Muslim Women and the Politics of Representation (2002)*

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Abstract

This paper examines the politics of knowledge production as it relates to Muslim women in western literary traditions and contemporary feminist writing, with a view to understanding the political, ideological, and economic mediations that have historically framed these representations. The meta-narrative of the Muslim woman has shifted from the bold queens of medieval literature to colonial images of the seraglio's veiled, secluded, and oppressed women. Contemporary feminist writing and popular culture have reproduced the colonial motifs of Muslim women, and these have regained currency in the aftermath of 9/11.

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Drawing upon the work of Mohja Kahf, this paper begins by mapping the evolution of the Muslim woman archetype in western literary traditions. The paper then examines how some contemporary feminist literature has reproduced in new ways the discursive tropes that have had historical currency in Muslim women's textual representation. The analysis is attentive to the ways in which the cultural production of knowledge about Muslim women has been implicated historically by the relations of power between the Muslim world and the West.

Introduction

Examining the production of knowledge related to Muslim women in historical and contemporary texts allows for an understanding of the sociopolitical mediations that historically have informed these discursive practices. This is particularly salient with the revival of Orientalist constructions of Islam as one of the by-products of the 9/11 tragedy. The resurgence of Orientalist tropes that label Islam and Muslims as barbaric and uncivilized terrorists have gained alarming currency. Muslim women are particularly marked, as media images of *burqah-clad* women have become the trademark of Islam's repression. These images serve to justify all forms of military action under the trope of "liberation," as was the earlier formula for colonial intervention and control in the Muslim world.[1]

Therefore, once again Muslim women's bodies are being positioned upon the geopolitical stage not as actors in their own right, but as foils for modernity, civilization, and freedom. To what extent the continuing discourse of abject victimhood essentializes the representation of Muslim women and limits their agency is rarely questioned.[2] Unraveling the complex ways in which the processes of global change and transformation implicate the cultural production of knowledge allows us to better understand the tacit modes through which power operates via discursive practices.[3]

In this paper, I examine the politics and economies of difference that historically have framed particular representations of Muslim women in two genres: western literary traditions and contemporary feminist

writing. Selected examples will show how Muslim women enter the texts as objects of "Otherness." Unmasking the discursive politics and dimensions of authority in the accounts produced of marginalized women is an important project in relation to developing an anticolonial and antiracist feminist critique. It is important for Muslim women to locate their own political and academic projects within these frameworks for the purpose of challenging academic and literary imperialism.

Following the work of Edward Said[4] and Mohja Kahf,[5] I argue that the politics of representing Muslim women has been tied to the material and ideological conditions characterizing the relationship between "the West" and Islamic societies. Historically, these relations were marked by shifts in the balance of power between these two societies. These shifts, in turn, engendered corresponding shifts within the archetypal paradigm of the "Muslim woman" as a literary invention and later as an object of the western feminist gaze.

In the first part, I draw upon Kahf's work to help map the evolving Muslim woman archetype in western literary works. I examine the Muslim woman's representation in medieval European and Renaissance texts up to the colonial era of Orientalist writing and representation. In the second part, I focus upon how some of the discursive tropes and motifs used in these literary writings are reproduced in new ways in some contemporary feminist works and popular culture.

The texts through which Muslim women came to be represented during the medieval, Renaissance, and colonial periods are predominately products of the male gaze. The Muslim woman archetype in the western male literary imagination has undergone many transmutations during these historical periods, ranging from powerful and heroic early medieval queens to the slightly more wanton and sexually transgressive images of Muslim women during the late Middle Ages.[6] The colonial era also produced more openly sexualized images of the Muslim woman as a harem concubine, as well as the victimized, veiled, and secluded image of the "oppressed Muslim woman."[7] The evolution of these archetypal images is intrinsically linked with the political, ideological, and imperial relationships and encounters between the West and the Islamic world.[8]

In the second part, I examine Muslim women's representation through the feminist gaze, first through the transcultural production of knowledge during the colonial era, and then in contemporary feminist writing where the colonial archetype of the disempowered and victimized Muslim woman is reproduced and canonized. I then show how the tropes and motifs that Kahf identifies as having historical currency, such as the "oppressed Muslim woman" and the "Muslim maiden in need of rescue," are similarly reproduced and invoked in these more contemporary works.

In contemporary feminist writing on Muslim women, I shift to examine the genres of travel writing and academic scholarship that attempt to portray "real" and non-fictionalized accounts. However, as I argue, the style of representation often uses "creative non-fiction" that borrows literary writing conventions to create a more "authentic"—and therefore more authorized—accounts. The examples selected fall within the genre of what has been called "imperialist feminism," in that the representations of Third World women and Muslim women in particular reproduce colonial motifs of women as powerless victims who are silenced and voiceless.[9] Finally, I conclude by commenting on Muslim women's current attempts to create alternative knowledge and achieve greater discursive authority over how their identities are represented.

