

The Empty Harem: Negotiating Muslim Women's Symbolism through
Literature

Research Thesis

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Introduction: The End of Orientalism and Rebranding the Muslim Woman

Edward Said dates the start of Orientalism in 1798 when Napoleon invades Egypt. The date marks the beginning of the colonization of Egypt, and after, cements the narrative of the victimized Muslim woman. Orientalism, to Said, “is a product of Western hegemony over the East”:

Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand. And why should it have been otherwise, especially during the period of extraordinary European ascendancy from the late Renaissance to the present? The scientist, the scholar, the missionary, the trader, or the soldier was in, or thought about, the Orient because he could be there, or think about it, with very little resistance on the Orient’s part. (7)

Edward Said’s theory of Orientalism has become such a common tool for analyzing the way we see Western literature, art, and politics in the Middle East that sometimes it becomes difficult to imagine a world without an Orientalist lens. Orientalism has, for decades, provided us with the Muslim woman: the sexualized victim oppressed in the confines of her family, her culture, or even her frequent abode, the harem. The Orientalist depiction of the Muslim woman has become so pervasive, appearing in paintings like those of Dominique Ingres, in the writings of travelers like Richard Francis Burton, and in Hollywood films like *The Sheik*, that it is easy to forget that the Muslim woman was not always a symbol of the Orientalist gaze and that her depiction is subject to change.

Mohja Kahf writes in *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman: From Termagant to Odalisque* that “there is nothing essential or timeless behind Western representations of the Muslim woman; they are products of specific moments and developments in culture” (2). These representations are reliant on the power dynamics between the East and the West. In the medieval period, the Muslim woman’s narrative is not the Muslim woman as a victim. On the contrary, she is often a princess or queen who possesses a power, either physical, magical, or sexual, over the Christian hero. Kahf argues that “the rhetorical move of many medieval literary texts involving Muslim woman is to subdue her, not to liberate her” (3). Thus, the Muslim woman in medieval European literature represents a resentment towards the military might of Islamic powers in the Orient and a desire to obtain that power for Europe and Christianity. The narrative of the Muslim woman as victimized by her culture only comes up rarely; in fact, a Muslim woman’s sexuality “is an indication of her outrageous liberty” allotted by Christians’ imaginings of Islam as a sexual, “orgiastic” religion (Kahf 36).

During the Renaissance, we begin to see a change in the representation of the Muslim woman. She is represented “between myths”, in some texts the Muslim woman is the powerful queen, in others the helpless damsel in need of saving. As the military might of Muslim powers begins to fade, symbolized by two dates which Kahf marks, the fall of Grenada to the King and Queen of Castile in 1492 and the 1699 Treaty of Karlowitz in which the Ottoman Empire relinquishes Hungary, Croatia, and Slovenia, depictions of the concubine, the harem, and the veiled woman, begin to rise until, by 1798, Edward Said marks the establishment of Orientalism. Kahf focuses on the harem as a perfect Orientalist symbol claiming that “the feminization of the Orient implied in relation to a virile Western master makes the harem as a discursive structure uniquely suited to the imaginative interpretations of the realities of expansion” (108). The harem

symbolizes all the Orient offers: the sexuality, the mystery, presented vulnerable and enclosed for the European man to easily step inside and move within without consequence. However, a component that is important in imagining the harem is that the harem, decades before, was unavailable to the European man. Whereas before the Orient and the Muslim woman represented the longing for power and the desire to control, with colonization she, both the Orient and the Oriental woman, is finally attainable. As such, Orientalism is as much about Western power over the East as it is about the final victory of the West over the East – the Orient is opened, fantasies run rampant, and as Said claims the European man “was in, or thought about, the Orient because *he could be there* (emphasis added, 7).”

If Said marks the start of Orientalism as Napoleon’s 1798 invasion of Egypt, I risk saying that the Syrian Civil War marks its end. While Western hegemony marks Said’s Orientalism, so does a desire to explore the Orient. Orientalism is as much about the fantasy of the Orient as it is about the power to be able to exploit that fantasy. However, with the utter decimation of Syria, the failure of the Arab Spring to bring freedom to the Middle East, and a seemingly continued cycle of violence, war, and defeat in the Middle East’s future, what allure does the Orient possess anymore? European countries no longer want to go into the Middle East. Instead, governments like America over the past year actively avoided serious engagement in the region. The harem has been emptied – all that could be explored has been explored, all that could be taken has been taken. All that is left is rubble and refugees. Whatever magic the harem and the desert possessed are gone – they have been televised alongside dead bodies and ruins. They are an old image of an old world. The fantasy of the Orient no longer exists in the present, but in the past, and such, by the destruction of the Orient by years of colonization and war, the Orient is

ironically unattainable again for the European man because he can no longer journey or explore there without consequence. Indeed, he no longer desires to go.

Just as Mohja Kahf mainly uses plays, the preferred medium of the medieval and early Renaissance period, to discuss the changing construction of the Muslim female over the years, I will use modern films with the help of Jack Shaheen to discuss the representations of Arabs in media and the fading of Orientalist depictions. Dr. Jack Shaheen analyzed 1000 films which depicted Arabs and sketched out an ongoing change in representation. Throughout the films, the Arab is always the villain. Arabs occupy “Arab land”, a place characterized by desert imagery, ominous music, oasis palaces, harem maidens and belly-dancers, scimitars, magic carpets, and snake charmers. The Disney favorite, *Aladdin*, is full of these stereotypes – in the opening song the narrator sings “it’s barbaric, but hey, it’s home.” Of the early Hollywood films representing Arabs, *Looking for Danger* (1957), *Cast a Giant Shadow* (1966) *Sahara* (1983), *Protocol* (1984), *Jewel of the Nile* (1985), and *Young Sherlock Holmes* (1985) among them, all use “Arab land” tropes, clearly evoking an Oriental lens of the mysterious East. However, in recent years that trope has dwindled – especially for the Muslim woman. Whereas before she was the belly dancer and harem maiden, in films at the turn of the century the Muslim woman is either a terrorist or a faceless, nameless black shape. While Shaheen notes the shift from Oriental exotics to terrorists, modern films depicting Arabs have almost completely turned into the simple terrorist character. Films like *American Assassin*, *Lone Survivor*, and *American Sniper* are staples of big-action, American, pop-corn action movies featuring terrorists – images of whom by now a modern audience is inundated with. In the case of *American Assassin*, the opening scenes in which the protagonist’s fiancé is gunned down by terrorists on a beach is followed by his extensive training sequences intercut with him learning Arabic and studying Islam. When he goes to the terrorists

to play-act at being a recruit, they ask him questions about Islam and he answers in broken Arabic. The scene puts the terrorist's Islamic motives on the forefront – even though leaked ISIS documents reveal that few recruits know much about Islam, and Europeans who left to join ISIS ordered “The Koran for Dummies” and “Islam for Dummies” to prepare for jihad (*Independent*).

The changing depictions of Muslims in Hollywood reveal a shift away from the Oriental Arab to the Terrorist Arab. Ironically enough, modern Western media presents the same kind of indifference towards accuracy that Renaissance plays did – characters and settings are constructed from topical and local material on Islam rather than real knowledge or interaction (Obaid x). “Arab land” still exists, it just looks different. There are few movies that come out to any large audience today that feature the kind of harem, desert, and camel scenes that marked early Hollywood films. “Arab land” today is a place full of tanks, hollowed out cities, refugee tents, and veiled women all in black. Just as the setting of “Arab land” changes, so do the characters within it, especially Muslim women. The veil itself no longer signifies the allure of the Oriental woman, or even the “oppression” of early-2000s rhetoric. Instead, the veil represents fear. The West no longer wants to save Muslim women, they want to ban them and keep them from Western society. Face-veils are being systemically banned in places from France, to Austria, and now in Quebec. The desire to look beneath the veil has faded, now the West no longer wants to look at veils at all. Thus, it appears that we are losing the Orientalism that so often characterized the relationship between the East and West. The change in the depiction of the Middle East surveyed above demonstrates what Mohja Kahf notes in her book: representations of Muslim women are not only subject to change, but we are seeing them change today. Therefore, with the steady decline of Orientalism, we have to explore the question of what lies next. When Orientalism ends, what will the Muslim woman look like?

In order to answer this question, we have to understand what the Muslim woman symbolizes today. The Middle East has, for decades, been characterized by war, ethnic and religious tensions, and failure. As Nizar Qabbani writes in his verse 17:

Friends,
 The old word is dead.
 The old books are dead.
 Our speech with holes like worn-out shoes is dead.
 Dead is the mind that led to defeat.

Our poetry has gone sour.
 Women's hair, nights, curtains and sofas
 Have gone sour.
 Everything has gone sour.

My grieved country,
 In a flash
 You changed me from a poet who wrote love poems
 To a poet who writes with a knife.

While Qabbani wrote the poem in 1967, the words could have come yesterday from any poet in Palestine, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Egypt, Iran, Afghanistan etc. Arab generations have for decades been defined by an impatience with their global and political position which Qabbani captures in his scathing verse written after the Six Day War. Despite his lament at the state of the Arab nations, Qabbani ends verse 17 with hope: "Arab children...you are the generation that will overcome defeat."

Yet, the next Arab generations never overcame defeat. Since the publication of the poem in 1967, the Middle East and neighboring Muslim-majority nations have existed in a state of seemingly perpetual war. The Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971, the Lebanese Civil War of 1975, the Iranian Revolution in 1978, the Gulf Wars of the 1990s, the US invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan in the early 2000s, to name a few, all building and destabilizing until the eruption of the Arab Spring, which began as an uprising for human rights and democracy, and ended with a

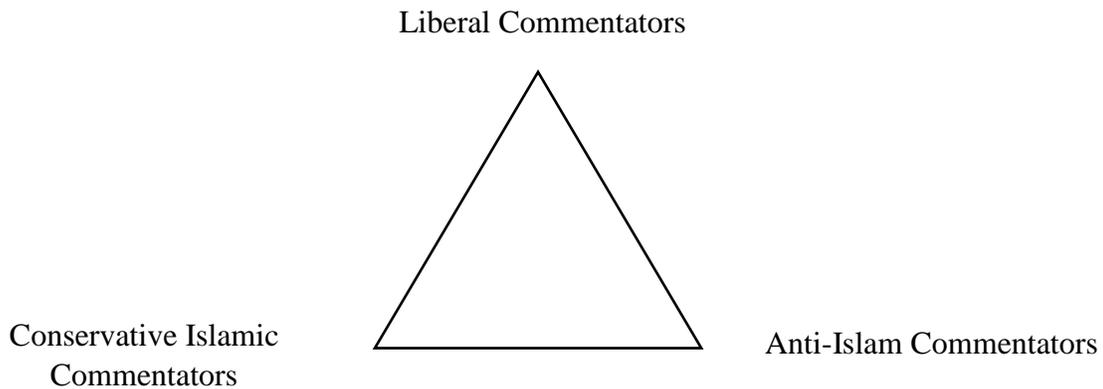
series of counter-revolutions which further destabilized the region. The exodus of refugees in response has led to the worst refugee crisis in history. Today, the news televises children drowning in the Mediterranean Sea as nations close their doors in the name of security.

Furthermore, the Middle East is not only the region undergoing rapid, social change. Nationalist and populist politics in countries across the globe, from Colombia to Hungary to India, have secured the place of nationalist politics which echo the same slogans: our countries first. Frightening slides from democracy in Ukraine, Turkey, and Venezuela challenge international cooperation. Referendums in Britain and Turkey demonstrated a surge of “patriotism”, and the election of Donald Trump in the United States on the slogan “Make America Great Again” saw the far-right come to power amidst cries to build walls and close borders to stave the influx of refugees and immigrants. On May 7, 2017, for the first time in French history, a far-right party received 35% of the vote. While Marine le Pen did not become president, her race mainstreamed French nationalist rhetoric and secured the National Front’s place in popular French politics. Nazism, too, has seen a return in a surge of neo-Nazi marches from Charlottesville to Warsaw.

The theme of the decade appears to be a desire to return to the past. It is this theme that has mobilized far-right wing politics in the wake of increasing economic inequality, the conception that life was easier in an idyllic past which must be resurrected. From France to the United States, people have voted on promises which will return their countries to a golden decade. Ironically, this sentiment is shared by the very religious fundamentalists that have been positioned as the greatest enemy of countries like France and the United States. “So rush, O Muslims and gather around you khalifah,” calls ISIS’s 2015 women’s manifesto, “so that you may return as you once were for the ages, kings of the earth and knights of war. Come so that

you may be honored and esteemed, living as masters with dignity.” However, while both religious fundamentalists and right-wing nationalists seek to return the world to the past, they seek that past in dramatically different ways. In the same passage, the 2015 manifesto continues, “By Allah, if you disbelieve in democracy, secularism, nationalism, as well as all the other garbage and ideas from the west, and rush to your religion and creed, then by Allah, you will own the earth, and the east and west will submit to you.” In contrast, Marine le Pen told her supporters in an election speech “the principles we fight for are engraved in our national motto, liberty, equality, fraternity, which stems from the principles of secularization resulting from a Christian heritage.” In warfare and terrorism, ISIS claims to oppose capitalism and nationalism to create a world in which all Muslims, regardless of race, live unified. Through democracy, right wing populists like Trump and Le Pen came to power on the shoulders of capitalism and nationalism, with calls to close their borders and stop the growing cosmopolitan identities of their nations.

Caught in-between this crux are Muslim women. Muslim women are the most visible icons of the contentious position of Islam in the modern world, and thus what they symbolize today is the amalgam of debates and ideologies that define modern global politics. When Marine Le Pen calls for secularism, she does so by discussing a desire to ban the veil in all public places. When ISIS calls for a return to religiosity, their image of decency is women walking the streets of al Raqqa and Mosul completely veiled. Muslim women find themselves positioned amid a series of debates which include nationalism, religion, secularism, and feminism, caught in crisscrossing dialogues imagined below as a triangle.



On one edge, Islamic fundamentalists like ISIS call seclusion for women freedom and find women’s fight for equality at the root of women’s plight. On the opposing side, militant secularists see Islam as inherently oppressive towards women. Of course, also engaged in these debates are liberals on the left. In response to right wing movements the left has also been active. The left organized to oppose Donald Trump’s Muslim Travel Ban, marched in response to neo-Nazi gatherings, and socialism, too, has been growing in popularity. However, while liberals despite all their best intentions seek to defend Islam from xenophobia, they also fail to properly critique feminism in the Islamic world and create a too-utopic vision of the religion. Amid the arguments on all sides, Muslim women often become symbols instead of people and their rights fall through the cracks in conversation.

