A "CRISIS OF MASCULINITY"?: THE WEST'S CULTURAL WARS IN THE EMERGING MUSLIM MANOSPHERE

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Abstract: This article aims to frame the emergence of a new category of thought, referred to here as "Alt-Wallah", within the Islamicate which exists at the intersection between a supposed crisis of masculinity, the Alt Right, and Muslim men. This framing begins by looking at the various crises that abound both in Islam and in masculinity. We then introduce what Farris calls "femonationalism", and give some reflections on the relationship between our new category of thought and this femonationalism. This new category of thought is given the name "Alt-Wallah", and then linked to certain already existing categories of thought within the Islamicate. Other names are considered throughout the piece, as well as reasons as to why these are not adequate to describe the phenomenon in question. This is followed by an analysis of examples such as online Muslim figures Daniel Haqiqatjou, Nabeel Aziz, and others, as well as an exploration of further similarities to what is called the "fundamentalist declinist" category of thought. We then conclude with a reflection on the buffered Muslim man, and on what role the idea of the mujtahid plays in this conceptualisation of Muslim man.

Keywords: alt-right, White Shariah, masculinity, Muslim manosphere, culture wars

Introduction

In July 2021, a video posted by Muslim Positive Psychology counsellor Gabriel Keresztes Al-Romaani provoked heated debate among Muslims on social media. In this video, a visibly upset Al-Romaani responds to globally renowned Mufti Menk, a Muslim cleric who shared a video of demonstrating his knitting skills – a skill that he had learnt as a child and which he hoped to pass on to his children. Al-Romaani's video, titled "Killing Muslim Masculinity Mufti Menk", begins with the question "is this masculinity?" (Al-Romaani 2021); it then proceeds to accuse Mufti Menk of displaying feminine behaviour when he should instead be modelling masculinity by teaching hunting, swimming, riding a horse, archery,

boxing, and other such activities which Al-Romaani insists are more in line with Sunnah manhood. Feminine activities by men, he charges, contribute to low testosterone and low libido, which lead to diminished manhood, making the men in question unattractive to women.[1]

This conception of a masculinity in decline and in need of intervention is symptomatic of a prevailing belief in some online communities of Muslim men. These groups see an impending "crisis of masculinity" in what this article maps as an emerging Muslim manosphere. This "manosphere" is a term we borrow in reference to the wider phenomenon of growing communities of men online (Marwick and Caplan 2018) who are focused on a range of concerns, but often centred on the defence of traditional masculinity. The Muslim manosphere is an online Muslim community of men who are highly mobilised, engaged, frustrated, and sometimes even angry, carving out their own space in the West's "culture wars" where debates about gender, race, multiculturalism, and religion have been cast as crises under neoliberal capitalism. The article maps out the Muslim manosphere as a complex political configuration of seemingly competing ideological forces by tracing where they converge and diverge with wider trends. It begins by examining the first convergence of a "crisis of masculinity" and how it is a precipitating factor in the resurgence of the alt-right, whose opposition to immigration, and particularly Islam, frames such stances as in defence of Western civilisation.

The political mood of this "crisis", which has allowed some to guard conventional masculinity and Western secular /liberal values in the shadow of the Muslim question, has morphed into a curious alliance between liberals, feminists, neoliberals, and the far right – one that Sara Farris (2017) calls femonationalism. As a front of the culture wars, femonationalists share a belief in a "crisis of Islam" qua the woman question as part of their preoccupation with the status of Muslim women in Islam. Such convergence raises an urgent question: how do we explain femonationalism in the shadow of a "crisis of masculinity" which itself identifies feminism as the key, looming social ailment? Femonationalism is not only a civilisational defence of Western values, but its capacity to mobilise Islamophobia – the treatment of Muslims as a problem – also repurposes and preserves Western "heroic masculinity" as an ideal guardian of the nation's boundaries. The nation's values are in consequence imagined to be defended by protecting Muslim women from the "toxic masculinity" of Muslim men.

At the same time, a Muslim manosphere is forming which has been called a host of names such as "akhi- right", "akh-right", the "Muslim alt-right", the "green pill movement". Identifying an ideological phenomenon in which the cultural wars have centred on Muslims, and quite often picking at issues surrounding gender and race, these Muslim men mobilise around a growing sentiment they share with the alt-right about a "crisis of masculinity" and the threat of "the radical

left". This convergence of Muslim men's activism with the Western right as part of a wider "red pill" phenomenon – a reference to the film *The Matrix* (1999) where the protagonist is given the option to take the red pill that releases one from a false-truth – unifies men across the gulf of cultural and political divides in identifying a threat to them *as men*.

The varying attempts to name how Muslim men have taken up such specific ideological positions within the West's cultural wars are noteworthy, as we too struggled to find a suitable name.[2] To speak of Islam and Muslims in the securitised post-911 world, where Muslims are positioned as inherently suspect communities, places us in a political minefield. Words matter. We are mindful then of the history that could be provoked by a name we first considered – "Islamonationalism" – as its formation makes sense alongside the term femonationalism, both being preoccupied with the status of Muslim women. Yet this is a name with historical baggage, evoking references to "Islamofascism", which signals an attempt to link Islam and Islamism with fascism. We reject this polemical move to associate Islam with fascism, as it relies on a belief that elements of fascism are somehow consistent with or inherent to Islam. In the end, we thus dropped Islamonationalism as a term to help trace how Islam is being invoked, uprooted, and abstracted in the cultural wars of the West. We instead settled for the name "Alt-Wallah", using this name in an attempt to shield it from the securitised impulse by resituating it in intimate and familiar cultural contexts – "wallah" as the colloquial of "wallahi" (promise by God) signals the uprootedness of Islam to be repurposed in everyday brotherhood discourse that resembles Muslim locker room talk. To this end, we show how it is an outgrowth of an already existing grouping, fundamentalist declinism. Declinism is an umbrella term that includes groupings who believe Islam/the Islamicate to be in almost terminal decline, with fundamentalist declinism being perhaps its strongest sub-group.[3] We link Alt-Wallahs with fundamentalist declinism through the themes they hold in common, as well as the similarities in their claims against feminism.

