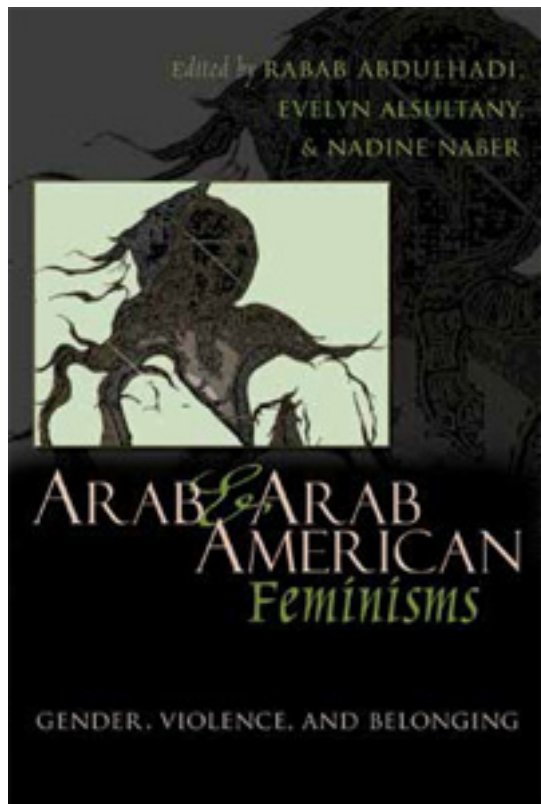


Mohja Kahf, "The Pity Committee and the Careful Reader: How Not to Buy Stereotypes of Muslim Women"

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The Pity Committee and the Careful Reader

How Not to Buy Stereotypes about Muslim Women

MOHJA KAHF

A surge of publication about Muslim women recasts old Orientalist fodder, the Western stereotype of the Muslim woman as Victim, and its companion stereotype, the Muslim woman as rebellious Escapee from Islam. The author calls the widespread discourse of this stereotype "the Pity Committee" and calls the equally biased, apologist reaction against it "the Defensive Brigade." A close reading of a New York Times column titled "Sentenced to Be Raped," about a crime against a Pakistani Muslim woman, illustrates almost all the seven key elements of the composite Victim-Escapee stereotype. The author cautions that real sexism exists among Muslims and should not be brushed aside; it is just not that different from sexism among other peoples. Demonizing Islamic difference and assuming Islam and Muslims to be inherently or exceptionally sexist do not help the work toward gender justice. Five strategies, the author suggests, can deconstruct the stereotype about Muslim women and keep the focus on the work toward gender justice. They are thinking critically, engaging in dual-fronted critique, finding cross-cutting parallels, remembering history, and refusing to erase economics.

Publication about Muslim women is a hot commodity today. We have had the Princess trilogy by Jean Sasson, *Infidel* (2007) and *The Caged Virgin* (2006) by Ayaan Hirsi Ali, *Honor Lost* by Norma Khouri (the 2000 book about honor killing in Jordan that was proven a hoax), and hosts of others. "Muslim" is not the same category as "Arab," and such writings cover Muslim women from varying ethnicities. All this new discourse on Muslim women, on closer glance, is not so new; much of it rehashes an old story: the Muslim woman as Victim, and its flip side, the Escaped Muslim woman.

In the Victim stereotype, the Muslim woman is chained to a harem lattice being beaten, raped, murdered for honor, or fill in your choice of oppression here

by the Muslim father, husband, imam, or fill in your choice of harem master, while Islam, the tribe, her society, and so on look on approvingly; “the West” rides up on a white horse and rescues her; fade to The End. This story dates back to romantic literature, and the Byronic plot of a white man saving a harem girl continued to thrive throughout the heyday of colonialism, part of the White Man’s Burden narrative. The Escapee story follows the same plot but is narrated by the Victim herself, who casts off the shackles of Muslim patriarchy all by her Nancy Drew self. Then she runs into the arms of the waiting West, or at least embraces a Victoria’s Secret shopping spree.

