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Thesis for Master of Arts

# Muslim Women from Victims to Agents of Terror and Feminism?

– Problematizing the Academic Narratives on  
the *Muhajirat*'s Agency in the Age of Neo-  
Orientalism –

August, 2023

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Orientalism –

Advisor: Dr. Siavash Saffari

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## Abstract

In 2014, a militant Islamist group named the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) proclaimed itself a new caliphate in the region surrounding Syria and Iraq. As its leaders called upon Muslims worldwide to join their ‘Caliphate,’ a significant number of Western women calling themselves *Muhajirat* (female migrants) travelled to join ISIS. This phenomenon drew attention from both the western media and the academia, especially in the field of terrorism and conflict studies. This essay asks whether the academic narratives on the *Muhajirat*’s motivation to join ISIS depart from the classical tropes of gendered orientalism that dwell on the victimization of Muslim women. By critically reviewing the extant works in conflict and terrorism studies dealing with the conundrum of the *Muhajirat*, I found that among the three broad categories of narratives explaining Muslim women’s membership in ISIS, two narratives, those of terrorists and feminists, seemed to acknowledge their agency and could potentially challenge a simplistic portrayal of Muslim women’s victimhood. However, situating the feminist and terrorist narratives in the broader global context of war on terror, I claim that even the two potentially progressive narratives reproduce and reinforce the Manichean assumption of a civilizational divide between the West and Islam, albeit inadvertently, playing into the neo-Orientalist dichotomy of irreconcilable cultural differences. This essay offers a critical analysis of the possibly changing dynamics of Muslim women’s representation in the academia in the age of neo-Orientalism. Further, it cautions against celebrating the newfound agency of Muslim women with a strong suggestion that this seeming trend be put under scrutiny of postcolonial and feminist studies in the future. (266 words)

**Keyword :** ISIS, *Muhajirat*, Orientalism, feminism, agency

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## Introduction

In 2015, a teenage boy from South Korea left to join the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS).<sup>1</sup> Only his last name, Kim, was known, but journalists uncovered online postings left by Kim before leaving where he had expressed his hate for South Korean feminism and feminists.<sup>2</sup> I personally witnessed the heated online debate sparked by the news of Kim joining ISIS between those agreeing with and even celebrating his denouncement of South Korean feminism and the feminists who in turn criticized Kim and the online commentators for their misogyny. However, there was one premise that both sides of the debate unwittingly seemed to share despite their disagreements – one echoing Kim’s assessment – that ISIS represented the antithesis of feminism and everything it entailed, including the idea that women have rights equal to men’s.

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<sup>1</sup> The group, also derogatively called *Daesh* by Arabic speakers, will hereafter be referred to as ISIS. This is not to lend legitimacy to the group’s claim to a statehood but to reflect the fact that most of the works examined in this essay chose this acronym as the most commonly used one.

<sup>2</sup> It is highly likely that Kim died shortly after successfully joining the ISIS according to media reports. See, for instance, this Korean article according to which Kim regretted his decision to join ISIS in a text message to his brother before being allegedly killed in a bombing incident within ISIS territory: <https://news.mt.co.kr/mtview.php?no=2015093011154781408> (Retrieved 3 January 2023).



Therefore, the commentators may be surprised, as were Western European and North American academics and journalists at first, to learn that a notable number of women and girls from the West<sup>3</sup> calling themselves *Muhajirat* (female migrants) willingly left their homes to join ISIS. In addition, Kim's kindred spirits wishing to escape from South Korean feminists might be doubly shocked that some academics studying the *Muhajirat* in the field of terrorism and conflict studies claim these Muslim women should not just be seen as helpless victims but rather as terrorists and even feminists.<sup>4</sup> This essay aims to critically examine this seemingly novel turn in understanding the *Muhajirat*'s agency in terrorism and conflict studies through a postcolonial feminist lens of gendered Orientalism, by

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<sup>3</sup> In the West the term is generally used to refer to the geographical locations of Western European and North American countries in addition to Australia and New Zealand. In my view, however, the West is not a monolithic, geographically stable entity in the same sense that the East or the *Orient* has a political and cultural life beyond its geographic designation in Asia and Africa. Even though the West itself consists of centers and peripheries, the West vis-à-vis the East more broadly has come into existence through economic and political privileges enabled by the modern history of colonialism and imperialism – which is why I use the term here interchangeably with another concept denoting the power imbalance, namely the Global North.

<sup>4</sup> A note on terminology: in this essay, I choose to refer to those Muslim women who migrated to Syria and ISIS-held territory to join ISIS as *Muhajirat*, meaning that they are women performing *hijrah* – originally meaning Prophet Muhammad's historic relocation from Mecca to Medina – as the term most adequately reflects their role within ISIS and is the preferred term by the migrant women themselves. See Erin Marie Saltman and Melanie Smith, *Till Martyrdom Do Us Apart: Gender and ISIS Phenomenon* (London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2015), page 7 for more detailed reasons for preferring the term to describe the Western women who migrated to the ISIS-held territory).

which the figure of Muslim women as a marker of the civilization divide between the West and Islam has come to be fundamentally problematized and questioned.

## **Background**

Although ISIS, following a radical Salafi ideology within many branches of Sunni Islam, claim they aim to go back to the first age of Islam and build a community recreating the seventh-century Caliphate, the group was in fact born out of the turbulent modern history of the Middle East marred by foreign occupations and exploitations. ISIS started off as a subset of al-Qaeda operatives in Iraq which could not have emerged without the context of US occupation of Iraq following the US ‘war on terror’ policy after the fateful terror attack on September 11, 2001.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, it is crucial to recognize that a large part of ISIS’s appeal to the Muslim youth around the world came from its claim that they were fighting foreign (Western) occupation in a Muslim country, as will be examined in Chapter 2.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Debangana Chatterjee, "Gendering ISIS and Mapping the Role of Women," *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 3, no. 2 (2016): 203.

<sup>6</sup> Emilio C Viano, "Introduction to the Special Issue on Female Migration to ISIS," *Annales Internationales De Criminologie* 56, no. 1-2 (2018): 3-5.

This subsidiary group captured international attention in April 2013 when its then leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi proclaimed the formation of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, having rejected al-Qaeda's authority earlier.<sup>7</sup> In 2014, ISIS consolidated and expanded its territorial control considerably, declaring the establishment of a Caliphate in Iraqi and Syrian terrains.<sup>8</sup> Al-Baghdadi issued a call for all Muslims around the world to join in the state-building efforts, claiming that making *hijra* to the ISIS-held territory is every Muslim's religious duty.<sup>9</sup> Around the same time, some Muslim women from Western European and North American countries such as France, Belgium, the UK, Germany, Finland, Sweden, the US, and Canada began to respond to the call and made the arduous journey to Syria to join the self-proclaimed Caliphate.<sup>10</sup> According to a much-cited 2015 study by Institute for Strategic Dialogue based in London, it was estimated that among the 4,000 odd foreign migrants to ISIS originating from Western countries, over 550 were women and girls.<sup>11</sup> In an updated study by Bidisha Biswas and

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<sup>7</sup> Chatterjee, "Gendering ISIS," 203.

<sup>8</sup> Chatterjee, "Gendering ISIS," 203; Hamoon Khelghat-Doost, "State Building Jihadism: Redefining Gender Hierarchies and "Empowerment"," *Central European Journal of International & Security Studies* 14, no. 4 (2020): 8.

<sup>9</sup> Saltman and Smith, *Martyrdom*, 13.

<sup>10</sup> Jessica Davis, *Women in Modern Terrorism: From Liberation Wars to Global Jihad and the Islamic State* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2017), 124.

<sup>11</sup> Saltman and Smith, *Martyrdom*, 4.

Shirin Deylami in 2019, the estimated number of Western female migrants increased to around 600-1000.<sup>12</sup> Although their number was small compared to that of men who joined and to that of women from other parts of the world such as the Middle East, the Western *Muhajirat* received significant media attention in the West echoed by the anglophone researchers in terrorism and conflict studies.<sup>13</sup>

In the academic writings produced as a result of this attention, one question seems to dominate - why did these Western Muslim women choose to leave their safe homes and abandon their rights in the West, only to join a militant Islamist group heavily criticized by outside observers for their 'backward' gender ideology?<sup>14</sup> To give an example of such puzzlement, I quote directly from Chatterjee – “it remains a puzzle to many as to why women voluntarily choose to adhere to the values of such a misogynist organization.”<sup>15</sup> To be clear, although it goes beyond the scope of this essay to discuss in depth whether violent Islamist

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<sup>12</sup> Bidisha Biswas and Shirin Deylami, "Radicalizing Female Empowerment: Gender, Agency, and Affective Appeals in Islamic State Propaganda," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 30, no. 6-7 (2019): 1194.; the rather significant gap between the smallest and biggest estimate may be partly attributed to the difficulty in ascertaining whether those who left their home country did actually join ISIS.

<sup>13</sup> Davis, *Modern Terrorism*, 123-124.

<sup>14</sup> As will be reiterated later, such difficulty in understanding the motivations of the *Muhajirat* reveals more about the assumptions about the Western countries and ISIS on the part of the researcher.

<sup>15</sup> “Gendering ISIS,” 210.

groups can be called backward or misogynic, it is undisputed that ISIS used sexual violence as an integral part of their war strategy and enslaved women, particularly targeting minority women such as the Yazidis in a blatant violation of human rights.<sup>16</sup> Despite my strong condemnation of the group's actions, however, a more relevant question to this essay will be to ask why ISIS was so easily positioned as the polar opposite of the West – a supposed place of freedom for the *Muhajirat* – in the academic narratives. Throughout this essay, I will keep returning to question such assumption of a naturally existing divide between the West and ISIS unfolding upon the figure of the *Muhajirat*.

## Research Question

My aim in this essay is not to put forward another list of push and pull factors that contributed to some Western Muslim women's decision to travel to Syria. Even ruling out the more sensational section of the media coverage on the *Muhajirat*, such literature accumulated in the anglophone academic in the field of terrorism and conflict studies is already quite vast.<sup>17</sup> Rather, I intend to engage in a critical

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<sup>16</sup> Biswas and Deylami, "Radicalizing," 1196; Viano, "Introduction," 5.

<sup>17</sup> Among studies in this field that seek to map all possible push and pull factors, Mia Bloom and Ayse Lokmanoglu's article "From Pawn to Knights: The Changing Role of Women's Agency in Terrorism?" in *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* (2020): 1-16 is typical of the genre, mainly owing to Bloom's expertise

analysis of the academic works focusing on the *Muhajirat*'s motivations for joining ISIS in an attempt to map the emerging narratives of Muslim women's agency in the literature. I limit the scope of this essay to academic works due to an obvious limitation: as shown in Alice Martini's study on the Western media narratives on the *Muhajirat*, the Western media essentially coined the term "jihadi bride" to refer to these women and in the process constructed a heavily gendered and Orientalist image of Muslim women who were then duly depicted as sexualized victims of ISIS men.<sup>18</sup> As already existing criticisms against the Western media suggest, their limited perspectives on the agency of the *Muhajirat* make it difficult to identify possibly changing narratives on the Muslim women's agency when they resort to commercially motivated reductionism focusing only on the *Muhajirat*'s victimhood.<sup>19</sup>

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on women's political violence. Another oft-cited work is a previously mentioned one by Institute for Strategic Dialogue, written by Erin Marie Saltman and Melanie Smith in 2015 (Saltman and Smith, *Martyrdom*).

<sup>18</sup> Alice Martini, "Making Women Terrorists into "Jihadi Brides": An Analysis of Media Narratives on Women Joining ISIS," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 11, no. 3 (2018).

<sup>19</sup> Shiva Zarabadi and Jessica Ringrose, "The Affective Birth of "Jihadi Bride" as New Risky Sexualized "Other": Muslim Schoolgirls and Media Panic in an Age of Counterterrorism," in *Youth Sexualities : Public Feelings and Contemporary Cultural Politics*, edited by Susan Talburt (California: Praeger, 2018): 83-106; Yasmin Ibrahim, "Visuality and the 'Jihadi-Bride': The Re-Fashioning of Desire in the Digital Age," *Social Identities* 25, no. 2 (2019).

