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The fallen female: A testimony

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THE FALLEN FEMALE:

A TESTIMONY

A Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis is a collection of thematically related nonfiction works that offers a critique of the author's three cultures – Pakistani, American, and Muslim – through a feminist lens. The author attempts to offer an intersectional feminist's insight based on her lived experiences as a Pakistani American woman – born in Karachi, raised in Louisiana and the Rio Grande Valley in South Texas. It explores feminist theory, focusing on rape culture and religious influences. It also details the author's experience as a Muslim woman who chose to observe hijab after 9/11, her crisis of faith, and ultimate rejection of religion. By not italicizing when code switching between Urdu and English, it touches on post-colonial theory.

The works are presented in various forms, including a screenplay and poetry; and hybrid forms are utilized to better present the arguments against patriarchal dominance in cultures both East and West using research, historical data, and empirical evidence.

DEDICATION

To the people I can never thank enough - My Parents, who gave me life, both biological and beautiful. My Partner in Crime, who holds my heart and my hand on the journey. Without their endless support and encouragement, this would not be.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I will always be grateful to my committee chair, Dr. Jean Braithwaite, for not only patiently helping me hone the craft of non-fiction writing, but also finding the courage to say what I need to say. Her mentorship and encouragement helped me gather my strength and confidence as a writer. Her informed world view, along with that of my committee member, Professor Emmy Pérez, gave me the desire to strive to discover my own; and their teaching methods helped me articulate it as well as contributed to my own teaching style. Dr. Deborah Cole's generosity and willingness to help me in a time of need was integral to this work being completed. I would also like to thank Dr. Colin Charlton for throwing me into the pool of Rhetoric and Composition and laughing while I splashed about trying to develop my own teaching philosophy and for having faith in my implementation of it. And, though I cannot list them all here, I would like to acknowledge each professor I took a class with in the MFA program. I cannot think of one who didn't impact my education in profound ways – even if it was simply by demonstrating what kind of writer and/or educator I do not want to be. But mostly good profound, by far.

I never would have met these life altering personalities were it not for the people who helped me through my lifelong journey of self-discovery: My parents, in no particular order, Alma Gohar and Husney Ahmed Naqvi, for encouraging freethinking, for answering my questions, for treating me as an individual and not a commodity, for the priceless strength of

knowing I have not one but two safety nets in this big bad world. My partner in crime, Mujtaba H. Naqvi, for picking me up and dusting me off every time I fell, for not letting me fall every time I stumbled, for late night brainstorming, for still making me light up when I see you. My brother, Ali Naqvi, for teaching me to push limits and to never be the naysayer, rather to be the person who gets things done. My glow sister, Yvette Solis, for supporting me in every harebrained idea I've had since we met all those years ago. I thank you all, for if you weren't you, I would not be me.

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A glossary of Urdu words is located in the back of this publication.

Names and some identifying details have been changed.

"If you wish to know how civilized a culture is, look at how they treat its women."

-Bacha Khan

CHAPTER I

MEMOIRESQUE

A Modest Woman

Every morning on my way to class, I would take a moment to look up at the University of Texas tower in awe. I would literally stop - unless I was tragically late, and even then I'd at least pause. Across the dewy grass of the South Mall, the State Capitol's dome assured me that yes, I was in Austin. Behind me, the iconic tower presided over its Forty Acres.

The first time I set foot on the legendary campus, which in the years since its inception had grown to over four hundred acres, was during a campus visit two years prior. Since the first wrong turn led our group directly into its embrace, I was smitten. Smitten is too soft a word. I was overcome by a suffocating desire to already be one of the students sprawled under a mighty tree, napping with a note attached to my backpack, "Wake me up by 3."

Stronger than my yearning was my unacknowledged constant companion, self-doubt, and it allowed me to dismiss the notion of being a Longhorn as a fleeting fantasy. Now, I needed that daily moment to reassure me that I, a Pakistani American example of extended adolescence from the tippity-tip of South Texas, had made it this far. I could make it through the day.

I had no real interest in the subject, but the McCombs School of Business had made me an offer I could not refuse: it allowed me to join its prestigious ranks as a transfer student. Though I knew nothing about bears or bulls or what they had to do with money, I appreciated calling the building my own. Built into the undulating terrain of the city, you could enter on one floor, ride the elevator to another, and exit through the other side. There was a flashing electronic stock ticker and many large flat screen TVs, usually turned to financial reports or news, in the lobby of the third floor. These were the first things you noticed when entering the building from the tower side of campus.

On September 11, 2001, a Tuesday morning, the weather was starting to cool off after the scorching summer months of central Texas. Just weeks into the semester, as I hurried to my first class after my moment of morning meditation, I found my way blocked by a group of students gathered in front of these screens. Navigating quickly around them, I gave the television a cursory glance. A building. Smoke. I was already on the escalator when I registered that it was the World Trade Center.

By the time I exited my classroom, the severity of the situation was becoming apparent. Not one, but both towers had been hit. People were jumping from windows. It was not an accident. All around me, students paced, pounding the buttons on their cell phones. It seemed that everybody knew somebody in The City. Some cried tears of relief upon hearing the voices of loved ones still alive. Others looked shell shocked as they got no response. No one knew exactly what was going on.

I had negligible ties to Manhattan, so I sympathetically took in the chaos as I left the building. On my way past the televisions, I heard the first of the speculations. Some news

channel – really can't remember which – was unsure of any of the facts. But, they were able to toss around the terms "Muslim" and "terrorist." I watched those around me pick up the casually thrown about accusations and run with them. I could almost see it spreading. I could almost hear the whispers grow to a roar as I walked by the groups of students gathered around campus exchanging pieces of information.

"Has anybody bothered you?" my father asked over the phone later that day, worried the assumptions would lead to anti-Muslim sentiments. They hadn't. "How about your roommates? Have they said anything?" I shared an off-campus apartment with three white girls – strangers I had been paired with due to our lease lengths. I had been living with them for less than a month. No, they hadn't but whoever was home – we all came and left throughout the day – sat glued to the news coverage.

My father's question came out of concern for my safety as the scope of the horror and the frequency of the "Muslim Terrorist" speculations increased. My response was tinged with annoyance – not at him, but at this knee-jerk reaction of blaming the generic Muslim terrorist. I felt the accusations were premature, as they had often been in the past, and it irked me. This was not the first time I had encountered the unfair stereotyping of Muslims.

I recall a feeling of victimhood among Muslims. "It's because of the way they portray us in the media," one could expect to hear. "We're always the bombers! Every movie with a terrorist, they have some brown guy in a keffiyeh shouting, 'Allah hu akbar.'" This was, more often than not, true.

"Watch, they'll blame us when a bomb goes off somewhere," someone might say. "But when it turns out it's some white guy, they won't tell us his religion. And they won't

apologize." These particular comments, a commonly accepted sentiment among many Muslims I knew, were a reference to the Oklahoma City bombing. Before it was discovered that it was actually two white males, Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols, who were responsible, nonspecific "Muslim Terrorists" were immediately hypothesized to be involved.

At the time of the 9/11 attacks, the Oklahoma City bombing was not even a decade old and Muslim Americans, still hurting from the injustice of the false accusations, wore their innocence on that occasion like a badge of righteousness. Much, much later I learned that a couple of years before the Oklahoma City bombings, in 1993 when I was eleven and too young to care, there was another bombing. A group of men, all from Muslim backgrounds, orchestrated the original attack on the World Trade Center. Six of them were later convicted on a variety of charges.

At the time of the second, world-changing attack on the Twin Towers, however, I was still wondering why it was only ever suspects of Muslim heritage who were identified by their faith. Why, even after McVeigh and Nichols were formally accused, they were not subsequently labeled by their religious beliefs. But Muslims, regardless of their country of nationality or, if from the United States, municipality of residence, were always referred to by their religious background. I felt unjustly picked on, attacked even, when noting this trend.

I have since come to understand that this phenomenon has a complicated and multifaceted history including forces of colonialism and politics, money and marketing. However, beyond the historical and current forces of oppression, "Muslim Terrorists" are partially branded this way because they – the actual bombers and hijackers in

these situations – present themselves as such. Their very motivation is to please their god, and they want to make sure everybody knows which god earned the sacrifice.

Now, a decade and a half later, as more and more people of other faiths use their religion as the catalyst for their hate, it is increasingly common to see the media, and ultimately the general public, associate their violence and anger with ideological beliefs as well – as was the case with Robert Lewis Dear, Jr., a man whose religious beliefs led him to shoot up a Planned Parenthood facility in 2015. Or anything the Westboro Baptist Church does. There are still many who commit horrid acts and are excused as 'lone wolves' despite the startling surge in similar atrocities. But, with an increase in culprits citing religion or God in their attacks or arguments, it is becoming more common than before to hear of other religious populations rush to defend their faith at large. With the current political climate globally – between ISIS and the Tea Party – it will be interesting to follow this rapidly changing set of circumstances.

Once the twenty-four hour news media confirmed that the hijackers of the September 11th attacks were, in fact, Muslim and the sickening reality of the greatest attack on American soil slowly unfolded, Muslims around the country feared for their safety. These fears were not unwarranted:

Hassan Al-Asfur, an Iraqi from Houston, was shot in the leg on September 21, 2001. According to police, a man held a gun to his head and said, "Your people killed my people." Waqar Hasan, a Pakistani from Dallas, wasn't as lucky. He died on September 15, 2001 when he was attacked in his convenience store by Mark Stroman. Stroman, who after his arrest said, "I did what every American wanted to do after September 11th but didn't have the nerve," also killed Vasudev Patel a few days after shooting Hasan, and admitted to blinding a

Bangladeshi in between. The fact that Stroman killed Patel, who was not a Muslim, demonstrates the confusion over what a Muslim looks like.

Due to this confusion, many Hindus, Sikhs, and non-Muslim Middle Easterners were also targeted such as Balbir Singh Sodhi, a Sikh from Arizona, who was killed by Frank Roque on September 15, 2001. Roque told friends, on the day of the attacks, that he was "going to go out and shoot some towel-heads." On December 12, 2001, two men beat Surinder Singh Sidhi, a Sikh from California, with metal poles. The men asked Sidhi, "Are you bin Laden?" to which Sidhi replied, "No, I'm a Sikh from Punjab, India." They proceeded to beat Sidhi saying, "We'll kill bin Laden today." Though they were Sikh *and* Indian, their attackers confused them, and countless other Sikhs, as Muslim due to the beards and turbans that devout Sikhs wear. Reports such as these were common at the time. These are just a few examples of the immense surge of hate crimes against Muslims, and those perceived to be Muslim, in America after 9/11. According to the FBI, hate crimes against these groups increased 1,600 percent between 2000 and 2001.

Needless to say, these populations went out of their way to blend in. "God Bless America" said bumper stickers on every Toyota, Honda, and Mercedes parked outside of a mosque, temple, or gurdwara. I knew Muslim men who shaved off their beards and Muslim women who took off their headscarves. I read about Sikhs removing their turbans and cutting their hair. It was at this time that I decided to start observing hijab, the physical and spiritual modesty required of women by Islam. It was like wearing a neon flag of Muslim-ness wrapped around my head.

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My parents emigrated from Pakistan to the US in the early eighties when my father began attending Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. I was two years old and their only child at the time. Even as they began acclimating to their new environment, they clung to their culture - a mix of traditions brought over from India, and Pakistan's majority religion, Islam. It was important to them that their kids grew up with knowledge of and respect for their roots. Convinced, rightly, that we would learn English at school, they only spoke to us in our native language, Urdu. So committed were they, that for a long time, I was under the impression that my parents did not know how to speak English. One day, I must have been around four or five, I wandered outside onto the cement terrace that formed the perimeter of the third floor of our apartment building. My mom stood talking to the neighbor, a lean, brown south Asian woman named Madhu who would later invite my brother and me over to help decorate her Christmas tree. Shock, tinged with betrayal, hit my belly as their English words and laughter hit my ears.

Other aspects were not as consciously planned. My mother, for the most part, only cooked Pakistani food. At home, and even when visiting friends, most of whom were also of south Asian descent, my mom would wear traditional Pakistani clothes. The melodies that emanated from the boxy cassette player and formed the soundtrack to the earlier years of my life were in Urdu or Hindi. We celebrated Eid, not Christmas. We observed Ramadan, not Lent.

As many third-culture kids will confirm, immigrant parents grow and assimilate along with their children. So, as my little brother and I grew and explored our surroundings, my parents, being relatively open-minded and pragmatic people, expanded their world view as

well. They understood that if we were going to be raised here, we would naturally adopt some of the habits and behaviors of our neighbors and peers. Some of their contemporaries, who were also immigrants raising third-culture kids, did not adopt this attitude. They firmly clung to the belief that their culture was superior and more important and must be preserved, untainted, at all costs. They tried to accomplish this by denying their children simple activities like visiting the homes of American friends or participating in cultural festivities like Halloween or Valentine's Day.

My parents must have had quite an internal struggle in deciding what to allow as a natural part of assimilation and what to insist we hold on to. However, though some of their mandates may seem unnecessarily strict and unreasonable to some – even to myself, and actually, to them as they are today – I realize and appreciate their sincere efforts. Though I would much rather have been raised by the people they ended up becoming, they did the best that they could at the time.

We went trick-or-treating. We exchanged secret Santa presents with our friends at school. We passed out Valentines. We dyed Easter eggs using a Paas kit in the kitchen of our apartment. One year, when some ladies came to the door to invite us to an Easter egg hunt at their church, my mom sat through a service while I ran around outside with kids who may have actually known why they were there.

My mom started catering more to our developing tastes for "American" food, trading out my kabab sandwiches, which as an adolescent I was convinced stunk up the cafeteria, with peanut butter and jelly. I read *YM* and *Seventeen* magazines and adorned my walls with pull out posters of heartthrobs from *Teen Beat.* In high school, my brother subscribed to *Maxim*, much to

my mom's monthly dismay. There was more English spoken in our house than Urdu after a certain point. We went to school dances, where I promised I wouldn't dance because it was against my religion – but I still did. The permission to go to my first dance in junior high was based on this stipulation.

In the darkened gymatorium, a few adolescent couples danced clumsily, but the majority of my classmates were too immature or nervous to participate in this adult behavior. It never crossed my mind to dance with a boy. That wasn't in my realm of reality...because I was Muslim and because I was me – awkward, self-conscious, late to develop and thus, ignored by boys. I did however feel left out as my friends all gathered in the center of the dance floor to wildly jump about while flailing their arms to Kris Kross' "Jump." It seemed harmless enough and I did not want to be the only one left out hovering on the sidelines. So, I stood with them bopping to the music. Though I felt bad about it, it wasn't long before I was self-consciously mimicking their movements. I had no experience in this activity, I had no idea what I was doing, and I was sure I looked like an idiot. But, I was like everyone else for that darkened, thumping song.

Of course, being the guilt-ridden creature that I am, I confessed the entire episode to my mother who seemed displeased, but not really as mad as I thought she would be. My brother had a much easier time with everything – partially, probably because he was a boy, but more, I think, because I was the older child of immigrants. I was their first experience at everything. When I went out and came back unharmed, they had an easier time letting my brother do the same. Like public policy, I had to establish the precedent and he was able to reap the benefits. He is also a lot better at pushing limits and not as concerned about disappointing people – a strength I

attribute to the entitlement afforded to males in both of our cultures. Girls are raised to be kind, nurturing, and to consider others' feelings; boys are expected to be self-entitled, reckless, and a little selfish.

Even as my parents were embracing these cultural changes, they were still going out of their way to ensure we were exposed to a religious education. Being part of a religious minority, first in Baton Rouge and then the Rio Grande Valley of Texas, forced them to get creative. We traveled for hours to Houston to participate in religious events where the Muslim, more specifically Shia Muslim, population was larger. As Shia Muslims we were a minority within a minority. Though the Muslim population in both Baton Rouge and the Rio Grande Valley was small, the Shia population was almost nonexistent. We would go to the local Sunni Muslim mosque and considered ourselves part of those communities. The Sunni Muslim communities also accepted us in their circle. This would be unheard of in a predominantly Muslim country where the two factions segregate themselves violently. In a foreign world, we were similar enough to be considered the same. What the hardline Sunnis thought of us joining their prayer rows, I will never know.

Throughout my childhood and teenage years, on Saturdays we attended the local mosque's religious lessons where we learned about the importance of praying five times a day, the non-negotiable expectation of veiling for women, the pillars of Sunni Islam, the sinfulness of music, and how to read Arabic, among other things. My mother had been trying to teach us to read Arabic, the language of the Quran, since we were old enough to decipher the squiggles. She would periodically try herself, enlist my father's help, and once, for a period, she hired an Arabic tutor – a woman, Sister Lamiya, about whom all I remember is her disapproval of my arriving to

Arabic class one week following a Halloween carnival with my face painted. She disapproved of Halloween and I remember feeling inferior and judged even though my father had taken my brother and me with no qualms and paid for the face art that ended up causing me such shame.

It was important to my mom that we read the Quran at least once in Arabic because it is a rite of passage all Muslims traditionally must go through. Its beginning and end are marked with celebrations. Though non-Arabic speaking Muslims may not know what they are muttering, all official prayers must be recited in Arabic and even illiterate Muslims, like my deceased grandmother, can recite the Arabic Quran by memory. It is a source of pride for Muslims that their holy book is unpolluted due to this strict adherence to the language of Prophet Mohammed. For those who don't speak Arabic, it seems somehow crippling to me, as well as distancing, that praying, reading, and memorizing the Quran in Arabic is mandatory whereas far too many people don't read it in their own language in order to actually know the messages it holds. I questioned the reasoning behind this at that time too, but my parents explained that this kept the word of God absolutely pure the way it was received by the Prophet over 1,400 years ago (although it was not actually compiled, much like the New Testament, until decades after the Prophet's death.) They also gave practical suggestions to combat the language barrier: you could always read it in your own language *as well*, though I doubt most people do, or you could go above and beyond and learn Arabic.

My parents were able to make peace with joining the Sunni community because a Sunni community was better than no community, but felt it necessary to also make sure we understood the difference between us and them. Besides the individual tutoring by my parents explaining the historical and current differences between Shias and Sunnis and the once in a while

gatherings with other Shias in larger cities, I remember having Shia "Sunday School" classes in our living room with a handful of other kids for a while. I'm not sure if this was before or after the tampon incident at the Sunni mosque in we attended.

