

CONSTRUCTED OPPRESSION AND FORCED LIBERATION:
ANALYZING, DECONSTRUCTING, AND REJECTING THE CONCEPTION OF
THE OPPRESSED MUSLIM WOMAN

by

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Introduction

Purpose

Imagine a CNN segment titled, “Does Christianity Promote Slavery?” or “Does Judaism Promote Greed?”. Now, imagine a CNN host pointing to countries such as Russia, Congo, and Venezuela to ask why Christians are backwards. And imagine if a CNN anchor were to showcase the rape statistics of Sweden, the United States, and South Africa¹ and say “be honest though. For the most part, Christian countries are not a free and open society for women”. On September 29, 2015, the hosts on CNN uttered exactly such words, albeit, about another religion, in a segment titled, “Does Islam Promote Violence?”. The hosts made statements such as, “defenders of Islam insist it is a peaceful religion. Others disagree and point to the primitive treatment in Muslim countries of women”² and “be honest though. For the most part it is not a free and open society for women in those states”^{3,4}

For many decades, Western cultures and media have portrayed Muslim women, mainly from the ‘Orient’, i.e. parts of the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia, as oppressed and abused women with no agency over their lives. During these decades, Western, white ‘feminism’ has colonized the words ‘oppressed’ and ‘empowered’, and has made itself an authority on who these words can and cannot apply to. What many people forget is that both of these words are subjective terms. Many Muslim women living throughout the world would completely disagree with this Western perspective of them. Some even believe the reverse, that Western women are

¹ The countries listed are among those with some of the highest reported rape incidents (Pandey, 2018).

² stated by Alisyn Camerota

³ stated by Don Lemon

⁴ More examples of islamophobic statements in mainstream media can be found in Vox’s article, “It’s not just Fox News: Islamophobia on cable news is out of control” (Fisher, 2015).

oppressed, while they themselves are empowered. These Western generalizations of them are a representation of the colonality of power⁵ and are part of a neo-imperial worldview. The image of the helpless Muslim woman is simply a way of defining ‘the other’, and telling ‘the other’ who and what they are since they are perceived as being incapable of defining themselves. Some even regard Muslim women as *brainwashed* by their ‘patriarchal’ religion. As Edward Said commented on the Western construction of the Orient, “she never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history. He spoke for and represented her” (Said, 1978, p. 6). This form of modern-day imperialism *colonizes* the victim’s identity. These women’s cultures and religion are seen as inferior *to* the West, *by* the standards the West has set and imposed upon the rest of the world.

It is also an injustice to tell other women, especially women of color and of a persecuted religious minority in the United States, who they are. It takes away their voice; a voice of women who are often brought up during discussions of the Orient and Islam, but are rarely allowed to speak for themselves or listened to by people in Western media and academia. Though there is some research and analysis critiquing the very colonialist attitude the West has regarding Muslim women, commentary and perspectives from how Muslim women *themselves* feel about the labels given to them and how *they* view Western culture are less accessible to the American public. Additionally, there is still a widespread assumption among Americans, especially in the media, and even among some feminists, that Islam and Eastern cultures are inherently oppressive, and that the

⁵ Quijano (2000) termed the concept of ‘coloniality’, which is well explained by Appelbaum (2005): “I use ‘coloniality’ to address ‘colonial situations’ in the present period in which colonial administrations have almost been eradicated from the capitalist world-system. By ‘colonial situations’ I mean the cultural, political, sexual, spiritual, epistemic and economic oppression/exploitation of subordinate racialized/ethnic groups by dominant racialized/ethnic groups with or without the existence of colonial administrations.”

women who adhere to the religion and/or are from these regions need ‘saving’⁶. Whereas, these same sources tend to portray the West as a beacon of light for the rights and freedoms of women, a beacon of light that must be spread to other places and peoples in order to ‘rescue’ them. It is necessary to begin the process of decolonization⁷ by dispelling those notions and presenting counterarguments to challenge such a binary conception of the world.

The overall purpose of my research is to identify and challenge the misconceptions and mischaracterizations the West has of Islam and Muslim women from the ‘Orient’. What one defines as ‘oppression’ and ‘empowerment’ may not be the same for everyone else. Imposing one’s definition on someone else and refusing to listen to theirs is a form of dominance, and in the case of the West, has colonial roots. The desire to liberate Muslim women may even be oppression in itself. As Abu-Lughod (2002) states, “what presumptions are being made about the superiority of that to which you are saving her? Projects of saving other women depend on and reinforce a sense of superiority by Westerners, a form of arrogance that deserves to be challenged,” (pp. 788-789). This ‘white feminism’ prevalent in the West comes from a place of racial and cultural superiority, ethnocentricity, and the universalization of provincialism⁸. Feminism is not truly liberating if it only seeks to represent and define the ‘other’ (without the ‘other’s’ input) as oppressed.

⁶ “Some Americans cite ‘gender inequality’ among the top things they admire least about the Islamic world” (Mogahed, 2006, para. 9). “Perceptions of Muslims cross partisan and ideological lines... The most prevalent negative stereotype of Muslim Americans was that they have outdated views of women (68 percent were perceived this way)... Concerns about Muslims’ treatment of women also emerge in studies of public opinion outside the United States” (Sides & Mogahed, 2018, para. 3, 32 & 33).

⁷ “Decolonization engages with imperialism and colonialism at every level... This means ‘writing back’ against the ongoing colonialism and colonial mentalities that permeates education, media, government policies, and ‘common sense’. For us, it also means challenging how higher education, research and publishing are complicit in and, in fact, vital to the colonial oppression of Indigenous peoples around the globe” (Ritskes, 2012, para. 2).

⁸ According to Lexico (2019), provincialism is described as “the way of life or mode of thought characteristic of the regions outside the capital city of a country, especially when regarded as unsophisticated or narrow-minded”.

Power and knowledge are highly connected; French philosopher, Michel Foucault, even used the term ‘power-knowledge’ to signify the relationship between the two (Foucault & Gordon, 1980). Throughout history, empires, governments, regimes, and individuals have utilized knowledge—its control, suppression, and distortion—in order to control the masses and oppress certain groups of people. Truth is “produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true...” (Foucault 1984, quoted in Rabinow 1991, pp. 72-73). History (and hence, the truth) is often times written by the most powerful, and the most powerful seeks to exert authority over the less powerful, and thus rarely critiques its own flaws. This is why ‘counter-discourses’ such as the ones I will be presenting are so vital to the decolonization process. Religious, academic, political, and social discourses in the West have conceived phantasms of the Orient, Islam, and Muslim women, which I seek to illustrate, deconstruct, challenge, and then finally, reject.

This paper will present a multi-dimensional examination analyzing history, colonialism, religion, culture, academic discourses, literature, news, media, social media, gender roles, and more. Additionally, this will be supplemented by responses from interviews I conducted to situate the perspectives of real people in my analysis. This will allow me to explore how some American women and Muslim women from the Orient define ‘oppression’ and ‘empowerment’, and to see their perceptions of one another, and to what extent they are different or the same. I hope to dispel the idea that ‘oppression’ and ‘empowerment’ are objective and universal truths that must be applied the same way to all women and cultures. Just because something is not Western or does not fit the mold the West has created, it does not mean that it is dangerous, unjust, or wrong. Modern-

day feminism must be all-inclusive and take into account different cultures, religions, experiences and lifestyles of women. Especially because a ‘Western superiority’ mindset does nothing to help women and further exacerbates not only coloniality, but patriarchy as well. Our society should focus on making sure that women all over the world have the freedom to live the lifestyles they choose, instead of attacking the lifestyles they choose.

Definitions and Representations

There are numerous terms that will be used throughout this paper, and it is important that I clarify my definitions of them. ‘The West’ and ‘Western societies’ broadly refer to various cultures, regions, states, and nations in parts of Europe, North America, and even Australia, or what is academically referred to as the ‘Occident’. The word ‘American’, although it can apply to anyone from North America (such as Canada), Central America, and South America, will be used to refer to residents of the United States. The term ‘American public’ will more specifically be used to discuss the dominant beliefs and viewpoints held by many in the United States. And when mentioning the ‘American media’, I will be referring to the mainstream media in American society, where the large, mass-news organizations both *inform* the American people, but also *reflect* the thoughts and moods of the American people. The use of the terms ‘Western feminism/feminists’ or ‘white feminism/feminists’ will specifically refer to the toxic form of feminism that lacks intersectionality and is colonial in origin⁹. These terms will be used to address a subset of feminism that tends to be very Euro-centric in nature and leaves out women of color, women of other faiths, LGBTQ+ individuals, and women from the ‘global south’. “Some groups associated with this movement pressure all women into accepting and celebrating their narrow view of feminism and

⁹ Though feminism is divided into three main waves, and aspects of ‘white feminism’ exist in all three, for purposes of this paper I will be referring to the third wave, which started at the end of the 20th century. (Cargle, 2018)

notion of liberation, assuming that the Western woman has the license to act on behalf of the ‘oppressed’ woman, thus interfering in her struggles in order to liberate her from all forms of oppression” (Jailani, 2016, p. 53). In fact, some have even referred to this form of feminism as ‘white supremacy in heels’ due to its link with the white-savior complex¹⁰ (Cargle, 2018).

I will use the word ‘Orient’ to refer to parts of North Africa, West Asia, and parts of South Asia. I have chosen this word because Edward Said’s book, *Orientalism*, played a large role in inspiring me to analyze this topic from a post-colonial perspective. At first, this word may seem problematic due to its geographical vagueness; the ‘Orient’ originally was used by Europeans to refer to the Near East, and then later the Middle East as well, and then eventually the entire continent of Asia. The term’s meaning was fluid, much like the perception the West had of it. However, this geographical vagueness is the exact reason why I have chosen the word. The ‘Orient’ seems to exist, and has always existed, as a *concept* rather than a geographical fact, and was created in the mind of the West, divorced from actual geography or cultural reality. Many of the Western scholars that participated in the construction of the Orient did not care for the nuances between the countries and regions of Western Asia, North Africa or South Asia. These scholars did not distinguish between them and lumped them all together, into one imagined reality. This made it easier to study the ‘other’, because the other was not even worth the in-depth study required to truly understand them, because they are all inferior to the West in the end any ways. We see this attitude today as well. Many Westerners, and especially the media, refuse to acknowledge the differences and nuances that around 50 different countries (spanning

¹⁰ “The White Savior Complex is the idea that people who benefit from white privilege are wanting to help those in underserved communities for their own benefit more than that of the communities” (Reed, 2018, p. 5). It is heavily connected to the attitude that non-white peoples do not have the ability to improve their situation without intervention from white people, a form of the ‘White Man’s Burden’ which was prevalent throughout colonialism and imperialism.

multiple continents) can have. Instead, the entirety of the Orient is painted with one broad brush of stereotypes and assumptions. “In newsreels or news-photos, the Arab is always shown in large numbers. No individuality, no personal characteristics or experiences. Most of the pictures represent mass rage and misery, or irrational (hence hopelessly eccentric) gestures” (Said, 1978, pp. 286-287).

When referring to the Orient, I am discussing the *conceptualization* of it. Non-Muslim women are included in this conceptualization as well, whether they be Hindu women in South Asia, or Christian women in Egypt. The concept of the Orient *erases* all nuances and differences that exist in reality, because all Oriental peoples have been viewed as inferior by the West. Specifically when discussing ‘women from the Orient’, I will be referring to women that live there now, women who were born there and then immigrated elsewhere, and women whose parents or grandparents were born there. The last term I will define is ‘Muslim women’. This term is more specific than the last and exclusively refers to adherents of the Islamic faith that identify as women, regardless of race, ethnicity, nationality, or place of birth.

Clarifications and Disclaimer

Throughout this paper, certain terms or phrases may be used that will seem like generalizations. It is important to note that I, as a researcher, am fully aware of the nuances that exist within populations. When I will be referring to terms such as ‘the West’, ‘American public’, ‘Western feminism’, etc... I am in no way generalizing or painting that entire population with a broad brush. Rather, I am referring to and discussing the hegemonic discourses prevalent in Western and/or American societies. It is not unbeknownst to me that there are individuals in Western and/or American societies that do not hold such notions. In fact, many Muslims are a part

of these societies as well. However, it is an undeniable fact, supported by numerous studies and polls¹¹, that there is a *dominant* narrative prevalent in the minds of the general public in these societies concerning Islam, Muslim women, and the Orient. This dominant narrative is what I seek to explore and unravel in this research.

That being said, it is important to make another point clear. When discussing Muslim women, I do not wish to present myself as an authority or voice for these women. Muslim women are a diverse population and they all have their own viewpoints on the subject matters I will be discussing. Some Muslim women have a very conservative view of the world, their religion, and societies, and others, a very secular view. I am in no way claiming myself, or even my research, to represent the voices of Muslim women. Rather, I seek to show that viewpoints that counter the dominant narrative in Western and American societies regarding them *can* exist among Muslim women. I seek to show that the conceptualizations the West has created for ‘the other’ do not necessarily have to be universal truths.

It is also necessary to state that though I seek to counter the dominant narrative in Western societies that Muslim women and women in the Orient are ‘oppressed’ and need to be ‘liberated’, I am not blind to the fact that some oppression of women does exist among Muslim communities and in these regions. It would be dishonest for me to say that no Muslim women or women who are from those areas of the world face oppression. Some Muslim and Oriental women do in fact live under dictatorial and corrupt regimes that oppress them. Some Muslim and Oriental women do in fact live under patriarchal societies and cultures that oppress them. Some Muslim and Oriental women do in fact live with abusive partners and family members that oppress them. However, it is

¹¹ Some of which, will be mentioned in this paper.

also dishonest to paint the *entirety* of the Orient and Muslim community with a single broad brush because of these cases. It is untrue and unproductive to assume that religion or culture *alone* are the causes for this oppression. It is untrue and unproductive to assume that the path to ‘liberate’ or ‘empower’ these women is through Western values and culture. It is also untrue and unproductive to assume that Western values and culture are void of oppression when it comes to women. There is undoubtedly a double standard present among discourses concerning women’s oppression. While, the West certainly oppresses women, oppression seems to become much more of a problem when it is taking place in ‘other’ societies and cultures.

Research Approaches

School of Thought

An appropriate research approach should reflect the intention, knowledge, questions, and purpose being applied to the research process. One approach that fits well into my research is post-colonialism. This approach seeks to analyze and dissect dominant knowledges and power structures in the world which resulted from and are the legacy of colonialism and imperialism. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said, one of the most influential post-colonialists, analyzes how the West has created “a set of fantasy projections, distorted disparagements, and demeaning misrepresentations, the real purpose of which was not to understand the Middle East, but to justify and encourage European conquest, oppression, and exploitation of the Middle East and its peoples” (Birx, 2006, p. 1911). As my research intends to, post-colonialism is meant to explain why and how representations of colonizers and colonized peoples differ and permeate into various aspects of the world today. Perceptions—the ways of viewing and being viewed—are interconnected with ‘power-knowledge’ and constructions of the ‘other’. That is why “essentialist characterizations of

peoples, societies, and cultures” are to be rejected under this approach, which seeks to give power to the subaltern and confront Western hegemony (Birx, 2006, p. 1910). An aspect of post-colonialist research is that it critiques “both the authority of anthropologists to speak for other cultures and essentialist descriptions of those cultures” (Birx, 2006, p. 1911). And that is what I aim to do in my research, to challenge Western conceptions and portrayals of Orientals and Muslim women by placing an “emphasis on ‘voices’ of the subjects themselves” (Birx, 2006, p. 1911). This approach allows me to reframe political and socio-cultural discourses from underneath dominant colonial power systems, to include the voices and perspectives from those who continue to suffer its effects.

Another approach that is especially fitting for my research is feminist critique¹² which, much like my research, has a two-dimensional approach, unlike more traditional methods. It seeks to *produce* new knowledge but also *inspires* social change by analyzing the struggles women have faced and are facing through the multiple ways in which they are oppressed—even if it is by other women. This lens seeks to challenge and dismantle the various institutions responsible for women’s oppression such as patriarchy, coloniality, racism, heterosexism, and capitalism. Feminist approaches recognize that the world has been dominated by white, straight, cisgender, Western men who have, through unjust ways, established their hegemony upon others. Though initially, and even in some ways today, the concept of feminism was very Euro-centric and heavily focused on white women, voices of women from different backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives are being heard more and more, reshaping this approach. And so now, the feminist approach has

¹² “Methodologically, feminist research differs from traditional research. It actively seeks to remove the power imbalance between researcher and subject; it is politically motivated in that it seeks to change social inequality; and it begins with the standpoints and experiences of women” (Brayton et al., para. 5).

transformed from centering around white, Western, straight, cisgender women to becoming an approach that is diverse and more inclusive of people in marginalized communities such as women of color, LGBTQ+ individuals, poor women, women from the global south, and even men. This approach, as well as my research, intends to empower women, to alter power relations, and to challenge inequality with the perspectives and experiences of women themselves.

Methodology

Feminist critique is also a methodology, which I have employed in analyzing my research and interviews. This methodology aims to counter the gender inequality that is present in our patriarchal societies and allows women's voices to be heard, because for most of history, the experiences of women have been left out, ignored, belittled, or assumed. My research explicitly focuses on the experiences and perceptions of women to be able to counter misconceptions surrounding them, and to decolonize their identities. This methodology rejects universalism and the 'Western feminist' practice of speaking for 'other' women; "such embodied knowledge comes from being in place, and from acknowledging the partiality of that location, rather than from claiming a special privilege or knowledge of oppression" (Thien, 2009, p. 73). This methodology is not characterized by the research techniques it applies, but rather by the *intent* and *purpose* of the research techniques being applied. Due to this characterization, the term feminist methodologies can be quite broad and encompass a wide array of issues. However, some of the common themes include "(1) a critical attention to issues of social injustice, (2) an agenda for social change, (3) an emphasis on ethical research relations, and (4) an explicitly subjective research process" (Thien, 2009, p. 74). This methodology also has a strong focus on interviews and one-to-one dialog between the participant and the researcher. "This qualitative method is valued for putting the

production of knowledge into the hands of the participant. Interviews privilege respondents' voices, according authority to their experience, rather than subjecting them to scientific scrutiny" (Thien, 2009, p. 74). And that is why I have chosen to incorporate interviews in my research.

Positionality, Reflexivity, and Ethical Considerations

Due to the nature of this research it is especially paramount that I address issues of reflexivity¹³. This is relevant to my research because the topics I am exploring relate to the rejection of objective truths. Research, and I would argue especially discourses surrounding Orientals and Muslim women, is often "presented as a seamless, disembodied, neutral process of collecting facts" (Thien, 2009, p. 73). This characterization is simply false. Researchers themselves come with their own positions of power (or lack thereof) and various biases and cultural perspectives that must be addressed as they will undoubtedly affect the resulting research. Reflexivity is defined "by the researcher's close self-examination of how s/he shapes and is shaped by research encounters... what kinds of research questions are asked, what resulting research data are gathered, and where, and how those data are interpreted" (Thien, 2009, p. 73). All research will in some ways be influenced through the relationship of the researcher to the researched. And that is why I must discuss my positionality¹⁴. Whether we like it or not, the world is unequal. How individuals are "positioned within various contexts of power affects the way they understand the world" (Longhurst, 2009, p. 583). It is therefore important that I, as a researcher, recognize my

¹³ Reflexivity refers to "the process of naming or 'locating' a researcher's various subject positions, as a means of acknowledging the partiality of ones' positioning and so the limits of one's knowledge and contribution to knowledge, and of knowledge itself" (Thien, 2009, p. 73).

¹⁴ Positionality is "a person's position within the midst of complex, shifting and overlapping" identities (Longhurst, 2009, p. 583)

“own positions of power in the context of social relations and the partiality and subjective nature of the data collected in the field and of the knowledge generated” (Bosco & Moreno, 2009, p. 120).

I am an American, U.S. citizen, immigrant (from a Muslim-majority country), educated, middle-class, straight, cisgender, Pakistani, Muslim woman. I, as a human being, am not neutral and unbiased; I am “not divorced from relations of power” (Dowling, 2009, p. 597). I have my own identity, experiences, worldview, superiority, and inferiority within society that undoubtedly affect my research whether I would like them to or not. Researchers are “never fully inside or outside”, they occupy “the spaces of betweenness” (Bosco & Moreno, 2009, p. 120). And due to my identity, I do share some similarities with the women portrayed in the discourses on which my analysis focuses on and also my interview participants. And this fact may have aided my research and assisted me in understanding their perspectives better. However, there are also some differences that may hinder my research and prevent me from understanding their perspectives. Nonetheless, identifying these similarities and differences is important.

I have an inherently personal connection to the research I am conducting. Not only have I, as a Muslim woman of color, been in a position of being subjected to the Western gaze, but I, as an American woman, have also subjected others to this same gaze. It is important that I understand and admit the complexities of my identities and positions of power in relation to this research. Additionally, I am a political and cultural activist, both in my private and academic life, who seeks to reverse the effects of colonialism on our world today and uplift the subaltern by dismantling the oppressive systems imposed on to them by dominant, Western, hegemonic institutions. This has undoubtedly influenced my research. The cultural, ethno-racial, geographic, political, religious,

economic, sexual, and social contexts in which my identity is situated are entangled with the topics explored in this research, and are highly relevant to discussions of this research.

An especially critical and significant ethical obstacle to my research is the possibility of contradicting the purpose and intent of this project. While challenging the colonization of women's identities, I do not want to become the colonizer in the process—and there is a possibility of that. There are numerous challenges in “speaking with and for others who many times are in unprivileged positions of power relative both to dominant structures in society [or] to the researchers themselves” (Bosco & Moreno, 2009, p. 122). Will I, who have been criticizing the West for speaking for women from the Orient, begin to start speaking for them or other women as well? This is an important question that I have been mindful of throughout this research because even though I have the right intentions, the results of my research could have harmful implications. I understand my role as a researcher, which is to simply present the perspectives of my participants, not to speak for them or to use them for any agenda. I am cognizant of the sensitivity and risks involved in representing and presenting the words and perspectives of others, and have been careful in doing my best to “avoid the inevitable risk of presenting [my]self as an authoritative representation of subaltern consciousness” (Gandhi, 1998, p. 2).

Orientalism, Imagined Geographies, and Colonialism

As mentioned before, knowledge, and more specifically the construction of truth, is power. The West has dominated the Orient simply by defining it; Said refers to this as “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said, 1978, p. 3). Therefore, the Orient and Islam exist in ‘imagined geographies’; meaning, the Orient is not the Orient, and Islam is not Islam, but rather, both are what the West *perceives* them to be. As Said stated, “the

Orient was almost a European invention” (Said, 1978, p. 1). It exists only to define the Occident, and has been constructed *by* and *in relation to* its creator. For the West, the Orient represents an embodiment of what contrasts, is inferior to, and also, is alien to the West. For example, in the case of veiling, it has been

conflated with the marginalized status of women in the Muslim societies where it is thought to have challenged the idea of gender equality and individual freedom, notions which are considered fundamental to western democratic values and global human rights... in the Western discourse, the oppressed Other is successfully constructed by reference to Western women who are presented as educated, modern, and autonomous. (Khan, 2014, p. 7)

This construction of the other is especially exemplified in what the Orient has signified throughout history. Scholars have only

recently begun to trace the entrenchment of the western image of the oppressed Muslim woman. This informal knowledge about Muslim women seeped into numerous travel books, and occasionally into historical and anthropological accounts of the region. In a century and a half, between 1800 and 1950, an estimated 60,000 books were published in the west on the Arab orient alone. The primary mission of these writings was to depict the colonized Arabs/Muslims as inferior/backwards who were urgently in need of progress offered to them by the colonial superiors. (Hoodfar, 1993, p. 426)

The perceptions of the Orient and Islam were *systematically* constructed by European colonial ideologies—which have permeated into modern-day. And the thing with perceptions is, they seem like reality to the eye of the beholder.

During earlier interactions with the Orient¹⁵, European depictions of ‘that world’ were quite the opposite of what they are today. Paintings of the Orient often showcased half-naked women lying around seductively in gardens and harems with fountains, fruits, and jewels surrounding them. “Europe already knew the Orient as an exotic, cruel, barbarous, but also

¹⁵ The ‘exoticism’ of the East began around the 14th century, and eventually heightened in the 18th and 19th centuries (Mancall, 1998).

delightfully sensual, indulgent and licentious place. The image had been impressed upon European consciousness by a wide variety of sources for several centuries.” (Bullock, 2010, p. 6). The West was *enamored* with the East and there seemed to be a sort of preoccupation, and almost obsession, with the strange world. This was exemplified through: sensual and exotic paintings; folktales; scholarly studies on the Orient; “Middle English Romances with a common theme of the **chivalrous** Western gentleman saving brutalized Oriental women”; the presence of Turks and Moors in Shakespeare’s plays; “the stories of *A Thousand and One Nights* and the *Arabian Nights*” which “were enormously popular in Europe, filled with tales of kings, princesses, magic, devils, and beheadings”; images and stories of belly dancers; exotic spices, jewels, and silks being imported from the East; and much more (Bullock, 2010, p. 7). It is not unrealistic to assume that the West’s infatuation with the East may have emerged from a source of envy.

