



Decolonial Voices: Muslim Immigrants in Canadian Education

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Abstract. *Objectives:* Muslim immigrant community faces many obstacles and challenges in their successful integration into Canadian society. This paper presents their lived experiences in the Canadian labour market and educational system, as they are interconnected in terms of integration, in the context of rising anti-Muslim sentiment and the Canadian integration discourse. *Methods:* This research anchors its analysis within the existing literature on Muslim immigrants in the labour market and education system alongside my previous research. *Results:* Through an emphasis on a decolonial reading of the term “Muslim immigrant” in relation to the intersectionality of gender, race, religion, and immigrant status, I argue that future research on Muslim immigrants can benefit from a decolonial perspective. *Conclusion and Implication:* This paper shows that such a decolonial reading reveals the coloniality of power embedded within these categories and the discussion shows that Muslim immigrants experience an absence of their positionality from the Canadian national imaginary.

Keywords: Muslim Immigrant, Canadian Education, Islamophobia, Integration, Decolonial, Open Access.



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Introduction

Canada continues to welcome newcomers through its established points system based upon human capital such as skills and education, with a projection of 395,000 permanent resident arrivals in 2025 (Nicol & Vrhovsek, 2024). Through this system, diverse groups of Muslim immigrants from around the world have arrived in Canada over the past few decades. Muslims made up 4.9% of the total Canadian population in 2021 (Statistics Canada, 2025). Muslims face unique issues pertaining to their labour market integration including but not limited to employment disadvantages such as nonrecognition of credentials, occupational downgrading, and demand for Canadian experience (Adamuti-Trache, M., 2016), further adding to socio-economic inequities while propelling their entry into Canadian education where they face Islamophobia, exclusionary attitudes, and limited access to professional opportunities. As the Muslim population grows, they face similar integration issues in both the labour market and academic spaces which further limit their participation, growth, and learning. Muslim immigrant students in Canadian higher education experience myriad forms of exclusion in their educational journey due to their faith and cultural identity (Torres-Zaragoza & Llorent-Bedmar, 2024; Yaqzan, 2018). This work utilizes my previous research and scholarly literature to outline the integration issues Muslim immigrants face in the labour market, arguing for a decolonial perspective. My research findings on Muslim immigrants in Canada showcase the interconnected nature of labour market with academia since unequal access to the labour market leads them to further education accumulation, creating a cyclical effect, as similar integration issues arise in both spaces (Zainub, 2023). Thus, this work presents these areas of challenges and argues that we must investigate these issues from a decolonial perspective with a focus on intersectionality engaging with gender, race, religion, and immigrant status. Hence, what follows is a detailed look at Muslim integration issues in the labour market alongside academia and a decolonial intersectional analysis of how gender, race, religion, and immigrant status impact the lived experience of Muslim immigrants.

The literature shows the intersectionality of race and gender (Zine, 2001, 2006) while others have considered the role of religious identity in generating obstacles for the successful economic and social integration of Muslim immigrants in Canada (Kazemipur, 2014; Khattab et al., 2019, 2020). However, there is less emphasis on the conflation of immigrant status with that of race, gender, and religious identity. This necessitates an inquiry on how immigrant status and a racialization of Muslim identity becomes entangled, further marginalizing and minimizing opportunities for growth and active participation in Canadian society. This important observation must be further examined through a decolonial lens which locates the immigrant body within a historical and political process of coloniality as it contests the concepts of migrant integration (Quijano, 2000;

Schinkel, 2018). Even when they become citizens, Muslims wear their immigrant identity intertwined with that of their religious.

In the current global anti-Muslim climate, Muslims suffer a rise in Islamophobia and racism. Anti-Muslim refers to the growing sentiment of unacceptance of the Muslim body within non-Muslim majority societies such as most European countries, United States of America, Canada, China, and India. These geographical regions have experienced their own social issues, however, Muslims in these societies have been treated as a monolithic group. Specifically in Western countries, Muslims are inherently considered a distinct group, unable to integrate and considered a threat to their socio-political value systems (Kazemipur, 2014; Zainub, 2023). Anti-Muslim sentiment has fueled hatred towards Muslims and resulted in policies against them, for instance, Quebec's Bill-21 (which prohibits the wearing of hijab) has had real consequences for women's participation in the labour market (Zainub, 2024).

Since Anti-Muslim sentiments have similar consequences as Islamophobia, some scholars prefer one term over the other, however, for the purposes of this work, I use the terms Anti-Muslim and Islamophobia interchangeably (Emon, 2023). Zine (2022) defines Islamophobia as "a fear and hatred of Islam and Muslims (and those perceived as Muslims) that translate into individual actions and ideological and systemic forms of oppression that support the logic and rationale of specific power relations" (p.14). Islamophobic acts include hate crimes, harassment (any form), physical and verbal abuse and violence, exclusionary treatment and name-calling, sexual aggression, and vandalism.

