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Roundtable Discussion

RELIGION, GENDER, AND THE MUSLIMWOMAN

DEPLOYING THE MUSLIMWOMAN

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In Paris, Istanbul, Jakarta, Amsterdam, and Cairo, Muslim women are recalling anxieties that go back to the colonial era, when Muslim fundamentalists, Orientalists, and Muslim and non-Muslim states were arguing about what was right or wrong for Muslim women. So extreme is the concern with Muslim women today that veiled, and even unveiled, women are no longer thought of as individuals: collectively they have become the Muslimwoman.

I combine “Muslim” and “woman” into one word, *Muslimwoman*, when these two words are used to evoke a singular identity. In so doing, I am following Islamicist Sherman Jackson’s use of the term *Blackamerican*, which connects race and citizenship, and womanist theologian Joan Martin’s *blackwoman*, which links race and gender.¹ The veil, real or imagined, functions like race, a marker of essential difference that Muslim women today cannot escape. The neologism Muslimwoman draws attention to the emergence of a new singular religious and gendered identification that overlays national, ethnic, cultural, historical, and even philosophical diversity. A recent phenomenon tied to growing Islamophobia, this identification is created for Muslim women by outside forces, whether non-Muslims or Islamist men. Muslimwoman locates a boundary between “us” and “them.” As women, Muslim women are outsider/insiders within Muslim communities where, to belong, their identity increasingly is tied to the idea of the veil. As Muslims, they are negotiating cultural outsider/insider roles in Muslim-minority societies.

Some women reject The Muslimwoman identification and others embrace it. Its uniformity across gulfs of difference intensifies an awareness of the global community in which they participate, a cosmopolitan consciousness that con-

¹ Sherman Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican: Looking toward the Third Resurrection* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); and Joan M. Martin, *More than Chains and Toil: A Christian Work Ethic of Enslaved Women* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000).

nects strangers who recognize an unprecedented commonality in terms of religion and gender. Their political consciousness qua Muslimwoman affirms the inextricable bond between gender and religion.

Some Muslim women are strategically deploying the Muslimwoman identification in order to change it. In the process, it is becoming what sociologist Manuel Castells calls a “primary identity.” New information technologies have shaken old certainties and compelled new allegiances. In the network society, “meaning is organized around a primary identity (that is an identity that frames the others), that is self-sustaining across time and space. . . . The search for meaning takes place then in the reconstruction of defensive identities around communal principles[,] . . . religion provides a collective identity under the identification of individual behavior and society’s institutions to the norms derived from God’s law, interpreted by a definite authority that intermediates between God and humanity.”² In other words, new media produce radical connectivity across the globe and foster a new kind of cosmopolitanism marked by religion. Cosmopolitanism is at once unifying and diverse because the more people identify with and connect to each other the more their identities will be hybrid and split among the multiple groups in which they act and want to belong. Those threatened by such hybridity in Muslim women may try to cage the proliferating identities. The sign of the cage is the veil (whether mandated or forbidden).

Veiled or not, the Muslimwoman has become the cultural standard for the umma, or collective Muslim society worldwide. Whereas before it was men who represented the umma, today the Muslimwoman stands in for it. The religious and gendered exemplar confirms and highlights the morality of a God-fearing patriarchy where men protect and women are protected. In such a moral economy, women define the border between pure and polluted. The logic of the argument is that women are the potential *outside* whom insiders must keep pure or purify in order to save the purity of the *inside*. To uphold this moral regime, insiders must cooperate in maintaining and monitoring the Muslimwoman’s appearance and behavior.

Since the 1990s, the politics of covering has become highly contested, especially when the state intervenes either to ban the veil or to impose it. In secular Turkey and in Europe, women are claiming the right for the Muslimwoman to cover, and they are being persecuted for their demands to wear the symbol of their religion in public. Secular societies are not the only places where the veil has become a weapon in the war among women, Islamists, and the state; in Egypt, for example, women are insisting on their right to wear the forbidden *niqab* to university. Conversely, in Indonesia, Afghanistan, and Iran, top-down instructions enforce covering for women. So general have the dress codes become that they may apply to all women, not just to Muslim women. Naming them “cultural custodians,” Islamist men invest women with symbolic value that

² Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 7, 11, 13.

deprives them of individuality and agency. The Muslimwoman becomes not just a standard but a substitute for all norms and values of the umma.

