

GENDERING RELIGION AND POLITICS
UNTANGLING MODERNITIES

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CHAPTER 8



FEMINISM, DEMOCRACY, AND EMPIRE: ISLAM AND THE WAR ON TERROR

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The complicated role European feminism played in legitimating and extending colonial rule in vast regions of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East has been extensively documented and well-argued for some time now.¹ For many of us raised in this critical tradition, it is therefore surprising to witness the older colonialist discourse on women being reenacted in new genres of feminist literature today, with the explicit aim of justifying the U.S. war on terror in the Muslim world. It seems at times a thankless task to unravel yet again the spurious logic through which Western imperial power seeks to justify its geopolitical domination by posing as the “liberator” of indigenous women from native patriarchal cultures. It would seem that this ideologically necessary but intellectually tedious task requires little imagination beyond repositioning the truths of the earlier scholarship on Algeria, Egypt, Indonesia, and India that has copiously and rigorously laid bare the implicated histories of feminism and empire.

Yet it is important for feminists to address the relationship between contemporary feminist discourse and Euro-American imperial domination of the Middle East. While ordinary Americans and Europeans seem to have lost their enthusiasm for the Bush-Blair strategy of unilateralist militarism (whether in Iraq, Afghanistan, or Iran), they continue to trust the judgment offered by their politicians and media pundits, that Muslim societies are besotted with an ideology of fundamentalism whose worst victims are its female inhabitants. This judgment further entails the prescriptive vision that the solution lies in promoting

"democracy" in the Muslim world and Western values of "freedom and liberty" through religious and cultural reform, so that Muslims might be taught to discard their fundamentalist propensities and adopt more enlightened versions of Islam. I do not expect the change in the White House regime (with the election of President Obama) to dim the appeal of this narrative given its longstanding hold on the Euro-American imaginary. What concerns me most in this chapter is the role the tropes of freedom, democracy, and gender inequality have come to play in this story, and the ease with which Islam's mistreatment of women is used as a diagnosis as well as a strategic point of intervention for restructuring large swaths of the Muslim population, if not the religion itself. How have the tropes of freedom, democracy, and gender equality—constitutive of a variety of traditions of feminist thought—facilitated the current Euro-American ambition to remake Muslims and Islam? What does such an imbrication obfuscate and what forms of violence does it condone? How has the normative secularism internal to liberal feminist discourse made the Euro-American war on Muslims made palatable to feminists from across the political spectrum.²

NATIVE TESTIMONIALS

The empirical terrain from which I want to think through these issues is the plethora of recently published nonfiction bestsellers written by Muslim women about their personal suffering at the hands of Islam's supposedly incomparable misogynist practices. Since the events of 9/11, this vastly popular autobiographical genre has played a pivotal role in securing the judgment that Islam's mistreatment of women is a symptom of a much larger pathology that haunts Islam—namely, its propensity to violence. Calls for the reformation of Islam, now issued from progressive, liberal, and conservative podiums alike, are ineluctably tied to its oppression of women. The argument is simple: women are the most abject victims of the ideology of Islamic fundamentalism. The solution lies in bringing "democracy" to the Muslim world, a project that will not only benefit women but that will also make them its main protagonists. In our age of imperial certitude, it seems that the fate of Muslim women and the fate of democracy have become indelibly intertwined.

Many of the authors of these accounts have been handsomely rewarded by conservative political parties and think tanks internationally, and some have been catapulted into positions of political power, having few qualifications other than their shrill polemic against Islam. Given their public prominence, the authors of this genre perform a quasi-official function in various American and European cabinets today: lending a voice of legitimacy to, and at times leading, the civilizational confrontation between "Islam and the West."

As will become clear, however, the popularity of these authors extends beyond their conservative supporters to liberal and progressive publics who dismiss the poor writing and gross exaggerations characteristic of this genre as incidental to its real merits: the truth of Islamic misogyny. The ideological force of this literature lies to a great extent in the ability of the Muslim woman author to embody the double figure of insider and victim, a key subject within Orientalist understandings of women in Muslim societies. These autobiographical works are, however, also distinct from earlier colonial accounts in which it fell to Europeans to reveal the suffering of indigenous women.

The fact that this genre of Muslim women's biographies speaks to a range of feminists, many of whom oppose imperialist politics, is particularly disturbing. A number of well-known feminist critics have endorsed these books, and several of the bestsellers are either taught or widely read within women's study circles.³ While the authentic "Muslim woman's voice" partially explains the popularity these books command, it is the emancipatory model of politics underwriting these accounts that provokes such pathos and admiration among its feminist readership. It is this emancipatory model, with its attendant topography of secular politics and desire for liberal freedoms, that I wish to examine in this chapter.

In what follows, I will make three related but distinct arguments. In the first section of the chapter, I will examine the symbiotic relationship between the authors of this genre of women's literature and conservative political parties and think tanks in America and Europe, a relationship that should serve to mute the enthusiastic reception these books have received in many feminist circles. The second section of this chapter analyzes the particular kinds of elisions and inaccuracies, so characteristic of these autobiographical accounts, that have helped construct an essential opposition between Western civilization and Muslim barbarism (or fundamentalism). Finally, the third section examines current arguments for bringing democracy to the Muslim world and the role the figure of the oppressed Muslim woman plays in these calls. I draw attention to the singular and reductive conception of religiosity underwriting these calls, one that enjoys wide currency among a range of feminists (Pollit 2002) but that needs to be criticized for the forms of violence it entails and the narrow vision of gender enfranchisement it prescribes. In this section I also discuss how the liberal discourse on freedom, endemic to various traditions of feminist thought, blinds us to the power that nonliberal forms of religiosity command in many women's lives. If indeed feminists are interested in distancing themselves from the imperial politics of our times, it is crucial that these forms of religiosity be understood, engaged and respected, instead of scorned as expressions of a false consciousness.

