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.

CHAPTER 1

Do Muslim Women (Still) Need Saving?

Commentators noted the political timing of *Time* magazine's cover story about a beautiful young woman from Afghanistan whose nose had been cut off. The unsettling photograph of Bibi Aysha, whose Taliban husband and in-laws had punished her this way, appeared on newsstands in August 2010. Eight months earlier, President Obama had authorized a troop surge, but now there was talk about bringing some Taliban into reconciliation talks. The juxtaposition between the photograph and the headline—"What Happens if We Leave Afghanistan?"—implied that women would be the first victims. Unremarked was the fact that this act of mutilation had been carried out while U.S. and British troops were still present in Afghanistan.[1]

Time had selected this photograph from a large number of possible images. The talented South African photographer who took it explained the backstory at the award ceremony when it was declared World Press Photo of the Year. Jodi Bieber had been on assignment in Afghanistan taking portraits of women. She had photographed politicians, documentary filmmakers,

popular television hosts, and women in shelters and burn hospitals.[2]

Time's managing editor defended his decision to feature this shocking photograph in both moral and political terms. Even if it might distress children, he wrote (and he had consulted child psychologists), they needed to know that "bad things happen to people." The image, he also argued, "is a window into the reality of what is happening—and what can happen—in a war that affects and involves all of us." He was not taking sides, he said, but he would "rather confront readers with the Taliban's treatment of women than ignore it." He continued: "The much-publicized release of classified documents by WikiLeaks has already ratcheted up the debate about the war . . . We do not run this story or show this image either in support of the U.S. war effort or in opposition to it. We do it to illuminate what is actually happening on the ground . . . What you see in these pictures and our story is something that you cannot find in those 91,000 documents: a combination of emotional truth and insight into the way life is lived in that difficult land and the consequences of the important decisions that lie ahead."[3]

Bibi Aysha had been photographed in a shelter in Kabul run by an American organization with a large local staff, Women for Afghan Women (WAW). She was waiting there to be sent to the United States for reconstructive surgery, thanks to the generosity of donors and the Grossman Burn Foundation. Both the photographer and WAW were broadsided by the publicity following the *Time* cover. WAW tried to protect Bibi Aysha from the glare, eventually preventing all interviews and photographs. By then they were sheltering her in New York, hoping she would recover enough from her trauma for surgery to take place.

A member of WAW's board nevertheless echoed *Time*'s political message. She predicted "a bloodbath if we leave Afghanistan."

Bibi Aysha's plight was to remind the public of the atrocities the Taliban had committed. Esther Hyneman rejected the suggestion made by Ann Jones in the *Nation* that the Taliban were being singled out for demonization when they were not much different from other misogynous groups in Afghanistan, including those in the U.S.-backed government. If the Taliban were to come to power, she warned, "the sole bulwarks against the permanent persecution of women will be gone." These bulwarks were the international human rights organizations and "local" organizations like her WAW.[4]

The controversy over Bibi Aysha indicates how central the question of Afghan women's rights remains to the politics of the War on Terror that, almost from its first days in 2001, has been justified in terms of saving Afghan women.[5] As an anthropologist who had studied women and gender politics in another part of the Muslim world for so many years, I was not convinced at the time by this public rationale for war, even as I recognized that women in Afghanistan do have particular struggles and that some suffer disturbing forms of violence.

Like many colleagues whose work focuses on women in the Middle East and the Muslim world, I was deluged with invitations to speak at the time of heightened interest in 2001. It was the beginning of many years of being contacted by news programs, as well as by departments at colleges and universities, especially women's studies programs. I was a scholar who had by then devoted more than twenty years of my life to this subject, and it was gratifying to be offered opportunities to share my knowledge. The urgent desire to understand our sister "women of cover" (as President George W. Bush had so marvelously called them) was laudable. When it came from women's studies programs where transnational feminism was taken seriously, it had integrity. But I was uncomfortable.

Discomfort with this sudden attention led me to reflect on why, as feminists in or from the West, or simply as people concerned about women's lives, we might be wary of this response to the events and aftermath of September 11, 2001. What are the minefields—a metaphor sadly too apt for a country like Afghanistan (with the world's highest number of mines per capita)—of this obsession with the plight of Muslim women? What could anthropology, the discipline whose charge is to understand and manage cultural difference, offer us as a way around these dangers? Critical of anthropology's complicity in a long history of reifying cultural difference, linked to its ties with colonial power, I had long advocated "writing against culture." So what insights could I contribute to this public discourse?

