Embodied Coloniality: Affective experiences of Muslim immigrant women living in Norway

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Abstract

This comprehensive study examines the lived experiences of Muslim immigrant women in Norway, focusing mainly on the colonial wounds as a manifestation of the enduring impact of coloniality on daily lives. The research illuminates the profound influence of colonial legacies on social structures, cultural norms, and power dynamics through meticulous examination and analysis of in-depth interviews. The participants' narratives, including Amal, Ayse, and Zahra, provide crucial insights into the challenges of marginalization, dehumanization, and the struggle to forge a coherent sense of self within a society shaped by colonial structures. This study underscores the normalization of dehumanization and sheds light on the constraints imposed by the majority society, resulting in feelings of non-relationality, suffocation, survival, resignation, and a loss of futurity. By addressing the intersection of coloniality, racism, and the lived experiences of Muslim minority women, this research offers valuable contributions to the academic discourse on decolonial feminist studies of affect, providing a nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics at play in contemporary Norway.

KEYWORDS: Muslim Women, Immigrant, Norway, Coloniality, Decolonial Feminist Studies of Affect

Introduction

> *Nezihat: "How do others relate to your Muslim identity?"*
>
> *Zahra: "You see, the dehumanization of Muslims is so normalized—the one where you are worthless […] in a way that you are not equal. You are always a second-class citizen […] This applies to all the possibilities you get, no matter where you move, also, in Norway."*

Zahra's description of life in Norway as a Muslim is at once shocking and unsurprising; though Norway prides itself on its progressive politics and social equality, the abounding accounts from minority women in recent years have regularly articulated the existence, persistence, and affective impact of everyday racism (Bahar, 2017; Mehsen, 2017; Joof, 2020; Ali, 2018, 2023). Avowedly cast as "second-class citizens," Muslim minority women feel burdened by expectations to prove their humanity in ways that white Norwegians are not (Minotenk, 2017), confirming that labels such as '"Muslim woman,' 'immigrant,' 'foreigner,' and 'Muslim Norwegian"' deny them recognition "as fully Norwegian"—they are excluded from the concept of "Norwegianness" (Thun, 2012b, pp. 19, 1).

These women live in a society shaped by coloniality which often marginalizes and dehumanizes them, producing enduring colonial wounds. *How do they establish a sense of coherence between their past, present, and future within such an erosive and erasive context?* This article aims to answer this question, building on the recognition that dehumanization is central to racism (Mignolo, 2021, p. 144) and that it functions as a "denial of humanity" that deprives certain people of their "status" and identity "as human beings" (Stauffer, 2015). Examined as a form of colonial wound, which Mignolo (2021) understands as "the consequences of systemic and hierarchical social classifications," "inflicted epistemically," yielding "ontological/aesthetic" effects, these experiences of racism and sexism impact the individual's beliefs and emotions, wreaking epistemic and aesthetic injury. They fundamentally alter the individual's "senses, beliefs, and emotions" ontologically and aesthetically (pp. 9–11).

In using the concept of the *colonial wound*, my aim is to deepen our understanding of its connection to the affective and embodied experience of racism, such that this knowledge can enable the emergence of "border thinking" (Mignolo, 2005, p. 62; Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2012, pp. 36, 60) and contribute to decolonizing knowledge, as it can illuminate how prevalent epistemic frameworks for Muslim women continue to perpetuate coloniality. Recognizing colonial structures rooted in global systems of imperialism, slavery, and the colonization of Sápmi in the Nordic region is essential to this task. Writing from my own position as someone with an "immigrant consciousness" situated within the realms of "decolonial and border thinking" (Mignolo, 2011, p. 274), I parse the narratives of three Muslim minority women living in Norway and explore how they navigate their past, present, and future while embodying coloniality.

Muslim women in the western racial imaginary

Though this article zooms in on Norway, the experiences of Muslim immigrant women are influenced by the broader legacies of colonialism, which extend beyond historical events to persist in contemporary social structures. The classification of certain groups as "irrational, 'raw,' underdeveloped, or sexually deviant" has long functioned as "colonization of being," perpetuating racial and patriarchal hierarchies within the modern colonial knowledge system, as elucidated by Tlostanova (2010, p. 22). Therefore, prevailing modes of classifying Muslim women is thus part of "the Eurocentric system of knowledge production, based on colonial and imperial epistemic differences" (p. 22).

In this sense, Muslim women are often reduced in the Western racial imaginary to a mere 'figure' (Ahmed, 2000)—devoid of flesh and bones,

situated within a framework, as Tlostanova (2023a) demonstrates, in which they are transformed into "tokens of culture, religion, sexuality, race, or gender" and their subjectivity negated (p. 148). This colonial portrayal of immigrant women, particularly Muslims, works to bolster gender equality as a 'core Western value' and to cast Muslim women as "backward" (van Es, 2016; Hassani, 2023). These colonially inflected portrayals not only perpetuate harmful stereotypes, but they also deny humanity, or what activist Semra Ertan specified (prior to her self-immolation in protest of Germany's racism in the 1980s) as "the right to be treated as human beings" (Henneberger, 2021).