One of the most successful examples within this genre of Muslim women's literature is Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. Since its publication in 2003, this book has been on the *New York Times* best-seller list for over 117 weeks, translated into more than 32 languages, and has won a number of prominent literary awards. Although Nafisi's writing exhibits aesthetic and literary qualities that make it unique among the works I discuss here, it shares with these other writings a systematic exclusion of information that might complicate the story of women's oppression in Iran.

A second book published to wide acclaim—though it does not have the literary pretensions of the former—is Canadian journalist Irshad Manji's *The Trouble with Islam: A Muslim's Call for Reform in Her Faith*. This book has been translated into more than 20 languages, republished in over 23 countries, and was on the Canadian bestseller list for 20 weeks during the first year of its publication. Manji's shrill diatribe against Muslims has won her a prominent public profile: she regularly appears on a variety of television networks (including BBC, CNN, FoxNews), her op-eds are published in prominent international dailies (such as the *New York Times*, the *Times of London*, the *International Herald Tribune*, the *Sydney Morning Herald*), and she is invited to give lectures at elite academic institutions despite the fact that her writings and speeches are full of historical errors and willful inaccuracies about Islam.

A third sample of this genre, Carmen bin Laden's *Inside the Kingdom: My Life in Saudi Arabia*, is an account of Carmen's marriage to one of Osama bin Laden's 25 brothers and the years of claustrophobic (albeit plush) boredom she spent in Saudi Arabia. Translated into at least 16 languages, with translation rights sold in more than 27 countries, the book was on the bestseller list in France for months after its initial publication as well as on the *New York Times* bestseller list during the first year of its publication.

In France a number of such books reached high acclaim at the time of the passage of the controversial law banning the display of the veil (and other "conspicuous" religious symbols) in public schools. Leading these publications was Fadela Amara's *Ni putes ni soumises*, which received two prominent literary awards (Le Prix du livre politique and Le Prix des Députés in 2004), sold over 50,000 copies, and has been translated into multiple languages. A sequel to the book, *Ni putes ni soumises, le combat continue*, sold out prior to its publication. An equally popular first-person account attesting to Islam's barbaric customs is *Bas les voiles!* written by Iranian dissident Chahdortt Djavann (2003), whose quote on the dust jacket exemplifies the enunciative position that constitutes this autobiographical genre: "I wore the veil for ten years. It was the veil or death. I know what I am talking about."

Both Amara and Djavann provided personal testimonies against the veil to the Stasi Commission (a government-appointed investigative body that recommended the ban), which reportedly moved the presiding officials to tears. These women's highly dramatized statements, marshaled as "evidence" of the oppressive character of the veil in the Stasi Commission's report, played a key role in securing French public opinion against the veil and creating a *communauté* of shared aversion to Islam's religious symbols and the misogyny to which they give expression.

Other European countries, including Holland, Spain, Sweden, and Germany, also lay claim to their own ambassadors of Islam's patriarchally oppressed. These authors authenticate and legitimize the Islamophobia sweeping Europe today, lending a voice of credibility to some of the worst kinds of prejudices and stereotypes Europe has seen since the rise of anti-Semitism in the 1930s. These authentic Muslim voices have played a crucial role in shoring up support for the passage of a number of anti-immigration laws in Europe targeting the poorest and most vulnerable sections of the population. It is no small task that these female "critics of Islam" perform, and indeed, their service is recognized by the conservative political forces of contemporary Europe and America who have bestowed considerable honors on this group.

NEOCONSERVATISM AND WOMEN'S SUFFERING

Consider, for example, the mercurial rise of Ayaan Hirsi Ali in Dutch politics. A woman of Somali descent, Hirsi Ali had no public profile until she decided to capitalize on the anti-Muslim sentiment that swept Europe following the events of 9/11. Excoriating Muslims for their unparalleled barbarity and misogyny, she scored points with the right wing when she attacked the Dutch government's welfare and multicultural policies for fostering and supporting the culture of domestic violence supposedly endemic to Islam and Muslims. In highly staged public statements, Hirsi Ali has characterized the prophet Muhammad as a pervert and a tyrant, claiming that Muslims lag "in enlightened thinking, tolerance and knowledge of other cultures" and that their history cannot cite a single person who "made a discovery in science or technology, or changed the world through artistic achievement" (Hirsi Ali 2006: 152–53, Kuper 2004). Soon thereafter the right-wing People's Party for Freedom and Democracy offered her a ticket to run for member of parliament, a seat she won by popular vote in January 2003 despite the fact that she had little qualification for such a position.

Dutch immigration services subsequently discovered that Hirsi Ali had lied to gain entry into the Netherlands, fabricating the story of her flight from a forced marriage and a vengeful natal family. Threatened with the repeal of her Dutch citizenship, Hirsi Ali resigned from the

Dutch parliament and was immediately granted a position at the prestigious right-wing think tank in Washington, DC, the American Enterprise Institute. Predictably, Hirsi Ali also published a memoir titled *The Caged Virgin: An Emancipation Proclamation for Women and Islam*, a title highly reminiscent of the nineteenth-century literary genre centered on Orientalist fantasies of the harem (cf. Alam 2006). Despite the facts that Hirsi Ali's personal story of suffering under Islamic customs has been discredited and the book is full of absurd statements (such as "[Muslim] children learn from their mothers that it pays to lie. Mistrust is everywhere and lies rule," Hirsi Ali, 2007: 25–26), it has done quite well. At the time of the writing of this chapter, *The Caged Virgin* (Hirsi Ali 2006) had sold translation rights in 15 countries, and Ali is widely regarded as the contemporary doyen of "conservative left criticism." Importantly, she is also hailed by left critics (such as Christopher Hitchens 2006) and in February 2008, she was awarded the Simone de Beauvoir Freedom Prize.

