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For my mother,

who watched me struggle

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Introduction

Rights and Lives

On a bright December day in 2010, I was having tea with Zaynab, a woman who lives in a village in southern Egypt.[1] I had known her for many years, and as we caught up on each other's news, she politely asked me about the subject of my new research. I explained that I was writing a book about how people in the West believe that Muslim women are oppressed. Zaynab objected, "But many women are oppressed! They don't get their rights in so many ways—in work, in schooling, in . . ."

I was surprised by her vehemence. "But is the reason Islam?" I asked. "They believe that these women are oppressed by Islam."

It was Zaynab's turn to be shocked. "What? Of course not! It's the government," she explained. "The government oppresses women. The government doesn't care about the people. It doesn't care that they don't have work or jobs, that prices are so high that no one can afford anything. Poverty is hard. Men suffer from this too."

This was just three weeks before the day that Egyptians took to the streets and the world watched, riveted, as they demanded

rights, dignity, and the end of the regime that had ruled for thirty years. Zaynab had a particular reason for her anger that day. I had arrived that morning to find her household in distress. The café that had been made out of the old living room of her house was shuttered. Inside, her son lay on the couch, despondent. He was the one who ran the café; the youngest of her sons, he was practical and hardworking. He had been a bright and eager kid when we first met him, watching closely when my husband helped Zaynab fix her washing machine and delighting us with the motor-driven toys he made. He had always been the first to hitch the donkey cart to go off to get fodder for the sheep and water buffalo that Zaynab had kept for milk and income.

Zaynab had just returned from the police station and she was agitated. She had gone to find out why they had picked up the boy who helped her son in the café. She explained what had happened. The local security officer had come in demanding breakfast. Another customer was served first. It seems that the security officers and the military police came in regularly, or sent an underling to get them food. Zaynab dramatically described all the good food her son would prepare for them: fava beans smothered in real clarified butter, eggs, cheese, pickles, and a mountain of bread. They never offered the full price; sometimes they didn't pay at all. This time, they had the waiter arrested.

As she drank strong tea for her headache, I tried to cheer up the family by making a facetious suggestion. How about posting their menu and prices on a board so that everyone would know what things cost? And to shame the police and military, have a second column listing the special discounted prices just for them. Neither Zaynab nor her son was amused. They were tired of this harassment.

The problem, Zaynab explained, was that no one dared stand up to them. With just a word, these men could have her shop or

café closed down. She already had to pay off the security police and the tourist police daily. I had seen Zaynab seethe when the uniformed men or plainclothes police came by asking for packets of cigarettes and then refused to pay. They saw her as an ignorant peasant, her face dark with years of work in the fields, her black robes marking her as uneducated. They knew she was powerless. No wonder she blamed the government for women's oppression.[2]

I had been close to Zaynab and her family for almost twenty years. Her youngest child was the same age as my twins; we had met when they were infants. I admired the way Zaynab had raised her children and run the household more or less on her own. Her husband had left to find work in Cairo, as did so many from this depressed region, and only returned for short vacations.[3] Intelligent and knowledgeable about everything from poetic funeral laments to the economics of farming, she had been indefatigable in building a good life for her family. In recent years, when her children were old enough to help, she finally was able to capitalize on her location, which was near the buses that brought tourists to her hamlet to visit a well-preserved Pharaonic temple. She set up a small kiosk selling cigarettes, batteries, and chewing gum, and then expanded to sell bottled water, sodas, and snacks. Endlessly moving things indoors and out, serving customers, arranging for supplies, applying for permits, and paying bribes and fines, the headaches were regular and the income inconsistent.

Zaynab's individual circumstances are unique, of course. She lives in a poor region of Egypt. Her marriage had not been ideal. Active and independent, she had a head for business and managed a complicated farming enterprise more or less on her own for years. She regretted that she had never gone to school—many girls didn't when she was growing up—but she was sharp and

wondered why she seemed to understand more about the world than her children, all of whom had gone to school.

Yet her reaction to the subject of my book on "the Muslim woman" confirmed something I had seen across the Arab world. She lived with hardships, but she was always thinking about how to do the best for her family. She was keenly aware of the political circumstances that shaped her life and her possibilities, whether they came from a security state or from being part of the international tourist economy. Her shock at my suggestion that anyone would think she was oppressed by her religion was significant. Like so many women I have known across the Arab world—from university professors and businesswomen to villagers—her identity as a Muslim is deeply meaningful to her, and her faith in God is integral to her sense of self and community.