Cultural Explanations and the Mobilization of Women

In an essay I published in 2002, less than a year after I gave it as a lecture at Columbia University, I argued that we should be skeptical regarding this sudden concern about Afghan women. I considered two manifestations of this response: some conversations I had with a reporter from the *PBS NewsHour;* and the radio address to the nation on November 17, 2001, given by then first lady Laura Bush. The presenter from *NewsHour* first contacted me in October 2001 to see if I would be willing to provide some background for a segment on Women and Islam. I asked her whether they had done segments on the women of Guatemala, Ireland, Palestine, or Bosnia when the show covered wars in those countries. But I agreed to look at the questions she was going to pose to panelists. I found them hopelessly general. Do Muslim women believe X? Are Muslim women Y? Does Islam allow Z for women? I asked her if she would ask the same questions about Christianity or Judaism. I did not imagine she would

call me back. But she did, twice. The first was with an idea for a segment on the meaning of Ramadan, which was in response to an American bombing during that time. The second was for a program on Muslim women in politics, following speeches by Laura Bush and Cherie Blair, wife of the then British prime minister.

What is striking about these three ideas for news programs is that there was a consistent resort to the cultural, as if knowing something about women and Islam or the meaning of a religious ritual would help one understand the tragic attack on New York's World Trade Center and the U.S. Pentagon; how Afghanistan had come to be ruled by the Taliban; what interests might have fueled U.S. and other interventions in the region over the past quarter of a century; what the history of American support for conservative Afghan fighters might have been; or why the caves and bunkers out of which Osama bin Laden was to be smoked "dead or alive," as President Bush announced on television, were paid for and built by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

To put it another way, why was knowing about the culture of the region—and particularly its religious beliefs and treatment of women—more urgent than exploring the history of the development of repressive regimes in the region and the United States' role in this history? Such cultural framing, it seemed to me, prevented the serious exploration of the roots and nature of human suffering in that part of the world. Instead of political and historical explanations, experts were being asked to give religious or cultural ones. Instead of questions that might lead to the examination of internal political struggles among groups in Afghanistan, or of global interconnections between Afghanistan and other nation-states, we were offered ones that worked to artificially divide the world into separate spheres—re-creating an imaginative

geography of West versus East, us versus Muslims, cultures in which first ladies give speeches versus others in which women shuffle around silently in burqas.

Most troubling for me was why the Muslim or Afghan woman was so crucial to this cultural mode of explanation that ignored the complex entanglements in which we are all implicated in sometimes surprising alignments. Why were these female symbols being mobilized in the War on Terror in a way they had not been in other conflicts? As so many others by now have pointed out, Laura Bush's radio address on November 17, 2001, revealed the political work such mobilization accomplished. On the one hand, her address collapsed important distinctions that should have been maintained. There was a constant slippage between the Taliban and the terrorists, so that they became almost one word—a kind of hyphenated monster identity: the "Taliban-and-the-terrorists."[6] Then there was the blurring of the very separate causes of Afghan women's suffering: malnutrition, poverty, class politics, and ill health, and the more recent exclusion under the Taliban from employment, schooling, and the joys of wearing nail polish. On the other hand, her speech reinforced chasmic divides, principally between the "civilized people throughout the world" whose hearts break for the women and children of Afghanistan and the Taliban-and-the-terrorists, the cultural monsters who want to, as she put it, "impose their world on the rest of us."

The speech enlisted women to justify American military intervention in Afghanistan and to make a case for the War on Terror of which it was a part. As Laura Bush said, "Because of our recent military gains in much of Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned in their homes. They can listen to music and teach their daughters without fear of punishment . . . The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women."[7]

These words have haunting resonances for anyone who has studied colonial history. Many who have studied British colonialism in South Asia have noted the use of the woman question in colonial policies. Intervention into *sati* (the practice of widows immolating themselves on their husbands' funeral pyres) and child marriage were used to justify rule. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak famously put it, "white men saving brown women from brown men."[8] The historical record is full of similar cases, including in the Middle East. In turn-of-the-century Egypt, what Leila Ahmed has called "colonial feminism" governed policy on women.[9] There was a selective concern about the plight of Egyptian women that focused on the veil as a sign of their oppression but gave no support to women's education. The champion of women was the same English governor, Lord Cromer, who had opposed women's suffrage back home.

Marnia Lazreg, a sociologist of Algeria, has offered vivid examples of how French colonialism enlisted women to its cause in Algeria:

> Perhaps the most spectacular example of the colonial appropriation of women's voices, and the silencing of those among them who had begun to take women revolutionaries . . . as role models by not donning the veil, was the event of May 16, 1958 [just four years before Algeria finally gained its independence from France after a long struggle and 130 years of French control]. On that day a demonstration was organized by rebellious French generals in Algiers to show their determination to keep Algeria French. To give the government of France evidence that Algerians were in agreement with them, the generals had a few thousand native men bused in from nearby villages, along with a few women who were solemnly unveiled by French women . . . Rounding up Algerians and bringing them to demonstrations of loyalty to France was not in itself an unusual act during the colonial era. But to unveil women at a well-choreographed ceremony