In order to situate the lived experiences and voice of Muslim immigrants in Canada, it is imperative that these disadvantages are examined through a decolonial perspective. This entails a decolonial intersectional focus on race, gender, religion, and immigrant status (which includes economic, refugee, and other migrants). This article argues for the necessity to research the lived experiences of Muslim immigrant students from a decolonial perspective with an intersectional focus on race, gender, religion and 'immigrant' status. I use existing research literature and my previous qualitative work to argue for a decolonial analysis of their issues (Mignolo, 2007, 2012; Quijano, 2000). In the discussion later on, I offer an intersectional analysis which reflects the challenges faced by Muslim immigrants in Canada. This pertains to the ways in which gender, race, religion, and immigrant status create an oppressive matrix of oppression for Muslim immigrants. For instance, integration issues faced by Muslim immigrant women in the labour market due to their Hijab and a racialization of their Muslim identity prevents them from entering the Canadian job market.

Located within the contemporary dynamics of a global anti-Muslim sentiment, this work investigates aspects of pedagogy which restrict the educational journey of Muslim immigrants. It interrogates unequal access and engagement within discursive colonial formations of Canadian

education system. This work highlights systemic racism, discrimination, and Islamophobia which impacts Muslim socio-economic integration in Canadian society. Furthermore, we must widen the analytical parameters to include immediate relations such as immigrant parents and guardians. This work confirms previous findings and indicates that Muslim immigrants' lived experiences in the education system must be understood from a decolonial perspective. This entails a decolonial intersectional analysis based upon race, gender, religious identity, and 'immigrant' status.

Methods

In this article, I have discussed the findings from existing literature (Torres-Zaragoza & Llorent-Bedmar, 2024; Baksh, 2024) and my own research with Muslim immigrants. The literature presented provides valuable data on the lived experiences of Muslim immigrants in the Canadian labour market and educational institutions as they attempt to integrate socio-economically. Some studies provide a focused intersectional perspective while others argue from a human capital approach. Both approaches provide us with substantial evidence that Muslim immigrants' lived experiences must be studied further to combat the obstacles and challenges in their settlement into Canadian society. They also point to the necessity of studying these challenges from a decolonial perspective (Grosfoguel, 2007; 2012) which can engage with an intersectional focus on race, gender, and religion as well as immigrant status. This is imperative as coloniality is embedded within structures of migration and since the focus is upon Muslim immigrants and their transition to citizens, it is important to assess these distinctions as essential to their identity. Thus, this existing literature and my research gives further support to these issues.

In the following discussion, I will present a literature review of the challenges faced by Muslim immigrants in the labour market and education system in Canada as these areas are interconnected aspects of their settlement journey. Furthermore, they provide the necessary context to present the main argument. Next, I will address the aspects of decoloniality which are foundational to a better understanding of their lived experiences. Finally, I will conclude with implications of this research and future directions.

Discussion and Results

Muslim immigrants in the Canadian Labour Market

Canadian immigration has been consistently accepting newcomers with the aims to boost its labour shortage and propel population growth. This has meant an increase in the diversity of foreign-trained people and professions. Canada welcomed over 400,000 new residents in the past year (Nicol & Vrhovsek, 2024), a majority were accepted in the economic skilled category (Nazari, 2024). These factors show Canada's commitment to not only its economic goals, post COVID, but also its confidence in immigration as a positive factor in its socio-economic growth.

Canada attracts highly skilled immigrants from around the world who arrive at Canadian shores brimming with optimism for a secure future. Globally, Canada rates highly on integration indices such as MIPEX (the Migration Policy Index), with a spotlight on its health, education, multiculturalism, and security for immigrants (Solano & Huddleston, 2020). However, these Muslim immigrants join many others who have faced numerous challenges for years in their socio-economic integration into Canadian society. Among these obstacles are unemployment, precarious employment, nonrecognition of skills and education, language barriers, Canadian experience, occupational downgrading, discrimination, racism, and Islamophobia (Block et al., 2019; CLC, 2019). Hence, Muslim immigrants experience a host of issues which only serves to limit their occupational mobility.