In contrast, in my observation, some academic articles in the field of terrorism and conflict studies published on this subject show more diversity in their conceptualization of the *Muhajirat*'s agency and possibly suggest more progressive ways of understanding Muslim women's agency that goes beyond the conflating notion of victimhood. However, to my knowledge, there is a visible lack of critical analysis on the literature in terrorism and conflict studies from a postcolonial feminist perspective to explore these new possibilities. To address this gap, this essay asks whether the academic narratives on the women's motivations to join ISIS in fact depart from the classical tropes of gendered orientalism that dwell on the victimization of Muslim women and deny their agency. Does the academic literature on the *Muhajirat* challenge conventional Orientalist depictions of Muslim women by, for example, acknowledging these women's capacity for violence and/or focusing on their quest for female empowerment? Do they simply reproduce the time-old stereotypes of gendered Orientalism? Or do they, in the age of neo-Orientalism in the post-9/11 context, signal the ascendancy of a neo-Orientalist paradigm that confers agency on dissident Muslim women only when they safely remain as the Other of the West?

## **Methodology**

To answer the above questions, this essay critically analyzes some of the major academic works that have put forward one or more explanations for the Western Muslim women who have voluntarily left their homes to join ISIS. The majority of works examined will be coming from terrorism and conflict studies, as the field has been traditionally responsible for studying political violence and offering suggestions for the state's counterterrorism policy. The *Muhajirat* naturally falls under the scope of these studies as the most prominent modern example of female participation in political violence and/or terrorism influenced by Islamism.<sup>20</sup>

When engaging in critical discourse analysis of this literature, my approach will be a postcolonial feminist one that is actively conscious of the “mutually constitutive relationship between gender and Orientalism,” as Maryam Khalid has put it in her introduction of the concept of gendered Orientalism as a powerful tool of analysis for the US-led War on Terror.<sup>21</sup> While postcolonial studies enable a historically balanced analysis critical of the Western imperial legacies, feminist approaches offer insight into the central role gender assumes in

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<sup>20</sup> As put by Davis, ISIS is notable for its success in drawing female members, as “never before in the modern history of terrorism has a group attracted so many women, particularly from the West (Davis, *Modern Terrorism*, 123).”

<sup>21</sup> Maryam Khalid, *Gender, Orientalism, and the ‘War on Terror’* (London: Routledge, 2017), 35.



constructing, building, and challenging a given power dynamics. Taking the two disciplines together, I argue that a critical lens of gendered Orientalism is the most fitting positionality from which to examine the subject of the *Muhajirat*'s agency as any interpretation of these women's agency has to be situated at the intersection of Orientalism and gender, following Linda Åhäll's analysis of a female subject's agency in political violence.<sup>22</sup> Applied as a methodology, it will be used to bring to light how preexisting assumptions on race, gender, and religion that are visible in the literature on the *Muhajirat* work to predetermine a certain space for their agency. For example, the disproportionate attention on the *Muhajirat*'s possible combat role, examined in Chapter 2, can be best understood in the context of the time-old Orientalist representation of Muslim women as helpless victims of violence, not its wielders.

Tami Amanda Jacoby, a Canadian scholar in security studies, had already suggested that representations of the *Muhajirat* can be grouped into three categories according to their implication for feminism – the Victim, the Warrior, and the Feminist.<sup>23</sup> Jacoby explores whether the figure of *Muhajirat* as feminists who deny the rights of other women can be embraced by feminism, and if not,

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<sup>22</sup> Linda Åhäll, *Sexing War/Policing Gender : Motherhood, myth and women's political violence* (Routledge, 2017), 39.

<sup>23</sup> Tami Amanda Jacoby, "Jihadi Brides at the Intersections of Contemporary Feminism," *New Political Science* 37, no. 4 (2015).

what the rejection means for the boundaries of Western mainstream feminism.<sup>24</sup>

While I largely agree with Jacoby on the tripartite categorization of the *Muhajirat*'s images, I am more explicitly interested in the way these women's agency is conceptualized in each category. In addition, as ISIS is often defined as a terrorist group,<sup>25</sup> I replace Jacoby's second category of the Warrior with that of a Terrorist, as the term is more directly related to the neo-Orientalist project of War on Terror.

Here, I should briefly clarify my understanding of agency. As Saba Mahmood convincingly argued through the example of pious Egyptian women in her pioneering work, *Politics of Piety*, the Western liberal idea of agency is a limited one in that the individual is always in a contentious relationship with her environment which she has to resist, overcome, or otherwise exploit in order to liberate herself.<sup>26</sup> Rooted in the same enlightenment model of a rational and independent human being, mainstream Western feminism tends to define female empowerment and emancipation as resistance against patriarchal obstacles leading to the realization women's true selves in the public sphere.<sup>27</sup> As both

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<sup>24</sup> Jacoby, "Jihadi Brides," 526.

<sup>25</sup> Chatterjee, "Gendering ISIS," 203.

<sup>26</sup> Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety : The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>27</sup> Sirma Bilge, "Beyond Subordination vs. Resistance: An Intersectional

Mahmood and Sirma Bilge point out, such a definition of agency fails to make space for women who choose to submit themselves willingly to patriarchy or religion while mistakenly supposing these women must be coerced, deceived, or otherwise tricked into renouncing their agency.<sup>28</sup> Instead, my understanding of agency is a relational one that sees everyone as an porous entity surrounded by a web of material, human, and other connections that influence their decision at a given moment, assuming neither complete freedom nor victimhood of the agent.<sup>29</sup> In this regard, I take agency of the *Muhajirat* for granted – even when they can be said to be victims of ISIS’s systemic violence, for example, they always interact with their surroundings for better or worse in a show of autonomy. From this perspective, I will be able to critically examine the representation of the *Muhajirat*’s agency in the academic narratives that are following the Western liberal or a more relational definition of agency.

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Approach to the Agency of Veiled Muslim Women," *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 31, no. 1 (2010): 12.

<sup>28</sup> Bilge, "Subordination," 19-20.

<sup>29</sup> E. Katherine Brown, "Blinded by the Explosion? Security and Resistance in Muslim Women’s Suicide Terrorism," in *Women, Gender, and Terrorism*, edited by Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 209.

## Overview

In the first chapter, “Framing the Lens of Analysis: Muslim Women as the Ultimate Victims in Gendered Orientalism,” I will begin by outlining Edward Said’s main argument on Orientalism, followed by an introduction on the main features of gendered Orientalism, including the historical fixation on the Muslim women’s veil. As the most potent symbol of Muslim women’s (de)agency, veiling’s implication for Muslim women’s agency in the eyes of the Western commentators will then be examined.

In the second chapter, “Critical Literature Review: Making Victims, Terrorists, and/or Feminists out of the *Muhajirat*,” I briefly explain why the phenomenon of the *Muhajirat* garnered such international attention, drawing from the feminist critique within terrorism and conflict studies. Then I move on to the three categories of narratives on the *Muhajirat* (Gullible Girls, Veiled Terrorists, and Inadvertent Feminists) and critically examine how the women’s agency is acknowledged or denied in each narrative. I suggest that the latter two narratives, albeit with their limitations, may represent a positive development in Western representations of Muslim women’s agency – but at a cost.

In the third chapter, “Reframing the Lens: The Neo-Orientalist Fallacy of Muslim Women’s Agency,” returning to the concept of Orientalism, I show how

classical Orientalism has evolved into a more sophisticated Manichean device in the post-9/11 context. The gendered aspects of this neo-Orientalism are examined with a focus on the two novel and contrasting figures of liberated Muslim women informants and homegrown terrorists in veils. I argue that these two new representations of Muslim women can be juxtaposed with the seemingly more progressive latter two narratives examined in Chapter Two and suggest that the *Muhajirat* can be imagined as agents of violence or feminism only insofar as they remain manifest symbols of the 'Other' vis-à-vis the West.

In Conclusion, I reiterate the main argument of the thesis and suggest the possible limitations of this essay and a future direction of research. In the hopes that this essay can be built on and developed in the field of postcolonial studies and further, I finally offer a few remarks on the gender politics of neo-Orientalism and how they might be challenged.

## **Chapter 1. Framing the Lens of Analysis: Muslim Women as the Ultimate Victims in Gendered Orientalism**

### ***Orientalism as a Critical Lens of Study***

Originally, Orientalism referred to the study of and predilection for peoples, languages, and things belonging to the geographical boundaries of the Orient – but the scope and meaning of the term has undergone many changes throughout the centuries.<sup>30</sup> However, in his seminal book, *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said newly transformed the term into an analytical power that could now identify and criticize the Western discourse that has produced knowledge about the Orient for the profoundly political purposes of domination and colonization.<sup>31</sup> Roughly from the 18th century onward with Napoleon’s expedition to Egypt as an important catalyst, Orientalist productions legitimized and were in turn invigorated by Western European colonialisms by ‘mastering’ the language, art, religion, history, and people in the Orient.<sup>32</sup> As knowledge about the Orient was

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<sup>30</sup> Hazel Simons, "Orientalism and Representation of Muslim Women as “Sexual Objects”, " *Al-Raida Journal* 20, no. 99 (2003): 24.

<sup>31</sup> Edward W Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978); Hazel, “Representation,” 24.

<sup>32</sup> For a detailed analysis of Napoleon’s voyage to Egypt with his team of ‘experts’ on the Orient and its implication for the development of Orientalism, it is best to read Chapter 1 of Said’s *Orientalism*, “The Scope of Orientalism.”

accumulated, the West was simultaneously made and cast into the opposite of the Orient that was barbaric, irrational, and effeminate – while the propertied Western men became the epitome of civilization, rationality, progress, and desirable masculinity.<sup>33</sup> This dichotomy of the West versus East was at the same time a hierarchy where the Western superiority was taken for granted.<sup>34</sup>

While Said's main thesis in *Orientalism* undoubtedly left great impact on subsequent postcolonial studies and other critical studies, critics of Said have pointed out that his portrayal of Orientalism in his book fails to adequately emphasize that Orientalism is a profoundly heterogeneous venture with internal conflicts and paradoxes – not to mention the differences between each colonial power at a given time.<sup>35</sup> Another, more serious line of critique came from

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<sup>33</sup> Again, I suggest referring to Said's *Orientalism* as a whole to see how such binaries were constructed. Also helpful in understanding the construction of Eastern and Western masculinities in Orientalism are the feminist studies that I will introduce in the main essay shortly.

<sup>34</sup> It is worth mentioning there were more 'benign' forms of Orientalism, such as the exhortation of Eastern spirituality found in Japanese Zen Buddhism or Indian philosophy and religiosity that was supposedly lost in the industrialized Western societies. Although different from the more obviously belligerent forms of Orientalism, however, such perceptions shared the same essentializing impulse that sees the Orient as unchanging, irrational, and fundamentally different from the West (See Saba Mahmood, "Sexuality and Secularism," in *Religion, The Secular, and the Politics of Sexual Difference*, edited by Linell E. Cady and Tracy Fessenden, New York: Columbia University Press, 2013: 47-58).

<sup>35</sup> Lisa Lowe, *Critical terrains : French and British orientalisms* (New York: Cornell University, 1991), iv.

postcolonial feminist scholars largely sharing Said's view on the workings of imperial power in *Orientalism* who nevertheless argued that his work failed to take gender more seriously as one of the most central constituents of Orientalism.<sup>36</sup> Rather than dismissing Said's insight altogether, however, they have argued that his intervention can be used to critically examine the roles that gender played by demarcating the boundaries of civilization and culture.<sup>37</sup> As Khalid succinctly put it, the Foucauldian theories of power and knowledge enables *Orientalism* to be applied beyond its immediate historical context and to more gender-conscious analysis.<sup>38</sup>

Following the feminist critics of Said and specifically Khalid, I see gender as an indispensable constituent of Orientalism and focus on the body of Oriental women as the site upon which battles for cultural authenticity and superiority are fought.<sup>39</sup> In other words, this essay uses the term gendered

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<sup>36</sup> Meyda Yegenoglu, *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism*(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 2; Simons, "Representation," 24.