Part I: Muslim Women and the Politics of Representation

Muslim Women in Medieval Discourse. While examining the western meta-narrative of the Muslim woman during Europe's Middle Ages, we can trace the genealogy of this archetype as she first begins to enter into the Euro-western literary imagination. This entry point comes as a surprise when we consider more recent archetypes, since their representation during this earlier period was one of dominant queens or noblewomen who characteristically held powerful sway over the European Christian hero. This metaphorically mirrored the Islamic empire's formidable position in relation to Europe at that time.[10]

Representational politics were closely aligned to the material and ideological conditions of the historical moment in question. In this way,

later colonial representations of Muslim women as oppressed and victimized by a backward misogynist society laid the ideological groundwork for colonial intervention as a means to "liberate" them from the shackles of their "heathen" and barbaric societies. While this kind of representation reinscribed the position of European dominance over the "Orient" through colonialist expansion in the nineteenth century, the Middle Ages were characterized by very different political, social, and economic relations between these regions.[11]

The present status quo image of the veiled and oppressed Muslim woman had no currency during the Middle Ages. Of the few but powerful representations of Muslim women in literary works of the time (Kahf, for example, has examined texts such as *Chanson de Roland and Auccasin and Nicolette* from the twelfth to thirteenth centuries), we see a very different female archetypal character emerge: that of the *termagant*, a medieval term that came to be associated with a "quarrelsome or overbearing woman."[12] The significant sociopolitical context of this period helps us to understand how this particular metanarrative of the Muslim woman gained currency. The eleventh to fifteenth centuries were marked by the Crusades. The Islamic empire's imperial power and wealth, coupled with its "heathen religion," represented a threat and nemesis to the Christian world. At this same time, Islam and Muslim women, in particular, began to emerge as negative referents in European discourse.

The genesis of constructing the Islamic "Other" however, does not begin with the image of the subjugated female. The discursive current of European representational politics became fashioned through a more complex intermingling between the desire and disavowal of difference (as it came to be embodied within the Muslim woman). Kahf argues that Europe held a longstanding envy for the Islamic empire's material power and resources (headed at the time by the Ottoman Turks and the Moors of North Africa).[13] The Islamic hegemony of the period put a different "spin" on how Muslim women were used in texts as signifiers of difference.

The conventional formula used by medieval romance writers focused on a Muslim queen or noblewoman who was represented through the paradigm of the *termagant,* who had a characteristically bold and

forward personality and often bore a subversive textual presence.[14] The Muslim queen or princess eventually converts and leaves her country, religion, and qualities as a transgressive female behind as she enters Christian society with a newly tamed consciousness. Kahf shows us how the theme of conversion was usually introduced through a romance. In the twelfth-century tale *Historica Ecclesiastica* (1130-35), a Turkish princess falls in love with a captured French Crusader. She secures his release through the betrayal and disavowal of her father and coverts to Christianity, thereby renouncing her Islamic "Otherness." She allows the Christians to seize the citadel and claim its substantial fortunes as a symbolic redistribution of wealth, which speaks to Kahf's assertion of European envy of Islamic riches.[15]

As a recurring motif, I argue that these stories also represent the Muslim male's "symbolic castration" as much as they mask desire for the Muslim female, who becomes increasingly fetishized. The Muslim woman's abandonment and betrayal of the Muslim male in favor of the European-Christian enemy is an emasculating *denouement.* Manipulating the Muslim woman's meta-narrative in this fashion employs political control through discursive representation. In these formulas, the Muslim princess instigates the catalytic romance. This begins to constitute a more "wanton" image—what Warren has called the paradigm of the "enamoured Muslim princess."[16] This paradigm continues throughout the Renaissance (albeit as a less salient archetype) and plants the seeds of a more transgressive sexuality that emerges later.

These medieval conversion scenarios also bear the imprint of desire, for they are necessary to "legitimate" the hero's reciprocal desire for the Muslim woman, who is a pagan "Other" (and therefore morally out of bounds). Her conversion therefore translates into a mode of gaining "respectability," and hence legitimates this desire. Kahf notes that the conversion motifs ultimately result in the Muslim woman's silence.[17] Her physical and vocal presence in the text is erased after she submits to conversion and, through this transformation, the bold *termagant* becomes mute. We can see this silence as both the conquest and the sublimation of the Muslim woman.

Muslim Women in Renaissance Texts. The intersecting strands of gender, religion, race, and class in Muslim women's representation

during the medieval period begin to unravel in the early part of the Renaissance. Kahf documents a muting of difference in early Renaissance literature. The representation of Muslim women begins to become a more generic gendered difference largely uncomplicated by religious or racial difference. Muslim women are depicted through the same referents as European women with little textual difference or, as Kahf puts it, with "their Muslim-ness hovering in the background."[18]

This period of "equilibrium" is punctuated by certain shifts in the Muslim woman's sexuality. For example, she becomes less of a passive object of male desire and, in some scenarios, recuperates some control over her sexuality's deployment. According to Kahf, the "traditional myths of Islam waned or went into latency during this period because the forces producing them (e.g., the Church) had stalled."[19] During this "curious lull," she argues, "older myths of Islam cut off from their sources, mutate, transform, and seem to float randomly, while emerging new myths are still vague and unsteady."[20]

Emerging geopolitical changes also precipitated this indifferent attitude toward the Islamic presence. According to Rodinson, the Mongol invaders of the thirteenth century and other politically disruptive forces, such as the Persians, added greater diversity to the theatre of conflict.[21] The ensuing loss of a singularly Islamic referent led to a greater sense of ideological relativism.[22] Kahf also points to an increase in secular humanism as a sociological construct during this period, which may have influenced the more cavalier approach to religious difference.[23]

Other reasons, she notes, relate to Europe's expanding transoceanic trade and exploration, which began to position it on a more equal footing with the Islamic empires.[24] The genesis of European imperialism in the New World began to shift the Old World's balance of power and material resources. Muslims were no longer the only formidable actors on the geopolitical stage. The region's holistic approach to the Islamic world also fragmented into more specific interrelationships. Italy, Kahf notes, negotiated a profitable trading relationship with the Ottoman Empire and became increasingly dependent on it.[25] Therefore, class-based interests stemming from new economic prospects at home and abroad began to displace previous fears of Islamic hegemony. This development may have

led to the equilibrium of the Muslim woman narrative within the textual accounts of this period.

