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# WHOSE NIQAB IS THIS? Challenging, Creating and Communicating Female Muslim Identity via Social Media

GORDON ALLEY-YOUNG\*

The 2010 annual report of the US State Department on Human Rights reported a rising bias towards Muslims in Europe (US State Department, 2010) while France, Germany, Belgium and Switzerland enact laws restricting religious dress and/or mosques. Despite this bias, Gallup reports that 77% of UK Muslims identify with their country versus only 50% of the general public (BBC News, 2009). North American Muslims face similar challenges. US news reports of mosque building or expansion draw vocal opposition like that expressed about an Islamic Cultural Center opened near Ground Zero in New York City. US reality series *All American Muslim* lasted one season due to vocal opposition and a loss of sponsors. In Canada, the sitcom *Little Mosque on the Prairie* has gained an online following because it dramatizes the challenges and biases faced by Muslims in a small Canadian Prairie town. Faced with increasing bias and imperfect representations in the mainstream media Muslims are increasingly using social networks to build community and to regain control of representing their faith and their lives.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

History documents popular representations of Muslims from the time of the crusades though earlier representations likely exist (Hillen-brand, 2000). Qumsiyeh (1998) argues that three stereotypes summarize popular representations of Muslims as bombers, belly dancers or billio-naires. There is research that both confirms and exceeds Qum-siyeh's (1998) view. To focus the discussion this chapter considers three significant points in recent modern history that inform much of the current scholarship on Muslim popular representation: the publication of *Orientalism* by Saïd (1979), research pre and post 9/11 and the Arab Spring.

A key work in the study of popular representations of the East is Saïd's (1979) book *Orientalism*. Saïd argues that the West originally viewed the East based upon limited experiences and Western academic writings from the nineteenth to twentieth centuries.

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Called Orientalism this perspective views the East, its peoples and countries, as the opposite of the West and thus needing the control of Western colonizers. Saïd (1979) argues that Orientalism views the West as the mind, the birthplace of democracy, knowledge and logic and the East as the opposite.

Researchers use Orientalism as a lens when analyzing news reports on Turkey joining the European Union (Aissaoui, 2007), the political implications for Palestine (Rizvi & Lingard, 2006) and attitudes in Hollywood film (Konzett, 2004). Saïd (1979) however is not without his critics. The most popular critique is that Saïd (1979) overlooks Western approaches to the East that do not fall into Orientalism like the work that was done by Western academics to uncover, preserve and study the history of Egypt (Lewis, 1993). Such critique does not negate Saïd's (1979) importance but it reminds us to use his theory in concert with other perspectives.

Pre 9/11 literature as early as 1996 argues that Muslims are going online en masse to find community and challenge stereotypes such as after the Oklahoma City bombing when Muslims were first blamed (Bastani, 2000; Marquand, 1996). Post 9/11 studies examine the distortion and sensationalism surrounding Muslims in the news as a force that compels Muslims to go online to debate and contradict such representations in North America and Europe (Hallak & Quina, 2004; Harb & Bessaïso, 2006; Jackson, 2010; Macgilchrist & Böhmig, 2012; Sharify-Funk, 2009; Siapera, 2006). Post 9/11 studies explore how social media use can both defame and reclaim Muslim identity. Barr (2010) and Banks (2011) examine the negative online campaign labeling US President Barack Obama a Muslim and Citron & Norton (2011) cite the use of anti-Muslim videos on YouTube. Research also argues that social media facilitates communication between Muslims around the world by eliminating communication barriers between the sexes and initiating business and cultural dialogues (Brouwer, 2004; Harris, 2008; Piela, 2010; Sands, 2010; Tarlo, 2010). El-Nawawy (2010) argues that a collective identity is emerging in the Arab World. This appears to foreshadow the Arab Spring and highlight the events leading up to it.

The Arab Spring starts on December 18, 2010 after Tunisian Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire after his fruit cart, his livelihood, is confiscated (Fahim, 2011). Massive unemployment and poverty touched off an increase in Egyptian suicides in September 2010 (Cook, 2011). Signs foretelling the Arab Spring include the Iranian election protests of June 20, 2009 during which 26-year-old Neda Agha-Soltan died from a sniper's bullet to the chest. Video of Agha-Soltan's death traveled around the world via social media. Iranian authorities restricted memorials to Agha-Soltan, controlled the release of her body and tried to claim her death was a hoax and a Western plot (Farber, 2009; Thomas, 2010). Agha-Soltan became the face of a struggling Arab World and her story spurred talk of revolution. In March 2008 bloggers shaped the outcome of the election in predominantly Muslim (though not Arab) Malaysia; some proclaim them to be the thought leaders of a new generation (Subramaniam, 2011).