I was a teenager, maybe around seventeen. In the ladies section of the mosque, I sat talking after lessons with a girl only a few years younger than me – Mariam – who expressed desire to go swimming.

"So go," I encouraged her.

"I can't," she said, "I'm on my period."

This seemed like a non-issue to me; I had been using tampons for years and I told her as much. Blushing, she seemed to not know how to respond and I thought the conversation was over. To each his own and all that. Within minutes, however, I was approached by first one and then a group of women, some of whom were my religious teachers, others mothers of my peers. They were all from various countries, all in the Middle East, but they all were equally scandalized. They proceeded to tell me that I was no longer a virgin, question what my future husband would think, wonder at my mother's sense of judgement. My mother was, at the time, visiting family in Pakistan and I don't know how she would have reacted to all of this. I remember arguing even then, "Why would I marry a man who would care?"

Don't get me wrong – I was still brainwashed enough to believe that my virginity was of utmost importance. I just couldn't imagine marrying a man who wouldn't understand the concept of a tampon and who, more importantly, wouldn't trust me when I stated that I was a virgin. I tried to enlist the support of a peer of mine, Alia, who was on a dedicated mission to become a dentist. Since she was obviously a person familiar with science, I pleaded with her.

"Come on, Alia, you're a virgin unless a penis penetrates a vagina," I said, utilizing the knowledge and ideas I had at that time.

She looked shameful as she turned away. In a room full of women, I was on my own. It was after Mariam's mother took me aside and whispered conspiratorially that she could take me to...Libya or Syria or somewhere...and have me taken care of, have me sewn back up, that my mom's friend decided to intervene.

"You really shouldn't discuss these things with people," she warned, describing to me how in some Muslim cultures a bloody bed sheet must be offered as proof of the bride's purity.

I left mosque that day questioning if I really wasn't a virgin anymore and called my mom as soon as I returned home. It was the middle of the night in Pakistan when she answered, and after listening to my tearful story, she calmly told me to call her friend, a pediatrician who happened to be Shia and Pakistani. Upon hearing my tale, this doctor aunty became incensed. Her anger at the women who made me question the existence of the most valuable thing an unmarried Muslim woman can have – her virginity – made me feel better.

At some point in the nineties, I began noticing a change occurring within the Muslim community around me. When we lived in Baton Rouge – junior high and earlier – my mom and the women around me, though dressed modestly by American standards, did not wear a hijab. Hijab is a term for a woman exuding "modesty" – both in her actions and her appearance. Colloquially, however, it refers to the headscarf most people associate with Muslim women. With the headscarf also come long sleeves, long pants or skirts, loose clothing. Basically, you have to be covered up around men you aren't immediately related to. Among other reasons that are often cited, the main one seems to be to curtail the sexual

attraction of the female body. According to Sharia rules, hijab should be started at puberty, and many girls around the world do, often by force. Some women never observe hijab.

So somewhere around junior high, a woman arrived in the community and adamantly preached that Muslim women should be covered. The woman, who was considered devout and pious had five daughters, four past puberty. None of them wore hijab. This was a dent in her credibility and a source of gossip, but for some reason I associate her arrival and aggressive preaching with the onset of what I privately came to think of the American Islamic Awakening.

It appeared, at least to me, that the Muslims around me were becoming more devout, learning about their religion beyond just, "that's how we do it back home," focusing more on Islam and less on cultural traditions. I also noticed more women, and one five year old girl, voluntarily starting hijab. The reason I felt it was a trend that reached beyond just the Baton Rouge Muslim community, though I had no data to support the claim, was that I felt and saw it happen in other cities too.

In New Orleans, where we would sometimes go for Shia events, more women started wearing hijab. One girl a couple of years older than me, Fizza, a Shia Pakistani American with what seemed like very progressive parents – her mother didn't wear hijab, her father didn't have a beard, they didn't spend their days on a janamaz – went away for the summer and came back married and in an abaya and hijab. She was sixteen. Marrying young is recommended in Islam, dating is generally considered forbidden, and the immediate community seemed to think this a wise move and take it in stride.

My friends and I were astounded. She wasn't going to live with her husband, an attractive Muslim male not too much older than her. They would just be married so that all the

relations they had, which included simple things like holding hands and going to prom, would not be sinful. He lived in another state until she graduated high school and ultimately was properly married off. I took the positive reactions to these developments as affirmation that this was desired behavior.

When we moved to the Rio Grande Valley in 1996, the first community gathering we went to at the house of an Indian Muslim professor culminated in the adults sitting in a large circle around the living room singing songs in their respective languages: Urdu, Hindi, Persian. Most of the women, including his wife, did not wear hijab. His daughter, my age, did. Soon after our initiation into this hodge podge community of Muslims – that was the one thing we all had in common – it started changing.

These co-ed gatherings became more segregated – a segregation of the sexes is one of the more notable rules of Islam. The singing was slowly phased out due to the disapproval of an increasing number of participants. More women started wearing the hijab. My mom, who was raised with it and rejected it after she married my dad, was among them. Some of these events could have been happening because of the growing number of Muslims in the Valley. Maybe there was now not enough room for everyone to sit together and thus they stayed in their respective areas. Maybe there was a wider variety of opinions now thus giving the anti-singing (and anti-fun, if you ask me) group a stronger voice. Maybe. But even when these things could have been remedied, such as when we started holding community celebrations in larger venues or breaking off into smaller more ethnic specific gatherings, they weren't. This became the definitive acceptable form of behavior.

I wonder now if this renewal in Islamic fervor in the "West" had anything to do with the political developments in the "East" – both Middle and South Asian. The eighties saw Iran transform into a Sharia state under Khomeini and Pakistan feel the changes of Zia-ul-Haq's rule, a dictator bent on making the country more Muslim. This was also a period of time when, allied against the Soviets, the United States and Pakistan married and birthed guerilla fighting forces, the Afghan Muhjahideen, for purely political reasons. Between those who wanted a direct role in politics and those who wielded power behind the scenes, religious organizations were fighting for power, and some, such as the Jama'at'e'Islami and the Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Islam opposed the concept of nationalism in favor of a global Islamic ummah. The Iran-Iraq war was also of this decade, the two nations representing the hardest of lines in both the Shia and Sunni sects. In all of this political play, religion was used. Politics funded the ideologies cultivated in sectarian madrassas – which may have slowly migrated to the "West," reaching the little towns where I grew up, in the guise of honored guest speakers or video recordings of their sermons.

These speeches were on practical matters – such as the horrors reserved for those who committed various infractions. If you didn't take a shower after sex with your spouse, your grave would constrict and squeeze your already lifeless body. But you'd be able to feel it. But, you could make it up by praying all night with a pure heart on a special holy date and have all your sins – ever – erased. Or, you could be really holy, but look down upon someone and piss God off. Then you may have to trade your good deed, bad deed balance with the person you judged. Or you could be on the receiving end of continuous sin because of your exposed female skin inciting lust in the hearts of all the men who see you. Depending on the type of scholar you

listened to, the content varied. There were fear mongers and yellers and story tellers and the logic crowd. Those were the ones I recall seeing more as I grew up.

This brand of scholar seems more reasonable and worldly than some of the others. Instead of seeming delusional or out-of-touch, they seem knowledgeable of possible issues people may have with Islam. They are known for using science to convince the already captive audience of the validity of the religion. They recount arguments they have had with nonbelievers, with the hint of a smile, and the parts of the Quran that refuted them into silence.

Like, for example, the Quran describes Hell in detail. One such passage states that the dwellers of the fire, those who reject the signs of Allah, will go through continuous torture. Each time their skin burns off, new skin will replace it to achieve maximum pain. This detail is used to prove the validity of the Quran because we now know through medical science why first and second degree burns are the most painful. Once the nerve endings are out of the equation, the pain would lessen, so Allah in his wisdom knew 1,400 years ago what we can now back with science. This is one of many verses that are used to prove that the Quran contains things no one could have known that long ago and I heard quite a few growing up. Eventually, I began wondering why they kept telling us – we were already there to listen to the sermon. Why were they preaching to the choir?

First, they were arming us with evidence to use should we find ourselves in a similar situation with a nonbeliever – we could defend our religion. But more importantly, it reinforced our faith. It renewed and re-convinced. It made those who were there feel good about being part of the right club. And it instilled fear.

By the late nineties almost every Muslim female I knew wore hijab. Those who didn't were seen as lost or not yet on the right path. At mosque, before the tampon incident, the lady who taught us our religious lessons put the few girls who did not wear hijab on the spot and, in what felt like an interrogation, demanded to know why we didn't wear it and when we planned on starting. I remember feeling the eyes of all the appropriately modest girls looking upon me with judgment and the pity that comes with superiority. They might not have felt these things, but my guilt, which by this time was synonymous to my being, made me believe it was true and I stammered my responses with shame.

Those women who dared to wear sleeveless tops, short skirts, or shorts were harshly judged and routinely gossiped about. I already refrained from wearing swimsuits, shorts or dresses that showed my legs, or anything less than a t-shirt. Nonetheless, I was convinced that by not wearing hijab I was committing a sin on a daily basis. I believed that the pious women who went through the agony of South Texas summers covered from head to foot and withstood the stares of curious passersby with dignity were better than me. Despite this belief, I could not find it in me to don this symbol of uniqueness.

Like most teenagers, my main goal was to fit in and wearing a hijab to my tiny high school – graduating class around 300 - where I was the only Asian of any kind was beyond my capabilities. It never occurred to my parents to pressure me because they, especially my father, made it a point to ensure we understood that there can be no compulsion in religion – otherwise it is not true faith. Upon discussing these feelings with them as an adult, they've pointed out that they never told me I had to wear a hijab or even encouraged it. Looking back, I can concede that

this is true, but my perceptions led me to believe that in the eyes of Muslims, most important of whom were my parents, I would be considered a better person.

We take most of our cues not necessarily from what is overtly being said but from observing our surroundings and all the signs around me screamed 'sinner.' My guilt-ridden personality did not help because my friend Komal, one of the only other girls who was a sinner like me, didn't seem to suffer from these feelings. I assuaged my nagging guilt by thinking, "Some day. Soon."

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In the wake of 9/11, everybody was examining everything. In trying to deal with the unprecedented tragedy and make sense of the senseless devastation, Americans scrutinized it all, from the inane to the existential: airport security, race relations, immigration, national politics, foreign policy, religion, patriotism, freedom fries, terror, among many other multifaceted topics of conversation. The concept of our mortality was one of these subjects. Those people – thousands of moms, dads, neighbors, friends – went to work that Tuesday not knowing that they would not return home. To a twenty year old college student this was a striking realization. Although I had always been aware that life was uncertain – a concept hammered into me since childhood by my religion – this event brought the point into resounding clarity. I could die at any moment. Did I really want to die a sinner?

Before this became an all-consuming train of thought, I was on my way to joining a co-ed business fraternity. So, when in the middle of the night I got a cryptic phone call, I was not surprised. The caller gave me a time and a place. A rendezvous the following day was the last step to being accepted as a rushee. I was at a crossroads: I could continue, fit in, be "normal," or I could don the flag of my people and volunteer to stand out almost everywhere I went.

The day I vowed to start hijab, I walked out into the common living room of apartment I shared with three white girls. Amy, Cory, Jess, and I had been randomly assigned as roommates and were just becoming friendly – friendly enough to leave each other leftovers and borrow each other's clothes, but not so friendly that they felt comfortable asking about my ethnic origin. I think they felt it inappropriate to inquire about my ethnicity or religion so we tip-toed around my being brown and I was absolutely fine with the arrangement. This being the case, they were certainly not aware of the lifestyle change I was about to suddenly embrace.

This particular day, a few days after the missed fraternity rendezvous, they had friends over and had been playfully yelling at me to come out and join them. Looking back, I don't know how I had the courage to make that first dramatic entrance. I'll attribute it to the power of youthful ignorance and the feeling of invincibility one gets when in the throes of being on the right path.

I responded to their invitation by stepping out with a headscarf on. In addition to my roommates, there were four other people in the room. Their laughter and conversation literally came to a halt. If life were a movie, the record would have scratched. Their smiles froze awkwardly in a limbo between the mirth prior to my entrance and the shock upon seeing me. No one said a word, leaving the room full of a silence you could hear. The group of friends, not

knowing what else to do, exchanged uncomfortable looks as the awkwardness extended into the realm of rudeness. Finally, after what seemed like hours but was certainly closer to a few beats, one of their friends recovered and began chatting with me as if there was no elephant in the room. My first experience as a "modest woman" was a disaster.

After spending a lifetime striving to be like those around me, despite the obvious differences I carried on my face and in my name, I had taken a huge step in the opposite direction. Upon taking this step, I found my identity as the average American college student replaced by the scarf. It felt to me that it was the first thing people noticed when I walked into a room, that it became the basis by which everybody I met judged me. It was the launching point of their opinion of who I was as a person; it usurped my individual personality. I was no longer a woman. I was no longer a student. I was no longer an American. I was first, and above all a submissive, brainwashed objects of pity and contempt. These are inaccurate stereotypes of Muslim women that permeate our society and culture, and innumerable women find a kind of power and liberation in the choice to cover themselves. As with all stereotypes, these will hold true for some, but certainly not all and certainly not the majority. But though I chose to do hijab, I couldn't help feel it signaled my primary identity, and more importantly, it came with the responsibility of representation.

Some Muslims would argue that the scarf was doing exactly what it was intended to do: making the statement that I was beyond just a female body to be objectified, declaring to the world that I was a representative of my religion. Having been raised in this tradition, I gathered my pride in this symbol on a daily basis. I defended it with every piece of ammunition in my religious arsenal.

I joined the Muslim Students Association and found myself surrounded by others who were going through the same challenges of being an American Muslim in the post 9/11 world. After having spent my life, for the most part, longing to relate to others like me, I reveled in this new experience. These were people who grew up in the same kind of cultural purgatory as I did. They were also prisoners of two conflicting worlds. I found strength in their solidarity and support. I basked in their acceptance and used it to bolster myself during this period of transition. Instead of going bar hopping, or dancing, or to frat parties like our classmates, we socialized mainly amongst ourselves and tried to "stay on the right path." I later found out that many of these MSA students, too, would leave prayer meetings to discreetly go to said bar, or dance club, or party.

About a year into my stint as a modest woman, I attended an MSA sponsored co-ed Frisbee golf game. On a soccer field not far from the UT campus, on a sweltering afternoon, there were females both in the stands and on the field. The one who stood out most among us was Yasmin, a half Middle Eastern girl who showed up to MSA events sporadically and left a trail of gossip behind her. She was causing scandal on this day by playing in shorts and a tank top. "How dare she?" asked every sneakily exchanged glance, every judgement filled face. As we sat in the bleachers and cheered on the teams – they were both our teams, we were playing against ourselves – knowing looks passed among those present: the men, but more importantly, the women.

One of these women, who was looking upon Yasmin with a definite air of superiority, was wearing a headscarf and jeans, like me, but had opted for a t-shirt instead of long sleeves. In my long sleeved shirt, I looked at her and thought somewhat haughtily that her hijab was

incomplete and therefore not good enough. Upon looking around further, I was sure I, too, was being judged by the girl who not only covered herself from head to foot but did so with a loose gown-like garment called an abaya. Some women choose this method because, along with covering skin, it conceals the shape of their figures which are still detectable under regular clothing.

I thought then of the women, including the one on our campus, who wore the niqab. In addition to wearing an abaya, these women also cover their faces leaving only their eyes exposed, prompting us to jokingly refer to them as Muslim Ninjas. Thinking of the Muslim Ninja reminded me of her recent indignation at what she considered an infringement of her religious rights. I recalled how, with only her furious eyes visible, she recounted an exchange with her professor. She was of the school of thought that believed a woman's voice should also be hidden and should not be heard by unknown men, lest it attract them. Her professor contended that if she was going to be an architect she would obviously have to speak publicly, thus class presentations were an important part of the curriculum. So while some women didn't even believe hijab was mandatory, others took it to extremes of gloves and socks and not wearing perfume or shoes that make noise. I even invested in boots that refused to announce my approach. There is actually one extreme faction that insists a woman must cover all but one eye, as she only needs one to see – overlooking the small fact of depth perception, the efficiency of anatomical evolution, and basic human rights.

Like zooming in on a faraway object that had been in the blurry background all along, this relativity in religion came into sharp focus. It was a very sudden but important lesson in the fact that there is no complete agreement in religion, any religion.

Regardless of this new perspective I continued my life as a modest woman; but, the seed of discontent had been planted – and it is that very seed that rouses violence against those who dare to ask questions, because that seed grows, and its fruits are shared. That discontent, if gotten out of hand, can lead to the spread of heresy. For quite some time, I wasn't able to verbalize or even completely process the evolution that started on the soccer field that day. That seemingly insignificant incident became a catalyst for my dissent. By this time, I had also spent enough time with others "like me" to understand that there was definitely not one constant set of beliefs as I previously, and naively, believed. Islam, like all religions, is open to interpretation, leaving room for a wide spectrum of beliefs. I've come to understand that there are as many religions as there are practitioners of it, each following it based on their unique circumstances.

No two people of the same faith, of the same household even, would agree on all aspects of what their religion demanded. There would always be somebody who would look upon your practices of faith and be absolutely sure that you were doing it wrong. And there would always be somebody else to judge *them*. Each person, or family, or tribe is carrying on traditions based on different interpretations of what God, or the Prophet, or the guy after that, or the guy after that meant. And these interpretations, made by mortal men, have tainted history with wars and misery all over the world.

I was still reeling from this sock in the gut of my beliefs when it came to me – maybe in the middle of the night, maybe on a sunny afternoon lying miserable and lost on the blue carpet in my apartment, maybe as I continued life with the new friends I had made: It was always some man or another telling us how God wanted it. Religion, not just mine, but most, if not all, had been passed on from one man to another, and women were treated as second class citizens. Men

took the responsibility to ensure that their women understood how it was supposed to be very seriously – after all, they benefitted from it. Women, less educated and exposed only to select information for generations, could basically be sold anything if it was presented as the word of God – because you can't argue with God. You must obey me, it says so in the Quran. You inherit only half of what your brother does, it says so in the Good Book. You can't deny your husband sex, it's against the will of God. A man can have four wives, the Prophet has decreed. On and on and on it went. And this was a religion that prided itself on its revolutionary treatment of women, citing alleged rights and honor the religion brought upon women of the time.