Thinking like an Anthropologist

Because I have known women like Zaynab through my years doing ethnographic research, I am often bewildered by what I read or hear about "the Muslim woman." It is hard to reconcile my experiences with the women I have met in rural Egypt with what the American media present, or with what people say to me casually at dinner parties, in doctors' offices, and on the sidelines at my children's soccer games when they learn that I write about the Middle East. I am surprised by how easily people presume that Muslim women do not have rights.

This book is the result of my intellectual journey to make sense of the disjuncture between my experiences and these public attitudes. When defending the rights of Muslim women was offered as part of the justification for U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan in 2001, I had already spent twenty years writing about women's lives in various communities in Egypt. In the late 1970s, I lived for two years in a Bedouin community in Egypt's

Western Desert. I was then a graduate student in anthropology doing fieldwork for my dissertation. The book I eventually published based on this experience was called *Veiled Sentiments*.[4] It presented the surprising things that the poems so precious to women in this community could tell us about how they felt—about men, relationships, and life. The women who expressed themselves through poignant oral poetry first taught me just how complicated cultural and moral life was in at least one Arab Muslim community.

Worried that the academic style and arguments of my first book had stood in the way of conveying the liveliness of the women I had come to know, not to mention the nuances of their social relations and attitudes, I returned again to live in this community for about six months in the mid-1980s. Based on this research, I wrote a second book that was composed only of narratives. In *Writing Women's Worlds,* I used the everyday stories of individual women to try to capture something of the spirit of their world.

By presenting women's dreams, desires, anger, and disappointments—in their own words—I hoped to lay to rest some stereotypes. Some of the women longed desperately for children; others were frazzled by having too many. Some wanted to marry; others shied away—or pretended to. Some had husbands who were close life partners; others had husbands who hurt their feelings. Some escaped bad marriages; others were bound to them, as so many women are, by love of their children. The stories were about jealousies, arguments, deep interdependencies, and the changes women underwent as they grew older. Some of the women I wrote about clearly felt embraced by their large families and were confident and powerful; some were lonely and poor. Some women were defiant and proud; others were resigned to what fate had brought them. Some young women wanted to

escape what they perceived as their community's flaws, even if they fiercely defended central values and argued in terms of becoming better Muslims. All had a keen sense of their rights.

The individuality of these women's experiences and their reflections on life and relationships challenged what I felt was anthropology's tendency to typify cultures through social scientific generalizations. I imagined feminists as another audience for my second book; I hoped that the narratives would persuade them that it is not so easy to talk about "patriarchy" or to put one's finger on how power works. I wanted my years of research to offer something unusual to a public that had little understanding of, but strong views about women in the Middle East. Trying to remain true to my experiences of living in this small community in Egypt for so many years—watching children grow up, women struggle to build families, people figure out how to realize their dreams, relationships and roles shift, and hopes sometimes turn to resignation—I did my best to convey the texture of "life as lived."[5]

I called what I was doing "writing against culture." I was convinced that generalizing about cultures prevents us from appreciating or even accounting for people's experiences and the contingencies with which we all live. The idea of culture increasingly has become a core component of international politics and common sense.[6] Pundits tell us that there is a clash of civilizations or cultures in our world. They tell us there is an unbridgeable chasm between the West and the "Rest." Muslims are presented as a special and threatening culture—the most homogenized and the most troubling of the Rest. Muslim women, in this new common sense, symbolize just how alien this culture is.

Western representations of Muslim women have a long history.[7] Yet after the attacks of September 11, 2001, the images of oppressed Muslim women became connected to a mission to

rescue them from their cultures. As I explore in this book, these views rationalize American and European international adventures across the Middle East and South Asia. The media enthusiastically took up stories about the status and suppression of women. Feminists joined the cause. Popular memoirs by Muslim women who exposed the plights of their benighted sisters in Iran, Afghanistan, and Saudi Arabia became best sellers in the West. Women's organizations headed off to Afghanistan alongside a battery of humanitarians and legal experts. Later, these groups set up shop in Iraq, a country in which, ironically, women had previously enjoyed the highest levels of education, labor force participation, and even political involvement in the Arab world.[8]

