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# ARAB & ARAB AMERICAN Feminisms

GENDER, VIOLENCE,  
& BELONGING

Edited by Rabab Abdulhadi,  
Evelyn Alsultany, and Nadine Naber



SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY PRESS

**Mourning**

syrupy marmalade spread on toast, burnt  
the edges, a charred sandbox

irrepressible fires inside rivers, the Euphrates  
screams and rises with the Tigris  
emptied bells on ringing rooftops, the Church of the Nativity  
stands and hollers parallel to Al Aqsa

in the tenderness of morning,

who would have imagined miles of mirrors, imploding?

**Tangled**

I circle my accent, seeking my tail. Clip a thousand articles about the weather  
in Beyrouth, like stubborn hairs, stack them in a box without a lid, hope  
that fire rescinds memory, moves back rain. Righteousness in simple acts of  
solitude. Camus capitalized Suicide and we clerk and sort identity. You came  
back with a diamond necklace, *Allah* spelled out like stars, the refugee camp  
might miss it, don't believe in collective memory. Found a pen that belonged  
to my childhood, a lake in the south, seven tones of blue, green, green, blue

## 9

**Quandaries of Representation**

MONA EL-GHOBASHY

*Observant or not, Muslim women face a host of well-known stereotypes: that they are dependent, shackled by the strictures of their religion, and all-around unfree. Such stereotypes are compounded by the many "representational entrepreneurs" in today's media who are eager to speak for and about all Muslim women. The author discusses her experiences with the sometimes humorous, sometimes sobering expectation that she represent and embody the category of the Muslim woman. Rather than speak for all or even some Muslim women, she argues that she can speak only on her own behalf.*

Ever since I was fifteen, I have been trailed by curiosity. Once in tenth grade, while waiting in my high school guidance counselor's office, an elderly secretary got up from her desk and came over to where I was sitting to ask me, in a too-good-to-be-true New York accent, "Excuse me, deah, are you in religion?" Perfect strangers have been no less inquisitive about my head scarf. "Excuse me, does your family come from the Caucasus?" asked an extremely solicitous and almost apologetic fellow passenger on a New York City subway car several years ago. She seemed to slink away in embarrassment as I shook my head and smiled, and I remember thinking that her demeanor suggested an academic elated at identifying a potential research subject.

Now that I reflect on it, the subway has been an especially rich space for strangers to graft onto me their passions, queries, and memories. Once, as I sat impatiently in a delayed subway car on the way to college one late morning in the early 1990s, a young African American man abruptly took off his massive headphones and turned to me, "Excuse me, can I read you a poem?" "Okay," I ventured hesitatingly, relieved that the train car was entirely empty save for him and me and a snoring man in the far corner. He unfolded a white piece of paper and began to passionately read its typed contents, an endearing ode to Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. Then he folded the paper and carefully returned it to his pocket,

explaining to me how it was wrongheaded to argue which leader was better, that both of their strategies were needed and had their place. He looked at me intently for affirmation, and I nodded smilingly. "Thank you, sister," he said, and then returned to complete absorption in the music piped through his headphones.

Once, in a subway car crammed with commuters returning home from work, an elderly Asian man got up from his seat and negotiated his way to where I sat. He leaned down to me and put his finger on the word "contrition" in the *New York Times* article he was reading. "Excuse me, can you explain to me the meaning of this word?" I was happy to oblige, as other passengers sneaked glances at us from behind their books and newspapers.

Once, on the N Train, an elderly olive-skinned man who had been eyeing me shyly gingerly volunteered that he was raised in Iran. I forced a polite smile; I was half-asleep and extremely fatigued from staying up all night to finish a paper. He said that he was Jewish, and that when he was a boy in Iran he memorized all of the Quran in school, and that his mother covered her head, "like you," making a hand gesture that framed his face to mimic a head covering. Perhaps he sensed some doubt in my eyes, perhaps he could not resist reminiscing about his childhood, but he then reached for his black wallet and carefully pulled out a remarkably well-preserved, sepia-toned photograph of a young, angelic-looking woman in a white head scarf. I leaned forward to look at the photograph, which he delicately placed in my hand. Its rippled edges were only slightly creased, and I was overcome by its beauty. He was positively beaming at me, and I beamed back at him.