The fixity of this conceptualization of Muslim bodies under the racializing gaze denies them any other ontology in the Western imaginary—what the Muslim Iraqi diasporic feminist decolonial scholar Alia Al-Saji (2014) describes as "an inability to see otherwise" (p. 139). Accordingly, this can read as a product "of social-cultural horizons, historically tied to modernity and colonial expansion in the West and motivated by imaginary and epistemic investments in representations and subject-object metaphysics" (p. 139). The racialization of Muslim bodies, Al-Saji (2014) continues, "not only structures the ways in which bodies are represented and perceived, it describes the ways in which colonialism and White supremacy divide bodies politically, economically, spatially, and socially in order to exploit and dominate them" (p. 137). Thus, the affective experiences of racialization in this article can be understood as a manifestation of what Al-Saji (2020) describes as the "repetitive colonial duration," encompassing the enduring economic, military, material, and cultural impacts of colonialism. Thus, it is "a wounding […] in terms of affective experience and dismembered possibility" (pp. 821, 825).

Norwegian contexts

Studies on the experiences of Muslim immigrant women indicate that they regularly encounter marginalization. As various researchers have shown, individuals from 'third-world countries,' particularly Muslims, are often subject to racialization within contemporary Norwegian society (Bjoernaas, 2015, p. 79). Muslim immigrants are consistently framed as a distinct threat [*trussel*] due to the perceived incompatibility between "their culture and values" and those of the "Western and European" project (Fangen & Vaage, 2015, p. 38)—a view that perpetuates historical representations dating back to the colonial era (Stokke, 2012). Anti-Muslim hostilities, such as hate speech and discrimination, persist as significant challenges faced by the Muslim community, shaping their daily experiences (Ellefsen & Sandberg, 2022). Indeed, Muslim youth in Norway commonly encounter widespread racism as a normalized aspect of their everyday online interactions (Nadim, 2023).

Such habitual social racism aligns with representations in political and popular discourse, in which Muslims are portrayed as 'undesirable' or 'challenging' immigrants, at the center of integration and gender equality policy debates (Fangen & Vaage, 2018; Helland, 2019). Norwegian far-right groups regularly deploy gendered rhetoric and imagery "in arguments against Muslims and Islam," contributing to the societal division of "us and them" (Fangen, 2020, p. 451). This participates in the broader discourse surrounding Islam in Western Europe, which coalesces around gender inequality within the racialized Muslim community, often rendering Muslim women as passive victims rather than active participants shaping their own lives or narratives (Helseth, 2018).

Discourses of emancipation and integration, in which Muslim immigrant women are imagined as "other" and as passive victims of an oppressive culture or religion (van Es, 2016, 2019), promise partly to proximate them to white middle-class women, thereby rendering them "like us" (Berg et al., 2010)—in a way that excludes different practices rather than strives towards more "pluriverse ontologies" that could encompass the diverse experiences of immigrant women. While this dynamic is perhaps built on Norway's self-regarded state feminism and gender equality (Skjelsbæk, 2013; Hernes, 2013), ironically immigrant and minority women are not included in the prevailing vision of Norwegian women, thus implying that

"immigrants/ethnic minorities and Norwegians are constituted as mutually exclusive categories" (Thun, 2012a, p. 46). The exclusion of minority women from mainstream feminism not only underscores the unacknowledged racial biases and power differentials between 'immigrant women' and 'Norwegian women' but also points to the frequently disregarded issue of racism in the country and of marginalized viewpoints in its feminist discourse (Thun 2012a).

Though many of these dynamics are rooted in larger structures of race that stretch far beyond Norway, race as a category of difference is largely absent from the prevailing Norwegian narrative, as select researchers have pointed out (Berg & Kristiansen, 2010; Berg, 2008; Dankertsen & Kristiansen, 2021; Führer, 2021; Gullestad, 2002; Myrdahl, 2010). There is a noticeable dearth of studies (or even wider discourse) focusing on theories of racism and colonial history to understand social disparity, minority experience, and dehumanization—even though Denmark-Norway participated in colonial projects (including the slave trade), Norway's independent identity was forged out of the subjugation of Sápmi, and modern-day Norway has been involved in various imperial operations, such as the 'War on Terror.' Despite increased attention to racism in Norway following the July 2011 terrorist attacks, research has primarily centered on right-wing extremism and labor market discrimination, overlooking the importance of phenotypical traits and colonial racist notions in fostering anti-Muslim attitudes and actions (Døving, 2022), and prioritizing explorations of immigrant integration over studies of racism (Synnes & Iversen, 2023). In Norway, race is "an analytically problematic term" because it is often "substituted for concepts such as 'ethnicity,' 'culture,' 'multiculturalism,' 'diversity,' or 'Muslim,' terms which indirectly signify racialization" (Dankertsen & Kristiansen, 2021, p. 2). By situating the lived experiences of Muslim immigrant women within larger discourses, theories, and dynamics of race, racism, and coloniality, this article aims to redress these national and epistemological distortions and omissions.