At the same time that Islamists vie for control of women's bodies, neo-Orientalists bleat their compassion for the "poor" Muslimwoman. Muslim women today are caught between these two camps, each insisting on their foundational singularity. Iranian cultural theorist Minoo Moallem argues that the more evident the diversity among Muslim societies, the more Western societies project Islam and Muslim women as foundational and fundamentalist entities. In other words, the Muslimwoman erases for non-Muslims the diversity among Muslim women and, indeed, among all Muslims. This erasure of diversity is mirrored within Muslim societies under threat where the Muslimwoman becomes a lightning rod for danger. Under Western eyes, an essential (usually negative) Islam is encoded by the oppressed Muslimwoman; in Muslim societies under threat from non-Muslims, the Muslimwoman becomes the emblem of an equally essential (but this time positive) Islam. Some women are trying to appropriate and subvert the Muslimwoman identification. But how can they derive agency from an ascribed identity that posits their obedience and silence? How can they break free from the cage Islamists and neo-Orientalists have together erected around them over the past twenty-five years?

Since the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, the cage has tightened. Sunni and Shiite Islamists around the globe have been demanding the implementation of sharia with a special focus on women's public appearance and presence (or lack thereof). Recent misogynist Islamic legislation in Indonesia, reflected in fatwas (religious opinions), restricts the rights of women, and they have taken to the streets. Since 2004, Siti Musdah Mulia from the Ministry of Religious Affairs has challenged the mullahs: Why are there so many fatwas related to men's rights in marriage and so few concerning trafficking in women, abuse of migrant women, polygamy, rape, abortion, and violence against women? Mulia rails at biological determinists who believe that gender equality is "against the very nature of women as taught by Islam."³

While women from the tropical societies of Southeast Asia may seem to have little in common with women in the Arabian deserts or in the cooler climes of Europe, some are realizing that the Muslimwoman cage might provide a paradoxical platform for action. This new complex primary identity must be deconstructed and opened to contestation from within.

During the past thirty years, Middle Eastern and North African women have published fiction and poetry about strong women who shake readers' expectations. From Saudi Raja `Alim's Mecca-based magical realism to Lebanese Hanan al-Shaykh's tales of war, exile, and alienation to Egyptian Nawal

³ Siti Musdah Mulia, "Fatwa and Its Influence on the Legal Protection for Women" (paper presented at the conference on Islamic Law in Modern Indonesia, Harvard Law School, Cambridge, MA, April 2004).

el Saadawi's attacks on religiously justified misogyny to Sudanese-British Leila Aboulela's narrative of religious awakening in exile to Syrian-American Mohja Kahf's lyrical demands for women's equal rights to practice Islam, Muslim women authors are articulating new ways of being strong religious and gendered persons. They want their readers, like the men in their stories, to come to terms with newly empowered women who live their sexuality, their sex, and their religion in sometimes unexpected ways.

This new prominence of Muslim women writers has a troubling aspect. Some exploit the Muslimwoman label. By buying into the neo-Orientalist and Islamist gendered paradigm, they can expose its so-called misogyny to the outside world. Somali-born Dutch politician Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Sudanese-American Kola Boof, Canadian Irshad Manji, Saudi Raja' Abdallah al-Sana, and Iranian Azar Nafisi have mobilized the Muslimwoman as a marketing tool and publishers are opening their arms to this new wave of "insider stories." These authors present themselves as the exception that proves the rule: I am a Muslim woman, therefore I know the Muslimwoman. Other Muslim women are writing counterstories to right the record or they are putting together anthologies and edited volumes *by* and *about* Muslim women. Fawzia Afzal-Khan echoes other editors' motives for producing such volumes:

I aim to weave together the different strands of conversation that have been taking place between women from diverse Muslim-American backgrounds since 9/11. . . . I hope too that something new and dynamic can emerge from this recognition of a shared space and trajectory despite differences in outlook, culture, temperament, expression and, yes, the different relationship we each have to the concept of Islam and its place in our lives and identities.⁴

In these volumes, contributors emphasize the overall commonality of Muslim women within the diversity of their individual lives. Since 9/11, Muslim women artists, actors, playwrights, film producers, directors, and journalists have risen to prominence and glossy magazines for Muslim women are a brand-new trend.

