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deep connection to an individual's devotion to and understanding of her Allah. In this effort, the Muslim woman who veils would be just as valuable to Islam as the Muslim woman who does not. Perhaps this is an oversimplification. Perhaps it is one point that could unite Muslim women across the world. Perhaps this could lead to important and valuable changes that the Muslim world actually needs at this crisis point. When the *hijab* is disassociated from "strategy" and (re)associated with an ontological dimension of Islam, it will become a nonissue. And in its very neutrality, it will finally allow Muslims to focus on other problems that plague their world: poverty, violence, public and private safety, and other basic needs. This would go hand in hand with Azza Basruddin's call for an inward movement for what she calls "answers and solutions" to a world that is constantly "upset" by the sight of the veil for Muslims "[to chart] a struggle that turns *differences* into strengths. By challenging our communities to turn inward for answers and solutions, we hopefully will be able to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish" (quoted in cooke, 96).

This inward reflection would be closer to an internal recognition and struggle that all Muslim women, whether they veil or not, live through every day of their lives: one's own shortcomings in one's being rather than a self-consciousness elicited from the reception of the presence or absence of the veil. The privilege of self-definition would allow the complexity that creates a Muslim woman. And in the best of all worlds—both Muslim minority and Muslim majority—such complexity would be a juncture of self-realization.

BETWEEN MUSLIM WOMEN AND THE MUSLIMWOMAN

Margot Badran

When she fuses the words *Muslim* and *woman* to create the *Muslimwoman*, miriam cooke abruptly brings to attention the practice of collapsing two components of identity—religion and gender—into a "singular identity." The Muslimwoman is a composite identity constructed, *not* by Muslim women but by others, mainly neo-Orientalist Westerners and Islamists or proponents of political Islam. The Muslimwoman of their construction is veiled (typically wearing the *hijab*, a head cover, or infrequently, the *niqab*, which hides the face), compliant (with authorities in family and society), and protected (by men). If others created the Muslimwoman, it is Muslim women who must *be* The Muslimwoman. They must play the part. Herein lies the trouble—and the potential.

Speaking of the Muslimwoman encapsulated in an image, cooke summons the word *cage*. Nineteenth-century Egyptian poet Aisha al-Taimuriyya used this very word in speaking of how Muslim women of the middle and upper strata of society were incarcerated in their houses. By the mid-twentieth century, women

throughout Muslim societies in Africa and Asia had freed themselves from imposed domestic confinement. Muslim women are now ubiquitous in the public arena, where they put their skills and knowledge in virtually all known fields to good use. Neither the physical cage nor the metaphoric cage has suited women. Muslim women, as cooke notes, are using, refusing, and refiguring the descriptive/prescriptive model of the Muslimwoman that has been handed them.

Like many others, cooke looks to 9/11 as a pivotal—she calls it an “axial”—moment for the Muslimwoman. It was mainly and most dramatically so in the West. The post-9/11 world looked different beyond the West, where most Muslims continued as before, operating with and being recognized by their multiple identities or a flow between identities—the way most of us do anywhere as we get on with our lives.

If largely unnoticed in the West, the Muslimwoman had a life prior to 9/11. In the 1970s and 1980s, the Islamists had launched their version of the Muslimwoman in Muslim Africa and Asia. By the 1990s, Muslim women were seriously challenging Islamists’ fabrication of the Muslimwoman. Now, ironically, the (neo-Orientalist) West is doing the work of the Islamists in relaunching the Muslimwoman at precisely the moment when the West is intent upon containing Islamists. Could such Western embrace of the Muslimwoman be the gendered equivalent of a penchant for backing repressive (patriarchal) regimes?

Display of Muslim identity, in a born-again, politicized version, occurred in some places as early as the 1970s, such as Egypt, and more widely following the 1979 Islamist revolution in Iran. Emboldened by the Iranian success, Islamists in many Muslim countries pitted themselves against the “seculars,” whom they smeared, unleashing intra-Muslim strife. Islamists reconstituted a conservative model of the Muslim woman, now marked by the *hijab* (not the *niqab*, which prevailed among the middle and upper strata in Muslim countries in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries¹), at a time when women throughout the Muslim world had gained many rights—or as they noted, had *recovered* many of their Islamicly granted rights—thereby seriously eroding the traditional patriarchal order and the version of Islam that held it up.

Islamists sought to rally women around them and to make such women mark themselves publicly as political allies by hoisting the flag of *hijab*. Women who declined to take up the veil and who refused to bend to the patriarchal agenda (at a certain moment, Islamists were even calling for women to retreat to the home—an economic impossibility for the majority of women and their families) were upbraided and sometimes even branded non-Muslims. “Secular women” (those who did not publicly proclaim their Islamic affiliation) rejected the Islamist model of the Muslimwoman. By then, a second feminist wave was

¹ The *niqab* still remains common in Saudi Arabia.

ascendant in much of the Muslim world. Its proponents refused to respond to the Islamists but simply forged ahead with their own gender work.

