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U.S. NEWSPAPER REPRESENTATION OF MUSLIM AND ARAB WOMEN POST 9/11

by

NAHED M. ELTANTAWY

Under the Direction of David Cheshier

ABSTRACT

This study examines U.S. newspaper representation of Muslim-Arab women post 9/11 with an aim of better understanding how women are portrayed in relation to religion, society, politics and the economy. Through a discourse analysis, I examined local articles from across the nation, in addition to international articles, that examine various aspects of Muslim-Arab women's lives between 9/11/2001 and 9/11/2005. With the increasing focus on the Muslim world in general, and Muslim women in particular, it is necessary to determine how women are portrayed. Muslim-Arab women have increasingly been on the face covers of magazines and front pages of newspapers since 9/11 and all the events that followed; among the major topics covered were the war in Afghanistan, the U.S.-led Iraqi invasion, as well as the elections in both countries. This project aims to provide a comprehensive examination of the diverse stereotypes used by Western reporters to describe Muslim-Arab women, their appearance, status, roles, obligations, responsibilities and aspirations. The analysis also examines the journalistic practices that contribute to distortion and stereotyping.

INDEX WORDS: Islam, Muslim, Arab, women, media representation, Middle East, U.S., stereotypes, feminism, 9/11, newspapers, journalism

U.S. NEWSPAPER REPRESENTATION OF
MUSLIM AND ARAB WOMEN POST 9/11

by

Nahed M. Eltantawy

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

In the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2007

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2007

U.S. NEWSPAPER REPRESENTATION OF MUSLIM AND ARAB WOMEN POST

9/11

by

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to the memory of my late grandmother, Mama Nemat, who was my inspiration for this study. Her intelligence, resilience, good spirit and compassion have given me the faith and passion to complete my dissertation. I also dedicate this to my grandfather, Baba Labib for his endless prayers and encouragement throughout my life.

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Chapter One: Introduction

A November 13, 2001 opinion piece by *Washington Post* columnist Charles Krauthammer reads: “Let Kabul be taken as soon as possible and then have every earthly news camera show (as has just happened in Mazar-e Sharif) women taking off their burqas, music again being played, girls going back to school, and the Taliban gallows in the soccer stadium being torn down” (Krauthammer, 2001). A *Times of London* Special Report cover, of December 3, 2001, displays a green-eyed Afghan woman, her hair covered in a black scarf; the headline reads, “Lifting the Veil” (Times, 2001). These examples of Western news stories and images are not uncommon today. Americans are now familiar with images of Arab and Muslim women, thanks to their constant reiteration by the U.S. media. The Afghani burqa, worn by women, is now famous, following the many U.S. media reports and images during the war on Afghanistan in 2001. Among the common images circulated by the U.S. media of Iraq’s January 2005 elections was the image of the Iraqi woman wearing a black headscarf, showing off her ink-stained fingers after casting her vote. Then came the Iranian presidential elections in June 2005, where U.S. media coverage included pictures of Iranian women, clad, from head to toe, in black Abayas. Egypt’s September 2005 presidential elections were no different; images of women in various colored headscarves were widespread.

The common theme in all of these examples is the U.S. media’s persistence on using images of the veil or headscarf in its representation of all Arab and Muslim women. In many cases, the story accompanying these images does not even address women. Many of these images portray Arab and Muslim women for the American audience as an Other: different,

sometimes exotically mysterious, sometimes backward and oppressed compared to American women.

This study aims to analyze such images and reports by U.S. newspapers in an attempt to better understand how the U.S. media represents Arab and Muslim women. This study is important given the increased attention the Middle East region is receiving from the media, the government and American audiences, following the events of September 11. Furthermore, Arab Americans are one of the main groups in the U.S. community, yet they do not receive adequate attention in terms of academic studies or media representation. According to the U.S. census bureau, as of 2000, almost 1.2 million Arabs were counted in the U.S., compared to 860,000 in 1990 and 610,000 in 1980. This means that the Arab population in the U.S. has almost doubled over the past two decades (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). Further, according to the Arab American Institute (AAI), the 2000 census did not count Arab Americans who failed to respond to the census forms. If properly counted, this would bring the population total for Arabs living in the U.S. up to 3.5 million people (AAI, 2005). Hence, with this rapid increase of the Arab population in the U.S., more attention needs to be given to this minority group, and more studies are needed to provide a better understanding of Arabs and Muslims and to eliminate existing stereotypes and misunderstandings of the group's culture, values and religion. There are currently many studies on other foreign-born groups such as Latin Americans and Asian Americans, but only a few studies on Arabs in general and Arab Americans in specific. In what follows, I look at coverage that spans both international and domestic reporting on Arab and Muslim women worldwide.

Literature Review

The study of media representations of women is not new. Since the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s, feminists have strived to critique the media's discrimination against women (Meyers, 1999, p. 10). Such earlier studies concluded "not only that women are underrepresented in the media in both content and production, but that 'the women that do appear in media content tend to be young, conventionally pretty, defined in relation to their husband, father, son, boss and other men, and portrayed as passive, indecisive, submissive, dependent, etc.'" (van Zoonen as quoted in Meyers, 1999, p. 10).

Media Representations of Women

One of the first books dealing with this issue is *Hearth and Home: Images of Women in the Mass Media* (1978), edited by G. Tuchman, A.K. Daniels and J. Benet. Tuchman argues that in the late 1970s women were subject to a *symbolic annihilation* where the media ignored, condemned or trivialized women and their issues (1978, p. 8). Tuchman argues that magazines, newspapers and television underrepresented women and mostly portrayed them as sexual objects and within domestic roles (1978).

Another anthology, the 1999 *Mediated Women: Representations in Popular Culture*, edited by Marian Meyers, examines, through a qualitative textual analysis, how television, newspapers and magazines portray women with the aim of understanding the meanings behind these media portrayals (Meyers, 1999, p. 6). *Mediated Women* aims to "provide a current look at the images of women, to examine their mediated representations as they appear at this historical point in time, and to demonstrate how media texts promote particular understandings of women's lives and roles" (p. 5). *Mediated Women* concludes that the term *fractured* is more appropriate

than *symbolic annihilation* in describing media representations of women today, given the many developments occurring over the 20 years since Tuchman et. al. came out with *Hearth and Home*. By *fractured*, Meyers is referring to the media “images and messages inconsistent and contradictory, torn between traditional, misogynic notions about women and their roles on the one hand, and feminist ideals of equality for women on the other” (1999, p. 12). This is because women in the media today “appear both hypersexualized and asexual, passive and ruthlessly aggressive, nurturing and sadistic, independent and dependent, domestic and career-oriented, silent and shrill, conforming and deviant, and stereotypically racist and a departure from formulaic conventions of racial and ethnic representation” (Meyers, 1999, p. 12).

Books and articles dealing with the issue of women and the media have been on the rise; one of the latest works is *Women and Media: A Critical Introduction* by Karen Ross and Carolyn Byerly (2006). This is a cross-cultural examination of women working inside and outside of media organizations. It provides a rich literature of work on women and the media over the past 30 years and also analyzes women’s struggles to promote women’s issues in the media for positive social change. One of the interesting points the authors make is that despite the continued stereotyping of women in the media, the picture is not always gloomy, as positive changes coexist side by side with backlash, driven by feminist campaigns and female and male media professionals with “feminist consciences.” In other words, because of the dialectical nature of media representation of women, “progress inevitably occurs alongside recalcitrance, and backlash is a predictable part of these events” (Ross & Byerly, 2006, p. 18). The book also examines a study of women's media activism in 20 nations, which illustrates that women’s struggles against male-dominated media representation is universal. The authors analyze narratives of over 100 female media activists that were able, through their work, to create a

female public sphere and enforce women's issues on public agendas. "Women's active challenges to marginalization by mainstream media have resulted in specific advancements in numerous industries and nations," including more women hired and promoted in media decision-making positions and more positive representation of females on television and in the news (p. 231). Ross and Byerly conclude that even though progress and constraints coexist, women activists have been able to overcome many drawbacks through the establishments of female media enterprises, where women speak their own language and have control over their portrayal.

Muslim-Arab Women in the News

Scholars have addressed media representations of Arabs and Muslims in general (Akram, 2002; Ali Muscati, 2002; Merskin, 2004; Wilkins & Downing, 2002). Akram argues that the demonization of American Arabs and Muslims started well before the September 11 bombings: "It can be traced to deliberate mythmaking by film and media stereotyping as part of conscious strategy of 'experts' and polemicists on the Middle East, the selling of a foreign policy agenda by US government officials and groups seeking to affect that agenda, and a public susceptible to images identifying the unwelcome 'other' in its midst" (p. 61). Western media caricatures of the Arab man are common; he is "robed and turbaned, sinister and dangerous, engaged mainly in hijacking airplanes and blowing up public buildings" (quoted in Akram, 2002, p. 65). These one-dimensional images of the dangerous Arab terrorist have been widely distributed to the American audience by media and filmmakers over the years.

Jack Shaheen's (2001) *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* reviews nine hundred Hollywood movies and concludes that Arabs and Muslims are rarely portrayed in these movies as ordinary people with families, friends and social interactions. He argues that

stereotyping of Arabs and Muslims by American filmmakers has been so successful that film critics and commentators now barely notice it (p. 63). Shaheen argues that even though there are over three and a half million Arab Americans living in the U.S., Hollywood filmmakers insist on representing only five main Arab “types”: villains, sheikhs, maidens, Egyptians and Palestinians (2001, p. 55). More specifically, Shaheen points out that such movies portray Arab women as weak, silent black-covered creatures or as half-naked belly dancers (p. 56). He adds that Arabs were portrayed in a positive light in only five percent of the 900 movies he studied.

Other research of Arabs and Muslim stereotypes include Sina Ali Muscati’s (2002) analysis of Western media representations during the 1991 Gulf War. Ali Muscati looked at such media representations and racial constructions of Arab/Muslim people as “inferior, threatening, immoral and dehistoricized” (p. 131). The author concludes that despite constant media attention, Arabs and Muslims remain one of the most misrepresented groups, partly because of the Western media’s “insufficient attempts...to convey understanding” of these groups (Ali Muscati, 2002, p. 1143).

Following the September 11 tragedies, Debra Merskin (2004) conducted a textual analysis of President Bush’s series of speeches. She concludes that Bush relied on a series of stereotypical words and images that have been used to describe Arabs and Muslims for over 20 years. These media and popular culture portrayals describe Arabs as “evil, bloodthirsty, [and] animalistic terrorists” (p. 157). Another study by Wilkins and Downing (2002) analyzed the 1998 movie, *The Siege*. The authors argue that mediated representations of Arabs, Arab Americans, Muslims, and Islam privileged an Orientalist ideology.

Previous research, however, has not focused enough attention on media representation of Arab and Muslim women. It is not clear from these studies how Western media deal with Arab

and Muslim women through visual and verbal representation. More specific studies on Arab and Muslim women in particular are limited. Among the studies conducted on media representations of Arab and Muslim women is research by Elli Lester Roushanzamir (2004), who studied U.S. print media's representation of Iranian woman. Using verbal and visual evidence, Roushanzamir conducted a critical discourse analysis of U.S. news stories that range from hard news to entertainment stories between 1995 and 1998. The author argues that the U.S. media successfully drive home the message that Iranian women in particular and Iran in general are traditional and backward and an "enemy of the 'Us'" (p. 24). The media draws a picture for its American audience of Iranian women as the "Other". The Iranian women in these stories are all one woman; one who is veiled, and this "veil covers what it does not hide" (ibid.).

The author's findings suggest that American media use images of the veiled Iranian woman to accompany general news stories although "none focus on women in particular" (Roushanzamir, 2004, p.21). Further, Roushanzamir argues that every story about Iran representing the Iranian woman as "covered, faceless, and black" reiterates the message that "Iranian woman must fall on the subordinate side of the bipolar structure; traditional, fanatic, fatalistic, emotional, oppressed, and impoverished" (p. 24). Verbal representations of Iranian women portray them as either "passively oppressed" or "barely suppress[ing] their sexualized fantasies" (p.11). In sum, Roushanzamir argues that U.S. media representations of Iranian women form an ideological perspective "that has been recovered and refurbished from the rich past of Orientalist discourse" (p. 24).

Dana Cloud (2004) conducted a study on U.S. media images of Afghani women, which were used to justify the 2001/02 war on Afghanistan (p. 286). Cloud, who conducted her study on a series of photographs from the *Time.com* website, argues that, following the September 11

tragedies, U.S. national news, magazines and their websites widely circulated images of Afghani women that endorse Samuel Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations," by creating a binary opposition between the superior West and the inferior and backward Islamic Other. These "terrorist Islamists" are seen as enemies of the superior West, thus justifying a war against this inferior other and winning the American audience's sympathy and support to promoting democracy and respond to the negative treatment of Afghani women conveyed in U.S. media images (p.286, 290).

Cloud argues that mass public support "for the war in Afghanistan on the basis either of anger and fear at terrorists as savages or of concern for the innocents in Afghanistan is rooted in the common sense that is reproduced, in part, by photographs circulated in these mass media" (p. 290). Common images of Afghanistan that were circulated by the US media at that time included photographs that emphasized the discrepancy "between heroic, white, rational U.S. men on the one hand, and scruffy Al Qaeda fighters, represented variously as irrational militants, as savages in the desert, or as hopeless nomads" (p. 291).

Many images of Afghan women focus on the burqa; the traditional cover from head to toe that makes these women invisible to the viewer. Cloud argues that such images, similar to 19th century colonial discourses, offer a surveying paternal gaze, as it is the American, similar to the historical colonizer, who is able to enforce his/her gaze on others and "thus, defines the Afghan woman as the object of U.S. cultural hegemony" (2004, p. 293). Cloud also considered the narrative order of the images, stating that the order of the photos on the *Time.com* website suggest that "Afghan women wandered in chaos or lived, invisible and indistinct, at the mercy and discretion of irrational autocratic men," until the U.S. intervened to save them (p. 294). Cloud concludes that "the idea of the 'white man's burden' is a core element in the belief in a

clash between white, Western societies, and inferior Others requiring policing and rescue” (p. 286).¹

Shahira Fahmy’s (2004) article, “Picturing Afghan Women” examines the portrayal of Afghan women in AP photographs during and after the Taliban era. Fahmy argues that, contrary to US claims that the war on Afghanistan helped liberate Afghan women and they were beginning to remove their burqas, AP photographs in the post Taliban era did not visually portray them as more liberated. “Under the new regime, women were still wearing the all-encompassing garment” (p. 99). Fahmy however, points out that what changed was the visual framing of Afghan women. Her content analysis suggests that that the Western “media drew themselves closer to the subject of their representation [Afghan women],” through visual cues of camera angles, focus as well as social distance (p. 106). She argues that culturally rooted attitudes, such as wearing the burqa, are hard to change, whereas the attitudes of Western media towards Afghan women were easier to change.

After the fall of Taliban, more Afghan women were photographed from a closer angle rather than the profile or from the back, which would suggest that these women are the “Other” (Leeuwen & Jewitt as cited in Fahmy, 2004, p. 102). Moreover, more women were photographed in less subordinate traditional roles after the Taliban era. She shows examples of AP pictures of women shopping at the market, a woman reading a newscast, or women doctors, all this signifying an apparent change in the attitude of the Western media towards these women, though these changes were not total, since in every picture, the women’s hair remains covered.

Ghazi-Walid Falah (2005) conducted a study on the visual representation of Arab/Muslim women in U.S. newspapers within the period of post 9/11 up to the eve of the Iraqi invasion in March 2003. Falah, who was interested in current events on Palestine, Afghanistan

and Iraq, argues that the visual images used in newspapers at that time rarely related to the subject matter in the story, therefore suggesting that these images served another purpose. “I wish to suggest that these images are insinuated into the text, where they serve to project cultural judgments about Islam and Muslim societies and to convey the political viewpoints of the editors,” argues Falah (p. 305). Falah’s study concludes that two dominant and contradicting themes emerge in U.S. newspaper images of Arab/Muslim women: the woman as a passive victim and the woman as an active political agent. He argues that within each theme, there are also numerous subtexts that do not induce the viewer’s empathy or sympathy but rather evoke feelings of “self-righteousness and/or moral revulsion” (p. 305). He cites the example of images on the women of Iraq and Afghanistan, where the dominant theme is women as passive victims and the dominating message here, usually stated in the caption, is that the women’s oppression and suffering is being alleviated by Western liberation. On the other hand, images of Palestinian women, which also represent them as victims, tend to convey the message that their victimization is blamed on their own people (p. 305).

Images that fall under the second theme tend to be “jarring” and defy this stereotype of women as victims, Falah argues. “Yet the subtexts of these images project meanings that reinforce rather than challenge such stereotypes” (p.306). Falah cites images of Palestinian female suicide bombers and Iraqi and Palestinian women participating in political demonstrations as examples. Such images defy the stereotype of victimization by representing women with strong political convictions, yet the captions usually “reinforce the incomprehensibility of Muslim societies” and show how “women (yet again) appear to be brainwashed to support evil regimes” (p.314-315).

This research is relevant to my project even though I am not doing an image study, in part, because the same stereotypes that appear in images could possibly appear in text. Hence, it is important to examine these various portrayals of Muslim and Arab women in visuals to be able to judge if these portrayals change in print news.

Postcolonial Theory, Orientalism & the 'Other'

One theoretical framework that helps us understand how women from the developing world are sometimes unfairly represented is Postcolonial Theory; described by Raka Shome and Radha Hedge (2002) as an interdisciplinary field of inquiry committed to theorizing the problematics of colonization and decolonization. These approaches are positioned within the broader field of cultural studies that has largely influenced communication scholarship. But the focus of this theory is not merely the study of colonialism on chronicling facts about colonialism. It is a critical theory with interventionist and highly political goals, aimed at theorizing colonial conditions and asking *why* those conditions are what they are and how they can be undone or redone (Raka & Hedge, 2002). Postcolonialism is thus more than the mere act of describing facts of colonialism, and the theoretical impulse clearly seeks to advocate for an emancipatory political stance and to offer interventionist theoretical perspectives by which we could examine the violent actions of colonialism.

The genesis of Postcolonial theory is its early interest in the literature produced in countries that were once, or are now, colonies of other countries. It may also deal with literature written in or by citizens of colonizing countries that takes colonies or their peoples as its subject matter (Bill Ashcroft, 2000). The theory became part of the critical repertoire in the 1970s, and many practitioners credit Edward Said's book *Orientalism* (1979) as a foundational work.

“Anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient--and this applies whether the person is an anthropologist, sociologist, historian, or philologist--either in its specific or its general aspects, is an Orientalist, and what he or she says or does is Orientalism. . . .” (p. 2). He argued that a long tradition of false and romanticized images of Asia and the Middle East in Western culture have served as an implicit justification for Europe's and America's colonial and imperial ambitions. Said believes that a society builds up its identity more efficiently by imagining an “Other.” Orientalism helped the West to define itself. So the West became superior culturally and intellectually, while the East or the Orient was imagined and reflected as culturally static and inferior. So, according to Orientalism, Westerners and Orientals are in binary opposition of each other.

An orientalist perspective typically draws a false and negative picture of the Orient and its culture. In some cases, the mere use of the word *Oriental* was enough to provide the reader with a stereotypically sufficient body of information about the Orient. “Orientalism was the distillation of ideas about the Orient - its sensuality, its tendency to despotism, its aberrant mentality, its habits of inaccuracy, its backwardness” (Said, 1979, p.205). As Said put it, representation very often turns into misrepresentation. For instance, Islam has been fundamentally misrepresented in the West as Orientalism overrode the true Orient and negated its truth. As far as Orientalism is concerned, the Orient cannot speak and it needs to be represented. Said quotes Marx’s statement: “They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented” (p. 293). This comment by Marx connects to Gayatri Spivack’s (1988) famous essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” one of the founding essays on postcolonialism. There, she refers to men and women oppressed by colonialism as the subaltern, “whose identity is its difference” and concludes that “there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and

speak itself.” Spivak argues that for the female subaltern, the situation is even worse; she is even more deeply in shadow.

Typically, the proponents of the theory examine the ways in which writers from colonized countries attempt to articulate and even celebrate their cultural identities and reclaim them from the colonizers. They also examine ways in which the literature of the colonial powers is used to justify colonialism through the perpetuation of images of the colonized as inferior. However, attempts to derive a single definition of postcolonial theory have proved controversial, and some writers have strongly critiqued the whole concept. The Western concept of the oriental is based, as Abdul JanMohammed (1985) argues, on seeing the world as divided into mutually excluding opposites: if the West is ordered, rational, masculine, good, then the Orient is chaotic, irrational, feminine, evil. JanMohammed calls this the “manichean allegory,” signifying the desire to “fetishize a nondialectical, fixed opposition between the self and the native” (p. 62). The danger is that simply to reverse this polarity is to be complicit (involved or responsible) in its totalizing and identity-destroying power (where all is reduced to a set of dichotomies such as black versus white, etc.).

Colonized peoples are highly diverse in their nature and in their traditions, and as beings in cultures they are both constructed and changing, so that while they may be 'other' from the colonizers' perspective, they are also different one from another and from their own pasts, and should not be totalized or essentialized -- through such concepts as a black consciousness, Indian soul, aboriginal culture and so forth. This totalization and essentialization can become a form of nostalgia which finds its inspiration more in the thought of the colonizers than of the colonized, where, perversely, only the colonizer achieves a sense of the unity of his culture while others remain mystified (John Frow, 1985).

Women depicted within this Orientalist framework have often been represented as either exotic and mysterious or as oppressed and backward. Kabbani (1986) argues that colonial writing constructs the Orient woman as sensual, occupying harems (the section of the house reserved to women of a Muslim household), baths and other “sexually available” places. Alloula (1986) adds that a common theme in colonial texts was to represent the native women as sexually available, especially in the harem setting.

Hybridity is an important concept in post-colonial theory (Bhaba, 1987; Lye, 1998; & Kraidy, 1999), and refers to the integration (or mingling) of cultural signs and practices from the colonizing and the colonized cultures (Lye, 1998). The assimilation and adaptation of cultural practices, the cross-fertilization of cultures, can be seen as positive, enriching, and dynamic, as well as oppressive. “Hybridity” is also a useful concept for helping to break down the false sense that colonized cultures -- or colonizing cultures for that matter -- are monolithic, or have essential, unchanging features. Homi Bhaba, one of the main writers on cultural hybridity, argues that the English book (understood to be the Bible in this case), with its colonial power and capacity to dictate and spread European cultural heritage, at the same time empowers the colonized subjects. This is because the English book provides these subjects with a form of resistance against colonial oppressors. This notion of hybridity is key to the current project, since media portrayals are the main agents of hybridization, for better or worse.

Postcolonial feminists build on the idea of postcolonialism and extend its reach to encompass writings by colonizers and also current writings by Western feminists on women of the East. The theory was developed by feminists such as Chandra Mohanty (2003) and Gayatri Spivak (1988), whose work has criticized work by Western feminists that falsely represents, generalizes and universalizes the experiences of women from the formerly colonized South.

Postcolonial feminists argue that writings by some Western feminists (Cutrufelli, 1983; Hosken, 1981; Jeffrey, 1979; Lindsay, 1983; and Minces, 1980) depict Third World women as a singular, monolithic, powerless subject. Mohanty further argues that such Western feminist texts represent Third World women as victims of male violence; universal dependents; victims of the colonial process; victims of economic development; victims of the Arab familial systems, and victims of Islam (p. 23).

Postcolonial feminists have closely analyzed colonial texts about women. Sarah Graham-Brown (2003) argues that colonial texts, photographs, and French 19th Century paintings portrayed the oriental women as possessions; playthings of men; passive and still, waiting for the male who is the sole reason for their existence; barred within the walls of the harem. But she points out that, because foreign males were never allowed into the harem, such harem scenes were invariably fictive reconstructions composed in a studio or simply wholesale figments of the imagination.

Graham-Brown states that for male colonizers, the walls and windows of the harem came to be seen as separating the public and the private spheres. But Fatima Mernissi (2003) explains that what Western colonizers viewed as oppressive and secluded, was viewed by women from the East, specifically Moroccan women in this case, as a sight of prestige and source of pride. Keeping a harem was not inexpensive; it is a tradition mostly experienced by wealthy women, as it requires servants to tend to their needs and messengers to deliver their demands.

Muslim Feminists Speak Out

Margot Badran (2004), historian and senior fellow at the Christian-Muslim Center for Understanding at Georgetown University, who specializes in “Islamic Feminism,” defines the

term as women calling for justice for other women under the rulings of Islam. For such feminists, or religious activists, religion is the solution rather than the problem. Islamic feminism is “an idea of awareness preaching that men and women have equal rights based on re-reading the Quran, re-examining the religious texts and telling people to practice it,” says Badran (*The Milli Gazette* online).

Islamic feminism dates back as early as 1908, when Fatima Rashid, the wife of Mihamed Farid Wajdi, the owner of a nationalist newspaper named *al-Dustur*, or the Constitution, formed the Refinement of the Woman Organization. The organization, which was built on principles of modesty, morality and the notion that Islamic law is advantageous to women, invited women to follow Islam and adopt the veil (El-Guindi, 2005, p.71). Another charismatic Muslim female and one of the pioneers of Muslim Egyptian feminists was Zaynab al-Ghazali, a strong-willed, independent-thinking Muslim intellectual who divorced her first husband for interfering in her Islamic activities. Al-Ghazali rejected the secular, Western form of feminism that was dominant in Egypt at the time, and instead founded the Muslim Women’s Association, an organization that was active from 1936 to 1964. Her “public activism and mastery of and leadership in Islamic issues set her apart, and qualified her to lead women within the Islamic fold” (El-Guindi, 2005, p.70). This feminism that stresses on Islamic principles is believed to be more relevant to understanding Muslim women’s activism. “Approaching Muslim women’s rights through liberal feminist agendas cannot be effective because these agendas are based on the Western experience and derive from Western values, hence they are irrelevant to most issues of concern to Muslim women” (p. 69).

The Muslim feminism that emerged in the 1970’s, however, was different because it was a populist movement that started within the universities and then spread throughout Egypt’s

urban centers. “It was a grass-root, voluntary youth movement, possibly begun, by women... [who] mixed backgrounds, lifestyles and social boundaries” (El-Guindi, 2005, p.71). The movement was very powerful as it gave birth to a grassroots Muslim feminism that sought to liberate women according to Islamic principles. El-Guindi argues that both secular and Muslim feminism are similar in that they both aim to liberate women. But, whereas secular Egyptian feminists sought to emancipate women from exclusion by taking off the veil, Muslim feminists sought to liberate women from “imposed, imported identities, consumerist behaviors, and an increasingly materialist culture,” through the voluntary adoption of the veil (El-Guindi, 2005, p.71).²

American Muslim feminist, Amina Wadud (2002), who converted to Islam during the 1970’s second wave feminist movement, explains how Muslim feminists are not all in agreement with each other. On the far left, there are those whom Wadud terms ‘secular feminists’-these are Muslim women yet their policies are more informed by post-colonialism and Marxism than by Islam (*New Internationalist* online). This group of Muslim feminists understood women’s equality through Western terms; similar to many Western feminists for example, they view the veil as oppressive and backward. On the right side, there are Muslim feminists, who “spearheaded a reactionary, neo-conservative approach” (New Internationalist online). This group called for an ideal Muslim state, similar to the one ruled by Prophet Muhammad and his companions and followers in Medina. They called for the adoption of shari’a as the main state law. Muslim feminists that appeared in the 1990s lie somewhere in the middle between the two groups of Muslim feminists, argues Wadud.

The Real Dilemma for Muslim Women

Feminists view the real problem with Muslim women in many other factors other than religion. Tyseer Abounasr (no date), for example, cites misinterpretations of Islamic teachings as a main cause for the deteriorating status of Muslim women in various countries. She states:

One can't help but wonder, if Islam is so good for women, how come what we see in countries with Muslim majorities is utterly different? If it makes things any easier to understand, without justifying them, the same applies to all other religions. I am sure Jesus would be appalled to see how his teachings have been twisted around for ages to the extent of promoting slavery or tolerating exploitation through turning the other cheek (Islamfortoday.com).

Moreover, Abounasr argues that many Muslims have also “done a super job of twisting” Islamic teachings to fit their needs of gaining power and influence in society by either generalizing specific Islamic rules or limiting general rules. This combined with the blurring of cultural practices with religious teachings, produces many times circumstances and conditions that are far from the original sayings of Islam. “On top of that you have a media that is either too ignorant or too hostile, then the end product that reaches the average unbiased non-Muslim definitely has nothing to do with the real teachings of Islam,” says Abounasr (Islamfortoday.com).

Afaf Lutfi Al-Sayyid Marsot (1996) argues that women's status is not so much determined by Islam as it is by social practices. Basing her argument on a historical survey of women's position in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, the scholar examines the difference between the ideal and practice in Muslim societies; she argues that women's position is largely an outcome of the political structure as well as economic power. For instance, although Islam

clearly states that women can inherit money or property and that a bride legally owns her dowry, Marsot says in practice, some societies cut down a woman's inheritance share, and many families retain their daughter's dowry. In other cases, the husband unjustly controls the wife's wealth, Marsot adds. To demonstrate how political, economic and social factors determine women's status, Marsot cites the example of 18th century Egypt, when the government was decentralized, and the Mamluks, engaged in power struggles, left their property to their wives, fearing death or confiscation. This inheritance gave women substantial power in the Egyptian society; and with the support of the religious ulama, who were very powerful at the time, women had strong legal rights. The 19th century on the other hand, saw deterioration in the status of Egyptian women, as the government was centralized, and Mohamed Ali increasingly controlled the state, curbed the ulama's power and slowly marginalized women. Marsot, therefore, displays how religion was not historically a main force in determining women's status in the Muslim world, as the practice of Islam did not always match the true teachings of the faith.

Mohja Kahf (2005) on the other hand, argues that women's status can also be an outcome of some local practices, such as honor killings, which work against women; while class, status or poverty can have great impact on a woman's range of choices. Kahf further suggests that women, like men, are influenced by political conditions and rights in their country. "For example, what's the point in saying, 'women don't vote in Saudi Arabia'-when men don't either?" (p. 181). Kahf admits that sexism is practiced by some Muslims in various countries; examples include poor economic and health resources for many Muslim women in the developing world; "obscenely perverted rape laws in Pakistan;" sex trade in certain Southeast Asian countries; Palestinian women's double suffering from brutal foreign occupation and homegrown patriarchy, as well as strict marital laws in some Gulf countries that make it difficult

for women to marry foreigners, thus giving many older Gulf women no options for their single state (p. 182). But, Kahf also points out that these sexist problems are no different than in any other culture; she cites examples of date rape and weak laws against domestic violence here in the U.S.. The scholar says that people in the West are just used to their local problems and seem to think they are more workable:

We think we can fix our own sexism with homegrown ingenuity, but we often assume that Muslim women's problems must be solved for them from abroad, all their veils replaced with blue jeans for them to be truly liberated, all different marriage practices brought into conformity with our own (p. 183).

Islamic vs. Western Feminism

Muslim feminists challenge this idea of a universality of womanhood, or “global sisterhood” assumed by a certain strand of feminism (El-Guindi, 2005, p. 53). Those that continue to adopt this “universality claim” tend to overlook “the obvious and significant fact that feminism itself is grounded in culture and that feminists from any society or any particular cultural tradition hold and internalize premises and assumptions stemming out of their culture that shape their orientation to feminist issues” (p.53). Azza Basarudin (2002) argues that Western feminism has fallen short in comprehending and conceptualizing the diversity of women around the globe. She argues that Eastern women's struggles and liberations cannot be approached through Western feminist agendas because these were cultivated in a different environment based on Western history, needs, experiences, and values that are not necessarily similar to those of Eastern women. Basarudin argues that Western feminists should start theorizing about women's struggles instead of assuming that women around the world experience the same kind

of oppression and patriarchal domination. Basarudin further explains that new approaches acknowledging individualities and particularities of each woman and feminist movement need to be devised and it is not acceptable for Northern feminists to simply aspire to help oppressed Southern women; it would be more feasible if Western feminists become more understanding and respectful of cultural differences, in order to enable a dialogue between the two sides.

Expanding on this diversity concern, Mohja Kahf (2005) asserts that, even within Muslim women, there lays a lot of differences and contradictions to the extent that she believes there is no such creature as the “Muslim woman.” Kahf says:

There are Afghani Muslim women from impoverished refugee camps, aristocratic Iranian Muslim women Shakespearean scholars, American Muslim women soccer moms, Klingon Muslim women aboard the Starship Enterprise, and so on. I myself am a Klingon (p. 182).

Yet Hamid (2006) contends that Western feminists’ bias towards Muslim women is not a result of willful malice. “In fact, the opposite is true. They often come with good intentions, but their knowledge of the Muslim world is often limited,” argues Hamid (p. 82).

In addition, Ezzat (2002) talks about movements within Islamic feminism, which, in recent years, she argues witnessed a qualitative change that pushed Muslim feminists’ demands closer to the international feminists’ agenda. Even so, Ezzat clarifies that Muslim feminists do not criticize Islam, but rather the patriarchal interpretations of the Quran. She argues that unlike Western feminists, Muslim feminists do not openly discuss certain issues that do not fit the culture of Muslim and Arab societies; these issues include the crisis of family values as well as demands of lesbianism. Among the issues forcefully pushed by Muslim feminists are problems concerning personal status law, as was the case in Egypt, Morocco and Lebanon. Feminists in

these countries, mainly lead by professional lawyers, led campaigns to enforce changes in marriage contracts to guarantee equal rights for the wife and husband.

In sum, Muslim feminists argue that there is no universality in feminism and that Western feminists need to engage more in dialogue with their Muslim counterparts to understand that they share a lot of commonalities yet are not identical on all fronts. Merali (2002) summarizes this notion when she says:

Whether we are Western, Muslim, both or neither, we must wake up to the possibility that what we see as problematic for women is much the same whoever and wherever we are. Plastered over billboards, or banished from view, women are subjugated by patriarchy. Demeaning Islam excludes voices of Islamic women and that liberates no one (Guardian online).

Muslim Feminists Discuss the Veil

Many feminists in Islam criticize Western stereotypes of their religion, Muslim women and the Islamic veil. Hamid (2006) argues that the hijab is one of the most problematic issues for Western feminists. “The hijab somehow manages to evoke a surprising amount of indignation and vitriol” (p. 82). Hamid cites the example of France, where almost all French feminist groups endorsed President Jacques Chirac’s 2004 ban on the headscarf.

In addition, Muslim feminists assert that, contrary to Western claims that the hijab is oppressive, Islam and the veil empower and liberate Muslim women (Ahmed, 1992; El-Guindi, 2005, & Merali, 2006). They question some Western feminists’ ridicule of their liberation claims. Merali (2006) cites the example of Western feminists like Harding (1987) and Toynbee (2001), who seem to argue that when Muslim women wear the veil in England or the U.S. and

claim it is liberating, they are merely practicing their right to express their ideology in a liberal society but they are still oppressed (p. 177-78). “The veil, burqa, chador, and headscarf are blurred into one symbolic entity; all Muslim women-their motivations, their beliefs and their aspirations-are generalized, despised, or simply denied legitimacy,” Merali argues, adding that academic studies decree the Muslim woman as “de facto victim” (p. 176). Merali argues that the Muslim woman is always problematized in the West. “We come to attention because of our (perceived) negativity,” argues Merali “and become the subjects of discussion only when our mistreatment brings us to the notice of critical circles” (p. 174).

Meyda Yegenogolu (2003) argues that the veil has long been an issue in colonial and more recent Western texts. In Algeria, French colonizers saw the veil as a sign of resistance, an actual obstacle to the colonial impulse to control the visual landscape. Therefore, conquering Algerian women was the key to conquering Algeria. Yegenogolu further explains that the oriental woman was turned into an enigma because of her veil, which protected her from the Western gaze. Thus her veil was considered a sort of mask which is thought to hide a mystery. Troubled by this mask, the orientalist is threatened and seduced at the same time. Yegenogolu states that European orientalist offer a variety of explanations for their fascination with the veil, including their aim to liberate, civilize, modernize the backward oriental woman and make her a “speaking subject.”

The veil, worn by Muslim women around the world comes in many variations and continues to change in accordance with fashions throughout the years. Yet, Hoodfar (2003) asserts that in Western literature, “veiling is often presented as a uniform and static practice going back over 1,000 years” (p. 11). Afkhami (1995) explains that Arabs adopted the custom of veiling from previous civilizations, where elite members of society used face covers or veiling as

a sign of high social status and prestige. The veil itself is worn for a number of reasons: some women wear it to identify with their religion. Others might wear it as a form of beauty (Chatty, 1996 & Wikan, 1982), whereas some women wear it to hide their identity (Fernea, 1965).

Veiling today usually consists of a loose-fitting outfit that could be a dress, blouse and skirt or pants along with a headscarf that can vary in its colors and wrapping style. “Nonetheless, the imaginary veil that comes to the minds of most Westerners is an awkward black cloak that covers the whole body, including the face, and which is designed to prevent women’s mobility” (Dickey, 1994 as quoted in Hoodfar, 2003, p. 11).

El-Guindi (2005), argues that in the 1970s contemporary veiling spread all over the Arab and Muslim world.³ In Egypt, which is the main focus of El-Guindi’s discussion on the spread of the veil, the veil movement was led by young contemporary college activists. The government initially felt threatened by Islamic militancy as veiling continued to spread throughout the country. In fact, in 1993, the Egyptian Minister of Education attempted to combat the spread of veiling and Islamic activism by imposing restrictions on wearing the veil and by revising the curriculum (p. 56). Upon being heavily criticized, the minister lifted the ban on hijab in schools. Despite the continued controversy on state interference focusing on the veil, today veiled women interact normally in society and engage actively in public. “The Islamic zaiy (dress) goes almost unnoticed in Cairo by the local population” (p.56). Hence, women from the south, unlike the too-often caricatured feminist representation, are not solely confined to the private or family sphere.

Muslim feminists thus summarize the development of veiling as a movement and also clarify what the hijab means to many women. McDonough (2003), who discusses veiling by Muslim women in Canada adds to this debate by explaining, that for many women that the author interviewed, the decision to wear the veil has been empowering. “This is a message that

the wider Canadian society needs to hear, namely, that for some women the hijab serves to increase a woman's sense of her own dignity" (p. 106). But, McDonough also asserts that for some Muslim women, the opposite has been true; many Muslim women have felt more empowered by actually giving up the veil "Both situations exist; both are valid for the individual," argues McDonough. Hence, it is necessary to understand that, even within the Muslim community, opinions on the veil are diverse and often contradicting. Yet, what is important, as McDonough suggests, is to understand that when women voice different opinions on veiling, this indicates that "each one of them is clearly thinking, and thinking for herself" (p. 106). Listening to the Muslim women is therefore the best indicator of what hijab means to them or how to influences their lives.

The Impact of News

In any country, the media to a large extent shapes the conception the audience has of faraway locales. The media's job for the audience is to inform them of events worldwide. When the industry succeeds, its accounts "are believed to be factual, accurate and impartial, which contributes to the acceptance of their reports as authoritative" (Kamhawi, 2002, 1). The audience does not however, have any control over what the media chooses to report and what it decides to omit. The question of what the media decides to reveal and decides to hide depends on various factors.

Western nations like the U.S. are prototypes of highly deregulated commercial broadcasting (Bennett, 2000, p. 202). The U.S., being the economic leader in this regards, contains the world's largest multinational communication corporations such as Disney, GE, AOL Time Warner and AT&T. "At least for the next decade and perhaps beyond, global offshore

growth for these U.S.-based companies will exceed any domestic corporate growth” (McPhail, 2002, p. 67). U.S. movies, television shows and entertainment parks and products influence culture across the globe (ibid.). This dominance has created a great deal of discussion of “Americanization,” or the export of American media formats and cultural products that replace public broadcasting systems and programming (Bennett, 2000, p. 202).

The U.S. media dominates worldwide; it commands the flow and coverage of international news (Chang, 2000, p. 517). In line with World Systems Theory and its account of how core nations like the U.S. dominate the periphery, the U.S. seems to hold a larger share of news than any other country (ibid.). This position as world leader in news creation and coverage allows the U.S. to set the global agenda for international news, deciding what stories should be covered. It also gives American journalists a wide range of freedom to portray the other side, or the periphery and semi-periphery, in any way it pleases.

Research Significance

The research on the Muslim-Arab woman has illustrated the existing media stereotypes towards these women. Whether they are presented visually, such as Cloud (2004) and Fahmy’s (2004) studies on the war on Afghanistan and Afghan women, or verbally, such as Roushanzamir’s (2004) study on the portrayal of Iranian women, it is clear that Arab and Muslim women are more often than not portrayed as the backward, helpless “Other” in need rescuing of rescue by the liberated white superior.

But this review of the existing literature on Arab/Muslim women reveals that there is a need to produce more comprehensive and all-inclusive studies on Arab and Muslim women worldwide. This is because the number of studies on the portrayal of Arab and Muslim women is

limited and because the available work, while strongly connected to the image/ideology nexus, has not yet sought to fully account for the way gendered images of Arab/Muslim women connect to the social production of the news. This is to say, the ideologically inflected way that daily reporting practices and protocols both subvert and more often reproduce stereotypes.

Furthermore, while there is a rich literature on the historical representation of Arab women (Alloula, 1986; Kabbani, 1986; Mernissi, 2003; Meyda, 2003; Said, 1979; Spivak, 1995; Steet, 2001; Winfred, 2003), these studies focus on Orientalism and Arab women within the harem setting. There are limited studies however, on how contemporary Arab and Muslim women are represented. Those that do exist (Cloud, 2004; Fahmy, 2004, and Roushanzamir, 2004) have focused on short-term periods or specific events compared to the current study, which is a more comprehensive 5-year period account of contemporary Arab and Muslim women's representation. Moreover, none of the existing studies have examined in detail representations of the Arab-Muslim woman with regards to religion, society, politics and the economy.

Furthermore, while this study focuses on representation of these women in print news stories, most previous studies have focused on the visual representation of Arab women. In addition, the previous studies have focused on women from specific countries, where the current study will examine the verbal representation of Arab and Muslim women, regardless of their country.

Another feature of previous studies is that most have focused on specific media outlets such as the *New York Times*, *Newsweek* or *AP* wire. These studies seem to be incomplete in the sense that they do not provide a comprehensive analysis of how Arab and Muslim women are portrayed in various media outlets, from various areas around the world and by focusing mostly on visual representation.

By contrast, the following analysis aims to move the existing literature forward by providing a more all-encompassing examination of media representation of Arab and Muslim women, through an analysis of articles from various newspapers and magazines that deal with Arab and Muslim women worldwide. Furthermore, the time period chosen for the current study, which starts immediately post 9/11 and continues through Sept. 11, 2005, provides a temporally more comprehensive account. Previous studies have been very short-term, examining a specific event, such as the war on Iraq, or before and after the fall of Taliban, whereas the current study is more long-term and will therefore provide a clearer picture of possible changes in the representation of Arab and Muslim women over the years.

Even though some of the previous work might appear similar in its investigations to the current study, such studies have taken a different approach to what I am about to do in this project. Roushanzamir's (2004) discourse analysis of visuals and print stories, for example, focuses solely on Iranian women, whereas this study focuses on Muslim and Arab women worldwide. This study also covers a different period than Roushanzamir's and also varies because of my intent of categorizing the representation of women under the general divisions of religion, society, politics and the economy. Furthermore, none of the previous studies attempted an in-depth examination of the journalistic practices that produce stereotypes, which is the intent of my study.

Social Construction of the News

Given that this is an essential component of the study, it is important to examine some of the social as well as journalistic factors that impact the news production process as these themes

will be revisited in subsequent chapters. These include conventional wisdom, primary and secondary socialization, parachute journalism as well as gate keeping and shaping.

Conventional Wisdom

A possible explanation for persisting distortion in the news is “conventional wisdom.” John Kenneth Galbraith (1958), who coined the term conventional wisdom, argues that “we associate truth with convenience-with what most closely accords with self-interest and personal well-being or promises best to avoid awkward effort or unwelcome dislocation of life” (p.7). These are ideas that are familiar and are accepted as truths by an audience for their stability and predictability. Hence, all too often, it is more convenient to accept these conventional ideas rather than challenge them. After all, if everyone around us accepts ideas of Islam as the oppressor of women, the creator of female genital mutilation and the promoter of polygamy, why should a reporter think otherwise or exert much effort to dispute such claims or clarify them to readers? Schudson (1993) argues that the press “more often follows than leads and reinforces conventional wisdom more often than it challenges it” (p. 41).

Conventional wisdom becomes a logical reason for the persistence of stereotypical reporting not just because these stereotypes are believed to be truths by many reporters, but also because, as Lippman (1922) argues, it is sometimes easier and more economical to rely on ready-made concepts and interpretations. Lippman asserts that it is exhausting and time-consuming to try to “see all things freshly and in detail, rather than as types and generalities...” (p.33). Thus, Scheufele (1999) states that certain frames become more salient than others because it is easier to access and retrieve them from our memories. “As a result, journalists’ content frames arise from the mental and societal frames that are vivid and readily available to journalists. Media content

frames then increase the salience of these specific frames for the audience who, in turn, may alter their mental frames and indirectly shape societal frames in an ongoing cycle” (Scheufele as cited in Miller, 2004, p. 247).

Primary & Secondary Socialization

Just as any other human being, a journalist is shaped by an ideological and cultural framework that conditions his/her reporting on the ‘other.’ This in turn makes communication with or about strangers rather difficult, “because we are guided by other presuppositions about the nature of truth and reality” (van Ginneken, 1998, p. 69).⁴ The notion of the ‘glass ceiling’ is important here as the dominating journalists worldwide are white males, who speak fluent English or another dominant Western language. This explains why till this day minority reporting in America is skewed (p.70-72).

Aside from belonging to a culture, journalists are also part of a profession and are guided by certain ways of doing and seeing things around them. This professionalism, according to Schudson (2003), is a problem because it “produces its own characteristic angle of vision, and it can be argued that it is one that helps reinforce a view of politics as a spectator sport” (p. 55).

McNair (1998) adds that a journalist is a “professional communicator whose work is structured and shaped by a variety of practice, conventions and ethical norms as well as by the constraints and limitations imposed by the fact that journalism is a complex production process requiring sophisticated organization” (p. 61). He argues that journalistic output is impacted by both bureaucratic and formal determinants. On the *bureaucratic side*, McNair explains that people often forget that journalists are employees and are subordinate to management and are

often given orders on what to report on and how rather than making their own reporting decisions.

Journalistic form also impact journalists. Television, radio and print work under different modes of communication and use different aspects of language. Television, for example, highlights the visual and limited wording accompanies the visuals with the aim of highlighting the images. Radio on the other hand, stresses on the elaborate verbal discussions as well as music to compensate for lack of visuals, whereas in print journalism, the reporter “may employ all the literary tricks of reportage and fiction...” (p.64). In addition, the *journalistic profession*, like any other profession, requires its members to follow strict codes of conduct to guarantee “their integrity, their trustworthiness and thus their status as reporters of ‘truth’” (p.64).

Objectivity is the oldest yet the key condition for liberal journalism today, yet it is also an essential factor that can impact the news production process. Its presence relays validity and trust. It is the main thing reporters strive to achieve in their story and it entails: separating fact from opinion, reporting both sides to a story as well as seeking credible sources to validate and support journalistic statements. McNair, however, argues that although objectivity is the “mantra chanted by journalists” to signify their status as credible and trustworthy truth tellers, it is also the “first target selected by those who wish to criticize or demystify that status” (p. 71). Many would argue that there is no single absolute truth in journalism but there are multiple accounts of the truth and the journalist selects from these choices to construct news stories. This is because truth is also dependant on who we are and how we perceive things around us. For instance, a man might see the truth differently from a woman, or a British person might hold different views than an Arab. So objectivity is therefore applied through selection, by choosing one form of truth over others, which McNair states is therefore *relative* rather than absolute truth. Looking at

truth and objectivity from this angle means there are three angles to the real: the world as it is with or without human observation; the world as it is viewed by human observers and the world as reported by human observers. McNair argues that “getting from category 1 to category 3 is a complex social process which changes ‘the real’ as it goes, in the same way that measuring the temperature of a liquid changes that temperature” (p. 73).

McNair also talks about *objectivity as structured bias*, where he argues that even though objectivity aims to win audience trust, it can lead to political and ideological bias in favor of the powerful. A reporter’s heavy reliance on credible sources for instance can produce stories favorable to those in power. Judith Lichtenberg (1991) argues that official, government sources and other decision-making sources relied on “often have the skills and the resources to use the media to their advantage” (p.227). Unlike reporters, these sources do not always strive to attain truth. Combining the organizational demand for source credibility with time restrictions leads reporters to resort to the same official sources over and over therefore excluding voices that might add relevant meaning to a story (McNair, 1998, p.76). Hence, objectivity more than often serves the interests of elite sources that benefit from journalistic coverage.

News values & journalistic style can also lead to distortion in some instances. Journalists learn how to decide what makes news through professional training, peer pressure as well as newsroom discipline. Journalists apply a set of news values to world events that allow them to what is newsworthy and what is not. Critics agree that journalists indeed need a system that helps them “sift through reality” but they do not necessarily see prevailing news values as that vehicle because of their distortion of reality and obsession with celebrities and wealth (Boyd, 1988 as cited in McNair, 1998, p.79). Additional constraints are imposed on reporters by what McNair terms the *grammar of news*. The news form, which tends to favor “narratives of event over

process, effect over cause and conflict over consensus” could distort reality as reporters gloss over complex histories and complexities in an effort to report the story within the allotted space or time (p. 80).

Parachute Journalism

With the escalation of prices worldwide, stationing print and broadcast reporters in foreign countries is not a favorable option for many news organizations. These media outlets increasingly rely on what is known as ‘parachute journalism,’ which is the act of sending out journalists to cover crises situations overseas. The problem with this is that journalists are usually unfamiliar with the culture, the people and also the best sources in this area, which are all factors that affect the authenticity of their stories. Author Don Oberdorfer said during a 2001 Media program at Newseum that inexperienced journalists sent to cover critical events give the “public a much thinner sense of what this is all about...because you (the journalist) don’t know it yourself” (as quoted by Savoor, 2001).

Because parachute journalists are unfamiliar with the foreign culture they usually rely on selective perception to fill in the blanks. According to Bartlett (1932) members of a different culture retell the stories of the other culture adjusting it to their own culturally-determined and predictable ways. For example, Rice (1980) found that when Americans retold stories about the Eskimo culture they tended to Americanize the story. Rice therefore argues that “cultural schemata are...responsible for a sort of ‘selective perception’ of the world which is common to members of a given culture and which has the effect of imparting a characteristic interpretation to the phenomena under consideration” (Rice, 1980, pp.161-162). This means that just as Americans tend to “mend the holes” in Eskimo stories, journalists have the same tendency in

their coverage of events about people from other cultures. “In other words, journalists, as members of a particular culture, are bound by the ‘culture grammar’ that defines rules of narrative construction, a realization that changes the notion of an ‘objective’ transposing of reality” (quoted in Bird & Dardenne, 1997, p.341). This argument ties in with Lippman’s (1922) theory on stereotyping. Lippman quotes John Dewey as saying that when a stranger visits a foreign place, all strangers of another race look alike. “Only gross differences of size or color are perceived by an outsider in a flock of sheep, each of which is perfectly individualized to the shepherd” (in Lippman, 1922, p. 30). This is why it is hard to produce an objective, stereotype-free story, because reporters unconsciously apply their cultural norms and prejudices to the scene and because people from other cultures might look very different sometimes, reporters do not see the differences among them, because they all seem as one to the reporter, and it is fair to say that the reporter goes about the story with the idea of us against them or the “other”.

The act of acquisition of meaning or apprehension of new things is done through “definiteness and distinction” and “consistency or stability of meaning into what is otherwise vague and wavering,” according to Dewey (in Lippman, 1922, p.30). The problem is we usually define first and then see and amid the confusion of the outer world, we tend to rely on definitions already laid out by our culture. Hence, “we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture” (p. 30). These cultural stereotypes are shaped by the moral codes, social and political beliefs salient in our culture (p. 31).

On top of all that, given that journalists more than often operate under time limitations, lack of familiarity with the new culture and its people, this all plays a role in reproducing the same stereotypes over and over. “In the pressure-cooker climate to get in fast, get the story first - - and, by the way, explain What It All Means (by 10 o'clock, please) -- the assumptions, short-

cuts, and stereotyping can be rampant,” argues Poynter Ethics Fellow Marjie Lundstrom (2001). “Even without pressing deadlines, some journalists' biases about certain regions simply go unchecked” (*Poynter* online).

In sum, these scholars seem to be saying that journalists tend to unconsciously distort facts about other cultures as they rely on their own cultural norms and codes to comprehend these events and as they are pressured to get the story out fast to meet deadlines. Through selective perception and through the reliance on their own cultural norms to make sense of events that seem foreign to them, journalists produce stories that are missing essential characteristics needed for an accurate understanding or comprehension of the phenomenon being addressed.

Gatekeeping & Shaping

Another factor that leads to the distortion of news stories is the long process of story selection and editing. The selection of story, editing, reviewing the words, images, etc., can inevitably lead to an incomplete, inaccurate or a biased story. Van Ginneken (1998) contrasts this procedure to the classic classroom game where one student whispers an ambiguous word or sentence to another student who whispers it to another and so on. “It turns out that such messages are often remolded, remodeled and reshaped along the way – and brought more into line with the preoccupations and presuppositions of the participants” (p.79). Van Ginneken refers to two rumor researchers, Allport and Postman (1947) who found that such a process of repetitive selection involves: the leveling of dissonant elements, the sharpening of consonant elements as well as the assimilation of the concerned message into existing views (p.79). This threefold process therefore results in an increased alienation of the ‘Other’ and stronger recognition of

familiar people and events. Van Ginneken therefore concludes that there is every reason to believe that this same process is involved in news reporting and thus negatively impacts news from foreign cultures.

Therefore, not only is the journalist a storyteller basing his or her reporting on culturally-embedded values, but he or she also has to fit these new events or situations into old and familiar definitions. “It is in their power to place people and events into the existing categories of hero, villain, good and bad, and thus invest their stories with the authority of mythological truth” (Bird, 1997, p.345). Schudson (1982) argues that the “power of the media lies not only...in its power to declare things to be true, but in its power to provide the forms in which the declarations will appear” (Schudson as quoted in Bird, 1997, p. 345). Journalists have to decide quickly on such role assignments or “news judgments” and so they turn to existing frameworks, where normality is perceived as good while difference is seen as bad or evil (Bird, 1997).

Hence, in their coverage of unfamiliar cultures such as Muslim cultures, difference could be seen in a negative light and when journalists assign roles in their stories, they sometimes frame the Muslim women as victims and Muslim men and Islam itself as the villains that chain and repress these women.

Methodology

Using framing analysis, I provide a close textual reading of news, features, editorials as well as images from US newspapers and magazines between September 11, 2001 and September 11, 2005. Hence, the unit of analysis will be news articles or news images that represent Arab and/or Muslim women in the specified time frame.

I also utilize a study of international media coverage of the same stories I am looking at in US media, where such coverage is available, which provides me with a comparison that will help me better determine how Arab and Muslim women are presented in US media. For example, if I am analyzing an article from a US newspaper on Afghan women before and after the rule of Taliban, I will search for similar articles from international media. I will analyze and compare both stories to determine if the representation is the same or if one seems to be more accurate than the other.

News framing

The notion of framing certain news stories while ignoring others is what Van Ginneken (1998) explains in his book, *Understanding Global News-A Critical Introduction* as selective articulation. Van Ginneken is attempting to explain how journalists select their stories and how they decide what is newsworthy. He explains why certain “tragic deaths” are given great attention and focus while others are totally ignored. Van Ginneken cites ample examples of how the media play a role in formulating global media messages and how they might not be able to tell the audience what to think but are able to tell them what to think about.

There has been a vast amount of literature written on selective articulation and journalists’ framing of different issues. Various scholars have approached this issue from different angles, providing diverse explanations of this phenomenon. Van Ginneken’s work is among the most prominent on this topic, and is cited by various scholars who have covered this issue. Van Ginneken discusses many issues connect to framing, including word choice, grammar and style, as well as ideology and discourse. One interesting argument about the journalists’ choice of words is ‘doublespeak’ language, which aims to make what is bad seem good or what

is negative appear to be positive (p. 146). “Doublespeak increasingly permeates press releases and news accounts, particularly when there is a conflict or crisis going on” (Van Ginneken, 1998, p.146). Another interesting observation by van Ginneken is the journalistic tendency to rely on unambiguous language in their reporting. He explains that the media has a tendency to use words like ‘public,’ ‘official,’ ‘national interest’ or ‘public interest’ to encourage the acceptance of certain actions that would otherwise be viewed skeptically or with hostility (p. 148).

Alexander Halavais (2002) has also written about selective articulation. He argues, “news is socially constructed, and reflects the social conditions in which it is created” (p. 3), and that this results in the representation of news within certain predictable frames, narrative structures that enable the journalist to describe world events and the reader to interpret such events. He cites several factors that cause framing. One is the process of source selection, which inevitably means favoring certain voices over others and which in turn means that journalists do not provide the complete picture (p. 3). Another factor that introduces bias in journalists’ work is related to the process by which journalists select and collect their data. While journalists do not intentionally introduce bias in their coverage, their data selection process drives them to “lend themselves to a set of systematic frames through which they interpret the world” (p. 3). Moreover, the accepted practice of newsgathering tends to favor the status quo and reflects the most accessible opinions, which in turn means that the ‘other opinions’ of reformers, activists, or those opposed to the status quo are usually not given equal attention (ibid.). “The result is a set of news frames, or organizing ideas that ‘enable journalists to process large amounts of information quickly [and to] package the information for efficient relay to their audiences’” (p. 3).

Ragnar Levi (1999) argues that the process of selective articulation is affected by the cultural and ideological framework of media workers, which influences media workers to

consider particular events new, powerful, unexpected and meaningful and thus worthy of reporting (p.1). Following in van Ginneken's (1998) footsteps, Levi agrees that the dominant ideology in global news reporting and framing of stories is that of the major Western media, in part because market-driven Western media companies economically control the global flow of media material (Levi, 1999, p. 1). These Western actors define what is newsworthy, choose a journalist angle and export their news stories worldwide (p. 2). This process is what van Ginneken means by 'selective articulation', Levi argues. The framing of global news from a Western perspective results in a one-sided staging of news. "This is apparent in biased modes of quotations, particular choices of labels, and the uniform use of images" (Levi, 1999, 3).

Tackling the issue of selective articulation from a gender perspective, Augusta Del Zotto (2002) argues that the media always revert to the expected and the familiar and avoid the unfamiliar, which in turn results in framing stories in a biased way (p.146). The author examined how the media framed stories on the 1998-1999 Kosovo conflict in a gender-biased way that aimed to focus on men and ignore women or treat them as a mass of bodies lacking voice or opinion. Del Zotto explains that in general, when the media refers to a group as a 'mass', this gives the impression that there are no diverse voices in the population and that 'the masses' give consensus to the elites' policies.

Rasha Kamhawi (2002) explains that journalists rely on frames to simplify complex events; this reliance in turn helps journalists to quickly classify information and sell it to the audience. The problem with this is that "frames are too restrictive. Multi-faceted situations are grossly oversimplified into a few dominant themes so only few topics are highlighted" (p. 2). Another problem with framing is that once created, frames are hard to erase. "The frames, which create American stereotypes of far away places, are maintained so as not to risk alienating the

audience” (ibid.). Kamhawi identifies four different frames often used by foreign media. The first one is the *conflict frame*, which is used to emphasize conflict between parties and is mainly used in election news. A second frame is the *human-interest frame*, which focuses on the individual and stresses emotions. The *responsibility frame* is a third type, and it “attributes responsibility, credit or blame, on individuals or institutions” (p. 3). The last frame Kamhawi identifies is the *economic consequence* frame, which focuses on the economic effects that a specific event can have on the audience.

Framing Analysis

News coverage can never be fully objective in its reflection of world events (McQuail, 1972), since the news media invariably frame the information they present, thus manipulating the news and influencing the audience’s perception of themselves and others (McQuail, 1994). News media use “content selection, organization, and emphasis,” that allow the media to “produce, reproduce, and acculturate preferred story lines and descriptions” (Miller, 2004, p. 245). Through this selective articulation process the media transform bits and pieces of information into “socially meaningful and powerful narratives that contribute to the social construction of race and identity” (p. 245).

Framing Analysis is a theory first fully elaborated by Goffman (1974) who provided a theoretical basis for the process of stereotyping and a methodologically rigorous account of how audiences form oversimplified opinions, attitudes and beliefs about a specific group (Fahmy, 2004, p. 94). Tuchman (1978), who believes that news is framed to organize everyday reality, applied framing analysis to her study of news reporting. Entman (1993) in turn further developed Goffman’s idea; he clearly conceptualized framing and frame, and how frames work. Entman

argues that framing involves the process of “selection” and “salience.” “In other words, the framing process is to deliberately select a piece of information to report and obviate others. At the same time, this piece of information will be particularly highlighted and given more salience while some others will be intentionally diminished” (Peng, 2003, p. 4). Entman (1991) says frames “call attention to some aspects of reality while obscuring other elements, which might lead audiences to have different reactions” (p.55). He further argues that frames “reside in the specific properties of the news narrative that encourage those perceiving and thinking about events to develop particular understandings of them. News frames are constructed from and embodied in the key words, metaphors, concepts, symbols, and visual images emphasized in a news narrative” (p. 7). Furthermore, content frames “simplify complex material and alert readers to both the causes and remedies of problems in ways that extend and reinforce the views of the dominant culture that produces the texts. Metaphors, stock images and phrases, key words, adverbs, descriptors, the choice of participants, and the crafting of narrative transform facts into culturally meaningful stories” (Entman as cited in Miller, 2004, p. 246).

Therefore, when analyzing print news stories, one has to study every single detail from the choice of words, to the metaphors, descriptors to the characters the story focuses on, in order to be able to identify the frame used. According to framing theory, each of us constructs reality through complex, reciprocal interactions among individuals, social groups, and cultural products such as newspapers. Scheufele (1999) argues that framing can be viewed as encompassing three central stages: mental framing, group framing, and content framing. Mental frames exist in our minds as a result of accumulating various independent evaluations, organizations and categorizations of external frames (Miller, 2004). Our mental frame is constantly filtering incoming frames due to the simultaneous influence from these external forces. Hence, our

formation of stereotypes and judgments does not always occur in chorus with exposure to external frames. “Instead, depending on the congruence of the external frame to our pre-existing mental frame, we may take seconds, days, months, or even years to assess the salience of the new frames and alter or reinforce our attitudes and beliefs in response” (Miller, 2004, p. 247). Hence the framing process is never ending.

At a collective level, group frames, which are tied to history and a central component of shared culture, develop in a very similar fashion, through the mutual reinforcing and changing interaction of individual mental frames (Scheufele, 1999). “These common frames encompass and transfer the myths, stereotypes, attitudes, beliefs, values, and behaviors shared by a dominant social group or groups” (Miller, 2004, p. 247).

Finally, the specific group that produces cultural products produces content frames. News media, being cultural products, have a limited number of content frames, given that the structure, norms and practices of the media usually reflect and reinforce frames of the elite group, where news organizations as well as individual reporters participate. Certain content frames are pushed to the forefront due to factors such as news deadlines, story form, journalistic routines, editing as well as business considerations (Miller, 2004). Furthermore, journalists rely on specific sources, interpretations and perspectives in their stories, which produce content frames that “emerge not from intentional bias but from unintentional yet explicit content choices - ‘keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments’ that reflect the group frame of the culture that produces them” (Entman as cited in Miller, 2004, p. 247).

Content frames are therefore “the routinized result of individual, group, and organizational processes” (Miller, 2004, p. 247). Scheufele (1999) states that certain frames

become more salient than others because it is easier to access and retrieve them from our memories. “As a result, journalists’ content frames arise from the mental and societal frames that are vivid and readily available to journalists. Media content frames then increase the salience of these specific frames for the audience who, in turn, may alter their mental frames and indirectly shape societal frames in an ongoing cycle” (Scheufele as cited in Miller, 2004, p. 247). This is why Weston (1996) argues that journalists reflect the prevalent biases and stereotypes in popular culture. Not only that, Weston also argues that the “very conventions and practices of journalism have worked to reinforce that popular - and often inaccurate - imagery” (p.163).

Applying Framing Analysis to Print Stories

The research that follows examines how U.S. newspapers represent Arab and Muslim women. Using Lexis/Nexis, I searched for and analyzed U.S. print news articles, editorials and feature stories that represent Arab and Muslim women between the dates of September 11, 2001 and September 11, 2005. September 11, 2001 is an appropriate date because the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington mark a renewed strong U.S. media focus on the Middle East region in general, and women in specific. The same year witnessed the war on Afghanistan (October of 2001), which brought more attention to the region’s women. The war on Iraq came on March 20, 2003, followed by the rebuilding of Iraq in 2004 and the Iraqi elections in January of 2005. The same year witnessed the Iranian presidential elections (June 2005) and the Egyptian presidential elections (September 7th, 2005).

I examine these print articles to identify the image(s) of Muslim and Arab women as represented in these stories. Seeking throughout to draw on postcolonial feminist theory to guide my analysis, with attention to words, themes or topics that represent these women as the Other;

as sexually or financially oppressed, traditional, backward, uneducated (C. Mohanty, 1991; A. Lacsamana, 1999; J. Urban, 1999), or exotic, sensual, sexually available, especially in the harem setting (E. Said, 1978; R. Kabbani, 1986; M. Alloula, 1981). It is essential to rely on this theory for my analysis of news texts, because according to van Dijk (1993), it is important to examine injustices, inequalities and oppression from the point of view of those oppressed. He argues, “it will be essential to examine and evaluate such events and their consequences essentially from their point of view” (p. 253). Hence, news articles on Arab and Muslim women could be termed stereotypical if knowledgeable women from this group identify them as so, “despite white or male denials” (p. 253). Since many postcolonial feminists are from the developing world, including a lot of Arab and Muslim nations, it seems reasonable to rely on what these feminists term stereotypical or a misrepresentation.

According to van Dijk (1988), when news texts were studied in the past, this was done superficially through traditional quantitative content analysis rather than from a qualitative perspective. Recent years, however, have seen a growing interest in the linguistic, semiotic, cultural or ideological analysis of news texts (p. 96). He argues that the manipulation of public opinion through the mass media is one tool white groups use to reiterate their political power in Western countries. “The justification of inequality involves two complimentary strategies, namely the positive representation of the own group, and the negative representation of the Others” (van Dijk, 1993, p. 263). Such news stories however need to be credible, so they would include other forms of persuasion that might include: *argumentation*, where facts are used to justify the negative evaluation; *rhetorical figures*, “hyperbolic enhancement of ‘their’ negative actions and ‘our’ positive actions; euphemisms, denials, understatements of ‘our’ negative actions; *lexical style*, choosing words that imply ‘our’ positive evaluations or ‘their’ negative

ones; *story telling*, citing personal experiences of negative events and highlighting details and features of such events; *structural emphasis* of ‘their’ negative actions, in a news report this means everything from the headline, lead, summary, in addition to highlighting the negative parts in prominent, topical positions in the story; and finally, *quoting credible witnesses*, sources and experts (van Dijk, 1993, p. 264). Hence, these are some of the details I examine in my analysis of news articles, features and editorials on Arab and Muslim women. I will specifically look at the structures of leads, headlines, thematic organization, presence of background information, style and choice of newsworthy items. This is because the formation of these structures is controlled by the societal context of power relations as reflected in the process of newsgathering (van Dijk, 1991). I also examine the body text and the headline as appropriate, and following this close reading of each article, I then assign it to the specific frame identified.

The analysis will entail an examination of overt elements of text to expose overt words, phrases, descriptors used in reference to Arab and Muslim women. I will also examine covert meanings embedded in the articles’ content related to Arab and Muslim women, based on details such as sources/expert opinion relied on; story focus and organization; presence or lack of opinions from Arab/Muslim women.

My analysis will rely on several questions, borrowing from a model developed by Perkins and Starosta (2001) and from van Dijk’s own work on newspaper racism. These questions include: *What* is the focus of these stories? *What* are the issues addressed in the stories? *Do* they largely focus on hijab, the veil and/or other religious, cultural, political, social or economic issues? If yes, how is this presented? *Does* the story present these religious factors as a constriction and form of oppression on the women or as a sign of their empowerment? *Do* such stories offer facts on Arab/Muslim culture that adequately contextualize given the normal

constraints on length? *What* role do Arab/Muslim women play in the article? *Are* the stories about specific women or do they address issues related to Arab/Muslim women in general? *Is* there a specific trend with the stories: do they mostly talk about women's oppression by men or religion? Or do they highlight developments and details of contemporary Arab/Muslim women in the domains of education, politics and economy? *Do* stories focus only on the negative exceptions of women in the Arab/Muslim world, or are there also stories that talk about exceptionally successful and talented women? *Do* reporters rely on female scholars and Muslim scholars to provide context on issues discussed? *What* words, phrases and descriptors are used to refer to the women? *Does* the reporter speak for the women or are they allowed to speak? If yes, *where* is this situated in the story? *What* credible sources or experts are cited in general and where is their opinion situated in the story? *In general*, with stories that have both a Western source (s) and Arab/Muslim women, whose ideas are supported or refuted? Also, in cases where the women are distorted or stereotyped, *what* journalistic factors helped produce such stereotypes. And when the women are represented in an objective light, *what* are the journalistic modes of production that contribute to such objectivity? In addition to finding answers to these questions, I will also look at story format details, such as the use of adjectives, catchphrases, descriptors and other semantic devices used to describe Arab/Muslim women (Perkins & Starosta, 2001; van Dijk, 1991).

Answers to these questions will therefore help me determine how Arab and Muslim women are represented in news stories. One of the challenges of this project is that some of the articles to be analyzed are news stories, whereas others are editorials or opinion pieces by columnists. While I realize the difference between the two and how an opinion writer enjoys the right to express personal opinions and conclusions, I also want to clarify that within the analysis

I will be treating both news stories and opinion pieces in a similar fashion. This is because opinion writers still need to rely on sound research, accurate facts and credible sources to justify their conclusions and claims and hence, if my analysis proves that this is not necessarily the case, then this raises questions about the trustworthiness of such a writer's claims and observations.

In sum, through this close textual analysis, I will be looking for *descriptors* of Arab and Muslim women; *the specific* arguments made in stories about them; *the sources* relied on in the stories, the *main focus* of the headline and lead; *the position* (beginning, middle or end) of these women in the stories; *and the space* allotted to their opinions and views versus that of the reporter or experts cited.

Project Organization

My searching strategies yielded approximately 300 unique articles by searching Lexis/Nexis using a set of search terms based on issues commonly discussed in Muslim Feminist literature as well as news events over the five-year period under study. These search terms include a combination of words and phrases on Arab and/or Muslim women and: Islam; religion, society; politics; economy; United States; Arab Americans; violence; education; hijab; veil; empowerment; voting, constitution; employment; government; democracy; marriage; divorce; Shari'a law; honor crimes; female genital mutilation; Muslim men; Quran; dress codes; religious scholars; 9/11; Iraqi war; Iraqi elections; war on Afghanistan; Afghan pre and post Taliban; .

Based on an initial topical sorting, the following chapters aggregate my analysis into four main divisions: Arab/Muslim Women & Religion; Arab/Muslim Women and Society; Arab/Muslim Women and politics and finally, Arab/Muslim women and the economy. Each chapter uses framing analysis to explore how Arab/Muslim women are represented in U.S. print

news with regards to society, religion, politics and the economy. Chapter two elaborates my findings on stories focusing on women and religion; examining everything from women in Islam, the veil or headscarf or burqa; women's rights and roles under Islam, and Islamic Shari' a law and women. Chapter three discusses my findings on articles covering women and society, examining all stories that discuss Muslim-Arab women and family life, marriage, education, empowerment or any other related topic to society. Chapter four focuses on women in politics and the economy, addressing coverage on topics as diverse as women's voting rights, women in the government, political activists, as well as working women, women's empowerment or women's economic status across different countries in the region. Since some articles dealt with more than one of these topics, in such cases, I dealt with the specific article in detail in one chapter and then reference it later when it reemerges. Chapter five summarizes the conclusions and findings of this study, while also offering more insight into the journalistic conventions that produce stereotypes and suggestions on how such practices can be avoided.

In sum, this study seeks to outline the various images of Muslim/Arab women in the news with regards to the specific categories of religion, society, politics and economics. The aim is to add to existing literature on media representation of women by examining current journalistic practices that help produce distortion and how mass media educators and journalists alike, can cooperate to produce more objective representations of women from non-Western cultures.

Notes

¹ Cloud is referring to Rudyard Kipling's poem "the White Man's Burden" in which he describes, "'savages' needing conquering as 'your new-caught sullen peoples...half devil and half child'" (in Cloud, 2004, p. 293).

² The secular, Western-looking form of feminism was championed by Egyptian feminists like Huda Sha'rawi (1879-1947). She is famous for her dramatic lifting of the veil (but she did not remove the hijab, just her face cover or veil) during a 1923 feminist conference in Rome, where she argued that the veil posed a barrier to women's progress. For more on this, see El-Guindi, 2005 and Kahf, Mohja (1998). Huda Sha'rawi's *Mudhakkirati: The Memoirs of the First Lady of Arab Modernity*. *Arab Studies Quarterly* 20 (1) 53-82.

³ Like Hoodfar (2003), El-Guindi (2005) affirms that the veil is rooted in historical contexts, but her discussion focuses on the religious veil that began to spread in contemporary Arab and Muslim culture starting in the 1970s.

⁴ Van Ginneken makes this argument based on a book by anthropologists William B. Gudykunst and Young Yun Kim (1992) titled *Communicating with strangers*.

Chapter Two: Women & Religion

News can never be a mirror representation of reality, given that truth is dependant on who we are and how we perceive the world around us. For instance, a man might see a situation differently than a woman, or a British person might hold different views than an Arab. So objectivity is therefore applied through selection, by preferring one version of events over others; McNair (1998) refers to this as the representation of *relative* rather than absolute truth. Events become further distorted as reporters gloss over complex histories and complexities in an effort to report the story within the allotted space or time (McNair, 1998, p.80). Michael Schudson (2003) also argues that this process of distorted perception selection is socially organized and “built into the structures and routines of news gathering” (p. 33). Taking these arguments into consideration, it therefore comes as no surprise that in this day and age coverage of Muslim and Arab women often remains prejudiced and distorted.

Yet, an analysis of published newspaper articles on women and religion leads one to conclude that such distortion is not always clear-cut nor is it applied to some degree across the board. In fact, the current analysis reveals that Western representations of Muslim women are far more complex than initially expected. The coverage overlays several frames, where Muslim women are represented as oppressed, weak and dependent on the one hand, and fully independent, empowered, intelligent and bold on the other hand. There are incidents where misrepresentation of the women and of how they are treated under Islam is very clear. In such cases, the Muslim woman’s voice is rarely heard in the story and instead readers are bombarded with stereotypical and distorted accounts from the reporter or other Western sources in a half-hearted attempt to understand Islam as a faith and to reasonably comprehend who Muslim

women are. On the other hand, evidence from the articles analyzed in this chapter demonstrates that Western reporting on Muslim women can be fairly sympathetic and objective. In these cases, women are given ample space in the story to voice their opinions, beliefs and concerns; they are allowed to discount stereotypes depicting them as weak, helpless and oppressed, and reporters provide sufficient context and background to enable readers to draw a comprehensive or at least nuanced picture of how Muslim women think and live.