Another dimension that I would add to both Kahf and Rodinson's analyses is that with the ascendancy of European imperial power and the corresponding decline in fear of the Islamic world's encroachment, Muslim women were no longer fetishized in their textual representation. Toni Morrison writes that fetishization evokes erotic fears and desires and, in literary use, "establishes [a] fixed and major difference."[26] According to McClintock, during the late Middle Ages "the Catholic priesthood used the term to condemn the charms and magical arts practiced by the restive populace and also to discipline wayward female sexuality"[27]—such as the wanton queen. The fetish then occurs at the nexus of fear/desire and leads to the disavowal of difference. As the boundaries of fear and difference were closing in on the political and economic relationship between Europe and the Islamic empires, the recurring tropes of "the enamoured Muslim princess" and disciplining her wayward sexuality through the recurring scenario of conversion (which led to her silence and sublimation) were no longer needed to fetishize her representation in the text.

However, the respite was short-lived. By the sixteenth century in Spain, the Reconquista movement heralded a major shift in imperial control, ethnic purity, and religious conflict. These led to the activation of new Muslim woman meta-narratives. Expelling the Moors from Spain led to a campaign of ethnic cleansing that involved purging all things associated with the Moorish presence. This included a ban on the Arabic language, intermarriage, reeducation, and castration. This was done, as quoted by one Spanish leader (the Duke of Lermes), to ensure that "all the kingdoms of Spain remain pure and clean from this people."[28]

A new archetype of the Muslim women was activated at this historical juncture when the vicissitudes of difference once again become negatively fixed. *Don Quixote* (Cervantes, 1605) is the new entry point for this emergent archetype. It is interesting to note that the heretofore unmentioned Islamic dress enters the textual discourse at this critical historical juncture. Once again an object that embodies fear (fear of the recuperation of Spain by "alien" forces), the Muslim woman archetype

enters as an unknown veiled foreign figure. In the play, a new paradigm emerges that equates her dress with both difference and silence: The character Dorotea asks: *"Is this lady a Christian or a Moor? Her dress and her silence make us think she is what we hope she is not."*[29] Hence the equation of silence and difference is woven into the discourse of Muslim women's dress.

As Kahf argues, elements of the enamored Muslim princess still inform this character, but she is reinvented as the "rescued Muslim maiden." The conversion theme is reanimated, as are the corollary themes of betraying the father, transferring Muslim wealth, and emigrating to Christian lands (essential elements of this recurring motif). The primary difference, according to Kahf, is that the Muslim woman shifts from an active to a passive mode. Kahf asserts that this is due to her loss of agency. While the enamoured Muslim princess archetype is enamoured as the result of her own desire, the "rescued Muslim maiden," on the other hand, needs to be rescued by another.[30]

Another important aspect of this character was the transformation of her dangerous and transgressive sexuality by the veil. As Moorish women represented the possibility of repopulating Spain with an impure element, their sexual presence needed to be constrained.[31] The danger represented by the Moorish women's reproductive power may account for why we see, for the first time, a veiled Muslim woman. In this context, therefore, the veil represents her symbolic erasure from the text.[32] Mernissi,[33] Moghissi,[34] and others have argued that the veil in Islamist discourse also represents an attempt to negate the fear of female sexuality. It is interesting that Zoreida, the veiled Muslim woman, unveils after her conversion so that, as the object of romantic desire, she becomes legitimated and redeemed from pagan "Otherness."

Legitimizing desire also is enacted by representing enamored Muslim women as being lily white. This contrasts with the abjectly racialized depiction of the Black Moor, another archetypal feature of this period. Physical blackness was associated with "devilry and monstrosity" in the seventeenth-century consciousness.[35] As a racialized and thereby lower class character, Zanthia, a Black Moorish woman in the play *(The Knight of Malta*, 1619), conflates her sexual nature to overcompensate for

her debased physical beauty. Such legitimization, therefore, was racially circumscribed and policed in this textual representation by reasserting the positional superiority of whiteness. Another highly sexualized motif gains currency here as well: that of the *seraglio* (harem). This enacts what Kahf refers to as the "motif of enclosure." This paradigm gives life to a whole new scenario, one in which we have the image of the jealous Muslim man guarding, veiling, and enclosing the women.[36]

Colonialist Discourse. Shifting now to the colonialist discourse, where the motif of enclosure becomes highly popularized, Bullock, following the work of Timothy Mitchell,[37] argues that the colonial encounters between Europe and the Islamic world were framed by a "metaphysics of modernity" or the modernist worldview of experiencing the "Other" as an exhibit or spectacle.[38] Mitchell calls this the "ontology of representation,"[39] where staged exhibits of foreign lands popularized in Europe during the nineteenth century led spectators through an ordered representation of the Orient, which was open to the penetration of their gaze and from which they derived "knowledge." This experience, Bullock argues, led to Europeans' dissonance during their actual encounter with Islamic societies, for the society's structure did not lend itself to the openness of the cultural spectacles to which they were accustomed. Instead, it served to deny the gaze through such practices as the veil.[40] Here the motif of enclosure gains a more threatening form. Women wearing the *niqab* (face veil) were particularly viewed as "gaze inhibitors" denying access and penetration of the colonial male gaze.[41] Unpacking the effect of how the veil denied access to the colonizers' gaze, Bullock argues that:

> Europeans had the confident knowledge of being at the apex of civilization, but this conviction could be destabilized upon their arrival in the Middle East, especially in the case of those who were used to and expected, the exhibition effect of detached, objective viewing.[42] How could one be superior to, or establish authority over, creatures that could not be known since they could not be seen or grasped as a picture.[43] What could not be seen or grasped as spectacle could not be controlled.[44] Moreover, Europeans felt uneasy about the veiled women.[45]

At the same time, the veil became highly eroticized. Rey Chow writes that: "The Orient has become a metaphor for sexuality is encapsulated by the recurrent figure of the veiled woman. The inaccessibility of the veiled woman, mirroring the mystery of the Orient itself, requires a process of Western unveiling for comprehension."[46] This "process of unveiling" is exemplified in Malek Alloula's *Colonial Harem*,[47] a collection not of literary works but of postcards produced by the French in the early part of the twentieth century depicting Algerian women posed semi-nude. Alloula writes of how the photographer's pornographic gaze is inverted by the subject:

> Thrust in the presence of a veiled woman, the photographer feels photographed; having himself become an object-to-be-seen; he loses his initiative: he is dispossessed of his own gaze ... The photographer will respond to this quiet and natural challenge by means of a double violation: he will unveil the veiled and give figural representation to the forbidden.[48]

This directly affected what Caplan refers to as the "looking relations" that serve to establish and sustain hierarchies and relations of power between social and cultural "Others."[49] The preoccupation with unveiling Muslim women was linked directly to these looking relations, according to Bullock,[50] in that the relationship between the viewer (superior European males) and the object of their gaze (inferior Arab women) became inverted through the veil. The act of seeing was a symbolic act of possession. Therefore, rupturing the motif of enclosure emanated from the nexus of power, desire, and conquest. The veil's enclosure allowed these women the vantage point of seeing without being seen, and hence disrupted the order and spectacle expected by the Europeans. Moreover, it ruptured the dynamics of power and privilege within the looking relations. The physical exploitation of the male imperial gaze therefore penetrated the very meaning of the "harem" or "forbidden space." Ella Shohat writes that "it is this process of exposing the female Other, literally denuding her, which comes to allegorize the Western masculinist power of possession, that she as a metaphor for her land, becomes available for Western penetration and knowledge."[51]

Europe's colonization of the Islamic world enacted a whole new political economy that had its own discursive ideological subtext. Muslim women entered the "imaginative geography" of the Orient as both an object of desire and a repressed maiden in need of rescue. The latter trope became more conventional in gaining consent and justification for colonial intervention to "rescue" Muslim women from their anachronistic and misogynist worlds. According to Bullock: "Invasion and colonization presented themselves to Europeans as something of a right and a duty, since only the superior Westerner could bring a stagnant Orient out of its backwardness."[52] Thus the white man's burden or *mission civilisatrice* became a project of political, economic, and cultural domination sustained ideologically through knowledge production about the Orient as an atavistic place in need of modernization and "rescue."

Part II: The Feminist Gaze

Colonial and Orientalist images of Muslim women persist, despite new feminist movements away from essentialism and the increasing academic and political investment in polyvocality and personal narrative. Allocating voice to female subjects has been regarded as the erasure of the concept of "woman" as a universal and undifferentiated sociological category. Yet, in producing knowledge on Third World women and particularly Muslim women, the issue of voice is compromised by the political investment in maintaining academic proprietorship over the discourse as part of western knowledge of the "Other."[53]

Does the feminist gaze simply reproduce the imperialist masculinist gaze, or is there a different logic to the way women see and represent "Other'' women? In many ways, the feminist gaze during the colonial period led to the same exoticization as the male gaze. Yet there is some debate over the nature of western women's imperial cultural production vis-a-vis Muslim women. Billie Melman[54] and Reina Lewis[55] argue that colonial women "registered difference less pejoratively and less absolutely."[56] Melman argues that European women presented harem women more as sisters than as "alien others."[57] The harem signified the "image of the middle class home: domestic and feminine and autonomous" and,

she continues, seemed to embody the Victorian ideal of separate spheres particularly well.

Still, their seemingly relativist attitudes nevertheless maintained the West's superiority over the Orient and, in so doing, maintained western society's cultural hegemony and its power to name and define the Orient. Conversely, Shohat argues that female travelers participated in the colonial gaze and that their accounts represented "a subliminal erotic fascination with the female other, a fascination masquerading at times as a male gaze."[58] Judy Mabro also affirms that "female observers have been as ambiguous, as hostile and as Eurocentric as men."[59]

Claiming Authority through Literary Strategies and Conventions. These forms of feminist representation of the Muslim "Other" relates to what Julie Stephens refers to as the "unmediated association between representation and reality that surfaces when non-Western women are the object of feminism's gaze."[60] This, she argues, represents the point at which "feminism collides and colludes with Orientalism."[61]

Specific literary devices are employed to inscribe ''truth'' and authority within such accounts. Stephens argues that various journalistic techniques are used to signal what is "information" in contemporary texts on third world women.[62] These writings take the form of "travel documentary rather than specialist academic study," she asserts, and employ such textual strategies for legitimation as "clipped phrasing and cliched images."[63] These stylized forms of writing render the scene so familiar, according to Stephens, that "the reader is almost immediately receptive to the 'information' that is to follow."[64]

In *Nine Parts of Desire*,[65] for example, Geraldine Brooks prefaces each chapter with a verse from the Qur'an—a seal of authority to her impressionistic (and voyeuristic) view of Muslim women's lives. It sanctifies her script and the "information" that she relays of the Muslim "Other" through her first-person narrative. Stephens argues that when the first-person literary style is used, "the narrator appeals to the 'authority of experience' to establish her qualifications."[66] She goes on to say that while all texts legitimate themselves, what is interesting (and disturbing) is "the conflict between the techniques used and the discourses' feminist concerns." In a final lament, she writes that "as

feminism weaves its picture of the non-Western woman, it undoes many of its own aims."[67]