Sky (2011) argues that Facebook, Twitter and feelings of powerlessness feed Pan-Arabism. The head of social media at Al Jazeera, Riyaad Minty, argues that social

media brings news to people in a way that is particularly human (Houndshell, 2011). Indeed Agha-Soltan and Bouazizi became an everywoman and everyman through social media as people posted their pictures and proclaimed We are Neda. Social media has created an army of citizen journalists who report what their government will not allow the world to see. Ironically, the same technological revolution that increased unemployment and thus discontent in the Arab World is also channeling the Arab World's messages and images of discontent (Aoudé, 2011).

Some question whether democratic change in the Arab Spring countries will continue and help to balance extremist perspectives from the region (Kaye & Wehrey, 2011). Others ask what role the US will or should play in reshaping the region (Aoudé, 2011). Whatever the political outcomes in the region the events of the Arab Spring tell us that the conflict will be as much about politics as it will be over who wields the power to communicate to the masses via social media. Representation will never be completely resolved as identity labels such as Muslim and woman are always in flux as floating signifiers (Hall, 1989 & 1997 a & b). Cook (2011) argues that as politically connected religious groups compete for power that popular representations of the Arab World and Muslims will narrow in focus (Cook, 2011). After the Arab Spring, specifically the increased awareness and collective consciousness facilitated by social media, it is difficult to conceive of a world where the power to represent rests only in the hands of the elite.

## **RATIONALE**

Recent research examines how Muslim women in business are using social media to reach target consumers, especially other Muslim women (Tarlo, 2010). Research on how Muslims use social media to change their popular representations specifically identifies women as a group leading this charge (Bastani, 2000). Piela (2010) argues that social media gives Muslim women a forum where they can discuss gender relations. Similarly, Harris (2008) argues that social media facilitates Muslim women's communication by helping to deconstruct cultural barriers that keep unrelated men and women from talking to each other (i.e., social media allows anonymity). Ongoing analyses of social media attest to the presence of Muslim women from Neda Agha-Soltan to anonymous women citizen-journalists, bloggers and activists who are helping to forge new representations of Muslims during a time of great cultural change. Given the increased public voice of Muslim women via social media, this chapter focuses on three questions: (1) What popular identity representations of the Muslim woman are emerging via social media? (2) What role do social media play in the construction of these representations? (3) What are the socio-cultural implications of these representations?

This chapter focuses on analyzing the ideology and implications of three specific representations of the Muslim woman popularized via social media: (1) the cultural outlaw, (2) the good Muslim sister and (3) the Western fantasy. This research has complications. First, a male researcher will not gain access to password protected and gender segregated social media. Second, the anonymity that Harris (2008) says

facilitates Muslim women's online communication means the social media researcher cannot completely know if the individual behind a representation is a Muslim and/or a woman (e.g., A Gay Girl in Damascus blog). This analysis aims to examine the implications of representations of Muslim women but does not assume or authenticate that Muslim women always create these representations. Finally, this chapter is not an exhaustive study but instead focuses on three prevalent representations that speak to a specific nexus of gender, culture and faith. The texts analyzed in this chapter include both written (e.g., responses, discussions and descriptions) and video texts from a variety of social media sites (e.g., Islamicity.com, YouTube.com, A Gay Girl in Damascus).

## METHODOLOGY

Robert Scholes' (1985) method of textual power argues that in reading the content of texts we have the ability to expose and critique social structures of power and privilege. Scholes (1985, p. xi) argues, "Texts are places where power and weakness become visible and discussable, where learning and ignorance manifest themselves, where the structures that enable and constrain our thoughts and actions become palpable." This method enables this study to explore beyond the level of written language to identify and analyze the structures that underlie the written work. Doing this allows one to consider the effect of a representation to reinforce, challenge, change, or ignore existing structures and discourses of power at work in society. The method involves three interrelated and overlapping tasks of reading, interpretation and criticism.

The reader needs to know the generic and cultural codes and symbols from which a text is constructed. Reading recognizes that there is a gap that occurs whenever we use codes and symbols (e.g., language, images) because their meanings reside in people's minds. It is the job of the reader to supply this meaning by articulating the codes that are used and to what effect. The reader will identify the genre of a piece and talk about the context in which a piece was constructed. This study establishes some of this context in the introduction and literature review that precedes this discussion. We must recognize how social context imbues a text with meaning. Therefore, by reading a short YouTube.com video one is reading its codes/symbols as well as its social context. Reading is also concerned with unusual and/or obvious symbol choices and asks why one chooses and uses them.