To this end, we draw attention to the Alt-Wallah phenomenon as a matter of urgency. Its naming is pertinent to identifying and formulating a response to the risks and challenges that we suggest it poses for Muslim communities, who are already vulnerable to a hostile climate of Islamophobia, counterterrorism, and a resurgence of white supremacy around the world. An additional concern is that this "red pill" alliance is emerging at the expense of Muslim women, who are relegated to being a cultural menace when they speak or being passive spectators when they do not.

Far from creating a rift between men that capitalises on their cultural differences, the Western preoccupation with "sexual democracy", gender, and sexual emancipation has had unintended side effects in unifying men against a greater

perceived foe: the feminist challenge to traditional masculinity and the wider radical left's complicity in so-called cultural corrosion. Like femonationalists and (fundamentalist) declinists, the Alt-Wallah community adopts the thesis of a "crisis of Islam" and articulates it through the problematisation of Muslim women in the West. While both phenomena have different intentions and purposes in invoking a "crisis of Islam" by reference to Muslim women, one to advocate for the preservation of Western culture while the other for the preservation of Islamic tradition, they nevertheless share a Eurocentric (or what Salman Sayyid (2014) calls a "Westernese") reading of Islam.

   For Grosfoguel (2009: 99), who refers in his work (not unproblematically)[4] to Eurocentric fundamentalism, Eurocentrism is the idea that Western tradition must be held sacred, and all others are inferior. It is this form of fundamentalism that has aided the West in its claim to universality. Due to the spread of Eurocentrism through colonialism, Grosfoguel states that certain movements outside of the West have become derivative of Eurocentrism. These groups attempt to fight Western hegemony by simply inverting the dichotomy that the West has placed itself in, thus capitulating to the story of the world as told in Westernese. As such, if the West is modern, these groups will affirm their traditionality, and it is this relationship which governs all of their responses to the woman question. Through such responses, they "affirm the opposite side of the binary and leave intact the hegemonic binary itself" (Grosfoguel 2009: 99). As a result, we can say that both the alternative right or alt-right and the Alt-Wallahs are playing on the chessboard of Westernese, one willingly, the other unwittingly. The Alt-Wallah does not, despite what they may believe, overthrow Westernese constructs but instead rebels against them in a way that is predicted and then incorporated by Westernese. Thus, their search for an "authentic Islam" can be reduced to little more than an attempt to be not-Western rather than being Islamic(ate). Our objective here is not to claim whether there is, or can be, an authentic Islamic tradition or not. Rather, it is to examine how these oppositional responses reimagine and position Islamic tradition against secularism and liberalism, and how the woman question enables a secular invocation of the "buffered Muslim man".

A Crisis of Masculinity?

The "post-9/11" era, which is characterised by an impetus to enforce civilisational boundaries against a crisis of illiberal and violent Others, has witnessed another claim to urgency centred on the erosion of traditional masculinity and the devaluing of men in society, identified by the hyperbolic expression of a "crisis of masculinity" (Shpancer 2020; Ferree 2020; Hearn 1999). Most vehemently expressed in the "manosphere" (Marwick and Caplan 2018) – an online sphere of

blogs, social media, forums on media such as Reddit, Facebook, Twitter, 4chan, 8chan, YouTube, of men converged to lament growing attacks against traditional masculinity. In this heightened climate of "the naming of men as men" (Hearn 1999), these men challenge social ills afflicting them, which they believe revolve around the problematisation of masculine norms. Groups like incels (involuntary celibates), Men's Rights Activists (MRA), Pick Up Artists (PUA), and Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW) attribute a host of economic and social problems to women. Women are violently targeted as scapegoats for men's disappointments with their sex lives (incels) or as objects to be "gamed" into having sex (PUA); the rise of feminism and women's empowerment is framed as a source of disen-franchisement for men (MRA) (Whyte 2018), or as reasoning for the wholesale and tangibly bitter rejection of women from their lives (MGTOW). This surge of male resentment and anger has been framed as both a symptom and a response to a "crisis of masculinity". Growing bodies of research point to a worrying trend of traditional men's rights activism shifting towards more violent and misogynistic content consequently (Farrell et al. 2019; Ribeiro et al. 2020).

Proclamations of crisis, Janet Roitman (2013) reminds us, require interrogation of what is being claimed. Crisis references norms and invokes comparisons. Crisis establishes "a criterion for what counts as "history" and in announcing a change has occurred, "crisis designates 'history' as such" (Roitman 2013: 7). Growing communities of men online – coined as a "manosphere" – mobilise crisis to rearticulate a misogynistic agenda that laments how the feminist turn has thwarted the way of men and presents challenges men are facing as a challenge to their right to be men (Lefkovitz 2018). In this defensive lens, which casts men as victims, crisis is mobilised to invoke claims about men as naturally endowed with the capacity for aggression and strength, and elaborates this as evidence of their capacities in leadership as well as the protection of women and family. These current champions of "true masculinity" or "deep masculinity" (Low and Malacrida 2008) experience a devastating blow to the world as they *choose to* know it, as it slowly disintegrates and compels immediate attention. Two historical cradles of power, whiteness and masculinity, converge in this atmospheric of loss, radiating with anger and resentment over a perceived dislocation of the self. Under the mantra "Make America Great Again", Donald Trump's presidency in 2016 became a greenlight to communities of men (and women) to express more openly and aggressively their "defence" of conventional masculinity and the racial order, which they saw as under attack.