Colonial structures

Norway has been represented as exceptional or external to colonial and racial developments that shaped the modern world, but recent research has demonstrated that this is more of a politicized forgetting than a political reality (Sawyer & Habel, 2014; Alm et al., 2021; Keskinen et al., 2009; Habel, 2015; Keskinen et al., 2020). Tlostanova (2023b) urges us to rethink our views on memories, particularly those that have been overlooked or expunged, while Sawyer and Habel (2014) ask "what stories are erased and silenced in the branding of the Nordic region?" (p. 1). They question the prevailing (and carefully constructed) image of the Nordics, which has traditionally treated imperialist expansion, "colonialism, engagements in the trans-Atlantic slave economy, and racist categorizations" as problems for only continental Europe (p. 2). This distortive sense of "Nordic exceptionalism" has, until quite recently, helped conceal their active and "deep colonial roots" at home and abroad (Diallo, 2023, p. 134; Dankertsen, 2021, p. 136; Groglopo & Suárez-Krabbe, 2023). Considering the colonial paths in the Nordics, it becomes imperative to remember what has been silenced as these trajectories have had a significant impact on "racial formations and divisions in the Nordic region […] shaping human taxonomies" (Tlostanova, 2023a, p. 156).

This reorientation has been formed partly by broader research on colonialism and race, and this article is situated amid current work in Decolonial feminism, drawing on the perspectives of Decolonial Sami-Indigenous, Black, and Anti-Racist-Muslim feminist scholars. As Dankertsen and Kristiansen (2021) argue, placing "research about race and ethnicity […] in a larger social context, including the colonial structures in the past and present" is worthwhile, since "racial practices and colonial structures continue to be important parts of the power relations in Norway" (pp. 14, 1). Thus, the experiences of racialized Muslim women in Norway can be connected with historical colonial power dynamics, which have wielded a considerable influence over the lives of the Sámi Indigenous people (Dankertsen, 2014, 2016, 2019, 2021).

The stakes of such conceptual reconfigurations are eminently tangible. Despite the ongoing genocide in Palestine, the city council of Drammen's decision to accept only Ukrainian refugees, explicitly excluding those with 'non-Western backgrounds' (NRK, 2024) demonstrates a clear hierarchy of values, with concern regarding 'integration work such as social control, honor-related violence, poverty. This approach coopts the bodies of Muslim immigrant women as "battlegrounds" in the construction of national identity, deploying tropes of both inclusion and exclusion (Keskinen, 2009) which underscores the utilization of equality ideals not just as "a symbol of Western democracy or civilization," Gressgård (2022) explains, but also as a "political instrument for distinguishing between acceptable and unacceptable groups and practices" (p. 133, my trans.).

In Norway, the hierarchy of Western and non-Western is specifically inflected by ideas of 'Norwegianness.' As Dankertsen and Kristiansen (2021), with reference to Keskinen et al. (2009), point out, the stereotypical representation of diverse cultures "as racialized and essentialized units [is] connected to 'colonial ties' in the past and present" (p. 11). The authors suggest that "colonization, welfare policies, assimilation policies towards the Sámi, and racialization went hand in hand," contributing to a hierarchy separating those considered self-sufficient, rational, and civilized from those "who are not"—a binary which necessitates "a superior category" of 'Norwegiannes' against a racial, inferior category of 'otherness' (p. 3). In recent work from Diallo (2023), she explores how the category of Norwegianness perpetuates anti-Blackness, establishing a "racial hierarchy where people who are visibly of black African descent are deemed non-belonging, always foreign, less intelligent, hypersexual, unskilled, and more likely to be criminal, thus often exposed to policing" (p. 15). Diallo aims to deconstruct the intimate connection between Norwegian anti-Blackness and Norwegian slavery and colonialism (p. 14).

Though the phenomena impacting Muslim women in Norway should not be simply conflated with anti-Blackness, the underlying dynamics of 'Norwegianness' affect them in comparable ways. In particular, the concept of the colonial wound is useful when parsing the affective and emotional aspects of these experiences, allowing us to connect the sense and perception of these women with their experience of a racializing gaze rooted in colonial difference—"a classification established in and by the colonial matrix of power" (Mignolo, 2021, p. 444). This article thus underscores the importance of recognizing coloniality/modernity as the context of oppression and the need for resistance to generate "new meanings that reject, resist and decry the coloniality/modernity relation and its logics" (Lugones, 2020, p. 30).