The difference between the representation of the Muslim woman today vs. her representation during the heyday of Orientalism is that today the Muslim woman represents so many opposing ideologies and images that her depiction is no longer so easy to define. I’ll use Mohja Kahf’s terminology again. She characterizes the early modern Renaissance period, between the representation of the Muslim woman as powerful Queen and later vulnerable victim as “a curious lull, then, in which the older Western myths of Islam, cut off from their sources,

mutate, transform, and seem to float randomly, while emerging new myths are still vague and unsteady (64).” We are in that kind of lull, between constructions of the Muslim woman. Orientalism fades, the depiction of the terrorist has gained traction, but even that edifice is growing tired as Hollywood begins to slowly diversify and the left mobilizes in response to the far-right. We may not be at the end of a history, but maybe we are between history. In the decades to come, now that the old symbols that so commonly represented the Orient and the Oriental woman are fading, what will Muslim women represent in the future?

The answer that many Muslim female scholars give is “it is complicated”. Multiple writers and activists, from Linda Sarsour, to Leila Ahmed, to Mona Eltahawy, while they frequently speak about the negative effects of Muslim women’s current political positioning, respond to the question of where Muslim women belong or what Muslim women are, between liberal and oppressed, as “somewhere in the middle”. Lengths are taken to discuss how Muslim women’s position in society is often more complex than common discourses imagine. Half of the scholarship and writing done by Muslim women has been done to try and complicate the narrative, not provide another simple alternative. However, claims that Muslim women are *both* liberated and oppressed, are *both* secular and religious, are *both* nationalist and feminist – simply claiming that Muslim women are human, that “it’s complicated” keep us within the triangle of dialogues entrapping Muslim women because those conversations never belonged to Muslim women to begin with.

Often, when students and scholars talk about construction or representation of the Other, even when we talk about Orientalism and a Western gaze, the conversation is one-sided. Always, the West decides what to think about the “Other” and the Other responds in turn. It isn’t that Muslims are not having conversations about Islam and feminism, or that Muslims aren’t making

headlines as writers, thinkers, and activists, or that facts about Muslim women written by Muslim women are not readily available. The issue is that people, from religious fundamentalists to nationalists, have, for decades, taken the conversation about Muslim women from Muslim women. Muslim women are thinking and acting and writing, but because the conversation no longer belongs to them they are often sidelined. Muslim women rarely guide the conversation, consequently conversations about Muslim women are conversations about symbols and ideology. Muslim women need saving – *well, not really*. The veil is oppressive – *well, not really*. Islam is a violent religion – *well, not really*. The conversations are defensive. Muslim women respond, but the foundation of the conversation has already been set by pre-existing “Western” media and scholarship. And, as we fight a war of symbols and ideology, we are doomed to remain trapped within a triangle of ideologies and discourses.

However, if we pay attention to Muslim female writers, we can see them trying a different tactic than deflection: instead of refuting and complicating symbols, Muslim women are simply reconquering them. This paper looks at the ways Muslim women react to their positions within historical and modern discussions about their roles as both women and Muslims, how they exist in the crux between conversations, and consequently how they make spaces for themselves within both literal and philosophical confinement by reclaiming the conversation about Muslim women. It is only by reconquering their own symbolism that Muslim women can reclaim the conversation about themselves. The writers throughout this thesis show this. Fadia Faqir, Ghada Samman, and Kamila Shamsie in their respective novels address how women must engage with the politics of their lives in order not to be abused by those politics. Fadia Faqir and Salwa Bakr demonstrate the failure of female solidarity except under extreme duress. However, all the authors succeed in creating solidarity and female agency by reconquering the symbol of

the harem. Their use of the space of isolation, so often forced upon Muslim women, as a tool through which to liberate Muslim women echoes how Muslim women have, for centuries, taken the constraints put upon them and reworked them to their advantage. Through these writers' efforts, they are overturning the Orientalist symbols which bound them. The harem, once a symbol of European men's domination over Muslim women, grows into a space for female solidarity, growth, and freedom. The reconquering of the symbol of the harem is not simply the reclaiming of that single space. Instead, the harem serves as a stand in for the entrapment and isolation Muslim women often find themselves in. Like the harem, those confines may be physical, but the confines of family, culture, and state are just as real. Muslim women writers in this thesis, too, work to overcome those confines.

Now, reconquering a fading symbol might not seem like a cause for applause. After all, if you believe what I say that Orientalism is dying, what is there to celebrate about Muslim women reclaiming a dead symbol that the West no longer cares about? The value isn't merely about reconquering symbols attributed to Muslim women, but reconquering their own symbolism.

Chapter 1: Complicating Narratives of the Muslim Woman

ISIS's 2015 Manifesto on Women begins innocuously with the failure of the modern Middle East.

“Thanks be to God, who revived for us the State of Islam, and upon his Prophet may we bestow the best of prayer and peace,” the manifesto begins, allegedly written by the al-Khansaa Brigade, a female unit of ISIS. They continue:

Thanks be to God [whose rule has] been returned to us, after decades of humiliation and surrender, since the Ottoman Caliphate fell and was replaced by Arab regimes and their clients who were supported by the enemies of religion. Because of this military, economic and intellectual occupation of Muslim civilization, Islamic thought derived from the Book and Sunnah became estranged from the lives of people, and hence, Western colonialism was able to continue spreading impure culture and atheism among Muslims, wherever they might live. (11)

ISIS begins their manifesto on women with the failure of Muslim modernity, exposing a key feature of their propaganda which reoccurs throughout several of their manifestos and pamphlets: ISIS reestablishes Islamic success, bringing back a gilded vision of the Islamic world after centuries of violence, failure, and disunity. ISIS desires a return to the time of the prophet. Their social rules and interpretation of religion hinge upon the decades that followed the introduction of Islam to the Arabian Peninsula – to “return to the first picture [of a Muslim community], the time of the rule of the Prophet and the Rightly Guided Caliphs, where everyone in it fulfilled their Rightly ordained roles” (11).

The al-Khansaa Brigade's manifesto lays out three rules that Muslim women must follow to fulfill their “Rightly ordained roles.” First, Muslim women should follow the example of

Mariam, Asia, Khadija, Fatima, Aisha, and Muhammad's other wives to know how to behave. Second, Muslim women must remain in seclusion for the benefit of society. Third, Muslim women should not seek knowledge outside religion because such knowledge is founded in Western concepts. Despite coming from a violent, barbaric fundamentalist group, the manifesto sketches out a rather typical highly conservative view on the roles of Muslim women in society which we can see front and center in countries in Saudi Arabia and practiced by other fundamentalist. Furthermore, the image the al-Khansaa Brigade provides of the Muslim woman is one which the West has often used to permit war in the Middle East. In 2001, Laura Bush supported in the invasion of Afghanistan by saying that the Taliban must be stopped because "the fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women" (*LA Times*). Thus, the roles and rights of women have very real and tangible effects on not only Muslim women's own lives, but even in supporting the imperial practices of more developed nations. Consequently, I want to begin by investigating this simple narrative the al-Khansaa Brigade presents of the Muslim woman, demonstrating how it does little to present an accurate image of the first Muslim women, and finally showing how simply complicating the narratives perpetuated about Muslim women often fails in truly changing those narratives.

First, the al-Khansaa Brigade claims they want to return the Muslim community to the time of the prophet and that Muslim women must emulate the women who lived at that time. What attributes of Muhammad's wives and early Islamic women does al-Khansaa brigade seek Muslim women to emulate? In general, the manifesto does not provide much detail describing the women whose practices Muslims must follow. In a brief section, the manifesto provides Asia and Mariam as two ideal women, citing Quran 66:12: "And [the example of] Mariam, the daughter of 'Imran, who guarded her chastity, so We blew into [her garments] through Our

Angel, and believed in the words of her Lord and his scripture and was of the devoutly obedient”. However, of Muhammad’s wives, the manifesto says nothing.

Muhammad’s first wife, Khadija, was a wealthy businesswoman whom he worked for before she proposed to him after already being married before. Khadija was older than Muhammad when they were married, and he did not marry a second wife until after her death. Muhammad ultimately married approximately twelve women from different tribes and backgrounds; however, after Khadija, Aisha was said to be the closest to him. Because of sources that claim that Aisha was nine when she married the prophet, Aisha is frequently used by anti-Islamic commentators to imagine Mohammad as a pedophile. However, Aisha’s age is contentious. While hadiths at the time state that she may have been six at the time of marriage and nine at the consummation of it, Aisha has been ascribed multiple ages throughout the centuries. As Asma Barlas notes, some Muslim scholars, after comparing Aisha’s age to that of her sister Asma, believe Aisha was over thirteen and maybe even seventeen by the time she was married (126). Barlas notes that these accounts fit better with other hadiths which claim that at the time of her marriage Aisha had “good knowledge of Ancient Arabic poetry and genealogy” and “pronounced the fundamental rules of Arabic Islamic ethics” – an impressive accomplishment for a six year old (126).

Regardless of arguments about her age, Aisha irrefutably possessed a highly visible and political role during Muhammad’s life and after. During one episode, Aisha became a victim of slander when she was left behind at a military encampment and returned to Medina with a male stranger. The Quranic passage 24:11-26 established her innocence and claimed that “Those who launch a charge against chaste women and do not produce four witnesses, flog them with eighty stripes, and reject their witness ever after, because they are sinful.” Aisha accompanied

Muhammad to the early Islamic battles, and following Muhammad's death she opposed Ali's rise to the caliphate. Furthermore, Aisha took on a prominent role as a source and interpreter of Muhammad's will, and consequently Islam, after his death. Men consulted her when faced with religious dilemmas and approximately 2,210 hadiths are attributed to Aisha alone (Ahmed 73). Early Muslims referred to her as "al-Siddiqa", or the "one who affirms the truth", and she was said to have "expertise in the Quran, shares of inheritance, lawful and unlawful matters, poetry, Arabic literature, Arab history, genealogy, and general medicine" (Anwar, "The History").

In addition to Aisha and Muhammad's other wives, many women played prominent roles in the early Islamic period, especially in warfare. Al Khansa, who the ISIS brigade take their name from, was a Jahiliya era poet who came to fame because of her elegies and later converted to Islam. She, like other women, rode into some of the early Islamic battles, notably the Battle of Qadisiyya (Ahmed 70).

However, the ISIS manifesto notes that women's roles in warfare are secondary, as are any other roles beyond the first of wife and mother:

...women had this Heavenly secret of sedentariness, stillness, and stability, and men its opposite, movement and flux, that which the nature of man, created in him. If roles are missed and positions overlap, humanity is thrown into a state of flux and instability. The base of society is shaken, its foundations and its walls crumble. (19)

The irony presented by the manifesto remains that little of what we know about Mohammad's wives or women of the time-period presents an image of "sedentariness, stillness, and stability", nor imagine the first Muslim women as perfect exemplars. The opposite, multiple anecdotes tell stories about fighting between the wives of Muhammad's household, and following the early Islamic period, male jurists often interpreted Muhammad's wives as not only perfect in religious

piety, but also representative of women's worst attributes. Following Aisha's defeat at Ali's hands during a civil war regarding his ascension to become Caliph, her critics used the event to demonstrate women's inability to function in a political role¹. Women, including Muhammad's wives, openly rebuked the Prophet in public. In one story, a woman asked why only men were referenced in early Quranic passages. Following that confrontation, both women and men were addressed explicitly for the rest of the Quranic verses. Even after Islam was comfortably established in the Arabian Peninsula and the new empire possessed male armies to expand during Umar's caliphate, sources still document Muslim women joining their male companions in the roles of conquerors. One Persian brigade documented how women took off their veils and turned them into flags as they went into battle (Ahmed 70).

Women's continued role in the expansion of the early Islamic empire and their opposing voice in both religious and political spheres challenge ISIS's claim that women were sedentary during and early after the life of the Prophet. Inarguably, Islamic society was hardly "feminist" to use a modern word, but neither was pre-Islamic Arabia, nor any other society existing in the same period. The patriarchal nature of Arabia in the 7th century remains indisputable, however Muslim women played active roles in shaping the early Muslim world and did not surrender those roles following its basic establishment to remain as only wives and mothers.

¹ Abu Bakrah Nufai' Ibn Al-Harith Al-Thaqafi narrated one hadith in particular which has had a negative impact on the perception of female leadership in Islam. He said:

Allah benefited me with something I heard from the Prophet, peace be upon him, during the Battle of the Camel. I almost joined the People of the Camel and fight on their side, but then I remembered what I heard from the Prophet, peace be upon him, when he told that the Persians appointed their deceased King's daughter as their Queen. The Prophet said: "A people who appoint a woman leader will never be successful".

However, Dr. Jasser Auda, the Chairman of the Maqasid Institute who has a PhD in the philosophy of Islamic law, memorized the Quran, and studied Fiqh, Usul, and Hadith in al-Azhar Mosque in Cairo is among the scholars who deem the hadith illegitimate. Abu Bakrah Al-Thaqafi did not narrate the hadith to anyone until 25 years after he claimed to have heard it and in the context of the Battle of the Camel, in which he fought on the other side. These circumstances led Dr. Jasser Auda to claim the hadith illegitimate, as well as a verses in the Quran 27:29-44 which use the Queen of Sheba as an example of a good leader despite her gender.

Second, the ISIS manifesto uses early-Islamic practices as evidence to support why women should remain in seclusion. The issue of seclusion itself is a contentious one. Quran 33:33 states “And stay in your houses and do not strut about in the manner of the former Jahiliyya”, which appears to mandate seclusion for Muslim women. However, the claim that seclusion is an Islamic practice is undercut by two arguments. First, while the separation of male and female spaces appears to have worsened following the introduction of Islam, the frequency of seclusion may have been a result of changing societal realities rather than religion. Before urbanization, within harsh, nomadic environments women were required to work alongside men. However, with the rise of the wealth in the region and the settling of the Arabs in cities, even as poor and working-class women continued to work outside the home, for the upper and middle classes the divide of a public space for men and a private space for women grew. Women’s work was at home, men’s was outside of the home, and so women’s seclusion, now possible, became mandatory. Furthermore, seclusion was a pre-existing practice in pre-Islamic Arabia among the upper class, serving as an example of how lines between pre-Islamic and early-Islamic practices blurred as pre-Islamic societal practices continued but were newly termed “Islamic”. Second, the Quran passage may have referred explicitly to Muhammad’s wives specifically rather than Muslim women as a whole. The interpretation presented by Islamic jurists following Muhammad’s death became seclusion for all women, further reinforcing a pre-Islamic practice which elite women followed as the Arabian Peninsula urbanized. Thus, the origins of seclusion and its mandate are not so straightforward as the ISIS manifesto claims.

