

Opinion

On the representation of the Muslim American community: As a muslim woman, Ilhan Omar's 'As-salaam Aleikum' made me uncomfortable

Thursday 15 November 2018, by [SADEQUE Samira](#) (Date first published: 12 November 2018).

Ilhan Omar made history as one of the first Muslim women elected to the U.S. Congress. Her victory was bold, it was timely, and it is what many American Muslims were waiting for at a time when Islamophobia is at a record high. I wanted to feel a surge of pride when I watched Omar's victory, to celebrate another Muslim woman's achievement. Instead, as someone for whom her greeting doesn't resonate positively, I ended up feeling an unexpected dissonance, even alienation.

For Muslim women like me, who escaped countries where Islam defined, demeaned and suffocated our lives, to live in America, it was jolting hearing the greeting in a place we associate with freedom.

Last Tuesday, Ilhan Omar made history as one of the first Muslim women elected to the U.S. Congress. Her victory was bold, it was timely, and it is what many American Muslims were waiting for at a time when Islamophobia is at a record high.

On the evening of her victory, Omar, a Somali American who came to the U.S. as a refugee more than two decades ago, addressed a crowd with dances and a speech that would resonate with any marginalized community in the country:

"What an amazing journey this has been. I stand here before you tonight as your congresswoman elect with many firsts behind my name: the first woman of color to represent our state in congress, the first woman to wear a hijab to represent [Minnesota], the first refugee ever elected to congress, and one of the first Muslim women elected to Congress."

Omar's various identities as "firsts" are important for any little girl watching her on TV, and sends a message across America about representation.

However, she started her speech with *"As-salaam aleikum,"* an Islamic greeting, followed by *"Alhamdulillah Alhamdulillah Alhamdulillah,"* to cheers across the room. Muslims across America rejoiced: they felt seen, they felt heard.

Sitting in my New York apartment, watching the video, I cringed.

As a woman who grew up in a Muslim country before relocating to New York, both the greeting as well as "*Alhamdulillah*," which means "(all) praise be to God," took me back to a time and place I'd been trying to free myself from.

New York, and more broadly America, was my escape to freedom, a life away from the religion being pushed down my throat - on the streets, to shops, to dinner table conversations. "*As-salaam aleikum*" to me is a reminder of what I associate with the oppression I felt in my hometown - of being muted down, a reminder that as a woman, I am lesser. Smaller.

But to Muslims in America, it was something completely different: An act of defiance, a symbol of liberation from the Islamophobia that shackles the U.S. Muslim community. As a friend of mine, who is a Muslim organizer in New York, said in response to my doubt about Omar's introduction: it's something that can be seen "as a revolutionary act of social defiance against structural and violent state-sponsored Islamophobia."

I noticed a divide between what this meant for Muslim Americans and to my progressive friends in Bangladesh, who have faced an equal level of oppression from our religion.

It's crucial to acknowledge that the victory of Omar, as well as that of Rashida Tlaib of Michigan, are needed now more than ever for the Muslim community, especially in a year which may have been the "worst [ever] Islamophobic election cycle," with numerous Muslim leaders running for office - both national and local - and facing backlash, according to a report by the Associated Press.

While it's important for the representation of the Muslim American community, it's interesting to note that my friends, from a predominantly Muslim country, found it disturbing, because of the symbolism it holds in our specific community. For me, and other women who grew up in a Muslim country where the religious doctrine defined every step of our lives - from what we wear, to what we can't drink, we felt a sense of powerlessness upon seeing the greetings in a place we associate with freedom.

Some would argue it's a matter of language: It's simply a greeting in Arabic, and Omar should exercise her right to be able to say it. And I agree. I fully believe in her — and anyone's — right to speak any language.

But as a Muslim, I also know the greeting, along with "*Alhamdulillah*," goes beyond that - there's an undeniable religious connotation to it that can't be missed.

While "*As-salaam aleikum*" translates to "Peace be unto you," "*Alhamdulillah*" is a reference to gratitude to Allah. And that makes it about religion. That is the thin line between religion (Islam) and language (Arabic) that Omar transcended when she made the greeting in her speech, and as someone who has migrated to a different country to escape that, it made me uncomfortable.

Perhaps she could simply have said "Salam," the Arabic word for "peace" and is also considered a greeting - but one that doesn't have a religious connotation.

In that same post-election conversation, another friend of mine pointed out that it shows that "American voters are maturing enough to vote for the best candidate, irrespective of faith." But in addressing her speech with a remark that applies to a less universal, and specifically only Muslim audience, she is disrespecting that very sentiment.

Don't conflate my discomfort with the hostility of "Shariah infiltrator" conspiracy theorists. Omar's greeting by no means poses a threat for America to be "infiltrated" by Shariah law, as 750,000 Americans apparently believe, the membership numbers claimed by anti-Islam group ACT! for

America. It is the sentiment that it evokes - resistance for American Muslims, to a sense of oppression for women in Bangladesh, that makes this point of conflict an interesting debate, and a reminder that Omar's words weren't met with an universal acceptance.

Omar and Tlaib are both important figures for the 3.5 million Muslim Americans to feel seen, to feel less invisible.

But going forward, it might be important for figures such as Omar to identify and acknowledge that thin line between religion and language, because it might mean representation in America, but to the rest of the Muslim world - who will likely be following her journey - it might be a reminder of the oppression that it reflects for some people.

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P.S.

- Haaretz, Nov 12, 2018 5:48 AM:

<https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/.premium-as-a-muslim-woman-ilhan-omar-s-as-salaam-aleikum-made-me-uncomfortable-1.6638173?=&ts=1542..>

<http://www.siaawi.org/article18237.html>

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