Methods

This project employs a feminist biographical method, a qualitative interpretive approach aimed at providing deep insight into the lived experiences of participants within their larger socio-historical context (Popadiuk, 2015, pp. 394–396). This method seeks to understand how individuals "partake in social contexts and make sense of them"; and it elucidates "the structures of personal and social processes of action and suffering and potential resources for coping and change" (Gültekin et al., 2006, p. 51). My analysis draws on interviews conducted between 2022 and 2023. Participants were identified using snowball method. The only requirement for participation was self-identification as Muslim woman with immigrant background. Interviews were conducted both digitally and in person (workplace and café). Verbal/written consent was obtained from all participants. The Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research was consulted to ensure the confidential and anonymous treatment of sensitive information. The interviews were conducted in Norwegian, with selected portions translated to English, and all names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

Feminist epistemologies prioritize positioning work because all knowledge is created from a distinct vantage point, and the knowledge a knower develops is inherently influenced by their situatedness (Harding, 2004). Therefore, the

researcher's positionality and personal history profoundly impact their fieldwork, shaping it into a dialogical process structured by the researcher and the participants. A valuable strategy for performing positioning work is to discern personal identity markers (Berg, 2008); in this study, I consciously position myself as an individual from southern Turkey, born to and raised within a family of lower socioeconomic standing, who has and continues to navigate Westernization policies in public spaces while embracing Anatolian-Islamic values at home. My relocation to Norway over a decade ago through family reunification further informs my perspective. Drawing from Amani Hassani's teachings, I understand that "what I carry leads me in the research" (Ph.D. course, "Race, Space, and Affect"). In other words, I acknowledge that my investment in this topic originates partly from my racialized position as a Muslim immigrant woman in Norway. My personal experiences as a racialized individual have significantly influenced my research and my interactions with the women participants in this study. During the interviews, the participants articulated emotions that I shared, feelings that resonate with me and, in doing so, highlighted the importance of affectively embodied sentiments in this research endeavor. Consequently, what I carry with me also affects the analysis of this study.

Convergence and Divergence: Experiences of Embodied Coloniality

This paper presents the biographical narratives of three women: Amal, who is now in her fifties, Ayse, and Zahra, both in their thirties. Amal is of Arabic descent, Ayse is of African descent, and Zahra has Macedonian origins. Amal arrived in Norway in her thirties as refugee, fleeing war in her home country. In contrast, Ayse has spent nearly her entire life in Norway since arriving at the age of four through family reunification. Zahra arrived in Norway at ten years old through family reunification. All three women diverge in terms of racialization, which alters the forms and intersectionalities of racism they experience.

Non-relationality and living "in a wrong place"

Amal sought asylum in Norway with her family approximately fifteen years ago, fleeing the violence of wars and conflicts that dominated her upbringing and adulthood. Her experiences mirror those of the other women interviewed for this project, as she was affected by the prolonged suffering attendant to political sanctions, bombardment, malnutrition, hunger, lack of healthcare, and an absence of educational resources. In his work, *The colonial present*, Derek Gregory (2004) explores the forceful imposition of colonial power in areas such as Afghanistan, Palestine, and Iraq. He notes that *orientalism* continues to exert an abiding influence over contemporary colonial thinking, evidenced by ongoing conflicts in these regions, in which places have been taken "in the most extraordinarily violent ways," but also that this violent influence is "not confined to the legatees of empires old or new, formal or informal"; instead it forcefully "dyes" the way we think, act, and experience "in the colors of colonial power" (p. xv). Amal's account highlights the profound impact of this destruction and stain on the lives of countless women and the enduring legacy of colonial power for future generations.

While Amal's narrative reflects a palpable sense of originary displacement, she feels out of place in Norway. As a visibly Muslim woman wearing headscarf, she narrates an experience defined by a sense of landing in the wrong place. Even though she has resided in Norway for over a decade, Amal struggles to feel a sense of belonging in her country of residence. She yearns to be part of a network and community: "I am a social person who enjoys being with others, but I ended up in a wrong place here," she laments. This sentiment of isolation resonates with Al-Saji's (2021) concept of "non-relationality," a feeling of a "missed encounter" with the white other, in which "coexistence," reciprocity, and mutuality are "absent" (p.184). Al-Saji describes this experience as "a sense of temporal non-relationality or disjuncture" (p. 184). Amal's sense of displacement reflects both spatial and temporal non-relationality, as she feels out of place in her current physical and

social environment and disconnected from the social bonds that would provide her with a sense of belonging over time.

Amal wonders why she cannot find joy in returning home to Norway after a short stay abroad.

