

Editorial

Introduction

Historically, the category of “Muslim woman” has been a malleable construct subject to constant redefinition to suit particular political, cultural, or ideological purposes. Policing this category is done by errant religious groups like the Taliban as well as western secular feminists. Both groups inscribe competing and contradictory frames of reference on Muslim women’s bodies. Located within this dialectical dynamic, the rhetoric of Muslim women’s liberation is all too often caught up in the vast undercurrents of ideological extremism on the one hand, and racism and Islamophobia on the other.

In the dominant academic discourses, the images of subjugated Muslim women persist, despite feminist movement away from essentialism and the increasing academic and political investment in polyvocality and personal narrative. Discourses of “Otherness” in feminist writing quite often begin with liberal notions of “letting women speak.” However, these voices are often muted by the alterity of the oppressed or victim-centered tropes through which they are represented. This type of representational politics implicitly denies that Muslim women possess the political maturity to speak for themselves.

This special issue of *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* (AJISS) is a response to the politics and economies of difference that frame particular representations of Muslim women in ways that differ from constructions of their own selfhood and womanhood. These articles by Muslim women scholars provide a critical counter-narrative to the conventional way of writing about the Muslim woman as the “Other.”

The Politics of Being Written as “Other”

The western feminist gaze has become the dominant lens through which the realities of Muslim women’s lives and the societies in which they live are

interpreted and defined. The politics of representation in transnational feminist discourses have centered on an imbalance of power based on the North/South divide. This reality allows Northern feminist scholars greater access to laying claim to discursive authority over Southern women as “objects” of academic inquiry, or through more paternal and politicized tropes of “rescuing the Other.” In addition, some Muslim feminist scholars from the South often frame their analysis of Islam and gender in western feminist terms, thus replicating, rather than undermining, the colonial discourse on Muslim women.

Producing knowledge on Muslim women has had its roots predominantly within Orientalist discourses. Despite a few more recent exceptions, these negative and essentialized representations have maintained their currency through the persistence of colonial stereotypes as recurring motifs. The meanings that have been inscribed on the Muslim woman’s body as “oppressed” or as a passive victim of patriarchal domination provide limited ways of understanding the complex narratives through which Muslim women actually live their lives as actors and resisters.

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

Writing Back/Writing Ourselves

As an attempt to subvert the prevailing paradigms through which Muslim women’s lives and lived experiences have come to be known, this special issue proceeds from an anti-imperialist framework. We attempt to develop a new epistemological space through which Muslim women become known and defined.

Following previous scholarship that centers Muslim women’s own writing as the authoritative narrative of their experience, the authors contributing to this issue continue to lay the ideological groundwork for developing counter-hegemonic knowledge on Islam and Muslim women. The

articles contribute to the critical dialogues framing the contemporary ideological and political negotiations of identity and representation within which Muslim women are engaged.

The themes explored include the vital and contested role of Muslim women in the Ummah; textual representation and the politics of knowledge production relating to Muslim women; the role of Muslim women in transnational feminist collaboration; and an examination of the notions of “authority,” “multiplicity,” “modernity,” and “tradition” in Arab women’s literary narratives and how they determine and/or relate to questions of identity.

The scholarly voices brought together in this issue speak to the often marginalized realities of women situated at the nexus of religion, race, ethnicity, class, culture, and tradition. They speak unapologetically to the politics and poetics of their lives as actors and subjects, as both spiritual and existential beings articulating for themselves the ontological experiences of being Muslim women. Rather than being marked by a sense of “absolute difference,” these writings move beyond sensationalized “Otherness” to a space in which Muslim women’s discourses and lives, both the ordinary and the extraordinary, can be read as part of a common struggle for voice, representation, and understanding.

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Guest Editors