Forum

Miss USA 2010, Muslim American Cyber-Discourse, and the Question of Exhaustion

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On 16 May 2010, NBC Universal and Donald Trump gave the Muslim American community its first Muslim Miss USA.[1] Upon finding out the basics – Rima Fakih is of Lebanese Shi`ite origin and represented Michigan at the beauty pageant – many began to wonder what the appropriate response should be: a "Thank you, Mr. Trump" and befitting celebrations, a "No thank you, Mr. Trump" and its share of condemnation, or an ambivalent "something in between." In this essay I discuss some of the considerations that made the third option a highly favored one among young voices on the Muslim American blogosphere. I argue that their articulation of this position shows significant trends in the development of a young Muslim American cyber-discourse, and that these trends cannot be fully understood without paying due attention to a shared sense of exhaustion among young Muslim Americans today.

A first striking trend about the debates sparked by Fakih's victory was how Muslim bloggers and writers treated Fakih herself, and particularly her choice to participate in the event, as completely peripheral to the discussion. Not only were they[2] decidedly uninterested in discussing the legitimacy or

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acceptability of her choice, they also scrupulously distanced their criticism from what might appear as any judgment of her "Muslimness." In a piece published by Muslimah Media Watch (MMW; http://muslimahmediawatch. org), "Sara" illustrated the boundaries of acceptable criticism. Although opposed to the notion that Fakih's victory represents a step forward for Muslims or Arabs, she made it clear that "whatever led [Fakih] to compete is her own business,"[3] an attitude echoed by "Majid," a reader of "Elan: The Guide to Global Muslim Culture" (www.elanthemag.com). While strongly disagreeing with Elan's festive mood, Majid did not want the object of his chagrin to be misunderstood: "Her [Fakih's] faith is not what's in question here," he insisted. "Our attitudes to her victory are."[4] This explicit refraining from moral judgment is not the prerogative of relatively "liberal"[5] Muslim sites.

More conservative online sites were also weary of appearing judgmental of Fakih and her morality. Muslim Matters (http://muslimmatters.org) had to deliberate on whether to publish a piece on the issue at all. When it decided for it, it prefaced it by following disclaimer:

> The following guest post by Hena Zuberi caused great debate and discussion among the MM staffers as to whether to ignore the subject or let Sr. Hena's voice be heard. There were concerns about being too reactive as well as piling on a "non-practicing sister."[6]

The article itself was an unambiguous "No thank you, Mr. Trump" with accompanying condemnation. But as with Majid and MMW's Sara, the focus of Zuberi's criticism was not Fakih's participation in the contest; rather, it was on how the Muslim media chose to cover the event. In Zuberi's reading of this coverage, Fakih's victory was treated as explicitly significant to Muslims, an idea she adamantly opposed. In the discussion that followed her article, she wrote: "Making it about her religion is where all this hoopla is about. If I didn't have to wake up to First Muslim blah blah I would not have cared … to write this (sic)." Looking back at my own article on Altmuslimah.com, I too tried to stay away as far as possible from criticizing Rima Fakih herself. When a reader on the post-article forum questioned Fakih's "Muslimness," I defensively jumped to clarify that that was not what my article was about. I wished to make it clear that "questioning the desirability of having a particular person represent Muslims (sometimes in spite of him/herself) is quite different than questioning their Islam."[7]

What all these cyber conversations about Miss USA 2010 had in common was a general unstated agreement that critiquing the impact of Fakih's victory in terms of image or representation was a legitimate endeavor. Cri-

ticizing her morality, on the other hand, was absolutely not acceptable and the reaction to anything that resembled it was quick and resolute. This agreement may easily be understood as subscribing to a normative rule: "criticizing somebody else's morality is wrong." Yet in these cyber-conversations one also reads a kind of exhaustion tied to Muslim Americans' experiences in their own communities, where criticizing somebody else's "Muslimness" based on behavior or appearance is often a common occurrence. Within this cyber-discourse, young Muslim Americans seemed to delineate a space where a discourse that alienates others through moral judgment is not welcome. Hence, a conversation that could go in that direction is quickly closed by a statement about Fakih's participation in Miss USA being "her own business." This choice only becomes worthy of discussion once it has a tangible effect on the community, and even then these voices are careful to frame their questions in terms of the impact on other Muslims, not in terms of the cause (Why did she do it?) or the impact on Fakih's Islamic morality (Does it make her a bad Muslim?).

