

Hijabi Activism

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Hijabi Activism

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I was eating a veg dosa at Delhi's Jamia Millia Islamia University cafeteria when a veiled student turned to me. "I like your glasses." I was surprised, because women students in Indian universities tend to be quite shy, and her chic women's aviator sunglasses were much nicer than my run-of-the-mill specs. We struck up a conversation, and I learned that Roshni Misbah was a biker, better known as Hijabi Biker. After introductions, her friends told me that Roshni was the fastest woman motorcyclist in India, with her top speed on the racetrack reaching 328 kilometers per hour! What did her parents think of their daughter's dangerous exploits? "Oh, they are very supportive. In the beginning, my mother was very nervous, but she is OK now." Roshni was a member of the Delhi chapter of the Bikerni group, a Muslim feminist athletic project "that aims at spreading women empowerment through the medium of motorcycles" (Tiwari, 2017).

What was she doing in Delhi's Islamic university? "I am studying Arab Islamic culture for my MA in Islamic studies." Surprised to hear that I was an Arabic professor, she wanted to know who in America wanted to learn Arabic, and I wanted to know why someone with almost 14,000 followers and a career as a speed biker should be pursuing graduate studies in Islam and Arabic. She laughed and told me about her childhood reading and memorizing the Qur'an without understanding a thing. "Me too," chimed in her friend, who until then had been sitting quietly next to her. I was not surprised. In my many travels in Muslim-majority countries, I have often heard Muslims say that they do not know Arabic beyond deciphering and memorizing the text of the Qur'an. Many seem happy merely to sound out the verses and perfect their recitation. Not Roshni and her friend. Why did studying this scripture, which she knew so well by sight and sound, matter? "I need to know what the Qur'an allows women to do." Did she not know the harams and halals of the Muslim scripture? Yes, but there were some difficult issues that she could not reconcile with her belief in the kindness of God and the equality she instinctively knew inhered in Islam.



I have met many powerful veiled Muslim women who have bucked the system in some way, but Roshni was unusual in declaring that excelling in a man's world was compatible with being a good hijabi.

In this essay, I look at hijabi activism as it is expressed in Islamic feminists' defiance of gender expectations and critique of misogyny. While many Muslim women have contested the norms of contemporary Islamic communities, until recently, most of these women have not veiled. Indeed, for many it was the veil that was the problem (cooke, 2000, 2001). The current choice to wrap the hijab and then denounce those who would deprive Muslim women of their rights has become a trend. There is something about the visibility of the hijab that makes a powerful point about a commitment to faith that might otherwise be challenged or overlooked.

What are hijabi activists' strategies to empower themselves and others despite the restrictions placed on Muslim women's public prominence? How do some Islamic feminist writers articulate concerns about the ways in which they have been held back from enjoying their rights as equal members of their communities? The subjects they have broached are many, but in what follows I will focus on hijabi activists' pious transgressions and demands for full participation in every aspect of the life of their Muslim communities, especially in mosques.¹

Before Hijabi Activism

In the 20th century, Muslim women around the world began individually and collectively to protest the misogyny they experienced in their communities. Many of the early Islamic feminists opposed the veil as a symbol too laden with patriarchal meaning and value to enable creative agency. During the last half of the 20th century, and especially after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which brought an Islamic theocracy to power and spread political Islam, feminists responded to the tightening of misogynist norms and values. Many targeted the veil as the key element in gender discrimination.

In 1928, Lebanese Nazira Zeineddine (1908–1976) published what I have hailed as a pioneering Islamic feminist text (cooke, 2010). The first woman to write an entire book on women's rights in Islam, Zeineddine argued for a women-friendly Islam and decried patriarchal interpretations of scripture. Reacting against some Syrian sheikhs' calls to veil recently unveiled women, *Al-sufur wa Al-Hijab* (Unveiling and Veiling) articulated a scholarly, literary objection to the veil. Although many religious authorities have claimed the veil to be an Islamic mandate, opponents have pointed out that the veil is nowhere to be found in the Qur'an beyond a verse telling women to cover their bosoms and not flaunt their charms. Zeineddine called for a revision of misogynist interpretations of the Qur'an and hadith, making the powerful argument that if hadith is not consonant with the Qur'an it must be wrong. God's unmediated revelation, after all, should take precedence over the human word, even if the speaker was the Prophet Muhammad (Zeineddine, 1928/1998, pp. 234–235; cf. cooke, 2010, pp. 32–38). Despite some support from clerics, and her 1929 *Al-fatah wa Al-Shuyukh* (The Girl and the Shaykhs), a retort to mean-spirited polemics, she soon disappeared into domestic obscurity (cooke, 2010).