> *"I have never had that feeling here in Norway. I have been living here for fourteen years. Unfortunately, I don't feel I belong here. People think, 'why do you say so? Because you are not integrated, or because you are not part of society?' I don't know why, but I should be feeling happy to come back home after being away. But when landing in Oslo, I feel that 'I am back again.' So, in my explanation, I don't enjoy myself here; otherwise, why don't I get happy?"*

A common thread in the women's narratives is that they contrast their navigation of white spaces with their experience of more culturally diverse spaces. At her new workplace, for instance, Amal, instead of enjoying time with others in the community during lunch breaks, feels burdened in a way that those who take Norwegianness for granted do not. She feels compelled "to play" a role, which she describes as "tiring" and burdensome. Consequently, she withdraws herself from social gatherings, unlike at her old job, where her colleagues were from various countries, and she was able to have fun with coworkers. While Amal presents her previous workplace as a "pluriversal" place in which multiple ontologies and worlds coexist (Escobar, 2017), at her current workplace she is the only non-Norwegian "in the sea of whiteness" (Ahmed, 2007; Andreassen & Myong, 2017), one whose body is racialized as 'dark' and as not-belonging. In Amal's narrative, withdrawal becomes a means of self-protection—a way of surviving in a space that fails to acknowledge ontologies like hers. This lack of validation implies that she is not considered an equally valuable subject. Withdrawal becomes a manifestation of resistance to the invisible exclusionary racist structures ingrained in society and habitually perpetuated by the majority.

Though Amal initially denies having experienced discrimination based on her beliefs, she soon describes a highly refined hierarchy of racial identity that prevails in everyday life:

> *Amal: "No, to be honest. I may interpret it this way […] but, for instance, when crossing the street, and the driver does not stop, I may think of being treated differently. Oh, maybe because I am not only Muslim, but I'm that black, or dark, as they call us, but not sure."*
>
> *Nezihat: "You said that they call us black…"*
>
> *Amal: "No, dark. We are dark. Because we are not Norwegian, but it doesn't matter that we are dark. […] As long as we are not white by Norwegian standards, we are dark. Although we are brighter than many of them. I also have such brighter face."*

Amal is labeled as "dark," a racialized categorization that she and others hailing from the Global South are burdened with. Amal is self-reflexively aware of this label, so much so that she is able to critique its flaws and inconsistencies—but not, of course, to repudiate it entirely, since it is *always already* imposed on her; Amal's body was interpreted, assigned its value, and marked long before she arrived in Norway. As Fanon (2021/1952) puts it, "I did not create meaning for myself; the meaning was already there, waiting" (p. 113). The time to establish or define one's own meaning to others is past long before one even meets them. Amal's awareness of being perceived as "dark" underscores the all-encompassing nature of coloniality and the imperative to critically interrogate how bodies are assigned meaning and value. According to Kelly Oliver's (2004) interpretation of Fanon, the inability to create one's own meaning triggers crushing alienation, with the most profound pain arising from the predetermined meaning of one's body. Consequently, one who "does not mean" or is sealed into "objectedhood" is thus deemed "not fully human" (p. 15).

The interview with Amal was both enhanced and complicated by my own position as researcher. My encounter with her was one of profound emotional intensity, as I could sense the immense

weight of sorrow structuring her world. As I interpreted it, a profound and open wound was revealed, exposing deep-seated sadness, loss, and grief that had long been hidden beneath the bodily surface. As Ahmed (2017) notes, "the past can be what is sealed. When the seal is broken; pain floods in" (p. 61). It was my impression that this seal had been broken during the interview, and that an overwhelming wave of sorrow, grief, and suffering had been set free, like a metaphorical dam breaking. Amal's lived experiences, shaped by the violence of war, conflict, displacement, marginalization, racialization, and alienation, as an "affective weight of the past" had come to structure her sense of present and future possibilities (Al-Saji, 2018, 2021).

Racial violence at the intersections

Ayse arrived in Norway at age four, and her experience in the country demonstrates the complexities of negotiating identity in a white space. Brought up in a small neighborhood known for its diverse population, Ayse only felt isolated once she reached secondary school. In elementary school, she explains, "all of us were foreigners (*utlendning*)" so we weren't that different. We were different, but not that different. We were all foreigners. Then we got to secondary school." It was not until this level that she first interacted with (white) Norwegian youth. Reflecting on her first visit to a Norwegian friend's house, she recalls how it felt like stepping into "a completely different world." The sentiment highlights Ayse's nuanced perception of her interactions with non-Norwegian children in elementary school and white Norwegian children in secondary school. She expresses a sense of shared identity with non-Norwegians, despite their differences, while viewing her encounters with white Norwegians as entry into an entirely distinct societal sphere: the 'white space.' In other words, race and class intersect in powerfully felt ways. The larger context of these affinities is housing market segregation, which impacts Ayse's experience of disparities between majority and minority groups.