This Victim-Escapee narrative is promoted by what I call the neo-Orientalist Pity Committee. It is not a real committee, but the Orientalism is real, no matter how many people think Edward Said outdated. The Victim-Escapee stereotype appears at every level of culture, pop to high. It is hegemonic, which means it is not seen as a stereotype but as The Truth: that Islam is exceptionally, uniquely, inherently evil to women seems to be one of the received truths of our era, axiomatic. It knows no bounds: left- and right-wingers, feminists and nonfeminists, religious and secular folk in the global Western conversation subscribe to it. Self-Orientalizing Muslims assume that the things this discourse says must be true, given the overwhelming “evidence.” The Pity Committee thrives in imperialist contexts, so it is riding high today with the U.S. occupying Iraq and waging war in Afghanistan, its story becoming dearer to its subscribers by the hour.

Join the Pity Committee, and you too can consume a fresh Muslim Woman Victim Flavor every season. The job of mascot for the Pity Committee, Escapee of the Month, is a tempting career opportunity, if you are a Muslim woman. If you sign up, the Pity Committee will give you a book deal much plumper than the one I got from my small publisher. All you have to do is have a victimization story—clitoridectomy or arranged marriage will do as well as honor killing. If you do not have one, you can make one up, like Norma Khouri, and still be believed by a readership primed by centuries of bigoted images of Islam.

Real Muslim sexism, like Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, secular, and other sexism, exists. Real Muslim women have victimizing experiences. But to be the feted mascot of the neo-Orientalist Pity Committee, you have to use your Escapee Story to demonize the whole Muslim world, or at least one whole Muslim country (Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, and Iran make good choices today). And you will locate the salve for women’s oppression only in the West, which earns sainthood for gender equality in your narrative. Your story, for best effect, ought to align with U.S. foreign policy and consumerism, or at least with the war on terror.

However, let's not leave out what I call the Defensive Brigades, or Muslim Apologists, the underdog camp in global discourse dominated by Western terms of reference, but no less wrong because it is the underdog. Books speaking this discourse are not typically sold at Barnes and Noble. To find it, you must read mosque newsletters, Muslim chat rooms, and conservative-press offerings in Muslim locales. This camp's knee-jerk defensive discourse on Muslim women demonizes anyone attempting to change the status quo and, more important, utterly fails to address the real issues of sexism in Muslim societies.

What gets lost in this ideological tug of war (besides Truth and Beauty, which are always, you know, sacrificed)? The jihad for gender justice pays the price. Yet the work goes on, often in quiet little underrecorded ways. Meanwhile, readers committed to gender justice without demonizing can resist the pull of both sides, the Pity Committee and the Defensive Brigades, through critical thinking, dual critique, and other strategies.

Case Study: The Pity Committee and the Careful Reader

In June 2002, a woman named Mukhtar Mai, in the remote village of Meerwala, Punjab Province, Pakistan, was gang-raped by members of a powerful feudal clan. A provincial tribunal without the authority to render such a verdict decided that she would be raped as revenge for the alleged sexual assault the overlords claimed that her fifteen-year-old brother had committed against a woman in their clan, a charge apparently concocted to cover one of their cronies' own rape of the boy. Mukhtar Bibi's father pounded on the door of the house where he learned she was being raped, and later put his shirt over her and walked her home, where he and her mother comforted her. The village imam, Moulvi Abdul Razzaq, expressed outrage about the crime at his pulpit, defying the rich clan, as did a Pakistani journalist who wrote of the crime in a local paper. The story did not gain the attention of the international presses for some time. Shariah justice came swiftly: within weeks, Mukhtar Mai was awarded a half-million rupees in damages, and the rapists were given death sentences. However, the defendants appealed to the higher Multan court, where (Western) evidentiary law helped them get their death sentences revoked. Ms. Mai took the case on to the country's supreme court. Pakistani women's groups rallied to her support.¹ Meanwhile, Ms. Mai took the monetary award and built a girls' school in her village. This place is where she chooses to remain: in her provincial hometown, doing the tasks she has taken on for her community.

Mukhtar verified the facts in an interview appearing in *Islamica* (2005), an English-language magazine published by an ethnic mix of Muslims based in Amman and Chicago and oriented toward traditional Islam.²

I first heard about the Mai incident from my colleague at the University of Arkansas, Susan Marren, an American feminist literary scholar. She sent a link to a *New York Times* article by a Nicholas Kristof, titled "Sentenced to Be Raped," which broke the story to the U.S. public on September 29, 2004, more than two years after the incident.³

Kristof opens with jocular reference to his being in Pakistan to "help Bush track down Osama." (Are we framing the Muslim woman's victimization within the war on terror yet?) Kristof says, "I can't say I've earned the \$25 million reward. But I did come across someone even more extraordinary than Osama." Mukhtaran is not the sort of "rogue" he usually writes about, he says. (We do not hear about Muslim women who are rogues in mainstream Western discourse, by the way, because a rogue is not a victim figure.)