My research on the integration of high skilled Muslim immigrants in Canada shows their experiences of discrimination and Islamophobia during hiring, retention, and at workplaces. Facing these integration issues, most of these participants were working in unregulated professions trying to re-enter their professions, however, familial responsibilities along with above mentioned challenges kept them from progressing in their efforts. Scholars have argued that these issues along with income disparities and the lower integration level cannot be explained through human capital alone (Khattab et al., 2019). Thus, what follows is an assessment of the gap within human capital theory, through an intersectional focus on race, gender, religion and immigrant status of these Muslim immigrants. These penalties vary according to their immigrant status; hence, refugees and other categories may face additional obstacles in actualizing their potential (Miled, 2020). Additionally, racialized immigrants are more likely to experience these obstacles than their non-racialized counterparts. Hence, the persistence of labour market issues for these racialized immigrants suggests that human capital factors are insufficient in understanding their lower economic integration and a racialized, gendered labour market (Pendakur & Pendakur, 2011).

Intersectionality shows that gender as a building block of human identity presents significant barriers for Muslim immigrant women in the labour market. It limits their participation in the labour market and presents unequal circumstances leading to wage gap and precarity. It also keeps them from engaging in a diversity of professional opportunities (Khattab et al., 2019). Scholars have presented an intersectional conception of the inequalities and Islamophobia faced by Muslim immigrants in the labour market as the “Muslim penalty” (Connor & Koenig, 2015). This inequality encountered by Muslim immigrants is primarily due to their religious identity compared to all other religious minorities. This disadvantage due to their religious identity is far more pronounced for Muslim women than Muslim men (CLC, 2019). Muslim immigrant women’s lived experiences are affected at the intersection of gender, race, and religion (more visibly for hijab wearing women) while their immigrant status presents an

additional barrier which may limit their access to basic rights and opportunities (Khattab et al., 2019, Nazari, 2024). Scholarly research in Western societies shows that Muslim immigrant women experience discrimination, gendered Islamophobia, and occupational segregation due to the intersectional effect of race, gender, and religion made prominent by their visibility (Hijab) (Baksh, 2024). They are more likely to experience disadvantages in promotions, employment access, earnings, and leadership positions (CLC, 2019). These studies highlight that their visibility due to headscarves distinguishes them from non-Muslims thereby “othering” them.

The integration barriers in the labour market lead Muslim immigrants to change professions or to work in precarious positions. In order to change professions and to secure better opportunities, Muslim immigrants may re-enter educational institutions. Scholarly research clearly shows that they encounter substantial barriers to full academic participation. The next section offers insights into better understanding their experiences in academic institutions.

Muslim immigrants and Canadian Education

Social discourses about Muslims play a fundamental role in the ways in which they are treated in the labour market and educational institutions, adding to the integration issues such as intolerance for Muslim practices such as the Hijab. An intersectional look at how the media plays a fundamental role in perpetuating anti-Muslim sentiment globally shows that social media and the mainstream media outlets propagate stereotypes and biases against Muslims which find their way in popular discourses. Hence, Khattab et al., (2019) state,

“as a result of the intensive, and often negative... public and media focus on issues surrounding Muslims in Canada, Muslims as a whole will face an additional penalty that is greater than the penalty faced by other visible and religious minorities. The impact of being a visible minority (due to physical appearance and skin colour) will be exacerbated when intersected with Islam.” (p. 2).

Thus, media also simultaneously curtails any positive representation of Muslims in the West portraying them as suspicious, uncivilized, and prone to commit crimes. It also paints Muslim women as oppressed and in duress to wear the hijab or to follow their faith (Thobani 2007, 2021). This portrait of Muslim men and women also presents them as a foreign Other who are either immigrants, refugees, or international students, hence, whose historical presence in Canada is conveniently disregarded and absent from the national imaginary (El-Sherif, 2019).

Since the tragedy of 9/11, Muslims have been dealing with an ongoing anti-Muslim sentiment which has now enveloped not only the West (Kazempur, 2014) but also other parts of the world. In Canada, the 2017

Islamophobic terrorist shooting resulting in mass murder of Muslim men at the Quebec Mosque has been violently etched upon the Muslim community's memory. After four years, in 2021, four members of the Afzaal family while out for a walk were killed by a truck in a horrific display of Islamophobic terrorism against Muslims (Zine, 2022). The memory of these events continues to devastate the Muslim community as recent Islamophobic acts such as vandalism of vehicles (Toronto Police Service, 2025), and mosques (CBC News, 2024), and hijab burning incident at a library (Alevato, 2025), make them even more insecure and traumatized. With Islamophobic hate crimes on the rise, Canadian Muslims are profoundly troubled and worried for their security more than ever. These tragic incidents point us towards understanding the place of Muslims as Others in Canadian society and in the Western countries. To find solutions, create resources, and raise awareness, this entails a deeper decolonial analysis of their experiences. Zine (2022) explains,

Individual actions are the most prominent and visible phenomena in the Islamophobia dynamic...hidden below the surface are the ideologies that serve to justify and rationalize these actions and the systemic practices through which Islamophobia is reproduced. There are ubiquitous ideologies and tropes that serve to demonize and vilify Islam and Muslims (p.15).