> added to the event a symbolic dimension that dramatized the one constant feature of the Algerian occupation by France: its obsession with women.[10]

Lazreg gives memorable examples of the way in which the French had even earlier sought to transform Arab girls. *The Eloquence of Silence* describes skits at the award ceremonies at the Muslim Girls' School in Algiers in 1851 and 1852. In the first skit, written by "a French lady from Algiers," two Algerian girls reminisce about their trip to France with words including: "Oh! Protective France: Oh! Hospitable France! . . . Noble land, where I felt free Under Christian skies to pray to our God: . . . God bless you for the happiness you bring us! And you, adoptive mother, who taught us that we have a share of this world, we will cherish you forever!"[11]

These girls are made to invoke the gift of a share of this world, a world where freedom reigns under Christian skies. This is certainly not the world the Taliban-and-the-terrorists would "like to impose on the rest of us."

Just as we need to be suspicious when neat cultural icons are plastered over messier historical and political narratives, so we need to be wary when Lord Cromer in British-ruled Egypt, French ladies in Algeria, and First Lady Laura Bush, all with military troops behind them, claim to be saving or liberating Muslim women. We also need to acknowledge the differences among these projects of liberating women. Saba Mahmood points particularly to the overlap today between the liberal discourses of feminism and secular democracy; the missionary literature from earlier eras, like the Algerian school skit, show instead that the earlier language was not secular.[12]

Politics of the Veil

Let us look more closely at those Afghan women who were said to be rejoicing at their liberation by the Americans. This necessitates a discussion of the veil, or the burqa, because it is so central to contemporary concerns about Muslim women. This sets the stage for some thoughts on how anthropologists, feminist anthropologists in particular, contend with the problem of difference in a global world and gives us preliminary insights into some of what's wrong with the rhetoric of saving Muslim women.

It is commonly thought that the ultimate sign of the oppression of Afghan women under the Taliban is that they were forced to wear the blue burqa. Liberals sometimes confess their surprise that women did not throw off their burqas after the Taliban were removed from power in Afghanistan in 2001. Someone who has worked in Muslim regions would ask why this should be surprising. Did we expect that once "free" from the extremist Taliban these women would go "back" to belly shirts and blue jeans or dust off their Chanel suits? We need to be more sensible about the clothing of "women of cover," and so there is perhaps a need to make some very basic points about veiling.

First, it should be recalled that the Taliban did not invent the burqa. It was the local form of covering that Pashtun women in one region wore when they went out. The Pashtun are one of several ethnic groups in Afghanistan and the burqa was one of many forms of covering in the subcontinent and Southwest Asia that had developed as a convention for symbolizing women's modesty or respectability. The burqa, like some other forms of cover has, in many settings, marked the symbolic separation of men's and women's domains, part of the general association of women with family and home rather than public spaces where strangers mingle.

Hanna Papanek, an anthropologist who worked in Pakistan in the 1970s, has described the burqa as "portable seclusion." She notes that many saw it as a liberating invention because it enabled women to move out of segregated living spaces while still observing the basic moral requirements of separating and protecting women from unrelated men.[13] Ever since I came across her phrase "portable seclusion," I have thought of these enveloping robes as "mobile homes." Everywhere, such veiling signifies belonging to a particular community and participating in a moral way of life in which families are paramount in the organization of communities and the home is associated with the sanctity of women.

The obvious question that follows is this: If this were the case in Pakistan or Afghanistan, why would women suddenly want to give up the burqa in 2001? Why would they throw off the markers of their respectability that assured their protection from the harassment of strangers in the public sphere by symbolically signaling to all that they were still in the inviolable space of their homes and under the protection of family, even though moving about in public? In fact, these forms of dress might have become so conventional that most women gave little thought to their meaning.

To draw some analogies (none of them perfect), why should we be surprised that Afghan women did not throw off their burqas when we know perfectly well that in our society it would not be appropriate to wear shorts to the Metropolitan Opera? At the time these discussions of Afghan women's burqas were raging, a wealthy friend of mine was chided by her husband for suggesting that she wanted to wear a pantsuit to a wedding: "You know you don't wear pants to a WASP wedding," he reminded her. New Yorkers know that the beautifully coiffed Hasidic women, who look so fashionable next to their somber husbands in black

coats and hats, are wearing wigs. This is because religious belief and community standards of propriety require the covering of the hair. They also alter boutique fashions to include high necks and long sleeves. People wear the appropriate form of dress for their social communities and their social classes. They are guided by socially shared standards and signals of social status. Religious beliefs and moral ideals are also important, including as targets for transgressions to make a point (one thinks of Madonna here). The ability to afford proper and appropriate cover affects choice. If we think that U.S. women live in a world of choice regarding clothing, we might also remind ourselves of the expression, "the tyranny of fashion."