In the late 1980s and especially the 1990s, religiously committed Muslim women, often called “religious women” (those who publicly displayed their Islamic identity) in various places around the globe started pushing against the constricted model of the Muslimwoman being thrust upon them. They (like secular feminists) resisted the rolling back of hard-earned gains (especially access to employment) they enjoyed as women thanks to secular feminist struggles. Women from among the ranks of the religious women began to advance the most radical gendered Islamic discourse to date, unequivocally articulating the principles of gender equality and social justice embedded in the Qur’an. They did this after going directly to the scripture, exercising *ijtihad* (independent rational discernment), and they connected principle and practice as an ethical imperative. Admiring “secular women” labeled this new discourse *Islamic feminism*, a term that for many would prove more problematic than the project itself.² Muslim women in Africa, Asia, and the West created and spread this gender-egalitarian version of Islam globally with the speed and immediacy that new information technology made possible.

During the final decade of the twentieth century, a global Islamic feminist movement was underway and the beginnings of the new Muslim cosmopolitanism, which cooke speaks about, were discernable. In the 1990s, I experienced a new interconnectivity unfolding via the Internet, as Muslims, mainly (but not only) women, excitedly circulated their new egalitarian readings of Islam and thus imbued the budding new Muslim cosmopolitanism with a distinctly progressive character. cooke’s definition of cosmopolitanism captures well the process, which, she explains, is “more than connection to others; it involves conscience, self-consciousness, and receptiveness to differences that might instruct and perhaps transform” (98).

The new Muslim cosmopolitanism and global Islamic feminism were in place and ascendant at the time of 9/11, when the West riveted its attention on both Islamic countries and upon Muslims in their midst. Islamophobia raged and the religion and its adherents were feared and denigrated. In the West, the Muslimwoman was conjured as the symbol of degradation in this demonizing frenzy. September 11 laid bare what many *really* thought and what they “knew” about Islam and Muslims, which they typically rolled into one.

While the Muslimwoman was mobilized in the (neo-Orientalist) West as the designer icon of “Islam/ic oppression” and prima facie evidence of every-

² I have discussed this elsewhere. See, for example, “Islamic Feminism: What’s in a Name?” *Al-Ahram Weekly* online, no. 569 (January 17–23, 2002), <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2002/569/cu1.htm>, and “Between Secular and Islamic Feminism: Reflections on the Middle East and Beyond,” *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies* 1, no. 1 (January 2005): 6–28.

thing wrong with the religion and its followers, Muslim women globally (in the East and West) continued to exhibit a woman-sensitive and gender-egalitarian version of Islam through their literary and artistic production, as cooke reminds us, as well as through their hermeneutic production and sharia activism, otherwise known as Islamic feminism.

In the West, early post-9/11, many Muslim women swung into an apologetic mode, defending Islam and the Muslimwoman, in a sense, accepting this essentialization. They repeated that the Muslimwoman was not oppressed and that she had freely taken up the *hijab*, which did not inhibit her in any way, but to the contrary, freed her. A small but highly vocal number—who were given massive media attention—attacked Islam and Muslims, whom they collapsed into one virulent cocktail of cruelty and oppression. They enlisted the Muslimwoman in support of their allegations, which they *proved* through their first-person accounts, outdoing the Islamophobes themselves in demonizing Islam/Muslims.

Defensively rallying round the Muslimwoman under siege adds to the reification of the Muslimwoman and lures one into the trap of allowing Islamophobes and their allies in the West to set the parameters of the debate: good Muslimwoman versus bad Muslimwoman, which through access to willing media they let loose on the world. But this does not sell well beyond the West, where the political agenda is quite patent.

Beyond the West, in the absence of homegrown Islamophobia, there has not been the same need to defend the Muslimwoman. The monolith of the Muslimwoman created by Islamists as part of a political project, which in time passed into the wider culture, has been unsustainable in everyday practice. One size can never fit all: women, experiences, needs, desires, and inclinations are simply too diverse. Even as numbers of women tried to live up to the Muslimwoman template, they stumbled into a tangle of contradictory behaviors, noticeable today more than ever before. If anything, women across class lines are becoming even more diverse and creative in their ways of living and expressing their religion, and in shaping their cultures and lives.

As we move further into the twenty-first century, in both the East and the West, growing numbers of Muslim women are being energized and emboldened by the new Qur'anic discourse of gender equality and justice and becoming part of the Islamic feminist surge as women increasingly decide for themselves how to be Muslims and how to be women within their diverse contexts. In the West—as in the East—the Muslimwoman model is unsustainable no matter how much women try to uphold it. Muslim women's daily needs and inclinations have caused them to present themselves and to perform in diverse ways as they juggle multiple identities and needs. This is also becoming apparent to the onlooker, dispelling monolithic myopia. The October 2007 edition of the Belgian journal *agenda intercultural* published a cartoon of three very

different looking women, one of whom wears a head cover, and an exasperated man who says, “And we know the Muslim woman is, ah, *zut!* Why does the Muslim woman always refuse to be what I think she is?”³ By simply living their lives, Muslim women are causing the Muslimwoman to crumble.

