

Chapter 1

Introduction

Haideh Moghissi

It seems that each historical period has its own heroes and villains, its own revolutionary and counter-revolutionary archetypes. And in each period one specific group and what it represents, or is imagined to represent, becomes the target of fascination, obsession and fear. The early 20th century had the Bolshevik revolution and the hopes and fears that it generated; then there was the rise of fascism and the resistance movements against that; the post-war anti-communism that followed also gripped the attention of protagonists and victims alike. We now have Islam. Islam represents, to some people, a merciless, backward and oppressive faith that sets off shock waves of terror around the world and to others represents the most or, indeed, the only egalitarian, compassionate faith. The fact is that Islam can be both, depending on who represents it and for what purpose uses it.

The rise of politicized Islam to prominence has in fact obscured the fact that even in terms of religion, the world's one and a half billion Muslims are more divided than united. For, in addition to Sunni and Shi'i divisions, we have many different schools and sub-sects within the faith. Besides, Muslims, like other people, include in their ranks orthodox believers, practising individuals, non-practising skeptics, secular and laic members. For this reason many scholars of Islam use the plural term 'Islams' rather than the singular Islam. Indeed, internal clashes and uncompromising, irrational hostility amongst the followers of the faith, be they between Sunnis and Shi'is or between absolutist and moderate Muslims, are much more profound than between Muslims and non-Muslims. The horrifying number of Muslims in Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan and elsewhere who fall victim to blind, brutal terror at the hands of other Muslims, in the name of defending Islamic prescriptions and values testifies to this reality.

Muslim populations in the Middle East and South Asia bear the brunt of these clashes in addition to the consequences of devastating wars imposed from outside. But life is certainly not free of trying experiences for the small sections of these populations who have managed to settle in Europe and North America, saving themselves from the devastating impacts of war, ethnic and religious persecution, and political and economic chaos. These realities, however, are lost to the overwhelming majority of people, even if they interact with Muslim migrants on a daily basis in one way or another. Indeed, the essentialist view in the West of Muslims, which overlooks the remarkable diversity of people inside and outside Muslim-majority countries in particular the existence of a large number of secular and laic persons has 'invented' a 'Muslim community' that is held collectively

responsible for the senseless violence committed by small groups. Moreover, not only do the socio-historical forces that have aided the actions of the violence not prompt interrogation, but the negative psychosocial and political consequences of stereotyping, particularly on the younger generations of Muslim diaspora, are not seriously investigated and addressed. Instead, we see ongoing barrages of commentaries, practices and policies for the control and containment of Muslim populations in Western countries where the socio-religious landscape is changing as a result of the growth of Muslim populations, either because of migration or birth rate. Hence, in place of well-thought-out plans and integration policies aimed at removing barriers to the full involvement of Muslims in the economic, social and political lives of their adopted countries, overt and covert racist statements warning the public of threats to European cultural identity and social values poison the minds of the public on a daily basis. Muslims are supposedly conquering the West step by step, destroying it from within.

The media, and terrorism ‘experts,’ call on the public to watch out for Muslim populations. In the words of a Canadian journalist, ‘Most of the ones who are likely to attack the West are already here.’ This same pundit went on to state that ‘80 to 90 per cent of known *jihadis* come from the great Muslim diaspora,’¹ hence implicating all migrants and citizens of Muslim cultural background in extremist activity. Security-driven immigration and settlement policies from country to country focus on how to watch, contain and control Muslims and thus protect their societies from cultural contamination. The Swiss electorate vote to change the country’s constitution to include a blanket ban on the building of minarets; French leaders push for legal restrictions on Muslim women’s full-face veils; and in Britain concerns over Muslims transforming the country into ‘Eurobia’ are reflected, among other ways, in anti-terrorist raids on Muslim-populated neighbourhoods, often based on purely speculative evidence.² On the Muslim side, mistrust, suspicion and alienation feed the notions of hard-core Islamists and the actions of disgruntled individuals, be they segregationist and missionary insistence on Muslim women’s dress code or harsh punishment of the young generation, again mostly women, for defying rigid moralistic rules of conduct, which only intensifies the difficult relations between Muslim communities and their new countries. Ironically, the moral panic does not prevent Western governments from continuing their misguided policy of talking only or mainly to the most conservative elements within the Muslim community whenever they need to address an issue related to the population, ignoring the existence of a rainbow of Muslims of differing national origin, rural–urban roots, class, gender, language, lifestyle and degree of religiosity, as well as political and moral conviction. In a sense it seems

1 *The Globe and Mail*, January 9, 2010, p. 17.