The line between progressives and right-wingers has blurred in this shared concern for Muslim women. Some conservatives accuse American feminists of failing to protest "glaring injustices," including especially the "subjection of women in Muslim societies."[9] They accuse feminist scholars of being so consumed by a toxic anti-Americanism or so obsessed with a patriarchy that prevails everywhere (not to mention being wary of femininity, antifamily, and hostile to traditional religion) that they don't criticize "heinous practices beyond our shores." On the other side, observers of the U.S. feminist movement have argued that the revitalization of American feminism in the 1990s came with a shift from domestic to global issues. Farrell and McDermott, for example, attribute the stagnation of U.S. feminism after the 1970s to the conservative backlash that challenged earlier gains in affirmative action, education, employment, and sexual rights (at the same time that minority criticisms of U.S. feminism for racism were debilitating it). The mainstream turn to global or international feminism, they say, was a "strategic diversion from a fragmented domestic politics." American feminists began to focus on spectacularly oppressive practices that were easy to

mobilize around: female genital cutting, enforced veiling, or the honor crime. Promoting causes far from home, they could secure themselves "a niche in larger political discussions around the role of United States as the beacon of humanitarianism."[10]

As an anthropologist who had lived for so long with women in communities where everyone was Muslim, I was forced by all these developments to reflect on what I could or should do with the perspective my ethnographic work had given me. The first principle of ethnography, which involves participating in daily life over a long period, is to listen and watch. I had already spent twenty years trying to understand something about women's lives in what now was being homogenized as "the Muslim world," where women's rights needed defending. So I embarked on a project to articulate why the emerging Western common sense about the plight of Muslim women did not capture what I knew from experience and from reading history. This book is my attempt to figure out how we should think about the question of Muslim women and their rights.

I do not just analyze or criticize media representations. Nor do I only study the ways popular rhetoric is put to political use. I am committed to taking seriously the lives of individual women I have known.[11] Each of the women whose lives I introduce in this book forces us to question dogmas. Each taught me something important about the inadequacy of contemporary understandings of the rights that Muslim women enjoy (or don't), even as they taught me that women live deeply gendered lives. Some face restrictions on mobility. Most have strong ideals of comportment and morality, work with laws and norms that distinguish men's and women's rights and responsibilities, and struggle with choices. I use their cases to bridge the gulf between the specific dilemmas and hardships they face in particular places

and times and the common Western story of the hapless Muslim woman oppressed by her culture.

Alternative Voices

I am not alone in raising doubts about the images of Muslim women we are offered in the West. Nor am I the only one to question the connection between these images and the prevailing politics of violence. Informed interventions and sensible dissenting voices can be found in the American public sphere. On April 13, 2011, a website called Muslimah Media Watch that monitors representations of Muslim women uploaded a striking poster from a German human rights campaign.[12] At first glance, one sees plastic trash bags lined up against a mud wall; some are black, some are blue. A closer look reveals that hunched up among these bags is a figure shrouded in a blue burqa (Afghan-style full covering). The German rights campaign slogan reads: "Oppressed women are easily overlooked. Please support us in the fight for their rights." A writer on another feminist website picked up the poster and retorted that "agency is easily overlooked if you actively erase it."[13] The feminists, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, who drew attention to this campaign poster are among those who ask us why so many, including human rights campaigners, presume that just because Muslim women dress in a certain way, they are not agentic individuals or cannot speak for themselves. These feminists are not ignoring the abuses the women suffer; to the contrary, they are suggesting that we ought to talk to them to find out what problems they face rather than treating them as mute garbage bags.

Martha Nussbaum, a feminist philosopher, also publicized the problems with presuming that veiling or covering might signal oppression. In a 2010 article in the *New York Times* blog

about the proposed bans of burqas in several European countries, she framed her arguments against the ban around the principle of freedom of conscience that is so central to American law and historical values and on the human rights principle of equal respect.[14] Her erudite demolition of the usual arguments put forward in support of banning an item of women's clothing was not just persuasive but amusing.

First, she dismissed arguments that the burqa is a symbol of male domination and coercion by pointing out that those who criticize this item of dress neither know the first thing about Islamic symbols nor would they support banning most practices commonly associated with male domination in our own society. These include commercial exploitation of women, plastic surgery, and fraternity violence, to name a few familiar examples. Nussbaum offered some everyday examples to show the inconsistencies in the other two arguments in favor of the ban: (1) "security requires people to show their faces when appearing in public places" and (2) "the kind of transparency and reciprocity proper to relations between citizens is impeded by covering part of the face." She wrote: "It gets very cold in Chicago—as, indeed, in many parts of Europe. Along the streets we walk, hats pulled down over ears and brows, scarves wound tightly around noses and mouths. No problem of either transparency or security is thought to exist, nor are we forbidden to enter public buildings so insulated. Moreover, many beloved and trusted professionals cover their faces all year round: surgeons, dentists, (American) football players, skiers and skaters."