When interpreting the text the interpreter needs to be able to extract underlying meanings. Scholes (1985, p. 22) argues, "It is the feeling of incompleteness on the reader's part that activates the interpretive process." Interpretation is thus the active search for a non-obvious or obscured level of meaning (e.g., unsaid, implied and repressed). In performing interpretation, the researcher is considering what the content, that is read in the first stage, means in terms of social structure. Part of interpretation involves identifying repetitions and/or oppositions in the text and asking what these represent. The interpretation stage also asks what is missing from the text.

The criticism stage requires taking a critical standpoint to deconstruct the symbols/codes from which a text is constructed. Scholes (1985, p. 23) argues, "Any group [...] can mount a critical attack on a story's codes and themes from the position of its own system of values." Criticism in this study does not speak for Muslim women but filters these texts through critical perspectives and writings on culture, gender and identity. Bowman and Kirstenberg (1992) argue that textual power allows the marginalized to comment on oppressive structures. Critique exposes texts that can, "change the ways we think and live" (Pollock, 1992, p. 60).

## RESULTS

The author of this study was an online non-participant observer and he identifies as a non-Muslim and a Communication scholar with a critical perspective on gender, culture and identity. This chapter focuses on analyzing the ideology and implications of three representations of the Muslim woman popularized via social media: (1) the cultural outlaw, (2) the good Muslim sister and (3) the Western fantasy. This study is qualitative and does not claim that these three themes are exhaustive. In the sections that follow these representations are read, interpreted and criticized after which the potential for spurring future research is explored.

### The Cultural Outlaw

To protest the French niqab-ban (enacted April 11, 2011) two Muslim women, Communication and Political Science students in their twenties, donned veils, miniskirts and high heels and took to Paris streets as the Niqabitches. The video went viral and played to the song Hey Fuck You by the Beastie Boys. In it, they pose in front of Socialist Party Headquarters, the Ministry of Defense and the Prime Minister's Center for Strategic Analysis. Countless passersby take cell phone photos. A man yells, "That's great, strike a pose," while another says, "It takes things like that" and gives them a thumbs up. Sanitation workers pose and take pictures with the women. While standing outside the Ministry of Immigration and National Identity in Paris two police officers approach the women. The male officer tells them they need to move along and when the Niqabitches ask if they are doing anything wrong, he is uncertain. The female officer asks if they are protesting the niqab-ban. They reply, "Yes, we want to defuse the situation," to which the female officer replies "Super, can I take a picture?" The Niqabitches opened Facebook/Twitter accounts, their video went viral and the press covered them.

The Niqabitches are cultural outlaws for opposing the law through performance that blends the sacred and the profane to engage politics, sexuality, women's and religious rights. The Niqabitches also speak out against one establishment (e.g., The French Republic) without being co-opted by another (e.g., Islam). Their message does not fix on one meaning. Even by claiming to advocate for women's choice they face opposition. One opponent writes online:

*were was there mind when they did that, ok , i see they r trying to change the culture ... allah asked us to cover our body , but allow for us to show our face, and leave it as a choice if we want to cover it too. i felt shy while i was watching this*

The Niqabitches are mentioned alongside Princess Hijab who paints hijabs on Paris billboards.

Moors (2011) argues that Princess Hijab rejects all labels claiming to be just an artist thus distinguishing her from the political Niqabitches. The Niqabitches also defy easy definition. They are not like other good Muslim sisters who reverently wear veils to challenge the law nor do they completely decry the veil. They stand culturally outside these and other standpoints. Instead of accepting negative interpretations and condemnations by respondents, the women privilege the lighter aspects of their performance with the effect of keeping the meaning of their work from being fixed in any one way. In an online posting about their performance the Niqabitches write, “Isn’t it better to LOL while making a statement?” (Moors, 2011).

Miniskirts and veils are politically charged symbols in France. A controversial 2008 French film called Skirt Day dramatizes the harassment that students and faculty face from religious conservatives for wearing skirts. Some French schools recognize a Skirt Day or participate in an awareness campaign called The Spring of the Skirt and Respect as a way to fight sexual harassment. Likewise, this is not the first time a veil has created a controversy for the French. In colonial Algeria, French attempts to abolish veiling made the veil a sign of cultural resistance and camouflage for resistance fighters who helped win Algeria’s independence from France in 1962 (Fanon, 1967). Fanon (1967, p. 44) argues, “The European faced with [a veiled] Algerian woman wants to see [behind the veil].” Fanon’s (1967) speaks to a French desire to possess the Algerian women’s body if only in the scope of the gaze. The current niqab law in France has similarly evoked criticism that the French government is controlling women’s bodies.