What happened in Afghanistan under the Taliban was that one regional style of covering or veiling—associated with a certain respectable but not elite class—was imposed on everyone as "religiously" appropriate, even though previously there had been many different styles that were popular or traditional with different groups and classes. There had been different ways to mark women's propriety or, in more recent times, piety. Even before the Taliban, the majority of women in Afghanistan were rural and non-elite. They were the only ones who could not emigrate to escape the hardship and violence that has marked Afghanistan's recent history. If liberated from the enforced wearing of burqas, most of these women would choose some other form of modest head covering, like those living across the region who were not under the Taliban—their rural Hindu counterparts in the North of India (who cover their heads and veil their faces from in-laws) or their fellow Muslims in Pakistan.

Even the *New York Times* carried a good article in 2001 about Afghan women refugees in Pakistan, attempting to educate readers about this local variety of modes of women's veiling.[14] The article described and pictured everything from the now-iconic

blue burqa with embroidered eyeholes, which a Pashtun woman explains is the proper dress for her community, to large scarves they call "chadors," to the new Islamic modest dress that wearers refer to as "hijab." Those wearing the new Islamic dress are characteristically students heading for professional careers, especially in medicine, just like their counterparts from Egypt to Malaysia. One wearing the large scarf was a school principal; the other was a poor street vendor. The telling quote from the young street vendor was, "If I did [wear the burqa] the refugees would tease me because the burqa is for 'good women' who stay inside the home."[15] Here you can see the local status in the Afghan refugee community that is associated with the burqa—it is for good, respectable women from strong families who are not forced to make a living selling on the street. It has nothing to do with being mute garbage bags by the side of the road, as the German human rights poster described in the introduction was to insinuate a decade later.

The British newspaper the *Guardian* published an interview in January 2002 with Dr. Suheila Siddiqi, a respected surgeon in Afghanistan who held the rank of lieutenant general in the Afghan medical corps.[16] A woman in her sixties then, she came from an elite family and, like her sisters, was educated. Unlike most women of her class, she had chosen not to go into exile. She was presented in the article as "the woman who stood up to the Taliban" because she refused to wear the burqa. She had made it a condition of returning to her post as head of a major hospital when the Taliban came begging in 1996, just eight months after having fired her along with other women. Siddiqi is described as thin, glamorous, and confident. But further into the article, it is noted in passing that her graying bouffant hair is covered in a gauzy veil. This is a reminder that though she refused the burqa, she had no question about wearing the chador or scarf. Over the past

decade, the demographics and meaning of wearing (and not wearing) the burqa in public have changed, varying especially between the cities and countryside.[17]

Veiling must not be confused with, or made to stand for, lack of agency. Not only are there many forms of covering, which themselves have different meanings in the communities where they are used, but veiling has become caught up almost everywhere now in a politics of representation—of class, of piety, and of political affiliation. As I describe in *Veiled Sentiments,* my first ethnography of a Bedouin community in Egypt in the late 1970s and 1980s, for women I knew there, pulling the black head cloth over the face in front of older, respected men was considered a voluntary act. One of the ways they could show their honor and assert their social standing was by covering themselves in certain contexts. They would decide (and debate) for whom they felt it was appropriate to veil.[18]

To take a radically different case, the modest Islamic dress that so many educated women across the Muslim world have been adopting since the mid-1970s both publicly marks their piety and can be read as a sign of educated urban sophistication, a sort of modernity.[19] For many pious women in the Islamic revival, this new form of dress is embraced as part of a bodily means, like prayer, to cultivate virtue. It is, as Mahmood has described, the outcome of their professed desire to be close to God.[20] Lara Deeb, who has written about the public piety of women in Lebanon who are associated with Hizbollah, described how these women see themselves as part of a new Islamic modernity, an "enchanted modern."[21] In some countries, and not just Europe, women have to violate the law to take on this form of dress. In other countries, like Iran, women's play with color or tightness, or the revelation of a shoulder, a belly button, an ankle, or a wisp of hair mark political and class resistance.[22]

So we need to work against the reductive interpretation of veiling as the quintessential sign of women's unfreedom, even if we object to state imposition of this form, as in Iran or with the Taliban. (It must be recalled that earlier in the twentieth century, the modernizing states of Turkey and Iran had banned veiling and required men, except religious clerics, to adopt Western dress and wear European hats.) What does freedom mean if we accept the fundamental premise that humans are social beings, raised in certain social and historical contexts and belonging to particular communities that shape their desires and understandings of the world? Is it not a gross violation of women's own understandings of what they are doing to simply denounce the burqa as a medieval imposition? One cannot reduce the diverse situations and attitudes of millions of Muslim women to a single item of clothing. And we should not underestimate the ways that veiling has entered political contests across the world.[23]

The significant political-ethical problem the burqa raises is how to deal with cultural "others." How are we to deal with difference without accepting the passivity implied by the cultural relativism for which anthropologists are justly famous—a relativism that says it's their culture and it's not my business to judge or interfere, only to try to understand? Cultural relativism is certainly an improvement on ethnocentrism and the racism, cultural imperialism, and imperiousness that underlie it; the problem is that it is too late not to interfere. The forms of lives we find around the world are already products of long histories of interactions among those living far from each other.