Yet, even if it improved the status of women, as Islamic scholars like to brag, it unfortunately did not go so far as to actually give women full rights as humans, maintaining that men were superior in authority and intelligence – something exemplified in the fact that two women's testimony is equal to that of one man. It entitled men to more as well – more inheritance, more wives, more virgins in heaven. Women, if they were good, would get the same husband in the afterlife. It seemed that the responsibility for men's actions lay at the feet of women, the same place Heaven lies when one becomes a mother. Women, it seemed, were simply a walking temptation, and to manage the desires of men, they were ordered to shroud themselves, confine themselves, limit themselves. The religion maintained that some men were worth more, for slavery was regulated not repealed and any girl, no matter how young, could be taken as a wife. If this was the word of God, if this was the right religion, why did he not explicitly get rid of these injustices as well?

Once I started unraveling it, the whole thing started coming apart. The more questions I asked, the less the answers that had so logically been explained to, and defended by, me made sense. The less things made sense, the more courage I gained to ask questions. It became a vicious cycle, the kind that strikes fear in the bellies of holy men everywhere. It wasn't very long after the day on the soccer field that I packed up my hijabs.

But I didn't stop searching. I continued to study, to look for answers. I delved into my religion as well as other faiths. When you grow up with something as a fundamental part of your being, it leaves a gaping, uncomfortable void when it's discarded. It seemed almost unimaginable to me to call myself a nonbeliever. It is the kind of crime that is punishable in the peaceful religion of Islam by death (If you live in some place like Iran, there may even be stones involved). It would even be preferable to be of a different faith than to deny God altogether, so I studied Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Sikhism, among others.

I found not one without flaw. Each one seemed preposterous in its own way. Yet, each one had believers who would live and die defending it as the one and only right path to eternal salvation. But there is no roadmap to Heaven. If, some would argue, there even is a Heaven. If someone hands you a book as truth and you find among its pages of beautiful words one lie, it is hard to accept that the rest is true. How many of the other poetically crafted tales are lies as well, one may ask logically. I found that one lie. And I cannot, to save my life or my soul, turn a blind eye.

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On a road trip to New Orleans after my college graduation, I took a picture of a wall. In this picture, which to this day hangs on my fridge, if you look hard enough there is a sentence spray painted upon that wall: "Faith is the death of logic." Well, logic killed my faith, but it was a slow, painful death. It has taken years for me to come to terms with its passing and I've gone through the stages of grief.

There was a period of fearful denial because you don't, you can't, question God. It was followed by anger at having been duped for so long, for spending decades suffocated by fear and guilt, for limiting myself and my life choices. I made some bargains to try to salvage my relationship with God, any god, for I knew if I became a kafir I would lose friends, relatives, and rituals, holidays, and history. The depression I carried with me all those years reared its ugly head as I adjusted to those losses, before I learned how much peace comes after the dissonance. Many of these phases have overlapped. Finally, however, I've reached acceptance and it overlaps with my own final stage. Liberation.

I had a fleeting sense of liberation in the early days of toying with the idea of blasphemy, a sudden surge of it when I broke my vow of modesty. But it was always accompanied by guilt. Only recently have I finally been able to shed that hijab which has confined me long after I put away my scarves. Evolution is a slow process and my journey to this point has taken more than a decade at least, a lifetime at most. But I can finally, proudly, say I am an infidel. I am an unbeliever. I am liberated.

CHAPTER II

A TRIP I TOOK

A Social Experiment

In December of 2015, I took a one-month trip to Karachi, Pakistan. Though, as a Pakistani American woman, I had visited numerous times throughout the years, this trip was geared toward observation and research of the current culture, norms, and social and political climate. This was my first trip in a decade. As I write nonfiction, it was important to me that what I report is accurate and current. While there, I interviewed people across demographics and socioeconomic levels, many on camera. I further recorded observations, including the disturbingly high levels of street harassment that is the norm.

I've witnessed street harassment in cities throughout the world, including New York, NY, Los Angeles, CA, London, England, and Reynosa, Mexico, but the type encountered in Karachi distinguished itself as more extreme and disempowering. The details of my experience are presented below – in the form of a social experiment.

Abstract

This study examined whether and how a woman's level of covering affected the reactions she received while going about her business in Karachi, Pakistan between December 17, 2015 and January 13, 2016. It was conducted by an American female, 34, of Pakistani origin who observed the variation in unsolicited male attention she received. Results show that the only way the researcher felt able to go out without attracting unwanted attention was by donning a niqab. This confirmed the researcher's hypothesis that some women wear the full covering as body armor in a hostile environment.

Introduction

The types and levels of covering worn by Muslim women are as varied as there are individuals. This paper is not an argument for or against veiling – as that is a personal choice that should be made by each individual woman. Rather this is a report on the researcher's attempts to analyze a phenomenon based on her specific understanding of the types of covering as they are generally defined.

How a woman chooses to cover herself, if at all, is determined by a myriad of factors, many interrelated. These include, but aren't limited to nationality, culture, family, and specific sect of Islam she identifies with. Some wear loose headscarves paired with their respective cultural attire, while others wear burkas, a garment which even covers the face. On this spectrum, the niqab (Figure 4) falls toward the more covered end. Leaving room for variations due to interpretations, a niqab covers the majority of the face, leaving only the eyes visible. It is, far more often than not, paired with a full body robe-like covering sometimes referred to as an abaya.

This level of devotion must be a challenging one to maintain if the person in question is wearing it for religious, rather than cultural or political, reasons. Those who cover themselves in any form for religious reasons do so with the belief that they should maintain that covering in

front of any unrelated male. For example, on the sixteen hour flight from Dallas, Texas to Dubai, UAE, three women wore niqabs. Though I did not stand guard to monitor them, based on my observations, those women did not remove the veils covering their faces. Not to eat, not to drink, not to sleep or soothe a crying child. For sixteen hours.

I have met other women throughout my life in the United States who observe it with such strictness as well, so I hold it as the generally accepted constant. However, upon reaching Karachi, I noticed a difference in adherence when I met the cleaning woman (masi hereinafter) who visited for about an hour a day. She arrived in niqab the morning after we landed and promptly removed not only the veil covering her hair and lower half of her face, but also the full length black abaya that hung loosely to her feet. After completing her tasks – in the presence of both genders – she once again donned her niqab before she left.

Since her niqab did not appear to be religiously motivated, I hypothesized that she uses it as a type of armor or protection while she travels from one house to another for her various cleaning jobs.

Background

History

Despite the official name being the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, the country does not operate under official Sharia law. Governments such as Iran and Saudi Arabia adhere more literally to the Islamic code of life – such as forcing females to cover themselves or banning them from driving. In such a nation, adherence to the state's interpretation of the laws of Allah is mandatory and failure to comply is legally punishable (often in the way "dictated in Islam," such as stoning). For the most part, Pakistan's legal system presents itself as a mainly secular

one[1]. However, in Karachi – one of the largest and most densely populated cities in the world – religion and its influences are inescapable. A brief history of the country follows.

In 1947, at the end of colonial rule, the nation state of Pakistan was created and consisted of an Eastern part (current day Bangladesh) and a Western part (current day Pakistan). It was carved out of the existing territory of British India after the demand for a separate Muslim country came to fruition. The migration that followed – of Muslims to Pakistan (both East and West) and Hindus to India – was one of the largest mass migrations in recorded human history.

Due to this influx of migrants from current day India, as well as the existing diversity of the region, current day Pakistan consists of a conglomeration of cultures and tribes. As in the making of many postcolonial nations, not enough heed was given when determining the perimeters of the new countries, leaving room for territorial disputes – that continue still today in Kashmir – as well as the very real issue of creating a cohesive national identity among individual regions and tribes. The creation of Bangladesh after a civil war in 1971 is offered as proof of this struggle.

Though there are multiple religions represented among the population of Pakistan, including Christianity and Hinduism, the majority religion is Islam which was used as a common factor to unify the vastly different populations of the country. Thus, Islam is very much a part of the politics, rhetoric, daily lives, and identity of Pakistan, a country whose very name means "the land of the pure."

[1] The political history of Pakistan and its relationship to Islam are complex; however, these statements apply to the literal and formal applications of Sharia law as it is internationally viewed.

This study focuses only on the megalopolis of Karachi – an urban port city that, in addition to its own booming population, attracts people from throughout the country as well as refugees from neighboring Afghanistan.

The influence of Islam in this urban environment is palpable. For example, one interviewee reported a specific type of hijab as the required dress code for a job at one of the leading banks. Another told me he pretends to fast during the holy month of Ramadan to avoid social stigma. Furthermore, the government regulates Internet access in order to censor blasphemous and/or obscene material – a recent example is the Youtube ban after the controversial 2012 film "Innocence of Muslims," which was only recently lifted. It is customary to begin a conversation – over the phone, in person, and on the nightly news – with As-Salaam-Alaikum, the Arabic greeting of Muslims despite Arabic not being one of the spoken languages. The sounds of the Call to Prayer are ever present, ringing out five times a day from multiple minarets through the city and streets are routinely shut down in observance of a religious festival of one sect or another. Alcohol, pork, and displays of affection are nowhere to be seen in public. Furthermore, the city is effectively shut down on Friday afternoons due to Jummah prayers, which are obligatory in Islam for all mature Muslim males. The same can be said of the city's altered schedule during Ramadan. In a city with a sign that translates to, "The Prophet's slaves' city, Karachi," Islam is not mandated by the government, but Islam is unavoidable.

Cultural Norms

There is considerable variation in the types of attire worn in Karachi. Pakistan Fashion Week television coverage, a celebration of the thriving fashion industry, can be found on the channel sandwiched between the one with girls in full hijab reciting Quran and the one playing a

rerun of a Hollywood movie. Similarly, clothing deemed "Western," such as pants, can be found represented in public alongside completely enclosed burkas as well as the latest sleeveless designer trend. This may be due to the previously discussed cultural and religious diversity as well as the very strong effects of colonization and globalization. The most common outfit would probably be the shalwar kameez (Figure 3), or some variation of it, depending on the fad of the moment.

That being said, it can be argued that regardless of type or style of clothing, a certain level of modesty is required in Pakistan if one desires public approval. For the vast majority of the population, anything beyond the face, neck, arms, hands, and feet is risqué. Women who dare to bare their shoulders or midriffs, usually seen on TV, are unabashedly publically shamed and equated with prostitutes by everybody from media pundits and Muslim leaders to the lady down the street. For the near one-month duration of this study, I only observed two women wearing sleeveless clothes in public first hand, despite the endless availability of such clothing in the retail sector. Not a single woman was observed to show any amount of leg in daily public activities.

While discussing cultural trends and norms, it must be noted that it is very common for females to be accompanied by a male family member, or to otherwise travel in groups, for "safety." Though females are not formally or legally required to be chaperoned – as they are in Saudi Arabia – and certainly women live and travel independently extensively, they are considered safer when in the company of a male.

One can often see a near-adult female accompanied by a much younger male, usually a brother. How a pubescent boy is to keep his older, physically larger, and probably more mature

sister safe has not yet revealed itself, so I am forced to assume it is a cultural trend that perpetuates a type of ownership as well as some level of control.[2] It also instills the notion that by being male, he is inherently socially superior and perpetuates and normalizes the concept that females are in constant danger.

In this atmosphere, when it comes to safety the burden of its responsibility falls completely on the female.[3] Despite the fact that she does not have to, by law, be accompanied by a male guardian, if she is attacked or harmed the general consensus will include that she should not have put herself at risk by venturing out alone. Though she does not have to wear a specific type of clothing, should she be harassed on the street, her level/type of dress will be cited as a possible cause for the harassment. For example, one woman (34) described her older brother getting mad at her for the stares she received when he walked her to college.

Another woman (55) described a similar experience from a few decades ago. Her brother angrily told her mother that he would no longer walk her to college because of all of the attention she received from males on the street. She began wearing a burqa with not one, but two thin black fabric veils that fell in front of her face, something the females in her family did after a

[2] There are literally innumerable cases where, in a population of over 23 million people, these statements do not apply. At all, never have, never will. Literally countless women live alone, go out alone, dine alone, work and study in a range of fields and professions, shop, socialize, and travel unrestricted. However, there are disproportionately more who adhere to the gender roles considered the norm in traditional Pakistani society, where, as a male (54) interviewed stated confidently and proudly, "it is a man's responsibility to protect the women in his life."

[3] Interviews revealed that males consider themselves to be the 'head of the household' for decision-making purposes due to the fact that they consider themselves socially responsible for any repercussions that befall the family. However, the responsibility mentioned here pertains to safety where a 'do not get attacked' mentality far supersedes a 'do not attack' one. This fractured chain of responsibility creates a dubious set of circumstances: He is responsible for her socially, but she is responsible for not getting attacked, allowing him every reason to control her dress/behavior/activities.

certain age. However, even with two layers of fabric hiding her face, he grew angry when he felt too many males were looking at her.

A female's role is to be constantly vigilant in maintaining a decorum that raises no questions about her morality (as it is defined in Pakistani society). In any questionable situation, she will, more often than not, be deemed guilty until proven innocent.

Researcher

The research was conducted by me, 34, a female master's candidate. I was born in Karachi to a Shia Muslim Pakistani family, but spent the majority of my life (age two and up) in the Southern United States. This was my first visit to the country since a short trip in 2006. Like that trip, each of the handful of times I've visited Karachi has lasted, at most, one month. Despite having spent a minimal proportion of my life in Pakistan, I am fluent in Urdu – one of the major languages spoken in the city.

Using this intimate knowledge of three cultures 1) Pakistani 2) American 3) Muslim, the intent is to explore the possible non-religious reasons a woman might choose a type of attire. Moreover, it is intended to offer insight on the use of social forces, rather than actual laws, to control a sub-population. It was born through the marriage of two main factors:

1) The level of street harassment/leering in Karachi is unnerving. The first trip that I remember was at age fifteen in 1996. One day, walking home with two other females, I realized we were being followed by a male who was either in his late teens or early twenties. I quickly learned that this behavior was commonplace – males would follow females home. My cousins said, "ghar chornay ara hai," he was "dropping us home." When, during one such instance, a nineteen year old male

cousin joined our group, the stalker suddenly took a detour. During another visit, later in the nineties, I remember standing on the flat roof of the house I was staying at. This architectural style is common in Pakistan, but to me it is a novelty, so I was up there often. One passerby stopped across the street and started making "ch ch" noises to get my attention. I refused to dignify his advances, but he stood there, making noises and gestures at me until I grew annoyed enough to leave. Even now, during this most recent trip, while walking down a residential street, crossing a busy intersection, eating out, or shopping, I was stared at without fail and by multiple men, regardless of who I was with.[4]

2) The apparent dichotomy of the extreme religious devotion symbolized by the niqab and the variety of casual adherence to its generally accepted rules, as apparent in the masi's actions, led to a dissonance and a hypothesis.

A masi in Karachi can visit five to ten houses a day and she must do so unaccompanied by a male protector. A niqab, then, must be a useful way to signify that she is a God-fearing woman who would rather not be bothered. Or perhaps a way to gain anonymity in a heteronormative male dominated social sphere.

Method

The methodology for this experiment can be broken down into two stages: (1) field experiments and (2) survey.

[4] It is important to keep in mind that, despite being Pakistani by birth and genealogy, as one person commented, a Western woman would attract more attention that a Pakistani one." Certainly, due to socialization and habit, there must appear a foreignness in my mannerisms and demeanor regardless of attire. To lessen the deviation due to this factor, I interviewed a variety of demographics in Karachi about their experiences related to street harassment. The feeling of street harassment as a given was repeatedly brought up.

The field research itself was conducted in four stages. At no point during the trials was any skin other than hands, arms, neck, feet, and parts of the face visible. All data gathered was subjective.

Firstly, I went about daily public activities such as shopping and eating out in attire usually deemed "Western." This includes loose tops with jeans as well as loose tops with tight pants and riding boots (Figure 1). Secondly, I wore a long kurta. This loose fitting garment reached well past the knees and was paired with leggings underneath (Figure 2). Thirdly, the "traditional" Pakistani dress of shalwar kameez was tried. This included a shirt that reached the knees with baggy parachute pants. It was accentuated with the usual dupatta which is an expanse of cloth that one can drape across or on the body somehow, or upon the head. I wore it draped across the front part of the torso. I did not cover her head (Figure 3). Finally, I wore a full abaya with niqab that covered everything except my eyes, forehead, and hands. Furthermore, when I raised the abaya to avoid puddles, my feet and shalwar were visible underneath (Figure 4).

The survey consisted of a small sample of females representing a variety of demographics. Of the ones asked about the hypothesis specifically, a subsample of ten, three were housewives, one was a voice actress, two were teachers, one was a business owner, one was an architect, one was a masi, one was a student. Each was asked her opinion on what she thought the motivation may be behind a woman wearing niqab for reasons unrelated to religion.

Figure 1 – “Western” Attire

Figure 2 – Kurta with Leggings

Figure 3 – Shalwar Kameez

Figure 4 – Abaya with Niqab

Figure 5 – Having coffee at Espresso.

Results

Stage 1 – The results of the field experiments are challenging to convey due to the qualitative nature of the results and the many variables such as part/area of the city and the time of day in which they were conducted. However, though the degree of reaction varied substantially based on factors such as the socioeconomic level of the neighborhood tested, certain constants remained.

In order to maximize accuracy, the results are reported in first-person narrative form.

1.1 I calculated the outfit I'd travel in based on a bunch of factors. The clothes I wore off the plane on my trip to Karachi could not be red. Let me back up. I'm a Texan who grew up in Louisiana. But I'm Pakistani. And was raised as a Muslim. Now, I was going to tag along with my folks in the hopes of collecting some research. I prepared in advance. I went to a wholesale store on Harry Hines Road – which my family likes to call Hari Hari Krishna Road – to look for suitcases. There I found the perfect cross-body bag. I bought the perfect notebook to fit inside. I drove from my home in Deep South Texas to Dallas to take the flight to Dubai, which itself is a two hour flight from Karachi.