The Niqabitches are both critical of objectification and humorous about it. They reply to Facebook critics who say they are getting attention with sex appeal writing, “C’mom, do you think [...] TIME would talk about us if it was all about the legs? We are very concerned about this issue. Stop dissing us or we will stop shaving to make you have nightmares (evil voice) Mwaahahaha.” Clearly, they reject the law. Yet they also use humor to keep their performance message from becoming focused on one aspect (e.g., objectification) when they engage a much broader set of issues (e.g., choice, identity, politics, religion, femininity, satire, performance).

Butler (1993) argues that we realize gender by repeatedly performing the same script and actions. With Butler (1993) one could argue that social media helps to disrupt the repeating script of the Niqabitches performance. Critics reframe the performance like the Zone d’Expression Populiste (ZEP) who call the video Neither Whores Nor Doormats and attach a disclaimer:

*This is a parody of the official NiqaBitch video. The video from NiqaBitch is insulting towards the French troops fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan, the French senators who have voted the niqab-ban in the streets of France and the Muslim women forced to wear the niqab and the burka against their will, and is an apology of the sharia and does not convey our statements Thank you (Moors, 2011).*

The ZEP changes the video's soundtrack to Collette Renard's *Les Nuits D'une Demoiselle*, a song that euphemistically celebrates sexual acts, thus giving the Niqabitches a different significance. Each time the performance is reframed like this the range of meanings grows.

Lloyd (1999) argues that Butler's theory of gender performativity overlooks how environment and participants give a performance meaning. The Niqabitches' performance has a different significance now that it is illegal under French law. Similarly, when the performance is participated in, viewed (or blocked), in environments like Iran where the chador is required of all women in public, the performance takes on a new significance. One respondent writes:

The irony of this, girls, is that you'd be stoned or killed or jailed if you wore those hot pants in pretty much any Muslim majority country from Iran to Afghanistan. [...] And wait until you all are forced to wear the niqab in France (Moors, 2011).

This respondent is patronizing to the women (e.g., calling them girls) and generalizes the Arab World into a singular entity but also he/she highlights that the Niqabitches satire is possible because of their cultural privilege; cultural privilege that many other women are denied.

Hall argues that race is a floating signifier because changing social discourse leaves the meaning of race open (Hall, 1989 & 1997 a & b). Gender, religion and sexuality are open in the Niqabitches' performance as parodies of the performance and online respondents challenge these meanings. For instance, some read them as men in woman's clothes like one respondent does by writing, "one question: r they real women or shaved men? coz my stupid friend beside me here believes that they r real women !" The Niqabitches quickly assert their sex. Others do not want to fix their sexual identity. One writes, "who care if they are women or men? ... My great respect and full support to them no matter if they are men or women." The meaning of their sex floats openly as signified by comments like this and by comments of other respondents that the Niqabitches do not fit their definition woman by not being GOOD WOMEN or good Muslim women. These comments are relevant to the discussion of The Good Muslim Sister.

The cultural outlaw representation speaks to performances that allow for multiple readings and that challenge social multiple social orders and established standpoints at once (e.g., The Republic, Islam, and Western Feminism). This identity is, if not made possible, then is facilitated through the respondents varying participation in social media in ways that performers do and do not intend. Van House (2011) argues that social media shapes identity performance by presenting us with identity categories in

our profiles and by requiring communication, that is short and attention catching. Therefore, when the Niqabitches respond to their own performance or to other respondents comments online they write in attention catching, flippant or meaning rich ways. This perhaps is a result of working with a media that values brevity and creating user interest. Conversely, their responses shape the countless ways they are read by respondents as men or women, gay or straight, Muslim or Christian, feminists or niqab apologists.

One critique of the cultural outlaw is that they distract us from others' rights struggles like the Arab Spring and social media is aiding them in creating this distraction. Others would argue that the two are one in the same in that they both fight oppression. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to resolve this issue neatly and some would argue not an issue for a non-Muslim, Canadian born academic to resolve. What is clear is that the ultimate point of the Niquabitches performance, like that of the Arab Spring, is just beginning to be understood, by no means resolved and is continuing to be written in ways that challenge linear thinking.