The arguments of these authors read like a blueprint for the neoconservative agenda for regime change in the Middle East. Irshad Manji is a case in point. Her book *Trouble with Islam* (2004) is breathtaking in its amplification of neoconservative policies and arguments—all told in the voice of a purportedly self-critical and reformist Muslim woman who wants to bring her lost brethren to the correct path. While inflammatory hyperbole is characteristic of this genre, Manji uses language aimed at injuring and offending Muslim sensibilities. Her text is littered with sentences that describe Muslims as "brain-dead," "narrow-minded," "incapable of thinking," "hypocritical," "desperately tribal," and "prone to victimology" (ibid.: 22, 30, 31). She brands Islam as more literalist, rigid, intolerant, totalitarian, anti-Semitic, and hateful of women and homosexuals than any other religion, and its rituals more prone to inculcating "mindless and habitual submission" to authority. Manji's denunciations of Islam and Muslims are matched by the unstinting praise she reserves for the "West," "Christianity," "Judaism," and "Israel." She finds the Western record unparalleled in human history for its tolerance, its "love of discovery," "openness to new ideas," and so on (ibid.: 18, 20, 204–18; Manji 2006b).

Like Hirsi Ali, Manji supported the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq and subsequently the Israeli destruction of Lebanon in the summer of 2006—all in the name of cleansing the Muslim world of "Islamic fanatics and terrorists" (Manji 2006a). In her book, Manji, in Manichaean fashion, upholds Israelis as paragons of virtue, capable of self-criticism and tolerance, while Palestinians are condemned for inhabiting a culture of blame and victimhood. She goes so far as to say that Israel's discrimination against its Arab citizens is a form of "affirmative action" (Mani 2004: 112). Manji has been promoted

by the pro-Israel information lobby, the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), and the infamous Daniel Pipes, who reviewed her book in glowing terms and with whom she has appeared at Israeli fundraising events.

Despite the cozy relations Manji enjoys with neoconservative luminaries, it would be a mistake to underestimate the broad public presence she commands. Not only do her polemical op-eds appear in prominent international dailies, she is routinely invited to lecture at a wide range of liberal arts colleges and universities and asked to comment on political events of international import on major television and radio talk shows. Her reviewers often benignly overlook the factual errors and polemical oversimplifications that characterize Manji's work. In an early review published in *The New York Times*, Andrew Sullivan (2004) writes:

The Trouble with Islam is a memorable entrance. It isn't the most learned or scholarly treatise on the history or theology of Islam; its dabbling in geopolitics is haphazard and a little naïve; its rhetorical hyperbole can sometimes seem a mite attention-seeking. . . . But its spirit is undeniable, and long, long overdue. *Reading it feels like a revelation.* Manji, a Canadian journalist and television personality, does what so many of us have longed to see done: assail fundamentalist Islam itself for tolerating such evil in its midst. *And from within.* (emphasis added) (10).

The last caveat is telling: Manji's identity as a Muslim lends particular force to her Orientalist and racist views, reaching audiences that ideologues such as Bernard Lewis and Daniel Pipes cannot. Apart from her vitriolic attacks on Islam, what makes Manji so valuable for someone like Sullivan is her "distinct tone of liberalism"—"a liberalism that," he writes, "seeks not to abolish faith but to establish a new relationship with it. If we survive this current war without unthinkable casualties, it will be because this kind of liberalism didn't lose its nerve. Think of Manji as a nerve ending for the West—shocking, raw, but mercifully, joyously, still alive." Note the providential role this imaginary is expected to play in the Muslim world. Not only is it a harbinger of joy and mercy for Iraqis whose country has been destroyed by the U.S. military occupation, but it promises to reorchestrate every Muslim's relationship to his/her faith.

SELECTIVE OMISSIONS

Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, with its literary pretensions and invocations of great "Western Classics," stands in contrast to Manji and Hirsi Ali's books. Indeed, much of its appeal stems from the fact

that it plays on Nabokov's subtle masterpiece *Lolita* in a manner that makes Nafisi's narrative palatable to sensibilities critical of the strident opportunism of the other texts. *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is a first-person account told from the point of view of an Iranian professor of English (Nafisi herself) who, after resigning from her post at an Iranian university out of frustration over clerical control of the curriculum, gathers several of her female students to teach them classics from Western literature in the privacy of her home. Nafisi uses these sessions as a means not only to denounce clerical political rule but also to express her visceral distaste for Iranian cultural life—both contemporary and historical. She paints a stultifying picture of life in post-Revolutionary Iran, devoid of any beauty, color, inspiration, poetry, debate, discussion, and public argumentation. In this suffocating environment, it is only the Western literary canon that offers any hope of redemption in its irrepressible power to foment rebellion and critique and its intrinsic capacity to incite critical self-reflection.

Despite the difference in tone between Nafisi and authors like Hirs Ali and Manji, the fundamental message her memoir communicates is not that different: Islamic societies are incapable of thought, reflection, and creativity, and their propensity to violence is most evident in their treatment of women. At one point in the memoir, Nafisi sweepingly declares that Iranian university students are only capable of obsequious sycophantic behavior toward their instructors because "from the first day they had set foot in the elementary school, they had been told to memorize. They had been told that their opinions counted for nothing" (ibid.: 220). Such declarations are coupled with gratuitous statements such as: "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a Muslim man, regardless of his fortune, must be in want of a nine-year-old virgin wife" (ibid.: 257). The contempt that Nafisi reserves for Iranians and Muslims stands in sharp contrast to the utter adulation she reserves for the West: from its cultural accomplishments to its food, its language, its literature, its chocolates, and its films. As must be clear by now, this dual theme of abhorrence of everything Muslim and sheer exaltation of all things Western is a structural feature of this genre of writing.