It couldn't be red because it was still the month of mourning for Shia Muslims and red is a color of joy. It was, instead, blue out of respect. A blue top that reached mid-thigh and tight black pants. On my feet, black riding boots that reached my knees, simply so the already overweight luggage would be that much lighter (Figure 1).

I wasn't the only one in Western clothes. Obviously, there were a lot of people flying into Karachi on that full international flight who wore jeans or pants of some sort – no skirts or shorts though. I still felt conspicuous. The first thing I noticed was the security guard at the entrance of the tunnely thing from the plane to the airport. I noticed him because he held a rifle of some sort.

Surprisingly, the attention I attracted at the airport was less intense than I remembered. Of course, it could have been jet lag screwing with my reality (by the way – jet lag is a thing. I just recently found out on WebMD it's an actual thing).

The very night I got there, I went with my partner, commonly known as my husband, and his brother to a shop close to the apartment where we were staying. It was in a relatively higher socioeconomic area, and I had been prepped with descriptions of people in this part of town being relatively liberal (read: Westernized). Just down the street, doormen ushered you politely into Nandos, Pizza Hut, and Tao. A little farther, valets parked cars at restaurants and grocery stores. Here, in a small corner shop, a middle aged man and a teenage male were behind the counter and several male customers filled the tiny space. I felt the eyes of the boy behind the counter as well as the man who loitered outside and a few of the shoppers as I picked through the bags of chips and breakfast foodstuffs.

The feeling of being watched did not go away. Even when I went to a shopping mall built in the Western style, I was stared down. This multileveled, air conditioned mall offered valet parking in the parking garage and the escalators

could accommodate the shopping carts one could use to make the experience more comfortable. Other than that, there was little that differentiated it from any similar mall in the U.S. Shop girls wearing jeans brought Guess and Gucci and Chanel to your dressing rooms for you and the food court served cuisine from around the world.

On my second day in the city, I sat at a chain coffee shop, Espresso, with five companions – three adult females and two adult males. Here, the Iced Frappe I ordered cost 325 rupees. To me, this was approximately $3.25, but to a local in a city where a sizeable proportion of the population lives in sub-standard conditions, this was a ludicrous amount. Here, at this chain café that serves lasagna and fajitas at its larger locations, the waiter who took our order, a twenty-something male, would not tear his eyes from me. Though it may sound "complimentary," this was actually a very disturbing situation. He stood at the counter, and every time I happened to look over he would be staring dead at me. As anti-feminist as this sounds, I'd like to describe what I was wearing at the time. It was a dress I took from the U.S. that I wore with leggings and my boots. I also wore a transparent black scarf around my neck (Figure 5). I offered that man no encouragement. Yet, he persistently stared at me, making me uncomfortable enough to lean into my partner. Now, I usually don't like to use a male to make my rejections easier. I'm not rejecting you because somebody else owns me, I'm rejecting you because I want to. However, he made me so

uncomfortable, I put my hand on my partner's shoulder – kind of a, "I'm with him" type thing.

The waiter stared undeterred. I wasn't the only one who noticed this. Later, when discussing this with my partner, a Pakistani male feminist and staunch supporter of female autonomy, raised in Karachi who now lives in Texas, he mentioned how rude the waiter's blatant staring was. "He didn't stop staring even when *I* was looking at him," he said.

1.2 So, Pakistan has an incredibly active fashion scene. And the results are stunning. Every few months a trend will arise – perhaps following trends in the "West." At this time, it was fashionable to wear a kurta top with leggings (leggings were in in the U.S., just saying). Kurtas are traditional Pakistani tops that can reach mid-thigh to mid-calf.

I wore these often – from mid-thigh top with jeans to mid-calf top with leggings. It usually drew a constant, predictable amount of attention. However, on one occasion, it was a little absurd, even relatively speaking.

I went to a historic district, though no-one who lives there would describe it as such. The buildings are from colonial times and my partner, my father, and I ventured out to take pictures. On the way, we took a detour and ended up walking through an ancient neighborhood called Meetadhar.

The buildings were tall and the alleys and roads cramped, crowded, and intertwined in a way that left an outsider like me confused. I followed my father and partner's lead, after all they had both been raised in that city. Literally – not

figuratively – it felt like every. Single. Man. was staring at me as I passed. I noticed men stopping in mid-task whether it be tailoring or shop keeping or auto-fixing. We noticed, at one point, an eggplant shaped middle-aged man who was tending some sort of wooden cart leering with a toothy smile. I fumed, made eye contact with him for a moment and then looked away again. My glaring at him would only encourage him, this much I knew.

What made me livid was that, soon after I broke eye-contact in resignation, he scooched over to the next cart over to ensure his neighbor knew that I was there. He gathered a tiny audience to leer along with him. So taken aback was I with the reaction I received, I took a hasty selfie in the mirror later that day (Figure 2).

1.3 As I walked down the street on "that side of the bridge" (the "better" one) with my partner, I tried as hard as I could to remember how far exactly the Subway was. Not an underground tube system, the sandwich place Subway. Monstrous colorful trucks, small yellow taxis, cars, mopeds, and rickshaws sped past us in the opposite direction. I wore my dupatta, the yards-long scarf spread wide across my torso (Figure 3). I nearly stopped in indignation when I noticed the man I just passed turning back to look hard at me.

I was wearing the traditional Pakistani dress, I was wearing the dupatta, I was accompanied by a male, yet this man, and others like him on our walk to sandwiches, felt the need to turn and look. What truly infuriated me was when I realized that one of the twenty-something males, whose job was to increase traffic

at the restaurants that lined the street, not only stopped working to leer at me, he began gathering his compatriots to partake.

I was especially surprised by the reaction I received due to, not only the area we were in but, the fact that the clothes I wore were so traditional in style. This was the most surprising set of results and it was recreated in other neighborhoods with similar results.

1.4 Finally, I wore an abaya with niqab (Figure 4). On our trip to one of markets I had visited in the other outfits, only two men looked deep into my exposed eyes. For the most part, I felt ignored. I walked down the same streets, shopped, and even had a soda (by lifting up the face veil slightly to allow the straw under). It was the most unacknowledged I felt since I arrived – it offered a type of cloak of invisibility. During this final field test, I was accompanied, not by a male, but by an adult female not in niqab. She did garner attention.

Stage 2 - The participants' responses, which are summarized in Table 1, Graph 1, and Graph 2 fell into five categories: (1) Fashion (2) Force (3) Armor (4) Prostitution (5) Convenience.

(1) 30% of the respondents mentioned "fashion" as a possible motivation for wearing the niqab. Religion and living a pious life is generally accepted as model behavior and current trends, both political and social, have made the appearance of piety desirable.

(2) Another 30% suggested an outside force, such as familial pressure, in the decision.

(3) 20% of the painfully small sample responded that it was likely for protection.

(4) 10% of respondents said prostitutes were known to also wear niqabs to turn tricks undetected.

(5) 10%, mentioned convenience as a possible factor, citing that it helped the wearer avoid the trouble and costs of all superficial concerns such as the latest fashions and/or makeup in a society that is both increasingly a) superficial and b) economically unstable.

Table 1		
Fashion	3	30%
Force	3	30%
Armor	2	20%
Prostitution	1	10%
Convenience	1	10%

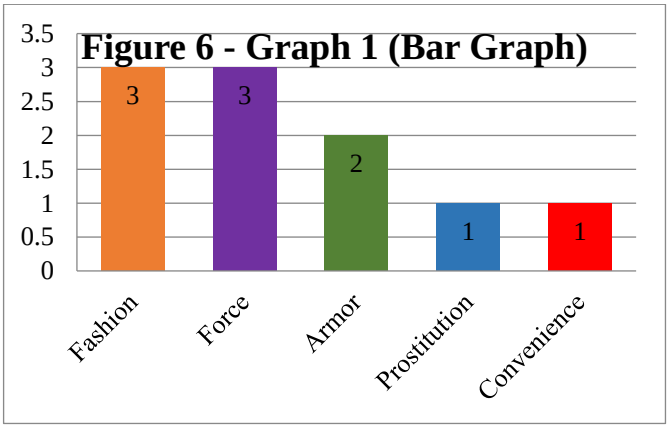
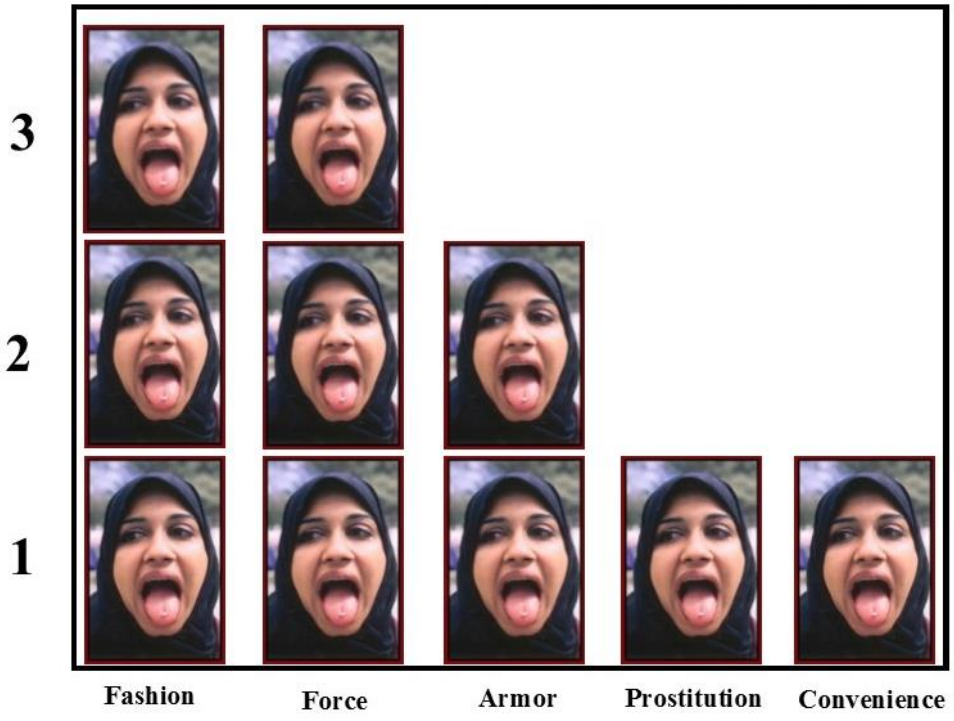


Figure 7 - Graph 2 (Pictograph)



Discussion

To better inform the discussion and analysis of results, I will attempt to describe my experience in public while visiting Karachi. From the moment I arrived at the airport to the moment I boarded my plane upon my return, I felt I was being watched in public, but it was not a welcome gaze. As I attempted to describe it to friends and family, I repeatedly uttered the phrase "raping me with their eyes."

In order to demonstrate, I offer an example: walking from Point A to Point B you become aware of a person looking at you. Upon making eye contact where both parties have acknowledged each other, one of four scenarios can happen: (1) The other person looks away (2) You look away (3) There is an amicable parting of gazes (4) There is a recognition of shared interest that can then be pursued.

If this example were to be set in Karachi, scenario (1) and scenario (3) are nearly null. So, unless scenario (4) is an appealing one, you only have one option – to look away. This small gesture is far heavier than it seems. By not looking away upon being caught staring at you, and not offering an amicable way out, the other person is effectively disempowering you.

Their steady, unrepentant stare conveys a challenge: one of you has to look away first, the first one to waver concedes the other's power, confirms their status as the Alpha. This "what are you gonna do about it?" look resembles that of a schoolyard bully in its threat-tinged audaciousness. It brought to mind that horrid act, rape, because the lack of control or options, the hijacking of all (social) power, leaves you feeling violated.

This example takes into account only one other person. What exacerbated the situation is that (1) far too often, multiple men could be caught staring at any given time and (2) more than once, a fifth scenario occurred: the person staring would invite others to join him in the staring.

I have been subject to street harassment in cities both large and small – from Matamoros, Mexico to New York, New York, from San Antonio, Texas to London, England. The difference between the unwanted advances I've experienced elsewhere and what I experienced in Karachi is significant. Whereas being catcalled in New York is annoying, insulting, infuriating, I still carry a feeling of empowerment. Whether I choose to confront my harasser or not, I feel I have the choice and ability to call him out. However, in Karachi, I felt stripped of this power – I felt forced to lower my gaze lest I encourage, empower, or please the harasser(s) further. That feeling of complete loss of control and power is the reason I kept viscerally using the term "raping me with their eyes," to describe the experience. Furthermore, the proportion of males who stared or catcalled or otherwise made me feel uncomfortable was far higher in Karachi than in any other city I've visited. Of course, not all men in Karachi are included in my critique; however, a disproportionately large number are.

I wondered about the possible reasons that so many males in Karachi seemed to be socialized to feel entitled to a woman's body – especially since Islam requires that males lower their gaze and avoid unrelated women. However, Islam also commands women to cover themselves, something that is stressed far more strongly than males' duty to look away. From verses in the Quran to hadiths to fatwas still today, women receive the bulk of the responsibility for curtailing sexual temptation. Women are discouraged from wearing perfume, adorning themselves, or even walking too loudly or in the middle of the road to avoid attracting male

attention. After speaking to a few males, I began to conclude that some men believe that because Islam states a woman should cover herself, if a woman does not, she is putting herself on display. The entitlement to leer at women seems to stem from this aspect of Islam. However, these same men seem to forget their own responsibilities in this situation.

Furthermore, the hyper-segregation of the sexes and social taboos related to co-ed relations creates a sense of deprivation and sexual frustration that has few healthy outlets. In addition to all of this, inequitable power distribution may contribute as well. In a society with vast class differences and rigid hierarchies of power – in the social sphere and workforce – a male may utilize this method to subconsciously empower himself. A male with an unfavorable position in society and/or low economic status in a hyper-patriarchal culture that values, nay demands, male earning power could overcompensate for his feelings of weakness by disempowering somebody with even less social power – women[5].

***

This research offers insight on the possible non-religious reasons women in Karachi choose to wear full body coverings. It also offers insight on social forces and their ability to control a population. While the responses gathered in Stage 2 are all, undoubtedly, valid – the

[5] These theories assume a heteronormative binary framework, and do not take into account the complex factors that come into play when including LBGT populations. One reason for this is the fact that in Pakistan heterosexuality is the only socially acceptable sexuality; homosexuality, though prevalent underground, is violently opposed. However, the last theory posed may address parts of these ignored and silenced, thus disempowered, populations as well.

results of the field experiments fully support the hypothesis that a full body covering offers a source of protection and/or anonymity in a heteronormative male dominated social sphere.

Going back to the previously discussed hierarchy of the chain of responsibility, the full body covering gives females the ability to empower themselves by 1) making a statement about their 'moral character' and 2) donning anonymity to go about their business without having to fight off as many challenging stares.

What it further does is perpetuate that fractured chain of responsibility. The female has less social power than the male and she is responsible for not getting attacked or harassed. She must manage this responsibility through her choices and actions. The responsibility on the males is protecting 'their' respective females which many males seem to change to "controlling" 'their' respective females (for their own good)[6]. The males, then, feel little responsibility to make the social sphere hospitable for their female counterparts. If she's there, she's fair game, because, a self-respecting female wouldn't _____. Using this entitlement to public space and judgmental attitude, males were observed to have little to no consideration of making females uncomfortable. By raising the level of discomfort for a female not behaving in a certain manner to the point of hostility[7], they are able to use social pressure, not laws, to achieve the same result[8].

[6] Which addresses that large proportion of females that may dress a certain way, not by choice, but by force.

[7] One female interviewed (40) mentioned often choosing to dine in the vehicle rather than dining in an establishment (both common dining options) due to the way she was dressed or that "people stare."

[8] This rings especially true for me, as I felt compelled to cover myself – beyond simply trying to maintain respect for the culture - when simply walking down the street. Exiting the security of home caused a near physical response to shield myself from the numerous sets of eyes I was sure to encounter.

Dear Grammar Girl

February 11, 2016

Dear Grammar Girl,

I have never written into an advice column before, but I just can't figure out what to do about this technical craft issue. You see, I'm writing an essay about sexism and street harassment in Pakistan, but after so many of my examples, I find myself interjecting the same qualifiers and it's creating a sense of redundancy. I feel the need to follow my examples with, "of course, this can be said of the U.S. too."

Like so: "when it comes to safety, the burden of its responsibility falls completely on the female," because, for example, when a woman's rape was reported in the local paper, a majority of the comments online were accusatory towards her. Along with calling her names and questioning her character, they made points such as "what did she think was going to happen if she was drinking at a party?" despite having no proof of her level of inebriation. This goes hand in hand with my other example, "a female's role is to be constantly vigilant in maintaining a decorum that raises no questions about her morality." Should I follow that, too, with a disclaimer?

Also, when I put, "in any questionable situation, she will, more often than not, be deemed guilty until proven innocent" it made me think of the more than fifty women who have accused

comedian Bill Cosby of drugging and raping them. Despite the large number of accusers adding weight to the accusation, these women are being held guilty by far too many for conspiring to ruin a good man's life. This seems especially twisted to me since it's always troubled me that in Muslim countries attitudes – and in some places actual laws – dictate that one man's testimony is worth that of two women. So, even in a country that practices actual Sharia law, all we would need, theoretically, would be two out of these fifty women.

It also makes me think of the countless young women I saw being disparaged when I was a junior high teacher here in the U.S. They would get labeled a "slut," "whore," etc., many times for, actually, not doing anything at all. Certainly, in Pakistan a girl can "lose" her reputation by simply being alone in a room with an unrelated male and sometimes even less that – but then, the same can be said of the girls here. You see what I mean?

And then there's the situation that most directly applies to the theme of the essay: "Should she be harassed on the street, her level/type of dress will be cited as a possible cause for the harassment." But, even in our far more liberal society, women's clothes are often blamed for unsolicited advances. Just this month, a New York woman made the news for encountering street harassment *despite* being covered up. The picture Christen Brandt posted (in an effort to shed light on the fact that women are harassed regardless of what they are wearing) she is in a bulky winter coat with leggings and boots – a close parallel to one I include in my paper.

So you see, I have too many examples which must be followed by similar disclaimers leaving my paper sounding repetitious and, quite frankly, a little unimpressive. I mean, if all the same things happen here then what's the point of my paper?

