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**“YOU THINK CHANGING YOUR NAME WILL BRING
YOU PEACE”: BREAKING THE CHAINS OF
ISLAMOPHOBIA IN ROHINA MALIK'S YASMINA'S
NECKLACE**

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Abstract

There has been an ongoing issue with attitudes towards Arabs, Muslims, and Islam in the United States. Unfortunately, there has been little to no progress in recent years, as these groups and their religion continue to face increased negative sentiments, largely fueled by the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. To shed light on this matter, this paper focuses on the play *Yasmina's Necklace* (2016) written by Rohina Malik (1964), an American-Pakistani playwright, and further incorporates Edward Said's revolutionary book titled *Orientalism* (1978) and Eric Love's insightful book *Islamophobia and Racism in America* (2017) for methodological guidance. The paper has three main objectives: firstly, to explore the representation of Muslim characters in *Yasmina's Necklace*; secondly, to examine the impact of Islamophobia on the play's immigrant characters; and thirdly, to investigate how Islamic communities in America are employing acts of resistance to combat Islamophobia. Malik's portrayal of Muslim characters challenges the prevailing negative stereotypes that depict Arab individuals as violent, primitive, and backward. By doing so, her characters resist the essentialist dichotomies such as terrorist/victim and educated/uneducated, as well as the divisive rhetoric of Us versus Them that continues to dominate post-9/11 American nationalistic narratives. In *Yasmina's Necklace*, Malik skillfully directs attention to Muslim women who have embraced the struggle against these stereotypes and prejudices. Thus, the play not only serves as a critique of imperial feminist narratives but also actively pushes back against them, primarily through *Yasmina*, its main character.

Keywords: Islamophobia- Muslim stereotypes- *Yasmina's Neckalce*- Rohina Malik-Edward Said

Introduction

I wish I could say, however, that general understanding of the Middle East, the Arabs and Islam in the United States has improved somewhat, but alas, it really hasn't. (Said, *Orientalism*, xii)

Scholars of Islamophobia recognize that contemporary manifestations of anti-Muslim racism originated as part of a larger system of racial capitalism that has influenced global trade, imperialism, and migration for centuries. Edward Said's foundational theory of *Orientalism* (1978) offers a conceptual framework for understanding how Europe was constructed by British and French colonial administrators as the imagined "Orient," the opposite of the West. *Orientalism* posits a fundamental cultural difference between 'the Orient' and the West. According to Said, European authors and philosophers in the late eighteenth century invented the notion of 'the Orient' to label vastly diverse cultures and people from the Greater Middle East. This discourse unfavorably depicted 'Eastern' people as irrational, prone to violence, and governed by lower instincts, while characterizing Islam as a regressive religion that degraded women.

Said argues that *Orientalism* silenced the voices of Oriental cultures by reinforcing negative stereotypes, contributing to the demonization of Muslims and erasing the actual diversity and complexity of Islamic cultures. Islam was portrayed as a monolithic and fanatical religion, inherently violent and irrational. This construction of Islam as a threat led to the marginalization and dehumanization of Muslims. The world we see is a result of a confluence of images and narratives that people in power have long crafted. Said opened the world's eyes to how the French and English systematically colonized, subjugated, and mischaracterized the Middle East. He states:

Since the demise of the Soviet Union, some scholars and journalists in the United States have rushed to find in an Orientalized Islam a new evil empire. Consequently, both the electronic and print media have been awash with demeaning stereotypes that lump together Islam and

terrorism, or Arabs and violence, or the Orient and tyranny (Said, *Orientalism* 368).