In the mood of a "crisis of masculinity", online harassment and violence expressed by men is explained away as a reaction to attacks on a masculinity defined as tough, competitive, self-reliant, stoic, and dominant maleness. These men, mainly white, feel an "aggrieved entitlement" (Kimmel 2013) to their diminished status as "the new, Little man" (Mills 1951 [2002];

Weiss 2021) – a restless, rootless, alienated modern figure, looking for purpose – who wants to restore his loss of power. According to Simon Copland (2020), the "crisis of masculinity" presents the problem in two ways: either members of the manosphere see society imposing an anti-men agenda, thus justifying anger, or critics of the manosphere see men willingly participating in "toxic masculinity", where men are struggling to deal with losing their privilege and power.

The most articulated response to the thesis of the rootless man has come from the psychology professor Jordan Peterson, who came to fame through vocal criticism of the left's "political correctness" and of the policing of speech in relation to gender. Dressed in designer suits, Peterson offers the "new little man" (Mills 1951 [2002]; Weiss 2021) a convenient narrative. Using the analogy of natural hierarchical systems in which lobsters live, and how they are chemically content in that system, Peterson argues humans are similarly bound in a hierarchy of order which is being disrupted. Peterson's method is both a diagnosis of ailments – feminists, progressives, and "cultural Marxists" who bring social disorder to a natural order – and a treatment – guiding alienated men on how to cope and be the best person (or crustacean) possible in *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos* (2018). As an obscure academic whose YouTube videos gradually grew a mass following, Peterson's intervention signals an appetite for protesting progressive movements which aim to alleviate gender and racial inequalities. Peterson targets "the left" as the cause of social disorder, as misrepresenting and even lying about inequality and oppression, arguing that hierarchies need to be reframed not as an imposition but a natural phenomenon of society.

Peterson's defence of "true masculinity" is grounded in biological determinism to present a man whose "state of nature" is instinctively aggressive, competitive, and power-driven. What we come to know as "masculinity" through him is therefore synonymous with the products of inheritance and evolution (Low and Malacrida 2008). As the old order crumbles, men have been displaced by a symbolic order that radically, disruptively questions the natural hierarchy and therefore the essence of who they are. For Peterson, the solution is to return to tradition, "ancient wisdom", and the great myths and stories (2018: 244) told about who we are – which contemporary society has neglected – as this is the cause of the meaninglessness that men experience.

The popularity in reception of Peterson, and the defence of "true" masculinity, also signals the nexus of race science related and socio-biological readings which attempt to naturalise gender inequalities. He gained a significant following of men in the alt-right and the "alt-lite" – an amalgam of far-right groups, ideologies, and individuals who rely, to different degrees, on a similar pseudo-scientific explanation of the West's superiority and the consequently elevated status of white men. We can discern this overlap in Western chauvinism, toxic masculinity, and racial

anxiety about a demographic threat in groups such as the Proud Boys, which denies its white supremacy but claims to be defenders of "Western values". For instance, to be a member of the group one must declare "I am a proud Western chauvinist; I refuse to apologise for creating the modern world". This is followed by a violent ritual of hazing (Southern Poverty Law Centre n.d.). Peterson offers such men vindication of their anxieties, from the limits of multiculturalism, to claims of "white genocide" where Western civilisation is perceived as under attack, as a mechanism for restoring (read: retaining) power as white men.

While there has been growing attention to these efforts, and growing attempts to retain power in the resurgence of the extreme right or the alternative right (alt-right) (Hawley 2017; Belew 2018; Stern 2019; Mudde 2019), and the crisis of masculinity (Blais and Dupuis-Deri 2012; Kimmel 2013; Nicholas 2018; Ging 2019; Farrell et al. 2019; Rafail and Freitas 2019; Taisto 2020) from certain feminist moments, there has been an absence of attention on its effects on other communities of men. Peterson, for instance, has a significant following of Muslim men, as he recently recognised in a patronising message to his Muslim fanbase perforated with stereotypes of Muslims (Peterson, 2022a).

The support Peterson is receiving from Muslim men portends to a curious obsession with feminism and its dangers for the minds and practices of Muslim communities – that which would propose a "crisis in Islam". It is a trend that, in the digital space, can be traced to the late 1990s and early 2000s where "culture wars" between "Salafis" and "moderates", or "traditionalism" and "modernism", were brewing online. Much of these debates centred around concern with feminism as a foreign ideology and a "soft weapon" (Whitlock 2007) which gives political sustenance to charges levelled by critic Bernard Lewis (2001) of a "crisis of Islam". These social and political concerns cannot be dismissed as conspiratorial considering that they were occurring in the shadow of the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan. The *casus belli* for this war centred on the protection of Afghan women, as part of a campaign that combined feminist discourse with that of Empire to "stop gender apartheid", in the mode of what Gayatri Spivak (1988) coined as saving brown women from brown men. Crises of Islam or within Islam are often cast against the bodies of Muslim women.[5]

Preoccupation with the body is symptomatic of what Eric Fassin calls "sexual democracy", a way of preserving secular values and marking out cultural differences (Fassin 2012: 288) to establish distinct identities around the agents of secularism, modernity and freedom (Butler 2008: 2). This political detour is pertinent to understanding the complex racial and gendered configurations that have coalesced around the woman question, the question around which a crisis of masculinity is powered, and the Muslim question, the question through which a politics of white racial restoration and defence of Muslim traditionalism is rekindled.