Should I risk being redundant for the sake of accuracy or fix it and just feel like a hypocrite? Or should I just scrap the whole project?

Thank you in advance,

Farwa Naqvi
Writer/MFA Candidate

Enclosure: A Social Experiment

Post-Colonial Stress Disorder

You and your friend's masi sit on the bed, you with your notebook, her without her iron. She's on the clock and you can tell she's worried about finishing the sweeping and mopping, and getting on to the next apartment. You hope she agreed to talk to you because she genuinely wants to reciprocate your friendliness and not out of some subconscious postcolonial need to please your blue passport-holding ass (PCSD?).

Your interview questions sound crudely translated, as if Urdu weren't your first language, as if you didn't speak it daily to your partner and your parents. But your thoughts on these matters are couched in English. In a way, here in her world, your ideas are structured in an alien tongue.

She smiles constantly, a lovely, disarming smile that adds a bit of playfulness to her conversations and lends her answers a tinge of laughter. She told you about her eighteen year old son and three daughters the first time you met, a few moments of small talk before she told you she's your age, 34. "When I had my son, I didn't even know how to take care of him," she told you. "I don't want my daughters to go through that."

Your friend, who's joined you with three cups of coffee, already knows the answers to all your interview questions; she befriended her masi long ago, which is unusual. It is your friend who asks what it was like when she found herself, age fourteen, in the bedroom of a man ten years older on the night of their arranged marriage. "I don't remember," she says. The only question she answers that way.

“He’s changed a lot,” she tells you, meaning the husband. “Thank God.” Before he found God eight years ago, he would hit her. She’s also relieved he no longer lets his jealousy make him suspicious of her; though she confesses that she is now suspicious of him. He takes showers as soon as he returns from visiting his sister-in-law, something he’s never done before.

She must be so resilient: to work for wages is in itself a small rebellion. She works to pay for her daughters’ education, and she speaks with unrestrained pride of their successes. One tutors her older brother in English because he was not taught the language in the madrassa he attends but must still pass the state exams.

You want to hug her when she cries, which she does only once, when describing her life with her stepfather and as a live-in maid, before her parents married her off.

You ask her, “If you could change anything about your life, what would you change?” and she looks at you blankly. “Like if you could be a doctor, or an interior designer, or a housewife...what would you like to do?”

“Anything else,” she says after some help from your friend. “I would learn,” she continues. “What would you learn?” you persist. “To read,” she says. “In English?” you ask. “In anything,” your friend answers. She agrees.

It took you this long to see the actual depth of the chasm that separates you.

The Chasm

Manchester Airport - Manchester, England

CHAPTER III

SHORTS

A Few Factual Generalizations, In My Opinion:

Far too often, men mistake misogyny for benevolence, see equality as sacrifice, confuse entitlement with confidence.

Pious people spend so much time preaching to the choir, they have little left for practicing what they profess.

The oppressors ridicule the oppressed for not excelling in the very things they have been excluded from for generations.

#Notallmen contribute to sexism; but all women experience it.

Everything The Other utters is rubbish, except when the words praise me.

You vigilantly guard your women from your neighbor while he determinedly guards his from you. Just call it a truce and set us all free.

Shame and Regrets

I told a guy I know I hoped he got raped. And interestingly, it is not primarily the vile notion of hurling wishes of rape as punishment that bothers me about the exchange. It is the debasement of my intellect. I'm equipped with far better rhetorical devices than I exhibited that night. One short snafu forced me to face my vanity and insensitivity, my crassness and inability to gracefully hold my drink. He was asking for it though.

I don't always hurl violent declarations at people I disagree with, but this guy. Far too often, something I've just said has been interrupted by, "There you go starting with that feminist crap again." It's true - since accidentally stumbling upon feminism in a graduate Gender and Lit class and acquiring the words to convey the thoughts that had long been brewing in my brain - I do have a tendency to let my informed opinion be known on problematic matters. This tendency becomes stronger and louder when fueled by wine. I don't do it on purpose, I just have trouble controlling myself when I'm drunk.

That particular evening though, he went out of his way to display his testosterone tinged plumage. Let me be more specific - I had spent the evening chatting with friends polite enough to humor me. The conversation turned, as it often does these days, to serious matters. Just that day I had experienced an occurrence familiar to females; one that, often when revealed to them, elicits surprise and disbelief from males. I described to them how I had been enjoying my solitude in the super quiet study room on the fourth floor of the University library when a male student walked in. It's a medium sized room, offering short wooden dividers between desks to

maintain silence, and he settled in somewhere far away and out of my line of vision. But I could feel his presence on my skin. That poor bastard probably didn't even give me a second thought, but that just infuriated me further. Why, even vaguely, should it have to cross my mind that his maleness posed a threat, I asked my sweet, trapped friends. Later, as the party ended in mass exodus and we gathered our belongings, this gem of a guy gets a whiff of my feminist pheromones. He must have secretly wanted it - by inviting himself to my conversation he went out of his way to tease me.

"Were you talking about rape again," he asked. "I swear, she's always talking about rape," he told the room at large. How. Dare. He. My inebriated brain, bursting with the pressure of pent up past aggression spewed, "Yeah, well I hope *you* get raped." I didn't hear him respond, though it may have been drowned out by my own shame and regret. He left soon after that, as did we. But even though I'm ashamed, I just can't shake the thought that somehow he deserved it. He knows how I am. He shouldn't have ventured over to my conversation without protection.

Kaal

I was writing about tomorrow
but my fingers typed ‘yesterday.’
A study states being bilingual
changes the architecture of your brain.

“No people whose word for ‘yesterday’
is the same as their word for ‘tomorrow’
can be said to have a firm grip on time,” said Rushdie
and I became enamored.

I wonder if this is why
speakers of this tongue
show up at ten
when you invited them at seven.

I wonder if this explains
why our attitudes about women
are as they shouldn’t have been yesterday
rather than how they should be tomorrow.

"It takes years as a woman to unlearn what you have been taught to be sorry for."
Amy Poehler

The Antithesis of Entitlement

I apologized 19 times today. I said 'I'm sorry' to the cashier at the convenience store for not moving up to the counter quickly enough. I said it to the information desk employee for standing too close in case she wasn't ready to address me. I said it to the librarian who had to get up from her desk to check out my books and to the professor who I had a meeting with but didn't want to bother, after all he's a busy man. And when I couldn't apologize for unzipping my bag loudly in the extra quiet study room, I did so with my body language: an interpretive dance of atonement.

My boss received it at the end of an email, it's so often there it's my closing salutation. My friend must have seen it when she checked her phone - I was unacceptably late in answering her text. My mother told me not to worry when I offered her one, I should have called her yesterday but didn't get a chance.

The lady who wanted tomatoes at the grocery store got one as I scooched out of the way, deciding I would finish filling my bag when she was done. I tossed out 'excuse me' generously as I maneuvered through the aisles full of screaming children and distracted mothers, but they sounded like apologies and my eyes confirmed my intent. I held the door open for someone too close to ignore but too far to catch up without effort. What else could I have done but answer his 'thank you' with an 'I'm sorry?' The trio on the sidewalk that didn't adjust their formation to let me by got an 'excuse me' from my detour in the grass, still dewy and mucky from the recent rain, and it only turned passive aggressive half-way in. And, right before I went to bed, I paired

the goodnight kiss I offered my husband with a guilty apology for wanting to go to sleep instead of watching TV.

None of these people asked me for this deference; those who receive it too often or unnecessarily may be annoyed. And for that as well, I am sorry. I used to think this was a symptom of extreme niceness, evidence of my high level of politeness - I'm nothing if not excruciatingly respectful. But, more recently I've come to realize this is symptomatic of something else, something sinister. I've mistaken self-abnegation for kindness, low self-worth for courtesy. I realized, I am apologetic for my very existence.

Problematic Things I've Heard Women Being Called in Daily Vernacular:

1. Good Girl
   A Male Doctor: "Why do you need birth control? I thought you were a good girl."

2. Trouble
   A parent to another parent: "Boy, Frank, you better keep your shotgun ready. She's gonna be trouble."

3. Jailbait
   A male with questionable judgement: "If she wasn't jailbait, I'd have no problem having sex with a minor."

4. Tease
   A male laying blame: "If she wasn't such a cock tease, I wouldn't have been so tempted."

5. Drama Queen
   A male throwing a tantrum: "Can you believe what a drama queen she's being?"

6. Amanat
   A bride's parents to future in-laws: "Now she is your amanat."

7. Boj
   A worried matriarch with a single daughter: "Ya Allah, when will this boj be lifted off my shoulders?"

8. Do din ki mehman
   A father justifying ignoring his daughters: "What's the point of getting too attached to them, daughters are just do din ki mehman."

9. Par ki jooti
   Some guy: "A woman's a par ki jooti."

10. Seenay ki sill
    On the birth of a baby girl: "Another daughter, another seenay ki sill."

THE INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE OF WOMAN

I interviewed two women, one in Karachi, Pakistan and the other in McAllen, Texas. These are their words presented, unaltered except some translation, as a screenplay of the footage after editing.

FADE IN:

INT. KARACHI APARTMENT - AFTERNOON

In a fixed shot the camera focuses in and out until it adjusts to show a 25 year old Pakistani woman. She sits on a red sofa. Behind her hangs a white curtain, printed with things like 'New York Fashion' and 'Style' in black. Visibly pregnant, she wears a royal blue shalwar kameez with black trim, accented with white, along the opening of the neck and sleeves. A dark blue velvet dupatta is draped on one shoulder and cascades down over one arm. She wears a large-faced gold watch on her left wrist and her shoulder length brown hair loose. On her right ring finger, a solitary gold ring and on her face, only the faintest evidence of make-up.

FEMALE VOICE (O.C.)
What is your marital status?

PAKISTANI WOMAN
I'm married.

FEMALE VOICE (O.C.)
And what is your level of education?

PAKISTANI WOMAN
I graduated in Textile Design from Karachi University.

INT. TEXAS HOUSE - AFTERNOON

In a fixed shot, a 31 year old American woman of Mexican descent sits on a swively computer chair in front of a white makeshift desk. Upon the rectangular folding table that extends beyond the frame, a computer, printer, and several books are visible, along with a tan coffee mug and a recording device. A fringe of black wires forms a mullet behind the monitor and chords create an arc against the background of the bare white walls. Three

pictures, pierced by a single thumbtack each, hang behind her and a wire wall organizer overflows with mail. She wears a royal blue short sleeved cowl neck top and black pants. Other than her black cat eye glasses and the hair tie on her right wrist, she wears no accessories. Her dark brown hair, parted on the left, hangs well past her shoulders and she wears minimal make-up.

FEMALE VOICE (O.C.)
What is your marital status?

AMERICAN WOMAN
Married.

FEMALE VOICE (O.C.)
What is your level of education?

AMERICAN WOMAN
I have an MFA in Art.

FEMALE VOICE (O.C.)
Do you feel free?

AMERICAN WOMAN
No. I'm married, so you're tied to your husband more - though I love my husband.

INT. KARACHI APARTMENT - AFTERNOON

PAKISTANI WOMAN
No.

FEMALE VOICE (O.C.)
What is your biggest fear?

PAKISTANI WOMAN
Losing myself.

INT. TEXAS HOUSE - AFTERNOON

AMERICAN WOMAN
Wasting my life. Not using it purposefully; not using it for something good. I'm very lazy and my

biggest fear is I will continue being lazy and I will waste away my youth doing stupid things or doing nothing.

INT. KARACHI APARTMENT - AFTERNOON

FEMALE VOICE (O.C.)
Can you give me an example of inequalities you may have witnessed based solely on gender?

PAKISTANI WOMAN
My parents' izzat lies with me. If my brother comes home after doing something stupid, their izzat won't be tainted - in the family, in the neighborhood. Like if a guy is coming late night at home, it won't affect their izzat but if a girl does the same, their izzat will be damaged.

INT. TEXAS HOUSE - AFTERNOON

AMERICAN WOMAN
Being female does work against you a lot of times. You look weaker all the time so people don't take you seriously - that's from guys and girls. In the job thing, you're judged a lot harsher. If a man and a woman say the same thing maybe a man would appear funny but the woman would appear stupid so we're judged a lot harsher and we can't move up as quickly and we have to work extra extra hard to compensate for being a woman.

FEMALE VOICE (O.C.)
Can you give me a more specific example of inequalities you've witnessed based on gender?

AMERICAN WOMAN

My dad likes to throw the Bible around when it comes to marriage and particularly to my mom. "Wives submit to your husbands," you know and he uses that a lot and to where it's even in the Christian western culture. He uses that to oppress my mom and to make her feel inferior and drive her to depression. I've had to see that and it breaks my heart and it makes me really really angry and makes me deathly afraid of marriage because, well, for a woman you're just signing your life away, you know? And so that's why I waited so long.

FEMALE VOICE
What is the worst thing that can happen to you?

AMERICAN WOMAN
A bad reputation. When your name is damaged.

INT. KARACHI APARTMENT - AFTERNOON

PAKISTANI WOMAN
In the future I won't be able to take my own decisions. I've seen my mother suffering, I've seen my family's women suffering…eventually, you end up being told one thing and I was told this after my marriage that a woman is the one who has to sacrifice. A woman is the only one who has to do everything. Not the man. Man is someone who has a big ego and who's superior than you.

FEMALE VOICE (O.C.)
Who did you hear this from?

PAKISTANI WOMAN

The superior thing I heard from my husband. He believes that a woman is inferior and a man is superior and he believes this is something Islam says which I completely disagree with but I cannot just argue with him all the time because arguments turn into a very aggressive thing so I stopped arguing and telling him that this is not true.

Her cell phone rings. She looks at its screen and back at the camera.

PAKISTANI WOMAN (CONT'D)
I'm sorry, it's my driver.

FEMALE VOICE (O.C.)
No worries. Take your time.

PAKISTANI WOMAN
Yes. Yes, I'll be down shortly.

She turns her attention back to the camera.

PAKISTANI WOMAN (CONT'D)
Sorry about that. Go ahead.

FEMALE VOICE (O.C.)
Define success.

PAKISTANI WOMAN
Doing something of your own choice. Doing something which you love to do and in this society if you can earn something from that, that's a plus point. If you're known for what you're doing, then I think that is success.

INT. TEXAS HOUSE - AFTERNOON

AMERICAN WOMAN
Being happy and satisfied with your life.

FEMALE VOICE (O.C.)

And what do you hope to accomplish?

AMERICAN WOMAN
Monetary success. A bigger impact in the art world - I want to make a business of it. Having a family - a large family.

FADE OUT.

Infallible

Exhibit A: The Book

Allah instructs you concerning your children: for the male, what is equal to the share of two females[9] and call into witness from among your men two witnesses; but if there are not two men, then one man and two women[10].

Men are in charge of women by [right of] what Allah has given one over the other and what they spend [for maintenance] from their wealth. So righteous women are devoutly obedient, guarding in [the husband's] absence what Allah would have them guard. But those [wives] from whom you fear arrogance - [first] advise them; [then if they persist], forsake them in bed; and [finally], strike them. But if they obey you [once more], seek no means against them. Indeed, Allah is ever Exalted and Grand[11].

Your wives are a place of sowing of seed for you, so come to your place of cultivation however you wish and put forth [righteousness] for yourselves[12]. They are a hurt and a pollution: So keep away from women in their courses, and do not approach them until they are clean. But when they have purified themselves, ye may approach them in any manner, time, or place ordained for you by Allah[13].

And if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly with the orphan-girls, then marry [other] 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 only one or [the captives and the slaves] that your right hands possess[14]. You may put off whom you please of them, and you may take to you whom you please, and whom you desire of those whom you had separated provisionally; no blame attaches to you[15].

[9] Quran 4.11
[10] Quran 2.282
[11] Quran 4.34
[12] Quran 2.223
[13] Quran 2.222
[14] Quran 4.3
[15] Quran 33.51

Exhibit B: The Man

Allah's Apostle said, I have seen that the majority of the dwellers of Hell-fire were you [women]." They asked, "Why is it so, O Allah's Apostle?" He replied, "You curse frequently and are ungrateful to your husbands. I have not seen anyone more deficient in intelligence and religion than you. A cautious sensible man could be led astray by some of you." The women asked, "What is deficient in our intelligence and religion?" He said, "Is not the evidence of two women equal to the witness of one man? This is the deficiency in her intelligence. Isn't it true that a woman can neither pray nor fast during her menses? This is the deficiency in her religion[16]." After me I have not left any affliction more harmful to men than women[17].

When the Prophet heard the news that the people of the Persia had made the daughter of Khosrau their Queen (ruler), he said, "Never will succeed such a nation as makes a woman their ruler[18]." If a husband calls his wife to his bed and she refuses and causes him to sleep in anger, the angels curse her till morning[19].

Exhibit C: The Legacy

Allowing women to drive contributes to the downfall of the society[20]. A Woman is also forbidden to put on perfume when she goes out of her house so as for men to smell her fragrance and [w]omen are also forbidden from walking in the middle of the road because it is a kind of showing off their adornment[21]. Even the Prophet says even when they're riding on the back of the camel, when the husband asks her, she must give. So there's no such thing as rape in marriage. This is made by European people, why should we follow? Once she got married, the dowry is paid, she can't refuse unless when she's [on her] period[22].

[16] Bukhari (810-870), 1:6:301
[17] Bukhari (810-870), 3:62:33
[18] Bukhari (810-870), 9:88:219
[19] Bukhari (810-870), 4:54:460
[20] Abd al-Aziz ibn Baz (1910-1999)
[21] Sheikh Muhammad ibn 'Uthaimîn (1925-2001) and Sheikh Abdullah ibn Abdul Rahmân Al-Jibrîn (1933-2009)
[22] Perak Mufti Tan Sri Harussani Zakaria

Many women who do not dress modestly... lead young men astray, corrupt their chastity and spread adultery in society, which increases earthquakes[23]. It is not permissible to have sexual intercourse with one's wife before she has reached nine years of age, be it permanent or temporary marriage. But there is no problem with all other sexual pleasures such as lustful touch, embracing, kissing and takhfiz (rubbing one's penis against her thighs) even if the wife is still a baby being breastfed. A man having intercourse with a girl younger than nine years of age has not committed a crime, but only an infraction, provided the girl is not permanently damaged[24].