<sup>37</sup> Lowe, *Critical terrains*; Simons, "Representation"; Yegenoglu, *Fantasies*; Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (Routledge, 1995).

<sup>38</sup> Maryam Khalid, "Gender, Orientalism and representations of the 'Other' in the War on Terror," *Global Change, Peace & Security* 23, no. 1 (2011):17.

<sup>39</sup> I am aware that the Orient at this stage in history usually encompassed India and even Japan, thus the Oriental women could actually refer to wildly divergent peoples who had very little in common. In this essay, however, for the sake of



Orientalism to highlight the central importance of gender in the Orientalist mechanism and to examine how till this day the figure of Muslim women is made the marker of a civilizational divide. Later in the essay and throughout, this concept will be used to critically engage with the academic literature on the *Muhajirat*.

### **No Orientalism Without the Oriental Women: Gendered Orientalism**

Fascination with the different and the exotic has arguably been a stable feature in human history. Erotic male fantasies about women from other tribes, lands, and religions likewise have always existed. However, with the dawn of European colonialism, a qualitative shift can be said to have occurred – as the European male travelers gradually penetrated the Oriental terrains, their sexual fantasies became more consolidated surrounding the figure of mysterious yet sexual Oriental women.<sup>40</sup> The highly selective text of *The Tales from the Thousand and One Nights* made available in European languages imbued the imagination of

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consistency on the topic of the *Muhajirat*, I mainly discuss how the Muslim women's bodies were used in the gender politics of Orientalism.

<sup>40</sup> See Lowe, *Critical terrains* for a more detailed analysis of French and British travelers and their respective Orientalist conceptions, particularly regarding the Oriental women.

Europeans with that of a highly sexual, mythical East and the Eastern women.<sup>41</sup> For Western men and women, gradually, the Eastern harem as a secluded, unreachable place ruled by a tyrant and the odalisque held as a prize inside came to represent the most famous tropes for portraying the Orient, symbolizing Muslim women's oppression and eroticism at the same time.<sup>42</sup> For example, the erotic and intrusive desire for the male gaze to see the unveiled Oriental women found expression in popular French postcards of staged Algerian women.<sup>43</sup> However, gender dynamics went beyond mere eroticism and sexualization of Oriental women, instead playing a fundamental role in "the securing and maintenance of the imperial enterprise."<sup>44</sup> In other words, gender was indispensable to Western imperialism in a way intersecting with Orientalism as a tool for colonial dominance.

By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the issue of Oriental women, or the "Woman Question" began to take center stage in the imperial politics and came into full

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<sup>41</sup> Hazel, "Representation," 27.

<sup>42</sup> Charlotte Weber, "Unveiling Scheherazade: Feminist Orientalism in the International Alliance of Women, 1911-1950," *Feminist Studies* 27, no. 1 (2001): 125.

<sup>43</sup> Mohja Kahf, *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman: from Termagant to Odalisque*, University of Texas Press, 1999.

<sup>44</sup> McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 7.

force in the later 19<sup>th</sup> century as the European imperialist projects were consolidated.<sup>45</sup> Now, the already familiar figure of the harem odalisque was first and foremost an oppressed creature, defined mainly by her victimhood and seclusion.<sup>46</sup> She came to represent all Muslim women who in turn were imagined as helpless, captive victims to be saved by means of Western imperial policy.<sup>47</sup> At the same time, her veil was made into a potent symbol of her oppression at the hands of the Oriental men – to rephrase the famous quote from Gayatri Spivak describing the gender politics of Western imperialism where white men were to save brown women from brown women.<sup>48</sup> This rhetoric of veiled Muslim women's victimhood provided a convenient justification for the Western powers' domination of the native culture. To cite a famous example, the British colonial official Lord Cromer saw the British occupation of Egypt as entirely justified based on the indisputable evidence of Oriental backwardness and oppression that was women's veiling.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, it was the duty of the more civilized country –

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<sup>45</sup> Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (Yale University Press, 1992), 150.

<sup>46</sup> Kahf, *Representations*, 5-6.

<sup>47</sup> Kahf, *Representations*, 131.

<sup>48</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," ..in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313.

<sup>49</sup> Ahmed, *Women and Gender*, 152.

i.e. Great Britain at the time – to rule the native populations to enlighten them in the Western way. Ironically, even though Lord Cromer painted himself as a protector of the victimized Oriental women using the language of feminism and women's rights, he was vehemently opposed to women's suffrage in Britain, as Leila Ahmed had noted.<sup>50</sup> Gender politics, albeit selectively employed, had already been deeply embedded in the language of Western superiority and imperial domination.

It is worth mentioning at this point that the Western feminists were unequal and inconsistent partners in the imperial project. As Charlotte Weber demonstrates in her examination of the key members of the International Alliance of Women from 1911-1950, early Western feminists sometimes saw that veiling worked to Muslim women's advantage in the public sphere, demonstrating the subversive potential of feminism that defies the Orientalist tropes.<sup>51</sup> Another, earlier woman commentator on the Oriental women is the eighteenth-century traveler-writer Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, who criticized the Orientalist belief that in Islam women are thought to have no souls and challenged the fantasies about the harem by describing the lively and disciplined lives in the women's

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<sup>50</sup> Ahmed, *Women and Gender*, 151-152.

<sup>51</sup> Charlotte Weber, "Unveiling Scheherazade: Feminist Orientalism in the International Alliance of Women, 1911-1950," *Feminist Studies* 27, no. 1 (2001): 129.

quarters.<sup>52</sup> However, as Weber cautions, the mitigating effect of feminism on Orientalist thinking should not be overstated – the early feminists still held that the Western European model of progress should be the norm for their oppressed Oriental sisters, as their naïve belief in the positive influence of Zionist women in Palestine as agents of progress hailing from Europe starkly demonstrates.<sup>53</sup> In the end, the Muslim women’s veil, in the eyes of the Victorian women whose clothing was in bad need of a feminist revolution, represented another symbol of universal female oppression – the solution, therefore, lay in unveiling.

It should be noted that indigenous male elites participated in the modernizing debate in the colonial period, basing their arguments on the same modernizing thesis or a counteractive, newly constructed model of cultural authenticity.<sup>54</sup> Although they cannot be said to have been the instigators of gendered Orientalism, they unproblematically embraced the language of gendered Orientalism where ‘their’ women were to be symbols of either progress or

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<sup>52</sup> Ahmed, *Women and Gender*, 150.

<sup>53</sup> Weber, “Scheherazade,” 141-147.

<sup>54</sup> It is regrettable that there is no space in this essay to discuss the indigenous female elites’ complex relationship with veiling as part of the bigger modernization project. Some upper-class Iranian women enthusiastically advocated for unveiling in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, for example, while in Egypt, as Ahmed shows, Westernized female elites had their counterparts in a figure like Zaynab al-Ghazali who was a staunch advocate for modest Islamic attire (See Chapter 9, “First Feminists” in Ahmed, *Women and Gender* for a more detailed discussion on first Egyptian feminists and their respective stance on veiling).

backwardness. As Lata Mani argues in her excellent dissertation on how the debate on the ban on *sati*, or widow burning, in the British colonial India unfolded, the debate between colonial officials and indigenous male elites happened upon the site of the Oriental women's body with cultural authenticity and colonial authority at stake, where the widows' voices were markedly absent and their material sufferings were not of prime concern to either party.<sup>55</sup> Leila Ahmed has also forcefully demonstrated that for the Egyptian jurist Qasim Amin, often hailed as an early champion of women's rights, women and their dress were markers of a given society's development and women themselves were of no importance to Amin – in much the same way Lord Cromer was not interested in women's liberation at home or in Egypt.<sup>56</sup> Even after the Western powers began to formally withdraw from the Middle Eastern societies from the 20<sup>th</sup> century onward, the Muslim women's unfortunate symbolic burden of being the cultural marker did not disappear. Development could not happen in isolation from the rest of the world, and western powers still provided a model for progress in the eyes of the native elites who had internalized the languages of modernization, including what place women were to have in the nation's progress. For example,

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<sup>55</sup> Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions : The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). To see how the agency of widows was blatantly denied in the eyewitness accounts of *sati*, see Chapter 5, "The Female Subject, The Colonial Gaze."

<sup>56</sup> Ahmed, *Women and Gender*, 161-162.

the nation-building processes in modern Turkey and Iran were much the same in their unitary unveiling of their women as part and parcel of their quest for modernization and progress of the male citizens.<sup>57</sup> The legacy still persists in both the West and the East, as the endless discussions on Muslim women's veiling continue to demonstrate.

### **Veiled Victimhood: Situating Muslim Women's Agency**

Taking into account the brief history of the Oriental women's ascendancy, or descendancy, as the ultimate marker of culture and civilization, it is wholly unsurprising that the representations on Muslim women did not acknowledge their agency, especially when they were still veiled – as veiling was equated with victimhood and oppression by the backward Oriental, or Muslim, culture.<sup>58</sup> For the political purpose of Western domination, the Muslim women were to remain as an object of salvation by the civilized Western men and women.

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<sup>57</sup> Roksana Bahramitash, "The War on Terror, Feminist Orientalism and Orientalist Feminism: Case Studies of Two North American Bestsellers," *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 14, no. 2 (2005): 225; Ahmed, *Women and Gender*, 164.

<sup>58</sup> Bilge, "Subordination," 14.

However, as a new generation of Muslim women academics began to actively participate in the anglophone and francophone academia from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century onward, the Western understanding of the veil's meaning gradually became more diversified. For example, Ahmed convincingly argued that for newly migrated urban women, veiling not only signifies a bridge to their traditional culture but also a practical tool for appearing in the public sphere.<sup>59</sup> In another case, veil was a symbol of cultural and at times physical resistance against the Western colonial power constantly seeking to unveil the Oriental women, as in the case of the years leading up to the Algerian war of independence.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Iran, veiling was a form of political protest for the religious and secular women alike who took up the garment in solidarity with the spirit of revolution at the time.<sup>61</sup> These new meanings of veiling not only more accurately reflect the lived reality of Muslim women around the world but also see them as exercising choice and agency to cope with the social and political circumstances they were facing.<sup>62</sup> In fact, as

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<sup>59</sup> Ahmed, *Women and Gender*, 222-223.

<sup>60</sup> Mounira M Charrad, "Gender in the Middle East: Islam, State, Agency," *Annual Review of Sociology* 37, no. 37 (2011): 429.

<sup>61</sup> Jasmin Zine, "Between Orientalism and Fundamentalism: The Politics of Muslim Women's Feminist Engagement," *Muslim World Journal of Human Rights* 3, no. 1 (2006): 10.

<sup>62</sup> Charrad, "Gender," 418.



Lila Abu-Lughod points out, educated women are often proactively going against the social and familial pressures when they choose to cover themselves – far from the picture of coerced women for whom veiling is mandated.<sup>63</sup>

Despite the much-needed interventions in the scholarship on Muslim women and their agency, however, mainstream liberal feminism, especially when collaborating with state institutions as policy makers and contributors, still seems to fixate on the Muslim women's veil and their supposed victimhood as an urgent feminist agenda. The most visible example of contemporary feminism's intolerance of veiling can be found in the French feminist advocacy of the ban on burqa in public places. As Sirma Bilge show in her examination of the feminist testimonies used in order to justify the ban, veiling was equated with oppression and, more problematically, negation of one's agency.<sup>64</sup> That is, as soon as one decides to put on a veil either out of coercion or from false consciousness, she is immediately rendered into a voiceless victim whose claim on agency cannot be taken seriously since no one can "voluntarily choose to wear such a symbol of female submission."<sup>65</sup> The view unfortunately still dominates,

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<sup>63</sup> Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (London: Harvard University Press, 2013), 17.

<sup>64</sup> Bilge, "Subordination," 15-16.

<sup>65</sup> Bilge, "Subordination," 18.

taking on new strength in the context of post-9/11 as the sensational figure of burqa-clad Afghanistan women served as a justification to invade Afghanistan in a bid to save these victims without voice or agency.<sup>66</sup> This neo-Orientalist turn in the representation of Muslim women's agency will be more closely examined in Chapter 3.