Zeineddine may have vanished, but others picked up the baton, writing about the disabling anxiety the veil can produce and the whirlwind of emotions that can pass unnoticed behind its thick cover. The doyenne of 20th-century Muslim Arab feminist writers, Nawal El Saadawi (b. 1930), has devoted her life to fighting the many injustices women experience across the world. Connecting class, patriarchy, and imperialism, she has consistently demanded attention to the ways in which the oppression of half a society's population damages the whole. In her 1988 short

story *Eyes*, El Saadawi shows how the veil does not merely cover the body, but draws attention to it and in so doing highlights what is shameful and debilitating about a woman's body in a man's world. The shrouded protagonist consults a psychiatrist about her nightmares of death and abandonment. Since childhood, she has been obsessed with the idea that she has unwittingly committed some great sin. Consequently, she covers her body and face and speaks with no one, either at university or in the museum basement storeroom where she catalogues mummies and ancient Egyptian statues. She does not use public transport or even ride in a taxi, lest contact with men defile her. Living alone with her penniless, pseudo-pious father, she dreads marriage lest she suffer the fate her mother faced at her father's hands. Then one fateful day, she notices "through the two narrow holes of the black cloth" (El Saadawi, 2004[1988], p. 206) a little statue that she has not previously registered or even noticed. The eyes of the small statue seem alive, and they rivet her attention. She fears losing "him" and starts to scour the streets for "a face that resembles his" (p. 208). Failing to find his living equivalent, she dreams that he drowned in the flood that took the lives of the evil seven thousand years ago. Has she become infatuated with a "follower of the devil" (p. 209)? Two days in a row she "sees" him on her way to work, and she approaches him only to be rebuffed and shamed. She falls into a fever that none can cure: "That's how she came to me" (p. 212). This woman closeted in panic and cloth drowns in a sea of fears and fantasies. For this woman and her author, the veil is a curse.

Hijabi Activists

This rejection of the hijab as inescapably patriarchal is not true for many 21st-century Islamic feminists, who deploy the veil in order to make their arguments for gender inclusivity and justice. For some hijabi activists, it is the hijab itself that provides a space for observant Muslim women to share men's space. A remarkable hijabi activist is 22 year-old Emirati Zahra Lari. Challenging the assumption that the hijab prevents women from competing internationally, she was the first professional ice skater to wear a hijab. At an international competition in Italy in 2012, Lari made headlines:

She was docked points for wearing a hijab on the ice.... After the event, Lari met with the [International Skating Union] and convinced them to amend their rule book to allow

Muslim skaters to cover their hair. It got Nike's attention; not only did the company ask Lari to help design the new Nike Pro Hijab, but she also fronts the campaign. (Farra, 2018)

She insists that her work with Nike is about empowering Muslim women:

Being able to show girls around the world that this major company is [making] a hijab, and is supporting Muslim athletes—that alone can encourage people to do whatever sport they want.... Skating is very important to me, but it's not just about skating anymore—it's about the message I want to send out to people all over the world. (Farra, 2018)

The message of course is first and foremost for all Muslim women who wish to cover their hair out of respect for their religion while performing in front of Muslim men and the world. The words "chic" and "pious" describe this pioneer.² Lari may not be studying Islam to learn her rights as an observant Muslim woman, but coming from the United Arab Emirates, a conservative Muslim society, she knows what she can and cannot do, and she knows that her religion allows her to compete athletically at the highest level.

