

From Victimhood to Mobilization: Stories of Muslim Women Activists in London, Ontario

Responding to The Afzaal Family Murders

By

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Abstract

This thesis explores the complex responses of seven Muslim women activists in London, Ontario, following the tragic Afzaal family murders. Employing a feminist-centered methodology, the study utilizes storytelling and qualitative interviews to probe the emotional and social impacts on the Muslim community in the wake of this terrorist attack. The research highlights how these women, engaged in various fields including non-profit work, campus activities, the arts, and youth initiatives, exhibit resilience and agency. Active listening and empathetic engagement, emphasizing "story-listening," are key methods in this study that align with progressive anti-colonial research practices. The study identifies three critical themes: Reclaiming Voices, where the activists take control of their narratives, assert their rights to tell their stories authentically and on their own terms; Navigating Ongoing Trauma, acknowledging the persistent effects of Islamophobia as a continual reality in their lives; and Collective Care and Community Building, underscoring their involvement in a broader support and solidarity network. These themes illuminate how the women move beyond a narrative of victimhood, positioning themselves as proactive agents in community healing and change. The findings challenge the conventional damage-centric narrative prevalent in research about Muslim women, focusing instead on their dynamic roles in fostering community resilience and activism. This research advocates for a shift in future studies from merely documenting suffering to a broader analysis of social and historical contexts. The activism strategies of these women provide insights into coping and resistance, challenging traditional narratives in feminist and decolonial research. This study significantly contributes to our understanding of the unique challenges faced by Muslim women activists, celebrating their strength, agency, and crucial role in community transformation.

Keywords: Storytelling, Afzaal family, Gendered Islamophobia, Antiracism, Decolonial Feminism, Desire-centered Research

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Dedication

For Madiha Salman,
A mother's dream carried across seas,
To Madiha, whose hopes live on in these pages,
In a quest for brighter tomorrows.
For you, for me, for us.

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Chapter One: Introduction

The idea of place, where we belong, is a constant subject for many of us. We want to know whether it is possible to live on the earth peacefully. Is it possible to sustain life? Can we embrace an ethos of sustainability that is not solely about the appropriate care of the world's resources but is also about the creation of meaning — the making of lives that we feel are worth living.

bell hooks, 2008, p.1, *Belonging: A Culture of Place*

1.1 Our London Family¹

In the tranquil summer of 2021, a year deep into the COVID-19 pandemic, a simple, unifying ritual had woven itself into the fabric of Canadian life: the evening walk. Families across the country, eager to breathe in the fresh air and relish a moment of togetherness, took to the streets in the fading light of day. Among these families was the Afzaal family, residing in the heart of London, Ontario. They were a close-knit family of Pakistani Muslim descent: Yumnah Afzaal, just 15, her parents Madiha Salman, 44, a PhD candidate in environmental engineering, and Salman Afzaal, 46, a physiotherapist, and Talat Afzaal, 74, the family matriarch, teacher, and artist, and the youngest, nine-year-old Fayez. The mother and grandmother, wearing hijabs, were visible symbols of their cherished Pakistani Muslim heritage.

This peaceful routine was shattered on a fateful evening when Nathaniel Veltman, 20, a white man harbouring deep-seated Islamophobic beliefs, intentionally rammed his truck into the Afzaal family. This heinous act, fueled by hatred and intolerance, snatched away the lives of Yumna, Madiha, Talat, and Salman, leaving behind only young Fayez,

¹ “Our London Family” refers to the Afzaal family murders that took place in London, Ontario, Canada, in June 2021. The tragedy was a stark reminder of Islamophobia and prompted nationwide grief, vigils, and calls for action against hate crimes in Canada. The phrase “Our London Family” became a rallying cry for unity and solidarity with the Muslim community in the aftermath of the attack.

grievously injured and orphaned. The police, recognizing the gravity and targeted nature of this crime, classified it as an Islamophobic hate crime (CBC News, 2021). Subsequent investigations in 2022 revealed a darker underbelly to this tragedy: Veltman had stored hate-related material on a personal device, and it appeared he might have been influenced by white supremacist content lurking in the shadows of the dark web (CP24, 2022).

Time marched to February 22, 2024, in a London, Ontario courtroom filled with solemn anticipation, Superior Court Justice Renee Pomerance pronounced a verdict in the Afzaal family murders case; a landmark decision in Canadian legal history. Her firm and resonant voice captured the gravity of the moment: “One might go so far as to characterize this as a textbook example of terrorist motive and intent... By not referring to the offender by name, and not restating his views, I am trying to reduce the potential use of these proceedings as a platform for the ideology that spawned the violent acts of June 6, 2021” (Dubinski & Fitzpatrick, 2024).

In this deeply charged atmosphere, The remaining member, Fayez, the nine-year old boy at the time of the attack, suffered an unimaginable loss—the murder of his parents, sister, and grandmother—in this targeted anti-Muslim hate crime and attack. His life has been irreversibly altered since that tragic day, June 6, 2021. The statement of the now-11-year-old, delivered in court by a relative amidst the support of other family members during the second day of sentencing for Nathaniel Veltman, revealed the depth of his suffering. He recounted enduring physical injuries such as a broken leg and collarbone, undergoing multiple surgeries, and the challenging journey of relearning to walk. He also spoke of the emotional pain of leaving the family home where he had grown up since he was three. He mournfully remembered the loss of family meals, cherished dishes like his mother's

cooking, his father's butter chicken, his sister's pasta, and his grandmother's potato wedges—comforts that are now irrevocably gone (LeBel, 2024a).

Justice Pomerance, in her ruling, remarked, “The offender is a self-described white nationalist and Christian. ... He hoped to inspire others and instill fear in the Muslim community” (LeBel, 2024b). These impactful words from Justice Pomerance set a legal precedent in the fight against Islamophobia and white supremacist groups in Canada (Dubinski & Fitzpatrick, 2024).

Amira Elghawaby, Canada’s Special Representative on Combatting Islamophobia, underscored the significance of this ruling, saying, "This designation adds to the perpetrator’s previous murder convictions and marks the first time in Canadian history that a case involving white nationalism has met the threshold of terrorism" (Elghawaby, 2024). The Afzaal family murders represented the most severe attack on Canadian Muslims since the 2017 Quebec City Mosque shooting, which resulted in six fatalities (Aljazeera, 2024). In response, the National Council of Canadian Muslims (NCCM) initiated the “Our London Family” campaign, challenging the notion of Muslims as outsiders and integrating them as essential members of the national community (NCCM, 2021b). The term "our" in this context emphasizes belonging and collective identity, framing the attacks as an assault against a shared family (Jiwani, 2022, p. 7).

The murders had a profound impact not only on the local Muslim community in London but also nationwide. Muslim communities across Canada were deeply disturbed, their sense of safety shattered, and their faith in Canada's proclaimed image as a supportive multicultural country was called into question. The incident, soon termed the 'London

Attack' in mainstream media, highlighted the stark reality that Islamophobia is a significant issue in Canada, just as it is in other parts of the globe (Farokhi, 2021; Jiwani, 2022, p.1).



A solidarity graphic representing the Afzaal family includes a green ribbon symbolizing the fight against Islamophobia and a purple ribbon honoring Yumna Afzaal's favorite color.

1.2 London, Ontario: A City of Diversity and Challenges

This study examines the daily experiences and responses of seven Muslim women activists in London, Ontario, following the Afzaal family murders. London, situated at the Forks of the Thames River, boasts a rich tapestry of history and cultural diversity. The city's story, spanning over 10,000 years, has been shaped by its Indigenous inhabitants, including the Anishnaabeg, Haudenosaunee, and Lenni-Lenape Nations. However, London's history and contemporary narrative are not confined to its Indigenous roots; they also encompass the varied experiences and challenges of diverse marginalized groups.

London, Ontario is a moderately-sized region known for its advanced and esteemed healthcare services and facilities, outstanding higher education and research institutions, and a variety of industries. Additionally, it provides the benefits typical of smaller communities, including cost-effective living, brief commuting times within the region, and ample opportunities for outdoor activities and enjoyment of natural surroundings (City of London, n.d.).

A recent report (Vaswani, 2023) highlights local incidents in London, ON have brought to light the harsh reality of discrimination faced by marginalized groups. An Indigenous woman's experience of having her Indian status card refused at a retail store, and a man facing overt racism from a police officer are stark reminders of the everyday challenges faced by Indigenous peoples. Another incident involved a visible marginalized man being wrongfully accused of being in the country (p.11). The Black community in London, ON has also faced its share of discrimination. Instances of racial slurs being hurled in public and in academic settings have been reported, along with disruptions of cultural club meetings with anti-Black messages. The public space, too, has not been immune to such incidents, with visible and religious communities being targets of racial abuse and property damage (Vaswani, 2023).

Amidst these challenges, an oral history project initiated in October 2021 has been making strides to capture and celebrate the stories of London's Black community, particularly in the SoHo neighbourhood. Spearheaded by Vision SoHo Alliance and Western University's public history program, this project is addressing the gap in recorded history from the 1870s to the 1980s, as noted by Professor Michelle Hamilton. The project is collecting oral histories not just from the SoHo area but also from those who have connections to the local hospital and medical school that once thrived in the neighbourhood (Rombouts, 2022). Western University, too, has acknowledged racism within its walls, with a significant portion of undergraduate students and faculty members reporting experiences of racism. This included prejudice against Black, Indigenous, Jewish, Muslim, and international students, revealing a multifaceted issue encompassing various forms of discrimination (Western University's Anti-Racism Working Group, 2020).

These dynamics within London, Ontario, provide a crucial context for understanding the environment in which the Muslim women activists in this study operate. Their experiences, responses, and activism are interwoven with the city's broader narrative of diversity, and challenges.

1.3 Mapping the impact and response in the community²

The significance of mapping the community's response to Islamophobia in London, Ontario, particularly in the wake of the Hyde Park³tragedy, cannot be understated. This approach sheds light on a range of local and national efforts tackling this pressing issue, illustrating a collective commitment to change and resilience. In the context of the Afzaal family murders, "collective" underscores the unity and shared purpose of the Muslim community, shaped by global imperialism and reactionary ideologies that influence how Muslim Canadians perceive themselves. For those identifying as Muslim in Canada, especially those who grew up post-9/11, their sense of identity and purpose is inseparable from the global power dynamics that have shaped their communal experiences. Navigating between the timeless principles of Islam and external influences, this collective identity embodies the adaptability and fluidity inherent in Islamic teachings, which have evolved through ongoing interpretations to suit shifting

² To better understand the local community's response to Islamophobia, I leveraged my journalism connections to engage with key stakeholders in London, Ontario and the federal government. This included discussions with Amira Elghawaby, Canada's Special Representative on Combatting Islamophobia, and Ahmer Khan, the Muslim Community Liaison Advisor for the City of London. Their insights, along with those from various community organization representatives, were instrumental in mapping the community responses effectively.

³ The location of the Afzaal family murders is at the intersection of Hyde Park Road and South Carriage Road. This area has since become the site of the "Our London Family Vigil Mural". In memory of the Afzaal family, the City of London erected a memorial at this location, specifically at the southwest corner of Hyde Park and South Carriage roads. This memorial plaza is notable for its hexagon paver surface, a design choice inspired by Islamic art. The hexagon is commonly used in Islamic designs to symbolize infinity and harmony, achieved through its symmetrical shape. (Source: <https://www.aliermanla.ca/hyde-park-road-memorial>)

cultural, geographic, and temporal contexts. Thus, the collective identity of Muslim Canadians highlights how faith and identity are deeply intertwined with political and social narratives as individuals adapt to their lives within contemporary global structures (Zine, 2022b, p. 39).

Although the term “resilience” has been rightfully questioned by critical scholars within this context it is used to reflect participant capacity to adapt and recover despite challenges, showcasing the community's strength in overcoming adversity (Smyth & Sweetman, 2015, p. 406). By mapping the community's response and sharing the stories of Muslim women activists in London, Ontario, we can better understand Islamophobia as a system of oppression, build the knowledge and tools to dismantle it, and create new anti-racist and decolonial legacies for future generations.

London, home to an estimated 33,000 to 35,000 Muslims, witnessed an escalation in anti-Muslim racism in the Hyde Park area, where the murders of the Afzaal family happened on June 6, 2021 (Livingstone, 2022, p.3). In the wake of these murders, a 2021 report by the London & Middlesex Local Immigration Partnership revealed an alarming increase in anti-Muslim racism, particularly targeting hijab-wearing women. This rise in hostility was further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (M. Vaswani & Esses, 2021). This context provides the broader narrative bridging individual experiences with collective community responses.

Various organizations have responded to the urgent need for action against Islamophobia. The National Council of Canadian Muslims (NCCM), for example, initiated a significant effort by convening the National Action Summit on Islamophobia on July 22, 2021. The primary purpose of the recommendations by the NCCM at the National Summit

on Islamophobia was to address and combat the rising tide of Islamophobia in Canada. This need was underscored by the Afzaal family murders, which highlighted the urgent requirement to tackle Islamophobia on a national scale. The summit emphasized the necessity for all three levels of government to actively engage in resolving the challenges posed by Islamophobia. It advocated for the establishment of an Emergency National Action Summit on Islamophobia, uniting representatives from all government levels, to ensure the implementation of effective and binding policy changes (NCCM, 2021a). This summit provided a platform for political advocacy, leading to the development of 61 policy recommendations. It showcased a proactive approach to achieving legislative change. These recommendations cover a broad range of actions, including the implementation of street harassment bylaws, allocating funding for local anti-Islamophobia initiatives, forming Anti-Islamophobia Advisory Councils, investing in public awareness campaigns, and recognizing the historical contributions of Canadian Muslims. A key focus is redirecting funds toward non-policing forms of community support and establishing training programs for young Muslims.

The formation and strategy of the Anti-Islamophobia Working Group are particularly noteworthy. According to a report published by the City of London after the Afzaal family murders, the community-centric approach is key to tackling Islamophobia effectively. This approach signifies a move away from immediate, reactive measures toward the development of long-term, sustainable strategies. It underscores the importance of collaborative efforts across various sectors in the fight against Islamophobia (Livingstone, 2022).

Another vital player is the Muslim Resource Centre for Social Support and Integration (MRCSSI). MRCSSI's crucial role in providing guidance and resources to a range of community-based and public sector organizations. Their focus on training service providers and public sector workers about the root causes and impacts of Islamophobia, underpinned by trauma-informed approaches, makes MRCSSI a key resource in addressing and mitigating Islamophobia through culturally integrative solutions. These solutions focus on fostering greater awareness and understanding of cultural differences, which are instrumental in diminishing stereotypes, biases, and prejudices linked to Islamophobia. An example of MRCSSI's initiatives is the "Creating a Safe Environment for Muslim Women and Girls" project. This project aims to bolster capacities for addressing gender-based violence (GBV) and enhancing safety for women and girls. It involves developing training curricula, training community champions, and collaborating with Muslim community institutions and leadership.

Furthermore, the narrative of resistance finds a vibrant chapter in the Youth Coalition Combating Islamophobia (YCCI). This group stands as a beacon of youth activism, embodying the vital role younger generations play in this journey toward understanding and change. With their "Youth Educating Youth" model, they bring a fresh, influential perspective to the fight against Islamophobia. YCCI's initiatives, ranging from organizing dynamic workshops to hosting community events and crafting informative educational materials, are more than just activities; they are the heartbeats of a movement committed to lighting the path towards awareness and inclusivity.

In the wake of the tragic Afzaal family murders, university campuses emerged as crucial arenas for activism and awareness. At the heart of this movement were student

groups, exemplifying the power of youth leadership in challenging times. Organizations like The Muslim Students Association (MSA) and the Muslim Law Students Association (MLSA) at Western University stood at the forefront of this response. They took the lead in organizing a series of impactful events and initiatives aimed at amplifying the conversation around the dangers of hate crimes. These events informed students and urged the university administration to recognize the severity of the situation and to take meaningful action. Through these efforts, these student groups not only provided a platform for dialogue and education but also showcased the influential role that young voices play in shaping a more inclusive and aware academic community.

In addition, mosques and various organizations across the community have come together, orchestrating numerous events in their honor. These events, spearheaded by institutions like the London Muslim Mosque, Muslim Association of Canada (MAC), and Muslim Wellness Centre, among others, serve a dual purpose. Firstly, they act as beacons of healing, providing spaces for communal grieving and recovery. Secondly, they reinforce a support network, which is crucial for addressing the broader impacts of such a tragedy. These gatherings and initiatives reflect the community's resilience and its commitment to stand together, offering solidarity and support to those affected and continuing the journey towards healing and unity. Mapping these diverse responses is crucial for understanding the multifaceted nature of the community's fight against Islamophobia. It highlights the collective efforts of various groups and organizations. This mapping process serves as an insightful instrument, not only in showcasing the community's resilience and strength but also in identifying gaps in current efforts.



Image 1: Artwork at the Our London Family Memorial Plaza Captures the Silhouette of the Afzaal Family - Photos by Travis Dolynny, CBC

1.4 My Self: Personal is Political

Connecting with the community's collective response, I draw on my experiences as a journalist, activist, and immigrant Muslim woman of color to shape this study of the Afzaal family murders. The transition from the wider community response to my personal story mirrors the transition from a public to a private sphere, illustrating how large-scale events like the Afzaal family murders resonate on an individual level. The news alerts on June 6, 2021, were not just headlines for me; they echoed my deepest fears and vulnerabilities, serving as a chilling reminder of the pervasive threat of hate and intolerance.

This attack, occurring in the country I chose for its promise of safety and tolerance, struck a profoundly personal chord. It reverberated through my experiences as an immigrant fleeing Egypt in 2017, where as a journalist and activist, I faced escalating attacks and suppression. The traumatic raid on my office in Cairo by armed security forces was a defining moment, ending my work there and propelling my move to Canada (Amnesty International, 2015). I arrived, hoping for peace and freedom to continue my work without fear. Yet, the London attack was a brutal reminder that the specter of hate and intolerance knows no borders.

I was particularly moved by the story of Madiha Salman. Her journey as an immigrant paralleled mine; she was not just a subject of my professional observation but a kindred spirit. Madiha, working towards her Ph.D. in environmental engineering at Western University, embodied the drive and dedication of immigrants contributing to their new home. The loss of such a promising individual highlights the profound tragedy that struck the Afzaal family. In June 2021, Western University posthumously awarded Madiha her doctorate, an honor that, while recognizing her academic achievements, also poignantly underscored the dreams and potential cruelly halted (CTVNewsLondon, 2021). Madiha's story, reflecting the struggles and aspirations of many immigrants, resonated deeply with me as a Muslim mother. Her tragic murder struck a personal chord, highlighting how her dream of building a better life was cut short, leaving her son alone and vulnerable. Her fate serves as a poignant reminder of the vulnerability faced by mothers and families, while also underscoring the cruel impact of hate crimes on those who leave their homelands seeking safety and new opportunities. The story intertwines professional and personal elements, emphasizing the profound impact of Islamophobia.

Professionally, these murders resonated deeply, transcending the realm of mere news reporting. It demanded a deeper exploration, going beyond the headlines to uncover the underlying narratives. This tragedy was not an isolated act of violence but part of a broader pattern of Islamophobia, including incidents like the Quebec Mosque attack of 2017. As a journalist, I felt compelled to delve deeper to tell the stories that capture the lived experiences of communities, including my own.

Reflecting on the attack, I confronted the reality that my hijab, a symbol of my faith and identity, marked me as a potential target for hate. The fear that engulfed me extended beyond personal safety to concerns for my children, highlighting the constant negotiation of identity faced by many Muslim women in Canada. The tragedy ignited a renewed professional drive. I realized the critical importance of giving a voice to those affected by such hate crimes. In my role as a journalist and scholar, I had the responsibility to illuminate these issues, to tell the stories of those living in the shadow of hate, and to contribute to a narrative that fosters understanding and empathy. Focusing on the stories of Muslim women in Canada, I explored how Islamophobia shapes their lives. These stories were reflections of my own fears and struggles, infusing my journalistic journey with deep personal relevance and impact.

Thus, the London attack marked a crucial personal and professional turning point. It reinforced my dedication to using journalism and research as a tool for advocacy and change. It also served as a poignant reminder of the continuous fight against hate and intolerance, even in a nation celebrated for its diversity and inclusivity. My story, interwoven with the stories I share in this thesis, continues as a narrative of resilience,

understanding, and relentless pursuit of a society that not only tolerates but embraces diversity.

1.5 Canadian Muslim Women: Identity and Sense of Belonging

In London, Ontario, the Muslim community—a vibrant mosaic of diverse backgrounds—faces significant challenges in establishing their identity and sense of belonging. This thesis zeroes in on Muslim women activists, whose experiences provide a unique lens to explore these themes within the broader Canadian context, which is characterized by Islamophobia and the lingering effects of pivotal historical events like 9/11 and domestic legislative changes. The Muslim community in Canada, comprising over a million individuals, is predominantly youthful and urban. This demographic, particularly those who have grown up post-9/11 amidst widespread Islamophobia, navigates complex identity formations influenced by global conflicts in Muslim-majority countries and the tension between traditional Islamic beliefs and contemporary Canadian values. Such tensions often result in feelings of isolation and misunderstanding, with their internal conflicts intensified by global religious disputes (Jamal et al., 2022). Moreover, the pervasive atmosphere of Islamophobia has recast young Muslims as potential threats in Western societies, exacerbating their identity crises and feelings of alienation (Bakali, 2022).

This research emphasizes the critical role of Muslim women activists in navigating and challenging this identity and belonging complexities. Their activism not only addresses the overt manifestations of Islamophobia but also tackles the subtler, systemic discriminations that permeate their daily lives. For instance, government and institutional narratives often play a significant role in demarcating who belongs within the national

fabric, effectively categorizing Muslim women along the insider-outsider divide (Zine, 2022b).

Intersectionality, a key concept in feminist scholarship, is pivotal in understanding how overlapping identities—such as race, class, and religion—affect Muslim women's experiences of citizenship (Lister, 1997). In the context of Islamophobia, which often targets visible symbols of Muslim identity, Muslim women bear a disproportionate burden. The enactment of Canada's anti-terrorism Bill C-36 post-9/11, which reformed existing laws to introduce new offenses related to terrorism, has led to increased profiling and surveillance of the Muslim community, impacting their citizenship experience and potentially curtailing their rights (Nagra, 2011).

The "hijab question" in Canada is emblematic of the intricate dynamics of identity and belonging that Muslim women face. For many, wearing the hijab is not only a personal choice but also a political statement—a declaration of their identity, an act of feminist resistance against Western stereotypes, and a refusal to succumb to anti-Islamic sentiments (Halabi, 2021). It challenges prevailing Western views and serves as a tool for both personal empowerment and public activism. Furthermore, the experiences of oppression are often more acute for Black hijabi Muslim women or those from working-class backgrounds, as they navigate the intersection of racism, class prejudice, and Islamophobia, which uniquely shapes their encounters with societal acceptance and discrimination.

Thus, the activism of Muslim women in Canada is essential in addressing and reshaping the narrative surrounding their community. It confronts both the overt and the subtle forms of discrimination that stem from global and local sources, fostering a deeper

understanding of their complex identities and striving towards a more inclusive sense of belonging in the multicultural tapestry of Canada. This focus on Muslim women activists is crucial for comprehending the nuanced ways in which gendered Islamophobia and broader societal attitudes intersect, influencing how these women perceive themselves and engage with society at large.

1.6 The Research: Telling Whole Stories

This research delves into the daily experiences of Muslim women activists in London, Ontario, following the Afzaal family murders. I interviewed seven participants who confront gender based Islamophobic violence either through their activism and community engagement or through their personal experiences. The study weaves together a rich tapestry of community activism and resilience. The narrative evolves from individual journeys to a collective exploration, examining the broader impact of the Afzaal family murders on the activism of Muslim women in London, Ontario. This study is more than a chronicle of events post-tragedy; it's an exploration into how these women have transformed grief into a catalyst for change.

This research presents a pivotal shift from the commonly adopted damage-centered narrative in examining the activism of Muslim women. Such a narrative, as pointed out by Tuck & Yang (2018, p. 10), often remains incomplete due to its heavy emphasis on "pain narratives." Critics like María Lugones (2010) and Jasmin Zine (2022, 2006, 2004) have argued that this approach tends to oversimplify or pathologize communities, concentrating predominantly on their deficits and damages, which can obscure their resilience and agency. My study aims to depart from this conventional perspective, illuminating the experiences and activism of Muslim women in London, Ontario, following the Afzaal

family murders, in a way that moves beyond mere victimhood. I delve into how their actions demonstrate strength, resilience, and proactive change. This approach offers a fuller, more empowering narrative that resonates with the tenets of decolonial Muslim feminism and intersectionality, thereby providing a more nuanced understanding of their activism.

Research Questions

The study is guided by a primary research question:

- How are Muslim women activists in London, Ontario, responding to the Afzaal family murders?

The sub-research questions are:

- What roles and experiences have Muslim women activists in London, Ontario, undertaken, particularly following the Afzaal family murders?
- How do these activists define and characterize their activism, and how have the murders influenced their awareness and actions?
- What strategies are they implementing for community building and collective care?

Organized around these pivotal questions, the research initially examines the personal impacts on these activists, exploring how the tragedy influenced their roles and motivated them to channel emotions into activism. Subsequently, it assesses the nature of their activism, investigating how the incident reshaped their awareness and actions, thereby understanding the evolution of their advocacy in response to tragedy. Finally, the study focuses on their strategies for building community and fostering collective care. It aims to capture their complex narratives of pain, loss, resilience, joy, and empowerment, contextualizing our London family within broader social and historical frameworks in

Canada. This comprehensive approach is key to preventing constrained and incomplete narratives, empowering communities to tell their own stories. By adopting this approach, we acknowledge the full humanity of individuals, recognizing their complex and distinct lives, instead of confining them to narratives shaped by singular experiences or aspects of their identity (Neimand et al., 2021). Incorporating insights from feminist scholars like Jasmin Zine, Sherene Razack, Leila Ahmed, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Katherine Bullock, this study employs storytelling within a decolonial Muslim feminist framework, highlighting how racism and marginalization uniquely affect Muslim women.

