

ROUNDTABLE

Representations of Muslim Women after 9/11 and the Enduring Entanglements of “Writing Against”

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In the fall of 2021, I taught a graduate seminar entitled Women and Gender in the Arab World at Georgetown University. It had been two decades since 9/11 and the start of the “War on Terror,” events that most of my students were not old enough to recall, but which still had, in one way or another, profoundly shaped their interest or experience in the region. In planning the course, I received a syllabus that had been used in past years. The first week was an introduction to the course, and it consisted of two essays intended to frame the state of the field of Middle East women’s studies: Lila Abu-Lughod’s “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?” and Mounira Charrad’s “Gender in the Middle East: Islam, State, and Agency.”¹

The first of these two articles was published in 2002. In it, Abu-Lughod discusses the way “experts” on the “culture” of “Muslim women” were sought out in the wake of the 2001 US invasion of Afghanistan in ways that fed into, rather than challenging, the dominant media and policy impulse at the time: to represent Muslim women’s suffering at the hands of Muslim men as a problem of culture and religion “over there,” devoid of political, historical, and even geographic context. The only solution was a singular idea of liberation, one that served the US occupying forces.² The second article, by Charrad, focuses on the state of the field of Middle East women’s studies nearly ten years later, at the end of the first decade of the 21st century. Charrad suggests that the scholarship is driven by two “mandates”: first, to dismantle stereotypes of Muslim women as passive, and second, to challenge monolithic and causal readings of how Islam has shaped and continues to shape the conditions of women in the region. Charrad situates these two mandates squarely on 11 September 2001, arguing that after this date gender came to “demarcate battle lines in geopolitical struggles” and “to occupy a central place in the discourse of international relations with regard to Muslim countries.”³

Both articles share a preoccupation with representations of Muslim women in the “West” and the complex entanglements of media, scholarship, and war that followed September 11. Although this preoccupation is neither surprising nor unwarranted, I want to reflect on the implications of framing an academic course on women and gender in the Arab world in terms of “writing against” dominant and problematic representations. Obviously, my interest goes beyond these texts and this particular course. Rather, since 9/11—and for the very reasons enumerated by Abu-Lughod—students and scholars in the realm of Middle Eastern

¹ Lila Abu-Lughod, “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?” *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (2002): 783–90; Mounira Charrad, “Gender in the Middle East: Islam, State, and Agency,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 37, no. 1 (2011): 417–37.

² Abu Lughod, “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?” 785.

³ Charrad, “Gender in the Middle East,” 417–18.

women and gender studies, particularly those of us who are part of diaspora communities from the region and working in the Anglo-academy, have found ourselves driven by a desire to correct narratives that are so uncritically deployed around us. Whereas much has been gained as far as insight and critique from these efforts, what has been lost or ignored? The classroom is a primary site of our scholarship, and how we teach and frame women and gender as subjects of scholarly inquiry of the Middle East reflects larger trends and dilemmas when it comes to knowledge production over the twenty years since the start of the “War on Terror.”

Genealogies of Middle East Women’s Studies

Introducing a course with the two aforementioned texts underscores Charrad’s own assertion that the field of women and gender studies in the Middle East came to matter, urgently, because of the events of 11 September 2001, and the ensuing “War on Terror.”⁴ For our students, many of whom do not even consciously remember experiencing 9/11, this frames the field in terms of that date and its aftermath. Of course, this is not the whole story. Indeed, both Charrad and Abu-Lughod, in their respective articles, allude to a rich body of scholarship on women and gender within Middle Eastern studies, a field whose roots for both historians and anthropologists stretch back to the late 1960s, and feminist scholarship that centered on women’s lives and contributions out of a desire to correct older Orientalist historians who had largely ignored women. Following this was a growing scholarly concern throughout the 1980s and 1990s with gender, sexuality, and the subaltern as subjects of inquiry.⁵

Scholarly critique of how gendered discourses play into the geopolitical struggles involving the Middle East and Islam predated 2001 and Laura Bush’s now infamous Thanksgiving radio address on Afghanistan.⁶ In *Orientalism*, gender was central to Edward Said’s critique of Orientalist knowledge production as a marker of the boundary between Occident and Orient.⁷ The insights ushered in by Said and the postcolonial turn provided such fertile ground for scholars of gender and cultural production because it highlighted their political work. Concerns with representation heavily weighted research agendas in Middle East women’s studies throughout the 1990s.⁸ By 1998, Julia Clancy-Smith and Frances Gouda described studies of colonial discourse analysis as an “academic cottage industry.”⁹ However, what may have started to feel like stale or well-trodden ground in the late 20th century took on new relevance at the dawn of the 21st as a result of the neocolonial projects engineered by the US in Afghanistan and Iraq.