But negotiating her minority identity in racialized white spaces is not something that resolves or ends; Ayse's relationship to Norwegianness, and thus her relationship to herself, is continually changing, raising questions about "who she is and who she can become:"

> *"Now, I'm very much proud [of] my culture again. When I was younger, I was occupied with being accepted by Norwegians. That I am part of society, and being Norwegian can also be me. But now it is OK [laughter], whether you see me as Norwegian or not. I am proud to be myself and being from [country name] is an essential part of me. I want, if I have children, to teach them about that culture and identity."*

Ayse strikes a clear contrast between past and present, a sense of pride allowing her to narrativize and process feelings of difference and exclusion. Though she remains ambivalently connected to Norwegian identity, there is a sense that such connection is neither essential nor even necessary, since white Norwegians control the recognition of identity; this is an unattainable ideal, and as such not worth pursuing. As she puts it, for her this means that "you are not one of us; there is no room for that." This sentiment echoes what Diallo (2023) describes as the impossibility of being Black and Norwegian at the same time, a dynamic that can be traced back to "Norway's involvement in the transatlantic slave trade" (pp. 135–136). Instead of desperately striving for such recognition, Ayse embraces her family background as an integral part of her identity, expressing a desire to instill this "inherited culture and identity" in her future children. In this sense, she aims to prevent a cycle of alienation, inculcating a pride in her children that will anchor them—even if not in the majority identity.

Although she does have a strong sense of Norwegian identity, by rejecting the pursuit of recognition and embracing her cultural heritage, she exemplifies practices of disobedience and 'living otherwise'—yet, not entirely without feelings of resignation.

> *"Some days I am [from that land]; then fuck Norway and [laughing]. I grab my passport to move back. But on other days it is okay: let it be Norway. I need to change it to make space for people like me and the next generations."*

As Ayse suggests, everyday events often shift the dynamics of her identity, which is evidently both insignificant and deeply frustrating. It is a commitment to intervene in Norwegian culture, perhaps even to transform it in ways unsought by white Norwegians, which makes it possible for her to remain connected to Norwegian identity. Among other examples, she recounts several incidents in which she was perceived as an outsider or alien other, often with the implication that she lacked the intelligence to articulate herself in Norwegian. This aligns with Al-Saji's (2014) argument that "racialized bodies are not only seen as naturally inferior, they can't be seen otherwise" (p.138). Such racialization is built on a hierarchy around Norwegianness and Eurocentrism that stretches back several centuries, one in which anti-Blackness—keyed to a broader denigration of 'darkness' as foreign, other, and ignorant—plays an integral role (Diallo, 2023). One specific incident that stands out for Ayse is from her college days: a fellow student opined on race, categorizing whites and non-whites by ranking them based on intelligence, citing 'research' that seemingly demonstrated the intellectual superiority of the white race.

Ayse's experiences with racialization thus span a wide spectrum, from everyday happenings that unsettle her identity to encounters with antiquated theories of racial superiority. As a Black, Muslim woman, Ayse recounts experiences punctuated by everyday microaggressions and humiliations. That her skin color and religion are interconnected—as markers of foreignness and otherness—is clear from her account, and it aligns with theory on this affiliation. Diallo (2023) emphasizes the interconnected nature of anti-Blackness and anti-Muslim racism within the Norwegian context, underscoring the reciprocity of these two forms of racism which cannot be effectively addressed in isolation (p. 136). Sumaya Jirde Ali (2023), a Black Norwegian Somalian Muslim woman, elucidates the intersection of anti-Black and anti-Muslim racism through the dehumanization of the Black Muslim woman's body. She shares that personal attacks targeting religion were not as distressing to her as comments about skin color or immigrant background; the most dehumanizing, in her opinion, was when someone made comparisons to reptiles or insects—such rhetoric left her feeling 'knocked down' for days, weeks, or even months (p. 125). This narrative aligns with Ayse's experiences and serves to articulate the intricate imbrication of anti-Blackness with anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant racism. For example, when asked if she has ever been treated differently because she is Muslim, Ayse pauses hesitantly before confirming. In the end she finds it difficult to untangle which elements are connected with her Blackness and which with her religion:

> *"Yes, I have, also as Muslim… People can talk shit about Islam, so I say, 'but I'm Muslim', then start discussing it with me... but if I have been treated differently, I most likely have, but I don't know if it is because I am Black or is it because I am Muslim."*

When questioned about the inclusion of Muslims in society today, Ayse's response reflects the interplay of anti-Black and anti-Muslim racism in her narrative. While Black bodies are seen immediately as *utlending*—"always foreign" (Diallo, 2023, p. 15)—Muslim bodies represent a threat. She explains that being a Muslim is perceived as the worst status from a societal perspective, particularly due to the enduring association of Islam with terrorism.

> *"Being Muslim is the worst you can be. We have had for years focus on terrorism, only linked to Muslims. Every time something happens in Norway, everyone stops breathing because the fear of it can be related to Muslims."*

Ayse exposes the emotional ramifications of discrimination and the covert impact racial violence has on her psychological well-being. Her account

illuminates the affective responses she experiences in light of these occurrences, encompassing from anger to frustration to humor to activism to resistance. Yet her everyday interlocutors sometimes resist her responses. In her encounters with people using the N-word, for instance, attempts at resistance or critique are dismissed as overly sensitive: "stop being so offended […] for everything," she is told. In other words, the affective and emotional effects of racialization are easily overlooked by others who demonstrate neglect that entails "a denial of the capacity to sense suffering in those marked as different from oneself" (Guilmette, 2019, p. 74).