2 For example, in April 2009 a group of students of Pakistani origin were arrested and sent to Pakistan after an anti-terrorist raid. No evidence of terrorist activities, such as bomb-making equipment or a specific plot, have emerged. *The Guardian Weekly*, November 12, 2009, p. 13.

that conservative Muslims, rather than being influenced by the secular cultural and political values and practices of their new countries, are influencing them to make religion the guiding principle in dealing with their ethnic minorities. All this makes one wonder about the prospects of integration, issues of human rights and democratic values.

The chapters in this collection are the outcome of two conferences on the subject held in Toronto and Amsterdam in 2006 and 2008. They have one overarching goal in common, that is, to show how wrong it is to homogenize and weld together individual citizens from Muslim-majority countries and single out culture and/or religion as defining every aspect of their lives. Different experiences reflected and retold in these contributions clearly speak to the fallacy of a singular, crude and naive reductionist emphasis on the notion of 'culture' that obscures the many different factors shaping the experiences of individuals of Muslim cultural background. Reducing everything to 'culture' causes confusion for the public in their encounters and interactions with their fellow citizens; it also confuses those individuals from Muslim-majority societies who never thought of themselves as religious in their home countries and are now compelled to identify themselves as Muslims or let such identity be imposed on them. Obsessive preoccupation with culture also prevents Western governments from standing up firmly and clearly against the aggressive demands of conservative factions within Muslim communities who seek 'special' or 'exceptional rights' for the imagined Muslim community – rights that could trample the individual rights of other community members, particularly women, and should have no place in an open and democratic society.

Taken together, the chapters in this volume point to incredible links and similarities among the chapters, or rather among important aspects of diasporic life related to the larger society, despite different geographical locations and specific differences in other aspects. Gender, home and belonging are central themes in the majority of chapters in this collection. Surely, in no area is misconception about Islam and Muslims more profound and overpowering than in relation to Muslim women. The global context of the 'War on Terror,' which has given Muslim women's rights centre stage, is thus reflected in the choice of contributors to the two conferences and in the experiences and voices they reflect. The problem with wrapping populations of Muslim cultural origin in a single religious cloth, leading to the racialization of Muslims through faith, is also a linking thread throughout the collection.

The culturalist approach to integration, as Halleh Ghorashi in Chapter 2 argues, is ironically the very reason why Dutch society has become harsher and more disrespectful towards the immigrant women it seeks to emancipate. The reluctance to acknowledge the ability of these women to identify the problems hindering full-integration into their adopted homes, and the refusal to include them in decision-making processes that have direct effects on their lives, are demonstrated in Ghorashi's discussion of various empowerment courses launched by various immigration agencies in the Netherlands for such women, and clearly demonstrates

that when the focus is on the shortcomings of migrant women, viewing them as 'walking deficits,' they and their voices are not taken seriously. An instrumentalist approach to potentially useful integration practices, Ghorashi argues, would limit the type of reflection and evaluation that is necessary to grasp the complexity of the real problems.

The problem of negative stereotypes of Islam and Muslim women, and how they may negatively affect women's attempts to challenge patriarchal gender roles is also discussed by Fauzia Erfan Ahmed in the United States, in Chapter 3. Through a historical review of Muslims' presence in the US, Ahmed shows the binaries faced by women within and without Muslim communities. The binaries result from the conservative Muslim communities and the patriarchal nostalgia they harbour, with the expectation that the Muslim woman act as the citadel of an endangered culture, and white feminists' well-intentioned wish to assist women's emancipation on their own terms, without attention to the differences inherent to women of colour, including Muslim women. Ahmed is concerned that post-9/11 legal changes that have reduced citizenship rights for Muslims in the US, and their greater marginalization, have intensified patriarchal expectations. This imposes silence on women who have historically played leadership roles within their communities and pulled them together since the dawn of slavery in the US. Cassandra Balchin's discussion of the rise of transnational Muslim feminist consciousness in Chapter 4, however, demonstrates that Muslim women refuse to allow either governments or religious leaders within their communities to dominate the discourse regarding women's legal rights. Critical of the British policy of multiculturalism, which induces homogenization of Muslim communities, and the government's frequent failure to 'talk to' entire communities through a larger number of representatives, Balchin tells us that the women are now beginning to question the doublespeak of both the government and the supposedly moderate Muslims within their communities.