This image of Iranian life is ruthless in its omissions. During the period Nafisi writes about, not only has Iranian clerical rule faced some of the toughest challenges from a broad-based reform movement in which women played a crucial role, but Iranian universities have been at the center of this political transformation. This is in keeping with Iran's long history of student involvement in almost all protest movements of any significance in the modern period, including the overthrow of the Shah. One of the most interesting accomplishments of the last three decades is the establishment of a feminist press and

a critical scriptural hermeneutics that is quite unique in the Muslim world (Najmabadi 1998). During the same period about which Nafisi writes so disparagingly, Iran has produced an internationally acclaimed cinema, which is just as fiercely critical of various aspects of contemporary Iranian society as it is reflectively ponderous about the existential meaning of modern life itself. None of this has been easy or without cost for those who have struggled against the absolutist impetus internal to the clerical establishment in charge of the Iranian state apparatus. But it is important to note that dissent has come not only from secular leftists and liberals but from the clerics themselves, many of whom had supported the Islamic Revolution at its inception but who became the most trenchant critics of the establishment's corruption and totalitarian control.⁴ Social and political critique, in other words, has become a deeply integral aspect of post-revolutionary Iranian life.

Reading Lolita in Tehran fits the Orientalist paradigm: it reproduces and confirms the impressions of its Western audience, offering no surprises or challenges to what they think they already know about Iran and its rich cultural and political history.⁵ Like Delacroix's famous painting *Women of Algiers*, Nafisi's memoir only embellishes the tapestry of anecdotal prejudicial impressions that the audience bring to their reading of the object at hand. One cannot help but wonder how Nafisi's book would have fared had it surprised its readers with social facts that do not neatly fit her readers' structure of expectations, such as the fact that the literacy rate for women shot up dramatically under Islamic rule from 35.5 percent in 1976 to 74.2 percent in 1996, or that over 60 percent of Iranian students in higher education are women, or that post-revolutionary Iran has had more women representatives elected to the parliament than the U.S. Congress (Bahramitash 2006: 235). In addition, the population growth rate in Iran declined from 3.2 percent in 1980 to 1.2 in 2001 as a result of one of the most effective family planning and public health initiatives launched in recent history. If indeed Iranian women have been able to achieve this kind of political and material enfranchisement under conditions of Islamic clerical rule, then how does this complicate the rather simple diagnosis that Islamic rule is and always will be oppressive of women?

Nafisi's book neatly fits into the geopolitics initiated by the Bush White House which declared Iran to be part of the "axis of evil," and neoconservative plans to attack Iran were made public (Hersch 2006). It is hard not to read Nafisi as providing the cultural rationale for such plans, particularly those extended to her by the neoconservative establishment. Bernard Lewis, the Orientalist ideologue of the current U.S. imperial adventure in the Middle East, calls the memoir "a masterpiece," and Nafisi was given a prestigious position at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, where her

friend Fouad Ajami, another prominent conservative ideologue, directs the Middle East program. The fact that Nafisi was awarded such a position, even though she had no substantial publishing record or a comparable position at a similar institution, attests to the considerable service she has performed for the scions of the U.S. empire.

Political patronage aside, Nafisi has also been promoted as a cultural icon by corporations eager to showcase their socially responsible side. The manufacturer of the luxury car Audi, for example, promoted Azar Nafisi (along with media figures like David Bowie and the actor William H. Macy) as part of "Audi of America's 'Never Follow' Campaign" to sell the brand to affluent and educated potential buyers. Nafisi has appeared in Audi advertisements for magazines as diverse as *Vanity Fair*, *Wired*, *Golf Digest*, *The New Yorker*, and *Vogue* (see Salamon 2004). Inasmuch as automobile advertisements do not simply sell cars but also forms of social identity, Audi's promotion of Nafisi shows the extent to which a genuine concern for Muslim women's welfare has been evacuated of critical content and whittled down to a commodified token of elite chic. The project of "Saving Muslim Women" is reminiscent these days of the "Save the Whale" campaign: while the latter might have contributed to the well-being of the species the campaign sought to protect, the former, I fear, might well obliterate the very object it champions.

Indeed, this is a conclusion that echoes Hamid Dabashi's assessment in his devastating review of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (Dabashi 2006). Apart from the political service the text renders, Dabashi criticizes the book cover for the "iconic burglary" it performs. The cover of the book shows two young veiled women eagerly poring over a text that the reader infers to be *Lolita* "in Tehran." Dabashi shows that this is a cropped version of an original photograph that portrayed two young students reading a leading oppositional newspaper reporting on the election of the reformist candidate Khatami, whose success was widely attributed to votes cast by Iranian women and youth. In censoring the photograph and denuding it of its historical context, Dabashi argues that the book strips these young women "of their moral intelligence and their participation in the democratic aspirations of their homeland, reducing them into a colonial harem." For Dabashi, inasmuch as the book cover places the veiled teenage women within the context of Nabokov's celebrated novel about pedophilia, it reenacts an old Orientalist fantasy about the incestuous character of the East, simultaneously repulsive and tantalizing in its essence. It is hard to escape the conclusion that the women whose suffering Nafisi sets out to capture must be obliterated in their particularity, both narratively and iconically, so that they can be re-enshrined as the "caged virgins" of Islam's violence.

The fact that Nafisi's book has drawn accolades from feminist writers such as Susan Sontag and Margaret Atwood is disquieting in that even vocal critics of the conservatism characteristic of the Bush-Blair era remain blind to the dangerous omissions that texts such as Nafisi's embody and to the larger political projects they facilitate.⁶ It is crucial that feminist writers and cultural critics learn to read such texts more critically, a reading that must ground itself in a familiarity with the complexities and ambiguities that attend even the much spurned Iranian clerical regime and the politics of dissent it has spawned.

BUT WHAT ABOUT ISLAM'S ABUSE OF WOMEN?