Declinism, the Alt Wallahs, and the Muslim Manosphere

Simultaneously to a surge in men's rights activism converging with the far-right, "femonationalism" has united forces across the political spectrum in defence of Western civilisation. How do we make sense of a crisis of masculinity against the background of alliances between feminists and conservative neoliberal agendas in the form of femonationalism? Key to this arrangement is the nation, as imagined in what Feree (2020) calls the masculinisation of the "brotherhood" state, which long defended liberal ideals. We see in femonationalism a contemporary colour-line drawn, where membership in the brotherhood state is extended to European (white) women. Femonationalism allows the nation to remobilise masculinity in defence of civilisational values, for racial restoration. The colour-line unifies White European women with White European men, by projecting conceptions of unfreedom onto Muslim women and pointing to dangerous Muslim men as the cause.

The Alt-Wallah appears to challenge the objectives of a femonationalism which problematises Muslim men, but it finds common ground with the alt-right on masculinity. However, if the gender objectives of these communities converge on defending masculinity, they diverge significantly in their civilisational objectives. The concept "Alt-Wallah" fuses the invocation by that community of Islam as an ideological formation driven by a common conviction in the superiority of not Islam itself, but of what Islam signifies, with tools borrowed from the alt-right to further themselves. Like femonationalists and the alt-right at large, the Alt-Wallah subject is preoccupied with concerns about the status of Muslim women – what they wear, what they desire, and *where their loyalties lie.*

Those whom we are describing as Alt-Wallahs have shaped the Muslim manosphere, which is characterised by figureheads like Daniel Haqiqatjou, author of *The Muslim Skeptic*, Nabeel Azeez, Facebook page administrator for "Becoming an Alpha Muslim", Gabriel Keresztes Al-Romaani, the positive psychology counsellor behind a "Muslim Alpha Men's Course – How to be Real Men", The Muslim Realist, The Mad Mamluks and the Muslim Debate Initiative with Abdullah Al-Andalusi. Those mentioned are only some examples of emerging voices who document the trials and tribulations of Muslim men and the challenges that community faces against so-called "social justice warriors" led by "identity politics", "critical race theory", "cancel culture", and their most ardent activists – Muslim feminists. In this apocalyptic worldview, where culture risks extinction, Alt-Wallah figures curiously subscribe to the thesis that Islam is in crisis. Not only does the problem originate from within, as Western critics claim, but also from without. The Alt-Wallah wages a cultural war against Western modernity through its most contaminating intrusion – feminism – on an authentic Islamic tradition that has remained undeterred.

But what is the authentic Islamic tradition that the Alt-Wallah deploys? Alt-Wallahs subscribe to a form of declinism, one which accepts Lewis's diagnosis of a crisis within Islam. The nodes of declinism (as illustrated by fundamentalist declinist and Alt-Wallah sub-groupings) will thus help us to delineate what is authentic Islamic tradition and their relationship to it.

The first node amounts to an understanding that the Muslim world is in near terminal decline. For the different subgroups within declinism this decline's start time varies, but for the Alt-Wallah it begins with the onset of the modern. Thus, if we were to date this, it would be in 1798; the Muslim world's first contact with Westernese. For declinists those who came before modernity were living whilst history was still running, as opposed to present-day Islam, which is a "zombie-like revenant" in "frankly primitive conditions" (Murad 2004). The Alt-Wallah Daniel Haqiqatjou, founder of The Muslim Skeptic (a popular blog that tackles culture war themes such as feminism, anti-racism, and liberalism), has echoed this sentiment that "humanity will continue to deteriorate until the Last Day" (Haqiqatjou 2021).

If we believe the pre-modern or "traditional" to be the time in which history was running, it makes sense that those who lived then had privileges over those who do not. For declinists, those of "tradition" have epistemic and spiritual privilege over those of the modern, and this forms the second node of declinism. Thus, the "fallible, time-bound, prejudices" of the modern are contrasted with the "transformed souls" of the "traditional" (Islamondemand 2012). The epistemic privilege of those within "tradition" comes from their spiritual status as transformed souls. Of course, the same conclusion is easily reached by the Alt-Wallah. Indeed, Haqiqatjou regularly laments the loss of what he calls "authentic Islam", which is often set against modern forms of Islam (5Pillars 2018). As Noor (2020) states, Haqiqatjou and other Alt-Wallahs such as Nabeel Azeez believe in an orthodox Muslim supremacy over other types of Muslims. What the content of that orthodoxy actually *is* seldom receives sustained detailing beyond ontic laundry lists of beliefs. However, given how authentic Islam operates within the discourse of Alt-Wallahs, one can see how it fulfils the same function as the privileged tradition in declinism.

The third node of declinism follows on naturally from the second. If we believe that there are people with epistemic and spiritual privilege over us, naturally, the only course is to follow them without question. Thus, taqlid is arguably one node of declinism which explains why declinists believe it to be "shirk" and a "form of pharaonic arrogance" to question the tradition or (attempt to) to go beyond it (Islamondemand 2012). The presentation of "authentic Islam" (with no word on content) as a given, despite centuries of debates between the fuquha, Sufis, and philosophers on various subjects within Islam, shows the Alt-Wallah to believe in

taqlid.[6] Indeed, the following quote from Haqiqatjou sums up the Alt-Wallah posi-
tion on this node well:

> The ulama are the most worthy of our husn al-dhann. But we live in the age of
> nafs. The nafs pulls people to question where there is no legitimate reason to
> question. (Haqiqatjou 2017a)

Here, we see a clear bestowing of privilege upon those who came before "the age
of nafs", especially when we consider the lack of husn al-dhann which Haqiqatjou
shows to modern Islamicate scholars. We also see an environment of taqlid fos-
tered with the assertion that "there is no legitimate reason to question". This must
be taken in connection with the Facebook post Haqiqatjou quotes, in which it
is stated that one must have precedence from an "Imam" for saying something
regarding Islam, and that one should not have the "mentality [of] constantly
seek[ing] out errors". Thus, with a disavowal of seeking error (and, presumably,
of correcting them) and with an inability to say anything other (or more) than what
has been said before, we observe an Alt-Wallah alignment with fundamentalist
declinism and, through this, wider declinism.