Kristof issues this missionary statement of ideological purpose: "I firmly believe that the central moral challenge of this century, equivalent to the struggles against slavery in the 19th century or against totalitarianism in the 20th, will be to address sex inequality in the third world." If only he had put a period after "inequality." The *New York Times* columnist goes on in terms that suggest he has never set foot in a women's studies department in his native country: "The plight of women in developing countries isn't addressed much in the West, and it certainly isn't a hot topic in the presidential campaign. But it's a life-and-death matter in villages like Meerwala, a 12-hour drive southeast from Islamabad." Gender injustice is never a life-and-death matter in the West, it seems. Kristof then narrates the rape itself: "As members of the high-status tribe danced in joy, four men stripped her naked and took turns raping her. Then they forced her to walk home naked in front of 300 villagers."

"In a society that values modesty, how would three hundred villagers watch her walk home naked?" my friend Susan Marren asked me. Even though she has no background in Middle East studies or South Asian culture, Susan at once spotted this plot hole in the *New York Times* journalist's story.

"In Pakistan's conservative Muslim society," Kristof goes on, "Mai's duty was now clear: She was supposed to commit suicide." Apparently, Pakistanis think alike on this issue across all urban and rural classes. A quote from Ms. Mai's brother that, if read outside Kristof's loaded context, simply explains why being raped drives many to consider suicide is cited by Kristof as if to suggest that her brother wanted Mukhtaran to commit suicide. It is Kristof's sole quote from any of Mai's family, so it almost implies that this stance is her family's position, which is scandalously misleading, compared to what Ms. Mai herself says in the *Islamica*

interview about her parents' staunch support. Kristof cites another village gang-rape victim who did commit suicide.

His "fieldwork" for establishing the suicide mandate thus finished, Kristof constructs the next sentence to suggest that Pakistanis do not find rapist behavior shocking or criminal: "But instead of killing herself, Ms. Mai testified against her attackers and propounded the shocking idea that the shame lies in raping, rather than in being raped." The reader is excused for assuming, based on Kristof's passage, that Ms. Mai is the first rape victim to press charges in Pakistan and that shame is never an issue for rape victims in America.

Absent from this conclusion is another (alleged) rape victim in the story, the upper-class woman whom Mai's younger brother was accused of assaulting. And where is any discussion of Mai's young brother, himself a rape victim? These other rapes complicate the claims Kristof makes about gender and Muslim or Pakistani attitudes.

Following the lead of Susan's careful reading, we find more spotty logic here: If the overlords did not think rape a shocking crime, why would they have arranged brutal vengeance for the alleged first rape? Even if the first charge was fabricated, they had to fabricate something that would make a plausible motive for revenge.

Next, Kristof mentions the sentencing of Mai's rapists: "The rapists are now on death row, and President Pervez Musharraf presented Ms. Mai with the equivalent of \$8,300 and ordered round-the-clock police protection for her." We are not told how a society that unanimously views rape victims as worthy only of suicide sentences the rapists to death and awards punitive damages to their victim. Kristof seems to minimize the money by putting it into dollars, a unit where it looks like a pittance, out of its context in a poor region of Pakistan, where it is a small fortune. He glides into a portrait of what Mukhtaran Bibi did with the money—open a girls' school in her underserved village.

Here Kristof injects a plot-thickening moment—he stalks around, with Bryonic drama, one imagines, in "the area where the high-status tribesmen live," and senses danger! It is almost as if he is the hero in this story, as if the government had not already, uh, recognized this threat and given Mukhtar an armed guard. Kristof here says he talked to a "matriarch in a high status family," who belittles Mai—surprise—with malevolence worthy of Joan Collins's *Dynasty* character. This partisan woman's insult is made, without sense of irony by Kristof, to represent the view of all Pakistan toward Mai.