Furthermore, even though the ISIS manifesto claims that women’s seclusion is healthy for society – “It is always preferable for a woman to remain hidden and veiled, to maintain society from behind this veil. This, which is always the most difficult role, is akin to that of a

director, the most important person in a media production, who is behind the scenes organizing” (60) – the roles early Muslim women played were highly visible and not practiced in seclusion. The simplest refutation is arguably the most important woman in the early Islamic period who we already discussed at length: Aisha. After Uthman’s murder, Aisha warred against Ali and his supporters to avenge Uthman’s death. Specifically, Aisha led the Battle of the Camel on top of a camel, hence how the Battle received its name, and was not veiled (Ahmed 70). Neither veiled nor hidden, even while she received critiques from her enemies, the men who fought under her did not appear to raise contention. Following Uthman’s assassination, it was Aisha’s army who stormed the city of Basra, and under Aisha’s orders that 600 of the perpetrators were executed in Basra’s Great Mosque (Jabala, “Khalifa Ali”). Even beyond her highly visible political role, Aisha’s role as a religious leader and the foremost interpreter of hadith saw her take on a role beyond that of a director behind the scenes organizing. The argument can be made that Aisha cannot be used as the prime example of Muslim women because she was, after all, the wife of the Prophet. However, the ISIS manifesto describes Aisha as one of the ideal women Muslims must emulate and look to in order to understand women’s roles within a Muslim society. Therefore, to emulate Aisha, Muslim women should be political leaders, battle commanders, and scholars – I doubt that is what the individuals who composed the manifesto were thinking.

Third, the al-Khansaa Brigade claims that women should not learn material outside of religion because such material is founded in “Western” ways of thinking. In fact, the al-Khansa brigade’s manifesto finds that women overstepping their boundaries in learning material beyond Islam is the other root cause of women’s misery. On modern Muslim women, the manifesto says

They claim that most important knowledge is the worldly one that the only true knowledge, Shariah, is not a knowledge! Because of this, a woman studies these

worthless worldly sciences in the farthest mountains and the deepest valleys. She travels, intent upon learning Western lifestyle and sitting in the midst of another culture, to study the brain cells of crows, grains of sand, and the arteries of fish! By that the ummah is saved, generations righted, and the flag of Islam raised. (21)

ISIS directly refutes this way of thinking because of their general disavowal of the sciences or any knowledge beyond an Islamic scope. In their viewpoint, the role of Muslims in the world is to worship God and spend all their time in pursuit of this single goal, or tawheed. Therefore, any other material knowledge or creation becomes a distraction, and consequently forbidden. For women, non-Islamic studies postpone or altogether eliminate marriage, making it a violation of God's will. For society in general, the manifesto reads that "[T]he ideal Islamic community should refrain from becoming caught up in exploring science, the depths of matter, trying to uncover the secrets of nature and reaching the peaks of architectural sophistication." The general negation of the sciences and women's role in them stems from ISIS's seeming hatred towards the Muslim empires that arose following the end of Ali's caliphate, or the period following that of the "Four Rightly Guided Caliphs":

We must correct that which has become entrenched in our minds since we were small, what we were told by our teachers that Muslims must prove to the disbelievers of Europe and elsewhere in glorious days gone by, that [Muslims] had built material civilizations, its heroes the atheists and libertines like Ibn Sina the esoterist, Ibn Nafis [who discovered the circulation of blood] and Ibn al Haitham [optics and physicist] and others. The civilizations of these people are built upon the ruins of those before it. Now, we must disavow these heretics, these 'geniuses' of Europe – they are friends and protectors of each other. Muslims do not need what these people provided. (15)

Because ISIS hates the period, let us take a close look at it.

The reason behind ISIS's hatred of the Classical Islamic empires is simple: the classical Islamic empires presented a vision of Islam which not only completely violates a vision of Islam as unchanging and immovable, but presents a space in which Muslims could excel as both Muslims and global citizens. Historically, the dualism between science and faith did not exist in Classical Islam. According to Amira El Zein "Classical Islam strived to create a concord between nature and culture, being and thought, rather than seeing things through the lenses of a dualism based on the opposition of sacred versus profane (88).

Setting the repudiation of science aside, in their vision of women ISIS has more in common with the Classical medieval Islamic period than the early Islamic period. Legal paradigms of the 9th century codified the behavior of Muhammad's wives as the theological and legal obligation of all Muslim women following the expansion of the Islamic empire. As Kecia Ali highlights in *Marriage and Slavery in Early Islam*, judicial discourse analogized slavery and marriage: "marriage and purchase (of a female slave) operate with payment of dowry or price to legalize intercourse; release of a wife through *talaq* parallels the release of a slave of either sex through manumission (165)." Rules that may have been specific to Muhammad's wives, like seclusion, are cemented into law by Islamic scholars and jurists in the years after the first Caliphs. In general, women in the Classical Islamic period appear to have had less active roles in the "Westernized" Islamic period than they did during the time of the prophet. However, again, it is important to recognize that Muslim women lived diverse experiences in every period. For example, the area in which we see the most female agency and engagement in society appears to be a rarely cited period, Al Andalus, or Muslim Spain, which I will use below to demonstrate

how even in a time in which women were the closest picture to what the ISIS claims is ideal, Muslim women exercised agency and complicated desires to imagine them in only one narrative.

Because not much anthropological research has been conducted regarding the lives of women in al Andalus, scholars like Maya Shatzmiller in “Women and Property Rights in Al-Andalus and the Maghrib: Social Patterns and Legal Discourse” and Jessica A. Coope in “An Etiquette for Women: Women’s Experience of Islam in Muslim Spain” use the few texts available: legal fatwas. Fatwas provide windows for researchers into the social and economic lives of common Andalusian men and women and, for the most part, illustrate the inarguable patriarchy of the time period. Al Andalus’s Medieval Maliki Shariah draws similarities to the Roman and Persian legal codes of the centuries, especially in terms of legal status (Coope 76). Only men of the dominant social group, in this case Muslim men, possessed full legal rights (Coope 76). While Muslim women and non-Muslim men enjoyed some rights, such as the ability to engage commercially, their exemption from military drafts translated to an expected deference to Muslim men (Coope 77). In other words, physical protection came at the cost of legal rights. Furthermore, a woman often remained under interdiction, or *hajr*, which gave others the right to exercise control over her property unless the woman went through the process of liberation, or *tarshid*, which had to be initiated by the woman’s father and required four witnesses to testify that she was capable of handling her personal legal affairs (Shatzmiller 229). In addition to legal constraints, women were discouraged from participating in public religious celebrations and pilgrimage (Coope 77). There was documented fear of women’s freedom of movement, exemplified by a case in which a woman who cross-dressed to go about her affairs undeterred was reprimanded by a Maliki court (Coope 78). Legally women were then at a clear

disadvantage. They were sometimes at the mercy of their fathers' good-will to handle their property and their movement was restricted both socially and religiously.

However, while the subordinate legal status of women in Muslim Spain is clearly evident, a woman's legal power was also protected by the courts. Shatzmiller's research, which studied the implementation of women's property rights in al Andalus and the Maghrib in the period between the tenth and fifteenth centuries, indicates that

the majority of Muslim women owned property independently at some point in their lives, that women acquired property at every stage of the life cycle, and that women played an important role in the intergenerational transmission of property and in keeping familial property intact. (222)

Women's right to property was generally and consistently upheld in courts despite existing legal constraints (Shatzmiller 255), and women's presence in legal courtrooms demonstrates that at least some women were aware of their rights, indicated especially by instances in which women gifted property to family members (257). As Shatzmiller concludes, "the property rights accorded to women by Islamic Law, and their implementation in practice, helped to create a family environment in which Muslim women might be feared and respected (256)". Therefore, the property rights that Muslim women were allotted went a long way in securing a legal voice for women. Thanks to their property rights and freedom to engage commercially with society, women were given access, however limited to social, economic, and cultural power which they appeared to exercise (Shatzmiller 257).

In addition to their official legal rights, both Coope and Shatzmiller found in their research that despite the listed restrictions women faced legally, often Shariah's official views on women were undercut in social practice (Coope 76). Marriage contracts from al Andalus reveal

that men often gave up their legal privileges for the benefit of their wives (Coope 77). For example, despite its allowance in Islam, there is little evidence of polygamy in Muslim Spain with the exception of the ruling class. The difference between the legal allowance and social application of polygamy is well-cited Islam, dating back to a hadith which details an account of the Prophet Muhammad refusing to allow his son-in-law Ali to marry another woman over his daughter Fatimah, claiming that “she is a part of me; what alarms her alarms me, and what hurts her hurts me” (Coope 79). Moreover, despite inheritance laws in Shariah which often prevented women from full inheritance, there are legal documents which confirm that fathers willingly gifted their daughters all their wealth to circumvent inheritance laws² (Shatzmiller 228). Therefore, despite legal restrictions, there is evidence that in addition to the legal rights women were already allowed, fathers and husbands not only defended, but expanded, upon the rights of the women in their lives.

To further visualize the social reality of Andalusian women beyond legal fact, scholars turn to the wealth of literature and biographical material from the tenth to fifteenth centuries. Take for illustration Wallada bint al Mustakfi, the daughter of one of the last Umayyad caliphs of Cordoba (Irwin 274). Wallada published several poems, often bantering back and forth with another famous Andalusian poet, Ibn Zaydun, and maintained a famous literary salon open for both men and women (Irwin 274). Some of her verses were embroidered on a robe she often wore, a couplet on each sleeve:

I am, by God, fit for high positions,
 And am going my way, with pride!
 Forsooth, I allow my lover to touch my cheek,

² As al Andalus followed the Maliki school of law, this was allowed so long as there were witnesses to a physical passing of the wealth, sometimes symbolically through a key to the home (Shatzmiller 228).

And bestow my kiss on him who craves it! (Irwin 274)

Wallada's words, bold and often sensual, in addition to "her self-confident look, her disdain for the veil, her daring conversation and her sometimes eccentric attitudes" indicates a rare freedom of choice (Viguera 712). The fact that Wallada was allowed to go about her writing, and was lauded for her talents and characteristics, implies that the strict Islam interpreted through Shariah was far less strict in al Andalus.

Moreover, there is little evidence to even suggest that Wallada was an exception.

Women's intellectual achievements are well-documented in al Andalus. Wallada was only one of many women in al Andalus who wrote poetry, and Maria J. Viguera finds in her essay "On the Social Status of Andalusian Women" that poems composed by women, and about women's actions, reflect clear female agency (709). As Hafsa of Guadalajara expresses in her verses

I have a lover who does not bear my reproaches.

If I leave him he says with disdain:

"Do you know one to compare with me?" And I say:

"Do you know one who resembles me?" (Viguera 710)

Muslim women from al Andalus openly discussed love, and their pursuit of desire seems surprisingly free. In addition to literary achievements, both boys and girls were taught basic Arabic literacy in al Andalus, and there are cases of girls studying religion and law with their fathers – texts in the tenth century even cite female scholars as experts (Coope 79). Ibn al Arabi, one of the most influential and prolific Sufi writers since his time, was educated in Murcia by multiple Sufi masters, two of whom were women: Shams, Mother of the Poor, and Nunah Fatima bint al- Muthanna (Ahmed 99). Therefore, because women appear to have participated openly in all intellectual and cultural events of their time, scholars like Viguera have concluded that "the

position of women in Spain was freer than that in other Muslim countries” despite fatwas’ contrary evidence (Viguera 711).

The example of Muslim Spain demonstrates how Muslim women’s experiences never were the same. Even when the laws of a time-period might appear to severely inhibit women, social and cultural accounts demonstrate that those laws did not necessarily completely control Muslim women in the way they were designed to. Women living in al-Andalus are only one example of the way that women throughout history have complicated the simple narratives we attempt to prescribe to the time periods they lived in. The ISIS manifesto seeks to present one narrative of what Muslim women looked like during the time of the Prophet and prove that such a way of life is ideal for the Muslim community; however, as I have attempted to demonstrate the last few pages, not only does the true reality of Muslim women at the time of the prophet refute their claims, but so do the women who lived in a time-period which appeared to be more like ISIS’s vision. It is not hard to contradict ISIS’s claims, the facts are out there and have been stated and repeated over and over and over again, but simple narratives about Islam and its view on women remain stubbornly entrenched in our global political rhetoric.

Refuting simple narratives about Muslim women based on generalizations in the Quran or historical misconceptions is neither a unique nor recent. In the 1990’s we can see the first threads of *Islamic feminism* which rose together with Islamist politics that blamed secular nationalism for the failure of Middle Eastern nations to create economic prosperity and fulfill a democratic promise. The Islamist political ideology sees religion as a tool for reviving nations and the key to remedying social and political ills. Within this ideology, women are relegated to the private sphere which juxtaposes the secular nationalist idea that sees women’s participation in the public sphere as an integral part of advancing society. Some of these Islamist movements

disenfranchised women who did not want to return to the private sphere, nor wanted to be used on the other spectrum as political symbols for national progress. Consequently, Islamic feminism was born, holding that Islam as a faith is egalitarian towards men and women, regardless how Medieval patriarchal male jurists interpreted the texts. Scholars like Leila Ahmed have gone far enough to say that the segregation of men and women from early in the faith's inception created two versions of Islam, one for men, and the other for women (Ahmed 2005). Islamic feminism seeks to reinterpret Islam in an egalitarian lens and combat patriarchy using a religious framework. Furthermore, scholars like Myriam Francois Cerrah have used the very same arguments I used the last several pages to refute the notion that Islam is wholly oppressive and anti-feminist on one end, and also attempted to open space to discuss the parts of the religion that disadvantage women.

However, as easy as it is to provide facts to refute simple interpretations of Muslim women's roles throughout history like those the ISIS manifesto presents, these discussions educate but rarely make any real change. For decades, Muslim female scholars have attempted to use religious and historical facts to support a vision of Islam that is more egalitarian. Unfortunately, the same stereotypes of the 2000s, that Muslim women are oppressed and Islam infringes on the rights of women, remain the same despite their best efforts and only have changed in the way they manifest. As Rafia Zakaria writes, under Donald Trump in the United States for example, the role of the Muslim woman is still that of a victim and pawn, but she is used to support cultural wars at home rather than abroad (*The Nation*). Trump's Executive Order 13780, issued by Trump on International's Women's day, calls for federal agencies to collect statistics on "honor killings" and other violence against women committed by foreign nationals. As Zakaria summarizes: "Just like the premise that justified intervention in Afghanistan under

the guise of saving Afghan women from Afghan men, the order insists that Muslim men must be banned from the homeland to save American women at home.” Consequently, the same narratives which create the fear of Islam and the belief that Islam is inherently violent towards women continue to perpetuate, and women are still at the center of a contrived cultural war between Islam and the developed world.

The next step to break Muslim women out of a cycle of ideologies is to take the symbolism that is so frequently ascribed to Muslim women and give it back to Muslim women. In other words, listen to Muslim women as they converse about their political positioning rather than continue letting others (fundamentalists, nationalists, men, etc.) lead the conversation. Historically, Muslim women have used the aesthetic as one way to break the boundaries of the enclosed spaces Muslim women are locked within; therefore, in the next few chapters I want to discuss how Muslim female writers negotiate boundaries created by society, class, and symbolic objectification. I selected a few Muslim female writers from diverse backgrounds to put in dialogue and use to investigate the issues important to them. First, I want to look at how Muslim writers use literature and aesthetic space to reconquer their symbolism by looking at one example: the harem, and consequently, isolation.