Similarly, Muslim bloggers writing on this issue consciously or unconsciously opted out of employing "Islamicity" as a lens of analysis. Rather than asking how "Islamic" or "un-Islamic" Fakih's victory was (and basing their reaction on the answer), the common framing question appeared to be whether this could be considered a positive development for Muslims in America. As with the shift away from making her the object of moral criticism, this shift in frame points to the types of questions that this young Muslim cyber-discourse is interested in producing and those whose thrust may be on the verge of expiration. Questions that read "Is the Miss USA beauty pageant Islamic?" or "Was Rima Fakih's choice to participate *halal*?" are likely to produce a simple and straightforward "No" and foreclose the debate. But would a *halal/haram* moral verdict change the fact that she already won the contest and that her face is a new fact of life in America? With America's Muslim community being on the sensitive spot it is in right now, there appears to be an awareness that the manner in which questions are framed is itself a matter of pressing importance. Any new fact on the ground must be examined, discussed, and dealt with appropriately – even if to the chagrin of some that this is a bikini-wearing fact.

I do not wish to suggest that an Islamic moral compass has no place in this young Muslim discourse. If one is to word it in *fiqhi*[8] terms, it may simply be that this discourse unselfconsciously explores the world in a *halal, mandub, mubah, makruh, haram* array of choices, infused with unselfconscious sense of *maqasid al-shari`ah*,[9] as opposed the *halal/haram*

dichotomy that still prevails in many Muslim communities. In non-*fiqhi* terms, this simply means that young voices emerging within this Muslim American discourse are seeking to examine and explain Muslim-relevant issues in a more complex and nuanced manner, based on the premise that gray is a fact of life.

Naturally, the transition from a simple binary to a complex spectrum of possibilities is not easy, and events such as Fakih's victory highlights the tensions. It would have been easier to either disregard the entire event as all bad (*haram*) or cheer as though it was all good (*halal*), yet few voices within this cyber-discourse seemed interested in doing so. There were elements that required criticism and others worth capitalizing on, and it was crucial to acknowledge both and see the difference between them. As Nida Khan from MMW wrote: "Today, while I'm ecstatic that we are finally depicted in another context outside of the usual long-bearded extremists … I have to think of our progress in critical terms."[10] In Khan's case, the gray area she recognized lay between breaking the regular stereotypes of Muslim women and a potential negative impact on veiled women:

> Even though Rima's victory is undoubtedly shattering the proverbial glass ceiling, it is also painting those Muslim women who practice the religion in a more traditional matter as further and further from the norm.[11]

In fact, it was in regards to image and representation that many bloggers found room to explore the gray area. The relevant question was if the addition of Fakih's image to dominant misrepresentations of Muslim women be regarded as progress? Three kinds of answers were provided: an exhilarated "Yes!," a frantic "No!," and a qualified "Yes/No." These three positions have to be examined in light of the Muslim community's situation in America today. Muslim Americans are the object of public scrutiny, negative media coverage, and political mistrust. The image of Islam and Muslims is skewed on a daily basis and projected onto the television screens of 300 million Americans with an aura of absolute authority. These images, which have become a distorting glass through which all Muslims are perceived, represent all male Muslims as violent and oppressive individuals and all female Muslims as docile, voiceless, and oppressed victims.

Suffice it to note here that not even Rima Fakih, a supposedly innocuous beauty queen, could escape the double standards and demonization by right-wing American media outlets. Racializing her victory, Daniel Pipes attributed Fakih's victory to "an odd form of affirmative action."[12] Debbie Schlussel called the event "a sad day in America" and went as far as to claim

that Fakih's "bid for the pageant was financed by an Islamic terrorist and immigration fraud perpetrator."[13] In the context of these constant attacks, the formative power of exhaustion has to inform how we understand Muslim American behavior. It is difficult to understand bloggers' responses to the introduction of Fakih's image without it.