Another hijabi activist is American photographer Rana Abdelhamid, founder of the New York City Women's Initiative for Self-Empowerment. She works with Muslim women to combat Islamophobia from a position of strength. She teaches self-defense workshops for Muslim women, and in January 2016 she created the photography series *Hijabis of New York*, modeled on *Humans of New York* (Blumberg, 2016). Her art project mirrored the kind of work Tayyiba Taylor did in her *Azizah Magazine*, which modeled the many different ways Muslim women can cover and be fashionable while advocating for women's rights within a well-understood Islam. Marrying the tough to the beautiful to the feminine to the pious, these women are leading their sisters out onto the stage to take their rightful place alongside men in whatever capacity they choose.

Trespassing on Men's Space

There are many barriers to women participating fully in the life of a Muslim community, and none are more difficult to overcome than the female body and its voice. Women are told not to lead communal prayers; they cannot be imams or deliver the Friday khutba. They are said not to be able to call the *adhan*. Many are barred from mosque space.

During the past 25 years, Muslim women have been taking on these taboos and showing them to be man-made. In August 1994, Amina Wadud shocked Muslims the world over when she

delivered the Friday *khutba* at the Cape Town Claremont Road mosque, with women and men praying side-by-side although separated by a partition. Attempts to have her removed from her teaching position at Virginia Commonwealth University failed, and in March 2005, after Suhayla al-Attar had called the *adhan*, she took the next step when she led a New York City congregation in the Friday prayer, this time without any gender separation. In 2008, Wadud led the prayer in Oxford, UK. Her 2006 *Inside the Gender Jihad* reviews Islamic feminist activism over the past 20 years, including her own activism:

I have fought the gender jihad to remove the blinkers that see only the illusion of fragmentation and then build structures and formulate systems to sustain the perception that it is real; and then to give divine sanction to the human illusion of human independence from transcendent peace and unity, and to pretend the practices, codifications, and systems constructed to sustain the illusion are divinely ordained. (pp. 257–258)

In January 2018 in Malappuram, K. Jamida “Teacher” became the first woman in India to lead the Friday communal prayer and deliver the *khutba*. Despite intimidation that escalated into threats on her life, Jamida said: “I want to do things differently in a way that benefits my community in the long run” (Naha, 2018). These two Islamic feminists have set trends that seem unlikely to be stopped.

Women writers have joined their activist sisters in denouncing discrimination in religious spaces and rituals. Women, they insist, can lead the faithful in prayer; they can call them to prayer from the height of the minaret. Above all, they must be given space in the communal mosque to pray with the same freedom that men enjoy.

In her lyrical novel *The Honey* (1999), Lebanese Zeina Ghandour (b. 1966) writes of the beauty of a woman’s voice: it is not *’awra* but honey, like the honey in the Qur’anic chapter entitled “The Bee.” This honey-voiced woman is called “the desert mermaid, and she performs the call to the dawn prayer. Those who have heard her say that her voice is so luminous, it was as though the sun and moon both had been arrested in it” (p. 6). This extraordinary voice evokes at once joy and fear, “dark and rare like black coral, and deep and mysterious as the sea which contains it” (p. 7). Ruhiya, daughter of a desert village muezzin and sister of the terrorist Yehya, calls the *adhan* in a

way that halts her brother's suicide mission while also creating "a disorder and agitation inside me and I wish I could fly with the same grace and not choke with this despair" (pp. 37–41). Here is the *fitna*, or social disorder, that some Muslim men fear from women's voices. From a woman's perspective, however, calling the faithful to prayer is a blessing and permissible. How does Ruhiya manage to call the faithful to prayer from her father's minaret? It started at home. She quietly called the adhan every time she prayed:

Because I read that this was permissible, as long as it was performed in private. I like the way my voice sounded and unconsciously began to raise it. I raised it and raised it, aiming for the sky. And like our prophet, who once prayed to Jerusalem, I turned west to al-Quds, instead of south, to Mecca. (pp. 22–23)

Her confidence in her luminous honey voice grows, and with it her defiance of other injunctions against women's freedom, so that at dawn on the day her brother is to blow himself up, she unties and wraps her "hijab around her waist." For the first time in years, she feels "the wind at the nape of her neck." She must make sure that her voice is unencumbered. Climbing the stairway of the yellow mosque from which her father always calls the adhan, she wonders why the great Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum's voice has not been considered *'awra*, the word for shame and women's pudenda.