During these centuries where ‘exoticism’¹⁶ of the East was prolific, the West was highly conservative, and so many Western Christians criticized the Orient for being overtly sexual, free, exaggeratedly licentious, carefree, passive, and blasphemously promotive of science. Especially during the Age of Exploration¹⁷, to European travelers, “Islam was supposedly an overly indulgent religion that scandalously allowed divorce and remarriages” (Bullock, 2010, p. 20). The Orient and Islam were seen as primitive, barbaric, and inferior. Fast forward to today, where they are depicted as sexually repressed, less free, uneducated, violent, too strict, and too religious—contradictory to the previous perceptions. Yet the Orient and Islam are *still* seen as primitive,

¹⁶ “The quality of being unusual and exciting because of coming (or seeming to come) from far away” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.).

¹⁷ Also known as the Age of Discovery, where Europeans sought new trade routes in order to travel and trade with the rest of the world, ranging from the 15th to 17th centuries (Wolfe, 2019).

barbaric, and inferior. So what exactly changed? Surprisingly, it was not really the Orient itself, but rather, the West. As Western society became less conservative and more sexually promiscuous, the Orient, but mainly the image of the Orient, became more strict and not sexual enough (in the minds of the West). According to political scientist and activist, Dr. Norman Finkelstein,

When Europeans came to North America, the thing they said about the Native Americans was that they were so barbaric, because they walked around naked. The European women were wearing three layers of clothes. Then they came to North America, and decided that the native Americans were backward because they all walked around naked. And now, we walk around naked, and we say that the Muslims are backward because they wear so much clothes. (Finkelstein quoted in Caglayan, 2015, para. 28)

So why exactly did this switch happen, one might ask? Because: the Orient is simply there to *contrast* the West; it exists in ‘imagined geographies’. This term, coined by Said, refers to the perceptions of a place constructed through discourses, images, news, texts, films and more. In whatever way the Orient is constructed, whether it be too liberal and sexual, or too conservative and sexually repressed, the constructor will, and always has, constructed itself as superior to it. That is why though the two images of the Orient may have been almost polar opposites, the connotations behind what those images represented stayed the same (i.e. inferior and backwards). By doing so, the colonizing and imperial force has the ability to justify its actions as, not only *beneficial* to the ‘other’, but *necessary* for the ‘other’ as well.

This is where power-knowledge comes into play, when negative and stereotypical images of ‘Orientals’ are reinforced and engrained in the minds of the masses through texts, film, art, literature, music, news, and more. This is where most of the *construction* of the other takes place. For example, in numerous, and fairly recent, movies and shows, such as *Homeland*, *Iron Man 3*,

Aladdin, *True Lies*, *American Sniper*, *Buried*, *Hala*, *Elite*, *Fauda*, *The Messiah*, and many more, Orientals and Muslims are portrayed in a very stereotypical light—often times as backwards and violent. These depictions then become normalized in the minds of the masses and play a role in reproducing racist beliefs and assumptions of the other. And this is not by coincidence, it is a fundamental phenomenon in human psychology known as the availability heuristic, which is used to further the colonial/imperial agenda by those in power. Humans tend to make judgments and decisions based on what examples easily come to mind; our minds like to use mental shortcuts.

That associative bonds are strengthened by repetition is perhaps the oldest law of memory known to man... it uses strength of association as a basis for the judgment of frequency... in general, frequent events are easier to recall or imagine than infrequent ones... Consequently, the use of the availability heuristic leads to systematic biases. (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973, pp. 208 - 209)

The historical circumstances of colonialism and orientalism have utilized this natural phenomenon of repetition and consequently, reinforcement, to their advantage. By only portraying a singular image of the ‘other’ over and over again, that is who the ‘other’ becomes. In today’s world, the power of knowledge, and consequently constructing the other, lies in the media. That is why Reza Aslan, a religious scholar, argues “What we as Muslims have to do is learn to harness the power of pop culture as a means of reframing perceptions toward Muslims” (The Secret Life of Muslims team, 2017, para. 6).

Edward Said understood this deep connection between power and depictions. He argues that imagined geographies are a tool of power for colonialists who have utilized them to control and dominate areas. The Orient is an imagined geography because it is defined by *descriptions*

created by outsiders and not by the Orient itself. Additionally, it, in its vast geography, has been reduced down to one single geography in the mind of the West.

It is perfectly possible to argue that some distinctive objects are made by the mind, and that these objects, while appearing to exist objectively, have, only a fictional reality. A group of people living on a few acres of land will set up boundaries between their land and its immediate surroundings and the territory beyond, which they call 'the land of the barbarians.' In other words, this universal practice of designating in one's mind a familiar space which is 'ours' and an unfamiliar space beyond 'ours' which is 'theirs' is a way of making geographical distinctions that can be entirely arbitrary. I use the word 'arbitrary' here because imaginative geography of the 'our land—barbarian land' variety does not require that the barbarians acknowledge the distinction. It is enough for 'us' to set up these boundaries in our own minds; 'they' become 'they' accordingly, and both their territory and their mentality are designated as different from 'ours.' To a certain extent modern and primitive societies seem thus to derive a sense of their identities negatively. A fifth-century Athenian was very likely to feel himself to be non-barbarian as much as he positively felt himself to be Athenian. The geographic boundaries, accompany the social, ethnic, and cultural ones in expected ways. Yet often the sense in which someone feels himself to be not-foreign is based on a very unrigorous idea of what is 'out there,' beyond one's own territory. All kinds of suppositions, associations, and fictions appear to crowd the un-familiar space outside one's own. (Said, 1978, p. 54)

The power of thus *creating* the other lies in the hands of those who are in the position to *imagine* the other. Imagined geographies are myths, legends, and tales that often illustrate the 'other' in a monstrous, fantastic, illusory, and grotesque conception. The images the creator designs, unsurprisingly, seek to serve and benefit the creator.

Said argues, "for there is no doubt that imaginative geography and history help the mind to intensify its own sense of itself by dramatizing the distance and difference between what is close to it and what is far away" (Said, 1978, p. 55). And this is not a thing of the past. Geographer Derek Gregory argues that the United States' War on Terror was a continuation of the same imagined geographies of the past, presenting themselves in a slightly different form

albeit for the same objective nonetheless: to dominate and control the ‘other’ (Gregory, 2010). Especially post-September 11th, the ‘Islamic world’ has been portrayed in the U.S. as backwards, barbaric, uncivilized, and violent. This imagined geography has had real life consequences, and justified the imperialistic, military interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and numerous other countries in the Middle East and North Africa, which has led to the deaths of *millions* of people (Davies, 2018).

And for centuries, women have been pawns in these very imperialistic endeavors of the West.

By the nineteenth century the focus of representation of the Muslim orient had changed from the male barbarian, constructed over centuries during the Crusades, to the ‘uncivilized’ ignorant male whose masculinity relies on the mistreatment of women, primarily as sex slaves. In this manner images of Muslim women were used as a major building block for the construction of the orient's new imagery, an imagery which has been intrinsically linked to the hegemony of western imperialism. (Hoodfar, 1993, pp. 425-426)

Colonizers knew that in order to transform a society, one must transform the women, after all, it is they who birth and nurture these very societies. “Whether in the hands of patriarchal men or feminists, the ideas of Western feminism essentially functioned to morally justify the attack on native societies and to support the notion of the comprehensive superiority of Europe” (Bullock, 2010, p. 21). One case in history that exemplifies efforts to colonize and dominate, masquerading as feminism, involves Evelyn Baring, 1st Earl of Cromer, the Consul-General of Egypt. Cromer believed that “the position of women in Egypt [is] a fatal obstacle to the attainment of that elevation of thought and character which should accompany the introduction of European civilization” (Bullock, 2010, p. 21). The colonial aim to transform and ‘westernize’ Egyptian society had a strong focus on the women living there. Cromer argued,

The European reformer... may devise the most ingenious methods for the moral and material development of the people... to graft true civilization on a society which is but just emerging from barbarism, but unless he proves himself able, not only to educate, but to elevate the woman, he will never succeed... (Bullock, 2010, p. 21)

And this is exactly why Western feminism has been so detrimental and pernicious: it's been a staple tool for colonizers.

Unsurprisingly, Cromer was no feminist or advocate for women's rights, or even believed that women were anywhere near equal to men. In fact, he was the founder and first president of The Men's League for Opposing Woman Suffrage in England in which he *actively* fought against women's rights and fought to suppress the voices of women (Cawthra, 2017). To Cromer, and Western feminism in general, it was never truly about the women they were trying to "elevate". To them, these women were simply objects to be exploited for their own personal gain. And to Cromer, it was never truly about Egyptians either, let alone 'elevating' them. He saw them as inferior to himself and *actively* suppressed their fight for independence.

Convinced of the innate superiority of Western civilization, Cromer believed that 'Orientals' could never improve their lot until they had mastered the ways of the West, and for this they required a long apprenticeship under the enlightened tutelage of 'advanced' countries like Great Britain. Throughout his long tenure as British consul general, Cromer disparaged Egyptian demands for independence and assured his superiors in London that direct British guidance would be necessary for years to come. (Cleveland & Bunton, 2018, p. 104)

Additionally, many teachers in Egyptian missionary schools often tried to convince young girls to go against their parents and religion by taking off their veils. Western Christian missionaries even made remarks such as, "the reconstruction of the Egyptian village demands the re-education of its inhabitants, and first of all of women. We must work from the inside out" and "the primary

object of Mission schools for girls was to lead them to Christ, ‘If you get the girls for Christ, you get Egypt for Christ’ (Bullock, 2010, p. 22).

One of the most prominent accounts of the so-called ‘oppressive’ veil was from 20th century Christian missionaries. “Considering themselves being tasked with ‘liberating’ the ‘oppressed’ women and bringing light to their lives, Muslim women were rendered to be lacking freedom of choice and thus needed to be ‘saved’” (Khan, 2014, p. 2). These missionaries even published a book with the title, *Our Moslem Sisters: A Cry of Need from Lands of Darkness Interpreted by Those Who Heard It*. The authors of the book stated,

it needs the widespread love and pity of the women of our day in Christian lands to seek and save the suffering sinful needy women of Islam... they will never cry for themselves, for they are down under the yoke of centuries of oppression, and their hearts have no hope or knowledge of anything better. (Khan, 2014, p. 2)

This Western feminism, which was simply a tool for colonization, never intended to benefit the Oriental woman, but rather, to further the colonizers’ agendas. This same tool has been used against other colonized groups as well. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) says in her essay about the prohibition of sati¹⁸ by the British in South Asia, titled “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, “white men are saving brown women from brown men” (p. 93). The view that the Islamic veil is oppressive to women actually has its origins in this very colonialism. The Islamic veil had frustrated European colonizers from the start and this frustration eventually morphed into what it is today. Much like the Orient being constructed in the minds of the Europeans, the veil was also constructed in these same minds to represent a symbol of women’s oppression. And much like constructing the Orient, constructing the veil as oppressive also had the same intention and goal:

¹⁸ A practice in which a widow, by force or voluntarily, sacrifices herself atop her husband’s funeral pyre; it was mainly practiced among Hindus in South Asia.

to define the other, dominate the other, and finally, exploit the other—all the while pretending to liberate the other.

Because Islam was placed above the pagan religions of Africa and the Native tribes in the Americas, but below Christianity, its adherents were seen as still ‘salvageable’ (Bullock, 2010). This is why the fight to liberate the Orientals from their ways was so persistent and relentless. The Africans and Natives were seen as a ‘lost cause’, whereas there was still a ‘chance’ for the Muslims. And the biggest challenge that was presented to the colonizers of the Orient at the time was the veil (Bullock, 2010). It was a sort of force field—impenetrable to the European gaze, secretive, elusive, mysterious, and private. It was not only a symbol for the Muslim woman (the one domino they believed they had to topple to sway all of the Orient), but it was also a symbol and metaphor for the *entire* Orient (Bullock, 2010).

Women as mothers were seen to play a crucial role in educating their children, and thus perpetuating the civilization. So colonialists, missionaries, and feminists, as well as native elites trying to ‘modernize’ their countries, all hoped to have access to the Muslim woman in order to influence her, so that the nation might progress. (Bullock, 2010, p.18)

This lack of access was an obstacle for these individuals. Muslim women had an aura of exclusivity attached to them as they were often segregated from men and foreigners. Both the harems and veil, and hence, Muslim women, were seen as a barrier (both in a physical and figurative sense) to ‘progress’ (but in reality, submission) (Bullock, 2010). This is why the West began painting Muslim women as victims of the oppressive religion of Islam, in order to try to surpass that barrier and further their colonial agenda.

This colonial agenda has permeated into present day, in the form of American imperialism. In her essay, “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural

Relativism and Its Others”, Lila Abu-Lughod (2002) critiques the United States’ involvement in the Orient, specifically the invasion of Afghanistan, and examines one of the justifications provided for that war. She presents the argument that American involvement in Afghanistan mirrors the ‘missionary’ rhetoric that has been prevalent throughout Western colonial history. This rhetoric can be seen in instances such as the Crusades; the Spanish Inquisition; the genocide against indigenous populations in the Americas; the African slave trade; colonialism throughout the globe; and American imperialism and involvement in South America, South East Asia, and the Pacific Islands. In many of these brutal events throughout history, the West intended, or appeared to intend, the *liberation* of said people. However, in reality, Western involvement only led to those peoples’ oppression, torture, rape, enslavement, or even genocide. As history repeats itself, the same can be said about many of America’s recent wars such as the war in Afghanistan. The United States used Afghan women to justify its violent actions and falsely presented itself to be the *liberator* of these women. This was especially exemplified in Laura Bush’s statements after a *bombing* in Afghanistan by U.S. forces, “because of our recent military gains in much of Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned in their homes...The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women” (Abu-Lughod, 2002, p. 784).

Especially from the West’s past actions, it doesn’t seem it is at all interested in the actual well-being of these women, or is interested in liberating them. Abu-Lughod states,

the question is why knowing about the ‘culture’ of the region, and particularly its religious beliefs and treatment of women, was more urgent than exploring the history of the development of repressive regimes in the region and the U.S. role in this history... Instead of political and historical explanations, experts were being asked to give religio-cultural ones. (Abu-Lughod, 2002, p. 784)

In fact, she concludes that the main reason there is an obsession with the plight of Muslim women, and specifically Afghan women, is for an imperial agenda. This same agenda has been used time and time again throughout Western colonial history and is meant to impose Western dominance over a group of people. When the U.S. brings up Afghan women, it is not to address the actual causes of their problems and sufferings, but rather to specifically attack the culture and religion of these women—to *weaponize* these women. She states,

I do not know how many feminists who felt good about saving Afghan women from the Taliban are also asking for a global redistribution of wealth or contemplating sacrificing their own consumption radically so that African or Afghan women could have some chance of having what I do believe should be a universal human right—the right to freedom from the structural violence of global inequality and from the ravages of war, the everyday rights of having enough to eat, having homes for their families in which to live and thrive, having ways to make decent livings so their children can grow... (Abu-Lughod, 2002, p. 787)

It seems that Oriental and Muslim women are just used by Western feminists to vilify Oriental culture and Islam, and justify Western dominance and violence—just as Cromer¹⁹ and other colonizers have done. There is an inherent problem in the notion that the West must ‘save’ Muslim or Oriental women. It intrinsically implies a sense of superiority, and inevitably, violence. Despite the fact that many Western feminists criticize the fairytale narratives of ‘a prince coming to save the damsel in distress’—as it is sexist and implies women are incapable of saving themselves—many Western feminists *themselves* have argued that Muslim women in other parts of the world must be saved and rescued. The West has become the patriarch in this narrative, while the Oriental and Muslim woman is the damsel in distress, unable to liberate herself from her ‘oppressive’ culture and religion.

¹⁹ see pages 23-24

In one of her other essays, “The Muslim Woman: The Power of Images and the Danger of Pity”, Abu-Lughod (2006) goes further. She not only criticizes the West for exerting its imperialistic dominance on Muslim women by portraying them and their cultures and religions as backwards and oppressive, but she also points the finger back at the West. She even quotes Osama bin Laden, “You are a nation that exploits women like consumer products or advertising tools, calling upon customers to purchase them... You then rant that you support the liberation of women” (Abu-Lughod, 2006, para. 23). Many Muslim women would agree with this statement²⁰. The objectification and strict beauty standards imposed on women in the West is rampant²¹. Abu-Lughod also points out that the Quran²² gave women the right to vote 1400 years ago, whereas American women only received that right within the last century (Abu-Lughod, 2006). Additionally, she points to the fact that many Muslim majority countries have already had women as heads of state, whereas the United States has had none in its history. Abu-Lughod cites the numerous problems within American society,

the glass ceiling that keeps women professionals from rising to the top, the system that keeps so many women-headed households below the poverty line, the high incidence of rape and sexual harassment, or even the exploitation of women in advertising, we do not see this as reflective of the oppressiveness of our culture or a reason to condemn Christianity—the dominant religious tradition. (Abu-Lughod, 2006, para. 25)

The essay criticizes the West for its hypocrisy and inability to see its own flaws; “is what these apologists describe by way of sexual exploitation or lack of public power a reason to pity American or European women? We would find this either absurd or annoying” (Abu-Lughod,

²⁰ See the discussion of Mogahed’s research from pages 102-104.

²¹ This topic will be discussed in-depth in later sections.

²² The Islamic holy scripture which was revealed in the 7th century. It can also be spelled in other ways, including Koran or Qur’an.

2006, para. 25). So it makes sense why many Muslim women would see these charges of oppression absurd and annoying as well. It wouldn't make sense to demonize American culture for these problems, let alone Christianity. So why are some okay with doing exactly that to Muslim women?

There are two ideas being discussed when talking about 'saving' Muslim women:

saving *from* something and saving *to* something... The Western intervention in Muslim societies is aimed at saving the veiled Muslim women from the 'oppressive' practice of veiling to the 'liberating' Western values and to do so; violence is justifiable as it is thought to be aimed at achieving wellbeing of the people who cannot think better for themselves. (Khan, 2014, p. 7)

While the veil cannot be dismissed as wholly oppressive²³, the idea of being the authority to speak *for* Muslim women is by nature, oppressive. Abu-Lughod (2002) believes that instead of seeking to 'save' these women, we must start to think how we can work *with* them. And part of that process, she argues, is developing an understanding and appreciation of women all around the world as well as their different lifestyles, cultures, religions, and perceptions. She advocates for the

hard work involved in recognizing and respecting differences—precisely as products of different histories, as expressions of different circumstances, and as manifestations of differently structured desires. We may want justice for women, but can we accept that there might be different ideas about justice and that different women might want, or choose, different futures from what we envision as best? (Abu-Lughod, 2002, pp. 787-788)

This approach involves a mutual understanding and respect, something that seems to be absent in the 'white feminist/white savior rhetoric'.

²³ This will be expanded upon in coming sections.

Misconceptions and Myths of Women in Islam

It is important to discuss the topic of the religion²⁴ of Islam because one cannot talk about Muslim women and leave out their faith. A lot of the misconceptions people have surrounding Muslim women are directly related to misconceptions about Islam. Most of the misconceptions regarding Islam stem from: misinterpretations of its religious texts (both from islamophobes but also misogynist and patriarchal Muslim scholars themselves); confusing and conflating religion and culture; seeing the actions of Muslims (often times an extreme and/or uneducated minority) as representative of Islam; and as detailed previously, the lingering colonialist mindset towards the religion. This is why it is important to begin unravelling the *actual* religion through its texts, rather than perceiving it simply based on misconceptions. Before I begin this discussion, it is necessary to mention that I am not a religious scholar or expert on Islam. I am simply conveying my interpretation of the religion, which is derived from my university coursework but also my own research and discussions with other Muslim women, some of whom are professionally educated in the field. Also, it is necessary to mention that Islam is not a monolith. There are approximately 1.9 billion Muslims around the world, and consequently 1.9 billion different understandings of Islam (“Muslim Population By Country Population”, 2020). Some Muslims hold very strict and conservative interpretations of the religion, while others hold more liberal interpretations. In this paper, I will be conveying *my personal* understanding of the religion and will be supporting my

²⁴ Though there are different perspectives on what constitutes religion, in this paper, Islam will be examined through its original, primary texts (the Quran, the hadiths, and a few explanations by scholars of these sources). There are numerous sources and meanings one can attribute to religion, including practices that have developed over time by adherents to a faith, but for the sake of making this analysis more focused, it was necessary to limit the analysis to primary texts. Additionally, there is an emphasis in Islam on preserving the originality of its primary textual sources (something Muslims believe is unique to their religion and absent in others) and on avoiding *bid'ah* (which means innovating or modifying religion through its original sources of knowledge). This is not to say that different interpretations of the religion do not exist, but rather, the sources that are *being* interpreted must stay in their pure, original form.

statements with textual evidence from the Quran, hadiths²⁵, and the opinions of scholars. The reader is open to do their own personal research on the topics being discussed.

Many who view Islam in a negative light claim it is one of the most, if not *the* most, oppressive religions towards women. According to Elizabeth Altschull, who is a self-proclaimed, French ‘feminist’, “all religions have their oppressive aspects toward women, none [but Islam] has gone so far, is as systematic, or is as explicit about the inferior status of women” (Altschull, 1995, p. 200). However, in reality, Islam is not too different from the other two Abrahamic faiths, Christianity and Judaism, all of which have very similar teachings and beliefs. But while those two faiths have been adopted by the West, Islam is still seen as a religion that is *alien* to the West, making it more vulnerable to criticism and being ‘otherized’. And due to the history of colonialism and orientalism, the lines between reality and the construction of the ‘other’ (which is predominantly based on mischaracterizations rather than facts) are blurred. For example, the main misconception critics have about Islam is that it promotes gender inequality²⁶ (in numerous ways). However, according to the Quran²⁷ itself, in multiple verses, both men and women are *equal* to each other in the eyes of God:

Their Lord²⁸ answered them: ‘I do not waste the work of any worker from among you, be you male or female, you are all as each other’ (Quran 3:195); If any do deeds of righteousness - be they male or female - and have faith, they will enter Heaven, and not the least injustice will be done to them (Quran 4:124); Whoever does an evil deed will only be paid back with its equivalent. And whoever does good, whether male or female, and is a believer, they will enter Paradise, where they will be provided for without limit (Quran 40:40)

²⁵ Narrations of the sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad that were written down hundreds of years after his death.

²⁶ See footnote 6 on page 6.

²⁷ There are various English translations of the Quran. In this paper, I have used multiple.

²⁸ The topic on how God is referred to in religious scriptures will be expanded upon later in the paper.

It is clear from these verses that neither men nor women are above or below each other unless it is based on their actions.²⁹

Reasons for Misconceptions and Myths of Women in Islam

Misconceptions regarding Islam often stem from misinterpretations and mistranslations of various verses in the Quran regarding topics such as women's inheritance, women's testimony, domestic violence, divorce, polygamy, rape, marriage, etc.³⁰ This is because the Quran, in its original text, is in Arabic. In the translation of any language, one word can be translated into multiple different words in English. Consequently, one sentence can be translated in numerous different ways. This is why it is so easy for verses to be distorted and twisted to fit one's interpretation, whether the interpreter be a racist islamophobe or a patriarchal, misogynist mullah³¹, both seeking to fulfill their agenda rather than understanding the meaning behind the text. And often times, these people will also take verses out of context, and ignore other, clearer verses and hadiths that contradict their interpretations of that verse. Others might even resort to weak and unverified hadiths³² to legitimize their claims that cannot be found in the Quran or be verified by strong hadiths. And it is quite ironic because the Quran clearly mentions and warns us of these people,

²⁹ There are also many misconceptions about the religion based on the veiling of women. This will be discussed in detail later on.

³⁰ Though there is a lot to be unpacked and clarified about these common misconceptions of Islam, that is not the objective of this paper. In-depth, scholarly explanations can be found at sources such as Yaqeen Institute: <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/nazir-khan/women-in-islamic-law-examining-five-prevalent-myths/>

³¹ teacher and/or scholar of Islam

³² Muslims believe that since hadiths were written down by humankind, and not by God, they are prone to error or inaccuracies. Compilers of hadiths went through a lengthy process involving chains of narrations and verifying every hadith by numerous sources to ensure accuracy. However, it was unavoidable that some hadiths are stronger and more accurate than others. There are even some hadiths that clearly contradict the Quran and other stronger hadiths. In every matter, the Quran takes precedent, and then secondly, strong hadiths. Any weak hadiths that contradicts the prior two, are especially unreliable.

He it is Who has revealed the Book to you; some of its verses are decisive, they are the basis of the Book, and others are allegorical; then as for those in whose hearts there is perversity they follow the part of it which is allegorical, seeking to mislead and seeking to give it (their own) interpretation (Quran 3:7); Do you then believe in a part of the Book and disbelieve in the other? What then is the reward of such among you as do this but disgrace in the life of this world, and on the day of resurrection they shall be sent back to the most grievous chastisement (Quran 2:85)

Both critics of Islam and some Muslims themselves, are guilty of these actions.

The reasons why many of the interpretations of the Quran have veered towards favoring men is because it was them doing most of the interpretations throughout history. “Everything we understand of Islam comes from human intervention with the word of God... Human engagement with the divine text produces laws that are fallible and open to change, given changing times and circumstances” (Segran, 2013, para. 8). Though women played a large role in the early development and spread of Islam, after the Prophet Muhammad’s death, the influence of ‘true’ Islam on society started becoming diluted and pre-Islamic culture slowly began to revive itself.