[23] Hojatoleslam Kazem Sedighi (1951-)
[24] Ayatollah Khomeini (1902-1989), Tahrir ul Vasila Volume 4

The Hijab

Ah, but it was so much more. That simple cotton scarf, perhaps silk on a dressy day, wrapped securely around my head, carried a vow taken as earnestly as that of a nun. The commitment was the same, barring the fact that the nuns receive a calling whereas I only received the guilt of an average Muslim woman. That and the fact that I had not wed God, which seemed fitting because God sounds like a man and I was to have nothing to do with men.

The covering contained more than the curves of my small frame. It held the honor of a family, a nation, an entire monotheistic faith. It exuded the stench of marked territory, one that has permeated fourteen hundred years, tainted billions of breasts. It hid the fear that rises from deep within the hearts of men, masqueraded as the proud flag of my people. Planted deep and waving in the wind, it trumpeted the conquest of yet another spirit.

What an honor it was for me to have that obligation, that protection from the dangers of this world. How kind it was of those lovers of Allah to not let me forget the horrors reserved for the sinful - and few are as sinful as a fallen woman. So vivid were the descriptions of the tortures reserved for the afterlife, they festered in my young mind, taking root, creating my reality. I could almost feel the two angels that perched upon my shoulders with little angelic notebooks writing down all of my good, right shoulder, and bad, left shoulder, deeds. If weighing the lists on a scale wasn't enough for God, he could always call each grain of rice I had ever left on my plate to testify against me. I could forgive the rice. At least it didn't owe me anything. I had

heard even my eyes and fingers would betray me, recounting my transgressions while the Almighty made his decision.

I wound that culmination of guilt and anxiety in intricate folds, admiring the proof it held of my shame, for any woman worth her hymen had shame. Unlike the embroidery of Hester Prynne, it told not of what I had done, but what I was capable of doing - and worse, what I was capable of enticing. It allowed the words, "it depends on what she was wearing - maybe she was asking for it," to leave my lips. It burdened me with the responsibility of the desires of half the world's population. After a year, it became a catalyst, because it very quickly became apparent that I am so much more than the keeper of their honor, than a symbol of their righteousness. I am more than a scapegoat for their weakness. I broke that vow, because I am so much more

CHAPTER IV

TRIGGER WARNING

Bollywood's Rape Fetish

In India, 'no' doesn't mean no. If your friend's cousin, once removed, offers you another helping of food, you are expected to decline politely. "Aray, nai nai," you say, even while pushing your plate forward for seconds. On the other side of the coin, she's ladling out more daal despite your protests, even if they're genuine. Both participate in this social dance of thakalluf that confirms your good breeding - your honor and your manners.

Playing loosy-goosy with the meaning of the word 'no' - and thus perilous grasp on the concept of consent - has bled over into neighboring cultures as well as into their respective social norms. My own family in Pakistan clarified this point during my visit this past winter.

I was visiting my aunt, who happily lives with her son and daughter-in-law and grandchildren. Her daughter and son-in-law, with three kids in tow, arrived as well, and were soon followed by cousins and more children. At a certain point, the sensory overload of the full house paired with jetlag overtook the pleasure of reconnecting with family after nearly a decade. I, along with two out of three of my companions were ready to leave. However, no matter how sincerely we attempted dissuade them from preparing another meal, or ordering

pizza, or - as ended up happening - both, we had no choice in the matter. We could not leave without seeming unforgivably rude. It was expected that we would politely tell them not to go to any trouble. In their world, it was expected that they would.

In order to have irrefutable reason to leave, we called for a taxi. Surely, if it arrived, we would have to be allowed to leave. "The taxi is here," my partner announced among the chaos. The pizza was not - but it was on its way. "Well, what can we do? Let's go" I said, certain that this was my way out of the hostage situation I found myself in. "Let's go?" asked my cousin, her eyes wide with incredulity. To her, after they had gone to so much trouble, my suggestion was the height of rudeness. To me, having been raised in the US, them refusing to value my saying 'no' and doing exactly what I asked them not to, and then expecting me to oblige them - well, that was ruder.

In the end, we sent the driver some pizza in exchange for him waiting while we hastily ate so we could leave. Though I know it was an expression of their love, it made me realize the value and relativity of rhetoric across cultures. I couldn't help but tie the futility of my resistance to the futility of the concept of 'no' in Indo-Pak culture. Though evidence of this can be found in nearly every aspect of the culture I grew up with, Bollywood, India's film industry, is the most potent one.

I have never been to India - but as a Pakistani American, I've watched an embarrassing number of Bollywood films. My childhood in Louisiana was plagued with feelings of not belonging, of not being represented. Though the differing majority religions ripped the subcontinent apart and Pakistan and India are still in constant strife, the language and culture remain similar enough that I related more to the brown bodies depicted in India on bad bootleg

films than the white ones available on American TV. Seeing a brown woman with red sindoor in her part - something my Muslim culture did not ask for - was more comforting than seeing the three blond sisters I watched with almost a religious passion. I could never have a boyfriend like DJ Tanner did and while Stephanie fought for pierced ears, I shamefully fingered mine, pierced since infanthood. The people on the fuzzy VHS tapes were more like my family, with their modesty, and traditions, and arranged marriages.

These feelings only intensified to unhealthy amounts when, in my mid-teens, my family moved to the southernmost tip of Texas where I was literally the only Pakistani most people I met had ever interacted with. Bollywood flicks, now available on DVDs, sustained not only my everlasting identity crisis, but also my teenage need for romance and cheesiness. Like countless girls the world over, I practiced the dance moves to my favorite songs - and each Bollywood film has to have at least a handful. By my undergraduate years at UT-Austin, I performed choreographed dance routines with my best friends - all Indian or Pakistani - all Muslim.

Because Bollywood. Bollywood - which specifically refers to the Hindi language films coming out of Mumbai (formerly Bombay) - is often combined in conversation with the Tamil and Telgu movies from other parts of India. Together, they are watched by billions around the globe. The actual reach of these movies surpasses the South Asian populations that make their homes throughout the world. Every few weeks some video will circulate on social media of a group of white or japanese or arab or whatever folks mimicking the infamous dance routines, mouthing words they think they understand thanks to badly translated subtitles. Bollywood is big. It is melodramatic. It is full of clichés and it has immeasurable reach.

Whether the content of media is a reflection of society and its desires or it is helping shape society and its desires, or both, is debatable. Either way, Bollywood flicks serve as the perfect medium to analyze how the culture's perilous relationship with the concept of consent echoes far beyond the delicious discomfort of having to eat one too many samosas.

Ah, Romance

Boy meets Girl. Girl shows immediate disinterest in Boy. Boy pursues Girl with grand gestures - almost always involving a musical number - while Girl stomps around annoyed, repeatedly rejecting Boy. For some reason - either as a challenge or because the poor protagonist is just that in love with this near stranger - Boy will make it his life's mission to win Girl's heart.

He may stalk, he may threaten suicide, he may harass her undeterred. And eventually he will succeed. Every time. Usually, this success comes after Boy serves some heroic purpose, far too often the purpose of saving Girl's honor - read: virginity - from less chivalrous males.

His new position as the lesser evil - say between him as the original stalker and a gang of thirsty looking men - nay, as the savior, increases his desirability. So common - and successful - is this strategy that it can now be found written into the plot: Boy arranges "attack" so that he can become the savior and win the initially disinterested Girl.

This storyline of rejection, persistence, and the successful wooing of Girl by Boy can be the main one. But, more often than not, it is paired with other obstacles that hinder their blossoming relationship such as feuding families[25], a forced marriage elsewhere[26], or, in one high

[25] Dil (1990)
[26] Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge (1995)

budget production, a headmaster who cannot stand the concept of love[27]. My concern, though, lies more with the initial premise: Girl acts coy, Boy pursues doggedly, wins Girl's heart.

This pattern is one I have witnessed again and again since the mid-eighties and Bollywood writers don't seem to grow tired of using it to sneak in a song or two. In fact, in a 2012 production[28], Boy - who is following Girl - mentions the trope as he helps her pick up her spilled belongings. "What did you need to do all this for...seen it in every movie, first the heroine gives the brush off and then she slips," he says insinuating she dropped her bag on purpose. However, this tired pattern perpetuates attitudes toward gender relations that manifest themselves as social ills.

The concepts being hammered into social norms directly contribute to the rape culture that plagues the Indian subcontinent and the Indo-Pak culture. There is most obviously the disregard of consent. After being initially rejected, Boy's continued advances are nothing more than harassment. However, his increasing insistence earning him his coveted delivers a message of false entitlement and promises. If you don't give up, she will eventually say yes. You will eventually break her.

This method of wooing seems to be seen as a legitimate one - Boy's ardour seen as the epitome of passion rather than stalking, Girl's rejection seen as playing hard-to-get rather than a lack of interest. But in examining the dynamics, problematic issues arise.

First is the madonna/whore dichotomy. In this polarized view, females are either piously virginal (or elderly mothers) deserving space on a pedestal, or whores deserving contempt and whatever comes to them. This lack of middle ground, of a place to be simply human, exists the

[27] Mohabbatein (2000)
[28] Kismet Love Paisa Dilli

world over for women. However, in a culture where izzat is of utmost importance, the effects of being branded the wrong label are life altering. Even being accused of behaving in a besharam manner - with little actual proof - is enough to lose the entire family their izzat. The repercussions can lie anywhere between social ostracization, lack of marriage prospects for other members of the family, and in worst case scenarios, honor killings.

Furthermore, gender roles are depicted as pretty much set in stone - so it is expected that a female would resist advances from males, lest she be labeled besharam. Of course, women are neither virgins nor whores. We are human and we too desire romance and sex. So, it is very possible that, in a culture where the questionable meaning of 'no' combines with Girl's duty to protect her family's izzat - yes the entire family's izzat lies between her legs - she may very well say 'no' when she wants to say 'yes.' She is expected to say no, even if she feels genuine interest or pleasure. Even if only to save face in front of the very man pursuing her, she must at least appear to resist, to be coy, to be lady-like. To be the virgin, not the whore.

Consequently then, even though she very clearly may say no, Boy is aware that it is her role to resist, to say 'no' despite possibly wanting to be pursued. He is supposed to want it, his aggressive behavior a symptom of his manliness. She is supposed to say 'no,' her coyness a symbol of her femininity. After all, boys will be boys. Girls better be virgins.

Though this may sometimes be the case, quite often it is not. Quite often, she really does not want the attention. But, in addition to expecting the rejection from a virtuous woman, Boy has more than likely grown up watching 'heroes' in Bollywood getting their way. All it takes is persistence and perhaps a musical number. Growing up in the States, I learned countless nuances about my culture through Indian cinema. It is not impossible then, that growing up with

overwhelming repetition of these socially expected behaviors would influence attitudes of Bollywood's male viewers.

I can't help but wonder, what happens if Boy, having seen this method of wooing work in nearly every plotline, doesn't get the coveted 'yes'? Would he persist regardless until he gets what he wants, despite the discomfort he may be causing Girl? Or if he doesn't get it, would he be unable to understand the rejection and avenge his wounded entitlement by harming Girl in some way, such as with rape, acid, or through murder - all forms of violence against women that abound in south Asia?

Damsels in Distress

Girl was angry - and rightfully so. Boy had been following her, and she wasn't really interested, but when a group of men started leering at her, following her, harassing her - his company kept her safer than she would have been alone and was thus, welcomed. Even his presence didn't deter the would-be gang rapists, so as they wander the streets of Delhi, India, looking for a way to get home, she mentions his original, non-chivalrous intents. So upset is he at this insinuation, he pretends to attack her - to prove the power he has, but has, apparently as a favor, not used. He doesn't actually rape her, but she angrily storms off, alone into the dark streets of Delhi at night, nonetheless.

One may think that since the damsel in distress trope has already been applied, she will find herself in some other predicament; however, considering Bollywood's rape fetish, one would be wrong. In a white van four goons have been roaming the city, robbing and stealing in celebration of the mustachioed leader Captan Sahab's birthday. Their presence seems to be for comedic relief and, perhaps, to help move the plot forward by picking up the lone female. When

the four spot her walking in the dark, abandoned streets, thought bubbles pop up over their heads: “shikar.”

Their hunt is successful and their “prey” ends up in the back of the van, tied and gagged. One of them blows bubbles - I suppose to create a festive atmosphere while they force her at gunpoint to sing Happy Birthday to Captan Sahab through the cloth tied around her mouth. “Give madam some sweets,” says Captan Sahab while driving. “Madam is about to become a mother. Happy Mother’s Day,” he says in a humorous tone.

Later, when she’s passed out in the back of the van - still tied and gagged - and is offered to Captan Sahab - “cake is ready, cut the cake” - he looms over her unbuttoning his shirt and taking off his gold chain. The three goons watch longingly, and the party is about to commence when they notice a little boy peeking in the window. The goons take what they refer to as a “rape break,” and after some comedic relief, she is saved. By the original stalker, I mean hero, she stomped away from earlier.

The jocular take on such a serious issue is especially disturbing, however, rape as a plot device offering the hero an excuse to save the damsel in distress is so overused it seems to be included in nearly every Hindi movie. It’s not always done as jokingly, and sometimes it is offered as serious social commentary, but more often than not, it is used disturbingly casually. Rape, or the danger of it, is used with such frequency as a device to make Boy the savior and Girl the saved that the concept of a woman being in constant danger of sexual attack has been perpetuated into the norm.

In the dialogue itself, there is regular reference to a woman being in danger 1) on her own 2) at night 3) with a male companion but at night 4) by existing...and betrays the attitudes about a

woman's role in society. Just hearing this repeatedly and as a matter of fact is enough to form the constructs of a prey/hunter mentality - the constant hammering reminding females that they can be raped, and males that they can.

However, seeing it played out, sometimes more than once in each film, solidifies it as a social norm; and unless it is some sort of social commentary, it does little else than to serve as a way to show the strength of the hero - who can fight off gangs at a time - and the weakness of the woman who needs him. It perpetuates the notion that a woman is either something to be attacked or saved; and even worse, perhaps, that her value can be so easily decreased using a fabricated construct. Equating her worth with the man-made concept of virginity arms society with a convenient and constant threat against her, and a socially acceptable way to retain control over her actions and choices. It further sets the standard for laying blame - if a woman does not guard herself or confine herself to the parameters that are perpetuated with every on-screen near rape, she's obviously asking for it.

When all she is is trouble waiting to happen, is it any wonder that males babies are preferred to female babies in such a culture?

Item Number

Women are objectified worldwide. That is to say that the female body, or its parts, are separated from her person and used for consumption or enjoyment. The regular commodification of women in popular culture dehumanizes her, portraying her body as an object to be used for sexual gratification and little else. This may be why, when trying to deter sexual attacks on females, the concept of, 'she's somebody's mother/sister/daughter' is often brought up - to remind the male viewer that the sexual body he's looking at is, in fact, human. (Even then,

notice, that her humanity is argued relative to the male being addressed, not as an individual in her own right.)

Two types of issues arise from objectification of women: 1) issues of physical appearance and body Figure 2) and those of physical safety and fear of being attacked. Yes, this is a problem across the globe, but in a culture where a movie will not do well in the box office without an "Item Girl" performing an "Item Number," objectification and its repercussions must be stressed.

Bollywood films are usually more than two-and-a-half hours long. They contain a variety of songs and dances. There are those that are "part of the plot" and involve the hero and heroine and may somehow move the narrative forward. Then there are the ones that are simply for sexual gratification. Those are the Item Numbers, and the females performing in them are the Item Girls.

That in the industry - and in common social discourse - this concept has grown into one that deserves its own pop-culture reference is nothing short of disturbing. Unlike more "subtle" objectification, the growth of the item number's blatancy speaks of the growth of entitlement to women's bodies. These elaborate routines, performed in the films on stages at nightclubs or strip clubs or beaches or boats, feature a scantily clad woman, sometimes wet, dancing among either more scantily clad women or men. She is often performing for a crowd of leering men. I will include in this critique the reverse item number: where a male actor - usually the protagonist - is dancing among scantily clad women who can barely restrain themselves as he manhandles them. The effect is the same: the female body is being used - through camera angles and

sexualized imagery - as a commodity by the industry. It is being consumed - yet regulated - by society.

I cannot help but wonder if the rise of the Item Number has anything to do with the fact that, especially due to growing globalization, the market demanded increased sexualization, however the culture still calls for the semblance of virginity and tradition. Though the female lead may be dressed non-traditionally, she will always find the modest path before the end of the film. Love, apparently, brings with it shame and fabric. Thus, in order to cater to the Madonna/whore dichotomy, Bollywood allows Girl to remain virginally pure for Boy[29], while still being sexy, and brings in an Item Girl, or a few, to fulfill the demand for a whore.

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Our constructs, how we make sense of the world, are formed by our surroundings and these were mine. Of course, I grew up with the added questionable content of American media with its Disney damsels in distress and Wonder Woman about to pop out of her impractical superhero outfit. Hollywood, and American media in general, is not much better at its representation of females - however, Indo-Pak cultures' already questionable relationship with the word 'no,' and lingering attitudes about tradition and female sexuality, increase the problematic nature of Bollywood's content.

Certainly, there is nothing wrong with female sexuality. However, these movies rarely feature empowered females taking charge of their bodies - were they to do that for a reason other than desperation, they'd be labeled whores. These are films created by mostly men for mostly

[29] I've noticed the need to keep Girl virginal goes to such extremes as: Girl in question is married, but her husband left on the wedding night before they consummated the marriage so when Boy gets her in the end, the audience can rest assured she is not soiled goods.

men and their impact affects all genders and ages. One way to remedy this problem would be to overhaul the industry, end Item Numbers, hire wittier writers, censor ages-old storylines. But even despite the exponential reach of the problematic messages being consumed by the masses, I would not call for censorship, for censorship is never the solution.

I would, however, ask for a counter message. In a country where rape culture is a joke, the victim is always at fault, item numbers sell movie tickets, sisters must be escorted, and gang rape is in the news on a regular basis, it is wrong to ignore the effects of a culture that enjoys such films. In this same country, where the horrific gang rape and murder of Jyoti, a 23 year old student prompted worldwide protests in 2012, counter voices are silenced.