In a later post, Nussbaum responded to readers who objected that the burqa was different because it portrayed women as nonpersons (think trash bags). Much of our poetry treats eyes as the windows of the soul, she noted. Then she again described her own experience. During a construction project in her office at

the University of Chicago she had to cover everything but her eyes because she wanted to protect her singing voice from dust. Students soon got used to it, she said: "My personality did not feel stifled, nor did they feel that they could not access my individuality."[15] She concluded that if we accept that human beings are entitled to equal dignity, we have to recognize that each of the arguments put forth in support of these bans is discriminatory. As she later elaborated in her book *The New Religious Intolerance: Overcoming the Politics of Fear in an Anxious Age,* what motivates these proposals to ban "covering" is not any problem with face covering but a fear of Muslims.[16]

None of those speaking out against the stereotyping of Muslim women is silent on the issue of women's suffering. Nussbaum herself has drawn attention to the gross inequities that are based on gender and the repugnant violence against women that occurs around the world.[17] I share the sentiments of all those who want to see a world in which women do not suffer as much as they do now—whether from hunger, poverty, domestic abuse, sexual exploitation, or practices that compromise their health or dignity. Anyone concerned with women's well-being must pursue moral and political ideals, however utopian. Yet as a scholar and someone who has lived with the kinds of women most often held up as prime and even exceptional examples of the grossly oppressed, I insist that we must analyze carefully the nature and causes of women's suffering. A good place to begin is to take seriously the insights of women like Zaynab.

Where Is Feminism?

The last two decades have been momentous for the development of new international instruments of women's rights and for the consolidation of feminist concern about women worldwide. In the 1990s, with the Fourth World Conference on Women in

Beijing in 1995 and the successful campaign to claim women's rights as human rights, we entered a new era of international exchange among women, activism by nongovernmental organizations devoted to women's empowerment, a growing feminist elite in other parts of the world, and the involvement of Western feminists in other regions. The UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) provided an important framework and set of ancillary institutions for pursuing gender equality.[18] In the academy and elsewhere, lively debates have taken place. Liberal feminists who condemn patriarchy in other cultures and advocate universal standards of gender equity have been confronted by third world feminists and women of color in the West who insist that racial difference, class position, and geographic location shape women's experiences differently.[19] How can we treat women as an undifferentiated category?

The sharp debate within feminist circles about whether women share enough to constitute a singular category ("woman") has implications for the subject of this book. Should we be working with the similarly homogenized subcategory of "the Muslim woman"? I have taken her as my subject because others, some outside and some inside Muslim communities, are framing women's rights issues this way. Yet all of the cases of particular women I analyze in this book are drawn from the Arab world, and most are from the rural communities in Egypt where I have done research. This leap from the general to the particular requires explanation.

Muslim women live on all continents. More Muslims live in South and Southeast Asia, by far, than live in the Middle East. Many important developments in law and culture have emerged from these regions. Scholars have written about gender issues in all the nations in which Muslim women live. Women's

experiences living in these other contexts can teach us different lessons than I can, with my focus on Egypt. Each country in which Muslims live has inherited a different history. In some countries, Muslims are minorities; in others, they are majorities. In a few countries, most are wealthy; in others, they are poor. The careful ethnographies that anthropologists and sociologists have written; the vivid documentary films that have been produced; the historical studies that those who work in the archives have published; the fiction, poems, and essays that women from these communities have created; the studies of law and legal reforms that experts have contributed—all confirm the tremendous diversity.

If I were a specialist on India, I would have drawn on a vast variety of experiences and situations—dating back hundreds of years and differentiated by region—to bring home this diversity. The dynamics that shape Muslim women's rights and lives in the subcontinent are dizzying. From their vulnerability in the tragic communal riots in Gujarat to their earlier use as pawns during Partition, when they (like Hindu and Sikh women) were booty of war and then reclaimed in the aftermath of independence for national honor, their identities as Muslims were key to what happened to them. Battles over a proposed Uniform Civil Code for family law in India have been pitched for years. Mobilized by a divorce case taken up by Indian feminists (mostly Hindu), the Muslim community protectively entrenched itself by insisting on preserving Muslim personal status law.[20]

Some of the more sensationalized abuses of Muslim women that have garnered world attention come from parts of the world other than where I have lived and worked. Because troops have been on the ground in Afghanistan since 2001, U.S. newspapers have regularly featured the problems that women in Afghanistan face. The focus has tended to be on "cultural practices" rather

than war injuries or other consequences of militarization or the dislocations of war, as I explore in Chapter 1. It is important to look behind the headlines.