In structuring discourses on Muslim women, the use of discursive power results in what can be construed as "metaphorical violence."[68,69] The use of descriptive metaphor and allegory are literary devices that often serve the writer's political aims and biases.[70,71,72] Brooks uses these strategies skillfully to portray women according to her Eurocentric conceptions.[73,74,75] For example, her description of a friend and colleague who began to wear the veil is unpacked through the following imagistic realism: "It was like watching a nature film run in reverse: she had crumpled her bright wings and folded herself into a dull cocoon."[76] Using the allegory of a reversal of nature allows Brooks to bring her readers to the conclusion that the practice of veiling is "unnatural." To what extent she does violence to her friend's choice is a question that becomes elided through the use of aesthetic language. Through this style of writing, metaphor and descriptive language are employed in ways that do violence to the subject(s) by objectifying and obfuscating their realities so as to blur the distinction between actuality and the ideologically situated account that is produced.

The continuity of colonial and Orientalist scholarship in contemporary representations construct Muslim women as a universal, ahistorical, and undifferentiated category who become essentialized through the uniqueness of their difference. Eurocentric discourses on Muslim women serve the continuing political intent of justifying western superiority and domination. This form of academic imperialism sets up a binary analytical framework that juxtaposes the West's "liberated" women with Islam's "oppressed" women. Positioning Muslim women within this dynamic has been used to frame a particular understanding of them as second-class citizens within Islam. The essentialism invoked in this process projects Muslim women as an *a priori* social category with embedded qualities that become objectified through a discourse of Otherness.[77] Lazreg goes on to explain how the Third World female subject is constructed as a prior category of analysis:

> The totalitarian character of the existing representation of difference appropriates differential items haphazardly and

incorporates them into a structure that becomes autonomous and stands for the lived reality of Third World women. An abstract anthropological subject deemed "oppressed" is thus created. Studying this constructed subject is not for the purpose of understanding her as such as it is to gather documentary evidence of her "oppression." Ironically, the language of liberation reinscribes relations of dominance.[78]

This sort of academic treatment connects how social meanings are constructed and tied to projects of economic and political domination, and how knowledge production reproduces the ideological practices of colonialism.

Reproducing Literary Tropes of Otherness. Examining contemporary feminist writing, we see such paradigms of the "oppressed Muslim woman" and "rescued Muslim maiden," or perhaps "Muslim maiden in need of rescue," reproduced. We also see the motifs of "conversion" and "enclosure" operate in renewed ways. This occurs within the genre of what has been termed imperialist feminism and has been critiqued by Mohanty, Amos and Parmar,[79] Lazreg, and others for representing Third World women through the binary relations of the First World/Third World balance of power and the corresponding construction of Muslim and Third World women as an essentialized category of "Other."[80]

I will give some examples of how these archetypal paradigms, which historically have permeated knowledge production on Muslim women, are reproduced in imperialist feminist writing. Let us begin with the "oppressed Muslim woman paradigm." It is hard to narrow the many contemporary representations of Muslim women as "oppressed." They occur in travel writing, fiction/non-fiction, and popular culture. Some salient examples come from the title of books that utilize the "enclosure motif." For example, Patricia Jeffery's book on women and *purdah* entitled *Frogs in a Well* has a selfexplanatory imagery.[81] Then there is Juliette Minces' *House* of *Obedience*.[82] Both descriptively capture particular images of enclosure and repression. While this is not to deny that women living the circumstances described in these books do suffer oppressive conditions, it is necessary to problematize the process through which these

metaphors, once having gained currency, become universalized and are used to essentialize the representation of all Muslim women as an undifferentiated category marked by oppression.

Novelist Katherine Govier describes seeing Muslim women wearing a face veil at the Beijing conference as "walking black pyramids, shrouded in black … rendered voiceless and invisible." She remarks:

> It shocks me and then makes me want to laugh at its absurdity. Two black figures, their oval heads distinguishable atop a pyramid of swathing … who are these figures? Bank robbers? Egyptian mummies in full drag? Escapees from the executioner's chambers?[83]

This description is a prime example of the dissonance of imperialist feminist gaze as it confronts and defines the nature of these women's "difference" as total, abject, and irreconcilable. It simultaneously divests these women of their agency and assumes their lack of political maturity to decide their own expressions of identity and womanhood.

Similarly there is the description of the veiled Muslim woman as "anonymous, a non-person unapproachable, just a silent being skulking along looking neither left nor right."[84] This recaptures the equation of silence, erasure, and Islamic dress that emerged in *Don Quixote* and is reminiscent of the line "*her dress and silence make us think she is what we hope she is not.*" In this type of representation, the Muslim woman operates as a foil for the liberated western woman. This "positional superiority" serves to create dominance by promoting essentialized difference. This move falls into the revamped paradigm of conversion, where the goal is not religious conversion but emulation of the western woman as a marker of Muslim women's liberation. For example, Fatima Mernissi writes that ''the nascent liberation of Muslim women has indeed borrowed many characteristics of Western women's way of life. The first gesture of the 'liberated' Arab women was to discard the veil for Western dress."[85] Conversion and "respectability," then, now occurs through the westernization of Muslim women rather than their acceptance of Christianity.