One need only look at the inaugural issue of *JMEWS* (the *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies*), published in 2005, to see how the field viewed the significance of 9/11. In the editor’s introduction, Marcia Inhorn and Mary Layoun put forth *JMEWS* as a way to synthesize and keep track of the rich but dispersed interdisciplinary scholarship produced by and about

⁴ Ibid., 418.

⁵ For a good overview of this trajectory in anthropology see Sertaç Sehlükoglu, “Revisited: Muslim Women’s agency and feminist anthropology of the Middle East,” *Contemporary Islam* 12, 73–92 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11562-017-0404-8>.

⁶ Lara Bush, “Radio Address by Mrs. Bush,” 17 Nov. 2001, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/11/20011117.html>.

⁷ Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, (New York: Pantheon, 1978). While Said’s work addresses the colonial male gaze and its representation of women, scholars have noted its lack of attention to gender or women as actors in the histories of colonialism, see for example, Sarah Mills, *Discourse of Difference: An Analysis of Women’s Travel Writing and Colonialism* (London: Routledge, 1991), 57–58.

⁸ For a review of this sizable literature in feminist studies, following from Edward Said’s work, see Lila Abu-Lughod, “‘Orientalism’ and Middle East Feminist Studies,” *Feminist Studies* 27, no. 1 (2001): 101–13.

⁹ Julia Clancy-Smith and Frances Gouda, eds., *Domesticating the Empire: Race, Gender, and Family Life in French and Dutch Colonialism* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1998), 10.

Middle Eastern women in the preceding decades. However, they conclude their discussion of the journal's timeliness with this reflection:

Topics such as women's veiling, *purdah*, and honor killings are part and parcel of the essentializing media obsession that has accompanied the events of September 11, the overthrow of the Taliban in Afghanistan, and the U.S.-led war in Iraq. There are far too many media pundits asked to comment on Middle Eastern women's lives without any first-hand knowledge of those lives, including their complexity and their richness. It is therefore imperative that an informed scholarly sensibility be brought to bear on the material being generated about the Middle East, its dominant religion, Islam, and women's lives in the region. A journal such as *JMEWS* can do just that—namely, serve as a corrective and scholarly antidote in an era of profound misinformation.¹⁰

In this way, scholars whose work touched on women and gender in certain geographies, even those whose work did not explicitly take up themes of the “War on Terror,” were caught writing against, around, and in the context of its logics. Their research agendas were part of this multi-scalar war whose legitimacy depended upon the creation of a Muslim “other,” associated with, but crucially not bound to, certain geographies.

In 2004, Saba Mahmood meaningfully pushed back against what she deemed an excessive concern among anthropologists of women, Islam, and gender since 2001—scholars she criticized for getting so caught up in the desire to illustrate Muslim women's agency and write against their passivity that they neglected to note how women made sense of their own political engagement and disciplinary practices.¹¹ Yet, even as she generatively wrote against the impulse to place ethnographic inquiry in the service of liberal values, Mahmood also was rendering her work valuable, in part, for how it fit into a set of concerns about Muslim women that proliferated after 9/11, one that was shaped by representation and the strength of the popular tropes and pervasive imagery around Muslim women largely in the US.

“Postcolonial Orientalism”

In the decades since, it has grown increasingly important to ask how “writing against” can further mire us in the frameworks we are hoping to escape. Writing against US imperium and the violence that it renders justifiable through representations of the “other” is of course urgent and necessary. However, it also can be a flattening exercise, particularly when it comes to people or movements whose situations do not so easily fit into the terms of our critiques. It gives researchers an ideological predisposition to favor convenient narratives and ignore less convenient ones.

Mahmoud Arghavan has addressed this conundrum incisively in his contribution to the edited volume, *Middle East Studies after September 11*.¹² Arghavan critically engages the postcolonial scholars who, driven by their skepticism of how Iranian women's rights were deployed by neoconservatives in the 2000s, overly emphasized the progress Iranian women had made since 1979, and in so doing left no space for women who were vocally agitating against the Iranian government's forced veiling and for their rights. Arghavan deploys Lisa Lowe's concept of “postcolonial Orientalism” to illustrate how intellectuals, in trying to

¹⁰ Marcia C. Inhorn and Mary N. Layoun, “Editor's Introduction,” *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 1, no. 1 (2005): 3.