### **The Good Muslim Sister**

A non-Muslim reading Muslim discussion boards will feel some shortcomings. Some sentences in Arabic script appear as photo images rather than as text. Such messages are difficult to decipher with translation software. This could be called gatekeeping, or marking who is part of the in-group by who is able to decipher the messages, both Arabic script and the various English spellings of Arabic words. Is it a way of keeping certain meanings within the Muslim community and away from outsiders? If so, does it also remind Muslims that being a good Muslim sister (or brother) means following the community's example and seeing the different sets of permissions for cultural insiders and outsiders?

Gatekeeping weaves through discussion threads in prescriptions for behavior. For example, discussion board posts across several sites warn Muslims against being, acting or speaking like a kufir (also kufir, kuffar) or a non-believer. One should instead act as a mu'min or a believer (e.g., putting your faith in Allah's law). Postings appeal to a good Muslim sister who avoids kufir dress (e.g., inappropriate or revealing) and kufir social practices (e.g., mixing socially males). In fairness, most cultures prescribe behaviors for good women (Faludi, 1991). Critics argue that Freud's virgin and whore dichotomy defines Western culture's view of women (Nagle, 1997). Dichotomies like these affirm men's power over women because they are not applied to males, not applied with the same strength and/or not bound to men's sexuality. When the author finds respondents debating if a man is kufir it is not because steps outside his prescribed gender role as a good Muslim brother. For example, respondents criticize a man in one thread because he went to the police for help after being cheated rather than first going to the Muslim community.

In contrast, a young Muslim female moving to Britain asks a British Muslim male what his experience in the UK has been like in a YouTube video. The majority of

respondents encourage and reassure her of a safe and easy transition. Though the word *kufir* is not used, the implication is clear in some responses to her that she is not behaving as a good Muslim sister as with one self-identified male respondent who questions her behavior, "Why is an arab sister from youtube messaging a british brother from uk anyway?" The tone of the post suggests that the asker is questioning the woman's status as a good Muslim sister. In keeping with conservative interpretations of Islam, discussion forums like *Islamicity.com* do allow for separate discussion forums for men (brothers) and women (sisters) who prefer sex segregated discussion but there is no rule against opposite sex discussion and this latter type of discussion is common.

*Islamicity.com* allows cross-sex dialogue but prohibits writing about sex. There is a rule against impersonation but site registrants self-identify. How many people are operating within the forums for Muslim sisters who are not women or Muslims? Critics suggest that identity deception is widespread online. An online respondent questions the identity of a fifteen-year-old Londoner who says that she wants to wear the hijab but her parents are against it. Respondents praise her for taking an active role in her faith and even when they disagree with her choice, they affirm her right to choose. Despite an overwhelmingly positive response, one conspicuously asks, "are you bein serious?" Does asking if she is serious mean to question her story, identity, intent (e.g., serious or satire) or all three? The young woman does not respond to the question, nor do others, who accept her identity by continuing to give advice.

She wears the headscarf and the abaya and her mother has told her that she must wait until marriage if she wants to choose the hijab. Her father resists the hijab and teases his daughter, calling her Taliban. She explains, "When it comes to me and my hijab matters [...] he just backs my mum in whatever she says and doesn't really care himself, to tell you the truth." Many respondents write to support the young woman's decision and compliment her faith. One writes, "May Allah reward the sister for trying to practice her deen [faith] to the fullest of her ability." The young woman is praised for being a good Muslim sister when her family disagrees. The family dynamic she describes with her mother setting the rule and her father backing up his wife and even finding humor in the situation is very different from the mainstream media stereotype of the abusive and dictatorial Muslim father (e.g., in Hollywood films like *Not Without My Daughter* and *Towelhead*). Here her mother's word is the law of the family.

Others admit being denied the hijab by parents who fear for their safety. Therefore, while parents are shown objecting to the hijab it is out of fear for their children. Another writes, "I know plenty of girls who want to wear niqab, but they're scared of even suggesting it to their parents." This affirms the young women's family situation where they discuss it openly. Others support both the young woman and her parents. One writes, "It would be quite useful if you had your parents support because inevitably you will face some form of discrimination." This represents the Muslim family as a source of support in the face of discrimination. Another respondent simultaneously supports both the young women's identity and her parents' view:

Think about when you go to college, uni and then work. Have you thought about the niqab and your work place? Don't think I'm dissuading you from the niqab at all, I think its a great thing just trying to make you see your mother's perspective too.