I suggest that we approach the issues of women, cultural relativism, and the problems of "difference" from three angles. First, we need to consider what feminists should do with strange political bedfellows.[24] I used to feel torn when I received the e-mail petitions circulating in defense of Afghan women under the

Taliban. I was not sympathetic to the dogmatism of the Taliban; I do not support the oppression of women. But the provenance of the campaign worried me. I do not usually find myself in political company with the likes of Hollywood celebrities.[25] I had never received a petition from such women defending the right of Palestinian women to safety from Israeli bombing or daily harassment at checkpoints, asking the United States to reconsider its support for a government that had dispossessed them, closed them out from work and citizenship rights, and refused them the most basic freedoms. Maybe some of these same people were signing petitions against sensational "cultural" practices, for example, to save African women from genital cutting or Indian women from dowry deaths. However, I do not think it would be as easy to mobilize so many of these American and European women if it were not a case of Muslim men oppressing Muslim women—women of cover, for whom they can feel sorry and in relation to whom they can feel smugly superior. Would television diva Oprah Winfrey host the Women in Black, the women's peace group from Israel, as she did the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), which was also granted the *Glamour* magazine Women of the Year Award?

To be critical of this celebration of women's rights in Afghanistan is not to pass judgment on any local women's organizations such as RAWA, whose members have courageously worked since 1977 for a democratic secular Afghanistan in which women's human rights are respected, against Soviet-backed regimes or U.S.-, Saudi-, and Pakistani-supported conservatives. Their documentation of abuse and their work through clinics and schools have been enormously important. It is also not to fault the campaigns that exposed the dreadful conditions under which the Taliban placed women. The Feminist Majority campaign helped put a stop to a secret oil pipeline deal between the

Taliban and the U.S. multinational corporation Unocal that was going forward with U.S. administration support.

Western feminist campaigns must not be confused with the hypocrisies of the colonial feminism of a Republican president who was not elected for his progressive stance on feminist issues, or of a Republican administration that played down the terrible record of violations of women by U.S. allies in the Northern Alliance, as documented by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, among others. Rapes and assaults were widespread in the period of infighting that devastated Afghanistan before the Taliban came in to restore order. (It is often noted that the current regime includes warlords who were involved and yet have been given immunity from prosecution.)

We need to look closely at what we are supporting (and what we are not) and think carefully about why. How should we manage the complicated situation of finding ourselves in agreement with those with whom we normally disagree? In the introduction to this book, I talk about the blurring between Left and Right on the issue of Muslim women's rights. How many who felt good about saving Afghan women from the Taliban are also asking for a radical redistribution of wealth or sacrificing their own consumption radically so that Afghan, African, or other women can have some chance of freeing themselves from the structural violence of global inequality and from the ravages of war? How many are asking to give these women a better chance to have the everyday rights of enough to eat, homes for their families in which they can live and thrive, and ways to make decent livings so their children can grow? These things would give them the strength and security to work out, within their communities and with whatever alliances they want, how to live a good life. Such processes might very well lead to changing the ways those communities are organized, but not necessarily in

directions we can imagine. It is unlikely that such changes would not include being good Muslims, and debating, as people have for centuries, how to define a good Muslim, or person.

Suspicion about bedfellows, I argued in those early days of the U.S. presence in Afghanistan, was only a first step needed for our rethinking. To figure out what to do or where to stand, I suggested that we would have to confront two more issues. First, we might have to accept the possibility of difference. Could we only free Afghan women to be "like us," or might we have to recognize that even after "liberation" from the Taliban, they might want different things than we would want for them? What would be the implications of this realization? Second, I argued that we should be vigilant about the rhetoric of saving others because of what it betrays about our attitudes.

Accepting difference does not mean that we should resign ourselves to accepting whatever goes on elsewhere as "just their culture." I have already introduced the dangers of "cultural" explanations; "their" cultures are just as much part of history and an interconnected world as ours are, as I explore more fully in this book. Instead, it seems to me that we have to work hard at recognizing and respecting differences—but as products of different histories, as expressions of different circumstances, and as manifestations of differently structured desires. We should want justice and rights for women, but can we accept that there might be different ideas about justice and that different women might want, or even choose, different futures from ones that we envision as best?[26] We must consider that they might be called to personhood, so to speak, in different languages.