¹¹ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 38.

¹² Mahmoud Arghavan, “The Dilemma of Postcolonial and/or Orientalist Feminism in Iranian Diasporic Advocacy of Women's Rights in the Homeland,” in Tugrul Keskin, ed., *Middle East Studies after September 11: Neo-Orientalism, American Hegemony, and Academia* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 150–72.

challenge neo-Orientalism and its “other-ing” of the illiberal Muslim subject, created their own reified Other, one who is still serving Western audiences.¹³

Nadje Al-Ali has expressed a similar discomfort with what she labels “the tendency by some scholars and activists, mainly those based outside Iraq, to focus solely on the ongoing impact of the invasion and occupation as well as neo-liberal economics without recognising not simply the complicity but the proactive involvement of various local and regional actors.”¹⁴ Like Arghavan, Al-Ali notes that this dilemma of critique is one that is particularly pronounced for “diaspora” scholars of gender and those of us who are producing work outside of the given context in which our work is situated. As an antidote, she encourages anthropologists to return to the principles of strong, empirically grounded research, to search for nuance in the field among their interlocutors and in conversation with local activist organizers, who might have more immediate concerns or alternative power struggles that, although embedded within the larger geopolitics of the “War on Terror,” have their own logics.¹⁵ She further urges us to think beyond the binary of “‘authentic regional’ versus ‘Western’” when it comes to knowledge production.¹⁶ One way of doing this is to reconsider where we focus when we study representations of Islam or the Middle East, particularly in the context of imperial war-making and global neoliberalism. In this vein, Yousef Baker’s contribution to this roundtable provocatively pushes us to question whether such work even belongs in Middle Eastern studies.¹⁷ Another approach can be found in the ethnographic impulse to de-center religiosity in studies of Muslim women, by focusing on pleasure, ordinariness, or the everyday lives of gendered Muslims.¹⁸

Representing Afghan Women

I want to return to the syllabus for a class on women, gender, and the Arab world that began this discussion. Given this geographical focus, it is not surprising that both the Abu-Lughod and Charrad articles were penned by scholars whose work focuses on majority Arab societies. Yet both scholars, and thus the course as a whole, in responding to the way the “War on Terror” conflated Afghan with Muslim with Arab, and took representations of Afghan women as their starting point. Indeed, since 2001, Afghan women have become the “faceless face” of the neocolonial critique.¹⁹ These (mis)representations have spurred a generation of scholarship in a field of area studies that largely excludes Afghanistan beyond its role as a site of imperial violence.

I do not want to downplay the truly groundbreaking scholarship on Afghanistan of the past twenty years, which engages women and gender within and beyond the intervention.²⁰

¹³ Arghavan, “Dilemma,” 153.

¹⁴ Nadje Al-Ali, “Feminist Dilemmas: How to Talk about Gender-Based Violence in Relation to the Middle East?” *Feminist Review* no. 122 (2019): 18.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁷ Relatedly, Jasbir Puar’s generative work on queer theory and the “War on Terror” was notably written in an American studies program but is necessary reading for the student of gender and representation and racialization of Muslims after 2001; Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

¹⁸ Sertaç Sehlükoglu, “Revisited: Muslim Women’s agency,” 84.

¹⁹ Marya Hannun, “From Kabul to Cairo and Back Again: The Afghan Women’s Movement and Early 20th Century Transregional Transformations,” *Genre et Histoire* 25 (2020): 11.

²⁰ See for example, Jennifer Fluri, “Feminist Nation Building in Afghanistan: An Examination of the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA),” *Feminist Review* 89, no. 1 (2008): 34–54; Judie Bilaud, *Kabul Carnival: Gender Politics in Postwar Afghanistan* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015); Wazmah Osman, *Television and the Afghan Culture Wars* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2020); Sonia Ahsan-Tirmizi, *Pious Peripheries: Runaway Women in Post-Taliban Afghanistan* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2021); Annika Schmeding, “Dissolving Gender Difference: Female Teachers, Male Allies and the Creation of Islamic Sufi Authority in Afghanistan,” *Afghanistan* 4, no. 2 (2021): 142–69; and Mejgan Massoumi, “Radio in Afghanistan: Resistance through Persianate Literary Cultural Production,” *Iranian Studies*, forthcoming.