The reader might object at this point that even though accounts of Muslim women's suffering have been opportunistically used to serve a political agenda, is it not the case that Islamic societies exhibit a forbidding record of misogynist practices? How can anyone concerned about women's well-being not criticize and condemn such unspeakable atrocities? By way of an answer, let me begin by stating categorically that I fully acknowledge that women in Muslim societies suffer from inequitable treatment and are disproportionately subjected to discriminatory acts of violence. Any feminist concerned with improving Muslim women's lot, however, must begin not simply with the scorecard of Islam's abuses but with the terms through which an act of violence is registered as worthy of protest, for whom, under what conditions and toward what end.

Let me flesh out these points by considering the much publicized issue of "honor killing," a widely condemned practice that received international media attention even prior to the events of 9/11 but has since surfaced more dramatically in the genre of literature I discuss here. "Honor killing" is generally understood to be an "Islamic practice" in which women suspected of engaging in illicit sexual behavior are murdered by male family members. This practice might be compared to acts of man-on-woman homicide common to many Western societies. Consider, for example, the following comparable statistics: various reports show that in a country of 140 million people, almost 1,000 women are killed per year in Pakistan (that, along with Jordan, has one of the highest recorded instances of "honor killings").⁷ The U.S. Family Violence Prevention Project, on the other hand, reports that approximately 1,500 women are killed every year by their spouses or boyfriends in what are called "crimes of passion" in the United States, which has a population of roughly 300 million (slightly more than three women are murdered by their boyfriends or husbands every day in the United States).⁸ Despite these parallel statistics, discussions of "honor killings" are seldom analyzed within a comparative context.

Instead, most discussions construct "honor killing" as symptomatic of "Islamic culture" (note the elision between religion and culture in this formulation), while acts of man-on-woman homicide in the United States are presented either as acts of individualized pathology or excessive passion. In this logic, American men are represented as acting out of jealousy (a "natural" emotion) against their sexual rivals (albeit swept away by its force), while Muslim men are understood to be compelled by "their culture," irrationally and blindly acting out its misogynist customs and traditions. An individualized account of domestic violence in the West is secured, in other words, against a tautological account of "Islamic culture." Once this premise is conceded, it follows that an appropriate strategy for combating this form of violence in the West is to transform individual behavior, whereas in Muslim societies one would need to reform, if not eradicate, "Islamic culture."⁹ Such a polemical account, in its drive to quantify sexism (West equals less; Islam equals more), fails to realize that both forms of violence are equally cultural as they are gendered, each depending upon distinct valuations of women's subordination, sexuality, kinship relations, and various forms of male violence. Any opposition to these different (if comparable) acts of male violence requires a precise and grounded understanding of the social relations and cultural grammar that give meaning and substance to such acts.

The point I am making here is rather simple and straightforward: no discursive object occupies a simple relation to the reality it purportedly denotes. Rather, representations of facts, objects, and events are profoundly mediated by the fields of power in which they circulate and through which they acquire their precise shape and form. Consequently, contemporary concern for Muslim women is paradoxically linked with and deeply informed by the civilizational discourse through which the encounter between Euro-America and Islam is being framed right now. Feminist contributions to the vilification of Islam do no service either to Muslim women or to the cause of gender justice. Instead they reinscribe the cultural and civilizational divide that has become the bedrock not only of neoconservative politics but also of liberal politics in this tragic moment of our history.

WOMEN, DEMOCRACY, AND FREEDOM

In these last two sections, I want to examine the work that the rhetoric of democracy and freedom has come to perform in the "war on terror," paying particular attention to the secularity of this rhetoric and its constitutive assumptions. As is evident from even the most cursory reading of the media, progressive and conservative strategists agree these days that one of the most compelling strategies for eliminating

Islamic fundamentalism consists of empowering Muslim women by educating them and giving them access to economic resources and political representation. The logic underlying this project is rather simple. In the words of *New York Times* reporter Barbara Crossette (2001): "When women's influence increases . . . it strengthens the moderate center, bolstering economic stability and democratic order." The conventional wisdom seems to be that inasmuch as feminism is "the opposite of fundamentalism" (Pollit 2002: xiv), and fundamentalists are supposed to hate democracy, it follows that empowering women will further the cause of feminism, which in turn will help eliminate Islamic fundamentalism.

Apart from the more complicated fact that a number of Islamist movements—those pejoratively referred to as fundamentalist in the literature I cite here—seek to broaden the scope of political debate in the Muslim world rather than narrow it, I want to question the facile equation made between democracy and women's socioeconomic status: the idea that promoting the latter will automatically lead to the former. This equation is easily put to the test if we look at the conditions under which women lived in Iraq prior to the first U.S. war on Iraq in 1990. Despite the fact that Iraq was not a democracy under Saddam Hussein, Iraqi women enjoyed one of the highest rates of literacy in the third world and were widely represented in various professions including the army and public office. At the height of Iraq's economic boom, Saddam Hussein implemented a series of policies to attract women to the workforce by providing them incentives such as generous maternity leaves, equal pay and benefits, and free higher education (Chew 2005; Bahdi 2002). In this important sense, Iraq was no different than a number of socialist countries (such as Cuba, the former Soviet Union, and Eastern Europe), where the lack of liberal democracy did not translate into complete marginalization of women from the socioeconomic and political life of these countries.

Iraqi women's condition declined after the Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988), but suffered the most serious setback after the first Gulf War (1990–1991) and the subsequent economic sanctions imposed by the U.S. in cooperation with the United Nations and its European allies. Female literacy dropped sharply after the Gulf War, and Iraqi women's access to education, transportation and employment became increasingly difficult. The current U.S. occupation of Iraq is the most recent chapter in 12 years of debilitating sanctions that directly contributed to the most dramatic decline in Iraqi women's living conditions. Needless to say, in the current situation of violence, chaos, and economic stasis, women (along with children, the elderly and the disabled) are the most vulnerable victims of this disorder, and they are not likely to experience even a modicum of social order in the foreseeable future. Not only

has Iraqi women's dramatic loss of "life and liberty" failed to arouse the same furor among most Euro-Americans as have individualized accounts of women's suffering under Islam's tutelage, but a number of political pundits now suggest that perhaps the promotion of electoral democracy in the Middle East is not a good idea after all, since it might bring Islamist political parties to power (as indeed was the case in the 2005 elections held in Palestine and Egypt) (Feldman 2006; Friedman 2006). Apart from the fact that these commentators find Islamist ascendance to political power inimical to American strategic interests, the fate of women under Islamic regimes is often marshaled as the ultimate reason for thwarting Islamist success at the polls. Note here once again the neat equivalence drawn between Euro-American strategic interests and women's well-being, between democracy (narrowly defined in electoral terms) and women's status.