Sharia activism is another arena where women have sharpened the rhetoric against Islamic institutions and practices shaped by men. Rejecting a sacralized language that invokes God or a single, normative Islam or the Qur'an, they are reinterpreting authoritative texts and their feminist interpretations are changing traditional understandings of what it means to be a Muslim woman. In the process, they are expanding the public space for rethinking Islam and negotiating the exchange of sacred meanings. Zainah Anwar, a founder of the Malaysian network Sisters in Islam, writes, "If religion is to be used to govern the public and private lives of its citizens, then everyone has a right to talk about religion

⁴ Fawzia Afzal-Khan, ed., *Shattering the Stereotypes: Muslim Women Speak Out* (Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2005), 4.

and express views and concerns on the impact of laws and policies made in the name of Islam. . . . The fact that Islam is increasingly shaping and redefining our lives means *all of us* have to engage with the religion if we do not want it to be hijacked.⁵ The reference to “all of us” includes women from across the Islamist-secular divide, and each woman engaging with Islam to prevent it being hijacked reaffirms this new primary identity as Muslimwoman.

Self-declared Islamic feminists are not the only ones who are rethinking religious and gender roles and images. Religiously observant women who shun the limelight and seem to ask for nothing more than pious, passive lives also are compelling acknowledgment of their membership in communities that until recently had blocked women’s public presence. By linking piety with politics, they are resisting pressures to be obedient, silent wards of men. Drawing on models from Islamic history, especially Zaynab, the defiant warrior granddaughter of the Prophet Muhammad, Shiite women in Iran, India, Syria, and Lebanon are making the connection between individual performances of “public piety” and representations of modernity. The community that encourages women’s public commitment to Islam is socially and spiritually modern. The importance of women in the Prophet’s family so central to Shiite ritual and beliefs provides a historical precedent for women’s empowerment.

Sunni women also are linking piety and politics. Sociologist Islah Jad argues that the Palestinian women of Hamas have understood the implications for them of the conflation of religion and nationalism. When “Islam becomes the core of Palestinian national identity,” women activists may be designated moral custodians whose place is in the home.⁶ Hamas’s Women’s Action Department is working on a new image: model mothers, wives, and political activists. Within that context, the veil comes to be “seen as a signifier of modernity. . . . For the first time, women became a strategic concern for the national Palestinian movement, this time under the banner of Islam. . . . Veiling can also become an important political symbol employed to forge new social modern (identity) and a concrete tool in opening new possibilities for women within and outside the movement.”⁷ These activists demand greater equality and representation in the party. Other women, like those in the Cairene women’s mosque movement, are flooding mosques, where they want recognition as Muslim women. What that means will vary from one person to another. Some may want to be imams, others may wish merely to experience the piety that constitutes true Islam, or submission. However, it is worth noting with anthropologist Saba Mahmud that

⁵ Zainah Anwar, “Sisters in Islam and the Struggle for Women’s Rights,” in *On Shifting Ground: Muslim Women in the Global Era*, ed. Fereshteh Nouraie-Simone (New York: Feminist Press, 2005), 248.

⁶ Islah Jad, “Between Religion and Secularism: Islamist Women of Hamas,” in Nouraie-Simone, *On Shifting Ground*, 175.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 177, 178, 181.

these women have “significantly reconfigured the gendered practice of Islamic pedagogy and the social institution of mosques.”⁸

Some women who embrace the Muslimwoman label have also chosen violence. After 9/11, Palestinian *istishhadiyat*, for example, gained notoriety for their participation in suicide operations. In a testament given before she detonated herself, Dareen Abu Aisha wrote, “the Muslim woman’s role is not less than that of our brother mujahidin. The Palestinian women’s role is no longer just weeping for her husband, brother, or father, but she will transform her body into a human bomb.” These women, Jad explains, are not imitating men; they are demanding a “fatal equality” that will allow them to protect men through a “spectacular act of self-sacrifice.”⁹ The right to bear arms on Islam’s behalf has long been a bone of contention between women and religious authorities: Where does the armed woman fit into the Muslim imaginary? Since the unmarked religious warrior is presumed to be male, these *istishhadiyat* unveil and challenge the exclusion of women from this identity-confirming, citizenship-conferring arena.