Before I begin, I want to discuss the writers and a potential point of contention. All the writers I used for this piece come from diverse backgrounds. While I have been confronted with the issue of whether it is proper to compare writers from such diverse backgrounds, my hope is that comparing Muslim women across cultures can remind us how similar the Muslim community can be in addition to the differences we already recognize. That we can find within an umbrella a series of themes that we might predict define some of the struggles Muslim women face on a daily basis. This isn't to say I want to take universalist lens, merely that in a

dialogue filled with disparities I'm listening for echoes. Across their national and ethnic boundaries, these women share a religion: Islam. As much as people try to limit or essentialize "Muslim" as a category, historically, people have fought for the right for the Muslim *ummah* to be diverse. The Umayyad dynasty fell not only because of its decadence, but because diverse Muslims across the newly minted Muslim empire did not want Islam to be only an Arab religion like the Umayyad's claimed. With the Abbasid Empire, the Muslim *ummah* expanded to include Muslims of all ethnicities, and this diversity still exists today. Consequently, while Islam is practiced in diverse ways across national and ethnic boundaries, the very notion of a Muslim *ummah* creates connections across those boundaries which I want to explore.

However, attempting to keep "Muslim" from being a limiting category is obviously ideal. Every category, either national, religious, ethnic, or class-based, is naturally limiting. After all, to belong to one community means that by default you do not belong to another. Consequently, to avoid falling into the same trap of using Islam as a limiting category on the writers, I want to employ Kimberle Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality. In her 1989 article, Crenshaw coins the term "intersectionality theory" to describe how overlapping and intersecting social identities relate to systems of oppression, domination, or discrimination in regards to black women. She explains that "discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them." The metaphor of the intersection is fitting when we apply it to Muslim women. Historically, they have suffered oppression based on their gender, religion, and race in different ways and forms. In other words, I recognize the differences between Muslim communities across nations, but the scope of this project is to focus on the similarities.

Below is a key of the authors for easy access:

Ghada al-Samman

Ghada al-Samman is a Syrian writer and journalist. Born 1942 in Damascus, she was a prolific writer and published *The Night of the First Billion* in 1986. *The Night of the First Billion* follows a group of Lebanese Arabs in Geneva after fleeing the war in Lebanon. The novel follows the wealthy immigrants as they attempt to forget about the war and their homes in Lebanon, even as the war follows them into their privileged lives.

Salwa Bakr

Salwa Bakr, born in 1949, is an Egyptian critic and novelist. Her novel *The Man from Bashmour* was named as one of the 100 best Arabic novels by the Arabic Writers' Union. Originally written in 1995, Dinah Manisty translated Bakr's novel *The Golden Chariot* into English in 2008. In *The Golden Chariot*, the protagonist, Aziza, decides in her cell within a women's prison which of fellow prisoners to take with her on a golden chariot to heaven.

Fadia Faqir

Fadia Faqir is a Jordanian British author. She was born in Amman in 1956 and completed her MA and Ph.D in creative writing in Britain. Her second novel, *Pillars of Salt*, was translated into Danish, Dutch, Romanian, and Bulgarian, and follows a Bedouin woman, Maha, as she recounts the tale of how she ends up sharing a room in a mental asylum by an urban woman.

Kamila Shamsie

Kamila Naheed Shamsie is a Pakistani writer. Born in 1973, Shamsie grew up in Karachi and studied at university in the United States. Her first novel, *In the City by the Sea* was listed for the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize, as was her third novel, *Kartography*. *Kartography* follows the

protagonist, Raheen, as she learns about the influence of the 1971 Bangladesh War on her family and her best friend, Karim. Shamsie is currently a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain was born in 1932 and is considered the pioneer of Islamic feminism in Bengal. She was a prolific writer of novels, short stories, satires, and essays, and advocated for gender equality through education. One of her pioneering works, *Sultana's Dream*, is a science fiction novella in which the protagonist wakes up in “Ladyland”, a city in which the women have locked their men in the home and created a utopia for women. Hossain founded the Muslim Women’s Association in 1916 which fights for women’s education and employment opportunities. Bangladesh has named December 9 “Rokeya Day” to celebrate her work and activism on behalf of women’s rights.

Chapter 2: Reconquering the Harem

A long-standing issue revolving around Muslim women is the issue of isolation. The image of the harem in which women were secluded drew the eyes of the West, depicted in famed harem paintings. A contradictory junction emerged in the imagining of Muslim women exemplified by the harem. The harem as an isolated space was deemed as backwards, and yet simultaneously fetishized in the eyes of European men. On the one hand Muslim women were oppressed (consider Lord Cromer solemnly unveiling Egyptian women to liberate them) (Abu Lughod 785), and on the other hand their oppression was sexualized. Even when in the late 19th and early 20th century harem literature took on a more feminist leaning as European women began to write a more balanced look on the harem, this blossoming of transnational feminism did little to change the way Muslim women were caught in the crux of oppression and sexuality, and consequently, the crux of “East” and “West”. This crux seems to represent the stance of Muslim women in rhetoric about Islam and the Middle East. From the West, Orientalists and conservatives deem Islam’s treatment of women as backwards. In the East, nationalism and Islamism attempt to defend Islam’s treatment of women. On another end, the left and liberals attempt to defend Islam but also criticize the other sides. In the conversation, Muslim women lose their voices. However, throughout their texts, multiple Muslim female writers reconquer their space in the conversation by reconquering the space of the harem. Ironically, the secluded space of the harem, once a source of isolation and oppression, becomes a kind of freedom devoted to, and inhabited only by, Muslim women.

Salwa Bakr’s *The Golden Chariot* follow the protagonist, Aziza, in a women’s prison after murdering her stepfather and lover. Throughout the novel, Aziza tells the stories of the other women sharing the prison and tries to decide which of them she wants to take with her on a

golden chariot to heaven. In Salwa Bakr's novel, there are two different kinds of real, physical isolation: Aziza's house and the women's prison. Growing up, Aziza shared a home with her blind mother and stepfather. She and her mother rarely left, "both of them inhabited the narrow world of two women restricted by the four walls of the large, old house and both longed for [Aziza's stepfather's] return every day" (12). Aziza and her stepfather begin a romantic affair while she is still a child. In her young eyes, she is in love, and she loves him even after she murders him for falling in love with another woman. When Aziza herself begins to crave the outside world, she is riddled with guilt because "she had allowed herself to be disloyal and had gone beyond the permitted boundaries of her secret world and her unique love" (16). While it seems difficult to understand Aziza's love of an older man who appears to be her abuser, she is quickly defended by Bakr's interjection that her "worldly knowledge had never been sharpened because her experience had been limited to a life of perpetual isolation in the large house with her blind mother" (21). She is, after all, a victim of abuse. Aziza's home, the isolated space in which she was born, grew up, fell in love, and ultimately suffered great sorrow, was her secluded space. "There were secrets known only to this house," she says, "sheltered in the heart of its magnificent garden, the house who sounded with a secret life of its kind unexperienced by anyone before" (185). Aziza romanticizes her old home, what from outside eyes appears to be a prison. And yet, Aziza's happiest memories originate from seclusion within the house.

The isolated space of the women's prison is nothing like Aziza's old home. Whereas her home revolved around a man, her step-father, and Aziza and her mother spent their days preparing and waiting for him to return, the women's prison is the domain of women alone. It is not romanticized – Aziza dubs it a "wretched" place, and yet among the prison's benefits was its seclusion:

Perhaps one of the extremely limited benefits of prison was that the seclusion imposed long periods of contemplation and the possibility of discovering aspects of life which were inaccessible to all but those who had tasted the bitterness of banishment. The forced isolation within the boundaries of the prison walls separated them from the daily trivialities of life in the vast ocean of humanity. (73)

The ability of the female prisoners to exist in a space outside the world is lauded despite the suffering they endure in the prison. Furthermore, the seclusion allows bonds between women to blossom: “the ordeal of isolation and imprisonment behind bars created a bond between them” (103). As Aziza notes, during her time in the prison, “she became aware of the comforting truth that she wasn’t the only oppressed woman in the world as she thought, nor was she alone in suffering from misfortune; there were many other women to whom fate had dealt a terrible blow and robbed of happiness and mercy” (121). The prison is unique from Aziza’s childhood isolation because of the relationships she builds. Aziza mourns not appreciating and bonding with her mother growing up. However, the ability to forge bonds with other women fills that void. Across the prison, women find and seek comfort from one another. Throughout the novel, women are paired off: Bahiga and Zaynab, Mahrousa and Saffiya, Hinna and Azima, etc. Women find bond within the women’s prison which they could not find before. Zaynab, an aristocrat’s daughter, notes that her friendship with Bahiga fulfills a long held wish she had to create an intimate platonic relationship with a woman which she couldn’t do while in the outside world because of the influence of men. Mahrousa, the prison warden, takes this belief into her daily life among her daughters. She swears none of her daughters will marry as long as she lives because she considers all men evil, created from the devil’s rib (133). When her youngest

daughter marries, she hopes the marriage will end quickly and that “her straying daughter would rejoin her daughter’s squad which was hostile to men” (133).

The central difference between the isolation Aziza experienced in her life, between her childhood home and the women’s prison, is the women within. Aziza’s home centered around a man, and the prison block shuns men. This demonstrates a unique quality to the women’s prison lacking in Aziza’s home – despite the enforced seclusion, the women’s prison is not entirely isolating. On the contrary, many women who felt isolated in the outside world no longer feel alone within the walls of the prison because they find common kin – women who have suffered much like them. You can find the same quality in *Pillars of Salt*; Fadia Faqir’s novel which spends half of its time within a mental asylum room that the protagonist Maha and her roommate Umm Saad share. The Bedouin, Maha, and the urban Jordanian woman, Umm Saad, spend every night sharing their suffering, to the point that it almost becomes unbearable. Maha wants Umm Saad to stop telling her tragic stories, and yet she cannot stop the woman’s cathartic narrative. By the end of the narrative, the difference between them is both physically and symbolically pushed aside as they are both shaved, rendered to look identical. Every night when the lights of the mental asylum are lowered, the women go somewhere else, lost in the memories of their life. In the physical place, they are isolated, the women create a bond together, and then take it one step further by creating an aesthetic space apart from reality through their bond. It is through their interaction that both women imagine the worlds they inhabited outside the prison cell. During their conversation, Maha says lines like “the anguish wells up” and then the book turns away from the room in which Maha sits in the present and goes into chapters on her past. The memories spill over, blurring the line of past and present, memories and reality. Just as Maha relives her past through memory in the mental asylum through conversations with another

woman, so do the readers move between time and setting over the course of the novel. Blurring the edges of reality within an isolated space breaks down the isolation – memories and the unreal become vehicles through which to escape isolation.

Similarly, we see the line between memory and reality blur in *The Night of the First Billion* by Ghada al Samman which follows multiple Lebanese characters in Switzerland who escaped the Lebanese Civil War. One of the characters, Dunya, has fictive conversations with her former self. Dunya, once an artist, is trapped in an unhappy marriage with her wealthy husband Nadim. She sees her house as a prison, dubs it isolation: “A world of opulent isolation. Prisons graced with the most elegant décor. That’s what we’ve made our house into” (451). At night, when she is alone, she stares at a self-portrait she painted for Nadim when they were in love. Sometimes, the girl in the painting, her former self, speaks to her. “When I was young, I was free and alive,” the girl says. “I was full of hopes. It was talent that flowed through my veins, not alcohol. Look at what you’ve done to me. Look at the slavery that I strain under now. Look at what you’ve done to the young woman that you were once upon a time” (227). The morning after her conversation with the painting, Dunya notices that someone painted a tear on the girl’s face. Dunya doesn’t know who vandalized the painting, and wonders if her own torment and misery painted the tear to reflect her personal sorrow (233). In her conversations with the painting, Dunya reflects on her past. She remembers her youth in which she was a rebel, feminist painter, one of the first to open an exhibit depicting renderings of male nudity. However, she was poor, and when she fell in love with Nadim she fell in love with the life he promised her, of wealth and comfort. Ultimately, she regrets her decision. In her isolation, Dunya remembers her past through conversations of her former self, creating a fictive space which blurs the edges of reality.

The narratives' ability to render a fictive, aesthetic space through female interactions in isolation emerges repeatedly throughout Muslim women's narratives. In *The Golden Chariot*, Aziza renders the golden chariot, an imaginary vessel designed to take women to "a beautiful place in heaven where there is grace and favour, everlasting, supreme happiness and true, deep love between human beings and where they would not be kept awake by continual quarrels and strife" (191). Aziza chooses the women to take with her to paradise across classes and backgrounds, regardless of their innocence or guilt regarding the crimes they committed to land in the women's prison. Aziza's chariot unites the women in a fictive space beyond the isolation of the prison. The chariot cannot exist without the other women – Aziza never once considers boarding the chariot on her own despite the risk that the secret of the golden chariot might reach the ears of the male guards. The golden chariot not only symbolizes a literal vehicle towards freedom, escaping the prison and going to paradise, but it also promises a space which only women inhabit, separate from war, struggle, and strife.

There is no better example of this narrative mechanism than *Sultana's Dream* by Rokeya Sakhwat Hossain. A Bengali-Muslim writer, Hossain wrote about purdah, or women's seclusion, throughout her literary career. In selections from *The Secluded Ones*, Hossain compiles anecdotes from the women in her community about seclusion. As Hossain describes in her forward, Muslim women in her community were used to seclusion, and therefore they, like herself, had nothing to say about it for the longest time: "If one asks a fisherwoman, 'Does rotten fish smell good or bad to you?' how would she answer that?" (24). *The Secluded Ones* consists of short narratives about women's experience with seclusion, and most are disturbing. Consider Report Eight³:

³ Selected because of its worth and its length

Once, a house caught fire. The mistress of the house had the presence of mind to collect her jewelry in a handbag and hurry out of the bedroom. But at the door, she found the courtyard full of strangers fighting the fire. She could not come out in front of them. So she went back to her bedroom with the bag and hid under the bed. She burned to death but did not come out. Long live purdah! (26)

The *Secluded Ones* was first serialized in 1929; however, the anecdote of the woman burning in the house fire is hardly a relic of the past. In 2002, fifteen young girls died at Mecca Intermediate School No.31, an all-girls school in Saudi Arabia. According to reports, members of the Mutaween, the religious police, did not allow the girls to escape the burning building because they were not properly attired and the Mutaween feared that the physical contact between the girls and the civil defense forces would “sexually entice: the men attempting to help. One civil officer even described how girls who escaped were sent back inside the burning building. He said, “whenever girls got through the main gate, these people [Mutaween] forced them to return via another. Instead of extending a helping hand for the rescue work, they were using their hands to beat us.” Similarly, in the 2014, a Saudi college student, Amna Bawazeer, died of a heart attack on the woman’s-only King Saud campus when male paramedics were not allowed inside the campus. In another case, a UAE lifeguard recalls an incident when, late 1990s, a twenty year old girl drowned after her father fought off two life guards because he would rather his daughter die than have strange men touch, and therefore dishonor, her. These cases demonstrate the continued relevance of *The Secluded Ones*, and consequently, Hossain’s *Sultana’s Dream*.

