

Lost in Translation:
“[Muslim] Women and [Films on] Islam”

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I would like to thank the National Film Board of Canada for inviting me to give the keynote address for this series of films on “Women and Islam” and for hosting my family in our favorite Canadian city.

I’ve framed my comments as a critique, not of the individual films in this series, but of how we generally tend to publicize and view the work of Muslim women film-makers in the West. The reason I’m not commenting on the films is because I haven’t seen them all. Besides, I find it hard to critique films that strike me as rather personal since there’s just so much one can say about another person’s life beyond what they’re willing to say about it themselves.

But, I’ve also lived in the West long enough to know that it’s never quite that simple when it comes to films by and about Muslims—specially women—both because of the kinds of voices that get heard and because of how audiences interpret those voices. So, I will focus on some broad issues pertaining to representation and spectatorship and I’ve titled my commentary “Lost in Translation” for reasons that I hope will eventually become clear.

The basic point I will be making is that when we watch films by and about Muslim women, we tend to deny their subjectivity, both in the sense that we fail to treat the film-maker herself as a subject and in the sense that we fail to see her work as being subjective.

Subjects and subjectivity

What do I mean when I say that we don’t treat Muslim women film-makers as subjects? First I should clarify that by subject I mean an individual with a discrete identity as distinct from the identity of the collective.

And the reason I believe we don’t treat Muslim women as subjects is because of the tendency to brand all Muslims with the “mark of the plural.” This is a quote from the work of the famous Tunisian-Jewish intellectual, Albert Memmi, who has written one of the most powerful indictments of European colonialism that I’ve ever read. By mark of the plural, Memmi means the racist colonial practice of viewing a colonized person as a representative of their entire group or race rather than as an individual, and he gives a simple example to make this point. I quote:

“if a colonized servant does not come in one morning, the colonizer will not say that she is ill, or that she is cheating, or that she is tempted not to abide by an oppressive contract. ... He will say, ‘You can’t count on them.’ ... He refuses to consider personal, private occurrences in his maid’s life; that life in a specific sense does not interest him, and his maid does not exist as an individual.”¹

In other words, the colonizers habitually collapsed the personal and the communal thus robbing the colonized of their subjectivity, and here I mean in the first sense of the word as I have just described it.

European colonialism is of course over, but its legacy of racism is not. We still continue to view people from minority groups not as individuals but as representatives of their race. And while all “minorities” are forced to carry this “burden of representation,” as we now call it, Muslims seem to have gotten stuck with more than their share of it after 9/11. It is because we’re viewed as being all the same—in other words, as lacking individuality — that there is unrelenting pressure on us to self-identify as non-terrorists. Every time there is a terrorist act or threat, people expect so-called moderate Muslims to run around condemning the terrorists and assuring everyone that there are nice, ordinary, and humane Muslims out there, like themselves.

But we never see white people running around condemning the heinous and genocidal policies of white governments and trying to assure everyone that there are nice, humane, and ordinary white folks out there, somewhere.

So, why this extra burden on Muslims and why these abnormal expectations of us?

You might be wondering how any of this is relevant to watching films by Muslim women. It’s relevant because of the tendency to treat such films not as the work of specific film-makers but as over-arching and authoritative commentaries on Islam. In other words, it’s relevant because we also tend to collapse the personal and the communal when it comes to Muslims.

How else can one explain the fact that films by and about Muslim women are often curated, marketed, and publicized as films about Islam, as is true of this very series. It may be that “Women and Islam” was just a handy rubric for a variety of films whose only commonality is that they’ve been made by Muslim women and are about Muslims. But, this doesn’t necessarily make them films about Islam. In other words, a film about a Muslim woman’s failed marriage or repressed sexuality or unhappy childhood or travels abroad or search for her voice is a subjective interpretation of that woman’s life, not a grand and universal truth about all things Islamic.

¹ Albert Mammoth *Colonizer and the Colonized*, Beacon, 1991: 85.

In fact, I would venture to suggest that it's hard to make a film about Islam because Islam isn't an empirically fixed or quantifiable thing or object, much less a sort of madman as is suggested by headlines like: "Islam builds itself a prison and locks itself inside;"² "When will Islam damn the chlorine bombers?"³ "Will the Real Islam Stand up?"⁴ and so on. Who has ever heard of a religion building something or talking or standing up or sitting down? It is just a reprehensibly anthropomorphic and ignorant way to speak about Islam.

One can, of course, speak of the people who practice it—i.e., Muslims—in whatever fashion one likes, but Islam and Muslims are not the same. Islam is a complex matrix of beliefs, ideas, and practices, some changeable and others not. And while these beliefs and practices take form and shape through cultures and histories, Islam itself is not reducible to Muslim history or culture or practices.

As I see it, Islam is an ontology and an epistemology; it is a specific understanding of the divine and our relationship to the divine; it is a revealed scripture and a mode of spiritual and ritual practices inspired by that scripture; it is a theology and a cosmology; it is a set of legal and ethical principles, and it is other things.