As discussed above, the socio-economic issues faced by Muslim immigrants are unique and present themselves through their interaction with social institutions. Diverse groups of Muslims engage with educational spaces in Canada. These may include those economic immigrants who may attempt to re-enter educational institutions, Muslims from non-economic immigrant categories may simply invest in their academic journey, while others engage as parents or guardians. Additionally, there are those who work as educators, administrators and staff in educational institutions. The factors which affect their engagement are varied and existing studies have shown that they face exclusion and systemic Islamophobia in each of these categories. I will briefly discuss some of these studies in this section.

Studies have been documenting the experiences of Muslim students in Canadian schools for decades. Zine (2001) studied Muslim students who wanted to maintain an Islamic lifestyle. She focused on how race and gender intersect with their religious identity to understand their challenges. The study found that these Muslim students experienced peer pressure to adjust to the dominant cultural lifestyle as well as racism and Islamophobia, however, these students were able to continue their religious practices. These racialized students and parents shared the issues in a secular educational system which restricts an expression of their religious identities and their attempts at dealing with peer pressure and Islamophobia. She notes that,

Resisting assimilation in this case was manifested by the maintenance of strong links with fellow Muslims both inside and outside of school in order to develop a social network that supported the continuity of their religious practices. These students' strong engagement with Islamic religious practices and way of life provided the very strategies for negotiating resistance. (p.419)

Thus, Muslim resistance to the oppressive daily lived experiences is shown here through an intersectional lens disentangling the effect of race, gender, and religion. This identity formation significantly helped them in negotiating a way of life in which they were able to maintain and secure their religious identities while dealing with the social pressures for conformity. In discussing future implications, the author emphasized the importance of inclusive schooling. Identity management is a central concern for Muslim students especially for refugees. Hence, Miled (2020) finds that for female refugee students, adjusting to Canadian society presented many obstacles. This included physical and verbal abuse, Islamophobia, and being perceived as outsiders. It added to their struggles and trauma of war afflicted countries and fleeing from violence and persecution resulting in low academic achievement.

In a review of 24 journal articles, Torres-Zaragoza & Llorent-Bedmar (2024), found that first and second-generation Muslim migrant students in Western school systems, including Canada, experience significant systemic and exclusionary barriers in their integration. The authors state that “most studies find discrimination, racism and Islamophobia as a barrier to the inclusion of Muslim migrant students” (p. 14). The authors find that school systems are ill-prepared to integrate these students, thus, the school environment is not inclusive, lacking appropriate resources to address their needs. This presents obstacles in academic achievement, participation, and access. Their literature review shows that these obstacles are due to culturally insensitive educational policies, systemic and organizational issues at the school system and in curriculum development. This included an assessment of the teaching patterns of educators, who lacked proper training and through inappropriate policies reproduce prejudiced attitudes and racialized discourses against Islam, resulting in further marginalization of these students. However, the review notes their resistance strategies for a strong and secure Islamic identity formation whereby they engage in learning about Islam, dialogue, and educating others to counter Islamophobia and racism. The authors conclude that it is imperative to offer training to teachers and administration, invest in the provision of appropriate culturally sensitive resources while engaging in promoting diversity and respect through learning about Islam and the many cultures who practice it.

Abu Khalaf et al., (2023) conducted a comprehensive literature review of the studies on the Muslim students' experiences of Islamophobia.

They note that this issue remains insufficiently studied in scholarly research. Conducting a mixed methods review of this literature, they find 44 studies which document religious discrimination at individual and institution levels in Canadian education. They discuss student experiences in relation to the systemic discrimination at the school and university level, as well as student responses to these incidents. They also share implications and ways to mitigate such discrimination in academic settings. The authors find that in all studies, students experienced discrimination from a peer, teacher or the institution. Students expressed the negative role of media in perpetuating and reinforcing stereotypes about Muslims. They also felt that it was challenging and increasingly difficult to practice their faith especially for female students. Studies in this literature review noted that teachers, staff, and educational bodies were complicit in discriminatory acts and their actions or inaction showed their exclusionary attitude towards Muslim students. This included the lack of accommodation to pray or observe religious holidays as well as institutions openly engaging in anti-Muslim actions such as inviting anti-Islamic speakers. These lived experiences are those specific integration issues in educational setting which affected students' identity formation in relation to their country, contributing to lower grades, and an increase in stress, anxiety, and fear. The authors noted that students drew on their faith's teachings, family, and Muslim associations for strength and to cope with this fear and anxiety.