“Sultana’s Dream”, published 1905 in *The Indian Ladies’ Magazine*, follows a woman, Sultana, as she wakes in the strange, utopic world of Ladyland. As her guide, Sister Sara, describes: “You need not be afraid of coming across a man here. This is Ladyland, free from sin

and harm. Virtue herself reigns here” (8). In Ladyland, purdah is reversed. Men are shut indoors, the logic being that because men cause harm, like wild animals, they should be kept inside.

When Sultana tells Sister Sara about how the opposite is true in India and women can't help it because they are weaker, Sister Sara responds by saying “A lion is stronger than man, but it does not enable him to dominate the human race. You have neglected the duty you owe to yourselves, and you have lost your natural rights by shutting your eyes to your own interests” (9). Ladyland uses science and practicality, two things fundamentalists like those at ISIS abhor as we discussed earlier, to create an Eden within which women reign supreme, and life is blissful. Since the women sent the men into what they call mardana, the opposite of the zenana, an area of the home where women have been secluded, there has been no crime in Ladyland. However, Ladyland is nonetheless secluded. While their scientific abilities keep foreign nations from attempting to conquer them, Ladyland does not engage in trade or communication with the rest of the world because they do not wish to interact with men, who are considered less intelligent and more barbaric than women.

Sultana's Dream reconquers the space of the harem. While women's isolation was used against them in, as *The Secluded Ones* demonstrates, often catastrophic ways, *Sultana's Dream* takes isolation and uses it to create a space in which women can co-exist. Ladyland's utopia is secluded, and yet paradise. The citizens of Ladyland feel no need to go beyond their borders, nor to interact with the other countries around them. Ironically, a space which oppresses women, in the hands of Muslim writers like Hossain, is rendered freeing and utopic. Like Hossain, writers like Faqir, Bakr, and Samman also employ and reconquer the space of the harem. Faqir and Bakr place their female protagonists within isolated spaces, forcing them to not only interact with women who are different from them, but allowing the isolation to breed female comradery.

Then, the writers take the process one step further by allowing the aesthetic to elevate reality, creating utopic spaces in which women can be free. The golden chariot, Ladyland, trips to the past, all serve as escapist mechanisms with a political edge. Because, beyond narrative, forcing Muslim women to come together in a space isolated from men, appears as a powerful rhetorical political strategy. Within the texts, Muslim women forcibly create a space by Muslim women and for Muslim women. The utopic space created exists as a critique of the oppression of women, renders room for women to achieve success, while also ensuring that women maintain a voice in a conversation which has, while discussing Muslim women, also ignored them. Muslim female writers have, within their texts, forced women to be a part of dialogue which shapes a world of their choosing.

Chapter 3: Bedouin Women's Elegy in the Past and Present

Muslim women's ability to reconquer spaces into which they are sent through the aesthetic, especially literature, is hardly a new phenomenon. In fact, just as modern writers like Faqir, Bakr, and Hossain reconquered the isolated space of the harem through their literature, so too did early Muslim female poets.

A mote in your eyes, dust blown on the wind?
 Or a place deserted, its people gone?
 This weeping, this welling of tears, is for one
 now hidden, curtained by recent earth.

The words open a lament by al Khansa bint Amr ibn al Sharid for her brother. Al Khansa, known as "the Gazelle" of the tribe of Buna Sulaym, became renown for her funeral elegies, and today is considered one of the greatest female poets of medieval Arab literature. Her laments for her brothers celebrated tribal values, and her words even spurred soldiers at the Battle of Qadisiyah at which she was present. Al Khansa joined a rich group of poets who wrote at the Bedouin roots of Islamic Society. The relationship between Arabs and poetry dates to the earliest understanding of the pre-Islamic world. Ibn Khaldun wrote in the fourteenth century that at the very beginning Arabs knew nothing but poetry, as at that time "they practiced no science and knew no craft" (Irwin 4). Women in pre and post Islamic Arabia participated in this integral cultural practice, and like al Khansa women's writing focused on *ritha*, or lament. Consequently, elegies written by Muslim women root themselves in a long history of poetics that dates from the lives of poets like al Khansa to the modern Bedouin women writing today. Fadia Faqir invokes this history in *Pillars of Salt*, drawing vibrant parallels to the metaphors and allegories of modern Bedouin elegies, turning the novel itself into an extended lament typical of the Bedouin *ritha*

genre. The longevity of the genre as a female space demonstrates how historically Muslim women have reconquered areas in which they were sent to. When other poetry was prohibited to them, Muslim women wrote elegies and continued to excel in them even as men entered the genre. The genre became a reconquered space, much in the same way we saw the writers of the novels reconquering isolation.

In *Pillars of Salt*, three narratives weave together. First, a storyteller imagines a version of Maha's story in which she is the antagonist who seeks to harm her brother and enchants Harb, her husband. Second, sequences of Maha's past life told from her perspective, beginning with her marriage to Harb. Third, the present which we discussed in the earlier chapter, in which Maha sits in the room of a mental asylum and, at night, listens to a Jordanian woman, Umm Saad, tell Maha the tragedy of her life. The chapters and perspectives transition, ultimately telling Maha's story through three lenses: that of an onlooker who sees her as a witch, the events as they happened in Maha's perspective, and a reflective vision of her life given by her present self, imprisoned in the mental asylum. While the story is a prose narrative, and Fadia Faqir is not Bedouin, the structural and metaphorical language of *Pillars of Salt* evokes a tradition of Bedouin poetry.

Moneera al Ghadeer writes in *Desert Voices: Bedouin Women's Poetry in Saudi Arabia* that the genre of Bedouin poetry is often referred to as *nabati*, either because of its historical origins with the tribal Nabateans who migrated from Arabia and established themselves in the Fertile Crescent around the sixth century BC, or from its meaning in Arabic to "gush out" or "stream forth". Whether the root of the word is both or neither, ultimately *nabati* poetry refers to oral Bedouin poetry which, as al Ghadeer writes, "displays the desire to draw on the desert values and expressions of its dwellers and is unlike classical poetic forms composed in classical

Arabic⁴.” Al Ghadeer’s book fills a gap in research on women’s contributions to Bedouin poetry. Anthologies collecting Bedouin poetry historically excluded women (12-13), and both Western and Arabic Literary critics ignored Bedouin women’s poetry (9). Ibn Raddas compiled Bedouin women’s poetry first in *Shai’rat min al-Badiyah*; however, al-Ghadeer goes beyond collection and attempts to seat the poems anthologized in context, as well as provide a thorough analysis of the prominent themes of Bedouin women’s literature. Among those themes is grief and loss.

Ironically, the very term for “word” in Arabic, *kalimah*, translates and relates to a wound, either its opening or its remnant. For example, *kalama al rajul* might mean two things: he spoke to the man, or he wounded the man (28). Imru al Qays, a pre-Islamic poet, said “the wound of the tongue is like the wound of the hand.” Words, as ironically evidenced in relationship to their linguistic connotation, were a central part of grieving in Bedouin culture. Werner Diem writes in “The Role of Poetry in Arabic Funerary Inscriptions” that the first and main function of poetry in the context of grief was to express subjects which individuals felt they could not express in prose epitaphs per Islamic conventions. Prior to Islam, and even despite it, it was common to bewail a deceased person. However, the Prophet Muhammad discouraged bewailing as a practice, advising composure instead. Poetry, then, became an avenue through which to channel intense grief when wailing was frowned upon and the aesthetic becomes a refuge (122).

Historically, women were central to the practice of grieving in Bedouin culture. Some women could take jobs as professional mourners, either joining groups of women to bewail the deceased, or to compose songs and poetry lauding the deceased’s attributes. In fact, in fact, in accordance to social practice it was difficult for women to excel in other genres (Gelder 12).

⁴ The main differences lie in language – Bedouin poems are often written in their original tribal dialects, maintaining the oral poetic structure of those languages

Female poets wrote poems spurring soldiers to battle; however, unlike their male counterparts they rarely wrote poetry about the experience of battle. Hunting, too, was a genre dominated by male poets. Consequently, laments and elegies were central to Bedouin women's poetry historically, as female writers thrived in the genre, and even gained fame for their laments as al Khansa did.

In the Bedouin tradition, elegies align with desire. Grief and loss journey in tandem with the desire for the object at the source of the feelings of grief and loss, often either a lost loved one or the desert (48). Poems on grief and melancholy often lament the dead, and al Ghadeer finds that a common feature of Bedouin female elegies is “constructing an allegory and recuperating the dead”, thereby denying death (72). To do this, Bedouin women often use extended allegories and metaphors comparing their pain to the pain of animals. Naturalistic metaphors are common in Bedouin poetry; however, while male poets often describe animals and nature to demonstrate their mastery over the desert, female poets instead “establish reverence and generosity toward otherness in nature” (93). When a female poet likens her pain to the pain of a grieving female animal, she suggests that her grief encompasses not only the human condition, but widens its net to include all the creatures of the desert. This all-consuming grief establishes that the poet's grief exists beyond simple words, hence she seats the expression in animal allegory. Take the following stanza written by a modern Bedouin woman:

My heart

A she falcon

With broken eggs

Whose yolk has vanished:

Nothing left but the shell.

The poet likens the loss of her lover to a mother falcon following the breaking of her eggs. The two griefs are not identical – on one hand the female poet loses her lover, and on the other a mother loses her children – and yet the grief itself is staged within a single moment: painful loss regardless of species or type.

One of the clearest ways *Pillars of Salt* echoes a typical Bedouin elegy is its consistent use of animal metaphors throughout the novel, especially when describing the relationship between Maha, the protagonist, and Harb, her husband. Harb calls Maha his “beautiful mare” and “deer eyes” (15). Maha imagines herself as, within two pages, cowardly like a rabbit, and a Bedouin woman “free like a swallow” (14). Harb remains tied to animals and nature from the beginning of the novel to the end: “Despite my mother’s wisdom, I fell in love with an eagle. Yes, I loved him like the love of henna for water. As long as camels chew the barely and groves yield oranges, I would love him” (16). For the majority of novel, he is imagined as the sound of galloping hooves (64), further associating him with the animal rather than the human. Maha, too, imagines herself as part of nature: “I spun and spun like a silkworm; I dug and dug the soil like an earthworm; and at night I curled my spine like a hedgehog and went to sleep under the solitary sky” (194). Both Maha and Harb are consistently associated with nature as animals, and their relationship ties itself intimately to their natural setting. When Maha swims in the sea Harb appears to her as if he was real, and he fades away when she emerges from the water (213). The use of animal metaphors and ties to nature do two things in *Pillars of Salt*. First, they associate Maha, Harb, and her Bedouin society to the nature around them, making them distinct from the modernizing forces Maha’s brother brings into the village. Cars, city women, and even jet planes (metal eagles), all breach Maha’s village which, for much of the novel, appears crystalized in the past, formed and molded by Bedouin ideals. Second, the animal metaphors serve the same

purpose as they do in Bedouin women's elegies – they connect the speaker, in this case Maha's grief, with the desert so that all creatures mourn with her. Faqir establishes the reason for Maha's grief by page seven:

The English had killed Harb, the twin of my soul. His gentle hand stroked my braidless head. "Don't cry, twin of my soul. Don't cry. By your grandmother Sabha's life you will be happy with me." Must lock out the memories. Hakim, the wise man, might have a special herb to heal the anguish welling up inside me. He buries the dead and has nothing to do with the living. A wanderer.

Are you headed towards the depths of the desert, oh gazelle?

Where are you going? Your departure brings sorrow.

"Where are you going?" A wanderer, following my heart. Look where my heart has brought me. To the end of the journey. The end that was never in my sight. To Fuhais Mental Hospital. (7)

The passage makes three interesting turns. First, Faqir reveals the ending of the narrative at the very beginning of the book: Harb, Maha's husband, dies and somehow she finds herself in a mental hospital sharing a room with an urban Jordanian woman, Um Saad. First, by configuring Harb's death early, Faqir foregrounds the tragedy of Maha's story. Second, Maha imagines Harb's voice and actions, blurring the temporal lines between past and present. Maha discusses how she must lock away the memories and how the anguish is "welling up" inside of her. The memories, the cause of the anguish, are threatening to spill forth, which they begin to do with the bleeding of Harb's dialogue within the passage. Ultimately, the memories cannot be locked away as in the next chapter the audience finds themselves in a conversation between Harb and Maha. Third, Faqir embeds a verse of poetry within the prose. The speaker of the poem remains unclear

– does the wanderer speak the verse, does Maha, or a third, unidentified voice? Maha ultimately answers the question “where are you going?”, and the gazelle is frequently associated in Bedouin poetry to a woman’s beauty. For pre-Islamic poet Imru al Qays, “the woman can neither be imagined nor become more beautiful unless associated with animal attributes” (78). Therefore, we might infer that Maha is the gazelle, wandering into the desert. The verse comes at an interesting part of the passage. Maha discusses how she needs a remedy to stay her grief, and then the verse begins with an animal metaphor, echoing the Bedouin concept of using not only poetry to capture grief, but using animal metaphors when words cannot do the grief justice.

The animal metaphors, and the revelation of tragedy at the beginning of the novel, turn the novel *Pillars of Salt* into a kind of extended Bedouin elegy. Two women, a toothless Bedouin, and the wife of a Jordanian butcher, sit in a room and compose the tragedies of their lives. Umm Saad shares her grief with Maha, and Maha shares her grief with the readers. The *ritha* genre, shared and experienced by women historically, continues its practice in the modern day in prose form. Furthermore, the use of animal metaphors echoes not only the past, but provides the narrative with the same quality prescribed to elegies in the first place: words express a grief which cannot be spoken, or set in simple prose. On a structural level, *Pillars of Salt* sets itself up as an elegy by establishing the tragedy from the first pages, and on a sentence- level the animal metaphors evoke Bedouin elegies specifically. However, it’s important to note that Maha not only mourns her lost love in Harb, but also her desert home, taken by the British, further evoking modern Bedouin *ritha*.

Pillars of Salt is an elegy not only for the loss of a lover, but the loss of the desert itself. Take this elegy for the desert written by a modern Bedouin woman in Saudi Arabia:

My longing for a tent

After an adobe house.
 My longing to see
 Scattered herds of white camels.
 My longing to accompany
 A just-departed motor.
 My longing to gaze
 On the plain behind the mountain.
 When Bedouin nomads
 Disperse to desert camps,
 The absent beloved
 Will not be remembered.