Kristof concludes with this wild-eyed sentence, which should live in infamy, so broad a spray of hatred does it emit: "So although I did not find Osama, I did

encounter a much more ubiquitous form of evil and terror: a culture, stretching across about half the globe, that chews up women and spits them out." He concludes, in classic Pity Committee fashion, "We in the West can help." In a postscript a few weeks later, he promises that if you send a check for Mai, he will be sure she gets it, bringing the reader into the role of Western rescuer of the Muslim woman Victim.

My friend Susan, the careful reader, said, "How does a woman as shunned and isolated as he paints her up and open a school? Wouldn't there be *people* helping her do that?" Indeed. Prodded to investigate by Susan's queries, I found online Pakistani forums where vastly different versions of the story were floating amid lively debate. "Not that they're the whole truth either," Susan said, but the possibility of these variations makes the narrative more understandable. Kristof's story by itself did not make sense to an intelligent reader.

Key Elements of the Victim-Escapee Stereotype

Kristof's column illustrates many elements of the Pity Committee story of the Muslim woman as Victim-Escapee.

Mute Marionette or Exceptional Escapee. The Pity Committee's Muslim woman is not a speaking subject in her own right but framed within the narrative of the Westerner giving her a voice, who alone is able to construct and analyze her plight. The modern-classic example is Jean Sasson's original 1992 *Princess*, which the American author wrote ostensibly because her fabulously wealthy, well-traveled subject could not speak for herself.

In the late 1980s, there was a clamor for "authentic voices" to represent minorities; it was thought that only someone from that same identity could "get it." This idea turned out to be misguided; in the end, it is about discourse, not identity. But discourse from "authentic voices" of Muslim women dutifully came out, playing largely the same game at one less narrative remove. When the story is told by the woman herself and not a Western proxy, she is constructed as exceptional, a solo act, who against all odds escaped from this brutal culture and found her voice—never because there were factors within the culture that enabled her to develop a voice.

Meek Mother. Muslim mother figures are made meek, minimized, or invisible in the Victim-Escapee stereotype. For example, the English version of first-wave Egyptian feminist Huda Sharawi's memoirs (misnamed *Harem Years* in the English abridgement and translation by Margot Badran of 1986) leaves out the strong personality of her Circassian mother.⁴ In constructing the Victim's victimhood or the Escapee's exceptionality, the Pity narrative tends to eliminate empowering

relationships with sisters, grandmothers, and girlfriends and to ignore homegrown feminisms. Kristof's mise-en-scène admits no indigenous Pakistani feminisms and portrays other local women as either helpless doubles of the victim or evil pawns of patriarchy such as the "high-status matriarch."

Forbidding Father. Lurking about the Victim or Escapee story is a cruel male authority figure. The Muslim father figure is no kindly Austenian Mr. Bennet, who is equally patriarchal, but endowed with ambivalent feelings and an understandable wish to see his daughter protected through conformity to accepted social norms. The Muslim father's motivations are inscrutable, or thoroughly evil. Mai's father, who played a heartbreaking role of trying and being unable to protect his daughter and then holding her hand through the aftermath, is completely absent from the *New York Times* story. The reader is given the vague impression that the father gave his daughter up to be raped.

Rotten Religion. The idea that Islamic values could play positive roles for women is inadmissible in Kristof's Pity Committee perspective. Mukhtaran Bibi's strong Islamic faith, which she says in the *Islamica* interview was an integral part of how she coped with the horrific experience, is left out. Ubiquitously, Western media, and many secular Muslim feminists, take the word "shariah" (Islamic law) as code for "oppression of women." In Mai's case, shariah championed the woman, punishing the perpetrators in the initial ruling far more severely than any Western law code would. The term "shariah" is erased in Kristof's telling (remember, it is only a Western value to punish rapists). Islamic terms are mentioned only when they can stand as icons for misogyny. The concerned local imam, whom Mukhtaran Bibi in the interview describes as having been "a continuous source of support," is absent from Kristof's version. In the 1993 film *Not Without My Daughter*, a classic of anti-Islam hysteria, the Islamic call to prayer is used as a voice-over during a wife beating. This metonymy, suggesting that the very rites of Islam are implicated in sexism, has a concrete effect on Muslims living in the West, training a hostility on the symbols and practices of their religion that can make them the target of court actions, harassment, or Islamophobic violence.