Islamophobia is not solely rooted in ignorance or uneducated beliefs as it is being perpetuated by scholars, artists, and the media. Negative images of Islamic culture have been disseminated at the highest levels of Western culture, leading to the embedding of stereotypes and negative images of Arabs and Muslims in the American psyche (Shaheen 3). To many scholars, Islamophobia is a kind of racism (Werbner 5, Durrani 346, Love 82). For example, Erik Love in his book, *Islamophobia and Racism in America*, argues that Islamophobia is seen as a form of racism built into American institutions alongside white supremacy. He says:

American islamophobia developed in very much the same way as all American social structures that involve race. As a form of racism, islamophobia is built into American institutions. White supremacy and Islamophobia stem from the same root. . . Therefore, any effective understanding of islamophobia must take into account the full scope of American race and racism. (4)

Islamophobia is not limited to individual bias but is also enacted through cultural expectations, political acts, laws and policies. Khaled Beydoun suggests that because Muslims are seen as a threat to American security, various social and political institutions have advocated for imposing additional restrictions on them (33). Examples include Donald Trump's "Muslim Ban" and the Supreme Court's 2015 rulings on Islamic attire, such as the case against Abercrombie and Fitch's discriminatory policy towards Muslim women wearing hijabs on the perceived grounds that they contaminate Western civilization. Beydoun categorizes Islamophobia into structural, dialectical, and private forms, encompassing anti-Muslim legislation, sociocultural stereotypes perpetuated by government and media, and personal acts of violence (52). Love suggests that the racialization of Muslims stems from the same white supremacist ideology underlying other forms of racism (84).

The post-9/11 era witnessed a surge in Islamophobia, which activated existing fears and justified hostility and animosity towards Muslims. This phenomenon aligns with English social theorist Raymond Williams' concept of a "residual culture," wherein anti-Islamic tendencies are strongly reinforced by a single dramatic terrorist attack. Notably, both in Europe and North America, hate crimes targeting Muslims saw a significant rise, including attacks on mosques, Islamic centers, and women wearing hijabs (Bazian 25). In the words of Shehata, the aftermath of 9/11 suggests to Americans that the Muslim family next door could be a sleeper cell committed to inflicting mass casualties against its fellow citizens (84).

Military campaigns waged against predominantly Muslim nations like Afghanistan and Iraq further contributed to the perception of Muslims as the enemy, fostering a defensive mindset in the Western world. The Western media has played a role in perpetuating Islamophobia by focusing on violence and controversy when portraying Muslims, thereby reinforcing stereotypes and biases. Hollywood films have also contributed to the negative portrayal of Arabs and Muslims, depicting them as the "new enemy of the West" and frequently portraying them as terrorists or villains with a deep-seated hatred for the United States (Moten 168).

Building upon the understanding of Islamophobia and its varying manifestations that has been established, this analysis will delve into the intricate web of symbols in Malik's *Yasmina's Necklace*, illuminating their significance in dismantling stereotypes and fostering empathy. As we navigate the multifaceted world of the play, we will embark on a transformative journey that challenges the deeply ingrained prejudices that perpetuate a climate of intolerance. Through the power of storytelling, Malik offers us an opportunity to

engage with the human experiences and emotions behind the headlines, ultimately fostering a sense of connection and compassion that transcends boundaries.

Malik is an award-winning American-Pakistani playwright, actress, and screenwriter, born in London to an Indian mother and a Pakistani father. Her family immigrated to Illinois when she was a teenager, and she now resides in Chicago. Malik's first play, *Unveiled* (2009), is partly based on prejudices she encountered after the September 11 attacks. The solo performance premiered at the 16th Street Theater in Berwyn, IL, and has been presented at theaters both across the United States and internationally. Her subsequent plays, *The Mecca Tales* (2015) and *Yasmina's Necklace* (2016) were nominated for a Joseph Jefferson Award for Best Play. Another of her plays, *The Hijabis* (2020), which premiered in 2022 was commissioned by the Big Bridge Theatre Consortium.

In 2018, Malik received the Lee Reynolds Award, given annually to a woman active in any aspect of theatre whose work has helped illuminate possibilities for social, cultural, or political change. Malik's works explore the complexities of being a Muslim woman in a global society that tends to hold a reductive view of such people as veiled, oppressed, and in need of saving. She challenges these stereotypes in her plays, resisting Western media's tendency to perpetuate them. Through her plays, Malik seeks to challenge her audience's perceptions of the diverse people and cultures who make up the Muslim community and to promote greater understanding and empathy for Muslims in the global community. This paper demonstrates how Islamophobia is presented in Malik's *Yasmina's Necklace*, and points to a group of Muslim women who have taken up this struggle.