Bangladesh entered the limelight with publicity about incidents in which acid has been thrown at women, notably a major American television documentary called "Faces of Hope." Elora Chowdhury, who studied both the problem and the publicity, discovered that the issue of acid violence had been tackled in local campaigns by dedicated Bangladeshi feminists for years. They had set up organizations and laid the groundwork for providing services for survivors. Bangladeshi campaigners and victims (some the same) mobilized international support for their work, but then, as Chowdhury shows, the efforts of these groups were erased in the award given to the American documentary by the international rights organization Amnesty International.[21] More disturbingly, she traced how the incidents and the shifting demographics of the problem were simplified to fit a narrative of progress in which downtrodden Muslim women were given new lives by enlightened "saviors" who rescued them from "savages."[22] The messiness of the facts—who the acid throwers were and why the victims were attacked (for anything from rejection of sexual advances to family or land disputes)—were set aside. Even more worrying was what had happened to the victims whose causes were adopted by well-meaning benefactors. Interventions transformed their lives, but subjected them to novel pressures including Christian proselytizing. Some girls were criticized for making choices that went against the rescuers' scripts for them. In short, the story behind the news was complicated. It did not fit the story of Muslim women oppressed by their culture.

Muslim women's issues regularly stir up international debate in ways that concerns about women elsewhere in the world do

not. Dina Mahnaz Siddiqi's meticulous research into the high-profile legal cases of rape in Bangladesh that were taken up by international women's rights groups shows neatly how stories get distorted when they go global. Siddiqi discovered that in many of the controversial cases where judges ruled that women should marry their rapists, women's testimonies and lawyers' explanations revealed that what we had instead were consensual relationships gone awry. The charges of rape or seduction were being brought forward when a pregnancy had exposed a relationship or when a relationship did not end in a promised marriage. Portraying the women as innocent victims of rape saved face and social respectability, and brought pressure on men to marry their girlfriends. International human and women's rights groups portray such resolutions as hideous violations of girls' rights when the problem is that the social ideals of female respectability, the stigma of sexuality, and the narrowness of the legal system limit women's options. Such gendered limits should not be confused with hideous "crimes against women." They also have nothing to do with Islamic law because the legal system in which the cases are pressed is the secular state court system.[23]

In recent years, Shari'a—the term people use loosely to refer to law that derives from Islamic legal traditions—has become an international symbol of Muslim identity and, to many in the West, a dreaded and traditional enemy of women's rights. The impact and implications of imposing "Shari'a law" are sharply debated.[24] In Southeast Asia, something called Shari'a law was imposed in Aceh after a protracted conflict with the Indonesian state and in the wake of autonomy and post-tsunami wealth.[25] Its violation of local gender norms and its connection to the political conflict reveal it to be anything but traditional. In nearby Malaysia, however, an innovative group of Muslim feminists calling themselves Sisters in Islam emerged to challenge conservative

interpretations of Islamic law. In 2009 an international movement for legal reform of Islamic family law grew out of this organization.[26]

These examples from different parts of the Muslim world illustrate the variety of situations in which Muslim women find themselves, the sorts of debates and strategies they engage, and how frequently their experiences are misunderstood and the complexities of their situations ignored. These analyses of what's wrong with the simple story of Muslim women's oppression hold cautionary tales for us. Abuses and infringements of women's rights must be acknowledged. This is true everywhere they occur, whether in sex trafficking in Seattle, Tel Aviv, or Dubai; rape in Belgium, Cambodia, or Bosnia; or domestic violence in Chicago, Capetown, or Kabul. At the same time, we have to recognize the everyday forms of suffering that women endure—from insecurity to hunger and illness—that are not always gendered or specific to particular cultures or religious communities. We have to keep asking hard questions about who or what is to blame for the problems that particular women face. What responses might be most effective for addressing problems that we do find, and who is best situated to understand or respond to these problems? Muslim women activists have been addressing gender issues in their communities for more than a century in places like Egypt, Syria, and present-day Bangladesh. As Elora Shehabuddin notes, these reform movements were initially led by men, but "by the late nineteenth and early twentieth century . . . Muslim women themselves were making passionate pleas for change."[27]

For the past decade, I have been trying to think through both the politics and the ethics of the international circulation of discourses about "oppressed Muslim women." Inspired less by debates in my discipline of anthropology than by what is happening

in the world, I have been following the very active social life of "Muslim women's rights." If the prominent use of the sad figure of the oppressed Muslim woman for a war in Afghanistan in 2001 set me on the path to thinking through the issues, I have nevertheless felt that the best way to approach the problem is to go deeply into the specifics and what I know. That is why I draw heavily on my experiences living in some small communities in Egypt. I do not claim that the women whose lives I analyze are representative or can stand in for all others. Instead, I use them to suggest that intimate familiarity with individuals anywhere makes it hard to be satisfied with sweeping generalizations about cultures, religions, or regions, or to accept the idea that problems have simple causes or solutions. I am more drawn to the detail and empathy of the novelist than to the bold strokes of the polemicist.