It is obvious that the Miss USA pageant, like any other beauty pageant out there, measures anything but intelligence. The contestants are not asked for anything other than to conform to popular notions of beauty and to learn how to parade semi-naked while smiling at the camera. Yet when Linda Sarsour (director, the Arab American Association of New York) opted for an exhilarated "Yes!," she explained it in the following terms: "What a breath of fresh air for the Arab-American community, to have Rima Fakih named Miss USA 2010 … This is only a testament that Arab and Muslim American women too are strong, intelligent, beautiful and competitive."[14] Given the undisputed fact that Sarsour is a very accomplished, strong, and intelligent woman herself, the only part of her statement that makes sense is the "breath of fresh air," and this only makes sense in the context of Muslim and Arab-American exhaustion. This quote was picked up by Elan's Farrah Hamid, who concluded her piece about Fakih with a delight that almost sounded like sarcasm: "You go, girl. One small step for a Muslimah, one giant leap for Muslim-kind, as we go from being stereotyped as hairy/angry/terrorists to hot/giggling/beauty queens. I love it." Again, it is only in the context of the exhausting stereotype of the hairy angry terrorist that another stereotype can be welcomed with cheers.

However, few other voices subscribed to this unqualified "Yes, thank you Mr. Trump" letter. On most articles published by Muslimah Media Watch, Altmuslimah, Muslim Matters, and Illume (www.illumemag.com), the mood was more cautious and the cause for excitement far more modest. Fakih's image as a Muslim woman whose success depended entirely on her looks was not seen as ideal, but it was still considered "better" or simply "less harmful" that the regular stereotypes of Muslims in American pop culture. "Perhaps a pretty girl in a shiny bikini," wrote Carma Hassan for Illume, "will help dispel the ominous rumors and generate interest in, or at least Google searches on, Islam." Supporting this view, Fareeda, a reader of Elan, wrote that "having a Muslim win a Miss USA pageant, which, other than obvious beauty, rewards affability, charm, and diplomacy in nature, is a better, more positive image than the daily images on CNN."[15] At no time did Carma Hassan or Fareeda ascribe Fakih's victory the best pedagogical impact on American society, but in the context of the exhausting stereotypes

of Muslims, Fakih's image was deemed relatively positive and hence a cause for celebration.

For yet a third set of young Muslim voices, the cause for excitement was not that Rima's image was relatively "better" or "less harmful" than regular ones. What mattered was its perceived capacity to impact the American perspective on what it means to be Muslim. According to this perspective, the American media's thin pool of stereotypes – rehashed to the point of exhaustion – begged for diversification, and Rima Fakih's victory arrived to add a new face and provide some relief. Fatemeh Fakhraie (founder and editor-in-chief, MMW), who considers herself a feminist, shared this perspective. On her blog entry "My Thoughts on Miss USA," she noted that Fakih's "victory is not a real one for Muslim women or Arab-American women," yet

> … as someone who sees media portrayals of Muslim women that are completely negative every single day, I'm just going to take this one moment and enjoy it. Ms. Fakih's high-profile win adds to the diversity of how Muslim women are represented.[16]

She was not alone in this position. Other self-identified Muslim feminist women felt conflicted when news of Fakih's victory reached them, and their feminist position on the oppressive nature of these contests immediately vanished. I read this not as competing values (feminist and other) or as a convenient disposal of a challenging position, but as genuine values that exist not in machines, but on human bodies that are vulnerable to exhaustion and thus subject to modification, abeyance, or change.

Yet another group of voices wondered whether the introduction of any new image for Muslim women should truly be regarded as progress and be welcomed as a true relief. If the average Muslim American woman who is a doctor, a lawyer, a teacher, or a stay-at-home mom feels misrepresented by the usual mainstream narratives, this group argued, Fakih's image would not alter this situation at all. In my Altmuslimah article, I subscribed to this position for at least two interrelated reasons. First, the possibility of Muslim girls taking Rima Fakih as a Muslim role model was too serious to ignore. The message her victory would send to girls would be: "You too can make it." But if this were taken as a legitimate standard, the measurement for success would be sought in all the wrong places.[17] The second interrelated reason is that the new image that she has introduced to popular culture was not produced on our own terms. If a new norm develops from this participation, this would be yet another alien norm incapable of providing any true deliverance from the exhaustion that besets Muslim Americans today.