Another example of the redefined motif of conversion-as-westernization is evident in an ad by the sportswear company Bijan, printed in a 1993 issue of *Vogue* magazine. The image of a Muslim woman stared back from the page with a blank expression, veiled in black with the message written below: "Women should be quiet, composed, obedient, grateful, modest, respectful, submissive and very, very serious." This picture was juxtaposed with the image of the same woman transformed into the quintessential all American girl, smiling with a baseball bat in hand, looking feisty and vivacious. The message below her read: "Women should be bright, wild, flirty, fun, eccentric, tough, bold, and very, very Bijan."

This ad reinforces the notion of conversion to American cultural norms and values as the medium of liberation for Muslim women. It also reasserts the dichotomization of social values associated with women in Islam's "backward" vision versus the West's "progressive" vision. In this recurring paradigm, the Islamic "Other" is portrayed once again as the foil, a caricature based on notions of an anachronistic Islamicized identity.

McClintock argues that a popular Victorian trope of "Otherness" emerged as the "invention of anachronistic space."[86] In the Victorian imagination, the "Other'' of the colonized world existed almost metaphysically in an anachronistic moment of prehistoric temporal space. This representation contrasted sharply with the concurrent concept of imperial "progress" and the inherent superiority of Europe and Europeans. McClintock goes on to say that "within this trope, the agency of women, the colonized, and the industrial working class are disavowed and projected onto anachronistic space: prehistoric, atavistic and irrational, inherently out of place in the historical time of modernity."[87] Said also notes the Orientalists' tendency to view the Orient in terms that were "static, frozen and fixed eternally."[88] This "backwardness" continues to be inscribed upon the archetypal image of the Muslim woman. Her only redemption lies within her willingness to accommodate herself to modernity and western cultural norms.

The material and ideological conditions for this paradigm's persistence also may be tied to globalization and the homogenization/

westernization that occurs through the attempt to develop a "singular world culture." This simply masks the encroachment of western cultural hegemony over the South. Complex issues arise relating to the assimilative affect of a global cultural synthesis taking place as the result of the North's cultural and economic imperialism over the South. Samir Amin argues that "the progressive Westernization of the world is nothing more than the expression of the triumph of the humanist universalism invented by Europe."[89] He points out that the dominant ideology of Eurocentrism is not only a world vision, "but a political project on a global scale: a project of homogenization through imitation and catching up."[90] For Amin, as long as the peripheries are connected to the world capitalist system, they will be doomed to being only a cheap imitation of the West. He goes on to say:

> [T]hese societies can only progress to the extent that they imitate the West. And this is what they are doing in any case even if they are doing it slowly and imperfectly, because of elements or resistance based on outmoded dogmatism (like Marxism) or anachronistic motivations (like tribalism or religious fundamentalism).[91]

Within the Eurocentric paradigm, liberation for Muslim women is measured by the degree to which their dress codes conform to standards acceptable in the West.[92] This is not to deny the fact that the policing of women's dress by repressive regimes (e.g., the Taliban) is unjustifiably oppressive. However, to expect conformity to a set of cultural codes determined by the West means that Muslim women will be subjected to yet another hegemonic worldview and will continue to be denied the opportunity to define for themselves what liberation and empowerment mean and whether or not this includes the veil.

Another example of contemporary imperialist writing from Geraldine Brook's *Nine Parts of Desire* provides a narrative account of her traveler's tale voyaging through Muslim societies. She describes her feelings of dissonance when she meets a Muslim woman whose Islamic militant voice appears incompatible with her "Western dress." She writes: "For me it was

easier to deal with Hamida in her *chador.* The things she said somehow seemed less jolting coming out of that anonymous darkness."[93] Brooks is disconcerted by Hamida's unwillingness to fall into the conversion paradigm—adopting western dress was supposed to herald a change in feminist consciousness that should have led her to betray her religion and way of life. In another encounter with what she describes as an "Egyptian yuppie," who interrupts her Orientalist vision of what the Middle East should be, Brooks is compelled to remark:

Sahar was both reassuringly familiar and depressingly unexotic. I had imagined the Middle East differently. White robed Emirs. Almond eyed Persians. Camels marking the horizon like squiggles of Arabic calligraphy. An Egyptian yuppie hadn't been part of the picture.[94]

Brooks is disappointed that the reality she encountered did not correspond with her imagined Orient. This relates to how Said describes the Orient as "a system of representations *framed* by a whole set of forces that brought the Orient into Western learning, Western consciousness and later Western empire."[95] According to Said, the West's fixation with the Orient exists in almost axiomatic terms:

[T]hat Orientalism makes sense at all depends more on the West than on the Orient, and this sense is directly indebted to various Western techniques of representation that make the Orient visible, clear "there" in discourse about it. And these representations rely upon codes of understanding for their effects, not upon a distant and amorphous Orient.[96]

So in order to have the Orient "make sense," there must be a correspondence between what the imaginative geography of the West deems it to be and the ontological reality that it is. For Brooks, the disjuncture between the two overburdened her sensibilities.

The last motif I want to touch on is that of the "Muslim woman in need of rescue." This is underscored by the insistence that western

feminists must become the intellectual vanguards of Muslim women, who apparently lack the political maturity to articulate their own discourses of emancipation. The trope of "rescue" has become a popular motif. However, many Muslim women writers who seek to reclaim discursive authority over how they are represented and named are resisting it.[97] The meanings that have been inscribed on the Muslim woman's body as "oppressed" or as a passive victim of patriarchal domination provide limited ways of understanding the complex narratives through which Muslim women actually live their lives as actors and resistors.