Women were largely excluded from religious authority, despite the Qur’anic declaration that men and women were equal in the eyes of God and the role of the female Companions in transmitting the hadith. Patriarchal values became increasingly codified in the *sharia*, or Islamic law, as well as in the daily life of Muslim women. (The Center for History and New Media, 2006, para. 8)

The influence of the West also began creeping in. During the Islamic Golden Age, Muslim scholars begun extensively translating and studying European, especially Greek, texts (D’Ancona, 2019). These scholars were heavily influenced by philosophers such as Aristotle, Plato, Ptolemy, Hippocrates, and more. As these philosophers’ works began influencing the world view of those in the Islamic world, they began influencing the interpretations of Islam as

well. “The Translation Movement also fostered a strong appreciation for reasoned thought... this rubbed off on religious philosophy, giving rise to the school of Mu’tazilism. Mu’tazila³³, such as al-Ma’mun, believed that rationalism could be used to understand both the physical world and God” (Green, 2018, n.p.).

This ‘obsession’ with European philosophy and world view became so prevalent among many prominent Muslim scholars that some even began placing it *above* the word of God.

The Mu’tazila adapted Greek philosophical reasoning and attempted to understand it in an Islamic context. To them, the Qur’an and Sunnah³⁴ were not necessarily the only sources of truth; rather, they gave reason an elevated role in understanding the world (both material and spiritual) to be equal to, or even in some cases, higher than revelation. (Itani, 2018, n.p.)

And this is problematic. The original meaning of Islam became distorted, as it was now being understood from a male-dominated, Western standpoint. Aristotle was especially a favorite among Muslim scholars during this time (Kennedy-Day, 1998).

‘You know when Islamic scholars get really against women?... When they start studying philosophy.’ Aristotle, a man who held that the subjugation of women was both ‘natural’ and a ‘social necessity,’ influenced key Muslim thinkers who shaped medieval *fiqh*, the theory of Islamic law, argued Akram. Before Aristotle became a core text, and before the medieval scholars enshrined their views on gender roles in to law, men and women were accorded far more equal freedoms in Islam. (Power, 2015, para. 49-50)

The Greek philosophers³⁵ that were so influential for Muslim scholars, during this pivotal time period in Islamic history where the religion was being spread and its texts were being translated, were *explicitly* sexist.

³³ followers of Mu’tazilism

³⁴ In Arabic, the word translates to ‘tradition’ or ‘way.’ While hadiths are specific narrations of the sayings or actions of the Prophet Muhammad, Sunnah is more broad and refers to ‘the way of the Prophet’. For example, one *reads* the hadiths in order to *follow* the Sunnah.

³⁵ especially Aristotle and Plato

There is no doubt that Aristotle's texts are misogynist; he thought that women were inferior to men... 'Aristotle says that the courage of a man lies in commanding, a woman's lies in obeying';... that a female is an incomplete male or 'as it were, a deformity'; that in general 'a woman is perhaps an inferior being'. (Witt & Shapiro, 2018, para. 6)

More recently, as Muslim women have begun reclaiming their faith, they're using the *same* religious texts (and often times the same verses), that had previously been twisted to oppress them, to empower themselves.

They maintain the Koran supports gender equality... Some contend that discrimination against women is a product of post-colonial oppression but most attribute greater blame on the culture of male-dominated tribalism and religious patriarchy which has distorted authentic Islam in shari'ah-legislated discrimination. (Lichter, 2009, p. 20)

This is exemplified in many recent Islamic feminist movements such as the Aurat³⁶ March in Pakistan³⁷.

Another reason for the inaccurate portrayal of Islam is the fault of some Muslims themselves. Aside from terrorists who claim to be practicing Islam—but in reality are just ill-intentioned individuals who actively commit atrocities that contradict the religion—there are also some non-violent Muslims that claim to be practicing Islam even though their actions contradict the religion as well.

The position accorded to women by Qur'an and Sunnah of the Prophet differs vastly from practice within various Muslim societies. Over the centuries, various pre- and post-Islamic cultural values have crept into the body of religious corpus and have become embedded as 'God's laws'. (Aslam & Kazmi, 2009, para. 1)

For example, some Muslims may believe that taking care of children is the sole duty of women, that women shouldn't get an education, that women shouldn't lead a country, that women

³⁶ *Aurat* means 'woman' in Urdu.

³⁷ This specific movement will be discussed in-depth later on.

shouldn't seek divorce, and some may even believe in forced marriages, child marriages, honor killings, and female genital mutilation. Though some Muslims may claim that these beliefs are Islamic, in reality, they aren't. A lot of these beliefs and practices stem from culture, not religion, and often times pre-Islamic culture and culture that is practiced among non-Muslims as well. "So many are portrayed as 'problems with Islam,' the religion, when they are in reality problems of culture, traditions, politics, superstitions, and tribal or ethnic codes of conduct of some Muslim-majority region" (Saidi, 2008, para. 1).

Culture, just like religion, is something people tend to hold very dear to them. The lines between culture and religion are heavily blurred for some people and many wrongly assume that cultural practices must be Islamic. "*Any belief or practice, even if common among some Muslim-majority country, which does not go back to the Quran or the Sunnah, is not an Islamic belief or practice*" (Saidi, 2008, para. 10) (emphasis added). Some Muslims may view something their parents, grandparents, and ancestors have been doing for centuries as a part of Islam. This is not always true. In fact the Quran even says, "When it is said to them: 'Follow what Allah hath revealed:' They say: 'Nay! we shall follow the ways of our fathers.' What! even though their fathers were void of wisdom and guidance?" (Quran 2:170). All of the sexist and horrific practices and beliefs listed previously in fact go *against* the teachings of Islam and are rather cultural, ethnic, or tribal traditions and beliefs without any connection to the religion.

Many of the countries that are commonly called 'Islamic countries'—which in reality are merely 'Muslim-majority countries'—practice an amalgam of Islamic practices and pre-Islamic/non-Islamic practices. More than 10 centuries ago, when Islam became the predominant religion of the part of the world that today is Muslim-majority, those countries already had very distinct and very patriarchal cultures, as many remain patriarchal today. After embracing the religion of Islam,

many of these cultures... abandoned some of the pre-Islamic cultures and traditions, but they hang on to many others. (Saidi, 2008, para. 8)

It is both the fault of some Muslims and Western media for failing to distinguish between culture and religion.

This problem of confusing Islam and culture arises partly because not all Muslims have studied their religion and many may only have limited knowledge of their scriptures³⁸. Another challenge is posed by language barriers. Most Muslims, in fact around 80% to be specific, are not Arabs and don't speak Arabic³⁹ as their native language, or at all ("Mapping the Global Muslim Population", 2009). So this means most of the world's Muslims are reciting and memorizing verses and texts in a language they do not understand⁴⁰, especially since the norm among many Muslim-majority cultures is that holy scriptures should *only* be recited in their original language⁴¹. This in itself goes against the teachings of Islam. The first word the angel Jibreel (Gabriel) is said to have told the Prophet Muhammad was *iqra*, 'read'⁴². He did not say 'memorize' or 'listen', but rather, 'read', the definition of which is "to learn from what one has seen or found in writing or printing", "to interpret the meaning or significance of" according to Merriam-Webster (2020). And unfortunately, not all Muslims are doing that. Many are not studying or practicing Islam, but rather blindly following cultural traditions assuming they are

³⁸ My intent is not to be elitist and criticize Muslims for being 'uneducated', but I see it necessary to point to the fact that just because someone is an adherent of a faith, it does not imply expertise, something which pertains to all faiths. Therefor all Muslims should not be held to that standard since adherents of other faiths do not seem to be.

³⁹ The original Quran was revealed in Arabic

⁴⁰ Many native Arabic speakers are also unable to fully interpret the Quran because it is written in a classical version of Arabic that is not commonly spoken today.

⁴¹ Islam stresses the importance of preserving the authenticity of its original scriptures, which has partly been accomplished through preserving these scriptures in their original language, Arabic. That is why many Muslims consider it important to memorize and read the Quran in Arabic, despite them not speaking the language themselves. Unfortunately, many Muslims stop there instead of taking the step further to understand and analyze the texts, even though that is what the religion (through its primary texts) preaches.

⁴² The Prophet Muhammad was illiterate, further emphasizing the importance of that one word.

the same. This is a significant problem in the Muslim community. Malaysia's former prime minister, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, even started a campaign called, "Let's Read the Quran". He said at one of his rallies, "The problem we have today is because people don't understand the Quran, the stress is on memorizing,... (It is) because we desert the Quran that we are lost" (Abdullah, 2016, para. 4-5). Failing to read religious scripture in a language one understands opens the door to not only ignorance about one's faith, but also misguidance.

There are three individuals to blame here: some of the Muslims themselves that are not educated about their religion and aren't practicing Islam but claim to; the Western media sending a message (almost always a negative one) about Islam by portraying some of these very Muslims (and usually the most extreme ones); and the consumers of this message (the Western public) that take what they see on the news as a representation of all Muslims and all of Islam. It is definitely the responsibility of all Muslims to learn and study their religion instead of practicing patriarchal and misogynistic cultural traditions and claiming it is Islam. It is also the responsibility of Western media to be honest and accurate in their presentation of Muslims and Islam. "On numerous occasions authors and 'pundits' have wrongly attacked the religion of Islam for the cultural practices of Muslims in certain places in the world" (Saidi, 2008, para. 3). Islam in the Western media has been exceedingly ethnicized. "Many attorneys make the major mistake of assuming that all of a Muslim's manners and practices are related to Islam⁴³. In fact, many Muslims are heavily influenced by their individual cultural backgrounds" (Mohammad &

⁴³ Discussing Islam, Ayaan Hirsi Ali states in her book, *Nomad*, "All human beings are equal, but all cultures and religions are not. A culture that celebrates femininity and considers women to be the masters of their own lives is better than a culture that mutilates girls' genitals and confines them behind walls and veils or flogs or stones them for falling in love. A culture that protects women's rights by law is better than a culture in which a man can lawfully have four wives at once and women are denied alimony and half their inheritance. A culture that appoints women to its supreme court is better than a culture that declares that the testimony of a woman is worth half that of a man." (Ali, 2011) (emphasis added)

Lehmann, 2011, p. 1). And it is additionally the responsibly of the Western public to not stereotype Muslims and to not hold the religion of Islam to a different standard than religions commonly practiced in the West. Yes, it is a fact that there are some Muslims who are violent, patriarchal, and oppressive to women. But there are also, Christians, Jews, Hindus, Atheists, and Buddhists who are violent, patriarchal, and oppressive to women as well. Islam does not contain any more sources of violence, patriarchy, and women's oppression than the other religions do.

While acts of terrorism, honor killings, and other atrocious acts are *automatically* linked to Islam when the perpetrators are Muslims, other religions are not held to the same standard.

Most Americans would agree... that it would be unfair to judge a religion (whether Islam, Christianity, or any other religion) by the practices it does not condone. The religion of Islam does not condone—and it actually condemns—practices such as dishonorable ‘honor killings,’ racism or tribalism, oppression of women, banning women from obtaining an education, and many other un-Islamic practices that make their way to the sensationalized news. If a Muslim, or a Muslim-majority region, practices these despicable acts, *it is not because of Islam, but despite Islam*. (Saidi, 2008, para. 1-2) (emphasis added)

In Western media, religions are presented from one side only. For example, Islam and Muslims are almost always portrayed in a negative light. Even verses from the Quran that are presented are the seemingly violent ones. Whereas the opposite is true with Christianity; only the positive aspects are presented and the rest are ignored and brushed under the rug or completely disassociated with the religion and blamed on other factors. However, the actions of Muslims, and more often, ‘bad’ Muslims, are an automatic portrayal of Islam.

Just as it is unfair to judge Christianity for un-Christian and inappropriate actions of some who call themselves Christians, it is unfair to judge Islam by un-Islamic and inappropriate actions of some who call themselves Muslims. Just as every action of every Christian is not necessarily based on Christianity, every action of every Muslim is not necessarily based on Islam. (Saidi, 2008, para. 11)

The expectations for Muslims are far stricter and something people of other faiths seem to be exempt from.

Muslims are treated as a monolith; a whole *ummah*⁴⁴ of almost two million people and their faith is blamed for the actions of a few. “Collective blame doesn’t exist in a vacuum... collective blame among American non-Muslims is correlated with blatant dehumanization—thinking others are less than human” (Resnick, 2017 para. 8, A). In a study that made Americans rate how ‘evolved’ and ‘human’ groups of people were, Arabs and Muslims were ranked the lowest (Kteily et al., 2015). “People who dehumanize are more likely to blame Muslims as a whole for the actions of a few perpetrators” (Resnick, 2017, para. 22, B). And this can have dangerous consequences, when “you collectively blame an entire group for the actions of individuals, it makes it totally reasonable to exact your revenge from any person from that group” (Resnick, 2017, para. 10, A). Collective blame of Islam and the dehumanization of Muslims are not mutually exclusive, they are highly intertwined.

Additionally, when looking at the teachings of Islam, the mistake that the West makes is viewing it from its own lens, and consequently, from its own expectations. This is something that has been done to colonized peoples for centuries: being dismissed as barbaric if they don’t meet ‘Western’ standards. For example, many Western feminists claim that women are inherently unequal in Islam. This, as mentioned above and proven by numerous verses from the Quran, is simply not true. However, these critics often cite the different roles, positions, and responsibilities men and women are assigned by the religion, which do in fact differ from man to woman, from husband to wife, from mother to father. But whether or not this is inequality is

⁴⁴ The Arabic word referring to the entirety of the Muslim community being bound together by their faith.

highly dependent on one's definition of the word 'equal'. The word 'equal' is not the same as 'identical'; rather, according to Lexico dictionary (2019), it can be defined as "uniform in application or effect" and "evenly or fairly balanced".

From the Islamic point of view, the question of the equality of men and women is meaningless. It is like discussing the equality of a rose and a jasmine. Each has its own perfume, colour, shape and beauty... Islam envisages their roles in society not as competing but as complimentary. Each has certain duties and functions in accordance with his or her nature and constitution. (Suri, 2019, pp. 117-118)

Men and women *naturally* and *biologically* are different from one another, so why does it become unequal all of a sudden if their duties and responsibilities are different? 'Different' is not synonymous with 'unequal'. There are ways the rules of Islam benefit men, but also ways they disadvantage men. Accordingly, there are ways the rules of Islam benefit women, but also ways they disadvantage women. Yet, Western feminism dismisses the entire religion as oppressive to women while ignoring these nuances and complexities.

An Analysis of Women in Islam

I will now be examining the religious scriptures of Islam in relation to women⁴⁵. For example, many critics cite this verse to portray gender 'inequality': "Men are in charge of women by [right of] what Allah has given one over the other and what they spend [for maintenance] from their wealth. So righteous women are devoutly obedient..." (Quran 4:34)⁴⁶.

In Islam, husbands are the protectors and providers for their wives, meaning they are *required* to

⁴⁵ As mentioned before, the teachings and beliefs of Islam and the actions of Muslims can be two different issues. For purposes of this research, I will be focusing on the religious scriptures of Islam rather than the latter because the latter often exists separate from or even opposed to the teachings of Islam.

⁴⁶ This verse has also been translated in other ways such as: "Men shall take full care of women with the bounties which God has bestowed more abundantly on the former than on the latter, and with what they may spend out of their possessions. And the righteous women are the truly devout ones, who guard the intimacy which God has [ordained to be] guarded", or: "Men are the caretakers of women, as men have been provisioned by Allah over women and tasked with supporting them financially. And righteous women are devoutly obedient and, when alone, protective of what Allah has entrusted them with"

work and financially support their wives⁴⁷. It is obligatory for husbands to pay for necessary and even some unnecessary provisions for their wives which include shelter, “food, clothing, cleaning tools, house appliances, like cooking equipment, accommodation, and servants” (Mohd & Ibrahim, 2012, p. 104). And in cases where the husband has the financial means, it is *required* for him to provide his wife with cosmetics, shoes, jewelry, education, transportation, and yes, even maids or servants. In return, women are required to be obedient towards their husbands, to some extent (as long as that does not infringe upon her practicing her faith and her *happiness*) (Al-Munajjid, 2001).

So though their roles are not the same, they are balanced. In fact, in this case, Islamic rules may even be disadvantageous to men; the money they gain from working hard all-day long belongs partially to their wives (and yes, wives are legally allowed to ‘steal’ from their husbands’ wallets if needed) and it is required of them to spend that money on their wives and children (Salahi, 2002). Whereas, when a wife chooses to work⁴⁸ (and her husband cannot prevent her from doing so), the money that she makes belongs *to her and only her*. And she is not required to spend that money on her home, husband, children, or even for *her own* basic necessities. In fact, her husband cannot even ask her for a single penny or ask her to contribute some money to pay bills or other responsibilities ascribed to him. She can do so if she pleases, but it is not her duty or obligation under Islamic law. On the other hand, if the husband refuses to pay for the aforementioned provisions, he may even be *punished* for it by Sharia court or in the afterlife (Khan, 2020). Whereas the wife has no requirements as to what she can spend her money on

⁴⁷ “*Nafaqah* is an Arabic word, rooted from *infaq*, which means to spend for a good purpose. Literally it means what a person spends for his family members” (Mohd & Ibrahim, 2012, p. 104).

⁴⁸ Though there are misogynist and patriarchal cultures that may prevent women from working, in the texts of Islam, there are no such prohibitions.

(Khan, 2020). If many would see the full picture of this area of Islamic guidelines, they might condemn it for being *unfair* to men. Yet when verses such as these are discussed in the West, only part of the picture is shown—the part that makes Islam seem unfair to women. That is why it is important to differentiate between perceptions and reality by looking at the full picture.

Additionally, in numerous instances, women are placed at a *higher* status than men in Islam. One of these instances is with the status of daughters. A daughter is seen as more of a blessing than a son, the Prophet Muhammad even said “When a boy is born, then he brings one Noor⁴⁹ and when a girl is born, then she brings two Noors” (Jamiatul Ulama, 2015, para. 16). He even commanded parents, “Whenever you buy anything from the market place first present it to your female children then to your male children” (Jamiatul Ulama, 2015, para. 25). And, daughters are given so much respect in the religion that they are the ‘ticket’ to heaven for their parents. There are numerous hadiths and scholarly statements that demonstrate this:

Whoever had a female who was not buried⁵⁰ nor insulted by him, and had not preferred his male children to her, Allah admits him to Paradise; When a girl is born to a family, then between the parents and Hell, there shall be a distance of five hundred years; When parents rejoice at the birth of a daughter, this is greater than making Tawaaf⁵¹ of the Kaaba⁵² seventy times. (Jamiatul Ulama, 2015, para. 21, 27 & 29)

While some cultures of the past, and even the present, favored male children, Islam favors female children.

⁴⁹ Noor is considered to be a ‘divine light’.

⁵⁰ One of the common ways female infants were killed in Mecca at the time was through live burials.

⁵¹ Tawaaf is an Islamic ritual that Muslims perform during their pilgrimage to Mecca in which they circumambulate the Ka’bah counterclockwise seven times.

⁵² The most sacred site in Islam.

The reason Islam went out of its way to present daughters as blessings rather than burdens was because of their low status in Mecca at the time, i.e. in pre-Islamic tradition (and some can say even now today). At the time of the Prophet Muhammad, female infanticide was rampant in Mecca. Parents would be upset at the birth of a baby girl and would often times bury her alive. The practice of female feticide and infanticide is still alive and well today, mainly in India and China, and in a few other countries as well (Brooks, 2012). Because of China's One-Child⁵³ policy and the 'son-preference' in East Asia, parents will often times abort a child if it is female, or in some cases kill her after she is born (Brooks, 2012). That is because since parents were given permission to only have one child, many often chose sons who are considered to be care takers of their parents in old age, whereas daughters are married off to live with their husbands' families (Brooks, 2012). Female feticide and infanticide is also a problem in India, where male children are preferred, and daughters are additionally seen as a financial burden because of the dowry⁵⁴ (Brooks, 2012). When Islam came to Mecca, the practice of infanticide was very strictly forbidden and condemned, and was even mentioned in the Quran, "And when the female infant buried alive is asked; For what crime she was killed" (Quran 81:8-9). Not only was this horrific practice prohibited, but the mere act of being *displeased* at the birth of a daughter was considered sinful,

When news is brought to one of them, of (the birth of) a female (child), his face darkens, and he is filled with inward grief! He hides himself from the people because of the evil of that which is announced to him. Shall he keep it with disgrace or bury it (alive) in the dust? Now surely evil is what they judge. (Quran 16:58)

⁵³ The policy was officially ended in 2015 and replaced with a more relaxed 'two-child' policy (Connett, 2019).

⁵⁴ A practice in which the bride's family provides the groom's family with a sum of money, gifts, or property (commonly practiced in India, but in other countries and cultures as well).

So the myth that Islam favors men over women is just not based on legitimate textual evidence, but rather cherry-picking and taking verses out of context to fit the narrative that Islam has a negative view of women. Yes, it is true one can read misogyny from parts of the Quran, but in order to do so, one would have to ignore a plethora of verses and hadiths that preach the opposite.

Another example that showcases Islam giving women *more* importance than men is with mothers. The status of mothers is above that of fathers, and this is expressed through numerous hadiths and verses from the Quran. A man once asked Prophet Muhammad,

‘O Prophet of God! Guide me, to whom should I be good in order to benefit completely from my good deed?’ He replied: ‘Be good to your mother.’ He asked: ‘Next to her?’ The Prophet repeated: ‘Be good to your mother.’ He said again: ‘And next to her?’ The Prophet answered: ‘To your mother.’ The man said: ‘To what other person should I be good?’ The Prophet said: ‘To your father’. (Brown, 2011, 1:316)

From this hadith, scholars have interpreted that a child’s duty to their mother, is three times that of their duty to their father. And not only does the mother’s command take priority over the father’s command, but in some instances, *it even takes priority over God’s command* (Sohofi, 2015). A man once approached Prophet Muhammad asking for his guidance, he wanted to go to war defending his people against attackers (which is a religious duty in Islam if you, your people, or the defenseless are attacked by aggressors). However, his mother did not want to see her son go to war. In any other instance, refusing to go and fight (unless for medical reasons) in self-defense or to defend others would be a sin. However, Prophet Muhammad replied, “Go and stay with your mother... the spiritual reward which you receive for serving her even one night and

making her happy with your presence, is greater than a one-year long holy war” (Kulainī, 1982, p. 130).

Another well-known hadith is, “your Heaven lies under the feet of your mother” (An-Nasā’ī, 2000, no. 3104). Scholars have interpreted this hadith to mean that the way one can attain heaven, is through serving their mother. The reason why mothers have been given such a high and respected status in Islam is because of the pain they endure and selfless love they give to their children from pregnancy, to child birth, and then on. The Quran says, “We have enjoined on man kindness to his parents; in pain did his mother bear him, and in pain did she give him birth” (Quran 46:15). And the sacrifices the mother has made to the child can never be repaid, that is why children are required to serve their mothers for as long as they’re alive, and even after that through making prayers for them. There is even a story about a man who was

performing Tawaf (circumambulating the Ka’bah in Mecca) while carrying his mother on his back. This man said to Ibn Umar⁵⁵, ‘I am like a tame camel for her! I have carried her more than she carried me. Do you think I have paid her back? Ibn Umar replied, ‘No, not even one contraction⁵⁶’. (Bukhārī, 1966, n.p.)

At a time where women were seen as less than men, Islam made it *incumbent* on its believers to treat their mothers with honor and respect.

One more example of Islam’s positive perception of women is connected to the word *rahmah*. “Bismillah-ir-Rahman-ir-Rahim” is a phrase fundamental to the daily life of every Muslim. It is recited: before every surah⁵⁷ in the Quran; before every prayer; especially before one is starting something important; and before almost any major or minor action throughout the

⁵⁵ Abdullah ibn Umar was a companion of the Prophet Muhammad.

⁵⁶ “Not even one contraction” refers to the painful contractions mothers endure during child birth.

⁵⁷ chapter in the Quran

day such as cooking, eating, drinking, doing homework, doing the laundry, leaving the house, driving, etc. The phrase is loosely translated to mean, “in the name of God, the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful”. The two words, *Rahman* and *Rahim*, are a description of the qualities of God. In the Quran, God uses these two words to introduce himself more than any other words in the Arabic language; they are integral to the essence of God in Islam (Majid, 2014). *Rahman* is “the One who is defined by complete and universal *rahmah*” and *Rahim* is “the One who continuously shows much *rahmah*” (Majid, 2014, para. 2). *Rahmah* is loosely translated to mean ‘mercy’, however this translation does not do the word justice. Mercy, according to dictionary.com (2020), is defined as the “compassionate or kindly forbearance shown toward an offender, an enemy, or other person in one's power”. An example of being shown mercy is when a police officer who would have written someone a ticket decides to be *merciful* and let them go. So ‘mercy’ is related to power, punishment, judges, police officers, murderers, dictators, or any one in a position of power who can cause us harm but chooses not to. This is *not* the definition of *rahmah*, which is much better described as deep, emotional, and selfless love and nurturing, and is central to the Islamic approach for one’s connection and relationship with God (Majid, 2014).

The Western concept of God is heavily focused on masculinity and fatherhood, and even in the English language, God is often referred to as “He”⁵⁸ (Velasquez, 2017, p. 308). The concept of God is consequently associated with terms such as “father”, “strong”, “brave”, “domineering”, “distant”, “absent”, “harsh”, “punitive”, “leader”, “King”, “master”, etc.