Muslim educators at the school and university level also face significant issues in their professional practice. Memon & Chanicka (2024) studied thirty Muslim educational practitioners in Ontario and found that provincial policies on inclusion and equity are not being implemented. The school administration lacks accountability, and the educators are unable to express their Muslim identities due to it. These findings are echoed in other studies conducted at the university level as well. Baksh (2024) is among a growing number of studies (Alizai, 2021) on Muslim educators and practitioners in higher education institutions who find that their participation at work is curtailed due to Islamophobia. Baksh (2024) powerfully narrates,

anti-Muslim racism is a real and present threat to the well-being of Muslims within the academy. The impact of microaggressions in the classroom, the use of power through identity, positionality and the specific tactic of white tears allow white students and administrators to access a racialized power structure in which I am framed simultaneously as the victim and the oppressor. As a hijab-wearing Muslim woman, I am an immigrant in need of rescuing.

The preceding discussion with this autoethnographic quote from Baksh (2024) demonstrate intersectional lived experiences. Academia's foundations are embedded in colonial constructs which must be disentangled. It is imperative to address these inequities which continue to

create anxiety and fear in Muslim educators and students. Most studies use the human capital approach to integration which posits that an immigrant's education, skills, and knowledge is necessary for successful integration into society. Human capital theory assumes that an immigrant's better and higher qualifications, education, and work experiences create a higher likelihood of socio-economic success. It also places the burden of integration on the immigrant rather than the host society and its systems. This relates to the emphasis placed on more points for these factors in Canadian immigration system. Scholars have conducted excellent work on understanding the factors which lead to discrepancies in the rewards for higher human capital. Although the literature acknowledges that visible and religious minorities face economic disadvantages in Canadian society, these studies have "failed to disentangle racial disadvantages from cultural or religious disadvantages by homogenizing ethnic and religious minorities that are otherwise heterogeneous, for example having the same ethnicity (e.g. South Asians) but different religious affiliations (e.g. Hindu or Muslim)" (Khattab et al., 2019, 2). Thus, a human capital approach to integration of Muslim immigrants doesn't sufficiently investigate their lived experiences.

Other studies emphasize the need to address race, gender, and religion with an intersectional focus (Nazari, 2024). They show that Muslim immigrants face unique pressures as they access and navigate the Canadian social institutions during their settlement from the time of their arrival to many years after. This intersectional focus provides us with a more detailed and nuanced focus on how a Muslim identity works in tandem with other aspects to limit their chances in securing a better future for themselves and their family. These studies point to the fact that racialized Muslim immigrants face cultural, ethnic, gender, and religious stereotypes and biases which significantly limit their earnings and professional growth. More importantly they point out that human capital approach is insufficient in explaining income disparities between racialized Muslim immigrants and native-born counterparts (Lightman & Gingrich, 2018). They indicate that, "institutional and structural discrimination tends to overshadow immigrants' professional capabilities" (Nazari, 2024, p. 2242).

However, these studies do not account for the coloniality embedded in the migration processes and discourses. This intersectional focus must also account for the colonial legacies which undermine immigrants' journey. It must address the ways in which an immigrant's positionality succumbs to the various pressures of the migration process. Decoloniality exposes these ideologies which are embedded within structures of power and institutional processes. It articulates the intersectionality of race, gender, and religion within a colonial lineage of migration. It engages with the cosmogeny of the global order of the division of labour alongside its religio-racial hierarchy that dominates the world system (Grosfoguel, 2007).

Decoloniality and the Muslim immigrant

Decoloniality accounts for the processes of migration impacted by an all encompassing coloniality, both its entrenchments in its historical past (i.e. separate from decolonization) and the ongoing forms it takes (Quijano, 2000). It always assumes that within the matrix of power in social structures and relations, there is a subject position from where one speaks. It posits this location to be affected by one's "class, sexual, gender, spiritual, linguistic, geographical, and racial hierarchies of the 'modern/colonial capitalist/patriarchal world-system'" and always 'situated' (Grosfoguel, 2007, p. 213). It aims to change this subject position of the world order from a 'European man' to that of the racialized 'Other'. Thus, decoloniality challenges the production and reproduction of knowledge to encompass the racialized Other's voice and agency. In locating the Muslim subject as intersectionally oppressed, decoloniality interprets Islamophobia as racism consequentially creating power imbalances and inequities within ongoing colonial social structures of labour and education (Grosfoguel & Mielants, 2006). Thus, a decolonial framework to investigate Muslim immigrant integration engages with Grosfoguel's (2007) concept of the 'coloniality of power' which he conceptualized as

an entanglement or... intersectionality ...of multiple and heterogeneous global hierarchies ('heterarchies') of sexual, political, epistemic, economic, spiritual, linguistic and racial forms of domination and exploitation where the racial/ethnic hierarchy of the European/non-European divide transversally reconfigures all of the other global power structures. What is new in the 'coloniality of power' perspective is how the idea of race and racism becomes the organizing principle that structures all of the multiple hierarchies of the world-system (p. 217).