The poet discusses her longing for the desert, not only to see it, the camels, the tents, the mountains, but also the desert as a balm for loss. Similarly, Maha longs for the desert, home, as well:

I was bored with stories about city life. I craved for a small village with blind mud houses
 and a river that sped down to the Dead Sea. I yearned for the blossom's cloud of perfume.
 That night, my heart looked through my ribs and called, "Mubarak, my son. Mubarak.
 Mubarak". (96)

The metaphor of her heart looking through her ribs parallels the bars on the asylum window through which she often watched herds of black stallions, whom she immediately associates with Harb. Her desert and Bedouin world lie beyond the asylum, and she is left trying to catch glimpses or memories of them through the bars. Consequently, Maha's tragedy, similar to the poet of the previous poem, is that as long as she cannot make it home, she cannot reconcile nor

forget Harb's loss. Maha is left in a perpetual state of mourning, trapped within a single room, trying to return and remember a home which is as frozen in her memory as it seems frozen in history. Her longing for the desert goes hand in hand for her longing for her love – the yearning is inseparable. The personification of the desert as a balm for loss, and even as a loved one, further entrenches *Pillars of Salt* in the Bedouin elegy tradition. Furthermore, we might even say that the rejection of the storyteller's elegy narrative in the novel is an attempt to keep the genre as a female genre rather than letting a male use it.

The metaphors and structure of *Pillars of Salt* renders it an elegy for Maha's lost world, told in sequences of memory that mirror the elegies of Maha's Bedouin ancestors. While Fadia Faqir is not a Bedouin woman, she employs the same tropes and metaphors used in Bedouin women's writing to bring Maha's eulogy to life, a eulogy which has been echoed across generations of Bedouin women from al Khansa to the women Moneera al – Ghadeer spoke too, elegies of yearning for love and a desert breeze. Furthermore, on a larger scale, it continues an Arab tradition of using poetry to express a grief which cannot be put in simple terms. Female Muslim writers' expressions of grief, love, and the state is a part of a historical tradition in which women eulogized the heartache of the world they lived in, either mourning for soldiers in a war, a lost homeland, or a deceased lover. The relationship between grief and female writers' is inseparable; inseparable, even as Maha's story speaks, as the grief for a lover and a lost home.

That Fadia Faqir writes an elegy novel which evokes the elegies of Bedouin women both today and centuries ago demonstrates how women can reconquer the spaces and boundaries which they are placed in, but also proves that once those isolated spaces are conquered, they can continue to be defined by Muslim women for centuries to come. Therefore, it can provide evidence to how once Muslim women manage to reconquer a space, either aesthetic, symbolic or

real, that space can remain for Muslim women. In other words, reconquering a symbol or a genre can be a viable method to encourage Muslim women's voices.

Chapter 4: Negotiating Class Barriers Between Muslim Women

While in the past two chapters, I demonstrated how Muslim women successfully transcended barriers placed on them by society and the state, whether it is isolation or a genre, the writers in the novels also address where transcending other barriers is harder, especially barriers not placed on women, but between them. For example, while we saw that isolation in Chapter 2 can create solidarity between women, in many of the novels that use isolation class often makes solidarity difficult, albeit not entirely impossible. Politics are formative in creating the worlds of Muslim women; however, regardless of the political atmosphere, issues of class can be the most intense kind of world pressure on women's lives. However, given extraneous circumstances, women whose social circles prohibit interactions may be forced together. This trope is fundamental to Fadia Faqir's *Pillars of Salt* and Salwa Bakr's *The Golden Chariot*. The writers collapse class boundaries by forcing their characters into small spaces, a mental asylum and a female prison, and forcing the elite and the subaltern to interact. Faqir and Bakr ask an interesting question: how do women of different classes treat one another when confined in a single space? Their characters demonstrate a fault in feminist solidarity – women often band and support women in their own class while maintaining prejudice to those of different diverse rank. However, in creating settings which promote dialogue between classes, Faqir and Bakr also concentrate the shared experiences of Muslim women and encourage a modern fashion of solidarity that sees class difference, but works across it.

We discussed in Chapter 2 how Fadia Faqir places a Bedouin woman and an urban Jordanian woman in the same room, however while they become friends over the course of the novel, the beginning of the novel demonstrates how solidarity is rarely immediate even when women share the same barriers. In *Pillars of Salt*, when Umm Saad first walks into the room in

the mental asylum where Maha lays on the bed, she immediately begins struggling with the guards.

“I am an urban woman from Amman,” she says. “I refuse to share the room with a grinning Bedouin” (6).

Despite her violent struggles, doctors strap her to the bed across from Maha and lock the door, leaving the two women together. As Umm Saad begins to weep, Maha closes the distance between them and begins to use part of her shawl to wash the Jordanian woman’s face with water and hum to her a lullaby to calm her. Afterwards, once Umm Saad has the strength again to speak, she apologizes to Maha:

May Allah forgive me, when I saw you sleeping in that bed in your black robe and headband I could not help it. To stay with a city woman in the same room is one thing but to share a room with a filthy Bedouin is another. But Maha, you are not filthy at all. Your hands when you were rubbing my body with cold water smelt of gardens, and meadows of ripe fruit. You transported me to my small garden at the top of Castle Mountain. By your life, you were not just rubbing my limbs with your fingers, but my heart too. (18)

Umm Saad works against her prejudice against Bedouins, calling Maha “sister”, and in their shared misfortune she ignores the class discrepancies between them. From that moment, Umm Saad begins to tell Maha her life story, beginning with the memory on top of Castle Mountain when she was a young girl with her whole life ahead of her. Trapped together now, both women grey-haired and abandoned in some way by their families, they spend the nights mourning over their tragedies. Within the mental asylum, their antagonist is a foreign doctor who tries to keep them from speaking, a stand in for both a male force and a colonizing force. Every night as Umm Saad tells Maha her stories, the doctor comes in and attempts to silence them with medication.

However, after every dose wears off, the women begin to speak again until finally Maha spits at the doctor and calls him a filthy foreigner. The confrontation with the doctor is an important one. When the women first encountered one another, regardless that they were both technically Jordanian, they see each other as different and foreign. Turning the language then on the doctor implies a solidarity between the two women that didn't exist before they were locked inside the mental asylum together. The narrative turn of women devaluing each other because of class, and then achieving solidarity between each other in opposition to an antagonist, is repeated in a similar fashion, and often, in Bakr's *Golden Chariot*.

The Golden Chariot follows Aziza, an Egyptian socialite imprisoned for murdering her step-father and lover, as she decides which women she wants to take with her on her golden chariot to paradise. From the beginning, Bakr is clear in establishing that Aziza is an unreliable narrator – the other prisoners in the women's block think she is mad. For hours, she paces inside her solitary confinement, her punishment for biting inmates, and thinks about the women she wants to take with her to paradise. In her eyes, the women were angels without wings who had lost their way to paradise and ended up in the prison, and her chariot would return them to their rightful place. The chariot may be imagined as a symbol of class – Aziza insists that only “the most distinguished and noble women of the prison” could ride upon it. Its goal, to re-elevate women who were now at the lowest stage of their life, is a way to establish nobility and hierarchy. Aziza's imagining of the chariot exudes wealth and status. It is an exact replica of a royal golden coach she saw once as a child, and in her mind the women who will ride on it will be like queens, dressed in the finest silks. However, just as Aziza imagines the chariot as a symbol of status, its position as exclusive for only those of a noble, upper class is quickly dashed as Aziza begins to invite women of all class backgrounds on the chariot. Its original iteration, as

a vehicle for the upper class, quickly turns into an image of solidarity in which all women, regardless of class, escape together from the wrongs of the world. The collision of classes in *The Golden Chariot* can be exemplified by three items: the acceptance of Umm Ragab and Umm Khayr on the chariot, the acceptance of thievery to achieve class, and the relationship between Bahiga and Zaynab.

To Aziza, “the very thought of Umm Ragab’s dirty hand contaminating that magnificent heavenly chariot which Aziza drew in her imagination, had been inconceivable” before the death of Umm Ragab’s daughter. Before then, Aziza imagined Umm Ragab as “the most wretched of the people she knew” (28), and from their first encounter Aziza sought to avoid her because of her “demonic appearance” and her “putrid smell”. Umm Ragab became a pickpocket after her husband divorced her, leaving her to fend for her then five-month-old daughter. All her life, Umm Ragab stole to give her daughter a good life, and while listening to Umm Ragab wail after hearing the news her daughter burned to death in a house fire, Aziza felt her “eyes open”, and bid the spiders in her room to tell Umm Ragab that she accepted her for the chariot. While Aziza believed at first glance that she would never allow Umm Ragab on her chariot, she thought the opposite of Umm El-Khayr. In fact, “it took no time at all – not even the time it took to soft boil an egg – for Aziza to decide” that Umm El-Khayr must be included on the voyage to heaven. Umm El-Khayr was a peasant; however, this did not “arouse Aziza’s scorn despite the fact that she herself came from an old city family who looked upon peasants as boorish, crude, and dirty with an unbearable smell” (71). These prejudices are dismissed when Aziza sees Umm El-Khayr feeding the cats in the prison, and caring for the other prisoners, even imagining her as the Egyptian cow goddess Hathor. In the case of Umm Ragab and Umm El-Khayr, Aziza’s old class prejudices are pushed away when she encounters the women first-hand. After talking to Umm

Ragab about her tragedy, and witnessing Umm El-Khayr's kindness, Aziza elevates the women to a higher status (in Umm El-Khayr's case, to that of a goddess). On the golden chariot the women are equal despite Aziza's past scorn as to their original social standing.

Furthermore, not only does proximity to characters of lower classes humanize them in Aziza's eyes, she begins to understand the world from their perspectives. Thievery is depicted as a just act, the only way characters can climb an unjust social ladder, exemplified by the words of another pickpocket's, Saffiya's, narrative:

She longed to have her hair styled and fasten it with a band of colored pearls and to put on red lipstick to match her red shoes like the city women did. When she saw them, anger and exasperation welled up inside her...She then came to an important conclusion: as far as she was concerned, stealing in this city was not only feasible and extremely simple, but essential if you wanted to live your life as many people walking the streets did. (127)

Aziza too adopts this perspective after meeting Saffiya and Umm Ragab. When Aziza first meets Umm Ragab, one of the foremost reasons she despises her is because she is a thief and a pickpocket. However, after hearing her story, and sympathizing for the death of her daughter, Aziza understands why Umm Ragab stole and even imagines it as a noble act. Where once she reprimanded the women around her for thievery, Aziza comes to term with the act as one of desperation, necessity, and requirement. For the first time, Aziza empathizes with those whose situations were vastly different from her own. Consequently, she accepts pickpockets and thieves like Umm Ragab and Safiyya on her golden chariot.

Beyond specifically Aziza's experience and her golden chariot, the friendship between Bahiga Abdel Haqq and Zaynab serves as another example of the impact of class on women's lives, and how women of different classes interact with one another. Bahiga grew up in a poor

household, however she received a good education thanks to the social circumstances of Egypt at the time (Gamal Abdul Nasser's rule): "In this rare time of opportunity in our miserable history, Bahiga, daughter of a nightwatchman, shared the same school seat with the daughter of a minister in the Government and both of them received the same dose of learning" (142). Thanks to the education she received, Bahiga sets out to be a doctor to climb the social ladder and supports her family. However, her dream to be a successful doctor in a petrol country turns out to be a sham (149). Not only can she not manage to climb the ladders of a hospital or make enough money to travel the world as she dreamed, her position as a doctor doesn't even help her find the love she yearned for:

Doctors, and those from the same social group who wanted to get married, did not consider Bahiga an attractive proposition. Rather the reverse because her lowly family background put them off; what, after all, was the attraction in a girl who had neither money nor beauty and whose family had no status? (148)

Even as Bahiga achieved her dream to be a doctor, her social class still haunted her, and her aspirations to lift herself higher up on the social ladder fell apart. Bahiga finds herself in the women's prison after no true fault of her own; however, Bahiga's desire to interact with the upper class is surprisingly fulfilled within the prison by her friendship with Zaynab, an aristocrat's daughter. The two become fast friends, and when they are introduced, the days of loneliness they each suffered in the prison end:

...Zaynab discovered that Bahiga fulfilled a long-held wish in the world of friendship, not only inside prison but in the world outside as well. Zaynab had never experienced the happiness which can come from true friendship between two women, because throughout her life men had stood in the way. Being beautiful, she was solely preoccupied with the

interest they showed in her and in how she was always the object of their gaze and admiration. Of course she knew many women but she never got to know a woman intimately in the way that she knew Bahiga Abdel Haqq in prison. From the time they first struck up a friendship together and began to share many aspects of their daily lives, Bahiga became a substitute for the family Zaynab had lost, and Zaynab became the sole source of comfort in Bahiga's desolate life. Bahiga had never experienced the intimacy she shared with Zaynab and had never felt able to confide her innermost anxieties and pain to any woman before. (157)

Bahiga and Zaynab represent the impossible dream of Aziza's golden chariot (to which they are both invited). Two women whose societies would never interact become intimate friends. In Bahiga's case, Zaynab's life is everything she craved and envied. In Zaynab's case, Bahiga is the true friend Zaynab was constantly denied because of the plasticity of her class.

By putting women of diverse social classes together in a single space and forcing them to interact, Bakr and Faqir's novels raise three interesting points. The first is that women rarely automatically stand in solidarity with one another – the bias of social class prevents it. The relationships between women in both *Pillars of Salt* and *The Golden Chariot* begin with trepidations about interacting with women from different classes. Furthermore, those breaches in social class often cannot be breached nor understood. For example, when a social activist is jailed, Aziza cannot identify with her nor bridge the class difference:

The girl spoke to her in the same way that all the other communists Aziza had met in prison before had done; she never understood anything they said to her, not the purpose of the mental and physical anguish that women like this girl brought upon themselves.

Aziza noticed that almost all of them were educated and respectable. They had good jobs and lived in more pleasant circumstances than most. (100)

Despite the activist's kindness, her desire for social welfare, and her share of the isolated space with Aziza and the other prisoners, neither she nor any activists are welcomed on Aziza's golden chariot. What, then, creates solidarity between women of different social classes if simple proximity does not do it?