Having outlined the bleak landscape of Muslim women's agency in the Western representations, I should briefly mention that I agree against reifying the veil as the most authentic symbol of religiosity for Muslim women. As Marnia Lazreg put it in her concise book on the debate on veiling, Islam is not reducible to a garment, and the veil does not sum up the religion.<sup>67</sup> Therefore, rather than weighing between pros and cons of veiling, I want to reiterate that the veil as an already overdetermined symbol became the center of debates through the mechanisms of gendered Orientalism throughout the colonial history. What is at stake, therefore, is not merely the Muslim women's agency but the hierarchy of civilization itself. Bearing the implication in mind, I will draw on and return to these Orientalist tropes about the veiled women in the next chapter where critically analyze the academic literature on *Muhajirat*.

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<sup>66</sup> Zine, "Engagement," 8.

<sup>67</sup> Marnia Lazreg, *Questioning the Veil* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 124.

## **Chapter 2. Critical Literature Review: Making Victims, Terrorists, and/or Feminists out of the *Muhajirat***

### **The ‘Woman Question’ in Terrorism Studies**

As briefly mentioned in Introduction, most of the academic literature on the *Muhajirat* comes from the field of terrorism and conflict studies that is related to state policymaking and holds political and social significance. Feminist critics within the field such as Laura Sjoberg have pointed out, however, that the idea of women as perpetrators of terrorism is still treated as an anomaly deviating from the more common narrative of women as victims.<sup>68</sup> Imagined as peaceful, life-giving, and passive according to their proper gender roles, women present a discursive challenge to commentators in the field when they engage in political violence and do harm.<sup>69</sup> For the same reason, women terrorists garner more media attention than their male counterparts, while their appearance, marriage status, and personal traumas with a focus on sexuality are explored in depth to

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<sup>68</sup> Laura Sjoberg, “Jihadi Brides and Female Volunteers: Reading the Islamic State’s War to See Gender and Agency in Conflict Dynamic,” *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 35, no. 3 (May 2017). For a concise overview of politically violent women within terrorism and conflict studies, see Lori Poloni-Staudinger and Candice D. Ortobals’s *Terrorism and Violent Conflict: Women’s Agency, Leadership, and Responses* (New York: Springer, 2013).

<sup>69</sup> Åhäll, *Sexing*, 45-79.

make them an exception in terrorism rather than the norm.<sup>70</sup> When the media and even academia focus on the women's personal motivations to 'explain' their out-of-the-character violent behaviors, however, they are in effect erasing the political motivations of these women in contrast to male terrorists whose political grievances and violent agency are taken for granted.<sup>71</sup>

In reality, women have participated in political violence throughout modern history as auxiliary but indispensable sympathizers, fundraisers, informants, spies, soldiers, and even leaders and ideologues – especially in radical militant left-wing groups such as Weather Underground.<sup>72</sup> In addition, as feminist critiques of conflict and terrorism studies have noted, women are often motivated for the same reasons as men to participate in violence ranging from pressure from family and friends, economic hardship, political grievances, and even empowerment.<sup>73</sup> It is therefore curious and even deplorable that female

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<sup>70</sup> Davis, *Modern Terrorism*, 23; Sjoberg, "Volunteer," 298.

<sup>71</sup> Brigitte L Nacos, "The Portrayal of Female Terrorists in the Media: Similar Framing Patterns in the News Coverage of Women in Politics and in Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 28, no. 5 (2005): 436-437.

<sup>72</sup> Davis, *Modern Terrorism*, 19; Poloni-Staudinger and Ortbals, *Terrorism*, 35-37. In the case of the LTTE (The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, Sri Lanka), the former leadership explicitly stated that one of the core ideas of the Tamil Tigers was gender equality, which may explain the relatively large number of women in its militant ranks and why women would decide to join the group (Davis, *Modern Terrorism*, 72).

<sup>73</sup> Nacos, "Portrayal," 441-444. It is notable, however, that while male

perpetrators continue to draw exaggerated attention as an exception while being overlooked as a viable threat in counterterrorism policies.<sup>74</sup>

The fascination with female perpetrators of violence in the field, then, cannot but have had an impact on the disproportionate academic attention on the *Muhajirat* as well. As another group of women participating in political violence pose a challenge to hegemonic notions of proper gender roles, they need to be tamed through the power of discourse such as infantilization, sexualization, and victimization<sup>75</sup> – this category of narratives will be examined shortly in the next section. Before doing so, however, I must mention that the *Muhajirat* are an even more marginalized figure than other female perpetrators of violence, situated at the intersection of gendered Orientalist expectations. The most striking demonstration of the discursively pre-constructed terrain occupied by the *Muhajirat* can be found in the term “*jihadi* brides,” a tabloid-coined term to describe the women and girls who migrated to ISIS-held territory after 2015 when

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participations in political violence do report finding empowerment in their membership, their motivation is not referred to as ‘male empowerment’ – in the same way that female membership in militant groups is interpreted as a wish for gender equality and empowerment.

<sup>74</sup> Davis, *Modern Terrorism*, 128-129.

<sup>75</sup> Åhäll, *Sexing*, 107.

three schoolgirls from Tower Hamlet, London, left together for Syria – known as the Bethnal Green girls – and made worldwide headlines.<sup>76</sup>

In her study on the neo-Orientalist representation of the *Muhajirat*, Alice Martini critically examined how the British media effectively produced the figure of *jihadi* brides as a powerful image under which all female migrants to ISIS were to be subsumed by relying on the preexisting fascination with the sexuality of Muslim women.<sup>77</sup> Martini argues that by voluntarily joining ISIS, the Western Muslim women defied the neo-Orientalist expectation of passive Muslim women, thus creating a threat to the Western imagination that needed to be contained by means of gendered Orientalist tropes.<sup>78</sup> Although it goes beyond the scope of this essay to discuss the motivations of the *Muhajirat* in joining ISIS, the more recent studies are in agreement that female migrants were motivated by similar reasons as their male counterparts, echoing the finding in previous feminist terrorism studies.<sup>79</sup> The reasons are as diverse as the social, educational, and even religious backgrounds of the *Muhajirat* themselves who mainly come from second to fourth generation of immigrant Muslim families with varying degrees of religious

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<sup>76</sup> Saltman and Smith, *Martyrdom*, 44; Martini, "Women Terrorists," 458.

<sup>77</sup> Martini, "Women Terrorists."

<sup>78</sup> Martini, "Women Terrorists," 461.

<sup>79</sup> Saltman and Smith, *Martyrdom*, 5.

commitment at home.<sup>80</sup> However, as Emilio C Viano summarized in his introduction to the special issue on the *Muhajirat* in *Annales Internationales De Criminologie*, one of the most strong motivations for the female migrants was the perceived persecution of Islam and Muslims in the Middle East caused by the foreign policies of their home countries in the West.<sup>81</sup> Increased Islamophobia in the West after the 9/11, felt more strongly by the veiled Muslim women whose visibility made them an easy target for hateful attacks, also seems to have provoked feelings of alienation and insecurity for some of the *Muhajirat*.<sup>82</sup> The question asked by puzzled researchers as to why the *Muhajirat* would leave their privileges in the West, then, seems premised on the faulty and homogenizing assumption that the Western values including women's rights would apply equally to the Muslim women at the intersection of gendered Orientalism.

In light of the diverse motivations expressed by the *Muhajirat* themselves, the simplifying connotation in the term *jihadi* brides that understands the *Muhajirat* as victims of romance existing only in relation to their *jihadi*

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<sup>80</sup> Amanda N Spencer, "The Hidden Face of Terrorism," *Journal of Strategic Security* 9, no. 3 (2016): 74-75.

<sup>81</sup> Viano, "Introduction," 2.

<sup>82</sup> Azadeh Moaveni, *Guest House for Young Widows* (Brunswick, Victoria: Scribe Publications, 2019), 270-274; Elizabeth Pooley, "A New Sisterhood: The Allure of ISIS in Syria For Young Muslim Women in the UK," Masters diss. (Arizona State University, 2015), 65; Viano, "Introduction," 3.

husbands cannot be sustained.<sup>83</sup> The wording carries similar Orientalizing assumptions to the term “black widow,” an inaccurate name given to Chechen women who participated in political violence against Russian authorities.<sup>84</sup> In both terms, the women’s sexuality expressed either in marriage or widowhood defines their identity and their motivation for joining politically violent groups, denying them political agency. It is notable, therefore, that some research to be discussed in the subsequent sections still decided to single out the *Muhajirat* as the subject of study based on their gender. I categorize this kind of academic works into three groups of Gullible Girls, Veiled Terrorists, and Inadvertent Feminists and ask whether these studies justify their gendered attention on the *Muhajirat* by proposing a new way of understanding Muslim women’s agency.<sup>85</sup>

### **Gullible Girls: Fangirls, Teenagers, and Victims**

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<sup>83</sup> Yasmin Jiwani, "Gendered Islamophobia in the Case of the Returning ISIS Women: A Canadian Narrative," *Islamophobia Studies Journal* 6, no. 1 (2021): 53.

<sup>84</sup> Davis, *Modern Terrorism*, 93.

<sup>85</sup> Here, I should briefly mention that I found multiple narratives can coexist in a single study, considering that many of the works examined build on previous works and update new information as it arises. My intention here is not to call out researchers as Orientalists; rather, I focus on how their usage of words in a given work covertly betrays their understanding of the *Muhajirat*’s agency.



Unfortunately, as the academia and media do not exist in a vacuum and instead interact with each other on a subject of public interest, narratives portraying the *Muhajirat* as gullible girls can easily be found in terrorism and conflict studies. For example, Anita Perešin and Alberto Cervone's 2015 study on the Muhajirat contends that "many of them are naïve and easily manipulated to embrace a cause that often they do not clearly understand" solely based on the relatively young age of the female migrants mostly in their teens and early twenties.<sup>86</sup> Perešin similarly argues in her another 2015 work that "adolescent girls are unlikely to fully understand what concepts such as 'Caliphate', ummah, or violent jihad really mean" without providing substantiating evidence for her argument, while she does not ask whether younger male members of the ISIS were similarly manipulated and victimized by ISIS.<sup>87</sup> Although not an academic work, the French journalist Anna Erelle's best-selling reportage, *In the Skin of a Jihadist*, echoes the assessment of such academics with a real-life example of a gullible Muslim woman groomed and lured by a devious male ISIS fighter.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Anita Perešin and Alberto Cervone, "The Western Muhajirat of ISIS," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 38, no. 7 (2015): 500.

<sup>87</sup> Anita Perešin, "Fatal Attraction," *Perspectives on Terrorism* (Lowell) 9, no. 3 (2015): 23.

<sup>88</sup> Anna Erelle, *In the Skin of a Jihadist: A Young Journalist Enters the ISIS Recruitment Network*, translated by Erin Potter (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2017).

This category of narratives in effect reproduces and authorizes the sensationalized media portrayal of the *Muhajirat* as brainwashed, lured, coerced, or otherwise pressured or deceived – according to Galit M. Ben-Israel's expression, the *Muhajirat* "have been lured in by slogans" of ISIS.<sup>89</sup> As Martini had criticized, such words imply that the female migrants were not fully aware of the consequence of their actions and were thus naïve victims without any wish to do harm.<sup>90</sup> Their naivety is again exaggerated in the expression by Perešin that the *Muhajirat* mainly see membership in ISIS as a romantic adventure, not different from going to a "Muslim Disneyland (Perešin's words)."<sup>91</sup> Such assessment is indeed curious, as both Ben-Israel and Perešin acknowledge in their respective studies that the *Muhajirat* play a substantial role in building the Caliphate once within the ISIS-held territory.<sup>92</sup> However, in Ben-Israel's case, the *Muhajirat*'s active online presence is at once infantilized as that of "fangirls" who idolize the bearded jihadi warriors like Western pop stars and boy bands.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Galit M Ben-Israel, "Telling a Story Via Tumblr Analytics: Europe's Young Muslim Female Attraction to ISIS," *Annales Internationales De Criminologie* 56, no. 1-2 (2018): 55.

<sup>90</sup> Martini, "Women Terrorists," 466.

<sup>91</sup> Perešin, "Fatal," 25.