A central hypothesis of this project, confirmed by close textual analysis, is that a reporter's bias or sympathetic reporting depends on multiple factors best explained by primary socialization or one's cultural and professional development; by secondary socialization in the newsroom; adherence to conventional wisdom, or deep-rooted ideas that have acquired the status of common sense; and peer group impact as well as patriotism. Another factor that impacts reporting is reporters' tendency to put a human face to a story by focusing on one person or group as a representation of the whole. While humanizing a story in this sense, is an acceptable standard in journalism that helps readers relate to the story more, it could on the other hand, lead to bias and distortion when the actions or beliefs of a single person are used to represent a whole group. This practice, therefore, tends to create tension and appears on several occasions in the coverage. Although a combination of these factors can be used to explain almost every news story, my own view is that sometimes one or two factors are the main stimulus for certain types of reporting, as I hope to demonstrate throughout this chapter.

This section's analysis could be more intelligible by examining some of the Muslim feminists and religious scholars' views on women's spiritual role under Islam and their status under Islamic Shari'a law.

Women's Status under Islamic Shari'a Law

Feminists in the Muslim Women's League (1995) explain that spiritual equality is the basis of Islam. Moreover the religious scholar Jamal Badawi (1971) has argued that the Quran clearly lays out the equal accountability and responsibility of both men and women; women are no different than men in fulfilling Islamic obligations of daily prayers, fasting, pilgrimage and helping the poor. On the contrary, women are given advantages compared to men, as they are exempted from prayers and fasting during monthly menstruation cycles; women also exempted from fasting during and after pregnancy (when the mother is nursing), and from prayers for a forty-day period after pregnancy (Badawi, 1971, Islamfortoday.com).

In addition, feminists add that spiritual equality in Islam also entails equality with men in all other aspects of life. To demonstrate that gender equality is intrinsic in Islam, feminists and religious scholars go back to Quranic descriptions of how Adam and Eve were told to avoid a specific tree, yet they both approached the tree and, as a result, God banished them both from the garden for this act of disobedience. The idea here is that the Quran does not accuse Eve of tempting Adam and being responsible for their punishment, which is the story described in the Bible as the "original sin," which says: "it was not Adam who was deceived but the woman. It was she who was led astray and fell into sin." Hence, feminists point to Quranic version, where both Adam and Eve were held responsible for their choices, as proof of gender equality under Islam.¹

Aside from stressing on the spiritual equality of the sexes under Islam, Muslim feminists discuss other issues that seem relevant to this chapter; hijab is one such matter. In addition to Muslim feminists' opinions on hijab discussed in the previous chapter, it is important to note how Islamic feminists stress on the idea of hijab as empowering. Hamid (2006) contends that the

hijab is in fact in accordance with feminist ideals, given that it enables women to reassert their “moral and political agency.” “The fact is that many Muslims do choose, out of their own free will, to wear the headscarf,” explains Hamid. “From the perspective of many Muslim women, wearing the hijab is a way in which to assert one’s identity and, more importantly, to assert one’s autonomy and independence” (p. 82).

In addition, Ashraf (1998) argues that even though hijab is required of every Muslim woman, this is not a means of controlling or suppressing women’s sexuality, but is rather a means of protection for the woman. “It is hoped that by dressing this way she will not be seen as a mere sex symbol but will be appreciated for her mind,” says Ashraf (Islamfortoday.com). Ashraf also argues that this head-covering is not an Islamic innovation as it was a common practice of Judeo-Christian women centuries earlier. Sherif says: "It is one of the great ironies of our world today that the very same headscarf revered as a sign of holiness' when worn for the purpose of showing the authority of man by Catholic Nuns, is reviled as a sign of oppression' when worn for the purpose of protection by Muslim women" (as cited in Ashraf, 1998).

Al-Hibri (2005) adds to this discussion by explaining women’s status under Islamic Shari’a law; she contends that no gender hierarchy exists in Islam and both sexes are judged by the same Islamic standards and share the same rights, duties and obligations. Yet, in reality that is not always the case; an example would be how in many traditional societies, women are the ones punished and blamed for crimes of rape, or adultery and not the men. Hibri blames this unfair application of Islamic laws on customs that somehow managed to be introduced in the Islamic legal systems of different countries. Hibri argues that this is why many countries today that “claim to be following Islam law often use religion to justify repugnant laws that are really based on custom” (p. 161). Another reason why Islamic laws are often applied unfairly to

women relates to *ijtihad*, or the established rights of religious scholars to engage in their own jurisprudential interpretation to ensure that laws are compatible with their jurisdiction and era. Yet, Hibri argues that unfortunately, Islamic freedom of thought and *ijtihad* are disappearing and no new schools of thought have come to replace old ones. The end outcome is religious scholars' continued adherence to historically-established schools of thought that do not suit contemporary societies (p. 161).

Another significant topic debated by Muslim feminists is that of “secular” feminists within Muslim feminism, who are usually favored by the West to give their opinion on Islam and women's status. Saraji Umm Zaid (2003) argues that these “liberal” Islamists take their political thought, not from Islam, but from Western secular norms, feminism and capitalism; hence they equate hijab with oppression among other things. “Naturally, it is to these Muslims, that the Western media turns when it wants a ‘Muslim’ perspective on ‘Muslim issues’,” argues Umm Zaid (Islamfortoday.com). Umm Zaid's conclusion is very significant to this chapter, as the current analysis points to several incidents where this possibly holds true.

All articles analyzed in this chapter deal with stories on Islam and women. Three general topics were identified that dominate the coverage on women and Islam: Women and the hijab; Islamic Shari'a law; and, backward Islam versus modernization. I begin by focusing on one of the most controversial issues related to Muslim women: the Islamic headscarf and other Islamic dress codes. This is the most commonly-reported subject related to Muslim women, and so is a reasonable starting point. Furthermore, this is the most complex issue covered in the reporting, with many articles that are both sympathetic and well-balanced and, contrarily, articles that are heavily distorted and misrepresent Muslim women. The second section of this chapter looks at

articles on Shari'a law and the final section discusses backward versus modern Islam, which is to say, the perspective on religious modernization reflected in coverage.

Women and the Hijab

One topic that has long occupied the Western media is Muslim women's dress code, with the hijab, or veil worn by many Muslim women around the world, the most prominent. The hijab is also one of the main features of a Muslim woman that many Western reporters view as "oppressive" to women; interestingly, few Muslim women confirm this claim in their own words. In fact, a 2005 Gallup Organization survey, where over 8,000 face-to-face interviews were conducted with women in eight Muslim countries, reveals that the "hijab, or headscarf, and burqa...seen by some Westerners as tools of oppression, were never mentioned in the women's answers..." and the majority of the women surveyed did not see themselves as oppressed (Andrews, 2006).

The real mystery is thus why coverage of the veil so dominates, even in articles not focused on the topic. A number of stories center on topics wholly unconnected with the hijab, yet reporters make it a point to mention it to readers nonetheless. Examples include this *USA Today* story on a Muslim American businessman who helps Muslims finance their homes through interest-free mortgages.² Reporter Elliot Blair Smith (2005) starts his story with this anecdote:

On a sunny afternoon, Yahia Adbul-Rhman ignores the broken air conditioner in his mortgage-finance company's cramped Southern California office. Around him, three-dozen employees, some of them Muslim women veiled in scarves, toil amid the rising heat and stacks of paper clutter. (p. 1B)

These “veiled women” are never mentioned again in the story, yet they appear in the lead. One might charitably interpret the reporter’s mentioning of the veiled women to demonstrate just how hot the atmosphere must have been for them, given that the air conditioner was broken. But even if this explanation is plausible, for audiences conditioned to equate veiling with oppression, the reference (perhaps inadvertently) reproduces the stereotype of the oppressed and helpless Muslim woman, who must endure the scorching heat with a head cover adding to her misery.

There seems to be an abundance of Western media reports on the veil where the coverage connects to interpretations or misinterpretations as to why women wear it, what it looks like and what it signifies. After 9/11, the United States witnessed a strong wave of nationalism across the board. The media were part of this patriotic wave, since the surge of sentiment supporting government policies and justifying the White House’s reactions to the bombings would have been hard to ignore. Silvio Waisbord (2002) explains this by saying:

Comforting and warning became two of journalism’s most obvious functions during the crisis triggered by terrorist strikes in New York and Washington. To provide comfort to a grieving, shocked country and alert it to possible future attacks, the media relied on a well-known nationalistic trope: a shared, national culture provides solace and unity to a community that has suffered foreign incursion. Risk was framed from this perspective.

Any threat existed as a potential danger to “the nation” (p. 201).

The media also had an important responsibility towards the public; they had to try to bring the community together by ending violent retaliations that spread throughout the nation against anyone who looked Muslim. Victor Navasky (2002) argues that journalism post 9/11 reflected several assumptions:

That this was a time for rallying around the flag and that those who questioned national policy were giving aid and comfort to the enemy; that any attempt to link the events of September 11 to America's previous role in the Middle East or elsewhere was unworthy of serious coverage or consideration and somehow smacked of apologetics; that (despite much rhetoric about Muslims being entitled to the presumption of innocence) the demonization of the Muslim world indulged by the American press over recent decades has been vindicated (p. xiii).

Because of this latter part of Navasky's quote and because of the surge in violent retaliations against Muslims across the nation, reflecting the darker impulse of nationalistic fervor did undertake some responsibility for educating the public on Islam and its followers.³ Muslim male and female thinkers, scholars and religious experts were invited onto television and radio shows, or quoted in print media to allow the audience to better understand the religion of Islam.

Among the many articles that were dedicated to this cause, 26 local articles and 20 international articles were identified that specifically discussed Muslim women and the hijab. As mentioned earlier, these newspaper representations of Muslim women who wear the hijab are more complex than might have been anticipated. The articles analyzed reveal both instances of fairly balanced and stereotype-free articles, where reliance on Muslim sources, specifically Muslim women, has been abundant, and articles that do the exact opposite, news reports or opinion pieces where reporters rarely rely on Muslim experts or women to voice their opinions and concerns. In the latter cases, reporters often speak for women and repetitively return to the dominant stereotype of the Muslim woman who is oppressed, weak, helpless and silent. Through the analysis of these newspaper articles, features and columns on Muslim women and Islamic dress codes, five general recurring themes were identified: (1) sympathetic reporting post 9/11

2001 up until the end of 2003; (2) comparisons of 20th-century American feminism with 21st-century Muslim feminism; (3) double standards: the French ban on hijab; (4) hijab as a fashion; and, (5) hijab as the most obvious proof of Muslim women's oppression.

Shattering Existing Stereotypes

Following the events of 9/11, media reports were distinctive in their collective support of President Bush's appeal to all Americans to stop attacks on Muslim Americans. On September 27, 2001, addressing the nation, President Bush said: "These acts of violence against innocents violate the fundamental tenets of the Islamic faith. And it's important for my fellow Americans to understand that." With regards to attacks on Muslim women who wear the hijab, Bush also said: "Women who cover their heads in this country must feel comfortable going outside their homes. Moms who wear cover must be not intimidated in America. That's not the America I know. That's not the America I value." With media patriotism on the rise and perhaps explicitly responding to his call, American newspapers supported Bush's statement through campaigns of in-depth reporting on Islam and Muslim women. The media therefore demonstrated social responsibility through multiple stories on Islam, and especially on Muslim women, in an aim to break existing stereotypes on Islam and veiled women. These stories informed readers about the Islamic faith, Islamic dress codes, the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, Muslim prayers, not to mention many other details typically overlooked or disregarded or distorted in reporting on the faith. The majority of stories analyzed in this section were printed on the first pages of newspapers, thus signifying the important attention such reports received by newsmakers. The national and international coverage during the remainder of 2001 and continuing to the end of 2003, does illustrate that balanced journalism is attainable when journalists search for the truth

and seek out opinions about Muslim women from the women themselves rather than rely on existing stereotypes or western expert opinions.

Several reports introduced readers to various Muslim women residing in the United States who lived in fear because of the increased violence in their community post-9/11, written in a manner likely to evoke readers' sympathy and compassion. A *New York Times* article, for example, quotes Efraha, a Muslim woman who refused to take off the hijab despite the dangers. Reporter Felicia R. Lee (2001) tells us Efraha "will not ride a subway or a bus..." for fear of possible attacks (p.1). The idea is that workers of religious difference are too easily misread by Americans looking for scapegoats and so these articles portrayed Muslim Americans as normal citizens who work, go to school and pay taxes like everyone else and therefore aimed to get readers to perceive Muslim Americans as less a threat and more as human beings.

Other news stories delved even further into the lives of Muslims, especially the women whose dress code, the hijab and loose-fitting dresses, made them easy to identify and therefore easy targets for retaliation. Such reports interviewed women from across the nation as well as from the Muslim world, allowing women to explain what Islam means to them and why they choose to cover their hair. It is important to note that this is one of the rare times that multiple news reports nationwide sought out Muslim women to speak rather than quoting others to speak on their behalf. A *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* article for instance quotes Sadiyya Ash-Shakur, who converted to Islam in the late 1990's and who explains her hijab by saying "I respect my body enough to cover it" (Sultan, 2001, p. B1). The *New York Times* reported on the Islamic revival among Muslim university students, where more women are donning the hijab and Muslim men and women in general, are gradually returning to Islamic faith. "Wearing a scarf just makes me

feel more liberated...It sort of elevates you from the status of being seen as just a sexual object,” the story quotes Ayesha Syed, a junior at Columbia University, as saying (Goodstein, 2001, p.1).

These stories portray Muslim women in a new light not commonly seen in the American media. The women are represented as independent, intelligent and in control of their own lives and their decisions. Most of the women quoted in such stories explain that they chose the hijab and they dispute common stereotypes of Muslim women as oppressed or as forced to wearing the hijab. Sultan (2001) of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, for example, says: “several Muslim women said other people have been surprised to learn that they choose freely to don the hijab and aren’t forced into it” (p. B1). She quotes Anila Sial, an employee at MCI WorldCom and part time college student, who explains that one of her co-workers had said to her: “my first impression of you was that you were a poor little girl married to some really mean guy” (Sultan, 2001, p.B1).

Reports on women wearing the hijab during this period tended to give the women control of the story; they do talking and are able to explain for themselves how and when they decided to wear the hijab and how it changed them. The space allocated to women’s quotes was thus significant in these stories. Such stories also attempted to explain to readers how the oppression and inequality women faced in some Muslim countries has nothing to do with Islam. “There is no doubt that the practice of Islam in some parts of the world is extremely oppressive,” a *Seattle Times* reporter quotes Paula Holmes-Eber, a UW anthropology professor who specializes in Islam and gender as saying. “But if you look at the fundamental religion, the base of the religion, the text, it could be a very fair religion for women” (Tu, 2001, p.A1).

In sum, these examples and many others illustrate a short-term wave of sympathetic reporting on women who wear the hijab, which really aimed at educating and informing readers about Islam and Muslim women so that they would be perceived as normal people rather than as

a threat. The aim was to end violent retaliations by acquainting readers with Muslims as students, employees and taxpayers and to shatter existing stereotypes of Muslim women as oppressed and having been forced to wear the hijab. Hence, many stories start with some variation on the following: “Sarah Fox...is not, as she readily will tell you, what most Americans think of when they think of Muslim women,” as a *Seattle Times* article states about a junior college student (Tu, 2001, p.A1); or as one *Christian Science Monitor* reporter writes, “If there is a Western shorthand for Muslim women, it might look like Heba Attieh,” referring to a Saudi Arabian female doctor residing in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia (Gaouette, 2001, p.1). The common message in these stories is that Muslim women, whether in the United States or in Muslim countries, are not all oppressed, weak, uneducated or helpless. These news reports introduced readers to Muslim female doctors, engineers, college students, activists, mothers or daughters, each portrayed as taking charge of their own decisions and reflecting their own pride in wearing the hijab as part of their identity. Hence, the news stories seemed to tell readers if Muslim women want to wear the hijab then it’s their personal choice and others should respect that.

This wave of sympathetic reporting on veiled Muslim women was also evident in international reporting, although the theme was not quite as strong as it was in American newspapers. Among the examples of such balanced reporting is an article from *The Australian* that explains how many Muslim Australians find the hijab to be ‘empowering’ rather than ‘oppressive’. The article explains how a veiled employment consultant leads a fairly conservative yet modern life: “Rawah Elsamman, 23, is educated and articulate. A strong-willed and active Muslim, she does not feel oppressed by her religion or intimidated in the presence of men. Neither does she feel compelled to impose her views on others” (Brown, 2001, p.15). Another article in the *Daily Telegraph*, explains to readers why some Muslim women are taking

the hijab off to avoid negative reactions from non-Muslims. “Hind Karouche is a role model for modern Muslim women. She runs a managerial consultancy and is a public speaker and community leader,” writes Ben English (2002). “However, she is one of hundreds of Muslim women in Sydney who do not wear the garb of their religion for fear of judgment by the wider community” (p. 20). A *Toronto Sun* story told readers that in an “Islam 101” show on October 5 of 2001, “Oprah Winfrey, the queen of U.S. daytime talk TV and arbiter of all things cultural for many Americans” tackled religious prejudice on her show by inviting two prominent Muslim females to talk about their faith and how Islam treats women. The article, which was based on a Reuters news story, said Jordan’s Queen Rania and Pakistani ambassador to the U.S. Maleeha Lodhi told Winfrey’s audience how Islam is not a hateful religion and that the majority of Muslims do not hate Americans. On the issue of the hijab, Winfrey told Queen Rania, “You look as modern as anyone can imagine...Are you accepted in your country for not wearing the scarf?” To this, Queen Rania answered, “There are different degrees of conservatism...It’s a personal choice. Some people are more conservative than others. The important thing is the spirit of Islam” (*Toronto Sun*, 2001, p.36). The aim of the show was to inform Winfrey’s audience about Islam and women and to differentiate between mainstream Muslims and extremists. Yet the problem here is, in her effort to paint a positive picture about Islam, Winfrey relied on two high-class women, a royal queen and an ambassador, who do not really represent the average Muslim woman and hence unwittingly reproduce yet another stereotype of the Muslim woman⁴.

Other national and international stories discuss how some Muslim women are “turning the stereotype on its head” by defying their parents’ wishes and wearing the hijab. The *New York Times* for example introduces readers to 19-year-old college junior Sarah Karim who “belongs to a campus group for Muslim women, some who have proudly donned the head scarves that their

mothers refused to wear” (Goodstein, 2001, p.1). Goodstein explains how these young women are enjoying the best of both worlds, practicing their religion while enjoying the freedom allowed in the United States without the cultural restrictions that many of their parents experienced back home. This is an important development, since such stories make it clear that the restrictions experienced by women back home are “cultural” rather than “religious,” thus discounting claims that Islam is the source of women’s oppression. The Canadian *Gazette* has a similar story that borrows quotations about young women’s experience with Hijab from the book *The Muslim Veil in North America: Issues and Debates*. “I had to accept her choice. There was nothing I could do,” a Montreal Muslim mother is quoted as saying about her daughter’s decision to wear the hijab. “I convinced myself that at least I did not have to fear that she is running around with unsuitable company, getting drunk, or worse, coming home with the news of an out-of-wedlock pregnancy. But it was not easy” (as quoted in Shepherd, 2004, p.H8). The article quoted in this news story is written by Homa Hoodfar, an Iranian associate professor of anthropology at Concordia University and one of the three editors of the book. Shepherd explains to readers that this book challenges the notion that the Quran calls for the hijab practiced by some cultures today yet at the same time illustrates how veiling is empowering for many women today. The reporter also quotes another of the book editors, McDonough, as saying that for some women the hijab has been empowering and yet for others doing without the veil has given them this sense of power. “Both situations exist; both are valid for the individual” she is quoted as saying (in Shepherd, 2004, p.H8).

This wave of sympathetic reporting also included reports on religious intolerance where Muslim women were victims of public embarrassment because of their veil. It also included columns where reporters took it upon themselves to educate readers about Islam and to defend

Muslim women's choice to wear the hijab. Reports on intolerance quoted female victims of discrimination who were told to refuse their hijab at school or the workplace (Hendricks, 2003, p.A15) and were harassed while driving (Magagnini, 2002, p.A1). Most of these articles present Muslim women as assertive, courageous in the face of such harassment and bold in their statements and actions. One example comes from the Cleveland, Ohio *Plain Dealer*, which introduces readers to Nahida Farunia, a Kuwaiti Muslim female who was asked to leave the swimming pool area at Madison Park because of her hijab. The pool employee told Farunia, a mother of five, that head coverings as well as coverings of the arms and legs were not appropriate for the swimming pool. Reporter V. David Sartin (2003) tells readers how Farunia complained to the mayor about the incident and how today, she is a member of the Lakewood community-relations panel, and seeks to bridge the gap between Lakewood residents and Arab Americans. "I'm a loudmouth," Farunia is quoted as saying about how she asserts her religion and strong conviction of the hijab. "I'm not allowed to show my hair – or my beauty – to anyone but my husband or my own family" (p.B3). The use of "I," here quoted multiple times, reiterates the idea that women can be strong-willed and independent. It is important to acknowledge how such reports therefore present Muslim women as educated, possibly employed and assertive and capable of speaking for themselves rather than have the reporter speak on their behalf. In sum, what all of these stories succeed in doing is to set free the Muslim woman within the narrative frame, when she has been long silenced and muffled in the news; these reports have allowed the Muslim woman to speak her mind and express her opinions and feelings about the hijab freely, whether she believes in it and wears it or not.

Other forms of unbiased reporting during this period included columns about the hijab and about Muslim women. Some focus on the idea of the veil, providing readers with

background information, while others defended the Muslim women's choice to wear it. Because these are opinion pieces, which mostly rely on the reporters' words, there is very little or no input by the women themselves. But the majority of these columns are by columnists who are either Muslim, or have interacted with Muslim women or had lived in Muslim societies, and hence had fairly good information about the hijab. The majority of these columns were printed in international newspapers. The one column printed locally was by Laila Saada (2003), a Muslim Egyptian graduate student at New York University. Saada's column, published in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, is worthy of note for several reasons. The writer, who does not wear the veil, informed readers about the veil and shared her feelings of respect and admiration for women who have the courage to do so.⁵ She challenges stereotypes of veiled women as backward and oppressed, citing the example of her veiled cousin who resides in Los Angeles.

Yet Saada also raises a unique argument about the veil post 9/11 and how her friends and family back in Egypt thought that it was her duty to "be visible" in her protests against Western "demonization of Islam" by educating these Western "Others" and by wearing the veil, as the most visible sign of support for her religion. This makes Saada wonder, "Is wearing the veil as a sign of solidarity no longer optional in a post-Sept. 11 world, where the whole faith seems to be under assault in the West?" Saada argues that, while this is not true for veiled women in Muslim countries, by "obsessing about the veil in the U.S." Muslim women confirm the idea that "Arabs are a different breed" and position themselves as "us versus them." Saada concludes that "Muslim women in effect wrap their scarves around their community, alienating all 'others.' This alienates us, too, Muslim women who don't necessarily want to wear veil. Yet it does not absolve us from our responsibility to shed more light on Islam and one of its core values, tolerance" (p.11A).

Whether Muslim women in the U.S. are drawn to the veil simply as a symbol of solidarity post 9/11 would be hard to prove, though one can understand how immediately after the attacks, this could have been the case for some women. Still, wearing the hijab is a long-term commitment and for a woman to be able to wear it day in and day out, she really has to have this strong faith and conviction that this is how she views herself. At issue is not whether women are forced by law to wear a head cover or an abaya, which is the extreme practice of Saudi Arabia and Iran; instead, the question relates to women who live in the most liberal and free of societies and may decide of their own free will to commit to wearing a head cover for life.

Yet, Saada's claim that the hijab in the U.S could have the unintentional effect of alienating all "Others," including Muslim women who do not wear the veil is a serious one. And her point that Muslim women need to focus more on "interaction and open dialogue with non-Muslims," which would allow them to express their solidarity with Islam and to bridge the gap between "us and them" also warrants close examination. This line of reasoning is logical in that it illustrates how Muslim women may be to some extent complicit in their own stereotyping in Western media. By cutting themselves off from the rest of society and limiting their interactions with other veiled Muslims, they might unintentionally convey the impression that they are in fact inapproachable and, therefore, it might be hard for non-Muslims to really get to know them. It could be that Muslim women isolate themselves as a strategic response to western biases about their faith and their hijab, but in using such a tactic, these women keep closed the door for dialogue and are not giving others the chance to be more informed about the veil and the women who decide to wear it. In essence, when veiled women shelter themselves as such, they deprive themselves of the opportunity to shatter existing stereotypes and might even be accused of fostering stereotypes and even inadvertently validating them. However one judges such claims,

at least they are given strong voice by a Muslim female who boldly defends her religion, defying stereotypes about Muslim women while unafraid of criticizing other women for the sake of Islam. The column is powerful both in its message of how Muslim women do share the blame and in its presentation of an informed and persuasive Muslim woman who defies the stereotype of the typically oppressed and backward female who cannot speak.

The international columns analyzed in this section mostly inform readers how stereotypes can be misleading. Geraldine Brooks (2001) writes in *The Daily Telegraph* of how she long thought women who were “blackcloaked” in the Saudi-style abaya were “pathetic” and how she viewed them as “poor things” who must be “brainwashed.” She began to question her stereotyping after an encounter with two such women on a plane ride from Cairo, Egypt to Dubai, where she sat beside the women in place of their brother, who had to sit behind them to aid his elderly father. “What I did not know was that they were thinking exactly the same thing about me,” Brooks argues. “To them, I was the object of pity: the solitary Western woman whose family evidently cared so little for her they let her travel alone in an uncertain and dangerous world” (p.35). The columnist questioned her assumptions and stereotyping about both women when one of them spoke to her “in perfect Oxford-accented English,” thus proving that she was educated rather than backward, and as the same woman, upon landing, took out “a number of Harrods shopping bags” from the overhead compartment thus defying the stereotype that the veiled women lead a pathetic or impoverished life. Brooks’ (2001) message is that “we look at a woman in a headscarf and make all kinds of assumptions about her status and condition...I have met women in chadors who are doctors and diplomats, engineers, Olympic athletes (the pistol shooting event) and soldiers studying to be officers at Sandhurst” (p. 35).

Brooks' column, however, illustrates how reporters, even when they do their best to remain objective and sympathetic, can also lapse back to existing stereotypes. At one point in her column, Brooks claims that she would still support a campaign advocating a women's right to "burn" such forms of dress, should this be imposed on them by men in power. Even though this is the only comment made by Brooks that one could read as stereotypical, in this sentence, it is almost as if the essay comes full circle, returning to the founding stereotype, where the Muslim woman is viewed as a weak, helpless subject who needs saving from the Western liberal heroine. On the one hand, this column illustrates how one can begin to question existing stereotypes by getting to know the women portrayed; one of the best ways to challenge inaccurate representations is to get closer to the subjects of such inaccuracies and hence learn from the source how they feel about their dress codes and to really understand how oppressed or backward they are (or are not).

But on the other hand, Brooks' column also illustrates how one cannot easily eradicate long-existing stereotypes. When certain ideas are held by one culture as conventional truths, it is very difficult to discard them: Brooks met the women and does understand now that they are not necessarily backward and helpless, yet she still commits to save any Muslim women who are forced to wear "restrictive dresses" and do not do so by choice. Assuming that there are women out there who really need to be "saved" from the burqa, hijab or abaya, why does Brooks feel that they cannot speak for themselves?

A New Stereotype: the Middle Class Muslim Woman

Taken as a whole, the articles appearing immediately after 9/11 are exceptional in the space they allocate to Muslim women's words and in their effort to correct the audiences'

opinions on Muslim women and to defy existing stereotypes of the silently oppressed Muslim woman. At once, appeared a collective approach both nationally and internationally, that liberates Muslim women in news stories by giving them some control over the narrative. The women quoted in these stories are all educated, the majority are working women, they are all assertive and none hesitates to speak her mind. In fact, a common tendency in the coverage is its reliance on educated and working Muslim women, thus producing the impression that the veiled Muslim woman is a well educated middle class woman with career aspirations, which is not exactly the case for each and every Muslim woman. If any criticism can be lodged against these more positive stereotypes it might be simply that reporters, as Oprah Winfrey did on her “Islam 101” show, are perhaps working too hard to discount the stereotype and in doing so risk presenting too perfect a Muslim woman, one who is well-educated, possibly employed, modern, assertive, powerful and independent in her thoughts and actions, confident and intelligent.

As reporters strive to introduce readers to Muslim women in a likable fashion, their work runs the risk of creating yet another “perfect minority” stereotype of the Muslim woman: a middle class, well-educated and employed woman who is proud of her religion and is assertive and bold enough to show it to everyone. This stereotype approaches the superhuman; she is a woman who can do everything and say anything and also be the good, obedient Muslim. While many Muslim women might fit this mold, it would be misleading to assume that all Muslim women are like this. As in any culture, Muslim societies are diverse in their class base and levels of education and employment, both for men and women. A more conducive way of correcting stereotypes would be to introduce readers to Muslim women from all walks of life; this would include the educated, employed, rich, bold, courageous, assertive, the stay-at-home mom, as well as the poor, uneducated, unemployed, and not-so confident and assertive Muslim woman. Also

to include in this list would be the many examples of Muslim women who wear Islamic dress codes by choice and are proud of doing so as well as those residing in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iran and Afghanistan, where women are told, or were forced (in the case of Afghanistan), to wear certain clothing. It would be interesting if readers can find out how strongly women feel on the imposition of the dress code compared to more serious issues that they might be confronting in their societies, and whether or not they perceive the dress code as an hindrance to their development, and most importantly, if they really feel the need for a Western intervention to save them from this piece of cloth.

20th Century Western Feminism vs. 21st Century Muslim Feminism

An interesting theme that also arose in the coverage during this period is the occasional comparison of Western feminists of the 1960's era to the Muslim women of today. The main reason for such a comparison is the fact that both groups of women embody similar principles, especially the idea that they do not want to be viewed as sex objects. In 1968, radical feminists protested the Miss America Pageant for its perception of women as sexual objects. "They decided to protest by throwing false eyelashes, bras, girdles, and so forth into a trash can in front of reporters. They also put a crown on a large pig labeled Miss America and led it around the pageant" (Wood, 2002, p.66). A reporter from the *St. Louis Dispatch*, for instance, argues that while radical feminists of the 1960's might not feel any solidarity with "cloaked and covered Muslim women of today" an increasing number of Muslim women are adopting the hijab for the very same reasons that motivated feminists of previous generations. "Both sets of women want to define their sexuality on their own terms" (Sultan, 2001, p.B1). Another reporter from the *San Antonio Express-News* quotes two American females who visited the United Arab Emirates and

returned to provide their impressions on the status of Muslim women in the region. One of these women, Mary Denny, assistant director of publications at Trinity University, says: “I came away feeling that women are women wherever they are, with the same desires, wants and concerns” (Stoelje, 2002, p.1D). “But there’s no sense of militancy or bra-burning, like there was here in the early days,” she adds, blaming tribal traditions and not Islam on women’s status in the Gulf region. Also, in a *Daily Telegraph* column, Geraldine Brooks (2001) writes: “I would campaign for any woman’s right to burn her headscarf, chador or whatever restrictive dress men in positions of power think she should be wearing. But after six years of working in the Middle East, I would now campaign just as vigorously for her right to wear that covering, if it is what she wants and believes in” (Brooks, 2001, p. 35).

The fact that some reporters chose to include such a comparison between feminists of the 1960s and Muslim women is interesting yet also importantly extraneous. It is interesting in the sense that journalists at least see the standpoint of Muslim women and acknowledge that they do not wear the hijab out of oppression as much as it is out of dignity and respect for their own bodies, similar to feminists in the 1960s, who shared that same feeling. Yet it is irrelevant because Muslim women have been wearing the hijab for centuries. There are periods in history and places when and where the cultural embrace of the hijab heightens but there are also times and places when it is discouraged. Hence, it would be difficult for a journalist working today to make a relevant comparison between a time of apparently required Western bra-burning and a need today for a veil-burning riot.

The comparison is inapt in other respects as well. In the 1960’s, feminists wanted to make their case public; they wanted the whole world to see beauty pageants as sexist and oppressive. In the case of veiled women, the situation is very different since many Muslim

women see the hijab as a personal choice, and not something Muslim women wish to impose on others or to force others to accept via rioting. Muslim women wear the hijab, sometimes amid the objection of family members, let alone a whole society or different culture. Even in extremely conservative societies like Saudi Arabia, which enforces the abaya, or Iran, where women are required to cover their hair, these are accepted by the women as cultural practices and, therefore, it is highly unlikely that these women would feel an urge to burn the covering. This is why comparing the hijab to the bra-burning era is irrelevant, which leads to the question, why does the issue keep reappearing, given such irrelevance? One possibility is that many reporters may have implicitly absorbed the stereotypical idea that the garment is invariably oppressive, and, relatedly, cannot help but see these women as backward and in need of emancipation.

Double Standards: The French Ban on Hijab

The only incident appearing in the dataset time period where one might argue that this comparison is viable relates to the worldwide unrest created when France announced its decision to ban the hijab in December 2003.⁶ At that time, newspapers everywhere reported that thousands of Muslim women worldwide protested the French ban. “From Baghdad and Beirut to London and Stockholm, protesters condemned the law as an attack on religious freedom,” reported the *Seattle Times*. “Even in the West Bank city of Nablus and in the summer capital of Indian-controlled Kashmir, Srinagar, women came out to support French Muslims” (*Seattle Times* world report, 2004, p.A18). This report, as well as others on the incident, quoted Muslim women chanting slogans such as: “Where is France? Where is tolerance?” or “The veil is my choice” (*Seattle Times* world report, 2004, p.A18). Ironically, of course, what this incident most fully demonstrates is that Muslim women worldwide held protests to *endorse* the hijab and not to

burn it. Hence, although it was not a replication of the alleged bra-burning of the 1960s era, it was similar in the women's solidarity in their support for the same beliefs and in their resort to protests to make these beliefs public.

One of the themes reported by some reporters is how the United States and its Western allies practice double standards by claiming that it's a woman's right to cover her hair in New York or London if she wants while at the same time claiming to "save" women from this same piece of cloth in places like Afghanistan. Other reporters discussed the ban on hijab in France, questioning why this garment was perceived as a threat. *The New York Times* reported on how the Bush administration voiced its objection to the French ban. Christopher Marquis (2003) quotes U.S. top-ranking official on religious freedom, John V. Hanford as saying "a fundamental principle of religious freedom that we work for in many countries of the world, including on this very issue of headscarves, is that all persons should be able to practice their religion and their beliefs peacefully, without government interference, as long as they are doing so without provocation and intimidation of others in society" (p. 8).

Yet several national newspapers reported stories that demonstrate how this official U.S. comment contradicts with reality. Newspapers across the nation reported on incidents where veiled women were asked by their school or employer to remove the garment. *Plain Dealer* reporter Karen Long (2003) cited the example of Amal Jamal, a senior student at a Catholic private academy, Regina High School, who was asked to remove her hijab because it violated the school's dress code (p. B1). The *Tampa Tribune* reported a case where a veiled Muslim social worker had filed a complaint claiming that she was discriminated against after converting to Islam and adopting the veil (Furtado, 2003, p.6). Anne Sweeney (2003) of the *Chicago Sun-Times* reported a similar story of a Muslim employee working at a juvenile detention center, who

was told by her boss not to wear the hijab. Finally, the *St. Petersburg Times* reported that the captain of women's basketball at the University of South Florida, a Muslim convert, quit because of the negative reaction she faced nationally after asking to wear religious clothing during games (Matus, 2004, p.1A).

Some local and international reports focused on the French banning of the hijab and on U.S. justifications of the war on Afghanistan to "liberate" women from the burqa. Barbara Amiel (2001) wrote in the *Daily Telegraph* wrote: "It seems we must fight to liberate women from the tyranny of the burqa under the fundamentalists of the Third World, but be vigilant in protecting a woman's right to wear it safely on Fifth Avenue" (p. 20). Amiel terms this intervention in Afghanistan "cultural imperialism," arguing that the West should "tolerate what others do to themselves," adding that the West was there as a response to the 9/11 attack and not to save women (p. 20). Amiel argues:

I don't like the single-child policy in China or female circumcision in Africa, but I don't expect Mr. Bush or Tony Blair to put Western soldiers at risk to change this. Buildings destroyed in Manhattan or Western embassies bombed in Africa are very much our problem, but we are not firing our missiles and risking World War Three in order to let women of cover show an ankle or make a three-point turn in their cars (p. 20).

In the *Jerusalem Post*, radio host and author Rabbi Shmuley Boteach (2003) wrote a column entitled "Leave Muslim women alone." The author sarcastically argues that if the West is going to save Arabs from tyrannical leaders, "let's hope no one becomes as dumb as the French. How else to explain a country that sees Saddam Hussein as benign, and fights to keep him in power, but views women's Islamic headdress as dangerous and shakes its society in order to get them banned?" He is also skeptical of France for "cracking down on the terrible danger

posed by Islamic women who have the truly dangerous practice of demanding that they only be treated by female doctors” (p. 15).⁷ Boteach’s column treats the hijab as the Muslim woman’s right, which is an interesting change to the dominating argument that the hijab is forced on women. He argues that countries like France confuse Muslim extremism with pious practices such as the hijab, adding that the West can be more effective by praising these “righteous practices” while “condemning” Islamic terrorists. “I applaud those Islamic women in the West who exercise their free choice to cover their bodies and not participate in the increasing Western sport of women as male entertainment,” argues Boteach. “The fact that they overdo it is a lot better than underdoing it. And who are the French, anyway, to lecture the world about women’s rights when they are at the forefront of female exploitation and misogyny?” (p. 15). Boteach’s message here seems to be that the real oppression resides not in the fact of women wearing the hijab but in trying to prevent them from doing so if that is what they want.

Another opinion piece that emphasizes Muslim women’s right to choose the veil is an *Irish Times* piece, where Lara Marlowe (2003) asks: “why should France, the self-proclaimed country of human rights, feel compelled to save Muslim women from a piece of cloth?” Marlowe further questions why the headscarf is viewed as “so offensive on the head of a Muslim schoolgirl, but perfectly acceptable if its Hermes silk worn by the British queen or a lady from the 16th arrondissement?” The author is perplexed as to why the hijab causes little or no problem in the U.S. as compared to other countries like France. Her message is: “stop poisoning inter-faith relations with your headscarf obsession” (p.13).

In sum, these reporters seem to be saying the veil is a Muslim woman’s right and personal choice and it should not be stereotyped as a sign of Muslim extremism or oppression. The reporters also seem to carry the opinion that the West should not claim that it is saving

women elsewhere from the oppressive face or hair cover when in truth it is fighting a war against terrorism following 9/11. This coverage presents a more sympathetic approach to veiling, where reporters accept it as a Muslim woman's right, introducing a significant change from dominating portrayals of the hijab as enforced on women by Islam and patriarchy. But the problem with these sample stories is that they lack the Muslim woman's voice; they include little or no input from Muslim women, hence once more, reporters talk on the behalf of the Muslim woman. Although one might argue that Muslim women are therefore deemed helpless and cannot speak for themselves but as argued earlier, it is the normal practice of opinion pieces, which make the bulk of this section, to rely on the reporter's voice and no one else's.

The New Fashion of Hijab

An interesting theme introduced by several local and international reporters is the hijab as a fashionable dress code. Reporters in such accounts explain to readers how Muslim women, as much as any other women, are fashion-conscious. A *Seattle Times* article, for example, explains how some Seattle Muslims have started to sell Muslim-style clothes and scarves in their homes, given the shortage of such fashions in the U.S. Reporter Florangela Davila (2001) describes the colorful scarves displayed in the home of one Muslim woman during what she terms as the "scarf party." Her report is also filled with quotes from various Muslim women, who explain why they turned to the hijab and how they feel about it. "I can see some Pakistani sisters wearing these," party hostess Michaela Corning is quoted as saying. "And the Somali sisters might like these," she adds, referring to the sparkly fuchsia and lime-green scarves. Davila explains to readers how Corning and her Muslim friends get into a debate with some non-Muslim friends

about whether or not Islam oppresses women sexually. “The truth is we are very happy with our own healthy sexuality,” explains Corning, “We just don’t want to show it off” (p. B1).

A *Toronto Sun* article explains how in Dubai, women wear the latest fashions and expensive jewelry underneath their black burkas (Warmington, 2003, p.20). The lesson reporter Lane Fraser-Sims (2003) of the *Ottawa Citizen* draws from these facts is that women everywhere are basically the same. In an article titled “Cloak couture: Sharp-eyed Arab girls can spot an expensive black abaya from miles away,” she tells readers she herself refuses to “weigh in on the popular Western debate over whether ‘covering’ is a form of female oppression.” Fraser-Sims adds, “I can say it sometimes represents something common to women around the world: fashion” (p. E10). She goes on to add that while in some parts of the world women “obsess” about clothes, shows, jewelry or hair, in the Gulf area, the abaya is not just a “black robe” for Muslim women. Everything from the length, to the type of fabric, the style and decoration make the abaya a fashionable dress for women. “Yes, the color is limiting,” argues Fraser-Sims. “But sharp-eyed Arab girls can spot an expensive black abaya from miles away” (p. E10). The abayas that seem to catch this reporter’s eye are the dressy ones worn by fashion-conscious women in the Gulf that are “adorned with embroidery, rhinestones, feathers—even, during 20 C winters, with fur at the cuffs” (p. E 10). The Gulf women’s increasing awareness of fashionable abayas has attracted fashion designers like French designer Judith Duriez, who started out designing abayas, scarves or shaylas as they are also known, for wealthy sheikhas and later established her own abaya and shayla business. Her abayas and shaylas now sell somewhere between \$300 up to \$1,600, which is the price of a “luxury abaya” Fraser-Sims explains. The reporter argues that although fashion is not “the great equalizer [or] the true way to break down cultural walls,” yet

she also believes it shows how “there’s a commonality among women when it comes to clothes” (p. E10).

These stories perpetuate the frame of the *fashionable Muslim woman*, who seems just as conscious about her outwards appearance like women everywhere. Reporters here clarify that Muslim women want to look good in clothes too, and want to feel confident about themselves while not exposing their bodies. Even in places like Saudi Arabia, where the women have little choice over what to wear in public, the women spend large sums of money on fashionable abayas so as to personalize their garment and look unique among others.

But not everyone shares this view. Several reporters have noted that the Saudi Arabian authorities are displeased with the new fancy abayas worn by Saudi women everywhere. A *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* wire report said that the Saudi government was “cracking down on factories producing versions of women’s cloaks that violate religious rules” (2002, p.16A). Fraser Sims explains that Saudi authorities claimed that decorative abayas -- ones that have glittery red or blue sequins, or cuffs, or even a jeans pocket sewn on the back -- were attracting too much attention to the women, and in some cases, certain styles of the abaya were too revealing or inappropriate. She cites the example of one abaya that bore the phrase: “Dare you touch me?” on the back in Arabic (p. E10). While the Saudi government’s restrictive policies here might seem extreme, it is not surprising, given that the Kingdom is in fact too restrictive of women’s freedom. Further, given that Saudi Arabia is extremely conservative, if not the most conservative Muslim country, it does make sense (within such a logic) that any additional color or wording on an abaya would attract too much attention to women, an outcome that would create concern for the kingdom’s leaders who argue in defense of protecting feminine virtue.

It would be naïve to claim that Saudi Arabia has no oppression, but what is missing from the coverage is any sense that counts as oppressive for one woman might not be so for a woman from a different culture. A *New York Times* article, for example, cites an incident where a senior female Bush administrator was visiting a Saudi female university and expressed her wish that Saudi women would soon be allowed to drive as well as to enjoy other liberties enjoyed by American women. Interestingly, her audience, comprised of 500 Saudi women dressed in black abayas, challenged the official (Weisman, 2005). One woman told her: "The general image of the Arab woman is that she isn't happy. Well, we're all pretty happy." The woman's comments drew applause from the students, faculty members and some professionals who filled the room (*New York Times* online). A Saudi female doctor also told the Bush administrator that driving is not on her priority list. "I don't want to drive a car," she said. "I worked hard for my medical degree. Why do I need a driver's license?" (Weisman, 2005, *New York Times* online). Finally, a Saudi student explained to the American visitor that Westerners do not understand the advantages that come with wearing the abaya. "I love my abaya," explained the student. "It's convenient and it can be very fashionable" (Weisman, 2005, *New York Times* online).

The point of these counterexamples is not to defend the claim that Saudi women are wholly free – in fact, the instances just cited concentrate on the experiences of economically upper class women, who might be expected to enjoy the greatest degree of autonomy and whose freedom to maneuver may stand in stark contrast to women living in poorer circumstances. Rather, what they reveal is the simple omission of any diverse representations in other more restrictive portrayals generalizing the lived experiences of Arab women. Weisman's article is an important exception to the general rules governing the coverage, since it brings to readers Saudi women's personal opinions on the abaya and their lives, contradicting many reporters' claims

that Saudi women are inherently oppressed by their black abaya. Weisman gave Saudi women the opportunity to speak for themselves rather than speak on their behalf, and so it is interesting to note that none of these women voiced a personal desire to get rid of the abaya.

International coverage of the hijab and fashion includes a Cairo story from the *Australian* by reporter Jackie Dent (2003), who tells readers how the hijab has grown into “the hot” accessory for Egyptian women. She specifically talks about a new fashion magazine that joined the likes of *Vogue*, *Harper’s Bazaar* and *Marie Claire* on the newsstands of the wealthier parts of Cairo. Yet this magazine, called *Jumanah*, has a very different style. Instead of finding “pale, slender beauties dressed in Gaultier, flashing breasts and thighs, the Arab models in Jumanah were veiled, their wrists and ankles hidden behind chic Egyptian fashion” (p. 16). Dent claims this fashionable hijab is known in Cairo as “the new hijab” and it is driven by young Muslim women who want to dress modestly and look good at the same time. “Instead of donning black scarves and shapeless dresses to get closer to God, new hijab girls are customizing their Western wardrobes to match their newly acquired scarves and religiosity,” claims the reporter (p. 16).

Dent explains that the new hijab started around 2001, with stores across Cairo catering to the trendy needs of middle and upper class young women who are returning to Islam. Nesrine Samara, a 26-year-old marketing manager and creator of *Jumanah*, is quoted as saying: “People’s idea of hijab is something very traditional and it’s not like that,” comments the young woman in her jeans, long blouse, blue scarf and tan boots. “When you get dressed, you want to look good right? You find the right T-shirt with the right pants and sandals, and yeah, my hair looks kind of cute when it’s all fluffy,” Samara goes on to explain. “It’s exactly the same thing for us here. We want to find ways of looking good in a veil” (Dent, 2003, p. 16). Satellite television also joined in this fashion frenzy, with certain channels providing women with tips on how to tie their scarf

in different styles and information in the hottest fashions and colors. Dent quotes many Egyptian girls who say they feel confident about the veil, because now they can be closer to God while maintaining their stylish dress. “You can look good and be veiled and be fashionable at the same time,” says Samara. “There is no fear about it. I want to encourage people to feel good in hijab” (p. 16).

Dent’s article and others illustrate the infrequently noticed possibility that women who wear the veil do not entirely lose their sense of style, and the prospect that although they do not like to be judged by their looks and how well their outfits accentuate their bodies, they still strive to look presentable and fashionable. One explanation for this might be that because women cover so much of their body with the hijab, they want to ensure that they cover it in an attractive way, because most people feel more confident if they look presentable, irrelevant of how conservative or not they are. But another explanation may have to do with all the stereotyping on women who wear the hijab. These women have been referred to as oppressed and backward and their dresses have been termed “shapeless,” “ugly,” and sometimes “ghost-like,” which could explain why many veiled women are working hard to defy the stereotype and to prove that a woman can be modest, conservative and stylish at the same time.

While Dent presents the Muslim woman in a fairly sympathetic frame, displaying the women’s elegance and eye for fashion, the reporter’s wording on several occasions appears rather harsh and maybe even prejudiced, where she returns in full circle to dominating stereotypes. On several occasions, Dent refers to the more traditional styles of hijab and the long robes as “shapeless.” For example, she argues that many girls have been “scared off” the veil because of the “austerity” of traditional Islamic clothes, which she describes to be a “nun-like headdress down to the waist, worn over an ankle-length, shapeless dress” (p. 16). She follows

this comment with a much harsher one, saying “Fashion-conscious women, fearful of looking like their veiled maids or losing their trendy image, are inherently bringing chic to hijab, which in turn is inspiring other girls to take the veil” (p. 16). Finally, towards the end of her column, while explaining that even the abaya has started to vary in its design, Dent (2003) claims that there are still other women who “are more radical and look like black ghosts in the niqab, a flowing black robe with matching black gloves, socks and face veil” (p. 16).

To what extent does this reporting perpetrate bias? Dent focuses exclusively on the higher social classes in Egypt; all the girls she interviews are middle to upper class, based on their education and employment status. This brings us back to the new stereotype of the middle class Muslim woman and of a divided culture (dominated by oppressed women, where only a few speak or act out), which as previously argued, can be very misleading in the absence of fuller contextualizing information. Dent also gives the impression that the “maid” class is not fashion-conscious and therefore is not into this new hijab, which is not the case. Just as there are stores in the wealthier parts of Egypt that provide the latest hijab fashions, lower class women also have access to stores providing similar styles, lower priced and in most cases of poorer quality. What Dent fails to explain is that fashion is not fixed to certain social classes, since any style can be presented at varying prices and qualities to serve the needs of different people, depending on their financial capabilities. One might also call attention to the prejudice embedded in the assertion that these upper class young girls do not want to look like their maids. There are no quotes by these girls to support her claim. To compound the impression with the assumption that girls are drawn to hijab because of new fashions or are driven away from it because it is unattractive is thus misleading, given Muslim feminist literature demonstrating how the majority of women and girls who chose to cover their hair do so for reasons of faith and the expression of

their Islamic identity (El-Guindi, 2003; Hoodfar, 2003; Merali, 2006). Hence, religion comes first for these women and then comes fashion, not the other way around. Then again, Dent goes back to the stereotypical labeling of Islamic dresses as shapeless, ghost-like as well as “radical.” It is important to note that aside from countries like Saudi Arabia and Iran, where women live with strict guidelines on what to wear, women across the Arab and Muslim world vary in their style preferences and their conservatism. While some women do not wear the hijab altogether, others find a hair cover to be sufficient, while many prefer to wear the long abaya and some women are content wearing the niqab, or face veil and the gloves, that Dent terms as “radical.” Hence, it seems unfair that she distorts their image as such and turns them into extremists because of what they choose to wear, given that there are no mandatory guidelines in Egypt on what women should wear.

Hijab as a fashion has been a focus of many reporters, both locally and internationally. Yet, these stories are not only focused on how women wear the hijab fashionably, there are two international stories, for example, that argue that women who wear the hijab might be obsessing about their bodies more than women who do not. A *Sunday Telegraph* story cites a research study by the University of California, which found that women in Iran, who have to cover themselves from head to toe and have little or no exposure to “images of unnaturally thin models and actresses in magazines and on television,” are also obsessed with their weight just like Western women. The study compared 59 students in Iran to 45 students of Iranian decent who live in Los Angeles. Jenny Booth (2001) tells readers that this study concluded that “women in Iran were just as likely to develop the slimmers’ diseases anorexia and bulimia” (p. 06). In fact, the study also found that in some cases, Iranian women had more symptoms of eating disorders than their Western counterparts. “Although a tiny minority of the Iranian women did have some

contact with Western culture, despite the legal ban on Western television and magazines, the researchers found no connection between the number of television programs they watched and how thin they wanted to be” (p. 06).

Booth (2001) relies on two females for comment on this finding: one is Yasmine Alibhai Brown, an author and broadcaster on women’s issues, and Ziba Mir-Hosseini, who makes films on Iranian women. These sources express contradicting opinions as to why Iranian girls obsess about their bodies. Alibhai-Brown asserts that because women are forced to cover up in Iran, this makes them more obsessed about their looks rather than freeing them from body images. “I wonder if, when you deny people the right to be attractive in public places, they become obsessed with attractiveness in private places,” Alibhai-Brown is quoted as saying (Booth, 2001, p. 06). Mir-Hosseini on the other hand, argues that Western media do in fact have large impact on these girls, just as they do on Los Angeles girls. “I dispute that women in Iran are not bombarded by Western culture, especially the educated and intelligent women who go to university,” she argues. “It is a global culture these days, and Western ideas and culture are seen as the ideal. The image of beauty comes from the West, and that is an image of very thin women” (Booth, 2001, p. 06).

One could argue that Mir-Hosseini’s opinion is the more convincing of the two views, given the spread of new media technologies and the easy access to information via satellite, Internet, television as well as newspapers and magazines. Even in a restrictive society like Iran, where the government does filter the Internet and cover up magazine images of women wearing revealing clothes, there are still many images available out there and multiple ways to access them.⁸ The CBS News online, for example, aired a story on plastic surgery in Iran that showed Iranians paying thousands of dollars to have their noses look like famous Western icons such as

Jennifer Lopez. The story quoted one Iranian woman as saying “a Western nose is more beautiful” (2005, CBS News online). The story also quotes photographer Newsha Tavakolian as saying that this “nose craze” is heavily influenced by Western satellite television. "Everyone saw how the Western women, they have very small nose and look almost like Barbie, and the Iranian women, they see them and they say, 'Oh, I want to look like them,'" Tavakolian is quoted as saying. "They want to make their nose small" (CBS News online). Furthermore, the argument that Iranian women who cover their hair are the very ones obsessed with their looks is rather weak, given that both Iranian men and women are experiencing this “nose craze.” The same report tells readers that Iranian men are also interested in these nose jobs. It quotes one Iranian male as saying: "Iranians in general have big noses and that's one of the reasons why this surgery is so popular," (CBS News online).

This example illustrates that men and women are interested in looking attractive, irrespective of a head cover. It also demonstrates that Western culture is in fact very influential in Iran as in other places across the Muslim world. Booth’s article generalizes about Iranian women without referring back to these women, whereas the more in-depth CBS story quotes Iranian men and women who tell readers why they resort to plastic surgery and who they want to look like. Booth’s article, thus demonstrates weak journalistic practices adopted by some who tend to rely on one or two sources, not necessarily the most experienced or knowledgeable about the subject, to generalize about a whole group, which essentially leads to distortion. Her article also displays lack of research, as the reporter makes no effort to prove or disprove the claim that Iranians have limited access to Western culture, when it turns out they do, given that some girls are familiar with Jennifer Lopez and other Western icons.

The second article on this subject is by Alibhai-Brown (2001) who, consistent with her statement in Booth's story, insists that the more women are forced into covering up the more they become obsessed with their bodies and looks. She writes in *The Independent* of two specific stories that she sees as separate yet intertwined. One is the study discussed earlier on Iranian women's eating disorders, while the second is based on personal accounts by Brown's friends in Pakistan on how some women in Afghanistan were taken to prison for among other things, owning make-up or perfumes. Alibhai-Brown argues that women worldwide, influenced by Western beauty standards, fuss over their looks and weight. "But could it be that these anxieties are worse for Iranian and other veiled women because they are so desperate to get some kind of control over their lives, some kind of autonomy, in an existence which offers so little personal freedom and choice" (p. 5). Alibhai-Brown here assumes that because the women are veiled they have no control over their lives, which is not necessarily the case. Even in Iran, veiled women work as doctors, engineers, sports players as well as artists, which surely demonstrates that these women have freedom to both work and think independently. Alibhai-Brown further assumes that veiled women are "desperate" yet it is not clear how she can make such a huge claim, given that there are no quotes or studies cited in this article to support these claims. The writer also claims that women who wear the veil or burqa do not necessarily want it. She argues that the women of Afghanistan want to remove the burqa, but they are just afraid to do so. "And please don't tell me women must want the burqa because they have not all thrown it off to dance semi naked in the streets," she contends. "They can't give up something that they have lived under for so many years without fear and they don't trust the men from the Northern Alliance not to violate them" (Alibhai-Brown, 2001, p. 5). The next quote she uses in her article in fact counters Alibhai-

Brown's argument as she relies on a quote from the Muslim researcher Sitara Khan's (1999) book *A Glimpse Through Purdah*, where Khan writes:

I wear the burqa, and would want my daughters to because this frees us from the horrible looks and wants of men outside the family and also makes us happy to be what we are. I don't need to diet, or color my lips. My husband likes me how I am and always will. Non Muslim women [have] nervous breakdowns because they must be young forever and look like film stars (Khan as quoted in Brown, 2001, p.5).

But Alibhai-Brown disregards this statement, arguing that "the truth is more messy and complex and I hope the stories I alluded to will lead us to reconsider the bland and brash statements we have all been making on the lives and desires of women in veils" (p. 5). Although Alibhai-Brown here relies on a Muslim woman's opinion, she still discounts it and is convinced it is a senseless, "brand and brash" statement. One might question why Brown uses Khan's quote, which is obviously a genuine account based on Khan's own personal experience wearing the burqa, if all she does with it is ridicule it. Yet Alibhai-Brown provides no significant evidence to support her counter claims. In fact, her argument is based on personal assumptions and on the one study on Iranian women's eating habits and on accounts that some women in Afghanistan were interested in make-up even if it got them to prison. She cites several examples of how veiled women still spend a lot of money on make-up, lingerie as well as perfumes, adding that some of these burqa-donned women "queue up in Harley street for cosmetic surgery, especially when they get to their thirties and begin to fear that their husbands will dump them for younger wives" (p.5).

Alibhai-Brown is making several assumptions here that might be questioned. On the one hand, she assumes that just because a woman is veiled she has no interest in looking good for herself, if not for anybody else. Many veiled women would argue that they still like to look

attractive, wear nice clothes, jewelry and make-up, just like many other women. Many veiled women also wear revealing clothes in front of their husbands and female relatives and friends, which is no crime in Islam. No rule exists to say veiled women cannot look attractive or to prevent a woman from looking attractive while wearing a veil. Islam does not ask women to look ugly; it merely asks that they dress modestly; hence Alibhai-Brown's statement here makes little sense.

Furthermore, her claims that some women resort to plastic surgery fearing that their husbands will fall for younger women is a huge generalization. Yet, it applies to women worldwide; there are women in each and every country who might have the same insecurities, irrelevant of whether or not they wear the veil. More significantly to the issue of reportorial practice, if Alibhai-Brown's claim is true and women who are forced to wear the veil turn to plastic surgery, no evidence is presented to support the claim. To the contrary, according to the International Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, the total number of plastic surgery procedures in 2002 for Saudi Arabia, where women are forced to wear the face veil, was 550 surgeries, versus 3,270 in Lebanon, where more than 40 percent of the population is non Muslim, and the highest number is in the United States, where the majority of women do not cover their hair, with 90, 992 surgeries for the same period.⁹ If Alibhai-Brown's theory was accurate then one would expect countries like Saudi Arabia and Iran to have significant numbers of surgeries, but that is not the case, since Saudi Arabia has an insignificant number and Iran is not even on the list.

Towards the end of the article, Alibhai-Brown's concludes that while she understands how for some women who wear the veil the "beauty business is empowerment" she fears that "for others, like the anorexic Muslim women in Tehran, it is an expression of self doubt and

desperation. And we should all be concerned about that” (p. 5). The conclusion contains a range of unverifiable assumptions. The reporter here concludes that some women in Iran are anorexic because of the veil and this in turn makes them desperate for attention. If this were the case then surely levels of anorexia all over the Muslim world would be so high that the whole world would have discovered it by now. Further, the fact that the writer believes that “we should all be concerned,” even read in the most sympathetic light, does implicitly reproduce the old stereotypes of the weak, helpless Muslim woman, who cannot speak for herself and therefore awaits the Western heroine to be her liberator. This belief that “we” should do something rather than “they” (the Muslim women, assuming that they need to do something), can thus be read as reflecting the notion that many Western reporters do in fact believe that Muslim women need help and need to be freed from their oppressors. Overall, Alibhai-Brown’s column portrays Muslim women in the classic stereotype of the oppressed and helpless but with a new twist. The author uses plastic surgery, a modern phenomenon, to justify her conclusions on Muslim women who wear the veil and to depict them as insecure and unconfident because of the veil, which drives them to plastic surgery, eating disorders and shopping for beauty accessories.

In general, articles analyzed in this theme highlight two trends: one is to actually view Muslim women as all other women when it comes to fashion-consciousness and the desire to look attractive. Articles that focus on this idea have portrayed Muslim women as confident and creative and staying on top of what is trendy, when it comes to veiling styles and colors. These articles once again defied dominating stereotypes by giving women more control over the stories and allowing them to express both why they chose the hijab and why they still want to look attractive. The women are essentially allowed to speak for themselves and for their choices. The second trend that comes out of articles on fashion is the long-held view that women are in fact

oppressed and forced into veiling which essentially renders them desperate and unconfident, forcing them to resort to unhealthy habits like eating disorders or in other cases to plastic surgery. Also within this group are reporters who support the view that veiling outfits are ugly, shapeless and sometimes even “ghostly.” Articles that fall under this trend more often than not are based on the reporter’s own conclusions and assumptions. The Muslim women’s opinions are rarely in the story, and when they are included, they are in fact discounted as senseless and unconvincing. In this case, reporters render the Muslim woman into silence as they feel it is their job to speak on her behalf and to liberate her from oppression.

This brings us to the discussion of journalistic practices that could explain such coverage. One could argue that socialization plays an important role in causing reporters to view other cultures from their own cultural perspective. Alibhai-Brown, for instance, draws conclusions about Iranian women, possibly, based on her own belief that strict dress codes cause women to be insecure about their appearance. Another explanation for the distortion in the coverage could be related to lack of sufficient research and sources that could possibly bring more objectivity and context to the reporter’s own opinion. Hence, lack of adequate sources and research, compounded by the dominating voice of the reporter, in many cases leads to distortion and stereotyping on Muslim and Arab women.

The Hijab as a Sign of Women’s Oppression

The final theme drawn from coverage on Islamic dress codes is the hijab as the most flagrant sign of female oppression. By the end of 2003, the wave of sympathetic reporting on Muslim women slowly begins to dissipate and to be replaced with the long-held stereotype of the oppressed, weak, backward and helpless Muslim woman, who is controlled by her faith and by

the powerful men in her life. With regards to the hijab, both national and international articles analyzed, in general portrayed women within this dominating stereotype. Everything from the choice of words, the quotes to the main argument or point made all seem to look down on the hijab as backward and as the Muslim men's way of dominating the women. Western reports on Muslim women who don the hijab have described these women as "ghosts" as one *San Francisco Chronicle* reporter explains. "Sometimes you can see their faces. Sometimes just their eyes. Sometimes you see nothing at all of the humans beneath the black shrouds" (Ryan, 2004, p.B1). Muslim women have also been described as "peering dark-eyed from inside their burkhas," as one *Scotland* reporter writes (Deerin, 2004, p.16). Such words alienate the women; they are depicted almost as phantoms that wander about, peeping their eyes from within their cocoons. The women's long dresses, known as abayas or chador and face covers, known as burqa, or nikab have also been described in such insensitive terms. The abayas have been termed by an *Advertiser* reporter as "shapeless robes and by a *Plain Dealer* journalist as the "black baglike garment" (Harris, 2001, p.2; Marchetti, 2003, p. J11).

Then there are reporters who just come outright and call the hijab oppressive and backward. One example is a *Toronto Star* article titled: "Lifting the veil on women's enslavement," Where reporter Michele Landsberg (2002) tells readers how a few years back, while in Paris, she had seen an Arab man strolling in the "shimmering heat" in casual clothes, while "close behind him trailed two women and several children." The women wore "stifling" black chadors. But what really distressed the reporter and had her nearly "choking" was the metal masks they wore on their upper faces, which is a face mask worn by some traditional Bedouin women. "Those dead, shuttered, hollow-eyed faces were the ugliest image of enslavement I have ever seen," Landsberg declares. "I couldn't sleep that night, and it wasn't

because of the heat. To see women in a state of such abject abasement, paraded through the sophisticated City of Light, was literally sickening” (p. A02). Not only does this strong-worded passage depict women as ghosts, it portrays them as slaves that “trail behind” their male master. It almost renders them as coming from another world or another century where they just cannot fit amid the sophistication of Paris, or the “City of Light” as Landsberg terms it. This passage is quite severe in its stereotyping and claims that these women are enslaved because of their dress code. Nowhere in the article does Landsberg attempt to ask these women how they really felt about their outfits, so how can she be so adamant in her enslavement claim? Landsberg extends her stereotyping of Muslim women when she tells her readers about six documentaries that were aired on the Canadian *iChannel* where Muslim men commit crimes against women in the name of Islam. Although she mentions briefly that these men act “misguidedly” the more dominant message in Landsberg’s article is that men justify violence such as honor crimes, female circumcision and forced marriages to “invoking the law of Islam” (p.A02).

The negative stereotyping of Muslim women in the news does not stop there. Some reports give off the impression that all Muslim women are one and the same. They are all represented as an Other who is alien to Western readers in her appearance and her thoughts. One such example is a *Boston Globe* article where three Iraqi sisters, Fatima, 16, Zainab, 15, and Anesa 12, residing in Dearborn, are interviewed about the possible creation of a democracy in Iraq. Reporter Jeffrey Ghannam (2003) tells readers that although the three sisters “wore nearly identical black robes [abayas] and headscarves at a memorial service...each had her own opinion on Iraq’s future, with emphasis on equal rights for women” (p. A3). This sentence comes close to implying that it is unusual or abnormal for the girls to have different opinions, given that they all wear the same outfit. It is as if all Muslim women who choose to wear an abaya or headscarf are

not expected to have independent opinions that reflect their individual personalities, but instead should all share the same thoughts since they are all one and the same woman.

Another reporter reported on how Fox's Bill O'Reilly views all veiled Muslim women as one and the same. To O'Reilly, these women are "the most unattractive women in the world." This *Daily News* article, which jokes that the Fox TV host "has brought a PR Jihad on himself, cites quotes by O'Reilly to the magazine *Stuff*, where he says: "You can't see them...So you are assuming that, if [they're] dressed head to toe in black and I can only see eyebrows, there's something going on" (cited in Rush et. al., 2002, p. 24). This *Daily News* article, however, took a more sympathetic approach by publishing reactions from the Muslim community, which denounced O'Reilly and deemed his comments "extremely offensive and racist" (p.24).

Another report in the London *Guardian* brings us back to scholarly work on Orientalism and the colonial gaze. Reporter Jonathan Cook (2003) starts his lead with a distinction between the blond-haired Jewish woman, the focus of his story, who is hard to miss amid "the rest of the women who cover their dark hair with scarves..." (p. 6). The reporter here automatically assumes that beneath the veil, the women hide "dark hair" even though he has no way of knowing what color their hair is. This ties in with postcolonial works by scholars such as Yegenoglu (2003) who, in talking of the relationship between the French colonizer and the Algerian veiled woman, explains that the oriental woman was turned into an enigma because of her veil, which protected her from the Western gaze. Thus her veil was considered some sort of mask, which is imagined to hide something behind it. The same argument can be applicable to this article, where Cook, who has no way of knowing that all the veiled women have dark hair, imagines that these Palestinian women hide dark hair beneath their veils.

This enigma of the veil seems to continue till today as reports on the hijab and how it is perceived by many Westerners continues to dominate many national and international news stories. While some reporters were becoming more conscious of the Muslim woman's right to speak for herself and to wear the hijab, others remained convinced that it is the Western reporter's duty to unveil Muslim women's so-called "oppression." Reporter Meilssa Fletcher Stoeltje (2002) tells her readers that, although her two Western female sources came out of a visit to Dubai convinced that women are not so oppressed after all, we should not fall for that claim so naively. She argues in the *San Antonio Express-News* that even though "some" women wear the veil by choice, "the whole concept (which is not rooted in the Quran) is objectionable, based as it is on the belief that women's bodies threaten the social order." She goes on to add that this idea is very convenient for men, as it lets them get away easily with "bad behavior" (p.1D).

Stoeltje's article can be criticized as factually inaccurate, starting with her claim that the hijab has no basis in the Quran. Although scholars agree that the hijab predates Islam and traditional Arabs, whether Jews, Christians or Muslims used to wear it (www.submission.org), yet they also point to several Quranic verses that ask women to dress modestly and cover their bosoms. This has been interpreted as a covering of the hair and chest:

And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what must ordinarily appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers, or their brothers' sons or their sisters' sons, or their women or the servants whom their right hands possess, or male servants free of physical needs, or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex, and that they

should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments. And O you Believers, turn you all together towards Allah, that you may attain Bliss. (Quran 24:31).

One American Muslim scholar, Sheikh Yusuf Estes (2006), Director of islamtomorrow.com, and National Chaplain WAMY,¹⁰ also states that Islam defined the proper attire for both sexes. He adds that Islam also carefully laid out guidelines for both men and women on how to behave toward each other. He cites the example of *surat* An-Nur in verses 30 and 31, which explains how one must act in the presence of the opposite sex: “Tell the believing men to LOWER THEIR GAZE...” And then “Tell the believing women to LOWER THEIR GAZE...” Estes therefore argues that “immediately we understand that it is more than just the clothing that is desired. It is the proper respect and behavior of the two sexes toward each other at all times” (Islamonline.net).

Hence this refutes Stoeltje’s claim that women are told to dress modestly to get men off the hook for bad behavior. One has to question the journalistic logic of making such claims, without referring back to the source, namely the Quran, or Muslim scholars. The most obvious weakness in Stoeltje’s article from a journalistic perspective is her lack of research on this topic, which in turn, leads the reporter to make distorted claims about hijab and why women feel a need to wear it to make up for men’s bad behavior. Western coverage of Islamic dress codes rarely informs readers that the dress codes apply to both men and women. In addition, it seems that even when the Muslim woman talks and defends her right to wear the hijab and explains how it empowers her and makes her stronger, her message is still veiled by some reporters who continue to assume on her behalf that it must be oppressive.

Another local article that carries the dominant stereotype of the oppressed Muslim woman comes from *USA Today*. Reporter Carol Memmott (2004) introduces readers to the book *Inside my Kingdom: My Life in Saudi Arabia*, by Carmen Bin Laden (2004), former wife of Osama Bin Laden's half brother. Memmott tells readers that this book "boldly displays the plight of women who live under the restrictions of Islam" (p. 4D). She adds that even though Carmen Bin Laden took regular trips to Europe, where she bought jewelry, furs and designer clothes, when back in Saudi Arabia, she still had to wear the black abaya. The reporter, who is summarizing the key points of Carmen Bin Laden's book, says the book author decided to cut ties with the Bin Laden family, because of her husband's infidelity and for fear "that her daughters would become religious fanatics forced to live the incarcerated lives of typical Saudi women" (p. 4D). Memmott selects this quote from the former Bin Laden wife to end her article: "I could not face the prospect that my daughters might grow up to become like the faceless, voiceless women I lived among" (p. 4D).

Although it is normal for a reporter to select excerpts from the book they are presenting to readers, it is also standard for them to add their own analysis, interpretation or opinion on the book and the author. In this case, the reporter relies heavily on the book author, adding very little of her own comments or critiques. The fact that Memmott has little to add to Carmen Bin Laden's negative comments about Islam and about Muslim women could be read as a sign of her approval or consent to these statements. This is evident from her opening comment, where she says the book shows women's "plight under the restrictions of Islam." Of course there is no doubt that women in Saudi Arabia are deprived of many basic rights compared to other women around the world. The list includes access to driving, education in all fields, employment as well as political participation among other things. Yet the main deprivation or restriction readers are

told about, both in the book presented and in the news report, relates to Islam. Readers are told the women wear the abaya, and later told how they seem “faceless” thus leaving readers with the impression that this is really the women’s biggest obstacle. Neither author clarifies if these negative impressions about Muslim women are based on personal accounts by Muslim women on just how frustrating and oppressive their life in Saudi Arabia really is. While it is understandable that Western-raised Carmen found it difficult to adjust to traditional Saudi customs, this does not mean that all Saudi women feel the exact same way and share her opinion that their lives are “incarcerated.” In fact, on various occasions Saudi women have criticized Western women for making the wrong assumptions about their lives and their needs, as demonstrated by the example of Saudi women’s reaction to the senior Bush administrator, discussed earlier in this section.

On the international side, a *Financial Times* book essay by Geraldine Brooks (2004) informs readers how Muslim women cannot win either way. The essay, titled “Double Jeopardy Muslim women can’t win,” explains how in “Islamic countries” women can be “flogged off” for not covering their hair, while in the west they “can be denied a public education or harassed in the street” for veiling (p. 26). Although the author seems sympathetic towards Muslim women, justifying in her essay why Muslim women prefer the hijab, she still goes back to the stereotype of the oppressed and helpless Muslim woman as victim, who is controlled like a puppet by powerful males back home as well as in the West. Brooks (2004) also exaggerates when she claims that in “Islamic countries” women can be flogged for not wearing the hijab, given that this is an extreme practice of very few Muslim countries and not the majority. “Perhaps because they have been forced into the frontline by their visibility, or perhaps because the most onerous burdens of Islam’s extremists have fallen on their shoulders, Muslim women are emerging as the

faith's most passionate polemicists" (Brooks, 2004, p. 26). This is how Brooks introduces readers to the many old and young Muslim feminists that are writing about Islam and coming to its defense. Again, Muslim women are portrayed to be helpless; they seem to have ended up in an awkward situation because of their hijab and they have no control over. Brooks' comments here contradict with comments made in her previous column, discussed earlier on in this chapter, where she had actually asserted that if women want to wear the hijab, then it is their choice (2001, p.35).

Brooks (2004) discusses in her essay two books written by what she terms "fresh, young voices [that] are emerging in the west, where the experience of growing up in noisy democracies such as the U.S. and Canada is emboldening a new generation of Muslim women writers" (p. 26). The two Muslim female authors she is referring to are Irshad Manji and Asma Gull Hasan. The reporter explains to her readers that Manji was raised in Canada, which is diverse and has Muslims who are Arab, Asian as well as African American. This leads Brooks to inaccurately conclude that this diversity has created an "American-style Islam." This new Islam that she believes exists is one that is free of:

cultural accretions-the customs that are often the worst of the anti-women practices associated with the faith, such as female genital mutilation, face veiling and denial of the right to a life outside the home – are eroded in the quest for the essentials of a faith that all can agree upon (p. 26).

Not only does Brooks create distortion by introducing female genital mutilation as a cultural practice approved by Islam,¹¹ she also scorns the hijab, claiming that it is "one of the worst" anti-women practices adopted by Islam. In her new "American-style Islam," Brooks (2004) explains

that although men and women might still sit at separate tables during the Virginia mosque's monthly potluck, not all the women are veiled:

Some, in fact, are pierced. As the mother of one nose-ringed, tongue-studded teenager explained to me: 'People in this society are going to have to recognize that a Muslim woman with a nose ring can be just as Muslim as a woman with a headscarf (p. 26).