Respondents mediate the conflict between mother and daughter like extended family members. Their comments remind the young women that being a good Muslim sister means having faith but more importantly it means acting with the support and permission of her parents.

The online community comes to the support of a twelve and a thirteen year old that had to leave their French school for wearing the hijab. Words of support and encouragement include, "It's wrong to be punished for your religion☺, but anyone who continues to wear the hijab in french state schools will receive great rewards from allah on judgement day even if inlife they are punished. Peace." Another writes, "The parents of these girls are blessed. They're so young ...but yet so strong. Allah will bless them for their courage." Such support might not be easily found in one's home community. A student writes:

*i believe muslim women have a right to wear hijab. When i was researching this so called law i came across an artical about a muslim girl shaving her head bald because she refused to go to school without her hijab.*

Others ask girls under the niqab-ban to shave their heads in protest and praise news reports of girls who have done this. Such posts celebrate the good Muslim sister as someone who is willing to suffer personal discomfort and challenge parental authority for what she believes.

This theme demonstrates the different facets of the good Muslim sister. Online writings present this identity as positive by reflecting a woman who is strong and self-determining in her faith, in dialogue with her family and community. In other online writings, we see a woman who is or is not a good Muslim sister while she is watched, criticized and reminded of her place by anonymous others. Muslims, like other groups, have firm opinions about what identity practices are acceptable and not. Some online respondents use their opinions of the culture to support those who do not have the social and/or family support to make certain identity choices.

It is problematic when social media users celebrate a woman's personal discomfort (e.g., a shaved head) as a sign of her faith when others might be expected to live up to these online examples. Would efforts be better focused on looking for forms of peaceful protest in which both men and women can join in equally? Those issues might be about women's dress and identity but it affects the entire culture. We cannot know how prevalent these phenomena (e.g., wearing the niqab in the West; shaving one's head) are by studying social media alone. There is the potential for the same story to be inadvertently distorted and become different stories by different tellers on different social media (e.g., how urban legends are created) thus making it seem like there are many more examples of a phenomenon than there actually are (e.g., "I know plenty of girls who want to wear niqab"). Also because discussion boards are fuelled by discussion starters that are dramatic in nature the impetus might be to focus on more

discussable aspects of faith activism. This might mean that we overlook the everyday work done by mainstream faith advocates because this is not as viable a topic for starting a discussion online.

### **The Western Fantasy**

Amina Abdallah Araf al Omari claimed to be a lesbian blogger born in Virginia and raised in both the US and Syria. She realized her sexual orientation at age fifteen, became a devout Muslim, married, divorced and came out at age twenty-six (she kissed another woman for the first time on September 11, 2001) and returned to Syria as an English teacher. Amina joined the uprising protests and became famous as a blogger for the site *A Gay Girl in Damascus*. She claims family connections to the government and the Muslim Brotherhood but identifies with the people protesting in the street and is critical of the Syrian government. In an April 2011 post, called *My Father the Hero*, Amina tells how officers came to arrest her for being a militant/foreign agent. Her father sends them away. The pair goes into hiding.

A cousin reports that Amina has been captured. The world waits with baited breath. The story unravels; no one has ever met Amina. Her picture was taken from a London woman's Facebook account. Defenders say Amina is protecting her identity. Her computer is tracked to Edinburgh, Scotland but bloggers and citizen reporters in Iran regularly bounce their electronic messages off proxy servers in other countries to protect their identity (Thomas, 2010). The US Government and Reporters Sans Frontieres look into Amina's safety. Finally, Tom McMaster, a Virginia born Master's student at Edinburgh University, unveils his hoax. Having a mother who had taught English in Turkey and a graduate student wife studying Syria provided the raw material for an elaborate Western fantasy. McMaster apologizes for his hoax while trying to sell Amina's story as a novel. So how did this fantasy captivate Western audiences?