Additionally, this research draws from the rich intellectual traditions of Egypt, integrating thoughts from Hesham Gaafar, Tawfik Ghanem, Heba Raouf Ezzat, Omaima Abou Bakr, Amany Saleh, Abd al-Halim Abu Shuqqah, and Hassan Hanafy. These perspectives provide a deeper understanding of the cultural, historical, and political contexts shaping the narratives of Muslim women activists, particularly regarding their experiences with the Islamic Civilizational Paradigm. This paradigm critiques the knowledge-power nexus in International Relations, exposing its Euro-centric, Western-dominated biases (Mostafa et al., 2022). Through this blend of diverse scholarly insights, the study endeavors to offer a nuanced and comprehensive examination of the responses of Muslim women activists to the Afzaal family murders.

Gendered Islamophobia

Gendered Islamophobia specifically targets Muslim women or those perceived to be Muslim, owing to their distinct religious and cultural identities. It manifests in physical assaults, verbal aggression, harassment, and discrimination. Feminist scholars emphasize the need for an intersectional lens to fully understand these experiences. This

intersectionality considers the confluence of gender, race, class, immigration status, and religion, highlighting the unique challenges Muslim women face when dealing with Islamophobic aggression (Zine, 2004, p.114; Khan et al., 2022).

Muslim women, regardless of whether they wear a hijab, encounter a combination of Islamophobia and sexism. The hijab often becomes a visible target of discrimination, accentuating the interplay of religious and gender-based prejudice (Mazigh, 2023). At the same time, Muslim women without the hijab continue to face challenges related to their Muslim identity (Zine, 2006). Their experiences are further compounded by factors like immigration status and ethnic minority backgrounds in North America, leading to an intersection of racism, Islamophobia, and sexism (Selod, 2015).

The cultural practice of wearing the hijab is central to these experiences. Often misunderstood and misrepresented, it leads to widespread stereotypes and biases (Abu-Lughod, 2013). An intersectional analysis reveals how Muslim women's access to rights and services is distinctively influenced by their intersecting identities, especially in healthcare and legal systems (Perry, 2014). Such an intersectional perspective is crucial for understanding the impacts of policy changes that disproportionately affect Muslim women (Massoumi, 2015).

This study, which investigates the responses of Muslim women activists in Canada to the Afzaal family murders, draws on Mohanty's insights on intersectionality. Mohanty (1988) underscores the critical intersection of race, class and gender in feminist discourse, asserting that feminist movements must address both sexism and racism, as they are deeply intertwined. This perspective is particularly relevant to the experiences of Muslim women activists in Canada, who navigate the dual challenges of Islamophobia and sexism. Their

activism embodies the intersectionality Mohanty describes, rooted in gender equality and racial justice. In the wake of events like the Afzaal family murders, they confront not only gendered Islamophobia but also broader societal issues of racism and religious intolerance. Mohanty's perspective on the necessity of addressing racism within feminism is essential for understanding the unique position of Muslim women activists in Canada. Their experiences, whether facing direct discrimination for wearing hijabs or encountering subtle biases in their advocacy, necessitate a feminist response that recognizes and addresses the racial dimensions of their struggle.

1.7 Overview of Chapters

This introduction lays the groundwork for exploring the Afzaal family murder case, highlighting the trial updates. The introduction also describes the diverse and challenging environment of London, a city known for its multicultural makeup yet confronted by significant social issues. The chapter progresses by mapping the impact of the tragedy on the community and detailing the collective and individual responses that emerged. It also delves into the personal narratives that intersect with political realities, highlighting how personal experiences shape public activism. Furthermore, it discusses the identity and sense of belonging among Canadian Muslim women, emphasizing how these are influenced by broader socio-political contexts. The research method and questions are then outlined, focusing on gendered Islamophobia and its implications for the community.

Chapter Two examines the evolution of Islamophobia in Canada. I unravel the complex interplay of political, cultural, and legal factors that contribute to Islamophobia, casting a spotlight on the influence of White supremacy. This chapter

paints a picture of a multicultural nation grappling with the contradictions between its ideals and the stark realities of Islamophobia, especially as it affects identity, belonging, and citizenship. Chapter Three details the theoretical framework employed in the study and uses a decolonial Muslim feminist lens to understand how racism and marginalization Muslim women living in the West. I include a discussion of the War on Terror and how colonial and Eurocentric feminist perspectives shape narratives about Muslim women.

In Chapter Four, I explain the storytelling approach used, ethical considerations, and provide details on the participants. I advocate for the importance of giving voice to those who are often silenced or erased. In Chapter Five, I detail the three themes that stand out from the participant stories about their activism in response to the Afzaal family murders and the diverse strategies employed to confront Islamophobia and foster community solidarity. In Chapter Six, I conclude with a personal reflection on the findings and outline some broader implications for change and the power of collective voice and action. This is a story about the resilience and activism of Muslim women in London, Ontario, painting a picture of a community striving for change and understanding amidst challenging circumstances. Furthermore, I explore the significance of diverse and innovative methodologies in academic research by showcasing some of my journalistic and digital storytelling work, including "Fearless Cities" initiative, which was inspired by the incidents discussed throughout the thesis. These pieces not only represent my approach to blending traditional research with more creative forms of expression, but also illustrate how such methodologies can offer deeper insights and more engaging narratives.

Chapter Two: Islamophobia in Canada and the convergence with white supremacy

Below are my political views for whoever is interested,"...
"multiculturalism doesn't work" because "different cultures have
different interests. "... I am a white nationalist. White nationalist
is simply wanting to preserve European existence, nothing more,
nothing less.

Nathaniel Veltman, A White Awakening, CBC, 2023⁴

2.1 Introduction

Muslim women in Canada have been the subject of numerous studies examining their experiences with Islamophobia and the harm they face in their everyday lives (S. M. Ahmad, 2018; Bullock, 2003; Farokhi & Jiwani, 2021; Halabi, 2021; Jiwani, 2010, 2011; Khan et al., 2022; Perry, 2014; Razack, 2004, 2008; Taylor & Zine, 2014; Thobani et al., 2010; Zine, 2006, 2022b). In the wake of the Afzaal family murders in London, Ontario, my research specifically focuses on the reactions of Muslim women activists in this city. I explore the personal and socio-political dynamics that influence and motivate their activism and resistance. This localized study sheds light on how these women, within their unique community setting, navigate and counter Islamophobia, drawing from their personal experiences and broader socio-political contexts to form a resilient front against discrimination. Understanding the specific context of Islamophobia in Canada that led to

⁴ Nathaniel Veltman, "A White Awakening," unpublished manuscript, June 6, 2021. Veltman, who is accused of committing a hate-motivated vehicular attack that resulted in the death of the Afzaz family in London, Ontario, articulates his extreme views in this document. The manifesto outlines his antipathy towards Islam, opposition to multiculturalism, and mass immigration. It also criticizes globalist companies and cancel culture while advocating for a society that prioritizes the interests and cultural heritage of white people. Veltman's text claims that white individuals are subjected to genocide and cultural replacement, particularly highlighting perceived threats and crimes committed by Muslims. The document ultimately calls for a unified white resistance against what it describes as widespread anti-white sentiment. See Kate Dubinski, "Manifesto of Man Accused of Terror Attack against London, Ont., Muslim Family Read at Murder Trial," CBC, October 4, 2023, www.cbc.ca/news/canada/london/manifesto-of-man-accused-of-terror-attack-against-london-ont-muslim-family-read-at-murder-trial-1.6986403.

these murders is crucial to contextualize the motivations behind such a horrific attack, including the legitimized systemic discrimination, as well as negative attitudes and actions aimed at Muslims.

This chapter explores the intricate and multifaceted phenomenon of Islamophobia within the Canadian context, particularly in the aftermath of the global War on Terror. The discussion begins by delving into the political discourse surrounding Islamophobia post-9/11, examining how policies and public sentiments have shaped the experiences of Muslim communities across Canada. It then transitions to an analysis of the paradoxical coexistence of multiculturalism, white supremacy, and Islamophobia, shedding light on the complexities that arise from Canada's identity as a multicultural nation juxtaposed with prevailing undercurrents of racial and religious intolerance. The chapter further explores the legal dimensions and challenges associated with Islamophobia, focusing on the legislative responses and judicial interpretations that have both confronted and sometimes inadvertently perpetuated discrimination against Muslims. Through this comprehensive examination, the chapter aims to provide a deeper understanding of the systemic barriers faced by Muslim Canadians and the broader implications of Islamophobia on national cohesion and identity.

Islamophobia

The term "Islamophobia" entered modern discussions following the 1997 release of a report titled "Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All," written by the Runnymede Trust, a UK-based organization focused on race relations. Since its publication, and particularly following 9/11 attack in 2001, the term has become commonly used in media, public, and NGOs, especially in countries like Britain, France, and the United States where there has

been a noticeable increase in Muslim populations (Bleich, 2012, p. 180). The introduction of the term "Islamophobia" in 1997 recognized the persistent anti-Muslim views stemming from colonial eras (Said, 1997). From the outset, Orientalism has played a role in politically-driven efforts to dehumanize Muslims, particularly Muslim men. They've been associated with marginalized groups in the West, emphasizing their perceived "otherness." These myths have also supported various colonial and imperial actions.(Arjana, 2014).

In Canada, the understanding of Islamophobia has evolved, particularly as the nation grapples with its own instances of anti-Muslim violence and discrimination. The term has gained traction across various sectors in society, recognizing Islamophobia as not only a personal prejudice but also a systemic issue that impacts social policies, media representation, and community relations. This broader understanding prompts a nationwide introspection on the ways cultural, political, and historical forces shape the experiences of Muslim Canadians and highlights the urgency of addressing such prejudice in the pursuit of a more inclusive society. Islamophobia is defined as indiscriminate negative attitudes or emotions directed at Islam or Muslims (Bleich, 2012, p. 182). This definition indicates that Islamophobia extends beyond specific critiques of Islam or Muslims and includes instances where negative judgments are universally applied to most aspects of Islam or most Muslims. It aligns with concepts like homophobia or xenophobia, encompassing a broad range of negative responses, such as aversion, jealousy, suspicion, disdain, anxiety, rejection, contempt, fear, disgust, anger, and hostility towards people due to their perceived membership in a defined category. The definition also acknowledges that the target of these attitudes can be the religious doctrine of Islam, its followers, people assumed to be followers, or those with ancestral connections to the faith (Bleich, 2012).

The Afzaal family tragedy on June 6, 2021, cannot be viewed as an isolated event but rather as part of the broader pattern of rising Islamophobia, particularly in the context of the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) initiated by the United States after the 9/11 attacks⁵. This campaign, focusing on militant Islamist groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, has had significant global impacts, including the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the rise of the Islamic State militia as a major adversary (Bush, 2001).

Islamophobia in Canadian Context

Jasmin Zine (2022a) and a group of graduates examined the intricate web of bias and hostility promoting Islamophobia. Their extensive 240-page report, "The Canadian Islamophobia Industry", resulting from a four-year investigation, uncovers a complex interplay of media channels, proponents of Islamophobia, White supremacist organizations, right-leaning pro-Israel factions, self-claimed 'Muslim critics,' strategic think-tanks, their security advisors, and the financial backers of these initiatives. Zine and colleagues highlighted how these various sources tap into far-right platforms, using social media to both enhance and profit from their prejudiced narratives. Additionally, they pointed out the role of 'soft-power factions,' which is defined as follows:

Soft-power groups leverage influence by promoting anti-Muslim campaigns to achieve specific political, ideological, and religious goals that drive Islamophobic subcultures. They do this under the

⁵ The September 11, 2001 attacks were a series of coordinated suicide missions by terrorists affiliated with al Qaeda, an extremist Islamic group founded by Osama bin Laden. These militants hijacked four commercial airliners, using them as weapons against targets in the United States. Two of these aircraft were flown into New York City's World Trade Center, leading to the collapse of both towers and causing significant destruction in lower Manhattan. Another plane struck the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia, near Washington, D.C. The fourth plane, overtaken by a passenger and crew revolt, crashed in a field near Shanksville, Pennsylvania. The attacks on September 11 resulted in the deaths of nearly 3,000 people, including the 19 al Qaeda terrorists. Broadcast worldwide, the harrowing events left a profound impact globally. In response, U.S. President George W. Bush's administration launched a comprehensive "war on terrorism," which included forming the Department of Homeland Security and initiating military action in Afghanistan.

guise of promoting democracy, human rights, free speech, and Judeo-Christian values—ideals they consider antithetical and incompatible with Islam and Muslims. Soft-power groups engage in coercive tactics such as bullying, harassment, and intimidation to silence those who oppose them (Zine, 2022a,p. 236).

Zine also provides examples such as Rebel News, which has been referred to as “Breitbart North” and serves as a central clearinghouse for Islamophobic narratives in Canada. Rebel News, which brands itself as a “fearless source of news” that delivers content “not found elsewhere,” plays on fears surrounding the erosion of free speech. Consequently, it often crosses into the realm of hate speech, establishing a platform for bigotry. Portraying itself as a defender against the "threat of radical Islam to the West," Rebel News has become a key platform for white nationalists and neo-Nazis, positioning itself as a major outlet for spreading anti-Muslim rhetoric and ideologies (Zine, 2022a, p. 238).

In the article titled “Terrorists are always Muslim but never white: At the intersection of critical race theory and propaganda” by Corbin (2017, p. 458) challenges the commonly held perception that Muslims are primarily responsible for terrorist attacks in the U.S., highlighting that this association lacks factual evidence. Responsibility for the perpetuation of this misconception can be attributed to various factors, including government policies, media representations, and public perceptions. Government policies, especially those enacted in the wake of 9/11, have often disproportionately targeted Muslim communities, reinforcing the stereotype of Muslims as the main perpetrators of terrorism. Through practices like heightened surveillance, profiling at airports, and specific anti-terrorism legislations, the government's approach can inadvertently lend credibility to this erroneous association.

There is a widespread misconception that equates terrorism with being Muslim. This stereotype existed even before the events of 9/11, with public perception often linking Arabs to terrorism. This view is part of a broader historical context known as "Orientalism," where Arabs and Muslims are portrayed as exotic, uncivilized, and threatening "others" (Said, 1997). However, the term "Muslim" has been racially charged to include not only actual Muslims but also anyone who looks Arab or Middle Eastern. Islam, under this stereotype, is unfairly labeled as inherently violent and fundamentally incompatible with Western society.

The media also plays a crucial role. Often, terrorist attacks committed by Muslims receive more extensive and sensationalized coverage compared to those by non-Muslims. This skewed reporting can create a distorted public image, making it seem as though Muslims are more frequently involved in terrorism than they actually are. In addition, public perception is both shaped by and contributes to this narrative. In the absence of broad knowledge about the diverse causes and perpetrators of terrorism, societal biases and preconceptions can lead to an overestimation of the role of Muslims in such acts. This is often exacerbated by social and political discourse that fails to critically examine or challenge these biases. Therefore, the responsibility for this misperception is multifaceted, involving government actions, media representation, and public attitudes that collectively contribute to and overlook the incorrect belief that Muslims are predominantly responsible for terrorist attacks in the U.S.

The aftermath of 9/11 has profoundly reshaped how Muslims are viewed globally, often resulting in baseless suspicions against them, irrespective of their personal beliefs or backgrounds. This trend is evidenced by increased incidents of racial profiling and

discrimination in various spheres, from airport security to public perception (Zine, 2022b). In Canada, there has been a notable rise in white supremacist ideologies, which has exacerbated anti-Muslim sentiments (Carr, 2022). This escalation is visible in various contexts, from hate speech on social media platforms to policy-making and political rhetoric that implicitly or explicitly endorses views of racial purity and cultural superiority (Razack, 2022). These developments underscore a disturbing trend toward intensified racism and xenophobia in post-9/11 societies.

Furthermore, the 2016 election of Donald Trump as the US President, known for his anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim positions, intensified Islamophobic sentiments. In 2017, Trump sought to restrict travelers from several Muslim-majority countries, including Syria, Iran, Sudan, Libya, Yemen, Somalia, and Iraq. These restrictions also applied to individuals with legal residency visas (Beydoun, 2018). During Trump's tenure, there was a notable uptick in discriminatory actions, particularly against Muslim women, manifesting in hate crimes and the perpetuation of negative stereotypes (Jamal, 2017). This phenomenon, often referred to as the "Trump Effect" by academics, has been observed in Canada as well (Perry et al., 2019). Concrete examples of this phenomenon include incidents of verbal and physical harassment, policies that disproportionately affected Muslim communities, and a general escalation in anti-Muslim rhetoric both in public discourse and on social media. This pattern has been extensively documented and analyzed, suggesting a correlation between the political climate of the time and the surge in Islamophobic incidents.

The resulting widespread dehumanization of Muslims (Arjana, 2014) is critical to understanding the attack on the Afzaal family in London. The frequent portrayal of

Muslims as terrorists in media and public discussions has led to their widespread dehumanization. This stereotype reduces the complex identities of Muslim individuals to just one negative image, often viewing them as outsiders and threats. This dehumanization is racial, affecting how people perceive Muslims based on their race and skin color, and it is also gendered, impacting Muslim women in particular. For instance, Muslim women wearing hijabs can be easily targeted for harassment or individuals who are Arab or Muslim, or who appear to be, have experienced increased scrutiny at Canadian airports. This heightened attention is reportedly due to authorities perceiving them as a greater security risk compared to other members of the population, based on their actual or perceived Arab or Muslim identity (Bahdi, 2003, p. 299). This kind of prejudice makes tragic events like the attack on the Afzaal family in London more likely. Understanding this helps explain how deep-rooted biases and discrimination contribute to violence against Muslims in Canada.

White nationalism and right-wing extremism have a historical presence that often contradicts Canada's image as a multicultural success story (Al Donato, 2017). Dr. Barbara Perry, a renowned hate crime researcher, observes that the beliefs of current right-wing extremists in Canada closely align with those from past decades. This reality is often unexpected due to Canada's self-perception as a multicultural haven. Reports indicate a parallel increase in hate crimes in Canada and the U.S., primarily driven by racial motives. In a 2017 CBC interview titled 'White nationalism and right-wing extremism aren't new to Canada,' Perry highlights a national reluctance to acknowledge hate-based violence, which is rooted in the country's pride in its multicultural fabric. This often leads to an oversight of the serious issues of racism and extremism within its borders (CBC, 2017). Perry and

Ryan Scrivens conducted research between 2013 and 2015, revealing the existence of at least 100 white supremacist groups in Canada, a number which is believed to have increased by 20 to 25 percent subsequently. Contrary to American right-wing extremism, Canadian groups tend to be less structured and less focused on gun rights. However, a notable development is the increasing collaboration among groups such as the Three Percenters, Soldiers of Odin, and Storm Alliance, indicating a new phase of organization and networking among these extremist factions in Canada.

The pervasive threat of white nationalism and right-wing extremism in Canada, as outlined by experts like Dr. Barbara Perry, sets a concerning backdrop for the tragic Afzaal family murders in London, Ontario. This event starkly illustrates how extremist ideologies can escalate into direct violence against minority communities. The rise in such extremist groups and their increasing organization, as Perry's research indicates, reflects a broader societal issue that directly impacts the safety and well-being of multicultural communities. The Afzaal family's tragic end is a grim reminder of the real-life consequences of unchecked hate and racism. My research into the Afzaal family murders seeks to explore how these broader national trends of extremism contribute to localized acts of terror, and how public perceptions and responses shape the aftermath of such events. This context is crucial for understanding not just the incident itself, but also the societal shifts needed to prevent future tragedies.

In the following sections, I provide further detail on the multifaceted nature of Islamophobia in Canada, exploring its political, cultural, and legal dimensions. Central to this analysis is the examination of how white supremacy, with its emphasis on racial and cultural hegemony, has intensified the marginalization of Muslim communities, effectively

positioning them as 'outsiders' within Canadian society. The chapter posits that understanding this broader socio-political context is vital to situate the responses of Muslim women activists discussed by the participants. This context is key to recognizing the driving forces behind their activism and the unique perspectives they bring to their advocacy and resistance. Their experiences are shaped by the intersection of their identity as Muslims and the broader societal dynamics.

2.2 The Political discourse and Islamophobia in Canada Post-9/11

This section examines the heightened visibility and scrutiny that Muslims in Canada have faced since the 9/11 attacks. The increase in focus has been significantly driven by political rhetoric and media representations that have often portrayed Arabs and Muslims through stereotypes. Key political figures have played roles in shaping these perceptions. For example, following the 9/11 attacks, U.S. President George W. Bush famously labeled Muslims as "evildoers." Similarly, in Canada, former Prime Minister Stephen Harper's categorization of "Islamicism" as a major threat to Western society has further entrenched these negative narratives, raising concerns among community members and advocacy groups (Perry, 2015, p.7). This section explores how these political statements and the media's portrayal have contributed to the societal and institutional challenges faced by the Muslim community in Canada.

Muslims, in Canada, much like in other Western countries, face various challenges shaped by the global War on Terror. Media coverage often fails to capture the diversity of Muslim communities, instead perpetuating age-old stereotypes. For example, Farokhi & Jiwani (2023) highlight in their work that there are two prevailing narratives — that 'all terrorists are Muslims' and 'no white Christian people are terrorists' — commonly echoed

in public discussions (Corbin 2017, 455). These narratives not only endanger Muslims or those perceived as Muslim but also divert attention from the threat posed by radical white Christians. A pertinent case is the media response in the U.S. to the 2017 Quebec City Mosque shooting. Alexandre Bissonnette, a twenty-seven-year-old white man, killed six and injured nineteen during the incident. Yet, in the immediate aftermath, Fox News incorrectly reported that the attacker was of Moroccan descent, tweeting, 'Suspect in Quebec Mosque terrorist attack was of Moroccan origin' (Farokhi & Jiwani, 2023, p.98). This has contributed to an environment marked by Islamophobia, resulting in heightened suspicion, criticism, and discrimination against Muslims in Canada (Zine, 2022a, 2022b)

Muslims have increasingly become a focal point in political discourse, leading to a rise in violence and hate crimes targeting the community (Amer & Bagasra, 2013). In Canada, Muslims have endured a range of hate crimes, from severe mass murders to mosque vandalism, intimidation, and physical assaults (Zine, 2022). These hate crimes manifest in various forms, including vandalism and both physical and political acts of discrimination. For example, a notable incident occurred when a man was charged with hate-related vandalism at a mosque in Toronto, illustrating the persistent threats to religious spaces (Callan, 2023). The political sphere is similarly affected, with visible and religious communities in London, ON reporting instances of racial slurs and property damage during election campaigns (CTV London, 2015). Notably, a politician of Lebanese descent had his campaign signs burned and defaced with racial slurs (CTV London, 2015), and a Black Muslim politician discovered culturally offensive items left at his doorstep (M. Vaswani & Esses, 2021). These incidents highlight the widespread and multifaceted nature of

Islamophobia in Canada, impacting Muslims in their places of worship as well as in their public and political engagements.

In the wake of these developments, Muslims have been prominently featured in Western political discussions. Islamic symbols such as the hijab and mosques have faced resistance in public conversations, leading to numerous legal and administrative measures aimed at limiting their presence in the West. Many Canadian activists, for instance, view Quebec's Bill 21 as preventing Muslim women from fully participating in Quebec society. Passed in 2019, this law prohibits individuals who wear visible religious symbols, such as hijabs, turbans, or kippahs, from holding several public positions of power. Although the law has negatively impacted all three religious groups, Muslims, and particularly Muslim women, feel its effects most acutely. For example, Fatemeh Anvari, a teacher from Chelsea, Quebec, was reassigned last year for wearing her hijab in the classroom. Many human rights defenders argue that Bill 21 legalizes systemic discrimination against marginalized communities, especially women (Rukavina, 2022). These symbols are often viewed as not aligning with Western ideals, and in some cases, as a threat to Western values and traditions (Farokhi, 2021). Building on this sentiment, there has been a tendency to equate Islam with terrorism, laws against Islamic clothing for women like bans on hijab and burqas, and increased xenophobia targeting Muslim immigrants, among other reactions (Najib & Teeple Hopkins, 2020).

Muslim Canadians face societal, political, and cultural obstacles shaped by the intense undertones of the global War on Terror (Zine, 2012). Political discussions and media coverages about Islam frequently overlook the diversity and humaneness of Muslim communities (Najib & Teeple Hopkins, 2020). This media portrayal is significant, which

can drive a wedge between "us" and "them," and reveal the societal power dynamics (Zine, 2004a). Studies examining the influence of media on the formation of Arab Muslim stereotypes are sparse. Nonetheless, the available research indicates a likely connection between more extensive media consumption and a heightened use of stereotypes related to Arab Muslims (Saleem & Anderson, 2013).

Within this setting, Canadian Muslims have been subjected to increased suspicion, criticism, and discrimination, driven by a mix of fear, misconceptions, and worries about security. (Zine, 2022b). Moreover, although 9/11 played a role in intensifying Islamophobia, studies also point out that media portrayal of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has fueled anti-Muslim sentiment in the West and worldwide. The media portrayal of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has often emphasized the group's extreme acts of violence and its interpretation of Islamic tenets, which are widely considered as a distortion of mainstream Islamic beliefs. These portrayals can inadvertently lead to broad generalizations and stereotypes about Muslims. In many Western and global media outlets, the focus on ISIS's connection to Islam can contribute to an association between general Muslim populations and extremist actions. This, in turn, can fuel anti-Muslim sentiment and prejudice, reinforcing a misleading association between everyday Muslim people and extremist ideologies. Such media coverage can exacerbate fears and misunderstandings about Islam and Muslims in general, affecting how they are viewed and treated in societies worldwide. When mainstream media fail to make a clear distinction between terrorism and Islam, it leads to non-Muslims harboring negative feelings towards Muslims (von Sikorski et al., 2021). Overall, this rise in Islamophobia led to hate crimes against Muslims, Arabs, Afghanis, and South Asians in North America and Europe.

Parallel to these events, the War on Terror has predominantly served to lump Muslims into a single, homogenous group, reflecting a colonial viewpoint that often oversimplifies and misrepresents complex identities. By incorporating culturally authentic experiences and situating them within the broader historical, cultural, political, geographic, and economic contexts, this research seeks to offer a comprehensive understanding of Islamophobic violence, particularly through incidents like the Afzaal family murders. This approach not only highlights the specificities of individual experiences but also contextualizes the systemic issues that contribute to such acts of violence, offering deeper insights into the pervasive impact of Islamophobia across different societies. Selod (2015) points out that by targeting terrorism instead of specific nations, various ethnicities and nationalities are grouped under a broad "Muslim" label. Following this generalization of Muslims into a single category, the process of racialization assigns religious identity as the primary reason behind every Muslim's behavior and action (Ahmed, 2021).