It is important to note that this very same quote was used by Brooks (2001) in her *Daily Telegraph* column, yet the author introduced this so-called mother there to readers as "my friend Sharifa alKhateeb, a U.S. born Muslim feminist with graduate degrees in education, who lives in a handsome blond brick house in an affluent enclave near Washington DC" (p. 35). Before citing al-Khateeb's exact comment on the nose ring, Brooks (2001) informs readers that this mother worries "about how many more body piercings her teenage daughter can possible find a place for. She wishes her daughter still wore a scarf covering over her hair, but accepts her choice to remove it" (p. 35).

It is quite misleading for Brooks to use the same exact quote in two different stories, yet in both incidents they appear to the reader as if they were used for the very first time. Had the reporter clarified to her readers that this quote was initially derived from her interviews for a story back in 2001, it could be acceptable. But given that she did not make such a clarification, this borrowing of an older quote creates timeliness issues, because people's opinions could change over the years and it is possible that her friend's opinions on her daughter could have changed in those four years. This reliance on previous stories or quotes could be explained by the journalistic practice of referring to the newsroom library or morgue for previous stories on the same topic, which many journalists rely on as a fast and easy way to get background information on a topic, given daily time constraints.¹² The weakness in this trend, however, is that reporters

create confusion when they reuse old quotes in a new, updated story. In addition, if one assumes that background information in the original story was lacking or incomplete, then by reusing the same information over and over, reporters circulate distortion or vagueness.

Brook (2004), who makes it clear she is very admirable of Manji's Westernized ideas and notions on "modernizing Islam," explained in her book *The Trouble with Islam: A Wake-up Call for Honesty and Change* (2004),¹³ also discusses Gull Hasan's book *Why I am a Muslim: An American Pilgrimage* (2004). Brook's enthusiasm towards Manji does not extend so much to Gull Hasan, whom she believes, in "her enthusiasm to balance the picture of her faith, she herself overbalances, averting her eyes, and her argument, from the knotty bits" (p. 26). She cites the example of Gull Hasan's discussion of Muslims' relationship with God and how no intermediaries are necessary. She cites mosque prayers, and how the role of prayer leader can rotate from one person to another, even to children, yet the author does not mention "that this wonderful egalitarian role-sharing must never include a woman when men are also present, as women's voices are considered enticing and are not supposed to be heard at prayer" (p.26). Brooks makes a good point here, as the author should have explained this clearly in her book. But the reporter is also too cynical in her mentioning of how women are not allowed to lead prayers in the mosque if men are present. This example was not cited by Gull Hasan to demonstrate "wonderful egalitarianism" as Brook cynically explains, but to show that Islam requires no clergy to intervene between Muslims and God.

Had the author wanted to demonstrate egalitarianism, she could have cited more obvious examples of how Islam calls for equality of men and women in matters such as education, in a husband's treatment of his wife, or in the treatment of sons and daughters. Brooks' skepticism of Gull Hassan is also evident when she critiques the author for pointing to all the "hype" on veiling

and to the “fiendish interest in the oppression of Muslim women.” Brooks’ response to this is: “an odd choice, the word ‘fiendish.’ Surely it’s the oppression of so many Muslim women that is fiendish, not the interest in exposing it” (p. 26). It could be argued that Gull Hassan’s use of the word “fiendish” is in fact too strong here, although for Muslim women who wear the hijab and yet see themselves portrayed as backward and oppressed by it, it might seem very appropriate. But the main criticism here is of Brooks for using the very same term to generalize about Muslim women’s oppression. Once again, a Western reporter gives herself the duty to talk on Muslim women’s behalf and to claim they are “fiendishly oppressed.”

Articles in this section have demonstrated that newspaper representation of Muslim women who don the veil is a complex matter that cannot be summarized as either stereotypical or not. While it is true that the dominating stereotype on Muslim women, which perceives them as oppressed, backward and helpless, continues to dominate in a lot of instances, yet evidence also reveals certain time-periods where reporters started to look beyond the stereotype and get to know Muslim women and allow them to speak. These incidents are short-lived and are gradually replaced by the dominant, distorted view, but in such stories where women are allowed to speak, we see that in most cases they are assertive, opinionated and not so oppressed after all. Most of the women interviewed about the Islamic dress code confirmed the opinion that they adopt it willingly and feel empowered by it. Yet it is usually the story that carries no comments from the Muslim women that is the one that represents these women as oppressed by the dress code, and usually there are no backup quotes from the women to confirm this view.

Hence, when the women speak, we see a different image than the dominant stereotype; it is almost as if there are dual images of the Muslim woman, the real-life image represented by the women themselves, and the distorted image, represented by Western reporters or Western

sources who are usually not so familiar with the women or with Islam and mostly rely on their long-held convictions about Arabs and Muslim in general and the women in particular.

The coverage in this section thus illustrates journalists' tendency to rely on inadequate sources in stories about Islam, where reference to religious scholars is almost nonexistent. The coverage also highlights the fact that many journalists rely on long-held beliefs and convictions about Islam, hijab and the status of Muslim women, in their writing. Reporters' conclusions, which should not be evident in news stories, sometimes creep into the writing, thus distorting facts or highlighting certain ideas over others. In addition, coverage also displays how stories that give Muslim women a space to express their opinion are usually more objective than stories where the reporter speaks on these women's behalf. But even in reports where the women are allowed to speak, a trace of distortion is noted, since the majority of the reports analyzed here have demonstrated the heavy reliance on the middle class Muslim woman, thus giving off this image of an ideal superwoman; a woman who is religious, well-educated, employed, usually married and just has it all. Again, this goes back to journalistic practices and sourcing, as in this latter case, the reporter does not diversify his/her sources to ensure reporting on all sides of the story.

Islamic Shari'a Law Oppresses Women

In this section, a total of nine local articles and 17 international articles were identified that report on Muslim women who are 'oppressed' by Islamic Shari'a law. One of the main factors at play here is what McNair (1998) terms the *grammar of news*. He argues that certain constraints are imposed on reporters by the news form which tends to favor "narratives of event over process, effect over cause and conflict over consensus" (p. 80). Reality becomes distorted as

reporters gloss over complex histories and complexities in an effort to report the story within the allotted space or time. This is what happened in many of the stories that covered Islamic Shari'a law. One of the major stories reported on in this section was the controversial case of a Nigerian woman who was sentenced to death by stoning for committing adultery. This case became the main proof of Islam's barbaric and backward treatment of women. In most of the stories analyzed, there was minimal effort by reporters to try to explain the complexities of Shari'a law and the varied punishments against Muslims who commit adultery. There was also minimal reliance on expert sources such as Islamic sheikhs who would be able to give an accurate account of how Shari'a works and in what cases are Muslim men or women put through such extreme punishments.

Another factor that leads to such stereotyping on Shari'a as oppressive to women is the newsroom morgue, or library. From my experience as a reporter, when one is faced with a complicated story about another culture, religion or political system, the first thing a reporter does is check previous stories written by his/her newspaper or news agency. Because of time limitations, it is always easier and faster to rely on the one or two paragraphs or background or context used by fellow reporters in the newsroom. Reporters tend to feel that such information is reliable and accurate since it came from members of their own news organization. If the information is not found, then reporters might turn to the previous stories of other reliable newspapers or news agencies. Hence a lot of times the same paragraphs of inaccurate, distorted or incomplete information is repeated over and over and therefore is overlooked by reporters who unconsciously reproduce the same stereotypes in an effort to get out an accurate story as fast as needed or to make it easier on themselves rather than having to investigate and report on what seem as unfamiliar, complicated and possibly irrational cultural or religious practices.¹⁴ In the

news stories on Shari'a, reporters repeat the same exact phrases, such as the definition of Shari'a as "strict Islamic rule of law backed up by harsh punishments," as one *New York Times* reporter explains it, or "harsh Islamic courts..." as one *Boston Globe* journalist reports (Dowden, 2002, p.28, Jackson, 2002, p.A17). The examples below will illustrate these tendencies.

Death by Stoning

Many articles analyzed focus on Shari'a law and how it 'oppresses' women or threatens their 'freedom'. The main topics covered in these articles were: (1) the two Nigerian woman sentenced to death by stoning for adultery; (2) the possible inclusion of Shari'a law in the Iraqi constitution and the threat this could pose for Iraqi women, and (3) Canadian Muslims' call for the use of Shari'a law to settle disputes among Canadian Muslims and its threat to women.

Several local and international stories covered the stories of Safiya Hussein and Amina Lawal, both of whom were convicted to death by stoning for adultery but then had their sentences overturned upon appeal. The coverage of both cases conveyed the message that women are helpless in the face of brutal and barbaric Islamic laws. Yet some of these very same articles also claimed that Shari'a law was misapplied in the two cases. So how can Shari'a be barbaric and brutal if it was not even applied?

These articles introduce readers to Hussein, the woman with the sad story, who is impoverished, helpless and weak. One *New York Times* article describes Hussein as an "ordinary woman as poor as any in this impoverished region of northern Nigeria..." (Dowden, 2002, p.28). She sits "on the earth floor of a tiny mud hut breast-feeding her 10-month-old daughter, Adama, ... occasionally ...waving away flies that swarm around the child's eyes and mouth" (ibid.). A *Star Tribune* reporter tells readers that, like "many in the village, she [Hussein] is described as

poor, illiterate and Muslim” (Milbourn, 2002, p. 4A). The fact that reporters tell us Hussein is poor is no necessary distortion, because she is poor and reporters have to portray an accurate picture of her life to readers. The problem is Hussein’s poverty extends to describe her as weak and helpless even though poverty alone does not mean a person has to be helpless or weak. Dowden, for example, explains that the “citizens of northern Nigeria, most of whom are illiterate peasants who have never enjoyed political or civil rights, tend to believe what they are told by the ruling elite — Sufiya and her father, for instance, agree that stoning is the correct punishment for adultery” (p. 28).

Readers may assume here that, similar to other illiterate peasants described by Dowden, Hussein is helpless and weak in the face of elitist rules and that is why she accepts adultery and not because she is literate enough about Islam to know that adultery can be punished by stoning in extreme cases. In fact, this very same article concludes with Hussein’s comment: “I know the laws of God are being implemented...but the law must be fair” (p.28). This quote suggests that Hussein has enough information about the punishments of adultery under Shari’a to know that what she has been convicted of does not fall under ‘the laws of God.’ Readers are also told that Hussein is deprived of all political and civil rights and is therefore helpless while at the same time reporters tell us that this very same woman divorced her husband because he could not support her financially. With such comments, reporters extend Hussein’s poverty to the image of the helpless, dependent Muslim woman who suddenly finds herself in such a desperate situation and is weak and submissive in the face of this backward Shari’a law that dictates that she be stoned to death.

One reporter illustrates to readers how Nigerian women are sexual objects used by men. Commenting on a statement by Nigeria’s attorney general of Sokoto State on how adultery is

viewed as the second most serious crime after insulting Allah (God), *New York Times* reporter Richard Dowden says: “It is a curious statement, coming from an official in a country including the Muslim North – where it is common for married men to boast of their numerous girlfriends” (p. 28). Yet Dowden cites no sources that support his generalized claim on Nigerian men’s extra-marital affairs. Almost one week after this article came out, Derrick Z. Jackson (2002) from the *Boston Globe* borrowed this very same claim in his article, saying in a “nation where many married men flaunt their affairs with women, single women remain targets for punishment and control” (p. A17). Jackson too does not cite his sources anywhere in the article, but he does cite Dowden’s interview with the attorney general, hence confirming that he borrowed the claim without trying to verify it through his own sources.

Such a generalized conclusion by these two reporters works to confirm the stereotype of the oppressed Muslim woman versus the polygamist male who views women as a commodity. Even if this conclusion about Nigerian men’s sexual behavior is true, it adds nothing to this specific story except to confirm the stereotype of the exploited Muslim woman, because this story is about Hussein and her relationship with one Nigerian man, so why generalize about all Nigerian men and therefore leave readers with exaggerated opinions about all Nigerian men and women? On the other hand, this example suggests that reporters may tend to rely on one another’s stories for background and context, which means that possible distortions or stereotypes are transferred from one reporter to the other. This ties to Timothy Crouse’s (1973) notion of ‘herd journalism’ or ‘pack journalism’, where journalists rely on their peers to subdue uncertainties. This reliance heightens when parachute journalists are sent in to cover an event in a foreign culture and therefore the probability of distortion also increases (cited in van Ginneken, 1998, p.80). It makes sense that reporters sent to Nigeria to cover the two cases of death by

stoning are unfamiliar with the culture and with religious practices and possibly did not have access to the right sources, all of which contributed to the production of incomplete and vague stories that reiterated the stereotype of the poor and helpless Muslim woman oppressed by her own faith.

Another incident of reliance on peers comes from an *Associated Press* article published on March 18, 2002, that quotes Hussein as saying: “people think that because I am poor I cannot defend myself. They are wrong” (*AP* published in *The Gazette*, 2002, p.B8). This very same quote is found in a *Herald* article published on the same day, yet reporter Vicky Collins (2002) does not tell readers the quote comes from an *AP* story, which is what reporters normally do when they borrow facts or quotes from wire stories. Hence, readers are left with the impression that Hussein’s statement was given to the reporter directly, which is misleading. This borrowing from other sources can not only lead to the continued circulation of possible distortions or incomplete stories but also gives out the impression that the views quoted in the story are widespread and recurring, when in fact the statement was said only once and to one reporter only. This journalistic practice also has timeliness and context implications. As mentioned earlier, when reporters borrow quotes or facts taken from an older story, this could impact the overall meaning of the story, given that the information is inserted in a story of a later date. Furthermore, when quotes are taken out of context this also impacts the overall meaning of the story. This journalistic practice of borrowing also carries ethical implications, because if the reporter does not clearly cite his/her source for the quote, he/she falsely enhances his/her credibility, as it appears that the reporter is the one who conducted the interview and is directly quoting from the source.

Story organization and focus has also played a role in distorting the image of Shari'a and how it pertains to Muslim women. Reporters focus on the two victims, on their poverty and how they were both convicted for becoming pregnant. The focus is on the barbaric act of stoning, with details such as the size of the stones. Yet only one local article tells readers that, if this stoning was to be carried out, Hussein would be the first woman to be executed in Nigeria under Shari'a law and that she can appeal to a federal tribunal which is opposed to death by stoning. So in essence, death by stoning was never carried out before in Nigeria and was not likely to happen in the first place, but reporters did not explain this to readers and instead focused on the oddness of the story and on this alien act of stoning for adultery.¹⁵ This focus on the novelty of the stoning practice fits in with dominant journalistic news values, where reporters more often than not, report on issues or actions that are novel, odd or unusual.

Another major problem with stories that reported these adultery incidents is that most of them failed to explain to readers that this was a clear misapplication of Islamic Shari'a and that the ruling in both cases was a political decision. When reporters did in fact mention this, it was very briefly and usually at the very end of their stories.¹⁶ Under Islam, there are very specific conditions to prove whether or not two people committed adultery. According to the Muslim scholar Sheikh Abdul-Khaleq Hasan Ash-Shareef (2002):

First and foremost, I want to state that the crime of Zina [adultery] is proved by one of two means: the evidence of four reliable witnesses or the confession of the adulterer or the fornicator. However, other things such as pregnancy and the like are merely signs or indications and are not qualified enough to serve as a legal proof. For instance, pregnancy does not necessarily denote fornication or adultery. Therefore, it should not be taken as evidence to prove the crime (Islamonline.net).

In addition, scholars agree that if the person confesses and then retracts his/her confession then they cannot be punished since there is no proof that they committed adultery. It is also important to note that punishment should be avoided whenever possible. So whenever there is doubt, it is better to avoid punishment. The Prophet's wife A'isha narrated that the Prophet (pbuh) said: "Ward off punishment as much as you can. If you find any way out for a Muslim then set him free. If the Imam makes a mistake in granting forgiveness, it is better for him than that he should commit a mistake in imposing punishment" (Islamonline.net).

None of the articles analyzed in this section explained these specifics about adultery in their reports. One exception however, is a *New York Times* article by Helon Habila (2003), which explains that "even by the standards of Shari'a, the case against Ms. Lawal was flawed: the courts made several procedural errors, under Islamic law, pregnancy within five years of divorce or widowhood is not itself conclusive proof of adultery" (p.13). The reporter further explains that the ruling was a political decision to make trouble for Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo by judges who knew that their sentences against both women would never be carried out. Habila (2003) explains that "to the politicians who enthusiastically champion it, Shari'a is a weapon against President Obasanjo, a southerner whose pro-American, ostentatiously Christian stance they detest. For them, the trials of Amina Lawal and Safiya Hussein were political triumphs..." (p.13).

Why is it that one reporter was successful in explaining to his readers that Shari'a was not applied justly and therefore was not oppressive to women? Why was this very same reporter able to explain to readers that the whole ruling was a political act in a country heavily divided by religious and geographical tensions? One logical answer is that Helon Habila is a Nigerian who has lived in the country and is familiar with the culture and politics and practiced religions.¹⁷ It

is fair to argue, therefore, that when reporting on other cultures, sometimes relying on reporters from that very same culture could be the way to avoiding distortion, vagueness and stereotyping. Yet, one might argue that, given the complexity of Islamic Shari'a law along with the confusing history of Nigerian political and ethnic tension, reporters cannot be blamed for the inaccuracies and stereotyping. But when faced with such confusion and complexity, it is necessary that reporters refer to the right experts on the issue. None of the articles analyzed quote a credible Muslim scholar who could have easily explained to readers whether or not these two rulings were legitimate under Islamic Shari'a law.

International stories that reported these adultery cases were no different in their distortion and strengthening of the idea that Muslim women are oppressed. A *Herald* headline for example reads: "...This woman is condemned to death for having a child while 14 girls are burned alive because they were not fully veiled" (Collins, 2002, p.1). The headline sends a distorted and inaccurate message about Shari'a treatment of women because the reporter groups together in very little space with no explanation whatsoever, two isolated events, and one of which has nothing to do with a Shari'a ruling. Collins' headline refers to a fire in a girl's school in Saudi Arabia in March, 2002, where 15 girls died because police refused to let the girls out without their abayas and headscarves. This incident, which was severely criticized by both local and international critics, was not based on a Shari'a ruling but rather on the irrational behavior of the three policemen who were at the scene who claimed it was a sin for the girls to be seen by men without their traditional abayas and headscarves.¹⁸ Despite the inevitable brevity of news headlines, the reporter summarizes this fatal accident in her headline, which creates distortion and only works to support her argument on Shari'a's brutality. Collins never mentions this Saudi fire in the body of her story, yet her mentioning of it in the headline is enough to paint a negative

picture about Shari'a's treatment of women. In addition, at the very end of her story, Collins briefly states that Hussein is the first woman to be convicted of stoning under Shari'a in Nigeria. She further simplifies this fact by jumping into a discussion about ethnic and religious divisions in Nigeria and how such tension escalates into violence and that this has intensified since Shari'a was imposed in Nigeria. In sum, Collin's oversimplification, placing of important facts lower in the story and focusing on the brutality and violence of Shari'a all work to distort this Islamic law and its treatment of women.

Another example of media distortion and vagueness comes from Fred Bridgeland (2002) of the *Scotsman*, who says: "Her [Hussein's] marriage, and two subsequent marriages, did not last, as is so often the case in the region's particular culture of Islam" (p. 6). This particular sentence is not only vague but quite irrelevant to Hussein's conviction. How can one explain a woman's third divorce as a common feature of a country's or a religion's culture? What does that even mean? This is another example of how a reporter's misinterpretation or misunderstanding of an incident can lead to distortion of a whole culture or religion.

It is necessary to question why the focus both locally and internationally on these two cases of death by stoning? The answer to this question again goes back to news values. Boyd (1988) and McNair (1998) explain how reporters judge what is news by applying a set of news values to world events that allow them to decide what is newsworthy and what is not. While it is necessary for reporters to have a system that would help them judge how and when to report on real events, critics do not necessarily see prevailing news values as that vehicle because of the constant obsession with celebrities, wealth and the odd or unusual, which in itself is a distortion because by focusing on such selective elements, reporters are wiping out other events that are of equal or maybe even more importance (Boyd, 1988 as cited in McNair, 1998, p.79). In this case,

reporters were attracted to the story because of its oddness; it is highly unusual to execute someone by stoning and in a western culture, even more alien to convict someone for committing adultery. Hence, reporters focused on the odd details of these adultery convictions while ignoring the specifics that would put these stories into context and would, therefore, transform them from odd to understandable. So if reporters had included more details on how this extreme punishment is only acceptable under severe conditions that were never presented in these two cases; or if they had cited explanations by Muslim experts on how both convictions were flawed; had reporters mentioned that no woman was ever convicted in Nigeria under Shari'a law, all of this would have worked to eliminate the alien quality of the story and so it would no longer be an odd scoop worth reporting on.

Shari'a Law in Iraq & Canada

Several articles were preoccupied with the idea of whether or not Islamic Shari'a law would be an important part of the Iraqi constitution. The main message here is that Islamic Shari'a law and equal rights for women do not go hand in hand. A *Christian Science Monitor* article by Daniel Schorr (2005) starts with: "In Islamic Iran the veil for women is prescribed. In secular Turkey it is proscribed. The framers of the Iraqi constitution have been trying to navigate between the two" (p.09). Schorr quotes chairman of the constitutional convention, Humam Hammoudi, as saying that there is no article in the Iraqi constitution to impose or prevent the veil, to which the reporter remarks: "This is the kind of constitutional double-talk that only disguises the deeper conflict over whether majority rule will, under whatever disguise, end up as religious rule" (p.09). Such articles send the message that women's rights cannot be fulfilled under Islamic Shari'a law. On the one hand, it is fair to stress the importance of taking women's

rights into consideration when writing up the Iraqi constitution, but it is unfair to claim that these rights will be ignored should Islamic Shari'a law be part of the constitution. Schorr paints a very bleak picture of Shari'a when he says that if the "outcome is some form of Islamic state, then one would have to ask whether America invested so much of its blood and treasure only to replace a radical secular Saddam Hussein with another ayatollah-ruled Islamic State" (p. 09). Nowhere in the article does Schorr provide a clear explanation as to why Shari'a is so bad for women.

This same bleak picture was painted by another reporter in a story about the possible 'voluntary' use of Shari'a by Muslim Canadians. The *New York Times*' Clifford Kross (2004) explains to readers that a group called the Canadian Society of Muslims was "testing the boundaries" of Canada's multicultural tolerance by requesting the application of Shari'a to settle disputes over property, divorce, marriage as well as inheritance. Kross makes a strong argument against Shari'a by saying: "Muslim arbitrators have not made a single public decision yet, but Canada would presumably never allow the stoning of adulterous women or cutting off the hand of a thief, both allowable forms of punishment in some Muslim societies under an extreme variation of Shari'a" (p. 4).

International coverage of this story carried the same stereotypes of Shari'a as harmful to women. One report in the *Ottawa Citizen* for example describes Shari'a as a "1,200-year-old code of conduct based on the Quran," and its application in Canada is feared because of concerns that it "would lead to discrimination against women" (Greenberg, 2005, p.A5). The article goes on to quote female and male members of the Canadian parliament who seem to oppose its application. It is ironic that not one single Muslim male or female is quoted in the story even despite the fact that the Muslims are the ones that should be asked to give an opinion before anyone else, since the application of Shari'a will directly impact their lives. One exception to this

stereotyping trend is an article in the *Montreal Gazette*, which starts with the headline “How do Muslim women view Shari’a?” The article takes a poll of six Muslim women, some of whom work while others do not. It quotes what each woman has to say on the possible application of Shari’a in Canada. It is interesting that out of the six women quoted not one single woman comes out and attacks Shari’a as evil or as constraining their rights as women. Only one of the women is not supportive of the application of Shari’a, saying: “I don’t think it is urgent to make Islamic tribunals an official matter. I think the judicial system here responds to our needs” (Gazette, 2005, p.D2). Again, this Muslim woman does not attack Shari’a as oppressive; she just feels her needs are met with the current legal system. So why do reporters feel the need to constantly frame Shari’a law as oppressive to women’s rights when the women themselves, even in a highly secularized society, do not perceive it that way?

The stories analyzed in this section illustrate how every argument made about Shari’a and its relation to women works to prove that Muslim women are oppressed by Islamic law. The majority of the stories analyzed tend to veil the women and muffle their voices. It is the reporter that speaks on their behalf and accuses Shari’a of oppressing them without confirmation from the women themselves. This veiling in itself actually oppresses the women as they are not given a chance to voice their own opinions about the law.

Moreover, the current analysis demonstrates how reporters depict Shari’a law as harsh and backward and its application as barbaric and inhumane. Even articles that suggest that Shari’a was misapplied in these adultery convictions do nothing to refute the idea of Shari’a as a backward law. In sum, one may argue that such reporting is not an innocent misreading of the law by various reporters who are unfamiliar with Islam but rather a misrepresentation and distortion of the Muslim culture as a whole and Muslim men and women for applying these laws.

In the adultery stories, for example, everything from story organization and wording, the repeated focus on the act of stoning as a punishment of Shari'a, the detailed description of the size of stones that the two women were to be killed by, the failure of the majority of reporters to mention that Hussein's conviction was the very first of its kind in Nigeria and the absence or brief discussion of the misapplication of Shari'a in the adultery cases, all work to distort the law and its followers as barbaric and backward.

One has to question the journalistic reasoning behind this skewed coverage of Shari'a law. It seems that when reporters fail to comprehend Shari'a because of its strict prohibition of things like sexual relationships outside of marriage and drinking alcohol among other things, their reaction is to establish Shari'a as backward and barbaric because it prohibits a lot of activities that are more or less commonly accepted practices in their own cultures. Hence, these reporters react by questioning how Muslim men and women can rely on such strict laws that seem so outdated and this impacts how they report on Shari'a-related stories. This is to argue that Western journalists, who are unfamiliar with Islamic laws and practices, seem to be judging Shari'a law from their own Western perspective, which leads many reporters to view Shari'a law as alien and barbaric because it does not conform to their own Western liberal practices. In addition, articles analyzed here demonstrate how this distorted view of Islamic Shari'a law is circulated among western reporters and the idea that Shari'a is a threat to Muslim women's freedom and rights is the common message delivered to readers. It is rarely the case that a reporter takes more time to understand Shari'a or to talk to the many credible scholars around the Muslim world, who would eagerly give accurate clarifications on the law and how it pertains to women's rights.

Islam Needs to be Modernized

The final section of this chapter deals with articles that generally seem to argue that Islam as it stands is backward and ancient in its ideas and practices, specifically with regards to women. Reporters discuss issues of polygamy, veil, female genital mutilation and bigotry as signs that Islam is oppressive and women are victimized. Another common idea here is that Islam needs to be modernized to get rid of such “ancient” practices. Several articles promote this idea of a modern version of Islam that can be reformed by the young generation of Muslims born or living in the West who, therefore, have the “freedom” to express and promote such notions of modernization and change. This section starts off with articles that, at first glance, seem to refute the stereotype and prove that reporters do in fact give Muslim women a chance to tell their story. These examples are challenging as they might give the impression that reporting on Muslim women is favorable, when it is not necessarily the case, as will be demonstrated later in the discussion of the more obvious examples of distortion by the media.

Muslim Women: Assertive or Not?

At least four of the U.S. newspaper articles analyzed are exceptions to the rule in the sense that they are stories of assertive Muslim women and they do really give these women a chance to speak their minds without the reporter having to talk on their behalf. But these exceptions are on two very specific women: Asra Nomani, a Muslim woman fighting to get women pray side by side with men inside Mosques, and Irshad Manji (2004), author of *The Trouble with Islam*. Both Nomani and Manji are very different from conservative Muslim women; everything from the quotes, to choice of wording, main theme and even the headlines of some of the articles on Nomani and Manji try to exhibit just how different these women are from

traditional Muslim women. For example, one *San Francisco Chronicle* article starts with the headline “Maverick Muslim women rip veil off religion’s traditional gender values” (Curiel, 2005, p. F1). Words like “maverick” and “rip veil off” lead the reader to conclude that these two liberal women are so untraditional and un-Islamic that they rip off the veil of their religious beliefs, just like ripping off this much contested veil from their face.

The articles on Manji and Nomani also portray them differently than other Muslim women as they pay attention to their looks and appearances, whereas with other Muslim women the focus is mainly on the hijab, and whether or not the women wear it. A *Daily News* article by Jordan Lite (2005), for example, describes Nomani to be “a petite stylish woman with bright, black eyes,” and although Manji “is dressed simply in jeans, a black sweater and pink collard shirt, Manji is intense; her large brown eyes never break their gaze” (p.50). Very few articles have described other Muslim women with such detail, whether they wear the hijab or not. One could argue that because these two women lead lives that are more Western than traditional Islamic, they are presented more as Western women than they are as Muslims.¹⁹ Both women lead sexually liberal lives, which is unconventional for both Muslim men and women. Nomani, for example, had a baby out of wedlock with her Muslim boyfriend, which is unorthodox in Islam. Manji, on the other hand, is a lesbian, who for three years was the host of a Canadian TV show called “Queer Television,” which is again very unconventional for a Muslim woman. Hence, it could be argued that these women are treated differently because their lifestyles and beliefs do not contradict with Western cultural norms and it is, therefore, easy for a reporter to understand them and represent them to readers in an unbiased way.

These exceptional articles seem to convey the message that assertive Muslim women as a general rule have to be born or raised in a Western culture. Hence, these women have found their

voice now that they are in a “free” country where they can speak their mind without oppression. Lite, for instance, starts out with the headline “Loosening their religion: sick of silence, Muslim women are shaking up the boy’s club.” The choice of words here confirms the belief that Islam is backward and “closed-minded” and needs some “loosening” and that is what these bold and forceful women are doing now that they are able to break the silence and speak their minds. Because this article lacks any quotes by the assertive Muslim feminists that reside all over the world, the message here is that only Muslim women who made it to the West have enough freedom, courage and strength to voice their demands and be equal to men, whereas Muslim women in the rest of the world will remain silent, backward and inferior. There is no mention of Muslim female scholars, artists, politicians and teachers who voice their demands and enforce changes every day in various parts of the non-Western world.

Lite’s article portrays Islam to be oppressive to women, with “brutal practices against women abroad in the name of the religion, from lack of education to limited rights to initiate divorce and retain custody of children” (p.50). Yet, there is not a single quote by a Muslim woman who specifically suffers from lack of education or marriage problems because of her faith to support the reporter’s claims. One has to therefore wonder, where is the Muslim woman’s voice? If such articles are truly written with the aim of bringing justice to these so-called oppressed women, why are they not allowed to tell their stories and voice their demands? Thus, once again, the generalized claim of Islam as oppressive to women is inserted in the story without sufficient proof, either from the women themselves or any evidence from the Quran or hadiths that illustrate how Islam promotes such oppression.²⁰

The article, however, portrays both Nomani and Manji to be powerful and assertive. The two women are given a chance to voice their opinions and to illustrate just how independent and

confident they are. Nomani, for example, is quoted as saying “All fundamentalism in all religions is ultimately united by real bigotry against women. When they can be intolerant toward women, they can be intolerant toward others. I didn’t want to be part of that conspiracy anymore” (p. 50). The reporter here allowed Nomani to illustrate her assertiveness by showing how she makes her own decisions and is in control of her beliefs and actions.

In sum, the exceptional articles reviewed above might give the impression that reporting on Muslim women is not distorted, given that Manji and Nomani have not been described using the standard stereotypes on Muslim women. But given the fact that these two women are more liberal and Westernized in their thinking and lifestyles, this is what stands out in their stories rather than the fact that they are Muslim women. The articles analyzed here focus more on the women’s contemporary and liberal thinking than on their religion and how it impacts their lives. In fact, these articles illustrate the differences and disagreements these women have with their religion and how they are trying to reform Islam to conform to their lifestyles and beliefs, thus confirming the claim that Islam is backward and oppressive. Hence these two exceptional cases cannot be used to dispute the argument that the image of Muslim women is distorted in U.S. news, given that reporters here failed to diversify their Muslim sources by interviewing independent and liberal women from different walks of life. Had the reporters interviewed liberal Muslim women from non-Western countries, this would have provided a more objective and comprehensive portrayal of independent Muslim women, but that is not the case. The remainder of this section will in fact summarize findings that confirm this conclusion with regards to newspaper reporting on women and Islam.

The analysis of both U.S. and international articles in this section reveal three possible premises that could explain why stories on Islam and women are written the way they are and

why in many cases they continue to portray women in a stereotypical manner with little or no evidence in the story. These are: conventional wisdom; parachute journalism; story telling and the assigning of roles.

A bulk of articles analyzed in this chapter focus on issues in Islam and its treatment of women. The common thread in all of these articles is their portrayal of Islam as backward and oppressive in its treatment of women. Reporters mention such issues as polygamy or hijab and then jump to the conclusion that Islam is unfair to its women followers. The problem with such stories is that none of these reporters provide sufficient background for the readers when discussing such complex issues in Islam. Context is very important in journalism and it is absent in a lot of the stories that discuss Islam and its followers. One would hope that reporters exert more effort to add more details about complex issues, such as Islam's treatment of women and issues like female genital mutilation (FGM). But in reality they usually do not. So why is it that journalistic codes command that certain details be included in a story, such as accurate names, titles, color of eye, description of place or person, etc. whereas other details are oversimplified? In this case, why do theological details about polygamy, FGM and Islam's treatment of women fall out of newspaper stories? Why do journalistic norms allow that?

One possible explanation is conventional wisdom, or long held beliefs about Islam and its treatment of women, that could possibly lead reporters to unconsciously distort the truth. Examples from some of the articles analyzed will illustrate how reporters rely on these culturally-agreed upon 'truths' that are readily made and accessible to them.

Can the 'Muslim Other' Speak?

A *New York Times* article by Jim Yardley (2001) relays events surrounding an annual fashion show sponsored by the Pakistani Student Association at the University of Houston. Yardley's lead tells readers how the participating females, who showcase modesty, wore "traditional neck-high gowns and took care not to touch hands with the male escorts beside them" (p.16). In mentioning that the women made sure not to touch the men's hands, but not explaining why, under Islam, the women do this, the women's actions seem alien and strange. Yardley's description of the Muslim women's gowns also warrants examination. Whereas in most coverage of fashion shows, readers are told details about the colors, patterns or designs of the gowns worn, in this story, readers are simply told that the gowns are "neck-high" again, giving the impression that these gowns, along with the women who wear them, are alien to American readers.

The reporter goes on to explain that for some male students, this fashion show was not "modest" enough, adding that these men said Islamic law forbids music and demands women to cover their hair. He explains how the University of Houston's diversely-populated campus illustrates differences among Muslim students, who range from the very liberal who "accept secular norms," to what the reporter describes as those Muslim students with "fundamentalist views that regards alcohol, the mingling of sexes and other commonplaces of college life as sinful" (p.16). The word 'fundamentalist' here is inaccurate; to say that Muslim men or women who do not drink hold fundamentalist views is misleading, given that the prohibition against alcohol is universal in Islam as opposed to a belief held only by Muslim fundamentalists. Yardley, therefore, alienates Muslims with his wording and portrays conservative Muslims as extremists. The alienation of conservative Muslim men and women is further emphasized when

Yardley starts a sentence in the same paragraph with: “on this modern campus,” thus providing a clear contrast between the modernity of the campus and the backwardness of some Muslims on campus. In this article, Islam is portrayed to be the opposite of modernity with its fundamentalist views on alcohol and mingling of the sexes as well as the neck-high gowns of its female followers. Karim (2003) argues that such generalizations and polarizations by Western media “tend to make Muslims who are interested in constructive dialogue with non-Muslims apologetic about their beliefs or, contrarily, disdainful about any interaction” (p.107).

Another example of the reporter’s alienation of Muslim women is when Yardley explains how in an iftar, the meal signifying the breaking of a fast, by the Muslim Students Association during the holy month of Ramadan, “about 20 women slipped in without speaking and walked to an area separated from the men by long tables.” He adds that another reporter was told by the male students that he could not interview any of the women in the group unless he had permission from her brother. This portrays Muslim female students as submissive and voiceless, as they “slip without speaking” to their own eating quarters. These women are weak and completely dependent on male relatives as they are not even allowed to speak to strangers unless authorized by the male brother. The reporter concludes by stating: “there is no dating, no drinking and no socializing.” This reinforces the view of Islam as backward and opposed to American culture and freedom. On several occasions the reporter mentions the headscarf, whether or not the woman he quotes wears one. If she is not, he notes that she “does not wear a head scarf.” This illustrates the media’s fascination with hijab and how they used to signal the backwardness of Islam.

Another article that portrays Islam as backward based on conventional wisdom is a column by *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof (2002). This column actually

demonstrates that even when reporters put some effort into defending Islam or at least portraying it in a neutral light, stereotypes and inaccuracies still seep into their stories because these are ideas and beliefs embedded in western culture and it is hard to get rid of them. Kristof, after defending Islam and its “admirable qualities,” returns to the stereotypes of Islam, equating it with “the status of women and for the genital mutilation of girls.” Yet, despite such a huge claim, Kristof fails to cite specific examples of how exactly women are mistreated under Islam. He also fails to cite one single example of a Muslim woman that has gone through the mistreatments he mentions. Even when they lack sufficient evidence, columns by prominent journalists like Kristof are effective in transmitting inaccurate messages about Muslim women as agreed upon truths because readers tend to trust prominent reporters.²¹

FGM is often tied to Islam but is a traditional practice by both Muslims and Christians of the Arab and African world and has no relation to Islam. Yet, Kristof discusses FGM as if it originated in Islam and is encouraged by Muslims worldwide. Kristof’s choice of words plays a large role in painting a negative picture of Islam. “Of course Islam is troubled in ways no one can ignore,” writes Kristof. The fact that he starts this sentence with “of course” confirms this idea of conventional wisdom. Kristof demonstrates here that it is obvious to himself and his readers that no two people can argue about his claim that Islam is a troubled religion. What makes his argument even more persuasive is his reliance on a credible Western source to back up his claims. Kristof quotes Samuel Huntington as saying the Muslim world has “bloody borders.” It is interesting to note that the reporter’s sole source in this column is a Western non-Muslim scholar who predicts the next clash of civilizations will be a cultural clash. Kristof’s reliance on Huntington, a Westerner surrounded by the same undisputable truths as Kristof, as his sole source also confirms the notion of conventional wisdom, because, had he quoted a Muslim

expert or source on some of the points he was making in his column, he would have more than likely received a very different and possibly contrary view to his arguments.

In sum, Kristof reaffirms the stereotype of Muslim women as helpless and oppressed in the face of their backward and unfair religion. The columnist here speaks on the behalf of Muslim women without letting the reader hear from these women directly about their alleged oppression. In journalism, this is what is termed generalization and concluding, where a reporter is no longer objective and fails to provide the necessary facts and quote credible sources on the specific issue under discussion to provide a complete picture to the audience. One might argue that because this is an opinion piece, Kristof is not obliged to rely on other sources. But even columnists need to back up their claims and opinions on credible research or sourcing, which is not the case in this column. This lack of research and sourcing is a serious weakness in many articles on Islam and its treatment of women, where reporters base their arguments on assumptions and exceptional cases and on examples of mistreatment of women that have more to do with culture and patriarchy than with Islam itself.

Even though Kristoff started out defending Islam, in his effort to be “objective” and show both sides of the story, he also turned to the negatives, because it is these negatives that have been long held as accurate facts about Islam in many Western societies. The question is, why did he choose to criticize Islam from a gender perspective? And then once he chose gender, why the oversimplification and lack of detail in this segment of his article? It could be argued that Kristof criticizes Islam from a gender perspective because it is easier to get away with than coming outright and criticizing Islam as a religion. When a Denmark newspaper published cartoons making fun of Prophet Mohammed (PBUH), the Muslim world unanimously protested these cartoons, demanded an apology and even went as far as boycotting Danish products from

their countries.²² So to criticize Islam is very risky and hard to get away with untouched. But to criticize Islam's treatment of women is easier to write about because of the long-held belief that Islam oppresses women.

Another example of conventional wisdom is the *New York Times* article about Afghani women in Kabul's jail, which attempts to demonstrate how Muslim women are victims of Islamic Shari'a law. Reporter Amy Waldman (2003) highlighted polygamy through the stories of the 15 Afghan women imprisoned in Kabul's jail, some of whom escaped arranged marriages by their parents. In some cases the men already had a first wife. Waldman (2003) explains this to justify why these women then remarried while they were still married to the first husband, or in some cases took up lovers, both of which are violations of Islam and Afghan law. "Sometimes innocently, sometimes defiantly, they grasped at happiness, and were met with confinement," explains Waldman. This quote portrays these women as victims of polygamy, who tried to escape their misery and seek love through a second marriage or through a physical relationship just to be further oppressed and thrown in jail for merely breaking the law. The reporter does not really focus on or explain the specifics of why or how these 15 women violated both Shari'a and Afghani laws as much as she focuses on the victimization of the women. She further stresses on this idea of Afghani women as victims by questioning how can Sharia law allow men to marry up to four wives whereas a "woman may not take a second husband under any circumstances."

A major problem with Waldman's story is the lack of context. She simplifies the conditions under which Islam allows a man to take more than one wife. According to the reporter, a Muslim husband can remarry if: he gets the first wife's consent; the first wife has a contagious disease; or if the first wife is unable to bear children. The reporter adds that the Muslim man is allowed to do this granted that he can "provide for all his wives equally." Islam

does not encourage polygamy and it evidently lays out conditions for men to go through such multiple marriages, which do not just revolve around financial equality for all wives, contrary to Waldman's oversimplified claim. The Quranic verse that talks about polygamy were revealed during the *Uhud battle* during which many Muslim men died, leaving behind widows and children that needed to be cared for by the surviving Muslims. This verse translates as: "If you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans, marry women of your choice, two, or three, or four; but if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then (marry) only one..." (Quran 4:3). Muslim speaker Jamal Badawi (1998) explains that this verse clarifies several facts: (1) Islam does not force or encourage polygamy but it does permit it under certain circumstances. (2) Islam permitted polygamy, not to help men satisfy their urges or oppress their wives, but out of concern "towards widows and orphans, a matter that is confirmed by the atmosphere in which the verse was revealed," (Islamfortoday.com) even though Islam permitted men to marry up to four wives, this was still far more restricted a number than the "normal practice which existed among the Arabs and other peoples at that time when many married as many as ten or more wives" (Islamfortoday.com). This verse also clarifies that a man has to be equal and just with all of his wives, not just financially, but also with regards to treatment and kindness. The Quran clearly states that if a man cannot treat his wives justly "then (marry) only one." (Qur'an 4:3).

Another problem with Waldman's article is that she bases her whole argument on 15 jailed women who did in fact commit a crime by remarrying or by conducting physical relationships while they were still married, so how can they be viewed as mere victims? Waldman completely disregards this fact and instead focuses on polygamy to justify why these women did what they did, thus giving readers the impression that these women are mere victims.

In sum, a story about 15 Muslim women who committed a crime are shown to represent all Muslim women and the impression given to the reader is that women are cheap objects that men oppress through polygamy and by making it hard for the women to leave or obtain a divorce. Readers are also left with the idea of Islamic Shari'a law as unfair in that it allows men to marry four wives but denies women the same right. Islam is also unfair because it forces these women into marriages and then when they seek love through a second marriage or a relation outside of marriage, they are punished and taken to prison. Islam is also harsh on women as it allows men to divorce their wives easily, whereas women are denied the same rights. After relaying all of these claims, it becomes very easy for the reporter to convince the reader that Islamic Shari'a cannot dominate in Afghanistan, given how harsh and oppressive it is on these women. Waldman was successful in highlighting the Muslim world's negatives through her citation of exceptional cases, and discussing them as if they were the norm in Islam, or in other words, an undisputable truth.

This is what van Dijk (1988) terms the 'hyperbolic enhancement' of a groups' negative actions. Reporters who write about polygamy in Islam rarely discuss its conditions and reasons for its allowance in Islam. Instead, Islam and Islamic Shari'a law are always attacked for allowing polygamy and the impression given to the reader is that polygamy is very easy under Islam and Muslim men can marry whenever they please, leaving the women oppressed and not even able to get a divorce easily.

Several stories from the coverage illustrate how some reporters are unfamiliar with Islamic culture and practices and, therefore, fail to provide accurate accounts to readers. A *Columbus Dispatch* opinion piece by Andrew Oldenquist (2004), for example, argues that Islam needs a charismatic leader, the likes of Martin Luther King, to bring "Arab and Iranian Islam out

of the Middle Ages and into the 21st century” (p.11A). The reporter feels that Muslims hold a “thousand-year-old mind-set,” mistreat women, and are hostile towards the West and other religions. Oldenquist stresses on “modern Islam,” which he feels must replace what he terms “conservative Islam,” which aside from gasoline, the reporter believes has brought nothing to the Muslim world. “Xenophobic, resentful, right-wing Islam constitutes their chains and oil is their opium” (p.11A). The irony is, no where in this article does the reporter cite specific examples that would explain to readers why they should think the majority of Muslims are hateful and that the majority of Muslim women are mistreated. There is no mentioning of Quranic verses or *hadiths* that prove Oldenquist’s unfair claims here. The reporter seems to be forming a superficial opinion about Islam and its followers that is not based on a deep understanding of the religion or its followers and their various cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Instead, his opinion seems to be borne out of Lippman’s (1922) idea of viewing all other people like a “flock of sheep.” Oldenquist is grouping peaceful, non-violent Muslims with fundamentalists as one large hateful and dangerous group.

Oldenquist goes on to explain that there are however, exceptions to these “Middle Ages” Muslims that he mentions. He seems to think positively of Asian Muslims, as he cites the example of Singapore, where he met a Muslim Imam who was “an urbane, sophisticated man completely lacking any hostility toward the West or toward other religions. It was almost like talking to a campus colleague,” says Oldenquist, who teaches philosophy at Ohio State University. His only criticism of the imam was at the Muslim man’s house, when his wife and children came to greet their guest “briefly” and then “disappeared.” “So there were limits to his [the imam’s] modernism; but still, this was East Asian Islam.”

Two important points here: 1) Oldenquist's interpretation of why the imam's wife left and how for him this means the imam's modernism is limited illustrates how he "Americanized" this story, inaccurately portraying the imam and his wife as backward and not as modern as he assumed they were. The fact that the imam's wife chose to leave after greeting their guest has nothing to do with modernism. Islam is about modesty; modesty in one's behavior, speech and attire. This is a point that the author of this opinion piece failed to deliver to his readers, thus leaving them with the impression that Islam forces women into seclusion. It could very well be that this wife felt more comfortable in another room, or maybe she had chores to attend to or things to do other than sit and entertain her husband's guest. 2) Another problem with this article is the author's claim here; he talks as if this imam from Singapore is an exception and that is why he is so "modern" and non violent in his thinking. Again, the author seems to lump together all Muslims of the world, or to be more specific "Middle East Islam" as he terms it, as the hateful, backward and oppressive Islam, versus the East Asian Islam, which he views as more peaceful, modern and progressive. Again, this is based on Oldenquist's selective perception and misinterpretation of people from other cultures. Had this author visited an imam in Egypt, Jordan, Morocco or Sudan, he would more than likely have felt the same hospitality and lack of hostility towards the west and he might have still felt that it was like "talking to a campus colleague." This is because Islam is Islam, wherever it is practiced.

Another stereotypical article comes from the *Boston Globe*. The article is on the empowerment of women for example states that "customs, taboos, and religious interpretations keep women oppressed in much of the world" (Loth, 2004, p. A18). This article, however, does not give any specifics on how religion oppresses women. Many reporters blame the oppression of women in the Muslim and Arab world on a combination of factors, with Islam at the forefront.

The problem here is that such reporters rarely quote Muslim women explaining just how oppressed they really are or cite specifics from the Quran that supports these claims. This could very likely be due to their own misinterpretations of Islam and for the notion of selective perception, where their reliance on Western cultural norms in their interpretations of Islamic societies could in fact lead to inaccurate assumptions about these societies. So the end result is distorted reports that usually blame Islam for many problems that in most cases are caused by corrupt or oppressive rulers or ignorant traditional practices and not Islam.

Other examples of media distortion of Muslim women include is a *Christian Science Monitor* article on a famous Saudi TV host who was brutally beaten by her husband in 2004. This article illustrates how reporters can misinterpret other cultures by attempting to understand them through the lens of their own cultural norms. Reporter, Souheila Al-Jadda (2004) a Muslim herself, worked hard to present a positive picture of Islam and to prove that Saudi mistreatment of women is due to “cultural practices and overly patriarchal societies” and not because of religion (p.9). Yet, despite her efforts, traces of prejudice and misinterpretations are evident when she writes that Saudi women “are forced to wear suffocating black veils that cover them from head to toe, turning them into shadows of the men they walk behind,” referring to the traditional black abaya worn by Saudi women and most female visitors to the Kingdom (p. 9). It is fair to say that the abaya is indeed “suffocating” at times in such a desert climate, since the abaya is black and made of heavy cloth that prevents ventilation and absorbs the blazing heat. As one Saudi woman comments, “if there is one thing that I envy my [Saudi] countrymen, it is their dress,” says Fatima Al-Oboud (2002), commenting on Saudi men’s flowing, light white cotton robes that reflect the scorching heat (p.1).

The problem with Al-Jadda's report, however, is her choice of wording when she claims that women who wear the abaya become "shadows" of the men and that the women "walk behind" the men and not side by side. Saudi women are, therefore, portrayed as sheep that follow their shepherd; they are inferior to men or almost nonexistent, since they are mere shadows to the men. What is interesting here is that Al-Jadda (2006), who is a freelance reporter residing in the US, wrote a more recent article in *USA Today*, where she recalls while walking in the mall, herself wearing a hijab and abaya, an American woman stopped Al-Jadda to say "you people are oppressed and submissive" (*USA Today* online). So why does Al-Jadda view Saudi women as lagging behind the men for wearing the abaya if she herself wears one and obviously does not see herself as a shadow or as inferior to men? This again confirms the idea of the journalist as the storyteller who relies on culturally-embedded values to tell the story of another culture. In this case, Al-Jadda (2004) is basing her opinion of women in Saudi Arabia on her own cultural codes and automatically assumes that because she chose to wear the abaya in a country that does not enforce a dress code, while Saudi women are told by their country to wear the abaya then this means they are submissive and weak.

Another feature identified in the coverage is the tendency by some reporters to assign roles to the main characters in their stories. Usually Muslim women are assigned the victim role, whereas men or religion are the villains. Examples of these role assignments are evident in some of the newspaper articles analyzed above among many others. For instance, a number of articles analyzed at first glance do not seem to fit the obvious stereotype of the Muslim woman as the oppressed victim. These are articles that portray the assertive Muslim woman who is independent and in control of her life and her decisions. Yet, a common theme in all of the articles in this section is that although they are intended to illustrate how strong-willed and determined the

women are, readers are still left with the notion of the Muslim woman as a weak and dependent creature. The examples below illustrate how these so-called assertive women do not really have a say in the story nor are they in control of the story as they supposedly are in real life. The reporters do not rely much on quotes by these women and when they do talk their quotes are weak, sending off the message that these women are controlled, oppressed and victimized.

When She Speaks What Does the Muslim Woman Say?

An article in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* for instance introduces readers to Dr. Ghazala Hayat, a Pakistani doctor who resides in St. Louis and has twice been elected to lead the Islamic Foundation of St. Louis, which governs two mosques in the area, in what the reporter describes as a “largely male-directed religion.” Reporter Patricia Rice (2001) describes Hayat as a devout Muslim but one who does not believe the Quran says women have to cover their hair. The reporter describes how during prayer, Hayat covers her hair and removes her shoes, but outside of prayer, she is shown to “uncover” her “shiny, wavy brown hair” that “hangs in a thick braid down the back of her starched, white doctor’s coat” (p. 16).

The article describes Hayat as a Western, American, liberal Muslim woman, which is essentially what gives her the power to speak and define the role for other Muslim women. The reporter seems to support the idea that life in America changed Hayat for the better as she is now more independent, working a male-dominated job, refuses to wear the veil, leads a mosque, is divorced and runs a family...a much different picture than the normal stereotype of the oppressed and controlled Muslim woman. Yet, despite all this positive talk about Hayat’s independence and career-oriented life, one could argue that quotes by Hayat in this story do not illustrate her assertiveness as a Muslim woman. There are no quotes in this story whereby Hayat says “I chose this” or “I wanted that.” Instead, she says: “The Prophet Mohammed didn’t

object to women working...The Prophet married the woman he was working for. He certainly didn't believe women should stay home, not work and not be educated."

Further, when the reporter tells us Hayat does not wear the head cover, except when she prays, it is not because Hayat says "I am not convinced I have to cover my hair," but because she believes that "nothing in the Quran says a woman must cover her head." Hence, one might argue that these quotes give out the impression that Hayat is a devout Muslim who does everything the Quran and Prophet Mohamed (pbuh) tell her to do, when in truth some of her actions and decisions are really based on her own personal choices, which is not really evident here. The majority of Islamic clergy, for example, would argue that the Quran does in fact tell women to cover their hair, hence this means that Hayat 'chose not to;' it means Hayat 'made her own interpretation of the Quran,' and hence, she is an assertive woman who has control over her choices. But this is not conveyed in her quotes. Also, the fact that she leads a mosque is not attributed to Hayat's hard work and determination but rather to the mosque's location in the U.S., the land of freedom. The reporter attempts to convey the message that women leading mosques can only happen in the U.S.. She quotes a Harvard female director as saying "...the American mosque has the ethos of the U.S." (Rice, 2001, p.16). Such a statement can therefore send the message that there are no Muslim females who hold any significant positions within their religious community across the Muslim world, when in fact there are many and they do in much more difficult circumstances, given the corruption and lack of democracy that govern various Muslim countries. Of course, it is possible that the reporter is just selecting the best quotes she got from her interview with Hayat, but it is also hard to believe that there was not one single quote from such a supposedly assertive woman, where she said "I" did this or that rather than justify all her actions and success in life on her piety and her life in the United States. This leads

to the conclusion that the reporter's choice of words combined with the selective quotations conveys the message that Hayat is a close follower of her religion that stipulates what she can and cannot do and that her life in the U.S. is the main cause of her success as a doctor and a mosque leader and not her hard work or her individual interpretations of Islam.

Another weak example of an assertive, defiant Muslim woman comes from a *New York Times* article that introduces readers to several Muslim American females who are part of this "new generation of Muslim women raised and educated in North America," who are "progressive Muslims" (Goodstein, 2004, p. 1). Though the article introduces readers to Muslim women who are determined to change conditions in American mosques to be more inclusive and attentive to women's needs, yet their voice is absent from the story.²³ It is ironic that a column that supposedly explains to readers that some Muslim American women are voicing their demands and enforcing positive changes does not include one single quote from such women that illustrates just how assertive they are. Instead, these women are quoted as saying comments such as, "We did not even know the prayer had ended... We were locked up like sheep and cows," says one such "progressive Muslim" woman of segregation of males and females during prayer time at some mosques. Another woman is quoted as saying "People felt that women weren't treated well in mosques, and excluded from decision-making."

Hence, despite the fact that this article represents assertive women, there are no quotes within the story that confirm these women's assertiveness. It is always the reporter speaking on their behalf to explain what they are doing to enforce positive changes. Whereas quotes from the women reflect oppression and submissiveness, which confirms rather than refutes the stereotype of oppressed Muslim women who are "excluded" on one extreme and "locked up as sheep and cows" on the other.

Again, one might read these quotes as innocent representations of Muslim women's realities and might justify the lack of assertiveness in the quotes to interview limitations. However, because there seems to be a trend and because a large number of articles that supposedly report on assertive Muslim woman lack quotes that demonstrate such assertiveness, one might also come to the conclusion that Western reporters tend to unconsciously assign the victim role to Muslim women, based on their own cultural interpretations and their assigning of new situations into old definitions. Because Muslim women are different from many Western women in their dress code and overall conservatism, they are automatically perceived as weak and as victims. Reporters, therefore, usually assume that they have to speak for these women and on the rare occasions when Muslim women are interviewed, reporters unconsciously rely on the women's weakest comments that fit their cultural interpretations of the weak and oppressed Muslim woman.

The articles analyzed in this section demonstrate how Muslim women are veiled in the story. They are not allowed to speak or voice their opinions and views about Islam and whether or not they really feel victimized by their faith. They are portrayed as oppressed and weak even when they are not so in real life, as we have seen with examples of assertive Muslim women. This leads one to conclude that stereotypes of Muslim women as weak and oppressed and backward still exist in the minds of many Western reporters, which creates such distorted accounts of the lives of Muslim women. For many Western reporters it is hard to think of Islam without comparing it to their own culture and religious background. According to van Ginneken (1998), most reporters working for elite media organizations in the West have a religious background even if they rarely attend religious services. "Yet in their portrayals of other cultures,

they often implicitly use Judaeo-Christian religion as a yardstick of civilization, and implicitly look down upon other religions as ‘primitive’” (van Ginneken, 1998, p.66).

Yet despite this bleak picture, there are exceptions to distorted reporting. Fair reporting does exist even if it appears infrequently, as illustrated in the section on hijab. Although most of the international articles analyzed in this section fall into the same categories as the American articles discussed above, quite a few articles do in fact present Muslim women in a more balanced way. At least five out of the 11 international articles analyzed here provide an alternative to the existing stereotypes on Islam in general and its treatment of women in particular. These articles contribute to educating readers about Islam as well as introducing them to real Muslim women who are allowed to speak and express their opinions.

An example of this is an article appearing in the London *Guardian* by Ambassador Akbar Ahmed (2001), the Ibn Khaldun Chair of Islamic Studies at American University in Washington DC, who answers commonly asked questions on Islam and addresses some of the existing stereotypes, such as women in Islam and why in some cultures Muslim women today are mistreated. On this, Ahmed says:

I believe that there is a clear correlation between the treatment of women and Muslim self-perception, which bears upon the position of women in Islam. When Muslim society is confident and in balance, it treats women with fairness and respect; when Muslim society is threatened and feels vulnerable, it treats women with indifference and even harshness (p.6).

Ahmed cites ample examples of historical Islam and women’s strong role, arguing that oppression of women started around the 19th and 20th century, closely connected to periods of colonization, when men thought it was necessary to protect and seclude their families from “the

prying eyes of foreign troops.” After Europeans left, Ahmed argues, Muslim women emerged once again in public life, “but they were left to fight now-entrenched local traditions and male views and prejudices” (Ahmed, 2001, p.6). Ahmed provides readers with extensive information and history on Islam and how it treats women. He also educates readers on how today Islam remains “only half understood” by so many, which is why some Muslim women remain “trapped in local, tribal codes and customs that do not permit them to benefit from their Islamic heritage” (p.6).

This article is thus an exception as it does not simply reiterate the usual prejudices and accusations about Islam but actually refutes them and attempts to explain why they exist. The essay is also different because, although it is written by a male, Ahmad is a prominent Muslim scholar with numerous award-winning books, films and documentaries, and thus, he provides readers with sufficient context and background on Islam and women’s rights that refute the stereotype of the oppressed and helpless Muslim woman. Ahmed’s expertise on contemporary Islam and women’s rights means he is far less likely to fall into the trap of selective perception or role assigning and he offers an objective representation of the issue addressed.

A similar article in the *Irish Times* aims to prove to readers that current oppression against women in many Muslim countries, such as honor killings and the harsh treatment of women in some countries is more a product of “fundamentalism combined with tribalism,” adding that “Muslim women fared better during the Golden Age of Islam” (Marlowe, 2002, p.52). Marlowe interviews two Muslim female scholars for her story, Algerian writer and linguist Latifa Ben Mansour and Moroccan author and research Fatima Mernissi. Again, the fact that the reporter relies on these two women demonstrates that there are Muslim women out there who are

informed, educated and independent enough to speak for themselves and for other Muslim women thus providing an alternative view to the dominating stereotypes.

A *Daily Telegraph* article also breaks away from existing stereotypes by illustrating how the renowned Muslim cleric, Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, often caricatured in the West as a fanatical Islamic preacher, encourages women's independence, education and employment. Miles (2005) cites the example of al-Qaradawi's three daughters who hold doctoral degrees, drive and work. Thus this Muslim cleric "practices what he preaches" (Miles, 2005, p.005).

Another article in the *Toronto Star* educates western readers on the Holy month of Ramadan and what it means to Muslims worldwide by following the life of a Muslim woman and her husband living in Canada. Throughout the article, reporter Raheel Raza (2001) allows Rehana Begg and her husband Mehdi Fedai-Nazari to voice their opinions without the reporter having to speak on their behalf. This article allows readers to visualize this Muslim woman and her husband as normal human beings, who go through a lot of daily routines that any other couple goes through. Hence, the woman and the man are no longer the Other, because the reader can relate to some of their daily practices and can view them as real-life people.

International newspapers also include in their reporting success stories of assertive women who seek changes and reinterpretations of Islam. One significant article in the *Financial Times* on Arab and Muslim female writers shows women from various extremes: on one side there are the heavy defenders of Islam such as Fawzia Afzal-Khan (2005), author of *Shattering the Stereotypes: Muslim women speak out* and Na'ima B. Robert (2005) who wrote *From my sisters' lips*. On the other side there is Irshad Manji (2004), whom reporter Noha Mellor (2005) describes as "not just in a different register, but on a different planet from these women" (p.26). Mellor argues that "it's a fantasy to believe that all Muslim women perceive their religion as an

oppression clamped upon them by fathers, brothers and husbands.” She claims that while Afzal-Khan and Robert emphasize the greatness of Islam, Manji on the other hand “accuses Islam of being an inflexible religion that needs to be reformed” (Mellor, 2005, p.26). Between the two poles there are assertive feminists such as Dalya Cohen-Mor (2005), who focuses in her book *Arab women writers: An anthology of short stories*, on the everyday problems of Arab women. What all of these women have in common however, according to Mellor, is “they want to clarify the whole issue of their rights and duties as Muslim women without the mediation of a male voice-and not by means that s either ‘biased’ or ‘politically correct’” (p.26).

This article is interesting as it brings together Muslim and Arab women with different perspectives on their religion and their lives and allows them to talk directly to the readers by voicing their beliefs and viewpoints. By bringing together women from opposite poles, with contradicting ideas and beliefs about their faith,, the reporter proves to her readers that Muslim women are not one ‘Other’ but are diverse in their beliefs, personalities and conservatism. In addition, the language of the article itself is neutral, with no sarcasm or stereotyping, as it is the women who are doing the talking and not the reporter.

This set of international articles thus demonstrates that there can be objective reporting on religions that does not fall under conventional wisdom, selective perception or superficial storytelling and role assigning. They specifically illustrate how some reporters manage to report objectively on Islam and its treatment of women through a combination of adequate sources, sound research and fair reporting. This is possible when reporters give themselves a chance to really get to know the culture they are examining and to listen sincerely to people from different background and let them explain who they are and what they believe in instead of putting words in their mouths.

Conclusion

The articles analyzed in this chapter illustrate how U.S. newspaper representation of Muslim women is complex and multifaceted at times. We have seen how the media was set on defending Muslim women and their relationship to Islam when this was important for internal security and we have also seen how the media promoted a contradictory opinion—Afghanistani women and the burqa—as a justification for the war on Afghanistan. This analysis has also demonstrated how when reporters talk about hijab, it is either described *by Muslim women* as *empowering* and a *source of strength*, or at other times is depicted *by the non-Muslim reporter* as *shapeless*, *backward* or even *ghostly*. When reporters talk about Muslim women and Shari’a law, women are more often than not described as oppressed by the laws, and such claims are usually made by the reporter or another non-Muslim source. Finally, when reporters talk about women and the idea of a modern Islam, the message is usually that Muslim women in non-Western countries are practicing a “backward” and “ancient” form of Islam that has to be modernized to fit with 21st century cultural developments. We are also told by reporters how some exceptional Muslim women in the West are practicing an almost different breed of Islam—one that is very modern and very liberal by Western standards. Finally, we are introduced to Muslim women in the West and elsewhere who tell readers how Islam is not backward or oppressive but it is misunderstood and is confused with the corrupt and oppressive governments that are common in many Muslim countries.

These diverse and sometimes contradicting messages, thus, illustrate just how complex newspaper representation of Muslim women really is. Based on the analysis of the coverage, however, it is important to realize that reporters are capable of writing balanced and well-sourced

stories on Muslim women. One should thus question why prejudiced and distorted reporting prevails. The fact that many reporters spend sufficient time researching facts about Islam and Muslim women, finding the right sources and most importantly, allowing the women to proclaim their beliefs, means that reporters are aware of the stereotypes, so why do they still continue to present them to readers? The answer to this question might rest somewhere in the various explanations provided throughout this chapter that include everything from a journalist's primary socialization and cultural upbringing, to conventional wisdom or pressure from editors and newspaper advertisers. In some cases, as illustrated in this chapter, reporters unconsciously allow their own cultural norms and beliefs to direct their arguments and to judge other cultures from their Western cultural standpoint. Yet, there are also cases where dominant news values dictate what journalists should report on, which was the case with the Nigerian stoning stories. The analysis also demonstrated how many reporters fail to rely on adequate sources from the culture or religion that would provide a more balanced and logical explanation on the various practices and issues reported on. In addition, stories that fail to give Muslim women a chance to voice their opinions and views usually tend to distort their realities, as it is the Western reporter who speaks on their behalf, making claims about their oppression and weakness.

Notes

¹ See Quran 2:30-37.

² Under Islamic Shari'a law, interest is prohibited, which is why interest-free business loans are a great service for Muslims. But Muslim scholars have also said that Muslims living in western societies and wanting to buy homes are allowed to do so with mortgage if they cannot afford to pay it any other way.

³ Newspapers across the nation reported attacks of retaliation against Muslims which included verbal threats, harassment of veiled women, the smashing of mosques and three deaths. Similar attacks were experienced in other western countries, including Canada, Australia and England.

⁴ This conclusion is discussed in more detail on page 16, as it was a general conclusion out of my analysis of articles included in this wave of sympathetic reporting.

⁵ Saada's column originally appeared in *Newsday*.

⁶ France announced this ban in 2003 and it took effect on September 2, 2004. The decision bans school students from wearing any religious symbols or apparel at school. These include Muslim headscarves, Jewish skullcaps, Sikh turbans as well as large Christian crosses. President Jacques Chirac justified this ban on France's need to preserve its secularism. "Secularism is one of the great successes of the Republic," said Chirac in a December 2003 address to the nation. "It is a crucial element of social peace and national cohesion. We cannot let it weaken." For more on this see "France Hijab Ban" in CBC news online <http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/islam/hijab.html>

⁷ Some Muslim men and women do in fact prefer to be treated by doctors from the same sex. They do it out of conservatism, especially if they have to do a complete check-up and hence they will need to undress in front of the doctor.

⁸ Iran is as strong as China in its Internet censorship, according to a recent country study. For more information on this, go to <http://www.opennetinitiative.net/studies/iran/> There are also articles that indicate that the government censors certain magazines and uses black markers to color over a woman's body if she is showing too much skin. You can access more information on this at <http://jturn.qem.se/2006/more-pictures-of-iranian-censorship/>

⁹ This information is available online from Nationmaster.com.
http://www.nationmaster.com/red/graph/hea_pla_sur_pro-health-plastic-surgery-procedures&ob=ws

¹⁰ WAMY is the World Assembly for Muslim Youth, a UK-based non-governmental youth and student organization affiliated with the United Nations.

¹¹ Female Genital Mutilation is a traditional practice by some Christians, Jews and Muslims in Africa. According to Sheikh Ahmad Kutty (2002), a senior lecturer and an Islamic scholar at the Islamic Institute of Toronto, Ontario, Canada, "There is nothing in the sources, either the Qur'an or the Sunnah, to suggest that it [female circumcision] is a PRESCRIBED ritual of initiation for women in Islam" (www.islamonline.net).

¹² Journalists commonly refer to the newsroom library or database of old stories as the morgue.

¹³ Irhsad Manji's book and opinions on Islam are discussed in more detail later on in this chapter, under the section entitled: Islam needs to be Modernized.

¹⁴ Borrowing essential background information is a normal practice in newsrooms as long as the reporter uses his/her own wording to rewrite the information.

¹⁵ Todd Milbourn (2002) of the *Star Tribune* is the only local reporter who explained in his story that Hussein's conviction was the first of its kind in Nigeria and he quoted a source who explained that she had the right to appeal to a secular court that opposed the conviction.

¹⁶ Richard Dowden's (2002) *New York Times* article towards the very end mentions that there are Islamic scholars in Nigeria who believe the verdict against Hussein was a misapplication of Shari'a and also mentions that there are those who seriously doubt the federal court will allow such an execution. Dowden's article was fairly long yet this paragraph was very brief and was positioned as the fifth paragraph from the bottom of the story; there were no quotes by the Islamic scholars that he mentions in the story and hence the bulk of his story worked to strengthen the idea of Shari'a as backward and oppressive towards Muslim women.

¹⁷ Helon Habila is a Nigerian writer and is the author of the novel *Waiting for an Angel*.

¹⁸ For more on this fire story, see http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/1874471.stm

²⁰ Both Manji and Nomani have been criticized by some Muslim critics for their sexual freedom and ideas, see Nomani's book, *Tantrika: Traveling the Road of Divine Love* and for their harsh criticism and accusations that Muslims hate Jews and Christians, which is what both women have claimed. For more on this, see Irshad Manji's book, *The Trouble with Islam Today*.

²⁰ According to Islamic scholars, Islam makes no distinction between male or female in seeking knowledge. Women in Islam are entitled to freedom of expression and in participating in public life. Muslim women also have the right to ask for a divorce just like men. For more information on Islam and women's rights see www.islamonline.net.

²¹ It is a misconception to assume that women hold a negative status in Islam. Muslim women hold rights as equal to men. According to Saimah Ashraf, a 1997-98 winner of the Stanford University Boothe Prize for Excellence in Writing:

"The Western media, for some reason, latch on to a few examples of unjust behavior in the Islamic world, brand Islam as a backwards and "fundamentalist" religion, especially in its treatment of women, and ignore that it was the first religion to accord women equal rights. While Christian and Jewish women were still considered inferior, the originators of sin, and the property of their husbands, Muslim women were being given shares in inheritance, were allowed to choose or refuse prospective husbands, and were considered equal to men in the eyes of God. However, through time, slowly changing customs, and the rise of male-dominated, patriarchal nation-states, Muslim governments began placing restrictions on women which had no grounds in the Quran, the Islamic holy book; or the hadith, the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad. On the other hand, Christian and Jewish women in the West have slowly been awarded rights not called for in the biblical tradition" (www.Islamfortoday.com).

²² On 30 September 2005, the Danish paper *Jyllands-Posten* published these cartoons initiating world-wide Muslim anger as under Islam it is considered blasphemous to insult Prophet Mohammad.

²³ There is an ongoing controversy in several mosques across the United States where women are objecting to partitions between men and women in their mosques. Some women are calling for more inclusive prayer sections that allow women to be able to hear the imam clearly during prayer. Other women and at the forefront, Asra Nomani have gone to the extreme of not only wanting the partitions removed, but they want to pray side by side with the men. According to Dr. Muzammil H. Siddiq, president of the Fiqh Council of North America, men and women in Islam can pray in the mosque without any partitions. However, the men stand in rows right behind the imam, followed by rows of women and children. This is how Muslims prayed during Prophet Mohammad's times (PBUH).

Chapter Three: Women and Society

Articles analyzed in this section deal with a wide range of diverse issues that shape Muslim-Arab women's social lives: reporting on social gatherings, marriage, divorce, children, education and empowerment, sports, arts as well as literary works. The analysis of these articles revealed a number of frequent practices that journalists follow, which in turn lead to distorted or stereotypical accounts of Muslim women.

A common trend, which was also discussed in the previous chapter, is the lack of adequate context or background that would help readers make sense of a story; in some cases this leads to distortion and in others leaves one confused about cultural and religious practices that seem peculiar and sometimes even alien. In many cases reporters rely on a single anecdote to generalize about Muslim women; sometimes this anecdote is very extreme, such as honor crimes against women or cases of incest and abuse, yet these exceptions are presented to readers as the Muslim world norm. Another trend identified in the coverage is the tendency to use Muslim women as markers of broader modernization; the women are judged as modern or traditional based on how Western their clothes and outside appearance are and on how Western their ideas are, which is not very realistic since many liberal Muslim still hold conservative religious opinions that fit their culture and lifestyle. Another common theme connected to the last point is the tendency of some reporters to impose Western values as an overlay. If a Muslim woman holds certain beliefs that are uncommon in Western culture, she is described as backward, no matter how highly assertive, educated or independent she is; in other words, women are not judged on how they fit within their culture as much as they would fit in a Western culture. Furthermore, as much as the majority of reports try to achieve balance in the story to comply with journalistic protocols of news production, some reporters still end up giving too much

attention to one side; usually it is the negative, stereotypical view that is emphasized. The examples that follow will illustrate some of these frequent reporting practices. In general, the bulk of the coverage in this chapter frames the Muslim woman as an oppressed victim, a sexual object, as abused and also as voiceless. Yet, there are also stories within the coverage that overlay frames of the Muslim woman as artistic, bold, creative and athletic.

Before turning to the analysis of stories on Muslim women's social life, it is important to examine some of the writings by Muslim feminists that clarify their stance on issues of marriage, divorce, polygamy, etc in Islam.

Muslim Women's Social Status

As a general rule, the majority of Muslim feminists argue that Islam elevated women's position in society and was successful in ending many traditional practices that undermined women. Ashraf (1008) contends that among the first thing Islam did that reflects equality of the sexes under Islam, was to banish the Pre-Islamic Arabia practice of infanticide, where baby girls were often buried alive out of fear of shaming the family or tribe. The Quran clearly states that girls should not be treated as a disgrace but rather as a blessing from God: "To Allah belongs the domination of the heavens and the earth. He creates what He wills. He bestows female children to whomever He wills and bestows male children to whomever He wills" (42:49). Ashraf (1998) further explains how Prophet Mohammed guaranteed Paradise to fathers who apply "benevolent treatment" in raising their daughters (Islamfortoday.com).

Moreover, feminists further contend that under Islam, girls are not considered the property of their fathers and, therefore, have complete control over their sexuality. One of the prominent Muslim female politicians and a strong advocate of women's rights is former

Pakistani Prime Minister, Benazir Bhutto (1995), who argues that traditional Islamic law dictates that, no one, not even a woman's father, can force a woman to marry someone against her consent. "And a woman does not cease to be an individual after marriage" (Islamfortoday.com). Yet, Kahf (2005) points out how, in reality, laws are often "maneuvered around" or even overruled in certain traditional systems where other powerful forces, aside from religion, dominate (p. 180). Kahf further contends that a Muslim marriage is contractual, which means the wife can add any stipulations she sees as necessary to protect her rights. Al-Hibri (2005) adds that a Muslim wife is an independent legal entity; the wife retains her own name after marriage in addition to her financial independence (p. 164). Kahf further states that domestic violence is neither allowed or encouraged under Islam. "Of course this never stopped a wife beater," states Kahf. "Domestic violence is as much a problem in the Muslim community as it is in other communities" (p. 180).