Amina lowered her cyber veil and wrote Western fantasies of the exotic East and of lesbians. Fanon (1967) argues that the European man desires to look behind the Muslim woman's veil. Saïd (1979) similarly argues that European authors from 1800 on like Flaubert sexualize the East as a place of harems, dancing girls and sexual freedom. Amina's postings, reported in *The Guardian* and elsewhere, engage this Western fantasy as she describes falling in love with women and finding, not dancing girls, but a lesbian hair salon (Marsh, 2011, May 7). Bill Graber, a heterosexual male, claiming to be lesbian blogger Paula Brooks (on the blog *Lezget Real*) helped popularize Amina's blog while the pair flirted as lesbians (Flock & Bell, 2011, June 14). Similarly, Canadian Ms. Sandra Bagaria thought she was in a six-month online romantic relationship with Amina (Swaine, 2011). In addition, McMaster had posed as a lesbian on popular dating sites and had flirted with several women via instant messenger (Bell, 2011, June 13). Canadian photographer Nina Levitt uses her work to criticize how popular culture (e.g., pulp fiction) represents lesbians as a straight male fantasy (Cooper, 1994). Levitt recognizes that this Western fantasy has taken hold in

North America and one cannot help but see it as informing McMaster's and Graber's work as well as the devotion of their most ardent followers.

The popularity of Amina speaks to a criticism of Western feminism as wanting to rescue Third World women from suffering at the hands of Third World men (Fanon, 1967; Mahonty cited in Mohanram, 1999). Before her abduction Amina writes, "I keep my nails trimmed shorter than they have ever been lest I be captured and they try and pry them off" (Sly, 2011, June 8). Amina avoids a meeting with a UK reporter by saying that she was followed (Addley & Hassan, 2011, June 9). Even her post, *My Father the Hero*, conjures two Arab thug stereotypes that threaten to abduct Amina and her father. In these comments and others, Amina constructs a faceless Arab boogeyman as a villain to her hero who lurks a few steps behind her, waiting to leap, with the teeth of his pliers poised just above her fingernails. This boogeyman is a target for Western angst about the East and was believable enough for The US State Department to investigate Amina's plight (Flock & Bell, 2011, June 14).

Criticism of Amina's account does not diminish the suffering of legitimate journalists, bloggers and women in the Middle East. While the world watched Amina, blogger Kamal Sheikhou was charged with "publishing information liable to defame the nation" and then he disappeared. Jihad Jamal, a journalist and blogger (under the pseudonym Milan) was arrested on May 5, 2011 along with the owner of the computer he was using at the time of his arrest (BBC Worldwide Monitoring, 2011, June 8). In August of 2011 the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reports that a 28-year-old woman was detained for a week after which she died from torture in the city of Khan Shehoun; just one of a UN estimated 2,200 Syrians that by that time had been killed in the chaos (ABC News, 2011, August 25). This chapter also does not intend to diminish feminism's gains for women around the world. This discussion aims to explode a Western fantasy narrative that diverts attention from real people.

The Amina story is pleasurable for its narrative familiarity. Amina is a fictitious Neda Agha-Soltan whose death during the Iran election protests mobilized protestors around the world with masks of Neda's face and the rally cry of *We are Neda*. Neda was defiant in the face of authority, fought for and won the right not to have to wear a chador in her high school (Thomas, 2010). Similarly, Amina's cousin reports that Amina defiantly slapped her abductor. During the protests Neda refused advice to hide her beauty and was proud of her femininity (Thomas, 2010) while Amina was proud of her sexuality. Both were married, divorced and found new love, Amina online and Neda with Caspian Makan on holiday in Turkey. Their protests accounts are similar. Neda tells her mother, "They fired tear gas and we're inside a laboratory. We put cigarettes on but our eyes are burning so much" (Media 4 Free Iran, 2010, April 30). Amina writes, "Teargas was lobbed at us. I saw people vomiting from the gas as I covered my own mouth and nose and my eyes burned [...] if this becomes standard practice, a niqab is a very practical thing to wear in future" (Marsh, 2011, May 7). The niqab foreshadows Amina's hidden identity. Both Neda and Amina are at different times untouchable and vulnerable. Neda is vulnerable to the sniper's bullet and is so

revered in death that her family in Tehran is untouchable and thus speaks freely about her (Thomas, 2010). Amina describes how her family connections protect her from persecution in blog posts like *My Father the Hero* but ultimately once her fiction unraveled there was nowhere to hide. Ironically, both Neda and Amina had fictionalized elements to their stories. Amina was pure fiction while the Iranian government tried to claim that Neda's death was a fiction, initially saying that she was alive and well and living in Greece (Thomas, 2010). Neda's death was real and devastated people and some also saw McMaster's cruel hoax as a death underscored by Swaine's (2011, June 14) headline that read, "Death of a gay girl." The familiarity of the story no doubt draws in some aspect of Amina's audience who see in Amina a chance to change the ending of, to what Neda Agha-Soltan's example reminds us, is a tragic story.