This decolonial concept articulates the gendering and racializing of religion as it pertains to Muslim immigrant experience in the Western societies. It works with the concept of race as the central 'organizing principle' which creates the framework or multiple forms of oppression. Within social relations, power is assigned according to a racial hierarchy intersecting with religion, gender, immigrant status, and other identities. Thus, racialized, visible minority women are subordinate to dominant non-racialized women while Islam has a lower status as a non-Western religion.

The significance of a Decolonial analytical framework for understanding the lived experience of Muslim immigrants lies in working with those concepts which remain unexamined by other theoretical frameworks such as Human capital theory. In the following discussion, I use an intersectional focus as I have in the previous sections. Considering the scope of this article, I will explore two fundamental aspects of Muslim immigrants' lived experience from decolonial perspective: the positionality

of the ‘Muslim immigrant’ status in Canadian society and the conceptualization of gender in relation to Islamophobia.

Contextualizing the information presented in the previous sections must begin with an understanding of who is an immigrant? The following is the definition of the term ‘immigrant’ used by Statistics Canada for the purpose of collecting and analysing data and to create knowledge products on immigration related topics:

The term “immigrant” refers to persons who are, or who have been at any time, landed immigrants or permanent residents. Such persons have been granted the right to live in Canada permanently by immigration authorities. Immigrants who have obtained Canadian citizenship by naturalization are included in this category (Statistics Canada, 2022).

This definition and the current discourse on migration refer to ‘immigrants’ (including those who have naturalized) as immigrants regardless of their citizenship status for their entire lives. It presents multiple queries and is misleading, as scholars have noted (Banting & Kymlicka, 2010), not only in terms of research but also their relation to the nation-state (Thobani, 2007). We must ask then, what is the relationship of an immigrant with the nation-state? Are immigrants, who are now citizens, equal to the native-born citizens? How does this status intersect with gender, race, and religion in the case of Muslim immigrants? Thus, this section focuses on examining these questions from a decolonial perspective to contextualize Muslim immigrant’s positionality in the Canadian space.

The above cited Statistics Canada’s definition presents an entry point into the discourse on migration in Canada and elsewhere in Western societies. This discourse posits that immigrant integration is primarily concerned with Muslim immigrants, and the problems of immigrants are their burden (Kazemipur, 2014; Schinkel, 2018). Reading the definition of the term ‘immigrant’ from a decolonial perspective, brings into focus the lived experiences of Muslim immigrants. Muslim immigrants experience the migration process from the position of both an ‘immigrant’ and a ‘Muslim’. These labels are intertwined with the intersectionality of race, gender, and religion. Thus, it is important to unpack what those identity labels mean for the discourse on migration.

An immigrant as the definition conveys, remains an immigrant even after being naturalized and even after acquiring the rights of a citizen. However, with the continuity of the label of an immigrant it implies that s/he remains foreign to the land and to the national imaginary, both of whom continue to benefit from an immigrant’s earnings and participation in society. In media and public discourse, immigrants tend to get blamed for crimes and a host of other problems which leads to a surge of anti-immigrant sentiment (Akseer, 2019). However, research has showed that there is no

relationship between crime rate and immigrants (American Immigration Council, 2024).

Yet these concepts continue to persist and form many of the attitudes against immigration not only in Canada but also in United States and European countries especially as it pertains to the migrant crisis. As Thobani (2007) stated,

The media has contributed in no small measure to the growing anti-Muslim racism in North America and to the erosion of their citizenship rights. The distance between ‘immigrants’ and ‘real’ Canadians has thus vastly increased since 9/11, with unforeseeable consequences for the future. (p. 247)

An immigrant is, thus, someone outside the host society’s boundary, at the borders and not part of the nation building process. An immigrant remains foreign and suspect in terms of any allegiance with the onus to prove again and again their loyalty to the country. This was evident when, on a televised show in 2019, Don Cherry, a Canadian ice hockey professional and commentator, said,

"At least you can pay a couple bucks for a poppy... You people... you love our way of life, you love our milk and honey, at least you can pay a couple bucks for a poppy or something like that. These guys paid for your way of life that you enjoy in Canada, these guys paid the biggest price. (*Don Cherry: Canadian Hockey Pundit Fired for Poppy Rant*, 2019)