"Allahu Akbar!" Her body was stiff. The yell had escaped from her. She stood steadfast as a volcano disgorging boiling liquid, dispensing words like ashes.... Ruhiya opened her eyes and put her hand on her heart.... Her mouth bore no traces of shame, despite the slight tremor and the tingling beneath her skin.... The villagers were willing to overlook the fact that it was being sung by a woman. But when they were woken that morning by Ruhiya's song, they stumbled out of bed and ran out into their gardens with dread and disbelief. For the women immediately knew she would pay for this pleasure, even though it had been so gracefully displayed. And the men? The men felt her song pierce through their hearts like a burning spear.... [N]othing could have prepared them for the gratification and delight they felt on hearing her, or for the sweetness that lingered on in the atmosphere of her song at mid-morning. (pp. 23–28)

When a foreign journalist interviews the village women, they call what Ruhiya did "unbearable. Like pure sugar" (p. 64). They, too, have been thrown into paradox. The men, on fire and thrilled, are torn between belief that it was a miracle, because it lifted her father's fever, and reaffirmation that it was taboo for a woman to raise her voice:

For all to hear, without shame, and worse she has done this in God's name...[O]ur community has been polluted and must be cleansed...A woman immodest enough to display her ecstasy to the entire world! She is obviously the perfect accessory for the Zionists. (p. 81)

This linking of women's ritual dissidence with Zionism and international conspiracies appears in other Islamic feminist writings. What they write and articulate is dangerous.

Mohja Kahf (b. 1967), a Syrian-American poet and academic who has satirized Americans' and Arabs' views and treatment of each other, has denounced women's exclusion from Islamic public space. She defends Muslim women's rights to do what they want within a well-understood Islamic context. In her 1998 "My body is not your battleground," she informs men that they may not till a woman's body like a field, even if they quote a relevant Qur'anic verse: "My private garden is not your tillage" (Kahf, 2003, p. 58) God told them to respect women and include them in their public lives.

Her wide-ranging 2006 novel *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* paints a portrait of Middle American Muslim life. Through the eyes of Syrian-American Khadra, the reader observes the dailiness of Muslim devotions and women's challenges in living fully Muslim lives against the background of international events such as the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, Hafiz Asad's brutal 1982 crackdown on the Muslim Brothers in Hama, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the 1991 Gulf War, and the war in the former Yugoslavia during the early 1990s. From reaching menarche to donning the hijab, to attending burial rituals for a raped and murdered Muslim student leader to marrying the grandson of a Kuwaiti pearl diver—a seemingly open-minded husband turned tyrant, whom she divorces—to going to college, Khadra negotiates the incompatible values of two different cultures to which she does and yet does not belong. The veil, however provocative in Islamophobic Indiana, becomes a necessary part of her identity. Khadra leaves when she can to work as a reporter for *Alternative Americas* in Philadelphia. To her dismay, she is sent to her hometown to give an insider's perspective on Muslims living far from the cities where most reside. Her assignment runs her up against all that she loves and hates. She loves the warmth of a close-knit family, the camaraderie with her strong, beautiful Muslim sisters, and the multiple threads of cultures that make up the tapestry of the Indiana Islamic community. She hates the Ku Klux Klan,

who torment her community, and also the tensions within the diverse ethnic and national Muslim groups, which are exacerbated by funding from warring factions far from the American heartland. The assignment sends her reeling back into the past, and a large part of the novel is devoted to her account of how she learned to be a strong, independent, albeit not always orthodox woman committed to Islam.

Khadra's first experience of gender discrimination comes during the family's hajj trip to Mecca. Enchanted by the dawn call to prayer, she goes to the mosque. The *matawwa*, or morality police, return her to the house where she and her family are staying. Why, she wants to know, are women not allowed to pray in Saudi mosques when "women have always gone to the mosque. It's part of Islam" (Kahf, 2006, pp. 167–168)? The next shock comes when some Saudi men think they can take advantage of an American, even though she keeps repeating that she is Arab. Khadra is agonized that the holiest of Islamic rituals, the hajj, has been defiled.