Confounding Choices

Even if many are willing to set aside the sensationalized stories of oppression that capture media attention and contribute to the widespread sense of certainty about the direness of the situation of "the Muslim woman," most people still harbor a stubborn conviction that women's rights should be defined by the values of choice and freedom, and that these are deeply compromised in Muslim communities. This obsession with constraint is shared by outsiders and secular progressives within the Muslim world. It is expressed perfectly in persistent worries about the veil (hijab/niqab/burqa/head scarf). Women who cover themselves are assumed to be coerced or capitulating to male pressure, despite the fact that wearing an enveloping cover is mandatory (in public) in only a few settings and that educated Muslim women in the past thirty years have struggled with the opposite problem: They must defy their families and sometimes the law to take

on what they value as pious Islamic dress. Women's decisions to take on the veil in what Leila Ahmed has called "a quiet revolution" are shaped by a long history of controversy over its meanings.[28] Can dress symbolize freedom or constraint? How can we distinguish dress that is freely chosen from that which is worn out of habit, social pressure, or fashion? A cartoon on a 2007 cover of the major New York literary magazine the *New Yorker* captures this dilemma wonderfully. Three young women sit side by side in a New York subway car. One is in full black niqab with just her eyes showing. Next to her sits a blond who is wearing large sunglasses, shorts, a bikini top, and flip-flops revealing painted toenails. Next to her sits a kindly looking, bespectacled nun wearing a habit. The caption reads: "Girls will be girls."

Because of the terms in which Muslim women's lives are represented and debated in the West, no book about women in the Muslim world can avoid confronting the question of how to think about choice and what it means to assert freedom as the ultimate value. I return again and again to these issues that lie at the heart of the matter. Born into families, we all find ourselves in particular social worlds. We are placed in certain social classes and communities in specific countries at distinct historical moments. Our desires are forged in these conditions and our choices limited by them. This is not to say that some individuals and communities do not enjoy more choice and more power to choose than others—after all, Virginia Woolf taught us in *A Room of One's Own* that at least in Britain up until the Second World War, these have usually been men.[29] But is the relative power to choose defined solely by sex or by culture? We need to reflect on the limits we all experience in being agents of our own lives. And beyond that, we have to ask ourselves what we think about those for whom choice may not be the only litmus test of a worthy life. Most religious traditions are built on the premise that

people do not fully control what happens to them. Even the ancient Greeks saw hubris—excessive pride or belief that one could defy the gods—as a tragic flaw.

Questions like these are crucial for thinking about Muslim women and their rights. In considering the strange idea that liberal democracies want to legislate what Muslim women should wear, Wendy Brown reminds us that secularism has not brought women's freedom or equality in the West. Our views, Brown says, are based on the "tacit assumption that bared skin and flaunted sexuality is a token if not a measure of women's freedom and equality."[30] The women who are going to the mosques to learn how to be better Muslims and who are embracing a new kind of veiling as religious duty would be nonplussed.[31] My friend Zaynab, in her black overdress and head covering, would be shocked by this assumption. Our convictions about Muslim women's relative lack of choice, Brown concludes, ignore "the extent to which all choice is conditioned by as well as imbricated with power, and the extent to which choice itself is an impoverished account of freedom."

How such simplistic ideas about freedom are maintained is a running theme of this book. I look both at political rhetoric and popular culture. Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the Somali émigré whose voice has been so crucial in the past decade to defining North American and European views on women and Islam, refers to Muslim women as "caged virgins." She presents herself as a Muslim woman who has freed herself from the cage, rejecting the "tribal sexual morality" that she ascribes to Islam and emancipating herself through atheism.[32] She gives step-by-step advice to young Muslim girls about how to run away from home.[33] Mass-market paperbacks about abused Muslim women buttress such views with metaphors of caged birds, trapped flies, and spiders in jars.