It is because this neat package of logical steps has been disrupted that we see
the declinist, in Alt-Wallah form, lash out against those perceived to be causing
disruption: the feminist. Woman qua feminism operates here as a vanishing media-
tor, realising men's claim to the cultural and symbolic domain. In this mode, we
can understand the nexus between a white nationalist movement and the Muslim
manosphere through opposition to feminism as a cultural menace.

This commitment to fighting for men's rights is not necessarily a one-way alle-
giance if we consider the "white sharia" strategy of the alt-right, which feeds on
the femonationalist depiction of Muslim patriarchy as oppressive toward women.
The "white sharia" strategy has been adopted by ethnonationalist circles of the
alt-right to master the domain of women (Kelley 2017). Orientalist racist fantasies
of the harem, domination, and unbridled passions converge with contemporary
anxieties of a crisis of masculinity. In this violent worldview, return to the "tra-
ditional man" means return to barbarity, return to a patriarchal order that secures
white men's natural place.

Haqiqatjou has responded positively to the notion of a "white sharia", declaring
that white supremacists must then concede that sharia is an "antidote to moder-
nity's social ills" (Haqiqatjou 2019). Like Muslims, Haqiqatjou contends, much of
the right wing is "tired of the left's cultural project of pushing feminism, homosex-
uality and cross-dressing on society and labels whoever does not embrace that filth
with smiles and rainbow pins as a fascist". Professor Shareef Muhammad of the
Black Dawah Network, one of few organised Muslim efforts to comprehensively

critique the "akhi right", references Haqiqatjou's receptive response to the socially conservative ways of the right – even while it appropriates sharia as part of an anti-Islamic agenda – demonstrating Haqiqatjou's willingness to compromise what he is most invested in preserving. Nor does Haqiqatjou appears to recognise the harm that this endorsement would have on the African American community, where Islam is gaining momentum (Muhammad 2020a, 2020b).

According to critics like Haqiqatjou, feminism wants to "dismantle traditional family structures and traditional religion". The adoption of feminism by Muslim women (and men) spells the end of Islam and what it means to be Muslim. This attack comes because feminism wants to overturn: "institutions, structures, language, and the very essence of what it means to be a man and a woman" (Haqiqatjou 2017c). Feminism, for Haqiqatjou (2017b) is an "anti-religious, anti-family movement … that is corrosive to Muslim faith" (2017b). The demands of feminism have also altered men's behaviour, so that they deliberately make themselves lesser men – and therefore, less attractive to women, whose "nature" is to be attracted to men with masculine status. We have already observed this fear of the feminisation of man in Al-Romaani's response to Mufti Menk's knitting.

While ardent critics of feminism dominate the daily discursive traffic, these sentiments have been expressed by others. YouTubers Mohammed Hijab and The3Muslims, as well as Australia-based podcaster and neuroscientist Mohammed Ghilan (2018), condemn feminism and critical race theories founded on "falsehood". Islamic studies scholars Shadee Elmasry (2019) has associated feminism with "cancel culture", and UK-based Muslim scholar and Dean of the Cambridge Muslim College Timothy Winter (Abdal Hakim Murad) conceptualises feminism as signalling secular modernity's continuous attack on "traditional" values, including but not limited to eclipsing gender norms (MishkatMedia 2016).

The perceived diminishment of men has inspired an earnestness by Muslim analysts and commentators not normally in the mould of Alt-Wallah. This demonstrates that it appeals to their concerns within the framework of a "crisis of masculinity". Put another way, the spectrum of figures examined below demonstrates the extent to which this "crisis" has become normative, not specific to a geography, and taken a hold of wider Muslim discourse.

Islamic studies scholar Jonathan A. C. Brown wrote an open letter to Muslim men on how to cope with this "crisis". Brown reads the risks through an axis of what he calls a polarisation between "Sell Out Vs Real", where positions are measured based on whether figures are authentically Muslim or adopting frameworks from outside/beyond. Attempting to make sense of the gender debates within the Muslim community, Brown finds that these men are forced to decide between two competing ideas of manhood:

> If the only choices one sees are the Progressive Male (and the Progressive vision he comes with), on the one hand, and an angered defense of the Traditional Man's Man by effectively Alt-Right and Men's Rights champions on the other, many young Muslim men conclude that the second choice is, by far, the superior. (Brown 2019)

The above paints a picture of a community with defeatist mentality. This picture is symptomatic of Muslim elites not being able to see beyond the culture wars of the West. Or beyond, to return to Roitman, the normative claims of a crisis.

While Brown's reading acknowledges the limits of this false binary and the perilous path that it may set some men on in their relationship with tradition, Murad argues the cultural archetypes of manhood – the "traditional" man – which roles and traditions are built on have been dangerously undermined by secular modernity's desire to break from all social boundaries. As one of many crises afflicting the modern due to its removal from the traditional, Murad attributed the "crisis of manhood" to feminism, and specifically claims that its project of masculinising women and feminising men has led to the "disappearing father" and the "crisis of family". In a khutba, he invokes the story of *Star Wars*, drawing on Luke Skywalker's initiation as one into manhood and presenting it as a metaphysical and cosmological reality that men are disciplined into fulfilling. The latest *Star Wars* film, *The Force Awakens*, has however displaced the male hero with a new feminist hero (Rey) leaving men without representations of manhood to guide them into how to be men (MishkatMedia 2016). Though Murad warns of not over-reifying gender to become reactive, his use of the categories "tradition", "modernity", "manhood", and "womanhood" are uncritically treated, leaving open this very possibility (Quisay 2019). Binaries are used to tell a tale of loss, where women's empowerment equates to men's disempowerment, and through this a wider picture of decline is painted that unites both fundamentalist declinists (as represented by Murad) and Alt-Wallah.

