this as part of your research”. I may not have taken this up in this way were it not for my supervisor’s advice. Feminist resistance is rooted in the notion of community (Collins 2010), and it is so necessary for feminists to engage in a “more collaborative feminist praxis” which strategically integrates multiple intersections of identities and builds strategies and solidarities for political resistance (Zine 2006, p. 21). This will contribute to a more robust and authentic understanding of the lived experiences of diverse Muslim women in the diaspora.

## 6. Strivings

Du Bois ([1903] 2007, p. 7) writes, “being a problem is a strange experience,—peculiar even for one who has never been anything else”. I feel privileged to have the opportunity to embark on this analysis of the impact of politico-religious persecution on my subjectivity as an Ahmadi Muslim woman in the diaspora. I know that it has taken me too long to write

on this topic. In speaking about internalized Islamophobia, [Abdel-Fattah \(2017, p. 399\)](#) writes: “This is hard stuff to write. [ . . . ] It is hard because internal oppression is like a tightly woven ball of string and so it seems next to impossible to detangle your own agency, if any, from a reactive politics”. It is hard, but also necessary work that I approach with the utmost humility and gratitude.

To develop a more acute awareness of multiplicities of subjectivities and their various complexities, within and across racialized groups, it is necessary to continue to engage in these autoethnographic exercises that connect the personal, the sociopolitical, and the community. This is how we work towards justice for our communities and for one another’s communities. What is required is more research, more action, and more compassion. I look forward to doing this work together.

**Funding:** Ayesha Mian Akram is supported in part by funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

**Acknowledgments:** First: I am grateful to my Creator. Second, I am indebted to the Ahmadiyya Muslim community and the sacrifices of my family and community members. Third, I am grateful to Amina Jamal and Kayla Wheeler for co-editing this Special Issue that forges an academic space to foreground multiple and varied ways of being Muslim women. Finally, I am grateful to my amazing supervisors, the late Donna Chovanec and Jane Ku, for their determined and unwavering feminist mentorship and guidance.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> A detailed exposition of the beliefs of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community can be found on the community’s official website at [www.alislam.org](http://www.alislam.org) (accessed on 22 May 2022).
- <sup>2</sup> Mirza Ghulam Ahmad founded the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community in 1889. See “The Promised Messiah: A Prophet to Unite Mankind in the Latter Days,” <http://www.alislam.org/topics/messiah/index.php> (accessed on 22 May 2022).
- <sup>3</sup> In *The Essence of Islam, Volume IV*, [Ahmad \(2006, p. 31\)](#) writes that as a *Mujaddid*, “The purpose was that I should re-establish the faith which had disappeared from the earth, and pull mankind towards reform and righteousness and truthfulness through the power and strength that God had bestowed upon me and through the magnetic power of His hand. I was also destined to correct their doctrinal errors and to reform their conduct.”
- <sup>4</sup> For a detailed exposition on the distinction between Ahmadi Muslim beliefs and those of other Muslim group’s beliefs, see [Qadir \(2015\)](#).
- <sup>5</sup> Ahmadi Muslims are not the only community to experience State-sanctioned exclusion in Pakistan. Other communities include the Shiite, Sufis, Christians, and Hindus (see [Rashid 2011](#)).
- <sup>6</sup> Exact statistics on the number of Ahmadi Muslims who migrated from Pakistan to escape persecution are difficult to find ([Ahmed-Ghosh 2004](#)). This difficulty may be due to concerns around disclosure, anonymity, and safety. [Human Rights Watch \(2020\)](#) estimates that there are about 4 million Ahmadis still in Pakistan.
- <sup>7</sup> It is important to note that this targeting of the Ahmadiyya Community is not unique to Pakistan. It is a South Asian sentiment rooted in pre-Partition India and spread to proximal countries such as Bangladesh, India, and Malaysia. The state-led persecution of Ahmadis in Indonesia is particularly distressing ([Marshall 2018](#)) although notably countered through Indonesian Ahmadi women’s activism ([Inasshabihah 2020](#); [Noor 2015](#)).
- <sup>8</sup> Despite (or perhaps due to) persecution faced in many parts of the world, the community’s “perpetual ‘homelessness’ transcends boundaries, and it is only through their faith that [Ahmadis] believe they can locate themselves globally as a community with history and continuity” ([Ahmed-Ghosh 2004, p. 74](#)).
- <sup>9</sup> [Goldberg \(2015, p. 44\)](#) argues that our society is postracial, which does not mean that we are “beyond race,” but rather that “the postracial has made race almost unrecognizably part of the ‘natural’ fabric of the social and the social fabric of the natural order of things”. As a product of colorblindness in pluralistic societies, the postracial has produced a paradoxical reality: “its racial erasures are coterminous with new *intensities* in racist expression” ([Goldberg 2015, p. 127](#), emphasis in original). These new intensities entitle people to say anything they want about other religions ([Goldberg 2015, p. 80](#)).
- <sup>10</sup> For example, Bill 21 (“An Act respecting the laicity of the State”) was enacted in Québec in June 2019. By appealing to human rights and equality between the sexes, Bill 21 restricts public employees in authority positions from wearing any religious symbols. Although there is no provided list of what constitutes a “religious symbol,” there is direct reference to the uncovering of faces, which implies a Muslim woman’s practice of niqab. So although the vague language of the Bill attempts to demonstrate a



non-targeting of a particular population, Bill 21 is a primary example by which Muslim women are required to sacrifice their religious beliefs and practices for the sake of the moral ethos of society.

- 11 I am indebted to the scholarship of seminal Black and Black feminist scholars for their theories that conceptualize and explicate the experiences of multiply marginalized communities. As Abdel-Fattah (2017, p. 400) cautions, “there are dangers in simply transposing black theory onto a collective ‘Muslim’ experience”. I am acutely cognizant of the convergences and divergences between Black Muslim and South Asian Muslim experiences in the diaspora (Massa 2020; Mugabo 2016) as well as problematic racial hierarchies in Muslim communities and use these analytical tools with the utmost respect and gratitude.
- 12 The question of intra-community oppression and complicity in the maintenance of racial hierarchies is an important and complicated one. Black Muslims in particular face layers of intersecting racisms, even within Muslim communities (Massa 2020; Mugabo 2016). Mugabo (2016, p. 165) writes, “Black people, Muslim or not, are always already cast outside the categories of the human and the citizen” (Mugabo 2016, p. 165), and we must be mindful of the reality of such problematic set of relations, particularly when considering the important work of challenging racial hierarchies in Muslim communities.
- 13 My master’s project comprised of working firsthand with seven women over the course of several months. Data sources included written reflections, individual interviews, and a focus group conversation (Mian Akram 2018). Although my fieldwork was extensive for a Master’s thesis, I still had difficult analytical decisions to make around what to include and exclude from my thesis. For the purpose of this paper, it is necessary for me to reflect on why I did not disclose my Ahmadi identity to the participants even as we shared many personal details over the course of working together.
- 14 This is the pseudonym given to Amal in my Master’s research.
- 15 South Asian countries include Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.

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