Muslim feminists also maintain that polygamy, which was unrestrained in pre-Islamic Arabia, is not encouraged in Islam. Hibri (2005) argues that one thing is clear in the Quran, and that is the clear statement that "polygamy results in injustice" (p. 173). Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi (no date) adds to this debate by arguing that there are many misconceptions and inaccuracies about polygamy in Islam. He states that the overwhelming norm in Muslim marriages is for a man to marry one wife. Allowing a man to marry up to four wives was permitted as a way to protect orphan women and widows, but it was not encouraged as a norm under Islam, given that the husband has to treat all wives with the same fairness, which is almost impossible. Hibri argues that, while many pious men have abandoned polygamy, in an effort to reach the high state of marital and human relations described in Islam, others have "opted for the minimal standard, despite its questionable application to contexts broader than those referred to

in the revelation” (p. 173). Feminists also discuss divorce under Islam; while it is not encouraged, Ragab (no date) explains that a woman maintains the right to divorce a husband if she feels she was treated unjustly or even if she feels unhappy living with him (submission.org). Furthermore, the husband has to pay alimony for the wife.

In terms of empowerment and rights to education, feminists contend that Islam clearly encourages both sexes to seek knowledge and education. Bhutto (1995) cites a popular saying of the Prophet as evidence of this: "Education is obligatory on both Muslim men and women, even if they have to go to China to seek it." Ragab argues that Islam has always recognized the prominent role played by women in society. Muslim women are at liberty to pursue jobs in any profession; they can seek political office; they can even join men in the army, which was done historically by Aisha, the Prophet's wife, who led an army of 30,000 soldiers in battle (Ragab, N.D., submission.org).

In sum, Muslim feminists clearly lay out women's obligations and rights under Islam and go into detail about women's rights within marriage, divorce, work, and education among other things. Hence, Muslim feminists (Hibri, 2005, Kahf, 2005; Ragab N.D.) assert that when women are not allowed to enjoy their rights as specified under Islamic law, this could be related to other reasons than Islam, which include patriarchal control, cultural practices; economic poverty as well as political reasons. The analysis in this chapter covers many issues relating to Muslim women and society, whereby some reporters seem in agreement with Muslim feminists on women's rights and reasons for oppression or inequality, while others introduce their own theories on the matter. Coverage analyzed in this chapter is divided under three general themes: Male-Female interaction; Muslim women and empowerment, and Muslim/Arab women's outstanding achievements.

Male-Female Interaction

Lack of context can confuse readers and lead to negative opinions about a foreign culture if this culture is regularly portrayed as odd. An example of this comes from a *Christian Science Monitor* report on the lives of reporters on the job, where we are told that the *Monitor's* reporter Don Murphy and a photographer were invited to spend the night at the home of a Mahdi Army leader while reporting on a story in Iraq. After the report relays the gracious hospitality that the two men received -- a generous meal and hospitable family -- readers are then told that "in this religiously conservative household Dan didn't meet his host's wife, or any of the other women, with one exception: His host's nearly 80-year-old mother, her face adorned with green tribal tattoos" (*Christian Science Monitor*, p. 06). Murphy explains to readers that "at her age, a lot of the conservative rules don't seem to apply. She shook my hand firmly, interjected when she wanted to make a point, and even lit up a cigarette, usually a strict no-no for women among religious Shiites here" (*Christian Science Monitor*, p. 06).

The fact that the reporter provides no context to explain why conservative Muslim women do not mingle with non-relative males could lead readers to believe that these women are prisoners in a *harem*. The wider facts are more complicated, according to Yusuf Al-Qaradawi (2005), Islam permits contact and socializing between men and women as long as both parties adhere to Islamic teachings and ethical morals. He adds that there is nothing in Islam that prevents men and women from cooperating together "on that which is lawful and permissible such as acquiring beneficial knowledge or good work" (Islamonline.net, 2005). Having said that, traditional and cultural values do play a role in how men and women interact in various Muslim countries; some countries are more open than others. In some cultures, women and men interact

freely, while in others women are forbidden to socialize with the other sex unless it is for business or medical reasons; there are also cultures where all contact with the other sex is completely discouraged.¹ Yet, readers are not led to understand how Muslim men and women interact in different cultures. In this *Monitor* report, when the 80-year-old mother is mentioned as an exception to this seclusion, she is portrayed as eccentric, with her tattoos, smoking and loud interruptions to the conversations. One could argue that this woman was comfortable talking to the two journalists because of her motherly status and seniority in the family; maybe she thought it fit that she greet her son's guests. Other women of the household, on the other hand, might not feel comfortable talking to strangers out of shyness and conservativeness. Yet, the impression one gets from this short passage is that the reporters were prevented from seeing or meeting other women because they were kept hidden or isolated, which fits the stereotype of Muslim women in the harem, whereas this eccentric elderly woman is presented as exceptional only because of her oddness and not because of her personal choice.

Using women as markers of modernity is illustrated in another *Christian Science Monitor* story on Syria's fear of the impact of the U.S.-Iraqi war. This story starts out with a lead on two young women enjoying a night out at a "trendy Pit stop café." Reporter Helena Cobban (2002) says the girls' outing is a symbol of how young Syrians are creating their own modernity by combining both East and West. Although the story does not include any quotes from either woman, Cuban describes them both in detail; she explains how one of them wears the headscarf and a "stylish pantsuit" while the other tosses "flowing J-Lo locks" making it difficult to tell if she were Muslim or one of Syria's 15 percent Christian population; the details of their outfits are supposed to emphasize their modernity to a Western audience. Although the focus of the story is on the war on Iraq, the reporter starts with this lead, concluding with this comment: "Young

women having a night out together without a male chaperone: until recently, you wouldn't see that in many Arab countries. And in many of them, you still don't" (p. 09). One could argue that Cobban's latter comment is slightly vague as she mentions no specific countries where the idea of women going out without a male guardian is 'just' starting to happen, nor does she mention any of the 'many' other countries where this is still an impossibility. This remark also seems to deem Syrian women male-dependent even when they obviously are not. In sum, it makes this outing sound like an exception in Syria and other Arab countries for that matter, rather than the norm. The reporter ignores the fact that women in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt as well as several other Arab countries, go about their business freely: they go to work, school or other places without a male chaperone, yet readers are given the impression that this is a rare occurrence and is only now becoming a norm thanks to Westernization.

But the real question is, why start off with this lead when the rest of the story is all about the war and Syrian fears of how this war might impact their country? The answer is found towards the end of Cobban's story when she explains how it can be simultaneously the case that many Syrians like Americans but are also angry at American policies unfavorable to Syrians and Arabs. This leads Cobban to conclude that "while Syrians remain eager to adopt those 'Western' ways that fit their own view of a desirable modern lifestyle, they try hard to reject anything specifically American" (p. 09). Cuban seems to assume that the two young women at the café alone, without a chaperone, are only there because they are modernizing the Western way. A reader could therefore conclude that Muslim or Arab women cannot be out on their own unless they are imitating Western cultural norms, not an entirely convincing argument, but the one Cuban seems to be arguing here.

An example of a news story that generalizes through a single anecdote comes from the *Washington Post*, where reporter Nurith Aizenman (2002) explains how American maternity wards are adapting to the diverse needs and practices of immigrants. The reporter cites the example of an African man who wanted to wash his baby in wine immediately after delivery, then refers to the “Middle Eastern women whose Muslim religion forbids examination by male health workers” (p. A01). The word “forbids” here is misleading, as nothing in the Quran forbids a Muslim woman from seeking medical help if the medical expert is a man. Some conservative Muslim women choose not to show their bodies to a male physician just as many Muslim males feel uncomfortable having a female doctor examine their naked bodies. The fact that some Muslim women choose to do so out of a personal preference does not mean this is a universal approach by all Muslim women. Hence, the reporter’s claim here is misguided as it is not based on these women’s own accounts nor for that matter on the Quran. Yet inserting such a claim in a news story without sufficient context or explanatory from women who prefer female doctors presents the Muslim woman as Other, with her unusual and backward tendencies on display even when it comes to medical assistance.

Another example of oversimplified generalizations comes from the *Boston Globe*, where reporter Victoria Burnett (2004) describes in her lead a scene where Muslim Afghani women sit in a circle, “weeping and waiting for their snowy-bearded leader to emerge” (p. A8). She is referring to Ismail Khan, Herat’s former “autocratic” governor, who despite his change of status, still has many male and female supporters. Burnett describes how Khan spoke to his group of weeping female supporters, “shrouded in blue burkas and black cloaks” and then rested “his hand on their heads in benediction and they leaned to kiss it,” while one woman rushed to press “four heavy, gold bracelets into his palm” (p. A8). The anecdote portrays Afghani women as

helpless, weeping women, awaiting their male master's blessing and kind words; they sacrifice their most valuable possessions to ensure the satisfaction and approval of their master. This single scene therefore conveys the impression that this is how Muslim women in Afghanistan live, to please their male masters. It is also interesting that the story is not actually about this group of women; they are never quoted in the story. The topic instead is about this former leader and his outlook for the future, yet for Burnett (2004) the story of the weeping women was important enough for her to use it as her lead.

Other incidents of such generalizations include another *Boston Globe* story focused on Muna Irziqat, a Muslim immigrant from the West Bank who has used technical skills acquired from her college education back home to wire computers in the entire social service organization. Reporter Tasha Robertson (2005) explains that Irziqat is an assertive young Muslim, who believes Muslim women can achieve anything if they are determined to do so, yet she immediately follows this sentence with an anecdote about how Irziqat "panicked" when a male client was about to close the door during their one-on-one business meeting. Robertson tells readers that Irziqat wears the veil and she quotes the young woman defending her action as a cultural and religious reaction rather than fear of men, even though in this case he happened to be Muslim. This single anecdote leads Robertson to conclude that, "like Irziqat that day, many Muslim women from immigrant Arab families experience the push and pull between the traditional Islam, of their homelands and the relative freedom enjoyed by women in the United States" (p. A3).

The Robertson story illustrates how some forms of generalization are undone even on the basis of the story's own evidence to the contrary. Not only does the reporter generalize about Muslim women from this one single incident, she also distorts the daily realities of these

women's lives. Even the quotes she relies on from Irziqat and other Muslim women fail to support her claim. Robertson fails to understand that if Muslim female immigrants do in fact experience a "push and pull," it is not between their "traditional" religion and their newly-acquired "freedom" as much as it is a struggle to be able to practice their religion freely and not be judged as oppressed, backward or helpless. It is not that Muslim women are struggling to leave the traditional for the new, liberal culture, as much as it is their desire to maintain their Muslim values in the new culture, which ironically should not be difficult given the "relative freedom" enjoyed in the U.S., a fact even Robertson has mentioned. Robertson thus contradicts her main claim when she quotes Irziqat explaining that Muslim women in the Middle East work and socialize in cafes but New Yorkers who see her walking down the street in her traditional Muslim dress assume she must be backward and oppressed. "To be honest, when I first came to this country, I hated it. Not the people. But, in my home, I was working. I was very active," explains Irziqat (Robertson, 2005, p. A3).

Although Robertson quotes two Muslim women who are educated, employed and fairly assertive and in control of their lives, based on the reporter's own description and the women's quotes, Robertson reiterates the stereotype of the oppressed and helpless Muslim woman. She frames the women as torn between two cultures or in a constant struggle to maintain traditional values while acquiring new, "liberal" ones. Linda Sarsour, another Palestinian-American who works as a community activist, is quoted as saying "to mainstream Americans, I am always talking about my culture and trying to show women are not oppressed, but to my people in the community, I am progressive" (p. A3). Robertson later adds that both Irziqat and Sarsour "struggle with guilt and frustration as they try to be independent Muslim women in America" (p.

A3). The reporter also tells readers that it is Sarsour's "internal quest to prove she can be both progressive and traditional that causes her to feel duplicitous..." (p. A3).

Robertson's wording in these examples confirms the stereotype of the helpless Muslim woman who is a victim of the struggle between the traditional and the modern or who is alternatively unable to live with integrity. One could argue that nothing in the two women's quotes proves they are victims of tradition; on several occasions Robertson explains how both women wear the veil by choice and choose to act in accordance with their Islamic traditions. They are not struggling between tradition and freedom, because we are also told that Irziqat, in her own country, was free to study, work and socialize with female friends; hence it is actually not like they are changing their lives drastically to benefit from the freedom. Rather, the real pressure on a woman living conservatively comes from Muslims who, although they lead lives similar to many Western women in terms of juggling between home and work, must prove everyday to the non-Muslim community in which they live that they are not so backward or oppressed after all. Yet despite the actual evidence enabling such a conclusion in the article itself, the overall impression the reader acquires from Robertson's story is that women struggle because they are stuck between these traditional cultural beliefs, such as being alone with a strange man in a room, and between the attractions of their new liberal culture. All this makes it sound as if the women want to break through their traditional barriers and embrace new freedoms, but because of their traditional raising they are prevented from doing so and hence live with constant frustration, guilt and struggle.

Robertson also seems to impose Western values in her judgment of the two women's appearance. She tells readers that "unlike Irziqat, who dresses in long coats even when it is warm, Sarsour tries to hold onto her Western ways by wearing hijabs that are colorful, short

jackets, long jeans skirts, and jazzy high-heeled boots” (p. A3). The reporter adds that Sarsour colors her hair blond for \$150, “though few will ever see it,” and whereas “Irziqat reads the Quran and prays five times a week, Sarsour goes to the mosque twice a year” (Robertson, 2005, p.A3). Robertson pits Irziqat as the more traditional of the two, with her long coats worn even on hot days, versus Sarsour as the modern, with her stylish Western-inspired clothes. Another sign of Sarsour’s modernity is her rare visits to the mosque compared to Irziqat’s daily prayers. But this sentence is very vague because it is more common for Muslim women to perform the daily five prayers at home and not at the mosque like men; hence, the fact that Sarsour does not visit the mosque does not necessarily mean she fails to pray. Actually, the fact that she is religious enough to commit to covering her hair should rather lead one to assume that she does pray five times a day, despite Robertson’s generalized conclusion, based on what seems to be her limited knowledge about Islam.

Even though Sarsour is described by Robertson (2005) as the more modern of the two women, she is still traditional compared to Western women since she spends a lot of money dying hair that no one will get to see because of her hijab. In sum, Sarsour is presented as a modern woman not because she is more educated or has better job skills, but because of her outward appearance; it is purely the clothes that make her more modern than Irziqat as well as the reporter’s assumption that she is not as religious as Irziqat since she does not visit a mosque regularly; and yet she is still not as modern as Western women because she illogically spends a fortune on her hair that is mostly veiled. If a non-veiled woman claims she dyes her hair or dresses attractively for herself and not for anyone else’s eyes, she would normally be admired for her autonomy, yet in Sarsour’s case, readers end up confused or led to think her behavior is illogical since the story provides no context on the veil and what it means to women, or even an

additional but easily added quote from Sarsour explaining why she pays that amount of money when nobody but herself and close relatives would see it.

Another reporter who seems to impose Western culture as an overlay is Robert Collier of the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Collier describes an Iraqi female as “modern,” given her fluency in English, stylish “form-fitting pantsuits,” and because she carries out her job “with the smooth assurance of a Western sophisticate” (2003, p. A1). Hence, Collier concludes that Reem Abu Shawarg, a 23-year-old Baghdad University graduate and an employee at an international aid agency, is modern and sophisticated based on her fluent English, her snugly fitting pants and her confidence at work. One might wonder if Collier would have the same opinion if Abu Shawarb wore a headscarf and loose-fitting outfit; the reporter here is applying Western standards of how a modern woman should look and sound.

Despite his apparent admiration for Abu Shawarb, Collier tells readers that she is very modern “until she speaks her mind” (p. A1). He specifically objects to her belief that polygamy is a good thing for Iraqi women amid the shortage of eligible Iraqi men. “Shawarb’s statements illustrate how Iraqi women have become transformed by the country’s shift in recent years toward religious and social conservatism—a trend partly orchestrated by Saddam Hussein’s government” (p. 09). Collier uses this one isolated but for many readers jarring anecdote to make generalized claims about all Iraqi women based simply on the personal opinion of a single female. Further, Abu Shawarb’s approval of polygamy, since it is verbalized by a woman portrayed as apparently searching for a husband within the culture, it is likely that it deflects attention from the fact that many men and women also support her opinion. But Collier judges her by Western standards. Hence, the reporter approves of her looks and appearance as modern but thinks her mind is too conservative. How is it that he can approve of one part of her but not

the other? Why judge her by a single comment and ignore the fact that she is educated, employed, fluent in more than one language and independent? Shawarb's statement is not a sign of her newly-acquired religious conservatism as much as it may simply express her interest in marriage. Many women her age in Western cultures might share the same desire, yet no reporter is likely to brand them as "religiously conservative" for wanting this.

Collier further argues that Iraqi women in the 1970's and 1980's advanced professionally and were able to walk the streets in miniskirts, whereas now the situation has changed. The government legalized polygamy for Muslims, segregated public high schools and barred women under the age of 45 from traveling outside the country without a male guardian. He adds that a 1990 law removed penalties related to honor crimes, which eventually led to an increase in such crimes.² He concludes this section by saying, "Even Manal Younes, the president of the Federation of Iraqi Women [FIW], the official women's branch of the ruling Baath party, now wears the hijab, or veiled black cloak" (p. 09). An important distraction is lost in this litany, leading Collier to confuse conservatism and oppression, since he offers evidence of conservatism as also signifying the deterioration of Iraqi women's rights, which is misleading. The fact that he cites the reduction of honor crime penalties for example has nothing to do with religious conservatism and to combine them as sign of women's social and legal regression is a distortion. Furthermore, Collier's conclusion that 'even' the president of the FIW now wears the veil is not a fact necessarily subversive or contradicting to her position. Why the stress on her wearing of the veil, and how does the fact of the veil undo her work for women?

Collier contradicts his previous remark that Iraqi women today are not as advanced as they used to be when he cites a U.N. Development Program report that found Iraqi women to have the highest scores in gender equality among Arab countries. Iraqi women enjoy equal

access rights to employment and education; they receive a six-month paid maternity leave; Iraqi divorce laws are among the most balanced in the region, forcing the husband to repay the wife's dowry. In sum, one could argue that Collier forms a biased opinion on Iraqi women and their rights based on the comment of a single Iraqi woman who seems very interested in getting married. Other Iraqi women quoted in the story do not support his claim. While one female professor admits that Iraqi women have lost many achievements gained in earlier years, she blames U.N sanctions and the loss of public services for the deterioration, all of which have forced more women into their homes. Another woman, a senior member of the Iraqi National Assembly, argues that compared to countries like Kuwait or Saudi Arabia, where women have few political rights, Iraqi women on the other hand are "trusted and considered first-class humans..." (p. A1). He balances out the argument with a quote from a Kurdish exile, whose lungs were permanently damaged from Iraqi chemical weapon attack, who claims that many Kurdish and Shiite Muslim women are sexually harassed and even raped in Iraqi prisons in retaliation to their fathers, brothers or husbands' support for the opposition.

The problem is that even in a story containing an apparently reasonable range of voices, Collier misreads religious conservatism in the form of the veil or segregated high schools, as sign evidence of the loss of women's rights and achievements, when this is not really the case. He also brands a woman as modern (or not) based on her personal beliefs, which again, is not a necessarily accurate representation of these women. Given the cultural differences between the reporter and these Iraqi women, they might view modernity differently; in fact, one could argue that the idea of a young woman favoring polygamy is an assertively independent change of opinion, as it is normally the contrary view that is held by women, whether conservative or not.

At the close of the article, Collier argues that feminists across the Arab world have in recent years “managed some small victories,” referring to events such as the passing of laws entitling women to rights of divorce in Jordan and Egypt; Jordan’s raising of honor crime penalties as well as a proposal to add eight women’s seats to Jordan’s 104-male dominated lower house of parliament; Morocco’s new election quota system that has allowed a 10 percent female parliament (p.A1). Offset only by contrary anecdotes, Collier’s description of these events as “small victories” significantly devalues their magnitude; when similar goals were achieved by Western feminists, certainly they were not counted as small victories, but major accomplishments. Why should Muslim women’s triumphs be so underrated?

A *Washington Post* column by Colbert I. King (2002) also seems to impose Western values as an overlay in his harsh criticism of the Saudi Arabian culture and treatment of women. King claims that Saudi “second-class treatment of women” reveals their dependence on male guardians, control by religious police, and explains even the discriminatory treatment women receive in restaurants. He dismisses the opinion of an American female who teaches English to Saudi women, who argues that despite the lack of freedom Saudi women experience, they enjoy the love of their husbands. “Perhaps love is more important than freedom,” King quotes the woman as saying (p. A25). The columnist reacts to this by asking: “But I wonder if those warm and fuzzy feelings toward hubby extend to the rule requiring a woman to obtain a male relative’s permission before she can have surgery, travel, work or do just about anything important in the kingdom besides bearing children?” (p. A25). He quotes another American woman who works as a nurse in Saudi Arabia, who explains how women need authorization from a male guardian to travel or have a surgery performed, adding that women are harassed by Saudi religious police if their face veil is blown off by the wind. “Is that called tough love?” asks King. He expresses

dismay at how an American woman visiting a Starbucks in Riyadh had to be seated in the “family section” and could only visit exclusively serving women coffee shops.³ It is not until the very end of his column that King decides to passingly inform his readers that this “discriminatory treatment of women is reportedly rooted in cultural practices, not authentic Islamic teachings” (p. A25). Placing this important piece of information at the very end of the column could lead many readers, who may lack the patience to read the entire piece, to automatically conclude that Islam is the source of women’s tribulations in the kingdom. King ends with a question to the U.S. Congress, “why not an anti-apartheid act for American businesses in Saudi Arabia?” (p. 25). King thus equates Saudi Arabia’s treatment of women to South Africa’s racial apartheid in the 1970s, during which the American government imposed harsh economic policies in its dealing with South Africa. But the fact that King decides to brand Saudi women’s eating in family sections as apartheid is quite extreme, giving that Saudi women do in fact enjoy many privileges that he fails to mention.

Moreover, the fact that King dismisses the opinion of one Western woman who did not share his view of Saudi women’s second-class treatment, while he takes the opinion of another woman as consistent with his own view, illustrates how reporters can impose Western values as an overlay even when the material of a column provide the basis for better balance. This American teacher, who interacts with Saudi women and therefore hears from them firsthand, got to really understand the positives and negatives about the women’s lives and was therefore speaking from a better informed position of knowledge of these women and an understanding of their conservative culture. Yet, King refuses to believe that any woman can be content under circumstances presented as so alien to American culture.

The *Post* later published a response to King's (2002) column, where a male business executive who lived in Saudi Arabia for two years criticized some of King's comments as "sweeping" generalizations, adding that unless one has close relationships with Saudi people, "it is not possible to gain more than a surface understanding of the cultural drivers of the society" (Pike, p. A24). Pike (2002) defends the kingdom's separate eating arrangements as a protection of women from the thousands of immigrant workers that the economy relies on, many of whom are not allowed to bring their wives or families. "Saudis see them as necessary but also as a risk for their women," Pike argues (p. A24). This same reaction piece quotes Susan Akyurt, a Saudi woman residing in Jeddah, as thanking food chains like McDonalds for the same feature that King so strongly attacks. "We are grateful for McDonald's for making a separate section for us. Most of us here wear abayas...and most of us also wear veils...we do this out of religious convictions and not for any other reason," explains Akyurt, adding that eating in a family section allows them to unveil their faces without other men seeing them and protects them from the humiliation of having ketchup smeared all over their veils if they were to sit in the same place with males and therefore have to eat with their faces covered. She argues that such separate seating arrangements allow Saudi women to feel comfortable. "We in no way equate our religious practices with apartheid or slavery," Akyurt (2002) says in response to King's (2002) column. "We are not oppressed women but are exercising our right to dress modestly and to comply with our religion" (p. A24). These comments, although buried in the letters section, help illustrate that one must not necessarily judge other cultures by Western standards, for what is normal in one culture is likely to be read as alien in another.

A story in the *Sunday Telegraph* about rising abortion rates in Iraq also helps demonstrate how Western values are used to judge Iraqi women as helpless and innocent victims. Damien

McElroy (2003) explains that after the fall of Saddam Hussein prostitution has spread throughout Baghdad, with a number of brothels opening within newly-formed red-light districts. Although contraceptives are widely available, hospitals provide limited information on family planning and so many women who became pregnant out of wedlock are now turning to backstreet abortions, which are readily available. “Iraqi tradition dictates that a single woman who becomes pregnant brings great shame on the family, which can salvage its honor only by killing her and her lover,” McElroy quotes an Iraqi doctor as saying (p.31). The doctor further explains that with many husbands dead or having disappeared given the war, many women desperate for money have turned to prostitution, while others are sexually abused by neighbors or relatives. The reporter ends his article with a story of a 25-year-old woman crying after she received a positive pregnancy test at a hospital. “Her choice was stark: ostracism or possibly death at the hands of her family, or a dangerous search for a back-street abortionist” (p.31).

There are undoubtedly a number of truly desperate women in Iraq and in the context of war it is a difficult call for reporters to judge whether the women they are reporting on are victims or whether they might bear some sexual responsibility for their pregnancies. But what is telling in this story, based on the choice of quotes and the overall focus, is that the coverage comes entirely down on the side of the victim frame, evidenced by the fact that even though the reporter quotes a woman who runs a brothel and informs readers that many women are working as prostitutes, no mention is made of even the possibility of an individual woman’s responsibility.

It is important to question why such stories are attractive from a journalistic angle. One possible reason could be the sexually lurid character of these stories, which attract journalists for their sensationalism. Another explanation might be the journalistic impulse to unveil the

hypocrisy of religiously conservative societies that chant religion everywhere and build millions of mosques, yet at night time, flock to the brothels. A final possible explanation is that in this specific story, McElroy informs readers that prostitution and abortions were rare during Saddam's era, thus insinuating that America's presence in the country has brought on all of these ills. Hence, this story could reinforce readers' preexisting views of the failure of U.S. policy in the region and the spread of anarchy and chaos. But whatever interpretation one chooses from these options, women are situated as helpless bystanders to their own oppression.

Two stories relating to the existence of women-only subway cars in the Cairo metro reveal similarly contradicting opinions about the culture and about Islam. On the one hand, Hayat Alvi-Aziz (2005), a Middle East Politics and Islamic Studies Professor at the American University in Cairo, writes an opinion piece in the *Jerusalem Post* on how in the "women only" metro car, women and sometimes 12-year-old girls wearing the hijab stand up to preach about Islam. "They emphasize the importance of obeying the commands of Allah performing the five daily prayers and wearing the hijab or headscarf," explains Alvi-Aziz (p. 17). Alvi-Aziz further claims that preaching continues in Cairo taxis, shops, offices, homes and "even some medical labs have recitations of the Quran blaring in their audio speakers. The sheikhs in the local mosques shout and scream into the loudspeakers during Friday sermons scaring people with warnings about the evil deeds that will land them in hell" (p. 17). The reporter is insinuating that instead of focusing on issues that impact people on a daily basis, such as health, literacy, or improving living standards, these preachers are preoccupied with "worship dress codes moral principles, gender segregation and yes, condemning the US and Israel" (p. 17). Alvi-Aziz suggests that Islamic regimes hope to keep the people ignorant so as not to hold governments accountable for their human development failures. The point is interesting and it is certainly true

that many mosque preachers are not among the most eloquent speakers. Yet it is also unfair to extrapolate from street preaching to an entire religion and thus to infer that the broader faith succeeds by keeping people ignorant and scared about their prospects in an afterlife. Just as there are ignorant preachers, others are informed and discuss education, knowledge and hard working in this life as basic duties of all Muslims. The author thus exaggerates when she claims that most preachers “scream” and “shout” during Friday speeches. The reporting further tends to put all the responsibility on religious leaders, who essentially have no power when it comes to human development essentials such as sound health and educational facilities. Where is the government’s role in all of this?

A second article on the Cairo metro’s women-only car is from the *New York Times* and is written by G. Willow Wilson (2005), a journalist who left Colorado in 2003 and converted to Islam in 2005 and chose to wear the headscarf. Wilson (2005) explains that when she first moved to Cairo, she found life overwhelming, with the segregation of men and women in many public and private settings, including the Cairo metro, with its women’s only car. “Commuting women learn, however, to look on the first car—jokingly referred to as the harem, or women’s quarters—as a safe haven from the persistent scrutiny of men, who still dominate public life in Egypt,” Wilson explains (p. 62). The reporter adds that this women’s car is off limits to any male above the age of 12; “should a man wander on, a quiet word is usually enough to send him out the door again. Few men risk so blatant a violation of a woman’s first right in Egyptian society: privacy,” says Wilson (p. 62). The reporter mainly argues here that in the women’s car, all differences are forgotten; it does not matter if one woman is American and another is Egyptian, what really matters is their collective right to privacy in this metro car. She recalls an incident when her headscarf came off and as she was replacing it over her hair, a young man selling tissue

boxes wandered into the car to be met with collective scolding from her fellow women passengers. “What are you thinking? Don’t you have shame?” was one woman’s response. To this reaction, Wilson comments:

At that moment, I was grateful to be part of the floating world of the women’s car. In that small corner of a culture so different from my own, culture itself ceased to matter. For a few station stops I carried no baggage — no problematic nationality, no suspect political agenda. I was simply a woman among other women and worth defending because we shared that much. Regardless of the many factors that might separate us on the street, in the women’s car my fellow passengers felt I had the same right to privacy as they did (p. 62).

One could argue that this column is interesting and unique because of how it focuses on the exceptional commonalities between this Western-raised reporter and the Egyptian women she accompanies on the metro. The reporter does not choose to discuss how different she is from traditional Egyptian women, but on how they share the same rights to enjoy their metro ride in privacy, without any male interruptions. In other words, she does not read Egyptian women through a Western lens or apply her cultural norms to their lives.

Among the other stories that both generalize on extreme cases and use a Western overlay is a *New York Times* report by Marlise Simons (2002), headlined “Behind the Veil: A Muslim Woman Speaks Out.” The story is about a young Dutch parliamentarian from Somalia who came to the Netherlands as a refugee and became known for her efforts to “liberate Muslim women.” Ayan Hirsi spent a lot of her time documenting the living conditions of Muslim women in the Netherlands; she criticized the Dutch government’s multicultural policy, which she argues continues to isolate Muslim women from society. Ali began to receive hate mail and death

threats and accusations that she was a “traitor to Islam” because she made public a lot of the suffering some Muslim women experience inside the home (p. 4). She cites cases of forced marriage, domestic violence and secret abortions. “Sexual abuse in the family causes the most pain because the trust is violated on all levels,” Ali is quoted as saying. “The father or uncle says nothing, nor do the mother and the sisters. It happens regularly—the incest, the beatings, the abortions,” adds Ali. “Girls commit suicide. But no one says anything. And social workers are sworn to professional secrecy” (p. 4). Simons supports Ali’s assertions when she tells readers that the “theme of injustice toward women in Islamic countries has become common in the West...,” adding that the issue gained more popularity for Ali’s “European perspective,” close study of Dutch immigrants as well as the former Somali’s hardships growing up back home (p. 4). Simons relays how Ali had to undergo the “cruel ritual” of female genital mutilation at the age of five; then fled the country with her parents to Saudi Arabia, where “she was kept veiled and, much of the time, indoors.” At 22, Ali escaped to the Netherlands after her father’s failed attempt to force her into an arranged marriage. Ali has joined the club of Westernized Muslim women who claim they want to “modernize” Islam, as she argues that “at the very least Islam is facing backward and it has failed to provide a moral framework for our time” (p. 4).

News reporting of this type is both valuable and problematic, since it lacks broader contextualizing information, thus stories about FGM and veiling also end up reproducing the stereotype of Islam as a monolithic source of women’s oppression. Nowhere in the article does Simons inform her readers that FGM is a traditional cultural phenomenon unrelated to Islam. In fact, the Arab Human Development Report of 2005 asserts that in countries like Egypt for example, circumcision is also practiced by some Coptic Christians. The report further explains that in Egypt as well as Sudan, governments have banned this procedure, explaining that it was

un-Islamic as it had no basis in the Quran or Sunna (Prophet Mohamed's practices) and was harmful for girls' health (p. 117-118). Yet the reporter mentions none of this in the story, thus distorting the broader and potentially more troubling the truth about FGM.

There is no question that hideous crimes against Muslim women are perpetrated everywhere, but why in this story have these aberrant incidents been brought to the forefront as if this is the norm for all Muslim immigrants in the Netherlands? Why is the extreme portrayed as the norm? Furthermore, why is the blame put on Islam rather than on the disturbing men who use their power to abuse and torture women? Crimes against women exist in every country and are committed by men of diverse religious and cultural backgrounds, yet when a Western man commits incest or rape, the reporting very rarely attaches blame to, say, Christianity.

Furthermore, although Ali's personal experience seems very bitter, with an over-controlling father and an ignorant family that permitted the ancient, non-Muslim, ritual of FGM, it still should not be blamed on Islam. Yet, both Ali and Simons fail to explain anywhere in the story that such abuses are non-Islamic; on the contrary, everything from the wording and choice of quotes seems to confirm to readers the supposed backwardness of the Islamic faith, and to imply its responsibility for Muslim immigrant misery. Simons accentuates this idea further when she says that once in Saudi Arabia, Ali "was kept veiled" and stayed mostly indoors. This fact is presented as if Ali was a victim of oppressive religious beliefs, when in truth all women in Saudi Arabia have to wear the veil, according to the kingdom's traditions. But again, Simons provides no context on life in Saudi Arabia, one of the most conservative Muslim societies, thus exacerbating the suggestion that Islam oppresses women.

The image of Ali as the female Muslim victim is further emphasized by Simons' choice of sources, as she quotes a Dutch-Moroccan male author, who had also received death threats for

criticizing Islam, and who is quoted as saying “No criticism of Islam is accepted from women...Muslim women are particularly vulnerable” (p. 4). This comment could lead readers to the view that all Muslim men ridicule women and disrespect their opinions. She quotes another Moroccan writer residing in the Netherlands, who dismisses all the attention given to Ali and claims that she “panders to the Dutch” (p. 4). Again, this quote can be understood as confirming the idea of Muslim men’s disregard of women. Then Ali is quoted as saying part of the reason for the negative attention she receives is because she is a woman. “I am a Muslim woman saying these things, and it has provoked a lot of hatred,” Ali explains (Simons, 2002, p. 4). Ali’s quote confirms the stereotype of the oppressed and silenced Muslim woman, although in this case, she is silenced by Muslim men and not the reporter.

All three of these quotes confirm the idea of the weak Muslim woman, oppressed and victimized and unfit to participate in serious talk. Yet this is quite a distortion; when Salman Rushdie criticized Islam,⁴ he received even worse threats and accusations; and the Dutch-Moroccan writer Simons’s quotes received the same threats. Hence, such threats have less to do with being a woman than with some Muslims’ intolerance of any male or female who attempts to tarnish their faith. Thus this raises the question: why emphasize the image of the Muslim woman as victim, as a victim of oppression by Islam and a victim of violence by Muslim men? Violence against women happens all around the world and hence it is not a unique consequence of fidelity to the Muslim doctrine. In France for example, figures for 2000 show that one in every 10 women was a victim of domestic abuse and 50,000 rapes were committed that same year (UN Division for the Advancement of Women, 2005, p.11). Yet, French rapists or wife abusers are never identified as such on account of their religion and their crimes are rarely interpreted as religious, so why is the case different for Muslim men and women?

Marital Issues

A number of local and international news articles deal with the topics of marriage, divorce, dating, arranged marriages as well as abortions and sexual relations. As before, my analysis of these diverse articles reveals cases of distortion and insufficient context; the imposition of Western standards as an overlay; reporting on extreme cases as the norm as well as reporters' use of binaries or black or white terms. The cases below help shed light on these reporting practices.

An article from *The Scotsman* for instance, informs readers that contraceptive pills are in high demand in Gulf countries, or in "some of the Arab world's most repressive countries" (Veash, 2002, p. 23). Veash clearly judges such cultures through a Western lens, as the reporter argues that "by Western standards women in the Gulf countries are treated as second-class citizens: unable to vote, drive a car or travel without the permission of a male relative" (p. 23). It would be more useful to judge these women within the standards of their existing culture and according to their own needs and not based on what is practiced by women in the West. As illustrated previously, not all Saudi women see driving as a main concern, yet these women might have other needs or aspirations that fit their environment that reporters fail to highlight because they tend to judge from the outside.

Women in the Gulf states "are also denied regular access to contraception," Veash adds (p. 23), quoting Dr. Atef Khalifa, coordinator of the UN-funded Pan-Arab Project for Family Health as saying that it is not easy to get contraception in some Gulf countries as governments do not advertise these options, provide limited education on their use, and although available at pharmacies, women need a special request to buy them, which "socially stigmatizes them" (p.

23). Veash s adds to this by claiming that in many Gulf countries, “it is a woman’s Islamic duty to have a large family and not use any form of contraception” (p. 23).

One could argue that this whole section on contraceptives in Gulf countries is generalized and based on limited facts and figures to support the claims being advanced. Contraceptives are widely available in pharmacies, which is what Khalifa is quoted as saying. The fact that women have to make a special request for them may not be all that unusual by global standards; patients in Western countries have to get prescriptions for various medicines, so why does this “special request” sound so unusual when applied to Arab countries and why should women feel “stigmatized” by making such a request? In fact, considerable evidence suggests that women in the Gulf have been using contraceptives for years, thus refuting Veash’s claim that making babies is a woman’s “Islamic duty.” A 1988 study by Fahad Al-Abdul Jabbar et. al., for example, where 2,675 Saudi women attending a gynecology clinic were interviewed about their birth control methods, revealed that about 56 percent of these women were either using or had used in the past some form of birth control (Jabbar, 1988). Another study on birth control among Kuwaiti women revealed similar results. Shah and Kamel (1985) interviewed 7,164 pregnant women visiting Kuwaiti hospitals between 1978 and 1979; the women were asked about previous use of contraceptives, and 41 percent of Kuwaiti nationals said they used birth control prior to their pregnancy (p. 108). It is important to note that both studies occurred in the 1980s, hence illustrating that birth control has been widely practiced by women in the Gulf for at least a quarter century. It is important to therefore question why Veash fails to mention such information and instead portrays Gulf women as victims forced into making babies for an Islamic cause. Everything from the story headline (rich picking for drug traffickers as Islamic

women defy their husbands to take the pill), to lack of facts and distortion of information confirms the idea of the oppressed female who has minimal reproduction rights.

The reporter argues that Gulf women seek contraceptives through illegal means, thus rebelling against their husbands. Yet nowhere in the story do readers get to hear from women. Even if one assumes that it is hard to interview Gulf women about such issues, it would not be hard to interview gynecologists from the Gulf region who could enlighten readers about this issue. The reporter's main source, Khalifa, further confirms this victimization stereotype when he argues that "forcing women to have so many children is definitely a way of controlling them... There is a clear relationship between denying women the choice about the number of children they have and impeding gender equality" (p. 23). In sum, judging Islamic culture by Western standards, lack of research and distorted information all work in this case to portray Gulf women as oppressed reproduction machines who are denied the right to choose when to give birth.

Another example of reports that judge Muslims by Western standards is a *Houston Chronicle* article with the headline "Gulf residents use Net to lift Islam's veil."⁵ Reporter Inal Ersan (2001) starts with the lead "In the land where sex outside marriage can be punishable by death and women must be covered in public, frustrated men are turning to the Internet" (p. 36). The article explains how Arab men and expatriates residing in conservative Gulf countries find sexual freedom online. Ersan quotes several men who explain how they use the Internet for cyber sex, including one man who lost his job and wife to Internet chatting. The reporter quotes one Arab housewife who says she uses the Internet for chatting and music downloads, yet Ersan follows her quote with "but the Internet is not just about sex for Arab expatriates in the Gulf," thus giving the impression that she too is online for sexual freedom, when she clearly is not.

The overall story seems to give the impression that Arab men and women are sexually-deprived because of their conservative culture and would therefore do anything to satisfy their needs. The headline confirms this opinion when it states that Gulf residents use the Internet to lift Islam's veil, therefore confirming this notion that Islam is a restrictive, sexually oppressive religion and the Internet provides a desperately needed escape path out of repression. The irony of the matter is that internet porn is popular everywhere, arguably vastly more popular in Western nations like the United States, and could be seen as perverted or promiscuous anywhere, but when it involves Muslim men, the implicit message is that they are doing this because of sexual repression. Furthermore, this story seems to judge Gulf cultures through Western standards; since sexual freedom is a norm in the West it therefore should be the same in Gulf countries. The reporter clearly indicates that Islam and the West stand at opposite extremes when he states in his lead that sex out of marriage is punished by death in the Gulf, thus clarifying to his readers just how alien Muslim men and women are.

The issue of Muslims' dating and marriage trends has been tackled by various Western newspapers. The *Washington Post* published an article by Sabaa Saleem (2003), a Muslim American with a Southeast Asian background, who confesses that she "might agree" to an arranged marriage. Saleem explains that her parents raised her according to Islamic and cultural traditions and norms, but also gave her sufficient freedom to enjoy her teenage life. "Inexplicably, I grew up liberal and a feminist," she explains (p. A13). Saleem goes on to explain how everyone she knows, "friends, teachers, co-workers," expect her, "a child of the West, to reject the notion of arranged marriage, to proclaim independence loudly," observes Saleem. She argues that sometimes she has the same thoughts but also knows she has an obligation as Muslim. Saleem further explains to readers that neither her parents nor her faith are denying her

liberties. “My parents are not evil people who have kept me in a box my whole life, bent on handing me over to a man who will do the same” (p. A13). She clarifies to readers that in the end, she will have the last word; it will be her decision as a Muslim woman to decide whether or not she agrees to marry one of the suitors her parents introduce her to.

This article is important on several levels; for one, it illustrates how the West views liberty and Islam as polar opposites. This means that one could choose one or the other but cannot have both. Hence, Saleem’s friends expect this Western-born Muslim to disregard her faith and cultural heritage and totally adopt a Western lifestyle, which is not necessarily what she or other Muslim women in the West want for themselves. It is important to question why reporters insist on these binaries: why one or the other? Why can’t a Muslim woman living in the West adopt the best of both worlds, if that is what she wants?

Another observation about the article is its attention to context, as it provides readers with details on Islam and traditions that clearly educates them about the faith and about traditional values. Furthermore, the fact that it is written by a liberal Muslim woman, who considers herself to be a feminist, also disputes the stereotype of the ignorant, submissive Muslim woman, as this example clearly illustrates that independent and assertive Muslim women do actually exist. It also demonstrates that Islam and liberalism are not necessarily binary opposites; a woman can be a devout Muslim and liberal at the same time.

What is further interesting about this article is that *The Gazette* published the same story a week or so later, but instead of the original Post headline “A Proposal I Never Thought I’d Consider,” *The Gazette* wrote an extremely long headline, saying:

A Bridal Dilemma: Young Muslim women who were raised and educated in the West face a tough choice when they reach marrying age between following their hearts or breaking their parents' hearts.

Upon reading the complete article, this new headline seems misleading; because conveys the message that this woman is confused and torn between pleasing her parents with an arranged marriage or going the Western way, which is not necessarily what Saleem is saying here.

Although Saleem mentions that sometimes she gets confused about the cultural disparities and that she tries not to upset her parents by choosing their same path, yet she also tells readers that the marriage decision is her choice. The reporter tells readers that she asked her mother on the logic behind arranging her marriage and the mother's response was: "Do you think I want you to leave us-to have a man at the center of your life? Maybe even to go away? I want my daughter close to me always, but this is my duty; I don't have a choice -- I can't be selfish. I have to let you go." Saleem then tells readers, "that day, I decided I would have an arranged marriage" (p. A13). She also states that in the end, "the decision will be mine. My parents would never force me to marry a particular man" (p. A13). These quotes therefore illustrate that Saleem is not in a dilemma as the new *Gazette* headlines insinuates, because she firmly states that although she is agreeing to a traditional marriage to please her parents, she "decided" to take this path and she is doing it her way; in other words, Saleem (2003) clarifies that she will have the upper hand and the last word.

Another article on arranged marriages comes from the *Seattle Times*, where Farnaz Fassihi (2002) tells the story of two Afghani sisters who were arranged in marriages to al-Qaida members. "The crime was that they were young and beautiful, and somewhere at a wedding or party, or during a social call someone decided they would make good wives for Arab men who

had come to Afghanistan to fight on behalf of the Taliban or al-Qaida,” explains Fassihi. But with the fall of Taliban, the husbands have disappeared leaving the wives uncertain whether they were still married, divorced or widows. “Who will feed them? Where will they go? What will they tell their children about their fathers,” Fassihi asks (p. A5). One of the sisters, Fariba, is quoted as saying “they told my father ‘give your daughter [in marriage] or we’ll kill you,’ ... What choice did I have, my personal wish or my father’s life?” (p. A5). This leads Fassihi (2002) to add that in Afghanistan as in other Muslim countries, “marriages are arranged and a bride who defies her father brings shame to the family. Divorce is unheard of, and once a girl leaves her father’s home for marriage, she is not expected to return” (p. A5).

One could argue that based on the earlier article by Saleem, Fassihi’s version of arranged marriages’ rigidity and forcefulness is outdated, as Muslims who do get into arranged marriages these days are not necessarily forced into the marriage, and women in most cases do get to decide whether or not they want the groom. Divorce rates are escalating all over the Muslim world, which disputes the claim that divorce is “unheard of.” Hence, it is a distortion for Fassihi to generalize about all Muslim women, based on one extreme case, where these sisters were forced into arranged marriages under the Taliban, where the whole country was ruled by force. Moreover, it is not until the end of the article that Fassihi quotes a religious advisor on women as saying that an Islamic fatwa will be announced to proclaim all forced marriages to foreigners, Arabs and Taliban members as null while retaining children’s legitimacy. I think this important announcement illustrates that religious ulama are supporting these women and are demonstrating that Islam does not endorse forced marriages where the woman does not have a say in the matter. Yet, Fassihi leaves this crucial statement to the conclusion of her story, thus downplaying its significance.

Fassihi quotes Fariba as saying she only met her husband on the day of the ceremony and that he locked her in the house every morning before leaving for work, drew the curtains, prevented her from making phone calls or going anywhere without him. Yet Fariba also tells the reporter that she loved her husband. "I know it sounds strange, but we had a good life together...he was nice to me, respected me and was a generous man," said the teary-eyed Fariba. "I cry all the time...I will always be his wife. If he comes back, I'm here. If he doesn't, then that's it. I'll stay here and raise my son," adds Fariba (p. A5). Unlike Fariba, her sister Shakiba tells the reporter her marriage "was a disaster," not because of her husband but because she was forced into marrying a foreigner. "My life was over the minute I got married," Shakiba says (Fassihi, 2002, p. A5). The reporter adds that Shakiba refuses to remarry but would still like to get a divorce.

Overall, the article does portray both women as helpless and victimized, which in these cases is the reality. The problem, however, is Fassihi's generalizations about all Muslim women and her implications that arranged marriages by force are still very common, while divorce is nearly impossible. According to an online article, divorce rates in Qatar and Saudi Arabia stand at 25 percent, and in Kuwait at 29 percent, while the UAE divorce rate is at 40 percent. "Anecdotal evidence suggests that modern Arabian women are less willing than their mothers' generation to tolerate unhappy marriages and are initiating a growing proportion of divorces," the article concludes (Data Dubai, 2006). Furthermore, there are many studies that reveal changing marriage trends in Muslim countries. El-Haddad (2003) argues that within Gulf countries, there has been a shift from:

Totally arranged marriage to marriage based on prior acquaintance between the bride and the groom who later received the approval and the blessings of the family; delay in age at

first marriage; and the rise of marriage across religious sects, social classes and ethnic groups. Also observable was the rise of marriage based on romantic love; women leaving the house to work and mixing with men; improvement in women's education; women playing a greater role in public life; and the new phenomenon of breaking the engagement and divorce (p. 8).

El-Haddad further argues that Gulf women today are more aware of their marital rights. He quotes research by Baqader (1993), who found that many brides in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, include conditions in the marriage contract ensuring their right to study, work, and own a house and in some cases even insist on their right to divorce should the husband take a second wife (p. 8). Hence, based on this evidence, one cannot generalize about all Muslim women, by looking at the extreme case of women under Taliban rule.

Furthermore, one could argue that the reporter reinforces the image of the helpless and victimized Afghani woman by focusing throughout the story on how the two wives were forced into marriage, and how they are unsure of their legal and social status now that their husbands have disappeared. Yet at the very end of her article, Fassihi informs readers that Islamic ulama do not consider these forced marriages legal and hence they are on the women's side. One therefore has to question the sequencing of information in the article: why does the reporter allow readers to live out this compelling drama of two female victims stuck in a forced marriage without informing them that religious ulama are on their side and that the women's situation has changed until the very end of the piece?

Another article on Muslim dating and marriage comes from Ksenia Svetiova (2004) of the *Jerusalem Post*. The reporter tells readers that globalization has brought to the Middle East McDonalds and Benetton, as well as Western-inspired reality shows, and now it is Western-style

dating. “But when it comes to personal relationships, this particular region comes from a much more conservative place, making this trend more than just another fashion exported from the West” (p. 28). The reporter goes on to say that “not so long ago,” the majority of Egyptians, Kuwaitis, Moroccans, Syrians as well as other Arabs, were introduced through family, and “some even met on the day of the wedding itself” (p. 28). While it is fair to say that many Arabs and Muslims still meet through family and friends, the meetings are not typically as rigid or coercive as some reporters portray them, and it is also quite an exaggeration to claim that “not so long ago” Arab newlyweds met on the day of the wedding. Svetiova further exaggerates when she claims that “there were always those who tried to find love on their own, but they were usually considered rebels or free spirits who objected to the interference of family and society in their personal lives” (p.28).

The reporter here assumes that all Arab men and women can be treated monolithically, instead of viewing them as diverse people with varied levels of freedom, independence and conservatism. In every generation many men and women choose their own partner and they are not necessarily considered “rebels” as Svetiova claims. Furthermore, Svetiova distorts reality when she tells her readers that it is common for an Egyptian groom to be asked to “purchase the fully-furnished flat” the common tradition in Egypt is for the groom to purchase the apartment and provide the electronics (refrigerator, oven, washer, etc.) and for the bride’s family to furnish the rooms. One could argue that the reporter’s distortion is the outcome of insufficient research or lack of credible sources; as such information is very accessible in Egypt.

Svetiova also seems misinformed about marriage trends among Egyptian college students. She claims that amid the unaffordable marriage requirements and the declining economy, many grooms are unable to get married, and this is true. But, she also claims that

because of such difficulties, young men and women in Egypt are resorting to other forms of marriage, which she terms the “trial marriage,” where a couple gets married in the absence of the bride’s guardian and can later either separate or have an official ceremony. Svetiova also mentions “blood marriages,” where the bride and groom mix their blood, “claiming that this is the most ancient Islamic form of marriage, and that it originated in the days of the Prophet” (p. 28). Finally, Svetiova suggests that young Egyptians also turn to “pleasure marriages,” or *muta’a marriages*, a Shiite tradition popular in Iran, where a couple signs a temporary marital contract for “a few days or a week-spends a honeymoon at a secluded hotel on the seashore, and returns home already divorced” (p. 28). For almost 10 years now, young Egyptians have been increasingly turning to what is known as “orfy marriage,” an unregistered contract that is written by both parties and signed by two witnesses. Religious scholars contend that such a marriage is un-Islamic if it is a secret marriage and thus not announced to people who know the bride and groom.⁶ This is the only type of marriage that Svetiova has failed to mention even though it is the most dominant. One could argue that Svetiova based her assumptions about the various types of marriages in Egypt on weak, non-credible sources, as these so-called blood marriages and pleasure marriages are not Islamic and are not as common in Egypt as she presents them to be.⁷ Hence, one has to argue that such careless reporting does contribute to branding Islam as backward and oppressive to women, even though in this case the marriages she describes are not Islamic. Yet none of this is explained to the reader.

Another distortion arises when Svetiova claims that religious ulema object to personal dating/marriage ads and try to cite evidence from the Quran to “argue that young people can’t decide for themselves whom they should marry” (p. 28). In fact, Svetiova contradicts herself here by quoting more than one Muslim scholar on the issue, and their response is not as unified

in opinion as the reporter's claim that young people cannot decide on who they should marry.

"There is nothing wrong, as far as Islam is concerned, in helping people get married through the Internet or any other means," Svetiova quotes Sheikh Ahmed Kutty as saying. Kutty asserts that the only problem he fears is that by posting Muslim women's pictures in such ads, these pictures can be abused by some people and could harm the women. "So, caution has to be exercised," Kutty continues (Svetiova, 2004, p.28).

Moreover, one of the paragraphs in Svetiova's story that illustrate how the West is used as an overlay is when she tells readers about marriage ads posted in a popular UAE magazine. "While the magazine itself is full of Western-style ads, which show provocatively dressed women, a few pictures of its readers attest that many of them would never leave their homes without a scarf on their heads or a full veil...covering them from head to toe" (p. 28). Aside from the fact that this sentence is irrelevant to Svetiova's article, which focuses on dating, the reporter here assumes that just because the magazine advertises provocative Western-style clothes, then each and every UAE woman has to adopt this style of clothing. Again, the women here are judge through a Western lens; if they are importing Western fashions then why are they not dropping the veil?

Svetiova generalizes about Muslim men and women's marriage intentions, based on second-hand sources, relying on the opinions of single journalist in Bahrain who used dating ads himself. This sole source claims that when a woman in an ad says she is seeking "an Arab man," she really means a wealthy man from the Gulf region. He further claims that this woman would be willing to "become a second (or even third or fourth) wife of the wealthy Arab, whose modest villa in Dubai or Kuwait she will gladly move" (p. 28). One can very well argue that this source is unreliable, as his clarifications are not based on anything solid other than his own

generalizations and conclusions. Svetiova does some of her own concluding, including her assumption that ads by men who promise to allow the wife to continue to work are “indeed generous,” because in Muslim countries that follow Shari’a law, it is the husband’s decision. “If he doesn’t think it’s a good idea, a court order could be issued to force the wife to quit her job,” explains Svetiova, adding that the “situation is less common in poorer countries, where a working wife is not a luxury, but a necessity (p. 28). Again, it must be noted that Arab men and women are viewed as a single, monolithic subject, with no diverse qualities or personalities; this paragraph assumes that all women who advertise for marriage are after money and are willing to do anything to get a wealthy catch, even if it means being a second, third or fourth wife. The graph also assumes that all men are oppressive and controlling and abuse Islamic Shari’a law to control their wives.

Several articles in the *South China Morning Post* deal with muta’a marriages in India, focusing on the increasing popularity of this temporary “sex marriage,” as reporter Amrit Dhillon (2003) terms it. Dhillon explains how Arab male tourists visit Bombay, “not to enjoy the sights, but to have sex with young girls in temporary Islamic marriages” (p. 12). The bulk of Dhillon’s article focuses on the case of Saheeda Aziz, a 16-year-old Muslim Indian, who has been in temporary marriages four times in just one year to various wealthy Arabs. “The National Commission for Women has warned that a growing number of young Muslim girls from poor families are being sexually exploited in these ‘sex marriages,’” the reporter adds (p. 12). Although Dhillon briefly mentions that muta’a marriages are permissible only in the Shiite Muslim sect, one could argue that more context would enable readers to learn more about the practice and how it is considered un-Islamic by the Muslim Sunnis, which make up the majority of Muslims worldwide. Yet, Dhillon provides no opinions from religious scholars on the matter,

which can therefore lead to inaccurate assumptions that this is a widespread practice among all Muslims, when it is not. Sunni Sheikh Mohamed Ali Al-Hanooti (2001) for example asserts that:

This marriage is not approved by all the Islamic Schools except the Shi'a schools. I don't see it functions for marriage as the Quran describes marriage. This does not give marriage more than sex and intimacy. This is not fair and not the goal of marriage (Islamonline).

Both stories by Dhillion (2003 & 2005) reveal a reliance on wording and choice of quotes that lead to more confusion and to the mistaken assumptions that temporary marriages are sanctioned Islam. His headline in one story reads “women’s groups oppose Arabs’ mosque-approved sex tourism,” yet nowhere in the article does he go back to explain that these marriages are refused by the majority of Muslims. In fact, he further stresses this point when he later argues that these “muta’a marriages [are] permitted in Islam” (Dhillion, 2005, p. 14). It is important for readers to know of course that Shiites and Sunnis, although they agree on the basic religious tenants, have a lot of differences when it comes to certain Islamic beliefs and practices. Moreover, about 85 percent of Muslims worldwide practice Sunni Islam, which means that Muslims who practice muta’a marriages make up about 10 to 15 percent of all Muslims; hence, it is a clear distortion to assume that all Muslims endorse this type of marriage.⁸

Another weakness identified in both articles is their lack of commentary from the “victimized brides.” It would have been interesting to hear their side of the story and to learn whether or not they married willingly for the money or if they were forced into the marriages by the parents. But readers do not get to hear the voices of these victimized women as it is the reporter who speaks on their behalf. In addition, the two articles downplay the role of the parents of these young Muslim girls and focus more on the idea of how these “sex marriages” are

popular among wealthy Muslim males from the Gulf. While I do not endorse these marriages in any way, it is nonetheless odd that the parents are never held accountable; when in fact one could argue that the mother and father of such brides are the cause of their child's victimization in this specific case. Dhillon (2003) quotes Aziz's father as justifying his offering of his daughter to four different men by saying "I have six daughters and two sons. How can I look after them and feed them all?" (p. 12). There are millions of men and women who live in poverty around the world yet not all of them would sell their daughters into prostitution disguised as a marriage. Hence, one should mention that these poor families are not innocent victims and the fathers who agreed to accept such money are to blame, certainly more so than Islam, but reporters do not focus on this angle of the story and instead focus on the idea that rich men from the Gulf shop for sex in these poor communities, thus implicitly connecting female victimization to Islam and not the culture of profit for the father. Yet whether the blame put on Islam or the greedy fathers, the woman in all cases is framed as the innocent victim, which could truly be the case, but since there are not quotes from these women, it is hard to confirm.

Several articles in the dataset discuss divorce in Islam; some articles examine specific cases while others discuss Islamic divorces in general terms. A *Toronto Sun* article, for instance, explains how Canadian lawyers and women's groups are asking immigration officials to ban verbal divorces from Muslim men emigrating to Canada. Under Islam, a husband can divorce his wife by saying "I divorce you" three times, provided that he is not in a rage, the wife is not menstruating, and the announcement does not immediately follow a sexual coupling between the two (Muslim Bridges.org).⁹ Tom Godfrey (2003) explains to readers how some Muslim men 'misuse' verbal divorces to control women. He quotes Raheel Raza of the Canadian Council of Muslim Women, who says "many of us came from Muslim countries because we want

equality...This is an equality and human rights issue” (p. 30). Godfrey also quotes immigration lawyer Richard Kurland who argues that “undue hardship is placed on the victims of many Islamic divorces” (p. 30). The problem here is that the reporter has insufficient context about verbal divorces. The story lacks both research and quotes from religious scholars that might have explained how verbal divorce is used. Furthermore, the choice of quotes here add to the stereotype of the victimized Muslim woman; this time, she is a victim of controlling men who use two words (“you’re divorced”) to subjugate their wives.

Another article on divorce is an *Irish Times* story of an Indian woman, “torn between two husbands.” Readers are told that Gudiya, married and pregnant to Taufiq, recently found out that her former husband Sapper Mohamed Arif, who was assumed to be dead for five years, was actually freed from Pakistan. Reporter Rahul Bedi (2004) tells readers that the young wife declared on a show aired on the Zee television network that she would return to her first husband Arif. Bedi explains to readers how the Gudiya’s story had triggered public debate across India. “Being Muslim has complicated matters, as the ulama (Islamic clerics) have joined the debate and invoked the Sharia, or Muslim law, on the affair,” Bedi (2004) argues. One could argue that this latter sentence, combined with the story’s headline “TV declaration tests views of India’s Muslims,” frame Islam as the source of Gudiya’s awkward situation, when in reality the issue would still be problematic, irrelevant of the religion of the wife and two husbands. Furthermore, the fact that religious ulama are providing guidance to Gudiya is normal and also necessary. Had this same scenario happened with a Christian wife, one would expect priests to advice the wife on her situation.

Furthermore, towards the end of his article, Bedi quotes Arif as saying he loves his wife and wants her back, but would like her parents or current husband to care for the child. Bedi later

agrees to accept the child as well. “Taufiq has further muddled matters by declaring that he wants Gudiya back,” Bedi says of the current husband. “It appears that Gudiya is obviously in love with him and eager to remain with him, but dare not say so out of fear of reprisals and subsequent public shame,” is how Bedi concludes this story. The article overall focuses on Gudiya as the helpless victim, which is understandable, whose problem is complicated by religious ulama, yet no where in the story does the reporter discuss the other victims – especially the two husbands, who also found themselves in the same awkward situation. The fact that Bedi focuses on Gudiya as the main victim is understandable since she is the main link between both men, yet one would still expect quotes from or information about Gudiya’s current husband Taufiq, for example, who suddenly lost his wife and baby to another man. One could therefore fairly note that reporters insist on focusing on women as victims, when in reality men fall victim to circumstances just as well.

Divorce problematics are also discussed in an opinion piece from the *New Straits Times*, where Rozi Ali (2002) argues that the seven-year-old divorce case of Aida Melly Yan Mutalib “is one of the snapshots from the larger multi-dimensional life drama of Muslim women.” She further asserts that the “symbol of oppression - her divorce certificate - reflects the sexual politics of Muslim societies” (p.10). If this lead were analyzed in isolation, one could very well argue that it paints an extremely negative picture of Islam and its oppression and victimization of women through divorce. But Ali adds sufficient context and background in the story to enlighten readers that patriarchy, and not Islam, is the real problem. “Islam, the most liberal of all religions, stresses gender equality,” explains Ali. “But, as highlighted by Aida’s predicament, patriarchal values, religious suppositions and traditions (perceived as Islamic) in the male-centered administration of the syariah courts¹⁰ have subverted its egalitarian voice” (p. 10). Ali

explains to her readers that while Islam allows women to divorce their husbands, ignorance of court administrators, patriarchy and some husbands' belief that women have no say all work to let the man have the last word. The reporter explains that while Islamic family laws in Singapore are fair, some syariah court officials continue to rely on the jurisdictions of the old ulama. "The ground reality is that many Muslims tend to consider it self-evident that men are "above" women and have a degree of advantage, rights and duties over them," Ali asserts. "Although they pay lip service to Islam's position on gender equality, there is ambivalence about women's rights..." (p. 10).

Ali cites several examples of discrimination against women in various Muslim societies that are carried out in the name of Islam. She further argues that when women complain and try to bring these problems to public attention, they are ignored. "The common refrain is: a return to Islam will guarantee women their dignity and rights," explains Ali, adding:

But the 'return' outlined by some ultra-conservative ulama today is not a return to inherently liberatory nature of Islam. It is a utopia designed to control women and perpetuate patriarchal authority. Nostalgia is the disease of intellectually-bankrupt scholars (p. 10).

Ali clearly acknowledges discrimination and mistreatment of Muslim women while also clarifying these are not invariably problems caused by Islam. The reporter provides sufficient analysis, opinion and facts to demonstrate to readers that patriarchy and ignorance are the main cause of women's problems both in Singapore and in other Muslim societies. "By liberating Islam from the yoke of male-centeredness, women's legal and social rights will be secured," Ali concludes. "It is thus vital to challenge the ulama's monolithic power to interpret the Quran and

Sunnah” (p. 10). She further clarifies that her aim is not to reject Islam but hopes for a “post-patriarchal Islam” (p. 10).

One could argue that Ali’s column is effective for two reasons: from a journalistic side, the reporter provides readers with a combination of her own opinions and facts about Islam and about Islamic jurisdictions in Singapore. By giving ample space to context, Ali (2002) ensures that readers will not necessarily defer to stereotypes of Islam as backward and repressive towards Muslim women. The second reason for this column’s effectiveness is that it is written by a Muslim woman who clearly demonstrates her assertiveness and independent opinions, which sometimes contradict with those of prominent male scholars. For instance, Ali tells readers that she was castigated for criticizing the renowned Islamic scholar Imam Ali Al-Ghazali (1058-1111). “This is not to deny his intellectual contributions, but reading his *Kitab al-Nikah* I disagree with his view that a woman’s legitimacy and honor is established in relation to a male...” (p. 10). This segment therefore demonstrates that this Muslim woman is not afraid to voice her opinion, knowing that it will be criticized. One could also conclude that readers might question stereotypes of Muslim women as oppressed, weak and voiceless by reading the strong opinions voiced by Ali in this column.

One of the few other articles analyzed that attempted to explain to readers how inequality towards Muslim women is not related to Islam comes from the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, where Moni Basu (2001) informs readers that Muslim women see no problem with their faith. “They say the problem is not religion, but the men who subjugate them in the name of the Quran, Islam’s holy book” (p. 8A). Basu cites examples of mistreatment of women in various Muslim countries, such as difficulties in getting a divorce, as well as extreme poverty that forces some women to remain in bad marriages “as it does poor women worldwide” (p. 8A). She quotes

experts as saying that the treatment of women in Muslim societies depends on economic and political conditions. “Experts agree however, that a loathing of women is nowhere to be found in the religion,” explains Basu (p. 8A). Basu backs her statements with quotes from various Muslim as well as non-Muslim sources. For example, she quotes Professor of Arabic at Emory University, Hanaa Kilany, as saying that Islamic practices are affected by both culture and those in power. “Islam is what Muslims make it; it is not a monolithic thing,” Kilany is quoted as saying. “You can look at any religion on the face of the Earth and find stuff that is antithetical to women’s rights” (as quoted in Basu, 2001, p. 8A). Basu also adds sufficient context to inform readers on Islam and examples of Muslim women throughout history:

Islam was viewed as a liberator of women. Islamic doctrines banned the practice of burying alive unwanted baby girls, required education for girls, and declared ownership of property a basic right for women (p. 8A).

In sum, Basu’s report is exceptional in that it does fully point to the mistreatment of women in various Islamic countries, yet includes sufficient information to explain to readers the true source of such abuse and inequality. Basu combines credible sourcing with sound research and sufficient context to refute the stereotype of Islam as backward and oppressive to women. Women face inequalities and abuse in varying degrees worldwide, including Muslim countries; but this is one of the rare articles that takes the time to educate readers that Islam does not make victims out of women, and just like any other culture, the source of oppression comes from a range of sources, including everything from bad economic conditions to corruption to controlling men.

The *Guardian* provides another informative article, where Giles Tremlett (2004) tells readers of Morocco’s progressive laws on women’s rights. These include the eradication of

polygamy, except in extreme cases, in which case the husband has to receive permission from the first wife as well as from a judge before other spouses are added to the marriage. Changes also included raising girls' marriage age to 18 from 15, and giving wives "joint responsibility" in family affairs with the husband. Tremlett argues that the changes spurred accusations by radical Islamists that the government was "bowing to pressure from Europe and the U.S." (p. 15). He quotes Nadia Yassin, female spokeswoman for Morocco's popular yet illegal Justice and Charity Islamist movement as saying that the reforms "have been elaborated in response to the desires of foreigners and the feminist movement, but not to produce any real change in women's lives" (p. 15). One could argue that a quote from women who support the recent changes would balance Yassin's claim, yet Tremlett does not provide any women's reactions to the changes, which I think is necessary.

Honor Crimes

One of the issues that has received a lot of media attention, especially from international journalists, is honor crimes; a total of 12 local and international articles on honor crimes were analyzed. Honor crimes are committed by family members against a girl or a woman suspected of "dishonoring" the family's name by having a sexual relationship outside of marriage. Such killings are gender-driven crimes that plague many Third World countries, and are common "particularly in countries where poverty-stricken families cling to male-dominated cultural traditions" (Hanania, 2007). It is also important to note that honor crimes are not only committed by extremely traditional Muslims and Arabs as they are also carried out by some Christians and Jews (Hanania, 2007; Wakim, 2004). Islamic scholars argue that the phenomenon is not encouraged by Islam. Kutty (2002) for example asserts that honor killing are "based on

ignorance and disregard of morals and laws, which cannot be abolished except by disciplinary punishments” (Islam online). Kutty quotes sheikh `Atiyyah Saqr, former head of Egypt’s Al-Azhar Fatwa Committee as saying:

Like all other religions, Islam strictly prohibits murder and killing without legal justification. Allah, Most High, says, “Whoso slayeth a believer of set purpose, his reward is Hell for ever. Allah is wroth against him and He hath cursed him and prepared for him an awful doom.” (An-Nisa’: 93).

Moreover, it is also worthy to note that in some countries where honor killings are very common, such as Pakistan, the lenient punishment of the killers dates back to British occupation and the British penal code, which included “a clause of ‘grave and sudden provocation’ which was often used in cases of honor killings to skirt convictions for premeditated murder” (Tohid, 2005, p. 06). *Christian Science Monitor* reporter Owais Tohid (2005) further adds that under this British-inherited penal code, in recent cases of honor crimes, the acquittal ratio has been over 80 percent. But in January 2005, Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf signed a bill banning honor killings and branding them as criminal acts punishable by death. It is interesting to note that, aside from the few exceptions that include Tohid’s article, readers are rarely informed of the specifics of honor crimes and the origins of the punishment and instead, reporters focus on the assumption that these are crimes by Muslim men and the majority of Muslim women are defenseless.

Newspaper stories on honor crimes are an intricate topic to analyze for evidence of media stereotypes because the women in this case are certainly victims, and hence one cannot claim that reporters are prejudiced by referring to them as such. Yet, one could argue that while there are many victims of honor crimes, these are by no means the majority of Muslim women; and hence, while using the term “victim” here is viable, one should also clarify that it should not be

used to generalize about the majority of Muslim women. Scanlan (2004) explains that editors of *The Oregonian* of Portland tracked errors in stories to find that three of the most frequent error sources are: reporting from memory; making assumptions, and dealing with second-hand sources (*Poynter* online). My analysis of honor crime stories illustrates that at least two of these error sources - making assumptions and relying on second-hand sources - commonly appear in honor crime reporting.

Several questions emerge from my analysis of articles on honor crimes: why do journalists resort to sensationalist reporting on honor crimes? And why the disproportionate coverage of these exceptions as if these crimes dominate Muslim societies, when in truth they do not? Moreover, if these are stories about Muslim women then where are their voices in the coverage? Furthermore, why do reporters link honor crimes to Islam when in reality they have nothing to do with the faith? Do reporters really do their research when reporting on such sensitive topics? Finally, why do reporters rarely rely on Muslim scholars for an opinion rather than reaching their own conclusions about honor crimes and Islam? Based on the stories analyzed here, one would think that honor crimes dominate every single Muslim country and pose a threat to every Muslim woman on earth. Furthermore, the majority of stories analyzed have also illustrated how Muslim women are indeed portrayed as submissive victims, yet these very same articles quote no Muslim women to confirm this generalization. Surely there are female social workers or experts on women's issues in the region that can be reached for comment. Also, news stories on these crimes hardly include journalists' own research on the issue, and instead tend to rely on one or two secondhand sources. Moreover, the stories analyzed here also demonstrate that in many cases reporters make baseless assumptions about the majority of Muslims. The end result is generalized, exaggerated, distorted and oversimplified accounts of

honor crimes that too often misinform and confuse readers and confirm the stereotype of the weak, submissive and victimized Muslim women.

Articles that portray honor crimes as Islamic include a *Toronto Sun* column by Licia Corbella (2001), who says that in the Muslim world “what would generally be considered small stuff is often severely punished, while the severe stuff is lightly punished” (p. 16). Corbella claims that “it’s okay for a woman in Algeria or Afghanistan to be summarily executed if a man sees her exposed ankle, but it’s not okay for the U.S. to seek out the perpetrators of an act of terrorism that wiped out 5,000 innocent people and 20 percent of the commercial real estate on the Island of Manhattan?” (p. 16). The reporter follows this by a discussion of honor crimes in Jordan, citing several examples of Jordanian victims whose stories were aired on a CBC documentary. Reaching her conclusion, Corbella declares that the world has stood by as “50 percent of the population of most Muslim countries - while not exterminated in death camps - have been stripped of the most basic human rights,” referring to Muslim women’s alleged victimization (p. 16). The stereotype of the Muslim women as helpless, oppressed and victimized is strong throughout the article, starting with the headline “Death before dishonor - her death; in some Muslim nations, not just Afghanistan, women are mere chattel.” One could therefore argue that Corbella’s wording and overall argument confirms her “assumption” that the majority of Muslim men are barbaric Muslim men who go around murdering innocent women, whom they “own” for “showing an ankle” or for “dishonoring” the family name. As a columnist, Corbella is entitled to expressing her views, no matter how extreme they are. But she also has to establish her credibility, by citing valid sources and/or research, which is not the case here.

Honor crimes are committed in many traditional societies, but it is misleading to assume that this a normal practice rather than exceptional and it is even more misleading to conclude that

Islam is the source of women's victimization. Hanania (2007) argues that honor crimes are a problem in many non-Arab and non-Muslim countries as well, and so instead of "using these tragedies to advance political agendas, the focus should be on the criminal act rather than on the race, ethnicity or religion of the perpetrators and the victims" (*South West News Herald*). This is an interesting point because, while they do mention the leniency of laws against honor criminals,¹¹ reporters fail to focus on this issue and tend to frame their stories around victimization accounts, framing honor crimes as a distinctively Islamic pathology.

Articles presenting honor crimes in a sensationalist manner include the *Denver Post*'s story on a "harrowing documentary" of honor killings in Pakistan. Joanne Ostrow (2002) starts with this lead:

The Pakistani men are matter-of-fact as they explain why they feel justified in killing their women. "She is our property," one says. "If she sleeps with another man, God says you can kill her." Another sums up: "My donkeys, my women" (p. I-05).

This lead sends the powerful message that Pakistani women are indeed victims; victims of ignorant, and backward-thinking men who view women as property or even as donkeys, when in truth this is an extreme statement that does not necessarily represent the opinions of all Pakistani men. Again, one could argue that this report is inaccurately based on the reporter's assumptions about a country and a culture with which she is unfamiliar.

One of the important factors missing in many reports on honor crimes is research; reporters fail to do their homework and instead supply readers with distortion, unreliable sources, and information attained from second-hand sources. This problem is clearly visible in the various reports covering Norma Khouri's (2003) bestselling book *Forbidden Love*.

Reporters hailed the writer and her courage for writing a "true story" of her best friend Dalia's

murder due to honor crimes in Jordan. Excerpts from Khouri's book were quoted religiously without confirmation from expert sources or additional research by the reporters. Janet Bagnall (2003) from the *Gazette* for instance reports that "Medical examiners confirm, Khouri writes, that approximately 90 percent of honor-crime victims had not engaged in any sexual activity or were not guilty of the acts they were rumored to have committed" (p.11). Bagnall concludes her report on *Forbidden Love* by saying "the world owes Khouri a debt of gratitude, not only for daring to tell the truth about her friend's death, but for condemning the belief structure that supports 'honor' killings" (p. 11). Nowhere in the story does the reporter provide her own research or background on honor killings and therefore exclusively relies on Khouri's facts, which later turned out to be false.¹²

Moreover, with complete reliance on Khouri's exaggerated account on honor crimes and in the absence of reporters' independently-acquired information on the issue, reporters have therefore helped solidify an uncontextualized image of the victimized Muslim woman as a very likely candidate of honor killings. Alexandra Economou (2003) of *The Advertiser*, for example, writes that the "softly-spoken but passionate guest speaker, Jordanian-Australian author Norma Khouri, had her audience captivated as she described the horror of women murdered in so-called 'honor killings' in Arab countries" (p. 15). Such wording strengthens the image of the helpless, victimized Muslim woman and one could further argue, leads readers to believe that this is the fate of the majority of Muslim women. Towards the end of her article, Economou mentions how Khouri's book has angered many Muslims women who accuse Khouri of inaccurately blaming Islam for these killings, adding that Khouri refutes this argument by explaining such a crime relates more to tradition than religion. But by featuring the rejoinder over the critique, the reporter tilts the coverage and fails to provide any quotes from these

opposing women or credible sources or information to educate readers further about these crimes. Hence, the very women whom she refers to as disagreeing with the book are silenced in her story, as Economou is captivated by Khouri's sensationalist account.