One heart-rending appeal for instituting democracy by legislating women's freedom was made by Barbara Ehrenreich in an op-ed piece written for the *New York Times* in the lead-up to the 2004 American elections. In this piece, Ehrenreich upheld Carmen bin Laden's memoir *Inside the Kingdom* as the manifesto that all Democrats should embrace in their policy toward the Muslim world. As I mentioned earlier, *Inside the Kingdom* is Carmen's account of her luxurious life both in Switzerland, where she was raised and currently resides, and in Saudi Arabia, where she lived as the sole wife of one of the rich scions of the bin Laden family for several years. Much of the book lists the claustrophobic character of her life in Saudi Arabia, one punctuated by extended luxurious vacations in Europe, palatial houses with an army of servants, and lavish parties. Carmen, much like the authors I mentioned earlier, brims with her adulation for the West, its lifestyle, and its "opportunities." Carmen's zeal for a Western lifestyle is only matched by her sneering and derogatory portrayal of Saudi women. For Carmen, they are doomed to a herd mentality by the straitjacket of their cultural traditions: "You never develop as an individual in the Middle East. People may manage to escape their tradition for a short while, but those rules catch up to them" (Bin Laden 2004: 16).

It is this account that inspired Barbara Ehrenreich's plea to the Democratic Party presidential candidate John Kerry to make gender parity a cornerstone of his foreign policy in the Middle East, because the real enemy, she opined, is not terrorism, but an "extremist Islamic insurgency whose appeal lies in its claim to represent the Muslim masses against a bullying superpower." Ehrenreich erroneously but predictably reduces the heterogeneity of Islamic movements to the likes of Osama bin Laden, and in due course, treats the practice of veiling (now so common in large parts of the Muslim world) as nothing but the entrapment of Muslim women in this patriarchal ideology. As a number of

scholars have shown in the last 15 years, *pace* Ehrenreich, the Islamic movement is not only quite diverse, but a number of its constitutive strands have strong support among women, who are the backbone of the welfare work undertaken by this movement (Abdo 2004; Deeb 2006; Mahmood 2005). Far from curtailing women's freedoms, Islamic movements have often been the vehicles for women's participation in the sociopolitical life of their societies. One of the grave costs of Ehrenreich's argument is that it fails to account for the complicated social shifts, challenges, and political transformations Islamic movements have produced that do not fit the simplistic logic of patriarchal subordination and authoritarian politics.

The fact that Carmen bin Laden's model of white elite bourgeois femininity is the symbol of this vision of "democracy" should alert us to its imperialist underpinnings. Callous and unrelenting in the modes of sociability and subjectivities it seeks to remake, this vision ridicules and scorns women whose desires and goals do not fit the telos of a liberal lifestyle. It is precisely because Ehrenreich is so sure that this insurgency is not in the best interests of women that she is led to conclude that it is up to the United States (better led by the Democrats than Republicans) to free these enslaved souls. This missionary zeal to remake "cultures and civilizations" has strong resonances with colonial projects of the nineteenth and early-twentieth century, when European powers, also outraged by what they took to be Islam's degradation of women, undertook cultural and educational reform to civilize the local population. British regulation and policing of practices of widow sacrifice (*sati*) in India and feminine genital cutting in Sudan, symbolic of the colonized cultures' barbaric treatment of its women, seldom benefited those whom they were supposed to save. As Mani has noted, indigenous women were neither the objects nor the subjects of these reforms; rather, they were the ground on which European and national battles were fought for competing visions of empire and modernity (Mani 1998; Boddy 2007; Mahmood 2005, esp. chap.1 and epilogue).

SECULARISM AND EMPIRE

Calls for secularizing and liberalizing Islam so that Muslims may be taught to live a more enlightened existence are issued from a variety of quarters these days, left and right alike. These calls strike a chord with secular feminists (from a variety of political perspectives) who have long been convinced that religion is a source of women's oppression. While critical of neoconservative militaristic belligerence, many liberal feminists support a broad-based strategy of slow *progressive* transformation, one in which, as Katha Pollit (2002) puts it, "organized religion [is made to] wither away or at any rate modulate away from dogma

and authority and reaction toward a kind of vague, kindly, nondenominational spiritual uplift whose politics if it had any, would be liberal" (ix). This seemingly benign vision encodes a secular conception of religiosity in which religion is treated as a private system of beliefs in a set of propositional statements to which an individual gives assent. Secularism, often reduced to its doctrinal principal (the separation of religion and state), operates here as a sociocultural project, authorizing a privatized form of religious subjectivity that owes its allegiance to the sovereign state (rather than to traditional religious authority). Importantly, the autonomous individual is the protagonist animating this secular liberal model of religiosity, a self-choosing subject who might appreciate the spiritual truths religious traditions symbolize, but is enlightened enough to understand that these truths command no epistemological or political force in this world. These aspects of secular culture, now often noted under the rubric of secularity, are propagated not only through the agency of the state but also through a variety of social actors and organizations that might well be critical of various policies and prerogatives of the state.¹⁰

Embedded in this secular conception of religiosity (echoed in Katha Pollit's quote above) are a number of presuppositions about autonomy and freedom that resonate with liberal feminist thought. The most obvious is the powerful trope of the autonomous individual—capable of enacting her own desires free from the force of transcendental will, tradition, or custom—that continues to animate many strains of feminism despite trenchant philosophical and anthropological critiques of such a limited conception of the subject (see Butler 1993; Mahmood 2005: chap. 1). A second assumption central to this secularized conception of religiosity is the understanding that a religion's phenomenal forms—its liturgies, rituals, and scriptures—are inessential to the universal truth it symbolizes. The precise form that scripture and ritualized practices take, in other words, is regarded as inconsequential to the spirituality (immaterial and transcendental) that they represent but are not reducible to.