At the very moment when the diversity of Muslim women worldwide is gaining some recognition in the West, and while globally, the rights-and-justice-seeking Islamic feminist movement is on a roll, chipping away at the Muslimwoman project, it is getting a shot in the arm with the Western, especially American, invention of the “moderate Muslim.” The primary function of the construction of the moderate Muslim is to distinguish “safe” Muslims from “extremist” Muslims—and to urge Muslims to declare themselves and declaratively distance themselves from extremists (often a loose hodgepodge). The moderate Muslim is ideally quiescent and conformist. The Muslimwoman slides nicely into the moderate Muslim woman. The moderate Muslim woman does not function as the antithesis of the female extremist (still rare) but as the antithesis of the gender-radical sharia activist women or Islamic feminists (not to be confused with conservative sharia-ist women). The moderate Muslim woman is obedient and quiescent. Sharia activists are not—they agitate for equality and justice within the umma (Muslim community) and beyond. The Muslim mainstream community in America that upholds a patriarchal version of Islam has little tolerance for the gender-radical sharia activists. The moderate Muslim woman is to be the complement of the moderate Muslim man: she will not be demanding in the (patriarchal) home; he will not be demanding in society—together they uphold the status quo. The mainstream West is pushing the moderate Muslim woman/Muslimwoman. She is increasingly welcomed into the world of the academy and of the think tanks where this particular identity, which sometimes trumps credentials, allows her to be embraced as an authority.

Meanwhile, globally, the Islamic feminist movement continues its ascendance. Muslim feminists have won many gains for women in Muslim societies, such as reform of the Moroccan Family Law, nomination of judges in Egypt, or granting women suffrage in Kuwait. While backing the “moderate Muslim,” the West, that is Western states, especially the United States government, at the same time, finds feminist movements inside Muslim societies beyond the West useful in their efforts (for their own political reasons at home) to force socially regressive regimes to lighten up.

In the West, to take the American example, Islamic feminism has a sharp edge (women pioneering as imams in gender-mixed congregations, women effecting changes in the use of mosque space, and women engaging in Islamic jurisprudence reform). But these acts are irritants to the mainstream American Muslim community; they’re too disruptive. Meanwhile, security-minded offi-

³ Yacine, cartoon, *agenda intercultural*, no. 256 (October 2007), 3.

cialdom in the West prefers the moderate Muslim woman who does not rock the community boat and who is quiescent in mainstream society.

Around the world, in their demeanor, lives, and work, Muslim women are acting out and displaying the diversity that is theirs and the umma's, and indeed the strengths of both. The Muslimwoman as a construction has limited utility and limited credibility—as Muslim *women* prove.

MUSLIM WOMEN AND THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

Minoo Moallem

In her essay “Deploying the Muslimwoman,” miriam cooke raises a number of important questions and issues, the most important of which is a discussion of the category “Muslimwoman” as a transnational imaginary enabling the production of new meanings, discourses, and identities in the context of gender and Islam. She argues that the category Muslimwoman includes a broad range of issues and subjects, from the formation of a cosmopolitan identity to the creation of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) advocating transnational and translocal activism to women’s participation in nationalist and militaristic movements to sharia activism. cooke’s formulation of a primary identity of the Muslimwoman as a form of strategic essentialism that enables rethinking Islam and negotiating gender issues challenges hegemonic discourses that justify neocolonial policies of war and militarism in the Middle East in the name of women’s oppression in Islam. Her claims that the category Muslimwoman has become a site of women’s activism confront and displace the framing of neocolonial and imperialist forces of occupation as liberating the so-called oppressed Muslimwoman.

While I agree with cooke’s argument that the category Muslimwoman is a place from which women can speak out against the imperialist and patriarchal regimes of power and knowledge to which they have been subjected, I would like to take the category in a different direction and discuss complexities involved in and contradictions between this identity and multiple historical and geopolitical locations.¹ These issues are important because we are living in a transnational context that is marked by uneven power relations in the circulation of systems of representation along with capital, labor, and bodies. In my view, questions of race, gender, religion, and cosmopolitanism cannot be separated from old and new forms of colonialism and new formations of empire. Indeed, if we were to ignore the hidden operation of imperialist subtexts, it

¹ I also agree with Elizabeth Castelli that the categories of women, gender, and religion are inherently unstable and cannot be easily discerned. See Castelli, ed., *Women, Gender, and Religion: A Reader* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 4.