In support of Fakih's participation in the Miss USA contest, a reader of Elan criticized the belief "that being an active participant in one's culture, be it in America, Britain, or Abu Dhabi, is some kind of strike against Islam."[18] This critique is worth taking into consideration, because it speaks to the need of introducing images on our own terms. And yet this project is also imbued with exhaustion, for Muslim women the choice between being the object of pity (burqa) or the object of desire (bikini) is just as exhausting as it is limiting. We know that neither one of these stereotypes captures the complexity of our experience as western Muslim women. We also know that we will continue to be unseen and unheard until we are the producers of our own narratives. But how can we produce and project our own narratives? What does it mean to be an active participant of our cultures? Does it mean one becomes a contestant in the Miss USA pageant as opposed to passively watching the contest from our couches at home? This is what Elan's reader seemed to suggest; however, participation must certainly mean more than that.

The problem with discussing what participation means and what it entails is that our *halal/haram* binaries are likely to exhaust us before we even hit the ground. Having reduced our knowledge of Islam to its bare minimum, some of us fear, whether rightly or not, that we do not possess the right equipment to navigate the rugged terrain of American popular culture without losing ourselves. As soon as we bump into the first *haram* roadblock we are likely to become paralyzed and try to stretch the *haram* label to cover the entire enterprise. Up-and-coming young Muslim American artists have pointed to this attitude and criticized prevalent double standards in Muslim American communities; we are not willing to deal with the messy business of creating Muslim American culture because of a perceived threat to Muslim values, but we do not mind consuming mainstream cultural productions that regularly run counter to them. Exhausted as we are from being the object of public scrutiny, negative media coverage, and political mistrust, the last thing we want is to engage with more complexity. Yet we often ignore that culture not only speaks to us (through products we love to consume), but it also speaks for us. Forget questions about "Who speaks for Muslims" that are concerned with religious authority. Factually, popular images and representations of us do. Hence, the choice is between the exhaustion of dealing with the messy business of cultural production and the exhaustion of having our stories perpetually lost between a burqa and a bikini.

On 16 May 2010, when NBC Universal and Donald Trump gave the Muslim American community its first Muslim Miss USA, many of us did not know how to respond or how to explain our conflicted feelings on the

matter. Should we celebrate, criticize, or do a bit of both? Some of us opted
for writing as a means to make sense of this confusion and resorted to the
Muslim American blogosphere as an apt forum in which to situate our dis-
cussions. I argued that beyond our independent opinions on the event itself,
our choice of focus (viz., image and representation as opposed to Fakih's
choice itself; how we framed our questions; its impact on the Muslim
American community as opposed to its inherent Islamicity; and why we dis-
cussed this the way we did – seeking constructive engagement rather than
futile moral judgment) reveals some of the defining features of young
Muslim American cyber-discourse.

Yet I also argued in this piece that this "what," "how," and "why" sug-
gests a shared common sense of exhaustion that traces its roots back to our
Muslim communities on the one hand, and to American society at large on
the other. Given the multiple attacks to which Muslim Americans are sub-
jected, its seems that the effectual and shaping power of exhaustion has not
yet received the attention it deserves. Nor have we given enough attention to
how we could potentially move from a defensive position to one that pro-
duces and projects its own representations of itself. Humor, for instance, has
been underexploited. A satire piece like Wajahat Ali's "How Will Miss USA
Push the Secret Muslim Agenda?"[19] was enormously successful in both the
Muslim and non-Muslim blogosphere, yet it was the only one of its kind.
Ultimately there will be no easy and non-exhausting alternatives to the cur-
rent situation of Muslim image and representation in American pop culture.
Unless we engage the challenge, the only answers we will ever have to pon-
der will run along the lines of "Yes/No/Maybe so, Mr. Trump."