This secularized conception of ritual behavior makes it difficult, for example, for many secular feminists to entertain the claim made by a large number of Muslim women that the veil is a doctrinal command. Women who contend that the veil is part of a religious duty, a divine edict, or a form of ethical practice are usually judged to be victims of false consciousness, mired in a traditionalism that leads them to mistakenly internalize the opinions of misogynist jurists whose pronouncements they should resist.¹¹ The veil—reduced either to its symbolic significance (a symbol of Muslim identity or women's oppression) or its functional utility (the veil protects women from sexual harassment)—is seldom entertained as an expression of and a means to a Muslim

woman's submission to God's will, despite repeated evidence that for many veiled women this understanding is central (Mahmood 2005; Fernando 2006; Scott 2007). To take such a claim seriously would require stepping out of the simple opposition liberalism constructs between freedom and submission, instead exploring the forms of submission internal to a particular construction of freedom and the system of gender inequality in which such a construction resides. Sadly, this is not the direction in which the Euro-American public debate is headed (evident in the French ban on the veil and the attempts in other countries to follow suit). Instead, contemporary calls for reforming Islam are built upon a narrow vision of a secularized conception of religiosity that mobilizes many of the liberal assumptions about what it means to be human in this world.

The problem of this prescriptive vision of secularized religiosity lies in its singularity and certitude that brooks no argument and makes no adjustments for different ways of living, both religiously and politically. It is the telos of a liberal-democratic Protestant society—whose ethos is condensed in the cosmopolitan sensibilities and pleasures of its enlightened citizenry—that is posited as the Mecca toward which all Muslims should conscientiously head. Apart from the infeasibility and singularity of this vision, what strikes me as imperialistic is the chain of equivalences upon which such a vision rests. It is not simply Islamic militants who are the object of this unrelenting prescription, but all those Muslims who follow what are considered to be nonliberal, orthodox, and conservative interpretations of Islam, key among them the wearing of the veil, the strict adherence to rituals of Islamic observance, the avoidance of the free mixing of the sexes and the adjudication of public and political issues through religious argumentation. Inasmuch as the appellation of fundamentalism has now come to enfold within itself not simply Islamic militants but also those who embrace this range of practices, calls for the liberalization of Islam are aimed at the transformation of these Muslims, making their lifestyles provisional if not extinct through a process of gradual but incessant reform.

As I have shown elsewhere, the prescriptive force of this liberal project is not simply rhetorical. It enjoys the support of the U.S. State Department that recently allocated over \$1.3 billion under an initiative titled "Muslim World Outreach" to transform the hearts and minds of Muslims through a range of theological, cultural, and pedagogical programs. Part of a broader strategy of the White House National Security Council, this initiative is engaged in training Islamic preachers, establishing Islamic schools that propagate liberal interpretations of Islam, reforming public school curricula, and media production (which includes establishing radio and satellite television stations, producing and distributing Islamic talk shows, and generally shaping the content of

public religious debate within the existing media in Muslim countries). What is notable about this broad-based multipronged strategy is that it is not the militants but the ordinary "traditional" Muslims who are the targets of this reform, in that they are seen as woefully lacking in the kind of secular sensibility required of modern subjects.¹² This project bears obvious similarities to the State Department's Cold War strategy with one exception: the current campaign has an overt theological agenda that abrogates the same secular liberal principal—the right to religion and freedom of conscience—that the United States is supposed to be fostering among Muslims through this campaign. There are many ironies in this attempt of the U.S. government to orchestrate Islamic reform in the Muslim world, but one that merits some reflection is how this policy of promoting liberal religiosity in the Middle East sits in tension with the Bush White House's active promotion of a particular form of Evangelical Christianity at home. As I have argued elsewhere, these seemingly opposite tendencies need to be analyzed as part of what constitutes secularism today—particularly the understanding that secularism is not simply an evacuation of religion from politics but its reorchestration.

Furthermore, it is not clear to me that inculcating a liberal religious sensibility among Muslims is necessarily going to decrease militant attacks on the U.S. or other Western European powers. This is not because all Muslims are violent, but because the grievances they hold against the West have more to do with geopolitical inequalities of power and privilege. Even Osama bin Laden was clear in his message at the time of the World Trade Center attacks: he wanted American troops out of Saudi Arabia, a just solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and an end to Euro-American domination of Muslim resources and lands. His ends, if not his means, speak to a wide range of Arabs and Muslims who are currently witnessing one of the most unabashedly imperial projects undertaken in modern history, a project that, as a number of observers have pointed out, has done more to fuel the militant cause rather than eliminate it.

The Muslim World Outreach program seeks to build alliances and networks with what it calls "moderate" Muslim scholars who promote a liberal interpretation of Islam and who largely echo the programmatic vision championed by the U.S. State Department through this initiative. The fact that calls for liberalizing Islam are now increasingly made by a range of prominent Muslim intellectuals—such as Khaled Abul Fadl, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, Abdolkarim Soroush, Hasan Hanafi—is testimony to the hegemony that liberalism commands as a political ideal for many contemporary Muslims, a hegemony that reflects, I would submit, the enormous disparity in power between Euro-American and Muslim countries today. In their reflections, it is Islam that

bears the burden of proving its compatibility with liberal ideals, and the line of question is almost never reversed. They do not ask, for example, what it would mean to take the orthodox practices of Islam, embraced by many in the Muslim world right now, and rethink some of the secular liberal values that are so readily upheld today, such as freedom of choice, autonomy, and indifference to religious forms of belonging. What would such a dialogue look like? How would such a conversation change our world-making projects?