“Our resistance has made us different from our society’s definition of acceptable women,” wrote Azza Basaruddin in a published e-conversation. “Daring to remember, write and question, we stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled by those who wish to keep us in the bondage of silence and oppression. By building solidarity through our different experiences, we are charting 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.”¹⁰ Responding to Basaruddin, Khanum Shaikh lamented the difficulty of negotiating between desires, dignity, and commitment to a “loving relationship with Islam. . . . For the first time in my life, I hear myself referring to myself as a Pakistani Muslim woman. Is it the context of Islamophobia that feeds my desire to connect with the umma? Is it the imperialistic wars against Muslims that propel me to (re)create my own relationship with a religion I have personally been warring with?”¹¹

This quintessentially post-9/11 conversation touches on several important points. First, whether they like it or not, Muslim women are feeling compelled to take their religion more seriously than ever before in their identification of self. Second, since the creation of the Internet, Muslim women qua Muslimwoman have been forging virtual relationships across continents and creating

⁸ Saba Mahmud, “Feminist Theory, Agency, and the Liberatory Subject,” in Nouraié-Simone, *On Shifting Ground*, 120.

⁹ Jad, “Between Religion and Secularism,” 189–93.

¹⁰ Azza Basaruddin et al., “Our Memories of Islam: Pakistani, Malaysian, and Palestinian Women (Re)imagine ‘Muslim’ and (Re)define Faith,” in *Voices of Resistance: Muslim Women on War, Faith, and Sexuality*, ed. Sarah Husain (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2006), 156.

¹¹ Khanum Shaikh in *ibid.*, 158.

transnational communities in which information can be pooled, problems can be aired, and coalitions built, as Basaruddin says, to “define and seek a world in which we can all flourish.” Third, and again whether they like it or not, they are functioning in terms of a new complex primary identity: Muslimwoman.

September 11 as an axial moment, the globalized political, cultural, and economic conditions that enabled it, the rampant Islamophobia that followed it, and the increasingly interconnected world it has engendered have created the Muslimwoman. Muslim women are everywhere asserting a visible presence in their chosen communities. Some meet in mosques, others at international conferences or exhibitions, and most are in touch online through e-mail and discussion forums, such as “Wake Up” and “Islam Today.” Castells underscores the novelty of information networks that emerged in the 1990s. For example, WLUML (Women Living Under Muslim Laws) and Karama (a Muslim women lawyers’ network) are linking women who before 1994 had no idea of each other’s existence and who would not have thought that to be a Muslim woman was commonality enough to warrant connection. These networks create a “transnational space for intellectual reflection on Islamic norms and identity. In the process, [Muslim women’s] sense of identity and agency is changing. . . . The transnational has become a form of ‘public space’ that enables women to transcend their isolation and derive inspiration for actions from their own local realities. . . . Transnationalism is not only a means of empowerment but it is also a doorway to a *redefinition of self-identity*.”¹² In a translocal context, differences can thrive and knowledge is quickly diffused through both technology and the physical networking provided by national and international conferences that weave, in Castell’s colorful terms, “a hyper-quilt of women’s voices throughout most of the planet.”¹³

Transnational, transmodern connections are daily forged and reinforced as Muslim women become integrated into the fabric of public life across the globe. These new networks blur the geographic, national, religious, and ideological boundaries that used to be so clear-cut. Under such circumstances, it becomes imperative to demarcate the disappearing lines between insider and outsider. Once delineated, these lines need to be policed to keep the community pure. But where are these lines? There where the Muslimwoman is. The Muslimwoman represents simultaneously the boundary, the purity it preserves, and also a weapon in the war against the very line it serves to mark.

Muslim women are today’s new cosmopolitans. They connect with each other across frontiers of all sorts and destabilize roles they are expected to play as border markers for their communities. They negotiate borders as places to erase but also to mark and inhabit. This ambivalent location intensifies awareness of multiple belongings and of cultural hybridity, while making their voices

¹² Meena Sharify-Funk, “Women and the Dynamics of Transnational Networks,” in Nourai-Simone, *On Shifting Ground*, 252–53, 264.

¹³ Castells, *Power of Identity*, 137.

possible. And Muslim women are speaking out. Committed to a transnationalism that remains rooted in specific places and identities (in other words, translocalism), they are espousing a cosmopolitanism that is suspicious of the “potential for conformist pressures within the communities celebrated by pluralists.”¹⁴ They “advocate an encounter with people who are markedly different from and at the same time much like ourselves—a complex encounter made in a sympathetic effort to see the world as they see it and, as a consequence to denaturalize (their) own views.”¹⁵ The basic assumption is that individuals can see the world through the eyes of others and in so doing find “enough overlap in their vocabulary of values to begin a conversation.”¹⁶ Such conversations are not meant to change others’ minds or to create consensus. Rather, they reach for an exchange of ideas and views that can be argued and contested but never rejected outright. They may agree about what to do even if their reasons for developing contingent common platforms may differ.