<sup>92</sup> Perešin, "Fatal," 33; Ben-Israel, "Tumblr," 58.

<sup>93</sup> Ben-Israel, "Tumblr," 67; Hind Fraihi similarly criticize the academic impulse to treat the *Muhajirat*'s interest in ISIS as teenage romanticism in her work "The Future of Feminism by ISIS Is in the Lap of Women," *Annales Internationales*

When the younger section of male migrants to ISIS are not singled out as fanboys of ISIS, there is no justification to infantilize and thus depoliticize the *Muhajirat*'s political motivations for joining the group. It is no coincidence that some *Muhajirat* are described as having been groomed, implying that the girls and women can be likened to a child victim of pedophilia.<sup>94</sup> It goes without saying that these narratives work to deny the women's agency, closely evoking the well-oiled Orientalist images of victimized Muslim women who suffer at the hands of Muslim men.

Interestingly, in this category of narratives, online platforms were seen and thus blamed as agents responsible for the gullible girls' radicalization. In Sara Shaban's words, more agency was attributed to Twitter than to the women using it to join ISIS.<sup>95</sup> To cite Ben-Israel again, "ISIS's very active and pervasive online presence" managed to lure the girls into joining ISIS – giving testimony to Shaban's assessment that in studies on the *Muhajirat*, 'technopanic', or the fear of the harmful influence of technology helps position the female migrants as victims

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*De Criminologie* 56, no. 1-2 (2018): 27.

<sup>94</sup> Jacoby, "Jihadi Brides," 537. Here, Jacoby is broadly referring to the images fitting her first category of the Victim.

<sup>95</sup> Sara Shaban, "Teenagers, Terrorism, and Technopanic: How British Newspapers Framed Female ISIS Recruits as Victims of Social Media," *International Journal of Communication* 14, no. 1 (2020): 547.

and technology as an accessory to the crime of ISIS propaganda.<sup>96</sup> It is true that ISIS has operated a sophisticated propaganda network on a number of popular social network service platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, WhatsApp, Ask.fm and more.<sup>97</sup> They also tailor their recruitment strategy to appeal to young Muslim women who are often converts, based on the calculation that converts with no previous religious backgrounds or networks can be more easily isolated by ISIS and tend to be more pious and enthusiastic participants in their new religion.<sup>98</sup> However, online platforms are not only a dangerous place for young women and girls; it is also a gendered space where the *Muhajirat* act as active propagandists of ISIS, or “jihadi cheerleaders” to borrow from Nava Nuraniyah’s expression.<sup>99</sup> The *Muhajirat* are integral agents of ISIS whose pronounced digital presence has been documented in a number of studies including that of Elizabeth Pearson that argue that the *Muhajirat* create a specifically gendered online network amongst themselves.<sup>100</sup> In another famous example, a Glasgow-born

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<sup>96</sup> Ben-Israel, “Tumblr,” 57; Shaban, “Technopanic,” 537.

<sup>97</sup> Spencer, “Hidden Face,” 85; Pooley, “Sisterhood,” 3-4.

<sup>98</sup> Lauren R Shapiro and Marie-Helen Maras, “Women's Radicalization to Religious Terrorism: An Examination of ISIS Cases in the United States,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 42, no. 1-2 (2019): 90.

<sup>99</sup> Nava Nuraniyah, “Not Just Brainwashed: Understanding the Radicalization of Indonesian Female Supporters of the Islamic State,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 30, no. 6 (2018): 894.

<sup>100</sup> Ben-Israel, “Tumblr”; Elizabeth Pearson, “Online as the New Frontline:

migrant named Aqsa Mahmood ran a popular online blog where she painted a homely but not unrealistic picture of life within the ISIS territory and urged other ‘sisters’ join the Caliphate.<sup>101</sup> Attributing more agency and blame to online platforms such as Twitter than to a female member of ISIS , therefore, risks distorting the reality of ISIS’s digital propaganda while at the same time conveniently overlooking the *Muhjirat*’s flagrant display of agency online.

The most telling example of this insistence on the *Muhajirat*’s victimization are the claims that these women and girls should not be threatened with persecution upon their repatriation to their country of origin, as Viano argues.<sup>102</sup> The logic is that the female migrants are likely to have been duped victims of ISIS, not qualitatively different from other women in the Middle East who were captured and exploited by ISIS members against their will.<sup>103</sup> It is questionable whether this analysis can be sustained in the presence of personal accounts provided by the former *Muhajirat* who testify that their status within ISIS territory depended significantly on their husbands, whom they often voluntarily

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Affect, Gender, and ISIS-take-down on Social Media," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 41, no. 11 (2018).

<sup>101</sup> Carolyn Holye, Alexandra Bradford, and Ross Frenett, *Becoming Mulan? Female Western Migrants to ISIS*, London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2015, 28.

<sup>102</sup> Viano, "Introduction," 7.

<sup>103</sup> Viano, "Introduction," 7; Chatterjee, "Gendering ISIS," 212.

married by their own choosing.<sup>104</sup> Of course, in order not to romanticize the life in ISIS territory, it should be mentioned that some *Muhajirat* expressed distress at the news of their husbands' death and experienced discomfort shortly thereafter due to continuing pressure to quickly get remarried.<sup>105</sup> However, when a woman managed to get married to a male ISIS member higher up in the group's hierarchy, she could enjoy relative comforts and benefits following her elevated status – which may be why complaints have been raised by male jihadis after being bombarded with online marriage proposals from women wishing to secure a place in the ISIS territory before their arrival.<sup>106</sup> This is an interesting example that shows that for the *Muhajirat*, marriage is perceived as a way of social mobility in realistic terms, again defying the common perception of the *Muhajirat* as lovesick victims of the ISIS men.

Such naïve and inaccurate perception of the *Muhajirat*'s agency is again exhibited in the expectation that when they see for themselves how ISIS is treating other women, they will have no choice but to realize they have made the

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<sup>104</sup> Aysha Navest, Martijn De Koning, and Annelies Moors, "CHATting ABOUT MARRIAGE WITH FEMALE MIGRANTS TO SYRIA," *Anthropology Today* 32, no. 2 (2016): 22-25.

<sup>105</sup> Holye, Bradford, and Frenett, *Becoming Mulan*, 27.

<sup>106</sup> Navest, De Koning, and Moors, "Marriage," 24.

wrong choice and wish to return to the benign, civilized Western country.<sup>107</sup> This suggestion again relies on the gendered assumption of the *Muhajirat*'s relative peacefulness and remorse in comparison with the male *jihadis* who are not expected to feel betrayed or shocked at the egregious violations of human rights perpetrated in ISIS.<sup>108</sup> Based on gendered assumptions about Muslim men, they are easily portrayed as terrorists and security threats. In the Syrian refugee crisis, for example, Muslim boys and men were discussed as a political and security problem, not a humanitarian issue. In fact, however, studies have documented that not only do these women justify ISIS's violence against other women, the *Yazidi* women, for example, they also publicly celebrate it in online spaces and call for more blood to be spilled.<sup>109</sup> This celebration of violence at times provides the *Muhajirat* with an occasion to express their deeply held wish to participate in physical violence – fundamentally challenging the assumption of their victimhood and passivity within ISIS.<sup>110</sup> Indeed, this section has shown that although some researchers primarily saw the *Muhajirat* as young and gullible

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<sup>107</sup> Viano, "Introduction," 6-7.

<sup>108</sup> On the impact of gender and age in the construction of the European refugees, see Lesley Pruitt, Helen Berents, and Gayle Munro's "Gender and Age in the Construction of Male Youth in the European Migration "Crisis"," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 43, no. 3 (2018): 689-709.

<sup>109</sup> Holye, Bradford, and Frenett, *Becoming Mulan*, 29; Pooley, "Sisterhood," 61.

<sup>110</sup> Holye, Bradford, and Frenett, *Becoming Mulan*, 29.

victims of ISIS, they defied the Orientalist expectation of the passive Muslim women and instead expressed a dangerous capacity for violence. The longing for active combat roles leads to the second category of narratives, “Veiled Terrorist,” whose agency resides in her ability to do harm.

### **Veiled Terrorists: Security Threats and Would-Be Militants**

As noted above in a brief literature review on terrorism studies, women play roles on all levels of political violence, sometimes taking up arms alongside their male comrades and taking leadership positions. However, Salafist Islamist groups engaging in violence have previously been seen as reluctant to utilize female combatants, due to the principal of gender segregation and the ideology of male militancy that shuns women’s participation in the ‘lesser’ or military *jihad*.<sup>111</sup> Although Islamic militant groups ranging from Palestinian Hamas to Boko Haram in Nigeria have made use of female suicide bombers, the agency of suicide bomber is a debatable one, in that her successful attack results her erasure from the political scene.<sup>112</sup> Therefore, even though militant Islamist groups utilize

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<sup>111</sup> Agnes Termeer and Isabelle Duyvesteyn, "The Inclusion of Women in Jihad: Gendered Practices of Legitimation in Islamic State Recruitment Propaganda," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 15, no. 2 (2022): 46.

<sup>112</sup> Brown, “Blinded,” 209.



female operatives for suicide bombing missions, it cannot be said to pose a threat to the male leadership positions in the long term. As noted in a recent study, however, ISIS was distinguished from other militant Islamist groups in that it operated as a quasi-state allowing for a wider variety of roles for women filling its rank, including future combat roles.<sup>113</sup> Taken together, it is not surprising that academics in terrorism and conflict studies have all paid close attention to the possibility that ISIS might allow its women to participate in the battlefield as militants.

According to early research, the *Muhajirat* who joined ISIS were explicitly prohibited from participating in combat, and the female members of the ISIS have made it clear in their online Q&As with potential *Muhajirat*.<sup>114</sup> Instead, they were encouraged to first and foremost perform domestic roles as wives and mothers, as every man and woman carried their own gendered responsibility to the Caliphate.<sup>115</sup> However, a caveat always followed in the prohibition that when the *ummah* is under attack, women will be allowed to wield weapons alongside the jihadi fighters – which may be the reason ISIS

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<sup>113</sup> Ruth Gan, Loo Seng Neo, Jeffery Chin, and Majeed Khader, "Change Is the Only Constant: The Evolving Role of Women in the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)," *Women & Criminal Justice* 29, no. 4-5 (2019): 205.

<sup>114</sup> Holye, Bradford, and Frenett, *Becoming Mulan*, 33.

<sup>115</sup> Saltman and Smith, *Martyrdom*, 7.

incorporated weapons training in their curriculum for girls and women.<sup>116</sup> ISIS seemed to capitalize on the Western women's willingness to take up arms within ISIS, as they published glossy photos of women in their English edition of *Dabiq* holding guns standing next to gleaming sports vehicles presumably to attract more women to its territory using the familiar language of female empowerment.<sup>117</sup> The statement on women's military participation in times of absolute necessity was seized upon by researchers interested in the limits of the women's participation within ISIS, betraying the academic fascination with the novel figure of a female jihadi fighter. As Nuraniyah observed, the academic debate shifted to "whether IS really allows women to participate in combat"<sup>118</sup> — a male domain previously prohibited to Muslim women.

Although women could not yet be called foreign fighters or terrorists like their male counterparts, some academic analyses focused on the existence of the al-Khaansa Brigade, formed in 2014, as signaling the next stage of women's evolving agency in violent political actions.<sup>119</sup> This all-female brigade acted as a morality police, principally responsible for ensuring that women within ISIS

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<sup>116</sup> Gan et al., "Evolving Role," 206.

<sup>117</sup> Nelly Lahoud, 2018, *Empowerment or Subjugation: An Analysis of ISIL's Gendered Messaging*. New York: UN Women, 2.

<sup>118</sup> Nuraniyah, "Brainwashed," 892.