Brown and Murad offer us two different approaches to resolving the "crisis of masculinity", yet they share with the Muslim manosphere and Peterson the assumption there is a crisis. As noted earlier, a crisis can only be recognised if there is a shared understanding of "masculinity" in the first place. It is not clear if this crisis, for scholars, is the result of a loss of privilege/power or a loss in purpose. Murad laments the diminishing power of the masculine hero (who signifies power) which women have replaced. In this sense, he is problematising the loss of power by masking it as a loss of identity and purpose.

What we see in Murad's lamenting the loss of men's identity is an echo of Haqiqtajou's critique of feminism, signalling a greater loss to Islam as subscribed by the ways of "traditional", orthodox Islam. If we return to Brown's framing of

what choices are presented to Muslim men in this "crisis", one between "progressive men" or the men's rights champion of the "traditional man", Murad has made the choice of aligning himself with forces which *also* aim to undermine "traditional Islam" in his attempt to preserve the Muslim man qua the traditional man. Assuming a shared masculinity that cuts across cultures and faiths, the "crisis of masculinity" transcends acute political, economic, and social differences and demands a united response even when fronts remain divided.

To further contextualise Murad's opposition to growing feminist consciousness, his recent book *Travelling Home* (2020) situates feminism within the dominance of "ideology". He equates feminism here with the dominance of "materialism", misleading Muslim engagement with Others. Murad contends that Islamism, or political Islam, and Muslim immigrants are so preoccupied with "grievance culture" that this preoccupation has spiralled into polemics and an attachment to materialism, where Muslim anger and race ideology dominate belief, in a way that he suggests borders on kufr.[7] Like knowledge of the social sciences, which Murad contends is a godless mode of sociological analysis that bolsters materialism, his deployment of ideology only pinpoints Marxist and secular usage of feminism, voiding it of Muslim interlocutors and Islamicate objectives. "Postcolonial grievance" extends to Muslim immigrants, whose presence in Europe is allegedly on occasion not for the purposes of security and protection, but to enjoy tagine and an EU passport, therefore not meeting the criteria for hijra (Murad 2020). It is unclear which immigrants Murad is referring to, or who the "we" of Europeans that he addresses in this intervention are. In a climate of hostility towards refugees and immigrants, and growing interrogation of their deserving status, it is a perilous sign that such scepticism is shared by a leading European Muslim scholar.

By framing postcolonial challenges as ones of a culture of grievance, bullying, and narcissistic victimhood, Murad parrots the criticisms of those who call for historical redress, which the alt-right labels as "cancel culture" and which has given rise to Peterson. Like Peterson, we see the influences of Carl Jung's archetypes and ideas about cosmic natural order and disorder ([1959] 1991). As a fundamentalist declinist, Murad's thought resonates with Peterson's metaphysical account to naturalise gender, but whereas Peterson prescribes a "secular" guide in his *12 Rules* for the modern man akin to an initiation ritual, Murad looks to the Sunnah for guidance. Both share belief that gender has a natural origin, and that it needs to be properly cultivated to realise a natural purpose for men and women. Both share a post-racial (Goldberg 2015) proclivity by diminishing the contemporary presence and impact of race in their diagnoses of social ailments, but with starkly different objectives. Peterson defends the preservation of a secular West which has been shaped by an Abrahamic tradition (excluding Islam), while Murad aims to (re) integrate Islam into Western conservatism to fend off an alienating disenchantment.

It is curious, then, that while Murad (2020) is concerned with dominance of ideology in the form of "grievance culture", he put forth an argument that Muslims should strive to be more understanding, forgiving, and to adopt a role of a "therapists" against European grievances – reframing these grievances as suffering from disenchantment. It is unclear why the natural alternative for Muslims who oppose "grievance culture" is to play therapists for fascists. If we take Murad's concerns that Muslims are too preoccupied with grievance at face value, it is clear that this analysis omits ways of Islamising poststructuralism or critical theory in defence of an Islamic epistemology (Vadillo n.d; Sayyid 1997; Sayyid 2014; Ali 2022). Murad's attack on grievance culture plays out the same hierarchy that the Westernese instituted at the onset of the colonial project. It operates according to and within norms of Eurocentrism. Murad has not offered therapy sessions to Muslims who may have been groomed and abused by ISIS, for example. Whilst he wrote a seventeen-page document for Joram Van Klaveren before his conversion (Zab 2021), one wonders if he has also been talking to Shamima Begum. The "therapy" route implies the rationality of one extremism and the irrationality of the other, based on its proximity to Westernese and whiteness.

Murad also naively discounts the nativist project of the European right, whose anomie is not simply economic or rooted in an absence of "religion", but rather rooted in attachment to the white supremacist project founded on racial purity and anxieties of racial contamination/replacement by demographic threats. Dismissing race analyses of European injury also omits the biopolitical working of the nation-state in its management of populations (Foucault 1995; Agamben 1998; Bracke and Hernández Aguilar 2020). Murad offers a cultural account that reimagines the nation within Europe, without addressing inequalities of language that attempt to rehabilitate the foreign (Asad 1993). His governmentality, in the same way, uses the Islamist project as a means of confining the umma to the modern state (Hallaq 2012).