After the events of 9/11, there was increased scrutiny regarding the assimilation of Muslims in Canada. This heightened attention was fueled by concerns that cultural isolation might give rise to extremist factions within the country. The possibility that native-born Muslims could pose a threat was deeply concerning for many Canadians. To understand these apprehensions and the perceived internal enemy, the discussion frequently revolved around societal values (Zine, 2012).

The incidents cited in this section demonstrate the impact of the War on Terror on Muslim Canadians. From 2017 to 2021, Canada has witnessed the highest number of

Muslims killed in hate-driven attacks compared to any other G7 country⁶ (NCCM, 2021a). G7 countries, known for their economic and political stability, are generally expected to be safe for all residents, including religious and ethnic minorities. This statistic challenges this expectation, highlighting that even in well-developed, democratic nations, vulnerable communities can still be at significant risk of hate crimes. Canada is internationally recognized for its multiculturalism and its open, inclusive approach to immigration and diversity. However, this statistic starkly contrasts with Canada's global image as a tolerant and safe country for all ethnicities and religions.

Many Muslims experienced derogatory remarks, notably being labeled as terrorists, or associated with Al-Qaeda or Osama Bin Laden (Badaloo, 2022; Caidi & MacDonald, 2008). Islamophobia is undermining health equity, which reduces Muslim Canadians' access to healthcare systems (Badaloo, 2022). This discrimination can manifest in healthcare professionals exhibiting biases, insufficiently accommodating cultural and religious needs, and creating psychological barriers that discourage Muslims from seeking necessary medical care. Such dynamics undermine health equity, leading to significant disparities in health access and outcomes for Muslim Canadians, thereby necessitating a concerted effort to address these issues at systemic and individual levels. Islamophobia fosters and sustains societal prejudice against Muslims, heightening their distress and perceptions of discrimination.

In short, the aftermath of 9/11 and the subsequent War on Terror significantly amplified Islamophobia in Canada and beyond. With media stereotypes, political agendas,

⁶ The G7, or Group of Seven, includes Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States. These countries are often viewed as leaders in promoting democratic values and human rights.

and right-wing factions fueling misconceptions, Muslims faced increasing hostility and discrimination. Even in Canada, renowned for its multiculturalism, this surge in prejudice has led to rising hate crimes against Muslims, which is what I discuss next.

2.3 Canada's Paradox: Multiculturalism, White Supremacy, and Islamophobia

Canada's self-perception as a beacon of multiculturalism is contradicted by the prevalent issues of White supremacy and Islamophobia. The surge in hate crimes and the growth of right-wing extremist groups suggest that white supremacy is deeply intertwined with the nation's settler identity. This section explores this contradiction, shedding light on the intertwined currents of racism and Islamophobia that challenge Canada's national identity.

In a study conducted during the 2019 federal election, (Momani & Deschamps, 2021) examined the online presence and activities of Canada's Right-Wing Extremists (RWEs), in particular the networks known for their connections to domestic terrorism and hate crimes. The findings indicate that these extremist groups often rally around themes such as media distrust, anti-liberal sentiments, anti-immigration stances, and a feeling of White victimization. The study also highlighted key influencers within these networks who significantly shape the extremist narrative. Recognizing the potential of these influencers to catalyze violent actions, the report underscores the importance of monitoring and addressing their activities to ensure Canadian public safety (Momani & Deschamps, 2021, p.9).

In a similar vein, Razack (1999) discusses how the understatement and denial of racism in Canada lead to two significant outcomes. Firstly, it constrains people of color from effectively addressing racism because they often feel obliged to primarily recognize

the kindness of their Canadian hosts. Secondly, such denials bolster the notion of White Canadians as being innocent of racial prejudices. Razack said:

We must ask, as well, about the alternative stories of citizenship and national belonging we can tell [.....] When the official story of white respectability and Black degeneracy is disrupted, who can we each know ourselves to be? The "we" in these sentences is a broadly inclusive one, for while the content of our performances varies in important ways, both white and non-white citizens can be drawn into hegemonic national stories (p. 162).

This quote explores the potential for redefining narratives around citizenship and national belonging by questioning and disrupting dominant stories that reinforce racial stereotypes and inequalities. Specifically, it references the concept expressed by James Baldwin regarding a societal crisis where mainstream narratives uphold the image of white respectability at the expense of portraying Black individuals and communities as degenerate. The quote challenges us to consider alternative narratives that do not rely on these racial dichotomies.

It prompts a reflection on who we might understand ourselves to be if these divisive and harmful stories were disrupted. The use of "we" emphasizes inclusivity, suggesting that both white individuals and people of color are implicated in and affected by these national narratives. The quote highlights that while the specific content of our individual and collective narratives may differ, the overarching national stories often pull us into their hegemonic (dominant and controlling) framework. Thus, it calls for a collective effort to transcend these narratives, fostering a more equitable and inclusive understanding of identity and belonging within the nation.

To understand how Islamophobia fosters whiteness and supports global white supremacy, one must consider three principles: racism spans both far-Right and liberal

stances driven by emotions; white supremacy has roots in Christianity and imperialism yet adapts to global dynamics; and the law legitimizes white supremacy and racial violence (Razack, 2022). Canada's Right-Wing Extremists (RWE) interactions reveal efforts to integrate anti-immigration, anti-liberal, and populist views into mainstream politics, subtly maintaining ties to neo-Nazism, racism, and conspiracy theories (Momani & Deschamps, 2021). Building on this context, it becomes clear that the tragic killing of the Afzaal family in Canada is not an isolated incident; rather, it is part of a broader pattern of hate-fueled actions targeting the marginalized communities. Racialized and Indigenous populations have similarly faced increasing aggression. Notably, there has been a rise in vandalism at places of worship, including mosques and synagogues (Perry & Scrivens, 2019).

Despite earlier trends indicating a decline, hate crimes, primarily motivated by race or religion, surged from 2016 to 2020 (Momani & Deschamps, 2021). The year 2022 was particularly stark, with over 3,500 reported incidents, with Ontario and Quebec bearing the brunt (Statistics Canada, 2024). The growth of white supremacy groups is also alarming, increasing from 130 in 2015 to 300 by 2016 (Perry & Scrivens, 2019) reflecting shifting dynamics in regions like Western Ontario.

The history of white supremacy in Canada is deep-seated, with commentators like Alex Boutilier remarking that "White supremacy is as old as Canada" (Boutilier, 2021). According to Zine (2022a), far-right, White nationalist, and neo-Nazi groups, along with their agitators, remain active in promoting anti-Muslim hate, both online and through public protests and demonstrations. Historically, Canada's establishment as a settler nation involved the mistreatment and displacement of Indigenous communities, a legacy that continues to influence its identity. The country's efforts to maintain its white settler identity

are evident in historical immigration policies from the 1800s and 1900s that favored white immigrants (Bakali, 2022).

These realities set the stage for the next section, which will delve into the legal dimensions of Islamophobia in Canada. This discussion will explore how laws and legal frameworks have responded to the rising tide of hate crimes and systemic racism, and how these responses have shaped the landscape of civil rights and social justice in Canada.

2.4 Legal Dimensions and Challenges of Islamophobia

Following the 9/11 events, Canada, alongside allies like the US and UK, expedited the enactment of an anti-terrorism Bill C36 on December 7, 2001. This legislation, which reformed multiple existing laws on crime, data protection, and more, introduced new offenses linked to promoting terror. The swift adoption of this bill, critics believe, bypassed rigorous public debate. The legislation potentially enables profiling, especially at entry points like borders and airports. The policy shift seemed to bolster the surveillance powers of institutions like Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) and Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), disproportionately affecting the Muslim community and those with ambiguous immigration statuses. The motivation behind this Canadian legislative overhaul can be traced back to its close alliance with the US, leading to alignment in immigration, security, and asylum policies. For Canadian Muslims, this law has reshaped their citizenship experiences, given the heightened surveillance and potential limitations on their rights (Nagra, 2011).

For Muslims in Canada, their daily experiences are colored by larger national and international narratives. Age-old stereotypes depict Muslims as violent, extremist, and culturally backward. Such misrepresentations influence how Muslims, especially youth,

perceive themselves and others. They often wrestle with these biases, more so with the proliferation of Islamophobic narratives in the era of the war on terror. This dynamic perpetuates existing power imbalances, reinforcing dominant societal structures (Zine, 2022b).

In settler regions like Quebec, race has played a pivotal role in maintaining white dominance and cultural hegemony. This is evident in attitudes within the French-Canadian community where Muslims are sometimes perceived as a threat to long-standing French-White Canadian traditions (Bakali, 2022). In Quebec, there is a prevalent belief that its unique cultural and national history makes the challenges posed by the Muslim community even more pronounced. Quebec is the only province in Canada with a majority French-speaking population, leading to longstanding concerns about the preservation of their language, values, and lifestyle. Consequently, Quebec has distinct immigration policies, setting it apart from the rest of Canada. While Canada promotes multiculturalism, aiming to nurture a society rich in diversity since 1971, Quebec, since 1981, has advocated for interculturalism. This policy emphasizes the assimilation of immigrants to safeguard Quebec's culture. Over the past ten years, there is a growing narrative suggesting not only that immigrant populations challenge key Quebec values like secularism and gender equality, but also that Quebec's identity is at risk of being overshadowed by Muslims and other immigrant communities (Mahrouse, 2018).

A clear example is Quebec's Bill 21, enacted in June 2019, which magnifies biases against Muslims (Rukavina, 2022). This legislation prohibits public servants, including teachers and police officers, from wearing religious symbols, directly affecting Muslims who wear hijabs. While presented under the guise of religious neutrality and equality, it

essentially inhibits Muslims from expressing their religious beliefs openly. Moreover, this Bill empowers the state to determine what constitutes a religious symbol and mistakenly posits that religious affiliation can be detached from personal identity. Critics argue that the legislation leans heavily towards a Christian perspective, marginalizing other faith practices. As such, Bill 21's interpretation of secularism severely undermines the rights and religious freedoms of Muslims (Patrick et al., 2021).

The amplification of Islamophobia in Canada can be attributed to diverse actors, including political figures, media, White supremacist groups, and specific research institutes such as Rebel News, and The Middle East Forum (MEF)(Zine, 2022a, p.243). These entities, despite their diverging agendas, collaborate to perpetuate negative stereotypes and misconceptions about Islam and Muslims (Zine, 2022a). These socio-political, cultural and legal factors shape the experiences and actions of the Muslim women activists in this study, whether born in Canada or immigrants, and informs the nuances of their activism and resistance.

This foundation sets the stage for the upcoming chapter, which will delve deeper into how the War on Terror has influenced “gender narratives” surrounding Muslim women, particularly focusing on the construction and perception of their identities. As the next chapter will examine the impact of global conflicts and security policies on both the personal and public perceptions of Muslim women.

Chapter Three: Applying a Decolonial Muslim Feminist Framework

The personal is theoretical.

Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, p.10

3.1 Introduction

I employ a decolonial Muslim feminist lens to framing this study, which is a synthesis of decolonial theory and Islamic feminism. This lens is useful to critically examine the connections between colonial histories and patriarchal systems within Muslim societies and seeks to emancipate Muslim women from the constraints imposed by external (colonial, Western) and internal (patriarchal, traditional) influences. While my study is deeply rooted in the perspectives of Muslim feminist scholars, it is also enriched by insights from Indigenous, Black, and Global South feminist theorists. The primary objective is to situate the responses of Muslim women activists in London, Ontario, to the Afzaal family murders within the oppressive structures that shape their experiences and responses.

I rely heavily on the Muslim feminist perspective as outlined by Jasmin Zine (2004) to challenge the misconception that Muslim women must choose between colonial narratives and “patriarchal” interpretations of Islam. It rejects such a binary choice, presenting Muslim feminisms as driven by Muslim women scholars and activists to resist patriarchal structures without submitting to colonialist ideologies (Zine, 2006, p. 250). Additionally, I incorporate the work of María Lugones (2010), who defines decolonial feminism as a framework that begins with the recognition and emphatic resistance of the “epistemological habit” of seeing and erasing the colonial difference (p. 753). This definition emphasizes the importance of acknowledging and challenging the ongoing

impacts of colonialism in shaping our understanding of gender, culture, and society. (Velez & Tuana, 2020, p. 2).

These insights support the context of Islamophobia I described in the previous chapter. Post-9/11, Muslim women find themselves at the nexus of gender and racial politics. This intersection affects how their bodies and identities are perceived and portrayed, as they navigate the complicated terrain where narratives about liberating Muslim women intertwine with issues of religious extremism, racism, and Islamophobia (Bruckert & Law, 2018; Bullock, 2003). The feminist endeavors and strategies of Muslim women are thus shaped in reaction to these interwoven discourses (Zine, 2004b).

Using storytelling through a decolonial Muslim feminist framework reveals how racism and marginalization disproportionately impact women of color (Birk, 2017).

In this chapter, I aim to:

1. investigate the connections between Muslim women activists' responses and actions to understandings of "gendered Islamophobia" (Zine, 2004);
2. explore how the War on Terror has influenced "gender narratives" surrounding Muslim women (Massoumi, 2015), particularly regarding the construction and perception of their identities;
3. examine the effects of colonialism and Euro-centric feminist viewpoints on the perception and treatment of Muslim women, thereby shedding light on the interplay between colonial legacies and contemporary feminist movements; and
4. analyze the political and social dynamics surrounding the hijab, niqab, and abaya in Canadian public spaces.

Overall, by connecting these discussions to broader themes of gendered Islamophobic violence and the principles of decolonial feminism, this chapter offers insight into the complex ways in which Muslim women's clothing choices and broader identities are politicized and scrutinized within the Canadian context. This will illuminate the broader societal reactions to the Afzaal family murders and how these reactions influence, and are influenced by, the activism and lived experiences of Muslim women in London, Ontario. This analysis not only deepens the understanding of a localized response to a national tragedy but also contributes to the broader discourse on the intersection of race, gender, class, and religion in contemporary society.

3.2 Gendered Islamophobia through an Intersectional Lens

This research delves into the daily experiences of Muslim women activists in London, Ontario, who confront gender based Islamophobic violence either through their activism and community engagement or through their personal experiences. Their experiences have significantly shaped their collective response to the Afzaal family murders. This section critically examines the intricate layers of discrimination faced by Muslim women, interwoven with religious bias and gender prejudices, and explores the impact of colonialism on Muslim communities, particularly how it contributes to the marginalization of Muslim women in Canadian law and policy.

The key concept of intersectionality is pivotal here: based on one's positionality, systems of oppression are experienced distinctly. For instance, Black Muslim women wearing the hijab might face a different spectrum of violence compared to lighter-skinned Muslim women who do not wear the hijab, even within the same community. This

differentiation in experiences underlines the importance of recognizing and addressing the nuanced ways in which race, gender, and visible markers of religious identity, like the hijab, intersect. Central to this analysis is Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1993) concept of intersectionality, which underscores the interconnectedness of race, gender, class, immigration status, and religion. Gendered Islamophobia, characterized by a blend of ethno-religious and racial discrimination, is rooted in historical prejudices and manifests in both personal and institutional oppression (Zine, 2006, p. 240). It includes acts of aggression, harm, or hostility targeting Muslim women—or those perceived to be Muslim—based on their actual or presumed religious or cultural affiliation (Zine, 2004b), p.114). This violence can take various forms, including physical assault, verbal abuse, harassment, and discrimination.

Feminist scholars highlight the importance of considering the intersectionality of gender, race, immigration status, and religion to fully understand and analyze the unique challenges faced by Muslim women in the context of Islamophobic violence (Khan et al., 2022). Abu-Ras & Suarez (2009) describe the complex identity of Muslim women, which includes challenges related to gender, social class, cultural norms, immigrant status, language barriers, religious identity, and adherence to Islamic dress codes, all of which contribute to their societal marginalization and increased risk of hate crimes and discrimination (p. 59). In the realm of gendered Islamophobia, employing an intersectional lens allows for a detailed exploration of how discrimination against Muslim women arises not only from their gender or religious identity but from a complex interaction of multiple social categories (Zine, 2004b). This nuanced approach is crucial to understanding the

specific vulnerabilities of Muslim women, who often find themselves at the intersection of gender-based prejudice and anti-Muslim sentiment (Zine, 2006).

Moreover, whether they choose to wear the hijab or not, Muslim women face a unique combination of Islamophobia and sexism. For hijab wearers, the hijab serves as a visible marker that frequently invites religious and gender-based discrimination. However, those who do not wear the hijab still encounter challenges associated with their Muslim identity. Additionally, the immigration status of many Muslim women, particularly those from racial or ethnic communities in North America, introduces another layer of complexity to their experiences as they often face a confluence of racism, Islamophobia, and sexism (Selod, 2015). The cultural practice of wearing the hijab and its varied interpretations further intersect with gendered Islamophobia, leading to widespread misunderstandings and stereotypes (Abu-Lughod, 2013). An intersectional analysis also illuminates how Muslim women's access to rights and services, including healthcare and legal systems, is distinctively influenced by their intersecting identities (Perry, 2014). This intersectional perspective is vital for assessing the impact of policy changes, as laws targeting Muslims or immigrants often disproportionately affect Muslim women (Massoumi, 2015).

In my exploration of the experiences and responses of Muslim women activists in Canada, particularly in the context of the Afzaal family murders, I draw upon bell hooks' insightful perspective on the intersectionality of race and gender. hooks (2014) advocates for a feminism that rigorously addresses these interconnected issues, emphasizing the significance of race in feminist discourse. Her argument that feminists must not ignore racism, as sexist and racist oppressions are intertwined, is particularly relevant to the

situation of Muslim women activists. These activists, many of whom are grappling with the dual challenges of Islamophobia and sexism, embody the intersectionality.

In the wake of events like the Afzaal family murders, these women are not only confronting a gendered Islamophobia but also the broader societal implications of racism and religious intolerance. This complex interplay of discrimination underscores the need for a feminist approach that is acutely aware of and responsive to the nuances of race and gender. Furthermore, hooks' assertion that overlooking racism undermines the feminist cause is crucial for understanding the unique position of Muslim women activists in Canada. Their experiences - whether as women wearing hijabs facing direct discrimination or as individuals confronting subtle biases in their advocacy work - demand a feminist response that acknowledges and addresses the racial dimensions of their struggle. Incorporating hooks' framework into this research highlights the rich, multi-layered nature of the challenges faced by Muslim women activists. It not only strengthens the feminist discourse by bringing race and gender to the forefront but also enhances our understanding of how these activists navigate a landscape shaped by intersecting oppressions. Their stories and responses, when viewed through this lens, offer profound insights into the resilience and complexity of activism at the intersection of race and gender in a multicultural yet challenging Canadian context.

This theoretical understanding finds clear reflection in the experiences of Muslim women in Canada, where the intersection of race, gender, and religion has tangible and often violent consequences. For example, the Muslim Advisory Council of Canada (MACC), in collaboration with researchers from McMaster University, published a study examining Islamophobia in healthcare settings (Jones, 2023) . The study aims to illustrate

how the health-care system falls short in serving Muslim women, both as patients and as health-care professionals. Another example from Alberta: since December 2020, the province has experienced a rise in racially motivated attacks targeting Black Muslim women (Euro-Islam info, 2021). In addition to physical harm, Muslim women frequently face Islamophobia expressed through microaggressions, encompassing derogatory language, intimidating actions, exclusion, and bias. Witnesses have reported to the committee that such acts of discrimination and mistreatment are a daily occurrence. Many Muslim women experience stress, trauma, and anxiety due to their visible Muslim identity, as evidenced by the 2021 London Ontario family murders (Badaloo, 2022). Muslim women in various communities share stories of fear and grief, discussing how hate-motivated violence contributes to further stigmatization and feelings of being outsiders (Ramadan, 2022).

To fully understand this form of violence, it is crucial to acknowledge the state's role and its representatives. For instance, the unequal targeting of “Middle Eastern women” by police during traffic stops implies that Muslim women are viewed as outsiders with lesser rights than non-Muslim citizens (Bruckert & Law, 2018, p.27). This situation indicates how stereotypes and compounded oppressions influence the enforcement and execution of laws and regulations. It underscores the importance of examining how state mechanisms contribute to violence and perpetuate oppression, pointing towards structural violence where social structures and institutions foster and maintain inequality (Bruckert & Law, 2018).

Legislation such as the federal Anti-Terrorism Act, which was passed in 2015, has been linked to an increase in violence against Muslim, immigrant, and racialized women

and men (Bruckert & Law, 2018). According to (Canadian Government, 2015) the Anti-terrorism Act, 2015, introduced by Harper government with the intent to fortify national security, the Act aims to tackle the terrorism through a multi-faceted approach. Key components of the Anti-terrorism Act include enhancing the government's ability to share information between relevant departments and agencies for national security purposes. This facilitation of information sharing is crucial in the coherent and coordinated response to potential threats. Additionally, the Act criminalizes the advocacy and promotion of terrorism offenses, aiming to stem the spread of extremist ideologies at their source. Another vital aspect of the Act is its provisions aimed at preventing terrorism-related travel and recruitment activities. It empowers judges to order the seizure and forfeiture of terrorist propaganda, and to mandate the removal of such content from Canadian websites. This is complemented by measures to enhance the Passenger Protect Program, which seeks to mitigate threats to transportation security and prevent individuals from traveling to engage in terrorist activities. The Act also grants the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) enhanced powers to intervene and prevent specific terrorist plots, under judicial authority. This proactive approach is designed to disrupt potential attacks before they occur.

Furthermore, the legislation makes it easier for police forces to detain suspected terrorists temporarily and to impose court-ordered conditions to prevent future acts of terrorism. It also strengthens penalties for those who violate these conditions, underscoring the government's commitment to not only prevent but also robustly respond to terrorism. Lastly, the Act addresses the need for responsible sharing of national security information across federal departments and agencies and enhances protections for participants in national security proceedings. This includes ensuring the government can better protect

and utilize classified information to deny entry to non-citizens who pose a security threat(Canadian Government, 2015). In the same year, the act was implemented, there was a 60 percent rise in police-reported hate crimes against Muslims in Canada, with women making up 53 percent of these victims, according to Statistics Canada's 2017 report (Armstrong, 2019).

Transnational efforts to suppress visible Muslim identities, especially among women, are a clear sign of systemic Islamophobia. Bakht (2023) underscores how this manifest in the legal restrictions placed on hijabs and niqabs, which have become increasingly common across various countries. These bans, often rooted in similar justifications, overlook the distinct cultural and social landscapes of each country. Quebec's Law 21, passed in 2019, discussed in the previous chapter, is a pertinent example. This law, which bars public servants from donning religious symbols and limits face coverings in certain public services, particularly affects Muslim women. It stands as a violation of the constitutional rights of religious minorities. Notably, the Quebec government has fortified this law against standard Charter challenges by employing Section 33. This move effectively cements the law in place, despite its impact on religious liberties, revealing a deeper entrenchment of Islamophobic policies (Bakht, 2023, p.180). Adopting an intersectional approach has allowed for a nuanced exploration of gendered Islamophobia's complex nature. This perspective emphasizes the distinct challenges encountered by Muslim women, who face discrimination influenced by the intersection of gender, religion, race, and culture, shaping the intricacies of Muslim women's experiences.

3.3 The Impact of the War on Terror on Muslim Women

Building on the intersectional approach discussed earlier, the “Gender Narrative” prevalent in War on Terror further expands our understanding of how racism and violence, based on intersectional identities, are exacerbated by global geopolitical developments. These developments, often disconnected from the organic realities of the communities they affect, have had profound implications for Muslim women. As I showed in Chapter Two, the aftermath of the 9/11 and the Global War on Terror significantly affected the lives of young Muslim in Canada and other Western countries (Bakali, 2022). Muslim feminist scholars have frequently observed the significant role of “gendered narratives” in the War on Terror (Massoumi, 2015, p. 716).

Proponents of the War on Terror have often cited women's rights as a rationale for military action. When the United States took on the mantle of leading the "civilized world against the forces of evil" in its quest to "spread freedom and democracy globally," President Bush and prominent members of his administration repeatedly highlighted the plight of Afghan women (Steans, 2008, p. 162). A notable example of this is Laura Bush's radio address to the nation on November 17, 2001, where she invoked a form of feminist solidarity as part of the justification for the intervention, marking a key instance in this narrative (Bhattacharyya, 2008, p.18). Bush said:

Long before the current war began, the Taliban and its terrorist allies were making the lives of children and women in Afghanistan miserable... Civilized people throughout the world are speaking out in horror -- not only because our hearts break for the women and children in Afghanistan, but also because in Afghanistan we see the world the terrorists would like to impose on the rest of us.

Radio Address by Bush, 2001.

A key element of the War on Terror involves the contention surrounding the interpretation and control of the concept of women's rights (Bhattacharyya, 2008). The widespread belief that Muslim women are the ultimate victims of gender oppression has become a prevailing story, often employed to legitimize U.S. military actions in predominantly Muslim nations (Abu-Lughod, 2013). This narrative places the promotion or protection of "women's human rights" at the forefront of legitimizing the War on Terror. The U.S. media has, until recently, largely supported this perspective, as framed by the White House. The contrast between liberated Western women and oppressed Muslim women has been instrumental in portraying the United States as a bastion of civilization and creating a stark "us versus them" divide between the West and the Islamic world (Steans, 2008, p. 160).

According to Saeed (2016, p. 64), the depiction of Muslim women in the media as either vulnerable or fanatical, places their identities on a scale of moderate to extremist. These labels affect how Muslim women are seen in society, leading young women to define themselves in opposition to these broad categories. The use of terms like 'moderate', 'extremist', or 'radical' by media outlets and government authorities constrains the everyday experiences of young Muslims within the confines of these ambiguous classifications. The War on Terror promotes a unified Western perspective and the safeguarding of non-Muslim, Western individuals, while concurrently undermining the value of Islam and the perspectives of Muslim individuals (Butler, 2004, p. 91). These stereotypes have fostered the perception that Muslims are distinct from the community, lacking common culture and Western values, and that Muslim women are oppressed by their traditional communities (Wilkins-Laflamme, 2018).