As a number of critics of liberalism have pointed out, it is a characteristic of liberal thought—which, we must remind ourselves, cuts across conservative and radical projects—to assimilate unfamiliar forms of life within its own projection into the future, a future that is defined by the unfolding of the liberal vision itself. All life forms that do not accord with this futurity are to be subsumed within a teleological process of improvement and are destined to become either extinct or provisional. This attitude toward difference seems not only to animate calls for Islamic reformation but is also operative in contemporary strands of feminism—particularly in its certainty that women's sensibilities and attachments, those that seem so paradoxically inimical to what are taken to be women's own interests, *must* be refashioned for their own well-being. It is this arrogant certitude that I want to question here. Does the confidence of our political vision as feminists ever run up against the responsibility that we incur for the destruction of life forms so that "unenlightened" women may be taught to live more freely? Do we fully comprehend the forms of life that we want so passionately to remake so that Muslim women and men may live a more enlightened existence? Can we entertain the possibility that practices like the veil might perform something in the world other than the oppression and/or freedom of women? Have we lost the capacity to be able to hear the voices of Muslim women that do not come packaged in the form of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Azar Nafisi, and Irshad Manji? Would an intimate knowledge of lifeworlds that are distinct, and perhaps even opposed to our cosmopolitan lifestyles, ever lead us to question the certainty with which we prescribe what is good for all of humanity? At a time when feminist and democratic politics run the danger of being reduced to a rhetorical display of the placard of Islam's abuses, these questions offer the slim hope that perhaps a dialogue across political and religious differences—even incommensurable ones—can yield a vision of coexistence that does not require making certain lifeworlds extinct or provisional. It requires us to entertain the possibility, perhaps too much to ask in the current imperial climate, that one does not always know *what* one opposes and that a political vision at times has to admit its own finitude in order to even comprehend what it has sought to oppose.

NOTES

- * This chapter would have been impossible to write without the assiduous research assistance of Noah Salomon, Michael Allan, Stacey May, and Mark McGrath. I am thankful not only for their help in locating the materials but also for keeping me abreast of the enormous popularity this genre of literature enjoys in various public forums. My thanks to Jane Collier, Charles Hirschkind, and Joan Scott for their critical comments, and to Mayanthi Fernando for introducing me to the French examples in this genre. A longer version of this paper appears in Joan Scott (ed.), *Women Studies on the Edge*, Duke University Press, 2007. I would like to thank Duke University Press for permitting the republication of this piece in its current version. My sincere thanks to Ann Braude for her expert editing for this volume.
1. A small sample of this vast scholarship includes Alloula 1986; Ahmed 1992; Lazreg 1994; Mani, 1998; and Spivak 1988.
 2. This is not to deny that there are traditions of feminist thought that have been critical of the imperial impulse internal to liberalism. My own engagement here is in fact enabled by and deeply indebted to this tradition. I use the term "liberal feminism" in this essay to designate those currents within feminism where the connections between a certain analysis of gender inequality and the politics of empire are most dense and pervasive. For a further exposition of this critique of liberal feminism, see my *Politics of Piety* 2005, esp. chap. 1.
 3. On Azar Nafisi, see, for example, Atwood (2003); on Carmen bin Laden, see Ehrenreich 2004. Both Ayan Hirsi Ali and Irshad Manji are regularly invited to women's and gender studies programs across US campuses.
 4. Some of these people include clerical luminaries such as Shariat-Madari, Mahmoud, Taleqani, Abdollah Nouri, and Hossein Ali Montazeri. For an account of the dissent from within, see Abdo and Lyons 2004.
 5. For a comprehensive analysis of the Orientalist character of Nafisi's book, see Keshavarz 2007.
 6. Susan Sontag, for example, offers the following praise for Nafisi: "I was enthralled and moved by Azar Nafisi's account of how she defied, and helped others to defy, radical Islam's war against women. Her memoir contains important and properly complex reflections about the ravages of theocracy, about thoughtfulness, and about the ordeals of freedom—as well as a stirring account of the pleasures and deepening of consciousness that result from an encounter with great literature and with an inspired teacher." See the Random House web site: <http://www.randomhouse.com/acmart/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9780812971064> (accessed September 4, 2006).
 7. <http://www/hrcp-web.org/women.cfm#> (accessed March 9, 2007); and the Amnesty International Report issued in September 1999 at <http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/engASA330181999> (accessed March 9, 2007).
 8. See the Family Violence Prevention Project website at <http://endabuse.org/resources/facts>.

9. The reigning presumption seems to be that the West has individualized and privatized culture so that when and if it is practiced, it is an expression of free choice. Muslims, in contrast, are subjects of their culture as a collectivity, lacking the values of autonomy and freedom that would enable them to choose rationally from their cultural practices. As Wendy Brown points out, culture and religion in this form of reasoning are understood to "perpetuate inequality by formally limiting women's autonomy, while the constraints on choice in a liberal capitalist order . . . are either not cultural or not significant" (Brown 2006: 195).
10. For recent scholarly work on the understanding of secularism not so much as an abandonment of religion but as its reformulation along certain lines, see Asad 2003; Mahmood 2006.
11. Nawal al-Saadawi (2004), a prominent secular Egyptian feminist, expressed this view on observing a sign displayed by French Muslim women protesting the recent ban on the veil that said: "The veil is a doctrine, not a symbol." Saadawi found this slogan to be an expression of the false consciousness of the protesting Muslim women, a sign of their naïve complicity with the capitalist plot to keep the Muslim world from coming to a "true political consciousness." Once again, any concern with religious doctrine cannot but be a ruse for material power in this kind of an argument.
12. For an extensive elaboration of the threats traditional Muslims pose to U.S. strategic interests and the "Western lifestyle," see Benard 2003.

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