After all the attention and hailing Khouri received by various Western reporters, in July 2004, the book turned out to be false in important ways. The *Ottawa Citizen*, *London Times*, and the *Christian Science Monitor* were among the many newspapers to report that Khouri, who sold over 250,000 copies of her book all over the West, had made up integral facts in her story. The *Mercury* posted an *Australian Associated Press* (AAP) story by Steve Connolly (2004), which tells readers that the book included over 100 errors in facts and statements on Muslims and Arabs. The article added that an investigation by the Jordanian National Commission for Women (JNCW) and the *Sydney Morning Herald* revealed that Khouri had spent most of her adult life in the U.S. and not in Jordan as she had claimed. "Her critics say among the factual errors is that Khouri does not seem to know where Jordan is, as she incorrectly writes it shares borders with Lebanon, Egypt and Kuwait," writes Connolly (p. 13).

Khouri also claimed in her book that in Jordan alone, over 2,500 women die annually due to honor killings, a figure strongly disputed by the JNCW, which claims the figure does not exceed 20 women. One could therefore conclude that any informed reporter who read the book and wrote about it should have questioned some of these inaccurate facts or at least attempted to confirm them independently. Instead, many reporters were content to affirm Khouri as a courageous heroine for writing about the misery and helplessness of Muslim women made the common victims of honor killings. Connolly ends the article with a quote from JNCW's Secretary General, Amal Sabbagh, saying "we refuse to have Jordanian women portrayed in the humiliating way that Norma Khouri portrayed them" (p. 13). Again, reporters who automatically

took Khouri's side and assumed all Jordanian women were helpless victims could have easily confirmed their facts from credible sources, which are not so hard to find.

Even in the face of these disclosures, stereotypical accounts persisted. The *Herald Sun* is where Ted Lapkin (2004) insisted that the "messenger may be proved to be a liar, but the message remains true, nonetheless" (p. 18). He adds that even if Khouri's book turned out to be false, "the brutal reality of this family violence still stands as indisputable fact" (p. 18), claiming that thousands of women die each year throughout the Arab world as victims of honor killings. The reporter offhandedly dismisses the fabricated book and maintains the assumption that honor crimes are as widespread as he claims: "The more traditional segments of Arab society demand that women must service, above all else, as the subservient repositories of their familial honor" (p. 18). Lapkin's wording here conveys a clear and powerful message about traditional Arab women: they are submissive, obedient, and helpless and in constant guard of the family honor.

Furthermore, Lapkin tells readers that Arab men are fanatical about their women's honor; he quotes anthropologist G. M. Kessler who describes the Arab world as an "honor-and-shame culture in which the need to avoid the loss of face is an obsession" (p. 18). One could argue that the reporter's reliance on a Western source speaking on a traditional Arab problem only reinforces the Western overlay, as it is this Western anthropologist's opinion, a distorted view, one might add, that Lapkin sees as credible instead of turning to Arab scholars to contextualize the issue. Lapkin interestingly links Arab men's "obsession" with women's honor to politics, as he claims that Arab men feel the same obsession with honor when it comes to "the infidel Israel" and the "political, military and technological power of the West" (p. 18). "Thus, terrorists who murder Americans, Australians or Israelis are frequently thought to reap the dual benefit of striking a blow on behalf of Islamic civilization, while also elevating their family prestige in the

eyes of the community” (p.18). One could very well argue that this whole segment of Lapkin’s story promotes Arabs as the Other – men who are alien, barbaric and evil both to women and to the West and Israel, and women submissive and weak. By grouping men who commit honor crimes with terrorists, Lapkin promotes the idea that all Arab and Muslim men are one and the same; they hold the same beliefs and think the same way. It is fair to argue that Lapkan creates great distortion by treating as fact his view that all Arab men, including those disturbed enough to commit honor killings, are terrorists, since they are all said to hate Israel and the West and to cheer terrorist actions against non-Muslims.

Out of twelve local and international stories on honor crimes, only one questions the Western media’s assumption that honor killings are irreducibly Islamic. Fareena Alam (2004) of the *Guardian* asserts that these crimes are in fact not Islamic. She cites the examples of Anita Gindha, a Sikh, who was strangled for refusing an arranged marriage, denouncing Sikhism and marrying her boyfriend in London, and Stuart Hogan, who in 2004 shot his former girlfriend and his sister. “Honor crimes have no relation to religiosity,” explains Alam, asking, “why is it then that such acts - along with practices like female genital mutilation continue to be linked exclusively with Muslims?” She further concludes that “it becomes increasingly difficult to tackle domestic violence in an environment of blame that borders on Islamophobia” (p. 21). The reporter goes on to explain how honor killings are a symptom of “masculinity, and socio-economic disadvantage,” adding that regardless of “class, people hold on to traditional practices more fiercely when they feel threatened or confronted” (p. 21).

Based simply on this sole report, one could conclude that reporters can easily include more background and context on honor crimes so as to accurately inform readers about why such crimes take place and who commits them. Although reporters criticize the leniency of laws

related to honor crimes, hardly any investigative reporting appears to explain the alleged legal tilt. Moreover, very few reporters turn to credible sources on this issue, and instead it is usually an outside source that is quoted to make assumptions and generalizations about a whole culture.

Several conclusions arise out of this analysis of honor crime reporting. It is important to ensure that journalists in general are equipped with sufficient information and knowledge about the issue in question. The book reviews on *Forbidden Love* illustrate how simple errors were wholly overlooked by the reporters who initially hailed this book. Such errors could have been easily discovered if the reporters had sufficient knowledge about the region or about honor crimes in Jordan. Furthermore, when lacking this background information, it is important that reporters seek information from sources closest to the issue, such as the JNCW or other women's groups in the Middle East that are outraged by honor crimes but also know its actual extent. It is also important that journalists familiarize themselves with the culture they are assigned to cover. "Journalists are generalists. Therefore we tend not to be particularly informed about specifics," explains Iranian-American reporter Gelareh Asayesh (2002). "Clearly, in the modern world, it behooves us to learn more about Islam and the Middle East" (Colín, 2002, *Poynter* online).

It is also necessary to examine why honor crimes are an attractive topic for Western reporters. One could argue that honor killings are a safe way of reinforcing stereotypes about Muslim women as weak and oppressed. Hence, reporters who discuss how women are brutally murdered by Muslim men in the name of honor without adding sufficient context thus safely confirm such stereotypes. Such coverage undoubtedly arises from a journalistic culture that values drama and conflicts. From a news value angle, honor killings are inherently dramatic narratives that carry both a human interest and an emotional news value. According to Fowler (1991), the media decide if a story is newsworthy based on a complex set of criteria or news

values that, in general, prefer stories about death in a family, love stories, eloping, etc., attractive because they appeal to readers' emotions. "People like stories about individuals' efforts to cope with life's challenges," according to Yopp and Haller (2005, p. 7).

Another explanation for this reporting has to do with the nature of honor crimes, which are inherently secretive and not necessarily publicized since when they happen they are related to a family's honor and a woman's alleged tarnishing of the family name. It could be argued that for some journalists, this element of secrecy is attractive; journalists seek to unmask the truth and to make the hidden public. Hence, by bringing these killings to public attention, journalists might feel they are unveiling the truth even if the tactic exaggerates the incidence of honor crimes.

One might also conclude that coverage of honor killings are a Western reporting tactic for reinforcing Christian superiority over other religions and cultures. Going back to van Ginneken's (1998) argument that in their portrayal of other cultures, elite journalists in the West "often implicitly use Judeo-Christian religion as a yardstick of civilization, and implicitly look down upon other religions as 'primitive'" (p.66). Hansen (2005) explains that this supremacy is apparent in Western coverage of Third World countries. "Some Western journalists exhibit a superiority complex when dealing with Arabs and other peoples from the Third World" (*Deccan Herald* online). Reporting on these killings therefore enables some reporters to portray Islam as primitive and backward.

Another explanation for the popular coverage of honor crimes is human rights activists and women's groups, that are understandably eager to successfully frame issues of concern to the media. Andsager (2000) asserts that interest groups are more successful in gaining media attention when they understand what makes news and when they are able to frame their issues in terms of the traditional newsworthiness values used by journalists. "Given that such sources can

shape rhetorical structures to frame stories about the issue, astute interest groups sometimes attempt to use emotionally bound rhetoric to increase the likelihood of coverage” (p. 580). Elder and Cobb (1983) further add that successful activist groups are ones that effectively manipulate symbols to gain media attention; such symbols include catchphrases or ideographs - certain words that express public values. In sum, one could therefore argue that various activist groups encourage reporting on honor crimes.

In sum, one could argue that a combination of reasons lead to the increased media attention on unusual issues such as honor crimes. Whether the news value element, or activists’ influence, or a combination of factors, the end result is that stories on isolated incidents of honor killings, incest, or FGM are increasingly in the news and are more often than not associated with Muslims. But with such increased attention these independent cases are presented to the public as the norm rather than as the extreme cases that they are. This in turn helps strengthen stereotypes of Muslim women as oppressed and victimized and of Islam and Muslim men as backward and tyrannical.

The result is that in many instances Western reporters present extreme issues as the norm; they tend to judge Muslim women by reliance on a Western overlay and in many cases fail to give women voice in these judgments and misinterpretations. The end result, whether reporting on honor crimes, marriage, divorce, or socializing, is that Muslim women in many newspaper stories, tend to portray the victimized, the oppressed, the sexual object, the abused and the voiceless. Aside from the intelligent exceptions discussed throughout this section, many reporters fail to provide sufficient background on Islam and women; they do not rely on credible sources, and most importantly, they do not quote Muslim women on issues of their concern. And

even when they do quote Muslim women, most reporters tend to ignore their message or distort its meaning.

Muslim Women & Empowerment

A significant number of local and international articles examined issues related to Muslim women's empowerment. Such articles normally outline the necessary steps needed to fulfill equality and empowerment of women in the Muslim world. One of the main justifications for the attractiveness of Muslim women's empowerment in the news relates to the salience of U.S. government policy in the Middle East as a journalistic topic. A 2002 \$29 million "ambitious program"¹³ by the Bush administration was explained by former Secretary of State Colin Powell as aimed at moving "Arab societies out of their current state of economic stagnation, closed and rigid political systems and severely limited educational opportunities, especially for women" (Walsh, 2002, p. A22). Powell was further quoted by reporters as saying that despite progress in some countries, many Middle Eastern governments curb democracy and rule people through closed political regimes. Powell was quoted in *The Washington Post* as saying:

There is a constant theme running through these challenges and that is the marginalization of women...More than half of the Arab world's women are illiterate. They suffer more than men from unemployment and lack of economic opportunity. Women also make up a smaller proportion of members of parliament in Arab countries than in any other region of the world. Until the countries of the Middle East unleash the abilities and potential of their women, they will not build a future of hope (Walsh, 2002, p. A22).

First Lady Laura Bush has also focused on Muslim women's empowerment in her speeches. In a 2005 speech at the World Economic Forum in Jordan, Bush said: "Women who have not yet won these rights are watching... Freedom, especially freedom for women, is more than the absence of oppression." Bush explained to her audience that this entails "the right to speak and vote and worship freely. Human rights require the rights of women. And human rights are empty promises without human liberty" (VandeHei, 2005, p. A20). This *Washington Post* reporter states that Bush's speech drew "a polite though unenthusiastic, response..." (p. A20).

This "unenthusiastic response" is likely of course because a Western figure, from a completely different culture, is dictating why and how Arab and Muslim women should be empowered. Moreover, some news articles use a Western overlay to critique the current status of Muslim women by comparing them to the advances of Western women. Such stories use an expert tone in their discussion of Muslim women's empowerment: A Western figure - whether the reporter or a prominent source - is assumed to know best what Muslim women should be able to do and to what they should aspire. A common idea is that Muslim women must follow the same path taken by their Western predecessors, thus completely ignoring the religious and cultural differences and the Muslim women's personal preferences in this empowerment. Even accepting critiques of the region asserting unequal access to education, employment and social activities in parts of the Muslim world, some reports still overly generalize about Muslim women at large. Therefore in many cases, readers are left with an obscured opinion about the majority of Muslim women, who are treated like "doormats," which is how *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristoff (2002) describes them in one of his pieces (p. A27).

Another feature of some of the reporting is the tendency to judge Muslim women's empowerment through Western eyes, where women are viewed as oppressed or constrained by,

for example, their Islamic dress. And one might also note the tendency to focus on the negative but exceptional instances of mistreatment of Muslim women while completely ignoring the many positive exceptions of powerful and assertive women who have succeeded in various fields throughout the Muslim world. A detailed analysis of some of these examples will more fully document these conclusions.

Western Overlay on Women's Empowerment

Empowerment of women is among the most frequently covered social issues; reporters often mention how women in the Muslim world lack fair access to education, employment, politics as well as an ability to freely interact in some countries. Invariably, it seems, reporters fail to cite the right statistics or evidence on the weaknesses and gains of individual Muslim countries with regards to women. The end result is generalized, vague and superficial reports, where reporters simply reiterate the same message without specifying the exact hindrances in various countries and how women can overcome them. More importantly, the coverage fails to talk with actual Muslim women to learn what they want in terms of education, employment as well as political rights.

Two articles that judge Muslim women's empowerment with a Western overlay appeared in the *St. Petersburg Times* and the *San Diego Union-Tribune*. In a *St. Petersburg Times* piece lacking a byline, readers get a brief synopsis of the status of women throughout the Muslim world. The article looks at women in Islamist regimes, the Arabian Peninsula, Persian Gulf, North Africa, as well as secular states and Muslim Asian countries. The article is an example of positive reporting in terms of the reporter's comprehensive research on the status of Muslim women worldwide and the diverse sources interviewed; the reporter quotes both Muslim women

who comment on their status as well as expert sources on the region. But the beneficial aspects are overwritten by a persistent Western judgmentalism of non-Western cultures, and this tone pervades the article. For example, when talking about the status of Muslim women in Persian Gulf states, the reporter explains that in Dubai “alcohol is available and there are topless beaches, although most patrons are European tourists” (*St. Petersburg Times*, 2001, p. 3D). This sentence is immediately followed by a quote from a Sudanese Muslim woman whose husband works in Dubai, who says “whatever you want to do, you can do [in Dubai]” (p. 3D). The question here is, why does the reporter think it is necessary to mention alcohol and topless beaches to judge the status of Muslim women in a conservative, non-Western society? Surely, alcohol and topless beaches are not an indication of the level of women’s empowerment.

Moreover, when discussing the status of women in Israel, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority, the reporter seems to indicate that women fare better than in other places of the Muslim world, thanks to the larger presence of non-Muslims in those regions. “Because of the influence of Israel, with its egalitarian status for women, and the large number of Palestinian Christians in the region, Muslim women hold many different roles in society,” argues the reporter. “However, with the rise of Islam linked to political resistance to Israeli occupation, many Muslim women have become more observant and have adopted traditional dress, including the chador” (*St. Petersburg Times*, 2001, p. 3D). One could argue that the clear message here is that Israel and Arab Christians are the source of women’s empowerment in this region and that Muslim women are regressing, as evidenced by their adoption of the chador. Yet this claim is misleading, because in reality Muslim women are among the worst off in Israel and they rarely hold any significant positions in the Israeli society. “Old women, single mothers, Arab women, immigrants from Ethiopia and the former Soviet Union and foreign workers (with or without

work permits) are most vulnerable to poverty, health problems and abuse of basic rights,” Werczberger (2001) explains of the status of women in Israel. “Women as a group are disadvantaged in the labor market, the health system, education, the courts and religious institutions and are subject to harassment and violence” (Werczberger, 2001, online).

Another incident where the article hints that non-Muslims are the cause of women’s empowerment in Muslim cultures is when the reporter talks about Muslim women living in the Far East (Indonesia and Malaysia). The argument here is that because these countries “have large, non-Muslim populations - including Chinese, Malay, Christian and Hindu communities - the governing parties do not impose restrictions on women” (p. 3D). Once again, the idea here is that non-Muslim women are the real cause of such openness and if it were not for their presence in these countries, Muslim women would not enjoy such freedoms.

Furthermore, this article depicts Muslim dress codes as disempowering to women. The fact that a Muslim woman wears a hijab or abaya or chador is not an indication of her empowerment or lack of it – the hijab is extremely common across the Muslim world and among the varying classes and educational levels - yet reporters tend to view the Islamic dress as a hindrance to women’s liberation. This idea is further illustrated when the reporter talks about Syria and approvingly notes how women there can do anything. The article quotes two Syrian women who talk about Syria’s great tolerance and respect for women and for moderate Muslims. The reporter then says of one of these women, “and she did not wear the veil,” therefore indicating Syrian women’s liberalism.

One has to question why some reporters exceedingly focus on the image of the veil even when it is irrelevant to the story. The caption for an image accompanying this article, for instance, indicates that all six women in the image wear some kind of Islamic dress. “A woman

wearing a burqa, a woman wearing a niqab and a bandana that reads, ‘God is great!’; a woman wearing a hijab; a woman wearing a Moroccan type of niqab; a Hindu woman wearing a veil...an Iranian Muslim woman wearing a chador,” notes the caption¹⁴ (p. 3D). Throughout this article, readers are told that these countries are home to Muslim as well as non-Muslim women yet the images accompanying the story are all of Muslim veiled women. Even within Islam, millions of women practice their religion but do not cover their hair, and so, why should a story about the diverse women in Muslim societies and their varying rights and liberties focus solely on veiling images?

Another example of a reporter’s focus on the hijab is an *Irish Times* article by Mary Russell (2003), who explains in her lead that during a forum on Arab women and education, held in Damascus, the diversity of the Arab world was highlighted by the varied views and dress codes. “A few women were, but for their eyes, completely veiled,” is how Russell (2003) ends the lead (p. 15). The author follows up with a paragraph explaining the different styles and colors of veils, headscarves and dresses worn by the forum attendants. But Russell contradicts herself here, because after allocating two main paragraphs to the veil, she then says “Veils and headscarves however, were not uppermost in the minds of the delegates who, between them, represented 21 Arab countries” (p. 15). As the story was framed, and despite the fact that the delegates had more pressing issues on their minds than their outfits, Russell reveals her own preoccupation with the veil, which carries from the lead into the follow up paragraph.

Additionally, in her discussion of the Internet and how it has opened opportunities to Muslim women, Russell portrays Muslim women as subordinated by some Muslim men. She claims, that “in a culture where some men will not shake hands with a woman - physical contact with someone who is not a spouse is discouraged in more traditional circles - the difficulties

facing a young female student wishing to attend university can be enormous” (p. 15). While the Internet has indeed expanded women’s freedoms, Russell’s wording creeps into caricature when she says “some men will not shake hands with a woman.” It would be more accurate for Russell to explain that the opposite is also true; it is very common for certain conservative women to refuse to shake a man’s hand. Reading it this way therefore clarifies that women are not stigmatized by men, but rather that some men and women mutually prefer not to touch each other out of religious conservatism. Overall, Russell’s initial focus on the veil, combined with her wording on men’s disregard for Muslim women, portray these women as ignored by men. This is further exemplified in her headline, “The importance of books versus burkas in a man’s world.” The focus is obviously on veiling and on men, even though the entire article is about the forum’s discussion of education and Internet use as well as other educational issues.

Another article that deals with women’s rights across the Muslim world appeared in the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, where reporter Dean Calbreath (2001) interviews Muslim women as well as Arab scholars on the idea of women’s rights and empowerment. The article is praiseworthy in its focus on positive examples from the Muslim world. He informs readers about Muslim women in countries such as Turkey, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Indonesia with female prime ministers, thus “outpacing many Western nations” while other Muslim countries such as Egypt, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan “offer women broad political and employment rights” (p. A-1). This is one of the rare articles that actually informs readers about positive women’s rights in the Muslim world, as the majority of articles analyzed tend to focus on what Muslim women lack rather than what they have.

Again, the hijab is used here as a measure of women’s rights. Calbreath introduces in his lead Jordanian female teacher, Don’a Matar, who describes what she teaches and in which

school. The reporter says that at “Matar’s school, each of the teachers keeps her head covered. That is a personal choice rather than a matter of government policy in a country where devout women often go uncovered” (p. A-1). I find this sentence to be informative as it clarifies that the women are free to either wear the hijab or go without it and in either case the Jordanian woman is capable of achieving anything. Calbreath confirms this conclusion when he quotes Matar saying “Here, a woman can do whatever she wants to, as long as she’s got the right qualifications,” who explains that her failure to fulfill her dream of becoming a doctor was unrelated to her being a woman. “There was nothing about being a woman that kept me from being a doctor. It was just the tests,” says Matar (p. A-1).

Yet although Calbreath uses the veil in a positive light, he contradicts himself when he mentions hijab in other Muslim countries. “Saudi Arabia’s veiled women still are barred from driving automobiles or entering most professions” (p. A-1). One could argue that the adjective “veiled” in this case is used to signify women’s backwardness or hindered rights, whereas in reality Saudi women demand many rights such as equal access to employment and education as well as the right to drive, but women there only rarely complain about wearing the veil. According to a *Washington Post* article, religiously conservative Saudi women comprise a large portion of the female population in the Kingdom, thus refuting the claim that “most Saudi women are unhappy with their lot and waiting to be liberated” (Saleh Ambah, 2006, p. A12). The article further claims that the black veil and even the driving prohibition are embraced by many women. Saleh Ambah quotes biology professor Faiza al-Obaidi as saying that she is proud of her religion and resists Western interference by maintaining her veil. “Just because this is closed,” she said, referring to her black face covering, “doesn’t mean this is,” pointing to her head (p. A12). The *Post* article also quotes Samia Adham, a statistics professor, who added: “This is a

choice. We choose to be ruled by Islam. We will make changes, but within our religion and in our own way." Hence, one could argue that it is misleading to point to Saudi women's hijab as a main source of oppression.

Calbreath's report on Saudi women is problematically sourced: he quotes Ekbal Baraka, an Egyptian "secular" feminist and editor of the women's magazine *Hawaa* (Eve), who is known for her extreme anti-hijab views.¹⁵ "Saudi Arabia for us is like the Vatican," Baraka comments. "It's a sacred place and the women are like nuns. The Saudis cannot change since they fear they'll risk losing their position as the leaders of the Muslim world" (Calbreath, 2001, p. A-1). While Saudi women do not enjoy many rights awarded to their counterparts across the Muslim world, one could still argue that Baraka's claim that they live like 'nuns' in the 'Vatican' is exaggerated and should have been better contextualized. Many Saudi women, both married and single, are students, doctors, artists and reporters, hence they are socially active even within the constraints of Saudi society. Hence, it is misleading to claim they are completely focused on religion and nothing else.

Why did Calbreath rely on this one source, when she is widely known for her extreme, anti-hijab views? One could argue that Calbreath's source choice demonstrates how some reporters, as Muslim feminists contend, rely on more Westernized sources within Islam that share the reporter's same beliefs on certain issues. Reporters also seem to focus on polar extremes; in this case the extreme conservatism of Saudi Arabia is vividly illustrated by relying on an extremely liberal view held by a Muslim woman. This polarity is more evident towards the end of the article, when Calbreath quotes Kuwait's first lady, Sheikha Latifa Al-Fahid Al-Sabah, who during a three-day women's summit, stated that women should be "protected from backwardness and attempts to keep them at home." Calbreath then states that while Al-Sabah

stated that opinion, “her own initiative on women’s rights was to have women become more effective mothers and keep their children away from drugs.” The reporter then concludes that “despite the division between the two camps, *Hawaa* editor Baraka described the summit as ‘one of the most important steps taken by women in this region of the world’” (p. A-1). The fact that Calbreath describes the women as belonging to “two camps” thus illustrates reporters’ reliance on polar extremes; in this case the reporter pits Baraka and her liberalism against Al-Sabah’s maternal tone on the other a highly constrained binary.

Furthermore, on several occasions, the reporter lapses into generalizations about Muslim cultures, without offering sufficient evidence of the specific cases he brings forward. For instance, Calbreath tells readers that despite the political and economic advances women in Egypt and other Muslim cultures have managed, such progress has not translated in social settings. “Jordanian homes are reminiscent of the United States in the 1950s,” explains Calbreath. “After cooking dinner, women typically retreat to the kitchen as the men smoke cigarettes and talk politics in the living room” (p. A-1). One could very well argue that this is a generalized comment as it is difficult to know the daily rituals of every single Jordanian family before or after dinner. The reporter confirms his claim with a quote from one Jordanian college student who says she declines to join men’s conversations. In her own words, she states: “I am not used to expressing my views among men.” While some women may find it uncomfortable to converse with men, others willingly choose not to socialize with men and then there are women who socialize with men everyday. Hence, once again, it is difficult to generalize about all Jordanian women from these isolated examples.

Another example of Calbreath’s generalizations comes from a story about Egyptian bazaars and shopkeepers who “often treat women as if they were not there, preferring to deal

with their husbands instead,” the reporter explains. “Don’t even talk... This is just between us men!” the reporter quotes an angry shopkeeper, yet fails to inform us who the shopkeeper was talking to. More likely than gender-based hatred, is the possibility this was simply an extreme case of an unfriendly shopkeeper since it is normally the women who are out shopping more than men and shopkeepers are therefore more in contact with the women. Having lived in Egypt all of my life and during my annual visits there, I have never found shopkeepers to be hostile to women; they are sometimes lazy and unmotivated to answer a question, irrespective of whether the customer is male or female, but they are rarely or never especially aggressive towards women.

Despite the above examples of generalizations and reliance on a Western overlay, there are cases where reporting is more credible and reporters make an effort to cite details and quotes from credible sources or studies. A *Washington Post* article, for example, cites evidence on women’s progress in the Arab world based on the Arab Human Development Report that was compiled under the UN. The article quotes Rima Khalaf-Hunaidi, head of the Arab section of the UNDP who explains that the report “aims to start a dialogue in the region. It won’t make many friends there, but that wasn’t the intention” (DeYoung, 2002, p. A10). This 2002 report praised Arab countries for their impressive gains in literacy, increased life expectancy and drop in infant mortality. Yet the report also clearly states that Arab countries score lower than any other region in terms of government accountability, civil liberties, political rights as well as media freedom. In terms of women’s rights, the report stated that over half of Arab women are illiterate and their political and economic participation remains low compared to other regions. The report also explained that contrary to findings in many other regions, no correlation was found between a country’s level of development and its empowerment of women. “While Kuwait and the United

Arab Emirates were the most developed overall, Iraq, near the bottom on the development index, scored highest in women's empowerment" (DeYoung, 2002, p. A10). This article provides a balanced view, as it clearly states the gains made as well as the problems that still exist for women to advance. Moreover, the article uses this Arab Human Development report to clearly differentiate between different Arab countries; it demonstrates how each country is at a different level of women's empowerment. Hence, readers can clearly understand the illogic of lumping all Muslim and Arab women into one, monotonous group.

In a similar story, Janet Bagnall (2005) from the *Gazette* reviews how Arab girls fare better in education than boys, even though girls are still underrepresented in schools. She blames the families in poor countries, both Muslim and non-Muslim, for burdening girls with house work or pulling girls out of schools to force them into marriage. "This is not a life girls want," Bagnall claims. "Whenever girls have a chance to go to school, they take it" (p. A23). One could argue that the majority of girls do indeed prefer schooling to housework, but the reporter fails to mention the cultural logic, not unique to the Muslim world, that would lead some to prefer marriage and children to school work. While they may not be many, some girls in fact allow the idea of marriage to dominate their aspirations and who prefer making a home and having children to going to school everyday. This omission, though is offset by how Bagnall cites sufficient evidence, based on a UNICEF report on the world's children, on the advantages of every extra year of schooling for women in poor countries in terms of more awareness of AIDS, drops in malnutrition as well as higher financial earnings. The reporter calls on wealthy countries to help children in poor countries finance their education. "They're [poor children] the ones doing the hard work, fighting stereotypes, battling the odds, studying on empty stomachs. Giving money is easy. Or should be," Bagnall concludes (p.A23).

Playing the Expert

Several articles categorized as relating to empowerment issues covered incidents of Western dictating of Muslim women's future and the rights they need to be awarded in order to be empowered. In many of these articles, the reporter tends to assume that he/she is the expert on the issues at hand, yet nothing in the article, in terms of credible context, sound sources or the reporter's own accurate knowledge of the region and religion, display a genuine reportorial familiarity with this non-Western culture. Nevertheless, these reporters assume the right to dictate what steps Arabs need to take to empower women. This usually entails modeling the West and viewing Western women as an exemplar of what Arab and Muslim women should become.

Among the most prominent columnists who have written about Muslim women and empowerment is the *New York Times*' Maureen Dowd. Although her intentions seem sincere, in almost every column on the subject, she relies on exaggerated generalizations, misinterpretations, and a commanding-tone to instruct the region on how Muslim women should be treated and what the U.S. needs to do about it. In one such column, Dowd (2001) starts with a lead that says "It is hard to fathom how a part of the world that produced Cleopatra - who perfumed the sails of her boat so men would know she was coming and ruled with elegant authority... - could two millenniums later produce societies where women are swaddled breeders under house arrest" (p. 13). Her column focuses on the women of Afghanistan, living under the Taliban, as well as women in Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. She claims that the White House long ignored the Taliban's mistreatment of women and that the sudden interest

in Afghani women's rights was nothing more than a political move to entice American women who supported Gore to shift to Bush.

A central critique relates to Dowd's reporting on the Gulf region; this is where she mostly deploys an over-confident tone and generalizes terribly about Muslim women. For instance, Dowd asserts that while Bush senior went to war to liberate Kuwait, "America has not made a fuss over the fact that Kuwaiti women still can't vote or initiate divorce proceedings." She adds, "We also turn a blind eye to Saudi Arabia's treating women like chattel. There are 5,000 Saudi princes, but where are the princesses?" (p. 13). In the lead, Dowd states her opinion about women in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, who she sees as oppressed, covered (i.e. the abaya), child breeders who are locked up in their homes. She then questions why the US did not meddle in these countries' local policies just like a parent would interfere in a son or daughter's actions. In her confident tone, Dowd advises First Lady Bush, since "Millions of Muslim women are still considered property. The first lady might think about extending her campaign beyond Afghanistan" (p. 13).

Moreover, throughout this column, Dowd vaguely refers to these millions of Saudi women who among other things are treated like property, must sit in the back of a car they cannot drive, who have to endure polygamy; to put up with a man's right to divorce without a cause and who cannot marry a non-Muslim although men can.¹⁶ Of course it is a distortion to claim that all Saudi women are treated like property just because they do not have the same rights as Western women. As previously argued, many Saudi women have reiterated on more than one occasion their general satisfaction with their conditions and even when they do seek rights, they do so according to their own needs and not in comparison to what non-Muslim, and even non-Saudi Muslim women have. But the Dowd column carries generalizations, inaccurate

and distorted claims that she is able to get away with given an over-confident, know-it-all manner. Of course, since this is an opinion piece, one would expect to see the author's strong opinion throughout, but even opinions must be based on sound and accurate information. The end result is that all the Saudi women mentioned in the article are portrayed as oppressed and enslaved women, nothing but property, and hence the U.S. has an obligation to save these helpless women from their shackles.

In another column, Dowd (2002) continues her criticism of Saudi society, saying:

It's a weird Rod-Serling-type feeling to drive through a city of four million and never see a woman (although I did see a shop called 'Ladies Photographs,' where women can pose without the veil). It is a weird feeling to be barred from the hotel gym and pool, and to see separate entrances for women at banks and separate women's malls within malls. It's odd to think that your hair is rude. (p. 13).

An interesting point to note here is Dowd's description of Saudi culture in this passage; the criticism sounds more like that of a tourist than an informed journalist, who should be well aware of the different cultures from one country to the other. This passage depicts Saudis as essentially "weird" by highlighting their differences from the West. The way she links Saudi women's lives to screenwriter Rod Serling (1924-1975), known best for his science fiction series *The Twilight Zone*, demonstrates how unreal and bizarre she views Saudi women. One could clearly argue that Dowd allows her own Western culture to preside and dominate over other cultures; she does not seem to acknowledge that people can act differently from her expectations, which again, is less than one would expect from a professional and prominent journalist like Dowd, working at the nation's paper of record.

Dowd showcases both her cultural bias and her cultural superficiality. The columnist tells readers that amid the extremism of Saudi culture, one can still notice “flashes of modernity.” Yet, the trivial signs of modernity that Dowd cites are very superficial; for instance, she offers the example of a teenager with “leather fedora on his red and white head scarf, [who] jumps out of a car to do a hip-hop dance in traffic... Teenage girls dress like Shakira under their robes. A satellite channel broadcasts ‘Sex in the City’” (p.13). One has to question how these examples can be taken as signs of modernity rather than signs of globalization and the transfer of Western pop culture into the Islamic world. After all, there is nothing progressive about Saudi girls dressing like Shakira. Overall, just as Dowd has been accused of trivializing Democratic politicians, especially female candidates,¹⁷ one could also argue that her claims about Saudi women’s misery are superficial and distorted.

Dowd does include several comments from Saudi men and women who defend their culture. At the very end of the column she quotes one Saudi female professor as saying that although she would like for Saudi women to get more rights, such as driving, she feels that the issue of women’s rights is the American media’s tool of turning “Saudis into the enemy.” Dowd concludes with a quote from Prince Saud’s daughter, Princess Haifa, as saying: “I feel you [Americans] are obsessed with the abaya and what we wear under it... The problem lies in you. Osama [bin Laden] used to be funded by the C.I.A.” (p. 13).

One could argue that Dowd is balancing her argument by allowing Saudi women to voice their contradicting opinion to her trivial conclusions about their lives. But one could also take this unanticipated ending as intentional, so as to leave her readers with a strong and clear message that Saudi women, depressed and helpless as she describes them to be, do not welcome U.S. interference. This latter argument makes sense considering that Dowd is a strong supporter

of the antiwar movement and since the U.S. has used women's oppression as an excuse to invade Afghanistan. One might simply conclude that this intelligent columnist wants to make sure the picture she paints of repressed Saudi women does not lead to similar invasions. Yet, at the same time, she genuinely, although ignorantly, believes that all Saudi women are extremely oppressed and helpless. Yes, she would like the U.S. to interfere, possibly by twisting its Saudi ally's arm but not to the extent of another war. Hence to solve this paradox, the columnist leads readers to sympathize with the women and feel anger at their alleged mistreatment, but hits them with a strong conclusion that leads them to scoff at this backward culture but be realistic about any ideas of attacking Saudi, since it is obvious that Saudi women would not welcome such an intrusion.

This same paradoxical tactic is used in a third column by Dowd (2002) titled "Driving while female." She interviews several of the 47 elite women who, in 1990, drove in a convoy and were later arrested by police. One of the women is quoted as saying "I never thought the day would come when my daughter would not be able to drive. It seems such a simple, necessary part of life." Another Saudi woman, whose own 22-year-old daughter says the protest was a mistake, comments "The aftermath was much worse than we thought it would be, even now there is some backlash" (p. 11). Dowd depicts the women as in constant danger because of their rebelliousness, claiming that this incident should have been the "moment when America should have tried to use its influence to help Saudi women..." (p. 11). She further argues that while these brave women were harassed and some even received death threats for their actions, "America was silent: Whether they drove was less important than how much it cost us to drive" (p. 11). Dowd continues to paint a severely dark portrait of Saudi women's lives when she tells readers how one of the driving protesters, an artist, in 2002 had a museum exhibition, attended

by Dowd and several of the other drivers, who stood “admiring the subversive photos of faceless women, including one of a woman’s ghostly outline on a couch” (p. 11). Even though she describes these women as subversive and claims that this exhibition is a sign that constraints on Saudi women might be loosening, Dowd’s use of strong words like “faceless” and “ghostly” are what readers are likely to remember about Saudi women.

Dowd assumes she is an expert on Saudi women’s tribulations despite her complete ignorance of the Saudi culture and her dismissal of the women’s own needs and aspirations. She trivializes Saudi women’s lives, downplaying or completely ignoring the achievements made by many of them, including these protestors she quotes throughout. She then chides the U.S. for not rescuing these extremely oppressed women; yet, once again, Dowd is clearly not justifying another war. Similar to her previous column, Dowd ends this one with a comment from a Saudi female professor, and one of the drivers, who believes the U.S. media is highlighting Saudi women’s oppression to demonize the Kingdom, parallel to what happened with Afghani women and the Taliban. “Americans are always saying they’re concerned with freedom and the democratic will of people,” the professor says. “But they don’t care about what was happening inside our country in 1990. And they still don’t care. We are seen only as the ladies in black” (p. 11). Once more, Dowd seeks to raise anger in her readers regarding the extreme oppression of Saudi women, and then hits them in the face with a pungent quote that elucidates that a new war is not the solution.

Dowd’s columns rely on distortions and generalizations to portray Saudi women’s lives as shallow and oppressive; ironically, she can get away with this, being the prominent, Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist that she is. In each column, Dowd assumes the expert role in dictating what actions should be taken by the U.S. to save these women. Finally, the columnist clearly

uses her words to discourage another war, as illustrated by the compelling quotes with which she ends her columns. Overall, one could argue that Dowd's columns lack depth and knowledge about the Saudi culture and tend to distort and confuse rather than inform. The problem here is that given Dowd's status as a prominent opinion writer, she can very easily confirm to her readers stereotypes of Muslim women as indeed oppressed, weak and helpless, based on her trivial conclusions about the Saudi culture and women. One is led to ask why Dowd should be allowed to get away with some of the outrageously wrong claims she makes about other cultures.

Another example of Western columnist's know-it-all attitude comes from *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristoff (2002), who believes that some women in the Middle East region, namely in Saudi Arabia, "are treated as doormats." Kristoff claims:

If American ground troops are allowed to storm across the desert from Saudi Arabia into Iraq, then American servicewomen will theoretically not be able to drive vehicles as long as they are in Saudi Arabia and will be advised to wear an abaya over their heads. As soon as they cross the border into enemy Iraq, they'll feel as if they are entering the free world: they can legally drive, uncover their heads and even call men idiots (p. 31A).

To sum it up, Kristoff pits Iraqi women against their Saudi counterparts; he informs readers that despite Saddam Hussein's dictatorship, Iraqi women enjoy empowerment; they are highly educated, employed in diverse fields; play sports and lead normal social lives where they can interact and socialize with men freely, unlike Saudi women. "More broadly, in a region where women are treated as doormats, Iraq offers an example of how an Arab country can adhere to Islam yet provide women with opportunities," Kristoff explains. It is "worth pondering this contrast between an enemy that empowers women and allies that repress them," he continues. Kristoff concludes that while the U.S. invades the Iraqi enemy, "its allies in the Muslim world

should feel deeply embarrassed that a rogue state offers women more equality than they do” (p. 31A).

One could argue that Kristoff is biased in his claims on Saudi Arabia; the columnist depicts the Saudi regime as extremely repressive and disrespectful to women, citing nothing but the abaya and driving as his evidence. As much as the Kingdom does lack in its empowerment of women, one cannot misinterpret the Kingdom’s overprotection of women as treating them as ‘doormats.’ His choice of wording here is therefore extremely harsh and the evidence cited is very weak. Yet, similar to Dowd, because of Kristoff’s prominence as an opinion writer, his superficial generalizations about Saudi women confirm to his readers the stereotype of the oppressed and worthless woman. It is unlikely that fans of his column would do their own fact-checking rather than take Kristoff’s words for granted; the end result is the persistence of negative stereotypes of Muslim women.

How can Kristoff make such a generalized claim based on such evidence? To make his argument more convincing, the reporter relies on a quote by an Iraqi female doctor, who says “I look at women in Saudi Arabia and feel sorry for them...They can’t learn. They can’t improve themselves.” Again, one has to question Kristoff’s choice of quote here, which comes from a woman unfamiliar with the Saudi culture and only serves to paint a very dark and repressive, yet distorted picture of Saudi women. In fact, statistics show that Saudi women outnumber and outperform men in all fields of education, with over 60 percent of university graduates female (Taylor, 2004). Hence, despite the limitations on their freedoms, these women are determined to learn and improve themselves.

Moreover, while Kristoff’s admiration of Iraqi women’s empowerment is well justified, his complete discounting of the achievements of other Muslim women in the region is the real

problem. Kristoff mentions no other country in the region where women have reached similar and in some cases higher, accomplishments to Iraqi women. I find this problematic, given that there are numerous Arab countries, including Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia, where women enjoy the same rights as Iraqi women. In fact, the only time Kristoff mentions another Arab country in the column is to tell readers that female circumcision is absent from Iraq, but still common in allied countries like Egypt. It is not surprising that Kristoff fails to mention that since 1997 female circumcision, which is mostly practiced by illiterate families in rural areas, has been ruled as illegal and un-Islamic in countries like Egypt and Sudan (Arab Human Development Report, 2005, p. 117). By choosing not to include such pertinent information, Kristoff leads readers to believe that the Egyptian government, a U.S. ally as he clearly points out, is doing nothing to eliminate this traditional practice and should therefore be shamed.

Kristoff also uses a Western overlay to illustrate just how empowered Iraqi women are compared to other countries. In this case his evidence is how much of their legs women show in Iraq. “A man can travel widely in the Arab world and know about women’s legs only by hearsay, but careful reporting in Iraq confirms that Arab women do have knees,” Kristoff explains. “In Baghdad, I saw women volleyball players who felt uninhibited enough to roll up their sweats” (p. 31A). First of all, Kristoff completely erases the conservative culture of these countries in question and uses Western cultural norms to judge how empowered these Muslim women are. Secondly, the fact that he judges how women are empowered or not by the amount of leg they show is problematic.

One could argue that there is nothing empowering in Kristoff’s mentioning of what a man can know or see of a woman’s legs. In fact, I find this particular sentence quite degrading to

women since Kristoff is objectifying women as sex objects, whose bodies become merely the target of the male gaze. In sum, aside from his praise of Iraqi women, Kristoff acts as the expert on Saudi women, yet provides nothing but vague generalizations and falsely portrays Arab women as nothing but doormats, completely ignoring the diversity of women from one country to another and discounting progress made by each individual country with regards to women's empowerment. The end result is a distorted image of the Muslim woman as repressed, ignored and even downtrodden.

Why do these distortions persist? And why can columnists get away with such exaggerated claims? More importantly, does opinion writing necessarily give columnists the green light to make any claims, no matter how absurd or distorted they are? Of course it should not. Most columnists begin their careers as journalists and therefore, should be fully aware that fact-checking and research are essential. Accuracy and research are also vital in opinion pieces, even though the reporter here is given more leeway to express his/her personal opinion on the matter. In fact, Conrad Fink, a University of Georgia's Grady college Professor, asserts that "Good column writing is 90 percent fact reporting and 10 percent opinion" (Barker, 2002, online article). Yet what seems to be happening in reality is that columnists have switched these numbers, so that their writing relies on 10 percent on facts and 90 percent on personal opinion. The dilemma here is that many readers rely on such 'expert' columnists to learn new information about people or places and when the columnists are uninformed or biased in their reporting, they transfer their distorted views to the pool of readers that follow their column from day to day.

A more dangerous trend in my opinion is that such generalizations about Muslim women in general and Saudi women in specific seep into Western news stories and are not contained to opinion pieces. Many news reporters confidently make unsupported claims about these women's

lives and aspirations, yet in most cases no backing from sound sources or from the women themselves is offered.

The *Washington Post's* David Ottaway (2004) falls into this trap when he generalizes using an isolated incident, where a Saudi female CEO of a prominent Saudi company was verbally attacked by conservative Wahhabis for attending an economic forum in Jeddah without covering her face. Ottaway tells his readers that the “veil is only one issue” that Saudi women are fighting against; a claim that is not supported by statements from Saudi women, including Lubna Olayan, the company CEO in question. Based on my analysis of various newspaper articles where Saudi women voice their own concerns, women talk about political rights, education, employment and even driving, but they never refer to the veil as one of their obstacles. This is not to say that all Saudi women love the black abaya and veil; but the point is, no evidence is presented that they are fighting against it, as Ottaway evidently claims.

A second generalization that Ottaway makes is his claim that Olayan is a “rare example” of a company CEO in the Kingdom. Whereas it is common knowledge that Saudi women fare worse than women all over the world in terms of social life, education, employment and even politics, numerous sources show that Saudi businesswomen are among the most powerful in the world. In fact, in March 2006, *Forbes Arabia* released the top 50 businesswomen in the Arab world, and three in the top ten were from Saudi Arabia, with Olayan herself topping the list of Arab businesswomen (Levine, 2006). Furthermore, the 2005 Arab Human Development Report estimates women-owned businesses in Saudi Arabia to range between 20,000 to 40,000 firms (p. 110). Hence, it is quite misleading to claim that Olayan is a “rare” case in the Kingdom, given such evidence. One has to therefore question why reporters insist on painting a weak and

oppressed picture of all Saudi women when numerous potential examples could have introduced the many Saudi women who do not fit this mold.

Why do news reporters increasingly rely on personal opinions and conclusions rather than simple facts? It seems that many reporters make large generalized claims about Muslim women's oppression and struggle for empowerment with hardly any evidence, in the same way columnists substitute facts for pure opinion. Few of the articles and columns analyzed portray the views of Muslim women, and they mostly fail to discuss specific problems that could differ from one Muslim country to the other. In sum, these reports and opinion pieces lump Muslim women into a single monolithically oppressed group that share the exact same problems and restrictions.

The point is not to criticize Western reporters for pointing out the challenges faced by Muslim women. On the contrary, my critique of these reporters is that their stories fail to accurately specify those problems by using reporting based on sound research and observation or interviews. Instead, most reporters simply reiterate the same vague and exaggerated stereotype of Muslim women as oppressed and victimized. This indication might become more obvious by weighing Western newspaper articles on Saudi women against an opinion piece by Saudi journalist Raid Qusti (2002), posted in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*¹⁸ where this liberal journalist talks about precise problems that Saudi women face and even suggests concrete solutions. Qusti asserts that the Saudi society certainly has a "female problem." "Ironically, the problem has nothing to do with females themselves but with traditions that have prevailed in the land for centuries," the Saudi reporter asserts. "And these are, it should be noted, traditions that have nothing at all to do with our great Islamic religion" (p. 11A). He suggests that these traditions stem from the mentality of some Saudi men who view women as inferior creatures. Qusti cites examples such as the school fire that claimed the lives of 15 Saudi girls, who were

locked inside the blazing school while the gatekeeper, most likely an illiterate old man, held on to the school building keys, so as to shield the women from men's eyes. Qusti cites other definite examples of Saudi women's ill-treatment, including the watered-down versions of male education curriculums and lack of access to employment in fields other than teaching and medicine. This leads Qusti to ask:

Why do Saudis spend billions of riyals every year providing free education for women from elementary school through university and then not allow them to fully utilize that education? Why do we provide women education in chemistry, geology, physics, business administration, mathematics, biology, history and geography when many of these fields are closed to them? (p. 11A).

Qusti compares the status of Saudi women to women in other Gulf countries, who have more political and social rights and even hold posts as ministers and ambassadors. "Are these women so much more qualified than Saudi women?" (p. 11A). The reporter argues that the solution to the Saudi "female problem" is that "Saudi males must open their minds and broaden their horizons," and the government must realize that it needs this female wealth for the Kingdom to develop and prosper. "Change will never come to our society unless all of us—the Saudi people—want it and are willing to implement it," Qusti concludes.

Compared to Western reporters that often rely on ambiguous generalizations and superficial conclusions like pointing to the women's veil as a main problem, Qusti discusses the concrete tribulations under which women suffer. And whereas Dowd and Kristoff suggest that America should intervene to fix this problem or to "shame" its Muslim allies, this Saudi journalist treats the issue as an internal dilemma that cannot be fixed unless Saudi men widen their horizons and open their minds and begin to view women as equals rather than as inferiors.

The column thus provides a stronger and more accurate line of reasoning because it points to precise issues that Saudi females deal with, which could be very different from the problems of women in neighboring countries. This column is also effective because of the reporter's own knowledge of Saudi culture, which enables him to suggest an adequate cure for the problem. With regard to the column's portrayal of women, one could argue that even though Qusti cites examples of mistreatment of women, he still does not portray all Saudi women as weak and helpless creatures.

The reporter clearly explains that the problem is not in the women, who are capable of succeeding in various fields if given the chance. One could even argue that the reporter portrays close-minded Saudi males as the weaker sex, because of their insecurities and narrow-minded thinking.

Given that Muslim women's empowerment has been identified as one of the key goals of U.S. foreign policy, it comes as no surprise that Western reporters frequently report on the topic. The analysis highlights how an expert tone is unjustifiably common in many Western articles that confidently claim that Muslim women are oppressed in one way or the other and dictate how Muslim women's empowerment should take shape. Reporters often attempt to mold Muslim women's empowerment on Western women's experiences, which is not necessarily the best route given the difference in cultures and religions and more importantly, a lack of evidence that those outcomes are sought by Muslim women want. As this analysis has illustrated, Muslim women are rarely consulted on the matter, and Western reporters tend to play the role of the assertive specialist who clearly knows what is best for these women. Among the common problems that some reporters claim hold Muslim women back are the hijab and religious conservatism, yet little or no evidence is offered that Muslim women share this view.

The evidence of the reporting thus shows that many Western reporters fail to identify the real problems that Muslim women face and hence, reporters insert their own assumptions about Muslim women. In a 2005 Gallup Organization survey, where over 8,000 Muslim women from eight countries were interviewed, the majority of Muslim women surveyed stressed their necessary right to vote, to work outside the home and to take up high government posts. The overwhelming majority stressed on moral and spiritual values as the top feature of their societies. Among the issues the women identified as most negative in their societies were the lack of unity among Muslim countries, religious extremism and political and economic corruption. Furthermore, the survey, “What Women Want: Listening to the Voices of Muslim Women,”¹⁹ showed that the majority of Muslim women associated sex equality with the West and these respondents “did not think adopting Western values would help the Muslim world’s political and economic progress”. When asked what they admire least about Western societies, the majority of women referred to the “Hollywood image” they believe degraded women and “the general perception of moral decay, promiscuity and pornography” (Andrews, 2006). This survey provides compelling evidence of the very different views on empowerment held by Muslim women, compared to the Western news reports analyzed. It is clear that reporters need to really ask what Muslim women want, in order to present an accurate idea of their envisioned empowerment, rather than simply presuming to speak on women’s behalf.

Empowerment Exceptions

More often than not, reporters focus on one or two extreme cases of mistreatment of Muslim women to generalize about all Muslim women, while very few reports do the opposite. Among the occasions where reporters actually took interest in an assertive Muslim woman are

the newspaper articles on the Iranian activist and lawyer, Shirin Ebadi, who won the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize. Multiple local and international newspaper articles introduced readers to this exceptional woman, who has for years fought for human rights and justice towards women and children in her country. The *Star-Ledger* hailed Ebadi as the “first Muslim woman and Iranian to win” the Nobel Peace Prize.” Reporter Borzou Daragahi (2003) writes that “Hardly a firebrand, Ebadi, a former judge-turned-human-rights attorney, walks a sometimes perilous tightrope between vocal opposition to the government and active participation in its legal system” (p. 1). Dina Rabadi (2003), a *Sacramento Bee* columnist, compared Ebadi to Western women, praising Ebadi for her bravery in facing obstacles such as being banned from work, taken to prison and humiliation. “Before we, as American women, shake our heads at the condition of women in the Middle East, we should look at the condition of women here,” Rabadi argues. “We still have a ways to go and I admire the courage of many Middle Eastern women who are trying to make things better, not only for themselves but for women throughout their country and even throughout the world...” (p. B5).

Nevertheless, some other news reports that chose to focus on what they saw as weaknesses in Ebadi’s character rather than praising her efforts and accomplishments. The *New York Time’s* Craig Smith (2003) mentions in his lead how Ebadi won the award, before adding: “But Ms. Ebadi....avoided sharp criticism of the Islamic government there [in Iran] and delivered her most pointed rebuke instead to the United States for what she called human rights abuses carried out in the name of fighting terrorism” (p. 20). Smith goes on to say how in her acceptance speech, Ebadi “offered only oblique criticism of Iran’s conservative Islamic government....” The reporter tells readers that Ebadi has “avoided” calling for a secular Iran, although “she goes without a veil while in Western countries—a punishable offense in Iran...”

(p. 20). One could argue that Smith's article downplays Ebadi's achievements in promoting human rights and women's rights by focusing on what the reporter sees as weak and cowardly behavior towards her country's leaders. Hence, a Muslim woman, in this case a prominent political activist who is obviously courageous and assertive, is again portrayed as weak and helpless in the face of Muslim male leaders. Furthermore, Smith assumes that because Ebadi does not wear a veil, this automatically means she wants a secular Iranian government, yet is too cowardly to demand one. Yet, the reporter contradicts himself, because in the very same paragraph, he tells readers that Ebadi says she differs with Iran's senior clerics on interpreting Islamic law in such matters as allowing women to run for presidency or fighting against capital punishment. Hence, this clearly explains that Ebadi supports Islamic laws but not the strict, patriarchal interpretation of these laws that Iranian clerics adopt.

Although there are several articles sharing Smith's focus, and thereby promoting the stereotype of the weak and helpless Muslim woman, nevertheless, the amount of sympathetic reporting on Ebadi is significant. Readers are mostly allowed to judge Ebadi for themselves, given the diverse local and international news article provided. In fact, readers were also able to hear from Ebadi herself a year after she won the award, as she wrote a column in the *New York Times* telling readers about herself, her country and her religion. "For many years now, I have wanted to write my memoir—a book that would help correct Western stereotypes of Islam, especially the image of Muslim women as docile, forlorn creatures," writes Ebadi (2004). "I have wanted to tell the story of how women in Islamic countries, even one run by a theocratic regime as in Iran, can be active politically and professionally" (p. 27). In this column, titled "Bound but gagged," Ebadi criticizes the U.S. for its regulations that prevent people like Ebadi, "those who advocate peace and dialogue" from writing such a memoir. The human rights activist

asks if such books are denied in the U.S., then what “is the difference between the censorship in Iran and this censorship in the United States?” Overall, this column is an example of the few sympathetic exceptions in Western newspapers where readers can hear directly from a Muslim woman; they get to see how a Muslim woman thinks and what she stands for, a fact enabling readers to make up their minds whether all Muslim women should be grouped under the stereotype of the weak and oppressed.

Another positive exception is a *Toronto Star* article on Sima Samar, an Afghani female doctor who defied Taliban to open girl schools as well as mobile clinics for women and children. Samar is “everything the Taliban has tried to repress,” is how Kathleen Kenna (2001) describes her. “Samar delivers babies and medical supplies, trains and supervises other working women and men, and wears a saucy T-shirt that says: ‘Feminism is the radical notion that women are people’” (p. A07). Not only does Kenna introduce readers to an assertive Muslim woman, but she gives Samar ample space throughout the article to voice her opinion and display her strong, independent persona. “I always dreamed of a hospital,” Samar is quoted as saying. “My dream was that when I was rich I would build a hospital and then an orphanage.” The Afghani doctor describes how she managed to get secret funding for her dream hospital during Taliban’s repressive rule. She formed a non-profit organization, *Shuhada*, which runs two clinics, two schools, night classes as well as a co-ed college in Pakistan, where Samar fled after a 1998 bombing in Afghanistan brought down two of her hospitals and after received death threats.

In Afghanistan, Samar also operated one hospital and six clinics as well as 50 schools. Her courageousness is exemplified in her response to the several warning letters ordering her to close the schools. “Let’s ignore it. Let’s see what they will do. They will not arrest 1,000 girls,” says the doctor. “It’s not Islam,” Samar continues. “I received three letters saying, ‘We will try

you under Shari'a...' I said, 'Hang me and announce my crimes: She is giving pens and pencils and papers to the girls.' Samar insists that the Taliban's actions were political rather than Islamic. "It's completely misusing Islam. Islam doesn't teach violence," she argues (Kenna, 2001, p. A07). Throughout the article, Samar reveals different sides to her personality and shares with readers her thoughts about her country. Furthermore, readers are allowed to see a different face of the Muslim woman, not common in Western reporting, the face of the assertive, educated and bold Muslim woman, present in various Muslim countries, but mostly absent from the Western media.

Muslim-Arab Women's Outstanding Achievements

Over the last three decades, Arab and Muslim women have advanced significantly in intellectual and media pursuits, thanks to the expansion of universities across the Arab world and the increase in the number of Arab women in higher education. The 2005 Arab Human Development Report states that Arab women have mainly advanced in the literary field, with the beginning of the twentieth century witnessing the birth of women's journalism in Egypt and Lebanon. By the end of the twentieth century, the Eastern Arab world, the *Mashreq*, included 475 female writers, with 167 writers in Egypt and 81 writers in each of Syria and the Palestinian authority (p. 101). The number of female creative artists is also expanding across the Arab world with diverse styles and modes of expression. The articles analyzed in this section reflect the outstanding achievements by Arab and Muslim female writers and artists in various fields that include theater, poetry and photography.

With regards to athletics, the 2005 Arab Human Development Report states that women's involvement in sports has not been very significant due to poor sports facilities in schools and

universities as well as the opposition by some hard-line fundamentalists to women's sports in some countries. Nevertheless, despite such delays, a number of Arab women have reached significant goals, both on a national and international level, some even winning gold, silver and bronze Olympic medals for their countries (p. 109). Athletic women in the Arab/Muslim world are therefore slowly emerging in the sports arena and are gradually breaking the negative stereotypes of women in sports, as some of the articles below will demonstrate.

Overall, coverage in this section displays the exceptional achievements of Muslim and Arab women worldwide in the arts and sports fields. Over 20 local and international articles were identified that fall under this theme. The interesting trend in the majority of these local and international articles is that they introduce readers to a completely different side of the Arab and Muslim woman, a side that is more often than not veiled or buried under the dominating stereotype of the helpless and docile Other. As the analysis will illustrate, despite the achievements noted in the articles, some reporters maintain a focus on the negative stereotypes of Arab and Muslim women, while others resort to obscured generalizations about all Muslim and Arab women. Nevertheless, this section presents one of the exceptionally sympathetic modes of reporting by Western journalists on Arab and Muslim women, where readers get a closer look at the diverse and creative minds behind the veil.

Athletic Arab & Muslim Women

A limited number of local and international articles discussed issues related to Arab and Muslim women in sports; this limited coverage is not really surprising given that the number of Arab women in sports is still insignificant. Among the articles that introduce readers to these successful women is a *New York Times* sports column by William Rhoden (2001), who presents

runner Jaleh Sedehi, a half Iranian, half French/Swedish marathon runner residing in New York City. The article is sympathetic to Muslim women in that it allows this woman to talk to the readers and express her thoughts, ambitions and love for running. Sedehi, who has a Masters in Social Work from Columbia University, talks throughout the column about her multiethnic roots, and how the events of 9/11 had great impact on her Islamic faith and her Iranian roots; “Sedehi’s sense of her Middle Eastern ancestry assumed a new and deeper meaning” (p. 13). Sedehi speaks about her love for running and how her Iranian father, a professor at Seton Hall College, encourages her and runs with her sometimes. She also talks about a journey with her French/Swedish mother to Iran, expressing the contrast she witnessed between her liberal, carefree life in the U.S. and the constraints women face in Iran. “They make an announcement: ‘you must now put on your cover,’” Sedehi explains of her plane trip to Iran. “So you see all these Iranian women sitting on the airplane with their makeup, their hair, and it’s like, we become one on this airplane, immediately. It’s this complete transformation” (p. 13). The Iranian runner also explains to the columnist that it was difficult to exercise her favorite sport of running while in Iran, unless she did so on a treadmill in a women’s-only gym or walked in women’s-only parks. “Since her trip to Iran, Jaleh has gone back and forth with much anguish between pride in Iran, respect for Islamic law and frustration that so many young girls are being deprived of the activity that has given her so much joy,” Rhoden explains.

The fact that women in Iran are under such restrictions is no doubt frustrating. But in explaining to his readers why Iranian women are not allowed to run, Rhoden does not specify that these harsh conditions are unique to very few conservative countries such as Iran. Instead, he vaguely claims that “under Islamic law, women are not allowed to run, engage in strenuous exercise, or do anything with their bodies to attract the attention of men” (p. 13). This could

create distortion as many readers might easily assume that Islam prohibits girls from playing sports, regardless of the country. Yet, contrary to Rhoden's claims, the Quran does not exclude women when it states that everyone should engage in sports and parents should also encourage their children to engage in sports. Apart from this one generalization, the bulk of Rhoden's sports column is sympathetic towards Sedehi and allows readers to get a close look at this Muslim woman's daily life and how it is not so different from the lives of many girls her age, including her love of running.

A common shortcoming evident even in these positive portrayals is the tendency for the reporter to return to a broader theme of oppression of Muslim women, whether by Islam or by Muslim men. This leads one to question why reporters feel the need to go back to the negative, dark and oppressive image of the Muslim/Arab woman even in stories where she is clearly the opposite of that. An article from the *Observer* by Duncan Mackay (2002) is a case in point. Mackay introduces in his lead Selima Sfar, a "wisp of a young woman who looks as if one gust of wind would blow her away," who was representing her country, Tunisia, in the Australian Open for tennis (p. 16). The reporter tells readers that Sfar will not just be playing for glory, "but for the emancipation of her sisters - all 140 million of them." Immediately this lead points to Sfar's fragility as presented through her tiny build; tellingly, reporters often describe women in such terms but only rarely refer to men who are short or very thin as weak or fragile. Furthermore, rather than following this lead with more news about this exceptional event, Mackay instead chooses to tell his readers:

Opinion will be divided on whether, by becoming the first Arab woman to make it on the international tennis circuit, the player from Carthage in northern Tunisia is a heroine or a harlot. In the strict Muslim world of the chador, a woman is supposed to know her place.

It is not striding out in front of men and it is certainly not doing so with exposed arms, legs and face (p. 16).

Mackay's choice of wording here and even the idea of following up with such a paragraph deserve questioning. It is worth noting that Tunisia is a very liberal country, "where women enjoy a greater respect for their rights and a relatively higher status than in other Arab countries," according to the 2005 Arab Human Development Report (p. 109). Furthermore, women from the Arab world, including countries like Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria and Syria have been participating in the Olympic Games since 1984. So, why does Mackay refer to all Arab women as if they are one massive oppressed group, when in truth, the status of women differs from one country to the next.

Another problem here is Mackay's highlighted attention to the hijab or the chador in this case, although it is not common in Tunisia. In fact, Mackay refers to the hijab twice in this article, as he concludes this story by saying "Support for Sfar will transcend nationalism and women of every country, race and creed will be willing her to succeed and continue to help in lifting the veil" (p. 16). This doubled reference to the veil in situations where it is not even an issue demonstrates how for many Western reporters that is all they see in a Muslim woman; whether veiled or not, these women are seen as invisible and submissive, even when they are clearly not. In the previous paragraph, Mackay describes the Muslim world as "strict," failing to elucidate that Muslim countries are diverse in their practice of Islam and range from the extremely liberal to the every conservative. The overall impact of this follow-up paragraph is to give readers an extremely negative impression of Arab people's regard for female athletes, with his claim that some might even view this exceptional woman as a "harlot" for revealing parts of

her body. While some extremists might hold such a view, it is quite misleading to claim that this could be the opinion of half of the Arab world.

Mackay describes Sfar, aged 24, as following in the footsteps of the Algerian Hassiba Boulmerka, who “defied the ayatollahs to win the gold medal in the 1500 meters at the 1992 Olympics.” He then tells readers that as the “first daughter of Islam to shine in international sport, Boulmerka was spat upon and had obscene graffiti about her daubed on walls around Algeria” during the Islamic Salvation Front’s rise to power (p. 16). This is another instance where Islam is portrayed as monolithically oppressive toward women athletes. The problem is that the paragraph is insufficiently contextualized: in fact, Boulmerka’s mistreatment was common in Algeria at that time and was not exclusive to women, as fundamentalists targeted and killed politicians, secular intellectuals, government officials as well as foreigners (Tiscali reference online). Because this background is missing, readers are left with the impression that any female athlete risks her life in the Muslim world.

Few American readers would likely notice that Mackay uses the word “ayatollahs” to claim that Boulmerka defied Islamic leaders when she won the Olympics; though Ayatollahs is a term used to describe high-ranking Shiite clerics and Algeria is a Sunni country with very few if any Shiites. But the error is quite significant, since it illustrates how ayatollahs, common in Iran, are evoked as general symbol of the presumably backward and oppressive leaders of all Muslims whether Shiite or Sunni. Overall, the negative insinuations throughout this article seem to shadow the real news; readers are led to forget about Sfar’s extraordinary achievement and what this means for the millions of Arab women worldwide and instead wonder about the extreme oppressiveness and barbaric treatment that Muslim women endure.

Fortunately some of the damage is undone by reporters who actually ignore and sometimes attempt to correct these negative stereotypes of Muslim women. A *Daily Telegraph* story on women athletes in Athens, 2004, explains how these Olympic Games represented a significant achievement for many women worldwide, as Athens represented the largest number of female athletes in the Olympics history. Liz Deegan (2004) cites the example of Dana al-Nassrallah, the 16-year-old first Kuwaiti female to represent her country. She also refers to the Pakistani swimmer Rubab Raza and explains to readers that Raza is able to compete “because of the development of the bodysuit which allows her to pursue her sporting passion without defying the strict dress codes of her Muslim faith.” Deegan further explains that this body suit is “just one of the technological advances helping them [the women] fulfill their dreams of being faster, higher and stronger” (p. 5). Although Deegan mentions Raza’s faith, she does not do so in a negative light; thus Raza is portrayed both as the conservative Muslim who respects her religion and as the determined swimmer who follows her ambitions.

Jessica Johnson (2004) from the *Columbus Dispatch* also wrote about this event in a column entitled, “Muslim women break barriers at games”. Although the column portrays the women who represent six Muslim countries as ambitious, determined and strong, it also demonstrates a Western overlay. Johnson tells readers that the participation of Muslim women athletes in this “Olympiad of the women” is “reminiscent of the victory Western women scored over the chauvinistic ideology of the members of the International Olympic Committee in 1912.” Johnson further adds that “As such events were once enormous hurdles for women who wanted to compete at the highest level, it is befitting that track-and-field competition became a liberation symbol for the Muslim women representing their countries for the first time” (p. 13A). The whole paragraph finally perpetuates the view that these six Muslim women are following in the

same exact path as their Western predecessors did some 90 years ago. This message is reiterated when Johnson concludes the column by noting that these women may not win any medals in the Games and may not receive endorsements but the real goal is for them to keep the competition doors open for themselves and for future Muslim and Arab women athletes. She further adds:

...these phenomenal trailblazers exemplify the creed written by modern IOC founder Baron Pierre de Coubertin: ‘The important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win but to take part, just as the important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle. The essential thing is not to have conquered but to have fought well.’ These Muslim women have just begun the struggle (p. 13A).

Again, this description of Muslim athletes in struggle ends up equating current competition with Western feminists’ struggles in the early 1890’s, carrying along the inference that the Arab world trails a century behind..

Even so, Johnson deserves credit for displaying these women’s leadership and determination, especially since some of the women are coming from impoverished nations and two of the athletes are emerging from the war-torn lands of Afghanistan and Iraq. The columnist tells readers that these Muslim women are not competing to win as much as for the “thrill of competition at the world’s largest sporting spectacle” (p. 13A). Johnson claims that the young women are “the Jennie Finches and Allyson Felixes for Muslim and Arab girls, but unlike their American counterparts, who did medal in the Games, there will be no lucrative endorsements awaiting them back home.” After citing the endorsement amounts awarded to the two American champions, Johnson says that the “closest any female Muslim athletes got to a major endorsement was the Nike top [Bahrain’s Rakia] al-Gassra wore to cover her arms” (p. 13A). Again, one could argue that this latter sentence hints to the great disparity between Western

athletes and their Muslim counterparts, not only by pointing to the latter's lack of endorsements but also to their conservative dress codes.

A final article on Muslim women athletes comes from the *Guardian*. Duncan Mackay (2005) introduces Nawal El Moutawakel, a Moroccan gold medalist in the 1984 Olympics and head of the Olympics team of inspectors that was to visit London for its bid to host the 2012 Olympics. "El Moutawakel could not have achieved what she has in her remarkable life if she did not have a core of steel running through her," explains Mackay. "A woman who broke down barriers during her running career, she is now fulfilling a new vocation as the highest-ranking woman in the traditionally male-dominated world of sports administration" (p. 25). Mackay also praises El Moutawakel's achievements, being the first Arab Muslim woman to take such a significant post as well as the first Arab Muslim woman to win an Olympic gold medal. Mackay portrays El Moutawakel as exceptional not just amid her Arab Muslim fellow women, but among women of all backgrounds and faiths, given her ability to penetrate an all-male administrative domain. In fact, the reporter goes as far as labeling El Moutawakel a "heroine" as his story goes with the title, "Arab heroine holds key for London: Moroccan mother heads inspection panel to assess the capital's bid." This headline immediately attracts reader's attention as it defies any claim that Arab women are backward and oppressed, portraying her as multi-talented, almost a superwoman, given that she is a mother and head of a prestigious inspection team.

Furthermore, Mackay demonstrates to readers that unlike the hostility other Arab and Muslim women athletes sometimes endure by extremists back home, "most notably Algeria," this sports star found tremendous support and appraisal in her country. When El Moutawakel won her final race in 1984, which was televised in Morocco at 2 am, "people across Morocco poured into the streets to celebrate." This determined athlete also inspired generations of

Moroccan and Arab and Muslim women to follow in her footsteps. “In Morocco women have been participating since the early sixties,” El Moutawakel is quoted as saying. “In 1984 I was the only woman in a Moroccan team of 100 but as a hurdler I am used to jumping barriers. Now those barriers are coming down in other Islamic countries because I believe I showed Muslim women a wider horizon” (p. 25). Mackay is consistent in his appraisal of El Moutawakel throughout and in introducing to his readers a new side of the Arab Muslim woman, a side that shows ambition, determination and courage.

Mackay also informs readers that despite her busy schedule as a wife and mother of two teenagers and the chief executive of a banking foundation, El Moutawakel has also established a program to empower Moroccan women in sports. Her aim is to educate women about health and nutrition by teaching them sports such as handball, basketball and volleyball. The reporter says this athlete funds her project by organizing annual women-only marathons in Casablanca, which in 2004, “attracted 11,000 entries, including many dressed in ankle-length robes and veils” (p. 25). One could read this last sentence as a sign that Muslim women are not oppressed by their dress codes and can accomplish anything even with a veil and long robe. But one might also question the significance of referring to the long dress and veil when the same message could have been conveyed just by referring to the number of Moroccan Muslim women who participated in the race. In sum, the overall impression one gets from reading Mackay’s story is that the Arab and Muslim world includes examples of exceptionally talented and assertive women, which refutes claims that most Arab and Muslim women are repressed, helpless and weak.

Exceptional Arab & Muslim Novelists

A significant number of articles introduce to the Western world exceptionally talented Arab and Muslim women who have thrived in the literary field. This is another example of sympathetic reporting that introduces readers to the creative side of Arab and Muslim women and illustrates that not all of these women fit under the rigid stereotype of the weak, backward and oppressed. The articles analyzed here also exhibit the diversity of Arab and Muslim women, who range from the very liberal, to the religious, to the patriotic and everything in between. The majority of these articles are in the form of book reviews where the reporter examines the novelist's latest work and also discusses the writer's personality and writing traits. It is important, however, to note that the nature of writing here is different from conventional news stories and editorial pieces as the author of a review is mainly focused on the review of the artwork or book at hand and not necessarily about presenting a researched and well-sourced factual story.

Celebrating Arab women is the title of a *Tampa Tribune* article on Moroccan researcher and writer, Fatema Mernissi. Reporter Kathleen Hipson (2001) reviews Mernissi's (2001) *Scheherazade goes West: different cultures, different harems*. Hipson immediately clarifies in her lead that Mernissi, who grew up in a harem, attempts to correct Western misconceptions about the harem through her book that deals with male-female relationships in the Muslim and Arab world through its focus on the region's well-known harem denizen, Scheherazade. In the book, Mernissi explains how tales of "The One Thousand and One Nights" lost some of Scheherazade's character when they were translated into French by former French ambassador and scholar Antoine Galland in the 1700s. Mernissi also questions Western depictions of harem women in paintings by artists "who portrayed 'odalisques,' their fantasies of beautiful, usually

nude or seminude harem women” (p. 6). This Moroccan writer argues that such images of Arab women are unrealistic and are more a creation of a Western ideal, which is different from the Arab ideal.

Moreover, Hipson explains that Mernissi “disputes the Western stereotype of the Islamic world as a monolithic, misogynistic culture,” adding that treatment of women has historically varied from one region to the next. “As for the veil, Mernissi wonders if the concept of female dress really differs much between the East and the West,” Hipson clarifies. “Is it any more restrictive to veil than to have to be constantly dieting to fit into a size 6 skirt? She asks” (p. 6).

Hipson later turns to Mernissi’s character and informs readers that the author, a sociology professor, is also known as an Islamic feminist, “but she is too complex to be categorized,” argues Hipson. “Intelligent, warm and often funny, she is always very frank about the culture that has influenced her thought.” Hipson ends by telling readers that Mernissi does not want to appear to be anything other than reality, “an Arabic woman” (p. 6).

Overall, this article is important on several levels; it introduces readers to a creative and intelligent Arab and Muslim woman who defies all negative stereotypes. Then Mernissi’s book, reviewed in the article, also enlightens readers about the unrealistic and false images often conjured up in the West by the word “harem” as the author clearly illustrates that such salacious images do not exist in the real Arab harem. In sum, this article, as well as others in this section, succeeds in humanizing the Arab and Muslim woman and presenting her in a familiar light. All too often, Arab and Muslim women are portrayed as the Other, alien to the Western world on account of their different appearance and alleged subjugation. But in this case, readers can connect with Mernissi on an equal level; they can view her as an intelligent and informed author who is making confident claims about Arab and Muslim men and women.

Another Arab writer whose book *Walking Through Fire* (2002) was reviewed in several local and international newspapers is the Egyptian Nawal El Saadawi. What is interesting in this case is the discrepancy of the reviews, as some reporters focus on Saadawi's achievements, while others stress oppression in the Muslim world. One of the fairly sympathetic reviews of Saadawi's book comes from Jonathan Curiel (2002) of the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Curiel explains that the book, which is Saadawi's memoir, presents a frank account of the author's life. Curiel portrays Saadawi throughout this review as a bold, courageous women's activist and novelist who, when faced with oppression, always took refuge in writing the truth. After receiving death threats from Muslim extremists for her views on Islam, Saadawi left with her husband for the U.S. in 1993, where she taught at Duke University. She eventually returned to her home in Egypt but not before beginning to write her memoir "that became a refuge for her feelings about the Egyptian government (which had her arrested in 1981), Israel, the religious fundamentalists who put her on a death list, and all the people who encouraged or discouraged her speaking about the injustices she started noticing at an early age" (p. 2).