In North America, we have seen similar encouragement for Muslims to reach out to an aggrieved right. Hamza Yusuf, of the Zaytuna Institute and often described as the most influential Muslim scholar in the world, in a 2016 interview suggests a more natural interlocutor for Muslim Americans are the right. For him, "one of our major problems right now is our inability to speak to the right. I think before 2001, we had a lot of Muslims who were registered Republicans. … That's no longer the case. Millennials have shifted incredibly towards the left, so we don't have an ability to talk to them" (cited in Birt 2017). In this statement, there is a discernibly explicit assumption that Muslim communities share with the right under the catch-all "Republican" than with the not-yet-defined left, and this rift is attributed to generational divide. Refusing to navigate the American political spectrum due to community concern for American foreign policy, which impacts millions of Muslims globally, police violence, racism, growing economic inequalities,

misogyny, and sexism, a stabilising foundation for engagement is precluded here. This convergence of Muslim male concerns with the alt-right is further consolidated by Jordan Peterson's interview with Yusuf in May 2022 (2022b), signalling Muslim men's willingness to engage with figureheads of the alt-right based on shared interests with defending traditional values, heralding a further shift to the right on the Western political spectrum.

   With access to multiple platforms in the digital sphere, white converts such as Murad and Yusuf frequently air their concerns about Muslims being too preoccupied with injustices and themes that centre around power. Such sentiments are echoed by other white converts. Abdullah Al-Andalusi frequently debates feminism's incompatibility with Islam. Similarly concerned are Islamic scholar and "ex-jihadist" Ismail Royer, Robert Dufour, who founded Islam For Europeans, YouTuber Saajid Lipham, and scholar of Islamic finance Joe Bradford, who compares critiques of whiteness and a global white system of oppression conspiracy theories akin to "Jews rule the world" (Bradford 2019) – a defence shared by alt-right claims that accusations of white supremacy are like the anti-Semitic conspiracy of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. With access to multiple digital platforms, the problematisation of a politics of injustice within Muslim communities – many whom hail from histories of dispossession, colonial, and imperial violence, continuing to face anti-blackness, racism, and Islamophobia – betrays a curious disavowal. While the broader Alt-Wallah presents Muslim men as victims of community activists, alerting attention to power dynamics within Muslim communities, this victimisation is compounded when white converts see themselves doubly reflected in critiques. Muslims, however, are not immune to the racial project of whiteness, which haunts the present despite being declared dead (Gordon and Radway 2008), operating as an economy of truth, desire, power, and violence (Seshadri-Crooks 2000). The inability to see, or the refusal to see, history in the present by dismissing it as disruptive to the otherwise knowable and spiritually contained Muslim subject is a practice of denial to preserve white innocence (Wekker 2016). Like history is often retold as a shedding of racial effects, conversion to Islam here performs a shedding of whiteness at the same time as whiteness possesses those wielding it, in its effects on authorising power and influence. Whiteness as a neutral signifier is rebranded to sermonise for Muslims the social ills of their particularities, or as Murad puts it when describing British Muslim communities, to prop up "race temples" (Murad 2020).

Conclusion: The Buffered Muslim Self?

We conclude with the question percolating in the shadow of these antagonisms: what does the safeguarding of "the Muslim man" offer Islam and its community?

The "crisis of masculinity" is based on a truth-claim that not only is there a "traditional man" to protect, but also that he is a Muslim man experiencing a crisis. Who is this Muslim man on which tradition hinges? What lies in this desire to depart from "Muslim" to Muslim men? What does the avowal of defending Muslim masculinity do for how Islam is practised, or how one looks upon Islamic history? Is there such a thing as an abstracted Muslim man, beyond the socially designated roles and identities in which they are addressed and interpellated? What hermeneutic shifts in traditional text can occur consequently, if any? These epistemic questions are rendered peripheral, if not absent, in the current anticipatory interventions which are content to simply name a crisis.

Responding to the "crisis of masculinity", Shadee Elmasry (2019) attempts to define the Muslim man in four steps: a provider, a protector, obedient to God, and wearing culturally acceptable dress to distinguish themselves from women. This is a remarkably short list of requirements, considering the claim of a crisis in the Muslim manosphere and the significant political stakes it has drawn. We already see signs of its slippages in arbitrary social distinctions which locate Al-Romaani's Muslim man somewhere in the realm of stitching clothes and shoes over that of knitting, as per the Sunnah.

Crises trade on urgency and the perfect memory of something lost that needs recovery. Crises polarise the political terrain to make possible uncompromising binaries and abstraction. Emerging in crisis's proclivity for the need to police boundaries are abstracted identities, uprooted from any grounded social relations and responsibilities. The crisis of masculinity has emerged as a symptom of the "naming of men as men", or in the Althusserian sense, the hailing of men as Men. This is a contemporary ideological phenomenon that Muslim men are not immune from, especially those who now speak as Muslim men. Yet, they are presented as detached interlocutors, managing the attempts at conversing with and within Islam and its community of believers.

In the crisis which spurns loss, modes of recovery are negotiated around a broader antagonism, for which feminism comes to be dually a scapegoat and placeholder: the ontological and epistemological danger that liberalism and secularism pose to "traditional Islam". Like feminism, language and categories of knowledge, including "Islam", are loosely thrown around and rarely defined with substance in the Muslim manosphere. Analysis of this kind, decluttered from superficial posturing, is germane to understanding what psycho-social and political function such categories have for Muslim men.

Muslim women's adoption of feminism is not only observed as a challenge to the notion of being a man (and therefore to the centrality of men in social, political, and economic life), it is reflective and symptomatic of an ongoing epistemic disruption. These concerns, for critics, are epistemological, as demonstrated by

the insistence on preserving and defending what constitutes the correct conditions on which knowledge and truths are identified and formed in Islam. In contrast, liberalism and secularism do not share the same epistemologies, as they hail from frameworks of knowledge production of the European Enlightenment. Yet the histories carved out in Alt-Wallah discourse are far from distant nor alien to the way in which Islam has come to be approached and translated (Asad 1993; Hallaq 2009) since the moment of the colonial encounter.