As we have seen, analytically reductive paradigms have limited the multiple meanings associated with the politics of veiling to a point where the metaphors of the veil as a marker of "backwardness" and "anti-feminism" have come to "stand in" for the varied lived experiences of Muslim women who veil, thereby erasing their agency. Homa Hoodfar writes:

> Muslim women like all other women are social actors, employing, reforming and changing existing social institutions, often creatively to their own ends. The static colonial image of the oppressed veiled Muslim woman, thus often contrasts sharply with women's lived experience of veiling.[98]

Therefore, our understanding of real Muslim women is impoverished by these dominant academic approaches.

Mohanty contextualizes the discursive practices of academic inquiry that produce these pejorative images relating to Muslim and third world women as part of the "First/Third World balance of power." She goes on to say:

> [F]eminist analyses which perpetuate and sustain the hegemony of the idea of the superiority of the West produce a corresponding set of universal images … These images exist in universal ahistorical splendour, setting in motion a colonialist discourse which exercises a very specific power in defining, coding and maintaining existing first/third world connections.[99]

Ironically it is this same mode of defining social reality in binary oppositional terms that inspired great criticism from feminist circles when western women were viewed in the same unidimensional terms and their experience as meaningful independent agents was categorically reduced to their role vis-a-vis men. Lazreg writes that "when the power of men over women is reproduced in the power of women over women, feminism as an intellectual movement presents a caricature of the very institutions it was meant to question."[100] Thus, this imperialistic brand of feminism has passed on the legacy of oppression to their Muslim/Third World sisters by creating the same ethnocentric—if not misogynist—climate for academic inquiry.

Conclusion: Writing Ourselves

The evolving Muslim woman archetype has undergone several transmutations. Her textual presence has embodied and symbolized the political, economic, cultural, and ideological relations between Europe and the Muslim world at particular historical moments. In the textual accounts presented, Muslim women have been produced discursively as products of both the male and the feminist gaze within the context of varying relations of power and domination. Neither construction speaks to the diverse realities and experiences constituting the existences of Muslim women on a global scale. Yet these paradigms have had an essentializing effect on representing all Muslim women as being part of a single undifferentiated category marked by a common trope of oppression.

Therefore, the western/Orientalist construction of Muslim women has maintained currency despite the fact that it presents distorted and static images. On the other hand, the concrete social category of "Muslim woman" absorbs many meanings and incorporates various individual, cultural, and sectarian interpretations of Islam. As such, there is a disjuncture between the various discursive paradigms that attempt to contain Muslim women's realities (including those equally limiting constructions from fundamentalist perspectives) and their varied ontological experiences. As such, no singular construct can harness the social

nuances and dimensions that constitute the Muslim woman as a subject and actor.[101] Being written within the recurring oppression paradigm requires that Muslim women must deconstruct the political and social realities that limit the ways their identities and experiences have come to be known before they can rewrite these scripts.

In discussing the politics of knowledge production, Edward Said said that "because of Orientalism, the Orient was not (and is not) a free subject of thought or action."[102] ln other words, the terms for entering into discussions of the Orient and of Muslims or Muslim women already have been determined discursively. Therefore there is no pure space from which we can begin to create counter-narratives that capture the complexity obscured and denied by recurrent archetypes.

Representational politics that recolonize knowledge production are being countered globally as part of a growing anticolonial movement by some indigenous feminist scholars who are attempting to redefine the epistemological terrain through which their realities have come to be known.[103] As part of this anti-imperialist approach to knowledge production, the saliency of dominant stereotypes and hegemonic ways of knowing about women and Islam is being challenged by some non-Muslim feminist scholars[104] and by Muslim women who contest the unidimensional way in which they have come to be represented and understood.[105]

The current political and social context following the 9/11 tragedy has brought the relationship between contemporary geopolitics, globalization, and representation into fresh relief. The project for Muslim women must now shift toward decolonizing the epistemological spaces through which one comes to know of Islam and Muslims, and reclaiming the space to name our own identities and realities. More "authentic" modes of representation need to be claimed by Muslim women themselves as a means to develop counter-narratives that challenge the hegemonic ways in which our identities have been scripted historically.

Endnotes

1   See also Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: The Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992) and Katherine Bullock, "The Gaze and the Colonial Plans for the Unveiling of Muslim Women," *Studies in Contemporary Islam* 2, no. 2 (2000): 1-20.

2   Chandra Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism,* eds. C. T. Mohanty, A. Russo, and L. Torres (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 51-80.

3   See also Michel Foucault, "Subject and Power," in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics,* eds. H. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 208-26, for a discussion of how subjectivities are constructed through relations of power.

4   Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

5   Mohja Kahf, *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman* (Texas: University of Texas Press, 1999).

6   Ibid.

7   See Katherine Bullock. "Challenging Media Representations of the Veil: Contemporary Muslim Women's Re-Veiling Movement." *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 17, no. 3 (Summer 2000): 22-53; Kahf, *Western Representations,* Homa Hoodfar, "The Veil in Their Minds and on Our Heads: The Persistence of Colonial Images of Muslim Women," *Resources for Feminist Research* 22, nos. 3-4 (1993); Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1986); Said, *Orientalism.*

8   See Kahf, *Western Representations;* Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Said, *Orientalism.*

9   See also Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes"; Annelies Moors, "Women and the Orient: A Note on Difference," in *Constructing Knowledge: Authority and Critique in Social Science,* eds. L. Nencel and P. Pels (London: Sage Pubs., 1991), 114-42; Marnia Lazreg, "Feminism and Difference: The Perils of Writing as a Muslim Woman on Women in Algeria," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 1 (1988): 81-107; Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar, "Challenging Imperial Feminism," *Feminist Review* 17 (July 1984): 3-19.