Other encounters can only be described as bizarre, ranging from annoying but harmless quotidian intrusions to darker experiences that every woman faces in slightly different forms. On the extremely snowy Christmas Day of 2002, I made my way to Queens to meet my best friend who was in town for a short visit. Lost in a neighborhood suddenly made unrecognizable by mounds of snow and shuttered storefronts, I ducked into the only open store, a drugstore, to ask for directions to the café where I was to meet her. As I asked the security guard for its whereabouts, a customer standing in line a few feet away called out, "But do you know how to read? Will you be able to read the street signs?" The security guard stopped talking in midsentence, and we both turned to look at the man's smirking face in genuine puzzlement for several seconds, before it dawned on me that he was calling me illiterate. "You need to know how to read to figure out how to get there," he persisted. Cashiers, customers juggling their purchases and dripping umbrellas, and the security guard all turned to me, and time seemed to stand still. I sputtered, "I'm studying for a Ph.D., you bigot," and he retorted, "Yeah, well I have a

law degree." I turned and sped out of the store, fighting back tears as I inhaled the bracing winter air.

My head scarf also attracts attention in Egypt, where I was born and now frequently return to conduct research and interviews. "You look like that over there, or do you wear that just when you come here?" I'm constantly asked. My interlocutors are puzzled and sometimes impressed when they learn that I look the same in Cairo and New York. Some seem to think of it as a badge of honor, though I point out that it entails absolutely no bravery to be *muhajjaba* at an elite institution like Columbia in a hypercosmopolitan, novelty-friendly metropolis like New York. After September 11, 2001, almost everyone in Egypt asked worriedly, "How do they treat you over there? Is it really bad?"

I have not experienced any harassment, but instead an outpouring of touching concern from colleagues, friends, and even solicitous strangers. But many hundreds of Muslims in less rarefied circumstances have indeed had their lives turned upside down by September 11. In the immediate aftermath, the most that I had to worry about was how my students would perceive me, and whether I could maintain my composure and walk into class on September 13 to steer a discussion about an event I literally could not comprehend. Other Muslims, Sikhs, and non-Muslim Arabs contended with physical harm, verbal abuse, social ostracism, loss of livelihood, and government harassment.

Over the years, as the American government's military and political intervention in the Middle East has intensified, the curiosity of others has honed in on my supposed exceptionalism. The vast majority of Muslim women are oppressed, goes the conventional wisdom, and I seem different. It must be because I live in "the West." "You look so elegant, but would you be allowed to dress this way in Egypt?" a woman I didn't know once asked. A perfect stranger sitting next to me on a flight from Cairo to New York tried to strike up a conversation by pointedly asking, "Do you always travel alone?" Instead of puncturing the widespread American conviction that all Muslim women are so downtrodden that they cannot dress freely (or elegantly) or travel alone, I am unwittingly deployed to confirm such certainties.

I have come to expect that, after delivering a public lecture on some aspect of politics in the Middle East, someone will invariably ask me a question about women and why they are so oppressed "in the Muslim world." At one and the same time, I am turned into a sanitized "liberal Muslim woman" who speaks unaccented English but also a credible insider able to "explain" my coreligionists' deplorable treatment of women. Equally revealing are the plaudits I receive for being "strong" and "articulate," well before my interlocutor has had a chance to

learn anything about my politics or preferences. I cannot help but think that such projections have much more to do with what others graft onto me than what I am and how I see myself. And so I am alternately amused and sobered by how others wish to package me.

Lest I appear to be whiny or caviling, let me concede that there is a necessary amount of reduction in every quotidian transaction. Superficial cultural small talk is often serviceable in everyday conversation, particularly between strangers. Since I am identifiably Muslim because of my head scarf, it is inevitable that my appearance will become the subject of attention. As I wait to pick up clothes from the cleaner, it is entirely ordinary for the owner to make friendly conversation by referring to my head scarf and asking whether it means I come "from the Arab," which segues into a comparison of the weather in South Korea and Egypt and how New York's weather is really quite ideal because there are four distinct seasons, a discourse that ends with me claiming my cleaned clothes and the dry cleaner pleasantly wishing me a nice day.