This is not to say that there is no Islam other than the Islam that is invoked as a negation, the antonyms for which it is contested, and in defence against restructuring efforts of Enlightenment traditions, which already constitutes it (Massad 2015). In their effort to protect Islam from liberal and secular forces released by a trojan horse of "modern Muslim deviance", the Alt-Wallahs curiously rely on the same epistemic idioms they are fending off in their pursuit for an authentic account.

By disavowing Islam of its material realities and imbuing it with a politics that extends beyond the cultural and social sphere, Islam becomes secularised into a religion whose traditions remain undisturbed. Islam appears as the religion of the Orientalists, who long ago claimed it to be static and unchanging, unburdened by historical interruptions (Said [1978] 2003). Muslim manophere figures, like Haqiqatjou and Al-Romaani, concede that their defence of Islam is a political response, but position it in the attempt to save Islam from political quagmires, or as Murad puts it, the "ideology" that "social justice warriors" are attempting to jam Islam within. But even here, Islam remains within the realm of symbolism, sensibilities, morals, attitude and personal growth (Asad 1993: 45). The desire to remodel history to match contemporary sensibilities and to simultaneously hermetically seal Islam and regulate it from intervention (always imagined as Western) is grounded in a secular desire for mastery. Muslims are presented as authentic religious subjects, immune from historical processes of discipline, and to impact from the common-sense world in its changes (Asad 1993: 52).

In proclaiming Muslim social relations as Muslims in crisis, there is a claim to authenticity sealed off from history. However, at the same time, the crisis relies on a secular reading of history, a reading which Koselleck (1988) describes as the passing of historical judgement, which assumes consciousness that history is a temporarility with the possibility for agents to change. In his critique of critical theory's propensity to temporalise history, Koselleck contends that crisis and critique are intimately tied, in that crisis reveals the limits of a type of epistemology and summons critique (Koselleck 1988).

Writing about modern subjectivity, Charles Taylor (2007) observes how the modern self is not irreligious but rather disenchanted. That said, unlike the enchanted world which collapses the self with a world of belief and spirits, the modern self has coherent boundaries between the self, others, and the world itself – a "buffered

self" (pp. 38–40). This is a self which contains the potential to distance itself from the world, to not be distressed, angered, to master the meaning of things, from the body to the influence of the world on who it is at its essence. Rather than seeing the Enlightenment as simply a coherent departure from faith, Taylor incorporates the complexities of the Enlightenment's legacy, a transcendent Christianity and the Nietzschean will, into the modern subject whose consciousness/mind became the locus of morality and the boundary from the outside "natural" world. It marks the distinction between experience (materialism) and belief (theory). Unlike "the porous self" which is subject to the spiritual world, demons and the fears that get entangled in it, the buffered self cultivates an absence of fear (p. 39).

Islam, we contend, is similarly abstracted by way of "the Muslim man", a buffered detached commentator allowing for alliances with other men, rather than situating what makes Muslim men intelligible through their social roles as being in the world, as believers, fathers, husbands, sons, nephews. While the main charge of Alt-Wallah is the breakdown of order, and the loss of status and purpose, the Muslim man appears as a Muslim buffered self who remains oddly structured even in social disintegration. Like Taylor's modern bounded self, this Muslim buffered self does not have to be entirely disenchanted, but secularised insofar as it is not influenced by the forces around it – history, race, gender, and economy. This can be seen in listing off the criteria of a mujtahid, who could be said to be the uber-Muslim buffered male capable of arresting decline, by Murabtal Haaj, a teacher of Hamza Yusuf. This extensive list includes being at least a middle-ranked master of a host of fields, including grammar and philology, the science of hadith narrators, knowing where answers are in books without memorising them, and knowing the issues upon which there is consensus (Haaj n.d.). There is no mention in this description of any context, or knowledge of the time in which this mujtahid comes. Thus, the man of medievaldom is kept as a man of medievaldom, rather than being stained with a time in which history does not run. This beyond-fiqh figure, which finds itself a home in modern masculinity, is seen in how Al-Romaani, in his critique of Mufi Menk's knitting, evades recognition of fiqh and exercises instead the internationally recognised authority of knowledge. Mufi Menk exhibits behaviour that presents no crisis, but somehow prompts some to declare one and attempt to retrieve and defend the abstracted Muslim man, who is to be preserved in activities averse to knitting. Or through the lens of Peterson, this is a masculine self that orders the world against the chaos of entangling feminine yarn of history.

Notes

Muneeza Rivzi. Their scholarly insights and own reading of these ongoing community conversations helped sharpen our examination of this emerging political terrain.

2   We are aware of the recent attempt to name this grouping Alt-Salafi-Jihadists (Ayad 2021). This naming was not given sufficient theoretical grounding to justify itself and papers over differences within both Salafism and Jihadism (differences the paper itself notes). The putting together of contested terms does not, of itself, make for a coherent concept. In addition, the paper says almost nothing regarding the appropriation of masculinity and men's rights discourse which represents a lacuna in its treatment of this grouping.

3   The idea of declinism has been explained more thoroughly elsewhere (Mir 2017).

4   See Sayyid (1997: 16–17) for a problems with using the "category of fundamentalism".

5   The "crisis of Islam" which came to summarise the complex challenges of poverty, conflict, social inequalities across 'the Muslim world' has longer histories however which can be traced back to colonial saviour practices that centred around the status of Muslim women as a sign of the regression of the East (Ahmed 1992; Massad 2015) or later as a way to govern through colonial modernity (Sayyid 1997)

6   We can find these nodes in the work of another fundamentalist declinist, Hamza Yusuf. He contends that we should not take the opinion of a scholar living in the modern over scholars from the past. This is because earlier generations were more knowledgeable than those who came after them. He also argues that the works of earlier generations was rightly guided and reached the highest level of perfection that is humanly possible (TheHamzaYusufChannel, 2012). See also Murad (1999: 14).

7   See critical review of the text by Al-Azami (2021).

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