This ‘poppy rant’ gained a lot of attention in Canadian media, and he was asked to step down from his position. His remarks underscore the need to examine how immigrants are perceived by the ‘host’ society. Rooted in a colonial mindset, it emphasizes the binary of immigrant/native and outsider/insider. Who are the people creating the Canadian ‘way of life’? Who ‘served’ to protect the country? Former National Defence Minister, Harjit Sajjan (Canada’s first Sikh defence minister) aptly responded on social media to Don Cherry’s comments: “we can turn this into a moment where we can learn about all who have served” (*Don Cherry: Canadian Hockey Pundit Fired for Poppy Rant*, 2019). Divisive to say the least, this coloniality functions to create a hostile, unwelcoming environment for newcomers. Thus, Schinkel (2018) explains that for the purpose of immigrant integration,

‘society’ is imagined as a pristine, pure domain that is without problems. Problems are problems of ‘integration’, and integration has to do with the position and opinions of non-white individuals...immigrants are in fact *still in the process of arriving*. (p.5)

The definition of immigrant finds its corollary once the historical coloniality of migration is understood and integration is presented as a continuous struggle and a process of entering a civilized ‘pure’ society. For immigrants this process presents obstacles at every step of the way. The participants in my research shared detailed narratives of their migration journey which began many years before they arrived in Canada. They shared the many factors which contributed to their decision to migrate and stay in Canada despite challenges and obstacles. After arrival they experienced profound setbacks when they couldn’t enter their professions which were the very basis of their skilled immigration profile. They also found troubling the demand for Canadian experience as well as the nonrecognition and downgrading of their previous skills and education. This coupled with the discrimination and Islamophobia in hiring, retention, and at workplaces created depression and mental stress. During these times of duress, I found their sense of belonging to Canada to be the foundation of their resilience (Zainub, 2023). However, as Muslim immigrants they face the double burden of an identity which limits their belonging and questions their loyalty. Muslims are stereotyped as terrorists as Thobani (2007) notes,

anti-terrorism measures have morphed into institutionalized suspicion of Muslim immigrants and refugees as the greatest threat to the security of both the Canadian and American nations. (p. 220)

This labelling decisively places them outside the national imaginary of the ‘pristine’ and ‘pure’ society without any ‘problems’ (Schinkel, 2018). Furthermore, in the years since Thobani (2007) stated the above, the discourse on Muslim immigrants has remained the same (Zine, 2022). In addition to terrorists, they are also portrayed as oppressive (of Muslim women who need saving), and uncivilized. These ideas have currency rooted in a colonial and orientalist legacy (El-Sherif, 2019, p. 17; Thobani, 2007, p. 218). This marking of racialized bodies combined with an immigrant status, only serves to further marginalize their position in society exacerbating the obstacles for any success. El-Sherif (2019) speaks of the absence of the earliest Muslims in Canada from its national story and writes,

“Muslims live in Canada, are born in Canada, have multi-generational genealogies in Canada, and yet they are seen as not really belonging in Canada” (p.2).

As the Muslim population continues to grow in Canada, it becomes more important that we as a nation strive to not only examine their issues but also to provide them with the resources they need to combat them. Part of this process is also to unravel the nationalist discourses which create boundaries of immigrant/ migrant/ refugees/ native. These boundaries legitimate a divisive narrative and pose the question of Who is and can be a

Canadian? El-Sherif (2019) presents the 2017 case of Masuma Khan, a Muslim hijabi woman who was also the vice president of the Dalhousie Student Union. She had proposed, in solidarity with indigenous people for reconciliation, that the student union abstain from celebrating Canada's 150 celebrations. El-Sherif (2019) recounts the way her proposal was received, the racism, and Islamophobia she suffered on campus and in media. She writes,

The hate speech attacked Khan in terms of her religion and gender, and much of the news commentary revolved around her being Muslim and perceived as foreign. Despite being a born-and-bred Canadian citizen, she was told to go back to where she came from, to be grateful to the country that welcomed her parents, and to assimilate to Canada's heritage and tolerant multiculturalism. (p.1)

Reading Masuma Khan's case from a decolonial perspective, it is apparent that despite being a 'native-born' Canadian, she remains an immigrant. She bears the consequences of both labels, that of being a Muslim and an immigrant for her proposal to show solidarity with the indigenous people of Canada. As a visible Muslim woman, she remains foreign, suspect, and unassimilable. She has failed to integrate and remains stuck in the "process of arriving" and becoming integrated (Schinkel, 2018). Her positionality is further complicated by her gender and racial background. As an outsider, her comments on a national, historical, colonial legacy of Canada are unwelcomed and irrelevant since she has no claim to the land nor its history. This suspension of status entrenched the coloniality of power (Grosfoguel, 2007, p. 219-20) which penetrates not only public discourses on migration and belonging but also on nationhood. Hence, the call to send her back to where she came from renders her indefinitely 'immigrant' and thus, 'mobile' (Schinkel, 2018). This hierarchical organization of racial privilege associated with land and bodies manifested in discourses of nationhood demonstrates the permanence of her immigrant status. As a Muslim immigrant woman, in this instance, she suffers gendered Islamophobia where her visibility makes her an easy target for a racialized attack. Her body becomes the site of coloniality of power (Grosfoguel, 2007), co-constitutive of race and religion embedded within an ongoing migratory process of arriving. This racialization of religion (Meer & Modood, 2012) defines the modern lived experience of a Muslim immigrant in Canada, whose precarious subject position as an immigrant/migrant/refugee/ is produced through a foreign racial and religious identity.