Furthermore, the reporter tells us that Saadawi, a novelist, doctor, academic and activist, spares no one in this book, and uses her "brutal candor" style to criticize even herself. One could argue that Curiel shows Saadawi's anger at her own weakness and vulnerability at times, which in a way, illustrates how this author is used to being in control and in having things her own way rather than being forced. For example Curiel argues that Saadawi criticizes herself for consenting to her parents' wish to become a doctor instead of focusing on her passion to be a professional writer. She also blames herself for marrying a rich man approved by her family, whom she loathed and later escaped by jumping from a window so that she could find a way to secure an

abortion. She also expresses guilt for failing to help a young bride who was frequently raped by her elderly husband and later committed suicide. Curiel argues that:

These revelations will surprise those who know El Saadawi as a daring, intrepid advocate for women's rights—the sort of person who won't take no for an answer—but “walking Through Fire” shows that, in a country like Egypt, where corruption, coups and military-backed demagogues have existed for generations, even El Saadawi is vulnerable to breakdowns (p. 2).

Curiel tells readers that Saadawi's book is filled with intense and personal stories of the author's life. “It's as if El Saadawi has taken the stage of a great theater hall, invited everyone into the front row, and—like Anna Deavere Smith¹⁹—given voice to people we would otherwise never know” (p. 2). Curiel's conclusion informs readers that Saadawi's book is a reminder that the “Middle East has strong and eloquent female leaders” (p. 2). He goes on to say that the Egyptian author was one of the first Arab women to speak publicly about sex and its relation to politics and the economy. He also asserts that it is impossible to describe Saadawi only as a writer, since she has accomplished a lot outside the literature domain, such as founding the Arab Women's Solidarity Association. The reporter quotes one of Saadawi's male students at Duke, who accompanied the writer to the airport on her way back to Egypt, as saying “you teach me dissidence and creativity...I want to fly with you” (p. 2).

Overall, Curiel does a fair job of revealing Saadawi's true character to readers; the reporter made it clear that this bold Arab and Muslim author does not succumb easily and although faced with multiple forms of oppression from the government and fundamentalists, she never lost faith in herself and in her ability to document the truth with her writing. Hence, once again, readers get to see admirable qualities of Arab and Muslim women that are often veiled

under some reporters' ignorance of these women or because of long-held views of the Arab and Muslim Other.

Another fairly objective review of Saadawi's same book is by Lorraine Adams (2002) of the *Washington Post*, who manages to bring out Saadawi's assertive and bold qualities throughout her review. Adams cites many of Saadawi's accomplishments, including her battle against female circumcision of which she was a victim. Yet on occasion, Adams reverses into stereotypes of Islam. One example is when the reporter refers to Saadawi as "the veiled Muslim girl [who] went to medical school in 1949" (p. T08). The mentioning of Saadawi's veil in this sentence is not newsworthy, yet Adams includes it. Also, when explaining how Saadawi filed for divorce from her second husband, who turned to addiction and attempted to throttle her one time, Adams mentions how Saadawi's father supported her decision, "making Islamic strictures against women filing for divorce moot" (p. T08). The latter part of the sentence vaguely claims that Islam makes it difficult for a woman to file for divorce when in truth the problem has to do with individual Muslim countries' interpretation and implementation of Islamic laws. Then, in her conclusion, Adams almost depicts Saadawi as muffled or forced into silence when she claims that "Young women who wear the veil as protection from pious ire consider El Saadawi's ideas dated," while her readership in the U.S. is almost nonexistent. "Only feminists in Britain, the land of her girlhood oppressors, still read her. This book so vital, deserves better" (p. T08). Also, Adams' use of the words "pious ire" to explain why young Muslim women wear the veil is quite vague and confusing. But overall, similar to Curiel, Adams offers readers a new dimension to the Arab and Muslim woman not commonly portrayed in the Western media.

On the other extreme, Anne Johnstone (2002) from *The Herald* seems more inclined to deny Saadawi's achievements in her review of *Walking Through Fire*, because of her generalized

claims and distorted assumptions about Arab and Muslim women in general. In her lead, Johnstone claims that “Unlike many Arab women, she [Saadawi] moves easily in a Western woman’s world” (p. 14). The reviewer here assumes she knows all Arab women well enough to make such a claim. Then later, in describing Saadawi’s upbringing in a family of nine children, Johnstone tells readers that “Though her father’s family were peasants, her mother’s was upper-middle class and, unusually, they wanted their daughters to have a good education” (p. 14). The reporter here claims that it is “unusual” in the Egyptian culture in the 1930’s for families to want their daughters to seek a sound education, yet she cites no evidence to support the claim or to demonstrate to readers that this was really the case.

Furthermore, although Johnstone talks about Saadawi’s bold triumphs across the years, she tends to veer back to the stereotype of the oppressed Arab and Muslim woman on more than one occasion. At one point, Johnstone quotes Saadawi as saying “Fundamentalists hate me, but the American media hate me too, because I’m very critical of George Bush and also of Israel for the way they are killing Palestinians.” To this, the reporter responds with “El Saadawi seems to have suffered the fate of many of those who shuttle between east and west. Both sides regard her with suspicion” (p. 14). Later, Johnstone argues that Saadawi is unpopular among Muslim feminists because of some of her views, especially her opinion that women do not wear the veil willingly “except to disguise themselves and carry weapons” (p. 14). Put together, these sentences portray Saadawi as the strayed writer, who wanders helplessly yet is turned down every where she goes, which is not entirely accurate, given Saadawi’s prominence within and outside of the Arab and Muslim world. Although the author has many dissidents, there are also many men and women who admire her work even if they do not necessarily share all her views.

Two patriotic Arab novelists reviewed by the *Weekend Australian's* Shakira Hussein (2005) are the Palestinian Suad Amiry and the Egyptian Ahdaf Soueif. Hussein argues in her lead that:

Anyone under the impression that Arab and/or Muslim women are submissive houris would do well to read Suad Amiry or Ahdaf Soueif. The success of these writers—Amiry's book has been a bestseller in Europe, Soueif has been short-listed for the Booker Prize—suggests that fresh, vigorous writing can be as attractive to readers as exotic tales of harem cruelty (p. B14).

Hussein explains how Amiry's (2005) book, *Sharon and my mother-in-law*²⁰, is a diary of her life under Israeli occupation of the West Bank. This conservation architect decided to move to Ramallah to teach at Birzeit University. Once there, she was caught in a 42-day curfew imposed by the Israeli military, which left Amiry stuck with her mother-in-law inside the house, with Sharon's army on the outside. Hussein explains how Amiry's book mixes outrage and frustration with humor and absurdity. At one point, she tells an imaginary Sharon "One day I may forgive you for putting us under curfew for 42 days. But I will never forgive you for obliging us to have my mother-in-law for what, then, seemed like 42 years" (p. B14). Amiry tries to make light of the absurdity of the Israeli occupation, like the one incident when her dog got to own "a coveted Jerusalem passport, an object of desire to so many human Palestinians, including Amiry" (p. B14).

Hussein says Amiry puts her architect background to good use in her compelling description of the destruction of old towns, Palestinian landscape and olive groves brought about by the occupation. "Palestinian women have tended to prioritize national liberation over gender struggle and Amiry is no exception," says the reporter, adding that there are moments however

when Amiry confronts both Palestinian and Israeli men for their sexism. “As in her description of an International Women’s Day demonstration—the ‘one day’ when Palestinian women demonstrate their rights as women rather than as Palestinians,” Hussein (2005) recaps. “And the ‘one day’ when Palestinian men are prepared to stand back and watch as Palestinian women are bullied by the Israeli authorities” (p. B14).

In sum, Hussein portrays Amiry as human, humorous yet also sensitive to the tragedy surrounding her. Readers not only see the human side of occupation, but they get a glimpse at this Palestinian architect’s day-to day life and realize that there is much more to Amiry than helplessness and repression.

Hussein then turns to Soueif’s (2004) *Mezzaterra: Fragments from the Common Ground*, a collection of essays organized over twenty years of the author’s life. “Soueif speaks of ‘people with an Arab or a Muslim background living in the West and doing daily double-takes when faced with their reflection in a Western mirror’” (p. B14). The reporter argues that Soueif’s style is more sophisticated and her book’s power comes from “its status as witness testimony rather than its use of language.” The Egyptian novelist, who studied and currently lives between Egypt and England, offers in her book “a mirror, in which, despite the destruction of imperialism, war and dispossession, the common ground can be a place of enrichment rather than civilizational clash” (p. B14). Once again, this review portrays Arab and Muslim women as creative, intelligent and assertive.

A different style of writing is presented in the works of Sudanese novelist Leila Aboulela, whose strong Islamic faith has significant impact on her writing. The novelist, born to an Egyptian mother and Sudanese father, experienced a reawakening of her Islamic faith once she moved to London, where she felt comfortable enough to wear the hijab (Sethi, 2005, online

article). *The Independent's* Carol Birch (2005) reviews Aboulela's *Minaret* (2005), in which the novelist portrays Muslim women in London as seeking to reinforce their religious identity rather than embrace Western culture. The story's heroine is Najwa, a Sudanese aristocratic girl forced into exile in England by a coup back home. On the outside, Najwa appears to rebel against her culture and religion, going to discos, wearing mini skirts and tight blouses. Yet on the inside, she is enticed by the aesthetics of Islam, as evident in her love of the sound of the dawn *azan*, or call to prayers. The story itself is a web of Najwa's current life as a nanny in London and recollections of her life in Sudan, her father the politician, and her first love to Anwar, a Sudanese communist and atheist, whom she meets once again in London. "Beautifully written, restrained and lyrical, *Minaret* is both thought-provoking and disturbing," is how Birch (p. 40) describes Aboulela's book. This review presents readers with yet another face of the Arab and Muslim woman; readers here encounter the religious side of the author, which is usually portrayed as oppressive and backward, yet Aboulela describes it very differently.

On the very other end of the spectrum is *The Almond: the sexual awakening of a Muslim woman*, written by a Muslim novelist who goes by the false name Nedjma (2005). Alan Riding (2005) from the *New York Times* both reviews the book and interviews its author in a column titled "A Muslim woman, a story of sex." Riding leads with:

An erotic novel written under a pseudonym might normally struggle to find a mainstream publisher and a wide readership. Not so, it seems, when it is penned by a Muslim woman living in a traditional Arab society. "*The Almond*," a semi-autobiographical exploration of sexual freedom, has sold 50,000 copies in France since Éditions Plon brought it out here last year. And it has now appeared in eight other languages, including English (p. 1).

Riding quotes Nedjma as saying that by releasing this sexually-explicit book, she wanted “both to celebrate the body as an expression of life and to strike a blow against the centuries-old repression of Muslim women” (p. 1). Nedjma further argues that it was the 9/11 attacks and America’s reaction to them that really triggered this shockingly explicit book. “I saw the two sides speaking only of murder and blood. No one cared about the human body,” says Nedjma, adding that she felt she had to talk about the body. “It is the last taboo, one where all the political and religious prohibitions are concentrated. It is the last battle for democracy. I didn't want to write politically, but I did look for something radical. It is a cry of protest” (p.1).

The Almond is written in the first person, and Nedjma claims that forty percent of its content is autobiographical and the remainder is based on the personal stories of friends, neighbors and relatives. The story tracks the life of Badra, a Moroccan village girl, who gradually discovers her femininity and when she falls in love she finds herself forced to marry a much older man. Badra later flees from her husband to meet and fall in love with the European-educated doctor, Driss, who teaches Badra “the mysteries of love and sex” (p. 1).

Given its explicit sexual descriptions, Nedjma’s book “has been compared to Marguerite Duras's coming-of-age novel, *The Lover*, and to Catherine Millet's more recent confessional essay, ‘The Sexual Life of Catherine M’” (p. 1). This probably explains why the “feisty 40-something North African author” chooses to remain anonymous. Nedjma tells Riding that she chose that false name as it means “star” in Arabic, which is an Islamic symbol.

"It's my way of saying, 'I am from this tribe, I am not from the outside, I am part of this world and no one can kick me out,' " said Nedjma, adding that she was a practicing Muslim (p.1).

Although neither Nedjma nor Riding ever specify what the “centuries-old repression” of Muslim women entails, the author does however blame this oppression on men who view

women's freedom as undermining their authority. "It is not the Prophet or God who is responsible for the condition of women today, but society," Nedjma asserts. "It is the Shari'a, the way laws are interpreted, the writings, the clerics who rule Islam in place of God." This leads her to conclude that "the Arab world is like a sick old man, consumed by gangrene, illiteracy, poverty, dictatorships, fundamentalism" (p. 1). The Muslim author also claims that most Arab and Muslim women view sex as a "burden" because of backward ideas and ignorance that impact their sexual relationship. "Love is only possible when women realize they are not there to be legally raped and men understand that a woman is not a slave or an inferior being," Nedjma concludes (p. 1).

This *New York Times* book review is significant on various levels: First, it portrays a Muslim and Arab woman as comfortably frank about her sexual life, which is a novelty both for Muslim women and men, who out of tradition and respect for religion, are usually very private about such issues. Unless it is for a medical reason, most Muslims do not openly discuss their private lives, at least not publicly. Furthermore, the novel as well as Riding's interview with Nedjma give readers multiple indications that this woman was most likely repressed in her early life; but the author is also very clear on blaming old-fashioned men rather than Islam for such repression, which rebuts the stereotype of Islam as oppressive towards women. In addition, *The Almond* interestingly reflects Nedjma's personal story through Badra's affair with Driss, and it is Driss, the man, whom Nedjma portrays to be "liberated sexually," yet oppressed socially by customs that prevent him from enjoying this love outside the traditional boundaries of society. Hence, the novel is unique in its depiction of a Muslim and Arab man as being repressed by his own backward thinking and therefore it illustrates that oppression could impact both men and women. This latter supposition is confirmed with Nedjma's concluding remarks to Riding's

review; when he asks her if she was more liberated than her lover in her own relationship, Nedjma hesitates before saying:

Yes; there you are, I've said it... The malaise of the Arab world is that people don't know how to love. They watch romantic soap operas on television out of frustration. They dream about love, they listen to songs, they are sentimental, but they are not tender. They appreciate beautiful love poems, but they don't have the courage of the heart (p. 1).

Two interesting articles worth mentioning deal with a different type of Arab/Muslim female writers; these are articles that talk about authors under suspicion of falsely claiming they were oppressed and publishing their horrifying stories in books. *The New York Times* published a column on Kola Boof, the alleged object of a fatwa ordering her death in her native Sudan because of her vigorous criticism of the Muslim government there. Julie Salamon (2002) argues that Boof could actually be truthful in that claim or could be an author aspiring to publicize her books “by fabricating a provocative persona, using the specter of fatwa as a marketing ploy” (p. 1). Salamon presents a fairly comprehensive investigation of Boof’s claims, interviewing Sudanese government officials, human rights officials, Muslim clergy and Boof herself. The column does portray Boof to be rather delusional because of her claim to have been Osama bin Laden’s mistress for a brief time. She also asserts to be under FBI protection, but Salamon disputes that claim based on an interview with an FBI spokeswoman, who had no knowledge of Boof. Overall, the columnist provides an objective investigation of all sides of this story, quoting some of Boof’s supporters as well as those who question her inconsistency.

A similar scenario is reported by David Leigh (2002) in *The Guardian*, where Mende Nazer, also Sudanese, published a book detailing her alleged kidnap from her Sudanese village by Arab slave traders. Nazer adds that she was taken to London, where she was forced to become

the slave of a Sudanese diplomat. Again, Leigh provides a comprehensive investigation, with quotes from the diplomat in question, who denies the author's story, insisting that "she was an au pair, free to leave if she wished" (p. 8). What both of these stories illustrate is that Arab and Muslim women might also be fraudulent and deceiving in their creativity.

Overall, this section of articles demonstrates that it is extremely misleading to lump all Arab and Muslim women into one monolithic group that is lifeless, oppressed and weak. The articles analyzed here show how the Arab and Muslim woman has many faces, multiple qualities and diverse characteristics; hence reporters cannot refer to Arab/Muslim women as one single Other. The female authors reviewed in these articles portray the radical, the patriotic, the humorous, the devious, the religious as well as the sexually explicit. Moreover, Western reporters here have demonstrated that they are aware of Arab and Muslim women's creativity, talent and intelligence. One therefore needs to question, why many reporters still refer to all Arab and Muslim women as oppressed, mistreated and deprived, when this is clearly not the case?

Muslim-Arab Female Playwrights, Filmmakers, Poets and Entertainers

Not only do some Western reporters portray the literary talents of Muslim and Arab females, but many reporters also portray the many talents of these women, including directing, photography, poetry and entertainment. Once again, this is one of the news areas that displays Western reporters' objectivity and awareness of the diversity of Arab and Muslim women and therefore helps disprove the stereotype of the oppressed and docile Other. *The Denver Post*, for example, reports on *Shatat: Arab Diaspora Women Artists*, an art exhibition at the Boulder Art Galleries, where four Muslim Arab female artists display a collection of their work that includes video works, photography and other multimedia displays. Kyle MacMillan (2003) tells readers:

Given the heightened focus on Arabs as terrorists and religious fanatics in the wake of Sept. 11 and the increasingly vitriolic rhetoric from all sides of the political spectrum, it might be tempting to sweepingly dismiss Muslims as backward and crude. But that, of course, is a simple-minded judgment, and it makes little sense if one takes time to learn about the rich intellectual and artistic history of the Islamic world...(p. FF-01).

As a case in point, MacMillan cites the example of the four female artists exhibiting their work at *Shatat*: Emily Jacir from Palestine, Zineb Sedira, an Algerian, Fatma Charfi, from Tunisia, and Susan Hefuna, a German-Egyptian. He argues that these women bring the political, economic and social tumult experienced in their homelands to their diverse forms of art, resulting in a subtle yet very powerful message. MacMillan gives the example of Jacir's memorial display for 418 Palestinian villages destroyed and occupied by Israel in 1948; the artist used an actual refugee tent, embroidered with the names of these depopulated villages, to convey her message.

Moreover, MacMillan asserts that *Four generations of women*, the display by the Algerian Sedira, who resides in London, is the strongest piece in the exhibition; Sedira lined a room with square ceramic tiles imprinted with computer-made designs that on close inspection reveal images of women and tiny texts. Her work expresses female, national and ethnic identity complexities that a woman might experience when living away from home and dealing with hostilities and discrimination. In sum, the reporter explains to readers that the potency of these artists' work "derives from the fact that these are not artists commenting from a safe distance. Instead, they are genuine and sometimes pained expressions of people who have lived the reality they address" (p. FF-01). Once again, this news story reveals the diverse talents and minds of Arab and Muslim women that lead readers to abandon long-held negative stereotypes of these women.

Another interesting article introduces readers to a diverse group of Arab and Muslim female dramatists, who moved to the U.S. from countries including Iran, Lebanon and Palestine, and in 2001, formed *Nibras*, Arabic for lantern. *The New York Time's* arts editor Liesl Schillinger (2004) says this group of Middle Eastern directors, playwrights and actors, founded by Najla Said, daughter of the late Edward Said among others, aims to tackle issues related to Arabs and Muslims. They "are united by a commitment to take their hyphenated experiences to the New York stage, and by their perception that, although many of them are not Arab, that is how they often are seen in the United States..." Schillinger explains (p. 7). She informs readers of the group's first documentary theater piece, *Sajjil*, or record, where the members interviewed Arab and non-Arab Americans on their reactions to the word 'Arab.' "The point we were trying to make was that Arab culture is linked to Islamic culture, but not all Arabs are Muslim, and not all Muslims are Arab," Said explains. "And not all people from the Middle East are Arab; that we're a varied culture" (p.7). The artists later acted onstage their *Sajjil* responses in an Anna Deavere Smith-like style.

Schillinger asserts that although this group, which also includes several male artists, are drawn together through their work with *Nibras*, each of the women she spoke with had her independent agenda; this signifies that Arab and Muslim women cannot be described as a collective Other, given their diverse personalities, talents and agendas. For example, the Palestinian Betty Shamieh, who is arguably the group's best known playwright, in recent years began to write "inherently political" plays that involve Arab or Arab-American characters. "Being Palestinian is a large part of who I am," says Shamieh. "I knew it was something I would eventually come to. I knew it would come to a clear choice for me; either stop writing, or start writing about what really matters to me" (p. 7). Iranian born Layla Dowlatshahi is described by

Schillinger as the group's most feminist in her politics. Her 2004 play, *The Joys of Lipstick*, surprised her audience, who assumed the play was a comedy about pretty Iranian girls, but turned out to be the story of an Iranian lesbian who goes to Los Angeles to get a sex change so she can return to Tehran as a man and live with her American girlfriend (p. 7). Overall, this art column delivers three main messages to non-Arab readers: the first is that not all Arabs are Muslims and vice versa, which is very often confused by Western reporters. Secondly, the column displays the diversity of Arab and Muslim dramatists, who unite on their traditional heritage, but differ in their agendas, talents and artistic styles. Lastly, the article clearly demonstrates that none of these women can be depicted as weak, helpless or oppressed. In fact, Schillinger confirms this point by saying that the women have always been encouraged and supported by their parents.

What is important about the coverage analyzed in this section is how it reveals the generous feed of articles on Arab and Muslim women with diverse talents that introduce readers to liberal and independent women from the region. These include even women from Gulf countries, often branded as the most oppressive and backward to women of all Arab and Muslim countries. *The Washington Post* cites the example of Nayla Khaja, Dubai's first female movie producer. Scott Wilson (2004) argues that, tired of hearing misconceptions about her homeland, 26-year-old Khaja, who was studying film-making in Canada funded by her government, decided to make a documentary titled *Unveiling Dubai*, "a promotional look at her home town as seen through the eyes of a visiting stranger" (p. A24). "Women are as likely as men to be driving the late-model jaguars that zip along the avenues here," says Wilson of Dubai. "And blue jeans are as common in the marble shopping malls as the black, cloak-like abayas worn throughout the Persian Gulf region" (p. A24).

In summarizing her documentary, Khaja says “we are not Saudi Arabia...That is really the lesson,” which ironically could be read as a stereotypical remark by the filmmaker who produced her own documentary to refute misconceptions and stereotypes about her own country. Yet, she also tells the reporter that she worries that her country is slowly losing its identity and culture, which is why she “chooses to wear the black abaya and headscarf as a nod to tradition...” (Wilson, 2004, p. A24). This last sentence delivers an important message about many women who wear the abaya; it essentially illustrates that many of them actually take pride in wearing it, as it represents their culture, contrary to many Western reports that claim the opposite.

Another talented female from the Gulf region, is the Saudi poet Nimah Ismail Nawwab.

The Washington Post says of Nawwab:

Her poetry is her fuel. It has carried her across boundaries assumed non-traversable: book signings and readings in mixed company at home in Saudi Arabia and abroad; the first publication in the United States of a collection of poems by a Saudi woman; uncontested exposure in the Saudi and American media (Boustany, 2005, p. A16).

It is important to note that Nawwab’s work was welcomed at home and she was allowed to appear in a public book signing, suggesting “some kind of a thaw in attitudes,” is how Nawwab, 35, describes it. This is a significant change in Saudi attitude, given that many of Nawwab’s poems visibly express “the suppressed desires and ambitions of Saudi women” (p. A16). The reporter gives the example of “The Longing,” Nawwab’s favorite poem, which says:

Freedom. How this one word Haunts,

Hooks, Entices us all!

Freedom, Will the time come

For my ideas to roam

Across this vast land's deserts,

Through the caverns of the Empty Quarter? (p. A16).

It seems that many Saudi women appreciate and support the young poet's success. Nawwab, who lives with her husband and two children in Jiddah, cites the example of a woman who came up to her one time in a Saudi restaurant, with only her eyes showing and said "Thank you. You have given us voice. Just keep at it and begin your next project" (p. A16). The poet later found out that her fan was a professor of English literature.

Nawwab's own upbringing however, suggests that the strict conservatism practiced in the Kingdom is not necessarily imposed in every Saudi home. Her father was a descendent of a line of scholars from the holy city of Mecca; he used to read to Nawwab, as a child, sonnets by Shakespeare and his home was always open to scholars and students from other countries. Overall, "the story of this writer's success is a confluence of talent, perseverance and inspiration from men and women in her life who nurtured her self-confidence and supported her endeavors," Boustany concludes (p. A16).

Arab and Muslim women are also active in the entertainment sphere. Lee Landor (2004) of *The Jerusalem Post* writes about one of these female talents. He argues:

She might be female, she might be Muslim, but that doesn't seem to have stopped

soprano Enas Massalha from becoming the first Israeli Arab Muslim woman to perform with the Israel Opera (p. 24).

Although Landor portrays Massalha to be talented, ambitious and a hard worker, he also makes several assumptions about Muslim women on more than one occasion in the article. One

example is the above lead, where he states that being a Muslim female does not stop Massalha from being an opera singer. One could argue here that the reporter assumes that there are no Muslim women who lead similar careers, when in truth Muslim women have been singing, acting and dancing since the early 1920s. Landor reiterates his assumption when he argues that growing in a Muslim village, “it would seem unlikely for a young woman to pursue a career in which she makes herself visible to thousands of people at a time.” But Massalha challenges his misconception by stating that her conservative Muslim community is a “very accepting village” and so is her family. “They are proud of me for succeeding...Religion is not even a factor,” Massalha says of her community’s support (p. 24). She tells Landor that it might have been difficult for her to sing if her community was extreme in its conservatism, which is not the case here.

Other than these exceptional generalizations, Landor portrays Massalha as ambitious and passionate about opera singing. “It was a challenge for me to learn different languages and many other new things,” she explains. “I explored, studied and fell in love with it, slowly but seriously” (p. 24). The 25-year-old told the reporter that she hoped to be able to perform worldwide. Again, this article portrays Arab and Muslim women’s determination to succeed in diverse fields.

Other examples of diverse and talented Arab and Muslim women include radio hosts and producers, such as the Iraqi talk show host Majda al-Jubouri and producer Ruwaida Kamal, who work at Radio Al Mahaba, which might be the only Arab radio station completely devoted to women’s issues, according to *The New York Times*. “We want to affirm women’s rights,” explains Kamal of her station that deals with issues like marriage, divorce, religion, jobs, physical abuse and dress codes. Jubouri adds that Iraqis have been slipping backwards due to

wars that started in the 1980s. “We just hope that in the future, society will respect the rights of women, and women won’t be alone in the Iraqi street” (Wong, 2005, p. 4). These Iraqi women exemplify women’s determination to emerge out of a war and develop their own forum to help all Iraqi women advance.

There are also an increasing number of young, attractive, Westernized Arab singers, whose music videos, transmitted via satellites to millions of Arab homes, are causing a divide between conservative Arabs and Muslims, who fear for the gradual loss of their culture and traditions, and the more liberals, who see these videos as a normal progression. Samar Farah (2003) of the *Christian Science Monitor* talks to women from both sides of the spectrum on their opinions of these Arab singers and their Westernized music videos:

Loubna Haddad was at her home in Damascus, watching TV with her grandmother.

Suddenly Elissa, a Lebanese pop star with inflated lips, shrunken outfits, and sultry looks popped on the small screen and outraged the old woman (p. 16).

On the one hand, Farah says there are those that view videos by Elissa and others, in which “they blow words of heartache over bare shoulders, writhe on beach sand, and stage trysts with mysterious men,” as a new way to promote Arab women as sexual objects. Whereas, others believe such videos are slowly eroding conservative attitudes towards sex and dress codes.

This article exhibits a wide variety of views on this new Westernized trend shared by various Arab women interviewed by Farah. For Syrian Nadia Muhamna, a member of an all-girl classical music ensemble, these videos do not portray open-minded and liberal women.

Muhamna, whom Farah claims would blend easily on any American campus with her trendy skirt and top, claims this new music trend is “only about the body, about appearance... [These videos] really affect the way men think about women. [They] focus men’s attention on the

body” (p. 16). On the other hand, there are women who share the opinion of Lebanese psychoanalyst and Professor Anisa Al Amin Merhe, who argues that women in these videos simply portray the “marriage between technology and tradition.” Merhe further asserts that tradition pressures a woman to “play the seductress” for her husband at home, and so “music videos only intensify that, offering plastic-surgery enhanced women as role models” (Farah, 2003, p. 16). A third interpretation of these videos suggests that they portray Arab women as strong, confident and independent, “willing to make unabashed declarations of desire” (p. 16). Music video director Nadine Labaki, is one of the Arab women who supports this view and claims to depict women in her videos who defy traditional stereotypes of “the docile and modest wife or girlfriend.” Labaki asserts that “women here [in the Arab world] are not very free with their body, they’re very self-conscious. I’m trying to change our point of view...to show women with character” (p. 16). It is important to note how Farah here relies on more than one view and more than one explanation on music portrayals of women, thus demonstrating her diversified sourcing and attempt to provide readers with a well-balanced story that covers all sides of the issue.

Overall, one could argue that the news stories analyzed in this section essentially illustrate that Arab and Muslim women vary in both opinion and character. The interviews Western reporters conducted with diverse Arab and Muslim women show that there are countless women who work to conserve their Islamic and Arabic cultures, while many others embrace Western liberalism and pop culture. An example of conservative women would be the 100 Bahraini women, who in 2004, called for a government resignations, after the Kingdom hosted an Arabic version of Reality TV hit ‘Big Brother,’ where 12 Arab men and women shared a villa on a resort in Bahrain. The protesting women “condemned female contestants for mixing with

men and not wearing the traditional hijab” (*The Australian*, p. 7). Examples of more the liberal trend include dramatist Dowlatshai, whose play represented an Iranian lesbian, as well as the countless Lebanese, Syrian and Egyptian singers referred to in Farah’s news feature. Between the two extremes there are numerous examples of women who both embrace their Islamic faith and traditional culture, yet also seek more freedoms and autonomy, such as the Saudi poet Nawwab. In the end, this analysis adds to evidence that disproves the stereotype of the helpless and oppressed Arab/Muslim woman, given the diversified pool of women alluded to throughout this section.

One could explain the positive coverage in this section on the nature and style of writing, as the majority of the stories fall under reviews, which do not necessarily confirm to the same journalistic guidelines used in news writing. It is usually a reviewer giving an implicit opinion about a book or an art work, and so the Arab/Muslim women in these reviews are portrayed as people. In other words, they are not treated as symbols of society but as symbols of their own work. They are not used to refute or advance a stereotype but are rather talked about as people. Furthermore, when the reviewer does lapse back into describing these women as symbols of society, we go back to the dominating stereotype of the oppressed and weak Muslim/Arab woman. This type of writing, therefore, presents some limitations, as one cannot make journalistic recommendations here, given that this is a different type of writing compared to news stories and columns. One might, however, suggest that if journalists and opinion writers learn to judge women from the Muslim/Arab world based on their qualities, personalities and aspirations instead of as symbols of a faith, culture or society, this could lead to fairly sympathetic reporting and to less distortion and generalizations.

Conclusion

The articles analyzed in this chapter reveal a multitude of characteristics, talents and mentalities of Arab and Muslim women. Whereas it is difficult to have a clear-cut conclusion on the overall objectivity or bias of Western representation of Muslim and Arab women's lives, it is fair to conclude that the majority of articles in the first two sections (Male-female interaction and Muslim women's empowerment) display the various journalistic practices that lead some reporters and columnists to form biased opinions on these women. The analysis in these sections has demonstrated how Arab and Muslim women are often seen as a gigantic universal Other; the women here are assumed to share exact same characteristics and suffer from identical forms of oppression and control. Furthermore, many of these articles also illustrate how the hijab constantly creeps into stories on women's oppression and disempowerment. The view of hijab as oppressive and a hindrance to women's liberalism seems to dominate in many Western news stories. In addition, many of the stories in these first two sections either completely eliminate Arab and Muslim women's opinion or when it is included, it is overridden by the reporter or other Western experts. The end result is that the women are veiled in many stories and deemed voiceless, which helps strengthen the stereotyped of the oppressed and docile Arab/Muslim woman.

Another conclusion is that reporters often focus on extreme cases where some women suffer from acute forms of oppression and they use these odd stories to generalize about the majority of Arab and Muslim women. Yet the countless examples of positive exceptions are more often than not ignored in the coverage. The question that therefore arises is why are such reports on successful and assertive Muslim women rare in Western newspapers? Even when certain stories mention one such woman, more often than not, her achievements are discounted

or the focus is still on the negatives. One example is a *New York Times* story that covered the world's first uterus transplant by doctors in Saudi Arabia. Denise Grady (2002) describes facts about the surgery and some of the obstacles the doctors faced and somewhere in the first half of the story, the reporter mentions that this Saudi team of doctors was led by female doctor, Dr. Wafaa Fageeh, a professor at Abdulaziz University. Yet this significant piece of information is completely ignored in this article, even though Grady quotes Fageeh commenting on the uterus transplant; but nowhere in the article, does the reporter mention how this doctor is a positive example of women's empowerment in a country famous for its extreme conservatism towards women. It is important to note that no local or international newspaper articles that portrayed Fageeh as a successful Saudi female could be identified, although many newspapers reported on the uterus transplant that this female doctor carried out with her team. One has to therefore wonder why there are multiple reports on Saudi Arabia's mistreatment of women, yet when reporters are presented with an exceptional case of a highly successful and professional Saudi woman, who works side by side with Saudi male doctors, this is totally disregarded. Why do such systematic omissions occur and why do many newsworthy tales of prominent and assertive Muslim women remain untold?

Notes

¹ The European Council for Fatwa and Research argues that some countries have extremely strict traditions regarding women, where the women are prisoners in their own house. The council argues that there is clear evidence that Islamic Shari'ah contradicts such extreme traditions. For more on this, see Talking with Members of the Opposite Sex, Islamonline.net (2005), http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?cid=1119503546580&pagename=IslamOnline-English-Ask_Scholar%2FFatwaE%2FFatwaEAskTheScholar

² Honor crimes, are violent crimes committed against women by a husband, father or brother who suspects that the woman had a relationship with a strange man. This will be discussed later on in this chapter.

³ In a previous column by King, dated December 22, 2001, he criticized American food chains like McDonald's for complying to Saudi Arabian culture by forcing women to sit in the family section of the restaurant. He questioned whether corporate America was concerned about what he terms "gender apartheid in Saudi Arabia" as they were concerned about apartheid in South Africa in the 1970s. For more on this see, King, Colbert I. (2001). Saudi Arabia's Apartheid. *The Washington Post*, p. A23.

⁴ Salman Rushdie caused a great controversy in the Muslim world when he released his novel *The Satanic Verses* (1988), which many Muslims argue contains blasphemous references. Rushdie's book was banned in the Muslim world and the Shah of Iran at the time issued a *fatwa* that called for the writer's death.

⁵ This story was taken from the *Reuters* wire service.

⁶ For more on *orfy* marriages see Al Sherbini, Ramadan (2005). Secret marriages become a public concern in Egypt. *Gulf News online*; available from: <http://archive.gulfnews.com/articles/05/01/01/146016.html>; Islamic Institute of Toronto, <http://www.islam.ca/answers.php?id=651>; and Nehad Abu El-Komsan. Women between Islamic Shari'a and Personal Status Laws. *The Egyptian Center for Women's Rights*; available from <http://www.wluml.org/english/news/ecwr-women-personal-status-laws.pdf>

⁷ I have researched all three types of marriage that the reporter introduces in her article. Again, *orfy* marriage is the second most popular in Egypt, after legal marriages. The pleasure marriage is used in places such as Iran or by few Gulf men who marry young women from various parts of the Islamic world. This type of marriage has been branded as un-Islamic by scholars. The blood marriage is unheard of in Islam, contrary to the reporter's claims that it dates back to Prophet Mohamed (PBUH).

⁸ For more information on the differences between Sunnis and Shiites, see Febe Armanios (2004). Islam: Sunnis and Shiites. *The Library of Congress*; available from <http://www.fas.org/irp/crs/RS21745.pdf>

⁹ The divorce is not effective if the man was in a rage fit, as this means he was not thinking logically when announcing the divorce. Verbal divorces are also not counted if the woman is menstruating to ensure that possible mood swings (PMS) of the wife were not the cause of the divorce. Also, if the couple was in a sexual relation and then the husband divorced the wife, it is also discounted, because Islam says if the man loved his wife enough to engage in sexual contact with her, then he needs to think about the divorce more clearly. In sum, verbal divorce has its conditions and the aim is to give couples the maximum reconciliation period to rethink the divorce. For more on verbal divorces in Islam, visit Muslim Bridges.org; available from <http://www.muslimbridges.org/content/view/355/>

¹⁰ Ali (2002) is referring to the Syariah Court of Singapore, a family court that deals with Muslims' legal issues including divorce. For more on the court, see <http://www.syariahcourt.gov.sg/english/home.htm>

¹¹ One of the main problems that seem to encourage honor crimes is the reduced sentences that killers receive in some countries on the justification that these men were "in a fit of fury." For more on this see Soussi, Alasdair (2005). Rana's War. World Press Organization; available from http://www.worldpress.org/print_article.cfm?article_id=2173&dont=yes

¹² Khouri's book turned out to be completely fake, as the writer claimed her story was based on real life events of her and her best friend back in Amman, Jordan when they were both in their 20s. Investigation has revealed that Khouri had immigrated with her parents to the U.S. at the age of three, returning to Amman only once in 2000.

¹³ This program is known as the U.S.-Middle East Partnership Initiative.

¹⁴ The article itself does not show any images but includes the captions that accompanied the original article with its images. Lexus Nexus does not provide images that accompany an article.

¹⁵ Ekbal Baraka has been quoted on various occasions on television and in news reports as saying that the hijab is not Islamic and is men's way of oppressing women. For more on this, see Al-Jazeera TV News Presenter and an Egyptian Women's Magazine Editor-in-Chief Debate the Veil (2006), *Memri TV*, available from <http://www.memritv.org/Transcript.asp?P1=1163>

¹⁶ Muslim women cannot marry a non-Muslim while men can marry either a Christian or a Jewish woman, as Islam believes in Moses and Jesus (peace be upon them) as Prophets of God and therefore Muslims should hold high respect for Christianity and Judaism. According to Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi (1985), the reason why Islam allows only men to marry a non-Muslim is because theoretically, a man heads the household; he is responsible for maintaining the family and caring for the wife and should they have different faiths, it is unlikely that the wife would force him to become a non-Muslim. Secondly, a Muslim man acknowledges all Prophets and therefore is more likely to respect a Christian or Jewish wife's faith, but there is no guarantee that a non-Muslim man whose faith does not accept Islam or Prophet Mohamed (PBUH) would do the same, which in this case can affect the wife.

¹⁷ Dowd has been accused by the *Daily Howler's* Bob Somerby of trivializing and making false claims about Democratic politicians as well as female politicians' campaigns, especially Hillary Clinton. For more on this see, Wikipedia; available from: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maureen_Dowd

¹⁸ This article originally appeared in the *Washington Post*.

¹⁹ Anna Deavere Smith is an American actress, playwright and professor at the Tisch School of the Arts in New York.

²⁰ Amiry's diary, which is the architect's first venture at publishing was initially to be read by her close friends; it was one of her close Israeli friends that actually suggested she show it to a publisher. *Sharon and my mother-in-law* was an immediate hit, translated into eleven different languages and winning the Italian Viareggio-Versilia prize; it was also long-listed for the Lettre Ulysses reportage award (O'Conner, 2005).

Chapter Four: Women and the Political Economy

The coverage analyzed in this chapter addresses the broadest spectrum of the status of women across the Arab and Muslim world. The topics addressed by the coverage ranged from Muslim and Arab women's political and economic rights, to Arab female suicide bombers to exceptionally politically active women and successful businesswomen.

A recurring theme in the coverage of this chapter is reporters' baseless assumptions on Muslim women's political and economic. In many cases it is the reporter assuming on their behalf how these women feel about their political/economic status and what they should achieve and/or aspire to. Another common trend in the articles is the emphasis on the veil and on Shari'a law as two drawbacks to women's political and economic advancement. In such cases, stories usually lack context and provide readers with oversimplified accounts of Arab/Muslim women's lives. In addition, such stories lack input from the women that would either confirm or refute the reporter's insinuations about their status. Lack of context and failure to provide adequate sourcing are two journalistic practices that contribute to such poor reporting in this case.

A wide range of frames were identified from this coverage, these include the politically subjugated Arab/Muslim woman, the economically deprived, the weak and repressed, the political activist, the powerful businesswoman as well as the fearless militia woman. A closer examination of the articles will help illustrate some of these observations. Yet, given the diverse frames identified here, wider contextual information is therefore vital, to understand the political and economic status of women under Islam.

Muslim Feminist Views on Women's Political & Economic Rights

In general, scholars agree that women under Islam are free to pursue political leadership, to seek employment, and to inherit money or property. Mohja Kahf (2005) cites historical examples as well as more recent cases of prominent women in politics. Historical cases include the rule under Muslim queens in Yemen, India as well as the Hausa Kingdom of Africa. Contemporary Muslim women in top leadership positions exist in at least four Muslim-majority countries with democratic systems: Turkey, Bangladesh, Indonesia and Pakistan. This leads Kahf to say:

Have I created any cognitive dissonance yet? How about if I ask: How many times has a woman been president of the U.S.? Prime minister of France, Germany, Russia, Italy? Head of the United Nations? Try none. Our U.S. Congress has the same percentage of women as there are in the parliament of - guess what country - Iran. Actually, that may not be true anymore - after their last election, Iran may have more (p. 179).

In sum, Muslim feminists and religious scholars agree that Islam encourages women's political participation. Nothing in the Quran prohibits women's involvement in politics, whether that is in the form of voting, or holding political positions such as a legislator, judge or even becoming head of state (Muslim Women's League, 2005).

Feminists also argue that Muslim women are free to work, inherit and enjoy financial independence under Islam. They cite the Quran (Sura 4, Verse 32) as evidence of this. "In the Islamic history there were no restrictions in women's full participation in the economic, political and social spheres of their society," argues Shorish-Shamley (no date, p. 5). Kahf further explains that Islamic law dictates that women's property belong to them and not be controlled by male relatives or a husband. Most scholars agree that women financial independence is not

impacted by marriage. In a Muslim marriage, instead of the wife paying the husband a dowry, as is the case in some cultures, the husband gives the wife a substantial financial gift, which should remain in her control even after a divorce. Other property owned by the wife should also remain hers after marriage. “Even if she earns her own income, it is the husband’s responsibility to maintain her and the children,” argues Ashraf (1997). “And she has no obligation to provide for the family” (Islamfortoday.com).

Muslim feminist literature, therefore, illustrates the many political and economic rights awarded to women under Islam. This could explain how any prohibition of these rights reflects less a shortcoming of Islam itself, but could be a result of patriarchal interpretations, corruption, poverty, among other factors (Aboulnasr, no date & Kahf, 2005). Through my analysis of the wide array of articles on women’s role in Arab/Muslim political economies, it becomes obvious that Arab and Muslim women cannot be lumped into a homogenous, monolithic group; because they are extremely diverse both in their capabilities and thinking as well as in their status and rights. While some reporters continue to rely on generalizations and stereotypes that portray Arab/Muslim women as politically and economically weak and deprived, others take a more in-depth look at the women’s diverse status and rights across the Arab and Muslim world.

Similar to the coverage of Muslim women’s social lives, the political and economic aspects of Muslim/Arab women’s lives has received a lot of attention, given the inclusion of such issues in U.S. administration policies in the region. Several themes are discussed in this chapter: general political/economic status of Arab/Muslim women; the economic status of Muslim women; women’s political rights in various Arab/Muslim countries; female suicide bombers and terrorism and the case of Iraq and women’s status pre and post Saddam, and emphasizing the extraordinary.

General Political/Economic Status of Women

Several local and international journalists have reported on the underrepresentation of Arab and Muslim women in politics and the economy; while some reporters heavily relied on generalizations or inadequate sources, others based their arguments on credible human development reports, updated statistics and informed sources. The *New York Times*' Barbara Crossette (2002) for example cites a 2002 Arab Human Development report, the first UN development report to focus on a specific region, which states that the majority of Arab women are denied advancement and almost half of the Arab female population remains illiterate. "Sadly, the Arab world is largely depriving itself of the creativity and productivity of half its citizens," the report concludes (p. 11). Throughout the article, Crossette quotes members of the all-Arab advisory team responsible for producing the report; these intellectuals include prominent Arab men and women from various disciplines.

Another *New York Times* article that cites a credible human development study is one by Elizabeth Olson (2003), who cites a World Bank report on "Gender and Development in the Middle East and North Africa." Olson says the report explains that the region's women are a "huge, untapped" economic resource, as the region's 325 million women comprise no more than 32 percent of the total work force. "No country can raise the standard of living and improve the well-being of its people without the participation of half of its population," Olson quotes Christian Poortman, World Bank vice president for the Middle East and North Africa, as saying. The reporter quotes another World Bank official, Jean-Louis Sarbib, as saying that due to improved health and education, one in every three Middle East women is 30 years-old or younger. "Yet she is likely to face greater obstacles in finding a job and playing an active public role in her society than do her counterparts elsewhere" (p. 11). Olson blames traditional views of

men being the family breadwinners as one of the main reasons women are discouraged from working.

Are All Muslim Women Politically & Economically Deprived?

Although many reporters cite reliable figures or studies to explain the status of women in the Middle East, some reporters still tend to distort facts about the region and its treatment of women. Richard Foster (2003) of the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, for example, cites a U.S. State Department human rights report that explains laws enacted in Iraq to protect women from sexual harassment at the workplace, allow women to join the army, and to give women equal rights in divorce, property ownership, taxation and suffrage. Foster argues that although Saddam Hussein was accused of political crimes that included the torture and rape of women, this was not because of Hussein's "contempt for women" but because of their oppositional political views. In fact, the reporter claims that, with all of its "horrendous" human rights violations, Hussein's Iraq "probably treats women with less scorn than some other countries in the region" (p. 06J). Throughout the article, Foster cites examples across the Muslim world of women's mistreatment; he criticizes the Bush administration and Laura Bush's claims that "the fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women," arguing that the U.S. has done little to end discrimination against the region's women. "In fact, some of this country's closest allies in the Arab world are among the worst offenders," says Foster, citing Saudi Arabia as "the most flagrant example," where women are not allowed to vote or drive cars (p. 06J). He also mentions an incident in Nigeria, where a woman was condemned to death by stoning for committing adultery, although the sentence was never carried out.

Ironically, after informing his readers of the “flagrant” examples of mistreatment of women in the Gulf region, Foster argues that “Muslim nations and men have often been targeted as the most flagrant offenders against women, but to single out this religion or its adherents in this fashion would be grossly unfair and inaccurate” (p. 06J). He reminds readers of the mistreatment and rape of Muslim Bosnian and Croatian women at the hands of Serb men in the early 1990s, and mentions similar incidents in Rwanda. Foster concludes his article by saying “There is no doubt that violence against women and other forms of discrimination are part of a pattern of oppression that is prevalent not only in the Persian Gulf, but in many places in the world, and that the abolition of this oppression is not only overdue, but essential” (p. 06J).

One could argue that, despite his reliance on a human rights report, Foster seems to paint an extremely gloomy picture of the treatment of women, especially in the Gulf region. This is inflated by the reporter’s blending of mistreatments such as prevention from voting and driving, which is the case in Saudi Arabia, with extremely harsh incidents of oppression such as war crimes of rape and torture and the Nigerian adultery case, which are not common in the Muslim Gulf countries he criticizes. Yet the end result is that readers receive a distorted and rather inflated impression of the discrimination against women in the Persian Gulf region; and even though Foster later attempts to explain that such mistreatments are not restricted to Muslim countries, one could argue that readers are still left with the sense that oppression is in fact extreme in these countries.

Another article that tends to both distort and generalize about the treatment of women in the Arab world is a *Christian Science Monitor* report titled “Reporters on the Job,” which explains to readers how the *Monitor*’s reporter, Nicole Gaouette (2001), “learned firsthand how men and women are treated differently in the Arab world” (p. 6). Yet the story is about two

specific incidents in Jordan and Saudi Arabia, and not the entire Arab world, as the lead suggests. Gaouette recounts how, on her way from Jordan to Saudi Arabia, Jordanian airport security “clearly irritated,” waved her away from the main security check, sending her to a women’s security check. “Inside the small tent, a lone female guard desultorily waved a metal detector in my general direction, then sent me out,” recalls Gaouette. Yet, the reporter fails to explain that female security guards are in fact, preferred by most traveling Arab females, who would feel rather humiliated if a male guard was to check them with a metal detector. Hence, with such information absent from the paragraph, readers are left with the impression that women are treated as second class citizens, and are not even allowed to enter the same security check as their male counterparts.

Gaouette then describes how she arrived to her hotel in Jeddah, “modestly covered” in a black abaya and scarf, “feeling like Darth Vader’s little sister” (p. 6). She says the desk clerk would not let her check into the hotel because she failed to provide a letter, or document that is required of all females traveling alone into the Kingdom. The *Monitor* story tells readers how Gaouette says “other female journalists jokingly refer to this document as the ‘I am not a prostitute’ letter – a note from the government confirming that you really are a working professional – but not that kind” (*Christian Science Monitor*, 2001, p. 6). Readers are then told that this Western female reporter was finally saved by a lot of talk and a “lucky coincidence – the hotel manager’s foreign wife hails from a city near my hometown” (p. 6). Overall, this passage again sends the message that women are second class citizens. Everything, from Gaouette’s depiction of the abaya as a Darth Vader-like dress to the strict government regulations on female travelers, which we are told is commonly referred to by Western female reporters as the “I am not a prostitute” letter, all work to show that women are treated with much less respect than men.

Furthermore, readers are given the impression that if it was not for the Western wife of the hotel manager, Gaouette would not have been saved from this ordeal.

Similar to a trend discussed in the previous chapter, some reporters assert their expertise regarding Arab/Muslim women's political and economic conditions, without providing sufficient evidence to support their claims. An editorial from the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* (2005) criticizes Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice for "reciting Bush administration slogans without thinking of the implications" (p. B-6). Rice, speaking at the American University in Cairo, had called on Arab countries, including allies such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, to hold free elections, release political prisoners and give women full rights. "No one can argue with her 'rights for women' point," says the editorial. "In fact, one of the major economic constraints on Arab countries is that women are not allowed to play their normal, fully participatory role in conducting the business of the country" (p. B-6). The problem is that the editorial fails to provide proof, whether through figures, citing recent studies or quoting expert sources, to confirm this claim. Another weakness is that this sentence tends to, once again, lump all of the region's countries as one and the same when it comes to women's rights, failing to take in the diverse circumstances of women from one country to the next.

Theories on Muslim Women's Current Status

One would receive a fuller impression of these distorted images on women's political and economic status by looking at international articles on Muslim women's status, where reporters examine reasons for women's decreased participation in the political economy. They include Akbar Ahmad's (2001) *Guardian* feature, discussed in Chapter Two, where the Islamic Studies

Professor blames European colonization of the 19th and early 20th century for much of the deteriorating status of Muslim and Arab women today:

There was loss of confidence, which resulted in a loss of tolerance. Muslim men reacted to this loss, not unnaturally, by doing what they thought was necessary for the protection and integrity of their families. They secluded their women from the prying eyes of foreign troops. Burkas, the black, tent-like attire women wear, became common. Women were now allowed to go no further than their front yards (p. 6).

When Europeans left the Muslim world, Ahmad argues, Muslim women were left to fight “now-entrenched local traditions and male views and prejudices,” some of which had nothing to do with Islam (p. 6). Ahmad further asserts that, though exceptional Muslim women exist throughout the world today, the status of the majority of Muslim women can only improve through the “widespread education and the restoration of Muslim confidence” (p. 6). The author stresses on the idea of turning to Islam to learn what rights are awarded to women. Throughout his article, Ahmad provides historical background on Muslim women’s assertiveness and influence to demonstrate to his readers that the current predicament of Muslim women is not because of Islam but in spite of it.

Another interesting explanation to the misery many Muslim women suffer today comes from Ayesha Imam, a Nigerian women’s rights activist, who is interviewed by Michele Landsberg (2002) from the *Toronto Star*. Imam’s argument ties in with Akhbar’s colonialism theory, as this Muslim feminist believes “economic disaster engineered by the West,” namely structural adjustment programs (SAPs)¹, are the cause of many Muslim women’s tribulations today. Landsberg explains:

Structural adjustment programs shut down schools and clinics, drove up the child and maternal mortality rates and condemned entire generations to illiteracy. The rewards for religious affiliation began to look tempting, as Muslim religious groups offered free schools and clinics (p. A02).

These “medieval-style religious” extremists surged in power, Imam explains. “And then service turns to coercion...A mother learns that unless she covers herself, her child won’t be able to continue at school” (p. A02). This standpoint on Muslim women’s economic and political status is quite novel as it moves away from the more dominating message that Islam is to blame for the women’s status. As Landsberg argues, Imam “offered a rare, informed perspective that was both more difficult to hear and more enlightening to grasp than the usual fare” (p. A02).

In sum, these articles are important for two reasons: first, they do not just feed readers negative, and sometimes distorted, images of the mistreatment of Muslim women, but actually suggest explanations for the current status of Muslim women. Second, the articles introduce readers to intelligent and informed Muslims, who speak from experience and who do not brand their religion as oppressive or blame it for women’s problems.

Islam, Democracy & Women

One of the topics addressed in a number of local and international articles is the question of democracy and Islam and whether or not the two can coexist. Articles that discussed this issue also questioned the role of women in promoting such an Islamic democracy and introduced readers to a number of Muslim women who support this cause. Jane Lampman (2003) of the *Christian Science Monitor* for instance introduces readers to a group of Muslim American men and women who formed the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy (CSID), a think tank

that aims to debate the compatibility of Islam and democracy. The CSID is bringing together Muslim and secular democrats in several Muslim countries that include Morocco, Egypt and Yemen “as part of an ongoing effort to promote democracy in the region” (p. 12). These activists engage in debates over human rights, women’s rights as well as religious tolerance. Lampman tells readers that participants in CSID workshops agree that democracy and Islam are compatible, “based on the [Islamic] values of justice, equality, and shura- the Quranic principle of consulting the people in matters of governance” (p. 12).

Lampman adds that many Muslims blame the political intolerance experienced in many Islamic societies today on “radical Islam and narrow concepts of Shari’a, or Islamic law” (p. 12). She adds that CSID activists believe women should participate in the process of democratization. Lampman quotes Stephanie Foster, a U.S. political consultant, who argues that young Muslim women, speaking from their knowledge of the Quran and from their Muslim experience, are especially good at articulating the compatibility of Islam and democracy. There are many female activists among the CSID’s 500 or so members; these include Sharifa Alkateeb, head of the North American Council for Muslim Women, who argues:

One concept I teach from the Quran is that each individual is God’s representative on earth...That implies moral agency and ownership of her own thought processes; awareness of community; the ability to criticize any level of control, from the family to government. That concept is fundamentally democratic, and it can revamp society (p. 12).

Lampman argues that CSID female activists also include Malaysia’s Zainah Anwar, leader of Sisters of Islam, an NGO that fights for women’s rights in accordance with Islam. Anwar, who has come under fire from local clerics for disputing state laws that discriminate against women, believes in the need for adapting Islamic teachings to the Muslim community’s current needs

(ijtihad²). “I’m a feminist and a believer, and am determined not to be forced into exile...Muslims need intellectual vigor, moral courage, and political will to open the door to ijtihad,” explains Anwar (p. 12).

Overall, Lampman’s article introduces readers to a progressive side of Muslim women; the reporter allows readers to see Muslim women as assertive political activists who seek the rule of democracy based on the respect Islamic teachings. By both introducing these female activists and allowing them to voice their ideas, Lamman’s article refutes arguments that Islam is oppressive to women, given that it is women that are actually calling for the coexistence of Islam and democracy.

Another article on Islam, democracy and women that adopt a ver different take on the matter is *The Australian’s* feature by ABC presenter Geraldine Doogue (2005). The article, titled “The road to a new Islam” which is an edited excerpt from *Tomorrow’s Islam*, a book by Doogue and Peter Kirkwood (2005), attempts to answer the same question on whether or not Islam and democracy can coexist. Doogue starts off the article by saying:

Democracy and Islam: unrequited lovers? Made for each other, if only they’d let themselves go? Or mutually exclusive, as proven by history? We have arrived at one of the two biggies in the obstacle course between Islam and the West. The other is women (p. 31).

The author argues that some politicians indeed think it is possible to have a Muslim democracy.

Doogue then attempts to look at the status of women in Islam and, interestingly, focuses on Muslim women’s dress codes as a way of understanding the status of women. Doogue quotes several women who talk about Islamic dress codes, arguing that Muslim women hold diverse opinions with regards to clothing. These include Baroness Pola Manzila Uddin, the first Muslim

woman to join the British House of Lords, who, according to Doogue, is “puzzled by the decision of many young English Muslim women to take up the veil.” Doogue adds that Uddin’s Bangladeshi home country has the highest world per capita for female engineers, “and the women she knows are not passive and submissive and haven’t considered the veil” (p. 31). One could argue that this whole passage depicts Uddin to be against the veil; especially this latter sentence, which insinuates that passiveness and submissiveness are obvious signs of the veil.

A tendency of Doogue’s throughout this article is to make claims about Islam and women based on other people’s statements, which at times seem to be abridged and result in confused and/or distorted claims about Islam and women. In this case Doogue says Uddin assures that women from her home culture are not “passive and submissive and haven’t considered the veil” (p. 31). Given that the author does not provide an exact quote from Uddin, it is hard to tell whether the Baroness talked about passiveness and veiling together or if Doogue condensed Uddin’s statement in such a way. Yet looking at Uddin’s comments and speeches throughout the years, it does not seem that this Muslim politician thinks negatively about the veil in any way. In 2003 for example, Uddin “expressed regret” to France’s decision to ban headscarves in schools (baronessuddin.com). Then in 2004, Uddin writes in the *The Guardian*:

For much of my adult life I have dressed modestly, in shalwar kameez and sometimes saris. Only when visiting places of worship or in the presence of elders did I ever feel obliged to cover my head. However, earlier this year, I wore a scarf on Umrah, a mini pilgrimage, and it somehow felt natural to keep on wearing it when I got home. For me, this was simply an expression of a deepening knowledge of my faith and of my self (Uddin, 2004).

Hence, it does not seem that Uddin is that “puzzled” about veiling as Doogue claims she is and one therefore, has to question the precision of the reporter’s delivery to her readers of Uddin’s precise message on veiling.

Doogue also refers to Turkish journalist and founder of the ruling Islamic party, Ayse Bohurler, who “deeply shocked her family when she donned the veil” (p. 31). The reporter wonders, if by choosing the veil, Bohurler was setting back gender advances promoted by reformer Kemal Ataturk or if the Turkish journalist was “spitting in the face of his central thesis: that abolishing constraints on women was key to moving the country into the modern world” (p. 31). Doogue’s answer is “absolutely not.” If anything, Bohurler’s decision to adopt the veil symbolized protest and affirmation:

Protest at the notion that Western modernization was a job lot, which you took in toto or not at all; affirmation of a collective identity that obviously mattered deeply to her sense of individual wellbeing (p. 31).

Doogue quotes Western and Muslim scholars who say none of this is surprising as many Muslim women are choosing to move closer to Islam and further away from Westernization to experience liberation. But the reporter contrasts Bohurler’s embrace of Islam and veiling with her compatriot, Ayse Oncu, a “secular, sophisticated” author and sociology lecturer. Doogue, seems to sympathize with Oncu’s argument, as she tells readers that she “could understand why” Oncu is “worried” because female students in her university are debating “an issue she had thought was obsolete: to wear or not wear the veil and in what version?” (p. 31). The reporter explains that Oncu feared that such a non-threatening debate could eventually lead to gender segregation as a state policy. “Only time will tell whether her fears are justified,” concludes Doogue.

Doogue's writing is problematic on several fronts. Firstly, one has to question why a discussion that started out on the compatibility of Islam and democracy and women's place in such a system ended up solely focusing on veiling. Secondly, Doogue's subtle anti-veiling messages throughout the article are problematic. This begins with her restatement of Baroness Uddin's visions on veiling all the way till the end of the article, where she concludes that the whole debate on veiling was "vexing" and it eventually led her to one of the greatest achievements of Western feminism: "namely, losing the idea that women impose self-regulation to protect the public realm from their sexuality" (p. 31). Even though nowhere in her article does Doogue quote Muslim women who claim they wear the veil because they "were blamed for being desirable," the reporter concludes:

To my eyes, Muslim women are again being encouraged to be anxious about their bodies, to believe that the public space is better for seeing less of them. Worse, they are being persuaded that covering up means joining a glorious, sacred quest, championing some rebirth of Islam. It suggests a brittle political and religious identity, not the reverse. In fact, it looks suspiciously like self-loathing — a time-honored brake on female aspirations (p. 31).

How did Doogue reach such a conclusion about Muslim women's justifications for veiling? Also, it is important to ask, when Doogue claims these women are "being persuaded," who is the persuader? Furthermore, this conclusion completely dismisses claims by Muslim women worldwide, including Bohurler whom Doogue quotes, that veiling was a personal choice to empower and feel liberated. Does this mean that all of these claims are mere lies? If so, should one conclude that Muslim women are weak, helpless and passive creatures that are easily "persuaded" to act without thinking? That certainly seems to be the message Doogue is

delivering to her readers, which is strengthened even further when she concludes that “in too many parts of the Muslim world, women are made the scapegoats for a range of perceived ills” (p. 31).

Doogue’s article thus fails to provide a balanced outlook on a Muslim democracy and women’s role in such a system, thanks to her fixation on the veil and what it epitomizes. Rather than investigating Muslim women’s political and economic aspirations and visions within a proposed Islamic democracy, the author, once again, drifts again to veiling as a symbol of women’s oppression. One could argue that by doing so, Doogue confirms Muslim feminists’ claims that some Western feminists dismiss their liberalization claims (Merali, 2006). At the end of her article, Doogue goes back to selective quoting to fortify her argument; in this case, she quotes Pakistan’s first female High court judge, Majida Rizvi, as saying “when it comes to our rights, Islam is not there; when it comes to our duties, Islam is there” (p. 31). Yet multiple media statements by Rizvi clarify that this assertive female is convinced that women’s rights, as laid out in the Quran, are just. What Rizvi criticizes however, is some of her country’s laws, which she considers “un-Islamic” because they deny women “the rights given to them in the Quran” (Terzieff, 2004, online article). Yet, for readers who know nothing of Rizvi’s views on Islam other than what Doogue quotes, they are likely to believe this female judge thinks Islam is in fact oppressive and unequal in its treatment of women.

Other articles that discuss Islamic democracy and women’s role include a *Financial Times* opinion piece by Emma Bonino (2005); the writer, who is a prominent Italian politician, asserts that democratic processes are slowly rising across the Arab and Muslim world and women are a main driving force. “We are at the beginning of a shift in attitudes and behavior as women fight for their individual rights in societies in which collective rights are traditionally

more important” (p. 19). Bonino cites several examples as evidence of this more favorable environment for women; these include increased political rights “in almost every Arab nation,” including Gulf countries and the Palestinian authority (p. 19). Arab and Muslim women are also fighting more aggressively to enforce constructive changes on diverse issues, ranging from increased economic rights, to easier divorce and child custody issues. Bonino adds that the women of the region are also campaigning to rid their countries of traditional practices such as honor killings and female genital mutilation. In sum, the writer clarifies that many Arab and Muslim women are progressive activists who support the drive for a democracy and work to embitter their lives as opposed to the view of passive Arab/Muslim women who helplessly accept their fate.

This notion of proactive Arab/Muslim women is reinforced by Nanette Asimov (2001) in a *San Francisco Chronicle* article, where the reporter quotes Muslim feminists who argue that “the common view of repressed, cowed women incapable of standing up for themselves is a distortion” (p. A3). On the contrary, many Muslim women are “active agents in their societies and cultures,” argues feminist Minnoo Moallem, chair of women’s studies at San Francisco State University. These women run businesses and strive to increase women’s political and economic opportunities throughout the region. Asimov also contends that though Islamic feminism “is a contradiction in terms” for many Americans, even the “most patriarchal of Muslim nations” include many thriving feminists. The reporter quotes Muslim feminists such as Mahnaz Afkhami, author of *Faith and Freedom: Women’s Human Rights in the Muslim World* (1995), and Audrey Shabbas, executive director of Arab World and Islamic Resources, who explain that Muslim feminists seek democracy and justice through the accurate interpretation of the Quran. They refute arguments that Islam is cruel to women, blaming fundamentalist governments and

extremists for misinterpreting the Quran and justifying violence against women. “Women are being oppressed in spite of Islam—not because of it,” argues Shabbas (p. A3). In sum, Asimov reiterates images of Muslim women as progressive, independent and assertive rather than passive and oppressed, both by quoting a variety of prominent Muslim feminists and by allowing them to inform readers about Muslim feminists’ successes and aspirations.

Margo Huston (2002) of the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* also introduces readers to assertive Muslim women from various parts of the world who want Muslim women to enjoy “higher education, important jobs, loving husbands, children and more” (p. 01J). Huston says the nine Muslim women from five countries attending a Muslim-Christian dialogue in Switzerland had one common refrain: “I want everything. I am not humble. I know I can get it” (p. 01J). Huston adds that some of the Christian attendees, like herself, “squirmed at ‘I am not humble,’ thinking humility is a virtue.” But the Muslim women insisted, “speaking with as much precision as possible in English...” (p. 01J). Huston tells readers that, gradually, the Muslim attendees’ meaning became clear:

They were screaming in soft voices that they did not have a low opinion of their own importance. A woman from Bosnia-Herzegovina said ‘I’m not humble’ meant that her husband was home taking care of their son. A woman from Lebanon said it meant, ‘Not in the shadow’ (p. 01J).

In other words, the women were saying they are not oppressed or pitiful; but are confident, independent and in charge of their lives. Huston’s article, therefore, helps readers understand what Muslim women think of themselves and what they hope for in life. Citing the women’s main motto, “I want everything. I am not humble. I know I can get it,” simply clarifies that Muslim women can be ambitious, confident and strong-willed.

The Australian's Kay Hymowitz (2005) also talks of Muslim feminists and democracies but carries a completely different argument on both issues than other reporters mentioned so far. Hymowitz argues that Muslim feminists are the “sisters” that Western feminists tend to ignore; she implies that Western democracies, which are very much mistrusted by Western feminists, are not so bad after all because they help “free” other men and women. In this case, she is specifically referring to Ayaan Hirsi Ali³, a Dutch MP and one of many “feminist heroines” Hymowitz claims “deserve recognition today” (p.15). Hymowitz summarizes Hirsi Ali’s story as follows:

Born in Somalia and raised in Saudi Arabia, Ali suffered through just about every indignity extremist Muslims had devised for women: she underwent genital mutilation, she was forced to wear a veil and to stay indoors, and she was coerced into marriage with a cousin (p. 15).

Hymowitz’s says that eventually, after seeking refuge in the Netherlands, Hirsi Ali finished university and later joined the Labor Party, eventually becoming an MP. Hirsi Ali focused her attention on documenting cases of incest and sexual abuse suffered by Muslim women in the Netherlands. “Sounds like a feminist fairytale, I know, but Ali has a mark against her,” Hymowitz concludes. “Her story is a vivid example of how democracy frees women—as well as men. And that’s just not the kind of story today’s feminists want to tell” (p. 15).

There are several problems that appear in Hymowitz’s article, the first her choice of Hirsi Ali to represent Muslim feminist “heroines” that she asserts deserve recognition. What Hymowitz fails to mention to her readers is that Hirsi Ali no longer considers herself to be a Muslim and that Muslim feminists do not sympathize with her because of Hirsi Ali’s harsh and unsupported claims about Islam and Muslims. Hirsi Ali seems to confuse her negative

experiences under traditional tribalism with Islam; everything from her subjection to female genital mutilation, forced veiling and imprisonment as well as her coercion into marriage, are features of backward traditions and tribal customs. For example, in criticizing Ali for her uncorroborated claims on FGM, Golia (2007) argues:

...FGM is neither pervasive in Muslim societies, nor practiced exclusively by Muslims. It occurs most widely across a swath of sub-Saharan Africa where it is a social custom long observed by Christians and Muslims alike. It is not practiced, for instance, in Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, or South and South-east Asia. According to Amnesty International, FGM was, however, used by doctors in England and the United States as recently as the 1950s, as a treatment for hysteria, lesbianism, masturbation and other perceived forms of deviance in girls and women. The notion that sexism, not Islam per se, has made women vulnerable to all manner of abuse, is not considered [by Hirsi Ali] (*The Times Literary Supplement* online).

Yet, Hymowitz, parroting Hirsi Ali's (2006) uncorroborated claims in her book *The Caged Virgin: An Emancipation Proclamation for Women and Islam*, inaccurately hints that FGM is Islamic and is carried out by extremists to oppress women. This confusion between Islam and tradition is very common among Western journalists who are unfamiliar with both Arab culture and Islam.

Hymowitz's hailing of Hirsi Ali's story as a "feminist fairytale" is illogical here, given Hirsi Ali's generalizations and distortions about Islam. For example, in her book, Hirsi Ali denounces Islam and Prophet Mohammed:

By our Western standards, Mohammed is a perverse man. A tyrant. If you don't do as he says, you will end up in hell. That reminds me of those megalomaniac rulers, Bin Laden,

Khomeini, Saddam.... You are shocked to hear me say these things...you forget where I am from. I used to be a Muslim; I know what I'm talking about (as quoted in Golia, 2007, online article).

As Golia concludes, it is quite unfair for Hirsi Ali to “indict a religion and the multifarious peoples that profess it. It is not that she says outright that all Muslims are fundamentalists; she just attributes fundamentalist beliefs and practices to all Muslims” (online article). Alam (2006) also problematizes Hirsi Ali’s depiction of Muslim women as victimized and oppressed by Islam. She contends:

Long before Hirsi Ali arrived in Europe, Muslim women were fighting against ignorance, religious prejudice and cultural misunderstanding. They are still pushing the boundaries, playing an increasingly important public role and advocating real long-term change - slowly but surely. For groups such as London's An Nisa Society, which pioneered programs in sexual health, domestic violence and mental health two decades ago, Islam is a potent, powerful ally. Many Muslim women want to maintain a strong, spiritual connection with their faith - a choice Hirsi Ali seeks to deny them (Alam, 2006, *New Statesmen* online).

Hymowitz’s choice of Ali as her “feminist heroine,” is weak given the abundance of prominent Muslim feminists that are also active in fighting for Muslim women’s rights without distorting their faith. A logical answer here is that Ali provides a classic case of a once-oppressed, helpless and victimized Muslim woman, who was saved from her misery by her refuge to a Western democracy. Hymowitz does not argue in this article that an Islamic democracy can “free” women but that Western democracies can.

The articles examined in this section offer diverse views on Muslim/Arab women and their political and economic rights and roles in promoting Islamic democracies. On the one hand, some reporters depict all Muslim women as oppressed, passive and deprived of all rights and privileges, therefore ignoring the diverse political and economic environments from one country to the next. On the other hand, many local and international reporters portray Muslim women as assertive, ambitious, and working aggressively to promote a democracy that adheres to Islamic principles of justice, equality and shura. While one cannot deny that Muslim women, as well as many non-Muslim women, suffer from violence, subjugation and denial of political and economic rights, sometimes in the name of Islam; it is also necessary to understand that these conditions are not universal for all Muslim women and they differ from country to country. Therefore, it is inaccurate to assume that all Muslim women are denied participation in their countries' politics or economies, given the ample examples of active women outlined in the coverage.

Economic Status of Muslim Women

A number of articles review the broad spectrum of women's economic status across the Muslim world. Local and international reporters quoted here examine the level and progress of women's economic activity, including Muslim women abroad. The majority of articles in this section could be considered an eye opener, as they provide a different picture of women's status in several countries that have long been depicted in the West as oppressive to women, including for example, Iran and Saudi Arabia. Articles in this section are divided under two themes: the status of Muslim women in individual countries across the region, and the economic status of Muslim women abroad.

Country-by-Country Examination

A peculiar feature of articles under this theme is that the majority of them come from international newspapers, which could possibly mean that U.S. newspapers do not pay close attention to the diverse economic conditions of Muslim women from one country to the next. The bulk of local stories, however, tend to examine the general economic status of Muslim women worldwide, therefore lumping all of these women into one homogenous group and failing to pay attention to their distinct status in different countries.

Articles that could be considered eye openers include the various reports on Muslim women in the Gulf region, which explain to readers that, at least economically, Gulf women fare better than many women across the globe. Terazono (2001) asserts in the *Financial Times* that many Kuwaiti female professionals “agree that they may have it better than their Western counterparts, especially in the workplace” (p. 3). The reporter explains that women in Kuwait are guaranteed equal pay and are free to pursue executive posts “unhampered by a glass ceiling” (p. 3). Terazono asserts that Kuwaiti women today “have numerous freedoms compared to other Arab women—they can dress as they please, hold jobs, drive, travel and divorce” (p. 3). Yet, the reporter also tells readers that what Kuwaiti women lack is political participation; as they are deprived of their right to vote or hold public office. While Kuwaiti women’s political rights were granted in 2005, it is still important to discuss Terazono’s article as it quotes various Kuwaiti female activists who talk boldly and assertively about their rights, thus demonstrating that Muslim women in the Gulf can be assertive, active and intelligent. The reporter quotes advocates such as Adelah al-Sayer, a former activist who runs private Kuwaiti schools, and Badria al-Awadhi, a Professor of international and shari’a law at Kuwait University, who argue that Islam encourages women, citing women’s participation in decision-making during Prophet

Mohammed's era. The women also compare themselves with women in Muslim countries like Bangladesh and Pakistan, where they have been appointed as premiers. "Are they against Islam?" wonders Awadhi (p. 3). Awadhi, Sayer and other professional Kuwaiti females quoted in Terazono's article demonstrate the women's vigor and determination to enforce changes that both adhere to Islam and empower women. "But even if women did get the vote, it will not calm some female activists," concludes Terazono, referring to the women's determination to fight other injustices within their country. Awadhi for instance vows to campaign against "an unwritten" rule that prevents Kuwaiti women from becoming judges, "an irony since many of her male students have become judges" (p. 3). "There is nothing in our constitution banning women, it's just tradition," explains Awadhi. "I am going to take this to the courts" (p. 3).

Another *Financial Times* story, by Roula Khalaf (2002), introduces readers to Saudi businesswomen striving to "carve a place in the future of their country" (p. 7). Khalaf explains that while Saudi women hold 40 percent of the Kingdom's wealth and account for over half of its university graduates, "a situation that is unique in the Arab world," the women make up only four percent of the workforce. Similar to other reporters mentioned previously, in talking about Saudi women, Khalaf reminds her readers of the women's black abaya and public segregation. But unlike many other reporters, Khalaf allows the women to comment about their segregation and their forced dress codes. Khalaf introduces Saudi women in her lead as follows:

Dressed in smart suits a group of Saudi women took copious notes as prominent speakers lined up on the podium. They asked questions, often challenging the speakers more than the predominantly male audience (p. 7).