Yasmina's Necklace, a play by Malik which was initially published in 2016, addresses Islamophobia and the challenges faced by Muslims in America, including issues related to naming, misnaming, name-changing, hijab-wearing, and cultural disrespect or hostility. It also examines the characters' responses and strategies for dealing with all these issues. The play garnered critical acclaim, with reviewers praising its script. It was described as “engaging and powerful” by Chicago On Stage, “brilliant” by Newcity Stage, and Edge Media commended it as a story that encompasses human resilience and possibility.

The play introduces Abdul Samee Marcario Lopez Hassan, the son of a Puerto Rican mother and an Iraqi father, who recently informed his parents that he changed his name to "Sam" to escape the stigma associated with anti-Muslim bias and to advance in the corporate world (11). Sam's parents are disappointed not only because of his recent divorce (as they never approved of his American wife, Tracy) but also because he refuses to pursue a recommended match with a woman, who recently arrived from Iraq, endorsed by Imam Kareem. Sam's parents become less enthusiastic about the match after discovering that Yasmina is a refugee. However, when Sam meets Yasmina, he is captivated by her unwavering commitment to her heritage and her desire to assist other immigrant families.

After offering to help Yasmina establish a nonprofit aid organization in Chicago to support other refugees, their relationship grows, and they eventually become engaged. However, on their wedding night, Yasmina flees from Sam's home. Later, it is revealed that Yasmina is haunted by the memory of her deceased lover in her home country, the man who gave her the necklace engraved with the word "Iraq" that she always wears. Yasmina worries that the pain, trauma, and death she has experienced have left her too scared to fully commit to Sam. In addition to the loss of Amir, Yasmina also discovered her mother's murdered body on the roadside and endured sexual assault during her 27-day imprisonment in a Syrian prison after refusing to betray the refugees she had been assisting. In the play's final scene, Sam, understanding Yasmina's pain, pleads with her not to annul their marriage, acknowledging her suffering and asking her to walk with him. They agree, expressing hope that despite their brokenness, they will find wholeness together.

In the preface to her play, Malik states that she writes plays because she is distressed by the prevalence of violence, discrimination, and ugliness in the world (Goodman Master Script). Regarding the play, Malik specifically refers to the post-9/11 period when many Muslim men changed their names due to anti-Muslim bias, which is how Sam's character emerged (10). This statement reflects the first issue of Islamophobia that Arab characters face in the play: the challenge of naming or name-changing. In *Yasmina's Necklace*, the dialogue between Sam and Ali illustrates how the latter encounters workplace racism due to his Arabic name:

SAM: I know, but I had to change my name. You don't see racism in the corporate world.

ALI: Of course, I do.

SAM: ...with a name like Abdul Samee Marcario Lopez Hassan, it is really difficult. (11)

This dialogue highlights the discrimination experienced by individuals from minority backgrounds in professional settings. As Alalawi correctly points out, Muslims, Arabs, and individuals with names that sound Muslim often become targets of discrimination (59). Sam's experience is not unique; a study published in the *Journal of Organizational Behavior* found that resumes with Arab names were four times more likely to be rejected than those with typical Dutch names, even when qualifications were equal (Derous 544). Sam explains to Yasmina that if they had known his "real name," he believes he would not have been able to secure the job (36). According to Sam, when he submitted his resume under his real name to potential employers, he was consistently ignored. However, when he resubmitted the same resume with the name Sam, he received instant responses from top companies.

This scenario depicted in the play illustrates how individuals with Muslim or Middle Eastern names are often stereotyped and confined to a predetermined perception (37), a reality experienced by many Arab-Americans and Muslim-Americans. Sam himself confesses that he attempted to assimilate into whiteness by choosing the name Sam, which he considered to be a "simple name, very normal and very white." When Sam's mother mentions a person named Osama in their neighborhood who did not change his name, Sam retorts, "He always complains about the way people treat him" (12). Similarly, his friend Saddam faces the same issue of name discrimination and is subjected to harassment at the airport (12). Even Tony Masood, the lawyer who assists Yasmina in establishing a nonprofit organization, has a real name of Muhammed. Consequently, Arab characters in such a context are treated as "outsiders, interlopers, and foreigners—above all, as enemies of the state" due to their ethnic origins (Beydoun 45).