Cosmopolitanism is more than connection to others; it involves conscience, self-consciousness, and receptiveness to differences that might instruct and perhaps transform. Cosmopolitanism is a way of living empathetically across differences. For the Muslimwoman, the nation is only one of several communities that determine actions, desires, and values. Muslimwoman cosmopolitanism mandates a triple commitment: First, to religious values that are not assumed to be universal. Second, to Muslim women’s rights to justice and dignity. And finally, to others’ rights to their commitments, however different.

Muslimwoman cosmopolitanism works across borders to weave a hybrid cultural system that disturbs the hegemony and desired homogeneity of both neo-Orientalism and religious extremism. To counter this instability, neo-Orientalists and Islamic extremists must constantly resort to a homogenizing rhetoric that reinforces and reproduces their own dominant paradigm and asserts it to be natural, unlike the unnatural hybridity of new Muslimwoman identities and desires. In the attempt to cage diversity and homogenize this hybridity, such hegemonic discourses in turn become hybrid, contradictory, and thus susceptible to exploitation. When the attempt to interpellate the Muslimwoman fails, when she refuses to be constituted as a subject by those who hail her, she undermines both their control and the reproduction of their ideology.

Muslim women are constructing a cosmopolitan identity with local roots that unites them in a “shared culture, diffused by electronic media, education, literacy, urbanization, and modernization.”¹⁷ Afghan, Pakistani, Saudi, Indonesian,

¹⁴ David Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 84–86.

¹⁵ Domna C. Stanton, “Presidential Address 2005: On Rooted Cosmopolitanism,” printed in *PMLA* 121, no. 3 (May 2006): 627–40, quotation on 629.

¹⁶ Anthony Kwame Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: Allen Lane, 2006), 57.

¹⁷ Castells, *Power of Identity*, 27.

Palestinian, and American Muslim women are increasingly aware of connections among their experiences and those of Muslim women elsewhere and they are demonstrating to the world how the Muslimwoman cosmopolitan can belong to many different communities while retaining her roots and rights in each.

Women's visible assumption of an Islamic identity in the twenty-first century is projecting a transnational imaginary in which they are full members of their religious *and* political communities. It is in terms of gender and religion that new connections become possible, and new meanings can be organized around this primary identity that frames but also subsumes the others. The more women represent themselves and project alternative notions of gender in the Muslim imaginary, the more control will they have over the Muslimwoman. This cosmopolitan faith-based resistance to the hegemony of a neo-Orientalist/Islamist imaginary seeks to "transform our worst experiences into new knowledge and increased self-understanding."¹⁸ More than ever, after 9/11, the formerly fixed Muslim imaginary is changing, albeit under the sign of Muslimwoman.

BEYOND THE *HIJAB* AS LODESTONE

Fawzia Ahmad

I was invited by the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* editors to participate in this roundtable and to comment on miriam cooke's article "Deploying the Muslimwoman." What follows is my response to her thought-provoking piece.

Whereas it is true that the veil remains a lodestone of political Islam, to use the word *upsets*, as many do, to represent the status quo of the Muslim woman who veils can erroneously generalize perceptions of the veil and its bearer's identity in both the Muslim-minority and Muslim-majority worlds. It is my position that the veil or *hijab* should neither upset nor trigger any predisposed reactions on the part of the onlooker. Unfortunately, precisely because the veil *does* elicit such responses in both the Muslim-minority and Muslim-majority worlds, it becomes a lodestone. Perhaps whether a woman's choice to veil or not were left alone, the *hijab* would not be viewed as such a marker.

I had previously thought the resurgence of the veil would only garner such a response in Muslim-minority settings. However, even among largely Muslim circles, it has become the focus of energy that could be better used elsewhere. Young Muslim women who have taken on the veil after an identity-searching, religious-awakening, group-consciousness experience are eager to talk about this experience among other Muslims. In sessions of my "Women in Islam" class at the University of Colorado, I often encourage Muslim students who veil to

¹⁸ Afzal-Khan, *Shattering the Stereotypes*, 17.