⁵⁸ The English translations of the Quran often use the word “He” and “Him”. That is because, although Islamic theology explicitly rejects gendered anthropomorphisms when referring to God, the Arabic language is deeply gendered, much like Spanish and other languages. The default in Arabic is masculine, and gender neutral pronouns are almost nonexistent (with a few exceptions). (Shaikh, 2019) (Berger, 2019)

However, in Islam, the words used most to describe God⁵⁹, the highest and most exalted being in existence, are *intrinsically feminine*. What is interesting about these words are that their origin, *Rahm*, the root of *Rahmah*, means ‘womb’ (Majid, 2014). The word is deeply associated with femininity, motherhood, and quite literally, the anatomy of the female body. After all, God is the creator and giver of life⁶⁰. However, fourteen-hundred years ago, and even very much so today, the concept of femininity was related to weakness and frailty; men were physically stronger, and hence, seen as far superior to women. That is why the association of God with womanness was not only revolutionary and progressive back then, but is maybe even more so now in the 21st century.

In fact, it is believed that God himself stated, “I am *al-Rahmān* and created the *rahm* (uterus) – And I named it after Me” (Çakmak, 2017, p. 1038). Being attributed in any way to the Creator is extremely significant, and the fact that the very core of God’s nature in Islam is derived from a word for a female organ is powerful, yet makes absolute sense.

A mother’s womb is a source of protection, it is a place where one grows and develops and is nurtured in an unparalleled way... There is an interesting relationship between the mother and the child. Does the child know the mother? No. Does the child love the mother? No. But does the mother already love the child? Yes. Is the mother already looking after the child? Yes. In every way the entire world of the child is taken care of by the mother but the child has no idea no clue that he is loved so much, that the mother is willing to do so much for this child and protect it from every danger and harm. Normally when a person protects themselves they will protect their face or body 1st etc [sic] but a mother before she protects herself she will protect her stomach out of concern for the child. (“The Name of Allah: Ar-Rahmaan & Ar-Raheem”, 2014, para. 10-12)

⁵⁹ What’s interesting about the Arabic language is that although it is heavily gendered, the word for God, *Allah*, is gender neutral.

⁶⁰ It is to be noted that in Islam, God does not have a gender, rather what is being examined here are the connotations and meanings behind the words *used* to describe God.

Though all human beings are capable of having this deep, God-like love, *rahmah*, it cannot be denied that the love and emotions mothers have towards their children are incomparable to any other human relationship. Therefore one can conclude, that the closest in nature in this world to God, is womenkind, and more specifically mothers, not man. Nevertheless, despite Islam comparing the qualities of women to the level of those of God, the religion is still perceived by many people in the West, and especially mainstream media, to have a negative view of women and to have placed women below men.

Women in Islam versus Women in the West

Many critics chastise Islam for being backwards and behind the West when it comes to its treatment towards women. However, for most of history⁶¹ (and even in some cases today), Islam has given *more* rights to women than Western culture has⁶². “Many Muslim women are emphatic that the Qur’an not only preaches the spiritual equality of men and women, it offers women more rights than other religions, or is at the very least no more inherently patriarchal” (Fetzer & Soper, 2003, p. 253). For example, (contrary to popular assumptions) Islam not only gave women the right to an education, but it made education a *religious duty* upon everyone. Education has a high place in Islam so much that Prophet Muhammad even said, “seeking knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim” (Ibn et al., 2007, no. 224). In the Quran it also says, “Allah will exalt those who believe among you, and those who have knowledge, to high ranks” (Quran 58:11). So pursuing an education is not only encouraged by Islam, but it is also seen as a duty, for all of its adherents. There are no hadiths, Quranic verses, or even prominent Islamic scholars, that prohibit women

⁶¹ Islam originated in Mecca and Medina around fourteen hundred years ago, during the beginning of the 7th century.

⁶² What is explicitly being discussed here is the religion itself based on its texts, and not practices of Muslims or Muslim-majority countries.

from seeking an education, dispelling the myth that Islam prevents women from seeking an education.

Now, let's compare this to the West⁶³. Early on in American history, women were not able to seek a proper, formal education, let alone higher education. Around the 18th and 19th centuries were when women gained the ability to attend universities and seek education beyond high school (Dentith, 2016). Britain also followed a similar pattern. It wasn't until as late as 1972 that the Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, which officially prohibited any discrimination "on the basis of sex in any federally funded education program or activity", was signed into law ("Overview Of Title IX...", 2015, para. 1). This stands in stark contrast to women's access to education throughout the history of Islam. The first, oldest, and continuously operating educational institution in history is the University of al-Qarawiyyin, which was founded in the year 859 AD in Fez, Morocco by a Muslim woman named Fatima al-Fihri (Nader, 2016). Though it is true that today many women in predominantly Muslim-majority countries do not have adequate access to education, the main causes of this are poverty and living in developing countries that lack proper infrastructure and funding for public schools (Mcclendon et al., 2018). It can also be caused by patriarchal and misogynist men who portray themselves as followers of Islam to gain power, but practice quite the opposite of what the religion teaches (such as the Taliban in Afghanistan). Lack of access to education for women is not a religious problem, it is a political, cultural, economic, and 'developing-world' problem (Mcclendon et al., 2018). So the idea that Islam is behind the West when it comes to women's rights and specifically education, is

⁶³ This comparison is not meant to generalize Western societies and cultures, as many distinctions and nuances exist within these broad terms, but rather to counter the myth that 'Western society and culture' in their *entirety* have been the most progressive feminist forces, while 'others' (especially Islam) have been lagging behind.

a gross misrepresentation of reality, especially since the opposite has been true and there is no support for such discrimination against women in the Quran.

Other rights given to women by Islam⁶⁴ earlier than in the West include, but are not limited to:

I. the right to work -

- Islam - “No one has the right to forbid without an authentic text which is clear in meaning.

On that basis, we say that the woman's work in itself is allowed. It is even requested if she is in need of it, if she is a widow, divorced, or did not have a chance to marry, and if she has no income to avoid the humility of asking for charity or people's condescension.” (Qaradawi, 1997, p. 46)

- United States - “The 1930s would see a spike in policies and laws that discriminated against, even forbade, women to work when they were married. During the Great Depression, discrimination against their employment even became law. ‘Nine states had marriage [work ban] laws prior to the Depression,...’” (Blakemore, 2019, para. 4-5)

II. the right to inheritance -

- Islam - “The Qu’ran, in Surah 4 Verse 7, states: ‘Men shall have a share of what their parents and closest relatives leave, and women shall have a share of what their parents and closest relatives leave, whether the legacy be small or large: this is ordained by God’... While women inherit less than men in four situations, they inherit more than men in 16 situations, and equal to men in 10 situations.” (Khan, et al., 2019, para. 49 & 51)

⁶⁴ This is specifically referring to the rights that were given to women by the scriptures and texts of Islam; whether or not Muslim societies offered women these rights is not being discussed here.

- The Bible - “Sons, if any, normally were implied to be the sole heirs... there seem to be no other biblical texts reporting daughters inheriting or expecting to inherit from their parents... The clear implication is that when a woman who had inherited her father’s property married, the inherited property then became her husband’s.” (Hiers, 1993, pp. 29 & 33-34)
- The West - “In the Western tradition, women generally, and married women in particular, had little or no place in the order of intestate succession. Until the end of the sixteenth century, women were basically denied the right to inherit property.” (Radford, 2000, p. 135)

III. the right to own property -

- Islam - “Under established rules of Islamic law, a Muslim man’s property is not wholly his, whereas a woman’s property (of all sorts, whether land, money, personal assets, etc.) is exclusively her own.” (Quraishi-Landes, 2013, para. 6)
- United Kingdom - “Women who held property of any kind were required to give up all rights to it to their husbands on marriage. However, a long-running campaign by various women's groups led in 1870 to the Married Women's Property Act. This allowed any money which a woman earned to be treated as her own property, and not her husband’s. Further campaigning resulted in an extension of this law in 1882 to allow married women to have complete personal control over all of their property.” (“Marriage: Property and Children”, n.d., para. 1-2)
- United States - “In 1848 New York was one of the first states to provide married woman the right to control the wages they earned and own property in their name. By contrast the following year the Tennessee legislature stated that ‘married women lack independent souls and thus should not be allowed to own property’” (Adams, 2017, para. 10). “Stowe

campaigned for women's rights, too, arguing in 1869 that the ‘position of a married woman... is, in many respects, precisely similar to that of the negro slave. She can make no contract and hold no property.... [I]n the English common law a married woman is nothing at all’” (Jen, 2015, para. 3).

IV. the right to vote -

- Islam - “One of the forms of equal rights which are granted to both men and women is the right of exchanging opinions and consultation in general and private matters and in religious and irreligious issues. God says in the Quran, ‘The believing men and believing women are allies of one another. They enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong...’ Quran 9:71. The verse did not differentiate between men and women in practicing their right to command the good and forbid the bad, voting is a kind of advice which includes commanding the good and forbidding the bad.” (Dar Al-Ifta, n.d., para. 3-4)
- United States - “on August 18, 1920, the 19th Amendment to the Constitution was finally ratified, enfranchising all American women and declaring for the first time that they, like men, deserve all the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.” (History.com Editors, 2009, para. 1)

V. the right to choose their husbands -

- According to Sahih Bukhari, a compilation of hadiths, “no father or mother or any close relation can force his/her children to marry any one against their free will and consent... If parents force their daughter to marry someone against her wish then the marriage will be void.” Prophet Muhammad stated, “no female whether a widow or divorcee will be forced to marry any one unless her express and categorical consent has been freely taken and in

the same way a woman not previously married can never be forced to marry anyone unless her free consent and permission is taken.” (Bukhārī, 1966).

- Medieval Europe - “In the Medieval Times, however, marriage was quite different. Women didn't have a choice as to who they would marry. Most of the time they didn't even know the man before they were married.” (Carter, n.d., para. 1)

VI. the right to keep their last names (and consequently, identity) after marriage -

- Islam - “it is closer to Islamic law and to the pleasure of Allah for a Muslim woman to not change her surname after her nikkah (wedding contract).” (Farooqi, 2019, para. 1)
- United States - Most American women take their husband’s last name after marriage. Around 72% of American adults believe a woman should give up her maiden name once she’s married, and 50% believe that it should be required by law, and not the woman’s choice (Hamilton, et al., 2011). More recently, many women have begun keeping their maiden names or hyphenating with their husband’s last name. It is seen as an empowering and feminist trend, even though it has been the custom among Muslims (as well as other cultures) for centuries, yet they get no recognition for it.

VII. and finally, the right to divorce -

- Islam - “The advent of Islam made the divorce process much more favorable to women. Women’s property is not divided during a divorce. Whatever a woman earns or is given before and during the course of the marriage remains her property if the marriage ends. This prevents men from taking advantage of women’s property or wealth through marriage. On the other hand, the man’s property is divided if a divorce occurs according to the couple’s

marriage contract. A woman is entitled to support and maintenance from her former husband if she requires.” (Mohammad & Lehmann, 2011, p. 8)

- Christianity and Europe - Christianity “placed the indissolubility of marriage at the core of its beliefs. Divorce was limited to occasions of grave offense by around the third century and generally prohibited in Western Europe by the end of the early medieval period. Civil courts lost their power to adjudicate matrimonial cases and canon law was paramount. The Roman Catholic Church also maintained that, upon marriage, husband and wife became one person in law, with the wife’s legal existence being suspended for its duration.” (Oxley, 2017, para. 3)

This is not to portray the West as inferior, and Islam as superior, but rather to hold the West to its *own* standards and its *own* criteria of women’s oppression. And to prove that even by the expectations it has created for ‘others’, for most of history, it has not lived up to those same expectations, even though it had imposed these expectations on others to paint them as inferior. So though Islam is often portrayed as a religion that strips women of their rights, and Christianity and the West are portrayed as the progressive forces that granted women *more* rights than other religions or cultures, reality does not necessarily reflect that. “Women under ‘Shari’a’, the Islamic Law, were given rights that women elsewhere have acquired only recently after they ‘fought’ for them on their own” (The Islamic Center of Lexington, n.d., para. 19). These are sides of Islam and the West that are not discussed in discourses of women’s rights in Western media.

Islam and Feminism

Despite how Islam is viewed, women have actually played an *active* and *assertive* role in its evolution and expansion. An Islamic scholar once stated, “I know of no other religion in which

women were so central in its formative history” (Power, 2015, para. 37). Muslim women in Islam’s history “taught judges and imams, issued fatwas, and traveled to distant cities. Some made lecture tours across the Middle East” (Power, 2015, para. 38). There have been numerous prominent women in Islamic history whose contributions have been largely ignored by Western discourse. One of them was the Prophet Muhammad’s first wife⁶⁵, Khadija, who was also the first Muslim in Islam⁶⁶. Khadija was the ‘CEO’ of Mecca’s largest and most successful trading company at the time (Haylamaz & Coşar, 2014). She proposed to Muhammad herself, and at the time, was 15 years older than him, a single mother, twice-widowed, and his boss—defying the social standards of her time (Haylamaz & Coşar, 2014). And even in the 21st century, she would be considered a strong, progressive female. Aisha, another one of Prophet Muhammad’s wives, was also an incredibly strong woman, she was “a top Islamic scholar, an inspiration to champions of women’s rights, a military commander riding on camelback, and a fatwa-issuing jurist, Aisha’s intellectual standing and religious authority were astonishing, by the standards of both our own time and hers” (Power, 2015, para. 55). Many of the Prophet’s wives became central figures in Islamic history and narrated thousands of hadiths, which are next in authority to the Quran.

Not only did women play a large role in the adoption and spread of Islam, but they also played a role *in the revelation of the Quran itself*. One of the wives of Prophet Muhammad, Umm Salama, approached him with her concerns about the Quran and its lack of inclusiveness of

⁶⁵ He had a total of 11 wives throughout his life; however, with Khadija (his closest and most beloved), he was monogamous until her death.

⁶⁶ Although Muslims believe Islam has existed since the time of Prophet Adam, when using the term commonly, it is meant to refer to the final revelation which was given to the Prophet Muhammad.

women⁶⁷, and asked, “why are we women never mentioned in the Qur’an as men are?”⁶⁸ (Lamrabet, n.d., para. 3). Though she⁶⁹ was aware that the neutral form in the Arabic language was masculine, Umm Salama wanted women to be recognized by the Quran clearly, and written in stone forever. “They wanted an equality transcribed for eternity in the sacred Text even though they were acutely aware that the Qur’anic discourse, through its neutral masculine *tone*, concerned them as much as men” (Lamrabet, n.d., para. 8). If a woman during our century would make this criticism to a male authority, she would be deemed disrespectful, finicky, and maybe even blasphemous. However, not only was Umm Salama making this criticism in the 7th century toward a male, her husband, a religious authority, the Prophet, but also, *God*.

This attitude is revealing of the mindset of the Muslim women of the era. Their commitment to the path of faith was as much if not stronger than men’s and, without hesitation, led them to demand a more pronounced pledge of fairness from the Creator... This is undoubtedly a protest discourse of a feminist nature. To demand rights on the same grounds as men, denoted the birth of a new female consciousness that refused to content itself in being assimilated into the general concept of believer and instead demanded distinct recognition in due form. One is frankly surprised by the *bravery* of these women who did not hesitate in seeking from the Prophet of Islam,... These women, who were almost certainly spiritually enlightened to be capable of expressing such comments, were clearly questioning *the revelation*. (Lambret, n.d., para. 7 & 9-10) (emphasis added)

And in response, the Prophet did not chastise his wife for questioning the words of God, or even show any sign of displeasure, rather, he remained silent (Lamrabet, n.d.). It didn’t take

⁶⁷ Refer to page 48 for footnote 58 on the Arabic language in relation to gender.

⁶⁸ Scholars have disagreed on what the exact wording of the sentence was. Some say Umm Salama said, “why are men mentioned at every occasion and not us women?”, and others believe she said, “I can see that everything favours men and that women are hardly mentioned by the divine words!” (Lamrabet, n.d., para. 3).

⁶⁹ Scholars believe it was numerous Muslim women that held this concern at the time, and not just Umm Salama (Lambert).

long for the answer to descend and God responded *directly* to these women, addressed their criticism, and materialized their wishes in the verses:

And *their* Lord⁷⁰ responded *to them*, ‘Never will I allow to be lost the work of [any] worker among you, whether male or female’ (Quran 3:195); Surely the men who submit and the women who submit, and the believing men and the believing women, and the obeying men and the obeying women, and the truthful men and the truthful women, and the patient men and the patient women and the humble men and the humble women, and the almsgiving men and the almsgiving women, and the fasting men and the fasting women, and the men who guard their private parts and the women who do so, and the men who remember Allah much and the women who remember—Allah has prepared for them forgiveness and a mighty reward. (Quran 33:35) (emphasis added)

Yet despite this event, Muslim women are told by men in power to not criticize any interpretation of Islam, even the weak and uncertain ones. When women try to demand basic rights they are told to stay in their place. When women try to question patriarchal power structures, they are silenced. When women do any of these actions, they are dismissed as being blasphemous and going against the teachings of Islam, even though these actions are *a part of its conception* and are even *encouraged* by the religion. This again shows that those in power (men) have been and are using Islam to maintain their power, rather than being proper followers of the religion’s teachings. This part of Islam is undoubtedly shrouded to many Muslim women (and also the West) in order to keep them silent.

Despite this, there have been many feminist movements in the recent years that have *utilized* the teachings of Islam.

Many passages in the Qur'an were interpreted by Patriarchy, loosely and out of context, in support of a vicious patriarchal ideology⁷¹. These interpretations were then handed down to women as God's revealed words. Also, the Arabic language is

⁷⁰ The Arabic word here in the Quran is ‘*Rabb*’, meaning Lord, Master, Creator, etc...

⁷¹ Refer back to pages 33-36 for the origins and explanations of patriarchal interpretations of the Quran.

a very rich language, and thus it is not uncommon to run into sentences that can be interpreted in a variety of ways. Today, as feminist activity asserts itself in the Islamic sphere, we find ourselves reexamining these old patriarchal interpretations and shaking them at the root. (Hibri, 1982, p. viii)

There are many ways to read and interpret the Quran and other Islamic primary texts, and feminist Muslims have put to good use this possibility of reinterpretation. After all, “‘Islam has always upheld a tradition of counter-narrative.’ The faith not only resists codification, it thrives on debate and evolution (to the chagrin and denial of hardliners)” (Hay, 2020, para. 29). The limitations of the reification⁷² of the religion’s original texts have always been challenged and pushed.

Though there are numerous examples of movements reinterpreting and utilizing the teachings of Islam, such as in Iran, Egypt, Afghanistan, Turkey, and more, for purposes of this paper I will focus on one particular case, the recent Aurat⁷³ March in Pakistan. This march is an annual⁷⁴ protest and political demonstration held in numerous cities across Pakistan such as Lahore, Karachi, Islamabad, and Hyderabad on International Women’s Day⁷⁵ (Amnesty International, 2020). In Pakistan, the Aurat March seeks to address and combat the various injustices women in the country face, at home and in the public sphere, such as lack of access to education, lack of freedom from family members, lack of access to contraception and abortion, son-preference, forced marriages, difficulty of obtaining a divorce, domestic violence, harassment, rape, honor killings, acid attacks, various sexism and toxicities within the male-

⁷² According to Merriam-Webster (2020), reify means “to consider or represent (something abstract) as a material or concrete thing : to give definite content and form to (a concept or idea).”

⁷³ As mentioned previously in the paper, *Aurat* means ‘woman’ in Urdu.

⁷⁴ The first Aurat March took place in 2018.

⁷⁵ “International Women's Day (March 8) is a global day celebrating the social, economic, cultural and political achievements of women. The day also marks a call to action for accelerating gender parity” (International Women's Day, n.d., para. 6).

dominated culture; even LGBTQ+ struggles are represented (Asher, 2020). The movement encompasses individuals from all backgrounds,

as organizers of the Aurat March you'll find us everywhere - from talking to your nani⁷⁶ and her friends at the Behbud Mela⁷⁷, to having chai with women in Rehri Goth⁷⁸, engaging with the khwajasira⁷⁹ community, and of course meetings with students at university campuses... We are tirelessly working in marginalized communities, discussing a diverse range of issues, always making sure our outreach is intersectional. (Staff, 2019, para. 11-12)

The prominent 'slogan' for this year's Aurat March was, "*mera jism, meri marzi*"⁸⁰, which translates to, "my body, my choice" (Asher, 2020, para. 15). This slogan especially is what created a storm of controversy and backlash against the march. Conservative, 'religious', traditional, and patriarchal figures have condemned the march as 'too provocative' and violating the teachings of Islam. In fact, another march was created in retaliation, the Haya⁸¹ March. One leader stated, "the organizers and those behind this [Aurat] march are promoting an agenda favoring vulgarity and anti-religious values... The rights that Islam has bestowed upon women are sufficient. That leaves no room for such campaigns" (Warraich, 2020, para. 4-5). However, these exact rights that Islam has given women are what the participants of the Aurat March are asking for. One activist explained,

Islam has given a lot of rights to women. None of the organizers or those who believe in this march have ever denied this for even a second... Women and many men are simply marching and raising their voices because women are NOT getting their due rights which are promised to them by the constitution of Pakistan and yes, also by our religion. (Ali, 2020, para. 5)

⁷⁶ maternal grandmother

⁷⁷ a festival or fair

⁷⁸ a fishing community in Karachi

⁷⁹ refers to transgender, intersex, or other non-binary identities

⁸⁰ Another slogan was, "*Khud khaana garam kar lo*", which translates to "heat your own food".

⁸¹ decency or modesty

Rather than protesting *against* their religion, which is what patriarchal traditionalists and even some Westerners would assume, these women are protesting *with* their religion. In fact, a petitioner reached out to the Islamabad High Court in order to have the Aurat march banned on the basis that it contradicted Islam (Correspondent, 2020). The court *rejected* the petition and IHC Chief Justice Athar Minallah stated,

It should be observed as a day of introspection. The petitioners and the society should demonstrably show their abhorrence and outrage against the norms of certain sections of our society, which are in defiance to the Islamic injunctions... There is a need to accept the reality and to change mindsets by demonstrably showing outrage against the flagrant violations of the commands of Almighty Allah. Islam had brought a revolution against tribal patriarchal culture and misogynist norms. (Correspondent, 2020, para. 27)

The Chief Justice even went as far as questioning the petitioners on why they weren't as outraged with the anti-Islamic and misogynist cultural practices taking place in their country (such as honor killings, domestic abuse, etc.), as they were with slogans on the signs of some protesters (Correspondent, 2020).

The women involved in movements such as the Aurat March not only face opposition from the patriarchal men in their societies—who view re-examining religious texts in any way other than the way they've been interpreted for most of history as sacrilegious—but also from some Western feminists who believe Islam is inherently contradictory to feminism⁸². “One of the things we have to be most careful about in thinking about Third World feminisms, and feminism

⁸² “The people most likely to be *a priori* resistant to my argument will be those who think of Islam as a patriarchal religion and who hold that only fundamentalists or apologists can conceivably defend it. Such people, however, ignore not only the interpretive/masculinized nature of reading, but also the fact that every text has multiple meanings and that there are always disjunctures between theory and practice, i.e., between what a religion teaches and how we practice it... Some resistance to my argument may also stem from the fact that the dominant discourses on Islam, particularly as exemplified by the media, still remain within narrowly essentialist confines that discourage viewpoints favorable to it.” (Barlas, 2001, p. 121)

in different parts of the Muslim world, is how not to fall into polarizations that place feminism on the side of the West” (Abu-Lughod, 2002 p. 788). The Aurat March and other feminist movements that have utilized Islamic principles as a form of empowerment, represent the *intersection* and *convergence* of two major struggles against the dominant power structures that have plagued our world: patriarchy and coloniality. That is why I am presenting the ‘Islamic feminism’ movements as, not only anti-patriarchal movements, but also, a form of decolonization, in which Muslim women are rejecting the narrative that *only* Western, liberal secularism is compatible with feminism.

For decades, many women believed they had to choose between their Muslim identity and their belief in gender equality. It was an impossible choice—one that involved betraying either their faith or their feminist consciousness. Four years ago, a global movement called Musawah—‘equality’ in Arabic—began to make the case that women can fight for justice and equality from within Islamic tradition. (Segran, 2013, para. 1)

This movement refuses to choose between the two paths given to them by the West (and men), to either be emancipated and empowered, or to hold on to their faith. Rather, the daring movement has pushed to create its own third path, in which they see Islam as *the* road to reach their feminist endeavors. What I see in these movements are the subaltern rejecting the imperialist monopoly on the movement of feminism (Seedat, 2013).

Western Feminism

Western Feminism Versus Islam

In Western discourse, Islam and feminism are presented as being mutually exclusive, paradoxical, and incompatible. In fact, in America specifically, the conception that Islam oppresses women has even been weaponized,

These facts show that the war we're fighting isn't just about bombs and hijacked airliners. It's also about the oppression of women—often in horrific ways. Nor is this oppression an incidental byproduct of terrorism. The Islamic law—Sharia—that terrorists are fighting to impose upon the world mandates institutionalized discrimination against women. Islamic gender apartheid goes far beyond second class citizenship. It is intended to crush and subordinate women. (Spencer & Chesler, 2007, p. 6)

What makes these statements in particular dangerous, is that they were in part authored by Robert P. Spencer, who has appeared on FOX News multiple times, has taught classes and seminars for law enforcement officers, and his writings have been listed in FBI training materials (Sacirbey, 2014) (Ackerman, 2011). Additionally, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a prominent anti-Islamic activist and ex-Muslim, has made statements such as “what matters is abuse, and how it is anchored in a religion that denies women their rights as humans” (Ali, 2013), and “I cannot think of a system of law that dehumanizes & degrades women more than Islamic Law”⁸³. She has also compared Muslim women to birds in the cage of their religion, and has stated that Islam and the cultures of Muslim women are inferior to European and Western, liberal, democratic culture (Ali, 2013). Many of her statements and beliefs about Islam echo those same sentiments made on major news-media outlets, which influence the American public. Activists like her are even applauded; in fact, she's considered “a compelling public figure and advocate for women's rights, and we respect and appreciate her work to protect and defend the rights of women and girls throughout the world” (“Statement from Brandeis University”, 2014, para. 1).