The 2012 Delhi gang rape inspired a BBC documentary about the disturbing incident. In it, one of the convicted rapists said when interviewed, "When being raped, she shouldn't fight back. She should just be silent and allow the rape." He also added, "A girl is far more responsible for rape than a boy… A decent girl won't roam around at nine o'clock at night…Housework and housekeeping is for girls, not roaming in discos and bars at night doing indecent things, wearing indecent clothes." However, this documentary which was set to be aired on International Women's Day in 2015 was banned in India. The Indian Government also directed YouTube to block the viral video in the country.

I find the content of Bollywood films absolutely unpalatable at this point. Trying to sit through one causes a visceral negative reaction because the attitudes cultivated through the perpetuation of rape culture in the media, mixed with the traditional views of a woman's role in society, create a toxic environment. Whereas males don't have a problem with watching the objectification and commodification of women on the big screen, a defense attorney for Jyoti's

attackers said, “If my daughter or sister engaged in pre-marital activities and disgraced herself and allowed herself to lose face and character by doing such things, I would most certainly take this sort of sister or daughter to my farmhouse, and in front of my entire family, I would put petrol on her and set her alight.” So while it is socially acceptable to make money off female sexuality, it is exactly that which is used to instill fear and control.

My argument is not to censor, never to censor. If Bollywood makes billions of rupees and reaches billions of viewers by repeatedly showing women being threatened by rape, both gang and regular, it is only right to also show loud and proud what happens when the ‘hero’ doesn’t come through. If Bollywood is not going to make its own tribute to the countless women who are victims of this hyper patriarchal Indo-Pak culture that so regularly feeds its male populace’s entitlement and ego, perhaps they should support those who want to tell the world how the attackers pulled out Jyoti’s intestines with their bare hands, how she was only one story out of millions where the hero never came.

CHAPTER V

CRITICAL AFTERWORD

This thesis came about by accident, and it has organically grown into a collection that demonstrates my journey as a writer, thinker, and academic. Besides the fact that it includes works from my second semester in the Creative Writing program to my last, its themes have evolved from notes scribbled in the margins of readings, born of stray thoughts inspired by literature assigned to me by my professors at the MFA program at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley[1] – from classic to graphic, and everything in between.

The Fallen Female: A Testimony it is called, for that is what it is – a testimony of my experience as a Pakistani American woman. The title betrays my insecurities; it gives me the strength to say things I otherwise may not. You see, I do not like offending people. I consider the feelings of others to be of utmost importance, regardless of my own – something I attribute to what Peggy Orenstein describes in *Schoolgirls* as a product of the "lessons of silence" American females learn through the "hidden curriculum" that abounds in our classrooms and society at large. As she explores the confidence gap between males and females, she concludes that the cues, both verbal and nonverbal, that our social norms carry lead males to "feel a sense of

[1] Formerly the University of Texas Pan American

entitlement: license to take up space in the world, a right to be heard and to express the full spectrum of human emotions" (xix).

On the other hand, females "are less likely to feel those things…our culture devalues both women and the qualities which it projects onto us, such as nurturance, cooperation, and intuition" (xix). She contends that by presenting socially enforced differences as purely biological ones, we harm females by "glorifying empathy in women and girls" which "ignores both the capacity and the necessity for female autonomy" and that "portraying a 'caring nature' as a chromosome-linked characteristic rather than a universal human trait…encourages a dangerous disregard for those qualities in men – it even absolves men of responsibility for them" (69).

Seeing myself mirrored in the girls Orenstein interviewed helped me come to terms with my own self-esteem issues; and while sorting out the mess that years of therapy were unable to help, I came to realize the reason I write. I searched for this reason repeatedly over the course of my MFA coursework, perhaps every time I had to explain to someone that I was spending thousands of dollars and hours to pursue a degree in Creative Writing. The looks I received reminded me of the reason I did not pursue Journalism as a college freshman – writing is not considered a practical field of study. It does not come with promises of monetary success.

I didn't major in journalism as an undergrad; I majored in business. But after years in financially stable professions I decided to return to study the craft of writing. Yet every time I tried to articulate why, I was unable to. Writing seemed like an exercise in redundancy; everything I was saying had already been said, and, chances are, probably better. The words of one of the first professors I had in the master's program only confirmed my fears. Roughly

paraphrased, he declared that there are no new stories. It's the same few plots – many exemplified in the works of Shakespeare – re-tooled and retold. Add to this my personal issues of low self-esteem which yield thoughts such as, "Why would anybody care what *I* have to say?" and you've got a recipe for the angst ridden writer.

But, upon exploring fields of study that until this point had been missing from my life – such as feminism and post colonialism – I found the words to explain why. I write to contribute to the conversation. I write to tell what I have witnessed of the human condition – the variations in types of existence I have seen. As a Pakistani American, born in Karachi, raised in Baton Rouge and deep South Texas at the turn of the century, I hold a perspective of reality unmatched by any other individual past, present, or future. And that is why anybody writes.

Certainly, some decide – or are allowed – to contribute to the conversation more than others – thus their perspective becomes the generally accepted one. Only recently have I realized that I have a need to add another perspective – or rather, perspectives: of a woman, of a person of color, of an ex-Muslim.

My tendency towards deference, paired with the themes in my work make *The Fallen Female: A Testimony* a fitting title for another reason: my collection is a cultural critique. In it, I critique my three cultures – American, Pakistani, and Muslim. In doing so, I make statements that will undoubtedly meet resistance. Even as I wrote each piece, each word, I thought of and countered in my head all the arguments I expected could arise.

Like, when working on "A Social Experiment" and describing social norms I have observed over the years during my sporadic visits to Pakistan, I immediately thought of the apologist statements I've heard in the past. For example, last summer Brandon Stanton of the

viral online blog Humans of New York visited Pakistan. He attempted to show the faces of the individuals in a poorly understood country and the posts helped initiate conversations between strangers around the world.

"A sad little broken piece of my heart silently screamed, but it can't be," wrote a Pakistani woman upon realizing Brandon was visiting, because she thought, "the world hates us."

"We don't hate you!" responded someone from the United States while people from the Philippines, India, and Canada, voiced their agreement. The heartwarming exchanges continued with Pakistanis thanking Brandon for showing the "real face" of the country that, according to countless commenters, is poorly portrayed by the media. Humans from around the world thanked him similarly, appreciating the unique perspective his journalistic endeavor offered.

Pakistanis were quick to show pride in the beauty and hospitality of the country as well as on posts that featured empowered or educated women, posts that broke the stereotypes of Pakistani gender roles. "Pakistani girls doing doctorate, marrying out of love and not caged in the house. Thank you for showing the true Pakistani girl," wrote one Pakistani on a post about a woman working on her thesis. "As opposed to the burqa clad oppressed women international media loves to show all the time."

However, when a young woman expressed her desire to have a career and be independent, many were quick to discount her experience. "I oppose this opinion…this is only her view," wrote one woman. "Alhamduhlillah I'm living my independent life, I became what I wanted, I studied what I wanted…"

"Totally not the Pakistan I know. We have changed a lot," contributed a Pakistani man. "The time when women remained inside homes was when most population was living in villages and yes we would not like our women to work in farms. They already do enough hard work at home but now the time has changed and our women are working with us in offices. They are doing much better in education it's a real hard competition in taking admissions in universities as girls study more," he explained. The "fact" that the majority of students in the medical field are now female was repeatedly mentioned and tired examples were parroted: Pakistan has had a female prime minister, Prophet Mohammed's first wife was a business woman. These are true, but they are also anomalous. And they do little to address the very real issues women do face in the country.

Like blindly patriotic Americans, some Pakistanis seem to believe that acknowledging weakness is treasonous; they seem unable to accept that there can be problems in a society that they hold pride in. Those in denial are quick to discount and defend. It was their voices – and a lifetime of similar ones – that echoed in my head as I attempted to recount my experiences as a Pakistani American woman. The matter was further complicated by my need to address that, truly, not all Pakistani women have the same experience and – most pressingly – not all interpretations of Islam are equal. My reflex to avoid sounding Islamaphobic comes from the current political climate that equates criticism with absolute hate. It comes with the trend that every statement about Islam be immediately followed by, "but, not *all* Muslims."

I think I can understand why this disclaimer is necessary – we've had decades of unfair stereotyping of Muslims, something I briefly address in my essay "A Modest Woman." In an attempt to remedy the damage caused by blanket statements and biased portrayals, the Muslim

Public Relations Team is always at the ready. However, the fact that not all Muslims are a certain way, not all Pakistanis are a certain way, not all Americans are a certain way, does little to change the very real and disturbing experiences of billions – especially women – around the globe. Criticism is not hate; parents criticize their children all the time because they want them to become better. Criticism is, rather, the first step toward improvement and growth.

As I imagine the offense at my "inaccurate" portrayal of my world, my main counterargument is this: this is a testimony of *my* experience. It is a collection of what I have witnessed and concluded, and that cannot be refuted.

Religion

It all starts and ends with religion, at least for me. This seems exceptionally fitting as Islam is not a religion, I had learned, it is a way of life. It is the identity of the blessed, before any nationality or race or gender. Islam is all demanding and all consuming. Islam, for a believer, is the purpose of life. Every action for a Muslim should be carried out in the way that would most please Allah and the more one pleases Him, the more rewards one will acquire to earn a ticket into heaven. And that was the goal – submitting to His will here, during the test – so that one could be rewarded for eternity in the afterlife.

Even now I believe I can follow the individual strands of the tangled web that constitutes my neurosis to its origin: My Islam. The qualifier "my" may be the single most important word in this collection. I firmly believe that no two people practice the same religion, despite being of the same faith or family. However, I have not always held this belief. In the Islam I grew up with – the one I created via the cues around me – there were absolutely absolutes. We knew exactly

what rules to follow; God had told us in the Quran and sent the Prophet to clarify. Anybody who was following a different interpretation was simply doing it wrong.

If we followed His directions, we would go to Heaven. If we sinned we would be punished in the grave, on the Day of Judgment, and for all of eternity. You wanted the net balance of your deeds to be in the black, as in positive. My Islam was one of unimaginable horrors and fear and guilt. The prose piece "The Hijab" names a few:

> How kind it was for those lovers of Allah to not let me forget the horrors reserved for the sinful – and few are as sinful as a fallen woman. So vivid were the descriptions of the tortures reserved for the afterlife, they festered in my young mind, taking root, creating my reality. I could almost feel the two angels that perched upon my shoulders with little angelic notebooks writing down all of my good, right shoulder, and bad, left shoulder, deeds. If weighing the lists on a scale wasn't enough for God, he could always call each grain of rice I had ever left on my plate to testify against me. I could forgive the rice…I had heard even my eyes and fingers would betray me, recounting my transgressions while the Almighty made his decision. (73)

Although the most repeated of Allah's ninety-nine names include "the Beneficent" and "The Merciful," I cannot recall a moment when my religion brought me peace or joy or love. My religion was about sinning – committing sin and avoiding sin. He would be merciful, I suppose, if you supplicated to him enough.

It was never my intention to lose my religion. Being an apostate is the worst sin in Islam, punishable in some countries by death – either through legal channels or simply vigilante justice.

It was further never my intention to have it be a major theme of my collection. It became, by default, the topic of my first nonfiction essay, "A Modest Woman," because my religion is the biggest contributing factor in each of my stories – past and future. It has shaped my very reality – my self-concept and interactions with the world, my aspirations and goals, my sexuality and individuality.

After that first fateful essay, Dr. Braithwaite asked, "Do you know who Ayaan Hirsi Ali is?" I did not. "You should read her," she advised. A quick Google search revealed that Ali is a severely loathed personality, a heretic who has made it her life's mission to sully the good name of Islam. I hadn't even openly rejected my religion yet; I could never compare myself to such a person. The woman lived in constant fear of being killed – I had simply written an essay of my humble experiences. Other than wanting, subconsciously, to distance myself from her, I feared the emotional taxation such a text would have on me. I may not have laid down a janamaz for years by that point, but I was still in the final throes of my crisis of faith. I did begin exploring other works with similar themes such as Sam Harris's *Letter to a Christian Nation* and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis,* each confirming conclusions I didn't know I had already made.

I read widely between that first essay and Ali's *Infidel*, which I sat down with nearly two years later. By that time I found myself agreeing with her and wondering what the fuss was about. I had become quite comfortable declaring myself an ex-Muslim. Not just comfortable, proud. When I read Shulem Deen's memoir of leaving a cloistered Hasidic community, *All Who Go Do Not Return*, I decided that though I did not want to write a full-out memoir, my story had to include my exit from a religion that prides itself on low levels of member turnover. It was important to me that, like Deen, I explain the journey.

"A Modest Woman" describes the brainwashing that formed my constructs of the world:

> This is one of many verses that are used to prove that the Quran contains things no one could have known that long ago and I heard quite a few growing up. Eventually, I began wondering why they kept telling us – we were already there to listen to the sermon. Why were they preaching to the choir? First, they were arming us with evidence to use should we find ourselves in a similar situation with a nonbeliever – we could defend our religion. But more importantly, it reinforced our faith. It renewed and re-convinced. It made those who were there feel good about being part of the right club. And it instilled fear. (17)

In it, I also try to convey my sincere devotion to what I accepted as the inarguable truth: "I even invested in boots that refused to announce my approach" (23). And finally, though I could not capture the intensity of the actual shift, I spoke of the victory of reason over religion.

> If this was the word of God, if this was the right religion, why did he not explicitly get rid of these injustices as well? Once I started unraveling it, the whole thing started coming apart. The more questions I asked, the less the answers that had so logically been explained to, and defended by, me made sense. (26)

Deen's work inspired me to explain that this was not a decision made out of ignorance or laziness or the desire to "sin." This was a long, painful, educated process, informed by my own lived experiences and knowledge as someone who had immersed myself in the faith with sincerity. When I read *Infidel* I became resolute.

Ali's criticism of Islam is very much a feminist one. That may be the reason Dr. Braithwaite recommended her work to me. My criticism of Islam focuses on its effects – intended or not – on women.

Feminism

This thesis was written by a woman. The three accomplished individuals on this thesis committee are women. And I am ashamed to admit that when choosing the academics most qualified to be on my committee, this fact crossed my mind.

It was not a matter of wanting a panel of females. It was the socialized, knee-jerk response of not wanting to seem prejudiced by having only females represented, lest it be brushed off as a biased work. A Composition and Rhetoric 1301 student of mine commented on an assigned reading, "I could tell the writer was biased because he used 'she' [as the general pronoun]. My immediate thought was, "Is it still biased if a writer chooses to use 'he'?" Similarly, should a panel – any panel – consist only of men, very rarely is it a point to be noted. That's simply the status quo.

When I stumbled upon feminism, I didn't know it was a bad word. During the honeymoon stage I just reveled in the logic and justice of it all. At first the thoughts were simply organic responses to readings in a Gender and Literature Seminar course. I pondered Gioconda Belli's life choices in *The Country Under My Skin: A Memoir of Love and War* and the implications of narrative choices through *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jean Rhys' postcolonial prequel to *Jayne Eyre*. Perhaps by fate, Dr. Caroline Miles assigned two memoirs by women of Muslim origin that semester. This direct connection to my own history – and my analytical responses to it – in Leila Ahmed's *Border Passage: From Cairo to America* and Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita*

in Tehran helped validate the ideas and relate them to my own life. I verbalized opinions I didn't know I had, basking in the support of like-minded thinkers and writers and activists, which I found tucked between the pages of their texts.

The more I learned about feminism as a movement, the more I noticed the many interconnected levels of misogyny woven into the very fabrics of societies, religions, and cultures, a point I tried to highlight throughout my work. The evidence of its prevalence may be most obvious in my piece, "The International Language of Woman." Based on on-camera interview footage, it scripts a proposed edited version of two participants' actual responses to similar questions. The following excerpts compare the similarities of the female experience in two very different cultures:

FEMALE VOICE (O.C.)
Can you give me a more specific example of inequalities you've witnessed based on gender?

AMERICAN WOMAN
My dad likes to throw the Bible around when it comes to marriage and particularly to my mom. "Wives submit to your husbands," you know and he uses that a lot and to where it's even in the Christian western culture. He uses that to oppress my mom and to make her feel inferior and drive her to depression. I've had to see that and it breaks my heart and it makes me really really angry and makes me deathly afraid of marriage because, well, for a woman you're just signing your life away, you know? And so that's why I waited so long. (67)

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INT. KARACHI APARTMENT - AFTERNOON

PAKISTANI WOMAN
In the future I won't be able to take my own decisions. I've seen my mother suffering, I've seen my family's women suffering…eventually, you end up being told one thing and I was told this after my marriage that a woman is the one who has to sacrifice. A woman is the only one who has to do everything. Not the man. Man is someone who has a big ego and who's superior than you.

FEMALE VOICE (O.C.)
Who did you hear this from?

PAKISTANI WOMAN
The superior thing I head from my husband. He believes that a woman is inferior and a man is superior and he believes this is something Islam says which I completely disagree with but I cannot just argue with him all the time because arguments turn into a very aggressive thing so I stopped arguing and telling him that this is not true. (68)

Feeling at the same time astounded at the novelty of these ideologies of justice and the ludicrousness of not being cognizant of my own constraints sooner in life, I dedicated myself to the cause. Until this point, I had endless empathy and extensive knowledge of the horrific conditions of women around the globe, many of them with origins similar to mine. I knew about ancient Chinese foot binding and female genital mutilation. I had read of women being sentenced to gang rape for the crimes of a brother and a baby girls being buried alive. I had witnessed, first hand, women being married despite saying ‘no,’ and others who spent their lives as virtual slaves.

I was empathetic; but I was removed. My "official" abandonment of Islam served as a catalyst for my adoption of feminism as a movement. It was almost like, if I could question *that*, I could – should – question everything. So I did. I questioned everything I had been socialized to believe as truth. The more I learned about the social cues we communicate that cultivate patriarchy as the norm, the more I immersed myself in the material.

Before I recognized myself in Orenstein's *Schoolgirls*, I studied her more recent book about girls, socialization, and self-esteem, *Cinderella Ate my Daughter*. Despite being able to relate to so much of the content, I was shocked and desperate to share the information with anybody who would listen. But, my impromptu oral skills left much to be desired. Like the time I tried to explain to a twenty-something male who drives the shuttles around campus that it was not, in fact, unfair that girls were encouraged to go to special science camps because women have historically been kept out of such fields. "Did you know that Legos aimed at girls are designed to build shopping malls and the ones for boys build rocket ships?" I argued over my shoulder as I exited the vehicle. It was very unimpressive.