The reporter then goes on to explain how the women had a separate seating section, this "while their voices were heard, their presence was invisible" (p. 3). This is followed by a quote from

Saudi business consultant, Nadia Baeshan, who dismisses the separate seating as irrelevant and as convenient, because it allows them to “feel free” and sit unveiled. One could argue that Baeshan’s quote does demonstrate that the Kingdom’s forced veiling constrains women. Saudi women refer to the Quran to prove that, while veiling is mentioned in the holy book, the black abaya is not. “There’s tradition and there’s religion and segregation between the sexes, full cover and driving are in the tradition, they happen only in Saudi Arabia,” argues social services worker Maha Fitani. “We want freedom of choice, not to be told to do things in the name of religion,” Fitani boldly demands (p. 7). Yet while the women do identify segregation and strict dress codes, issues that are “often raised in the West as the ultimate examples of discrimination,” as traditional and unIslamic, they also clarify that these are not their chief priorities.

Instead, Saudi women are more intent on loosening economic restrictions, such as limited employment fields and tough labor laws, and unfair family laws that make it both difficult and costly for women to get a divorce. Similar to their Kuwaiti counterparts, Saudi women are also determined to change the Kingdom’s political climate, which remains a male domain. What is interesting in Khalaf’s article is that it depicts Saudi women as intelligent activists and businesswomen rather than passive victims who helplessly accept the government’s strict laws. Another important point in the article is that Saudi women speak for themselves throughout the story; they list their priorities as well as their visions for change. For example, Khalaf explains that the women see change happening gradually and as an outcome of “compromise, rather than confrontation,” or outside pressure (p. 7). For example, Saudi women criticize the West for using them as a scapegoat to attack the country, “especially when their rights were hardly raised before September 11” (p. 7). Khalaf quotes sociology professor at King Abdel-Aziz University, Noura Khaled al Saad, as saying:

I refuse to see the outside saying we will save you...I don't ask Americans why they wear jeans or why nuns wear the veil...We reform ourselves by ourselves (p. 7).

Saad's criticism of Western interference in Saudi women's issues is a view that has been reiterated by other Saudi and non-Saudi Muslim women on more than one occasion.

Furthermore, contrary to many Westerners' belief that a secular society modeled after the West is the ultimate solution for gender inequality in many Muslim countries, Saudi women prefer to look at Iran as their model, where "women have held on to religious beliefs yet reached high levels of government" (p. 7).

Overall, Khalaf's article portrays Saudi women to be resolute and sharp in outlining their aspirations and the ideal system to get them there. Furthermore, similar to their Kuwaiti counterparts, the women constantly refer to Islam to uncover their rights. Hence, given that the women consult the Quran willingly, this refutes claims that women are oppressed by their faith; as it becomes clear that Muslim women seek liberation and freedom through local governments' truthful implementation of the Quran and not through its elimination.

Several other stories on Muslim women in Gulf countries demonstrate how women in countries like the United Arab Emirates, are encouraged by their government to seek economic advancement. These include a Malaysian *New Straits Times* article that tells readers how the UAE's support for women's advancement in business, led the government to sponsor a visit by six young UAE female business graduates to Malaysia, as part of a business exchange tour. "The government is supportive of women's development and this has contributed to our success," reporter De Lima (2002) quotes one of the women as saying. "We are even encouraged to pursue political careers and at present, there are many women who have their own businesses and many others have attained high positions in society" (p. 6). This leads De Lima to conclude that the

Gulf women's business visit to Malaysia, and a similar one to Japan the previous year, along with the women's promising comments about their country's support, put to rest "claims that women from the region were content to remain in the shadows" (p. 6).

This article ties in with a *Courier Mail* story on how a Brisbane company broke new ground by pioneering an employment training program for UAE women. Andrew Dawson (2002) quotes managing director of Victrix, Libbie Escolme Schmidt, as saying that the women were "very career minded and all keen to move up the ladder" (p. 29). "The women in the Emirates are highly educated and consequently in relation to the women in my program, they are particularly enthusiastic, motivated and exceptionally keen to hone their work practices," said Schmidt, adding that she found it "interesting" that UAE women's needs at the workplace were very similar to those of Australian and European women. This conclusion, therefore, demonstrates that Arab women are not so alien or different after all; whether wearing a hijab or black abaya, some of these women work like others around the world and face the same constrictions and share the same needs.

Although Dawson's article provides a positive outlook on the economic status of women in the UAE, one could argue that the reporter's choice of headline does not send the same optimistic message. Dawson's headline reads: "Brisbane company reaches out to help Islamic women in UAE," which could be understood as a charitable activity to support the "helpless and oppressed" Muslim women. The headline does not clarify to readers that this Australian company was in the Emirates because the government asked it to train UAE women as part of a national plan to "emiritize"⁴ the workforce. Furthermore, the headline does not clarify that this is a "business" agreement, where both sides would benefit; the UAE women get the training and the Brisbane Company gets paid for its services. Hence, if one is to read the headline alone, this

could give off the impression that the Australian company is charitably reaching out to help the needy, helpless women of the UAE.

Yet, overall, international articles that introduce readers to successful UAE female businesswomen and economists are abundant. These articles, therefore, for readers outside the United States help correct misconceptions of the oppressed, helpless and dependent Gulf woman. In fact, some of these articles also demonstrate how Gulf leaders are slowly opening up more government positions for women. These include a *Financial Times* story on Sheikha Lubna al-Qasimi, the “first ever female minister” in Dubai. McSheehy (2004) informs readers that Qasimi, a successful businesswoman and member of the royal family, was made minister of economy and planning. “Women are gradually being accepted into cabinets of the Gulf governments,” explains McSheehy. “Bahrain, Oman and Qatar each have two female ministers managing portfolios such as health, education and local crafts” (p 12). McSheehy thus explains to readers that Gulf women are slowly gaining more economic power and independence and so they cannot all be branded as oppressed and helpless.

A *Daily Telegraph* story on Iranian female taxi drivers introduces readers to a different side of Iranian women, thus discounting stereotypes of Iranian women as some of the most oppressed of their kind. Farsian (2003) informs readers that Iran’s holiest city, Qom, launched a woman-only taxi service, “which its founders say is striking a blow for female rights” (p. 19). This taxi service is a first for Iran and it caters to women and pre-pubescent boys, says the article. Farisian quotes founder of the service, Nayerreh Aghaz, as saying that some men were shocked when they first opened, but that slowly changed. “Now I have men calling us regularly wanting their wives to use our service,” said Aghaz, adding that other Iranian cities are rushing to open up similar women-only taxi service providers (p. 19). Aghaz argues that her company

provides employment for Qom's women, who have less employment opportunities than women in other cities, and also promotes women's rights. "The men's monopoly in our religious city is beginning to end and they have seen that we are not just housewives," asserts Aghaz (p. 19). Although Iranian women do not enjoy a lot of freedom, in terms of the government-enforced dress codes, and low representation in various economic and political sectors, things are slowly improving; aside from the increase of female taxi and bus drivers, in 2003 for example, Iranian women graduated from the police academy along with their male counterparts, a first for the country since the 1979 revolution (Eeles, 2003, BBC News online).

Farsian's article provides an optimistic outlook for the status of Iranian women in traditionally male jobs. It, therefore, helps refute stereotypes of Iranian women as oppressed, yet in other ways makes generalizations about Muslim women elsewhere. At the end of the article, Farsian says: "unlike some other Islamic countries in the Middle East, such as Saudi Arabia, women are allowed to drive in Iran" (p. 19). Farsian cites Saudi Arabia as one of "some) countries that prevent women from driving, when in fact, it is the only Muslim country that prevents women from driving. Hence, readers are given the impression that many Muslim women in various countries are not allowed to drive, which is not true.

Some international articles focus on banking and Muslim women in various parts of the world. Gabe Stewart (2002) of *The Scotsman*, for example, argues that although the "testosterone top-heavy gender split in top banking management is reflected" in the 2002 IBSS,⁵ where only 27 of the 148 international delegates were women, what "raises eyebrows," however, is that seven out of the 20 Muslim delegates attending were Muslim women. "Women are the sole representatives of Malaysia, the United Arab Emirates and Turkey," Stewart explains (p. 10). The reporter quotes Egyptian banker Reem Galal el Din Abdel Motaal, as saying that banks

generally prefer to hire men to avoid dealing with maternity leaves and because banks generally involve long working hours. “Of course the chairman of Egyptian banks are all men because such positions are very demanding,” argues Abdel Motaal. But Stewart also quotes Mona Badry, another Egyptian delegate, who asserts that both men and women bankers have similar salaries and opportunities. “Success depends on their skill and motivation, not their sex,” argues Badry (p. 10).

The reporter then quotes Malaysian banking delegate Khaliza Adillah Khalid, who says she expected more Western females to attend the 2002 IBSS. “After all, the West is not short of competent and smart ladies,” says Khalid. “You are way ahead of us in terms of emancipation and education. So what happened?” (p. 10). Commenting on Muslim women’s economic status, Khalid tells Stewart that Islam promotes equal rights for women and the Malaysian government practices such equality. “What is stopping women, I think, is themselves. Their reluctance to undertake bigger roles, lack of confidence, mobility and resilience are some factors,” concludes Khalid, adding that being at the top can be uncomfortable and very demanding. “But I feel women do make better managers. They are more patient, more nurturing and highly organized, not to mention their communication skills” (p. 10).

Overall, Stewart’s article once again demonstrates how, “across divides, it appears women have fundamentally more common than not” (p. 10). Muslim women include many career-oriented women, similar to their Western counterparts. Furthermore, the diverse comments by Muslim banking delegates illustrate how Muslim women vary in their thinking, personalities, aspirations and capabilities as well as their economic rights from one country to the next.

Another story on Muslim women and banking comes from the *Jerusalem Post*, yet reporter Dan Gerstenfeld's (2003) article has quite a different focus. Although Gerstenfeld aims to "destroy some of the old perspectives held by Israelis" about their Arab neighbors, his writing seems to confirm some stereotypes rather than "destroy" them. The article looks at Dubai's banking business, which Israeli visitors found impressive and therefore, concluded that "the Bedouin genius is not inferior to the Jewish one" (p. 32). Yet, when Gerstenfeld talks about women in Dubai, one cannot miss the Orientalist hints in the reporter's message. Speaking of the Israeli delegates who attended the IMF and WB annual gathering in Dubai, Gerstenfeld says:

The 60-strong mission received a taste of a city, which likes its women to dress in traditional black clothes over the latest designer jeans, and reveal only part of their faces, leaving the rest to the viewers' imagination (p. 32).

Later in the story, Gerstendfeld informs readers that most men and women in Dubai wear traditional clothes; yet, the country is less traditional than some of its Arab neighbors, "even hosting the Miss Universe competition in 1995" (p. 32). The reporter tells us that other features of Dubai's "liberalism" and "openness" include the abundance of alcohol, less strict enforcement of Islamic rules, veiled women smoking, non-veiled women dancing in jeans as well as "near-naked" belly dancers in Lebanese restaurants (p. 32).

It is quite interesting that Gerstenfeld focuses on women's veiling, smoking and attire, given that the main topic was Dubai's impressive banking business. Instead of getting an in-depth look at this banking system, and learning about the men and women who run this successful sector in Dubai's flourishing economy, readers learn about the superficial signs of liberalism, which mostly focus on the Muslim women and their outer appearance.

Job Discrimination against Muslim Women Abroad

Reporters who focus on Muslim women abroad either examine forms of job discrimination against the women or some Muslim women's success in foreign economies. The bulk of the local and international articles analyzed in this section, however, focus on job discrimination Muslim women face within the United States, Canada and Europe, mainly due to their hijab. The *Star Tribune*, for example, introduces readers to Saida Mohamud, a Muslim resident of Minneapolis who "has yet to recover from the impact that Sept. 11 had on Muslims such as she" (Leslie, 2002, p. 8A). Mohamud, a Somali, says she thought she had secured a housekeeping job in a nursing home after she was asked to fill out the paperwork, was handed a work schedule and was informed of her \$8/hour salary but was then told by a manager that she would not be hired because she was not fluent in English. "He almost hired me and he then immediately told me, sorry. Isn't that discrimination?" Mohamud said to the reporter through a translator (p. 8A). Amal Yusuf, director of the Somali Women's Association was quoted by Leslie as saying Mohamud was one of many Muslim women being discriminated against post 9/11. "There are jobs that you don't need English skills for, like maintenance or assembly work, but they're being deprived of those too," Yusuf adds (p. 8A). This leads Leslie to argue that for Muslim women like Mohamud, and "other Twin Cities Muslims and Arabs, this kind of subtle discrimination gradually has replaced the physical and verbal harassment they experienced soon after the hijacking attacks" (p. 8A).

Other stories on job discrimination against Muslim women include a *New York Times* article on a Justice Department lawsuit against the Metropolitan Transportation Authority and New York City Transit for discriminating against Muslim employees who wear the hijab, as well as Sikhs who wear a head turban. Luo (2004) explains that the lawsuit includes incidents since

2002, where four Muslim female bus drivers were barred from driving buses on the road and reassigned to work within bus depots after refusing to wear regulation caps over their hijab. Union leaders claim that the alternative jobs meant the women had fewer opportunities for overtime, a significant source of bus drivers' income. Luo also quotes Transport Workers Union lawyer Arthur Schwartz as saying that even if "the jobs were equivalent in pay and other benefits, reassigning them placed an unfair stigma on them" (p. 4). Schwartz also explained that one of the women had been wearing her hijab for over 10 years while driving a passenger bus without any problems. "The union has supported the rights of these individuals to wear religious headwear from the beginning," says Schwartz. "And we're excited that the government is coming in on the side of the employees and their right to exercise their religious beliefs" (p. 4).

Canadian newspapers include several stories on incidents of job discrimination against Canadian Muslim women who don the hijab; one of the noteworthy stories is a *Toronto Star* article that highlights a study on work discrimination among women who wear the hijab versus those who do not. Keung (2002) summarizes the results of a year-long study that involved three teams of two women each, where one woman in each team wore a hijab and the women of each team were matched in height, color, age, accent, Canadian work experience, mannerisms and identical resumes. Each team applied to jobs at 16 Toronto employers, including fast food outlets, retail stores as well as factories. The study, which was funded by a \$100,000 grant from the federal government and city, noted whether or not applicants were asked to fill out an application, given information about the available jobs or asked to leave a resume. Keung says the report revealed that women with hijab were treated differently in most cases; in 62.5 percent of the instances, women without the hijab were asked to fill out an application, compared to 12.5 percent for their veiled counterparts. "There were also examples where the woman with a hijab

was told there were no jobs or no application forms available, when another without the hijab had just completed the application process minutes earlier,” the reporter adds (p. A04).

Keung says that 29 out of the 32 Muslim women surveyed “said they have had an employer make a reference to their hijab while applying for a job in the manufacturing, sales and services sectors” (p. A04). Twenty-one of the women had been asked if they could take the head cover off and one-third of them had been told flatly, “you must take it off if you want a job” (p. A04). The reporter also mentioned that Muslim women have been discriminated against even without being seen at all, based on their Muslim names. Keung cites the example of a Muslim woman who applied for jobs using her maiden name, Mohamed, in her resume; when she received no responses, the woman applied to the exact same jobs using her married name, Covington, she immediately received calls for interviews.

Other Canadian newspaper articles reveal that Muslim women are among the most highly educated in Canada, but are underemployed. Harvey (2004) of the *Gazette*, for example, cites yet another study by the Canadian Council of Muslim Women that says nearly one in every three Muslim women over 25 is a university graduate, compared to one in five of all Canadian women. Canadian Muslim women are also twice as likely to hold a masters or a Ph.D., Harvey adds. Yet, 16.5 percent of these qualified Muslim women are unemployed, “more than double the overall national rate for Canadian women,” says Harvey. Moreover, the women who do find a job, usually do not work in their specific field, and sometimes land a short-term position; only 60 percent of Muslim women specializing in the health sector actually work in this field. “There are more than 1,100 women with PhDs, which are enough to staff a medium-sized university,” economist Daood Hamdani is quoted as saying. Harvey also cites board member of the Canadian Council of Muslim Women, Nuzha Jafri, who hopes the survey’s results will spur the

government and Canadian businesses to address work discrimination against Muslim women.

“The fact is that these women are available, and totally underutilized,” Jafri adds (p. A13).

Discrimination against Muslim women, based on the veil are also common in Europe, as highlighted by various newspaper articles. One of the most recent examples is that of a British Muslim school teacher, who was sacked for refusing to take off her face covering in class, although she had agreed to take it off in front of her students in the absence of male colleagues. The Church of England School in Dewsbury, West York, where 23-year-old Aishah Azmi had worked, claimed her veil made it hard for her students to understand her (*BBC News* online, 2006). Azmi’s story is noteworthy because it came shortly after comments by Member of Parliament and former British Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw (2006), who in October 2006, wrote a column in a local British newspaper suggesting that women who wear the full veil make community relations more difficult and, therefore, should abandon it altogether. Straw said he had previously asked veiled women who visited his office to take off the veil to allow for “better communication” (*BBC News* online, 2006).⁶

It therefore becomes clear from the articles analyzed in this section that women who cover their hair or face are often mistreated at the workplace or not even allowed to enter the job market, even if they are highly qualified. One could suggest that part of the reason for job discrimination against Muslim women in Western countries could be the stereotypical images and negative portrayals of these women, which are currently in vogue and are inaccurately seen to be a true representation of these women. The oppressed, helpless and ignorant Muslim woman is still the most salient image, despite the abundance of diverse examples of Muslim women, veiled or not, who are educated, assertive and active in the economies of their countries of residence. Yet, many reporters, politicians and professionals, choose to ignore these positive

models. A clear example comes from Straw's column, where he actually admits his conversation with one veiled woman "contained some surprises," such as his discovery that the woman was not forced by the husband into wearing the veil. "She had read books and thought about the issue," says Straw. "She felt more comfortable wearing the veil when out. People bothered her less" (online article). That still does not keep Straw from saying that the veil makes him "uncomfortable" when talking to these women.

Muslim Women Thrive in Foreign Economies

On the other end of the spectrum, there are many Muslim women who, in fact, excel in Western economies and are given the chance to compete equally with men for jobs that are often not open to them in their conservative home countries. These include Miriam Bouzid, the first Moroccan-Belgian woman to become a professional pilot. "When Miriam Bouzid was 9, her parents asked what she wanted to be when she grew up. Her answer shocked them/; a pilot," is how Jennifer Ehrlich (2004) introduces Bouzid in the lead of this *Christian Science Monitor* article. "Educated, motivated, and multilingual, she is part of an emerging group of young Muslim women who are outpacing their male counterparts in making the transition into mainstream European society, the workplace, and even political office," writes Ehrlich (p. 07). She adds that the success of these emerging educated young Muslim women is hoped to break the unemployment trend that has branded many European migrants. Ehrlich portrays Bouzid as determined and strong-willed; she tells readers that her route to being a pilot was "not direct," having dropped out of high school and getting involved in an unsuccessful arranged marriage at the age of 16, at her families urging. It took the young Muslim woman six years in Belgian courts to finally get a divorce, after which she "took adult education classes to finish high school

and pursue the advanced science degree needed for pilot training” (p. 07). One might argue that Ehrlich’s summation of Bouzid’s difficult marriage experience confirms the image of the helpless and oppressed Muslim woman. On the contrary, one could also argue that knowing Bouzid’s circumstances and how she was determined to move on and get over her failed marriage portrays her as strong-willed and assertive rather than weak and helpless. This image of Bouzid as strong is further confirmed by her quotes; as she tells Ehrlich that a Muslim woman’s success in a Western economy largely depends on her own attitude. “...you can’t expect presents to arrive at your door,” explains Bouzid. “You have to have a goal in life, but if you say, I am Muslim, I wear a headscarf, I will never get anywhere, then you really won’t” (p. 07). Not only does Bouzid here confirm to readers that she is assertive and strong-willed, but her reference to her headscarf, could possibly demonstrate how she does not view her hijab as an obstacle or a deterrence in fulfilling her childhood dream of becoming a pilot.

What is also interesting about Ehrlich’s story is how she explains that young Muslim men are not faring as positively as their female counterparts, possibly for the reasons that keep many women from traditional families inside the home. Ehrlich argues that Belgium’s Turkish and Moroccan families give young Muslim men a lot of freedom, yet girls and women are mostly restricted to the home. This has led girls to excel in education, whereas the boys, enjoying too much freedom, are not doing so well academically. “The future is getting better for girls who further their education but for boys it is getting worse-they get fewer chances in school and in work,” Moroccan-Belgian teacher, Rachida Mohout, is quoted as saying (p. 07). Ehrlich quotes Christiane Timmerman, an equal opportunities researcher at the University of Antwerp, as saying that the freedom that boys enjoy in the public sphere makes them less motivated to work hard to

get anywhere; whereas girls “know from the start that if they want more independent living, and they want to have a greater role in public life, education is their only way out” (p. 07).

Another reason for the increased success of Muslim women in Belgium as opposed to the men is related to Western perceptions of young Muslim men as responsible for crimes and violence. Ehrlich claims that such stereotypes are leading many schools to reject training Muslim males, which is, in fact illegal. The end result is that males are forced to drop out after high school or shift to vocational-type schools, which in turn, shrinks their job opportunities. Women on the other hand, are encouraged to excel in the Dutch economy. “Some firms feel that they are a progressive firm if they hire migrant women-but not the men,” argues Mohout (p. 07). Yet Timmerman gives a very different reason as to why Muslim women are accepted more easily into the Belgian economy than their male counterparts: “...Westerners often start with a negative attitude towards Mediterranean Muslim men, but the attitude toward women is that we pity them” (Ehrlich, 2004, p. 07). Timmerman’s statement therefore, demonstrates that even when Muslim women excel, their success is often ignored or shadowed by the prevalent image of the victimized and oppressed Muslim woman that deserves a Westerner’s pity because of her poor and helpless circumstances and not so much because she is smart, intelligent and deserves a chance like her Western female counterparts.

On the one hand, Ehrlich’s article portrays Muslim women as intelligent and assertive, as illustrated by her reference to Bouzid’s route to becoming the first Moroccan-Belgian Muslim female pilot. But, on the other hand, the article also demonstrates how Muslim women are still largely viewed as being fragile and helpless creatures that deserve the West’s pity and assistance. Hence, even when Muslim women work hard to succeed and fit into Western societies, they are still viewed with an Orientalist lens as the Other.

Another article that introduces readers to successful Muslim woman is Dunford's (2003) story about Khadija Darid, editor of *Femmes Arabes*, a bilingual magazine that targets the 1.2 million Arab and Muslim women in North America. "I was inspired to start a woman's magazine in order to give Arab women living in North America a sense of pride during this time of international tension," Darid is quoted as saying in *The Gazette* (p. B1). Darid, a Moroccan who moved to Montreal in the late 1980s, argues that her magazine caters to Muslim female immigrants who do not see themselves represented in Western women's magazines. "These women are uncomfortable with the type of articles published in conventional women's magazines such as new sexual positions and articles that glamorize the single woman," argues Darid, a wife and mother of three young children (p. B1). Durnford, whose article is titled "A voice for Arab women: *Femmes Arabes* published in Montreal," tells readers that, interestingly, men are among the magazine's greatest supporters. Overall, the reporter conveys the message that the West is abundant with successful and assertive Muslim women, who are determined to fit into Western societies while embracing their traditional and religious heritage.

The articles analyzed in this section demonstrate the diverse portrayals of Muslim women in the news, with regards to jobs and the economy. They demonstrate how the Muslim world is full of numerous success stories of assertive, smart and intelligent business women, bankers, economists and economic government officials. The articles also illustrate how economic conditions vary from one country to the next, informing readers that conditions are slowly improving for Muslim women in terms of better job opportunities and employment conditions. In sum, the majority of these articles portray Muslim women as independent, assertive and smart.

Newspaper articles on Muslim women abroad portray them as self-reliant and intelligent; helpless and pitiful, and as discriminated against because of their faith and/or hijab. The current

analysis demonstrates how Muslim women are still largely viewed as the weak and helpless Other, even when their intellect and job performance proves otherwise. Yet, the analysis also illustrates how Muslim women are able to defy obstacles and reach self-sufficiency and success at securing a job, or opening up a business.

Muslim-Arab Women in Local Politics

A diverse collection of local and international articles layout the political status of Muslim women in a number of countries; these news stories, columns and editorials examine specific issues regarding women in politics that differ from country to country. Stories on the Gulf region, for example, focus on women's voting and legal rights. Stories on Afghanistan discuss women's rights pre and post-Taliban and the U.S. invasion. These diverse articles, as I will demonstrate, make it clear that Muslim women differ in their rights, aspirations and capabilities from one country to the next and even within individual countries.

Gulf Politics

A number of local and international articles hailed the Bahraini 2002 elections, the first Gulf elections where women could participate as candidates and voters. The most notable trend in the majority of these articles is the number of politically active Bahraini women that immediately jumped at the opportunity to be politically active; these are women that are educated, independent, politically-informed and ambitious, thus refuting any claims that Gulf women are helpless, passive and nothing but oppressed. *The New York Times*, for example, quotes a number of Bahraini female activists who embraced the positive change, yet also had to endure local rejection by traditional Islamists who opposed women's participation. "Everyone

welcomed the step of giving women the right to vote, but when it comes to the elections, it's different," MacFarquhar (2002) quotes prominent government official, Bahiya al-Jishi, as saying. "Our society is still traditional, patriarchal. It gives you a picture of who dominates life here" (p.3). Safiya Assad, an accountant who was running for candidacy in one of the capital's districts, explains that the problem lies in traditionalists who turn voting into a "religious duty," thus leading many of his followers to vote for candidates proposed by religious clerics rather than based on a candidate's credentials. "Mrs. Assad, who wears a headscarf, was criticized for having too bright a shade of red lipstick and showing a little bit of hair on her campaign posters," says MacFarquhar (p. 3). Kindergarten teacher Bahiya al-Ataawi, another candidate who dresses very conservatively, with her eyes only showing, received daily phone calls asking her to withdraw from the elections. "Some of them said that even just my eyes were too alluring," adds Ataawi (p. 3). MacFarquhar's interviews with these female activists are important on two fronts; on the one hand, they illustrate that political female activists are a reality in conservative countries like Bahrain. On the other hand, these interviews also demonstrate that women are held back by close-minded traditionalists who misinterpret Islam to hold women back.

The dilemma is that many in the West focus on the latter, thus emphasizing Muslim women's misfortune and oppression, completely erasing ambitious and assertive female politicians' existence in such countries. But the truth is, these women exist, and they are equipped with resilience and determination to break through these obstacles. An example would be Saba al-Asfour, who MacFarquhar tells us found it difficult to attract constituents in the small village she was running from. "Finally, she erected a tent, moving it every couple of days to try to capture new audiences" (p. 3). Although Asfour still met resistance, like the one man who told her during an online chat session with voters that he considered it a sin to visit a woman's tent,

this incident demonstrates that Bahraini women are filled with creativity and determination to make a difference.

Although MacFarquhar's presents Bahraini women in a positive light, one has to question his lead; for the reporter starts the story by introducing Safat Aysar, a voter in the elections, who explains to readers why she finds "male candidates far superior" than women: "Men just use their brains better, they know more about what is going on in the world...In lots of situations women are overpowered by their emotions" (p. 3). As if her statement is not enough to portray Bahraini women as passive and apathetic, MacFarquhar confirms this conclusion by describing Aysar as a "hospital worker draped from head to toe in black so that only her eyes showed behind gold-rimmed glasses" (p. 3). Starting out the story with a combination of Aysar's veiling and black abaya and her docile statement on men's superiority immediately gives readers the impression that Bahraini women are invisible, both behind their black veils, and also from politics and social life. One, therefore, has to question why the reporter chose to start out with this stereotypical model of the Bahraini woman, given that his article is filled with examples of open-minded, confident and intelligent women.

Another noteworthy trend presented in some articles is the large number of elderly Bahraini women, who were among the first to take part in the 2002 elections. The *Ottawa Citizen* quotes Fatima Abdul Aziz, 70, who tells reporter Adnan Malik (2002) that she was not swayed by election resistors in her village. "I was asked by people to boycott, but I told them to get lost," says Abdul Aziz (p. A16). Thomas Friedman (2002) also writes in *The New York Times* of how he was mostly "struck" by "the number of elderly women who voted, many covered from head to toe in black burqa-like robes" (p. 13). Friedman adds that many of the women were illiterate; "they would check the picture of the candidate they wanted to vote for and then stuff the ballot in

the box—voting less for a politician than for their own empowerment” (p. 13). Indeed, the elections are empowering Bahraini women, a fact that is confirmed by the words of an elderly Shiite woman who, addressing the King’s wife, Sheika Sabika, a huge campaigner for Bahraini women’s suffrage, said: “Thank you. Because we can now vote, for the first time our husbands are asking us what we think and are interested in what we have to say” (p. 13). These articles, therefore, help explain to readers that political opportunities are slowly expanding for Bahraini women; they also demonstrate how women in Bahrain are embracing the change, both as active voters and as candidates. Thus, Muslim women can thrive in a democracy, even if they choose to wear traditional abayas, thus proving that their dress code is not impeding their political activities.

Although women in Saudi Arabia are not as lucky as their Bahraini counterparts, in terms of being granted suffrage rights, they are no less resilient or courageous, as is demonstrated by two articles on Saudi Arabia’s 2005 elections. A *Christian Science Monitor* editorial, for instance, says “Three brave Saudis broke history recently when they became the first women to announce plans to run in local elections in the gender-segregated kingdom-considered Islam’s birthplace” (*Christian Science Monitor* editorial, 2004, p. 09). The Kingdom conducted its first municipal elections in over 40 years in 2005; women were later told they would not be able to vote or run for candidacy for “administrative reasons,” such as the absence of enough “women to staff separate polling and registration stations; neither do very many Saudi women have the photo IDs required for voting” (p. 09). But eager Saudi women, including architect candidate Nadia Bakhurji, were confident that they could overcome these obstacles if granted the chance, but they were not.

Natasha Walter (2005) of *The Guardian* also examines the elections in a 4484-worded feature, arguing that Saudi Arabia's extreme segregation leaves women "effectively voiceless" (p. 14). Walter leads her story on the elections with a description of Saudi women shopping in a Riyadh, women-only mall, as the "black-robed figures without faces" who can shop at this mall "without fear of a man's glance (p. 14). Given that Walter's main focus is on women's voting rights, one has to query her focus on the women's abayas, and her reference to Saudi women as "faceless" and generalized assumptions that the women "fear" male glances. Among Walter's many sweeping generalizations is her description of Saudi journalist Iman al-Kahtani as both "unusual" and "not a typical Saudi woman," based on Kahtani's outspoken and bold nature. Yet the reporter contradicts herself, as she later writes that Kahtani is part of a growing trend of Saudi women who are calling for more freedom, including six women who wanted to take part in the city council elections. Aside from a description of Saudi women's outside appearance, readers are not really told what a "typical" Saudi woman looks like. Yet, throughout her story, Walter quotes many intelligent open-minded, religious and pro-democracy Saudi women who are publicly voicing their opinions, demands and aspirations, thus refuting her own argument that Saudi women are voiceless. Walter also explains that women like Kahtani, Bakhurji and many others are confidently speaking up because of their economic success in the Kingdom, along with their wide connections and sound education. "You have to be into female society here-you can't mix with men," Walter quotes Bakhurji as saying. "So we have started to build our own networks, and we are doing it very successfully" (p. 14). She also quotes Hatoun al-Fassi, a historian and human rights activist who was strongly campaigning for Bakhurji. "I couldn't stand as a candidate myself this time," explains Fassi, who was pregnant at the time. Walter explains in detail how a very pregnant Fassi was being served dates and tea by her "quietly urbane"

husband, who, in “his long, white robe,” also fetched her a footstool for her feet (p. 14). This brief sentence could clarify to readers that not all Saudi men are oppressive, polygamist bigots as they are often portrayed to be.

Ironically, after referring to more than one example of assertive and informed Saudi political activists, Walter again brings readers back to the image of the “faceless” Saudi woman. For, she says:

If radical change does come, observers assume that it will be propelled by women such as these. But of course they are only a minority. Their gloss and confidence seems almost surreal when contrasted with the invisibility of women in Saudi life as a whole. And however impressive this elite may be, some still seem infantilized by their experience of being dependent on the whims of men throughout their lives (p. 14).

Walter is referring to women who actually enjoy being cared for and looked after by their male counterparts. “I look at you women in the west and I think how hard it must be not to have anyone to look after you,” the reporter quotes a female owner of Saudi health spas as saying. This leads Walter to conclude:

I can see that for Saudi women who have high incomes, the chances to holiday in the West, the money for a reliable driver and, above all, supportive male relatives-the sine qua non of any tolerable life for a woman here-there is no urgent need for revolution. The glided cage is very glittery indeed, and many women are content to ignore the fact that they do not have the right to step out of it (p. 14).

Walter here seems to echo dominant feminist discourse that “Muslim women need to abandon hijab and adopt a secular framework for activism and resistance to the patriarchal establishments that pervade our societies,” as Muslim feminist Maliha Chishti (2002) argues (p. 107). She is

ignoring the fact that this successful Saudi businesswoman, like many other women, is framing her discussions of political equality within the framework of Islam and Saudi traditions. She does not talk of political rights in terms of a “revolution” as Walter expects, because like many Muslim women, she wants more rights without having to abandon the cultural and religious support system that encompasses her. Because this Saudi woman seems opposed to a secular, universal rights and freedoms view, Walter dismisses her views and brands her as “passive,” telling readers that she, and other Saudi women who share her view, are imprisoned in a “glittery cage” and do not want to get out of it.

As much as I agree that women in Saudi are segregated and mistreated on various fronts, as I have reiterated numerously throughout this study, it is also fair to argue that Saudi women are not passive and are not caged animals that are content with their imprisonment. The fact that they do not support a universal form of freedom and democracy does not mean they are anti-democracy. Like many Muslim women, Saudis want reform, on condition that it adheres to their Islamic teachings. In fact, many of the stories analyzed in this chapter, including Walter’s article, point to how Muslim female activists “refer to the Quran in order to argue that, in the deepest traditions of Islam, women could participate politically, could work freely, could travel, could have a voice in society” (Walter, 2005, p. 14). The bottom line is, Saudi Arabia is filled with examples of assertive, ambitious and politically active women who are willing to fight on their own terms to better their lives. This resilience is evident in a concluding remark by Fassi: “Rights are not given, they are taken. If our demands are legitimate, as I believe they are, then one day we will get these rights” (p. 14).

The bulk of local and international articles on the Gulf region examine the political status of women in Kuwait. These articles introduce readers to courageous Kuwaiti women who use

creative means to protest for political rights and also introduce them to Kuwaiti female politicians who finally won the vote in 2005. A 2003 story from *The Washington Post* includes an interview with Masoumah Mubarak, a professor of political science at Kuwait University, who says for years she waited for the day that women would be granted suffrage, based on promises from the Sabah ruling family. Then her hopes were crushed after the emir publicly endorsed women's suffrage in 1999, only to have parliament vote against it. "Mubarak no longer believes," says reporter Susan Glasser (2003, p. A01). In a *St. Petersburg Times* story, Mubarak later says "We want people to believe we are a democratic country, but unfortunately those in Parliament do not understand what democracy is all about" (Martin, 2003, p. 2A). Martin explains that although Kuwaiti women enjoy more rights than other women in the region, in terms of social freedom, education and work, unlike many women in the region they are not allowed to vote. The reporter cites Parliament conservatives who claim that Islam does not allow women to hold government positions. But Mubarak refutes this argument, saying there is "nothing in the Quran...that specifically bars women from voting or holding office; on the contrary, Islam encourages them to participate in public life" (p. 2A). The university professor believes that traditional Bedouin tribesmen, who were granted Kuwaiti citizenship in the 1970s, are to blame for such backward thinking. She argues that the Bedouins "look down on women and don't grasp the idea that we are human" (p. 2A). This conservative line of thinking is restricted to parliament, however, as many Kuwaiti women have for long held prominent government positions, including the ambassador to the United Nations, Nabeela Abdulla al-Mulla (Fattah, 2005, p. 6).

Many local and international reporters argue that Kuwaiti women have been demonstrating for years in the face of Parliament's reluctance to grant them their political rights.

The Irish Times, for example, cites the March 2005 demonstrations by 500 Kuwaiti mostly female activists outside parliament, which was the largest demonstration for women's rights. "Women's rights now," and "Our democracy will only be complete with women," and "We are not less, you are not more," are among the slogans chanted by the demonstrators (*The Irish Times*, 2005, p. 11). Not only do Kuwaiti women protest for their rights, but they use creative means and the latest technology to bolster their protests; an example would be Rola Dashti, one of several political activists and organizers of the 2005 demonstrations, who used text messaging to "mobilize followers, dodge authorities and swarm quickly to protest sites" (Coll, 2005, p. A01). These female activists are convinced text messaging made their protests more effective than previous ones as they were now able to call young protestors to come out of school and join them in the streets. Dashti, explains the anonymous insults she receives on her cell phone as a positive sign. "It means I'm making them nervous. I'm on their list," she says, referring to Kuwaiti conservative activists (p. A01). Coll tells readers that Dashti hopes to run for office, once Kuwaiti women are granted suffrage.

In sum, the majority of these articles clearly demonstrate that Kuwaiti women are courageous and persistent fighters who are determined to gain their political rights. In fact, the women's persistence, along with the Kuwaiti government's backing, forced Parliament to pass a law in May of 2005 that granted them the right to vote and run in elections. "We made it. This is history," Dashti is quoted as saying. "Our target is the parliamentary polls in 2007. I'm starting my campaign from today" (*The Irish Times*, 2005, p. 9). Many other female activists expressed their elation at the news, including columnist Muna Al-Fuzai, who says she "finally feels like a full human being" (Etheridge, 2005, p. 07). Five political female activists, including Dashti, announced themselves as candidates, promptly after being granted their rights. "These five are

well-known in Kuwait and liberal in their political outlook,” writes Etheridge in the *Christian Science Monitor*. “All will likely face stiff opposition from the Islamist political bloc” (p. 07).

Overall, these articles highlight women’s steely determination and loud voice that enabled them to gain the right to vote and run for office. A month after the decision was made, the government also named Professor Maasuma Mubarak as the first Gulf female minister. “I feel this is a great honor for Kuwaiti women and appreciation of their struggle and great services to the country,” said Mubarak, the new Minister of Planning and Administrative Development (*The Australian*, 2005, p. 7). Essentially, these news stories demonstrate how women are slowly gaining grounds in the Gulf countries, and are therefore, forcing neighboring countries to follow suit or risk persistent demonstrations by the growing number of female activists in the region.

The Women of Egypt

Moving away from the Gulf region, American and European reporters also examine the political status of women in Muslim countries such as Egypt, where the focus is on the mistreatment of female political activists, who were among the anti-government demonstrators severely attacked by government supporters in May 2005. *Washington Post* correspondent Daniel Williams (2005) affirms that at least five women were pulled from the majority-male protestors on the steps of the Journalists’ Syndicate in Cairo and “subjugated to slaps, punches, kicks and groping. The blouses of at least two were ripped” (p. A01). The government’s brutality is part of a crackdown on anti-government movements that aim to end President Hosni Mubarak’s 25-year rule. Opposition groups include the Muslim Brotherhood and *Kifaya* (Enough), a movement that combines male and female political and human rights activists, journalists and intellectuals. Kifaya protestors were the ones demonstrating at the entrance of the

Journalists' Syndicate. Williams (2005) quotes Kifaya activist and political science professor Rabab Mahdy, one of the women abused by pro-Mubarak marchers, who asserts that assailants, some as young as 20 years of age, punched and slapped her until she fell on the pavement. "They put their hands in every conceivable place. I was basically sexually abused," Mahdy later told the reporter (p. A01). The activist was finally saved by policemen in plain clothes. Development Support Center worker, Iman Ouf, was another victim of pro-government protestors. "Boys hit her with sticks until she fainted" (p. A01). *Associated Press* reporter, Sarah El Deeb, also told Williams that Mubarak loyalists punched, groped and tore the clothes of one woman while police looked on until the woman vomited and fainted. Deeb herself was grabbed and pulled by the hair (p. A01).

In another article, Williams talks to more female victims of pro-government demonstrators. These include lawyer Rabaa Fahmy, "a slender woman in a black skirt and jacket, [who] had already been beaten and dragged into the street" by the government-led mob. Determined to take revenge and press charges on her attacker she returned to the place where she was groped, slapped and dragged down a staircase to try to identify her assailant, only to be attacked once more (p. A17). "I wanted the police to arrest him," Fahmy later said. "I wanted to bring him to them. When the mob threw me out to the street again, a policeman asked me, 'Didn't we tell you to go home?'" (p. A17). Williams describes Fahmy, 38, as "an oddity in Kifaya;" she is a devout Muslim, a modern-dressed woman, who volunteered to serve in the Egyptian army, which is not mandatory for women, and as a civilian, she traveled to Iraq to fight American troops. After her second round of beating and humiliation at the Syndicate, Fahmy walked to the closest police station to file a complaint but the officers there refused to take a statement. The whole experience shattered Fahmy's "rosy view" of Egypt and the status of

women. “We are supposed to have an ethical basis of society here. We don’t attack women. I’m embarrassed,” says Fahmy (p. A17). Despite the humiliation she suffered, the activist is determined to continue the fight and keep on organizing and attending anti-Mubarak demonstrations. “This was obviously aimed at eliminating women from protest,” concludes Fahmy. “I would like to put Hosni Mubarak on trial for this” (p. A17).

In general, female activists, both humiliated and shocked by the whole incident, exhibit determination and resilience in their reaction to the attacks. Hundreds of these courageous women, all dressed in black, took to the streets one week after the assaults, denouncing Mubarak and demanding the resignation of Interior Minister Habib al-Adly. “I want a public apology from those responsible,” exclaimed demonstrator Ghada Shahbandar. “My children will not be brought up to believe that this is acceptable” (Saleh, 2005, p. 10). Journalist Eman Taha was another activist that was beaten by the mob and hospitalized for four days. She says after being attacked by men, “a boy then kicked me with his shoe in my lower abdomen two or three times” (El-Naggar, 2005, p. 8). Articles on this tragic incident on the one hand relay to readers that Egypt is endowed with numerous courageous and politically active women; women that are obviously scaring the government for it to react in such a shameful manner. On the other hand, these articles demonstrate that when it comes to women’s political status, Egypt seems to be retreating rather than moving forward; for a country that has for years included women in public office and granted women suffrage, it is inconceivable how the government could authorize such barbaric actions. The incident is even more mind blowing, given that women in Egypt are normally treated with great honor and the idea of men beating on a woman is unimaginable. One has to conclude that these women do seem to hold more power than they think; the government, threatened by their protests, seemed to think that by humiliating the women, this would

discourage their political activism. What the government failed to realize was that its barbaric actions in fact strengthened the women's determination to continue to fight political injustices.

A contradictory story on Egyptian politics highlights positive steps towards democracy and towards greater participation for women. This *USA Today* story informs readers that Egypt appointed its first female judge in 2003 (Slavin, 2003, p. 7A). In a more recent move, the government appointed 30 female judges earlier this year, "the largest such group to be appointed since 2003..." (*Gulf Times* online, 2007). Dressed in a dark business suit and colored headscarf, one of the newly-appointed judges, 35-year-old Eman el-Imam, said "I am so happy and proud. God willing, women will be able to show they deserve this" (*Gulf Times* online, 2007).

Thus it becomes obvious from these two contradicting stories that women in Egypt are taking positive steps towards more political power, yet are also retreating on other fronts. The government seems to encourage political participation by women as long as it does not contradict its agenda.

The Case of Afghanistan

The majority of local and international articles on the political status of women in Afghanistan focus on how women emerge out of the 2001 U.S.-led war as active politicians, prominent government officials and even presidential candidates. Many articles introduce readers to assertive Afghani women like Massouda Jalal, the first woman to run for president in post-Taliban Afghanistan. *The Houston Chronicle's* John Otis (2004) argues that even though Jalal, a pediatrician and mother of three, did not stand much of a chance in the October 2004 presidential elections, competing against interim leader Hamid Karzai, Jalal would still come out victorious. "Many see her as a pioneer, willing to ruffle feathers and risk the wrath of

traditionalists” (p. 1). Otis’ statement is confirmed by the wide support Jalal met from many women and men, including her husband. “We do not expect her to win, because the notion that men are superior still prevails,” explains Amina Afzali of Afghanistan’s Independent Human Rights Commission. “But even if Jalal fails, she encourages other women to get involved in politics.” Otis describes Jalal to be a devout Muslim, who made pilgrimage to Mecca, Islam’s holiest site; yet many traditionalists and conservative Islamists still do not approve of her running for presidency. But Jalal demonstrates determination and courage in the face of such opposition. “A woman can present the positive face of Afghanistan,” she asserts. “Most people see Afghanistan as the country of the Taliban and drugs, but I will bring more prestige to the country” (p. 1). The fact that a woman emerged out of years under Taliban oppression with the confidence and courage to run for presidency deserves recognition.

Many other Afghani women deserve recognition too, given that nearly 90 percent of the women are illiterate, yet women make up almost 42 percent of all registered voters, according to *The Independent’s* Nick Meo (2004). “For the first time in Afghanistan’s history, women will be playing a major role in the political process, although many will vote as their husbands say,” argues Meo (p. 28). Meo’s statement here needs to be slightly corrected, as these elections present the first time “in years” that Afghani women play a significant political role, but not the first time in the country’s history as the reporter inaccurately claims. Afghani women have been active politicians and have held prominent government positions as early as the 1920s, when King Amanullah Habibullah ruled the country and promoted liberal reforms and women’s rights up until his exile in 1929 (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003).

Although many of these news stories reflect the positive change in Afghanistan society and politics post-Taliban, focusing on the promising future for the country’s women, some

articles also discuss the troubles that women still endure. Amy Waldman (2004) of *The New York Times*, for example, talks to three uneducated Afghani women, who seem confused about the whole election process and cannot decide whether or not they should vote. “All three women said there had been far too little voter education for women, and they feared that many women would just vote for whoever’s ballot photo looked best to them,” says Waldman (p. 3). The women also seem fearful about voting, given the risk of possible attacks by Taliban insurgents; they further complain of conservative male relatives, who might not allow them to vote.

Waldman also addresses the education issue; for although Karzai opened schools and jobs to all women, many Afghani women have little or no education and, therefore, cannot get decent jobs. “Because we ruined our lives not being educated, we want a good future for our own kids so they do not have the same life,” Waldman quotes Roshana, one of the three women interviewed in the story, as saying (p. 3). Despite her education deficiency, this simple Afghani woman displays determination and assertion to write off the past and embark on a new life for herself and her children. “For 30 years of my life I’ve only seen war, killing, bloodshed and guns,” says Roshana. “There is fear, but we have to put the fear behind our backs” (p. 3).

When Karzai won the elections with 55 percent of the poll, he announced a new cabinet that includes three women, one of whom is his rival Massouda Jalal. Jalal was made minister of women’s affairs. Another first for Afghan women was the hiring Habiba Sarobi as Afghan’s first ever female governor, thus reflecting the new political atmosphere that is more open to women. A former minister, Sarobi displays a lot of guts, having turned down an ambassadorial position and demanding from a ‘surprised’ President Karzai the Bamiyan city governor position. “His first question was, ‘Do you think the people will accept you?’ I said, ‘Definitely, yes’,” a confident Sarobi states. And she was right; after a stormy start with 300 local men staging a

noisy protest, the female governor was gradually embraced by the men in her community and her “support has grown rapidly” (Walsh, 2005, p. 18). “Women have a long history as leaders in Islam,” says the villagers’ spokesman, Niamatullah Siddiqi. “We are proud to have you overseeing our community,” he addresses Sarobi (p. 18).

Other stories that emphasize Afghan women’s courageous and assertive nature, include the many reports in the 2005 parliamentary elections, where female candidates all over the country received threats to withdraw. Although former warlords won the majority of seats, 68 female members of parliament were elected through a quota system. Many of these female MPs courageously resisted the phone calls and letters that threatened their lives should they not withdraw from the elections. Aizenman (2005) of *The Washington Post* cites the example of Noorzia Charkhi, a resilient 36-year-old journalist, who had received repeated threats. “I’m not going to quit, because I want to show people that a woman should be able to do these things,” Charkhi told Aizenman prior to the elections (p. A01). She argues that people who threaten her “already have blood on their hands,” adding that what she really feared was that they would smear her reputation, a serious issue for women in conservative societies. “That would be worse than death,” declares Charkhi (p. A01). Another Afghan heroine is Zobaida Stanekzai, a school supervisor, whose house door was set on fire by resistors to her parliamentary candidacy. “But my decision to be a candidate is unshakable,” says a gutsy Stanekzai (p. A01). Aizenman declares that while some believe women are being attacked by traditionalists who are uncomfortable seeing women in public roles, others suggest that gender is not the issue and that women are possibly targeted by adversaries competing against them. In either case, Afghan women seem unperturbed and confident in the face of these threats. They are willing to risk their lives to run for office and to replace the image of the helpless, oppressed, burqa-clad Afghan

woman with an assertive and resilient woman, capable of holding office and working side by side with Afghan men.

Reports on Afghan women's political status did not just, however, focus on the promising political future for women, elections, or the existing problems, but also on their infamous burqa. Whether reporting on the 2003 limited elections to choose delegates for writing up the constitution, the 2004 presidential elections or the parliamentary elections of 2005, many reporters focused on "the extraordinary spectacle of women queuing, their blue burqas billowing, at the polling stations" (Walter, 2004, p. 25). An example would be the *Chicago Tribune's* Liz Sly (2003), who wrote about the initial 2003 elections, saying: "

Many of the women pulled their blue burqas down over their faces as they stepped up to cast their ballots, making it difficult for election officials to establish whether they were in fact entitled to vote (online article).

Then there is *The Guardian's* Declan Walsh (2005), who attempts to illustrate signs of Afghan women's empowerment by saying: "Afghan women can vote, work and go to school; a quarter of all seats in next September's parliamentary vote are reserved for women; in Kabul, increasing numbers are shedding their burqas" (p. 18). For some Afghani women, this Western focus on the burqa is puzzling. Suhaila Siddiq, the 60-year-old sole Afghan female general, is a case in point. The general, a surgeon and hospital director and role model for many young Afghan women, "sighs with exasperation at Western feminists and their obsession with the burqa, the all-enveloping veil whose forcible use symbolized for many outsiders the Taliban's oppressive rule" (Farrell, 2001, p. A5). "The first priority should be given to education, primary school facilities, the economy and reconstruction of the country," argues Siddiq. "But the West concentrates on the burqa and whether the policies of the Taliban are better or worse than other

regimes” (p. A5). The general believes that the burqa, “which was worn long before the Taliban and still is by most women around Kabul, is not the battlefield upon which to fight their war” (p. A5). One could interpret Western newspapers’ fixation with the burqa before the war as a way of justifying an intervention to save the oppressed Afghan women, and post-Taliban, to sustain the message that Afghan women remain weak and helpless in the face of post-war Taliban insurgents, illiteracy, poverty and fear; therefore, they still need to be saved by the West.

In sum, articles on Afghan women in politics generally, reflect the growing openness of the political atmosphere in the country and the slow embrace of women in elections and public office. These stories highlight the resilience and bravery of many Afghan women who do not fit the stereotype of the helplessly oppressed and destitute Afghan woman. These reports also reflect the impediments Afghan women still face, including intolerance by extremely conservative males, illiteracy, and lack of adequate employment.

The wide array of articles analyzed in this section display the varied political participation of Muslim women from country to country; these articles demonstrate how women face different challenges in each country, from Saudi Arabia’s no suffrage to Egypt’s government mobs and Afghanistan’s anti-women insurgents. Yet, although these stories reflect different political circumstances for the women in each country, they seem to share the same portrayals of Muslim women as assertive, resilient and courageous in facing these obstacles and in enforcing changes and tearing into the male-dominated public sphere to be heard. The current analysis also reflects the positive strides towards democracy taken by many Muslim governments; these include Bahrain and Kuwait’s women’s suffrage, Egypt’s assigning of female judges; and Afghanistan’s inclusion of women in elections and historically-male government positions. Women are still misrepresented in some reports, as I have demonstrated

by point out articles that excessively focus on the hijab, burqa, or Saudi Abaya as indicators of women's oppression.

Terrorism & Female Suicide Bombers

One might argue that images of Muslim women reflected in stories on terrorism and suicide bombers are very unique, compared to the representation of Muslim women under other themes. On the one hand, reports on female suicide bombers in Palestine, and more recently Iraq, portray these women to be far from the passive, helpless and oppressed image that is common in other stories; on the contrary, these women are portrayed as fearless, audacious and almost inhumane in their capacity to blow themselves up and kill innocent people with them. But they are also described as equal to men by penetrating an area of brutal violence, historically dominated by men; such comparisons are rare in U.S. newspaper articles. Yet, on the other hand, the stories that examine the terrorist acts of 9/11 portray Muslim women as oppressed and demoralized by some Muslim extremists, fanatics and terrorists, the likes of Mohamed Atta, the 'ringleader' of the 9/11 hijackers.

Militant Arab Women

A significant number of local and international articles are devoted to the new trend of female suicide bombers that recently appeared in Palestine, and later in Iraq. The first story of a female suicide killer that shocked reporters was that of the Palestinian Wafa Idris, a volunteer medic who is said to have "adored children," in January 2002 Idris blew herself up in an Israeli downtown shopping district, killing an Israeli man and wounding many others. James Bennet (2002) of *The New York Times* says this of Idris in his lead:

Here are a few details from the abbreviated life of Wafa Idris: She was born in a refugee camp, conditioned to militancy by the first Palestinian uprising against Israel, divorced by a husband disappointed over their failure to have children, enraged as she picked up and patched the Palestinian wounded of the current conflict (p. 1).

By combining bits and pieces of Idris' tragic divorce and failure to bear children with her harsh experience under the Israeli occupation, Bennet immediately gives off the impression that Idris' suicide attack, is possibly a result of her desperation and depression following her failed marriage, when in reality, based on the various quotes released by her friends and family, her violent act seems to be largely a result of her political and nationalistic ambitions for her country and for people. "The true motives and precise objective of this young woman may never be known," continues Bennet. "It is not clear to what extent she may have been manipulated by other Palestinians, perhaps including her eldest brother, a leader of the Fatah faction of Yasir Arafat" (p. 1). Bennet's claims here assume that Idris does not act out of her own convictions, but based on the convictions of others; she is portrayed as a puppet that succumbs to the orders of powerful males. This image of Idris as desperate, depressed and controlled, is further exacerbated when the reporter explains that the woman "lived in three rooms with her mother, a brother and his wife and five children, and several chicks who scampered...across the floor" (p. 1). Bennet also give details on how Idris wanted to get back to her husband, after his second wife bore him a child; but the husband refused, afraid that his wife would leave with his long-awaited child.

Yet, throughout the story, Bennet provides quotes from Idris' friends and relatives that confirm that this woman carried out her deadly act, "motivated more by nationalist fervor" (p. 1). The reporter says that Idris "was steeped in the violence of the [Israeli-Palestinian] conflict" even

before she started her medical work. She was politically active, as a demonstrator against Israel in the first *Intifada*, the uprising that started in the late 1980s. Moreover, Bennet quotes Idris' sister-in-law as saying that Idris had previously said she would like to be a martyr. Khalil Idris, the suicide bomber's brother said his sister was motivated by the daily injustices she witnessed from her medical job. "She used to tell me, coming home from work, about what she saw that day—someone lost a leg, or a brain on the ground, or a child killed...All these things accumulated," says her brother, adding that Idris had an "independent mind" and secretly decided on her own about "what was more important to her and to the Palestinian people—social work, or this kind of thing" (Bennet, p. 1). Bennet says Idris' two brothers are especially "proud" of their sister's suicidal killing because of her sex; "she was the first female suicide bomber to strike in Israel" (p. 1). The reporter also quotes Idris' mother, who refutes the claim that her daughter bombed herself out of desperation because of her failed marriage, adding that her daughter had recovered. "We are proud of it," says her mother. "I wish every man, every woman would do the same, be a bomber." But when all the reporters leave the room, Idris' mother drops her head in her hands and weeps bitterly. "I lost my daughter, says Idris' mother" (p. 1).

Readers are, thus, left with two images of Idris: on the one hand she portrays a desperate, divorced and motherless wife that adores children; she is a woman who lived in poverty, crammed in a small space with her family and therefore had nothing to look forward to in life and nothing to lose by killing herself. Yet, another image that Idris portrays is that of the independent woman and zealous nationalist who had witnessed many injustices under Israeli occupation and had taken part in other anti-Israeli political acts; hence, her nationalism and

hatred towards her occupiers builds up to the point that makes her decide to “become a martyr,” to use Idris’ own words.

A second female suicide bomber reports introduce is Darin Abu Eishah, “a devout Muslim college student...[who] believed that women should take their place beside men in the fight against Israeli occupation” (Wazan, 2002, p. 10). In March 2002, Abu Eishah, a top English student at Al Najah University in Nabuls, who took certified courses in karate and first aid, detonated explosives strapped to her body when the car she was riding in was stopped at an Israeli checkpoint near the border between the West Bank and Israel. Wazan says Abu Eishah “typified growing numbers of Palestinian women who have become radicalized by 17 months of deadly conflict with Israel. Some are now ready to die for the cause” (p. 10). Wazan says the student’s family and friends said she was motivated by the killings of Palestinians at the hands of Israeli soldiers, including some members of her extended family. “They also said she was particularly enraged by the shooting this week of two pregnant Palestinian women at an Israeli Army roadblock near Nablus,” said Wazan, adding that the women were wounded but their babies were unharmed. This seemed to be the last straw for Abu Eishah, an active campus supporter of the militant group Hamas. In a farewell videotape where she describes herself as falling in the footsteps of Idris, Abu Eishah delivers a deadly message to then Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon:

Let Sharon the coward know that every Palestinian woman will give birth to an army of suicide attackers, even if he tries to kill them while still in their mother’s wombs, shooting them at the checkpoints of death (p. 10).

Yet, Abu Eishah’s friends confirm that even before the shooting of the pregnant women, the student had previously expressed the opinion that there is no reason why women should not

engage in suicide attacks, adding that she would be willing to do so herself. Her family said that for months, Abu Eishah would visit Palestinian families who had lost loved ones in the conflict, and her anger would build up as she watched on television “images of death and destruction in the raging conflict with Israel” (p. 10). Her brother, Tawfik Abu Eishah says, “She was sure that we would be killed for nothing, maybe at a roadblock or when our houses are bombed, and she used to say that it is better to die for a reason” (p. 10).

Moreover, Wazan says that when Hamas refused to enlist her in a suicide mission, Abu Eishah turned to a militant group called Aksa Martyrs Brigades, under which she carried out her deadly act. Abu Eishah had also been possibly motivated by one of her male cousins, who had carried out a suicide killing one month before her own killing. Wazan also describes the memento napkins that Abu Eishah collected from the death scenes of Palestinians. One napkin had the blood of a dead Palestinian, while another one bore Abu Eishah’s words: “I will be crying, and I will be keeping this blood so that no one will ever forget” (p. 10). The reporter ends with the words of Abu Eishah’s stunned father, who disagreed with his daughter’s actions. “What good will it do? It’s against the will of the family,” says her father. Abu Eishah’s brother believes she acted out of despair for her country. “I think that when you lose hope, you are not worried about your life” (p. 10).

Unlike Bennet’s article on Idris, Wazan’s story from the start to the end portrays this woman to be fearless, independent and resolute on becoming a suicide bomber based on the frustration and anger that she accumulated inside her for years and years. By informing readers that Abu Eishah was a top English student in her university, and an active athlete, it becomes obvious that she had no personal reasons that drove her to take her life other than her conviction that she was doing her country a service.

Another Palestinian girl that seemed fairly stable and content with her personal life before shocking everyone with her suicide act is 18-year-old Ayat Mohamed al-Akhras, a “quiet, diligent schoolgirl” (*The Scotsman*, 2002, p. 13). *The Scotsman* and *The Sunday Telegraph* say the bride-to-be detonated an explosive in front of a crowded Jerusalem supermarket, during the Jewish Passover holiday. “In a recorded video message Ayat Mohamed al-Akhras condemned Arab leaders for ‘watching while Palestinian women’ fought Israeli occupation,” says *The Scotsman* (no byline, 2002, p. 13). The article adds that “Nobody had been more in the dark over Akhras’ plans than her fiancé...[who] spent Thursday evening at her family’s home and listened as his bride-to-be spoke of the different exams she was preparing for, and their marriage plans” (*The Scotsman*, 2002, p. 13). “I will never forget her,” the paper quotes her teary fiancé as saying. “She will always stay alive inside my heart” (*The Scotsman*, 2002, p. 13).

Moreover, Wilson (2002) describes Akhras to be a “Westernized Palestinian and not especially religious;” she had intended on finishing schooling with high grades and joining a profession before getting married. “That three young women would voluntarily die in such a premeditated and grisly way for their cause seems incomprehensible to most societies,” argues Wilson. “The way they went to their deaths had also puzzled outside observers and Israeli intelligence” (p. 52). But, the reporter also argues that “you don’t need to look too deeply to find the motive;” for Akhras it was her family’s refugee status after the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, the death of a cousin by Israeli soldiers and the severe wounding of two others. “It bred in us feelings of despair and revenge,” explains one man of the killings and arrests of Palestinians. “That is what a suicide bomber is: a mixture of despair and resistance. You don’t have to be a man to feel that. You don’t have to be a woman. You can be a boy—or a girl,” the man added (p. 52). These reports portray Akhras as a bright student with a promising future, both on an

academic level and also on a personal level, being engaged to-be-married. She is also portrayed as a passionate nationalist who believes in a cause, based on the suffering she and her family endured under Israeli occupation.

Hiba Daraghmeh, described by her family as a “self-confident path breaker” is yet another Palestinian woman who sought martyrdom by bombing herself outside an Israeli mall in May 2003, killing three and wounding many others (Bennet, 2003, p. 1). Daraghmeh, 19, chose to wear a face veil in 10th grade and turned down many marriage proposals to focus on her studies and her ambition to earn a doctorate in English, says her father. On the day of the bombing, Daraghmeh disguised as an Israeli woman, wearing jeans and a T-shirt, and became the first female suicide bomber to be affiliated with an Islamist group, Islamic Jihad. The young woman was hailed as heroine among the locals. One female student said Daraghmeh “made us feel proud” (Bennet, 2003, p. 1). Theories about the reasons why Daraghmeh decided to kill herself include her anger at Israeli authorities for imprisoning her older brother as well as an incident where Israeli soldiers insisted that she unveil her face on her way to school one day. But while Daraghmeh’s male and female colleagues praised her actions, her family remains baffled. “All her needs were provided for,” says her father. “She did well in school. She was living with her family,” he said (p. 1). Her mother told Bennet, had she known that her daughter was going to kill herself she would have tied her with a rope. Yet Daraghmeh seemed to be empowered by her planned suicide attack; as one student who saw Daraghmeh a day before the attack said she seemed very happy. “I asked her, ‘How come you’re happy?’” said the student. “She said, ‘Later you’ll know’” (p. 1).

The most destructive suicide killing by a Palestinian female is probably that committed by lawyer Hanadi Jaradat, who used a bomb strapped to her waist, to bomb the Maxim restaurant

in Haifa, killing 20 people, including Arabs, and wounding 40 others in October 2003 (Spencer, 2003, online article). Reporters say Jaradat watched Israeli soldiers shoot her brother and her cousin, days before her brother's wedding. Jaradat, like the other women before her, has been hailed by locals as a martyr. Jaradat's father told *The Boston Globe*:

I can tell you that our people believe that what Hanadi has done is justified. Imagine watching the Israelis kill your son, your nephew, destroying our house-they are pushing our people into a corner, they are provoking actions like these by our people (Greenway, 2003, p. A23).

"Hanadi's deed was not justified," Greenway states. "But Palestinians increasingly believe it was, just as Israelis increasingly believe their retaliations and assassinations are justified. Revenge begets revenge" (p. A23).

The growing trend of Palestinian female bombers is interesting yet not new; for female suicide bombers have existed since 1985 in places like Chechnya, Algeria, Lebanon, Kurdistan, Sri Lanka, Syria and now Iraq (Bloom, 2007, p. 95; Wikipedia, 2007). Yet these articles on Palestinian female suicide bombers could be seen to reflect a change in political resistance, where women are increasingly leaders of suicide operations rather than accomplices; they are no longer satisfied with the role of giving birth to martyrs, but want to play that role themselves. Moreover, these articles demonstrate how women are being accepted by Fundamentalist Islamic Organizations such as Al Aksa Martyrs Brigades, Islamic Jihad and others that used to consider women's participation in suicide operations as unreligious.⁷ Furthermore, these women seem to be empowered by their participation in deadly operations (Bloom, 2007, p. 97). Talking of Wafaa Idris, Bloom explains how she was instantly transformed into a "cult heroine," with

students calling on other females to emulate Idris (p. 98). The Egyptian *Al Sha'ab* newspaper wrote of Idris:

It is a woman who blew herself up, and with her exploded all the myths about women's weakness, submissiveness, and enslavement (*Al Sha'ab* article as cited in Bloom, 2007, p. 98).

The women in these stories indeed defy such stereotypes; for not only do they “exhibit courage and steely resolve as terrorists” (Bloom, 2007, p. 101), but they also demonstrate that suicide bombers are intelligent, educated and have promising futures that awaited them. Hence, they do not seem to be driven to suicide out of desperation, but possibly because of “rising aspirations followed by dwindling expectations, particularly regarding civil liberties,” as Atran (2004) argues (p. 67).

Furthermore, the recent Palestinian female suicide operations seemed to have inspired Iraqi females to follow suit. In April 2003, two Iraqi women, one of them possibly pregnant, carried out a suicide attack on U.S. forces (McCarthy, 2003, p. 3). *Al-Jazeera* TV station broadcast two videos of the two women vowing to attack American forces, in videos similar in style to those made by Palestinian attackers (p. 3). “I have devoted myself [to] jihad for the sake of God, and against the American, British and Israeli infidels, and to defend the soil of our precious and dear country,” the Iraqi Wadad Jamil Jassem said in her video (p. 3). Another woman, Nour Qaddour al-Shammari, said in her video: “We say to our leader and holy war comrade, the hero commander Saddam Hussein that you have sisters that you and history will boast about” (Winfield, 2003, p. 7).

Not only did stories of Palestinian female suicides inspire Iraqi women, but they also empowered female activists across the region to stand in solidarity with their Palestinian sisters.

A *Christian Science Monitor* article displays the rise in Muslim and Christian female activists in various Arab countries who engage in anti-government demonstrations and others who demonstrate in support of their Palestinian sisters. Philip Smucker (2002) writes:

Modestly dressed women in head scarves drop their books and charge riot police in Alexandria as two male colleagues are beaten to death. In Cairo, female students throw stones to denounce police officers guarding the Israeli embassy. These are not the images that Egypt - nor any country in the Arab world - expected to see this year in their streets from their own women (p. 06).

Smucker adds that mass demonstrations against Israel that have swept the countries of the Middle East, have for the first time, seen equal proportions of women participating alongside the men. "We are amazed by the amount of solidarity being shown in the streets by Arab women, particularly in conservative Gulf societies, where women have moved-for the first time-into the street," Smucker quotes a foreign relations official with the Palestinian Women's Union as saying (p. 06). The reporter adds that, many Arab women, support the notion of a female suicide bomber, otherwise known in Arab streets as a "self-sacrificer," in the face of rising Israeli offences. "A person who kills women and children must be burned to death, not just killed," Smucker quotes Walaa Samir, a female Cairo University student as saying (p. 06). The reporter explains that Samir's view is shared by Muslims and Christians alike. He quotes Coptic Christian university student, Marianne Adel, as saying that women in her Coptic community have been appalled at Israeli attacks in the West Bank. "I'm against suicide bombing, but it seems to me that these women have little choice at all anymore" (p. 06). Smucker says analysts assert that this new political awakening by Muslim and Christian women alike, "might have less to do with the influence of Islamic movements than human empathy" (p. 06).

On the one hand, Smucker's article displays how female bombers have been elevated to the state of heroines amid Arab women; they have also empowered these women to become politically active and support their cause. This has been demonstrated by the many protests that have driven women from the most conservative Gulf countries, to demonstrate in the streets, something these women have not done to dissent their own conditions. On the other hand, the article also displays that Arab women are increasingly breaking barriers and making their voices heard globally, thus refuting claims that the Arab/Muslim Other cannot speak.

Other Arab female activists display their Palestinian support in totally different ways. These include groups led by Nehad Abu El-Kosam, executive director of the Egyptian Center for Women's Rights, who are helping the Palestinian cause by planning an economic embargo on Israeli and U.S. products. "Our slogan will be: 'No one can do it like women!'" says Kosam, explaining how Arab women have a lot of financial power with their control of "the family purse strings" (p. 06).

Overall, the local and international stories on Muslim female suicide bombers paint a novel picture of the Muslim woman. Women here portray deadly courage; boldness and fearlessness as well as terrorism, an expression usually reserved for Muslim men. As Brunner (2005) asserts, these women are challenging everyone around them:

It is indeed a challenge for Palestinian men and women to see "the other sex" leave the private sphere and move towards the front lines, as well as for the Israeli population who therefore find themselves confronted with twice the potential threat to their existence in everyday life. Finally, these women also shock the whole world when they appear in international news headlines (p. 30).

As horrific as these suicide bombings are, they are nevertheless enforcing a new status for Muslim women that equates them with men in their fearlessness and violence; these women are no longer the weeping and wailing mothers of ‘martyrs’ but they are considered by many Palestinians to be no less of ‘martyrs’ than men.

Coverage of female suicide bombers is important on several fronts; on the one hand, it is clearly noticeable that this coverage is quite different and less distorted than coverage of women in other areas. This is one of the exceptional areas where reporters provided stereotype-free accounts of these women’s lives, personalities and actions. One has to, therefore, ask what are the specific journalistic norms that helped produce such accurate accounts? One suggestion is because female suicide bombers are relatively a new phenomenon; this makes it difficult for reporters to automatically include these women under preconceived categories, which has been relatively the case with American newspaper coverage of Muslim and Arab women in other areas. Because of the novelty of this female suicidal phenomenon, and also because of the inherently dramatic nature of these stories, it seems logical that reporters have to exert more effort, conduct additional in-depth reporting, and intensify interviews with relatives and friends of these women, in order to produce objective and balanced stories about them. All of these journalistic tactics combined, thus, helped bring readers as close as can be to the women’s state of mind, experience with Israeli occupation, and political and nationalistic upbringing. This coverage, therefore, demonstrates once again, that reporters tend to produce more objective stories on Arab and Muslim women when they take the time to actually know the women. In this case, reporters achieved this by talking to as many people as possible who were in contact with the suicide bombers. Furthermore, while reporters made it clear that they were against these suicidal attacks, they also provided readers with sufficient evidence of the women’s desperate

and frustrating experience with the occupation that at least put their insane suicidal actions into perspective.

Another important conclusion from this coverage takes us back to Edward Said's (1979) description of the Orient; according to Said, the Other is viewed by the West to be exotic, yet dangerous and threatening at the same time. Essentially, this creates a double paradoxical identity of the Other as both exotic, feminine and sensual on the one hand, and dangerously courageous and despotic on the other hand. One could very well argue that these traits can be identified in reporters' descriptions of these female suicide bombers. The women are described as young, in love, or completely covered and also depicted as dangerously violent.

Atta's Abhorrence of Women

A puzzling trend revealed from this analysis is the abundance of Australian newspaper articles on 9/11 terrorist Mohamed Atta. Out of seven international articles that announced the terrorist's will, six were published in Australian newspapers, including *The Advertiser*, *The Australian*, *Hobart Mercury* and the *Herald Sun*; the seventh article was published in the Canadian *Ottawa Citizen*. There were no local articles devoted to this piece of news, which is understandable, given that local newspapers were mainly focusing on the nation and on the tragic and heroic stories of the hundreds of men and women that lost their lives or witnessed the 9/11 attacks. Yet, one cannot find a logical explanation for Australian newspapers' focus on Atta's will. What is even more perplexing is the headlines and leads of most of these stories, which generally focused on Atta's barring of women from attending his funeral or burial. In his will, which was found in a bag left at the Boston Airport, Atta requests that women not attend his funeral, says pregnant women, or anyone who is "unclean" should not "come to say goodbye to

me. He also asks people to “pray that I will go to heaven.” Atta also instructed people on the specific steps of his burial and the exact way in which his mourners should act. “Those who wash my body must be good Muslims and I do not want a lot of people to wash my body unless it is necessary,” wrote Atta. “The person who will wash my body near my genitals must wear gloves so that I am not touched there” (Beach, 2001, p. 13).

Whereas articles devoted to this story mention most of Atta’s peculiar requests; almost all of them dedicate the headline and/or the lead or both to Atta’s anti-women comments. *The Ottawa Citizen* story, for instance, carries the headline, “Atta’s will bars women from funeral, gravesite;” and the lead repeats the same message, only adding more details on other requests made by the hijacker (Cobain, 2001, p. A4). The *Courier Mail* story’s headline reads “Ringleader’s will bans women from funeral,” while lead says “Hijack ringleader Mohamed Atta left a will barring women from his funeral and instructing mourners not to cry, scream or beat their faces” (Beach, 2001, p. 9). Another example is *The Australian*’s news story, which starts with the headline “‘Mother’s boy’ bans pregnant women from his funeral-War on Terror” (Cobain, 2001, p. 9). The same message was reiterated in the story lead. A final example comes from the *Herald Sun*, which, although starts with the headline “Pray I go to heaven,” leads with “Hijack ringleader Mohamed Atta left a will barring women from his funeral and instructing mourners not to cry” (Beach, 2001, p. 10).

Hence, the question is, of all the peculiar instructions outlined in Atta’s will, why the focus on his message about women? Furthermore, given that the hijacker asks Muslims to “pray” that he goes to heaven after his heinous crime, would it not be more newsworthy to focus on his heaven request? The single article that did in fact mention this request in the headline, namely the *Herald Sun* story, did not follow up on it in the lead. Why do these reporters feel it so

important to deliver Atta's anti-women message before everything else? A possible answer is to reinforce or fortify existing beliefs that Islam and Muslim men treat women as second class or inferiors, a view that is obviously held by this one hijacker. Whatever the reason might be, the end result is that readers are told about Atta's abhorrence to women before anything else, thus confirming the view of Muslim women as oppressed and inferior to men. Another possible explanation is that most of these articles are written by the same freelance reporters; Ian Cobain is the author of the two articles on Atta's will in the *The Ottawa Citizen* and *The Australian*, while Micheal Beach is the reporter of the five stories published in the *Herald Sun*, *The Advertiser*, the *Hobart Mercury*, *The Daily Telegraph* as well as the *Courier Mail*. It, therefore, makes sense that all seven articles carry similar writing style and story focus, given that they are all written by the same reporters.

Iraqi Women's Political & Economic Status

Iraq is one of the topics that received a lot of coverage beginning with the March 20, 2003 U.S.-led invasion. Stories in this section cover various issues that include the political and economic status of women during the Saddam Hussein era; the suffering of women during the war; women's role in Iraq's recovery from the war, the impact of the new constitution on their rights, and finally, women's rights under the new regime.