Cruel Country. The Pity Committee's Victim-Escapee story casts the Muslim country (any of them, take your pick) as unmitigatedly woman hating. Kristof's title, "Sentenced to Be Raped," implies that Pakistan itself approved Mai's gang rape. The country's police and court systems count for nothing in the syntax of Kristof's writing, but these authorities arrested, booked, charged, tried, sentenced, and jailed the rapists. They appealed, as defendants do, even in the United States. Even their appeal is based on due-process law, a requirement for a democracy, but Pakistan gets no credit for having this legal protection for all defendants.

The *New York Times* columnist does not even acknowledge his fellow journalist, the local writer who was the first to publish anything about the incident, despite the risk to him (but not to Kristof) of vengeance by the rich local clan. Here is another Pakistani man in the story who is not behaving like a villain, wiped from the *New York Times* version.

Kristof's Mukhtar, unlike the Mukhtar who speaks in the *Islamica* interview, is unconnected to her own society by bonds of love, relationship, and self-identification; she is without succor, except for that which he urges from the West. Audience members who hear me present this material sometimes come up to me saying they did walk away from reading the *New York Times* piece believing that Pakistan, and Islamic shariah, condoned the gang rape. Careless reading, or a result of the rhetorical strategies of the column itself?

Erased Economics. Absent from Kristof's column is any analysis of class. If you include class, the cruelty in the story starts to look awfully familiar to American readers, not exotically "Islamic." Mai's words in her *Islamica* interview, in sharp contrast, indicate that she sees herself suffering from her class positioning, not from her religious identity and only faintly from her gendered subjectivity. While she expresses bewilderment that anyone would think her rape condoned by Islam, she repeatedly brings up her status as a poor person. Asked why most villagers did not support her, she says, "The others were afraid. They would think 'we're poor, and maybe if we stand up, the tribal lords will abuse us in the same way.' In their hearts these people were with us, but they were scared to show this." She adds a class-based critique of the police and the government: "They never pay attention when such things happen to poor people anyhow." The *Islamica* interviewer, bent on scoring Defensive Brigade points about religion, glides over Mai's class analysis, too. But the interview form lets her articulation of the problem come through, whereas Kristof obliterates her voice under the weight of his condescending, Islamophobic, culture-war triumphalism in pseudofeminist drag.

Vile Veil. One element lacking in Kristof's column that is usually found in Pity Committee narratives is the veil, starring as the most oppressive device since the rack. The veil—inexplicably to most of those women who wear it—has become a visual icon of Islamic sexism. You can almost always spot a Pity Committee book by its cover: the image of a woman with face half hidden by a veil is nearly de rigueur. Although covering the face, a mode of dress preferred by many women on this earth, is not in itself oppressive, this image is used on these book jackets within a discursive community where such a sign signifies "Islamic sexism."⁵

Ms. Mai never asked to be enrolled as the West's Victim of the Month. Her story spills over the edges the stereotype. If Pakistan were such a dungeon for

women, for example, why does Mukhtar Bibi choose to go on living there, now that she has the means to leave? Nevertheless, the editorial and publishing discourses in which Kristof operates shape the story to their Pity Committee horizon of expectations. Muslim women get recruited to Victim or Escapee roles whether they go willingly or not.

The Charge of the Defensive Brigade

There's more to the Mai story, illustrating the second half of the dynamic, where the Defensive Brigade enters. This damage-control squadron (not a real armed troop, mind) is generally reactive, whereas the Pity Committee is powerful and proactive and sets the agenda. It is a discursive community that sees its role as "defending Islam" against ideological onslaught. It reifies or freezes Islam into one mold, much as does the Pity Committee, but from the opposing direction. Where the Pity Committee vilifies, the Defensive Brigade sugarcoats, rather than seeking genuine complex analysis of gender relations in the world of Islam.

After the U.S. press gets hold of the Mai story, there is a defensive backlash in the Muslim presses, in Pakistan and globally. The president of Pakistan, who is in a category of Autocratic Rulers, not the same as the Defensive Camp but here overlapping with it, rightly perceives the American espousal of Mukhtar as mired in neo-Orientalist Pity Committee agendas. Wrongly, he bans her from traveling abroad. When this textbook Defensive Brigade move backfires, making more negative press for Pakistan than her trip abroad might have done, he lifts the ban, grumbling, with inexcusable insensitivity, about women making money off being raped.