Chapters in Part II of the collection turn attention to two major areas of women's lives: family and sexuality. Through qualitative research among women of Muslim cultural background in countries with sizable Muslim populations, women's experiences and self-perception about the impact of migration and relocation on two central cores of their lives are examined. Two of the contributors, Anne Sofie Roald (Chapter 5) and Fataneh Farahani (Chapter 8) focus on Sweden. Vida Nassehi-Behnam's study (Chapter 6) is about the experiences of Iranian migrants in Britain, while Haideh Moghissi's contribution, Chapter 7, discusses the results of an expansive study conducted among migrants from four communities of Muslim cultural background in Canada.

Roald's chapter explores Islamic family legislation in view of Sweden's multicultural policies. She points to a contradiction in marriage and divorce laws in that country, where marriage ritual, based on the Christian tradition, is a sacrament ordained by God; hence, religious associations have the legal right to perform marriage ceremonies. Issuing divorce documents, however, is a civic act and the sole responsibility of the government. Roald argues that this practice

derives from a conception of matters related to marriage as part of the collective right of religious minorities, whereas divorce is an individual right recognized and administered by the state. However, this dualistic legal approach causes confusion and conflict, not least because of Islamic practices such as, among others, dowry, the unilateral right of a man to divorce, and the women-instigated right to ask for divorce. Roald argues that Muslim women coming to Sweden enjoy some legal protection and, particularly, the economic possibility of living without a man, and this new dynamic provides the opportunity for them to challenge the prerogatives of men more than they could in their countries of origin. The question still remains as to how much the recognition of the collective rights of a Muslim minority serves the interests of women in the community.

Vida Nassehi-Behnam's observations of Iranian women in exile has led her to the conclusion that generally they have proven to become their own agents. The lives they lead in Britain show that not only have they escaped the general stereotype of the helpless, subordinate, Middle Eastern woman who follows her husband into immigration, but in fact many Iranian women in her sample have been the instigators of their family's displacement. Feeling responsible for the consequences of displacement, they subsequently try to effectively protect and manage their families' interests. Nassehi-Behnam argues that in fact Iranian women in Britain have turned the harsh reality of exile into opportunity, and this has improved their status within the family and within the Iranian community. A relatively high percentage of Iranian women are now financially independent, either because they work (47 per cent in France and about 50 per cent in Britain) or because they are covered by the social security systems in those countries. All these factors have totally changed the marital relations of Iranian immigrants and forced couples to accept more egalitarian attitudes. My study of changing family relations among four populations of Muslim cultural background in Canada – Afghans, Iranians, Pakistanis and Palestinians – explores how the changes in life circumstances resulting from migration are processed and absorbed or made the subject of a continuing contestation by married couples within these communities. Two major themes emerge in this study. First is the remarkable difference in perspective, lifestyle and religious identification among the four groups. Secondly, the interviewees' responses show that marital contestation depends to a large extent on social and economic conditions that negatively or positively influence the process of adjustment, and hence relations within the family.

Fataneh Farahani analyses the narratives of a group of Iranian-born women in Sweden regarding their experiences in intimate relationships within or outside conjugal bonds and the impacts of 'home' and 'host' cultures on these women's self-perceptions about their sexuality as well as the more general conception of identity, subjectivity, sameness, difference, otherness, agency, and marginality. The interviewees' navigations between past and present and socio-cultural comparisons, as well as the dominant cultural stereotypes they encounter as 'Iranians,' 'Muslims,' 'immigrants' and 'Middle Easterners', Farahani suggests, shape the way these women experience intimacy within or outside marriage and

whether or not their moral values regarding appropriate sexual behaviour have been transformed.

The three chapters in Part III explore the experiences, expectations and reactions of Muslim youth in Europe. Thijs Sunier in Chapter 9 draws attention, once more, to the sharp, post-9/11 politicization of religious issues and the polarization of debate in Europe in general with examples from the Netherlands. He posits that this reality forces even young people of Muslim background who no longer practise Islam to relate to it one way or the other. The interplay between Islam, mass media, popular culture and the commoditization of religious experience, Sunier argues, shows the increasing diversity of the forms in which Islam is imagined, mediated and performed. He takes issue with the tendency of looking at young European Muslims as victims of a cultural clash or as being trapped in an identity crisis. Analysing some of the creative ways the youths use in expressing their religious identity, he offers, Muslim youths in Europe are agents of their own cultural environment, and they sometimes break away from the 'Islamic culture' of their parents in search of a pure Islam. In his view, the religious practices of young Muslims in Europe invite us to more thoroughly interrogate the 'religious' and 'secular' categories.