Amina represents contradictions that reflect Western dialectical perspectives on the world. Amina's blog describes how she evolved from a devout Muslim to an out and proud lesbian. She blogs, "I believe God made me as I am and I refuse to believe God makes mistakes" (Marsh, 2011, May 7). Coming from Virginia conjures images of rural America and thus makes a Damascene urbanite relatable to Westerners who do not know much about Syria or the Middle East. Amina became the Syrian-All-American girl next-door and thus realizable in the Western imagination. When Amina is captured, her online followers naively speculate that she will be spared the mistreatment of other Syrian protesters because she holds an American passport (Sly, 2011, June 8). Amina bridges the expanse between the East and the West by serving as a buoy of democracy within dictatorial sea. Amina is represented at the convergence point of dialectics that frame some Westerners' perspective on the world for she is the sacred while also the sexual, she is the foreigner made familiar and she is both the West and the East.

More than exposing the failings of her author Tom McMaster, Amina provides Western audiences with a window into the self. Saïd's (1979) *Orientalism* is alive and well and lives and breathes within Amina. McMaster created Amina but Western audiences actively participated in this creation by making her a media celebrity, relaxing the standard for factual information and by accepting a representation informed by our own assumptions and biases about the Middle East and its women. After Tom McMaster was exposed, press coverage of the story criticized and condemned him. Following this was a wave of suspicion and criticism directed at social media. Only then did the press gently wag its finger at itself. One journalist writes, "Where does [McMaster's] creativity begin to bleed into conning? ... Is it the moment when famous journalist strangers become emotionally invested?" (Hesse, 2011, June 14). This speaks volume about the press' selective look at itself. McMaster is exposed by name and is described as conning, another way of naming the villain in a story, yet not one famous Western journalist is mentioned by name but are left anonymous as famous journalist strangers who are only guilty of becoming "emotionally invested." Interpersonal Communication scholars refer to it statements when people use it rather than I when assigning blame (e.g., It just happened) is a way

of avoiding culpability (Adler, Rosenfeld & Proctor, 2013). One could argue that referring to famous journalist strangers has the same effect of exempting a subject or subjects from blame.

## DISCUSSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Eisenberg & Goodall (1997) argue that any representation undertaken by a researcher is partial, partisan and problematic and this chapter is no different. The quality of partial characterizes this study to the extent that one researcher's frame of reference is the limit of these findings. As a non-Arabic speaker and non-Muslim author there are levels of meaning in the text that have only been started to be read, interpreted and critiqued. It is worth repeating here that this study does not aim to be exhaustive of the popular representations of the Muslim woman. This study focuses on three representations that are dominant within social media but in recognizing their dominance, this does not mean that they are the most socially meaningful, valuable or even positive representations of women. In addition, not every woman can speak via social media due to political, economic or cultural barriers so the communication facilitated by social media is not universally accessible. Future studies should challenge the partial perspective of chapters like this one that speak from a specific if limited subjectivity.

This study was partisan for the lack of range in the perspectives that were chosen for study. Limiting the perceptions of choice for good Muslims where good means that one stays within the social parameters drawn by one's online community increases the chance that certain representations come to dominate discourse even when it does not reflect the will of all community members. Choice needs to be encouraged for any online community seeking to be active and vibrant even though choice challenges the identity characteristics and gatekeepers that define a community in the first place. In discussion boards, Facebook is cited as a place where hybridized identities of those who choose to claim dual identity as both European and as Muslims is accepted or even encouraged. Future research needs to examine how social media facilitates dual identity construction (e.g., French-Muslim) for those living in countries with a monolithic understanding of identity or those that conflate nationality with a singular identity for all (e.g., French persons who assert that the nation shares in one singular national identity).

Finally it is important to problematize the themes and meanings that emerge from this analysis. A Western researcher doing this research in the West and focusing largely on English language social media and English language translations perhaps renders this research as Orientalist in presuming to speak for the Middle East. A great diversity of perspectives is available beyond the English language. For example, the author cites the earlier discussion on problems working with Arabic language translation. There were also attempts in this study to explore a Dutch language forum for Muslims living in The Netherlands but this was complicated by a lack of familiarity

with slang, text speak and writings that blend Dutch and Latin spellings of Arabic words. This wreaked havoc with translation software and made securing *capta* (Ducker's (2011) term that recognizes when data is actually socially constructed knowledge) impossible for the scope of this project. Future research on Muslims in social media might take the perspective of a team, rather than an individual, including European, Asian and American Muslims alongside Western researchers that might bring a more diverse language and theoretical base understanding the table.

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