Reports from the Bonn peace conference, held in late November 2001 to discuss the rebuilding of Afghanistan just after the U.S.-led invasion, revealed significant differences among the few Afghan women feminists and activists who attended. RAWA's

position was to reject any conciliatory approach to Islamic governance. According to one report, though, most women activists, especially those based in Afghanistan who are aware of the realities on the ground, agreed that Islam had to be the starting point for reform. Fatima Gailani, a U.S.-based adviser to one of the delegations, was quoted as saying, "If I go to Afghanistan today and ask women for votes on the promise to bring them secularism, they are going to tell me to go to hell."[27] Instead, according to one report, most of these women looked to what might seem a surprising place for inspiration on how to fight for equality: Iran. Here was as a country in which they saw women making significant gains within an Islamic framework—in part through an Islamic feminist movement that was challenging injustices and reinterpreting the religious tradition.

The constantly changing situation in Iran has itself been the subject of heated debate within feminist circles, especially among Iranian feminists living in the United States or Europe.[28] It is not clear whether and in what ways women have made gains and whether the great increases in literacy, decreases in birthrates, presence of women in the professions and government, and a feminist flourishing in cultural fields like writing and filmmaking are despite or because of the establishment of an Islamic Republic. The concept of an Islamic feminism itself is also controversial. Is it an oxymoron or does it refer to a viable movement forged by brave women who want a third way? In the decade since that conference in Bonn, as we see in Chapter 6, Islamic feminisms have been thriving and developing well beyond Iran.

One of the things we have to be most careful about is not to fall into polarizations that place feminism, and even secularism, only on the side of the West. I have written about the dilemmas faced by Middle Eastern feminists when Western feminists initiate campaigns that make them vulnerable to local denunciations

by conservatives of various sorts, whether Islamist or nationalist, for being traitors.[29] As some like Afsaneh Najmabadi have argued, not only is it wrong to see history simplistically in terms of a putative opposition between Islam and the West (as is happening in the United States now and has happened in parallel in the Muslim world), but it is also strategically dangerous to accept this cultural opposition between Islam and the West, between fundamentalism and feminism. This is because there are many people within Muslim countries who are trying to find alternatives to present injustices—those who might want to refuse the divide and take from different histories and cultures, who do not accept that being feminist means being Western, and who will be under pressure, as we are, to choose: Are you with us or against us?

We need to be aware of differences, respectful of other paths toward social change that might give women better lives, and recognize that such options are set by different historical experiences. Can there be a liberation that is Islamic? Does the idea of liberation, as I explore more fully in this book, capture the goals for which all women strive? Are emancipation, equality, and rights part of a universal language or just a particular dialect?[30] To quote Saba Mahmood again, writing about the pious Muslim women in Cairo: "The desire for freedom and liberation is a historically situated desire whose motivational force cannot be assumed a priori, but needs to be reconsidered in light of other desires, aspirations, and capacities that inhere in a culturally and historically located subject."[31] Might other desires be as meaningful for people? Might living in close families be more valued? Living in a godly way? Living without war? I have done ethnographic fieldwork in Egypt for more than thirty years and I cannot think of a single woman I know—from the poorest rural peasant like Zaynab to the most educated cosmopolitan colleagues at the

American University in Cairo—who has expressed envy of women in the United States, women they variously perceive as bereft of community, cut off from family, vulnerable to sexual violence and social anomie, driven by selfishness or individual success, subject to capitalist pressures, participants in imperial ventures that don't respect the sovereignty or intelligence of others, or strangely disrespectful of others and God. This is not to say, however, that they do not value certain privileges and opportunities that many American women enjoy.

Saba Mahmood has pointed out a disturbing thing that sometimes happens when one argues for respecting other traditions. The political demands made on those who write about Muslims are quite different from demands made on those who study secular-humanist projects. Mahmood, who studies the piety movement in Egypt, is constantly pressed to denounce all the harm done by Islamic movements around the world. Otherwise, she is accused of being an apologist. Yet there is never a parallel demand on those who study modern Western history, despite the terrible violences that have been associated with the Christian West over the past century, from colonialism to world wars, from slavery to genocide. We ought to have as little dogmatic faith in secular humanism as in Islamism, and as open a mind to the complex possibilities of human projects undertaken in one tradition as the other.

Beyond the Rhetoric of Salvation

My discussion of culture, veiling, and how one navigates the shoals of cultural difference should put First Lady Laura Bush's self-congratulation about the rejoicing of Afghan women liberated by American troops in a different light. It is problematic to construct the Afghan or Muslim woman as someone in need of saving. When you save someone, you imply that you are saving

her from something. You are also saving her *to* something. What violences are entailed in this transformation? What presumptions are being made about the superiority of that to which you are saving her? Projects of saving other women depend on and reinforce a sense of superiority, and are a form of arrogance that deserves to be challenged. All one needs to do to appreciate the patronizing quality of the rhetoric of saving women is to imagine using it today in the United States about disadvantaged groups such as African American, Latina, or other working-class women. We now understand them to be suffering from structural violence. We have become politicized about race and class, but not culture.