10   Kahf, *Western Representations*, 18.

11   Ibid.

12   Ibid., 33.

13   Ibid., 18.

14   Ibid., 21.

15   Ibid., 19.

16   Warren (1914) cited in ibid., 33.

17   Kahf, *Western Representations*, 30.

18   Ibid., 63.

19   Ibid.

20   Ibid., 64.

21   Rodinson (1987), cited in ibid., 65.

22   Ibid.

23   Ibid.

24   Ibid., 65.

25   Ibid., 60.

26   Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 68.

27   Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather* (New York: Routledge, l 995), 185-86.

28   Chejne (1983), cited in Kahf, *Western Representations,* 81.

29   Ibid.

30   Ibid., 58.

31   Ibid., 86.

32   Ibid., 84.

33   Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

34   Haideh Moghissi, *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism: The Limits of PostModern Analysis* (London: Zed Books, 1999).

35   Kahf, *Western Representations,* 92. See also Partha Mitter, "The Hottentot Venus and Western Man: Reflections on the Constructions of Beauty in the West," in *Cultural Encounters: Representing Otherness*, eds. Elizabeth Hallam and Brian V. Street (London: Routledge, 2000) for a discussion on similar Victorian attitudes to blackness as it related to notions of beauty and white superiority, and McClintock, *Imperial Leather,* 41 for a discussion of the black female body as the Victorian invention of "primitive atavism."

36   Kahf, *Western Representations*, 105.

37   Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt.*

38   Bullock, "The Gaze and the Colonial Plans."

39   Cited in ibid., 3.

40   Ibid., 5.

41   Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt.*

42   Bullock, "The Gaze and the Colonial Plans."

43   Cited in ibid., 3.

44   Ibid., 5.

45   Ibid., 6.

46   Rey Chow, "Writing Diaspora," in *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1993), 57.

47   Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

48   Cited in Judy Mabro, *Veiled Half-Truths* (London: I. B. Taurus, 1991), 4.

49   Caplan distinguishes the notion of *looking relations* from that of the *gaze*. While *look* is related to a process or relation, *gaze* is defined as a one-way subjective vision. E. Anne Caplan, *Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film, and the Imperial Gaze* (London: Routledge, 1997), xvi.

50   [Text missing from original publication.]

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52   Katherine Bullock, *The Politics of the Veil* (Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 1999), 98.

53   Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes."

54   Billie Melman, *Women's Orients: English Women and the Middle East, 1718- 1918: Sexuality, Religion, and Work.* 2d ed. (London: Macmillan, 1992).

55   Reina Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism* (London: Routledge, 1996).

56   Ibid., 4.

57   Melman, *Women's Orients*, 310.

58   Shohat, "Gender and the Culture of Empire," 73.

59   Mabro, *Veiled Half-Truths*, 2.

60   Julie Stephens, "Feminist Fictions: A Critique of the Category 'Non-Western Woman' in Feminist Writings on India," *Subaltern Studies VI* (London: Oxford University Press, 1990), 93.

61   Ibid., 93.

62   Ibid., 98.

63   Ibid., 98.

64   Ibid., 98.

65   Geraldine Brooks, *Nine Parts of Desire* (New York: Anchor Books, 1995).

66   Stephens, "Feminist Fictions," 115.

67   Ibid., 99.

68   Ibid., 93.

69   Ibid.

70   Ibid., 98.

71 Ibid.

72 Ibid.

73 Brooks, *Nine Parts of Desire.*

74 Stephens, "Feminist Fictions," I 15.

75 Ibid., 99.

76 Brooks, *Nine Parts of Desire*, 7.

77 See also Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes"; Moors, "Women and the Orient"; Lazreg ""Feminism and Difference"; Marnia Lazreg, *The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in Question* (London: Routledge, 1994).

78 Lazreg, "Feminism and Difference," 10.

79 Amos and Parmar, "Challenging Imperial Feminism," 3-19.

80 Ibid.

81 Patricia Jeffrey, *Frogs in a Well: Indian Women in Purdah* (London: Zed Press, 1979).

82 Juliette Minces, *The House of Obedience: Women in Arab Society* (London: Zed Press, 1980).

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84 Jeffrey, *Frogs in a Well*, 4.

85 Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil,* 101.

86 McClintock, *Imperial Leather,* 40.

87 Ibid., 40.

88 Said, *Orientalism*, 208.

89 Samir Amin, *Eurocentrism* (New York: Monthly Review Press 1989), 108.

90 Ibid., l 11.

91 Ibid., 107.

92 See, for example, Ahmed 1992, for a discussion on the relationship between the veil and the modernization of elite women.

93 Brooks, *Nine Parts of Desire,* 25.

94 Ibid., 6.

95 Said, *Orientalism*, 203.

96 Ibid., 22.

97 See for example, Gisella Webb, ed., *Windows of Faith* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000).

98 Homa Hoodfar, "The Veil In Their Minds," 5.

99 Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes," 73.

100 Lazreg, "Feminism and Difference, 97.

101 See, for example, Shahnaz Khan, *Muslim Women: Crafting a North American Identity* (Florida: University of Florida Press, 1999).

102 Said, *Orientalism,* 3.

103 See, for example, Linda Tuhiwai-Smith, *De-Colonizing Methodologies* (London: Zed Books 1999).

104 See, for example, miriam cooke, *Women Claim Islam* (London: Routledge, 2001) and Elizabeth Warnock Fernea, *In Search of Islamic Feminism* (New York: Anchor Books, 1998).

105 Ibid.