Within Canada, hijabi Muslim women's rights and citizenship are frequently questioned, exemplified by cases like Suaad Hagi Mohamud⁷. Additionally, the "extremist mother" archetype, promoted by mainstream media, depicts some Muslim women as breeders of hatred. At the same time, colonial views, as noted by various scholars (Jiwani, 2011), fetishize the sexuality of colonized women, highlighting how these pervasive stereotypes are reinforced in popular culture and media narratives. The representation of Muslim women wearing hijabs and niqabs in Canada positions them as outliers from the Canadian norm. Canadian media coverage has sparked significant concern among Canadian authorities, particularly in Quebec, where efforts mirror France and Belgium's attempts to ban the hijab. In Quebec, niqab-wearing women are already required to show their faces for voting (Jiwani, 2011, p. 22).

Reflecting on the gender narrative within the War on Terror, it's evident that the implications for Muslim women are profound and wide-reaching, touching on more than just perceptions, but also deeply influencing their sense of identity and belonging. This narrative starkly juxtaposes the image of 'liberated' Western women against 'oppressed' Muslim women, fostering a divisive 'us versus them' dynamic. This dichotomy raises important questions about the roles played by media, policy, and societal discourse in

⁷ Suaad Hagi Mohamud, a Canadian black Muslim citizen, experienced a significant ordeal in 2009. After visiting her mother in Kenya, she was stopped from boarding her return flight to Canada due to Kenyan officials claiming her appearance didn't match her passport photo, suspecting identity fraud. The Canadian High Commission in Nairobi subsequently voided her passport. She spent time in a Kenyan jail and was charged with identity fraud, living in poor conditions while awaiting trial. The Canadian government initially showed little support, with Foreign Minister Lawrence Cannon expressing doubt about her identity. It wasn't until a DNA test confirmed her identity as the mother of her son in Toronto that the Canadian government agreed to assist. Charges against her were dropped, and she finally returned to Canada and was reunited with her son. Mohamud's case raised significant concerns about the treatment of Canadian citizens abroad and the government's responsibility to protect them. She later announced plans to sue the Canadian government for mishandling her case. The ordeal highlighted issues of bureaucratic negligence and the challenges faced by citizens of foreign origin within their own national systems. Source: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/suaad-hagi-mohamud-s-detention-in-kenya-1.785251>

crafting these perceptions and how these elements converge to create an environment where the rights and identities of Muslim women are constantly under scrutiny and debate.

3.4 Colonialism and the Eurocentric Feminists Gaze on Muslim Women

Connecting to the previous section, Thobani (2007) asserted that many white feminists, activists, and academics publicly supported the War on Terror policy⁸, framing the war as a battle between the West and the Muslim 'other.' White feminists often failed to address how the conditions of colonialism, imperialism, and globalization have contributed to privileging American men and women (Thobani et al., 2010) She said:

[Phyllis] Chesler's was thus a familiar colonial narrative that lent feminist credence to the racialized fantasy of an eternal war of the "civilized" West – defined as the Judeo-Christian world – against the forces of Islamic barbarism (p.131).

Examining Western feminists' views on oppression and liberation maintains the relevance of Crenshaw's (1993) call for intersectionality. In the liberal West, similar issues affect Muslim women, whose lives are often interpreted through racist and nationalist perspectives, portraying them as lacking agency, and oppressed by their "backward" culture (Razack, 2008). This perception further feeds into the stereotype of Muslim men as misogynistic and violent, aligning with the broader stereotype of Muslim men as terrorists (Bruckert & Law, 2018). Medina (2014) critiques the imperialist perspective within mainstream feminism, which often views Muslim women through a lens of

⁸ In a 2007 article, Sunera Thobani, a Canadian feminist scholar, criticized Phyllis Chesler, Judith Butler, and Zillah Eisenstein, three American feminists, for supporting the Afghanistan invasion. Chesler responded to Thobani (Chesler & Eisenstein, 2007), citing four reasons: firstly, to address what she saw as a typical yet rarely challenged perspective in feminist academia; secondly, to contest Thobani's criticism of three Jewish feminists; thirdly, after being disinvited from a keynote at a British university's feminist conference, she saw responding as a way to engage with the UK and international feminist communities; and fourthly, to highlight the silencing of dissenting or non-conventional feminist views in academic and campus settings.

essentialized feminism. This perspective stereotypes Muslim women as oppressed, culturally deprived, passive, and even potentially harmful to feminism. The hijab is seen as a negative symbol, an "abomination of the body" (p. 879).

The FEMEN campaign, initiated in Ukraine in 2008, has been known for its provocative activism, including topless protests against issues like sex tourism, religious institutions, and sexism. A significant focus of their activism has been the criticism of practices perceived as oppressive in Muslim communities, particularly the wearing of the hijab, which they argue symbolizes male oppression and contributes to the subjugation of women. FEMEN claims a duty to "liberate" Muslim women from such practices, often framing the hijab negatively and perpetuating the stereotype that Muslim women are uniformly oppressed and devoid of agency.

However, this stance has faced substantial criticism for its oversimplification and lack of cultural sensitivity. Critics argue that FEMEN's approach dismisses the complexities of individual choice and the cultural significance of practices like wearing the hijab. Medina (2014) contends that while questioning the hijab can lead to personal and communal introspection among Muslim women, when posed from an external, particularly Western, perspective, it becomes oppressive and disrespectful.

Moreover, Medina criticizes FEMEN and, by extension, elements of mainstream feminism for metaphorically placing Muslim women under a "tight veil" of ignorance, effectively silencing their voices and agency. This suggests that the campaign, while purporting to free Muslim women, imposes another form of ideological domination, portraying them as indoctrinated "damsels in distress" and assuming they are incapable of making informed choices about their lives (Medina, 2014, p. 879). Thus, in their attempt

to challenge patriarchal controls, FEMEN's actions often inadvertently perpetuate another layer of cultural imperialism and fail to respect the agency and diversity of women's experiences within Islam.

Razack (1998) noted that issues such as female genital mutilation and wearing of the hijab by Muslim women, viewed as symbols of the "South's inferiority", are oppressive to women. However, when these practices are oversimplified and become the predominant focus in Western news and academic work, they mirror the outdated racial stereotypes described by Fanon (as cited by Razack) in the colonial context. These stereotypes portray Asian and African women, in both the North and South, as individuals in need of rescue by supposedly more civilized Europeans (p.6). Often, there is a tendency in Western countries to view other cultures, especially those in the Southern hemisphere, as less advanced or enlightened. This mindset can lead to a simplistic view of a veiled woman as just a victim of her society or religion, without considering the complexity of her situation. We struggle to see the parallel between, for instance, a woman choosing to wear a veil and another opting for high heels or a tight skirt in the West. Similarly, while cosmetic surgeries like breast enhancements are seen as choices made by women in the West, practices like female genital mutilation in other parts of the world are viewed solely as forced procedures. The perceptions of women's choices in medical and body-modifying practices can often be influenced by underlying biases related to race and class. For instance, in the West, cosmetic surgeries such as breast enhancements are frequently seen as autonomous choices made by affluent, predominantly white women, reflecting their agency and control over their own bodies. This agency is assumed because these women typically belong to a higher socio-economic class that traditionally aligns with power and self-determination.

In stark contrast, practices like female genital mutilation (FGM), often found in less affluent regions predominantly populated by women of color, are viewed solely as forced procedures. This perception is deeply intertwined with racial and class-based prejudices. It assumes a lack of agency among these women, influenced by stereotypes that portray them as oppressed or lacking autonomy. This differential framing not only reflects a racial and economic disparity but also underscores a broader discourse that tends to value the decisions of wealthy, white women while scrutinizing and devaluing the choices—or perceived lack thereof—of poor, Black women and other marginalized groups.

Thus, the ways in which different societies perceive and judge women's bodily decisions are not merely about the choices themselves but are deeply rooted in issues of race, class, and the global power structures that prioritize certain voices and experiences over others. This dichotomy highlights the need to critically examine how race and class shape perceptions of agency and autonomy in discussions about women's health and body politics globally. This kind of thinking can make us in Western countries overlook the subtle forms of oppression in our own societies and fail to appreciate the ways women in other cultures actively resist oppressive practices (Razack, 1998, p.7).

By applying Mohanty, (1988) framework, which shifts feminist discourse from a simplistic approach that often sees non-Western women only as victims to a more nuanced understanding that recognizes their agency, diverse identities, and the various structural factors affecting their lives, we can critique Western feminism's tendencies. These tendencies often lead to the homogenization and essentialization of Muslim women's experiences, portraying them uniformly as oppressed and voiceless, seemingly in need of liberation from their own cultures and religions. This perspective fails to recognize the

diversity of their experiences and circumstances. Instead of viewing Muslim women as individuals with unique stories and struggles, they are often lumped together as a monolithic group in need of rescue.

Secondly, Mohanty (1988) challenges the narrative that Muslim women are entirely oppressed and require 'saving' by Western interventions. This view overlooks their agency, resistance, and diverse experiences, ignoring the complex realities of their lives. It assumes they are passive victims, rather than active agents in their own right.

Thirdly, Mohanty contends with the assumption that Western feminist ideals are universal and should be globally applied. When analyzing the gaze of Muslim women, it is crucial to avoid imposing Western standards of feminism, autonomy, and empowerment. This viewpoint does not consider the different cultural, social, and religious contexts that shape their experiences and identities. Fourthly, Mohanty argues that Western feminism often casts Muslim women in a colonized subject position, thus reinforcing power imbalances. Analyzing the gaze of Muslim women involves challenging these dynamics and recognizing their subjectivity and complexity.

In conclusion, applying Mohanty's framework to the responses of Muslim women activists to the Afzaal family murders provides a crucial lens through which to understand the complexity of these responses. By moving away from a monolithic portrayal of Muslim women as passive victims needing rescue, this framework allows for a deeper appreciation of their agency and the nuanced ways in which they navigate and resist the structures of power that seek to define them. It challenges the pervasive narrative of Muslim women's oppression under their own cultural and religious systems and highlights their active engagement in crafting responses that are informed by their unique experiences of

gendered Islamophobia. The use of Mohanty's approach in analyzing these responses not only enriches our understanding of the specific case of the Afzaal family murders but also broadens the discussion around the roles of identity, resistance, and agency within the context of global and local forces shaping Muslim women's lives in Canada. This approach underscores the importance of viewing Muslim women not as subjects needing liberation from external sources but as empowered agents within their own narratives of survival and resistance.

To summarize, the examination of Western feminist perspectives on Muslim women underscores the enduring relevance of intersectionality and the need to critique essentialist narratives. Thobani, Medina, Razack, and Mohanty's works collectively illuminate how Western feminism often falls into the trap of homogenizing and essentializing the experiences of Muslim women, portraying them as uniformly oppressed and voiceless. This approach not only overlooks the complexities of their lives but also diminishes their agency and resistance within their cultural and religious contexts. The tendency to view Muslim women through a colonial lens, as victims needing rescue from their 'backward' cultures, perpetuates stereotypes and reinforces power imbalances. It is crucial, therefore, to challenge these narratives, avoid imposing Western standards of feminism and autonomy, and recognize the diverse and empowered roles Muslim women play in negotiating and resisting oppression. This analysis not only deepens our understanding of the intersectional challenges faced by Muslim women but also calls for a more nuanced and respectful engagement with their experiences and perspectives.

3.5 Politics of Hijab, Niqab, and Abaya in the Canadian Public Space

The politics of the hijab (hair covering), niqab (face covering), and abaya (long, loose outer dress) within the Canadian context is centred on two critical points: the racialization of Muslims and the colonial ideology that positions Muslims as “others”. This is particularly evident when considering that “the appearance of the Muslim woman makes her an easy marker of such identity politics” (Saeed, 2016, p. 58). This section aims to unravel the origins of the perception that the hijab, niqab, and abaya are oppressive and challenges attempts to exclude visibly Muslim women from public spaces by policy and law and gender based Islamophobic violence. Razack (2004) notes that in Western perspectives, the Muslim woman’s body is often seen as restricted, harmed, or even killed for cultural reasons, leading to the notion that Muslims should be ‘deculturalized’ to avoid corrupting the superior civilization they have entered (Razack, 2004, p.131).

The roots of anti-Muslim violence lie in the perpetuation of negative imagery and stereotypes about Muslims. Common phrases used during such violence, like “Go home”, underscore a deep-seated belief in the inappropriateness of Muslim presence in the West, coupled with a strong inclination for retribution. Therefore, while the recent surge in anti-Muslim violence is undoubtedly fueled by fury and shock from the 9/11 attacks, it is also underpinned by a wider historical and cultural context that fosters anti-Muslim, anti-Arab, and anti-Middle Eastern sentiments (Perry, 2014, p.7).

According to Edward Said, Muslim communities and nations are constructed as static and homogenized entities (Said, 1997). Although feminist analyses of Said’s work have pointed out the lack of focus on women’s agency, their involvement and accountability in forming Orientalist narratives, and the subdued attention given to issues

of sexuality. Said himself, however, did highlight how the Orient was feminized, accentuating its portrayal as a region of sexual conquest (Jiwani, 2010, p.64). Orientalist and Islamophobic portrayals have significant implications for the self-identity and societal perception of Muslim women and girls. These representations, prevalent in literature, cinema, and popular culture, not only shape how others interact with Muslim women and girls in everyday life but also impose boundaries on their identities that are beyond their control. The frequent harassment and discrimination they face are, in many cases, direct consequences of these pervasive negative stereotypes and the lack of counter narratives to challenge them (Taylor & Zine, 2014, p.5).

The discussion about what Muslim women wear is not about liberating veiled Muslim women; instead, it highlights fears about perceived challenges to ‘national identity’ and the ‘Western lifestyle’ as symbolized by the hijab, thereby placing Muslims in a conflicting stance with the nation’s populace (Khokhar, 2022, p. 268). Jiwani (2010) noted “the consistent media obsession with Muslim women’s practices of veiling in contemporary settings” (p. 65). Bullock (2002) describes Muslim women as being portrayed as outsiders in media narratives, seen as alien ‘Others’ and adherents of a religion contrary to Canadian values. This perception has shifted views of what Muslim women wear from a religious identifier to a divisive symbol of ‘difference,’ thus linking it to gender disparity, democratic hostility, and Islamic radicalism (Chakraborti & Zempi, 2012, p.270).

Zine (2022) discussed the politics of what Muslim women wear as a form of “sartorial nationalism” and coerced unveiling in Quebec, focusing on the impact of policies regulating Muslim women’s religious attire in the public sphere. These policies frame visibly Muslim women (who wear hijab, niqab, and Abaya) as incompatible with Quebec’s

secular “neutrality,” challenging their citizenship and national belonging (p. 20). The term “sartorial nationalism” captures how dress codes are used as a tool of nationalistic policy to promote a specific image of national identity that aligns with the dominant cultural or religious norms. In Quebec, this form of nationalism manifests in the coerced unveiling of Muslim women, where policies are implemented to restrict the wearing of religious attire such as the hijab, niqab, and abaya in public spaces.

These policies are framed under the guise of maintaining secular “neutrality” in public spaces. However, Zine argues that they effectively single out and marginalize visibly Muslim women, portraying their choice of dress as incompatible with Quebecois values. Such policies do not merely regulate clothing but also serve as a means of challenging the citizenship and national belonging of these women. This coerced unveiling acts as a gatekeeping mechanism, where adherence to the dress code is posed as a prerequisite for being recognized as a true member of the national community. This approach raises profound questions about freedom, identity, and the inclusive or exclusive nature of nationalism in multicultural societies.

According to this, the introduction of Bill 94 in 2010 and subsequent legislation like Bill 62 and Bill 21 aimed to ban religious symbols in public spaces and workplaces, disproportionately affecting Muslim women. Public opinion in Quebec has been largely unfavorable towards Islam and in particular Muslim veils, with various surveys indicating a significant portion of Quebecers supporting these legislative measures. The text highlights how these policies are rooted in gendered Islamophobia and perpetuate cultural fears, thereby excluding foreign cultures from the national identity. It also notes a slight positive shift in public opinion towards Islam following the Quebec Mosque shooting. The

impact of these policies on psychological well-being and religious freedom is also discussed, emphasizing their contradiction with the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (p.21). The text concludes by pointing out that Quebec's ethnonationalism fuels these Islamophobic policies. Zine said:

These secular laws police and restrict religious freedom and have been challenged by civil rights organizations for 24 Under Siege their violation of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Quebec's ethnonationalism is a major driver in legislating fear and institutionalizing Islamophobia in Canada. (p. 23)

In summary, the exploration of the politics surrounding the hijab, niqab, and abaya in Canadian public spaces reveals a complex interplay of racialization, colonial ideologies, and deeply ingrained stereotypes. The portrayal of Muslim women in the media and public discourse as outsiders and embodiments of anti-Canadian values underscores a troubling narrative that conflates religious practices with threats to Western lifestyle and democracy. Ultimately, the politicization of Muslim women's attire in Canada is a microcosm of larger issues regarding multiculturalism, integration, and the struggle against deeply rooted orientalist and colonialist perceptions.

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter detailed the decolonial Muslim feminist framework and its insights into the complex realities faced by Muslim women. It also underscores the significance of intersectionality to understanding the multifaceted discrimination encountered by Muslim women, particularly in the context of Islamophobia, gender, and the lingering effects of colonialism. I emphasized the intricate interplay of religious bias, gender prejudices, and the implications of colonial legacies, particularly in Canadian law and policy, drawing on the works of Black feminist scholars (Crenshaw and hooks). Moreover, the chapter

critically examines how the ‘War on Terror’ and Eurocentric feminist perspectives have contributed to shaping and often misrepresenting the experiences and identities of Muslim women. It has highlighted the importance of challenging homogenizing narratives that overlook the diversity and agency of Muslim women and the need to counter the stereotypes perpetuated by both media and policy.

The analysis of the politics surrounding the hijab, niqab, and abaya in the Canadian context, particularly in Quebec, has shown how these religious symbols have been politicized, leading to debates on national identity and cultural integration. In essence, this chapter has not only contributed to a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by Muslim women but also emphasized the importance of integrating a decolonial Muslim feminist perspective in academic, social, and political discourse. Moving forward, the next section will explore storytelling as a vital methodology in this thesis, providing a platform for these women's voices and experiences to be authentically and comprehensively represented.

Chapter Four: Storytelling as a Methodology to Uncover Marginalized Knowledge

There have been times when I wasn't comfortable talking about being Muslim. But on days when I feel confident, I feel it's important to speak up because there's no guarantee that someone else will feel the same way or have the courage to speak up.

Malak, London, ON, 2023

4.1 Introduction

This chapter explains the importance and use of storytelling as a method to explore the experiences and responses of Muslim women activists in London, Ontario, following the Afzaal family murders. Storytelling emerges as a powerful tool to bring forth and reclaim narratives that have been misrepresented or ignored in mainstream media and public conversations. In the context of gendered Islamophobia discussed in the previous chapter, storytelling becomes particularly empowering. It allows these women to articulate their experiences of discrimination and resilience, challenging the stereotypical portrayals and one-dimensional narratives often seen in media and policy. This chapter emphasizes storytelling's role as a transformative method in feminist research and sheds light on the ethical considerations central to this study. By using semi-structured interviews, the participants' narratives not only detail the Afzaal family murders as heinous crimes but also frame them as incidents of racial injustice with extensive global repercussions. This approach, therefore, serves to counteract the impact of gendered Islamophobia by providing a platform for these women to voice their truth and experiences, thus reinforcing their agency and resilience.

I conducted interviews with seven Muslim women activists located in London, Ontario, where the murders were committed. The participants are engaged in various roles,

including work with non-profit organizations, student campus activities, artistic pursuits, and participation in local youth initiatives in London, Ontario. The storytelling approach that shaped the interviews recognizes the sensitivities involved in exploring topics related to Muslim communities in Canada. This implies an understanding of the complex cultural, religious, and socio-political factors that affect these communities. It also involves being mindful of potential prejudices, stereotypes, and misconceptions that might influence how these topics are perceived and discussed. The storytelling approach in the interviews is designed to acknowledge and respect these nuances, ensuring that the experiences and perspectives of the Muslim community are represented accurately and empathetically, without reinforcing any negative biases or causing discomfort to the participants. Additionally, I provide details on participant recruitment strategies, data analysis, and reflect on my unique position as an insider within the community.

4.2: Storytelling and Marginalized Knowledge

Storytelling captures personal experiences and respects the traditions of knowledge sharing that are deeply rooted in the culture and context of Indigenous people and their communities (Christensen, 2012, p.240). Clare Hemmings (2011), in "Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory," provides an analysis of why feminists engage in storytelling. She emphasizes how stories are significant, intertwining with the broader establishment of "gendered meanings" (Hemmings, 2011, p.1). According to Christensen (2012), "At its heart, research is storytelling" (p.232). The researcher engages themselves deeply in stories collected through methods like interviews.

A key aspect is active listening, as "story-listening" represents a progressive step in anti-colonial research practice. This approach, as outlined by Frenette (2023), p.3, seeks

to minimize the pressure on marginalized communities. Storytelling as a research method is a considerate and resourceful practice of listening to existing stories. Overall, it is proposed as a respectful and conscientious research method, ensuring that the process is not stressful or excessively invasive for the individuals and groups involved in the research process. Once the active listening phase is complete, the researcher then engages in a period of reflection and interpretation of the stories they have gathered. This analytical process is transformative, essentially transitioning the researcher into the role of a storyteller. The researcher can then share these stories with various audiences, enriching them with their own experiences and insights (Christensen, 2012, p.232).

I adhere to these practices in my study of the diverse responses of Muslim women activists in London to the Afzaal family murders. During interviews, I listened actively followed by reflection and interpretation to analyze the information collected. This approach became integral to highlight the resilience, agency, and chosen narratives of these women in the face of adversity. Through active listening, I deeply engaged with their experiences and stories, ensuring that their perspectives are heard and understood in their full complexity.

In the reflective phase, I interpreted the information gathered and themes of collective care and community building emerged. This reflective and interpretative process was vital to understanding the layers of meaning in their experiences and how these shape their responses to the tragedy. In the reflective phase of the research, I deeply engaged with the interview data, repeatedly examining the transcripts and notes to identify emerging patterns, particularly the themes of collective care and community building among Muslim women activists. This interpretative process involved delving beyond the surface level of

the narratives to understand their deeper implications and meanings, especially in relation to the tragedy.

An important aspect of this phase was my self-reflection, considering my position as an insider within the community and being mindful of potential biases. This reflexivity ensured that the interpretation remained true to the participants' perspectives. Furthermore, I contextualized these themes within broader socio-political and cultural landscapes, linking the individual experiences and resilience of these women to wider dynamics in Muslim women's activism. This comprehensive approach was crucial in unraveling the intricate layers of meaning in their experiences and responses to the tragedy.

By adopting this method, I was transformed from a collector of data to a storyteller and articulated the strengths and experiences of these activist women. This approach not only enriched my research findings, but also ensured that the narratives presented are presented in their own voice and representative of their experiences. The findings chapter of my study will further elaborate on the insights I gathered to showcase how these Muslim women activists came together to respond to the challenges they faced in the immediate aftermath of the Afzaal family murders and since then.

"As feminists, our stories tell something about us too" (Ilmonen, 2020, p. 366). When feminist stories are shared, they provide personal insights and contribute to a deeper understanding of intersectionality in new and different contexts. This highlights the critical role of personal and collective stories in shaping feminist knowledge and understanding (Moraga & Anzaldú, 2015). My positionality influences my choice of topic (Ahmed, 2021), how I frame my research questions and methods, and how I interpret and analyze the stories. The profound impact of the Afzaal family murders across Canada deeply

resonated with me and many other Muslim women, influencing my decision to focus on this tragedy. It led me to re-evaluate my safety and our position in my new home. In response to the incident, I even considered removing my hijab as a safety measure, reflecting the extent to which the perceived threat pervaded our community (Ramadan, 2021). Building on my experiences as a journalist interviewing Muslim women activists across Canada, my research is deeply informed by the insights gained from these interactions. It is inspired by my own reflections and the responses of Muslim women activists not only in London, Ontario, but also from various parts of Canada, who have been actively involved in grassroots initiatives and have openly shared their stories. These interviews have provided a valuable perspective, enriching my understanding of the dynamics of activism within Muslim communities. The firsthand accounts and experiences shared by these women during our conversations have significantly shaped the direction and depth of my research, allowing me to explore their resilience and contributions within a broader Canadian context. These responses demonstrate resilience and a strong resolve to address and challenge issues of Islamophobia and community mobilization.

Storytelling challenges established understandings of knowledge to reveal what Foucault identifies as "suppressed knowledge," representing worldviews and experiences often excluded from mainstream knowledge systems (as cited in Razack, 1993, p.55). Storytelling methods plays a crucial role in strategies for social change, especially in areas like the legal field and education. Consequently, this research addresses the Afzaal family murders from the perspective of community mobilization, led by Muslim women activists in London who are combating Islamophobia in their community across various fields.

Storytelling also significantly influences academic discussions, particularly regarding intersectionality (Ilmonen, 2020, p. 347). Personal stories can provide a nuanced understanding of intersectional identities, highlighting complexities often ignored in traditional academic narratives. Traditional academic narratives often approach subjects in a more general or theoretical manner, which can overlook the unique, lived experiences of individuals who face overlapping forms of discrimination based on race, gender, class, sexuality, and other aspects of their identity. By focusing on personal stories, this study centers marginalized knowledges to delve into the specific, day-to-day realities of individuals, offering a more nuanced and detailed perspective. These stories provide insights into how different aspects of a person's identity interact with each other and influence their experiences in ways that broader academic analyses cannot always capture. In doing so, it also sheds light on the larger systemic issues faced by Muslim women in London, ON. These personal narratives reflect and reveal the broader patterns of discrimination, Islamophobia, and gender-based challenges that permeate their lives. The detailed exploration of individual experiences serves not only to highlight the unique struggles and resilience of these women but also to illustrate how these challenges are deeply embedded in and exacerbated by wider societal and systemic structures. Thus, the study connects the micro-level experiences of Muslim women with the macro-level dynamics of systemic inequality and injustice within the community and beyond.