We should be wary of taking on the mantles of those late nineteenth-century Christian missionary women who devoted their lives to saving their Muslim sisters. One of my favorite documents from the period is a collection called *Our Moslem Sisters,* the proceedings of a conference of women missionaries held in Cairo in 1906.[32] The subtitle of the book is *A Cry of Need from the Lands of Darkness Interpreted by Those Who Heard It.* Speaking of the ignorance, seclusion, polygamy, and veiling that blight women's lives across the Muslim world, the missionary women assert their responsibility to make these women's voices heard: "They will never cry for themselves, for they are down under the yoke of centuries of oppression."[33] "This book," it begins, "with its sad, reiterated story of wrong and oppression is an indictment and an appeal . . . It is an appeal to Christian womanhood to right these wrongs and enlighten this darkness by sacrifice and service."[34]

One hears uncanny echoes of their virtuous goals today, even though the language is distinctly secular and the appeals are less often to Jesus than to human rights, liberal democracy, and Western civilization, as we explore in Chapters 2 and 3. Sometimes

the appeals are even simpler: to modern beauty regimes and the rights to cut hair. This was the surprising message of a group of hairdressers who went to Kabul to open a beauty academy for Afghan women, teaching them "hair and make-up." These Australians, Americans, and exiled Afghans were part of an initiative called "Beauty without Borders," supported, not surprisingly, by the cosmetics industry and *Vogue*.[35]

The continuing currency of the missionaries' imagery and sentiments can be seen in the way they are deployed for even more serious humanitarian causes. In February 2002, a few months after coalition forces entered Afghanistan, I received an invitation to a reception honoring the international medical humanitarian network called Médecins du Monde/Doctors of the World (MdM). Under the sponsorship of the French ambassador to the United States, the head of the delegation of the European Commission to the United Nations, and a member of the European Parliament, the cocktail reception was to feature an exhibition of photographs under the clichéd title "Afghan Women: Behind the Veil." The invitation was remarkable not just for the colorful photograph of women in flowing burqas walking across the barren mountains of Afghanistan but also for the text, which read in part:

> For 20 years MdM has been ceaselessly struggling to help those who are most vulnerable. But increasingly, *thick veils* cover the victims of the war. When the Taliban came to power in 1996, Afghan Women became faceless. To unveil one's face while receiving medical care was to achieve a sort of intimacy, find a brief space for *secret freedom* and recover a little of one's dignity. In a country where women had no access to basic medical care because they did not have the right to appear in public, where women had no right to practice medicine, MdM's program stood as a stubborn reminder of human rights . . . Please join us in helping to *lift the veil*. (emphasis added)

Although I do not take up here the fantasies of intimacy associated with unveiling—fantasies reminiscent of the French colonial obsessions so brilliantly unmasked by Malek Alloula in his book, *The Colonial Harem,* about Algerian colonial postcards—I can ask, and try to answer in the chapters that follow, why humanitarian projects and human rights discourse in the twenty-first century need to rely on such stereotyped constructions of Muslim women.

It seems to me that it is better to leave veils and vocations of saving others behind. Instead, we should be training our sights on ways to make the world a more just place. The reason that respect for difference should not be confused with cultural relativism is because it does not preclude asking how we, living in this privileged and powerful part of the world, might examine our own responsibilities for the situations in which others in distant places find themselves. We do not stand outside the world, overlooking a sea of poor, benighted people living under the shadow—or the veil—of oppressive cultures; we are part of that world. Islamic movements have arisen in a world intimately shaped by the intense engagements of Western powers in Middle Eastern and South and Southeast Asian lives; so has Islamic feminism.

A more productive alternative might be to ask ourselves how we could contribute to making the world a more just place—a world not organized around strategic military and economic demands; a place where certain kinds of forces and values that we consider important could have a wide appeal; a place where there is the peace necessary for discussion, debate, and institutional transformation, such as has always existed, to occur and continue within communities. We need to ask ourselves what kinds of world conditions those of us from wealthy nations could contribute to making, such that popular desires elsewhere will not

be determined by an overwhelming sense of helplessness (or angry reaction) in the face of forms of global injustice. Where we seek to be active in the affairs of distant places, we might do so in the spirit of support for those within those communities whose goals are to make women's (and men's) lives better.[36] And we might do so with respect for the complexity of ongoing debates, positions, and institutions within their countries. Many have suggested that it would be more ethical to use a more egalitarian language of alliances, coalitions, and solidarity, rather than rescue.