According to the novels, it seems to be the ability to share grief and a shared antagonist without the anxiety of a social ladder. Both *Pillars of Salt* and *The Golden Chariot* revolve around conversations between women about what befell them to lead them to the place they were trapped in now. In comforting one another, as Aziza comforts Umm Ragab, as Maha comforts Umm Saad, and as Zaynab comforts Bahiga, the class barriers crumble and even turn into intimate friendships. Furthermore, the presence of antagonists also breaches social boundaries. Umm Saad and Maha defy the doctor together, and Aziza sees her golden chariot as the vehicle to which the women can escape to "a beautiful place in heaven where there is grace and favour, everlasting, supreme happiness and true, deep love between human beings and where they would not be kept awake by continual quarrels and strife" (191). The individuals who could potentially keep the golden chariot from taking off are all men – the warden and his guards. Beyond merely Aziza's golden chariot dream, men are consistently the antagonists in the women's stories, and often they are the reason behind the women's presence in the prison. The female prison warden, Mahrousa, goes far enough to say that all men were evil and created from the devil's rib, an opinion to which other prisoners agree (133). Sharing grief allows the women to empathize with one another and see the world from each other's perspectives, and the antagonists, often male,

allow women to stop warring against one another and instead stand in solidarity against a common opponent.

The underlying reason beneath the conflicts between women of different social classes is ultimately frustration thanks to the inability to climb the social ladder. Most of the women in the prison struggled within the boundaries of their world, forced to marry men within their station of life, forced to steal to feed their children, and forced to commit crimes to escape their lives. Bahiga, Saffiya, Umm Ragab, and the rest, their inability to raise their status no matter how hard they try is not unique to fiction. Christine Delphy looks into issues of social class and its impact on women in *Separate and Dominate*, focusing on the Algerian Muslim population in France. Delphy notes the impossibility of class mobility in modern society, especially for Muslims, going as far to say that social classes resemble castes today in which “people inherit exactly the same status that their parents had, with no probability or even possibility of social mobility” (113). Saffiya’s jealousy of women of upper classes is based in her own inability to climb the social ladder despite working all day, and Bahiga’s distress at failing to achieve her dream of upward mobility hinges on her social stasis. And yet, when this distress is set aside when the women are placed on the same social plane, in this case the prison, the frustrations ebb and friendship blossoms in its place. This is perhaps the greatest thing about Aziza’s golden chariot. At the end of the novel it houses women from all walks of life. It elevates them all to the same social level, fulfilling Aziza’s dream of a place in which women might love each other truly beyond quarrel.

This leveling of class might appear as an elite feminist dream, which would be a valid point considering the writers of all the novels are elite women. However, the writers undercut the utopic ideal of transcending class by not really overcoming it. As mentioned in the beginning of

the chapter, Aziza is an unreliable narrator. The golden chariot exists only in her mind. Any attempts towards equality, exemplified by the sacrifice of the communist activist, fails. At the end of both *Pillars of Salt* and *The Golden Chariot*, the women are where they began – trapped within a confined space. No friendship can free them from their bonds. This is seemingly the tragedy of *The Golden Chariot*, that the idealistic dream of leveling class remains in a mad woman's mind. Thus, the writers succeed in ensuring that the category of Muslim women is never essentializing. They recognize the importance of class and its impact on Muslim women, while also using aesthetic tropes to create conversations about class between Muslim women. That isn't to say that solidarity in itself is an unattainable goal, but that in reality hopes of solidarity are rarely easy. The writers refuse utopic conclusions that will arise when Muslim women work towards solidarity and instead leave their novels open-ended to demonstrate how even if Muslim women successfully reconquer some spaces they are trapped inside, the next, and often most difficult, step is to overcome the barriers between them.

Chapter 5: Muslim Women's Bodies as Sites of Political Conflict

Over the last several chapters, we discussed how Muslim women attempt to conquer spaces in which they are trapped and isolated, and discussed where that transcendence is difficult. In Chapter 2, Muslim women reclaimed the symbol of the harem and isolation through the aesthetic. In Chapter 3, modern and ancient women excelled and claimed a genre they were trapped within, and in Chapter 4, the writers addressed how class can create barriers between women even when they inhabit the same space. However, in all these chapters I have made an assumption that Muslim women must reclaim their own symbolism, not that Muslim women shouldn't be symbols at all. This may seem counterintuitive – after all, if symbolism is the problem why are we keeping Muslim women as symbols? There is a difference between saying that Muslim women shouldn't be symbols and that Muslim women should reconquer their own symbolism. The first I think is impossible at this stage. As much as Muslim women have struggled to not be used as pawns and symbols of states and ideologies, they have historically been used as such. Consequently, while the ideal in the long run is to allow Muslim women to finally stand as human beings rather than symbols, the only way for Muslim women to do that is to first recognize their own symbolism and make that symbolism their own.

Rendering bodies as symbols for larger political conflicts emerges as a trope in both history and fiction. Fadia Faqir's *Pillars of Salt*, Ghada Samman's *The Night of the First Billion*, and Kamila Shamsie's *Kartography* all feature characters whose bodies are used as symbols of political conflicts, and who see political conflicts manifested in the bodies of the people who surround them, especially those they love. Despite their vastly different contexts, all three novels describe how political strife stitches itself into the skins of countries and their inhabitants. Bodies become sites of political conflict fought over not only by ideological others, but the lovers

closest to them. The novels serve as a good tool to analyze how bodies are used to rhetorically represent political events and ultimately how these extended metaphors detriment women in both history and fiction by imagining them as symbols rather than people. In other words, how while metaphors can enlighten in literature, they can undermine in the real world. Within this chapter, I am going to use *Pillars of Salt*, *The Night of the First Billion*, and *Kartography* as studies into how women are rendered as symbols of political strife in fiction by discussing the novels, the history they fit in, and the way the characters relate within their novels and in comparison. Afterwards, I am going to explore the historical and real implications of turning people into political pieces.

The Individual as a Political Symbol in Fiction

Ghada Samman opens *The Night of the First Billion* as the protagonists flee on the last planes leaving Beirut as Israeli fighter jets drop bombs from above. The novel follows Khalil, a Lebanese man formerly imprisoned by the government after joining political protests, and his family as they escape to Geneva. Khalil's wife, Kafa, comes from a wealthy family, and after years living in war-torn Lebanon and losing her young daughter, she seeks an escape from even the mention of war. In Geneva, Khalil and Kafa enter a society of Lebanese Arabs who, like them, fled the war and started new lives. Their society is marked by the millions the Lebanese earn in Geneva, and how they handle *al ghorba*, or distance, from their homeland. The characters in *Night of the First Billion*, regardless of their degrees of patriotism, all seek to forget about the war in some point of the novel.

The Lebanese Civil War lasted from 1975 to 1990 and resulted in nearly 120,000 fatalities. Born out of French colonial rule from 1920-1943, the government favored the elite Maronite Christian community despite a large Muslim population. However, with the influx of

Palestinian refugees following the creation of Israel, the demographics began to shift and violence broke out between the Maronite Christians and Palestinian forces. Over the years, the war continued and engulfed the multiple ethnic and religious groups within Lebanon. During the third phase of the civil war in 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon following Fatah's attempting assassination of Israeli ambassador Shlomo Argov in London and in June, Israel began shelling Lebanon to eliminate the Palestinian Liberation Organization.

Samman's characters flee from this third phase of the civil war; however, the war, despite being thousands of miles away, is never truly far, a theme represented both literally and metaphorically by the character Bahriya. After losing her entire family to the war, Bahriya arrives in Geneva under the care of her wealthy relative Raghid Zahran, mute and suffering from intense PTSD. She is a clear example of how bodies represent countries and homes – Bahriya clearly represents Lebanon. Every time a character encounters Bahriya, they remember Lebanon and the people they left behind there. When she lands in Geneva, Nadim, Raghid's butler, immediately associates Bahriya to Lebanon:

There was a furnace ablaze from the sun, as though the winds of homeland were exhaling their hot breaths here in Geneva...He was assailed by the image of the old Beirut alleyway where he'd grown up and the old house that his parents were still so attached to... When she tossed her exquisite hair this time, it gave off the stench of fires and gunpowder. (267)

Bahriya reminds Nadim of his parents in Lebanon, whom he doesn't know are dead or alive, and describes himself "waking up" from the "trivialities" of his life in Geneva. Bahriya enters Genevan high society and reminds many of the characters, cradled in the lap of luxury and ignoring the events back home, of their past in Lebanon. Bahriya is a reminder of war and

violence that walks into their lives, an action made literal when she interrupts a dinner party naked and covered in blood:

In her presence, there was a telegram of sorts from Beirut, written in blood, wounds, and silence. It was as if she represented the entire city, and as if everyone who left it was like her somehow: naked, clothed in nothing but wounds and mute afflictions, cast out into a vast, empty expanse to be torn to pieces by people in search of the best way to make use of a corpse. (293)

Bahriya's symbolism is rendered through the eyes of other characters. She is one of the few characters who is provided no voice throughout the novel, in fact, she does not have a single line of dialogue even though the book is over four hundred pages long. The characters see Lebanon in her, and yet we never hear her perspective on the country which she symbolizes, the war which she survived, or the new setting she finds herself in. Whatever depth is provided to her character is provided by the characters who project their own guilt, nationalism, and grief onto her. In other words, she is a reflection of the characters around her rather than an individual all to herself. For characters like Nadim and Khalil, coming from lower-class backgrounds with a fierce love for Lebanon, Bahriya's entrance into the story wakes them from the trance they have been living in – for Khalil's part induced by cocaine, and for Nadim his attempt to make enough money working for Raghid. Even the antagonists of the novel, Raghid, Sheikh Watfan, and Sheikh Sakhr all connect Bahriya with their homelands, associate guilt with her, and seek to possess her. As Sheikh Sakhr says, he wants to marry Bahriya because she is "lithe and slender as a palm tree from his homeland." Bahriya's body serves as a representation of Lebanon, and through her, characters remember, argue, and struggle with the political strife they left behind. Her character represents the way that bodies can serve as extensions of political conflict, and

perhaps her silence is Samman's critique of how that symbolism can rob women of their humanity and individuality.

Similarly, in Faqir's *Pillars of Salt*, the narrative of colonization is rendered familial in the bodies of Maha's husband and brother, taking larger political conflicts and descaling them into physical human bodies. We discussed the other two storylines in *Pillars of Salt* in earlier chapters, that of Maha in the insane asylum and the other narrative of the storyteller, however in this chapter we will focus on her marriage to Harb and the growing consequences of war and modernization on her Bedouin village.

While the name of Maha's village is not explicitly mentioned, the description of events, as well as a brief mention in the timeline provided at the beginning of the novel, insinuate that Maha may belong to the village of Wadi Musa. In 1923, the British formally allowed Jordan self-rule under Emir Abdullah following a series of rebellions against the British rule of the then mandate territory. The Adwan Rebellion was the largest of the uprisings, and was consequently crushed by the British RAF. It is possible that *Pillars of Salt* might reference a Bedouin village as part of the Adwan Rebellion; however, the village of Wadi Musa was a Bedouin village which, like Maha's, refused to pay taxes and looted government outposts before being crushed by the RAF. The timeline fits with the events of *Pillars of Salt* – the British are a nameless force in conflict with the village at the beginning of the novel, and then become friends of the heads of the village at the end.

Maha's storyline ties directly to the British via her relationship with her husband, Harb. Harb is consistently absent – off to fight the British until he and the other warriors of the village are destroyed by the British's "metal eagles." Harb represents the Bedouin in Maha's life. He is the "horseman," a man like every other man in her village. Associated with the horse, Harb's

return to Maha from war and his presence is related to the sound of galloping hooves. When she dreams or remembers Harb, she likens the feeling to “coming home after a long, sweaty day.” Harb represents her Bedouin home, both its traditions, and its distance. His body is the site of a lost homeland to which she aches to return, but cannot. Her devotion to Harb, and consequently the culture of her home, creates the central conflict between Maha and her brother.

If Harb represents the Bedouin in Maha’s life, then her brother represents the British and the modernizing forces threatening to change her Bedouin lifestyle. Her brother brings foreigners to the village, drives a car, and dines with the British at the end of the novel. While Maha works in the field to support her father, Maha’s brother is absent, imagined in Maha’s mind as lazy, his focus on bringing modernity to the village via urban relations and inevitably the British. Maha’s anticolonial sentiment is expressed vividly in her distaste of her brother and the Western women whom he brings home (whom Maha covers in a cloth because they are so scantily clad). In contrast, Harb is a comforting and respectful, albeit largely absent, force in Maha’s life; her brother is abusive, and while also absent, his return into her narrative always spells conflict and disaster. Maha’s relationships with the two men in her life make the large, political conflicts mentioned only in passing gestures a real and physical presence. Through Harb, the traditions of her village and the familiarity of culture act on Maha and provide a dream slipping away with time. Through her brother, Maha is violently confronted with her changing home, and even as she clings to the Bedouin ideal, she is forced to reconcile its loss.

In both *The Night of the First Billion* and *Pillars of Salt*, characters come into conflict with one another over politics by becoming physical manifestations of political strife. However, the most marked effects of identifying human being with political conflicts can be seen in intimacy and romance. Staying with *Pillars of Salt*, Maha imagines Harb as her homeland, and

remembers him fondly because of it. Maha yearns to be with Harb, not only because she misses him as an individual, but because he has come to represent home for her.

The opposite is true in *The Night of the First Billion*. Instead of a lover's body representing a homeland, the imagination of a homeland interferes with intimacy rather than supporting it. When Kafa and Khalil attempt to have sex, Khalil imagines that "as he took her in his arms, he could feel two masses of barbed wire protruding from her bosom and being plunged in his chest" (116). Every time love and romance are mentioned, evidenced especially with Kafa, Khalil remembers his experience in the war. When Khalil walks into a fine restaurant, he looks at the candles on the tables and associates them with "bombings, power outages, the misery of war and the wailing of young children. As for 'romantic lighting', that would have meant bright lights the length of a ceiling that hadn't been ravaged by shells" (99). Even when Khalil is sitting in what should be the paradise of Geneva, drinking a cold Cola while overlooking a beautiful, peaceful city with his alluring wife, Khalil still cannot divorce his mind from Lebanon. During their conversations, Khalil doesn't listen, instead goes "back to where he'd been before, that is, to the wild, brutal carnival. To slaying, theft, and bloodshed, the oppression of the unfortunate and the innocent" (111). It is because of the trauma Khalil suffers at the hands of the war that he can no longer imagine happiness or love: "I lost my appetite for life, for love, for the sun, and even for women. I didn't touch my wife after that. I didn't even notice her or any other woman (59). Khalil roots the persistent struggle between Kafa and himself with her desire to possess him when he cannot be possessed:

She wants me to say to her, and mean it, 'your body is my homeland and my dignity'.

And she claims that this would be love! I wish I were able to love in that way: filling the

horizon with her body till I couldn't see beyond it, distracting myself with its borders and contours from my own and all other borders, resting from battle. (484)

Kafa cannot replace the homeland of Lebanon in Khalil's mind, which might answer why when Khalil sees Bahriya he discusses feeling closer to her than he does to Kafa. The characters in *Night of the First Billion* wage political and ideological wars over each other's bodies. Just as Kafa seeks to colonize Khalil and make him her own, Bahriya's physical presence reminds him of Beirut and interferes in that process. In some ways, it is as if Beirut has already colonized and consumed Khalil, and throughout the novel Kafa struggles to compete with Lebanon for Khalil's love and devotion, forcing him to choose between his wife and his country.