<sup>119</sup> Spencer, "Hidden Face," 83.

territory abided by the strict dress codes. Later, their role continued to grow as to perform stop and search activities in the whole of Raqqa as male combatants in veil may try an attack on the ISIS territory.<sup>120</sup> The patrol group was necessitated and legitimized by the strict rule on gender segregation within ISIS, as kind of a solution to surveillance on women reminiscent of the Islamic Republic of Iran's deployment of women to police and surveil other women.<sup>121</sup> Studies exhibit fixation on this brigade and claim that it represents a new, dangerous figure of armed Muslim women, despite the fact that the number of women in the Brigade took up a very small portion of the female population within ISIS.<sup>122</sup> The vast majority of women, especially the ones from surrounding Middle Eastern countries, mainly acted as housewives and mothers throughout their stay in ISIS-controlled areas.<sup>123</sup> The disproportionate interest in the brigade, then, may be partly explained by fear, fascination, and uncertainty on the part of researchers for

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<sup>120</sup> Spencer, "Hidden Face," 83-84.

<sup>121</sup> On a side note, Spencer convincingly argues that al-Khansaa Brigade could not have been made up of mostly foreign women, as their patrol duty would have necessitated interaction with the local women in Arabic and other languages used in the area (Spencer, "Hidden Face," 96). It is therefore interesting that in earlier research, the Brigade was thought to be made up of Western women – perhaps indicating the Western commentators' expectation that the *Muhajirat*, as the more Western and therefore active women, would perform more militant roles.

<sup>122</sup> Anne Speckhard and Molly Ellenberg, "ISIS and the Allure of Traditional Gender Roles," *Women & Criminal Justice* (2021): 12.

<sup>123</sup> Viano, "Introduction," 8.

whom the al-Khaansa Brigade women embody a future threat to the Western countries in the shape of veiled women, as Shiva Zarabadi and Jessica Ringrose had warned in their diagnosis of the changing perception of the violent agency of Muslim women in the UK.<sup>124</sup> Lauren R Shapiro and Marie-Helen Maras argue, for example, that since Muslim women are not expected to be perpetrators of violence, the *Muhajirat*, equipped with the violent agency within ISIS, pose a “big, if not a bigger threat to American security” than male *jihadi* fighters.<sup>125</sup>

The fear is not unwarranted, especially as ISIS stepped up its use of women for violent tactics from 2017 when it had already been experiencing significant territorial loss by the US-led alliance force. In the battle for Mosul in the summer of 2017, ISIS deployed female militants in active combat roles in a departure from their previous reluctance to utilize women in the battlefield.<sup>126</sup> Although the female combatants are not an imminent possibility, therefore, their potentiality as agents of violence in the Western soil seems to have marked a new chapter in the representation of Muslim women where they are newly put under scrutiny of the state. Compared to the previous omission in terrorism studies which overlooked the real threat posed by radicalized women, the academic

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<sup>124</sup> Zarabadi and Ringrose, “Affective Birth,” 87.

<sup>125</sup> Shapiro and Maras, “Radicalization,” 89.

<sup>126</sup> Gan et al., “Evolving Role,” 205.

attention to ISIS women's violent agency has the obvious benefit of taking the *Muhajirat*'s violent capacities seriously and perhaps being able to better design counterterrorism and deradicalization programs. I claim that the acknowledgement of these women's violent agency even challenges the conventional Orientalist expectation of the Muslim women as victims of violence, not perpetrators.

However, I find it also worth mentioning that this recognition comes at a price of securitization of Muslim populations in Western countries in the post 9/11 era, the most visible examples of which is the prevention measures in the US and in the UK.<sup>127</sup> In the example of UK's Prevent, part of a counterterrorism program aimed at preemptively deradicalizing school-age children and youth, female Muslim students are made to bear the burden of the new violent agency equated with their veiling. In Afsaneh Moaveni's words, beginning from 2015, "wearing the hijab, being socially conservative, belonging to a family that hadn't yet made the transition from village patriarchy to modern independence" could be a marker of extremism in the eyes of the security officials.<sup>128</sup> Muslim girls and

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<sup>127</sup> Anna Piela, *Wearing the Niqab: Muslim Women in the UK and the US* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021), 16-23. Here, Piela talks extensively about the new era of securitization in the UK and the US with a focus on female Muslim students who choose to wear niqab or otherwise cover themselves; Zarabadi and Ringrose, "Affective Birth," 87.

<sup>128</sup> Moaveni, *Guest House*, 270.

women, especially students, once deemed potentially extremist, could be put under surveillance by the police and/or other relevant authorities.<sup>129</sup> As Zarabadi and Ringrose succinctly put it, the Bethnal Green trio became a threatening potentiality that “can be attached to all British Muslim schoolgirls via the mass media panics over the threat of Muslim girls’ radicalization.”<sup>130</sup> My argument is that the academic attention on the possible combat roles by the *Muhajirat* cannot be separated from the visible panic over the possibility of veiled terrorists and the tighter securitization in the Western countries that incorporate the previously overlooked Muslim women into the fold of potential threats to the West. In this sense, the veil came to signify a tangible threat in a far cry from its previous role as a garment of oppression and victimization. The agency of veiled terrorists, then, resembles that of bearded Muslim terrorists directed against the West, a new threat that must be preemptively contained.

### **Inadvertent Feminists: Empowerment and Liberation from the West**

It is perhaps surprising that one may find a feminist agency in the *Muhajirat*, who are participating in an “intensely patriarchal and often misogynistic group” that is

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<sup>129</sup> Moaveni, *Guest House*, 274; Zarabadi and Ringrose, “Affective Birth,” 87.

<sup>130</sup> Zarabadi and Ringrose, “Affective Birth,” 94.

ISIS.<sup>131</sup> Indeed, I suggest that this category is the most dynamical and an often paradoxical one that pushes the limit of feminist critique within the field of terrorism and conflict studies. Broadly, I found that two different ways of understanding the female agency and empowerment of the *Muhajirat* could be identified. One is defined by resistance against the patriarchal barriers, following the Western liberal conception of agency that defines the individual as a rational actor existing independently of her surroundings.<sup>132</sup> For example, women's participation in combat roles discussed in the previous section may represent a form of female empowerment and even power feminism, drawing in other women interested in militant empowerment in the future.<sup>133</sup> In this case, her liberal-humanist agency lies first in the ability to fight and second in overcoming what may be called *jihad* glass ceiling. Jacoby points out that by joining ISIS, women and girls rebel against the authority of their father figures at home and thus make their mark against conventional social mores.<sup>134</sup> Speckhard and Ellenberg further argue that the *Muhajirat* defy the authority of their patriarchs and social norms when they choose to perform *hijrah* and get married to a *jihadi* fighter, arguing that the women's sense of empowerment and liberation is enabled by their resistance to

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<sup>131</sup> Biswas and Deylami, "Radicalizing," 1196.

<sup>132</sup> Bilge, "Subordination," 12.

<sup>133</sup> Gan et al., "Evolving Role," 209; Ben-Israel, "Tumblr," 62-63.

<sup>134</sup> Jacoby, "Jihadi Brides," 542.

their immediate surroundings, regardless of the real-life experiences once within the ISIS-held territory.<sup>135</sup> In the long term, it is even argued, these women can slowly dismantle the gender structures of ISIS in a “sexual revolution” as they take on more essential roles in combat and propaganda.<sup>136</sup>

On the other side of the spectrum, there are those who find nascent feminist agency in the *Muhajirat* by highlighting the women’s own perception of the empowerment in accepting the gender roles offered by ISIS that are considered traditional, misogynic, and disempowering in the eyes of the Western commentators. Biswas and Deylami, for example, argue that ISIS’s official statements advocate for strictly gender-segregated roles for women and men, the former often recommended to be home-bound. Their analysis, however, reveals that it is the promise of these traditional gender roles that may have attracted the *Muhajirat* from the Western countries.<sup>137</sup> Hind Fraihi similarly locates female empowerment in the gendered influence that the *Muhajirat* can wield on the next generation of *jihadists*, passing on the *jihadist* ideology as primary caretakers and nurturers.<sup>138</sup> The highly gendered form of power deriving from motherhood was similarly commented on by Hillary Matfess’s in her study on Boko Haram women,

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<sup>135</sup> Speckhard and Ellenberg, "Allure," 4-6.

<sup>136</sup> Perešin and Cervone, "Muhajirat," 503.

<sup>137</sup> Biswas and Deylami, "Radicalizing," 1204.

<sup>138</sup> Fraihi, "Future," 28.



whose supposed victimhood did not correspond to their lived reality surrounded by her husband and sons.<sup>139</sup> Jacoby, from a more critical viewpoint, suggests that the *Muhajirat* were seeking to challenge the gender hierarchy at home (in the West) by willingly accepting the seemingly regressive roles for women in the ISIS territory.<sup>140</sup> Their feminist agency, albeit a misused and warped one, is then defined by their renouncement of the West and its gender norms.

Katharina Kneip's contribution on the *Muhajirat* fleshes out the idea of a new radical feminist agency vis-à-vis the West.<sup>141</sup> Kneip argues that while the *Muhajirat*'s role within the ISIS controlled territory may not conform to the Western understanding of female emancipation, its empowerment is real for the female migrants who escaped the oppression in the West and found their feminism, or "Islamicipation," by following the strict codes of the *shari'a* implemented by ISIS.<sup>142</sup> Likewise, Joseph Makanda identifies *jihad* feminism as one of the main pull factors for ISIS, characterized by its sharp opposition to the Western mainstream feminism.<sup>143</sup> Makanda goes so far as to suggest that the *Muhajirat*'s

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<sup>139</sup> Hilary Matfess, *Women and the War on Boko Haram : Wives, Weapons, Witnesses* (Zed Books, 2017), 113-123.

<sup>140</sup> Jacoby, "Jihadi Brides," 540.

<sup>141</sup> "Female Jihad – Women in the ISIS," *Politikon: IAPSS Journal of Political Science* 29 (2016): 88-106

<sup>142</sup> Kneip, "Female Jihad," 89-98.

<sup>143</sup> Joseph Makanda, "The jihad feminist dynamics of terrorism and

motivation for joining ISIS can be considered a form of Islamic feminism, providing no information as to whether he is likening ISIS to the empowering projects by Islamic feminists such as Amina Wadud whose reading of the Qur'an from a woman's perspective has sparked lively debate on the contemporary faith-based feminist approach to Islam.<sup>144</sup>

The second set of understandings differ from the first category in that they do not dismiss the self-professed importance of domestic functions played by ISIS women. In fact, in my view, the second subcategory even challenges the mainstream liberal Western feminist idea of finding power in public roles and male-dominated environments.<sup>145</sup> The attempt to understand the *Muhajirat* as conscious agents of feminism seems to signal the possibility of radical tolerance in which

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subordination of women in the ISIS," *Géneros* 8, no. 2 (2019): 137-139.

<sup>144</sup> Makanda, "The jihad feminist," 139; See Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (Oxford University Press, 1999) for a groundbreaking study of the Islamic feminist reading of the Quran.

<sup>145</sup> I find it highly regretful that even in the kinds of narratives I identified as feminist, few if ever focused on the religious agency of the *Muhajirat*. It is true that their personal accounts and self-testimonies were given more importance in these analyses; however, a simple explanation of piety was deemed adequate, always to be accompanied by other tangible gains such as feminism, romance, and political grievance (See Perešin, "Fatal," 23 for an example). While I do not claim that the *Muhajirat* are an especially pious lot who can be likened to the Egyptian women participating in the mosque movement studied by Saba Mahmood, I nevertheless contend that our conception of agency is impoverished by the inability to imagine the kind of agency that is outside of the realm of enlightenment worldview.

even the seemingly incomprehensible Muslim women choosing her own demise may be understood as rational individuals with agency. Here, I would like to borrow from Bilge and say the second strand of feminist agency can be likened to the postcolonial feminist project to take the views of subaltern, in this case Muslim, women seriously and to “confer them with agency and subject status.”<sup>146</sup> By listening to the *Muhajirat*’s own reasons for joining ISIS seriously and seeing them as feminist agents, the narrative also departs from the classic Orientalist image of the Muslim women whose veiling could never be a sign of feminist consciousness.

Although discussing the boundaries of feminism goes far beyond the scope of this essay, I want to caution against considering *Muhajirat*’s ‘feminism’ as an authentic form of female social movement on par with other faith-based feminisms. It is clear that female migrants who voluntarily joined ISIS women were at least indirectly empowered, materially and socially, at the expense of other women and minorities who are persecuted by ISIS for not sharing their ideology or simply coming from different faiths.<sup>147</sup> Positively embracing some women’s empowerment at the cost of other women’s suffering cannot be a sustainable feminist strategy to restructure the system. To iterate, calling the phenomenon ‘Islamic Feminism,’ as Makanda does, would be an affront to those advocating for

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<sup>146</sup> Bilge, "Subordination," 14.