Even members of RAWA, which was so instrumental in bringing to U.S. women's attention the excesses of the Taliban, opposed the U.S. bombings from the beginning. They did not see Afghan women's salvation in military violence that only increased hardship and loss. They called for disarmament and for peacekeeping forces. Spokespersons pointed out the dangers of confusing governments with people, or the Taliban with innocent Afghans who would be most harmed. They consistently reminded audiences to take a close look at the ways policies were being organized around oil interests, the arms industry, and the international drug trade. They were not obsessed with the veil, even though they were perhaps the most radical feminists working for a secular democratic Afghanistan. Unfortunately, only their messages about the excesses of the Taliban were heard, even though their criticisms of those in power in Afghanistan had included previous regimes.

As U.S. involvement in Afghanistan increasingly came to resemble the quagmire in which the Soviets found themselves in the 1980s, arguments of groups like RAWA have been proven prescient. In a comprehensive analysis of the situation in Afghanistan six years after the invasion, Deniz Kandiyoti drew attention to two key factors adversely affecting Afghan women.

Looking closely at the political history of the country and at the current political jockeying among groups in a weak and aid-dependent government, she noted easy threats to women's legal and social rights, which are readily pawned. As WAW's Esther Hyneman had warned in her defense of "the bulwarks" against retreats on women's rights, women have indeed become part of what Kandiyoti calls a "new field of contestation between the agenda of international donor agencies, an aid-dependent government and diverse political factions, some with conservative Islamist agendas."[37]

But this expert on gender in the Muslim world asks us to concentrate not on Kabul, with its politicians, technocrats, and international experts (including transnational feminists), but on what the war economy has done to people's social lives across the country. In the shift from subsistence agriculture and herding to opium production and arms smuggling, this criminal economy has funded and emboldened local warlords, including the Taliban, while putting most rural households into debt. Families and communities have been stripped of their autonomy and live in a constant state of insecurity. In the rural areas, Kandiyoti notes, we see "corrosive interactions between poverty, insecurity, and loss of autonomy." These create new forms of vulnerability with serious consequences for women. As I describe in the introduction for Zaynab in southern Egypt, women's options in places like Afghanistan are "conditioned by the fortunes of the communities and households in which their livelihoods and everyday lives are embedded."[38] They are distant from the government and formal legal systems, Islamic or secular. A disturbing development has been a new pattern of commodification of women. Like Bibi Aysha, who was given to her husband's family allegedly to settle a murder debt, daughters are now regularly given by their impoverished or frightened families to militia commanders

and drug traffickers. Kandiyoti heard stories of young girls being offered to old men in "distress sales" or sent away to save them from roving bands of Taliban youth.[39]

These abuses are not extensions of local custom or traditional culture. They are reactions to the current situation in Afghanistan. Kandiyoti says, "What to Western eyes looks like 'tradition' is, in many instances, the manifestation of new and more brutal forms of subjugation of the weak made possible by a criminal economy, total lack of security and the erosion of bonds of trust and solidarity that were tested to the limit by war, social upheaval and poverty."[40] Traditions built on mutual obligations have been undermined by rapidly changing, desperate economic circumstances and by political instability. Men are no longer able to meet their obligations to women or fulfill their ideals of honor, protection, or generosity. This is the problem; this is the situation on the ground.

Yet Afghanistan, with its thirty-year legacy of conflict, continues to be understood as traditional. In the 2010 *Time* magazine article that accompanied the photograph of Bibi Aysha, we find a typical example of a seamless move between Islam and tradition. A timeless culture appears directly following a quote from the minister of the economy, leader of an Islamist party who expressed his views against coeducation: "That is in accordance with Islam. And what we want for Afghanistan is Islamic rights, not Western rights." The article comments that "traditional ways, however, do little for women. Aisha's family did nothing to protect her from the Taliban. That might have been out of fear, but more likely it was out of shame. A girl who runs away is automatically considered a prostitute in deeply traditional societies, and families that allow them back home would be subject to widespread ridicule . . . In rural areas, a family that finds itself shamed by a daughter sometimes sells her into slavery, or

worse, subjects her to a so-called honor killing—murder under the guise of saving the family's name."[41]

I have much more to say about so-called honor killing in Chapter 4. For now I want to suggest that rather than resorting to such general cultural statements, we owe it to women in Afghanistan to look at their history and its impact on their current situation. With its power rivalries and its war economy, Afghanistan's circumstances are thoroughly tied up with the West, its everyday worlds embedded in a global economy and an international War on Terror. Militarization always has hidden consequences for women; these surely have more force than "culture" or "tradition."[42]

So a first step in hearing the diverse voices of Afghan women and the political message of groups like RAWA, which even in 2001 expressed concern about military intervention, is to break with the language of (alien) cultures, whether to understand or to change them. Missionary work and colonial feminism belong in the past. We should be exploring what we might do to help create a world in which those poor Afghan women—for whom First Lady Laura Bush said "the hearts of those in the civilized world break"—can have safety, decent lives, and a range of rights. What we have learned since the United States and its allies intervened is that conflict, insecurity, impoverishment, and international drug trafficking do not bring them closer to having such lives.