A religion, any religion, is always more than the sum of its parts and instead of confusing the whole with its parts, we need to trace their relationship with some care and integrity. I realize that not everyone wants to do this and that it's hard to distinguish between Muslims and Islam, or between texts, cultures, and histories, or between beliefs and experiences, specially in a film that is not explicitly a documentary about Islam. So I don't fault Muslim women film-makers for not always knowing how to make these distinctions or even for not wanting to make them. What I do fault them for is for reducing Islam to the sum of their own life or experiences and, on that basis, indicting it.

Of course, it's unavoidable for Muslims to look at Islam through the prism of our own experiences, but, I don't believe that there's a neat connection between one's experiences and one's views about anything. One Muslim woman who has had a hard life might hate Islam on that account. Another may be able to tell the difference between Islam and its abuse by some Muslims. So one's biography may or may not explain one's attitude towards religion. That is why confusing Muslims with Islam results in the double negation of Muslim women's subjectivity: first, because it glosses over the specificity of an individual woman's life and views and second, because it fails to recognize the partisan or subjective nature of her work.

² New York Times Book Review January 27, 2002.

³ Guardian, Sunday, April 29, 2007.

⁴ Article on the internet, October 2001. No author.

Here, of course, someone might ask how a mostly non-Muslim audience can recognize or resist this confusion between Muslims and Islam when so many Muslim women film-makers themselves don't distinguish between their own biographies and their religion. Why should the onus of doing so be on the audience? So I will switch now from talking about representation to talking about spectatorship.

Spectatorship and (mis)translations

The answer to the first question isn't all that hard. One doesn't have to be an expert on Islam to understand that being born a Muslim doesn't give every Muslim great insights into Islam, or teach us to think of Islam in the same way, or even in a good way. Nor do all Muslims have the same experiences of being Muslim even if they live in a Muslim society, and nor is everything that happens in Muslim societies reducible to Islam even if it is labeled "Islamic."

I'm sure you already know this, but, in a rather different context. I suspect that you know that one doesn't need to be an expert on Canada to understand that being born a Canadian doesn't give every Canadian great insights into Canada or teach them to think of Canada in the same way, or even in a good way. Nor do all Canadians have the same experiences of being Canadian even if they live in Canada, and nor is everything that happens in Canada reducible to Canada even if it happens in the name of Canadian law, or tradition, or values.

This isn't a perfect example, of course, but, my point is to stress that just as a country isn't reducible to its citizens, so, too, a religion isn't reducible to its adherents, even if there are close relationships between them. So, if you can distinguish between Canadians and Canada, hopefully, you should also be able to distinguish between Muslims and Islam since the same basic principles are involved.

I know that you can distinguish between Canadians and Canada because if a non-Muslim Canadian woman were to make a film about her failed marriage or repressed sexuality or unhappy childhood or travels abroad, I doubt you'd watch it as anything other than a film about that woman's marriage or sexuality or childhood or travels abroad. You wouldn't market that film as a film about "Women and Christianity" or "Women and Judaism" or "Women and Atheism," or "Women and the West," or even "Women and Canada." I know because I've never once seen a film series under such a rubric.

So, why this exceptional positioning of films by Muslim women as "Women and Islam?" More to the point, where does this leave you—the spectator—vis-à-vis such films?

Arguably, it puts you into a specific spectator position even before you've watched the film. And given how Islamophobic dominant public discourses are these days, it sutures

you into a viewing position that is always already hostile to Islam. How then can you watch the film in an open-minded or understanding or generous way?

Here, of course, one can ask a more interesting question: are audiences really interested in fairness and generosity? In fact, the opposite seems to be true if the type of films that get funded and distributed in the West are any indicator of an audience's attitudes. Isn't it because of audience tastes that only some Muslim women's lives become media-worthy here? By this I mean only certain kinds of lives get narrated in and by the media; certain other lives never make it to the big screen, or even to the littler one, even if they are equally meaningful and compelling.

Obviously it's not just the media that decides what makes one woman's life compelling and another one's not. I think we need to spread the blame more democratically, in that fairly, and recognize the audience's role in all of this as well. After all, if we, the audience, didn't want to consume something, the media wouldn't give it to us. So we need to ask what sorts of Muslim women's lives seem compelling to non-Muslim audiences and, indeed, even to non-practicing or secular Muslims as well.

I don't know what your experience has been, but mine is that only or mostly those lives seem to interest people that confirm them in their phobic view of Islam as oppressive and sexist and, in contrast, of the West as the citadel of liberty, equality, and freedom. I haven't done an actual body count of such films, but I've been watching movies by and about Muslim women for years. We even have a long-running series on my campus called "Women Direct" that often show-cases the work of Muslim Canadian women. And from what I've seen, most (though not all), films that get funded or picked up for distribution are films that deal with sexual and religious oppression among Muslims. And of course these films are framed as indictments of Islam rather than of Muslims.