How can one be an advocate for the liberation of women, and at the same time, assume certain women don't have agency in their life choices, are brainwashed, have backwards beliefs,

⁸³ On 7 News Sydney (April 4, 2017)

have inferior cultures and religion, and even go as far as comparing them to helpless, confused animals? This is representative of ‘Western/white feminism’.

Many Third World women have argued that while the genesis and historical development of Western feminism primarily reflected Eurocentric realities, Euro-American feminists regularly assumed that they could speak for the experiences of all women. Feminists from the Third World and African-American womanists argued that this presumption of a universal womanhood represented only the realities of a particular group of women, namely, First World, white, middle class women. Such discourses marginalized and eclipsed the realities of women with different experiences and who came from diverse contexts. (Safi, 2010, n.p.)

The criticisms of African American women, Latino women, and women from the Third World altered feminist discourses by the end of the 20th century, and did in fact make feminism more inclusive. “Subsequently, many Western feminists, particularly from the 1980s onwards, have acknowledged their own positioning and have significantly responded to issues of pluralism, representation, and hegemony” (Safi, 2010, n.p.). However, this inclusivity has not yet extended towards Islam and Muslim women, of whom

“feminists more easily discard judicious analysis and reiterate negative stereotypes. Thus some Western feminists, who would otherwise be sensitized to questions of diversity, persist in making sweeping claims about Muslim women or Islam without engaging the necessary levels of complexity and specificity” (Safi, 2010, n.p.)

Muslim women are still being told that their cultures, religion, and way of life contradict feminism and must be compromised in order to be able to call themselves feminists. Western, white feminists have become the gatekeepers of who can and cannot be deemed as a feminist.

Western Feminism and Capitalism

Another prominent discourse surrounding feminism in the West is the push for women to work outside of the home, and simultaneously, the disdain for women who work inside the home.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty's article "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" (1988) is highly critical of Western feminism, which places Western women and their cultures as superior compared to women and cultures from 'third world' countries. According to Mohanty, the Western feminists see themselves "as educated, modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions" (Mohanty, 1988, p. 337). Whereas they see 'other' women as "ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc." (Mohanty, 1988, p. 337). This way of thinking does nothing to help those women and only further exacerbates not only coloniality, but patriarchy as well. Feminists need to focus on making sure that women all over the world have the freedom to live the lifestyles they choose, instead of attacking the lifestyles they choose. "Feminist theories which examine our cultural practices as 'feudal residues' or label us 'traditional,' also portray us as politically immature women who need to be versed and schooled in the ethos of Western Feminism" (Mohanty, 1988, p. 338). Western feminists need to keep in mind that women have cultural and religious differences, and should understand them better rather than jump to the conclusion that the 'Western way' is the 'right way'; this superiority complex must be eliminated.

Mohanty (1988) also comments on capitalism and its role in such colonial perceptions of the 'other'. Muslim women and women from the 'global south' are seen as oppressed if they don't work outside their homes, even if they *choose* not to. The idea of 'the working woman' is seen as empowering, while the role of the housewife has negative connotations and is seen as 'traditional' and 'primitive'. In fact, the United Nations Gender Inequality Index (GII) uses "labour force participation rates of female" populations to determine a country's gender

inequality (“United Nations Development Programme”). The GII “yields insights in gender gaps in major areas of human development” and views lower numbers of women in the workforce as one of the “systematic disadvantages of women” (“United Nations Development Programme”). The GII *does not* take into consideration women who choose not to work, thus dismissing even this choice as having “negative consequences for development of [women’s] capabilities and [women’s] freedom of choice” (“United Nations Development Programme”).

This may have emerged from the efforts of governments⁸⁴ during the World Wars to motivate women to join the workforce in order to replace the men who were abroad fighting. The iconic Rosie the Riveter poster, which became a representation of feminism, is a good example of society, specifically the U.S. government, encouraging women to join the work force—often times in factories to produce weapons and ammunition. Women who did work in the labor force were seen in a positive light since they were contributing to the war efforts, while women who didn’t were seen negatively and labeled as ‘lazy’. Mohanty refers to this as the constructed ‘ideology of the housewife’—the

notion of a woman sitting in the house, as providing the necessary subjective and socio-cultural element for the creation and maintenance of a production system that contributes to the increasing pauperization of women, and keeps them totally atomized and disorganized as workers. (Mohanty, 1988, p. 345)

This lingered on into today. There is still a prominent notion in Western feminism that working women are empowered while women who work in their homes are oppressed.

According to the prominent ‘feminist’, Simone de Beauvoir, “no woman should be authorized to stay at home to raise her children... *Women should not have that choice*, precisely because if there is such a choice, too many women will make that one” (O’Leary, 2012, para. 4)

⁸⁴ especially the United States’ government

(emphasis added). Another ‘feminist’, Ellen Herman, believes that “the family—especially, the western patriarchal, bourgeois, and child-centered, nuclear family” is “the most important source of women’s oppression” (O’Leary, 2012, para. 5). Director of the Washington-based Institute for Women’s Policy Research (IWPR), Heidi Hartmann, writes, “the crucial elements of patriarchy as we currently experience them are heterosexual marriage, female child rearing and house work, women’s economic dependence on men” (O’Leary, 2012, para. 6). This pro-working-outside women and “anti-stay-at-home, motherhood attitude can be traced all the way back to Frederick Engels, Karl Marx’s collaborator, who wrote: ‘...the first condition for the liberation of the wife is to bring the whole female sex back into public industry’” (O’Leary, 2012, para. 8).

This way of thinking pits “women against one another along the fault lines of conviction, economic class and need, and, often, ethnicity” (Bennhold, 2010, para. 5). Additionally,

women who stay home are increasingly seen as old-fashioned and an economic burden to society. If their husbands are rich, they are frequently berated for being lazy...Their daily chores of cleaning, cooking or raising their children have always been ignored by national accounts...In a debate that counts women catching up with men in education and the labor market in terms of raising productivity and economic growth, stay-at-home moms are valued less than ever. (Bennhold, 2010, para. 6-7)

It is true there are cases where women are prevented from working or it is seen by their society as inappropriate for women to work, this is undeniably sexist and oppressive. However, the perception that the idea of women working outside the home is *automatically* a sign of empowerment whereas the idea of a woman staying home is *automatically* a sign of oppression, presents the same strict and binary perception of women that I’ve discussed at length in this paper. It is inaccurate and generalizes the experiences and perceptions of all women and subjects them to a singular standard.

There is nothing inherently oppressive about being a housewife or stay-at-home mom, and there is nothing inherently empowering about being in the work force. However, when viewed from the notion that capitalism is exploitive in nature, the mere idea of *anyone* working in a system meant for the sole purpose of profit for the owners of the means of production *can* be seen as oppressive. Capitalism values profit, and therefore spending quality time with one's family and participating in an economy which doesn't result in profit is deemed as 'lazy', and even oppressive. According to Mohanty, capitalism and this Western feminist mindset defines “‘non-working housewives’ and their work as ‘leisure-time activity,’” and insignificant (Mohanty, 1988, p. 345). One example to illustrate this is “if a man marries his housekeeper and stops paying her for her work, G.D.P. goes down. If a woman stops nursing and buys formula for her baby, G.D.P. goes up” (Bennhold, 2010, para. 7). However, this concept ignores that women in the home are still contributing to an economy; an economy in which the resulting ‘products’ are the nourishment of future generations and the strengthening of familial bonds⁸⁵. Women that choose to stay at home, are not women who don't work, in fact, there is *a lot* of work⁸⁶ involved for housewives and stay-at-home moms. And for most of history, and in some parts of the world today, being a housewife was a sign of luxury, and a privilege. Especially, in the United States, African American women did not have the luxury of having the choice to stay at home like their

⁸⁵ This is not to say that women who work are not able to achieve this. The point here is the ability for the woman to choose, and that this ability is impeded by the strong negative associations Western society tend to have towards women not working outside of their homes.

⁸⁶ “To be a housewife is to be a member of a very peculiar occupation—an occupation like no other. The nature of the duties to be performed, the method of payment, the form of supervision, the tenure system, the ‘market’ in which the ‘workers’ find ‘jobs,’ and the physical hazards are all very different from the way things are in other occupations. The differences are so great that one tends not to think of a housewife as belonging to an occupation in the usual sense. It is commonly said that a housewife ‘doesn’t work’ and that she ‘is unpaid.’ The truth is, of course, that a housewife does work and does get recompense. Like other workers, she can quit or be fired. One dictionary defines an occupation as ‘an activity that serves as one’s regular source of livelihood.’ Being a housewife is an activity that gets one food, clothing, and a place to live, and that certainly meets the dictionary’s definition of having an occupation” (Bergmann, 2005, p. 133).

white counterparts did. However, from capitalism's perspective, since this form of work does not result in direct monetary profit, it is seen negatively. In fact, one article⁸⁷ is fairly honest about this, it concludes with the statistic, "the region loses an estimated 27% of income due to the gap in women's labor force participation" (El-Swaiss, 2016). Therefore, women who choose not to work in the labor force, especially Muslim women and women from the global south, are not only subject to the Western and male gazes, but also the gaze of capitalism.

History of "Feminism"

Part of the conflict surrounding what is and isn't feminist deals with the problematic history of feminism, or more so, *what is deemed to be the history of feminism*. Historians, and even some feminists themselves, typically separate feminism into waves. The first-wave of feminism began with the Seneca Falls Convention in the mid-19th century and stretched into the first half of the 20th century (Mikva, 2018). It focused on political and legal rights such as the right to vote, reproductive rights, and property rights, and included prominent activists such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, Susan B. Anthony, and Margaret Sanger (Mikva, 2018). The second-wave of feminism was heavily centered on the role of women in culture and society and began with Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in the mid-1900's (Grady, 2018). This movement spoke out against a woman's designated role as homemaker and housewife, and sought to expand a woman's role in the workforce and fight against the systematic sexism ingrained in society (Grady, 2018). The third-wave began towards the end of the 20th century and revolved around sexual harassment, sexual violence, and abortion rights (Grady, 2018). Some believe the third-wave is still ongoing, while others believe we have moved on to a fourth-

⁸⁷ The article discussed the lack of female participation in the workforce in Middle Eastern countries.

wave because of the advent of the ‘Me Too’ movement (Grady, 2018). The problem with this history is that *it assumes that feminism began in the West*. In fact, on some websites the movement is even described as “largely originating in the West” (Burkett, & Brunell, 2020, para. 1). This narrative falsely concludes that feminism was brought to the world *by the West*, is thus absent in other places, and that in order for a culture or religion to be feminist, it must ‘Westernize’.

As usual, the dominant power is able to write history in its favor. And this false history has placed the West at the forefront in the fight for women’s rights.

However, some feminist scholars object to identifying feminism with these particular moments of political activism, on the grounds that doing so eclipses the fact that there has been resistance to male domination that should be considered ‘feminist’ throughout history and across cultures: i.e., feminism is not confined to a few (White) women in the West over the past century or so. (McAfee, 2018, para. 13)

For example, there have been numerous cultures throughout history where women have held an *equal* status to that of men, and in matriarchal societies, women even held *higher* statuses than men. In Palawan, Philippines, men and women have been historically each other’s equals and the gender equality surpasses that of the West even today (Knight, 2020). Another matriarchal society is Khasi, India which is also matrilineal (Knight, 2020). In this society, women are also given more rights than men in the areas of inheritance and custody (Knight, 2020). The culture of Mosuo, China is especially fascinating in regards to gender roles and norms.

Mosuo women carry on the family name and run the households... The head matriarchs of each village govern the region by committee... The Mosuo are known for their tradition of *zouhun* or walking marriage, a union where women are free to take different sexual partners—no stigma attached... Mosuo women each have their own *babahuago*, or flower room, to receive visits from lovers. (Knight, 2020, para. 8)

Other societies where women's status has been equal or higher than men include the Nubia in Sudan, the Trobrianders of Papua New Guinea, Sparta, and Koraput, India (Knight, 2020).

Its principles are ingrained in their very culture. They practice and follow feminism as a matter of habit that has come to them down the ages. They do not follow it out of fear, compassion, enlightenment, education or compulsion; it is a necessity that comes quite naturally to them. It has been spontaneous and indigenous. (Mohapatra, 2009, para. 1)

Many cultures of people of color have been 'feminist' before the 19th century, yet are absent from prominent discussions of the history of feminism. Feminism was only given historical recognition when it began emerging in Western society. This history, is why the West is able to maintain a monopoly on feminism.

In fact, with the case of American white feminism, it can even be deemed a form of cultural appropriation⁸⁸. Many American women's rights activists were inspired by women in nearby Native American tribes, especially the Haudenosaunee⁸⁹ (Oneida Nation, 2017). Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Matilda Joselyn Gage, Lucretia Mott, and other feminists all had close encounters with Native American women which inspired their feminist efforts, which they even wrote about in detail (Oneida Nation, 2017). Sally Roesch Wagner, a feminist historian, explained,

I realized I had been skimming over the source of their inspiration without noticing it. My own unconscious white supremacy had kept me from recognizing what these prototypical feminists kept insisting in their writings: They caught a glimpse of the possibility of freedom because they knew women who lived liberated lives, women who had always possessed rights beyond their wildest imagination – Iroquois women. (Wagner, 1996, p. 21)

⁸⁸ When a culture adopts the practices or customs of other cultures without giving recognition to that culture.

⁸⁹ commonly known as the Iroquois

Yet in talks of feminism and its history, these societies and women are virtually absent. And thus, feminism and women's rights have been constructed to be attributed to the West and Western women.

The Muslim Veil

Since the West was able to *claim* feminism and women's liberation to themselves, they were also able to dictate what women's liberation means and thus, what constitutes oppression; and the West has come to the conclusion that the Muslim veil is a symbol of oppression. The historical origins of what has led to this conclusion have been discussed earlier⁹⁰, but now I will present the modern-day discourse regarding Muslim women and veiling. Though there are various forms of covering worn by Muslim women, such as the *burka*⁹¹, *niqab*⁹², *chador*⁹³, and *abaya*⁹⁴, for purposes of this paper, I will discuss the more commonly worn, and universally recognized form of covering, the headscarf⁹⁵ (the *khimar* as it is referred to in the Quran).

The Veil Outside of Islam

It is to be noted that the concept of female modesty and head covering existed before Islam, and exists in almost every major religion. For example, in Christianity, nuns cover their hair and bodies because they believe it is a commandment of God and a way to follow in the footsteps of the Virgin Mary, who is shown wearing a veil in most depictions. In fact, in some interpretations of

⁹⁰ see pages 24-26

⁹¹ a full face and body covering (not showing the eyes); most commonly associated with Afghanistan

⁹² a veil that covers the face, only showing the eyes; often times associated with Saudi Arabia

⁹³ a full body, usually black, cloak; most commonly worn in Iran and Afghanistan

⁹⁴ a loose over-garment and robe-like dress; most commonly worn in the Arabian peninsula

⁹⁵ There is disagreement among Muslims regarding what is Islamically required. Some view the *niqab* as compulsory, while others believe the *khimar*, headscarf, is enough to fulfill the requirements, while others believe no form of covering is required as long as one is modest.

Biblical verses, it can even be deemed a requirement for *all* women to cover their hair⁹⁶. Early Christian women used to wear veils and in some denominations of Christianity, some women do today as well; the puritans that came to America used to wear bonnets, and so do some Amish and Mennonite women today; some Catholic and Eastern Orthodox women wear a veil called a *mantilla*; and during weddings or church services, it is custom for some Christian women to wear the veil. Additionally, the head covering is even present in Judaism. Many religious Jewish women cover their hair after marriage, either with a wig or veil, and more orthodox denominations such as the Haredi community, even wear veils that resemble full burkas. In Sikhism, some women cover their hair using turbans, wraps, or veils, especially when in the Gurdwaras⁹⁷. Many Hindu and Jain women also cover their hair using a *dupatta*⁹⁸ or *ghoonghat*⁹⁹ in public places or just when visiting the temples. Also, some Sabian and Druze women cover their hair with veils as well. The veil and concept of female modesty is not exclusive to Islam, yet discourse surrounding the religion present them to be. Additionally, only the veil for Muslim women is presented to be oppressive, while nuns and women from other religions who choose to cover are often exempt from the label in prominent discourses.

Aside from veiling being practiced across religious boundaries, throughout history, and in many cultures, veiling in fact was a status symbol of elite and wealthy class women. In Roman, Mesopotamian, Greek, and Persian empires, women from the upper-classes would cover their hair

⁹⁶ 1 Corinthians 11:6 “For if a woman does not cover her head, she might as well have her hair cut off; but if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, then she should cover her head.”

⁹⁷ A temple or place of worship for Sikhs.

⁹⁸ A long shawl worn by women in South Asia. It is an accessory to the traditional attire. Some women choose to cover their hair with it, while others wear it over their shoulders.

⁹⁹ A veil or *dupatta* used by Hindu, Sikh, or Jain women to cover their hair and/or face.

(Dossani, 2013). In fact, in the Assyrian empire¹⁰⁰, women who weren't deemed as 'respected' or elite, such as prostitutes, poor women, and slaves, were *not allowed* to cover their hair¹⁰¹. It was a privilege only women who were 'worthy' could enjoy. The veil served as a mark of an educated, respected, wealthy, elite woman; "the veil served not merely to mark the upper classes but, more fundamentally, to differentiate between 'respectable' women and those who were publicly available" (Ahmed, 1992, p. 15). Rather than representing the oppression of women¹⁰², the veil represented an honored woman. In ancient Rome, veiling was also used as a force to protect women against evil; "the veil also protected the married woman from religiously impure things, limiting the likelihood of her seeing some omen, object, or act that would diminish her purity" (Bonfante & Sebesta, 2001, p. 49). Additionally, even after the pagan era in Europe and into the Middle Ages and Renaissance, European women covered their hair with veils or headdresses known as wimples (Lofting, 2018). Even in the 19th and the early part of the 20th century, "no self-respecting woman would be seen in town without a hat" (Enderwitz, 2009, para. 3). And it continued to be a sign of wealth¹⁰³ and respectability. The concept of veiling for women has crossed cultures and times, and has not always been a symbol of oppression, it had to be constructed to be.

¹⁰⁰ "A prostitute shall not veil herself, her head shall be bare. Whoever sees a veiled prostitute shall seize her, secure witnesses, and bring her to the palace entrance... Slave-women shall not veil themselves, and he who should see a veiled slave-woman shall seize her and bring her to the palace entrance: they shall cut off her ears; he who seizes her shall take her clothing." (Stol, et al., 2016, p. 676)

¹⁰¹ This law was also prevalent in parts of Europe in the 12th and 13th centuries (Gilbert, n.d.).

¹⁰² Though the fact that some women were barred from wearing the veil is undoubtedly oppression as well.

¹⁰³ Poor women were often unable to afford the extra cloth (Lofting, 2018).

The Veil in Islam

Though the Muslim headscarf is commonly known as the *hijab* in the West, that is not the literal translation of the word. In the Arabic language, every word can be traced back to three letters, its root. That root can then be used to create multiple words that are related¹⁰⁴. The root for ‘hijab’ is *ha jeem ba*, which means ‘to conceal’ or ‘to cover’. The actual word ‘hijab’ has been used in the Quran to refer to a “curtain”, “screen”, or “barrier”, while the specific word used to describe the head covering in the Quran is *khimar*¹⁰⁵. ‘Hijab’ as a concept in Islam refers to ‘modesty’—and is for both men and women—and is not exclusive to clothing, but rather encompasses a person’s behaviors and mannerisms as well. It is more so a set of practices, rather than simply a covering on one’s head. For example, under the Islamic concept of hijab, a man would not be permitted to wear clothing that is tight fitting or shows off his body (Rizvi, 2017). There is also social hijab and hijab of the eyes¹⁰⁶. Contrary to what some would assume, when addressing hijab, the Quran addresses *men first*, not women.

Islam places the primary responsibility of observing hijab not on women – but on men... And at the genesis of the hijab discussion, the Quran commands men to not stare at women and to not be promiscuous. The Quran 24:31 obliges men to observe modesty: ‘Say to the believing men that they restrain their eyes and guard their private parts. That is purer for them. Surely, Allah is well aware of what they do.’ This verse rebukes forced laws on women that claim ‘women must cover otherwise men are distracted’. It destroys rape culture because it commands men to reform themselves first and exclusively... In Islam, men have an obligation to God and to women to observe hijab. (Rashid, 2017, para. 2-5)

¹⁰⁴ For example, the root *ka ta ba* is used to create the words *kitab* (book), *maktaba* (library), *katib* (author), *aktuba* (I write), etc.

¹⁰⁵ The word *khamr*, which has the same root, is used in the Quran to refer to ‘intoxicants’, since they cloud a person’s *head* or judgements.

¹⁰⁶ This means observing modesty in behavior around others and refraining from staring at the opposite gender and viewing sexual images.

This is a common misconception among non-Muslims, but also many Muslims themselves: modesty is for *both* men and women in Islam.

The Islamic Veil In the West

As mentioned previously, the *khimar* is often seen by Western media as oppressive to women. Though it is true that the *khimar* has been and can be used as a tool for oppression, that does not justify blatantly dismissing the *khimar* as a whole as oppressive.

It is certainly true that some discourses of the hijab are based on the coercion, the ‘othering,’ and the subjugation of women. This is most apparent in cases where women are forced to veil and are punished if they resist, as in the case, for example, of Afghani women under Taliban rule. However, this type of coercive discourse is by no means universal. (Safi, 2010, n.p.)

In fact, the *khimar* throughout history has been used as a form of protest. Secular governments in multiple countries (including Muslim-majority countries) have forced women to uncover themselves¹⁰⁷.

Near the end of Iran’s monarchy, in an effort to mimic Western societies, ‘traditional dress styles were discouraged,’ according to a history from the University of Central Florida. In Turkey, for decades, wearing headscarves in government offices was banned to promote secularization. Today, France infamously imposes legal restrictions on wearing hijab. Against that history, voluntarily covering oneself can be an act of empowerment, not subjugation. (Quraishi-Landes & Ahmad, 2019, para. 8)

Self-proclaimed ‘feminist’ and Belgian writer, Nadia Geerts says,

How, then, can you hope to make us forget that everywhere¹⁰⁸ in the Muslim world, the veil is imposed on women by those who have made Islam a political ideology? How can we turn a blind eye to the fact that while you are talking to us about individual freedom and free choice, millions of women around the world

¹⁰⁷ In some cases, the laws applied only in schools or for government positions, while in some cases the laws applied to any public place.

¹⁰⁸ The claim that the veil is forced on women “everywhere in the Muslim world” is incorrect. In fact the only countries that mandate the veil in public are Saudi Arabia and Iran. There are around 50 Muslim-majority countries, yet the example of two extreme ones are enough to vilify the rest (“Muslim-Majority Countries”, 2011).

are deprived of this freedom and choice by men who want to force them to cover their hair...When a piece of cloth becomes the imposed uniform of a sexist and theocratic ideology, how would you like us to see it as a symbol of freedom, and how can you persist in seeing it only as a personal step? (Geerts, 2016, para. 9)

When people try to justify their dismissal of the veil as oppressive to women, they use examples of a few countries or instances where women are forced to wear it, yet don't hold the examples where women were (and are) *banned* from wearing it to the same standards. If we are basing what the veil represents on how it's been used throughout history and countries, logic would dictate that it should be considered a symbol of empowerment *as well*. However, that is not the case, and there is a very clear double standard here. The reasons behind why women wear the khimar vary immensely, whereas the discourses surrounding it in the West, show only *one* picture, in which the reason is only coercion.

This one picture can be summed up in these statements by Ayaan Hirsi Ali and an Australian columnist,

The veil deliberately marks women as private and restricted property, nonpersons. The veil sets women apart from men and apart from the world; it restrains them, confines them, grooms them for docility. A mind can be cramped just as a body may be, and a Muslim veil blinkers both your vision and your destiny. It is the mark of a kind of apartheid, not the domination of a race but of a sex. (Ali, 2011)

Some argue that far from being a universal symbol of subjugation, the hijab and even the face covering niqab and burqa are empowering. I am sorry, ladies, but I'm not buying it...I've seen first-hand the pressure on girls to obey their devout parents as well as their community's wishes in regard to how they dress. That pressure to conform can be overwhelming. You risk not only being judged, denounced and reviled but completely ostracized. Being a source of shame to your family for not abiding by accepted cultural practices can be traumatic for any young girl let alone one raised in cultures where she's considered subservient to men. (Panahi, 2015, para. 22-27)

Not only do these comments, and discourses such as these, portray the veil as inherently and undeniably oppressive, but they also portray the women who even *choose* to wear it as lacking any autonomy. It “ignores the agency of the person who dons it” (Quraishi-Landes & Ahmad, 2019, para. 8). Ironically, in an effort to reverse patriarchy, these assumptions of women *reinforce* patriarchy and sexist stereotypes by portraying these women as mindless, brainwashed sheep, and bots controlled by the men and societies around them. It is also a continuation of coloniality. As Edward Said stated, “she never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history. He spoke for and represented her” (Said, 1978, p. 6). These women are portrayed as *not knowing* what is good for themselves, as *not being capable* of making that decision, and *in need of being told* by Western, and hence ‘liberated’, women what lifestyle is best for them. This is the same rhetoric colonizers have used for centuries, telling the ‘barbarians’ that their lifestyle is incorrect, and that the West will *help to civilize and save* them.