Dehumanization and racist representation

Hailing from Macedonia, Zahra was brought up in a region that, while not directly affected by war, was plagued by a constant fear of annihilation—a feeling that she articulates clearly. Zahra describes her secondary school as comprising diverse cultures and backgrounds. She felt a sense of freedom in expressing herself without the need to compromise on her identity. She and her peers built a group of friends with multicultural backgrounds, among whom she did not have to negotiate her identity and could truly be herself. Khawaja (2023) highlights "the strength of seeking out communities sharing similar experiences with discrimination and othering," emphasizing their "healing," "strengthening," and "humanizing effect against the forms of objectification and dehumanization experienced by many ethnic, racialized, and religious minorities" (p. 101, my trans.). Zahra's experience exemplifies this notion, as she derives strength and a sense of completeness from her participation in a circle of friends that enables her to express her entire self.

However, Zahra's narrative is also marked by experiences of dehumanization, insignificance, and inequality—of feeling like a second-class citizen. When asked if she can be open about her religious belonging, Zahra asserts:

> *"You must be prepared f you are going to be open. The fact that there are reactions shows that you are second-class citizens—not second-class citizens, but third- and fourth-class citizens, at the bottom of the hierarchy."*

Khawaja (2023) emphasizes the concept of "the white gaze" and its implications for the acknowledgment of one's identity and humanity, which can result in a denial of opportunities to be recognized as a legitimate subject. She posits that the recognition of one's humanity is crucial to overcoming the dehumanization and objectification inherent in racialization. In doing so, Khawaja brings to light a duality at the core of this issue: while an individual may "be seen, designated, and visible," "their existence may be simultaneously denied, rendering them invisible as an unworthy subject" (p. 99, my trans.). Similarly, Lugones (2020) argues that "denial of humanity" also involves exclusion from participation in societal structures, as continual dehumanization signifies a lack of inclusion in civil society (pp. 44–45).

Thus, even as Zahra is a successful student during her school years, she is simultaneously denigrated as a racialized minority pupil. "As a minority," she explains, "you are always something much more." Throughout her school years Zahra has come across teachers who either expressed their disdain of "foreigners" or mistreated Zahra and her fellow Muslim students. Other times, she felt the impossibility of being seen as a "neutral" student by some teachers. For example, she recalls how certain teachers treated her differently, making her feel as if her views and opinions were biased or partial, while everyone else was considered "neutral". Even today, Zahra often faces skepticism about her motives. She feels that her voice does not hold the same weight as that of a white Norwegian: "and as a minority, you will always be asked questions about whether you are biased." The feeling of not being seen as "neutral" aligns with the colonial classification of Muslim as "epistemically deficient and ontologically inferior" (Mignolo, 2021, p. 539). The differences denigrated by colonialism have accrued epistemological and ontological meaning, marking certain bodies with

an "incapacity to think rationally" (Andreassen & Myong, 2017, p. 99).

Since connected with assumptions about rationality and intellectual ability, it is not surprising that much of this marginalization occurs in the education system; Zahra recounts several instances in which teachers facilitated the marginalization and degradation of Muslim students. Zahra singles out a religious teacher whom she describes as "the most racist" for conducting interrogations that delved into private matters, touching on questions about finances that would not be asked of Norwegian students:

> *"She asked utterly absurd things and then dug into private things. [...] Like, can you take out a loan? […] you would never have experienced that if you were Norwegian. […] But the worst thing was that it created acceptance that others could treat us badly."*

This type of treatment, as Said et al. (2004) explains, reflects the perpetuation of negative representations that are rooted in the racist colonial imaginary: from ideas or fantasies about the Other derived from an ancient representation of Islam to the construction of an exclusionary educational environment for Muslim students (p. 110). Zahra's teacher's actions not only reinforce the essentialized and fictitious characteristics of the Other that Said identifies, but they also foster an environment in which the mistreatment of Muslim students was tacitly accepted and modeled, leading to a shift in how their "majority Norwegian" peers viewed and engaged with them.

> *"It also ruined how my friends in the class, the majority Norwegian, saw me. I started to withdraw more and began to feel much worse about myself. Then, I became more religious because I thought I had to know when she asked."*

If one of the roles of education is to help enter social life, here it has failed remarkably; Zahra becomes more withdrawn, repudiating a burgeoning connection to her fellow students. Ironically, the heightened scrutiny of her religion pushes Zahra towards it, but not as a source of fulfilment, but rather as self-defense. Though this was an especially painful incident, Zahra makes it clear that it was representative, rather than unique. "The dehumanization, the racist representation," she discloses, "it was like everywhere: books, students."

