

Feminists, Stereotyping, and Liberation
Films on Islam: *In my Father's House & Voices of the Morning*

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What I want to do tonight is not to comment on the content of these films or tell you how to interpret them but to share with you my own theoretical & epistemological framework for "reading" them.

Site from which I "read"

My response to these films is shaped by the fact that I am a Muslim woman; but what exactly does it mean to be Muslim woman in the US and at IC? On the one hand, Muslim women are treated as representative of all Muslims and taken seriously when we say something about Islam; on other hand, and at the same time, there is also a tendency to silence us when what we say doesn't conform to some people's sense of what we should be saying about Muslims or Islam.

So, in a sense, I speak from a site that is inherently fractured. I say this because when I was consulted about which films to show here, I did not favor showing films like the ones you saw tonight, at least not as part of the discussion series on Islam. I felt that it would reinforce stereotypes of Muslim women and Islam and what we have been trying to do in the discussion series is to try and dispel stereotypes and build some understanding about Islam and Muslims

Stereotypes, as we know, act as an impediment to the process of understanding because they lock people on both sides-those being represented & those representing them-into preexisting ontologism of Self/Other, and thus into binary oppositions from the start, and we want to question this sense of radical difference that binary oppositions suggest for reasons I will return to in a moment.

Context(s)

I opposed showing such films here because, as Patty Zimmermann pointed out when we asked her to curate the films, films are always shown in a context. Of course, films are also made in a context and the contexts of their making may not be same as those of their viewing. So we need to ask: what is the context in which these films were made and what is context in which we have watched them tonight?

Both films are ostensibly about Muslim societies even though they have been made from a relatively privileged site outside such societies; I say privileged because of the reality of women's oppression in many Muslim societies which I

would be the last to deny. However, the very fact that women are discriminated against in Muslim societies means that Muslims are likely to watch such films differently than us because they have a different stake in watching them than we do.

This is because Muslims are invested in their social and religious practices in a way that non-Muslims cannot be; in Muslim contexts, therefore, such films may actually function as critiques of such practices. As my husband pointed out, it would be like watching *Memories of Under-development*, a Cuban film, in Cuba; in the Cuban context, this film functions as a social critique and thus also as an impetus to social and political change, whereas outside Cuba it can merely add to the cacophony of antiCastro hysteria and propaganda.

So, what is the context in which we have watched these films tonight? For one, we have not watched these films as Muslims who are invested in Islam since it is safe to say that our positive investment in Islam, as a society, is nil. For another, we have watched these films in the context of already existing racist discourses that misrepresent Islam and Muslims. In such a context, these films are likely simply to reinforce the negative stereotypes many of you have about Islam and Muslims.

Equally damagingly, they are also likely to reinforce the positive stereotypes many of you have of yourselves as non-Muslim Westerners. In fact, I want to suggest that-given the contexts of the US -the dominant function of such films is precisely to confirm non-Muslim Westerners in the sense of being radically different from and superior to Muslims.

So, I was opposed to showing these films not because of their content but because I was apprehensive about the contexts of their viewing.

Discourse of "Criticality"

I am told that both films are "critical and cutting edge." This may well be true, but again, the way in which they are critical here may not be the same way in which they may be critical in Muslim societies.

What do I mean?

Well, one meaning of critical is analytical, discriminating, and momentous; and conceivably for Muslims both films can be all three. However, critical also means disparaging, fault-finding and derogatory and unfortunately, that is the sense in which these films are likely to be critical here given-as I said-existing notions of radical difference between non-Muslim Westerners and Muslims.

Difference

I want to distinguish between difference as diversity and the idea of radical difference which, as Chilla Bulbeck says, leads to radical exclusion and hyperseparation; i.e., to absolutizing and magnifying differences which cannot lead to greater understanding between people.

Yet, as Bulbeck also points out, the idea that Other women are radically different from white Western women is integral to white Western women's construction of themselves (I don't wish to homogenize all white Western women, but to speak of a pervasive tendency). The notion of radical difference is particularly noticeable when it comes to Islam and Muslims and it has certain consequences. Let me suggest two: first, it can lead some people to assume that patriarchy, sexism, and misogyny are peculiar only to Muslim societies, ignoring the way in which they are present here. Alternatively, the notion of radical difference can lead some people to construct a hierarchy of oppression in which Other women are always seen as more oppressed than oneself. In fact, I want suggest that it is this second notion-that Other women are always more oppressed than we are-that provides the discursive contexts in which we applaud the films we have seen.

Veiling:

I think it is important for not only white Western men in the audience, but also for white Western women to ask why it is that they are fascinated by such films, if in fact, they are fascinated by them. Could it be that white Western women, no less than white Western men are invested in the master narrative that depicts Muslim women as always being in captivity?

Let me say something now about the nature not of this captivity but the way in which the West constructs it. The quintessential metaphor of captivity is that of the veil and the quintessential metaphor of liberation is ripping it off women. Much has been said about white Western men's investment in un-veiling Muslim women; so here, I will restrict myself to saying something about what Meyda Yegenoglu calls white Western women's "erotic investment in seeing" and the "imperialist feminist desire to unveil."

This desire to unveil, as she points out, springs from the association between tradition and women which, she says, explains the "continual obsession and the fundamental weight given to women's unveiling as the privileged sign of progress." To many white Western feminists the veil becomes the most visible marker of tradition and religion though, the unveiled body is no less marked or inscribed. Yegenoglu points to the control, supervision, training, and constraining of bodies by such practices as bras and stiletto heels, to which I would add dyed hair, obsessive exercising; dieting, breast implants, and the list goes on.

Even while white Western feminists are invested in ripping the veil off Muslim women's bodies and exposing these bodies to their own feminist gaze, their construction of Oriental, and particularly Muslim women, as their devalued

Others is also crucial for their view of their own advances as universal. In other words, representations of Oriental and Muslim women as oppressed and veiled helps white Western women identify and preserve their own boundaries.

This identification between what is universal and what is Western is of course, profoundly phallographic, as Yegenoglu points out; and it is in this sense that I talk about the feminist gaze which, as far as Muslim women, and women of color are concerned, is no less scopical than the male gaze.

So, the challenge I want to raise for you in the end, is not what have you understood about Muslim women's oppression from these films, but what kinds of assumptions are you making tonight about the nature of your own liberation?