Yet there remains a fine line between harmless everyday cultural interactions and the quandary of unwittingly being made to represent and somehow stand in for all Muslim women, everywhere, at all times. The task of representation entails negating the manifold stereotypes that stubbornly cling to Muslim women, a task I am reluctant to take on. As it was and continues to be for African American and Asian American women, the burden of deflecting stereotypes is especially acute for Muslim women at this historical juncture, buffeted as they are by unceasing attempts to "reform," "liberate," "uplift," and "empower" them by a motley crew of individuals, institutions, and national governments. As an identifiably Muslim woman, I often feel torn between countering pernicious stereotypes and resisting the mantle of representation that battling stereotypes entails.

When I am called upon to speak from a Muslim, Arab, or Muslim female "perspective," I always wonder: is there one Muslim/Arab/Muslim-female point of view? Do all Muslim women have the same positions on all issues, or even one single issue? I doubt that anyone would claim that Episcopalian or Reform Jewish or Catholic women have a single perspective, so why are millions or even thousands of Muslim women assumed to hold a uniform point of view? Muslim women are divided by national origin, generation, class status, level of religious observance, level of education, and political orientation. What is meant by statements such as "Muslim women are oppressed" or even "In general, Muslim women are unfree"? Conversely, it makes no sense to me to think that one person can be emblematic or representative of "Muslim women," even if it is done positively, as

when attempting to identify a spokeswoman or "positive role model" for Muslim women, such as former Turkish prime minister Tansu Çiller or former Pakistani prime minister Benazir Bhutto or Iranian human rights lawyer and Nobel Prize laureate Shirin Ebadi.

There is a reason to be suspicious of the zeal to represent Muslim women. I have in mind the cottage industry of instant celebrities and "public speakers" eager to speak about and for "Muslim women." This sort of representational entrepreneurship is especially prevalent in the United States and countries in Europe with substantial Muslim minorities, where every few years a Muslim woman is trotted out as an exemplary role model to her "sisters." Inevitably, she is carefully packaged as a freethinker and courageous gadfly eager to "speak the truth" to her coreligionists.<sup>1</sup> Such entrepreneurs almost always adopt a lecturing, hectoring tone, speaking down to real Muslim women. They excoriate "Islam" for its oppression of women (sometimes its "Muslim men") and demand that Muslims "speak out against the fundamentalism in our midst," or some similar trope that is strategically deployed to launch lucrative careers as professional identity peddlers.

As is so common with disingenuous attempts to address "the community," the audience for such self-appointed spokeswomen is not their community but the publishers, talk-show hosts, and think tanks eager for more sordid tales of the backwardness of Muslims and the oppression of Muslim women. Far from valiantly subverting stereotypes, such manufactured missionaries are deeply invested in upholding stereotypes, confirming the comforting belief that Muslims are a benighted lot, incapable of any positive action and clinging to not a single redeeming value. So they must wait for the brave missionary to come and save them from themselves. Without the stereotype, the entrepreneurs have no traction.

Self-anointed representatives are a far cry from people with more modest and truer aspirations, those individuals who work away from the limelight, who live and work among the communities they seek to empower, who understand the sociological structures and intricate layers of inequality that ensnare Muslim and non-Muslim women alike. I cannot help but recall Virginia Woolf's cutting words, no less true today than when she published them in 1938:

Money is not the only baser ingredient. Advertisement and publicity are also adulterers. Thus, culture mixed with personal charm, or culture mixed with advertisement and publicity, are also adulterated forms of culture. We must ask you to abjure them; not to appear on public platforms; not to lecture; not to

allow your private face to be published, or details of your private life; not to avail yourself, in short, of any of the forms of brain prostitution which are so insidiously suggested by the pimps and panders of the brain-selling trade; or to accept any of those baubles and labels by which brain merit is advertised and certified—medals, honours, degrees—we must ask you to refuse them absolutely, since they are all tokens that culture has been prostituted and intellectual liberty sold into captivity.<sup>2</sup>

I do not share Woolf's suspicion of all institutions, but I wholeheartedly identify with her aversion to loud publicity seeking and self-promotion, the sort of entrepreneurship and scramble for representation now routine when it comes to "Muslim women."