Endnotes

1. Though generally agreed that Fakih is the first Arab Muslim Miss USA, there
   is no absolute way to confirm this claim since Miss USA keeps no track of par-
   ticipants' religion. Rima identifies herself as a Muslim, but said her family cel-
   ebrates both the Muslim and Christian faiths.
2. I use *they* to reflect the young American Muslim voices participating in this
   discourse, although the space provided by the Muslim American blogosphere
   is not only open to young American Muslims, but also to young Muslims in
   America. Hence my own participation in these debates.
3. Online at http://muslimahmediawatch.org/2010/05/beauty-and-the-beastly-
   pundits-more-on-miss-usa/.
4. Majid786, comment on "From Mis-Represented to Miss USA: Muslims
   Applaud Rima Fakih, 2010 Pageant Winner," Elan, the Guide to Global

Muslim Culture, comment post May 25, 2010 www.elanthemag.com/index. php/site/blog_detail/from_mis_represented_to_miss_usa_muslims_applaud_ rima_fakih_2010_pageant_w-/P5/.

5. It is very difficult to situate the Muslim blogs reviewed for this essay on an ideological spectrum, and these labels are highly subjective. Yet, these sites' content and approach provide a general sense of where they stand in terms of openness to difference of opinions, respect of alternative interpretations of what it means to be a Muslim, and the degree to which their content is presented from a traditional Islamic perspective.

6. Preface to Hena Zuberi, "I Cannot Cheer for you Sister Rima Fakih, Miss USA 2010: Too Much is at Stake," *Muslim Matters* 22 May 2010, http://muslimmatters.org/2010/05/22/i-cannot-cheer-you-on-sister-rima-fakih-miss-usa-2010-too-much-at-stake/.

7. Janan Delgado, "Miss USA 2010, It's Complicated." Altmuslimah.com, 21 May 2010, www.altmuslimah.com/a/b/print/3727/.

8. *Fiqh* refers to Islamic legal rulings. Although only two are in general circulation, *halal* (lawful) and *haram* (unlawful), there are three other categories in between: *mandub* (recommended), *mubah* (neutrally licit) and *makruh* (discouraged).

9. Usually translated as General Principles and Purposes of the Law, beyond individual rulings themselves.

10. Nida Khan, "The New Miss USA: Progress or Bigger Problems for Muslims," Muslimah Media Watch, 19 May 2010 http://muslimahmediawatch.org/2010/ 05/haters-gonna-hate-the-backlash-against-miss-usa/.

11. Ibid.

12. Daniel Pipes, "Affirmative Action in Beauty Contests?" DanielPipes.org, 16 May 2010, www.danielpipes.org/blog/2010/05/affirmative-action-in-beauty-contests/.

13. Debbie Schlussel, "Donald Trump, Dhimmi: Miss Hezbollah Rima Fakih Wins Miss USA; Rigged for Muslima? Miss Oklahoma's Arizona Immigration Answer," Debbie Schlussel, 16 May 2010, www.debbieschlussel.com/22000/ donald-trump-dhimmi-miss-hezbollah-wins-miss-usa-was-contest-rigged-for-muslima-hezbollah-supporter-miss-oklahomas-great-arizona-immigration-answer/.

14. Quoted on Farrah Hamid, "From Mis-Represented to Miss USA: Muslims Applaud Rima Fakih, 2010 Pageant Winner," *Elan*, 17 May 2010; www.elanthemag.com/index.php/site/blog_detail/from_mis_represented_to_miss_usa_ muslims_applaud_rima_fakih_2010_pageant_w-/P0/.

15. Fareeda, comment on "From Mis-Represented to Miss USA: Muslims Applaud Rima Fakih, 2010 Pageant Winner," Farrah Hamid, 17 May 2010, comment posted May 21, 2010, http://www.elanthemag.com/index.php/ site/blog_detail/from_mis_represented_to_miss_usa_muslims_applaud_rima _fakih_2010_pageant_w-/.

16. Fatimah Fakhraie, "My Thoughts on Miss USA," Fatemeh Fakhraie, http://
     fatemehfakhraie.com/2010/05/17/my-thoughts-on-miss-america/.
17. Delgado, "Miss USA 2010."
18. Fareeda, comment on "From Mis-Represented to Miss USA: Muslims
     Applaud Rima Fakih, 2010 Pageant Winner," Farrah Hamid, comment posted
     May 25, 2010, http://www.elanthemag.com/index.php/site/blog_detail/from_
     mis_represented_to_miss_usa_muslims_applaud_rima_fakih_2010_pageant_
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19. Online at www.salon.com/life/feature/2010/05/18/plot_to_infiltrate_america_
     through_miss_usa/index.html.