Not only in Saudi Arabia and other Muslim-majority countries but also in the United States, women are prevented from participating in public Islam. During a period of enchantment with Qur'anic studies and her preparation for a *tajwid* competition, her recitation tutor tells her that women cannot participate (p. 199). Adding insult to injury, her exquisite *tajwid* at a session of the Muslim Students' Association raises alarm about her gorgeous voice seducing men. Rather than fight the age-old insult that women's voices are *'awra*, she gives up Muslim student activities (p. 204).

During the newspaper assignment, just as she is beginning to feel good about her hometown, she hears that a concert she was about to attend has been cancelled. Why? Hijab hip-hop with Nia Girls has tested the limits of the local Muslim authorities. They have decreed that women "are not to dance and not to make their voice suggestive and seductive" (p. 413). Despite these setbacks for Muslim women, Khadra still cherishes her hijab, her tangerine scarf from Syria, even if she does not feel bound to wear it all the time (pp. 424–425). Accepting her own ambivalence about people she may love at one moment and hate at another, she condemns the many forces in society that restrict Muslim women's freedom to be who they want to be and say what they want to say.

Kahf's Islamic feminist critical rhetorical strategies entail multiple critique, which I have defined as:

[Muslim women's ability] to balance their religious, specifically Islamic loyalties with national, local, class, ethnic, or any other allegiances to invent a contestatory, but also enabling, discourse within the global context that will not be easily coopted. They may thus initiate new forms of conversations across what were previously thought to be unbridgeable chasms.... [Their] multilayered discourse allows them to engage with and criticize the various individuals, institutions, and systems that limit and oppress them while making sure that they are not caught in their own rhetoric. (cooke, 2000, pp. 99–100)

Kahf's Islamic feminist masterpiece poem is a poem entitled *My Little Mosque* (2005). A lament for the loss of the generosity and openness that should characterize Islam and Muslims, her poem highlights the many ways Muslim women are deprived of their God-given rights to live freely and worship fully.

In my little mosque
there is no room for me
to pray. I am
turned away faithfully
five
times a day
My little mosque:
so meager
in resources, yet
so eager
to turn away
a woman
or a stranger (p. 116)

Short staccato lines explode like bullets she shoots at the mosque guards who refuse entry to women and strangers. She knows because she has been told to go away. Sad and perplexed, the poet laments ignorant men's eagerness to turn a woman away from her rightful place. A woman in a short skirt once dared to cross the mosque threshold in search for help in a time of pain and despair. The men did not care about her physical and emotional needs, only about what they considered to be improper dress.

Everyone rushed over to her
to make sure
she was going to cover her legs (p. 120)

The only women the little mosque loves are those who “live like seventh-century Arabian women /or at least dress / like pre-industrial pre-colonial women.” Even for such pious women there is at best only a cordoned-off place where they can pray. Moreover, the congregation is expected to support the gendered division of space with regular contributions for “another curtain to partition off the women” (pp. 116–117).

These women-despising men are infatuated with Arab men “with pure accents and beards” who are the source of “Real Islam” (p. 121). For these men, no luxury is too much:

My little mosque has a Persian carpet
depicting trees of paradise
in the men’s section, which you enter
through a lovely classical arch (p. 118)

The opulence of the men’s sanctuary, with its entrance arch, magnificent columns, and carpet promising the pleasures of paradise, contrasts shamefully with the women’s section, which is entered:

through the back alley
just past the crack junkie here
and over these fallen garbage cans (p. 118)

The injunction to cleanliness, so central to Islamic belief and practice, does not pertain to women and their prayer space. So cruel have the men become that she has no choice but to carry a little mosque:

in the chambers of my heart
but it is closed indefinitely pending
extensive structural repairs (p. 119)

Funny, ironic, and despairing, Kahf flails around for a mosque that will welcome her. Failing to find one, she tries to build a little mosque in her heart. However, despite her religious commitment, her extensive learning in Islamic sciences, and her study of the *Sahih* by al-Bukhari, her little mosque falls into disrepair. Nowhere can she find a sanctified space to pray, not even in her heart.