The Wounded Bird

The contrast between the free and unfree is at the core of contemporary American feminism, drawing on a powerful national ideology and political philosophy. One of the most poetic and familiar evocations is the title of Maya Angelou's classic memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Her autobiographical story of emancipation from both racism and sexual abuse turns on a contrast between the caged bird and the free. The caged bird's shadow, in Angelou's poem, "shouts on a nightmare scream."[34]

I want to set beside this classic contrast another song about a nightmare scream, one that I heard in Jordan. This other song invites us to think differently about women and freedom because it speaks to the new context in which we live, a context dominated by a popular discourse like Ayaan Hirsi Ali's, which pits Western freedom against imprisonment by Islam. This song is a sober reminder that we must situate such images and ground our thinking about the meanings of freedom in the everyday lives of individuals, on the one hand, and the imperial politics of intervention, on the other. We will find that it is rarely a case of being free or oppressed, choosing or being forced. Representations of the unfreedom of others that blame the chains of culture incite rescue missions by outsiders. Such representations mask the histories of internal debate and institutional struggles over justice that have occurred in every nation. They also deflect attention from the social and political forces that are responsible for the ways people live.

I heard this song from one of my favorite aunts (technically my father's first cousin, but we called her "aunt"). Widowed a decade ago, she had decided to move to Jordan to be near her brother and sisters. The family was scattered after their expulsion from Palestine in 1948, but her siblings were gathering again

after they, like many Palestinians, were driven out of Kuwait in the first Gulf War. I had not seen her for many years, but when a conference took me to Jordan, I got in touch. In her late seventies now, she remained beautiful and glamorous. She still wore tasteful makeup and had her hair pulled up in a bun with a colorful clip. Wearing an elegant, long black skirt and trendy ankle boots, she also carefully draped a chiffon scarf loosely over her head when we went to pay a call on some relatives.

As long as I'd known her, she had been punctual about prayers, and on her lips were the same entreaties to God and expressions of faith that are familiar to anyone who has spent time in the Muslim world. But my aunt also loved to sing. That day, she wanted to sing for us. Of the many songs she had written, this plaintive song was the one, she said, that best expressed her feelings. It was intriguing to me that it played on the same images as the poem in Angelou's book on freedom.

I'm a wounded bird
Living in the world, a stranger . . .
I search, search for my country
I find nothing but my laments . . .

The wound in me is deep
And will need years to heal . . .
I am screaming inside
But no one but me can hear

She interpreted her song for me, not sure I would understand the Arabic or the deep meaning. Everyone, she said, thinks she is happy because she is so warm and fun-loving on the outside. Vivacious and funny, she is indeed a lively raconteur and someone who appreciates people's foibles. When she complained about her bad knee or her failing eyesight, she would say with a twinkle, "You know how hard it is when you get to be thirty-seven and a

half years old!" She confided to me that she had composed this song after her daughter (who was about my age and had been dear to me, too) was killed in a car accident with college friends in Wisconsin. She didn't leave the house for months. But she sings the song with new feeling now—shortly after her husband passed away, she lost her eldest son to cancer.

My aunt has not had the life she deserved. With her talents and intelligence, and her origins in a good family from Jaffa, she had what looked initially like a good marriage. She married a man who was considerably older but well educated by the Jesuits. He had a respectable job working for the British customs office at Lydda (now Ben Gurion) Airport. In the black-and-white studio photograph of her on their wedding day, which she had enlarged and hung in her bedroom, she sits demurely on a chair, her hair in curls, and a white pearl necklace around her neck, her young body feminine in a long, white lace dress. But their life took an unexpected turn.

A few years after they were married, fighting broke out in Jaffa with the settlers in Tel Aviv who wanted Palestine as a Jewish state. During the troubles, her husband took her and their two young sons "on holiday" to Egypt. They had two suitcases with them. She tells the story of what happened when they got the news that Jaffa had fallen to the Zionists. They were in a hotel in Cairo when they learned that the Zionist settlers had taken by force what, even under the partition plan imposed by the United Nations (UN), belonged to the part of Palestine to have been left to the Palestinians. The state of Israel was declared and it included Jaffa. Her husband beat his head against the wall. Never able to return, they spent the next twenty years living a modest life in a lower-middle-class neighborhood in Cairo.

I got to know them in the late 1950s, when my father took a job working for the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and

Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in Egypt. We loved to play with our cousins, her children. My aunt would cook us delicious food, sing as she worked around the house, and let us play pranks on the neighbors. She kept the household going without much companionship from her husband. As a refugee, her husband found it hard to find work and was often forced to be away. He was a dour man anyway, at least by the time I knew him, proud that he spoke many languages (Arabic, French, English, and Hebrew) and often buried in a book. He did not share her zest for life or music. They raised four children, sending them off, one by one, to the United States for college. The eldest became an engineer and eventually sent for his parents, setting them up in a Midwestern suburb.