This rhetoric has crept its way into pop culture. In the rare instances where Muslim women are given representation in TV shows or movies, they are depicted in a stereotypical manner, thus reinforcing those colonial assumptions of them, and hence, furthering their ‘oppressed’ conception in the minds of the Western masses. Whether or not Muslims and Orientals are represented fairly in movies and TV shows can be determined by ‘The Riz Test’¹⁰⁹, which is defined by five criteria:

If the film stars at least one character who is identifiably Muslim (by ethnicity, language or clothing) is the character... 1. Talking about, the victim of, or the perpetrator of Islamist terrorism? 2. Presented as irrationally angry? 3. Presented as superstitious, culturally backwards or anti-modern? 4. Presented as a threat to a Western way of life? 5. If the character is male, is he presented as misogynistic? Or

¹⁰⁹ The list is inspired by British-Muslim actor, Riz Ahmed, who has discussed the importance of non-stereotypical representation of Muslims in the entertainment industry.

if female, is she presented as oppressed by her male counterparts? (Choudry & Habib, 2018, para. 7-8)

If any of the answers to the questions above are yes, then the show or movie in question has failed the test. And often times, they do. For example, Apple TV's movie *Hala* centers around a young, Muslim teen living in the United States. In the trailer, she wears a headscarf and is shown to have strict parents. Hala also seems to be discontent with her life, culture, religion, and parents, which begins to change once she meets and falls in love with a white, non-Muslim boy, who 'liberates' her from all that was listed before (TMV Team, 2019). This show is especially guilty of representing the 'white-savior' myth that people of color need saving from their lifestyles and cultures by the West. This myth is also portrayed in the Spanish Netflix series, *Élite*. One of the main characters is a Palestinian-Muslim girl named Nadia. In a scene that went viral, she is shown taking off her veil¹¹⁰ in order to attract the attention of a boy she likes. During the show, Nadia is presented as a rebellious character who goes to parties, drinks alcohol, and has sexual encounters with a male (Khalife, 2019). The show portrays Nadia's parents, culture, and religion as repressive and restrictive. And once Nadia took off her veil and engaged in activities outside of her parents' wishes, culture, and religion, she was shown to be happier and free¹¹¹.

Though it is true that some Muslim girls and women in the West may go through experiences such as these and feel liberated through those actions, it is the *only* representation Muslim women have in mass media. And this is harmful because it plays a large role in strengthening the already prevalent stereotypes Westerners have about Muslim women. Muslim

¹¹⁰ In the mentioned scene, in addition to taking the headscarf off, Nadia wore more makeup, jewelry, and revealing clothes than in previous episodes. In this scene she was also presented as more sexualized. The implications of this will be expanded upon in later sections.

¹¹¹ Refer back to pages 24-25 on the discussion regarding Egyptian girls that were told by Western missionaries to rebel against their society, parents, and religion.

women are only seen through the Western gaze. Their cultures and religion are *by default* repressive. And the only cure seems to be Westernization. But can it be that “Muslim women are not in need of a ‘White Male Savior,’ nor are they craving the life of a non-Muslim woman? Why are hijabis often portrayed as oppressed beings who hate their religion and want to rebel against their families?” (Khalife, 2019, para. 3). Not *every* Muslim woman, and everyone who wears the veil, feels oppressed¹¹². Not every Muslim or brown woman desires to leave their culture and live ‘like Western women’. Additionally, this form of thinking becomes harmful for women in the West as well.

On the one hand, these mostly man-made images of the oriental Muslim women are used to tame women's demand for equality in the Western world by reminding them how much they are better off than their Muslim counterparts. On the other hand, these oriental and negative stereotypes are mechanisms by which western dominant culture recreates and perpetuates beliefs about their superiority and dominance. (Hoodfar, 1993, p. 441)

This is how stereotypes perpetuate coloniality and patriarchy. “The characters are built on faith identity, not personal identity. They perpetuate misconceptions rather than challenge them” (Khalife, 2019, para. 6).

However, due to a recent wave of Muslim women being represented by prominent brands and companies, a shift from this rhetoric could be impending. Nike released the ‘Nike Pro Hijab’, Macy’s introduced the Verona Collection—a modest clothing line for Muslim women featuring quality head scarves—and makeup brands such as L’Oreal, Fenty Beauty, and Cover Girl began hiring Muslim models who wear the headscarf. Additionally, Muslim models who

¹¹² It is important to note that I am aware that some Muslim women may feel oppressed or restricted by their families or communities. I am not arguing that those women are non-existent or that they should not be heard. It is important to show the *numerous* ways in which Muslim women are affected by their culture and religion living in a Western country. But in reality, only one is ever really shown. And showing that one way over and over again, creates a singular image for *all* in the group.

wear the veil have also been featured in magazines such as Vogue, Sports Illustrated, Elle, and even Playboy. Though this positive representation of Muslim women has started ‘normalizing’ them in Western culture, only time will tell if it will be enough to counter-balance the negative image of Muslim women that has been so fundamental in the West’s ‘understanding’ of Islam and the Orient.

Despite what’s often presented in the media, many of the Muslim women who wear the khimar *choose* to do so (Dakkak & Mikulka, 2012). In fact, only a small minority wear it because they are instructed by others to (Alghafli et al., 2017). And in the countries where the veil is required by law, history has shown that even when those laws are lifted, most women continue wearing it (Abu-Lughod, 2006). Additionally, most Muslim women who don’t wear the veil, “are not against the Islamic concept of veiling”, but rather, “they haven’t yet taken the decision to veil, because they do not feel ready to take this important step in their life” (Grima, 2013, p. 461). Western discourses surrounding the veil are too busy trying to portray the women who wear it as powerless and helpless victims, that they have refused to even try to understand Muslim women’s reasonings behind their choices. For Muslim women, covering the hair “does not constitute a singular symbolic field. It has come to represent varying meanings within multivalent realities” (Safi, 2010, n.p.). For many Muslim women, the khimar is a religious requirement and duty which exemplifies the Islamic value of modesty, and is a way for them to be nearer to God. For other women, wearing the Islamic veil is a feminist embodiment and a form of protest against patriarchy and capitalism.

They argue that the veiling detracts from patriarchal prioritization of women's physical and sexual attractiveness. Moreover it provides resistance to a perceived Western consumerism in which money and energy are constantly spent in keeping

up with changing fashions that in reality keep women hostage to their appearance and to the market¹¹³. (Safi, 2010, n.p.)

Also, some Muslim women simply wear it for the same reasons Western women wear jeans, or shorts, or t-shirts: culture and society. “Norms for dress are socially and culturally specific and there is no reason that Muslim women's clothing needs to be measured against specific Western norms of dress” (Safi, 2010, n.p.).

It is important to deconstruct the social and ideological perception of the veil in the West. It is an assumption that the veil is a static, indisputable, unambiguous symbol of oppressive patriarchy which victimizes the women who wears it—even the ones who choose to. This assumption “has prevented social scientists and western feminists from examining Muslim women's own accounts of their lives, hence perpetuating the racist stereotypes which are ultimately in the service of patriarchy in both societies” (Hoodfar, 1993, p. 441). This assumption arises due to many Western scholars, feminists, and the media treating Muslim women as objects of research, rather than subjects¹¹⁴. Instead of asking *them* what the veil means *to them*, the essence of the veil is often devised *separate from them* and then *imposed on to them*. Muslim women *must* be invited to discussions regarding the veil, because

such an approach will prioritize Muslim women's self-understandings, it will look at the varying ways in which veiling operates in relation to women's agency, it will recognize sites of resistance as well as contradictions and ambivalence within the discourses, instead of treating veiling as evidence of the monolithic victimization of women. (Safi, 2010, n.p.)

¹¹³ This will be discussed in detail in following sections.

¹¹⁴ Though a few Western academics and feminists have included Muslim women in discussions about the veil (for instance Geographers Anna Secor and Jennifer Fluri), these discussions have not yet permeated into general Western discourse or media.

The intention of this is not to portray the veil as a wholly positive symbol devoid of any oppressive implications and disregard the difficulties, conflicts, or challenges it may pose in some situations—that in itself is dishonesty and still a form of the same perpetuation of rendering the veil as a universally, absolute symbol—but rather to add the voices and perspectives of Muslim women so that discourses regarding them can be more inclusive, accurate, and broad.

The Veil as Protest

There are sides of the veil that are not shown or discussed in the West. For many women who wear the khimar, it is a decision that takes power and courage, “women’s confidence in speaking about the sense of completeness... shows an ascetic aspect of: (a) self-discipline and control; of (b) giving up other forms of dress; and of (c) consciously endorsing the responsibility of moral behavior” (Grima, 2013, p. 470). The irony here is that many in the West perceive the veil to be a sign of a woman’s weakness and powerlessness, an insult to the women who choose to wear it. According to Fadwa El Guindi, “the voluntary wearing of the hijab... is about liberation from imposed, imported identities, consumerist behaviors, and an increasingly materialistic culture” (El Guindi, 1999, p. 71). For women who choose to wear the khimar, it is liberating and empowering.

They maintain that the veil enables them to become the observers and not the observed, that it liberates them from the dictates of the fashion industry and the demands of the beauty myth. In the context of the patriarchal structures that shape women’s lives, the veil is a means of bypassing sexual harassment and gaining respect. (Alghafli et al., 2017, para. 8)

The veil frees women from the patriarchal chains of beauty standards and sexual objectification. In ignoring this and dismissing the veil as oppressive, the West is also, in a way, veiling their own oppression and injustices towards women.

Western Oppression of Women

The Emphasis on Women's Beauty and Physical Attractiveness

We are often told that ‘all women are beautiful’, but the question must be posed, ‘why do women need to be beautiful?’ Why aren’t women complemented on their bravery, intellect, strength, generosity, etc.? According to a study by Parker, et al. (2017) on what adults in the U.S. value in each gender, the answer is quite clear. In men, people valued their honesty and morality at 33%, professional success at 23%, ambition and strength at 19%, and hard work at 18%. Men’s physical attractiveness was only mentioned by 11% of respondents. However for women, 35% of respondents stated their physical attractiveness is what is *valued the most*. Thirty percent mentioned empathy and kindness and 22% valued intelligence in women. Every other quality, such as strength, loyalty, hard work, etc. were in the single digits (Parker, et al., 2017). This is highly representative of the disparities in expectations for each gender in society. There is undeniably a strong emphasis on the physical appearance of women and a socially constructed belief “that physical attractiveness is one of women’s most important assets, and something all women should strive to achieve and maintain” (Valentine, et al., 2020, p. 181). While men were attributed to a variety of characteristics, women were mostly limited to their physical appearance. This promotes the objectification, and thus, the subjugation of women.

‘Women are aware that beauty counts heavily with men and they therefore work hard to achieve it.’ The social importance of the feminine beauty ideal lies in its ability to sustain and to reproduce gender inequality... The feminine beauty ideal can be seen as a normative means of social control whereby social control is accomplished through the internalization of values and norms that serve to restrict women's lives. (Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz, 2003, p. 712)

Because of rigid, pervasive, and unattainable standards of beauty, and the demand to attain them, women are prevented from freeing themselves from the male gaze¹¹⁵ and hence, attaining their personal goals. It limits women's values to their outward appearance.

Perhaps the most egregious example of women's objectification are beauty pageants, which have been a part of Western, and more specifically, American culture for centuries. In these pageants, women are *literally* rated on how physically attractive they are by beauty standards predominantly set by men. Though pageants have recently begun including non-physical criteria such as musical or literary talent and speeches, it is undeniably clear what the genuine objective of them truly are. In these 'contests', women are paraded out half-naked for the male gaze and judged on their *body parts*. And for most of history, these pageants have also presented Euro-centric beauty standards, leaving out women of color. Though the pageants have become more diverse in recent years and winners have even been women from numerous ethnicities and cultures, that does not eliminate what these competitions represent: a patriarchal society which places a woman's value on physical beauty. And though these competitions are a result of the ingrained sexualization and objectification of women in society, they also continue to propagate more and more of this sexism since people from all over the world watch the Miss Universe, Miss World, and Miss America competitions. The audience watches as the judges reduce an entire human life—a person with a personality, memories, experiences, thoughts, desires, hopes and dreams—to the size and proportions of her physical attributes. If there's any doubt that these competitions represent the flagrant gender inequality in society, one should ask themselves why the male equivalents to these pageants are not as well-known or relevant in

¹¹⁵ The act of perceiving women as sexual objects with the sole purpose of pleasing men.

popular culture. What's even more horrific is that there are beauty pageants for girls as young as six, and even some for toddlers and infants. These young girls are made by their parents to compete in competitions and wear makeup, fancy dresses, heels, fake teeth, spray tans, fake nails, hair extensions, and more, in order to win cash prizes¹¹⁶. Girls begin to ingrain in their minds from childhood their own objectification.

Especially in Western media and culture, women are heavily objectified and told that the source of their value lies in their physical attractiveness. Dalia Mogahed says¹¹⁷,

oppression means the taking away of someone's power... and what hijab does is that it basically privatizes a woman's sexuality. So what are we saying when we say that by privatizing a woman's sexuality, we're oppressing her. What does that say about the source of a woman's power?

It is an undeniable fact that there is pressure on women to look a certain way, and although that pressure is prevalent in most societies, it is higher in many Western societies where women are especially objectified and hyper-sexualized.

[Beauty] in the West is the last, best belief system that keeps male dominance intact. In assigning value to women in a vertical hierarchy according to a culturally imposed physical standard, it is an expression of power relations in which women must unnaturally compete for resources that men have appropriated for themselves. (Wolf, 1992, p. 3)

Beauty is a patriarchal, and in some ways, capitalistic, power structure that dehumanizes women.

Beauty is a convenient fiction used by multibillion-dollar industries that create images of beauty and peddle them as opium for the female masses. Beauty ushers women to a place where men want them, *out of the power structure*. Capitalism and the patriarchy define beauty for cultural consumption, and plaster images of beauty everywhere to stir up envy and desire. The covetousness they inspire serves their twin goals of making money and preserving the status quo. (Etcoff, 2000, para. 3) (emphasis added)

¹¹⁶ TLC's reality show, *Toddlers & Tiaras*, goes behind the scenes at some of these competitions.

¹¹⁷ on an episode of *The Daily Show* which aired January 7th, 2016

Dehumanizing and reducing women to mere objects involves ten features: *instrumentality*¹¹⁸, *denial of autonomy*¹¹⁹, *inertness*¹²⁰, *fungibility*¹²¹, *violability*¹²², *ownership*¹²³, *denial of subjectivity*¹²⁴, *reduction to body*¹²⁵, *reduction to appearance*¹²⁶, and *silencing*¹²⁷ (Nussbaum, 1995, p. 257) (Langton, 2009, pp. 228–229). These ten features pervade through Western society in numerous ways, which will be discussed in the following sections.

The Objectification, Sexualization, and Commodification of Women

The female body is hyper-sexualized almost everywhere in Western society, in ads, magazines, books, shows, movies, social media, music, music videos, clothing, and more. Though men are not excluded from this sexualization, women are unquestionably targeted more¹²⁸. And this hyper-sexualization is far from liberating and rather, seeks to subject women to the desires of men¹²⁹. While women are pushed to be sexual, they are also criticized for embracing their own

¹¹⁸ “the treatment of a person as a tool for the objectifier’s purposes”

¹¹⁹ “the treatment of a person as lacking in autonomy and self-determination”

¹²⁰ “the treatment of a person as lacking in agency, and perhaps also in activity”

¹²¹ “the treatment of a person as interchangeable with other objects”

¹²² “the treatment of a person as lacking in boundary-integrity”

¹²³ “the treatment of a person as something that is owned by another (can be bought or sold)”

¹²⁴ “the treatment of a person as something whose experiences and feelings (if any) need not be taken into account.”

¹²⁵ “the treatment of a person as identified with their body, or body parts”

¹²⁶ “the treatment of a person primarily in terms of how they look, or how they appear to the senses”

¹²⁷ “the treatment of a person as if they are silent, lacking the capacity to speak”

¹²⁸ An example of the hyper-sexualization of women is shown in Image 1 (in the Images section at the end of this paper beginning on page 138) where the discrepancy between how men and women are presented in society is extremely clear. All front covers are from the same magazine. Additionally, Images 2, 3, and 4 illustrate this same discrepancy by showing the male and female versions of the same costumes.

¹²⁹ This section is not critiquing women who choose to show their bodies or flaunt their sexuality. In fact, this can even be a form of empowerment, demonstrating agency by taking ownership over one’s body and sexuality. Rather, what is being discussed here is society’s *perception* and *representation* of women, which may negatively impact them. I am aware that there are many women who feel empowered by showing their bodies; I am not critiquing them but a culture which makes many women feel they are *expected* to do that and may even feel it is *required* of them in order to gain popularity or attain success in their careers, etc.

sexuality. For example, women can't speak openly about their sex drive, female masturbation is still considered a taboo subject, women are shamed if they're too sexually promiscuous, and breastfeeding in public is criticized for being too revealing. However, women are unnecessarily undressed all over the media and pressured into having a specific, sexually attractive, body type. Additionally, popular songs on the radio include vulgar and offensive lyrics about women which often reduce women down to their sexual organs. Many songs and movies even promote sexual encounters where the men don't even bother learning the woman's name. Women are allowed, and even encouraged, to be the object of someone else's sexual desires, but are not encouraged to have those desires themselves.

Women's sexualization leads to them being objectified and treated like "an object to be valued for its use by others. [Sexual objectification] occurs when a woman's body or body parts are singled out and separated from her as a person and she is viewed primarily as a physical object of male sexual desire" (Szymanski, et al., 2011, pp. 7-8). This is heavily apparent in pornography and magazines such as Playboy, but even in commercials—a prime example of capitalism and its exploitiveness—where women's bodies, as objects, are used to sell other objects than what the woman is wearing¹³⁰ (Zimmerman & Dahlberg, 2008). This commodification of women's sexuality is more apparent in commercials which are geared towards men such as advertisements for beer, cars, and burgers¹³¹. And power dynamics between men and women are more pronounced in commercials, in fact, "the majority of women appeared in either swimwear or leisure wear, whereas the men often appeared in work clothes" (Szymanski, et al., 2011, p. 16). This overt

¹³⁰ Although this is common in many Western countries, there are some Western countries such as Norway where such depictions of women are illegal, unless the purpose is to advertise the clothing the woman is wearing.

¹³¹ Examples from such commercials can be seen in Images 5 through 14.

sexualization and objectification is so rampant in society that it has become commonplace and goes unnoticed—until it’s pointed out. “The representation of women in the media has always been exploitative. It has, throughout the years, reduced women to being nothing more than objects to be won, prizes to be shown off, and playthings to be abused” (Berberick, 2010, p. 2).

False and Unattainable Beauty Standards

This sexualized representation of women in the media has “created a definition of beauty that women compare themselves to. Also, men compare the women in their lives to what they see on television screens, in magazines, and on billboards” (Berberick, 2010, p. 2). Commercials especially portray the female body as the epitome of perfection—even when it contradicts the message they are trying to send or undermines the product they’re selling. For example, commercials for hair removing products, such as razors or waxing strips, portray women with no hair on their legs using the products. These portrayals are not honest and further create a false sense of reality. The problem with these portrayals, and the portrayals of women shown all over the media in general, is that they *simply do not exist*. The pictures of women shown to us, especially those of social media influencers, often times seem unrealistic, because *they are*.

Our understanding of the images we see seldom takes into consideration the ‘beauty’ we see are fabrications. These images are designed by graphic artists commissioned to change appearance and stimulate desire. ‘Each image is painstakingly worked over. Teeth and eyeballs are bleached white; blemishes, wrinkles and stray hairs are airbrushed away... Almost every photograph you see for a national advertiser these days has been worked on by a retoucher to some degree¹³²... (Jacobson and Mazur 1995)’. The deception in these images goes largely unnoticed, which leads women down a road of destructive self-comparison’. (Berberick, 2010, pp. 2-3)

¹³² An example of this is shown in Image 15.

These images often don't come with disclaimers that the models represented in them have a *whole career* based on looking physically attractive in pictures. They often have a *team* of personal trainers, nutritionists, dietitians, chefs, makeup artists, hair dressers, dermatologists, plastic surgeons, photographers, and most importantly, photo editors.

Jameela Jamil is a prominent feminist and activist who has publicly criticized numerous models, celebrities, and influencers for not being open about their plastic surgeries and photo editing, especially because so many young girls and women look up to them. She stated that the individuals doing this are simply 'recycling self-hate back into the world' and says, "I think it's a disgusting crime to Photoshop your images and put them out there in the world without announcing that's what you've done. It's a lie..." (Henry, 2018, para. 7). Jamil has gone as far as to call for Photoshopping and other forms of photo editing to be made illegal. Though this may not happen in the near future, the attention she has drawn to the subject has increased awareness about the issue. The app Instagram has even added a feature where people can know when a video or image has used filters. The app has also prevented filters that distort a person's face to seem more attractive from being used through their platform. This, however, has its limitations; people can still filter and edit their photos or videos outside of Instagram and then post them on to the platform. And now due to apps such as Facetune, VSCO, and many more¹³³, people can edit their photos at home without a professional. This is harmful even to the person who is editing their own images. "When you're Photoshopped you're setting yourself up for a fall, because you can't live up to a digitized image" (Henry, 2018, para. 5). And this is the problem with the beauty standards

¹³³ And now apps such as Snow make it possible for individuals to edit their faces while taking a video of themselves, further blurring reality.

in today's digital age, they're physically unattainable, leading women to set goals for their body, that can never be reached, preventing their satisfaction with themselves.

Social Media, Mental Health and Cosmetic Procedures

Because of the prevalence of the sexualization of women's bodies in Western society, "women are denied a basic sense of humanness—are objectified—when focus is directed toward their physical rather than mental qualities" (Heflick & Goldenberg, 2014, p. 1). This has consequences for how others perceive women, but also for how women perceive themselves.

There is

direct evidence that a focus on the physical aspects of women *by others* causes women to be perceived like, and act like, objects lacking mind. Manifestations of this *literal objectification* include attributing women less of the traits that distinguish people from objects and visual-recognition and neural responses consistent with nonhuman-object perception. Women themselves also behave more like objects (by, e.g., speaking less) when they are aware of this focus by others. (Heflick & Goldenberg, 2014, p. 1)

Women and girls have begun internalizing this self-objectification, which has especially become prevalent in the age of social media. Humans by nature are social creatures and desire the acceptance and appreciation of others; this however, has gone to extremes with the rise of social media platforms. "Social media is an economy of the self—hence the rise of the 'selfie.' Sharing a selfie has become a type of transaction. It is the price girls pay for attention. And attention is incredibly important to the girls" (Bianco, 2016, para. 6). In this economy, 'likes' on an image and 'followers' are currency, and it seems as if there is an endless competition and drive to attain the most, just like with money. We have begun the "making of ourselves into 'things'—commodities for others' consumption. By turning our lives into a series of images, and attempting to be desired or 'liked' by everyone" (Bianco, 2016, para. 3). Women and girls

especially, have put their value and self-validation into the hands of how many ‘likes’ they receive from others.

Women are taught that in order to fit in, they must meet specific standards of beauty that society has set for them which satisfy the male gaze. This objectification, hyper-sexualization, and commodification of women has detrimental effects on women and young girls. Constant exposure to these images and movies where women are dressed in overly-sexual clothing leads to women and girls becoming more aware of their own body and consequently comparing themselves to those standards. They may begin to think, ‘I want to be like her too’. It begins to impact and alter women’s and girls’ view of their role in society. Such sexualization in popular culture affects their self-esteem and body image. It influences girls and women to be pre-occupied with their physicality and causes them to be discontent with themselves and even want to alter their body to ‘fit the mold’ in order to compete for men’s attention—as if that is the ultimate goal a woman must achieve, as if they exist merely for men’s satisfaction, and nothing about them matters beyond their physicality. “These types of media also influence a woman in what her place is in the world—to be an object or decoration for men to admire” (Szymanski, et al., 2011, p. 16). Struggles such as these can result in depression, anxiety, body dysmorphia, eating disorders, sexual dysfunction, relationship issues, self-objectification, and lack of confidence and self-value.

And it has, insecurity with one’s appearance has led to numerous mental health illnesses and disorders among girls and young women. According to a survey,

fifty-six percent of women say they are dissatisfied with their overall appearance. Their self-disparagement is specifically directed toward their abdomens (71 percent), body weight (66 percent), hips (60 percent), and muscle tone (58 percent)... The overwhelming majority of women—89 percent—want to lose weight. (Garner, 1997, para. 7)

Along with being dissatisfied with their bodies, an increasing number of women have a *distorted* perception of their body.

Thin women distort reality by seeing themselves as fat. Today this type of distortion is rampant and has become the norm. It explains why so many women are susceptible to eating disorders, where the pursuit of thinness is driven by faulty perceptions rather than reality. One hundred and fifty-nine women in our sample are extremely underweight—and 40 percent of them still want to lose weight. (Garner, 1997, para. 12)

Young women and girls having insecurities of their bodies can have serious and even fatal consequences. Eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia are increasing among girls, even among those younger than 12 (Smith, n.d.).