The relationship between Kafa and Khalil juxtaposes that of Maha and Harb. Maha associates Harb positively to her homeland, while the inability of Khalil to imagine Kafa as his homeland creates discord. In both cases, the politics of countries exercise themselves through the bodies of lovers. Consequently, we raise the question: when did love become so dependent on geography? We might begin to answer the question by introducing the novel which asked that question – Kamila Shamsie's *Kartography*, which centers around the effects of the 1971 Bangladesh War on a circle of family and friends. The novel follows the protagonist, Raheen, and her best friend, Karim, as they learn the influence of 1971 on their families, and consequently each other.

The conflict within *Kartography* centers around the Bangladesh Liberation War, in which the rise of a Bengali nationalist movement in East Pakistan led to a revolution and a genocide. The war began when the Pakistani military targeted nationalist Bengali civilians, students, scholars, and religious minorities to quell civil disobedience following the stagnated 1970s elections in which the Eastern Pakistani political party, the Awami League, was denied the

Parliament after a landslide victory. Out of widespread violence, Bangladesh announced its separation from Pakistan, and to this day the death-toll of the conflict remains contested. The war and genocide was defined by ethnic conflict, and it is ethnic conflict that takes center-stage in *Kartography*.

From when they are children, the ghost of the 1971 war lingers in Raheen's consciousness, present, and yet she never allows herself to truly confront it, especially the way it places her in opposition to her best friend Karim. When she is young she says:

...I was forced to consider that Karim and I were separate in some way that seemed to matter terribly to people old enough to understand where the significance lay...I was Muhajir with a trace of Pathan, and he was Bengali and...Punjabi? Sindhi? What? I considered. Probably Punjabi, I decided. He had relatives in Lahore. These days, with the Civil War treated as a long distant memory that had nothing to do with our present lives, his Punjabiness would probably be more of an issue on the nation's ethnic battleground than his Bengaliness. But did any of it really have anything to do with Karim and me?

The irony of young Raheen's thoughts is that the Civil War has everything to do with their present, and despite their attempt to turn 1971 into a distant memory, it remains an undercurrent throughout their entire lives.

Raheen and Karim ultimately learn the lesson their parents did in 1971: however far the distance, however long the time, people cannot escape the world and the history surrounding them. It is Raheen's fixation with keeping herself and Karim out of the narrative of the 1971 that creates conflict between them. Raheen's father was the same – he tried to pretend that the war around him had nothing to do with him and the woman he loved, but when the war finally arrived at his door the feelings he kept repressed emerged, and the bleeding of culture and

politics into his life burst out, and he could never make it right afterwards. Karim sees Raheen making the same mistake. “You’re the same, Raheen,” Karim tells her. “The city is falling apart and you’re the same....I [want] you to find a way to see beyond the tiny circle you live in, I [want] you to acknowledge that you’re a part of something larger (244).” Karim recognizes that he and Raheen cannot distance themselves from the political conflicts around them. In order not to lose her, Karim asks Raheen not to turn to Karachi while she was in the United States for university, which prompts her question: “when did love become do dependent of geography?”

“When personality started to change with location,” Karim answers.

Raheen challenges him on his response, claiming that the person she is in the United States is the same person that lives in Karachi. Karim, however, remains undeterred – “In Karachi I have to see your reactions to things. Amid the roots and berries there’s no cause for those reactions.”

The conflict between Raheen and Karim, the question of love and geography, of the choice to flee to the middle of nowhere and ignore the world, these themes are also wrapped up in *The Night of the First Billion* with Kafa and Khalil. Despite being about separate conflicts, featuring dramatically different characters, both couples, Raheen and Karim, and Kafa and Khalil, struggle with the influence of political conflict on their romantic relationships. Karim at first wants Raheen to recognize the world around her, but when that affects their relationship he backtracks and wants her to leave with him somewhere he doesn’t have to see the effect of politics on her person. In a way, Karim is Kafa, wanting to cut himself off completely from the violence back home. And yet, Raheen answers Karim in the same way Khalil answers Kafa: “I knew that every other city in the world only showed me its surface, but when I looked at Karachi I saw the blood running through and out its veins” (297). Ultimately, Raheen recognizes that she

cannot separate from history. She chooses to return to Karachi and see the past and the present for what it was, because, as all the texts appear to answer, love and geography are inseparable and people cannot escape from the politics surrounding them as hard as they may try. A “homeland” is made up of homes, and homes are made up of people, and in the intimate, familial stories of the three texts, you can see how the burden of war on individuals is often heavier than the burden on the state.

In *Pillars of Salt*, *The Night of the First Billion*, and *Kartography*, the authors grapple with the way politics plays out in the intimate lives of individuals. Characters symbolize homelands and their personal conflicts represent state and ethnic wars on a greater scale. Consequently, it is easy to imagine that turning bodies into symbols is only an allegorical tool reserved for fiction. However, while these metaphors linking bodies to politics to love register poignantly in novels, they have immediate and violent effects in history, especially on women. Shamsie recognizes this throughout *Kartography*, and its insinuation emerges in the original conflict between Raheen’s father and his then fiancé Maheen. When asked by another Pakistani how he could marry Maheen because she is Bengali, Raheen’s father responds: “How can I marry one of them? How could I let one of them bear my children? Think of it as a civic duty. I will be diluting her Bengali bloodline” (232). In that moment, Raheen sees her young father “stepping into history, stepping where [Maheen] could not go, and kicking her away as he stepped there, kicking her with blood-drenched boots” (238).

The Woman as a Political Symbol in Reality

The Bangladesh War for Independence, sparked by the rise of the Bengali nationalist movement, ended with a genocide of 300,000 by Pakistani accounts, to 3,000,000 by Indian and Bangladeshi accounts (Brownmiller 80). Women were especially targeted. During the war, a

fatwa released in Pakistan declared that Bengali women could be taken as “gonimoter maal” or war booty (BBC). Accounts have up to 200,000 to 400,000 women raped during the conflict in a series of rapes presumed to have been sanctioned by the Pakistani military (Brownmiller 80). Because of differing ethnic makeup of Bengal and Pakistan, the issue of the children of rape arose after the war when thousands of rape victims became pregnant, and “in addition to an understandable horror of rearing a child of forcible rape, it was freely acknowledged in Bangladesh that the bastard children with their fair Punjabi features would never be accepted into Bengali culture – and neither would their mothers” (Brownmiller 84). Therefore, the issue of the rape of Bengali women to either “dilute the bloodline” has a potent impact in not only the small world of *Kartography*, but violent and real repercussions in recent history.

Women’s rape during the Bangladesh War of 1971 is a violent example. However, throughout history women’s use as symbols of war have subjected them to violations of human rights. Christine Delphy discusses in *Separate and Dominate* how, in colonial contexts, “the relations between the colonizing society and the colonized society are also the relations between two patriarchies” (110). In Algeria, the “unveiling” campaigns, rapes, and treatment of native women in brothels was no so much an issue with Algeria, but an issue with Algerian men – men taking other men’s “property” as a show of dominance. Women, as symbols of a minority, national, or religious group became the items through which men exercised political power. In *The Night of the First Billion*, Raghid, the antagonist, describes women as understanding this fact: “It was if, in their womanly wisdom, they understood that they really had no place in this golden corner of the world except as decorations, or as battlegrounds. They knew they weren’t the center of men’s lives, but mere playthings” (361). Raghid claims that Kafa’s body is “little

more than a barricade from which he could hide from Bahriya, and a battleground between him and Khalil” (361).

In addition to war and colonial contexts, historically women have been used as symbols of nations, creating a top down, or state feminism, which disregards the agency of women. The clearest example would be Mustafa Kemal Ataturk’s reformatations in Turkey in 1922. Religion was brought under state control, some religious groups were banned, and Ataturk eliminated overt symbols of religion in dress. The restriction on religion was one of the six Arrows of Kernalism, *laicism*, a French originated theory which encouraged the extreme separation of state and religion, relegating religion to strictly the private sphere. Ataturk’s Republican State became a “Feminist” state, or a “male dominated state that made women’s equality in the public sphere a national policy” (Atakav 21). This Feminist state was top down – the upper-class performed newly changing gender roles in education, action, and dress, for example unveiling and adopting Western dress, and the lower classes were meant to follow their example. However, the irony is that this “ideal new Turkish woman” was constructed; therefore, “the ideal new Turkish woman” divided urban and rural women. For urban women, the “new Turkish woman” represented a path towards freedom. For rural women, the “new Turkish woman” embodied a modern oppression. From the 1980s onward this irony created tension as more conservative women became upwardly mobile and argued against veiling legislation, only becoming successful recently under an Islamist government. State feminism, while often leading to good outcomes for women, also turns women into symbols and violates their right of choice, ultimately defeating the purpose of legislation geared towards equality.

These examples demonstrate the real-world impact of the use of women as symbols for political purpose rather than people. The novels demonstrated the way the metaphors unfold, and

the history the repercussions to those unfolded metaphors. The crux of the problem is made clearer: within nationalist conversations, women often lose their voices. The question then stands: how can we talk about women as people while also discussing the nationalist struggles that influence their lives? Activism – exemplified by Palestinian and Kurdish women’s movement – may provide us with a starting point by demonstrating that when women engage with agency in nationalist discourse, instead of being rendered as tools or symbols, they can achieve both a “feminist” and a “nationalist” result.

Palestinian women’s organizations were secular and urban-based during the late Ottoman period and consisted of elite women conducting social work. That changed, however, after the 1948 *nakba* in which thousands of Palestinians were forced out of their homes. Palestinian women’s organizations suddenly faced a dramatic shift – in this new world where Palestinians were robbed of their homeland, all Palestinians, including all women regardless of class, had to fight back. Refugee camps became sites of resistance. 1964 marked the birth of the PLO, complete with a Women’s Union whose goal it was to raise political consciousness among women, create vocational projects, prepare them for employment, and help them participate in the PLO movement. By the first intifada, Palestinian women’s roles in the establishment of a Palestinian state established their role in it. Women’s roles became a part of nationalist discourse rather than being swallowed by it. Throughout the next decade, women’s organizations were founded for Palestinian women, focusing on domestic issues and creating women’s centers and shelters. They employed a language of “gender awareness” to avoid “feminism”, which was seen as a Western import, emphasizing a Palestinian feminism chosen by Palestinian women, rather than forced upon them by outsiders.

Kurdish women's role in politics began with the emergence of Kurdish nationalism Post WWI. The Treaty of Sevres promised an independent Kurdistan which never came to being, giving birth to the PKK, or Kurdistan's Worker's Party, a leftist/ communist group. The PKK's founder, Ocalan, viewed incorporating women into the PKK as integral to the organization for two reasons. First, practically, allowing women to participate in the PKK increased its ranks. Second, liberating women was seen as a separate, indivisible goal to independence. Beyond the PKK, other political groups like KADEM and the People's Democratic Party support both women and the Kurdish cause, to which now women are indivisible.

Both Palestinian and Kurdish women's brand of feminism is unique because it is born out of active resistance. Whereas state-born feminism, practiced by both Turkey and Iran at some stage of their histories, tried to enforce a brand of feminism onto women which they were expected to accept passively, Palestinian and Kurdish feminism was born of activism. They joined political organizations not only to fight for the rights of their people, but their own rights as women as well. The Principles of the Women's Liberation Ideology of the PKK is an interesting way to understand this idea. Their first point, "Patriotism", emphasizes that women's ideology cannot exist without land. Therefore, women's struggle as women is indivisible to the patriotic struggle for the state. In a way, the oppression of the outside state, Israel and Turkey, on the Palestinian and Kurdish populations allowed women the ability to fight for their rights.

Palestinian and Kurdish women's role in political organizations demonstrates how women can use nationalist agendas to fight for women's issues; however, we can still see the struggle between the balance of feminism and nationalism in the Arab Spring. As Mona Eltahawy often says, men would be liberal and egalitarian in the streets while pursuing democracy, and yet still abuse their wives and emphasize the gender hierarchies at home. A

delicate balance exists between using nationalist discourse to fight for women's issues (PLO and PKK), to allowing women's rights to be engulfed and used as a weapon for nationalist issues while actually disregarding women (Mustafa Kemal's Turkey), to seeing women's issues as distinct from nationalist discourse (Arab Spring).

How can we relate this Palestinian and Kurdish activist model to the three texts? In *Pillars of Salt*, the *Night of the First Billion*, and *Kartography*, the women all start as politically passive. Kafa and Raheen try to ignore the political conflict back home and Maha does not fight against her brother. All three female protagonists in the novel try to distance themselves from the politics that compose their lives. But, as we explored in depth, they simply cannot. Consequently, Raheen and Maha are caught between politics and their personal lives, and Kafa is used as a pawn in men's games. However, once women make the choice to recognize the impact of the politics and encounter it – Raheen returns to Karachi, Maha confronts her brother and the British – they reach a strange kind of peace. Raheen addresses her love with Karim, Maha hides in the ocean and there Harb comes to her as a kind of vision. While conflict continues to violently act on them, by exerting agency in the politics of their lives they succeed in reconciling themselves as political symbols, even as Kafa, who continues to run, remains in stasis. The authors construct characters to move towards agency, which provides them political power or lack of it.

In the three novels, the protagonists do not simply stop being connected to the politics which act on their lives. They continue to embody the very conflicts they struggle with, and the people around them continue to do the same. The difference is, as Raheen demonstrates, that the symbolism becomes theirs. They recognize what the politics in their lives mean and they act on them with agency rather than being passive pawns like Bahriya who is solely a symbolic

character. Through activism, the characters, like the real Kurdish and Palestinian women, are able to reconquer their own symbolism even as they do not shed it completely. The novels throughout this thesis as a whole demonstrate how Muslim women can, by engaging with their political symbolism, negotiating the barriers that separate them, and reconquering the spaces they are confined within, have voice in a global political conversation within which they are often at the center. As the old ways in which we view Muslim women change, and the world contends with the positions of Muslim women, it is at this moment that Muslim women can claim the conversations about themselves from those who would use them as pawns for ideology. To break from the triangle of criss-crossing dialogues which entrench them, Muslim women must make that dialogue their own rather than respond with “it’s complicated.” If Muslim women have for centuries symbolized opposing ideologies, now that those symbols are dying Muslim women must lead the conversation before they come to symbolize something else. If we are inevitably to be symbols in the eyes of the East and West, then what do WE choose to symbolize? If we aren’t tokens of nationalism or religious fundamentalism, liberalism or conservatism, what do we stand for in our own eyes?

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