Jubilance versus Humiliation

Stories on Iraqi women within the 9/11/01 to 9/11/05 time frame start with a look at the Iraqi war and women's reaction to the U.S.-led invasion as well as the influence of the war on women's lives. On the one hand, some reports display Iraqi women as thankful and relieved

by the fall of Saddam at the hands of American troops; these include a *New York Times* article by Danny Hakim (2003), who describes how, in Dearborn where many Iraqi Shiites reside, “Two women in black robes held large American flags out the windows of a red Ford Expedition,” in celebration the fall of Saddam (p. 13). A related story comes from *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, which tells the story of an Iraqi family in Southern California, who are “waging their own campaign from the family’s dining room in Chula Vista,” to help U.S. authorities with any information that can help them defeat Saddam (Gembrowski, 2003, p. B-1). “It’s because of our troops that we have freedom there,” argues daughter Esra Naama, a 23-year-old Shiite. “Oil, if that is the reason the United States is there, so be it” (p. B-1). Gembrowski says both Esra and her mother, Sabria Mahdi Naama, belong to the national organization, Women for Iraq. The reporter cites the family’s hardships under Saddam, where their father had disappeared for a while in the early 1990s for his anti-government sentiments. Esra explains how Saddam executed tens of thousands of Shiites; these included her father’s two brothers and many relatives. “Bodies were left to hang on trees and men were tortured in public,” wrote Esra, who now works in Bank of America, in her autobiography (p. B-1). The Naama family fled Iraq to the Saudi borders and Catholic charities later helped the family enter the U.S.

Together, these two stories portray Iraqi women as oppressed and helpless under Saddam; these women are relieved that their savior, the U.S., ended their misery and subjugation. It is important to note that both stories mention nothing of the political and economic status of women under Saddam’s regime; yet the stories send the message that this status was extremely negative. Essentially, these articles portray Iraqi women as jubilant and relieved that their oppressor is out and the U.S. is in.

In contrast to this image of the jubilant Iraqi woman, however, are accounts that examine the negative impact of the war on women as well as personal accounts by women who voice their rejection of the U.S. presence in their country. Take for instance the words of Iraqi novelist Betool Khedairi (2003), born to an Iraqi father and a Scottish mother, who displays in a *Guardian* opinion piece her rejection of Western presence and how this might distort the traditional image of Iraq:

I really want to get to Baghdad before McDonald's and the other multinationals get there and ruin the scenery. I want to get a glimpse of the genuine stuff, the real city before the Americanized reconstruction starts, the days when Baghdad was a magical place to grow up in, even on sad occasions. Like when my uncle's wife used to take me with her to witness mourning rituals in the neighborhood. There was an etiquette on how to offer your condolences (p. 15).

Khedairi, who lived in Iraq until she was 24, before moving to Amman, explains the traditional condolence rituals practiced by Iraqi women, which involve leaving their slippers at the door of the deceased, sitting on a mattress on the floor with other women, drinking bitter coffee and crying or praying for the dead. The novelist exclaims how she has to go back to Iraq, as there are many mourning ceremonies she has to attend:

Here in Amman, on television, I am watching Iraqi ladies wrapped in black, crying for the civilians who died in the American attack a few days ago against what was called Iraqi resistance. Stop these deaths! We have already lost around 5,000 souls in the war. On the other side, funerals are being set up in the West to mourn the coalition soldiers who are losing their lives in my country amid this chaos. There, they will be sitting on

chairs, or standing around graves, with mothers wondering what this is all about and wishing that these deaths would stop (p. 15).

Overall, Khedairi makes it clear she is not happy with this war; she does not talk of Saddam's oppression but of the fear of how Iraq would slowly be Westernized, or Americanized.

Moreover, the novelist's words display how she treasures Iraq's traditional atmosphere; with everything from its "magical" feel to the traditional etiquette of mourning. In essence, Khedairi portrays an Iraqi woman mourning the loss of her country. Khedairi's concluding words further confirm her displeasure of a Western presence in her country:

For the Western mothers who are crying over their sons, I would like to say that their sons are killing our sons, and unfortunately our sons are shooting back at their sons. Perhaps we need mothers of the world to unite and put an end to this mess. Ladies, we need to set a new etiquette of condolences (p. 15).

Another *Guardian* story that portrays Iraqi women as discontent with the invasion of their country is an article by Luke Harding (2004), who focuses on the degradation of Iraqi women at the hands of foreign troops. Harding's lead reads:

For Huda Shaker, the humiliation began at a checkpoint on the outskirts of Baghdad. The American soldiers demanded to search her handbag. When she refused one of the soldiers pointed his gun towards her chest (p. 13).

Shaker, a political science professor at Baghdad University, goes on to explain what the soldier did next. "He pointed the laser sight directly in the middle of my chest...Then he pointed to his penis. He told me, 'Come here, bitch. I'm going to f... you'" (p. 13). Shaker's friends then pushed her back in the car and they drove off. "I vowed never to talk to another American soldier," she said (p. 13). Harding argues that Shaker's experience is "one of a number in which

U.S. soldiers are alleged to have abused, intimidated or sexually humiliated Iraqi women” (p. 13). Shaker, who was conducting an Amnesty International research on the torture and rape of female prisoners held in Abu Gharib, asserts that men were not the only ones being abused in prison. She cites the example of Noor, an Iraqi girl who was raped by American soldiers and impregnated before she disappeared; the professor believes Noor was killed. Shaker also mentions another incident, where a friend of hers was arrested and taken to prison and later cried when Shaker attempted to ask her what happened in Abu Gharib, leading the professor to believe her friend was raped. “Ladies here are afraid and shy of talking about such subjects,” explains Shaker. “They say everything is OK. Even in a very advanced society in the West it is very difficult to talk about rape. But I think it happened” (p. 13).

Harding refers to a *New Yorker* article that confirms Shaker’s assertions on how Iraqi female prisoners were sexually humiliated. He explains how the article mentions unreleased Pentagon photos and videos that show American soldiers “having sex with a female Iraqi prisoner;” in addition to a secret report that confirms that U.S. guards videotaped and photographed naked female prisoners (p. 15). “U.S. officials have acknowledged detaining women in the hope of convincing male relatives to provide information: a strategy that is in violation of international law,” Harding asserts.

Harding’s accounts of the intimidation and sexual abuse of Iraqi women portray these women as oppressed and humiliated; but this time the coercion is from the outside. Hence, instead of portraying the West as the women’s savior and Islamic culture and men as the oppressors, this time, the reporter describes the West as the subjugator, which is a unique depiction of the relationship between Muslim women and the West.

Women Pre & Post the Saddam Era

Another image of the Iraqi woman portrayed in U.S. newspapers, and some international newspapers as well, is that of a woman who transforms from independent, assertive and economically and politically active to one threatened by Islamic extremists and forced into silence and veiling. Local and international articles explain how under Saddam, Iraqi women were better off than many of their Arab sisters, enjoying rights to voting, education, employment, free from dress codes, and receiving equal pay to men as well as five-year maternity leaves, “a benefit American women can only dream of,” argues Laura Liswood (2003) of the *Christian Science Monitor* (p. 11). But Liswood argues that Iraqi women are now in danger from extremists and also from exclusion. The reporter explains that certain sectors of the Iraqi Shiite community are posing a threat to women’s status, already calling for a compulsory burqa-like dress code and the ban of make-up among other things (p. 11). An Ellen Goodman (2003) column⁸ posted in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* further states:

Saddam is gone but women don't feel safe; kidnappings are common and so, Human Rights Watch reports, is rape. Signs in the market say, "Sister, Veil Yourself." Cars line up outside the schools to pick up daughters who cannot walk home safely (p. A-19).

Goodman urges the U.S. to not forget about Iraqi women and to ensure that they are in fact “liberated,” in accordance with White House plans. She argues:

Women in Afghanistan are better off than under the Taliban, those poster boys of oppression. And few women in Iraq miss Saddam. But we are at a point of great uncertainty about the future of our "liberated" women -- whether they will be free or forced to conform to a womanhood imagined by a theocrat (p. A-19).

These articles and others portray Iraqi women as newly oppressed and fearful amid the rise of Islamic extremism that is confining many women inside the house, or forcing them to cover up and be accompanied by men, should they choose to go out. These are women that went from equality and liberty under Saddam's oppressive regime to subjugation and isolation after his fall.

Furthermore, many reporters also discuss the exclusion of women from the reconstruction process. Liswood argues that "women's voices in the postwar construction process may not be heard at all" (p. 11). The reporter cites evidence that includes facts on the Iraqi Reconstruction Group, set up with the backing of the U.S. and Britain, which includes only five women out of its 30 members; a meeting in Nasiriyah, which included four women out of 80 delegates, and the 13 legal experts chosen by the U.S. Justice Department to rebuild Iraq, none of whom are women. "Women need to participate in this rebuilding at a level of critical mass," Liswood asserts. "At least 30 percent of those involved-both at the local and national levels- must be women to ensure a real voice. A token few are not sufficient" (p. 11). A *Boston Globe* article further concludes that if the U.S. fails to include women in the rebuilding of the country and in the government, this then "notifies other countries in the region that women's political engagement is not, in fact, the pillar of democracy the West portrays" (Hunt & Posa, 2004, p. A11). The Canadian *Gazette* quotes Manal Omar of Women for Women International, as saying that with women in Iraq, "we're going backward. We are fighting for the status quo" (Rubin, 2004, p. A21). Reporter Trudy Rubin (2004) argues that many Iraqi women fear that the economic and political and social status they enjoyed under Saddam could be reversed following the U.S. invasion (p. A21).

Again, these articles reflect an image of Iraqi women who are fearful and worried about losing rights that they have enjoyed for years. These reports immediately portray Iraqi women as forgotten or muffled in the rebuilding of their country. This message is conveyed in the

headlines of many stories, which include questions like “Where are the women in the new Iraq?” (Hunt & Posa, 2004, p. A11), and demands such as “Find a role for women in rebuilding Iraq” (Liswood, 2003, p. 11). Yet, the problem with many of these stories is that they are short of the Iraqi woman’s voice; these reports are largely based on the reporters voice and expertise on the matter. Aside from a few exceptions, in most of the stories analyzed, it is the reporter who suggests what is best for Iraqi women, but where are the women and why are they not given the chance to express all their concerns and worries?

Many of these same stories also talk about Iraqi women’s suffering under Saddam. They talk of how, in recent years, Iraqi women became increasingly insecure after Saddam, in a move to win Islamists’ support, passed a law in 1991 permitting honor killings. In addition to this, suspected prostitutes were targeted by Saddam’s oppressive regime for execution (Walter, 2003, p. 23). The *Toronto Star*’s Landsberg (2003) quotes several “passionate Iraqi feminists” as saying that most of the parties represented in the new government opposition were in fact contributing to Saddam’s oppression and did not encourage women’s equality. “We want a free, secular Iraq with guarantees of equal rights for women,” Landsberg quotes architect and political advocate Yanar Mohamed as saying (p. K01). The reporter explains how the Iraqi feminists she interviews are members of the Independent Women’s Organization, which saved 250 women from honor killing threats and provided them with shelters to escape violence. The women also recount horror stories of Saddam’s brutal silencing of assertive Iraqi women. “They watched helplessly in the summer and fall of 2000 when Saddam instituted his ‘faithfulness campaign,’” says Landsberg. “At least 200 women accused of immorality (including doctors and political activists) in Baghdad and Mosul were dragged from their homes and beheaded in the street by the fedayeen’s swords” (p. K01).

Women this time are depicted as extremely oppressed under Saddam's regime; they are victims of honor killings, male brutality and government cruelty. Yet some of these reports seem contradicting as they balance out this oppression with evidence of women's political and economic status under Saddam. After all, Iraqi women are not just victims," writes Walter (2003). "On the contrary. Iraq has a strong tradition of women's education and employment" (p. 23). Pamela Constable (2004) of *The Washington Post* confirms this view, as she cites evidence of how women under Saddam enjoyed "the most modern legal protections," with a civil code that prohibited marriage for those under 18, arbitrary divorce and male bias in cases dealing with child custody and property inheritance disputes. "Saddam Hussein's dictatorship did not touch those rights," argues Constable. "But the U.S.-backed Iraqi Governing Council has voted to wipe them out, ordering in late December that family laws shall be 'canceled' and such issues placed under the jurisdiction of strict Islamic legal doctrine known as Shari'a"⁹ (p. A12).

Another noteworthy conclusion here is how these reports do not portray the West as a savior of women; in fact, a lot of reporters seem distrustful of the U.S. and of the "empty promises" of liberation. These sentiments are evident in Landsberg's words:

The American conquerors have obviously not given a moment's thought to Resolution 1325 of the Security Council, which demanded that women be present at the highest decision-making levels in every situation of peacemaking and post-war reconstruction (p. K01).

Thus, Iraq women here are depicted as oppressed either way; under Saddam they suffered from brutality and under the new regime they suffer exclusion and elimination from contributing to their country's recovery.

The Militia Woman

A unique portrayal of Iraqi women is that of the militia woman or suicide bomber. Although Jan Jarboe Russell (2004) of *the San Antonio Express-News* is mainly upset by the atrocity displayed by U.S. female soldiers in the Abu Gharib prison, his comments on Iraqi and Afghan women is also worth noting; Russell says in the lead:

Since Sept. 11, 2001, we have lived in an age of atrocities that have made sadists of us all - men and women alike. At first, the images of women from Iraq and Afghanistan were of veiled Muslims, silent as stones. Then came images from the Middle East of silent female suicide bombers, using their bodies as bombs (p. 1H).

Russell here is referring to Palestinian and Iraqi female suicide bombers that were discussed earlier on in this chapter. The important issue here is Russell's binary depiction of Iraqi and other women in the region as either silently oppressed and veiled or violent militia women.

The image of the Iraqi militia woman is further compounded by articles on Iraqi female suicides, discussed in the previous section and by articles such as that of *The Houston Chronicle* on Umm Mohammad, one of the first female commanders in rebel cleric Muqtada al Sadr's Mahdy Army. "Even my husband didn't know I was fighting, or he pretended not to know," a seven months pregnant Umm Mohammad tells reporter Hannah Allam (2004). "He tells me, 'One day you're going to go and never come back.' I tell him I dream of martyrdom" (p. 29). The reporter explains how the Mahdi Army is training at least 150 women as suicide bombers, weapons experts and intelligence agents; these women are increasingly relied upon because they are "smart, covert and willing to die," says Allam (p. 29). These militia women's fearlessness is evident in a comment by one of the women, who says in a popular recruiting video: "We will

carry out our martyrdom operations against the pagan American government... We will make this a second Vietnam. We will fight anyone who dares to harm Muqtada al Sadr” (p. 29).

Such stories depict Iraqi women as unfeminine, cold and almost delusional; Umm Mohammad portrays such delusion when she says of her expected baby, “If it’s a boy, I’ll name him Muqtada... But I’m hoping for a girl, so I can train her myself” (p. 19). The female rebel’s comments depict her as cold and aloof; she reflects a chilling type of motherhood, where her expected son or daughter is only awaited to join her in combat. These stories therefore uniquely depict Iraqi women as far from oppressed. These are women that are intelligent, intrepid and self-confident in their capabilities to terrorize others for their cause.

Iraqi Women & Elections

The portrayal of Iraqi women in a more positive light is common in the coverage of the Iraqi February 2005 elections and women’s role before and after the actual elections. Articles under this theme mostly portray Iraqi women as intelligent and informed political activists, determined to get their country back on its feet. These include exiled opposition leader, Safia al-Souhail, who has for years battled rid her country of Saddam’s government and today she fights to get into the new one. “Since the fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime, Ms. Souhail has been pleading a new cause: quotas for women in Iraq’s new government - in the cabinet, in the national parliament, and in drafting the constitution,” the *Christian Science Monitor*’s Annia Ciezaldo (2003) argues. She quotes Souhail as saying “They have seats for Shiites, Sunnis, Kurds, Assyrians, and they didn’t think that they should have a seat for [half of] the country?” (p. 01). Souhail, who took over the political leadership of Bani Tamim, a central Iraqi tribe, an exceptional leadership role for an Arab woman. “We have to have a quota,” Souhail argues.

"This is the only way to force them to have a number of skillful women. After people have become more educated to this, they won't need it" (p. 01).

Another image of the assertive female political activist is reflected in Salama al-Khafaji, a "self-proclaimed 'technocrat' in a head scarf," and a candidate in Iraq's parliament elections, says Larry Kaplow of *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (p. 1B). Kaplow (2005) portrays Khafaji as a loyal Iraqi and determined nationalist that has not been deterred by recent hardships and personal tragedy. Kaplow is specifically referring to an August event, where during a trip to Najaf where Khafaji wanted to negotiate an end to the violent fighting between Shiite militias and U.S. forces, her convoy was attacked by insurgents, killing one of her bodyguards and her 17-year-old son, who insisted on protecting his mother. Although the incident left Khafaji distraught and upset by the violent ousting of Saddam, it also enhanced her strength and determination to get more politically involved. "We didn't want this way, destroying everything," says Khafaji in reference to the violence and havoc of Iraq. "But we gained something important...We can speak" (p. 1B).

Khafaji also displays a strong feminist side, evident in her fight for Iraqi women's rights, which she argues "should be practical before anything else" (p. 1B). For instance, Khafaji believes that Iraq's new constitution should place civil law ahead of Islamic religious law, "a departure from many of her peers" (p. 1B). She also thinks hijab should not be compulsory and should be based on a woman's freedom of choice. But despite her liberal outlook on women, Kaplow also brings attention to Khafaji's traditional and conservative Islamic side. "But on polygamy, the devout Shiite Muslim and her supporters are for tradition," explains the reporter. "In Iraq, a land flush with war widows and fatherless children, she says, women need the opportunity to become a man's second or third wife" (p. 1B). Kaplow quotes Khafaji as saying

"We speak about what is really happening in our community...Not for bringing in extremist, liberal ideas" (p. 1B).

This focus on Khafaji's religious and traditional side is further exacerbated in this paragraph by Kaplow:

The energetic, earnest al-Khafaji, 46, is a mix of traditional and progressive --- maybe the picture of the new Iraqi woman activist. She has worn a head scarf since she was 15, when it was a less common sight in Iraq than now. But she is her husband's only wife. She is an English-speaking dentist and likely to be in Iraq's new national assembly as part of the party list of the United Iraqi Alliance (1B).

Reference to Khafaji's hijab, once again depicts the head scarf as a sign of backwardness and tradition. It is interesting to note that this is the second time Kaplow mentions Khafaji's head scarf, after describing this female activist in his lead as a "self-proclaimed 'technocrat' in a head scarf" (p. 1B). Kaplow also makes reference to Khafaji's husband, to indicate that she is his only wife, thus suggesting that this is abnormal or unusual in her country, which is not the case. The reporter is likely basing his conclusions on Khafaji's encouragement of polygamy, which she argues is needed right now in Iraq given the many widows the war left behind.

Overall, Kaplow depicts Khafaji to be a mixture of modernity and backwardness; on the one hand she portrays progressiveness and liberalism in her call for a stronger political role for women and more freedom of choice. But on the other hand, she reflects the oppressed Other, with her belief in polygamy and her veiling.

Optimistic sentiment towards women's role in the Iraqi elections can be summarized in Jim Hoagland's (2005) *Washington Post* article, which argues that the elections reveal a "little-publicized result that President Bush, feminist organizations and democracy advocates should be

shouting from the rooftops” (p. A21). This is because women composed one third of the 140 winners in the Shiite parliamentary. Moreover, many of the elected women tend to be “more educated, better informed and more committed to change than are their male counterparts” (p. A21). Sarah Guach (2005) of the *Christian Science Monitor* talks of even more reason to celebrate, with the new parliament’s approval of six female cabinet ministers of Kurdish, Christian and Sunni backgrounds. “Those six, and the 89 other women who occupy one-third of the seats in Iraq’s parliament, are part of a growing number of women in the Arab world entering the political arena,” asserts Gauch (p. 06).

These articles combined, portray Iraqi women as slowly gaining their political status under the new government. These women reflect intelligence, bravery and resilience in their success in fighting injustice and in carving a space for themselves under the new political system. Yet on the other hand, many of these women portray the Other; these are women that choose the veil and hold traditional thoughts on women.

Women’s Place in the Iraqi Constitution

A final theme discussed in this section is that of the Iraqi constitution, which was completed in August 2005, and was surrounded by speculation on how it reflected women’s rights and roles under the new regime. *The New York Times’* Edward Wong (2005) writes about the protests from women’s groups who feel that the constitution “strengthens religious law and sharply curtails women’s rights” (p. 1). Under the draft ordered by conservative Shiite members, families are expected to settle disputes on personal issues like marriage, divorce and inheritance in religious courts, while secular Iraqis would prefer to settle such issues in civil courts. Michael Howard (2005) of *The Guardian* reiterates this message when he argues that secular Islamists

and women's groups fear that involving Shari'a law in personal status "will destroy freedoms gained over decades in Iraq" (p. 19). *The Toronto Sun's* Salim Mansur (2005) adds to this by suggesting that "women across the Arab-Muslim world know best how cruelly unenlightened and repressive is the patriarchal system imprisoning them" (p. C4). Mansur argues that women carry a "decisive weight" as voters, irrespective of their faith and ethnicity; he believes that when women went out to vote in Afghanistan and Iraq, they did so to "extend the limits of freedom" (p. C4).

While all of these reporters reflect genuine concern for Iraqi women's liberties under the new constitution, the main problem here is that these reporters speak for the women. Wong Wong, Howard and Mansur, among others, portray Iraqi women to be oppressed and fearful from Islamic Shari'a law, and as desperate to break free of its chains. Yet, none of these reporters quote women who support their claims. One has to therefore question why these reporters do not back up their arguments on how Shari'a could negatively impact women's rights by personal statements from Iraqi female activists and politicians, given that there is ample evidence of the easy access to these women inside and out of Iraq.

Some reporters on the other hand, have done an exceptional job of quoting Iraqi women and voicing their exact concerns. "Iraq is a multiethnic society with many different religious schools," says Nasreen Barawi, Iraq's minister for social welfare and public service to *The Washington Post*. "Such a sweeping decision should be made over time, with an opportunity for public dialogue" (Constable, 2004, p. A12). Unlike other reporters on this issue, who seemed satisfied with merely vague claims of how Iraqi women view Shari'a law as oppressive, Constable explains that what the women mostly fear is "the more egregiously unfair interpretations of Islam advocated by conservative, male-run Muslim groups" (p. A12). Among

the opposers is political activist and retired female judge, Zakia Ismael Hakki, who argues that Iraqi civil family law had been developed since 1959 and amended under a series of secular governments to give women a "half-share in society" and an opportunity to advance as individuals, regardless of their religion. "This new law will send Iraqi families back to the Middle Ages," says Hakki. "It will allow men to have four or five or six wives. It will take away children from their mothers. It will allow anyone who calls himself a cleric to open an Islamic court in his house and decide about who can marry and divorce and have rights. We have to stop it" (p. A12). Hakki's statement, therefore, clarifies that women fear the misuse of Shari'a by extremists who claim they are following Islam; her argument also explains how applying Shari'a would be unfair, given the diverse religious affiliations of Iraq's 27 million people.

A *Daily Telegraph* article confirms this diversity when it quotes Hanaa Edwar, secretary of the Iraq Women's Network and one of 700,000 Christians in Iraq. "If everyone has to abide by their own religions it means we are giving the authority to religious leaders to rule the country and this will weaken the state," argues Edwar (Harding, 2005, p. 014). Harding quotes another Network member, Haifaa Al-Kharaji, who says "We have no objection to Islam being part of the law but we fear people might misrepresent the Quran" (p. 014). *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution's* Kaplow quotes another Iraqi Muslim woman who carries a similar view. Um Wilayah, a secretary at Baghdad's Technology University, "considers herself a devout Muslim and goes to work in her office in a head scarf and long, loose-fitting denim coat despite the extreme summer heat, but she does not want religion in her government," writes Kaplow (2005, p. 14A). "I am a Muslim. I practice Islam," says Um Wilayah. "But when religion gets involved [in government], it makes a big problem" (p. 14A).

Articles like these portray Iraqi women as hesitant and fearful of extremists; yet these women are also depicted as informed, intelligent and passionate about their country. Moreover, many of the women are devout Muslims, who respect their faith, yet they still prefer to have a secular government, given their knowledge of the diverse interpretations and misinterpretations of Islam experienced by patriarchal governments elsewhere in the Muslim world. “We could end up like Iran,” exclaims Um Wilayah. “And if you look at Iran, [even] the Iranian people want to get away from that” (Kaplow, 2005, p. 14A). In sum, Iraqi women here are depicted as active protestors who think independently, are not afraid to voice their demands, and are resolute in how they want to be ruled; although they do not portray oppression, they fear it and want to ensure that new laws and extremist misinterpretations would not eventually lead to their subjugation, as is the case of women in a country like Saudi Arabia.

This section is among the few that offers a variety of portrayals of the Iraqi women, given the rapid developments experienced in Iraq between February 2003 and end August 2005. Women have been depicted as oppressed under Saddam’s brutality and liberated at the hands of Western troops; the women are also portrayed as independent and liberal-thinking, who despite Saddam’s tyranny, enjoyed many political and economic freedoms, and thus fear being forced to succumb to oppression and humiliation at the hands of Western invaders. Many stories in fact, depict Iraqi women as oppressed and sexually humiliated by U.S. soldiers. Other stories on the other hand, portray the Iraqi woman in a totally contradicting light; these are articles that display the militant and aggressive side of Iraqi women. Other portrayals of Iraqi women include the brave, resilient political activists, alongside the traditional and conservative woman of the veil. In sum, Iraqi women here display a wide array of images, which one could argue is a result of the many changes experienced in Iraq in this short period of time, with the fall of Saddam, the rise of

Islamist insurgents, the rebuilding of Iraq and the elections and constitution-drafting period. Similar to conclusions made in previous chapters, reporters once again fail to include Iraqi women's voices in their accounts, deliver a more distorted and vague message about the women's needs and aspirations.

Emphasizing the Extraordinary

An exceptional trend noted in this chapter has to do with some reporters' focus on the political and economic progress of Arab and Muslim women, therefore breaking the more dominant cycle of reporting on these women's tribulations. Many reporters devote articles to exceptionally unique Muslim women who clearly do not fit the mold of the oppressed and submissive woman.

Women Who Challenge Stereotypes

Examples of exceptional Arab and Muslim women are plenty in a *Washington Post* article by Roxanne Roberts (2001), who interviews members of Mosaic, an American charity created by spouses of Arab ambassadors to the United States. These women clearly defy the stereotype of the passive, helpless and oppressed Muslim woman; they aim to "gently educate Washington about what it means to be an Arab woman in today's world" and to clarify that "the Arab world is made up of Christians, Muslims and Jews," says Malea Abdel Rahman of the Palestinian National Authority (p. C01). Roberts (2001) adds that Rahman, an "outspoken, funny" human rights lawyer and mother of four, is frequently annoyed by stereotypes on Arabs, "especially that Arab women are oppressed, uneducated and weak" (p. C01). While Rahman, acknowledges that there's a lot to be done to elevate the status of Middle East women, still,

“women’s status from one culture to another cannot be measured with the same criteria,” argues Rahman, who is a Christian. “I think it’s wrong to point to women covering their heads and assume they’re not progressive. That’s an assumption women here make, and it’s nonsense” (p. C01)

Roberts (2001) introduces readers to other Muslim and Christian female members of Mosaic, including Lynne Muasher, wife of Jordan’s ambassador to the U.S. and a mother of two, who holds a degree in social and behavioral science. These women also include Rim Aboud, wife of Lebanon’s ambassador, who “has a master’s degree in electrical engineering, a six-year-old son who plays soccer, and two sisters—a banker and a teacher” (p. C01). Another assertive Mosaic member is Princess Haifa Al-Faisal, the youngest daughter of the late King Faisal ibn Abudulaziz and the wife of Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the Saudi Ambassador to the U.S. Roberts (2001) argues that while these women “are exceptional,” they “insist [they are] not the exception. Jean AbiNader, managing director of the Arab-American Institute, argues:

If you look at the Arab world from Morocco to Iraq—all 22 Arab countries—there are various degrees in the role of women in society... You have women who have been ministers in Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon and others. You have women who are independent businesswomen. But the tendency is to see all of them as some variation of Saudi Arabia, which is the country with the least public role for women (p. C01).

Roberts’ (2001) article, therefore, reflects the diversity of Arab women and makes readers aware that many of these women are intelligent, educated and assertive.

Whereas many reporters present to readers Palestinian women as suicide bombers, *The Irish Times*, introduces readers to Palestinian women like Dyala, who are working to create peace in their neighborhoods. Michael Jansen (2002) says Dyala, “a slender woman in tailored

jacket and trousers,” is one of many Palestinian men and women who in the holy month of Ramadan provide the poor with meals to break their fast, among other services. After the Ramadan breakfast meal is over one night, Jansen relays how Dyala called the gathered men and women for “an impromptu meeting” about the security situation in the Old City and the spread of drug use, violence and wife, and child beating. “This violence is the product of the anger and despair caused by the Palestinian-Israeli conflict,” retorts Dyala, chiding one of the young men in the area to do something to save the children wandering in the streets. When the young man tells her that they have no leader, Dyala says “yes...you are the leaders, make a committee and decide what to do” (p. 15). Jansen’s story, although brief, allows readers to learn that Palestinian women can also work peacefully to help their people and not necessarily resort to violent means to do so. Moreover, the reporter’s quotes of Dyala portray her as a determined, strong-minded and assertive woman, who is not afraid to speak her mind and even suggest to Palestinian men what to do and how.

Other articles on exceptional Arab women, include a *New Straits Times*’ article titled “An Arab takes on California,” referring to the Saudi-born Ferial Masry, a teacher who strives to become state assemblywoman for the Los Angeles county of Ventura. “Ferial Masry is repainting the American political landscape. Big Time,” writes Theresa Manavalan (2004), who adds that this Saudi woman had been a community activist in the U.S. for years. “Masry hails from Mecca but if all goes well; she will make political pilgrimage to Sacramento where the California state assembly sits” (p. 4). Manavalan argues that the fact that Masry was born in Saudi Arabia “further compounds people’s expectations,” given that Masry reflects a totally different picture from what they expect. A wife and mother of three, Masry says her family and her religion, help push her forward. “Islam is my spirituality, Arab is my culture and America is

my life,” Masry tells Manavalan. Masry did not get the backing of some of the Muslims in her community because she does not wear the hijab, says Manavalan. “The hijab is between me and God,” defends Masry. “Clearly they don’t know Islam” (p. 4). Manavalan tells readers that back in Mecca, Masry’s family had encouraged her education, sending her to Egypt to study journalism. Upon her arrival to the U.S. with her Armenian-Lebanese husband in 1979, she joined many other immigrants who feared how life in the U.S. could impact their cultural and religious heritage. “I wanted my children to enjoy being Arab, Muslim and American,” explains Masry. “That’s why I started my own school,” she adds, referring to her international, multicultural school.

Aside from displaying Masry’s confidence and belief in her capabilities to do anything, including penetrating American politics, Manavalan demonstrates to readers this woman’s determination and her belief in justice for all. Masry explains how the war on Iraq had direct impact on her family, with her oldest son, Omar, being sent to Iraq as a reservist. “It hit home and it hurt,” explains Masry. “I was extremely upset with the Patriot Act because our phones were bugged. I was unfairly targeted because of my Arab Muslim background” (p. 4). Masry’s experience with the Iraqi war and how many innocent people were targeted is what fueled this woman with the determination to enter organized politics. “I decided to get into leadership, not just stand in the sidelines and complain,” says a confident Masry. “I chose to live in America. I will not let this place become like the one I left,” she says of her conservative home country (p. 4).

In sum, Manavalan portrays Masry as an exceptionally strong-willed and confident Saudi woman, who is used to following her dreams; she built a school to ensure a solid and multicultural education for her children and is now pursuing leadership to help put an end to the

innocent targeting of innocents. This article also displays how Masry is against her home country's suppression of women's rights, which makes her more determined to enjoy the liberties and freedoms of her new home.

Judith Barnett (2004) of *The Washington Post* also writes about exceptional Saudi women and progress within the kingdom, which she claims is mostly unheard of in the West. At first glance this story looks similar to the *Christian Science Monitor* article, cited earlier, on Gaouette's negative encounter in the Kingdom; but unlike Gaouette, however, Barnett came in close contact with various Saudi women and was therefore able to form a more realistic opinion on their status. Barnett explains that upon arriving at a Jeddah Economic Forum and being summoned by a "frantic" guard for mistakenly heading towards the men's entrance, the reporter was convinced that "Saudi business is for men only," as she had been told repeatedly over the years. "Yet the remarkable Saudi businesswomen attending the annual conference on the kingdom's economic and social issues were about to prove that wrong," Barnett says (p. B02). The reporter recounts an incident during a question-and-answer period, where the moderator, looking at the "ladies section" for questions, noted that he could not see the audience there because that side was "in darkness." To this, a female delegate responded by saying, "We are not in darkness, you just don't see us" (p. B02). Barnett argues that "increasingly, these women who are still perceived as being in the shadows are not" (p. B02). She cites examples of prominent Saudi businesswomen who "stole the limelight" at the forum, including Lubna Olayan, CEO of the multibillion dollar Olayan Financing company, who was the first woman in the conference's history to deliver the keynote speech. These Saudi women talked of economic reform and changes that were gradually happening and other reforms that they hoped would soon become a reality. Barnett adds that the Saudi female delegates discussed women's changing role in the

Kingdom. She quotes Thurayya Arrayed, planning advisor to the Saudi oil company Aramco, who said “we need proper training and employment of women” in order to speed economic growth (p. B02). Overall, Barnett concludes:

I have no doubt that Saudi women are now at the table, perhaps not as full participants, but never again to be ignored. For three days in Jeddah, they showed that the hand that rocks the cradle may well be the hand that rules the world (p. B02).

The Boston Globe’s Charles Radin (2004) also talks of Saudi women’s changing status and pays close attention to what Saudi women aspire to achieve and not what they “should” achieve based on the West’s experience.

Hessa Abdul Rahman al Oun and her sisters in the cause of Saudi womanhood have a vision of a progressive future that would not score well on a Western checklist of liberation indicators: No rush to discard the head-to-toe black cloak and veil that all Saudi women must wear in public. No clamor to vote or drive cars. No demand for working and mixing with men on an equal rights basis. Educated and ambitious Saudi women aspire to greater social freedom and to freedom of choice- but not yet (p. D1).

Radin explains that what Saudi women see as the most necessary change is a greater role for women in the economy and not in politics. “First I ask for the right of men to vote. Then I will ask for women,” the reporter quotes Oun, a businesswoman who owns multi-businesses and leads multiple social welfare organizations, as saying. “We have bigger issues-building infrastructure, building our social structure. It is premature to have voting- it would be a sham” (p. D1). Oun further suggests that the Kingdom should truly practice what is laid out in the Quran. “If it [the Quran] is read right and applied correctly, we don’t have to demand women’s rights or voting rights” (p. D1).

On more than one occasion, Radin clarifies to readers that Saudi women are slowly gaining the economic power they seek. He explains how Oun became the first Saudi woman to receive government permission to train females for factory and technical work. This businesswoman is participating in a massive project to empower the female workforce through the construction of a “mini-city with 80 factories” (p. D1). “It will have complete infrastructure-health clubs, clinics, hotels-completely for women,” explains Oun. “This is the main solution to female unemployment and to the Saudi transition to an industrial society” (p. D1). Radin makes it clear throughout the article that Saudi society is home to many successful women that include high-tech experts, educators, journalists and businesswomen. These include Nadia Refaat-Shaikh, who was the first Saudi woman to receive a license to operate a media services company in the Kingdom. “It is always nice to have a choice, but if I have to choose between educational opportunities and the right to drive, of course I would choose educational opportunities,” Refaat-Shaikh argues. She further argues that negative sentiments expressed by some Saudi males over women’s participation in the economy is simply a sign of male insecurities. “The men fear women expressing ourselves and entering the workplace because they fear we can do it,” she concludes. “They have lived for many years as the dominant force” (p. D1). Radin quotes other prominent Saudi women who state their demands and aspirations for the future. “We want men to look at women as human beings with rights, and to recognize that these rights are non-negotiable,” is how Khuziema Al-Attas, chief women’s editor of the Saudi publishing group Okaz, describes it. “But we are not looking for freedom to go without our abayas” (p. D1).

In sum, this article is another example of reporters’ focus on exceptional Arab/Muslim women who are active in their countries’ political and economic sectors. Instead of returning to recurring themes of Saudi women’s oppression and segregation, Radin looked at the success

stories within the Kingdom and referred to the women to find out how they foresee their economic and political future.

Empowered Women

Other articles introduce readers to independent and self-reliant Muslim women who are in charge of their lives and are helping other Muslim women reach the same autonomy. These include a *Chicago Sun-Times* article on Nareman Taha and Itedal Shalabi, co-founders of Arab-American Family Services, whose diverse activities range from sensitivity training to assisting Muslim families in getting state benefits. Newbart (2003) introduces the two women as Muslim advocates, who use the Quran and Prophet Mohammad's teachings to "help empower women in their community" (p. 24). "Our prophet has taught us something 1,400 years ago that we have lost in our community today," Newbart quotes Taha as saying. "We have a right to an education, to get a job, to be our own person, to be what we want to be" (p. 24). Shalabi adds that "Islam is feminist" (p. 24). The activists' organization advises Muslim women on their legal as well as their Muslim rights with regards to everything in life. For example, they talk to women about domestic violence, their right to a divorce as well as their right to ask for inheritance. Taha and Shalabi assert that many Muslim female immigrants are faced with "strong cultural traditions that restrict women, practices passed down over generations" (p. 24). Newbart explains that the two activists, who "subscribe to Islamic tenets such as dressing modestly, wearing a hijab and praying faithfully," are outspoken because "Islam requires its followers to fight injustice" (p. 24).

Essentially, Newbart's article demonstrates how assertive Muslim feminists aim to empower other Muslim women living in the West by moving closer to Islam rather than drifting away from it, therefore, refuting claims that Islam is oppressive to women.

Other stories of exceptionally successful and determined women include *The New York Times*' article on two confident Afghan women, who are among the many working to help Afghan people recover from years under Taliban's oppressive rule. One of the women Amy Waldman introduces is Soheila Helal who, under Taliban, had to teach in secret, but today is free to advertise her teaching services. "Girls as well as boys crowd into her basement classroom, and she no longer needs to school them in how to lie to the Taliban about it" (p. 3). Waldman (2004) says, added to her classes, Helal also teaches at a government school in the morning, then goes to the university, where she is one year short of earning her bachelor's degree. Helal's schooling is part of a government initiative to educate teachers in college. "Knowledge is a river," says Hilal, a widow and mother of two. "Whatever you take is not enough" (p. 3). Waldman tells readers that Helal is determined to put the Taliban years behind her and start a new life. "Nothing remained," says Helal of the cleansing of Taliban, both from Afghanistan and from her memory. "We have completely forgotten" (p. 3).

Kobra Zeithi is another assertive Afghan woman Waldman introduces in her story. She is an employee of the UN Center for Human Settlement, Habitat, who speaks of changes and more opportunities for Afghan women yet also stresses on maintaining tradition and religion. "Maybe others think freedom means wearing pants, but I think women can participate in every aspect of social work," says Zeithi, whom Waldman says wears a veil in accordance with Islamic practices. "If I can go with others and give my views, that's what matters. That is freedom—if I can participate in the political, economic and social life" (p. 3) Zeithi seems to be doing just that, as Waldman describes how she sits in a mixed, coeducational workshop, among other women who are, "boldly challenging the man ostensibly running things" (p. 3). Zeithi says she is optimistic that positive change is already happening, in terms of the spread of education for men

and women; the gradual loosening of family traditions that keep women in the home, and the rising interest of women in small enterprise projects.

In sum, Waldman tells readers that Zeithi and Helal are “just two women among millions, illustrative of the resurrection of the urban, educated women who were most oppressed by the Taliban” (p. 3). She further adds that its determined and passionate women like Zeithi and Helal that “represent perhaps the best hope for women who remain bound by illiteracy, tradition and religion” (p. 3). Yet, these women, although determined to change their future and that of other women in Afghanistan, are not so keen on giving up their Afghan and religious heritage. “It is difficult to bring change immediately, to change the Afghan people suddenly,” says Zeithi. “But it is possible to bring change gradually and slowly, by keeping traditions, by keeping religion (p. 3). Waldman’s (2004) article portrays Afghan women as resilient and determined in their fight to improve their own lives and those of the millions of other Afghan women, who had for long suffered from illiteracy, unemployment and overall subjugation. The women are also portrayed as proud of their traditional and religious background, and are convinced that they can bring about positive change within these boundaries.

Another look at exceptional women comes from a *New Straits Times* story on an assertive Syrian female politician. The article, which carries no byline, introduces readers to Syrian Minister of Expatriates Bouthaina Shaaban, who is the second female minister in Syria. Shaaban almost portrays a Muslim feminist, as she defends her Islamic culture and explains how Muslim women have a unique cultural stand in Islam and should therefore, not follow blindly in the footsteps of Western women. Shaaban cites Western women’s liberation movements of the 1970s that focused on women’s equality in career development and “taking men in all sectors and shifting away from family life” (*New Straits Times*, 2005, p. 12). “I want to be a professional

and a mother too,” says Shaaban. “Children and family were part of my plans. Family in our society is very important and something that we should treasure” (p. 12). Shaaban, therefore, believes women’s liberation in Arab countries is quite different from the Western experience. “I don’t want to be exactly like a man, I want to be a woman,” Shaaban argues. “God created us in different ways to fulfill different missions. It does not mean one should be inferior. We are different but equal” (*New Straits Times*, 2005, p. 12).

Moreover, Shaaban asserts that, contrary to popular beliefs that Arab men discourage women’s progress, the real problem was the prevailing systems in society. “The problem with women is that they think that if they are good, someone will invite them to take their place. This will never happen” argues Shaaban. “They must fight for that place and they must be twice as good as the men to be seated near them. Women should set the example that men can follow” (p. 12). This article demonstrates how Syrian women can be smart and successful in politics, based on Shaaban’s experience. Shaaban displays intelligence in how well she understands the Syrian political system and the best way for a woman to penetrate the dominantly-male public sphere. Moreover, this Syrian minister also demonstrates her faith in Islam and in family life, which by no means, makes her inferior or prevents her from pursuing a successful career.

Perhaps an article that summarizes portrayals of extraordinary Arab and Muslim women, is the *USA Today* story by Barbara Slavin (2004), who writes of incidents of progress in various Arab and Muslim countries, with regards to women, thus demonstrating that women’s empowerment in the Muslim and Arab world is in progress. She cites the example of Morocco, where the government drafted a code giving women equal rights to divorce, child custody and inheritance. “Morocco also has a quota of 35 seats for women in its 325-member parliament...,” reports Slavin (p. 16A). Similar political rights were awarded to Jordanian women, as King

Abdullah II also established a quota for women in parliament. Slavin also tells readers that the young monarch appointed a new cabinet that includes three women, “unusual in the male-dominated Arab world” (p. 16A).

While Slavin deserves credit for informing her readers of positive steps towards women’s political and economic empowerment in individual Arab countries, one also has to question her exaggeration for claiming that appointing women is “unusual” in the “male-dominated” Arab world. It is fair to argue that women remain underrepresented in the region’s political and economic arenas, but it is also essential to clarify that women have held prominent government posts in many of the region’s countries. Female ministers are not unusual in countries like Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, and Morocco; even in the Gulf region, countries like Qatar and Oman started to appoint female ministers by 2003. Also, countries like Iran, where many Westerners perceive “Iran’s ayatollah ruling with an iron fist,” women hold public office, comprise 25 percent of the labor force, run business and own property (Basu, 2001, p. 8A). Georgia State University Professor, Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, explains that 19 percent of Iran’s university teaching staff are women, “a higher percentage than Germany” (Basu, p. 8A).

The local and international articles summarized in this section display to readers the different faces and personalities of Muslim and Arab women. These articles illustrate how the region is full of exceptionally progressive, independent and resilient women. This analysis illustrates how many Arab and Muslim women defy the stereotype of the passive, ignorant and oppressed woman, given their success in economic careers or as political activists or prominent government officials. These articles also display Muslim women as passionate about their careers and determined to succeed and in helping others succeed; these are women that are empowered by their work and also by their families and their faith. This latter point is confirmed

by the words of many of the women quoted in these news stories, who stress on the importance of family, children, Islamic teachings and tradition and are convinced that they can still be equals to men without having to give up many of their long-held beliefs and practices.

Conclusion

Articles analyzed in this chapter demonstrate the complexity of the Arab and Muslim woman, given the diversity of women in this region and the different economic and political conditions of women that vary from one country to the next. It is important to note, however, that this is one of the few chapters where the stereotype of the oppressed, passive, helpless and ignorant Muslim woman did not dominate the coverage. One could explain this trend by reporters' close examination of individual Muslim countries' rights and regulations with regards to women; by reporting on the economic and political events and laws that vary in each country, this gives reporters less freedom to generalize about all Arab and Muslim women. Many articles also highlight the exceptional and extraordinary women in various countries, some of whom work equally with men or even lead or manage men.

Moreover, among the notable trends discussed in the chapter, is the growing political activism of Muslim females throughout the region, which could be taken as a positive sign of the gradual loosening of restrictions on women and the growing political power and impact of these women, who are increasingly voicing their demands and being heard. Political activism portrayed by Arab and Muslim women in this analysis ranged from voting and holding public office, as is the case of women in many Gulf countries, to women organizing and joining political demonstrations, as displayed by Kuwaiti and Egyptian women, all the way to extremist case of females suicide bombers, which is the case of Palestinian and Iraqi women. This latter

image of the Arab and Muslim woman is a new phenomenon that has received a lot of attention from Western reporters, in an attempt to better understand these women's stories and the events that could have driven them to end their lives. Coverage of suicide bombers is also important as it portrays the Muslim-Arab woman in a totally new light; this is a militant, fearless woman, who in many cases seems delusional. Other, less threatening images of this militia woman, has been portrayed in the various articles on aggressive female activists and demonstrators, who stand side by side with men in Arab streets, voicing their demands and frustrations; these are courageous women who put up with government violence and vengeance, which has been demonstrated by the image of Egyptian female demonstrators. As Philip Smucker of the *Christian Science Monitor* asserts, "A new female militancy has arrived with a vengeance as both social analysts and women's groups struggle to define the 'new Arab woman' - one with a newborn conscience (p. 06).

Essentially, articles in this chapter make it clear that it is extremely difficult and wrong to depict all Muslim-Arab women as a giant monolithic Other; these women are diverse in their personalities, aspirations, intelligence, education, and overall political and economic status. Hence, it is more feasible to closely examine the circumstances of individual countries or groups in order to offer readers more accurate portrayals of the Arab-Muslim woman. More importantly, stories that carry strong women's voice offer readers a deeper look at the lives and minds of these women, compared to Western reports dominated by the reporter's voice or by non-Muslim/Arab sources.

Notes

¹ SAPs are backed by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund with the aim of liberalizing developing countries' economies and reducing government control. The programs involve a reduction in government expenditure on health and education services, privatization of public enterprises and trade liberalization among other things.

² Ijtihad refers to independent thinking by Muslim scholars to derive rules of divine law by looking at the Quran and Hadiths.

³ Hirsi Ali is mentioned in more detail in the previous chapter, under the section Male-Female interaction.

⁴ The UAE economy, like most other Gulf economies, relies on millions of expatriates. These Gulf countries are currently working to curb their dependence on foreign employees by training the local workforce.

⁵ IBSS stands for the International Banking Summer School, an annual educational banking event that began in 1948, where the world's leading banking professionals hold a 10-day training event for bankers from around the world.

⁶ Jack Straw's comments sparked a veil controversy in Britain in late 2006. His comments were made public in his column, published in the *Lancashire Telegraph* and he was also quoted in various local and international newspapers.

⁷ The question of suicide bombing in Islam is a very complicated one, given that many religious speakers differentiate between suicide, which is forbidden in Islam, and suicide bombings, seen by many as "martyr operations." Those who endorse this latter view are convinced that these people blow themselves up, not out of despair or hopelessness in life, but they choose "to suffer death for Allah's sake, in the hope of furthering the Palestinian Cause" (Khorshid, 2004, Islamonline). Yet the majority of Islamic jurists, including religious scholars in the conservative Saudi Arabia, consider such suicide bombings to be unreligious because they target innocent civilians. For more on this debate, see Khorshid, Sara (2004). A culture or suicide? Islamonline.net; available from: <http://www.islamonline.net/English/Views/2004/04/article08.shtml>; Hameed, Shahul (2006). Supporting Terrorism? Islamonline.net; available from: http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?pagename=IslamOnline-English-AAbout_Islam/AskAboutIslamE/AskAboutIslamE&cid=1123996015684; and, Terrorism: The Islamic verdict on suicide bombings. Thetruereligion.org; available from: <http://thetruereligion.org/modules/wfsection/article.php?articleid=61>

⁸ This column was originally posted in *The Boston Globe*.

⁹ An analysis of reporters' coverage of Shari'a and the Iraqi constitution is discussed later on in this chapter.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

This study has aimed to provide a comprehensive analysis of the diverse portrayals of the Muslim-Arab woman in U.S. newspapers as well as in selected international newspapers. Its purpose has been to expand on previous research on media representations of Arab and Muslim women through a discourse analysis that reveals the image(s) of Arab/Muslim women in relation to religion, society, politics and the economy. One of the strengths of this study is that it provides a more in-depth examination of portrayals of the Muslim-Arab woman within these various themes; this is a departure from the majority of earlier studies on Muslim women, which have more often simply documented dominant stereotypes without breaking down the coverage in a topical way. Another strength of this study is that it also attempts to analyze the journalistic conventions that possibly produce stereotyping and distortion, an analysis that has not been approached by previous studies on portrayals of Muslim/Arab women.

Among the weaknesses of the current analysis is the absence of attention to visual images, which when combined with the print stories, would provide more context regarding the representation of Muslim-Arab women in the news. Images of Arab and Muslim women do appear in various U.S. newspapers, and since images have powerful impacts on audience as compared to the written word which can only be accessed by a literate audience, a more complete account would attend to both. Hence, future research should focus on an examination of both the visual and print representations of Muslim-Arab women, which would provide a richer, and more comprehensive and accurate analysis of the coverage. Another drawback is the complication presented by analyzing American coverage versus international coverage, which although in most cases revealed similar conclusions, was at times different and yielded

contrasting approaches that are difficult to explain in the absence of a more comprehensive international review.

Another limitation of the study is the fact that I merged news stories and opinion pieces together. While I believe that this was reasonable given that columnists and editorial writers are still required to make accurate claims in order to gain credibility, yet it is also true that my recommendations for journalists would not be equally applicable to journalists versus op-ed writers. Hence, future research could possibly expand on the current study by conducting separate analysis for both types of writing.

The Many Faces of the Muslim-Arab Woman

Despite these implications for future research, the analysis has revealed an important picture of varied, accurate but also distorted portrayals of Muslim and Arab women. A general conclusion noted in all chapters is the continued focus of many Western reporters on Muslim women's hijab and their outside appearance, which are more often than not taken as a sign of women's backwardness and oppression. This study confirms previous research showing that Western reporters remain fascinated by the veil.

Why are newspaper reporters and editors captivated by such a narrow aspect of Muslim women's identity? Falah (2005) provides one explanation of this phenomenon when he says:

Whether veiled or exposed, passive or wielding weapons, Muslim women are the ultimate 'Other,' and they serve as the main repositories of the West's sense of fear, fascination, and superiority vis-à-vis the Muslim world. Newspaper editors seem to be aware, given the actual content of newspaper reports, that the U.S. public has little interest in learning about the lives of 'ordinary' Muslim women, but they do have an

insatiable desire to be reminded of the great social and cultural gulf that exists between themselves and the Muslim world (p. 318).

If Falah is right, the veil, abaya, burqa or chador are the clearest way to identify this cultural gap for many Western reporters, which could explain the abundance of references to a woman's veil, abaya or burqa in many stories that do not discuss religion or women's fashion.

Yet the fact that this stereotype dominates coverage on Arab and Muslim women does not make it the only image of Muslim-Arab women portrayed in the Western media. Whereas this typecast still widely exists, the coverage also overlays other frames, where the Muslim-Arab woman is portrayed as intelligent, vocal, bold and resilient and far from oppressed. This analysis reveals the many faces of the Muslim-Arab as depicted by various reporters at different times; women have been portrayed as artists, creative writers, bold politicians as well as assertive businesswomen and economists. This more or less sympathetic representation of Arab and Muslim women is especially salient in times of national or global focus on the region; this was the case in the attempt of 9/11, and also during the war on Afghanistan as well as the invasion of Iraq. Coverage of these events included detailed interviews with Muslim women worldwide, and helps correct some of the distortion and misrepresentation of these women in the news. Yet, the current analysis also reveals how, in trying to provide a balanced image of the Arab-Muslim woman in the news, many reporters still tend to distort, as illustrated by the image of the superwoman, who has it all: sound education, competitive job, perfect family and kids. While many Muslim as well as non-Muslim woman are successful at multitasking and are financially able to afford an education, other women can neither afford an education nor find adequate employment. And other women are not so successful in marriage or in child rearing.

In sum, Muslim-Arab women are diverse; diverse in their physical endurance, mental capacity, financial capability, religious beliefs, outside appearance, as well as in their aspirations, ambitions, boldness and weakness. Hence, it is inaccurate to generalize about them either way; one cannot lump all Muslim-Arab women into a gigantic monotonous group. Perhaps *Al-Jazeera* network's prominent presenter, Kawthar Al-Bashrawi, spells it out when she says: "We [Muslim-Arab women] are so diverse; and each person has the right to her diversity. No one can say we should all be veiled...or the reverse. And between the two are countless shades of conditions, mentalities, hopes and dreams" (Aljunid, 2002, p.1). The analysis of newspaper representation of Muslim women in relation to religion, society, the economy and politics, indeed confirms Bashrawi's words.

However, the analysis also reveals that there are many journalists who present a huge population, namely the Arab population, through single and mostly unrepresentative examples. The chapters have illustrated how coverage exaggerates exceptional problems in the region that are reported on as if they are dominant features of the region. Issues like female genital mutilation, honor crimes and forced marriages receive a lot of Western media attention, yet the coverage usually lacks proper context and thus strengthens the frame of the victimized and helpless Muslim/Arab woman. On the other hand, reporters fail to give the same attention to the positive exceptions among Arab and Muslim women. Coverage illustrates how reporters sometimes gloss over news of an exceptionally intelligent Muslim woman, or of a liberal Muslim husband that supports his wife rather than oppresses her. Such shortcomings in the coverage, therefore, leads one to believe that it is necessary to examine weakness in journalistic practices that could be leading to distortion or exclusion.

Implications for Work on Muslim Feminism

To some extent, this study confirms arguments by Muslim feminists relating to the broader cultural Western misconceptions about Muslim women and their analysis of the general tendency to view all Muslim women in an undifferentiated way. This deduction has, in fact, been reiterated throughout the study, as many reporters continue to refer to all Muslim women as oppressed or subjugated under Islam or by Muslim men. Muslim feminists like Basarudin (2002), El-Guindi (2005) and Merali (2006) argue that Muslim women are only referred to in the news as victims who need rescuing by the superior Western culture and by Western feminists. While the articles analyzed do not always necessarily portray Muslim women as oppressed and in need of rescuing, to a large extent, this still remains the dominant trend in U.S. newspaper representation of Muslim women.

In addition, the study has provided evidence from Muslim women quoted in the coverage that supports Muslim feminists' contention that the hijab empowers and elevates women's status from a mere sexual object to an intelligent human being worth listening to (Ahmed, 1992; El-Guindi, 2005; McDonough, 2003, & Merali, 2006). But while Western reporters have occasionally demonstrated objectivity in reporting on women and hijab post 9/11, a phase that witnessed strong input from Muslim women worldwide, this has not always been the case throughout the five-year research period. As examples throughout repeatedly revealed the hijab is commonly referred to in articles that do not even deal with veiling, usually conveying the impression that the veil is a sign of oppression; the resulting reportage often renders women as faceless ghosts. Irrelevant of how it is presented in the news, the analysis has demonstrated that hijab continues to be a hot topic in U.S. and international newspapers.

Moreover, while the coverage has persistently talked about forms of Muslim women's oppression, the explanations provided by reporters usually contradict Muslim feminists' (Al-Hibri, 2005; Kahf, 2005 and Marsot, 1996) assertions that many of the ills suffered by Muslim women today are more related to culture and tradition than to Islam. Examples include the persistence of the Saudi women's black abaya and prohibition of driving and also more severe traditions such as female genital mutilation and honor killings that occur outside of Islamic sanction. This is why feminists ask that Muslims go back to the Islamic text to separate fact from fiction and to eliminate inequalities towards women and patriarchal domination. Yet, in many U.S. and international stories, these cultural practices are referred to as Islamic and reporters fail to cite Muslim feminist experts or religious scholars to confirm or refute such allegations.

But the study also problematizes Muslim feminist scholarship as the current examination of Western newspaper texts' portrayals of Muslim women also reveals that portrayals of Muslim women are far more complex than mere distortions and stereotyping. The analysis' revelation of the many faces of the Muslim woman – the oppressed, ignorant, dependent, militant as well as the superwoman - implies that, to a large extent the West sees Muslim women as a homogenous, monolithic group, which is in agreement with Muslim feminists criticisms. Yet these various frames also demonstrate that depicting Muslim women as weak, helpless and oppressed is one of many stereotypes used to describe the Muslim woman to a Western audience.

An important outcome of this study is that it possibly brings Muslim feminists closer to their Western counterparts. Hamid (2006) argues that women's issues in the Middle East are of a complex nature and Muslim/Arab women who embrace feminism could seem to outsiders as contradicting at times. The author adds that "...many Muslim women exercise their agency in ways that may appear perplexing to even the most open-minded of Westerners" (p. 84). The

current study could, therefore, enable a Westerner to comprehend these complexities, given that the analysis of the coverage clearly identifies the many faces of the Muslim/Arab woman. In other words, the study could lead a Westerner to see the more “nuanced, complicated picture” of the Arab/Muslim woman, rather than view all of these women as one, monolithic Other (Hamid, p. 86).

The current study also allows Western reporters to understand more clearly Muslim feminist critiques of media representation of Muslim women. For instance, while Muslim feminists reiterate how Islam has elevated women’s status, and today treats men and women equally while extending many rights and privileges to women, the dominant trend in many articles analyzed portrays Islam as the oppressor of women. Reporters refer to everything from veiling, to polygamy and to Shari’a law as signs of women’s oppression. Because in most instances articles fail to provide an adequate context about Islam and because reporters are unfamiliar with the range of Islamic jurisdiction, stories are usually inaccurate or distorted and give readers a very thin version of the truth as portrayed by Muslim feminists. The current study thus provides a bridge to connect the Muslim feminists’ views with Western journalists who can identify from the analysis the main problems with their coverage.

Another argument debated by Muslim feminists, which seems relevant to this study, is related to the Western media’s reliance in their stories on “secular” sources within Islam as trustworthy experts on Islam. This has been the trend practiced by many reporters, while others rely altogether on non-Muslim experts, usually to make negative deductions about Muslim women’s status. For example, several U.S. and international reporters refer to secular, Westernized, feminists and scholars such as Irshad Manji, Asra Nomani, and Salman Rushdie, among others. The problem with relying on these secular sources is that their accounts of Islam

and women's status might be expected to tilt more Western than Islamic. Hence, one has to question why reporters do not refer to the many prominent Muslim feminists available to offer facts and contextualizing opinions about Muslim women.

Aside from building on Muslim feminism work, however, the study has also looked at some of the journalistic practices that lead to stereotyping. The study also proposes possible remedies to such practices that start in the journalism classroom.

The Journalistic Conventions that Produce Stereotyping

Not only does this study attempt to reveal the diverse representations of the Muslim-Arab woman in the news, but it also tries to understand the journalistic conventions that contribute to generalizations, distortions and stereotyping of Arab and Muslim women. Why is it that journalistic codes direct reporters to certain details, such as accurate names, titles, color of eye, description of place or person, etc, where other details are oversimplified or excluded? Why do motivated journalists lapse into stereotyping? Specifically, why do theological details about hijab, dress codes and the overall treatment of Muslim women fall out of their stories? The answer may lie in existing journalistic norms that sometimes lead reporters to inadvertently distort reality in their stories, despite reporters' constant efforts to report the truth. Given that most of these conventions were discussed in previous chapters, this section examines the most common journalistic standards identified throughout the analysis, comparing them to ones that were not so prevalent.

Primary Socialization: Culture

My analysis of U.S. news stories on the Muslim-Arab women in fact confirms that reporters are often misguided by their own cultural upbringing and by myths that lead to distortion and stereotypes about other cultures. Journalists are highly influenced by an ideological and cultural framework that conditions his/her reporting on the ‘other’. “As both part of their culture and as storytellers for that culture, journalists construct stories through narrative conventions that are culturally resonant for themselves and for their audiences,” argues Berkowitz (2005, p. 608). Conventional wisdom and mythical archetypes can also distort coverage. Berkowitz defines archetypes, as “ideal stories” that are repeatedly revisited to tell a new story: “no version is definitive, yet most can be identified as the same basic tale that spans cultures and eras” (p. 608). By repetitively drawing on taken-for-granted interpretations about a society and its people, this in turn can produce generalized and distorted coverage.

One could argue that cultural bias and reliance on mythical archetypes is more evident in coverage of Muslim women and the veil, stories on female genital mutilation and honor killings, as well as in some general stories on Arab-Muslim women’s political, economic and social status.

Parachute Journalism

One could very well argue that the distortions and sweeping generalizations common in many of the stories analyzed could be a factor of the increased reliance on parachute journalism. Many of the news stories covering issues on Muslim women in Arab/Muslim countries, for example, carry local datelines, thus indicating that the reporting was mostly conducted outside the country being reported on. Examples include *The Star Tribune*’s article on the sentencing of

a Nigerian woman to death by stoning, which carries a Washington, D.C. dateline (Milbourn, 2002), a *Christian Science Monitor* article on Iraq, which happens to mention veiling in Iraq, Iran and Turkey, also carrying a Washington dateline, and a *Sunday Telegraph* story on a Palestinian suicide bomber, datelined London (Wilson, 2002). Others articles do carry Arab/Muslim datelines, yet they also display subtle hints of the journalists' passing familiarity with the country they are reporting on. One example is a *Christian Science Monitor* article on Nigerian women (Peel, 2002), datelined Lagos, Nigeria, where the reporter cites non-Muslim sources in his story on death by stoning and yet fails to interview a Muslim intellectual to interpret this alleged Shari'a ruling or cite a government official on the ruling itself. One could argue that because of Peel's (2002) unfamiliarity with Nigeria, it was difficult for him to find adequate sources that would help him report all sides of the stoning issue. Evidence of parachute journalism could arguably also include the *New York Times*' Amy Waldman's (2003) article on Afghan women in prison. Waldman (2003) argues that under Islam, men can marry up to four wives while women can marry only one man under the conditions of the first wife's consent, or if the first wife has "a contagious disease, or is unable to have children, and that the husband has to provide equally to all wives" (p. 1). Yet, as discussed in Chapter 2, the conditions highlighted by Waldman (2003) are oversimplified, thus demonstrating a lack of familiarity with Islamic law dominant in Afghanistan and the reporter's lack of familiarity with local religious sources who could have shed more light on the issue.

Parachute journalism therefore, could be one reason why many journalists rely on weak sources, often eliminate or distort context and/or background about the culture and overall provide a confused and somewhat twisted version of the truth. This is especially the case in coverage of women in Gulf countries, or in stories about women and Islam, where it might be

difficult for reporters to really understand cultural and religious complexities in a very short time, enough to be able to write about them.

News Values

One of the main conclusions of this analysis is reporters' interest in conflict, their occupational attraction to the odd or weird story, as well as inherently dramatic stories, which does not always allow journalists to see the whole truth so as to provide objective and balanced reporting. The bulk of stories analyzed focus on the problematics, injustices, and oppression that reporters seem to identify in Muslim cultures; Muslim culture is implicitly presented as at war with itself. This is very evident in stories analyzing the status of Saudi Arabian women; the majority of these news stories, editorials and columns talk about women's subjugation. We are repeatedly told about Saudi women who are not allowed to drive, have separate seating areas on public, cannot travel, work or study without a male guardian's permission, have limited political rights and are denied access to all jobs in the Kingdom. Yet, how many of these stories actually look at the positive side of these women's lives? How many reporters took the time to inform readers about the slow change that is bringing Saudi women to the cultural forefront and making their voices heard? Moreover, how many stories introduce readers to the many successful Saudi female doctors, engineers, artists, etc? Also, when these stories do exist, why does the reporter still have to divert attention back to the darker, gloomier and repressive framework themes?

Although this analysis identified several incidents where reporters looked at the bright side of Muslim women's lives, as indicated by the coverage of exceptional women, women's creative and artistic side, as well as stories that highlight women's economic and political independence in some countries; nevertheless, the bulk of U.S. newspaper coverage remains

focused on the dark side of these women's lives and on what might be seen by reporters as intriguing oddities. For example, one might argue that Muslim women are an attractive news topic because of their external appearance, which compared to Western clothing, can seem odd or unusual. Muslim women are also something of a mystery, with their veils and sometimes covered faces, and hence they intrigue reporters who feel that they can unmask women through their stories. In sum, this analysis provides evidence of the inherent problems in journalists' reliance on current news values, which do not seem to represent the whole truth.

Peer Groups & Newsroom Morgue

Another factor that possibly contributes to distortion is journalists' reliance on the newsroom morgue, or library.¹ This was indicated on several occasions, when reporters seemed to repeat the exact same background and/or contextualizing paragraphs used in other stories. One might also argue that peer groups could be another contributing factor; given that many reporters sometimes make the same vague or distorted claims about the women of a specific country. One of the examples cited in Chapter 2 revealed how an *Associated Press* article published on March 18, 2002, carried a quote from the Nigerian woman sentenced to death by stoning, which was later included in a *Herald* (Glasgow) story by Vicky Collins (2002), yet nowhere in her story does Collins clarify that this exact quote was taken from the AP original (AP published in the *Gazette*, 2002, p.B8). A similar incident was cited in the same chapter where a *Boston Globe* reporter (Jackson, 2002) cited a quote from a *New York Times* article (Dowden, 2002) without giving the reporter credit. This reliance on peer quotes, therefore, illustrates how reporters reproduce each others' stories and rely on one another's interpretations to reduce uncertainties.

Impact of Media Consolidation and Blogs

Although this factor was not discussed initially, one might argue that industry transformation does in fact impact coverage. Perhaps the ever-increasing supply in news outlets coupled with the growing movement of media consolidation also has impact on the quality of news stories. Although readers today have a wide array of news outlets to choose from, a report from the Project for Excellence in Journalism reveals that “this diversity does not add up to news consumers being provided with any greater depth of knowledge about issues or even a wider view of events taking place at home or abroad” (Gregorian, 2006, p. iii). The project director, Vartan Gregorian, the President of the Carnegie Corporation, argues that the end result is news stories lacking in context and diversity without standards. Gregorian further notes that with the fast spread of journalists’ blogs, journalists are to some degree put in the same category as creative writers. This is because anyone can become a blogger; a journalist blogger does not need to be affiliated with a certain media outlet to express his/her personal opinion. The problem with this idea is that we expect journalists to objectively report the facts, unless clearly stated otherwise, as in the case of editorials and opinion pieces. This leads Gregorian (2006) to conclude:

As opinions and facts become more and more indistinguishable from each other, confusion about the increasingly blurry line between fact and opinion - even between what is factual news and what is presented as news but becomes wrapped in ideology - and uncertainty about the trustworthiness of journalism and its practitioners grows (p. v).

Gregorian notes the widely publicized scandals where journalists plagiarized their stories and about others who have allowed bias and inaccuracy to seep into their reports. Then there are

incidents where governments explicitly encourage journalists to promote particular opinions (p. v).

The current analysis has revealed common cases of reporters' generalizations and the blurring of facts with opinion, outside of editorials and opinion pieces. There are also cases where one or two reporters wrote stories on a topic for multiple local and international newspapers. This was specifically the case with 9/11 reports that covered hijacker Mohamed Atta's will. Thus, this could be taken as an indication that media consolidation does not necessary expand our media choices, given that many networks, newspapers and magazines are combined under one owner, and hence they are more likely to produce similar accounts or coverage. This could essentially lead to more exclusion and more distortion as limited media decide news to cover and how to cover it.

Implications for Future Research & Journalism Practice

One way to read this coverage is to argue that there are actually no major problems or distortions; one could argue that reporters in fact, do the best they can to report the brutal and complicated reality of Muslim women in the region. I wish to make a contrary case. Given the systematic analysis of all the coverage on Muslim-Arab women between 9/11/01 and 9/11/05, one could actually argue that, even when reporters think they are being helpful by disclosing injustice done to Muslim women, they are many times actually only reporting stereotypes. Journalists tend to unconsciously distort facts about other cultures as they rely on their own cultural norms and codes to comprehend these events and as they are pressured to get the story out fast to meet deadlines. Through selective perception and through the reliance on their own cultural norms to make sense of events that seem foreign to them, journalists produce stories

missing essential characteristics needed for an accurate understanding or comprehension of the phenomenon being addressed. The end result is a mixed-picture of the Muslim-Arab woman: on the one hand a perpetuation of stereotypes, and on the other, occasionally evident efforts to fairly represent the experiences of exceptional women. This is why I suggest recommendations that could help well-intentioned reporters to really do the job they wish to do; my goal with these modest recommendations is to enable journalists who attempt to uncover truths about a foreign culture to do just that, without necessarily distorting reality. These suggestions could also be used in the classroom; since as mass media educators, it is imperative that instructors both become conscious of existing problems in coverage of foreign cultures and bring these problems to the attention of students. It is important for media educators to begin in the classroom, by discussing with students various correctives that both bring students' attention to their own stereotyping while proposing ways of overcoming this dilemma.

One of the best remedies to distortion of foreign cultures and peoples is for journalists to familiarize themselves with these cultures. Visiting a Middle Eastern restaurant, for instance, or striking up a conversation with a group of Muslim women can help aspiring journalists better understand the Muslim culture and learn more about the Islamic teachings these women adhere to.² While this familiarization with the 'Other' might not necessarily convince reporters with unfamiliar cultural and religious practices, it might at least get reporters to see that there is more than one version of the truth out there. Furthermore, in talking about the coverage of Muslims in America, Aslam Abdullah (2005), editor of the *Muslim Observer* and the founding director of the Muslim electorates' Council of America, suggests that media establishments expose themselves to comparative religions. Abdullah, speaking at a Seminar on *Covering Islam and Muslims in America* by the Western Knight Center for Specialized Journalism, adds that reporters covering

Islam and Muslims should make an effort to know at least one of the dominant Islamic languages.

This latter point connects to the issue of diversity in the newsroom. It is simply imperative for media organizations to hire reporters from diverse backgrounds, ethnicities and religions. The more diverse the newsroom, the less likely that stories on foreign cultures will be oversimplified and distorted, because there will be at least one reporter in the newsroom who is familiar with that culture, or can speak the right language that will get him/her in contact with the best sources. Retired *USA Today* editor, John Quinn (2006), argues that the “time has come to take news-staff diversity off the special-projects agenda and make it the way of life, as the Founding Fathers intended” (Newsroom Diversity online). “‘We the People’ still means just that. As the complexion and backgrounds of our nation become more diverse, so must the staffing and coverage of the free press to fulfill its obligation to all free people in all quarters of their communities,” Quinn (2006) explains.

Diversifying source pools would also help eliminate many distortions of foreign cultures. If reporters make it a point to talk to sources from the foreign culture, or specialists on that culture, it is more likely that he/she will get a clearer understanding of the concept being reported on and will therefore avoid stereotyping and sweeping generalizations.

Media educators should also direct student’s attention to the limitations and constraints embedded in current news values, which often restrict journalists to write about the rich and famous or the odd/unusual and the negative, thus ignoring the diverse issues and news stories that do not fall under these categories. It is also necessary to stress on ‘humanizing’ the story, which means focusing on individual people’s stories rather than generalizing about all people of a certain culture as a singular, monolithic ‘Other.’ “I’ve tried to get at diversity through profiles

to humanize the stories,” explains *Los Angeles Times* reporter, Teresa Watanabe (2005). The current analysis has demonstrated that stories that focused on individual Muslim women’s lives provide a more realistic representation of these women. But given that some reporters rely on extreme examples to generalize about the majority, one would advise reporters to expand their pool of sources, which in turn, would allow them to get diversified opinions and report all sides of an issue.

Another essential corrective involves context and background, which is often forgotten in stories about other religious and cultural practices. This often results in portrayals that make religious practices seem extremely odd or unusual. Although journalists today inevitably constricted by time and space limitations, even one paragraph of context or background can add a lot of meaning to a story. Geovanis (no date) argues that missing context is one of the limitations of many corporate news stories:

One limitation of many 'straight' corporate news stories is the absence of context. The story, for example, may talk about a bus bombing in Gaza — but not tell the reader that the bus route is typically used by Israeli soldiers traveling to and from their posts in the occupation, and that resistance fighters argue that this makes the bus line a legitimate military target. The reader may disagree with the fighter's analysis, but at least they know what their perspective is (Geovanis, online article).

Geovanis (no date) asserts that such omissions “decontextualize a story — literally strip it of its historical framework — leaving the reader with the impression that Palestinians are simply bloodthirsty religious extremists ...rather than laying down the historical basis of what drives conflict in particular regions, particularly from the perspective of the parties in conflict” (Geovanis, online article).

As for opinion writers, my main recommendation is to ensure accuracy in their writing. Columnists and op-ed writers still owe it to their readers to verify their facts, conduct thorough research and contact credible sources so as to support their arguments. Most columnists start out as journalists, and therefore, should have acquired the elements of good writing that should help them write more persuasively. Perhaps Grimm (2004) sums it best when he says:

Good journalism and good columns share these characteristics: accuracy, clarity, conciseness, compelling interest, good writing. Good columns have two additional characteristics: voice and a point of view. Problems arise when a person has the last two characteristics -- or, worse yet, just one of them -- but not very many of the first five (Poynter online).

Media educators, therefore, can offer their students numerous insights on how to avoid stereotypes in diversity reporting. By addressing inaccurate portrayals in the classroom, this could help eliminate a lot of the common problems in diversity reporting before they reach the newsroom. After all, as Young (2007) states, "Journalism should serve the interests of fairness, accuracy and balance. Stereotypes further none of the three" (Online article). In sum, dealing with diversity and media representation issues inside the classroom can essentially lead to fewer distortions and stereotypes in the newsroom and more objective representation and less exclusion of people from other cultures and religions.

This study has revealed the many faces of the Muslim/Arab woman in national and international print coverage that too often converge to one face, one impression, one monolithic portrayal only occasionally complicated by alternative accounts. It has thus shown instances where Muslim women were portrayed sympathetically and objectively, and also instances where

the women were heavily stereotyped and distorted in the news. One hopes that these findings, along with the analysis of possible journalistic practices that promote the coverage, may contribute to heightening journalists' awareness of distortions and stereotyping and guide journalism instructors, journalists and editors to promote more objective coverage of Muslim and Arab women, given the increasing importance of the Middle East region in the news and the growing Muslim/Arab population within the U.S. that expects to be covered fairly and not as an alienated, ghostly Other.

Notes

¹ Journalists commonly refer to the newsroom library or database of old stories as the morgue.

² One of the most impacting features of a Poynter Diversity seminar I attended in 2006 involved visits to ethnic restaurants and gatherings with people from different sexual orientations. This allowed the participants to learn more about the place and the people firsthand.

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