Suicidal impulses and attempts are much more common in teenagers who think they are too fat or too thin, regardless of how much they actually weigh... teens who perceived themselves at either weight extreme—very fat or really skinny—were more than twice as likely as normal-weight teens to attempt or think about suicide. (CBS News, 2005, para. 1-3)

As unfortunate as these statistics are, they are not surprising. Since women and girls are told by society that their worth lies in their physical beauty, when they are unable to meet those unrealistic standards, they believe that their bodies, and consequently, health and lives are not of value. We have told women and girls that there is *no point* in existing if they are not beautiful enough.

Because of this, plastic surgery and cosmetic procedures have increased dramatically. Plastic surgery and cosmetic procedures cover a wide array of procedures that range from minimally invasive to surgical; they can include Botox, rhinoplasty, brow and face lifts, reconstruction post injuries, buttock augmentation, and more. Unsurprisingly, more women undergo cosmetic procedures than men. In fact, according to the American Society of Plastic

Surgeons (ASPS), men only made up a mere 8% of all cosmetic procedures in 2016 (Miller, 2017). Women are the main consumers of this market and the most common procedures among them tend to be “liposuction and body contouring, breast surgery, and facial cosmetic procedures” (De Souza et al., 2018, p. 705). The procedures chosen most by women reflect the standards of beauty in the society they live in. Societal pressure is a major driving force for this industry. According to a study, women with “low self-esteem, low life satisfaction, low self-rated attractiveness and little religious beliefs who were heavy television watchers reported a greater likelihood of undergoing cosmetic surgery” (Furnham & Levitas, 2012, p. 47). And especially within the last 5 years, plastic surgery has risen dramatically to *unprecedented* numbers, primarily with a focus on procedures that enhance the body (Townley, 2019). Many believe the reasons behind this are due to the rise in

cell phones, selfies, and social media platforms... ‘If you think back even 10 years ago, let alone 25, rarely would you see yourself in pictures... Maybe a birthday or wedding, usually some type of special event. Now, with mobile devices and platforms, we’re literally seeing hundreds, if not thousands, of pictures of ourselves documenting things we don’t like about our appearance, as well as the aging process.’ In other words, we’re all under constant scrutiny—by ourselves. (Booth, 2019, para. 12-13)

Though plastic surgery and cosmetic procedures can empower women in many ways and increase their self-confidence, it is nonetheless a form of *self-mutilation* meant to achieve sexist beauty standards that entertain the male gaze. It is a means for capitalism and patriarchy to exploit and profit off of the insecurities of women.

Unveiling Western Oppression of Women

Though the objectification and sexualization of women, and its ramifications, are a problem in numerous societies and cultures, it is exceptionally rampant in Western countries,

especially in the United States. To illustrate, most of the cosmetic procedures, including surgical and non-surgical, in the world take place in the United States¹³⁴. Though it is true that the number of cosmetic procedures performed within a country also depend on factors such as economy, wealth, and accessibility of these procedures, the United States nonetheless has an exceedingly high number. And since society plays a large factor in influencing a person's decision to undergo these procedures, the high numbers may indicate something about American culture and the affect it has on women's self-image.

Additionally, "the prevalence of eating disorders in non-Western countries is lower than that of the Western countries" (Makino, et al., 2004, para. 4). While this may involve numerous other factors, the stark contrast should not be overlooked, especially since eating disorders are *not* a natural phenomenon which are prevalent in such high numbers across all societies, they are highly influenced by the nature of that society (Thompson et al., 1997). However, the number of eating disorders in non-Western countries seems to be increasing, which is largely due to the influence of Western culture and media.

One of the reported explanations for the development of eating disorders is the social pressure resulting from the standards of female beauty imposed by modern industrial society or Western culture. The increasing globalization and exposure to Western media have been suggested to increase the rate of eating disorders in non-Western countries. (Makino, et al., 2004, para. 7)

The finding that the influence of Western culture in non-Western countries has led to an increase in eating disorders, proves how harmful Western culture can be for women's mental health.

Furthermore, rape is a significant problem in Western countries, and one that is often overlooked by Western media. "According to UN Crime Trend Statistics 2013, UK has the

¹³⁴ International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery Global Survey Results 2018 (p. 31)

highest incidence of rape, followed by the US¹³⁵. In absolute terms, the US has the most rape cases¹³⁶ globally” (TimesofIndia.com, 2018, para. 1-2). Despite the widespread, and even deadly, oppression of women in the West, discourses surrounding Western society presents its culture as not only empowering to women, but one which is void of oppression towards women. This is just false. Every society has in some way, shape, or form oppressed women. The West is not immune to this; it is however, blind to its own forms of injustices against women in its society. Many individuals in the West mock and ridicule Muslim women for covering their bodies and call that oppression. But they don’t seem to find it oppressive that so many women in their societies feel the need to mutilate their own bodies in order to fit in; that so many young girls and women starve and harm themselves to feel beautiful; that the pressure society places on them leads some to taking their own lives; that in their society which has dehumanized women, rape cases tend to be the highest; that the beauty and entertainment industries train young women and girls to believe that in order to be loved they need to be sexual.

The movie and show referenced earlier¹³⁷ are a good representation of the harms Western society inflicts on women. Both Hala and Nadia removed their headscarf and sexualized themselves through makeup and clothing in order to be liked by the men they admired. To find a potential partner, these young, smart, and talented women had to sexualize themselves and display their bodies, the only characteristics that are perceived to matter. Their personalities or intellect weren’t enough, *the true currency for women are their bodies*. Though the implications of this are extremely sexist and dehumanizing to women, the characters were depicted in the

¹³⁵ per 100,000 population

¹³⁶ These statistics refer to the number of *reported* rape cases.

¹³⁷ see pages 80-81

show to have been oppressed *earlier*, and somehow liberated *afterwards*. As if being told that ‘the only way to be loved by others is by exposing yourself and altering your physical appearance’, isn't oppressive. As if enslaving women to society's expectations, demands of beauty and sexiness, and the ever-changing fashion and plastic surgery trends, isn't oppressive.

“Shalit¹³⁸ looks at women today and sees misery—women with eating disorders, women who cut themselves, women who go from one empty sexual encounter to the next” (Gurley, 1999, para. 3). This is discourse that is absent in Western media. And it is not surprising. Those in power have no problem criticizing, demonizing, exaggerating, or even falsifying the faults in others, especially those who are less powerful. However, self-reflecting on one's own shortcomings is something avoided by the powerful. The West is so busy labelling Muslim women as oppressed that they don't see the other side accurately, or themselves for that matter. Oppression is subjective. Some Muslim women would say strict beauty standards in the West and the hyper-sexualization of women which reduces them down to mere objects and places their value as a human on their physical appearance is oppressive. A Muslim woman who proudly wears the headscarf¹³⁹ says,

liberation is when you dedicate yourself to your Maker, not his creation... Oppression means when you follow the fashion designers to the letter and they dictate what outfits you wear on what occasion, when you can't leave your house without make up nor hair done, when you get depressed because you gained a bit of weight, and starve yourself just because you need to live [by] the rules set up by them.

This indeed is another definition of oppression, which the West seems to be indifferent to.

¹³⁸ The author of numerous feminist books which preach the concept of modesty.

¹³⁹ A personal friend of mine who was eager to give her opinion on this topic.

Another Form of Empowerment

This oppression, this objectification, this sexualization, this commodification, this dehumanization of women, and all of its consequences, is what the veil is meant to guard against. Hebah Ahmed, a Muslim woman who proudly wears the niqab, explains¹⁴⁰, “women are objectified, they’re sexualized, they’re used to sell products. Their worth is in their bodies. For me, my sexuality is in the comfort of my own home and in the commitment of my marriage”. Cosmetic procedures, eating disorders, and rape¹⁴¹ are all higher in many Western countries than in any Muslim-majority country. So why isn’t this talked about all over Western news stations? Why is the West not painted as a backwards and dangerous place for women—as the Orient is? While dismissing the ‘other’—Islam and the Orient—as oppressive, the West is able to hide behind its own veil, and conceal its oppression against women. The aspects of the Islamic veil that the West wants to ignore are the many ways it can and has empowered women. It frees women of this severe objectification where they are reduced down to sex slaves to society, only meant to please the male gaze. One can certainly view hijab as the opposite of objectification; it *forces* society to see a woman for who she truly is, not just her physical beauty. Yet this perspective of hijab is not portrayed to Western audiences by the media.

Many Muslim women have found through the veil, a source of empowerment which comes from the lack of sexualization and objectification. Another Muslim woman¹⁴² who proudly wears the veil says,

¹⁴⁰ on an episode of *ABC News* which aired September 30, 2010

¹⁴¹ referring to the previous statistics on rape, which only covered *reported* cases of rape

¹⁴² She runs an Islamic activism account on social media.

Have you ever wished that we didn't have bodies? That we were purely judged on our heart, character and soul? On our kind acts and our good intentions? We've become so concerned about how we look, how we dress, how pretty our faces are, how sexy our bodies are, how much we stand out or fail to be seen. We don't want to go out when we feel fat in an outfit in fear of someone treating or seeing us differently... We don't want to go out when our outfits don't match or we have a new spot on our face. We are so concerned about our physical appearance that we neglect our internal self. We forget our health, whether it's starving ourselves or comfort eating, we neglect our mental health, where we belittle and ridicule ourselves purely based on how we look. In Western society, I feel a constant pressure to look nice and pretty, and to show my curves as if it means I have more value or that the male attention I receive because of it will act as validation [for] myself. Whilst Islamic societies are not perfect, I'm purely talking about the 'hijab'... Hijab has not only liberated me from valuing my body over my soul in such a materialistic world, it's liberated my mind and my body. I pray as meditation for my mind and eat well for my health. (Activislam, 2018)

Women no longer may feel the need to prove their self-worth through their bodies. They no longer may feel the pressure to look a certain way in order to fit in. And in fact, studies can attest to this.

A fourth contextual element in SOEs¹⁴³ is women's bodies 'on display.' In their proposal of objectification theory, Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) suggested that wearing baggy clothing may be a strategy used by women to avoid SO as it conceals their physique. Such loose-fitting clothes obscure the body and assist women in 'opting out of the objectification limelight,' whereas wearing tight and revealing clothing that shows off the body serves to place women squarely within the 'objectification limelight.'... Additionally, wearing tight or revealing clothing may facilitate self-objectification, as women constantly review their appearance and the fit of their clothing in the surrounding mirrors (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Prichard & Tiggemann, 2005). Supporting this notion, Prichard and Tiggemann (2005) found that women in fitness centers who wore tight and fitted exercise clothing (gym tops and gym pants) placed greater emphasis on their appearance attributes and engaged in more habitual body monitoring than women who wore looser clothing (T-shirts and sweatpants). (Szymanski, et al., p. 23)

¹⁴³ sexually objectifying environment

Exposure and emphasis on women's bodies in public places has been shown to increase women's objectification and self-objectification. The negative consequences these may lead to have already been discussed.

Despite the prominent discourse on Islam in the West, the Islamic concept of modesty, hijab, is something that is meant to empower women. It *rejects* the objectification of a woman's body, and instead focuses on her identity as an individual, without the sexualized aspects of her. It promotes the focus on a person's individuality, intellect, and personality. Modesty can in fact be a feminist tool of empowerment. Through the veil and modesty, women can acquire self-confidence and self-respect, but also, demand respect from others and society at large. Women can take power over their bodies into their own hands and say, 'you can only see what I *choose* to show you. You must deal with my mind, not my body, unless I choose to grant you that *privilege*'. Hebah Ahmed states¹⁴⁴,

when I choose to cover this way it's because I am fighting against a systematic oppression against women in which women's bodies are being sexualized and objectified. *This is a different perspective and a different form of empowerment* in which I think when I'm in public, my sexuality is in my control and people have to deal with my brain and who I really am and not judge me by my body. And if we want to really talk about the oppressive situation of women, let's talk about all the eating disorders, all of the plastic surgery, all of the unhealthy diets that are being done, all in the name of having the perfect body. *To me, this is liberating and this is empowering.* (emphasis added)

So why has something that can and has been a tool of female empowerment be so negatively viewed in the West as a symbol of female oppression? My conclusion is that since the origins of the notion that the veil oppresses Muslim women came from European colonizers—who were mostly men—perhaps, they were frustrated at their inability to objectify those women. And

¹⁴⁴ on a debate on CNN

consequently, labeled them as oppressed in order to ‘free’ them from the veil and subject them to the same objectification and sexualization of the male gaze that the women in the West were subject to. “After all, the more women are developed internally, the more this is threatening to a society that insists on seeing them merely externally” (Shalit, 2007, p. 232).

“Perspectives of Women in the Muslim World” by Dalia Mogahed

According to a 2005 Gallup Poll¹⁴⁵ conducted by Dalia Mogahed, ‘gender inequality’ was one of the top responses Americans gave to the question, “What do you admire least about the Muslim or Islamic world?” (Mogahed, 2005, para. 5). So in order to explore how women in Muslim-majority countries see *themselves* and *their* societies, Mogahed did additional research¹⁴⁶. She asked Muslim women from Muslim-majority countries how they “perceive Islam and their own status in Muslim society” (Mogahed, 2006, p. 1). What her research uncovered not only summarized, but proved, the points I’ve made in this paper thus far. For instance, she found that the majority of women in these interviews did not see themselves as ‘second-class citizens’ in their societies, as the West believes they are. In fact, most of them believe that “women are able to make their own voting decisions, to work at any job for which they are qualified, and even to serve in the highest levels of government” (Mogahed, 2006, p. 1).

Mogahed’s research also tackles the myths of Muslim majority countries that have been invented by the West, such as the perception that gender inequality is rampant in those societies. She found that the majority of Muslim women from these countries do not cite ‘gender

¹⁴⁵ Though conducted by the same author, this is a different poll than the research being discussed throughout this section.

¹⁴⁶ “More than 1,000 face-to-face surveys were conducted in each of eight predominantly Muslim countries: Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. Nationwide probability samples of both urban and rural sectors in each country ensured that the surveys were nationally representative, with a sampling error of ± 3 percentage points” (Mogahed, 2006, p. 1).

inequality’ as one of their society’s biggest problems. “Rather, the aspects of the Arab/Muslim world that Muslim women most often said they admired least were similar to those that their male counterparts most often complained about—lack of unity among Muslims, extremism, and political corruption topped the list” (Mogahed, 2006, p. 2). So, it seems that the notion that Muslim women are oppressed by their societies and need to be liberated, does not hold true among the majority of Muslim women themselves—who don’t see the fabricated, extreme gender inequality that the West has attributed to their societies. In fact, rather than being ‘saved’ from Islam, as the West would prescribe, many Muslim women believe that “attachment to their spiritual and moral values is *critical* to their progress... Muslim women clearly tend to agree that Islamic principles *should* guide public policy” (Mogahed, 2006, p. 2) (emphasis added). And contrary to what the West believes, many women from Muslim-majority countries do *not* view the concept of Islamic law as oppressive, and in fact many believe it should be the *foundation* of a society, while only a small minority believe it should have no role at all¹⁴⁷ (Mogahed, 2006, p. 2).

The author additionally uncovered interesting perspectives of Western society among women in these countries. Though women cited freedom of speech and political rights as some of the aspects they admired about Western societies, many women believed there were aspects of American society that degrade and oppress women (Mogahed, 2006, p. 1). Mogahed found that “many women in the Muslim world disapprove of the way women are treated in Western societies, just as Western women do the treatment of women in Islamic societies” (Mogahed,

¹⁴⁷ “Respondents in each country were asked for their point of view regarding the role of Sharia, Islam’s sacred law, in creating government legislation. Majorities of women in all countries surveyed (with the exception of Turkey, which has a secular government), chose either ‘Sharia should be the only source of legislation’ or ‘Sharia must be a source, but not the only source of legislation’ over ‘Sharia should not be a source of legislation,’ with a plurality often choosing the second option.” (Mogahed, 2006, p. 2)

2006, p. 2). In fact, when asked what aspects they dislike about Western society, women often cited “promiscuity, pornography, and public indecency”, which as discussed previously, can be forms of oppression towards women as well (Mogahed, 2006, p. 2). And just like Americans base their perceptions of Muslim women from what they’ve seen on the news or media, Muslim women from these countries also base their perceptions of Western women from what they’ve gathered from sources such as Hollywood imagery (Mogahed, 2006, p. 2).

“So while the veil is often perceived by many in the West as a symbol of women’s inferior cultural status in the Muslim world, in Muslim societies, the perceived lack of modesty portrayed in Western media is thought to signal women’s degraded cultural status.” (Mogahed, 2006, p. 2)

Mogahed’s findings present an interesting counter-narrative to the dominant discourses in the West. Perceptions of oppression and liberation are not universal, but are rather subjective.

Interviews

Interview Methodologies

In order to add an empirical supplementation to my research I decided to exemplify some of the topics discussed by interviewing a few women. I wanted to be able to provide some anecdotal data on how Western women and Muslim women from the ‘Orient’ define ‘oppression’ and ‘empowerment’, and to explore their perceptions of one another. For research purposes, I define¹⁴⁸ ‘Western women’ as women who were born and/or raised in the United States, or other Western countries. And ‘Muslim women from the Orient’ may include women that live there now, women who were born there and then immigrated elsewhere, or women whose parents or grandparents were born there, are adherents of the Islamic faith. In order to recruit participants for

¹⁴⁸ Refer back to pages 8 to 10 for more clarification.

this research, I utilized purposive sampling, also known as selective sampling, in which participants are “selected based on characteristics of a population and the objective of the study” (Crossman, 2020, para. 1). This is a form of non-probability sampling because it does not attempt to study a random sample of participants, but rather a specific group of interest. And “subjective methods are used to decide which elements are included in the sample” (Lavrakas, 2008, para. 1). The reason why I chose to use purposive sampling was to be able to find “individuals or groups of individuals that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest” (Palinkas, et al., 2015, p. 534).

In terms of age range, I decided to recruit women between the ages of 18 and 70 because of the likelihood that the women within this range would be old enough to have grown their identities and developed their world views and opinions, while also being able to observe and understand the discourses and culture surrounding them. Additionally, it was convenient that participants be at least 18 years of age so that I did not have to obtain parental consent, as I had limited time to complete the research. Ultimately, some of the participants were found through my personal contacts, while some were people I had no connection with. All participants, at the time the research was conducted, lived in Long Island, New York, and were either born in the United States or had immigrated to the United States. Specific demographic details of each of the participants will be discussed later on.

I conducted in-person, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews, as these allow for the participants to be able to elaborate on their responses to my questions. The interviews ranged from ten to twenty minutes. A total of six participants were interviewed for this research, three from both of my target populations. After giving the participants an overview of the research topic and

purpose, I obtained their consent to use their responses in my research while protecting their confidentiality. I asked the interviewees a series of questions that would help me better understand their views and knowledge on the subject matter. Some of the questions were close-ended such as basic demographic questions including their age, ethnicity, religion, where they were born, and where they live now. The rest of the questions were open-ended and allowed for the participants to discuss in detail the topics at hand. Some of these questions centered around perceptions of different religions and cultures, perceptions of the veil, personal definitions of oppression and empowerment, and opinions on the hyper-sexualization of women in society. Participants were also shown and asked to react to a series of images. The interview questions can be found on pages 145-146, and the images can be found on pages 147-150.

The interviews were audio recorded and then later transcribed. After transcription, each of the interviews were organized into their respective target population sample. Within these populations, a profile and summary were created for each participant which included major themes and important quotes from their interviews. These profiles were then compared with others within their respective categories, but also across, in order to compare and contrast the differences and similarities between their responses. While writing this paper, I referred back to these profiles to cross-check and ensure accuracy of my discussions on these topics. Through this process, the participants' responses were organized, dissected, analyzed, and compared.

With any research involving human beings, it is necessary to take ethics into considerations, as there is a lot of room for harm—especially unintentional harm. There are many questions of ethics that one needs to take into account while doing research with human subjects, such as, how one “ought” to behave, the role of research in the pursuit of social change, and

whether and how research methods are ‘just’” (Dowling, 2009, p. 595). I’ve taken several steps in order to ensure the ethicality of my research, such as getting approval from Hofstra University’s Institutional Review Board for my research proposal and interview questions, and the above-mentioned process of seeking consent from my interviewees. Since the topics being discussed are sensitive in nature and may evoke emotional responses from some participants, I reminded them prior to the interview that they could refuse answering certain questions or end the interview during any time, without having to provide any reason for doing so.

While participants were given a brief summary and overview of the topics I would interview them about, I intentionally did not reveal too much about the intent of the research, as I was trying to explore the unadulterated views of the participants, and revealing too much information about the research may have caused them to rethink or change their answers. However, at the end of the interviews, I offered all participants the option to know the full intent of the research. This does not violate any ethical standards because there is no potential harm that may result, the research may have been affected if I had disclosed too much information, and the research has a good social cause (Dowling, 2009). In terms of confidentiality, all participants were made aware that their responses would be used for research purposes. However, I guaranteed that the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants would not be compromised, and that pseudonyms would be utilized when referencing their interviews. In terms of compensation, I have not provided any financial form of compensation as that would seemingly commodify the interviewees’ perspectives and maybe influence them to be more inclined to tell me what they thought I would want to hear. Rather, I gave participants the option to receive the completed results

of my research through email if they would like. Since the intent of this research is to promote social change, it is fitting to allow participants to see the impact their voices have made.

Discussion of Responses—Western Women

In this section, I will discuss the responses of Elizabeth, Hannah, and Olivia. To begin, I will briefly go over the demographics of these participants. Elizabeth is a 66 year old Italian woman, born and raised in New York. Hannah is a 23 year old woman, born and raised in the United States; she is Italian and Irish. Olivia is a 22 year old woman who identifies as white, and was born and raised on the east coast of the United States. All of these participants identify themselves as Christians. Elizabeth and Olivia described themselves as religious, while Hannah stated that she wasn't. It is important that I add that I met Hannah at a local mosque where she was volunteering through an organization, as this could potentially have an influence on her responses.

One of the first things I noticed about these participants, as observed from their body language and voice cues, was that the topics being discussed seemed to make them uncomfortable and uneasy. They were hesitant in their answers and seemed to think long and carefully before each of their responses. This came at no surprise to me because we were discussing sensitive issues such as oppression, feminism, religion, and other cultures and religions. Additionally, they may have perceived me as a representative of women from another cultural group than themselves, and may have been hesitant in voicing their opinions in front of me.

When these participants were shown images¹⁴⁹ of women from numerous religions wearing different forms of veiling, all but one were able to distinguish immediately that the women presented were from different religions. Hannah stated that all of the women were Muslim, while

¹⁴⁹ These images can be found at the end of the paper in the Interview Images section, starting on page 147.

Elizabeth and Olivia were even able to pick out specific pictures and correspond them to the correct religion. All three participants were surprised upon seeing those same images labelled with the respective religions of the women presented. The women were especially surprised to see that the woman wearing what seemed to look like a burqa, was in fact, Jewish. The two participants that identified themselves as religious were cognizant of the fact that the veil exists in numerous religions other than Islam, while Hannah, who stated she wasn't religious after being shown the labelled images, was not, and even stated that being shown these images was "educating." This may indicate that there is a population in the U.S. that perceive the veil to be solely an Islamic custom.

The participants' definitions of the term 'oppression' were similar. They saw it as preventing someone from being able to express themselves or act as they would like. 'Lack of choice and freedoms' were common themes among their responses; however, Olivia mentioned a specific example: "I think in Syria, like no one wants bombs to be dropped on their houses. I see that as oppression as well". Empowerment was defined by Hannah and Olivia as being comfortable to act how one would like, having choice, and the ability to make decisions for oneself. Olivia additionally defined empowerment to include being accepted and having one's choices accepted by others. She explained that society often pressures individuals to act or be a certain way, which also prevents someone from being empowered, and leads to their oppression. Meaning even societal pressure and influence, not just force, can be oppressive. Elizabeth defined 'empowerment' as success. Though common themes can be found among their responses in terms of their definitions for these words, there are subtle differences on how each perceive them.

When asked whether or not they believed that some places in the world women are more oppressed than others, the participants all agreed that there are. Hannah specifically mentioned the Middle East and Chinese cultures to be historically more oppressive towards women and patriarchal in nature. And while Elizabeth and Olivia both mentioned poverty-stricken areas in the world, Olivia additionally mentioned “places such as Iran” where women don’t have a choice to dress as they want freely. She specifically added that it was not the nature of the dress code that she found oppressive, but rather the fact that there was a ‘dress code’ at all for women. In terms of Western culture and society, all of the women agreed that there was a focus on the sexualization of a woman’s body, and that this was generally oppressive (Olivia added that it could be empowering to some women such as sex workers, etc.). Olivia and Hannah stated that women are pressurized to meet beauty standards and look a certain way, while Elizabeth stated she never felt this affecting her. Hannah added more insight to this topic and how it specifically affects the younger generations. According to her, “I would say social media drives those factors and what you do see on TV... I think it’s definitely a factor in how young girls grow up today”.