Kahf knows that her charge of misogyny will not be believed. Did the little mosque's men not reject God's application for the job of janitor because they did not consider him a Muslim? They will also reject her poem, deriding it as "written by the Devil / in cahoots with the Zionists, / NATO, and the current U.S. administration, / as part of the Worldwide Orientalist Plot / to Discredit Islam" (pp. 120–121). Echoes of Ghandour's *The Honey* ring loud. As conspiracy theorists, the fake religious authorities will never accept responsibility for what they have done wrong, but will always blame others—the usual others. Can she persuade them that her criticism is the fruit of her love for Islam? Can they be coaxed into opening the mosque doors to prevent the very real "bricks of bigots" from breaking the windows? She concludes with a plea for inclusiveness, not only for women, but for all people of all religions: Christians, Jews, Buddhists, and Hindus.

She is not demanding the impossible: "only a few square inches of ground / that will welcome my forehead, / no questions asked" (pp. 122–123). Since these precious inches of ground are not to be hers, she needs to remember "the Mosque is under your feet, wherever you walk each day" (p. 123). Better not to rail at the ignorant, but rather to understand that for Muslims the whole of God's earth is a mosque.

Many have lamented the exclusion of women from the primary ritual spaces in mosques. Almost as if in response to their plea for a proper place to pray, Iranian-American architect Maryam Eskandari (b. 1982), founder of MIIM Designs, has emphasized the importance of building inclusive Islamic architecture that insists on women-welcoming mosques. The transnational history of mosques reveals a space for worship, social interaction, education, justice, and commercialism. The mosque was never just walls, brick and calligraphy thrown together for ritual prayer. Instead it was a place of almost *functional worship* in which the very existence and cultivation of the mutual and altruistic relationships within the community were acts of devotion to God. (MIIM Designs, 2013)

MIIM Designs studio employs architects, researchers, and designers who have been trained in Islamic theology, Islamic art and architecture, and gender studies. For Eskandari, the Mecca Mosque provides the ideal model for gender-inclusive prayer places:

The architecturally designed spaces and socially negotiated places for and of Muslim women in community mosques in the United States emerge as a particularly understudied

problem...Oftentimes these retrofit buildings raise specific questions on the American Muslim identity struggling with the interwoven issues of religion and culture that are brought over from Muslim countries, such as, where do the men stand? How much space is allocated for women, and what about children? (Ali, 2017)

Some hijabi punk activists do not feel as restricted by specific laws, and they have recently modeled new ways of occupying men's space.

Hijabi Punks

After the turn of the new millennium, a surprising form of hijabi activism emerged: hijabi punks. The first popularization of this phenomenon came in Michael Muhammad Knight's 2004 Muslim punk novel *The Taqwacores*. The narrative revolves around the queerly observant life of Muslim inhabitants in a house in Buffalo.³ Among these young Muslims, who drink and enjoy free sex, is the badass, totally covered, *niqab*-ed Rabeya. When she first appears, the narrator describes her as "a baggy ninja with various patches on her flowing *burqa*" (p. 8).



Noureen deWulf as Rabeya in the film adaptation *Taqwacores* (Bhattacharya, 2011).

None of the men in the house will ever see her face, but they respect "Imam Rabeya" (p. 67) enough to let her lead Friday prayers. Her *khutbas* hit the narrator:

with the feeling that we had done a great deal for Islam just by sitting there to hear her. She knew her stuff more than any of us...and gave everything she had, every stupid second of her life, to that Islam. But I felt like there was nowhere else in the world that she could give a *khutbah* to men, and for that maybe we would be the vanguard of something new. (p. 19)

The tone is ironic, yet there is something revolutionary about this strange household where men take pride in their acceptance of a woman leading their prayer. They respect her deep knowledge of Islamic scripture, even going along with her decision to eliminate verse 4:34 about hitting a recalcitrant woman because it does not fit with her notion of a just Qur'an (p. 132). Imam Rabeya is not only learned and deeply observant; she also has an exquisite voice. The narrator finds himself on the verge of tears when he listens to her reciting the Qur'an (p. 82). With this reaction to Rabeya's voice reciting the Qur'an, the irony of masculinist self-congratulation is gone. With no hint of the contemptuous rejection of a woman's voice as *'awra*, the narrator submits to its overwhelming power. These Muslim punks know that others might consider their ceding of the Friday *minbar* to a woman worthy of censure, but they also know that Islam is not one thing and that it accommodates women religious leaders. Although Rabeya constantly tests her housemates and her readers, who believe they know what Islam allows and forbids, she remains for her author an observant Muslim from whom much may be learned.