Gender, subordinately defined within this colonial matrix, further outlines a boundary where a relationship to land and nation becomes even more complex. Gender, along with race and religion, must be discussed within historical relations of power as they pertain to coloniality of migration as it limits avenues for resistance. Thus, the term 'Muslim

immigrant' is inherently racialized and gendered. Within the context of migration, then, these identities do not perform well along with the notion of citizenship. These relations of power define citizenship as 'tenuous' at best, always subject to 'eviction' from the land, and any associated claims and rights (El-Sherif, 2019; Razack, 2008). This subject position help suspend and withdraw rights of Muslim immigrants in moments of national distress (Thobani, 2007, p. 221). Don Cherry's comments and the attacks on Masuma Khan share a similar ontology of coloniality. It delineates for the racialized, gendered, Muslim immigrant the limits of integration and nationhood. A decolonial perspective of the literature review on the issues and challenges in the labour market and education system, informs us of the interlocking nature of coloniality of power (Grosfoguel, 2007). It not only unravels the discourse on migration but also bares its relationship with race, gender, and religion.

Conclusion and Implications

Canadian Muslim population has increased in the past few decades mainly through the Canadian points system which welcomes highly skilled newcomers, along with programs for families and refugees. This paper endeavored to present the challenges they face during their settlement and integration into the labour market and education system. Upon arrival in Canada, Muslim immigrants face many issues related to occupational downgrading, nonrecognition of their credentials and education, Canadian experience, discrimination at workplace, and Islamophobia in hiring and retention. To deal with these issues they engage with further education in Canadian academic institutions. Along with these immigrants, there are refugees and other immigrant classes who join these institutions for studies. Included in these Muslim immigrants are also educators and academic administrators and staff. As these areas are interrelated in terms of socio-economic integration, I utilized existing research and my own findings from previous work to argue that we must examine their issues from a decolonial perspective. Decoloniality encompasses the necessary intersectionality of concepts related to race, ethnicity, religion, gender, and immigrant status, etc. embedded in the coloniality of power to investigate Muslim immigrant's lived experiences in Canada.

My previous research on Muslim immigrants in the labour market and educational institutions showed substantial evidence for racism and Islamophobia (Zainub, 2023). They face various forms of exclusion limiting full participation and engagement in their academic journey. This research along with the existing scholarship also showed the intersectionality of race and gender (Zine, 2001, 2006) and the role of religious identity. (Kazemipur, 2014; Khattab et al., 2019, 2020). There is a lack of emphasis on the immigrant status in most studies and this paper discussed the importance of analyzing the positionality of the Muslim immigrant in Canada and its relationship with gender and Islamophobia from a decolonial perspective. This paper discussed the discourse on who is and can be a

Canadian citizen and how does gender, race, and religion complicate this process in the context of integration.

The paper argues that Muslim immigrants find themselves at the periphery of Canadian society as the hate crimes and Islamophobia continue to violently target their positionality and claims to land and nation-state. The racialization of Muslim immigrants marginalizes them, removing them from any hopes of socio-economic success. It limits the participation of Muslim women as it visibilizes them generating fear and anxiety as they experience a rise in hate crimes and Islamophobia.

Interrogating unequal access and engagement, this work finds that decolonial perspective has the potential to examine these issues and present possibilities. It situates Muslim immigrants within a coloniality of power (Grosfoguel, 2007) and unequal relations as they pertain to the historical processes of migration and global division of labour. Their perpetual immigrant identity (even after naturalization) interlocking with that of religious curtails their full democratic participation and engagement in Canadian society (Quijano, 2000; Schinkel, 2018). Further research must utilize the decolonial perspective to investigate the ongoing challenges Muslim immigrants face as they engage with academic spaces.

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Notes: Anti-Muslim racism is a term used by many scholars. It can be understood as “the manifestation and expression of discrimination against Muslims and those racialized as Muslims. It is exhibited in Canadian society through education, policing, immigration, health, politics, and other areas” (TMU, n.d.).

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