David Thurfjell's analysis (Chapter 10) also focuses on youth in Europe, and poignantly points to the enormous challenges faced by the Muslim diaspora's second generations. Culturally distant from their parents' origins and with no longing for a remote motherland, they are pressured nevertheless by social forces that draw them away from the religious middle ground straddling radicalization and religious abandonment. Thurfjell argues that the meaning of a particular Islamic practice, such as the veil or daily prayers, like all other elements of culture, is not only dependent on the choices or preferences of the individual believer, but also on the meaning-making forces and societal discourses external to them. The tension between the desired meaning of a particular attribute and the ascribed meanings of it, along with the difficulty of full participation in society, forces Muslim youths to choose between two extremes: either to abandon Islam altogether or to accept a radical interpretation of it.

Sepideh Farkhondeh (Chapter 11) focuses on young Frenchwomen of Muslim descent. She identifies social and economic discrimination, mass unemployment and racism as the main causes of frustration amongst French Muslim youth. These problems in some cases force the youths to turn to the underground economy and, sometimes, illegal criminal activities, violence and ghettoization, which in turn give rise to the influence of underground Islam or 'les imams des caves.' Radicalized, disgruntled youths turn on young women of Muslim descent to exert some control over their own lives. The young women in Farkhondeh's study are caught between the racialized representation of Arabs in political debate and in the media, and the requirements of family customs. However, they yearn to be accepted as full-fledged Frenchwomen without being forced to deny their ethnic identities, which the dominant culture denies.

Two of the chapters in the last section focus on the post-9/11 experience of Muslim communities in the Netherlands, a country marked by the fear of fundamentalist Islam. Through an analysis of individual stories of home-making and belonging, Marjo Buitelaar and Femke Stock (Chapter 12) show how highly embedded these notions are in individuals' minds and in the larger society. The ambivalence about belonging to either the present home or the distant home, as expressed by their interviewees, speaks perhaps to the lasting experience of 'foreignness' and out-of-place existence of an uprooted person. This tortured existence, they observe, is more profound in individuals who are constantly under scrutiny and hostility for their use of Islamic symbols such as the head-cover. Buitelaar and Stock point to the preoccupation with Islam and the pressure to privatize religion in the Netherlands. This alienates Muslims who choose to be identified as Dutch Muslim citizens and yet are made to feel that they cannot fully belong in Dutch society as a Muslim.

Martijn de Koning's contribution (Chapter 13) also draws attention to the transformation of the Dutch liberal approach to its non-Dutch citizens and migrants post-9/11, and particularly in the aftermath of the murder of filmmaker Theo van Gogh. He points to a shift in public attitude along with the focus in the media and in politics on the notion of 'integration,' and, hence, the emergence of a rude and harsh discourse on multiculturalism, Islam and migrants. To de Koning, some of the ideas of the Salafi imams about, say, homosexuality and the rights of women have no place in a secular and democratic society, but they are not any different from those of orthodox Protestants and members of Pentecostal churches. However, it is only the positions of orthodox Muslims that are considered radical and against 'typical Dutch values.'

Chapter 14 focuses on the experiences of Iraqi émigrés in Canada, the United States, Britain, France and Jordan. These are individuals who left their country prior to its invasion in 2003 by the US and its allies. Providing a politico-historical context for the mass population movement from Iraq, Jacqueline Ismael and Shereen Ismael show that Iraqi displacement is the culmination of a long process of political shocks, from colonial intervention and political turmoil to Ba'ath Party terror under Saddam Hussein's regime. Ismael and Ismael point to the strong sentiments of home felt by Iraqi migrants, and their connections to the home country through folk culture and artifacts and to each other through memories of the homeland.

The size of Muslim populations in the West is rapidly increasing. The fusion of religion with indigenous cultures means that we have among us Muslims from a variety of cultures, national origin, rural-urban roots, class, gender, age, and language. Presumably, depending on political and/or socio-economic circumstances, some of these factors may play a more significant role in the sense of selfhood felt by these populations. We hope to bring to the attention of our reader through these chapters the fact that the rigid, conservative and punishing interpretations of religious texts that have found discursive prominence in the West for political reasons are not to be considered as the voice of Muslims in general.