In 2014 in Java, a trio of hijab-wearing teenagers burst onto the metal music scene. Calling themselves Voice of Baceprot (baceprot means "noisy" in Sundanese), they play loud, abrasive music in public. Many have tried to stop them, but they retort that Islam allows them to play music.



In a 2017 interview with Ashley Westerman on National Public Radio (NPR), singer and guitarist Firdda Kurnia said that after their initial objections, “her parents became proud and supportive.... She is emboldened and proud to be an inspiration to other women. “I’m a different musician because I’m a woman, and I play metal music but I’m wearing hijab,” she says. “Hijab is my identity, OK?” (Westerman, 2017)

On another occasion, she echoed hijabi activists when she affirmed:

Wearing a hijab should not be a barrier to the group’s pursuit of its dream of being heavy metal stars.... I think gender equality should be supported because I feel I am still exploring my creativity, while at the same time, not diminishing my obligations as a Muslim woman. (Reuters, 2017)

These girls model for the world an outspoken, rebellious version of the good Muslim woman who can stride onto a heavy metal platform and outperform her male colleagues, who thought the stage was theirs.

Conclusion

How better to conclude this essay than with the words of a feisty Syrian-American, the hijabi rapper Mona Haydar? In no uncertain terms, 28 year-old Mona, who calls herself a “rapper, poet, activist, practitioner of Permaculture, devotee, mountain girl, solar power lover, and a

tireless God-enthusiast,”⁴ informs the world that her hijab empowers her against negative stereotyping in America. Surrounded by her energetic multiethnic veiled chorus, she belts out: “So even if you hate it I still wrap my hijab.” Within a month, *Wrap My Hijab*, her debut video from early 2017, had garnered over a million views on YouTube. She was proudly pregnant and—like Hijabi Biker, her 23 year-old sister protestor in Delhi, with whom I began—she was deep into her MA in theology.

A year later, Haydar produced the *Dog* video, a sharp rebuke to faux-religious men who mistreat and prey on women. “Shaykhs on the DL. Shaykhs in my DM begging me to shake it on my cam in the PM,” she lirts, but the meaning is far from cheerful. According to the Urban dictionary (2018), the DL or “down low” refers to “straight, masculine, ‘thug like’ black men, often with wives and girlfriends [who] secretly have unprotected sex with other black men.” Like their “thuggish” lookalikes, these sheikhs who are in her DM, or direct messaging on the Instagram app, alternately engage in sexual activity with other men and beg Muslim women to arouse them online: “When the sun sets trying to hunt me down.” But they have no luck with these young women, who know that such men are dogs: “Boy you might need Qur’an.” Thus Zeineddine’s voice resounds down the decades, telling ignorant sheikhs to read the Qur’an before they presume to criticize her.

Not only does Haydar call out pseudo-pious Muslim men but, like the writers discussed in this essay, she also mocks the way men have called women’s voices *’awra*: “Say my voice is haram / Cuz you getting turned on.” In letters streaming across the screen, we read: “A woman’s voice is REVOLUTION.” Note that in Arabic, *’awra*, or shame, rhymes with *thawra*, or revolution. After insulting the hypocrites, “the seedy sidis in their sidi suits,” she sings:

Say you can save my spirit
But you’re a dog at night...
We can see right through him he’s a dog at night...
Emotional terrorist...
If you please lower your gaze...
You need a therapist
Boy you need an exorcist.

In the closing 40 seconds of the video, the following words flash in capitals onto the screen: “IN THE TIME IT TOOK YOU TO WATCH THIS 27 WOMEN IN THE US HAVE BEEN ASSAULTED OR ABUSED. 1 IN 3 WOMEN WORLDWIDE HAS EXPERIENCED PHYSICAL SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN THEIR LIFETIME.” Haydar ends with a piece of advice to the ignorant men who misuse Islamic authority to abuse women: “O my God you need God.”