As Durrani argues, the "Muslim subject can be understood as a 'hinge' where the racialized subject must prove themselves a good (compliant) subject that can be assimilated into a modern civilized, western world by distancing from any association or stereotype of the bad (terrorist) subject" (347). To remain in America, these characters are compelled to choose between assimilation and submission, constantly grappling with their sense of belonging to either the Arab or Western community. If Sam had continued to be known as Abdel Samee, he would have been deemed inferior, insignificant, and excluded from society.

To be recognized, Sam and his friends, as expressed by Fanon, must metaphorically wear the "livery that the White Americans sewed" (167). They are effectively required to wear white masks as a condition for entering American society. Unfortunately, surviving discrimination and racism in the corporate world seems to necessitate their complete acceptance of the pre-assigned roles determined by white individuals, leading to lives characterized by degradation and a denial of their abilities, intelligence, education, and economic status solely based on their Arab or Muslim identity.

While Sam appreciates his native culture, his aspirations for success compel him to believe that he cannot maintain both identities in America, forcing him to choose between his heritage and the ideals of the dominant culture. His decision should not be interpreted as an outright rejection of his background; he later affirms that he values his culture. Nevertheless, he is driven to redefine his identity in pursuit of the American Dream. Sam's acknowledgment of his marginalized position as "the other" within the American social hierarchy motivates him to reconstruct his sense of self. As he tells Yasmina, "Look, I know who I have to be to the outside world" (82). In this context, it is not surprising that, as an Arab immigrant, Sam opts to shorten his name to Sam, as at that time, only whites were allowed to apply for naturalization, and acquiring citizenship in the US seemed contingent upon assimilation.

The Western world began stigmatizing Muslim women after the 9/11 attacks, viewing their veils as both a threat and a means to conceal terrorism. Since then, hate crimes targeting Muslims have witnessed a staggering increase of "1700 percent" (Curtis 101), encompassing various forms of violence such as attacks on Islamic centers. In addition, Muslim women wearing the hijab have faced a heightened risk of harassment (Bazian 25). The hijab, being the most prominent visual symbol of Muslim identity and distinction, has become a focal point for hostility and it holds diverse meanings for different people. To those hostile towards Muslims, it signifies their unwelcome presence. Conversely, for those hostile towards Islam as a religion, but who possess a condescending disdain for Muslim individuals, the hijab represents misguided beliefs or oppressive conformity.

The covered female body in Muslim societies garnered significant attention from Western men and women during the rise of European colonialism and this resulted in opposing attitudes. Western men romanticized it, while Western women condemned it as a barbaric practice belonging to the Islamic world. After 9/11, these attitudes, towards the covered Muslim female body, which never completely vanished, resurfaced with greater intensity, thereby affirming Western perceptions of backward Islamic cultures. It is important to note that following the 9/11 attacks, the United States specifically joined in the stigmatization of Muslim women, perceiving their veils as a potential threat or a means to hide terrorism. This stigmatization was also depicted in *Yasmina's Necklace* where Muslim women constantly feared being attacked due to their manner of dressing.

In the Western world, the Hijab has been categorized as a tool for further oppression of women because it has been erroneously perceived as a symbol of political Islam and fundamentalism, rooted in hostility towards the West and Western culture. Malik, who is also a hijab-wearing woman, aims to convey the challenges faced by Muslim women in a world that lacks empathy for the foreign "other." In the play, Yasmina encounters hate speech, which resonates with the experiences of Middle Eastern, and South Asian immigrants and citizens in the US. Yasmina, the protagonist who wears a necklace engraved with "Iraq," narrates an incident where a female customer at the store she works in directs offensive language at her upon seeing the necklace. The customer asserts, "How can you be proud of being from that shit country. You are all a bunch of terrorists" (46). This American customer perceives Yasmina as "living in our communities — plotting, planning, and waiting to kill Americans" (Ascherofit 2005). This episode reflects the dehumanization of Arabs and the automatic association of brownness with terrorism, perpetuating Orientalist stereotypes identified by scholars like Said.