Any organized attempts to reduce Muslim women, whether ones that seek to "represent" them or ones that seek to "liberate" them or both, ignore the variation in their life circumstances. Some Muslim women are indeed downtrodden; others are not. Those Muslim women who are oppressed are oppressed in different ways and for different reasons. The same goes for those Muslim women who are emancipated. A genuine concern with diagnosing and alleviating oppression must grapple with unsexy sociological facts and political dynamics that do not make for good copy or riveting confessional narratives. Serious students of gender oppression tackle the variation head-on; hawkers of Muslim women's oppression smother inconvenient facts to serve their agendas.

On a more rarefied plane, attempts to represent or speak for Muslim women by definition must mute their unique selves. Real Muslim and Arab women are extraordinarily diverse, as the contributions to this volume make so amply clear. Like other human beings, they are fraught with ambiguity, contradiction, and inconsistency. I understand the need to suppress idiosyncrasy for purposes of sociological classification and policy intervention for poverty alleviation or literacy promotion, but I do not trust the zeal to flatten Muslim women's diversity by self-appointed spokeswomen and overnight do-gooders.

Each Muslim woman is an irreducible self, capable of speaking on her own behalf. When conceptualizing the self, I find myself returning again and again to Edward Said's final words in his beautiful memoir, *Out of Place*, where he ruminates on the multiple sources of the self:

I occasionally experience myself as a cluster of flowing currents. I prefer this to the idea of a solid self, the identity to which so many attach so much significance. These currents, like the themes of one's life, flow along during the

waking hours, and at their best, they require no reconciling, no harmonizing. They are "off" and may be out of place, but at least they are always in motion, in time, in place; in the form of all kinds of strange combinations moving about, not necessarily forward, sometimes against each other, contrapuntally yet without one central theme. A form of freedom, I'd like to think, even if I am far from being totally convinced that it is.<sup>3</sup>

Literature Today and short stories or nonfiction published in *Phoebe*, *Blue Mesa Review*, *Louisville Review*, and *Variety*.

2. Inanna is the Sumerian goddess of love, fertility, procreation, and war, the first goddess of recorded history.

### 9. Quandaries of Representation

1. I am thinking of such recent fictional and nonfictional confessional works as Ayaan Hirsi Ali, *The Caged Virgin: An Emancipation Proclamation for Women and Islam* (New York: Free Press, 2006); Asra Nomani, *Standing Alone in Mecca: An American Woman's Struggle for the Soul of Islam* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005); Nedjma and C. Jane Hunter, *The Almond: The Sexual Awakening of a Muslim Woman* (New York: Grove Press, 2005); and Irshad Manji, *The Trouble with Islam: A Muslim's Call for Reform in Her Faith* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004).

2. Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (New York: Harcourt, 1938), 94.

3. Edward W. Said, *Out of Place* (New York: Vintage, 2000), 295.

### 11. The Pity Committee and the Careful Reader:

#### How Not to Buy Stereotypes about Muslim Women

1. Many Pakistani feminist and human rights groups have also worked on reforming the misogynistic rape law enshrined in the Zina Ordinance since the mid-1980s, supposedly shariah based but in fact in violation of shariah principles. See Asifa Quraishi, "Her Honor: An Islamic Critique of the Rape Laws of Pakistan from a Woman-Sensitive Position," in *Windows of Faith: Muslim Women's Scholar-Activists*, ed. Gisela Webb (Syracuse: Syracuse Univ. Press, 2000), 102–35. However, the specific problems with the rape law did not hinder prosecution in the *Mai* case. The Zina Ordinance was reformed in 2004 and is under challenge for further reform.

2. Here is the link to the interview, so that the reader can refer to it in the following discussion: <http://www.Islamicmagazine.com/issue-15/interview-with-mukhtarani-mai.html>.

3. Here is a link to the Kristof piece: <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=980DE1D C1438F93AA1575AC0A9629C8B63&scp=2&sq=mukhtarani%20bibi%20osama&st=cse>.