Due to the efforts of pro-Islam Muslim feminists such as Asifa Quraishi of the Muslim women lawyers group KARAMA, several important U.S. Muslim organizations were not deterred by the Defensive Brigade, and supported her visit, arranged by the Asian American Network Against Abuse of Human Rights. Mukhtaran Bibi comes to the United States, speaks at women's rights venues, and collects money for Pakistani earthquake victims and her expanded school project. However, Aslam Abdullah, editor of the *Minaret*, a publication of the Islamic Center of Los Angeles, questions the veracity of Ms. Mai's version of the rape in a posting on Pakistan Link, and some other Muslims decry her U.S. appearances as opportunistic "publicity stunts." Turning from substantive criticism to ad hominem attack is a typical Defensive Brigade move. At the extreme, and most reprehensible, end of this mode of response, she becomes the target of threats from hyperdefensive Muslims.

Muslim women are recruited to be mascots for the Defensive Brigades as well. This mascot is Good Daughter, in contrast to Rebellious Escaping Daughter on

the other side. The Token Muslim Woman on boards and committees often finds herself in Muslim Apologist roles, whether she is comfortable in them or not.

The Apologist Camp also typically accuses any initiative to change the gender status quo as being tainted with Western imperialist influence or funding. The life-altering, country-altering, brutal violence done to many countries by colonialism cannot be forgotten. Nor is imperialism in the past; its new invasions continue. But there is a time to acknowledge that whatever injustice imperialism has done and is doing, there are indigenous injustices needing redress.

In Jordan, for example, there is a campaign to strengthen laws against honor killing, a crime not condoned by shariah but originating in pagan tribal values and violating Islamic principles. (Honor killing is treated as a crime in every Muslim country; the problem is the lack of severity with which it is treated.) The Jordanian law pertinent to honor killing, Article 98, comes from Napoleonic Code, in fact, not from Islamic law. Yet the local Jordanian initiative against Article 98 and its sister, Article 340, has been smeared by Jordanian Islamists as a Western-inspired, Zionist-aided attack on traditional Jordanian family values.⁶

Dealing with fallout from the tug of war between bigoted Pity Committee discourse and bigoted Defensive Brigade reactions is a terribly secondary thing to have to worry about when your time should be spent fighting honor killing itself. And this example is just one illustration of how the Pity Committee and its nemesis, the Defensive Brigade, create a bad dynamic that throws a wrench in the gears of actual struggles for gender justice. Thus, we see how stereotypes distort us as human beings; they take our energy away from real ethical development. When we say that Muslim women do not fit the Victim stereotype, we must not step away from our moral obligation to change the realities of Muslim sexism, just as we must work against endemic sexism in America.

Is it possible to participate in gender justice initiatives, to produce discourse on Muslim women, to include Islam and gender issues on one's syllabus, or even simply to read a book about women and Islam and not reinforce the battle lines? Yes, with some strategizing.

Slipping Past the Pity Committee and Dodging the Defensive Brigade

Native American activist Winona LaDuke says use multiple strategies.⁷ Five strategies might help to counter Pity Committee and Defensive Brigade discourses: critical thinking, dual critique, cross-cutting parallels, refusing historical amnesia, and awareness of economic inequities.

Critical Thinking. Good old-fashioned “If p, then q” logic works. Thank you, Aristotle, no matter how sexist you were, and thank you al-Farabi and Ibn Rushd, the medieval Muslim Aristotles. My colleague questioned the story for logical inconsistencies, and this examination led her to seek other versions for comparison.

Dual Critique. Critiquing oppression in the global Muslim community while simultaneously critiquing oppression committed by and in Western societies, waging a double-fronted battle, pries gender work out of both camps. Here we might recall 4:135 from the Quran’s chapter on, appropriately, “women.” It is a passage that construes the criticism of one’s own society as a strength: “Stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to God, even against your selves, or your parents, or your kin, and whether it be against rich or poor: for God can best protect either; and follow not your desires that conflict with justice, and if ye distort or decline to do justice, then truly God knows what it is that ye do.”