You could say this is because sex and scandals sell, but, I don't think all sex and scandals sell equally well. If it's true that there is a rape every 14 seconds in the U.S., why does the Muslim woman's burqa in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, or the ban on women drivers in Saudi-ruled Arabia, take precedence in the media here? Why has the fate of Muslim women become the most important political issue of the day for so many non-Muslims, specially white women and feminists? Why are they more emotionally invested in women in Muslim societies rather than in their own?

I don't put all white Western women and feminists in the same camp, of course, and nor do I think that we shouldn't have solidarity with people who are different from us. If nothing else, feminism has taught us to think of the world in terms of a sisterhood. But, as I've found out, sisterhood can often be fraught, there are many types of feminisms, and solidarity can sometimes mask a deep discomfort with difference.

So, it is worth ask why anti-Islamic films get funded so often. Is it really because white feminists feel solidarity with oppressed Muslim women or could it also have to do with the fact that negative portrayals of Muslims and Islam serve to buttress a particular view of Western identity?

Chilla Bulbeck,⁵ a feminist theorist, argues that they do. According to her, the idea that Muslim women are radically different from Western women and utterly oppressed is what allows white Western women to construct themselves as liberal and liberated.

In fact, I suspect that is one of the main reasons that anti-Islam films are so popular here: because they allow Westerners, specially white women, to construct a hierarchy of oppression in which Muslim women are always consigned to the very bottom; hence, the missionary urge to save these poor women from the alleged depredations of "Islam."

I realize that I'm putting this a bit crudely, but, my point is to challenge the pervasive view that anti-Islam films are progressive and feminist. There is nothing inherently progressive or feminist about confusing patriarchal and misogynistic readings of Islam with the religion itself. As I have tried to show in my own work, it is also possible to read the Qur'an, the Islamic scripture, as an antipatriarchal and liberatory text.

I know that Muslim societies don't practice sexual equality and liberation and that they therefore lend themselves to critique, but it seems to me to be intellectually lazy and, in fact, dishonest to condemn Islam for how Muslims choose to interpret and live it.

So, I have come full circle to my initial point: that we need to draw a fine line between one Muslim and the next and also between Muslims and Islam because when we collapse them we lose something in our understanding of both Islam and Muslims. And I have also tried to suggest what it is that we lose.

Understanding and art

I am nearing the end of my talk and, at this point, some of you may be expecting me to tell you how we can fix things in ten or five or at least three easy steps. This is something I'm always called on to do at the end of a talk because audiences feel that after I've told them what the problems are, I have to then tell them the solutions. But, unfortunately, I have no magic solutions. What I can do, instead, is to share some reflections on an exhibit I saw last week in the hope that there may be some lessons in it for you as there were for me.

The exhibition is at the Metropolitan Museum in New York City and is called "Venice and the Muslim World." Essentially, it highlights the shared history of medieval Europeans

⁵ Chilla Bulbeck, *Reorienting Western Feminisms*, Cambridge University Press, 1998.

and Muslims. I guess there's no better way to get people who see themselves today as civilizational enemies to think past and beyond their mutual exclusions.

In any event, there are several expository notes by the curators detailing the richness and complexity of the social, cultural, economic, scientific, and artistic interchanges between Muslims and Europeans, in particular, the Venetians. But even though the intent of the exhibition is to chronicle the exchanges, in the end, the curators seem to have found it hard to give much away to the Muslims. So, they often describe Muslims as the conveyers of ideas and artifacts to Europeans rather than as inventors or architects or originators of new knowledge or artifacts.

But, that is not what disturbed me the most. Rather, it was a painting titled "The Stoning of St. Stephen" in which the people who are seen casting the stones are not a group of Jewish men—as actually happened—but a bunch of Ottoman Muslims. The artist's decision to have Muslims stand in for the Jews seems to have been fuelled by the fact that he was painting at a time of increased tensions between Venice and the Ottoman Empire. So says the description next to the painting.

I suppose many people will consider that justification enough for what many Muslims are likely to experience as a shocking and egregious insult. I suspect also that many of the exhibition's visitors will gloss over the artistic mis-rendering without any qualms. But, the painting reminded me again not only how old the practice of mis-representing Muslims in the West is, but also how diligently ignorance has to be cultivated.

Beyond that, I wondered what had gone through the minds of medieval Europeans when they saw this painting. Did some of them know that Muslims couldn't possibly have stoned St. Stephen because there were no Muslims until the seventh century? (Of course since there was no Islam until the seventh century, they couldn't possibly have known that the Qur'an doesn't sanction stoning to death for any crime.)

Did the medieval Venetians realize, up front, that art is never not political? And, if they did, what did this painting say to them about their own identities as well as those of these villainous Muslim Others? Did the Venetians know that there were other Muslims besides the Ottomans? Or did the Ottomans represent "the Muslim world," as it seems to do for the curators of this exhibit? And, lastly, what did medieval Venetians learn or lose in their understanding of Muslims and also of themselves through this act of artistic translation and transgression?