There is so much in her life that seems unfair. As a girl growing up in Jaffa in the 1930s and 1940s, she married too early to get an education. As a refugee, like hundreds of thousands of Palestinians who lost everything, she was cut off from her family in 1948. As someone who spent more than fifty years married to a man who was not a good match for her, she could not flourish, though she made the best of it. Singing kept her going. The song about herself as a wounded bird, though, was about more than her personal plight. She explained to me, "I am like Palestine. My wounds are deep. We Palestinians are all wounded and strangers in this world." There was no way to separate her personal situation from the particular historical and political circumstances that gave it shape and limits.

My aunt finds comfort in her songs and takes pleasure in family. But I noticed when we talked that she also finds inner peace through prayer. She struggles to read a part of the Qur'an every day, even though she did not have the benefit of an education that would make this easy. With her eyes bright, she tells me that in the Qur'an she has found marvels. She comments, "You begin

to be philosophical about life. You have to accept what life brings you."

My aunt has had it easier financially than Zaynab has. She never had to work in the fields or confront security police. She now lives in middle-class comfort in her own apartment decorated with dried flower arrangements and framed photographs of those she has loved and lost. Yet no more than the village woman in her black robes living in a mud brick house would my aunt recognize herself in that figure of the popular American imagination: the Muslim woman who submits slavishly to an uncaring God and accepts abject confinement and harsh treatment by men because of some verses from the Qur'an. Love of family and faith in God keep her going.

These women's lives show us just how varied and complicated the sources of any one woman's suffering might be. From the abuse of power by security police in Egypt in 2011 to the injustices of colonial British support for Zionist expulsion of Palestinians from their land and homes in 1948, we see that the most basic conditions of these women's lives are set by political forces that are local in effect but national and even international in origin. Neither woman had a husband who was able to help her flourish, whether because of personality or precarious financial and political circumstances. The confidence of these women and even their public face was sometimes shaken by these men, who nevertheless did their best to provide for their families, burying their own humiliations and insecurity. Is it because they are Muslim men that they were less than perfect husbands?

And how are we to account for these women's resilience and initiative? Both threw themselves into making good lives for their children, living for and through them. My aunt's losses anguished her; she tried to manage this grief through her faith in

God. Zaynab has been consumed by the struggles and failings of her sons, by her eldest daughter's loneliness, and by her youngest daughter's diabetes. Zaynab's trust in God gives her strength and perspective.

The lives of women like Zaynab and my aunt reveal terms like oppression, choice, and freedom to be blunt instruments for capturing the dynamics and quality of their lives. Such terms do little to help us understand the tireless efforts of these women, their songs of loss and longing, and their outbursts about rights. Both women would find it bizarre to imagine that people could think they were caged by their culture or oppressed by their religion, even though they have not had easy lives and some of what they suffer is indeed gendered. Images of caged birds and trash bags by the side of a road obscure their social realities and their creative responses to hard situations.

Politics of the Everyday

This book seeks answers to the questions that presented themselves to me with such force after September 11, 2001, when popular concern about Muslim women's rights took off. I worry about the ways that representations of Muslim women's suffering and arguments about their lack of rights have been working politically and practically. I follow the concept of "Muslim women's rights" as it travels through debates and documents, organizes women's organizations and activism, and mediates lives in refugee camps and the halls of the United Nations. I try to uncover what this framework that describes distant women's lives only in terms of rights, present or absent, hides from us about both everyday violence and forms of love. I ask what evaluating lives in terms of rights does for (and against) different kinds of women. Along the way, I uncover how key symbols of Muslim women's cultural

alienness—from the veil to the honor crime—are deployed in twenty-first-century political projects, and why these symbols grip us.

Trying to understand people's lives is for me a passion. It is also my vocation as an anthropologist. That is why I seek answers to these big questions through the lives of particular women I know. These are women who are trying to lead good lives and who are making choices that are sometimes hard, limited by the constraints of the present and the uncertainties of the future. I have known them for many years, as individuals living in families, communities, countries, and the world. How do they see the problems they are facing? What do they say they want? How should this make us think about that mythical place where Muslim women, undifferentiated by nation, locality, or personal circumstance, live lives that are totally separate and different from our own? What can thinking about their circumstances teach us about values like choice and freedom in the context of human lives—any human lives?

These women, I believe, can help us reflect critically on the groundswell of support for global women's rights that has emerged in the past decade, and the special concerns about the rights (or wrongs) of "the Muslim woman." How is the current moral crusade to save Muslim women authorized? What worldly effects do well-meaning concerns have on the suffering of women elsewhere in the world? How does the proposition that such women live caged in their cultures undergird fantasies of rescue by "the world community"?[35] These are questions that troubled me because I knew from experience how surprised women like Zaynab and my aunt would be by the contours of this concern.