In exploring the responses of Muslim women activists in London to the Afzaal family murders, stories have been instrumental in uncovering a nuanced understanding of intersectional identities. For example, one story came from a woman involved in artistic pursuits. She discussed how her cultural background and experiences as a Muslim in

London shaped her artistic expression and activism, highlighting the intersection of cultural identity with her role as an activist. Another story came from an older immigrant activist, contrasting with that of a younger, second-generation participant. This showcased how generational differences impact perceptions and responses to the same event, influenced by their shared identity as Muslim women.

4.3 Ethical Considerations

Researching sensitive topics and vulnerable groups, such as Muslim communities, while crucial, can pose potential risks, such as emotional harm to participants (Lee & Renzetti, 1990, p.512). Razack (1993) highlights a challenge in using storytelling to bridge differences or address patriarchal and racist ideologies: the difference in position between the storyteller and the listener. For example, Razack (1993) mentioned that the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women collected stories from immigrant women by focusing on emotional and individual experiences, raising questions about the control and use of these narratives (p. 56).

Feminist scholars argue that research on sensitive topics inherently involves exploitation due to the power imbalance between the researcher and the participant, which can lead to feelings of abuse or exploitation (Fine et al., 2003). In the letter to communities, Eve Tuck (2009) advocates for rethinking the impact of "damage-centered" research, which often reinforces negative stereotypes of marginalized groups. Tuck, (2009) calls for a moratorium on such research, urging a shift from victimhood to resilience and introducing the concept of 'survivance' (p. 423). As Tuck asserted:

To forward our survivance, to deepen our sovereignty, I believe it is time for a moratorium on damage-centered research in our communities. This moratorium will put a freeze on damage-centered research efforts while stakeholders in our communities

take some time to reflect on the positive and negative outcomes of past damage centered research on our peoples; to create and implement guidelines for researchers working in our communities; and to (re)consider the roles of research in our communities (p. 423).

This moratorium aims to develop new theories of change, establish ethical guidelines for community research, and create mutually beneficial roles for academic researchers, ultimately empowering communities and transforming research relationships. Applying Tuck's approach to my research on Muslim women activists in London, Ontario, in response to the Afzaal family murders, involves shifting from a damage-centered narrative to a desire-based one. This means focusing on the strengths, resilience, and agency of the Muslim women activists. My aim is to document how they are positively impacting their community and advocating for change in the face of tragedy, rather than solely emphasizing the challenges and traumas they face. By providing a platform for these women to share their stories, goals, and aspirations, this approach respects their agency and avoids portraying them merely as victims of circumstances. It is important to avoid reducing the experiences of these women to a single narrative of suffering or victimhood, and to acknowledge the complexity of their experiences, which may include joy, success, and hope alongside struggle.

In this process, I engage with the community in a collaborative manner, ensuring that the research process and outcomes align with the needs and desires of the community. My research seeks to avoid perpetuating stereotypes or stigmatizing narratives and portray a balanced and nuanced picture. Additionally, I consider how my research can contribute to positive change, which might involve policy recommendations, raising awareness, or supporting community-led initiatives.

Beck & Britto, (2006) provided valuable insights on how to avoid harm in three key areas: 1) the use of feminist methods prioritizing marginalized groups' experiences and perspectives, 2) the strategy of building trust with participants often begins with icebreakers, 3) the importance of empathy in the research process. I applied these techniques in my study. I utilized feminist methods to prioritize the voices of Muslim women, who are often underrepresented in mainstream discourse (Bruckert & Law, 2018). I maintained an unwavering belief in the participants' ability to tackle their own issues, exercise personal agency, and play an active role in understanding their environments and effecting change in their social worlds (Nardon et al., 2021, p.9). Generally, this approach sought to encourage participants to share their experiences, thoughts, and emotions about the Afzaal family murder.

These methods to reduce harm were tailored to each participant's unique situation. For example, when one participant brought her daughter to the interview, she naturally began with talking about her. Another participant, who was on vacation, connected with me via Zoom and shared her vacation experiences. These personalized interactions at the beginning of each interview served a deeper purpose in building rapport with the participants. Their effectiveness lay not just in creating a relaxed atmosphere, but also in forging a sense of trust and mutual understanding. This approach was particularly significant, considering my own positionality as a hijab-wearing woman. Wearing the hijab allowed me to connect with the participants on a more personal level, as it often served as a shared cultural and religious touchpoint. This commonality was instrumental in establishing a sense of familiarity and empathy, enabling participants to feel more at ease and open in sharing their experiences.

Rapport-building was crucial for gaining in-depth insights into each participant's background, moving beyond superficial introductions. It helped create a safe space where participants felt understood and respected, thereby encouraging more candid and meaningful conversations. This method was particularly valuable in this context, as it acknowledged and respected the cultural and religious nuances central to the participants' identities and experiences. Overall, these initial interactions were a key part of my methodology, enhancing both the depth and quality of the data collected.

Additionally, I exercised empathetic engagement to build trust with my participants and ensure their perspectives are heard, respected, and understood. During interviews, I practiced active listening, which involved not just hearing the words of the participants but also understanding the emotions and experiences behind them. For instance, when a participant shared a particularly emotional experience, I responded with phrases like "That sounds incredibly challenging" or "I can see how that experience had a significant impact on you". Moreover, I asked thoughtful follow-up questions to show genuine interest in their stories. For example, if a participant mentioned a significant event in passing, I would ask, "Could you tell me more about how that event influenced your activism?" To further this trust, I shared the transcripts of their interviews with them, allowing them to review, edit, and remove any content they felt uncomfortable with.

Overall, storytelling as a form of qualitative research not only serves as a method of conveying experiences but also as a means of challenging and reshaping dominant narratives. The emphasis on shifting from damage-centred to resilience-focused narratives highlights a critical evolution in research methodology, advocating for approaches that support communities and honour their complexities.

4.4 Research Design

To ensure a diversity of participants, I used a multi-faceted recruitment approach, including a combination of social media platforms (Instagram, LinkedIn, X, WhatsApp, and Facebook), email, telephone, personal networks, and snowball sampling techniques. The initial step entailed identifying potential participants who were actively engaged online and involved in relevant social networks or community activism related to the subject of the study. I drew on my personal connections and asked current participants to refer others. I created and shared online posters (see Appendix A) and announcements to attract more participants. These materials included a brief overview of the study, its aim, and eligibility criteria. Notable organizations such as The City of London (Muslim Community Liaison Advisor), Muslim Resource Centre for Social Support and Integration (MRCSSI), Coalition of Muslim Women of KW, Muslim Students' Association - Western University, and Muslim Link - Muslim Canadians Online Hub posted the recruitment poster on their websites and social media accounts.

Participants who were interested in joining the study reached out by replying to recruitment emails, messaging me on social media (Instagram, LinkedIn, and X), or through people they know. Next, I sent them a detailed letter of invitation (see Appendix B) combined with interview questions (see Appendix C) and then followed up via email to set up interview time and preference for virtual or in-person interaction.

I engaged in two storytelling-based initiatives and one research project focusing on the experiences of Muslim and Arab-speaking women. The first initiative, a journalistic project titled [“Unheard Voices,” aimed to gather stories from Toronto, Ottawa, Waterloo, and Montreal, while I was studying journalism at Sheridan College](#) (Ramadan, 2022). It

highlighted how Islamophobia fosters social stigma and intensifies feelings of alienation among Muslim women in Canada. More on this can be found at Sheridan Journalism's Unheard Voices. The second initiative, ["Fearless Cities," is a collaborative effort between the Leading Social Justice Collective \(LSJC\), the School of Cities at the University of Toronto, and the United Way](#) (Elgendy et al., 2023; Ramadan et al., 2023). This project focuses on improving the safety and inclusiveness of public spaces for visibly Muslim women and other women of color in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). The third research project, titled ["The Pandemic's Influence on Gender-Based Violence Among Arab-Speaking Women in the Halton Region,"](#) is a meticulous endeavor aimed at documenting and analyzing the repercussions of the global pandemic on gender-based violence (GBV) affecting Arab-speaking women in the Halton Region (Elgendy et al., 2023).

These experiences with Muslim communities in Canada, my ongoing journalistic work, scholarly research, and community projects that focus on gendered Islamophobia and gender-based violence led to strong relationships with various organizations. I contacted these relevant community organizations with their permission and informed them about my research. These contacts were vital to recruiting participants. My goal was to engage a diverse range of participants from the Muslim community in London, Ontario. To achieve this, I sought out individuals of varied ages, ethnicities, religious sects, socio-economic backgrounds, educational levels, and immigration statuses. This inclusive approach was deliberate, aiming to highlight the often-overlooked diversity within the Muslim community, which is frequently misrepresented as homogenous. Notably, my positionality as a member of this community, especially as a hijab-wearing woman, played a significant role in how participants interacted with me. My shared cultural and religious

identity likely made them more comfortable and willing to share their stories, as they perceived me as someone who could empathize and relate directly to their experiences. This level of comfort and trust was crucial for accessing a range of narratives and perspectives that might not have been as readily shared with someone outside of their community. Therefore, my positionality not only facilitated a deeper engagement with participants but also enriched the data collected, reflecting a broad spectrum of experiences within the Muslim community in London, Ontario.

4.5 Participants and Demographic

Participants were self-identified as a Muslim woman activist, were at least 18 years old, and a resident of London, Ontario. I interviewed seven participants who met these criteria and consented to participate in the study. These participants ranged in age from 20 to 59. At the start of the interview, participants were asked to introduce themselves and had the option to share details such as their age, race, ethnic background/country of origin, immigration status, and whether they wore a hijab. The demographics of the group included three Middle Eastern participants, two South Asians, one African, and one person who identified as mixed South Asian-European heritage (see Table #1 on page 74).

All participants were university-educated - two of them have a Master's degree, and one participant has a Ph.D. Their immigration statuses and time of arrival in Canada varied. Four participants were born in Canada and three immigrated as children with their families. Five participants wore hijabs. Professionally, three participants work in non-profit organizations, two are active representatives of different student groups at their respective universities, one is an artist, and another is a member of a local youth group. Each

participant brings a unique perspective shaped by their cultural, ethnic, and professional experiences.

I selected pseudonyms that reflected the participants' cultural and ethnic origins, being careful to avoid stereotypes or overly generic names that might inadvertently reinforce certain biases or misconceptions, while remaining sensitive to the heterogeneity of the Muslim community in Canada, as indicated in Table #1 below. All participants read and signed consent forms (see Appendix D), which included a brief overview of the research, the sampling criteria, the purpose of the study, and participant rights. These rights included the option to withdraw at any time and assurances of confidentiality and anonymity. This study was not considered high-risk since it delved into the daily activities of participants. They were informed about the intended length of interviews and could withdraw at any point before the deadline of December 31, 2023, at which point the data analysis was intended to be completed. All interviews were audio-recorded with their consent. Participants received interview transcripts to review, edit, and remove any content they were uncomfortable with; however, I did not receive any requests for edits from the participants. These transcripts are stored on my personal computer in password-protected files and will be deleted after the completion of the thesis process.

Table 1: Participants Demographic						
Pseudonym	Age	Ethnic Background	Education	Immigration Status	Religious Visibility (e.g., hijab, niqab, abaya)	Professional Sector
Amal	59	Egypt	Ph.D	Canadian born in Egypt	Wears hijab	Non-profit
Asmaa	38	Pakistan	Master	Canadian born in Canada	Wears hijab	Artist
Gameela	31	Ethiopia	Bachelor	Canadian born in Ethiopia	Non	Non-profit
Hend	41	Mixed race Pakistan/Germany	Master	Canadian born in Germany	Non	Non-profit
Laila	23	India/Pakistan	Undergraduate student	Canadian born in Saudi Arabia	Wears hijab	Students Group
Malak	20	Palestine	Undergraduate student	Canadian born in Canada	Wears hijab	Local youth initiative
Mona	25	Jordan	Graduate student	Canadian born in the USA	Wears hijab	Students Group



Image 2: An illustration showcasing the diverse styles of the Hijab

4.6 Data Collection

Feminist researcher Nicole Westmarland (2001) observed that qualitative research, unlike quantitative approaches, often places more emphasis on validity rather than objectivity and reliability. The pursuit of an absolute "truth" is less of a focus. Instead, qualitative methods, especially semi-structured interviews, foster a deeper and more emotionally connected understanding of the subjects under study (p. 8). Furthermore, narrative interviews, can capture participants personal stories and their interpretations of the world. (Nardon et al., 2021, p. 7).

I adopted a storytelling approach to my interviews, as it aligns with both feminist principles and my own commitment to avoiding further harm and oppression of participants. Instead of referring to them as 'subjects'—a term that implies treating participants as insensate objects to be experimented on, akin to “observing an animal in a zoo” (Westmarland, 2001, p.8)—I chose to engage with them more empathetically and respectfully.

Influenced by Ashlee Christoffersen's (2017) intersectional approach, I carefully crafted my research questions to recognize the heterogeneity of the participants. This intersectional perspective is particularly important for understanding the varied responses of Muslim women activists to the Afzaal family murders. For instance, the viewpoints of second-generation Canadian Muslim women might differ from those of their immigrant counterparts, particularly in terms of mobilization and activism. I included questions specifically designed to allow participants to express their personal and activist identities, thereby providing insights into how they view themselves and their roles in activism (see Question #1 in Appendix C). I also developed follow-up questions to engage younger participants about the role of social media in their activism. This approach helped in capturing the unique ways different generations engage with activism. Similarly, for immigrant women, questions were crafted to explore the intersection of their immigration status with their experiences in community involvement and activism. This method is crucial in uncovering the complexities women face at the intersection of different identities. Additionally, I maintained several open-ended questions to create spaces for participants to include topics they wish to discuss (see Appendix C).

Overall, the interviews were designed as conversational to create a relaxed atmosphere conducive to candid responses (Halabi, 2021). This informal and open-ended style of questioning proved effective in bringing to light the intersectional differences among participants. For instance, the contrasting experiences shared by one participant, an independent artist, and another, an older community worker, highlighted how intersectional identities shape experiences. Furthermore, I offered participants the flexibility to choose their preferred interview settings, whether virtual or in-person. Due to their tight schedules, most interviews were conducted online. On the day of the interview, I reviewed the interview's purpose and obtained the participant's consent again as consent is an ongoing process throughout the interview (Nardon et al., 2021, p. 8).

4.7 Data Analysis

Storytelling stands as our most powerful tool for conveying significant systemic issues like racism, classism, and sexism. People naturally understand the world through stories. Compelling stories illuminate systemic issues by immersing us in the characters' lives. Experiencing the world from their perspectives profoundly affects us, making their journeys feel personal. Powerful storytelling can challenge and reshape established beliefs, offering communities a chance to reimagine alternative ways of thinking and living (Neimand et al., 2021).

Applying storytelling method in my research involved:

1. analyzing the data with an eye towards the broader socio-cultural and political context of the participants' experiences. I went beyond the individual narratives and drew on feminist literatures to connect the narratives to larger societal structures, issues, and social categories such as gender, race, religion, and politics.

2. attempting to acknowledge and incorporate the complex and intersectional identities and experiences of each participant and how these shape their responses to the Afzaal family murders.
3. using a process of theory elaboration to extend the participants experiences to theories of gendered Islamophobia to contextualize the stories of Muslim women activists. This process involved coding and categorizing the data to identify patterns, themes, and relationships relevant to the existing literatures and theorizations.
4. reflecting continuously on my own positionality as a researcher to understand and note how it influences the research process and outcomes.

I relied on NVivo to transcribe and code the interview transcripts. This software is useful to organize and code the rich interview data, facilitating the identification of various themes for theory elaboration. The query function of NVivo was especially beneficial, enabling me to explore the relationships between the themes, the characteristics of the participants, and the recurring concepts within my data. This process led to the identification of three broad themes – reclaiming voices, navigating ongoing trauma and community building – and several sub-themes. Each theme represented a distinct aspect of the experiences and perspectives of the Muslim women activists interviewed, capturing the complexity and depth of their stories and struggles. These themes illuminated their individual stories and shed light on the broader structure dynamics that participants navigate daily.

I selected quotes that reflect these themes and sub-themes, ensuring that the participants' voices are at the forefront of the research. Qualitative methodology and semi-

structured interviews, while rich in providing detailed insights, have inherent challenges and limitations. One key challenge is ensuring data consistency across interviews, as each conversation can diverge based on the participant's responses (Westmarland, 2001) . Additionally, the interpretation of qualitative data can be subjective and influenced by the researcher's perspective. Acknowledging these limitations is crucial for a balanced understanding of the research findings.

As an immigrant Muslim woman, activist, journalist, and researcher working in a non-profit organization in Ontario, I needed to consider my role and perspective throughout the study. My identity and experiences not only informed my research approach but also shaped the data analysis and elaboration. As a Muslim woman activist who is deeply connected to the Muslim community in Ontario, I could understand cultural nuances and unspoken realities often missed by those outside the community. This position was crucial in building trust with participants, leading to more open and genuine dialogues. Furthermore, my positionality sharpened my awareness of the participants' challenges, their remarkable resilience, and their resistance to injustice. For example, a participant's discussion about the experiences of immigration in Canada, particularly experiences of Othering, resonated deeply with me. Our shared experiences demonstrate the inadequacy of a narrative focused solely on victimhood and the importance of participating in transformative change. I remained acutely conscious of how my own background, beliefs, and experiences might influence my interpretation of the data and continuously reflected on it.

This reflexive approach was pivotal to ensuring that participant voices are included in a balanced and fair way. For example, knowing my journalistic background, a participant

shared about their experience with a White journalist who insisted on discussing sensitive topics like the decision of Muslim women to remove their hijab following the Afzaal family murders. She talked about her discomfort in addressing such a personal choice amid a tragedy. Such instances highlighted the significance of my dual role as both a member of the community and a researcher. This dual perspective was key to understanding the intricate dynamics within the community and was vital in capturing the nuanced experiences and narratives of the participants. Consequently, this approach ensured that my research was conducted with sensitivity, integrity, and a deep understanding of the participants' perspectives.

In this chapter, I discussed the role of storytelling in feminist research on marginalized communities and how it relates to the ethical considerations for this study. I explained the measures I took to reduce harm for participants through active listening, building trust, and fostering shared empathy. Additionally, I described my approach to participant recruitment, data collection, and analysis, how these processes were shaped by my insider status in the community. In the next chapter, I will discuss the themes and sub-themes that emerged throughout the interviews.

Chapter Five: Reclaiming Stories: The Voices and Responses of Muslim Women

Activists in London

I've had experiences that made me feel unsafe. For instance, while walking in Hyde Park, I remember a time when it seemed like someone threw a beer bottle at me from a passing car. I heard something hit the ground beside me, but all I really knew was that a car had passed by. It left me uncertain whether it was racially motivated or just a random act. On campus, as an engineering student, I've endured colleagues making unwelcome remarks about my background.

Laila, London, ON, 2023

5.1 Introduction

This chapter investigates the profound effects of the Afzaal family murders on the activism and daily lives of Muslim activist women in London, Ontario. It builds on the theoretical frames highlighted in Chapter Three that conceptualize the construction of gendered narratives in the post-War on Terror era, and how these have significantly shaped the collective identity of Muslim women activists (Massoumi, 2015). This influence has pervaded the lives of these activists and echoes across the broader generation of Muslim youth, shaping their perceptions and responses to Islamophobic incidents (Zine, 2022; Razack, 2022; Abu-Lughod, 2013), as validated by the participants. Additionally, this chapter builds on the context established in Chapter Two, which lays the foundation for understanding the responses of the activists interviewed in this study.

In this chapter, I offer an alternative narrative (Massoumi, 2015, p.716); one that Muslim women activists in London, Ontario, have crafted in response to the Afzaal family murders as an act of Islamophobia. The participants' stories highlight the need to avoid

simplifying their experiences as solely ones of suffering or victimization. As you will read, their experiences are complex and include moments of joy creativity, and hope, as well as challenges. Their stories are not merely reactions to an isolated incident of hate but are reflective of a larger, systemic issue that has continually affected their lives and their community(Khokhar, 2022, p.270).

Using a feminist-centered methodology, I investigate how these activists have responded to this tragedy in different ways. I focus on their use of personal and professional narratives to embody the concept of "the personal is political" (Hanisch, 1972). The findings presented here offer a look into the activism of these women, shedding light on how they navigate, resist, and reshape the discourse around Islamophobia and its impact on their personal and collective experiences. By highlighting their stories, this chapter not only contributes to the broader understanding of gendered- Islamophobia and its impacts on Muslim women, but also underscores the importance of their voices in shaping the narrative and fostering change. In doing so, it aims to provide a glimpse into their resilience, agency, and the alternative stories they desire to tell in the face of adversity.

This exploration of community activism in response to the Afzaal family murders involves looking into personal activism projects and understanding what motivates the participants to get involved. I examined how they first learned about the incident and their initial reactions. Next, I asked them to identify the support and resources they and their community drew on after the tragedy. Moreover, I asked them to share the steps taken by individuals and organizations to prevent similar events. Additionally, I assessed how the Muslim community in London, Ontario became united and collaborated following the Afzaal family murders. Finally, I evaluated the broader impact of the incident on London's

social, cultural, and safety aspects for Muslim communities, and finally gathering any additional thoughts or stories participants wished to share about their experiences.

It is important to acknowledge that the concept of activism posed a challenge for some participants in this study. Two individuals specifically requested clarification on what is meant by an 'activist.' To address this, I turned to Chomsky (2017) definition, which stresses the importance of challenging power structures and addressing social inequalities. According to this definition, an activist is someone who advocates for social, political, or environmental changes, either individually or as part of a group. Furthermore, I referenced the approach of racialized women within their roles in organizations and society, focusing on their lived experiences through an intersectional lens (Moraga & Anzaldú , 2015). While the participants recognized that their actions and experiences aligned with these definitions, some confirmed that they practiced their activism through their organizations and not as individuals. This hesitancy underscores the complex challenges faced by Muslim communities in Canada regarding activism, particularly in light of the securitization of Muslims in the Canadian context. As described by (Ahmad, 2020) in the article “Securitization and the Muslim community in Canada”: “Put simply, expressions of Muslim identity are portrayed as a threat to security in Western societies, including Canada. Such Islamophobic overtures have been catapulted into the public discourse in recent years with the mainstreaming of right-wing political ideas that rest on the demonization of Muslims”.

To summarize the vital demographic information about the participants: they ranged in age from 20 to 59, and they represent a variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds, including three Middle Eastern , two South Asians, one African, and one

with a mixed Southern Asian-European heritage. More detailed information is included in Table #1 in the previous chapter. Their stories are further complicated by their immigration statuses. Four women were born in Canada and three immigrated with their families. Their choice of religious attire and therefore visibility also varies. Five chose to wear hijabs, adding to how they are perceived and experience their social environment. Professionally, they are employed in a range of sectors: three work in non-profit organizations, two are members of different student groups at the university, one is an artist, and another is a member of a local youth group. Collectively, they embody the diverse composition of the Muslim activist community (as mapped in Chapter One), each bringing unique insights informed by their cultural, ethnic, and professional experiences.

As described in the previous chapter, I employed storytelling method to identify three primary themes from my analysis of the interview data: 1) reclaiming voices; 2) navigating ongoing trauma; 3) and collective care and community building. In this chapter, I describe each theme and sub-themes in detail drawing on quotes from participants to challenge the narratives of victimhood and showcase their roles as agents of change and empowerment in their communities. The diversity in their approaches, from art-based initiatives to mental health support and public policy advocacy, signifies the broad spectrum of activism they are engaged in and the necessity of multi-dimensional strategies to combat Islamophobia.

5.2 Reclaiming Voices

All seven participants were asked: "What words would you use to identify yourself or your activism?" Their stories revealed that their activism did not begin with the Afzaal family murders; instead, it started either in their early youth or after they arrived in Canada.

Their narratives illustrate how they, as Muslim women, feel about being Muslim in Canada and how Islamophobia has influenced their identities, experiences, and activism. Their narratives of their identities and activism are intertwined. These women bring unique perspectives and experiences to their advocacy and community support. Individually and collectively, they contribute to constructing more inclusive, empathetic, and equitable communities. Drawing from their personal stories and professional backgrounds, they advocate for change, support their communities, and inspire others to engage in meaningful activism. For example, Hend leads Education Programs in her organization; she focuses on raising awareness about various forms of gender-based violence among youth and women in her local community. Asmaa utilizes her talents as an independent artist to contribute to anti-racism efforts through her artwork. These are just a few examples, as I will delve into more detailed accounts of their stories.

Through their roles in non-profit sectors, Hend, Amal, and Gameela immerse themselves in combating societal issues such as domestic violence, anti-immigrant racism, and mental health stigma. Meanwhile, Mona's, Laila's, and Malak's activism, are rooted in their identities as young Canadian Muslim women. Their work spans youth-based groups and student movements, representing their community across various platforms. Asmaa's story as a South Asian first-generation daughter enriched by her visual arts and education in social sciences shapes her story. Her deep connection to current events and the Muslim community has shaped her activism and community engagement approach. From participating in early protests to advocating against gender-based violence, Asmaa reflects on her deep commitment to social justice and cultural representation. Similarly, Laila's activism, which began in her teenage years through involvement with a local youth-led

organization highlights activism's evolving nature. Her advocacy for affordable transportation and safe consumption sites, as well as her efforts to address marginalized communities needs within her university's engineering program, underscore the broad impact of activism across various domains.

Agents of Change

Hend's approach to combating gender-based violence, including gendered Islamophobia within her organization, is both creative and participatory. She emphasizes collaborative strategies that amplify diverse voices and facilitate structured processes for sharing experiences and leadership. Her personal experiences, particularly with Islamophobia, have significantly shaped her activism. Although she does not wear a hijab, she is acutely aware of the varying experiences of Islamophobia faced by Muslim women, largely influenced by their choice of attire.

I'm aware that I might blend into a crowd due to my appearance [not wearing a hijab] and not be as immediately targeted or harassed in public spaces as many other Muslim women are. This disparity is a significant issue, impacting the sense of safety within a community.

In her work, she emphasizes the importance of recognizing these varied experiences within the Muslim community, especially focusing on gendered Islamophobia and its impact. With an academic background in sociology, women's studies, and international development, complemented by health prevention and education, she brings a well-rounded and informed perspective to her role. Her professional journey has been marked by a deep commitment to community development and research, exploring the experiences of women and young women in relation to structural and interpersonal violence through an intersectional lens.