<sup>147</sup> Speckhard and Ellenberg, "Allure," 4.

the progressive potentials of various Islamic feminist projects that seek to empower women through the rich repositories within Muslim societies, including Islam.<sup>148</sup> Of course, if one were to stretch the limit of feminism, one may say that a prominent Islamist woman like Zaynab al-Ghazali can be called an Islamic feminist – as Miriam Cooke does in her deliberately provocative book on Islamic feminists.<sup>149</sup> Al-Ghazali certainly was a striking figure in modern Egyptian history with her central role in leading Islamist organizations and powerfully asserting a place for pious women in the realm of religiously inspired political movements.<sup>150</sup> However, her language of gendered roles for Muslim women and men set obvious limits for other secular and religious women living in the same society. The *Muhajirat*, too, may be called feminists for they seek empowerment and social stranding using the language of Islam – but what values are we condoning when we easily recognize the relativity of feminism for each group?

At this point, it seems fitting to draw on Haideh Moghissi's criticisms against the uncritical proponents of cultural relativism. In her book on Islamism and postmodernism, Moghissi, while critical of the Western imperialism and its legacies in the Middle East, is equally opposed to Islamic fundamentalism that

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<sup>148</sup> Makanda, "The jihad feminist," 139.

<sup>149</sup> Miriam Cooke, *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism Through Literature* (London and New York: Routledge 2001), 104.

<sup>150</sup> Cooke, *Women Claim*, 84-104.

curtails hard won women's rights in her view. She also directs her criticism toward the postmodern Western academia that inadvertently endorses the ascendancy of Islamic fundamentalism through the language of relativism and Islamic feminism.<sup>151</sup> I agree with Jasmine Zine that in her biting criticism bordering on polemic against the Islamic fundamentalists and their unassuming proponents, Moghissi tends to essentialize Islam as a monolith, finding it irreconcilable with feminism as a secular social movement.<sup>152</sup> However, her concerns for the dangers of relativism in regard to the rights of Other women should be taken seriously, as such a relativist and culturalist notion defines the authentic Muslim women only in her relation to her religion, made from a different mold from the liberal secular woman. As the pitfalls of relativism lie in the assumption of fundamentally different cultures and civilizations in my view, I am concerned that in the feminist narratives *Muhajirat*'s liberation can only be envisaged vis-à-vis their rejection of the West where they could not freely adhere to the traditional gender norms due to such obstacles as Western mainstream feminism.<sup>153</sup> In other words, if the second feminist narrative is taken to its logical extreme, what may be agency for *Muhajirat* women is the negation of

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<sup>151</sup> Haideh Moghissi, *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism: The Limits of Postmodern Analysis* (London; New York: Zed Books, 1999).

<sup>152</sup> Zine, "Engagement," 16.

<sup>153</sup> Speckhard and Ellenberg, "Allure," 6; Spencer, "Hidden Face," 81.

agency for Western women, because there is an essential difference between Muslim women and Western women. That their relative feminist agency according to their feminism can be so easily acknowledged implies that the Muslim women who in fact originated from the same Western countries, owing to their allegiance to Islam, cannot but hold different ideas about what counts as liberation and empowerment. The novel feminist agency bestowed upon the *Muhajirat*, then, is a conditional one that can imagine a limited kind of feminism for these Muslim women only insofar as they remain categorically separated from the West, a champion of a more mature liberal feminism for all – except the ones rejecting it.

### **Chapter 3. Reframing the Lens: The Neo-Orientalist Fallacy of Muslim Women's Agency**

#### **The Ascendancy of Neo-Orientalism**

After the attacks of September 11, 2001, what might be called neo-Orientalism emerged in North America and its allies in Western Europe.<sup>154</sup> While it draws on the well-established tropes of Orientalism such as fear of the barbaric other and the civilizing mission – in the case of the US, spreading democracy – the ‘neo’ dynamism in neo-Orientalism is characterized by a hyper-focus on the Arab and Muslim world that excludes such classically important Oriental destinations as India and Turkey.<sup>155</sup> Whereas classical Orientalism justified colonialism, neo-Orientalism came to the service of US imperialist designs in Middle East. The central neo-imperial project underpinning the new kind of Orientalism is the United States-led War on Terror, a modern form of crusade waged by the US and its allies against the Muslim terrorists in the Middle East.<sup>156</sup> The liberation of Muslim women from oppressive Muslim regimes remains a powerful rationale to justify the US invasions in much the same way Egyptian women's veiling and gender

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<sup>154</sup> Mubarak Altawaiji, "Neo-Orientalism and the Neo-Imperialism Thesis: Post-9/11 US and Arab World Relationship," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (2014): 314; Abu-Lughod, *Saving*, 30-32.

<sup>155</sup> Altawaiji, "Neo-Orientalism," 314.

<sup>156</sup> Altawaiji, "Neo-Orientalism," 316.

segregation justified the British colonialism two centuries ago.<sup>157</sup> Indeed, as Zine notes, the gender politics of neo-Orientalism in many ways reproduce the classic Orientalist figure of barbaric Muslim men and victimized Muslim women with no agency.<sup>158</sup> As Khalid shows in her analysis of the US military's Hollywood style rescue of Jessica Lynch, the Muslim men's barbarism was also juxtaposed with and thus highlighted by the figure of a white woman through whom the US could manifest the desirable masculinity.<sup>159</sup> However, I contend that another novel aspect of neo-Orientalism can be found in the new, more sophisticated gender politics headed by outspoken women, whose voices are technologically amplified across the Atlantic by the mass media including mass market books and televisions.

On November 17, 2001, Laura Bush made a radio address on the need to liberate the burqa-clad and oppressed Afghanistan women from the hands of Muslim men. As Abu-Lughod summarizes, the moment marks an important historical juncture where women's voice began to be mobilized to justify the neo-Orientalist imperial project with vigor unmatched by the relatively marginal place

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<sup>157</sup> Zine, "Engagement," 8; Saba Mahmood, "Feminism, Democracy, and Empire: Islam and the War of Terror," in *Women Studies on the Edge*, edited by Joan W. Scott (Duke University Press, 2008), 99.

<sup>158</sup> Zine, "Engagement," 8-10.

<sup>159</sup> Khalid, "representations."



of Western feminists in European colonialism.<sup>160</sup> At the time, the images of burqa-clad Afghanistan women were also proliferating the Western media and providing justification for the US 'liberation' of Afghanistan.<sup>161</sup> Although some feminists were suspicious of the Bush administration's adoption of feminist rhetoric, other US feminist groups such as Feminist Majority Foundation supported the Bush regime's war in the Middle East according to the same civilizing rhetoric, reminiscent of the colonial collusion of feminism with imperialism.<sup>162</sup> That Afghan women had been working for women's empowerment through their own organizations such as Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) was conveniently ignored or politely not mentioned, as their presence did not serve the US interests of constructing a neo-Orientalist dichotomy.<sup>163</sup> While the Western feminist participation in the imperial projects is not new, I contend that a truly new figure of liberated Muslim women *qua* native informants should be seen as a central feature in neo-Orientalism's gender politics. Another group of Muslim women in the shadows of the neo-Orientalist spotlight on the native

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<sup>160</sup> Abu-Lughod, *Saving*, 32.

<sup>161</sup> Christina Ho, "Responding To Orientalist Feminism: Women's Rights and the War on Terror," *Australian Feminist Studies Volume* 25, no. 66 (2010): 432.

<sup>162</sup> Yasmin Jiwani, "Gendering Terror: Representations of the Orientalized Body in Quebec's Post-September 11 English-language Press," *Critique* 13, no. 3 (2004): 282-284.

<sup>163</sup> Khalid, "representations," 24.

informants are the veiled Muslim women in the West, who now signify a symbolic and material security threat at home. By juxtaposing the two female Muslim figures, I intend to show that the agency bestowed on these liberated Muslim women *qua* native informants is contingent upon the guaranteed continuation of the hostile dichotomy between West and Islam, symbolized by the body of veiled Western Muslim women who are now legitimate targets of state counterterrorism and surveillance.

### **A New Chapter in Gendered Orientalism: Native Informants and Homegrown Threats**

With the rise of neo-Orientalism, a new class of women emerged who identified themselves as indigenous Muslims, now liberated and living in a Western country where they have found safe haven. Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a Somali-born author now living in the US, made a lucrative career out of denouncing Islam as the cause of women's oppression.<sup>164</sup> She presents herself as a emancipated woman and an authoritative native informant who bravely escaped the confines of her religion – Islam.<sup>165</sup> Her books became bestsellers in North America and Western Europe, while she was warmly embraced by powerful conservative politicians who saw in

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<sup>164</sup> Abu-Lughod, *Saving*, 88.

<sup>165</sup> Abu-Lughod, *Saving*, 19.

Ali a sophisticated tool to justify the denunciation of Islam.<sup>166</sup> According to Saba Mahmood, the authors of this genre effectively perform a quasi-official function to justify the civilization confrontation between Islam and the West.<sup>167</sup> Rokhsana Bahramitash, levelled a similar criticism at the self-proclaimed indigenous feminists whose personal experiences under Islam lend an aura of truth to their portrayals of Islam as primitive, misogynist, and profoundly anti-Western.<sup>168</sup> Bahramitash, for example, analyses the Iranian author Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003) – a chronicle detailing her life in Tehran under the Islamic Republic of Iran – and finds that Nafisi's biased upper-middle class view of the *hijab* does not reflect the realities of the lower class women, whose view on veiling is probably different from Nafisi's.<sup>169</sup> Among these group of native informant celebrities, the dissident Muslim journalist Irshad Maji's *The Trouble with Islam* (2003) is a more explicitly Islamophobic text which nevertheless has been recommended by Western conservative politicians and sold well worldwide.<sup>170</sup> Perhaps not surprisingly, they find readership in feminist circles who celebrate the

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<sup>166</sup> Abu-Lughod, *Saving*, 88; Saba Mahmood, "Feminism, Democracy, and Empire: Islam and the War of Terror," in *Women Studies on the Edge*, edited by Joan W. Scott (Duke University Press, 2008), 102-103.

<sup>167</sup> Mahmood, "Feminism," 99.

<sup>168</sup> Bahramitash, "Terror," 227.

<sup>169</sup> Bahramitash, "Terror," 230-232.

<sup>170</sup> Zine, "Engagement," 4.

brave journeys made by these women while not paying sufficient attention to the political implication of these books for the Muslims living in the US and other Western countries.<sup>171</sup> In an ironic turn of events, the feminist hermeneutic tool of listening to the woman / victim enables the formerly oppressed Muslim women to become authentic sources of Islam's backwardness and its harsh treatment of women, lending legitimacy to War on Terror discourse. Serving as indisputable evidence of Muslim backwardness, they are allowed the right to Orientalize oneself.<sup>172</sup> In this sense, their agency is not denied – their unveiling, both figurative and real, their physical and very public presence, and their confirmation of a familiar worldview of Western superiority all bestow them with the kind of agency on the right side of history. In other words, their one-way agency resides in their decision to take off the veil and testify against the Islam on the side of the West, but not the other way around.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> Mahmood, "Feminism," 99.

<sup>172</sup> In a similar twist of identity politics, sexual minorities in North America are co-opted in constructing the civilization divide between the West and Islam, by reinforcing the perception that Islam persecutes sexual minorities. For a detailed discussion on the theoretical concept of homonationalism, see Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblage : Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Duke University Press, 2017).

<sup>173</sup> As the agency of the Muslim women who acted as native informants was never questioned in the media, it is worth mentioning that the Yazidi women who took up weapons to fight against ISIS in a 'good cause' were endowed with exaggerated agency (Jacoby, "Jihadi Brides," 536).