Contrary to the stereotypical portrayal of Muslim women as "docile and speechless victims" (Sabbagh xi), Yasmina does not passively endure this treatment; she stands up for herself. She retorts to the customer, stating that she will "get back on [her] camel after she [the customer] gets back on her broomstick"(82). With courage and humor, Yasmina establishes her position and confronts the woman. The audience witnesses Yasmina's strength

of character and her commitment to aiding refugees escaping war-torn countries, through this incident and others in the play. This portrayal of Muslim women, particularly Yasmina as a hijab-wearing individual, challenges the stereotypes of Muslim women as victims awaiting rescue by the West. Thus, *Yasmina's Necklace* counters imperial feminist narratives by showcasing the character of Yasmina.

The title of the play, *Yasmina's Necklace*, proves to be aptly fitting as it symbolizes the journey of Yasmina who hails from an Islamic background. The necklace, prominently featured in the title, serves as a powerful metaphor for her deep-rooted connection to her heritage. It represents not only her cultural identity but also encompasses her unwavering adherence to Islamic beliefs and values. Just as a necklace adorns and embellishes, this piece of jewelry becomes a poignant representation of Yasmina's unyielding commitment to her roots and her determination to preserve her cultural heritage in the face of adversity. Through this symbol, Malik draws attention to the significance of cultural and religious identity, illuminating the complexities of navigating one's faith and traditions in a society that often misunderstands or misrepresents Islam.

A prevailing stereotype surrounding Islam revolves around the oppression of women, portraying them as subhuman beings. However, *Yasmina's Necklace* skillfully challenges this biased perception by showcasing the profound respect accorded to women within the institution of marriage. Musa articulates the significance of marriage to Yasmina, highlighting that it is regarded as an act of worship, emphasizing the belief that man alone is incomplete and requires the presence of women to achieve wholeness (15). These poignant words shed light on the elevated position women occupy in Islam, as they are recognized as vital contributors to the overall well-being and fulfillment of men. By presenting this empowering portrayal of women, *Yasmina's Necklace* dismantles the stereotype of oppression and effectively showcases the depth of respect and honor accorded to women within the Islamic tradition.

While Sam attempts to navigate the conflicting elements of Islamophobia, Yasmina shares an experience reminiscent of the personalized anti-Muslim rhetoric that became prevalent after 9/11. When Sam notices Yasmina's necklace with "Iraq" written on it, he cautions her that wearing it in public might put her in danger by stating that it, "might not be the best time to be making a political statement" (29). In response, Yasmina asserts, "It's not a political statement" (32). Yasmina, unlike Sam, fearlessly embraces and honors her heritage. She feels a deep responsibility to recount the stories of her people, establish a non-profit aid organization in Chicago to assist other refugees and express her experiences and memories of Iraq through art. Despite her family's struggles in the United States, she remains steadfast in her commitment to her cultural and religious roots. She accuses Sam of perpetuating white supremacy by denying his own culture and conforming. She said to him, "Because of people like you! You're the reason nothing changes" (37).

During the United States' initiation of the War on Terror in Iraq, a significant manifestation of Islamophobia emerged, plunging the Arab and Muslim communities in the United States into a state of crisis (Motyl 217). This military conflict had profound consequences, as it effectively transformed individuals of Arab descent into potential terrorists, intensifying feelings of insecurity and unease among Arab and Muslim Americans (Cainkar 11). Amidst this chaotic period, Sam's family sought sanctuary in a mosque, seeking refuge from the relentless bombings. Sam vividly recalls a distressing incident in which Americans, fully aware of his Iraqi heritage, responded to the bombing of Baghdad with jubilation and cheers (146). This heart-wrenching experience left Sam feeling utterly powerless, unable to defend his own people against the unjust vilification they endured.