Similarly, Gameela's activist projects are diverse, with a significant focus on understanding and addressing violence in the lives of girls and young women from different backgrounds. She believes in empowering these individuals by involving them in the creation and shaping of initiatives and community strategies. Following the tragic murders of the Afzaal family, her focus has intensified on addressing Islamophobia, particularly gendered Islamophobia, and involving the leaders of community into these conversations, with a special focus on young women's roles in these discussions.

My work is not just about understanding these issues but also about fostering community change. Addressing these complex, intersectional issues require multifaceted strategies.

The activism stories described by Hend and Gameela is also inspired by the young women they work with. They have provided a platform for these young women to connect, share experiences, and develop actionable steps against Islamophobia. They engage in bystander intervention training and creative projects to raise awareness and foster community engagement. Ultimately, they aim to instill a sense of community, belonging, and the importance of having their voices heard in these young women. This approach fosters enduring leadership and activism.

Personal Activism Stories in Fighting Gendered Islamophobia

Asmaa has a rich background in visual arts and social sciences and is redefining the landscape of activism and community engagement. For example, she addresses issues of identity and Islamophobia through her art. She created a series of artworks using strands of hair from hijabi and non-hijabi women, forming Islamic patterns on canvas. These artworks were showcased in an exhibition in Sarnia, which, despite being a city that is grappling with its own issues of racism, attracted a diverse audience. Asmaa utilized this

platform to offer a Muslim woman's perspective. She was born and raised in Ontario to parents who immigrated in the early 1970s from Pakistan; she grew up in a household that was deeply attuned to current events, particularly those affecting the Muslim community. This early exposure to activism saw her participating in her first protest at the tender age of six.

One of my teachers was surprised I didn't become a journalist, given my passion for writing. My studies and experiences reflect my passion for anti-racism, social justice, and current events.

She pursued her passion for art at Western University, originally planning to study sociology, but switching to visual arts just before university. Her academic journey was complemented by courses in sociology and psychology, reflecting her interest in current events. Her passion for writing and anti-racism led her to participate in protests against the War in Iraq in 2003, and her sister, a lawyer, served as an inspiration for her activism. After teaching for two years at an Islamic school in London, Ontario, she pursued a master's in education, focusing on visual arts and curriculum, and wrote a thesis on religious accommodation and Islamophobia. Her thesis critically examined the media's portrayal of Muslim students praying in a Toronto school, bringing to light the often inaccurate and Islamophobic reporting in mainstream media. Following her master's, she worked in social services, focusing on immigration policy. She got married in 2015, became a mother in 2018, and started her own business in 2019, with art continuing to play a significant role in her life, especially after marriage. She describes herself as creative, determined, and sensitive, with a deep passion for art that extends beyond traditional forms to various creative activities.

Creativity is a big part of who I am. It's not just about art, like painting or drawing, but also about making things, like adult Lego

sets. I enjoy various creative activities. So, I'd say “artistic” is a key aspect of my identity. I consider myself a believer, though I struggle with my faith at times. My faith has been a guiding force, especially during challenging times, like the attack we faced because of our faith.

Her activism has been a consistent thread throughout her life. In high school, she was active in protesting the Iraq war. Her role with the local immigration partnership involved significant anti-racism work, and she was an outreach coordinator for the Senior Muslim Association, engaging in interfaith activities and giving mosque tours. However, overt activism led to online harassment, especially during her pregnancy, prompting her to step down from her position. She continued her activism through her art, addressing issues of identity and Islamophobia. Her works included a series exploring cultural expectations and the clash between culture and Islamic principles, inspired by rising Islamophobia in Quebec and France.

Her art has served as a medium for dialogue on important issues, such as the Quebec Mosque attack and the problematic nature of banning the hijab. Her work reflects her unapologetically Muslim identity, with a recent piece inspired by the firing of a teacher in Quebec for wearing a hijab. Her approach to activism has evolved with her art becoming a more subtle yet powerful form of expression. Being a Muslim woman artist who wears a hijab and practices openly, she aims to be authentically herself, incorporating her faith into her social media presence and business. She believes that if someone chooses not to engage with her art or work due to her faith, it is their loss, as her art and activism are inseparable from her identity.

Sometimes my art is more literal and direct, like the piece stating, "Banning the hijab is not Feminism, it is Racism." It's quite forthright. Another artwork I created features hijabi women, hand-

painted in various styles. I turned this into a print, with a portion of the proceeds going to NCCM [The National Council of Canadian Muslims]. This work was inspired by events like the firing of a teacher in Quebec for wearing a hijab. It was frustrating to see people only then realizing the impact of laws that have existed for years, laws we've been aware of and affected by.



Image 4: An illustration showcasing "Banning the hijab is not Feminism, it is Racism " campaign.

Amal has a medical background and a passion for social justice in favour of transforming the landscape of community support and improving newcomer integration. She has over 25 years of experience in nephrology, but her story took a significant turn when she arrived in Canada 11 years ago. Her medical credentials went unrecognized in

Canada, and she turned her attention to her four children embarking on their educational journeys. She began carving out and navigating a new path for herself. She pursued a Master's in Public Health, followed by a series of roles in the social service sector, starting from volunteer positions to part-time coordination and eventually managing evidence-based programs. Challenges marked her story, as she had to prove her worth to her colleagues, partners, and herself. In eight years, she advanced within a not-for-profit organization, making significant contributions and introducing new services that supported numerous families.

I faced numerous challenges and had to prove myself not only to my colleagues and partners, who initially saw me as an outsider in this field, but also to myself. Despite these hurdles, I believe I have made significant contributions by introducing new services and supporting numerous families.

Her activism centers on facilitating the integration of newcomers, especially Syrian refugees who arrived around 2015. As a Safe Integration Coordinator, she was pivotal in guiding these newcomers' access to community resources and fostering integrative approaches. This work was crucial in bridging the gap between newcomers and mainstream services, helping to dispel fears, and familiarizing service providers with these individuals' cultural and religious backgrounds. A key initiative she was involved in is the translation of the "Strengthening Families Program" literature into Arabic for immigrant families. This program, focusing on family dynamics, addresses critical issues like family violence, child abuse, and behavioural problems in children, especially in educational settings. Her efforts also extended to supporting newcomer families with children with disabilities, a group that faced heightened challenges during COVID due to stigma and language barriers.

This project is another critical aspect of our work, offering much-needed support to an often neglected and vulnerable group. Our efforts also encompass responding to incidents like the one that happened in June 2021 [Afzaal family murders], further showcasing our commitment to supporting diverse community needs.

Her motivation for activism stemmed from her personal experience as a newcomer; she also faced the daunting task of starting anew in an unfamiliar environment. The stories of other newcomer families, their grief, struggles, and the gaps in support deeply resonated with her and compelled her to act. Witnessing their fears, lack of confidence, and struggles with parenting and integration, she felt a strong calling to be an agent of change, striving to make a difference in their lives.

Being a newcomer to a country where you have to set aside your entire career and face the challenge of proving yourself in a new environment has been a significant part of my journey. When I encountered the stories of newcomer families, it was a real eye-opener. The healing process is much harder than it appears, given the grief and struggles these individuals go through. It changed my perspective on what I need to do in my life.

She has worked tirelessly over the past eight years, often going beyond duty to assist these families. Despite the challenges and the need for a sabbatical, she has no regrets about her career shift. Her journey from a medical professional to a devoted advocate for social change and community support is a testament to her resilience, empathy, and unwavering commitment to making a positive impact in the lives of those around her.

Youth-led Mobilization

Laila, Mona, and Malak began their journey into activism during their teenage years, demonstrating an early commitment to social change. Their engagement has been diverse, spanning across youth-based groups, community organizations, and university

settings. These three young activists have made significant contributions to several organizations, notably the Youth Coalition Combating Islamophobia (YCCI), Muslim Resource Centre for Social Support and Integration (MRCSSI), the Muslim Association of Canada (MAC), and the Muslim Student Association (MSA) on their university campus. They have also played an active role in the Community Outreach Committee in London. Their involvement in these groups highlights their dedication to fostering community integration and support, while also advocating for issues relevant to Muslim youths and the wider community.

Mona noted that being a Muslim woman in public spaces is an act of activism in and of itself, especially in the field of law, where Muslim representation is scarce. Her activism extends to addressing taboo subjects like gender-based violence in the Muslim community, using improvisational acting exercises to foster dialogue and raise awareness. These efforts are crucial for representing and raising awareness within the Muslim community. Choosing to study law was more than just a penchant for debate; it was a calling born from being the sole representative of her community in a small New Brunswick town. Initially drawn to human rights, her passion for social justice, particularly for the Palestinian cause, led her to this path. Now, she uses her position in the legal field to support and encourage Muslim youth interested in law, understanding the importance of Muslim representation in such influential spaces. Her activism is deeply personal, inspired by events that hit close to home and a natural response to speaking up for her community. It is a journey of bridging gaps, offering support, and being a voice for those who might not have one, all while navigating the complexities of identity, community, and the pursuit of justice.

[Studying law] would help support Muslims who may not have access to or are unfamiliar with navigating the legal system, focusing on both their legal and Islamic rights [beliefs and practices]. That's a primary focus for me at the moment.

She clarified that she plans to use her legal education for the greater good by offering legal advice and conducting clinic hours at the center. Her focus will be on the intersection of Islamic and Canadian laws, particularly in areas such as marriage contracts and wills. This vision demonstrates her commitment to assisting those who struggle with navigating the legal system while respecting their religious beliefs and practices.

Malak's activism is deeply personal, inspired by events of the Afzaal family murders that hit close to home, igniting her sense of responsibility to speak up for her community. Her activism focuses on bridging gaps, offering support, and being a voice for those who might not have one, all while navigating the complexities of identity, community, and the pursuit of justice.

When something like this happens [Afzaal family murders] to someone in your community, you feel a need to speak up. So, it was a natural response to become active because it happened here, to us.

Laila's activism began around 17, initially through involvement with the London Youth Advisory Council (LYAC).

Being part of a minority group, I realized the importance of advocacy, even when it's not a chosen role. At engineering conferences, I often found myself advocating for the specific needs of minority groups. This advocacy became part of my identity, a necessity to address our unique needs.

As an engineering student at the university, she advocated for more student spaces within their department and engaged in discussions with faculty leaders. However, following the

Afzaal family tragedy and during the pandemic, their focus shifted to evaluating the university's support for its students. This advocacy extended to their participation in engineering conferences and assuming a leadership role in a business-oriented organization, in which they often represented the needs of Muslim students on campus to push for better accommodations, safety, and protection.

A sense of necessity and responsibility inspired Malak's activism. She felt compelled to advocate for their fellow students and Muslim youth, feeling like they need a stronger voice or the confidence to address issues, particularly within their community. This sense of duty was driven by the belief that their younger relatives would face the same challenges if they did not step up. Their activism is fueled by the conviction that if one can advocate and speak up, it is an obligation to do so for the benefit of others, ensuring that rights are not infringed upon. This commitment drives their continuous efforts in the field of advocacy and activism.

Some people aren't confident in speaking up or don't want to address these issues. There have been times when I wasn't comfortable talking about being Muslim. But on days when I feel confident, I feel it's important to speak up because there's no guarantee that someone else will feel the same way or have the courage to speak up.

5.3 Ongoing Trauma

At the time of the interviews, more than two years had passed since the tragic Afzaal family murders, but the enduring trauma was still palpable among the participants. Some of the interviews were conducted during the trial of Nathaniel Veltman. This period was

particularly challenging as the court released a dramatic video capturing the moments just before the family's fatal encounter, which served to reopen deep wounds within the community. Despite these harrowing circumstances, the resilience demonstrated by the participants was remarkable. In their own way, each showed formidable resistance to Islamophobia, embodying a spirit of resilience and perseverance. Their efforts to challenge Islamophobia became acts of defiance against hatred and ignorance. This theme addresses the ongoing impacts of trauma experienced by the participants and their communities and how they cope and respond to it.

Shock and Disbelief in Response to the Murders

Hend's initial reaction to the tragedy was a complex mix of emotions and thoughts. She described feeling an overwhelming sense of shock and feeling frozen in disbelief. The incident seemed incomprehensible to her as she struggled to process the depth of hate, horror, and violence involved. Along with the shock, Hend experienced sadness, grief, anger, and fear.

It was a whirlwind of emotions, compounded by a sense of responsibility to support others affected by this tragedy.

Similarly, Asmaa expressed deep devastation upon learning that the attack on the Afzaal family was deliberate. She found Mayor Holder's assurance of safety for Londoners to be hollow in the wake of such a targeted attack. The incident was particularly unsettling for her, especially considering her husband's proximity to the site just hours before the tragedy.

It has led to prolonged fear and unease, affecting even everyday activities like visiting Home Depot.

Journalists reached out to me for comments because of my work and social media presence. My experience with the Globe and Mail was disappointing; they seemed overly focused on stories of women who had taken off their hijab due to Islamophobia. I found this narrow perspective frustrating. The Associated Press journalist, who was Muslim, was more empathetic and considerate about the sensitivity of the topic.

Similarly, Amal's reaction to the tragic event was deep shock and a complex mix of emotions. Upon hearing about the incident, she experienced feelings of loss, fear, frustration, and anger. She emphasized the value of every life, noting that the affected family was exceptional in many ways. She recounted that the family's mother was an instructor for one of her daughters in engineering and a friend to a co-worker. Although Amal did not know the family personally, she had heard about them and learned more as the situation unfolded. She described the family as a “true model” of a Muslim family, highlighting their dedication and struggles.

For instance, I know the father, being a physiotherapist, had to take the exams several times to get his degree. Even when he started working, he faced racism and discrimination from clients who sometimes declined his service because of his appearance. He had a very pleasant personality, often attending mosque prayers and offering help to everyone. He was supportive of his wife, Madiha, who was working towards her engineering degree and career.

Laila's initial reaction to the tragedy, much like the other participants, was one of profound shock and confusion, further illustrating the collective impact of the incident on the community. She expressed disbelief, noting that one hears of such incidents in other countries.

You hear news from other places like the United States, Australia, and New Zealand about shootings at mosques, but you never expect it to happen in your own city, let alone five minutes from where you live. My initial thought was that it could have been me.

Mona's response to the tragic incident, when compared with other participants, reveals a pattern of initial disbelief to a gradual realization of the stark reality of hate-motivated violence within her own community. Initially, she harboured a sense of naivete or hope, finding it hard to believe that someone from her community could commit such an act of hatred. Her first inclination was to perceive the incident as an accident or the result of mental illness rather than a deliberate act of hate.

It was hard for me to accept that someone would do this intentionally. However, as it became clear that it was indeed a hate-motivated act, I was shocked. While it's not surprising to hear of Islamophobic attacks in general, the fact that it happened so close to home, to people who weren't strangers to us, was deeply shocking. It felt surreal, and the whole community was in a state of shock, quietly processing the event.

Malak's primary feelings evolved into a mix of shock and disappointment. While initially, she did not feel personally scared for her safety, her behaviour subtly changed over time, such as standing further back at streetlights, reflecting a newfound caution. This shift in behaviour indicates a more profound impact than she initially recognized, suggesting a lingering sense of vulnerability and the recognition that such events, though rare, could indeed happen. Her experience is similar to the reactions of other participants – a complex blend of emotions and a gradual coming to terms with the reality of Islamophobia and its consequences in their immediate environment.

It wasn't a constant fear, but there was an underlying acknowledgment that something like this could happen. So, there was definitely a mix of emotions.

The tragedy of the Afzaal family murders has had a profound impact on the participants of my study, stirring up poignant memories of past experiences with anti-Muslim racism. One such participant, Laila, recalls her own encounters with gendered Islamophobia, underscoring the pervasive nature of such incidents in the lives of Muslim individuals.

Laila, reflecting on her experiences, shared a particularly unsettling memory.

I've had experiences that made me feel unsafe. For instance, while walking in Hyde Park, I remember a time when it seemed like someone threw a beer bottle at me from a passing car. I heard something hit the ground beside me, but all I really knew was that a car had passed by. It left me uncertain whether it was racially motivated or just a random act. On campus, as an engineering student, I've endured colleagues making unwelcome remarks about my background.

Asmaa also recounted a disturbing incident from 2016, predating the attack. A far-right group akin to the Proud Boys held an anti-Islam protest at London City Hall. Asmaa, along with her friends, sister, and many non-Muslim supporters, organized a counter rally. The experience was intimidating, especially being surrounded by people expressing hate. The tension escalated when they encountered protesters in a secluded parking lot near their car, necessitating a police escort for their safety.

These experiences highlight the pervasive issue of Islamophobia and the lack of safety felt by the Muslim community, even in our own neighborhoods. It's concerning that such hate groups can exist so openly, and it's disheartening when you feel the authorities aren't fully supportive or protective. This is a reality that many Muslims, including myself, have to navigate daily.

Also, Mona acknowledged that she might have previously downplayed specific discriminatory incidents, considering them minor compared to the more severe experiences

of others. However, she recalled a specific incident that occurred during Ramadan, a moment that starkly contrasted with her usual resilience.

I was walking to Taraweeh prayer with my mother. An older lady cycled past us and made a derogatory comment, telling us to 'go back to our country' or 'take that thing off.'

She also touched upon her experiences at airports, where security sometimes requests her to remove her hijab, which she finds uncomfortable. Despite these challenges, Mona emphasized the role of personality and confidence in dealing with such interactions.

I walk confidently, which I believe makes me less of a target for such attacks. Those who appear vulnerable or less likely to stand up for themselves might be more susceptible to hate crimes or discrimination.

These experiences, recalled in the wake of the Afzaal family tragedy, serve as a reminder of the ongoing challenges faced by Muslim individuals in navigating spaces where their identity makes them vulnerable to both overt and covert forms of racism. They underscore the importance of acknowledging and addressing the deep-seated issues of anti-Muslim sentiment in our society.

Recognition of Hate and Its Impact

In her professional role, Hend felt a shift in focus towards thinking about how she could help and support those impacted, seeking to provide relief or support in any way possible.

In the early days, it felt like no action could ever be sufficient to address the enormity of the situation. It felt incomprehensible, yet we were aware that such hate exists. We've seen violent crimes and racial injustices globally, like the killing of George Floyd and the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement. There was already an awareness of the pain and suffering caused by racially motivated violence.

This realization brought a chilling personal dimension to the tragedy for Laila, recognizing that the victims were ordinary people, just like herself, who were simply out for a walk. The notion that it could have been any member of the community, including herself, added to the gravity of her emotions. Laila's connection to the event was further deepened when she discovered that her younger cousin was friends with one of the victims, whom she had spoken to shortly before the fatal walk. Reaching out to her cousin, Laila found her devastated, mainly because of the recency of their interaction. This personal connection brought the tragedy closer to Laila, making it more challenging for her to process her own emotions, and helping her cousin.

Amidst her attempt to comprehend the enormity of the situation, Laila was quickly thrust into the limelight, with media outlets reaching out for interviews immediately after the news broke. As an executive on the Muslim Student Association (MSA), she found herself at the forefront of mainstream media discourses and being asked to represent her community while trying to process the event herself.

I didn't really have time to fully understand what had happened because I had to step up and take action. It felt like a responsibility, especially when my friend, who was also connected to the family, told me it was our chance to make a change and prevent such incidents in the future. It was emotionally heavy, but I understood the responsibility and did my best to make the most of it, to ensure something like this never happens again.

Mona's response to the unfolding events was marked by a growing sense of clarity and disturbance. Initially, there was uncertainty surrounding the nature of the incident — whether it was a consequence of the driver's mental illness or a deliberate attack targeting the family because of their Muslim faith. As more information came to light, the reality

became more harrowing. It was eventually revealed that the driver had intentionally targeted the family specifically because of their Muslim identity. This revelation was deeply shocking to Mona.

He had made statements indicating he did not regret his actions and had intentionally aimed to kill them because they were Muslim. Learning the truth of these events and their motivation was a profound shock.

Coping Mechanisms and Reflections on Hate and Its Impact

Hend described a profound sense of slowing down after the tragedy as everyone struggled to process what had happened. This incident occurred when people were already grappling with the challenges posed by COVID-19. To address the impact, Hend and her team focused on connecting with women and young women in their groups, albeit virtually. They aimed to create a supportive space where these individuals could collectively express their feelings and grieve. Hend acknowledged that the incident revealed the impact of hate in communities and the vulnerability and targeting of specific groups due to systemic inequalities and oppression. Experiencing such hatred and violence, so close to home, invoked a mix of anger at the injustice and deep grief.

It raised questions like "How could this happen?" and "How do we move forward?" Though we knew we had to process and move through it, there was initially a sense of being at a loss for how to do so.

Amal found solace in her faith during this tragedy. Initially experiencing anger and pain, she later embraced patience and a belief in a higher purpose behind the event. She speculated that perhaps God chose this family as ambassadors to showcase the challenges that face the Muslim community. She hoped their legacy would continue to be a powerful

example of positive community impact. Amal also noted the sense of widespread shock within the broader community, particularly among those close to the family.

They gathered as a [broader] community within the Muslim community for the healing process, integrating with the Canadian Muslim community. They appreciated the broad support, including specialized support, which impacted different community members in various ways.

Additionally, Gameela mentioned that there were formal discussions involving the mosque, their organization, and other groups. The focus of these discussions was on figuring out the best ways to support the community through the trauma of the event and strategize on moving forward.

The Muslim community, including the mosque and various members, mobilized to address what needed to be done. The city of London took the issue of Islamophobia seriously, recognizing its responsibility to address and combat it in collaboration with the Muslim community.

The shift from initial uncertainty to the realization of the attack being a targeted act of hate based on religious identity heightened the impact of the incident, contributing to a profound sense of shock and disturbance for the participants and the community. This realization not only underscored the severity of the incident but also highlighted the broader issue of Islamophobia and its potentially deadly consequences.

5.4 Collective Care and Community Building

A common call among the participants was efforts towards and experiences of collective care and community building in the aftermath of the Afzaal family tragedy. They delved into the nature of support received, initiatives, and programs offered to the community or developed by the community members themselves to respond to this devastating event. Through these discussions, I identified three primary tools for healing

and advocacy: 1) art-based initiatives; 2) targeted mental health support; 3) an increase in youth advocacy and efforts to change public policy. Each tool is a unique approach to addressing the community's needs, fostering resilience, and building a cohesive and supportive environment in the face of adversity. Participants highlighted the community's efforts to heal and unite while underscoring the importance of diverse strategies to addressing the complex and ongoing impacts of such a tragedy.

Art-based Initiatives as a Coping and Awareness-raising Tool

Many participants indicated that they use art projects and other creative expressions, such as but not limited to, drawing, painting, writing, and filmmaking, to raise awareness and engage the community. One of those is Asmaa who found a therapeutic outlet for her complex emotions through artistic expression. She remembers vividly drawing a piece the day after the attack to capture the essence of a woman who lent a helping hand at the tragic scene. Her artwork resonated with the woman who requested a print - a small yet meaningful acknowledgment of Asmaa's talent and emotional depth. Asmaa then embarked on a memorial project involving painting rocks in honour of the Afzaal family and weaving in their love for nature and dolphins. Now part of the Coldstream Library Garden in London, Ontario, these rocks are not only a testament to the Afzaal family's memory but also to Asmaa's artistic expression of her grief. The rock holds profound significance, symbolizing a communal act of remembrance and respect. Alongside the orange rocks painted by Steve Maracle, an Indigenous artist, the rock unites different communities in their shared experience of grief and solidarity. Maracle's work honors the memory of children lost to residential schools and those who survived. Together, these rocks stand for unity in the face of tragedy, fostering healing and collective support

in the community. They symbolize not just a shared past but also a joint commitment to a compassionate and inclusive future.

The tragedy's weight propelled Asmaa's activism. She connected with anti-racism groups and joined a task force in London, but soon realized the toll it was taking on her, especially as a new mother. This realization led her to discover alternative ways to contribute - through her art business and social media presence. She used these platforms to counter stereotypes and present a positive image of Islam, a faith often misunderstood and misrepresented.

In my art business and through my social media posts, I strive to present the best version of Islam. This is my way of countering stereotypes, showing that as a Muslim woman, I am not oppressed.

Her engagement in the London community, though quieter now, remains impactful. She recently spearheaded an art piece for a memorial at Museum London, collaborating with the Youth Coalition Supporting Islamophobia. This project, significant in its reach, underscored the profound effect of the incident on Muslim youth, many of whom had to change schools due to the overwhelming trauma. The project led by Asmaa at Museum London, in partnership with the Youth Coalition Supporting Islamophobia, has had a considerable reach, resonating deeply within and beyond the Muslim community. Its impact was felt among a broad spectrum of individuals, touching not just those directly affected by the tragedy, but also reaching others in the wider London area and beyond. This initiative brought to light the pervasive effects of the incident, particularly on Muslim youth, many of whom faced the heavy burden of trauma, necessitating changes in their educational and social environments. The project's influence extended to raising awareness, fostering community solidarity, and highlighting the resilience of those

affected, thus marking a significant contribution to the ongoing dialogue and healing process within the community.

Asmaa's narrative is a poignant reminder that Islamophobia's impact goes beyond hate crimes to include the emotional and psychological scars left on individuals and communities. Through her art and advocacy, she continues to address these subtler forms of prejudice, underscoring the need for a broader understanding and widespread and coordinated action against all manifestations of Islamophobia. Her story is not just one of resilience but also of the transformative power of art and the importance of finding one's voice in the aftermath of a tragedy.

Hend also highlighted the importance of creating spaces where individuals can freely express themselves and affirm their worth, particularly in the context of tackling Islamophobia. She emphasized the desire for their voices to be heard and acknowledged, especially by non-Muslims, to foster a deeper understanding of the realities and impacts of Islamophobia. To achieve this, art projects and other creative forms of expression have been integral to their efforts, serving as powerful tools for raising awareness and engaging the community.

By creating [these] spaces where they can express themselves,
they affirm their worth and articulate their desire to be seen and
heard.