In these narratives, the history of the Western foreign policies that have contributed to the rise of oppressive regimes in the Middle East is not mentioned.<sup>174</sup> Likewise, the political and economic aspects of neo-Orientalism that facilitate the US military operations in the Middle East around the Gulf countries are left out of the picture.<sup>175</sup> Unsurprisingly, the military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq that were supposed to ‘save’ women have led instead to increasingly worse situations for women.<sup>176</sup> At home soil, too, the War on Terror increased physical and verbal threats directed against Muslim citizens in the aftermath of post-9/11 – suggesting that, perhaps, those who are visibly Muslim – such as veiled women – were never the ones to be protected in the war on terror in the first place.<sup>177</sup> Therefore, on the other side of the spectrum of Muslim women in neo-Orientalist representation are the veiled Muslim women at home who now represent threat to the West, physically and metaphorically. As the burqa debate across Europe in the 21st century has shown, veil is now equated by some with terrorism and profoundly

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<sup>174</sup> Fauzia Ahmad, “GREAT BRITAIN THE 7/7 LONDON BOMBINGS AND BRITISH MUSLIM WOMEN: Media Representations, Mediated Realities,” in *Muslim Women in War and Crisis: Representation and Reality*, ed. Faegheh Shirazi (University of Texas Press, 2010), 250.

<sup>175</sup> Altawaiji, “Neo-Orientalism,” 320.

<sup>176</sup> Khalid, “representations,” 28.

<sup>177</sup> Ho, “Orientalist Feminism,” 436.

anti-Western way of life.<sup>178</sup> Interestingly, in the case of "Burkini," a modest swimming suit bearing little resemblance to the extensive cover of burqa, the French local authorities debated on banning the garment despite the fact that it can hardly pose any threat to the public, with no room for concealing weapons, for example.<sup>179</sup> The ludicrous incident shows that the veiled bodies of Muslim women exist on the same plane of Western imagination that casts them as the ultimate Other and a threat to European/Western values. Many of the women considering wearing them already had citizenship in the country, but they were seen as fundamentally the same problem as refugee women who refused to take off their veil in that they were Muslim women.<sup>180</sup> In these discussions, the wearing of the veil was used as a measure of how much each Muslim woman adapted and assimilated to the society.<sup>181</sup>

It is also possible to analyze that Muslim women were not considered the real threat itself, given that although it is a visual symbol of the threat, Muslim

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<sup>178</sup> Piela, *Niqab*, 16.

<sup>179</sup> Brian J Bowe, Joe Gosen, and Shahira Fahmy, "Personal Choice or Political Provocation: Examining the Visual Framing and Stereotyping of the Burkini Debate," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 96, no. 4 (2019), 1076-1080.

<sup>180</sup> Bowe, Gosen, and Fahmy, "Burkini," 1093.

<sup>181</sup> Julian Petley and Robin Richardson, eds., *Pointing the Finger: Islam and Muslims in the British Media* (Oneworld Publications, 2011), loc.225.

women are still objects that can be condemned and suppressed through private sanctions on the streets – it is in relation to ‘their men’ that Muslim women’s bodies are to be put under surveillance.<sup>182</sup> Western Muslim women as a new security threat seems to signal a shift from the representation of victimized Muslim women in classic and neo-Orientalism. It can be said that they are acknowledged as legitimate agents of violent, threatening enough to be subjects of policy interventions. However, even the figure of male Muslim terrorists are portrayed as irrational and fanatical, and this undermines their political agency; as the Muslim women are gradually accepted as security threats, their agency in violence is acknowledged, but it is likely to be the one similar to the partial agency allowed to their male counterparts.<sup>183</sup>

### **The Limits of Muslim Women’s Newfound Agency**

As both classic and neo-Orientalism justify themselves through the figure of victimized Muslim women, the two categories of veiled terrorists and inadvertent feminists examined in Chapter 2 are a relatively new and even progressive attempt to understand the *Muhajirat* and their agency in more realistic terms. However,

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<sup>182</sup> Petley and Richardson, *Pointing*, loc.158-160.

<sup>183</sup> Jiwani, "Gendering Terror," 284.

even when the violent agency of the *Muhajirat* is acknowledged in the narrative of veiled terrorists, it must be viewed within the context of neo-Orientalist securitization in the Western world. In the above section, I have argued that the veil, a symbol of female oppression in classic Orientalism, has become of a marker of a perceived threat from Muslim women to Western civilization and Western societies, with the example of burkini as evidence of the public paranoia about Muslim women's garment. In addition, counterterrorism strategies in the UK and the US are now targeting the veiled Muslim women as potential agents of violence.<sup>184</sup> While Shapiro and Maras' analysis of radicalization of the *Muhajirat* examined in Chapter 2 seriously acknowledges the violent agency of the Muslim women, then, it is a double-edged sword that urges a tighter securitization at home suggesting that veiled women are potential candidates for radicalization and terrorist attacks.<sup>185</sup> The veiled terrorists narrative, therefore, can be said to parallel the neo-Orientalist War on Terror against the Muslim populations at home in the West.

The third category of inadvertent feminists examined in Chapter 2 represents a seemingly progressive attempt to find a logically feminist explanation of why some Western born Muslims joined ISIS, acknowledging the women's

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<sup>184</sup> Moaveni, *Guest House*, 274.

<sup>185</sup> Shapiro and Maras, "Radicalization," 89.



ability to pursue their own gendered interests and not dismissing their own accounts of the ISIS's appeal. However, the relativist notion of feminism in this category of narratives presupposes that there is a fundamental cultural divide between Muslim women and Western values, even when the Muslim women were born and raised in the West. As Kneip argued, the *Muhajirat*'s (misguided) feminist agency is found in performing their gendered religious duties that are fundamentally different from the Western ideas of female empowerment.<sup>186</sup> I suggest that while the relativist tolerance allows for a partial agency on the part of the *Muhajirat*, it fails to challenge the neo-Orientalist divide between the West and Islam. The claim that a domesticated lifestyle can be a form of female empowerment for the Muslim women originating from Western countries<sup>187</sup> rings particularly hollow when juxtaposed with the celebration of native informants such as Hirsi Ali and Nafisi whose feminist agency was built on precisely making the claim that Islam has fixed and backward gender roles for women.<sup>188</sup> In other words, the feminist narrative confers agency on the *Muahjirat* by playing into the neo-Orientalist fallacy of naturally existing civilizational and cultural divide between the West and Islam, not to mention that it equates the ISIS interpretation of Islam with the essence of Islam's gender politics and thus inadvertently perpetuating the image of Muslim

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<sup>186</sup> Kneip, "Female Jihad," 88.

<sup>187</sup> Fraihi, "Future," 28.

<sup>188</sup> Abu-Lughod, *Saving*, 19.

backwardness that is the central component of neo-Orientalism. The limits of Muslim women's newfound agency in the two narratives, then, are drawn when they are either positioned as a threat to the West or as an irreconcilable feminist comrade on the other side of the civilizational divide. Within the neo-Orientalist paradigm, the problematic figure of Western Muslim woman who joined an anti-Western group can finally be tamed by being allowed to become terrorist or feminist agents with half agency.

## Conclusion

In this essay, I examined the academic narratives on the *Muhajirat* in a bid to find possibly new understandings of Muslim women's agency. Situating myself in the scholarship of postcolonial feminist studies, I based my critical analysis on the insights afforded by the lens of gendered Orientalism. To briefly introduce my understanding of gendered Orientalism, I outlined the history of gender politics in modern Orientalism and examined the Western Orientalist representation of Muslim women's agency. Then I introduced three categories of victims, terrorists, and feminists in academic narratives on the *Muhajirat* and critically reviewed literature in each category. The latter two categories seemed to depart from the previous Orientalist representation of victimized Muslim women, holding progressive potentials for representation of Muslim women's agency. However, juxtaposed with the neo-Orientalist War on Terror and the increasing securitization against Muslim populations in the Western world, I found that the two narratives could confer limited agency on the *Muhajirat* only when these women were understood as the ultimate 'Other' of the West.

Muslim women's veil continues to be politicized as a visual symbol of total denial of the Western secularity and its values, newly embodying the image of a terrorist who poses a security threat. This essay has aimed to throw light upon the new figure of Muslim women as agents in an attempt to caution against

the neo-Orientalist fallacy of conditional agency that can only be sustained in the Manichean dichotomy of Us versus Them. One of the more obvious limitations of this essay is only using materials in English when Francophone articles on the debate happening within France would have yielded more insight into the securitization symbolized by the controversy over burqini. Another limitation is not exploring the religious agency of the *Muhajirat* more seriously, despite the fact that it may offer a vantage point from which to critically deconstruct the dichotomy of West and East (Islam). Hopefully, in the future, a more extensive critical analysis of violent Muslim women will offer make clearer the workings of neo-Orientalist gender politics across the Western world. Simultaneously, the value of religious agency as an alternative to the Western conception of agency will have to be actively debated in postcolonial feminist studies and religious studies.

I suggest that a productive course of action may be found by listening to the voice of many Western Muslim women who are using their voices to challenge the stereotypes and Islamophobia through advanced technology in a true demonstration of their resilience and agency.<sup>189</sup> In addition, I would like to urge individuals to recognize numerous cognitive pitfalls in the representation of

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<sup>189</sup> Omar Sacirbey, "UNITED STATES IMAGES OF MUSLIM WOMEN IN POST-9/11 AMERICA," in *Muslim Women in War and Crisis: Representation and Reality*, edited by Faegheh Shirazi (University of Texas Press, 2010): 271.

gender, race, and religious identity regarding ISIS and other media hyperboles making international headlines. Finally, tackling the unsustainable dichotomy of good and evil is a long-term project aiming for no less than a paradigm shift in our perceptions of the East and the West, and the modernity. It is the very Others who are best equipped to lead this change, as their magnified existence once serving the dichotomy can in turn pose the greatest challenge to the false divide and begin to unbuild it.

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## 요약(국문초록)

본 논문은 이라크 시리아 이슬람 국가(Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, ISIS)에 가담한 서구 출신 무슬림 여성에 대한 학술적 연구에서 드러나는 무슬림 여성의 주체성(agency)에 대한 이해를 비판적 담론 분석을 통해 점검한다.

ISIS는 2014년에 진정한 이슬람 국가를 참칭했으며, 이후 수백 명에 달하는 서구 출신의 무슬림 여성들이 서유럽과 북미에 있는 본국을 떠나 ISIS 치하의 영토로 이주하였다. 서구의 미디어와 테러 연구자들은 이 전례 없는 현상에 주목했으며, 후자의 경우 해당 여성들의 가담 동기에 대한 학문적 설명을 제시하였다. 본 논문은 이러한 학문적 설명들이 무슬림 여성을 피해자로 보는 오리엔탈리즘적 사고와 질적 차이를 보이는지 탐구한다. 비판적 선행연구 분석을 통해 본 논문은 ISIS에 가담한 무슬림 여성들의 동기를 설명하는 세 가지 유형의 내러티브 중 ‘테러리스트’와 ‘페미니스트’ 유형에서 무슬림 여성의 주체성이 긍정되는 것을 발견했으며, 이러한 시각이 무슬림 여성을 피해자로 고착화하는 기존 오리엔탈리즘의 한계를 넘어설 수 있는 잠재성을 가진다고 보았다. 그러나 동시에 두 가지의 내러티브 모두 무슬림 여성을 궁극적으로 서구의 타자로 상정한다는 점에서 9/11 사건 이후 미국을 필두로 한 ‘테러와의 전쟁’과 함께 부상한 신오리엔탈리즘(Neo-Orientalism)에서 드러나는 서구 대 이슬람의 구도를 재생산하는 한계를 가진다는 주장을 제시하였다.

본 논문은 새로운 유형의 오리엔탈리즘이 부상하는 맥락에서 무슬림 여성의 주체성 재현 또한 변화하고 있는 현상을 비판적으로 분석하였다는 의의를 가진다. 또한 테러리스트 혹은 페미니스트로 대변되는 무슬림 여성의 새로운 주체성이 향후 탈식민주의 페미니즘의 시각으로 더욱 비판적으로 접근되어야 한다는 결론을 제시한다.

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주요어 : ISIS, 무하지라트, 오리엔탈리즘, 페미니즘, 주체성

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