I also do not intend to gloss over the value of the scholarship produced on the Arab world, taking Afghan women's (mis)representations as its starting point. Rather, I want us to think about how this scholarly industry of knowledge production in "Middle East studies" around women and gender that is so concerned with "writing against" has managed to exist largely without engaging Afghan women.

If nothing else, that Afghan women's representations are so uncritically deployed by these scholars underscores a point, made by Arghavan and others, that the battleground of "representation" is not rooted in reality, even though its stakes are real.²¹ There is a deep disconnect between who we are writing about and who we are writing for, or to reproduce Abu-Lughod's succinct words, published in the spring of 2001, notably before 9/11:

Importantly, we have to remind ourselves that although negative images of women or gender relations in the region are certainly to be deplored, offering positive images or "nondistorted" images will not solve the basic problem posed by Said's analysis of Orientalism. . . . The problem is about the production of knowledge in and for the West. As long as we are writing for the West about "the other," we are implicated in projects that establish Western authority and cultural difference.²²

Not only are we still grappling with this conundrum, but one need only to look at the media and policy conversations surrounding the US withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan in August 2021 and the uncritical and homogenizing language around women's rights that has followed to be convinced of Abu-Lughod's assertion that offering correctives to these narratives is not the hoped-for solution we desire it to be.²³

Conclusions

It is undeniable that the "War on Terror" has and continues to shape popular imaginations and opinions on women and Islam. Yet, writing against the "War on Terror" risks mirroring us in several ways. Not only does it lead to the prioritizing of certain voices and narratives, it also sets scholarly agendas toward a particular set of concerns that may or may not reflect the concerns of our interlocutors and sources. Furthermore, as time marches on, our students will increasingly be removed from 9/11. It is important to present this inflection point for them as one node in a longer history of Orientalist discourse and colonial attitudes toward an imagined Muslim "other" and not as Islamophobia's origin story. Moreover, it is advisable not to present Islamophobia and (mis)representation as the *raison d'être* of our work.

Recognizing these problems, where do we go? In her work, Saba Mahmood modeled how to write with nuance on women's actual lived experiences even when they contradict the ideological imperatives set in the US academy. Arghavan instructs scholars to embrace the heterogeneity and complexity of the field. Al-Ali urges scholars to follow their interlocutors, not just when making sense of material in the process of writing and analyzing, but in setting research agendas and framing questions. In addition to pushing ourselves to engage the ethics of knowledge production amid overlapping and sometimes competing political concerns, I think scholars of Middle East women and gender studies must interrogate anew the mandates of the field. What are the purposes of this work? For whom and why do we produce and share it?

²¹ Arghavan, "Dilemma," 169.

²² Abu-Lughod, "'Orientalism' and Middle East Feminist Studies," 105.

²³ See, for example, Marie-Claire Chappet, "What Will Happen to the Women and Girls of Afghanistan?" *Harper's Bazaar*, 16 August 2021, <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/uk/culture/culture-news/a37317306/womens-rights-afghanistan>; and Charity Wallace, "The Nightmare Resumes for Afghan Women: America Rescued Them 20 Years Ago, How Can We Abandon Them to the Taliban Again?" *Wall Street Journal*, 17 August 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/biden-withdrawal-afghanistan-visa-women-rights-feminism-misogyny-sexism-torture-death-11629233425>.

I will end with a suggestion for more creative destruction within the fields of study. Not just in breaking molds and finding new audiences and forms of accountability for our work, or collaborating across geographies and languages, but also in the way we dispute frameworks. Educators and students alike should think critically about how we draw the boundaries of Middle East studies, and where the US fits in. Here we can take a page from postcolonial feminist historians who complicated Said's binary between metropole and periphery, examining the flows of people and capital between these spaces as well as the impact of colonial regimes on social difference within the metropole.²⁴ Finally, rather than writing against the "War on Terror," might we explore writing beyond its frames? What if we were to break apart the recent "War on Terror" framing of Afghanistan and Iraq and put them back together historically? Before the boundaries of nation-states (and area studies) severed these historically integrated geographic spaces and before the "War on Terror" yoked them back together, what else might link these spaces? And how might we link the field of Afghanistan women's studies to the field of Middle East women's studies? Rather than elide differences, or ignore violence, such exercises might help us embrace heterogeneity of the field as a starting point.

²⁴ For two very disparate examples of this kind of scholarship, see Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995); and Sikata Banerjee, *Muscular Nationalism: Gender, Violence, and Empire in India and Ireland, 1914–2004* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

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