Asmaa shared with me her collaboration now displayed at Museum London. This art project, known as the Hexagon Project, is a significant and symbolic installation commemorating the Afzaal family. The project invites Londoners to write messages of remembrance and community healing inscribed on purple wooden hexagon tiles. The hexagons represent the interconnectedness of humanity, with each piece joining to create a

unified whole. The colour purple was explicitly chosen to honour Yumna, one of the young victims of the tragedy, as it was her favourite colour. Asmaa shared that the art-based initiative is a powerful platform for collective reflection and healing. It allows the community to articulate their thoughts and feelings, symbolizing the unity and resilience of London in overcoming adversity. That helps not only to combat Islamophobia but also to memorialize those who were lost, ensuring that their memories continue to inspire and unify the community.

Asmaa also showed me her unique and impactful artwork; it is a creative endeavour utilizing an unconventional medium to address critical social issues, particularly Islamophobia. This art form, which Asmaa began exploring during her fourth-year Practicum course in Visual Arts at Western University, involves using individual hair strands to create patterns, featuring meticulously crafted complex mehndi and Islamic geometric designs. This approach not only challenges conventional art mediums but also serves as a personalized and culturally sensitive expression in the context of combating Islamophobia.

Mental Health Support for the Women in the Community

The participants expressed a strong commitment to fighting Islamophobia by focusing on creative and supportive strategies. Understanding the intricate nature of this issue, they concentrated their efforts on establishing secure environments where Muslim women, particularly young women, can freely share their feelings and seek solidarity.

Amal, in recognition of the deep scars left by the tragedy, initiated a group program tailored to provide trauma-informed care. This program became a beacon of hope for many, guiding them through their journey of healing. It was not just a program; it was a sanctuary

where the echoes of trauma were met with understanding and care. Understanding the unique challenges faced by Muslim women and girls in the aftermath, Amal's team crafted workshops and training sessions. These sessions were about safety, empowerment and reclaiming agency in a world that seemed to have turned upside down.

Our response efforts were channeled into three core action areas: public education and community programs, community healing and resiliency strategies, and intervention support, involving mental health agencies and professional services.

The response of Amal and her team was structured yet flexible, touching upon public education, community healing, and intervention support. They delved into the depths of Islamophobia, racism, discrimination, and bullying, unraveling these complex issues with screenings, assessments, and most importantly, conversations.

We collaborated with carefully selected private practitioners and had a pool of mental health practitioners from the same cultural background to provide counseling and therapy.

A poignant focus of their efforts was directed towards a group of young girls who were close friends of Yumna. These young souls, who shared classrooms and dreams with Yumna, found solace and understanding in the conversations facilitated by Amal's team. These sessions were more than just talks; they were the threads knitting a broken heart back together.

We had several conversations with these girls [Yumna friends], aiming to create a foundation of trust and rapport, and a secure haven for them to express their emotions. The conversations were filled with profound loss, overwhelming fears, anxieties, confusion, and frustration. After initial support, we collaborated with other partner organizationsand continued our work with a wider margin in collaboration ...

Gen Z and Advocacy Initiatives

The younger participants, aged between 20 and 31 years old, accounting for 4 out of the 7 participants, were deeply involved in community-driven initiatives aimed at fostering solidarity and raising awareness following the Afzaal family murders. Their involvement manifested in various forms, such as organizing marches and vigils, engaging with the media, producing videos and online campaigns, holding meetings with government representatives and politicians, and forming partnerships with the City of London and other non-profit organizations. These efforts were focused on enhancing the visibility and voice of the Muslim community.

Laila, a youth activist, underscored the importance of organizing marches both in the year of the incident and the subsequent year. These events went beyond symbolism; they were powerful affirmations of the Muslim community's integral role in Ontario. The support garnered during these events showcased the community's unity and resilience, leaving a profound impact on Laila and her fellow youth activists.

I think our mere existence as Muslims, maintaining a presence, is in itself a powerful statement. It shows people that we are human beings with unique needs that should be accommodated. Through this visibility and engagement, we aim to share our culture with others, humanizing our community.

Laila engaged extensively with the media, participating in online interviews, and speaking on behalf of the community. This exposure was crucial in maintaining a fresh and relevant Muslim presence at Western University. The pro bono assistance from a Toronto lawyer was a significant aid in these efforts, helping them navigate the complexities of representation and advocacy. Laila's activism took a toll on her emotional well-being; however, leading her to take a step back to recuperate. She continued to contribute in

meaningful ways, such as volunteering for photography during the march in the following year and engaging in meetings to advocate for Muslim rights and safety on campus. Laila emphasizes the need for proactive measures in preventing such tragedies. She advocates for broader engagement in communities across Canada, focusing on humanizing Muslims and fostering dialogues that pre-empt hate. She stresses the importance of conversations that recognize the humanity of Muslims to change negative perceptions before they escalate into hate-motivated actions.

Despite the valuable contributions from the broader community, some participants still felt unheard and perhaps dismissed, particularly when trying to communicate the ongoing threat of hate crimes inspired by international incidents. The lack of understanding and acknowledgment, especially from those in positions of power, has been a significant barrier. Laila said:

The biggest challenge is just not being heard. Communicating that there's a problem and not being understood is incredibly frustrating. For example, when there's something happening internationally and I try to express concerns that people might get inspired by such events, the response often is dismissive. People don't always understand the need for safety measures or protection, and they might say, "You are safe. We don't get why you're concerned." Not being acknowledged is probably the biggest challenge. If someone isn't willing to have an open-minded conversation, then there's not much you can do. It turns into a pointless conversation if the person in front of you doesn't believe in what you're advocating for or being an activist about. This is especially challenging when those people are in positions of power. The biggest challenge has been having a conversation with someone and getting them to understand enough to be willing to change and help.

The consensus among participants is that there has been a notable shift in how Islamophobia is discussed. Before the tragedy, conversations about Islamophobia might

have felt abstract, especially to non-Muslims. However, the grave nature of this event, with its loss of life and widespread impact, has made the issue more real and urgent. There is now increased awareness of the tangible harms and violence caused by Islamophobia. The extent to which this awareness has translated into meaningful change is a matter of debate. Some individuals still do not take Islamophobia as seriously as they should. Typically, those who attend workshops are already aware of its critical importance. This mirrors a common challenge in addressing gender-based violence - reaching people who do not yet recognize the severity of the issue. This shift in perception aligns with Razack's (1998) observations about the oversimplification of issues affecting Muslim communities, which often fail to capture the depth and complexity of these challenges. Similarly, Mohanty's (1988) critique of Western feminism's universalizing tendencies sheds light on the need to recognize diverse experiences within Muslim communities, acknowledging the unique challenges they face, including Islamophobia.

The tragedy has inspired leadership and activism within the Muslim community. It is a complex feeling to balance the horror of the event with the positive mobilization that ensued. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that the incident has ignited a strong resolve to prevent such hatred from happening again, highlighting the importance of recognizing and actively working against hate, violence, and oppression. The tragedy also led to the formation of new initiatives, like the Youth Coalition to Combat Islamophobia (YCCI). YCCI, a local youth-led organization, was founded by individuals like Maryam Al-Sabawi, who felt compelled to address the growing concerns of Islamophobia. This was especially after the June 6, 2021, attack that devastated the Muslim community in London, Ontario.

The YCCI was established as a response to this sense of fear and helplessness, providing a platform for those wishing to take a stand against Islamophobia.

One of YCCI's notable contributions is the creation and release of the video "To Yumnah with Love," which marked the first anniversary of the attack. This video featured personal stories and experiences of Islamophobia from friends and family of Yumna and the Afzaal family. It aimed to educate and emotionally resonate with the audience, emphasizing the various forms Islamophobia can take – from interpersonal to systemic. Produced in collaboration with YSK Media, the video sought to make a strong impact in raising awareness and fostering change.

Despite these proactive steps and growing awareness, the Muslim community continues to face challenges. Incidents of harassment and Islamophobia, particularly during significant periods like Ramadan, serve as stark reminders of the ongoing threats. These incidents underscore the necessity for continual vigilance and sustained efforts in the fight against hate and oppression. The tragedy of the Afzaal family, while profoundly saddening, has catalyzed a movement within the Muslim community, fueling efforts to create a safer and more inclusive society. The work of organizations like YCCI highlights the crucial role of community-led initiatives in this ongoing struggle against hate and discrimination. It is particularly crucial to recognize the unique impact of Islamophobia on visibly Muslim women. While the entire Muslim community, including men and mosques, is affected, the experience of women is distinctly different and requires specific focus and attention.

In this chapter, the activism and experiences of Muslim women in Canada are examined with a focus on the aftermath of the Afzaal family tragedy. This examination reveals a rich tapestry of activism deeply rooted in the life stories of the participants,

reflecting their enduring commitment to social justice. The women's narratives vividly illustrate the intersectionality of their identities, where religion, gender, ethnicity, and immigration status interweave, shaping their unique perspectives and responses to societal issues, notably Islamophobia and gender discrimination. A striking feature of their activism is its diversity - ranging from direct community engagement and policy advocacy to more nuanced expressions through art. This diversity underscores their adaptive strategies to challenge stereotypes and foster community solidarity.

Particularly notable is the focus on gendered Islamophobia, highlighting the specific vulnerabilities and discrimination Muslim women face, especially those who wear hijabs. In response to the collective trauma inflicted by the Afzaal family tragedy, these women exhibit remarkable resilience, channeling their grief into proactive activism and fostering community support. Their efforts, encompassing mental health initiatives, art projects, and youth advocacy, are pivotal in facilitating communal healing and advocating for policy changes. However, despite increased dialogue and awareness around Islamophobia post-tragedy, challenges persist in translating this awareness into tangible societal change. This ongoing struggle necessitates sustained engagement with broader audiences, particularly with those yet to fully grasp the severity of Islamophobia and gender-based violence. The evolving nature of their activism, marked by strategic adaptations and diverse methods, highlights their commitment to combating social injustice. Ultimately, this chapter provides insights into how Muslim women activists in Canada are not only confronting the realities of Islamophobia but also making significant contributions to the creation of a more equitable and inclusive society.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter presents a counter-narrative to the often oversimplified and homogenized views of Muslim women in the context of Islamophobia. By adopting a decolonial Muslim feminist framework, it foregrounds the unique and multifaceted experiences of Muslim women activists in London, Ontario, following the Afzaal family murders. The diverse stories of these women contradict the prevalent narrative that tends to depict Muslim women as a homogenous group, uniformly oppressed and voiceless (Bruckert & Law, 2018). These activists display agency, resilience, and a depth of experience that disrupts these simplistic views. Additionally, the narratives emphasize the intersectionality of identities, showing how factors like ethnicity, religious visibility, immigration status, and professional roles intersect with gender and religious identity (Zine, 2004). This approach moves beyond the reductionist portrayal of Muslim women, highlighting their multifaceted lives.

Furthermore, the chapter provides a platform for these women to voice their experiences, concerns, and activism, which are often marginalized in mainstream discourse. By focusing on their stories, it helps to break down the monolithic representation and brings forward a spectrum of perspectives from within the Muslim community (Massoumi, 2015). Moreover, the women's responses to the Afzaal family tragedy exemplify resilience and proactive community engagement, countering narratives that frame Muslim women solely as victims. Their initiatives in community building, mental health, and youth mobilization post-tragedy depict them as active change agents. The activism demonstrated by these women, whether through policy advocacy, art, or community support, is a form of empowerment. It challenges the victimhood narrative and

portrays Muslim women as capable of effecting change and influencing their communities positively. Overall, the chapter offers insights into how Muslim women navigate their feminist identities, contributing to a more inclusive and culturally sensitive understanding of feminism. This counters Eurocentric perspectives of feminism, enriching it with diverse experiences and approaches (Chakraborti & Zempi, 2012; Mohanty, 1988). By focusing on gendered Islamophobia, the chapter brings attention to a specific aspect of discrimination that affects Muslim women. This focus not only acknowledges the unique challenges they face but also rebuts the notion that Muslim women are passive recipients of their cultural and religious contexts (Saeed, 2016).

The participants' stories reveal the impacts of a multi-pronged activist approach. Their activism, rooted in personal experiences and professional commitments, reflects a deeper, ongoing struggle against the systemic issues of Islamophobia and gendered discrimination (Zine, 2006). These women, navigating through the complex layers of Islamophobia and gendered discrimination, have crafted unique paths of resistance and change. For some, activism is rooted in the professional sphere, where their roles in non-profit organizations or educational settings become platforms for advocacy. They utilize their positions to initiate and lead programs targeting societal issues like domestic violence, mental health, and anti-immigrant racism, intertwining their professional skills with their activist passions. Others find their activist voices in more personal settings, driven by lived experiences of discrimination and the desire to challenge misconceptions about Muslim women. Their personal journeys have led them to use tools like art, education, and community dialogue to combat stereotypes and build bridges of understanding.

Several participants emphasize the importance of creating safe and inclusive spaces, particularly for young Muslim women. Through art projects, workshops, and advocacy campaigns, they endeavor to empower these women, enabling them to articulate their experiences and resist the overlapping oppressions of Islamophobia and sexism. Youth activism, particularly in response to the Afzaal family tragedy, demonstrates the participants' commitment to bringing about societal change. Their involvement in organizing marches, engaging in policy discussions, and forming strategic partnerships highlights their proactive approach to addressing and raising awareness about Islamophobia.

Collectively, these stories of activism are not isolated endeavors but interconnected threads in a broader fabric of resistance against systemic injustices. Each participant, with their unique blend of personal and professional experiences, contributes to a dynamic narrative of activism that is both empowering and transformative. The chapter interweaves the individual stories of Hend, Asmaa, Amal, Laila, Mona, Gameela, and Malak, highlighting their unique contributions to their communities and the broader fight against Islamophobia. Overall, their stories shed light on the nuances and complexities of Muslim women's identities and activism. Furthermore, the varied religious visibility and immigration statuses of the women adds layers to their experiences and responses to Islamophobia. This diversity in visibility and permanence shapes how each woman encounters discrimination, with those who are visibly Muslim or temporary residents often facing more overt and direct challenges. Their religious visibility not only influences their personal experiences of Islamophobia but also informs their coping strategies and forms of activism. Despite these differences, there's a collective understanding and solidarity among

the participants. They recognize that Islamophobia impacts them in various ways, depending on their visibility as Muslims, emphasizing the importance of a united but nuanced approach to addressing these challenges.

In summary, this chapter contributes to a more nuanced understanding of Muslim women activists in response to a specific but not isolated tragedy. It moves beyond typical portrayals of oppression and passivity, offering a counter-narrative that showcases their complexity, agency, and the dynamic roles they play in their communities.

Chapter Six: Shifting from Damage-Centered Research to Recovering Muslim Women's Voices through Storytelling

Being a change agent became my mission. I felt the need to make this place better than when I joined. That was my main target.

Amal, London, ON, 2023

6.1 Introduction

This chapter continues from the previous one, in which I discussed how Muslim women activists in London, Ontario, responded to the Afzaal family murders. It delves deeper into how these activists have woven their responses into their broader activism efforts using their personal and professional backgrounds. Participants effectively combined their individual stories with collective actions for change, as I detailed in Chapter Five. In trying to connect their stories to my central research question - how are Muslim women activists in London, Ontario, responding to the Afzaal family murders? – I am drawn to Eve Tuck's open letter to the community (2009) mentioned in Chapter 4. It helped me understand their responses, particularly when Tuck says: "even when communities are broken and conquered, they are so much more than that—so much more that this incomplete story is an act of aggression (p. 416)". This statement underscores the stories shared and the storytelling I am engaging in through this thesis - even in adversity, communities hold a richness and intricacy that goes beyond mere narratives of damage and the risk of incomplete narratives as continuing brokenness and harm.

Drawing on Calderon's (2016, p.5): "As researchers dedicated to decolonial research in the educational field, we need to be constantly aware of how we might inadvertently perpetuate colonialist frameworks of knowledge." I have attempted here to

tell a complex story from the participants' perspectives, recognizing the need to avoid perpetuating colonialist knowledge structures. To do this, I avoid creating narratives that narrowly define people and issues. In this context, Neimand et al. (2021) stated:

To avoid creating limiting and partial narratives, support communities in telling their own stories. When we do this, we ultimately share the full humanity of people—people who live multifaceted and unique lives—and avoid creating narratives that define people and issues by a single experience or identity.

The concept of damage-centered research primarily focuses on documenting pain or loss in communities (Tuck, 2009). This approach differs from deficit models, which emphasize what is lacking to explain failure or underachievement, by being more socially and historically contextualized. It examines historical exploitation, domination, and colonization to explain contemporary issues like poverty, poor health, and low literacy. Although this approach is often intended to create social change, it runs the risk of pathologizing communities by defining them solely through their oppression. Tuck provides a clear definition: “damage-centered research is an approach that, even with benevolent intentions, establishes harm or injury as the basis for seeking reparations” (p. 413).

Building on this foundation, in this study, I move beyond merely documenting the deficits or challenges caused by the Afzaal family murders. Instead, I focus on the social and historical contexts shaping the participants' responses, as detailed in Chapter Two. This includes an exploration of historical injustices, societal attitudes towards Muslims, and experiences of Islamophobia, all viewed through an intersectional lens as discussed in Chapter Three. Additionally, I examine how these factors have influenced the strategies and actions of the participants, as outlined in Chapter Five. In this concluding chapter, I

interpret and explain the findings of my study using a in opposition damage-centered research approach, as proposed by Tuck (2009).

Before elaborating and evaluating the findings, it is important to revisit the research objectives that guided this study, which are centered on three key areas: 1) understanding the role and experiences of Muslim women activists in London, Ontario, particularly in the aftermath of the Afzaal family murders; 2) exploring how these activists define and characterize their activism, and the influence of the murders on their awareness and actions; and 3) investigating the strategies they implement for community building and collective care. I recognize the importance of understanding pain and loss while also aiming to uncover the community's dynamic and robust responses. In doing so, it provides a narrative that is fuller and empowering.

6.2 Muslim Women's Activism as a Counterpoint to Damage-Centered Research

Connecting to the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter Three, in this chapter, I explore the lived and professional experiences of my participants following the Afzaal family murders. Drawing on key concepts from influential scholars like María Lugones (2010) and Jasmin Zine (2022, 2006, 2004), I critically examine how colonial legacies continue to shape gender, culture, and societal perceptions and experiences. The decolonial feminist framework, which resists the persistent influence of colonialism, is particularly significant in our understanding of these areas.

This study introduced a critical counterpoint to the prevalent damage-centered approach in understanding Muslim women's activism because "pain narratives are always incomplete" (Tuck & Yang, 2018, p. 10). This approach, critiqued by scholars like Lugones and Zine, risks oversimplifying or pathologizing communities by focusing mainly on

deficits and damages, potentially overshadowing their resilience and agency. I sought to capture a shift from this perspective, highlighting how the experiences and activism of Muslim women in London, Ontario, in response to the Afzaal family murders, transcend a narrative of victimhood. I explored how their actions embody strength, resilience, and proactive change, providing a more comprehensive and empowering narrative that aligns with the principles of decolonial Muslim feminism and intersectionality.

The concept of intersectionality, as formulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1993) and supported and enhanced by several Black feminists, is central to understanding the experiences of the Muslim women activists in this study. Intersectionality posits that various aspects of a person's identity, such as race, gender, religion, and immigration status intersect to create unique experiences of discrimination or privilege. This concept is vividly embodied in the lived experiences of the Muslim women in London, Ontario, whose activism reflects a complex interplay of these identity factors. I illustrate this concept through the activism of Muslim women, who address challenges specific to their intersecting identities. For example, these women may confront issues unique to being Muslim, being a black Muslim, a black Muslim who wears a hijab, or an old immigrant Muslim woman from a working class background. Such activism differs from broader approaches that might focus on general themes of gender equality or religious freedom. Instead, it delves into the specific and compounded challenges at the nexus of these intersecting identities.

The activism of these women is a practical application of intersectionality as they give voice to issues often marginalized in mainstream feminist and anti-racist movements. This aligns with Crenshaw's (1993) emphasis on the importance of recognizing the voices

of those who exist at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities. In and through their activism, these women navigate multiple layers of oppression, which may include dealing with gendered Islamophobia within broader societal contexts, sexism within their own communities, and racial discrimination in both. This practical reality of navigating multiple forms of discrimination simultaneously illustrates the core principle of intersectionality.

In contrast to the traditional damage-centered research narrative, the activism strategies of Muslim women in London, Ontario, as revealed in this study, offer a different perspective. These strategies provide a more nuanced understanding of their roles as agents of positive change. Tuck (2009, p. 416) proposes an alternative to research that focuses on community problems or damage; she suggests concentrating on their aspirations and strengths. This approach, known as a desire-based framework (Tuck, 2009), counters the negative effects of perceiving communities solely in terms of their problems. The real issue is not the supposed damage within communities, but rather the way research often unfairly labels them as damaged.

In all seven interviews, participants were asked: “How have things changed in London since the incident?” Their responses shared stories of significant mobilization within the Muslim community, with individuals stepping into roles of leadership and activism. There has also been a noticeable shift in the conversation surrounding Islamophobia. Participants noted that prior to the incident, discussions about Islamophobia might have been abstract, especially to non-Muslims. The tragedy brought a stark, tangible reality to the forefront, increasing awareness of the actual harms and violence caused by Islamophobia. Despite these positive developments, ongoing Islamophobia, including

incidents during Ramadan, were cited, underscoring the need for continued vigilance and political engagement of the community. Hend said:

It's especially important to acknowledge the distinct impact of Islamophobia on visibly Muslim women. While Islamophobia affects the entire community, including men and mosques, the experience for women is notably different and warrants specific attention.

Participants also mentioned a significant positive change: the heightened sense of unity and solidarity within the wider community. Tragic events often unite people, and this case appears to have strengthened community bonds and mutual support. This unity is crucial in fostering a supportive and resilient community. Laila said,

The biggest positive change is the sense of unity that has emerged. Tragic events like this tend to bring communities together. There's now a stronger sense of looking out for one another and showing support.

Tuck (2009, p. 419) helped me to understand how the concept of desire challenges the simple division between reproducing and resisting social structures. Both ideas have their critics. Some argue that these perspectives oversimplify complex situations – they either do not fully acknowledge how systemic oppression can affect people or do not recognize the power of human decisions and actions. Tuck (2009) argues that desire should not be seen as the exact opposite of damage. It is not about replacing one idea with another, or about using different words for political correctness. Instead, it is about viewing desire as a shift in how we understand things. It is certainly not about denying reality or pretending that everything is perfect or resolved.

Applying the concept of desire as an epistemological shift to the participants' narratives in the study, I can see a profound transformation in the Muslim community's

response to the Afzaal family tragedy. For instance, Heng mentioned that in the wake of the tragedy, there has been a mobilization within the Muslim community towards leadership and activism, despite the difficulty of finding positives in such a horrific event. This mobilization is driven by a strong resolve to prevent future hate incidents, to openly name and address Islamophobia, and to work towards its eradication. Heng said:

The incident has catalyzed new initiatives like the Youth Coalition to Combat Islamophobia, which is significant. But hearing ongoing stories of harassment and Islamophobia, such as incidents during Ramadan, is a stark reminder of the persistent threats and the need for continued vigilance.

The concept of desire here is about acknowledging the pain and damage caused by the incident and recognizing and navigating the challenges it presented. In addition, Tuck and Yang (2018, p.7) point out a troubling pattern in academic circles, where there is a strong emphasis on sharing stories of suffering from underprivileged groups – those who are not White, wealthy, or heterosexual. This tendency is problematic for two reasons: it often feels like an invasive curiosity into these communities' pain, and there is an unending appetite for these types of stories. Furthermore, they warn about new researchers coming out of doctoral programs who are too eager to start projects focused on these narratives of pain, under the false impression that this is what defines good social science. The fact that collecting stories of suffering and supporting theories that emphasize their importance are so common in social sciences could lead some to mistakenly believe that this is the main goal of academic research. This insight is particularly valuable to me as I consider pursuing my graduate studies, reminding me to approach research with a broader perspective and avoid falling into the trap of focusing solely on narratives of pain.

6.3 Mobilization and Activism as Forms of Desire

Desire-centered research acknowledges the reality of tragedy, trauma, and pain, yet views the insights gained from these experiences as valuable and enlightening. This approach is not about looking for a positive aspect in difficult situations or assuming that everything happens for a reason. Instead, a desire-based framework operates within a nuanced and dynamic understanding of the knowledge and wisdom that individuals or communities gain through their lived experiences (Tuck & Yang, 2018, p.11). In this context, the stories of participants who stepped into roles of activism reflect a response driven by desire (Tuck, 2009, p. 416). Rather than being immobilized by the incident, community members used it as a catalyst to deepen their engagement in activism and mobilization. This shift signifies a move towards empowerment and active involvement, exemplifying the concept of desire as a proactive response to challenges.

Exploring the broader implications of the findings reveals that the responses of Muslim women activists in London, Ontario, to the Afzaal family murders carry profound consequences for community activism, policy-making, and societal transformation. Their impact transcends the local context, offering essential insights for nurturing similar movements elsewhere. Gameela reflected on the solidarity from various groups:

There was significant support from other organizations as well. I recall friends from Indigenous organizations offering help, acknowledging the shared understanding of trauma due to colonialism and ongoing harm faced by Indigenous communities. Following the discovery of unmarked graves, these organizations extended offers of trauma counseling and support.

The strategies employed by these activists offer valuable lessons for communities facing similar adversities. Their innovative use of art, mental health advocacy, and youth

engagement demonstrates how creative and inclusive approaches can foster resilience and unity during tough times. Hend noted the emergence of new collaborative efforts:

New relationships have formed as a result, and numerous initiatives are underway. Art-based strategies have been particularly prominent, like the creation of murals and digital artwork with the young women in the "Not in Our Backyard" group. Collaborations with the school board are also in progress, focusing on addressing Islamophobia in educational settings.

By highlighting the experiences and voices of Muslim women, this study challenges traditional views on marginalization and highlights the power of collaborative community-led responses. This approach serves as an inspiration for other marginalized groups to leverage their unique perspectives on activism and the needs of their communities. Desire challenges the dominant story that colonization was an unavoidable event with complete control over the future. By refusing the pre-set colonial outcome, desire opens a range of potential futures. As a form of resistance, desire simultaneously says "no" to one narrative and "yes" to alternatives (Tuck & Yang, 2018, p.25). Mona shared:

Before the incident, there wasn't much explicit acknowledgment or discussion about Muslims experiencing Islamophobia or feeling unsafe. The general community, not just the Muslim community, wasn't fully aware of how people felt towards Muslims – whether they were racist, supportive, or indifferent. The incident forced everyone to confront these issues and show their true colors.