The final message provides an example of multiple critique. While the song is about Muslim “dogs,” it targets all hypocritical men, everywhere and of all religions, who mistreat women while pretending to protect them. Haydar will not be caught in an anti-Muslim-men trap. In an interview with *The Tempest*, she said:

Violence against women is something important to me as a woman, and the statistics that I feature are staggering. I feel that, as an artist, if I’m not pushing myself to do things for the betterment of the world, then I shouldn’t do anything. I’m interested in using my art to explore the intersections of art, activism, music, and identity. I think to myself, “How can I use my voice for the greatest good?” That culture of silence is so damaging because it allows those cycles of abuse to continue and we have to break them... Hip-hop can be used as a global tool for liberation and the refinement of our selves and egos. (Mohammed, 2017)

Haydar’s urban slang is far from the down-to-earthness of her Syrian-American compatriot Kahf. But in just over four minutes each, Haydar’s two videos hit on topics that absorb hijabi activists: the illegitimacy of self-appointed Muslim authorities’ exploitation of women, and the banning of women’s voices, which are not *’awra* but *thawra*, even honey.

The work of hijabi activists such as rapper Mona Haydar, architect Maryam Eskandari, and writers Zeina Ghandour, Michael Muhammad Knight, and Mohja Kahf is beginning to rectify centuries of injustice against observant Muslim women who ask no more than their fair share of space in the life of their communities. They share scholar Amina Wadud’s fervent wish that the gender jihad they know they have to fight should end:

The spaces for women to demonstrate both their self-identification as female and their full humanity... belong to all women who have endeavored to sustain their roles as women and Muslims despite silence, separation, violence and invisibility. (Wadud, 2006, p. 262)

The revolution, which I had never imagined, finally came. It has now been over 100 days, and women have transformed political life as we know it. We did not wait for any donor,

nongovernmental organization (NGO), or government to come and empower us. We waited for each other and looked out for each other. We knew intuitively that the only way to organize was a feminist one, through inclusive, horizontal, and decentralized forms of leadership. We did not let the men monopolize the scene and tell us what to do. Actually, that part was easy—because we were the majority and they could not monopolize the spaces, and because frankly they did not know what to do and so could not mansplain the revolution to us. I had not connected with my own city and politics in such a deep and meaningful way before in my life. Suddenly I felt that we, as women, belonged to this place and were able to contribute to changing it. I am convinced that women have experienced this revolution very differently than men, because our struggles with the system are so existential. It is about our livelihoods, bodies, and voices. My women friends are more involved, stressed, and anxious, because they are expending more time, effort, and emotion in the revolutionary process, knowing that they stand to lose the most if the revolution is unsuccessful. Our personal is not only political, but it is revolutionary. If we go back to the way things were before October 17, we go back to being treated on the basis of whichever sectarian ticket we are handed. While we are different, our lack of rights to our bodies, to custody, to divorce, and to travel is oppressive, no matter the ticket we were born with. This time, we will not allow a handful of men to continue to push this country to the brink of apocalypse and then ask them to come and empower us. We will not let a handful of men, warlords or otherwise, design a system that keeps them powerful and rich at our expense. This time, our private political actions are revolutionary. The mere fact of marching down the streets with banners making feminist demands makes our personal choice to engage with politics revolutionary. The idea that the new political system must espouse gender equality is born out of our conviction that we have a personal duty to shape the trajectory of the revolution. Our visualization of the current system as a gender apartheid means that this revolution can only succeed to the extent that it is revolutionary enough to enable women to sit at the table and decide about the future. The revolution falters if we go back to a version of NGOization and state feminism that blames women for the system's long-standing discrimination. Yes, we need to replace these politicians. We need men to step aside as we rebuild a personalized version of the revolution that recognizes our agency and our role in the uprising.

Notes

¹ I will not deal with Muslim women's use of the veil to make citizenship claims in France.

² Other prominent Muslim women athletes who have tested Nike's Pro Hijab include weightlifter Amna Al Haddad and runner Manal Rostom from the United Arab Emirates, and Zeina Nassar, a German boxer (Nike News, 2017).

³ "At 17 he left home in upstate New York to study Islam in a madrasa in Pakistan. Fleeing an abusive father, among other things, he converted to Islam as an act of rebellion. But he soon found plenty to rebel against within Islam—not least its attitudes towards women, gay people and alcohol" (Bhattacharya, 2011).

⁴ Learn more at <http://www.monahaydar.com/>

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