When later asked about her children and whether she hopes they remain linked to their cultural-religious background, Zahra responds enthusiastically:

> *"Yes, it is essential. I don't want them to grow up with contempt for who they are when they are only so few. They should instead feel its beauty and warmth. This applies not only to my ethnic or religious background but also to meeting other multicultural people. That is the most important thing."*

Zahra's concerns about self-contempt resonate with the writing of Ali (2018), who struggled with such feelings for being Somali, Black, and Muslim in Norway: "I went around with baggage of self-contempt," Ali confesses, and "I just wanted to erase what made me different" (pp. 42–43, my trans.). To resist, Zahra hopes to develop in her children an appreciation for and pride in their cultural and religious heritage as an antidote or salve to colonial wounds of self-contempt.

Discussion

Though describing distinct experiences, the accounts of Amal, Ayse, and Zahra can be parsed together in relation to the concept of coloniality, which refers to the enduring effects of colonialism on social structures and cultural norms. It is within these parameters of coloniality that these three Muslim women are forced to navigate their identity and attempt to establish a coherent sense of self amid a past, present, and future fragmented by the affective influence of marginalization and dehumanization in Norway. From this perspective, the experiences of Amal, Ayse, and Zahra illustrate the existence and persistence of colonial

wounds—injuries inflicted by the legacy of colonialism as it manifests through the power dynamics impacting their everyday lives.

As my interview with Amal demonstrated, the researcher's position is never irrelevant. Though the meeting was relaxed, gathering at a café after work during the Christmas holiday, the interview eventually became emotionally overwhelming. I felt almost suffocated at one point, a sensation that evoked the powerful constraints attendant to coloniality. The profound impact of war and conflict on Amal's past in her home country, the subsequent challenges she faces in Norway as a racialized and gendered individual in the present, and the diminished futurity offered to her became almost unbearable to hear. This suppressed temporality and spatiality was translated affectively and corporeally. The profound sadness and sorrow I sensed, that permeated her world, left a lasting impression on me. It took a year to conduct another interview with a new participant, which became the final one.

A kind of grim humor can also serve as a way of processing such feelings, as my interview with Ayse showed. For instance, when asked how she starts the day, she answered: "I open my eyes, and hate life." Alternatively, when probed on the purpose of life, Ayse expressed that it is purely "to survive," repeating that the meaning of life is rooted in "survival." Amidst the laughter, I sensed something hidden beneath the humor—a hint of resignation and despair. Her statement about "losing faith in society" resonated with me, providing context to the perceived flatness of her delivery. Her sequential storytelling seemed to conceal a deeper well of emotions, leaving me with a lingering sense of unspoken turmoil. Disempowered by majority society over her own definition, Ayse endures the pain of daily microaggressions, often dismissed by the wider community. Such dismissals work to conceal the colonial wounds of minority women, causing them to fester and dehumanize, thus forestalling the possibility of healing.

Ayse's narrative evokes a Black life concentrated around surviving racial violence. When queried on how her experiences with racism have impacted her psychological well-being, Ayse's response powerfully sheds light on the ordinariness of racial violence endured by the Black body: "it's just part of being Black or looking different. But then you're so used to it that you don't know." This racial violence is so normalized—systemically and structurally—and so extensively inscribed on the Black body that it is a challenge to envision what it is like to live without it. But existence oriented towards survival can be seen as a pursuit of human dignity and meaning-making in a hostile environment.

Humor-laden resignation is not the only strategy for resilience. In my interviews with Zahra, which had to be postponed a few times due to illness, I found that withdrawal can also be a survival response, particularly to the dehumanization facing Muslims. When we finally met online, I found her worn out by the weight of being a minority in Norway, finding refuge in social isolation. In professional life, as in school, withdrawal serves to resist the exclusionary dehumanizing structures in white spaces. I could only listen and offer empathy— to acknowledge her injury and to heed Fanon's (2021/1952) enjoinder to "touch with our finger all the wounds that score [the] Black livery" (p.164).

All three accounts express a shared sense of constraint, self-fragmentation, and partitioning; in this society, these women must conceal, suppress, or even destroy parts of themselves. Hemmed in by colonial assumptions and presumptive gazes, Zahra is unable to exist on her own terms. Ayse and Amal express a similar sentiment, the former acknowledging the impossibility of being a Black Muslim and a Norwegian simultaneously, the latter recognizing that she is perceived primarily as "dark." Both categories, in hierarchies intertwined since the colonial period, are marked as inferior and different—incompatible with 'Norwegianness'.

Conclusion

The intertwined narratives of Muslim minority women in Norway provide a poignant portrayal of the lasting impact of coloniality. The narratives of Amal, Ayse, and Zahra offer insight into the

profound challenges encountered while striving to establish identity within a society shaped by the legacy of colonialism. Their experiences—from the emotional and physical suffocation caused by power differentials to the fixation on endurance and survival in the face of routine microaggressions—vividly illustrate the pervasive influence of coloniality on their day-to-day existence. These narratives underscore the dehumanizing structures present in white spaces, structures that not only restrict existence but also dictate the terms by which identities as Brown Muslim women and Black Muslim women are formed and recognized.

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