4. For a fuller discussion, see Mohja Kahf, "Packaging Huda: Sha'rawi's Memoirs in the U.S. Reading Environment," in *The Politics of Reception: Globalizing Third World Women's Literature*, ed. Amal Amireh and Lisa Suhair Majaj (New York: Garland, 2000), 148–72.

5. However, sometimes the stereotyped image is forced on authors who do not want it. Susan Muaddi Darraj wrote a book, *Scheherazad's Legacy: Arab and Arab American Women on Writing*, collecting essays by sixteen Arab and Arab American women writers, none of them having to do with the stereotype in the slightest, many of them in any case not Muslim but Christian, and her publisher imposed the exotic veiled Muslim woman image on the book cover, against her will, as she disclosed to this author. Similarly, the profaith Islamic feminist Amina Wadud was forced to accept such a cliché on the cover of her book, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, as this author knows from personal communication and being consulted by Dr. Wadud during the publication process.

6. See Hadia Mubarak, "The Politicization of Gender Reform: The Islamists' Discourse on Repealing Article 340 of the Jordanian Penal Code" (master's thesis, Georgetown Univ., 2005).

7. In her International Women's Day lecture at Evergreen State College, Olympia, Wash., Mar. 9, 2007. LaDuke was speaking about her struggles to regain land and rights belonging to her Ojibwe Tribe through the White Earth Land Recovery Project.

8. See [http://www.nbcactionnews.com/news/local/story.aspx?content\\_id=C6C407E2-D5F8-46AA-BA9E-40](http://www.nbcactionnews.com/news/local/story.aspx?content_id=C6C407E2-D5F8-46AA-BA9E-40).

9. Martin Buber, *I and Thou: A New Translation with a Prologue*, trans. Walter Arnold Kaufman (New York: Scribner, 1970), 103.

### 12. History's Traces: Personal Narrative, Diaspora, and the Arab Jewish Experience

1. E-mail communication, Dec. 30, 31, 2005.

2. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Cartographies of Struggle: Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism," in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, ed. Chandra Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1991), 33, 34.

3. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), 7.

4. Christine Stansell, "Sisterly Sentimentalism: Feminism and the Politics of Empathy," presentation at Sense and Sentiment Conference, Pomona College, Feb. 11, 2006. See Lauren Berlant, "Poor Eliza," *American Literature* 70, no. 3 (1998); and Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997) for critiques of suffering and empathy, what Berlant acidly refers to as "pain alliances," as affective tropes around which both progressive and reactionary politics are organized.

5. See Berlant again but also Wendy Brown's *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1995), in which she argues that contemporary liberal politics not only encourages the formation of identities around narratives of suffering but also encourages groups to remain invested in their injured status instead of pursuing collective transformation.

6. bell hooks, "Postmodern Blackness," in *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 23–32.

7. This recalls Frantz Fanon's famous example of being interpellated into blackness when a child looks at him and says, "Look, a Negro!" Of the experience of being a black Antillean in France he writes, "I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects. Sealed into that crushing objecthood" (*Black Skin, White Masks: The Experiences of a Black Man in a White World* [New York: Grove Press, 1952], 109). I might add that my mother was more than happy to explode the fantasy as well: walking out of customs and into the greeting area in Casablanca, she squinted at me and said: "What are you wearing?" Not much gets past my mother.

8. Caren Kaplan, "Beyond the Pale: Rearticulating U.S. Jewish Whiteness," in *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age*, ed. Ella Shohat (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998), 456.

9. Daniel J. Elazar, "Can Sephardic Judaism Be Reconstructed?" Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, <http://www.jcpa.org/dje/articles3/sephardic.htm>.

10. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 25. Palestinian intellectual and activist Edward Said quotes Gramsci in his introduction to *Orientalism* in which he explains, "Much of my personal investment in this stuff derives from my awareness of being an 'Oriental' as a child growing up in two British colonies. . . . In many ways my study of Orientalism has been an attempt to inventory the traces upon me, the Oriental subject of the culture whose domination has been so powerful a factor in the life of all Orientals" (25).