Furthermore, Islamophobia is evident in the struggles faced by highly qualified immigrants seeking professional positions in the corporate world and government, despite their impressive skills. This issue is exemplified in a conversation between Yasmina and Musa, where Musa explains that he is overlooked due to the perception that his education is worthless and is unfairly labeled as a "dirty terrorist" (16). Despite his successful career as a dentist in Iraq, Musa encounters obstacles in finding work in America due to the enduring association between Muslims and terrorists — a deeply ingrained stereotype that is challenging to eradicate (Shaheen 88). This portrayal of Arab Muslims as "dirty terrorists" perpetuates negative stereotypes linked to violence, highlighting the persistent nature of this problem and the ongoing efforts needed to combat it.

Islamophobia encompasses a wide range of prejudices, negative attitudes, discrimination, and violence targeting individuals from the Islamic world or culture. Depending on the context, it can assume various forms, intensities, and scopes. Regardless of its manifestation, Islamophobia ultimately contributes to the further deterioration of the wellbeing, mental health, and safety of already marginalized Muslim communities in the United States. Moreover, the prevalence of Islamophobia hampers the access of Muslim individuals to essential resources, due to these biased prejudices and misguided assumptions.

A careful examination of Rohina Malik's play, *Yasmina's Necklace*, vividly demonstrates how Islamophobia can manifest openly or covertly, as well as systemically or spontaneously. Set against the backdrop of the aftermath of the September 11th, 2001 attacks, the play sheds light on the experiences of Muslim and Arab individuals residing in the United States and their encounters with Islamophobia. Through *Yasmina's Necklace*, Malik skillfully portrays the hostile atmosphere that Muslims confront in the United States, creating significant obstacles for them to establish a sense of belonging. Malik's primary objective is to challenge the prevailing stereotypes about Arab communities by presenting a more nuanced and accurate perspective of Islamic individuals.

In *Yasmina's Necklace*, Malik presents a refreshing perspective on Arabs and Muslims, depicting them as ordinary individuals with strengths, weaknesses, and dreams, much like any other human being. Through her portrayal, Malik exposes the deeply troubling issue of Islamophobia in the United States, where racial discrimination and hate crimes against Muslims serve as stark reminders that achieving racial justice appears to be an elusive goal. The play effectively showcases the multifaceted nature of Islamophobia, including acts such as the misnaming or name-changing of individuals, the ridicule faced by those who wear the hijab, and physical or verbal attacks on those who express dislike or disrespect for Islamic culture.

Malik's characters vividly experience the consequences of shifting attitudes towards Arabs and Muslims in America. Despite sharing a common struggle against heightened hostility, the two main characters, Yasmina and Abdul, respond in distinct ways to their life in the United States. While Yasmina openly embraces and identifies with her native culture, refusing to conform to the stereotypical image of a Muslim portrayed by the U.S. media, Abdul seeks assimilation into American society. He attempts to shed his cultural identity, adopting the name Sam, marrying an American, and making every effort to distance himself from his Islamic heritage.

Rohina Malik's powerful contributions to the theatrical landscape stand as a testament to her unwavering dedication to combatting the pervasive Islamophobia that persists in American society. This paper has illustrated how Islamophobia is compellingly portrayed in *Yasmina's Necklace*, while highlighting the indomitable spirit of Muslim women who stand united in this ongoing struggle for justice and equity. It is hoped that by confronting these

stereotypes, the works of Malik and other artists will contribute to meaningful and lasting improvements in the experiences of Muslim individuals living in the United States.

Conclusively, as we reflect on Malik's accomplishments, we are inspired by her ability to challenge societal norms and provoke meaningful conversations. Her impact extends far beyond the realm of theatre, as she encourages us to confront our own biases and misconceptions, promoting a more compassionate and inclusive society. With Malik as a guiding force, we are compelled to continue the fight against Islamophobia and to foster a world where the richness of Muslim cultures and the experiences of Muslim individuals are celebrated and respected. Through her artistry and unwavering commitment, Malik paves the way for a brighter future, where stereotypes crumble and empathy triumphs.

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