The insights from this research and the ongoing work of these women can guide policymakers in understanding the unique challenges faced by Muslim communities, particularly regarding Islamophobia and hate-motivated and gender-based violence. Informed and sensitive policies stand a better chance of being impactful. Learning from

grassroots efforts can help governments and institutions support similar initiatives, thereby fostering a more inclusive policy environment. Hend recounted a significant interaction:

Meeting Amira Elghawaby [Canada's Special Representative on Combatting Islamophobia] was a significant moment for these young women. It gave them a platform to share their experiences and feel heard. It was empowering for them to know that their voices mattered and would be taken to higher levels of government for consideration and action.



Image 5: YCCI members alongside Amira Elghawaby, Photo source: the YCCI website

6.4 Strategies for Moving Beyond Just Documenting Pain

The stories shared by the participants illuminate their agency, resilience, and proactive approaches to activism. Through findings, it was clear that the participants have developed diverse and impactful ways to advocate for justice and systemic change in the wake of the Afzaal family murders. These strategies were not only rooted in the participants' lived experiences but also in their professional expertise, demonstrating a deep commitment to addressing the complex layers of this issue. It is crucial to recognize the multifaceted nature of these women's experiences, which extend beyond any singular narrative of suffering or victimhood. Acknowledging this complexity means appreciating the full spectrum of their experiences, encompassing elements of joy, success, and hope, in addition to their struggles.

The participants, in their various roles and capacities, have shown remarkable resilience and innovation. They have utilized art as a powerful medium for healing and raising awareness, tapping into its therapeutic and communicative potential. Art-based initiatives served as a channel for personal and communal healing, with projects like memorial rock paintings becoming symbolic gestures of remembrance and solidarity. For example, Asmaa's story is a testament to the power of personal experiences shaping activism. She shared:

Art became my therapy. I would paint whenever I felt sad, adding details as I struggled with my emotions. I never sold these artworks; they were personal. It's interesting that through this process, I discovered a new way of making art that I enjoy.

Her artistic expression became a conduit for coping and a unique form of communicating her activism, highlighting how personal grief can evolve into a broader, creative form of engagement.



Image 6: Hand-painted rocks by Muslim women artist and Indigenous artist Steve Maracle displayed at Coldstream Library's gardens. The rocks honor #ourlondonfamily and the children affected by residential schools, symbolizing remembrance, and resilience.

Similarly, Mona's narrative underscores the significance of representation and voice in activism. As she puts it:

Being present as a Muslim woman in these spaces is, in itself, a form of activism, particularly in the field of law where Muslims, especially Muslim women, are underrepresented. In my class, for example, I am one of only four Muslim students. Simply being there and being a voice at the table is crucial.

Her presence in a predominantly non-Muslim legal environment exemplifies a quiet but powerful form of resistance and activism.

Alongside artistic and advocacy efforts, mental health support played a crucial role in the community's response to the murders. Participants recognized the profound psychological impact of the event and responded by creating safe spaces and support groups, with a particular focus on Muslim women and young women. These environments enabled open discussions about Islamophobia and gendered Islamophobia, offering crucial support for individuals to process their experiences and emotions. Hend elaborated on this, saying:

However, alongside these fears [the potential risks associated with wearing hijab], many women who wear the hijab expressed a strengthened conviction. Despite concerns about being a visible target when out with their families, they maintained a sense of pride and identity. In our groups with young women, there was a focus on encouraging each other to stay strong and affirm their faith and identity as Muslim women.

This statement highlights the resilience within these support groups, where women not only shared concerns but also bolstered each other's courage and sense of identity.

Youth advocacy and public policy also played a significant role in the community's response. Young participants actively engaged in organizing events, such as marches and

vigils, and utilized various platforms, including media and social media, to enhance the visibility of the Muslim community and advocate for systemic change. For example, they played a pivotal role in the "Our London Family March". Additionally, they were instrumental in the planning and execution of the poignant vigil at Hyde Park and South Carriage roads, where the community gathered to remember and honor the Afzaal family. Beyond these events, they also developed an educational package about the murders and combating Islamophobia, tailored for two distinct age groups: grades 1 to 8 and grades 9 to 12. This educational initiative, designed to raise awareness and foster understanding among young students, further demonstrates their commitment to creating long-term systemic change. Their efforts were not only aimed at raising awareness but also at fostering a broader dialogue to combat hate and promote understanding. Mona shared:

Last year, we took several steps, apart from participating in annual marches and events. Around the date of June 6th, which is significant for our talks on Islamophobia, we introduced a new initiative at the university.

The narratives shared in this research highlight the varied strategies and tools employed by Muslim women activists in London, Ontario. These women have adeptly used art, leveraged their presence in underrepresented fields, and engaged in social media activism to foster justice and effect.

In applying Tuck's desire-centered research approach, I highlight how participants' strategies, rooted in their personal and professional experiences, go beyond mere resilience against adversity. Asmaa's art becomes more than a coping mechanism; it is a form of activism, transforming personal grief into broader community engagement, signifying empowerment, and creative resilience.

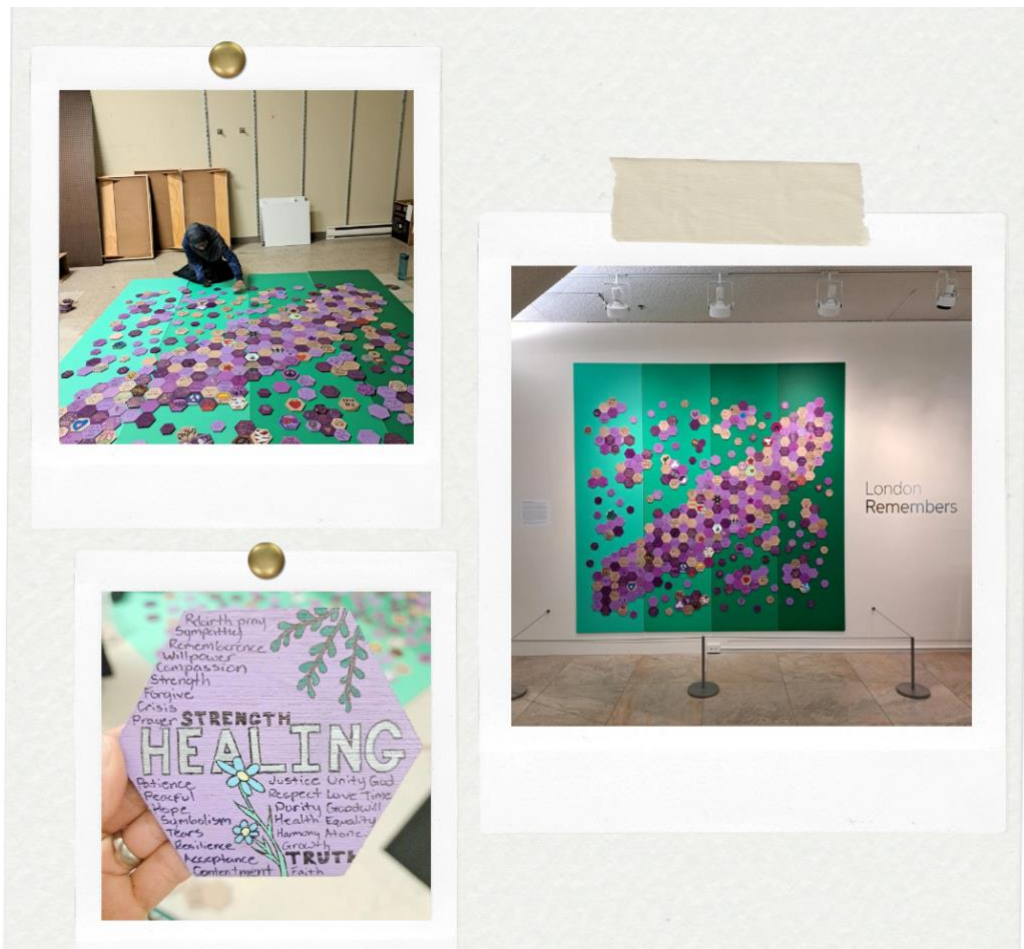


image 7: Collaborative artwork between Muslim women artist with YCCI, a fusion of art and research, now exhibited at Museum London. This collage crafted by me.

Similarly, Mona's presence in the legal field is not just about representation; it is an active challenge to the underrepresentation and stereotypes of Muslim women in professional spaces, exemplifying strategic empowerment and systemic change. In addition, Amal's commitment to making a positive difference in her community exemplifies a desire-centered approach. Her activism is fueled by a vision of positive change, indicating a move beyond reacting to adversity to actively shaping a better future for her community. These instances reflect a shift from reacting to trauma to proactively shaping empowering, strength-based narratives within the community, embodying the dynamic and multifaceted nature of their activism.

Overall, the findings reveal the community's dynamic and multifaceted response to the tragic and avoidable murders of an entire family that shook Muslim communities across Canada and worldwide. It highlights how the participants' strategies and tools are rooted in a profound understanding of the complexities of Islamophobia. Their varied activism efforts demonstrate a strength-based approach to activism by shifting away from a focus on damage, which creates opportunities to move beyond harm-oriented perspectives.

6.5 Concluding Reflections

We need to raise our voices a little more, even as they say to us
'This is so uncharacteristic of you.' To finally recognize our own
invisibility is to finally be on the path toward visibility. Invisibility
is not a natural state for anyone.

Mitsuye Yamada, *This Bridge Called my Back*, p. 35

My story did not begin in Ottawa, but far away, in the warmth and chaos of Cairo. There, under the shadow of a military coup, my family and I yearned for a haven, a place where our voices could be heard, and our dreams could soar. Canada, with its sprawling landscapes and mosaic of cultures, promised such a refuge. But little did I know, my fight

for identity and justice was just beginning. The tragic incident in London, Ontario, where the Afzaal family's simple pleasure of a walk turned into a nightmare, marked a pivotal moment in my life. It was more than a news headline; it echoed my own fears and the challenges we faced as Muslim immigrants in a new land. The incident was not isolated but part of a broader pattern of hate and ignorance, casting dark shadows over our new home.

In this thesis, storytelling emerges as a powerful tool for transformation, with archives and memorials serving as crucial mechanisms for preserving narratives and fostering collective resilience. Archiving Muslim activists experiences of resistance in relationship to the Afzaal family murders are my contribution to the literature. Telling stories, particularly those rooted in the activism and responses of the Muslim community in London, Ontario, after the Afzaal family murders, ensures that the struggle, activism, and resistance of marginalized groups are not only recorded but also understood within their broader socio-political and historical contexts. This work challenges the prevailing academic focus on narratives of suffering and instead emphasizes resilience, resistance, and collective strength. By doing so, it breaks the cycle of research that often centers on pain, offering instead a comprehensive framework that includes both challenges and triumphs. The archive of these stories allows us to intervene in academic spaces and transform how histories and narratives of marginalized communities are told, fostering a path forward to create anti-racist and decolonial legacies. Memorials, archives, and storytelling offer future generations a blueprint for responding to systemic oppression, ensuring that the lived experiences of the Muslim community and their efforts to engage, resist, and persist are not forgotten.

Compelled to make a difference, I embarked on a mission to intertwine my personal experiences with the broader canvas. In university, I sought to gain a degree to shine a light on the intersecting paths of hate crimes and violence against Muslim women in Canada, through the lens of power, positionality, and privilege. My educational and professional path as a journalist and activist specializing in digital storytelling led me to create 'Unheard Voices' and 'Fearless Cities.' These digital storytelling platforms, developed in partnership with seasoned urbanists and sustainability activists, were part of a collaborative effort between the Leading Social Justice Collective (LSJC), the School of Cities at the University of Toronto, and the United Way. They were conceived to enhance the safety and inclusivity of public spaces for visibly Muslim women and other women of color in the GTA, an 'arrival city' known for its welcoming spirit and diversity.

These digital storytelling projects, rooted in the 'right to the city' concept, delved into the lives of visible communities and visibly religious women in Toronto. I explored the impact of gendered Islamophobia and racism on their perception of the city and their ability to navigate it. I employed various research methods, including storytelling, interviews, and focus groups, ensuring a representative sample of the population. As twilight enveloped the city, I reflected on my journey, intertwined with many others, each vying for a place in the world's narrative. This tapestry of stories, woven with strength and unity, harbored an unwavering hope for a brighter, more inclusive future. This thesis is an extension of this storytelling and in conversation with academics. It is not just a conclusion but a reverberation of resilience, echoing across the city and the world, in the hearts of all those who dared to dream of justice and equality.

In recent years, the academic community has broadened its horizons, acknowledging the value of diverse methodologies. Traditional research, while invaluable, is only one facet of human inquiry. Tuck and Yang (2018) highlighted how this traditional approach often overshadows other forms of knowledge. This has led to a reimagining of what research can be, encompassing performances, poetry as autoethnography, and even the wisdom of our elders. In my quest for a master's degree, I envisioned a creative thesis using digital storytelling to analyze and present participant artworks. This study goes beyond data collection; it was an immersive engagement with participant experiences, allowing for a richer understanding. My goal was to create a platform for diverse creative content, making research a living, breathing entity accessible to a wider audience. However, this innovative approach was constrained by traditional academic frameworks, highlighting the need for more inclusive research practices. As I now plan for my Ph.D. journey, I carry with me the lessons learned about the importance of diverse research methodologies. This next chapter in life is another opportunity to challenge the traditional academic landscape, continuing to explore, understand, and advocate for a world where every form of inquiry and expression finds its rightful place.



Image 8: The Fearless Cities Initiative: Combating Gendered Islamophobia and Anti-Racism in the Greater Toronto Area

6.6 The limitations

A notable limitation of this study is its concentrated focus on a specific group of Muslim women activists in London, Ontario. The participants, whose ages range from 20 to 59 and who come from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds, offer a detailed view of activism in London following the Afzaal family murders. However, this group represents only a segment of the broader and more diverse Muslim community, meaning the study captures just a portion of this diversity.

Another critical limitation arose from the timing of the research. Recruitment of participants and several interviews took place concurrently with the trial of Nathaniel Veltman, who was accused of murdering a Muslim family in London. The emotionally charged atmosphere during this period posed significant challenges. Particularly impactful was the court's release of a dramatic video (CTV News, 2023), showing moments leading up to the incident, which deeply affected the community. This event reopened profound emotional wounds and potentially influenced the participants' responses. Conducting interviews during such a turbulent time may have limited the study's ability to capture the long-term implications and the changing nature of the activists' responses. The immediacy of the trial and the intense emotional reactions elicited by the video's release could have influenced the participants' perspectives, potentially differing from a more reflective viewpoint gained over time.

Appendix A: Recruitment Poster



Recruitment Poster
Participate in a study on

Sharing Stories: Examining the Responses of Muslim Women Activists in London, ON to the Afzaal Family Murders

This project aims to **explore** and **understand** the experiences and reactions of **Muslim women activists** in **London, Ontario**, following the tragic event of the Afzaal Family murders.

To participate in this study, you must be:

- **A Muslim woman activist**
- **At least 18 years old**
- **Residents of London, ON**

This is a 60-minute **interview study**, conducted either **in-person or via Zoom**. Participants will be asked to share their experiences and reactions as Muslim women activists in London, Ontario, following the tragic event of the Afzaal family murders.

Interviews will be audio-recorded with your consent. All the information you provide will be treated confidentially, and your identity will be protected using pseudonyms.

This study has been cleared by the **Carleton University Research Ethics Board A**, Clearance **#119503**.

For more details, please contact **Kawther Ramadan**, a master's student at the Feminist Institute of Social Transformation, Carleton University, at **KawtherRamadan@gmail.com**.

Appendix B: Invitation letter Sample



Subject: Invitation to Participate in a Research Project on Gendered Islamophobia

Date: 00/08/2023

Dear,

My name is Kawther Ramadan, and I am a master's student in the Feminist Institute of Social Transformation at Carleton University. I am working on a research project under the supervision of Prof. Manjeet Birk.

I am writing to you today to invite you to participate in a study entitled "Sharing Stories: Examining the Responses of Muslim Women Activists in London, ON to the Afzaal Family Murders." This study aims to explore and understand the experiences and reactions of Muslim women activists in London, Ontario, following the tragic event of the Afzaal family murders. Your perspective as a Muslim woman activist will provide valuable insights for this study.

This study involves a one-hour interview, either in-person or via Zoom, depending on your preference. With your consent, interviews will be audio-recorded. Once the recording has been transcribed and verified, the audio recording will be destroyed.

All the information you provide during the interview will be treated with the utmost confidentiality, and your identity will be protected by using pseudonyms in any publications resulting from this study. This will be done by keeping all responses anonymous and allowing you to request that certain responses not be included in the final project.

You will have the right to end your participation in the study at any time, for any reason before December 31, 2023, prior to data analysis. All recording and participant ID codes will be deleted after three months after the completion of the project. If you choose to withdraw, all the information you have provided will be destroyed.

This research has been cleared by Carleton University Research Ethics Board A Clearance # 119503.

Should you have any ethical concerns with the study, please contact the REB Chair, Carleton University Research Ethics Board-A (by phone: 613-520-2600 ext. 2517 or by email:

ethics@carleton.ca). For all other questions about the study, please contact the researcher.

If you would like to participate in this research project or have any questions about the research, please contact me at kawtherramadan@email.carleton.ca

Sincerely,

Kawther Ramadan (She/her)

Master's Student

Feminist Institute of Social Transformation

Carleton University

Appendix C: Interview Questions



Interview Questions

Name and Researcher: Kawther Ramadan

Contact Information: KawtherRamadan@cmail.carleton.ca

Supervisor, if applicable: Manjeet Birk, ManjeetBirk@cunet.carleton.ca

Study Title: Sharing Stories: Examining the Responses of Muslim Women Activists in London, ON to the Afzaal Family Murders

REB Protocol #: 119503

1. What are some words you would use to identify yourself or your activism?
2. Can you tell me about some of your activist projects?
3. How did you first become aware of what happened to the Afzaal family?
4. What was your initial reaction?
5. What support or resources from the community did you use after the incident?
6. Can you describe any specific measures or initiatives you or your organization to prevent similar incidents?
7. How have you engaged with the broader community in London, Ontario, in response to the Afzaal Family incident?
8. Were there any collaborative efforts or initiatives?
9. What inspired your activism and how you became active in this issue?
10. How have things changed in London since the murders?
11. Is there anything else you would like to share?

Appendix D: Consent form Sample



General Informed Consent Template for Participants

Study Title

Sharing Stories: Examining the Responses of Muslim Women Activists in London, ON to the Afzaal Family Murders

Name and Contact Information of Researchers:

Kawther Ramadan, Carleton University, Feminist Institute of Social Transformation

Email: kawtherramadan@cmail.carleton.ca

Supervisor and Contact Information:

Prof. Manjeet Birk

Email: ManjeetBirk@cunet.carleton.ca

Carleton University Project Clearance

Clearance #: 119503

Study Clearance Date: 30-06-2023

Consent form version date: 03-08-2023

Project Sponsor and Funder (if any)

N/A

Invitation

You are invited to take part in a research project because you identify as a Muslim women activist and reside in London, Ontario. The information in this form is intended to help you understand what we are asking of you so that you can decide whether you agree to participate in this study. Your participation in this study is voluntary, and a decision not to participate will not be used against you in any way. As you read this form, and decide whether to participate, please ask all the questions you might have, take whatever time you need, and consult with others as you wish.

What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of this study is to explore and understand the experiences and reactions of Muslim women activists in London, Ontario, following the tragic event of the Afzaal Family murders.

What will I be asked to do?

If you agree to take part in the study, we will ask you to:

1. Participate in a one-hour interview, which can be conducted either in-person or via Zoom, based on your preference and convenience. The interview will involve

answering questions about your experiences and reactions as a Muslim woman activist in London, Ontario, following the Afzaal family murders.

2. With your consent, the interview will audio-record to ensure accuracy in capturing your responses. You may also choose to opt-out of being recorded, and the interview can be conducted without any recordings.

Please note that you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time before December 31, 2023, prior to data analysis, without any penalty or explanation. If you choose to withdraw, all the information you have provided will be destroyed.

Risks and Inconveniences

1. Emotional/Psychological Risks: Discussing your experiences and reactions to the Afzaal Family Murders may evoke strong emotions or distress. You may find certain topics or questions uncomfortable or upsetting. Please remember that you have the right to decline answering any question or stop the interview at any time if you feel uncomfortable.

2. Privacy Risks: Although confidentiality will be strictly maintained, there is a minimal risk of a data breach. To mitigate this risk, all data will be securely stored, with electronic files being password-protected and physical copies stored in a locked cabinet. In the case of online interviews, please be aware that Zoom servers are located in the United States and subject to U.S. laws on data privacy.

3. Inconveniences: Participation in this study may require you to dedicate an hour of your time for the interview, which might cause some inconvenience in your daily schedule. However, the interview can be scheduled at a time that best suits your availability.

Please note that the researcher and research team are committed to minimizing any potential risks and inconveniences by providing a supportive and safe environment during the research process. If you experience any distress during or after the study, you are encouraged to inform the researcher who can provide you with resources for support.

Possible Benefits

You may not receive any direct benefit from your participation in this study. However, your participation may allow researchers to better understand the experiences and responses of Muslim women activists in London, Ontario, following the tragic event of the Afzaal family murders. Your insights will help researchers explore the impact of this tragedy on the Muslim community and identify ways to better support and empower Muslim women activists in the face of such challenges. By sharing your story, you will be contributing to a larger conversation on the resilience of Muslim women and the role they play in advocating for social change and justice. No waiver of your rights

By signing this form, you are not waiving any rights or releasing the researchers from any liability.

Withdrawing from the study

If you withdraw your consent during the course of the study, all information collected from you before your withdrawal will be discarded.

You can withdraw from the study at any time before December 31, 2023, by notice given to the Principal Investigator (named above). Confidentiality measures will be strictly implemented at every stage to address any participant concerns.

Confidentiality

We will remove all identifying information from the study data as soon as possible, which will be after three months. We will treat your personal information as confidential, although absolute privacy cannot be guaranteed. No information that discloses your identity will be released or published without your specific consent. Research records may be accessed by the Carleton University Research Ethics Board to ensure ongoing ethics compliance.

Please note that there may be circumstances in which we are legally obligated to disclose certain information, such as cases of child abuse or when there is potential harm to yourself or others. In these instances, confidentiality may be limited, and we may be required to report this information to appropriate authorities.

Rest assured that any such disclosures will be made only when absolutely necessary and in accordance with legal requirements. The results of this study may be published or presented at an academic conference or meeting, but the data will be presented in such a way that it will not be possible to identify any participants unless you give your express consent.

We will remove all identifying information from the study data as soon as possible, which will be after three months. You will be assigned a code or pseudonym so that your identity will not be directly associated with the data you have provided. All data, including coded information, will be kept in a password-protected file on a secure computer.

"In-session" data, such as audio, and chat transcripts from the interview, will be stored locally on the researcher's computer. Operational data, such as meeting and performance data, will be stored and protected by Zoom on servers located in the USA but may be disclosed via a court order or data breach.

We will password-protect any research data that we store or transfer.

Data Retention

After the study is completed, your de-identified data will be retained for future research use. In the unlikely event that some or all of the retained data continues to contain identifiers, we will ensure that the security of data storage provides adequate safeguards for the risks associated with a data breach. This includes storing electronic data on password-protected devices or secure cloud storage services with encryption and storing physical copies of data in locked cabinets in the researcher's office, accessible only by authorized personnel.

If audio recordings are to be used in this study, we will inform you whether they will identify you as a participant. We will obtain your explicit consent before using any recordings that may reveal your identity. You will have the option to opt out of having recordings used in the study while still being able to participate in other aspects of the research.

Please note that in order to ensure the security and confidentiality of recorded data, all recordings will be securely stored on password-protected devices accessible only to the researcher. Immediately following each interview, recordings will be promptly transferred to a secure storage location. Any identifying information will be thoroughly removed or anonymized during data analysis, and participants will be assigned code numbers to protect their identity. These recordings will be utilized solely for data analysis purposes and will be deleted once transcripts and notes are finalized.

New information during the study

In the event that any changes could affect your decision to continue participating in this study, you will be promptly informed.

Ethics review

This project was reviewed and cleared by the Carleton University Research Ethics Board

A. If you have any ethical concerns with the study, please contact Carleton University Research Ethics Board by phone at 613-520-2600, ext. 2517 or by email at ethics@carleton.ca.

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. ☐ Yes ☐ No

I agree to be (audio recorded) ☐ Yes ☐ No

Note: Recordings are optional for participation in this study. If you choose not to have your interview recorded, you can still participate in the research. Your decision to opt out of recordings will not affect your involvement in other aspects of the study. Our primary goal is to ensure your comfort and willingness to share your experiences, and we will respect your preference regarding recordings.

Name of participant

Signature of participant.

Date

Research team member who interacted with the participant

I have explained the study to the participant and answered any and all of their questions. The participant appeared to understand and agree. I provided a copy of the consent form to the participant for their reference.

Kawther Ramadan

Name of researcher

Signature of researcher

Date

Appendix E: List of Community organization in London, ON

Organization	Services provided	Website
Muslim Resource Centre for Social Support and Integration (MRCSSI)	Providing guidance and resources to a range of community-based and public sector organizations	https://mrcssi.com
Youth Coalition Combating Islamophobia (YCCI)	Organizing dynamic workshops, hosting community events and crafting informative educational materials	https://www.ycci.ca
Anti-Islamophobia Working Group	Consult with Muslim communities and community based and public sector organizations in London, ON, led by the City of London	https://london.ca
Muslim Students' Association - Western University (MSA)	Providing activities and initiatives to empower Muslim students at Western universities	MSA website
Muslim Law Students Association (MLSA)	Providing activates to advocate for Muslim students in the law school community.	https://community.ca.se.edu/mlsa/home
Muslim Association of Canada (MAC)	Hosting various programs organized by the Youth, Outreach, Spiritual Development.	MAC London website
Muslim Wellness Centre	Providing spaces for communal grieving and recovery	https://www.muslimwellness.ca/

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