My gracelessness with the spoken word convinced me to produce a written testament to my newfound insight. The succinctness of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *We Should All Be Feminists* convinced me that, if done well, complex ideas can be presented simply. Jean Braithwaite's *Fat: A Story of My Life in My Body* helped me beyond the subject matter, which itself was integral to my growth as a feminist and all around decent human being. It helped exemplify the generalized concept of the ladder of abstraction, something I thought I understood but had no idea how to utilize. As I devoured new material, I began seeing past readings – already dear to my heart – from a new perspective. Tom Wolfe's *I am Charolette Simmons*

highlighted the harmful effects of toxic masculinity and Lisa See's *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns, And the Mountains Echoed,* and *The Kite Runner,* and Amy Tan's work demonstrated how women play a role in perpetuating the patriarchy. Nearly everything I read demanded reexamination. It went from a passive emotional response to an active, analytical one.

Looking back, I have always harbored feminist tendencies. I recall being the odd one among my Muslim friends, the one with the crazy ideas. Ideas such as, "Yes, even if it's your husband, it can be considered rape." Or, as described in "A Modest Woman," a tampon did not take my virginity. This predisposition to reason was cultivated and encouraged by my parents, who themselves were attempting to balance inner logic and deep rooted tradition. But, the encouragement clashed with the messages hidden in our cultural norms – both Pakistani and American – and I was woefully, shamefully a part of the systems of oppression. I am confident that my religion allowed me to justify injustices in the name of pleasing God, an example of which I present in "The Hijab:" It allowed the words, 'It depends on what she was wearing – maybe she was asking for it,' to leave my lips" (74).

Furthermore, with my newfound rhetorical tools, I began pointing out problematic situations and encountered resistance, contempt, even hatred for the ideas that, to me, were simply basic human rights. I offer an example of this in my flash nonfiction piece, "Shame and Regrets:" "Far too often, something I've just said has been interrupted by, 'There you go starting with that feminist crap again.'" (58).

It seemed that many people had a poor understanding of the sociological and historical factors that contribute to current norms and far too many had an uninformed notion of feminism

as a concept. I began experimenting with ways to reveal truths, thus the majority of my work focuses on feminist ideas. Unfortunately, I also learned that some people disagree with the very notion of feminism even when they do comprehend what it actually stands for – because they truly do not believe the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes is desirable. They see nothing wrong with the way things currently are, have little desire for change, and have a negative connotation of the word 'feminist.'

I didn't choose to become a Muslim. However, as I figure out this thing called life, I've chosen to "become" a feminist. This thesis is a testament to that evolution.

Identity

When I was younger, I was ashamed because none of my peers knew about Pakistan. I was the poster child for the first-generation post-colonized mind. As a shy child with frizzy hair and eyebrows that were far too friendly with each other, I did not want to explain where this foreign place was or what our "costumes" were called. I wanted to blend into late twentieth century America as seamlessly as possible.

Later I became ashamed because, after the turn of the century, everybody knew about Pakistan when Global events catapulted my unknown infant of a country – declared a nation state in 1947 – into the international spotlight. It didn't help that as the years progressed my connection to the culture became more distant – despite choosing a life partner who grew up in the country. Together the two of us chopped through the social vines that entangle us, trying to make sense of the brainwashing we politely call socialization.

Thus, it was very timely that I encountered the concept of post-colonialism in Dr. Matthew Christensen's Postcolonial Literature class. Through discussing books such as Ngũgĩ

wa Thiong's's *Globalectics* and Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place*, I began understanding the manufactured superiority of certain cultures and the colonization of language. "Enlightenment, after all, assumes darkness as its other. And the darker the other, the more visable and luminous the light from the European stars" (32), Ngũgĩ writes. He continues,

> Intellectuals of the European Enlightenment and their work came to occupy center stage in a vast echo chamber…they would pass their unified perspective to their students who would…pass it on till it became a tradition, an inheritable truth. In 1960, with many African countries independent or on the verge of independence…Trevor Roper, could assert…that Africa was only darkness prior to European presence; and as darkness was not a subject of history, Africa's real history began with European presence. (34)

Not only did becoming aware of post-colonial forces contribute to my understanding of the interrelated factors that contribute to the current state of global affairs, it helped establish my writing choices as well.

In my first class in the MFA program, I learned from my white male professor how to properly italicize when using any language other than English – in order to be more reader-friendly and thus publishable. However, it wasn't until my final year in the program, in Professor Pérez's Form and Theory of the Short course, that I realized how doing so was reinforcing the concept of English as the dominant constant and the italicized tongue as "the other."

In this collection, I have chosen not to italicize for reasons of principle. I have combatted any confusion my readers may encounter by including a glossary, which I believe is a good compromise. However, I want to reach as many readers as possible. In order to do that, says my

business trained brain, I must be user friendly. I must be marketable. I can make all the political statements in the world, but they would mean very little if no one reads my unknown work. Should Khaled Hosseini decide to stop italicizing, people would take notice. So perhaps, if my writing ever becomes esteemed enough to earn attention, I will instigate that conversation. Perhaps I'll even go so far as Ngũgĩ and "decolonize" my writing altogether – though I doubt it as my eloquence in English is unmatched by my fluency in Urdu.

This was a relatively small issue during the beginning stages of compiling this work. Only a handful of Urdu words stood proudly against colonial forces. However, during my final year in the program, I embarked on a trip to cultivate research on current Pakistani culture. Though I had information and ideas, I wanted to ensure my knowledge was not dated, that my nonfiction work would be credible.

I spent nearly a month in Karachi interviewing a range of demographics, many on video. Since I went with the intention of observation, the city was my laboratory for my ethnographic research. It didn't take long before my observations led to hypotheses and ultimately conclusions. One such situation resulted in "A Social Experiment" in which I concluded, "By raising the level of discomfort for a female not behaving in a certain manner to the point of hostility, they are able to use social pressure, not laws, to achieve the same result" (50). However, despite standing strong behind my declarations, I could not shake the feeling of unease that comes with being hypocritical while having a conscience.

"Dear Grammar Girl" is my remedy for that. It is imperative to me to demonstrate that, though the difference in degree is obviously vast – and I'd much rather be a woman living here than there – American society is ripe with sexism and misogyny as well. Despite this, we have a

troubling number of people who believe that because women have gained rights denied to them for generations – such as voting or having access to their reproductive choices – equality has been achieved. This sentiment is apparent in the existence of movements such as the menenists who believe men are being oppressed by feminism, that by demanding our rights, we are taking something away from them. This is a sentiment I've tried to put into words in the piece, "A Few Factual Generalizations, In My Opinion:" "Far too often, men mistake misogyny for benevolence, see equality as sacrifice, confuse entitlement with confidence" (57).

Something else that gives me pause is the fact that though I am Pakistani by birth and genealogy, I have lived in the United States for the majority of my life. My growing knowledge of post colonialism, as well as my desire to be intersectional in my feminism, makes me question the propriety of critiquing Pakistani culture as a "Westerner." However, though I may be considered a "Westerner" by some, and indeed I am, I have intimate knowledge of Pakistani culture. I speak the language, I have visited the country, I have been raised with the traditions. I have also read extensively on the subject in books like Mohsin Hamid's *Discontent and Its Civilizations: Dispatches from Lahore, New York, and London* and in articles such as Matthew J. Nelson's piece on the political state of affairs in Pakistan. But what carries the most weight for me is the fact that I am not criticizing Pakistani or Muslim culture relative to women's rights in the "Western" world. I am criticizing Pakistani or Muslim culture, and actually American culture as well, relative to human rights.

One can criticize my criticism as an outsider's perspective, one that does not take into account the effects of colonization or offer intersectionality in my feminism. However, I believe being raised in the U.S. doesn't negate my experiences as a Pakistani woman. Being Pakistani

American just gives me a broader perspective when analyzing the current state of affairs in gender equality. Though I am immensely privileged, that privilege helps me voice the concerns of women who either cannot speak up for themselves or are silenced when they do.

Craft

Structure

My work can be considered multi-genre because it includes pieces that can be classified as essays, prose poetry, and hybrid forms. As I learned in *An Introduction to the Prose Poem,* works can fall into multiple categories and mine do.

The first chapter, "Memoiresque," contains a nonfiction essay focusing on my experiences as a modest woman in a piece with the same name. I've chosen to initiate my thesis with this piece because of its autobiographical nature – I believe it helps frame the pieces that follow.

I've compiled the major pieces inspired by my recent trip abroad in "A Trip I Took" in hopes that the first piece "A Social Experiment" will help inform the third, "Post-Colonial Stress Disorder," a piece influenced by Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*. Since "Dear Grammar Girl" is my own response to "A Social Experiment," it too lands in this chapter.

The other piece directly inspired by my primary research, "The International Language of Woman," is among my flash pieces in the third chapter, "Shorts." The works in this chapter were crafted as flash nonfiction and/or prose poetry. The pieces included in this chapter include aphoristic ("A Few Factual Generalizations, In My Opinion"), essayistic ("The Antithesis of Entitlement"), list ("Problematic Things I've Heard Women Being Called in Daily Vernacular"),

anecdotal ("Shame and Regrets"), and hybrid ("The International Language of Woman") prose poems, as "defined" in *An Introduction*, keeping in mind,

> [t]here are no "rules" for the prose poem; the only requirements are that it be written in prose and be presented in the context of poetry. In that sense, one might argue that whether or not a text is a prose poem is, beyond those two stipulations entirely a matter of *context* – a combination of *intent* on the part of the author, *perception* on the part of the reader, and an environment…that encourages intent and perception to meet. (Clements 4)

"Infallible" is an experimental piece that started off as a found poem and was inspired by the fact that some things need no embellishment as they speak for themselves. The first part, "The Book," contains verses from translations of the Quran. The second, "The Man," contains hadiths, or the words of the Prophet, which devout Muslims use as a guide of model behavior. Finally, "The Legacy" includes fatwas and rulings made by current Islamic scholars of both Sunni and Shia sects. These are rule-makers for millions and there are countless others like them. This piece is an attempt to highlight that despite the apologist rhetoric that is spurred whenever one criticizes the problematic verses in the Quran or hadith, their influences are apparent in the rulings and thought processes of Islamic scholars and leaders still today.

For example, if one were to offer a verse on men being given the right to beat their wives, one could expect to hear the argument that it is simply a bad translation from the original Arabic. Should one question the concept of keeping female slaves, one would very possibly be told that these are dated situations, being taken out of context. Whenever I've had trouble accepting a

disturbing hadith, I've been told that it is from a questionable source, despite the same source being acceptable otherwise.

Furthermore, when the ruler of some sect or country, such as Iran or Saudi Arabia, declares some mandate or fatwa that is met with criticism, the Muslim community at large begins a campaign of dismissiveness. Whether it is as ridiculous as the rules of having sex with animals or women not being allowed to handle phallic shaped produce, Muslims are quick to defend it with things such as, "that is just one person's interpretation," or "that's not what He, the Prophet or God, meant," or "Well that *one* guy is obviously not reputable, but ours is." Unfortunately though, the decisions still affect the philosophies and lives of millions around the globe today. In the past few months alone, Pakistan has rejected two bills, citing the Quran and hadith: one was a bill to ban child marriages and the other intended to criminalize violence against women. Many people truly believe that these decrees are infallible and will defend them with violence. And many others who may dismiss one here or there still validate these Islamic leaders by following them regardless of the shoddy judgement they seem to show.

As I have not altered any of the text I've found, these questionable quotes about women and their role in Islam create the patriarchal foundation that follows followers of the religion to this day. Similar problematic verses can be found in other religious texts as well; however, for this piece, I have chosen to focus on Islam.

Hybrid Forms

Studying the myriad of forms one can utilize helped free me of prior constraints I had imposed upon myself. It also allowed me to manipulate genres and take liberties to achieve the desired effect. For example, the piece "The International Language of Woman" is presented as a

screenplay to highlight the parallels between the responses of women half a world apart in a concise and potent format. It also demonstrates the skills I acquired in Scriptwriting with Professor David Carren.

"A Social Experiment" was to be written as a nonfiction essay of my experiences – however, I decided to craft it in the form of an actual social experiment write-up, utilizing the aesthetics of that format – at times unnecessarily – to accentuate this choice. "Dear Grammar Girl" is written as an epistolary essay, a problem presented in a letter. This hybrid experimentation was inspired by Anel Flores' *Empanada: A Lesbiana Story En Probaditas*, a fiction work in which some pieces are presented as horoscopes. Furthermore, the chapters of her book are interrelated, something I attempted to do with these two hybrid essays.

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In the ninth grade I wrote a poem dedicated to a little Pakistani boy, Iqbal, who was killed helping children escape modern day slavery. For my MFA application's writing sample, I wrote a story based on the life of a female Pakistani orphan. And now I feel my master's thesis is weighed down by its own subject matter. But, these are not themes I purposefully decided upon. They are themes that organically form a common thread in my work, and they are heavy themes. I have actively tried to avoid them, to add more lighthearted pieces to my collection. In this attempt, I have failed phenomenally. My best work comes from the most painful places or, as Professor Pérez told us on the first day of our Form and Theory of the Short class, when I "go for the jugular[2]." My intention is not to write tragic tales, but, as I learned from studying Sandra Cisneros, we must write what we know.

[2] Quoting Natalie Goldberg

Firstly, I know not the actual types of tragedies people endure – I grew up privileged with a loving family and more than I can be thankful for. But, being exposed to my Pakistani culture while trying to survive in my American one forced me to confront a wider breadth of experiences people face – my world was always bigger than the longitude and latitude I happened to inhabit. Growing up hearing stories of lives I could barely fathom helped me acquire empathy and perspective; it invited me to be cognizant of a variety of existences we, my peers and I in the States, can usually only read about.

Secondly, I did not know I was "writ[ing] what I know" when I was doing it. I was simply purging the pain those stories caused my heart. It seemed to me a tragedy in itself that people, especially women, spent lifetimes of horror and few took notice. I felt a need to tell their stories, to ensure the world had a record of its failure toward them. As I progressed as a writer, I discovered that, beyond recording the desperate situations of others, I had opinions of my own that needed to be heard. Furthermore, I realized that more people "like me" need to tell our tales.

There are some, of course, but there are not enough voices telling stories like mine. Becoming a writer is not at the top of our culturally esteemed career goals. Furthermore, mine are a proud people and do not appreciate others knowing our shameful business. Every now and then a voice will ring through and help record our experience through a narrative different from the dominant one. If they do a really good job, like Salman Rushdie, they'll even invite fatwas. I want to do my part to remedy this. I want to contribute my perspective – that of an ex-Muslim woman of color – to the conversation.

So I present to you, *The Fallen Female: A Testimony*.

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GLOSSARY

Abaya – A loose gown-like covering that conceals not only skin, but also the shape of the body.

Amanat – Property; something you own.

Besharam – Without shame; shameless.

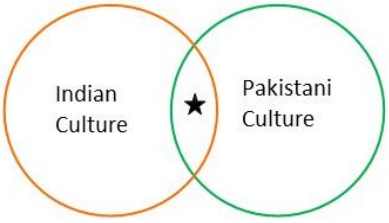
Boj – Burden.

Daal – Lentils, usually boiled with spices.

Do din ki mehman – A guest of two days.

Hijab – the physical and spiritual modesty most Muslims believe is required of women in the religion. Colloquially it refers to the headscarf most people associate with Muslim women. There is no one type of hijab: some women wear scarves with culturally fashionable clothing, jewelry, and make up while others wear abayas and other loose forms of clothing and avoid adornments. Some women wrap their hair and allow their ears and necks to show while others don't even let their chins show. The type and style is often determined by culture, nationality, sect of Islam, and family.

Indo-Pak – The part where the star is located.



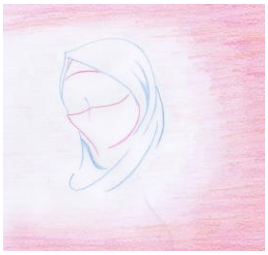
Izzat – Loosely, honor; however, in Indo-Pak culture, honor carries heavier connotations than its English counterpart, so Izzat would be honor on steroids. It is one of, if not the, most important possessions of a family and it is very easily lost.Janamaaz – prayer mat/rug.

Kaal – Both tomorrow and yesterday in both Urdu and Hindi.

Kafir – A person who is not a Muslim; a disbeliever.
Par ki jooti – A shoe; literally, shoe of foot.

Masi – a cleaning woman who travels from home to home doing household tasks. Generally considered of a lower social class and are often from and in poverty.

Niqab – A type of covering observed by some Muslim women that, in addition to the hair and body, covers the face as well – leaving only the eyes exposed.



Ramadan – The Muslim holy month of fasting and worship.

Rupees – Currency in Pakistan and India. Though they both share the same name, their valuation is as different as their respective economies.

Seenay ki sill – a heavy burden upon your chest; literally, slab of chest.

Shikar – As a verb: hunt; as a noun: hunted or prey.

Sindoor – Red vermillion powder that, when worn in the part of her hair, symbolizes a woman's marital status in Hindu culture.

Shalwar Kameez – Traditional Pakistani attire consisting of a long shirt and baggy pants.

Thakalluf – A show of formality and/or ceremony.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Husney Farwa Naqvi completed a Master of Fine Arts degree in Creative Writing and a graduate certificate in Gender and Women's Studies from the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. Her nonfiction thesis utilizes various forms, including personal and epistolary essays, prose and poetry, as well as hybrid forms. She earned a Bachelor of Business Administration degree in Finance with a minor in Marketing from the McCombs School of Business at the University of Texas at Austin.

Her professional background includes marketing the City of Mission as Tourism Director and South Texas College as an Outreach Specialist. She worked as a sixth grade math teacher at Valley View ISD and as a Graduate Assistant for the Gender and Women's Studies Program at the University of Texas Pan American. Most recently, she taught Rhetoric and Composition at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. Her work has appeared in the *Monitor*, the *Texas Review*, *RiverSedge*, and *Outrage*. She can be contacted at KnockV@gmail.com.