According to the participants, religion tends to be neutral, neither oppressive or empowering to women. Olivia specified that there are aspects of all cultures, rather, that can be oppressive towards women, and that often times religion is distorted and used to oppress women, but is not inherently the source of their oppression. When these women were shown side-by-side images of the same woman, one with her wearing a headscarf and one without, and were asked whether the woman seemed either oppressed or empowered in either of the images, the answers were relatively consistent. All three women saw the woman in the images as neither oppressed nor empowered, but rather neutral. When asked about Islamic veiling in general, such as the headscarf,

burka, and niqab, Olivia also believed that they are neutral (neither empowering nor oppressive), but added that she is sometimes 'weary' when she sees women in the full burka. Hannah stated that these forms of veiling could be empowering, but added, "I hope it would be their choice". Elizabeth stated that she perceived these forms of veiling to be neutral because she did not have adequate knowledge about them to judge. All of the women agreed that laws banning these forms of veiling, such as in France or Norway, are oppressive and that "women should be able to choose what they want to wear".

From Hannah's and Olivia's perspective feminism was defined as "being able to embrace who you are as a woman" and "uplifting women's position in society" respectively. Both women related the term to empowerment. Elizabeth did not know about the meaning of the word. The participants were then asked if feminism is compatible with predominantly Muslim countries, and if it is compatible with Western countries. According to Hannah, the cultures and religion of predominantly Muslim countries are incompatible with feminism, and cites patriarchy to be the reason why. She adds, "I would hope, looking forward, there's more of an opportunity there". As for Western culture, Hannah believed that "it's not black and white", that it's more "complicated". Olivia stated that there were aspects of both cultures, and all cultures, that are incompatible with feminism. She further stated, "feminism is not 'one-size fits all'", and emphasized that she has her own perspectives and definition of the word that could differ from others. After being informed of the dictionary's definition of the word feminism, Elizabeth stated that she could not speak on whether the cultures or religion of predominantly Muslim countries were incompatible with feminism due to a lack of knowledge and familiarity with said countries. However, she stated that the cultures and religions of Western cultures are compatible with feminism.

When asked where they've obtained knowledge or understanding of the cultures and societies of Muslim-majority countries, Elizabeth stated she was not familiar with them; "I mean I see it on the news but...". Hannah stated that TV and news media were her only sources of information regarding those societies. Olivia admitted that initially her perceptions of those countries were influenced by the news as well, "especially during the post-9/11 era, the images of war...", but that she had done more research through the internet and had connected with people from those countries which eventually changed her perceptions.

Discussion of Responses—Muslim Women from the Orient

Now, I will discuss the responses of Saadiya, Noora, and Ameerah. Firstly, I will begin by briefly going over the demographics of these participants. Saadiya is a 20-year-old Pakistani woman and college student, born and raised in the United States. Noora is in her late 40s, and was born in Ghana and raised in Togo; she is an immigrant to the United States. Ameerah is 45 and was born in Afghanistan and raised in Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, and the United States; she is also an immigrant. Saadiya and Noora are Sunni Muslim, while Ameerah is Shia Muslim; they all consider themselves to be religious. Additionally, since it is relevant to this research, I will mention that Ameerah does not wear the Islamic veil in her day-to-day life, while Saadiya and Noora do. All three women were living in Long Island, New York at the time of their interviews.

Unlike the other group of participants who seemed uncomfortable and hesitant in answering some of the questions, these women, from their body language and voice cues, seemed eager to voice their responses. In fact on many occasions, all three participants wanted to add more to their answers. They were more confident in their answering the questions and had a lot to say and had much more information and personal opinions they wanted to contribute. Since the topics

being discussed were related to these women's personal identities, and possibly life experiences, it makes sense they were more comfortable. Them being so eager and passionate in their responses may have something to do with not being asked to discuss these topics and voice their opinions on such matters in their day-to-day lives, thus appreciating the opportunity.

When these participants were given images of women from various religions wearing different forms of veiling, all but one were able to distinguish immediately that the women presented were from different religions. Noora believed that all of the women were Muslim, while Saadiya and Ameerah were even able to pick out specific pictures and correspond them to the correct religion (although Ameerah believed that most of the women were Muslim). Upon being presented with the same images along with their labelled faiths, all three participants were surprised and even fascinated to see the diversity in veiling. Noora also seemed to be delighted by the fact that veil is shared by women from other faiths as well. As the other group of participants, all of the women were especially surprised to see that the woman wearing what seemed to look like a burqa, was in fact, Jewish. This goes to show that even some Muslim women may be under the impression that veils generally represent Muslim women.

The ways in which these women defined 'oppression' shared some common themes but differed greatly. Saadiya held that 'oppression' means when a woman's "rights are taken away from [her] by someone who isn't a woman". She added, "women can't oppress other women; it's not oppression unless it's done from someone who's not in the same shoes as you"; she additionally described the word as having to do with "control". This was an interesting perspective on the word especially because it implied that oppression also is heavily related with the identity of the individual doing the oppression, something not expressed by other participants. According to

Noora, ‘oppression’ is when others force an individual to do “certain things they don’t like” or want to do. And for Ameerah, ‘oppression’ can be exemplified in lack of freedom to practice one’s religion. In terms of ‘empowerment’, there were also common themes. Saadiya believed it is about choice and being able to freely express your “identity”. For Noora, it additionally means to have worth and value in society, “to matter” to others, and for others to regard an individual as important. And for Ameerah, ‘empowerment’ means having control over their “future and destiny”.

When the women were asked whether or not they believed that in certain parts of the world women are more oppressed than in others, they all said they did, just as the previous group. Saadiya stated that there are some cultures which are more oppressive towards women than others, and cited examples of cultures having strict gender roles to be one of the reasons as to why. She believes that strict gender roles can lead to women having less rights than men. Noora believes that she cannot say which areas in particular are more oppressive than others, and that she’d “have to see it” with her “own eyes” before coming to a conclusion, because she does not simply trust news coverage to be an accurate representation. And according to Ameerah, in “all areas except for the first world countries” women “absolutely” face oppression. She believes the oppression is a result of various cultural and economic factors. All three of the women believed that religion is empowering to women. According to Saadiya, all religions, and the Abrahamic religions in particular, give women many rights and are empowering—when followed “properly”—and explained that “they assign roles to both of them [men and women] but they don’t necessarily oppress either of them”. To Ameerah, “religion has nothing to do with” oppression. It was interesting to see that these Muslim women believed that religion is not necessarily part of the

equation when it comes to women's oppression, and that other factors are at fault. All of the women interviewed had a positive perception of religion in women's lives.

Next, the women were shown side-by-side images of the same woman, one with her wearing a headscarf and one without, and were asked whether the woman, from the images alone, seemed to be oppressed or empowered in either one; the answers surprisingly differed from the previous group's. Saadiya and Noora believed that in both images, the woman was empowered. However, Ameerah's answer differed from all other participants; she regarded the image in which the woman was wearing the headscarf to be *more* empowering. Her reasoning was: "I would say she's empowered because she chose to put a hijab on, that's more empowering than wanting to take it off". This was interesting to hear especially because Ameerah herself does not wear the veil, yet still regards it positively as empowering. One would assume that Muslim women who don't veil reject the veil and view it negatively, but Ameerah's response indicates that it is not always the case. The veil's perceptions among Muslim women themselves is more complex.

When asked about Islamic veiling in general, and the khimar, burka, and niqab in particular, all of the women had positive perceptions of them and saw them as empowering to the women who choose to wear them. From Saadiya's point of view, "usually religion isn't something you can see on the outside of someone, but for me, someone can tell what I believe in, what my priorities are just by looking at me. I feel like I get to symbolize my entire religion through my actions". It is clear how fundamental the veil is to Saadiya's identity and self-expression. According to Ameerah, veiling is empowering due to the fact that it "empowers the women to show their brains, rather than beauty". To her, veiling prioritizes and emphasizes a woman's intellectual capabilities, something she regards as empowering. For Noora, it is empowering to

women but she added that it is important that women also understand the meaning behind the veil rather than simply wearing it. She recounted being a young girl in Togo, in which the population adhere to various religions, where young Catholic girls from her school would be “curious” about her veil; she said she never felt uncomfortable or oppressed. However, when she moved to the United States, she said “it shifted, because people around me, even Muslims from my country, they don’t cover. And sometimes they mock you for covering”. She explained that it was the people around her that led her to feeling oppressed, not her veil, and the pressure from the people surrounding her led her to let go of the veil briefly. However, once she began surrounding herself with more “positive people, good people,” it “changed” her. Earlier she had been afraid to cover because of the company around her, but after going back to the veil, she said, “subhanallah¹⁵⁰ I could not believe the strength that comes with it”. Noora’s story truly proves how important the veil is to her in her life, and that losing it made her realize how much it uplifted her and gave her strength.

All three women agreed that laws in some Western countries banning women from veiling are undoubtedly oppressive. According to Saadiya, “if you’re telling women they can’t cover how they want, religious or not, that’s still oppressing because you’re telling them how to dress”. When asked about Western culture, and whether or not they believed that it overly sexualizes and objectifies women, all three women also said that they do. Ameerah believes that this sexualization is becoming the norm for Western culture. Saadiya additionally gave a good example to support her view: “whenever you watch celebrity interviews, when they’re interviewing the man, they ask him about his life in becoming an actor and his life story. But when it’s about a woman, it’s always

¹⁵⁰ An Arabic phrase that can be translated to “Glory be to God”.

inappropriate questions, what she wore and who she's dating... That's belittling to women, saying their value is only based off of that". Noora added that the sexualization of women is dehumanizing because it puts monetary value on women's body parts and leads them to "lose their dignity". In terms of beauty standards, all three participants also agreed that they were heavily pervasive in Western society—and oppressive. Noora stated that these beauty standards don't affect her because she chooses to cover. However, to Saadiya, beauty standards played a large role in her perception of herself while growing up. The beauty standards she felt pressured to follow were very Euro-centric, and so she became insecure of her South Asian features as a young girl. Her response added a racial perspective to the discussion; she said "having Euro-centric features was considered beautiful". Ameerah also said that she is affected by beauty standards; she said she has felt a pressure to look "thin and pretty" and that she'd like to be "free from that".

These participants' perception of feminism shared many similarities. From Saadiya's perspective, feminism is "fighting for women to be equal" to men, who are at "the top of the food chain". Noora described feminism as "strength", and Ameerah defines it to be when women's voices are heard and when they are considered "important". The women were then asked if feminism is compatible with the cultures and religion of predominantly Muslim countries, and if it is compatible with the cultures and religions of Western countries. Saadiya said: "I think the religion is very compatible with feminism. Islam is actually the first religion to grant women the right to divorce... also, our own Prophet... his wife was actually the CEO of her own company and he actually worked below her. So that right there is a huge feminist move that not a lot of cultures at that time would approve of. A lot of cultures would say that a woman's role is in the house. Like there's nothing in the Quran that states a woman's role is in the house". Saadiya's response is an

example of many Muslim women who regard their religion as advocating feminism, and even know of its feminist history, rather than blindly following an oppressive religion, as the media would say that they do. In terms of Western countries, Saadiya answered that they are compatible with feminism, “for the most part, because women aren’t restricted to living a certain life style. But just with women being hyper-sexualized in media, that is the one thing that’s very oppressive”. For Ameerah, “when it comes to modesty”, she believes that aspect of predominantly Muslim countries is compatible with feminism, “but not when it comes to careers and stuff... they’re still contained.” And for Western countries, she says they’re “definitely” not compatible with feminism; “over here it’s just not obvious... It’s more ‘hush-hush’. It’s there, it’s just not talked about”. These responses, albeit only anecdotally, counter many myths, including the myth that Muslim-majority countries are inherently oppressive and the myth that Western society is more progressive in terms of feminism.

When asked if women from predominantly Muslim countries should be ‘liberated’, Ameerah answered “absolutely”. She even described what that liberation would look like; “they should be getting education, more in the working field, less children... I think it’s more of a cultural, male-domination type of thing”. Her response thus presents a counter-narrative, because despite her being Muslim and from the Orient, her answer partly represents the dominant Western discourses in the media, in the UN, and in academia. However, though she is cognizant of the problems many women face there and believes they should be ‘liberated’, she attributes those problems to patriarchal cultures, not religion. When asked if women from Western countries should be ‘liberated’, her response was, surprisingly, the same. She stated, “they should be educated too, education is low in the United States”. To Ameerah, there are aspects in both regions where

women's lives could be improved upon. It is rare to hear from anyone in the United States, that American women lack education; we're usually told that the U.S. is one of the best when it comes to education and that it is 'other' countries that have this problem. So her response provided an interesting perspective. For Saadiya, "liberated can be interpreted in many ways", and as long as the woman is doing something that is her choice, that's liberating. Specifically in terms of Western countries, she added, "there definitely is a wage gap, and the stereotype that women aren't as smart as men, and women can't lead. I think they should be liberated in that sense". Noora would like to see women in predominantly Muslim-majority countries to have "more freedom of speech". Commenting on women in Western countries, Noora believes they should be 'liberated' from beauty standards and sexualization. She stated, "if that's what they call liberated, that's not good"; she adds that Western women "should know [their] status, respect [themselves], respect [their] bodies". All three women stated they had understanding of Western cultures and society, specifically American, from first-hand experience and living in the United States.

Ameerah additionally wanted to add, "I think Islam is misunderstood. It hasn't been able to show its beauty and all you see is negative. So once you see the beauty of it, it empowers women, towards more education, to more working, to less children... It's seen so negative because they want to have a scape-goat, they want to have a villain and we are the villain now... If you look throughout American history they had villains... when they first came to this country, the Native Americans were the villains". She then went on to mention the demonization of African Americans, the Irish, the Italians, the Chinese, the Latinos, etc... "and now it's us as well".

Conclusionary Remarks

Reality greatly differs from the dominant narrative that has been conceived through assumptions and myths rooted in patriarchy and colonialism. And that is because in the “context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (Spivak, 1988, p. 83). These interviews have shown that when women are listened to, their responses can sometimes be surprising and unexpected. The world is not as binary as it has been depicted to be. Not all Western women hold the opinions one would assume and neither do all Muslim women. I am not trying to deny the agency of women in Western societies, in fact in *all* cultures women have agency and are empowered in their own ways¹⁵¹. Rather, I am trying to analyze and prove that there are indeed aspects of Western society that can be oppressive towards women *as well*, to present a counter narrative to the dominant ones. When women speak for themselves, various complexities emerge. These complexities are often veiled from view when the world is seen from the Western gaze. Such complexities include the West not being the beacon of feminism it had presented *itself* to be and the Orient and Islam not being the barbaric oppressors of women that the West had presented *them* to be.

While it is true some women face oppression under Muslim-led societies, some women also face oppression under Western, secular societies (as noted by the interviewees and in the examples I gave from literature and advertisement images). Yet, we are told the latter is towards the path forward, and we are

consistently pressed to denounce all the harm done by Islamic movements around the world—otherwise [we are] accused of being [apologists]. But there never seems to be a parallel demand for those who study secular humanism and its projects,

¹⁵¹ Any culture can be seen as a framework with potential for oppression; however, women have the ability to demonstrate agency everywhere in the world to mold cultures into what best empowers them.

despite the terrible violence that has been associated with it over the last couple of centuries, from world wars to colonialism, from genocides to slavery. We need to have as little dogmatic faith in secular humanism as in Islamism, and as open a mind to the complex possibilities of human projects undertaken in one tradition as the other. (Abu-Lughod, 2002, p. 788)

Individuals tend to believe that their own lifestyles and world-views are empowering *to all* (something both sides are guilty of). However, empowerment has different meanings for different people, different cultures, and different religions. Our society should focus on making sure that women all over the world have the freedom to live the lifestyles they choose, instead of attacking the lifestyles they choose. If we occupy ourselves with demonizing the other side without acknowledging our own shortcomings, neither will women in the Orient be empowered, nor will Western women be free from their oppression.

Decolonizing Muslim women's identities will require more effort than it took to colonize their identities. Because now, those who have been spoken for and quelled by the West will not only face the challenge of reversing history and all that was done against them, but to completely alter a very rigid and adamant force that has been reinforced for hundreds of years: societal perceptions. These perceptions and "Western discourses on Muslim women are predicated on unquestioned cultural and social assumptions that do not allow for the engagement of specific Muslim societies in their own terms" (Safi, 2010, n.p.). This engagement of Muslim women themselves is vital for a society that truly wants to encourage feminism and the liberation of women. Anything less than allowing Muslim women's perspectives and opinions to be heard, acknowledged, and respected, will only further promote mischaracterizations and misconceptions about them and embolden patriarchy and coloniality. "European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and

imaginatively” (Said, 1978, p. 3) by avoiding this very involvement of the ‘other’. While it pretends that these women are oppressed by being hidden behind the Islamic veil and their patriarchal cultures, the West is unable to see *its own veil* that is in reality the one keeping Muslim women hidden and oppressed. That is why interviews and research such as this are heavily influential in that regard; they begin the process of undoing, brick by brick, the concealment of Muslim women.

Winston Churchill once said, “History will be kind to me, for I intend to write it”¹⁵² (Roberts, 2013). And he was right, History worshipped and exalted him—and the West. This man, as brutal as he was, understood the power of writing, and thus creating. This paper is an attempt to erase the Western, male imprint upon Muslim and Oriental women by taking that power-knowledge back into our hands. And to allow *our own* histories to be written *by* ourselves and *for* ourselves. As Edward Said put it, “**I see myself as an Oriental writing back at Orientalists, who for so long have thrived upon our silence.** I am also writing to them by dismantling the structure of their discipline, showing its meta-historical, institutional, anti-empirical, and ideological biases” (Said, 1978, p. 47) (emphasis added).

¹⁵² According to sources, the actual quote was slightly different; however, this is the most commonly known one. (Roberts, 2013)

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Images

Image One

Can You Spot the Difference?



source: <https://www.womensrepublic.net/the-hypersexualization-of-the-female-body/>

Image Two



Image Three



Image Four



source: <https://www.womensrepublic.net/the-hypersexualization-of-the-female-body/>

Image Five



Like a lot of things in life, our Sherpa's biggest advantages are its vital statistics.

Quite obviously, Anne Aston of Golden Shot fame, looks nothing like a Sherpa van. But when it comes to vital statistics, our Sherpas are just as impressive as Anne.

For instance, each Sherpa van has 90 cubic feet of loadspace. And every inch is available thanks to its straighter sides and boxed-in wheel arches.

Another impressive statistic is the 28 mpg which "Truck" magazine achieved with the biggest Sherpa, the 240.

Clearly, the smaller Sherpas should be even cheaper to run.

And the vast choice of models you can choose from is another compelling figure:-

Three body options (van, pick-up and chassis cab). Three engine options (1622 and 1796cc petrol, and 1796cc diesel). In three payload ranges (14, 19 and 22/23 cwt). But whichever Sherpa you choose, it will be tough and reliable. And because of its car-like driving position, a joy to drive.

What's more, every Sherpa comes with Supercover, the most comprehensive 4-point after-sales commitment ever offered on any range of vans.

So you could say that it's vital statistics like these that make our Sherpas stand way out in front.

Just like Anne.



Sherpa
From Leyland Cars. With Supercover.

Image Six



Dodge CHRYSLER

Mother warned me...

that there would be men like you driving cars like that. Do you really think you can get to me with that long, low, tough machine you just rolled up in? Ha! If you think a girl with real values is impressed by your air conditioning and stereo... a 440 Magnum, whatever that is... well—it takes more than cushy bucket seats to make me flip. Charger R/T SE. Sounds like alphabet soup. Frankly, I'm attracted to you because you have a very intelligent face. My name's Julia.

Join the fun... catch
DODGE fever

Watch AFI, Hotshot and The Bob Hope Comedy Specials on NBC-TV.

Image Seven



Have an affair with a FOREIGN MODEL

SUPERB! In a Class of her own

STARION WALKERS GARAGE
SOUTH OTTERINGTON,
NORTHALLERTON, NORTH YORKSHIRE.
Tel (0609) 3656 & 774825

source: <https://metro.co.uk/2018/09/04/prepare-to-tinge-these-are-the-ten-most-sexist-car-adverts-of-all-time-7911751/>

Image Eight



Image Ten



Image Nine



Text reads: "You know you're not the first.
But do you really care?"
(for a used car ad)

source: <https://autowise.com/10-most-criinge-worthy-sexist-car-ads-ever-published/>

Image Eleven



source: <https://www.glamour.com/story/carls-jr-stop-using-sexy-women-in-ads>

Image Twelve



source: <https://www.bustle.com/articles/34832-model-in-burger-kings-sexist-blow-job-ad-had-no-freaking-idea>

Image Thirteen



Image Fourteen



source: <https://www.buzzfeed.com/copyranter/13-of-the-most-sexist-beer-ads-of-all-time>

Image Fifteen



source: <https://ashevillegrit.com/why-are-women-so-insecure-about-their-bodies>

Interview Questions

1. Basic demographic questions: What is your age? What country were you born in? What country were you raised in? What is your ethnicity? Do you practice any religion? If so, which? Any certain type/sect of that religion? Where do you live?
2. (show pictures of women from various religions wearing the veil) What comes to mind when you see these pictures? What religion do you think these women belong to? Would you say these women are oppressed? empowered?
3. (show pictures of a woman veiled and unveiled) What comes to mind when you see these pictures? From these two pictures, would you expect that any of these are women oppressed? empowered?
4. What does the word 'oppression' mean to you—specifically when it relates to women? If you can, please give some examples of what you would consider oppression?
5. What does the word 'empowerment' mean to you—specifically when it relates to women? If you can, please give some examples of what you would consider empowerment.
6. Do you think women all over the world face some form of oppression? If yes, do you think there are there parts of the world where women are more oppressed than others? If yes, which areas in particular?
7. Is religion usually oppressive to women? If yes, how? specifically Christianity? specifically Islam?
8. Is religion usually empowering for women? If so, how? specifically Christianity? specifically Islam?
9. Is the hijab/burka/nikab/other forms of female covering oppressive? empowering? Explain.
10. In certain countries, there are laws banning the hijab/burka/nikab/other forms of Muslim female covering. Would you consider these laws oppressive to the women they affect or empowering?
11. Are housewives oppressed compared to women who work? Why or why not? Vice versa?
12. Would you say that women are objectified, sexualized, commodified, exploited in your culture? If yes, give examples. Is this oppressive? empowering?

13. What does the word 'feminism' mean to you?
14. Are the cultures and/or religion of predominantly Muslim countries incompatible with feminism? If yes, in what ways? Are the cultures and/or religion of Western countries incompatible with feminism? If yes, in what ways?
15. Should the women in predominantly Muslim countries/Western countries be liberated? If yes, what do you mean by 'liberated'? How and Why?
16. From where/ how have you learned about the religion and culture of _____?
17. In your head, what image pops up when someone mentions 'Muslim woman'?
18. In your head, what image pops up when someone mentions 'Christian woman'?
19. In your head, what image pops up when someone mentions oppressed woman?
20. In your head, what image pops up when someone mentions empowered woman?
21. Would you say that you have ever felt oppressed? If yes, please elaborate if you feel comfortable doing so.
22. Would you say that you have ever felt empowered? If yes, please elaborate if you feel comfortable doing so.
23. Is there anything else you would like to share with me, about these topics or related topics?

Interview Images



(A) Muslim woman



(B) Sikh women



(C) Catholic Nun



(D) Christian Woman



(E) Druze women



(F) Hindu woman



(G) Eastern Orthodox nun



(I) Catholic woman



(H) Jewish woman



(J) Haredi Jewish women



(K) Sabian women



(L) Sikh woman



(M) Amish woman



(N)

Interview Images' Sources

- (A) - <https://fashionattheraces.com/jaguar-style-stakes-dubai-world-cup/>
- (B) - <https://medium.com/@saldef/none-may-exist-without-a-woman-achieving-gender-equality-through-the-gurus-message-d85739ca854>
- (C) - https://www.etsy.com/listing/274917378/31-inch-brown-veil-catholic-nun-nuns?item_group_id=PG_274917378
- (D) - <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/438960294921973869/>
- (E) - <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/news/3547506/posts>
- (F) - <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/hindi/movie-details/rowdy-hero/etmovienews/61292084.cms>
- (G) - <https://www.google.com/url?sa=i&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.facebook.com%2FHolyAssumptionOrthodoxChurch%2Fphotos%2Fyes-our-eastern-orthodox-nuns-still-wear-habitsall-of-them%2F1864984513623090%2F&psig=AOvVaw242zE03Imtea2qytyyQiBck&ust=1588645989856000&source=images&cd=vfe&ved=0CA0QjhxqFwoTCLC1gdKVmekCFQAAAAAdAAAAABAD>
- (H) - <https://www.google.com/url?sa=i&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.pinterest.com%2Fpin%2F445715694343838370%2F&psig=AOvVaw0JyVM0iDWIgQ5hQ0Enjcn0&ust=1588646070105000&source=images&cd=vfe&ved=0CA0QjhxqFwoTCODIrfeVmekCFQAAAAAdAAAAABAD>
- (I) - <https://www.galleon.ph/appliances-c863/women-c876/special-occasion-accessories-c3915/bridal-veils-c17009/lemandy-orthodox-veil-head-covering-with-p34889280>
- (J) - <https://10daily.com.au/news/world/a181217kbh/sickening-and-radical-why-these-women-are-so-controversial-20181224>
- (K) - <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/115545546668157754/>
- (L) - <https://www.outlookindia.com/magazine/story/entertainment-news-fashion-unlimited-sikh-community-gives-pugree-jewel-in-the-crown-treatment/302349>
- (M) - <https://brightestyoungthings.com/articles/gay-icon-of-the-week-betsy-ross>
- (N) - <https://www.npr.org/2011/04/21/135523680/lifting-the-veil-muslim-women-explain-their-choice>