

Unveiled
Mariam Bacchus

I'm almost fifteen years old; eight years an immigrant, two years a citizen of Canada. I was born in a small country, one colonized by both the British and the Dutch. Unlike the rest of the continent, Guyana was never under the rule of the Spanish or the Portuguese. Maybe if that were the case, things would have been different. As it is, I don't have much of a cultural identity. My ancestors were also immigrants: workers taken on ships from China and India by the British. Their pasts before that remain unknown, wiped away by the masters of their new home. I have no known family connections in either country, no background to fall back on or long-lost relatives to find. After eight years, I have now lived in Canada for far longer than I ever did in the country of my birth. Since my emigration, I've spent about six months in total in Guyana and had little to no contact with anyone there. I have never claimed to speak fluently any language other than English, except maybe the broken form I spoke in my youth. Even then, I ditched my accent years ago, after countless forms of teasing and the thoughtlessly cruel words of my year mates.

My sole claim to culture lies not in my familial past but rather my religion. As a Muslim, there are certain practices, customs and ideologies that influence my way of life and define how I view myself and the world around me. Without them, I would be very different from the person I am today. Without them, I would probably be treated very differently than how I am today. By my skin colour alone, it would be obvious that I am a foreigner. When my clothing and way of speaking are added, it's obvious that it changes how people react to me. I know what a lot of people say about my religion. I am well aware of their views on 'outsiders' and immigrants. I've had people judge me based on the way I look, the way I dress and the language I use.

There's a certain attitude used - by many - towards people who believe in certain things - and maybe this is not always the case - but for some, faith is regarded as not something bad, but rather, something stupid. Illogical or irrational, even. There's a hint of a laugh when I say something about my views, a bit of contempt or confusion. They ask me if I "don't know what they're doing in the East" if I "don't realize I'm being oppressed." There's another form of oppression when people are in danger of not being able to practice what they believe in; another form of conformism being put into place when people can't wear a symbol of faith - an article of clothing - just because you don't like it. And yes - if I didn't want to wear what I do, that would be fine, but I do want to wear it and that's also fine.

Their questions make me feel like I'm going to cry. In a country where freedom is preached, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms is almost ignored because someone doesn't like what I believe in. Or maybe it's not my faith but rather who practices it - but not every man with a beard has a gun and not every woman in a scarf is forced to wear it. Yes, I understand your security concerns but it's a concern to me if you want to see what's underneath. As far as *I'm* concerned, it's an invasion of privacy. I'm sorry for what some people do, but if we judged the practitioners of a belief by the actions of a few, then there would be no people found without guilt. I'm sorry if that's *extreme* but that's what you're saying when you call my brothers and sisters extremists. Or rather, 'Islamists'. And I'm sorry, but Islam is the only thing that I have and rather than connecting me to a country I left more than half a lifetime ago, it connects me to more than one billion people I could call my brother or sister.

You've asked me about racism and discrimination but it's more than that. It's ignorance. So yes, I am a Muslim. Yes, I am an immigrant. No, I'm not a terrorist. No, that doesn't give you the free license to treat me like one.