Cross-cutting Parallels. Kristof demonizes a far-off culture, one he sees as stretching across the *other* side of the globe, but how far away from New York is the misogyny that produced the rape of Ms. Mai? Ask Kitty Genovese, whose screams were heard by thirty-eight of her Manhattan neighbors when she was raped and murdered in 1964. Or ask the victim of the 1989 Glen Ridge, New Jersey, rape, in which four football players raped a mentally retarded young woman. Is it so hard to imagine, in an American setting, that star athletes from prominent families might find some local support for their abuse of a woman without many resources? “Supporters Surround Coach Accused of Sex Crimes,” reads an August 11, 2008, headline about six girls at a Warrensburg, Missouri, high school who reported sexual molestation by their popular coach, only to have their school and town turn hostile on them.⁸ Muslim sexism exists; it is just not that different from sexism among other people, despite having its specific local forms. Bizarrely, some reified notion of religious and cultural difference is made the culprit of sexism in Kristof’s column. Sexism in a “conservative Muslim society” is not seen as akin to sexism in “the West.” Seeing the world of Islam as utterly alien in this way, as an “It” rather than a “You,” involves one amnesia and two blindness, against which the careful reader can strategize.

Remembering One’s Own History. Historical amnesia strikes those persons who posit inherent Islamic misogyny, amnesia about the fact that the same debates about women’s rights, which have been swirling in the Islamic world in the past 110 years, have been raging in the United States and Europe for the past 150 years. The variation amounts to a few decades more or less of social change, depending on the Muslim country, even despite the added difference

that religious law is still in play in many Muslim nations and not in the West. I know it is not politically correct to say Muslim countries are two decades behind, or three or four, on some issues. Nor is it accurate in every case, but it is a useful start for comparison: The United States was a traditional agrarian patriarchal society around the time of the Industrial Revolution and went through lengthy stages of development with concomitant social change. Many Muslim countries started as traditional preindustrial agrarian societies a number of decades ago. The specific decade differs by country, but all have crammed into a shorter time span many developmental stages similar to the ones that served as catalysts for social change in Western countries. In many Muslim-majority countries these processes were complicated, also, by the debilitating effects of foreign colonial subjugation.

First-wave feminism happened in the United States from the 1860s to the 1910s, in Egypt from the 1880s to the 1930s, and although some specific issues differed, the processes were similar. The 1930s to 1950s were actually more progressive in the Arab world, the Indian subcontinent, Iran, and Turkey than in the United States. In the United States, in the 1950s a woman could not get a bank loan without a husband, and the cult of feminine domesticity held sway. Feminism woke up again in the United States and flowered into a mass movement in the 1970s. The feminist campaign to change American attitudes about domestic violence, for example, got a toehold on public policy only in the late 1970s (later in Texas, I am told). Why, then, should it be a surprise that in the 2000s, Saudi anchorwoman Ebtihaj Mubarak is spearheading the first major public campaign against domestic violence in Saudi Arabia, a country preindustrial until 1936, and that she is encountering Neanderthal attitudes? Do Americans simply not remember how recent was their own society's Neanderthal resistance to feminist reforms and that gender equality is still a jihad in progress, unevenly realized across states?

Economics Not Erased. Martin Buber once wrote, "When a culture is no longer centered in a living and continually renewed relational process, it freezes into an It-World."⁹ An It-World sees people as commodities, treating Muslim women's stories as chips in a global game of domination and consumption. Those people who reify "Islam" as the ultimate cause of the abuse of women in the "third world" seem blind to the fact that the global devastation of organic communities by transnational corporations with terrifyingly little accountability and the frightening gap between the world's poor and those countries whose consumption levels have strip-mined everyone else's economies are the biggest factors in the well-being or lack thereof of the vast majority of Muslim women. These economic

injustices have likewise undermined the well-being of poor American women and have impoverished working-class people in the United States. Here is the biggest cross-cutting parallel, and the biggest abuser of women, and we are all kin in the struggle against it. It is why the wars are being fought. Not over culture.

In this equation, an individual Muslim woman can be just as much the oppressor and the rogue as can a Muslim man, and a Western man and woman. Go on, ask me how: because we who are privileged consumers and happen to be Muslim women have just as much power as any other privileged person to consume and destroy, particularly when we ally with institutions of power. And if you think that what we wear or do not wear on our heads has anything to do with that power or its misuse, I will need to bop you on the nose.