



THE HIJAB IN western media.

There has long been prejudice in the matter of authentic representation of Hijabi women in conventional media, often categorizing them into harmful stereotypes like the ‘oppressed’ victim or token background character that serves a monetary purpose in existing. Showcasing just a woman in a hijab is not enough any longer, and that expectation has persisted in real hijabi voices for as long as the inception of those harmful ideas. What defines the Western media where these stereotypes are bred? It’s the Hollywood productions that reach the most exposure, the news sources that encompass everyone’s screens, and the prolonged preconceptions that riddle social media, often boosted by Western conservative outlets. These persistent portrayals shape public perception and influence how Hijabi women are treated, understood, and represented within society. The effects extend beyond media consumption, impacting self-image, social interactions, professional opportunities, and feelings of belonging. The Al-Furqaan Foundation, in pursuit of authoring the meaning of the hijab, questioned Hijabi women about what the journey means to them:

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The most important lesson I have learned is that hijab is not just about fabric—it is about mindset, patience, and sincerity. People will have opinions, some supportive and some critical, but at the end of the day, my hijab is between me and Allah (SWT). It has taught me resilience, self-worth, and the beauty of obeying my Creator with love, not just obligation [...] it is about liberation from societal pressures to look or dress a certain way. Just as many women choose modesty in different forms, Muslim women wear the hijab as an expression of their faith, their identity, and their autonomy! It is a personal and spiritual choice that brings peace and self-respect.

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— Saniya Hassan

And these sentiments in consensus lead to Hijabi women taking control over their narrative, since change can only be in motion once there is fuel in the tank, and Hijabi women are the drivers of said vehicle. Hana Ali, a Yemeni writer based in California, vows to never write on two tropes, “The first is the voyeur perspective on hijab. The second is the hyper-aggressive archetype of Muslim men.”

The past, present and future of media in its most prevailing is film; notably and critically the global influence of Hollywood. Reaching far beyond geographical boundaries, the conflicting ideologies in the Hollywood representation of Muslim women work in tandem with the already narrow oppressive perspective the west has towards the Hijab in undermining the diverse hijabi experience.

Muslim women are infamously presented in quieter and subserved roles, often manipulated by the surrounding men in their lives. They are profiled to be radical islamists and unwilling of change towards the western culture, stuck in their ‘archaic’ ways or involved in territorial activities. But one stereotype stands out amongst the rest for its both patriarchal and racist tendencies and that is of the “White Knight” saving the oppressed Hijabi from her cruel world, this often depicts a white man serving the purpose to ‘free’ a hijabi woman. The Anadolu Agency of Marmara University refers to these depictions as ‘oriental fantasies’, as a mystery to the majority of West, it has led to prejudiced narratives around them.

While these stereotypes have persisted for decades, there has been a gradual shift in recent years as Muslim women have begun to challenge these narratives both on and off screen. Rather than existing solely as symbols of oppression/conflict, or religious extremism, contemporary portrayals have started to acknowledge Hijabi women as multidimensional individuals with aspirations and agency

beyond their faith. This change has largely been driven by Muslim writers, actors, and filmmakers demanding greater authenticity and creative control over their own stories.

One notable example is the Marvel Studios television series ‘Ms. Marvel’ (2022), which presents a Pakistani-American Muslim family without reducing their identity to terrorism or oppression, or any of archaic tropes previously mentioned. While the protagonist Kamala Khan does not wear the hijab, supporting characters such as Nakia Bahadir demonstrate a more nuanced perspective. Nakia openly discusses choosing to wear the hijab for herself, and directly challenges the long-standing assumption that Muslim women are universally forced into wearing the hijab. Her character is politically engaged and independent, displaying confidence in her demeanor, offering audiences a portrayal rarely afforded to Hijabi women in mainstream Western media, especially on a platform as big as Disney’s Marvel.

Similarly, Hulu’s ‘Ramy’ presents Muslim women whose identities extend beyond religious symbolism, delving into exploring personal ambitions and moral complexity. Although the series has faced criticism from some Muslim audiences, it nevertheless contributes to a broader conversation by depicting Muslim characters as ordinary people rather than political statements to fulfil any sort of agenda.

Outside of scripted entertainment in Hollywood, the fashion scene in western Media has played a significant role in reshaping perceptions of the hijab, although its progress remains complex and uncertain at points. The emergence of hijab wearing models such as Halima Aden marked a turning point, challenging long standing beauty standards that excluded visibly Muslim women. Major brands including Nike, H&M, and Dolce & Gabbana introduced modest fashion collections and featured

Hijabi models in global campaigns, signalling a growing recognition of Muslim consumers and demonstrating that modest fashion could coexist with mainstream trends. However, these developments have also attracted criticism. Many campaigns have been accused of “modest fashion capitalism” where diversity is celebrated primarily as a marketing strategy rather than a genuine commitment to inclusion. Representation often remains superficial, favouring aesthetically pleasing imagery over authentic storytelling or the lived experiences of Hijabi women.

As a result, on the red carpet we have seen the rise of hooded veils and head cover decorations that mimic the hijab, yet fails to recognize its origins, and yes, I am talking about Anya Taylor Joy’s outfit at the ‘Dune: Part Two’ premiere. While fashion has broadened visibility, it continues to navigate the tension between meaningful representation and commercial exploitation, raising questions about whether inclusion is driven by social progress or consumer demand.

Social media has transformed how Hijabi women tell their own stories, shifting the power of representation away from traditional Western media. Platforms such as Instagram and TikTok primarily have become spaces where creators share their identities in a plethora of outlets; vlogs, fashion, podcasts and beauty, offering narratives that challenge long standing stereotypes. Voices like Dina Tokio have cultivated communities that celebrate authenticity and belonging. Yet these same platforms remain double edged, alongside empowerment exists a tide of Islamophobic abuse and unrealistic expectations surrounding modesty and appearance. While social media has opened the door to more diverse and self-defined representation, it remains a contested landscape where visibility is both a source of liberation and vulnerability.

Despite recent progress, authentic representation remains the exception rather than the norm. Muslim women continue to be underrepresented across Hollywood and wider Western media, and when included, are often disproportionately alienated by violence or cultural otherness. Ultimately, meaningful representation is not simply about visibility, but about portraying Hijabi women as complex individuals whose identities extend far beyond the hijab, allowing them to define their own stories rather than having them shaped by prejudice.