Claiming our Space: Muslim Women, Activism, and Social Media

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ABSTRACT: This paper addresses the ways in which Muslim women seek to employ online media, particularly social media, to reclaim narratives around space, embodiment, and power. I argue that digital space is, like any other form of media, structured essentially by racism and patriarchy, but I also note the crucial potential for resistance exhibited by Muslim activists such as political leaders Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib, Instagram influencer Ayesha Malik, and the largely anonymous women who participated in #MosqueMeToo, encouraged by the journalist and activist Mona Eltahawy. I draw upon a post/anti-colonial feminist framework and the tools of critical discourse analysis in examining specific instances where such women perform acts of resistance that, in turn, trigger a gendered and raced reaction. I note the ways in which some Muslim women, such as Saudi teenager Rahaf Mohammed, are constructed as media heroes, given that their stories can be co-opted to validate notions of the white colonial savior, while others directly challenge narratives of colonialism and oppression and are thus subjected to backlash. I point to the ways in which some of this vitriol continues to refer back to the notion that Muslim women should be silent, and to the fetishized Muslim woman’s body: how it should look, where it can/should go, and what can be done to it.

Keywords: Islamophobia, feminism, transnational activism, digital media, Muslim women, social media

INTRODUCTION

Digital media were expected to free the female, the queer, the raced, the disabled, and the aged from the expectations that come with embodiment, but the reality has fallen short (Ali 2020; Noble 2018). In the examples discussed here, there is a form of online activism that could serve as proof that Muslim women resist, as they have for many centuries (Ahmed 1982, 1999; Mernissi 1986, 1996; Yeğenoğlu 1998, their own oppression and that of their brothers and sisters across borders: they talk back, quite literally, breaking the silence that often seems to accompany images of them in the media. As Rana Kabbani and others have detailed, Muslim women and Middle Eastern women have long been depicted as passive subjects, either oppressed or hypersexualized, crucial to constructing an image of the Orient as inferior (Kabbani 1986; Khan 1995; Lewis 1996). No tricks of technology can change the extent to which this gendered and raced trope is embedded in the collective imagination, nor can they erase the intersectionality and the double bind Muslim women may face, expected as they are to perform gendered piety or risk being labelled unworthy victims (Jiwani 2011). Given this context, as well as ongoing revelations about the ubiquity of surveillance and harassment online, I continue to believe that digital spaces are not truly safe spaces for anyone who speaks truth to power, making it even more imperative to deconstruct coordinated online/offline attempts at oppressing activists such as Omar and Tlaib (advised to “go back” to where they came from), Malik
(dismissed as hysterical for her protest against Priyanka Chopra’s support of the Indian army during heightened tensions with Kashmir), and the women behind the hashtag #MosqueMeToo (accused of inciting their own sexual harassment).

As of August 2020, protests continue in Canada over the province of Quebec’s controversial Bill 21, which became law in June 2019 and decrees that public servants who wear symbols of religiosity, such as hijabs, kirpans, or kippahs, cannot hold certain positions, such as teacher, police officer, or prosecutor. Since its introduction, Bill 21 has been invoked frequently by politicians, scholars, and religious leaders as a contravention of human rights and of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, yet federal party leaders have all shown reluctance to challenge the law, arguing that their legal right to do so is limited (Bryden 2019). This unity of opinion seems to confirm the notion that the state has the right to control expressions of personal devotion, but perhaps more to the point, it affirms that the obsession with Muslim women’s bodies—whether they are covered, how they are covered, what those bodies are capable of—never seems to go out of style, as it were, and the obsession is held by many different groups that feel they should control these bodies in some way.

Of course, the notion of control over women’s bodies is not a new concept, nor is it specific to Muslim female bodies. In a world where patriarchy is so dominant, seen in issues ranging from sex trafficking to abortion rights to glass ceilings for politicians and executives, there is sometimes competing emphasis on breaking down hegemonic structures, and finding spaces where women can simply exist and function without undergoing constant judgment about their identity and the assumptions embedded therein. The growth of digital media has offered the rare promise of a space that can offer both: a place where women can be free of the expectations that come with embodiment, and therefore able to advocate, as Jürgen Habermas (1989) suggested, using the power of their intellect. However, while these media have certainly allowed for freedom of expression in a way that is limited in other quarters, we should be wary of defining digital media as fundamentally emancipatory.

**DIGITAL PLACES, SAFE SPACES? SPEAKING OUT ONLINE**

While the notion of a Habermasian public sphere is certainly attractive and many scholars have grappled with the ways in which it might be realized through specific forms of media, no solution has proven to be perfect: mainstream news outlets, public broadcasting, academic journals, and other platforms are all problematic in their own ways (Dahlgren 2013). With the increased accessibility of digital media, the possibility of a true public sphere seemed to grow. Many of the traditional forms of media and dialogue carry restrictions that limit one’s ability to participate in any kind of public sphere, as Nancy Fraser has noted:

> We should question whether it is possible even in principle for interlocutors to deliberate as if they were social peers in specially designated discursive arenas, when these discursive arenas are situated in a larger societal context that is pervaded by structural relations of dominance and subordination. (1990, 65)

While the digital sphere cannot independently address the fundamental concern that Fraser identifies here, the Internet’s anonymity, its facelessness, and the ability to create one’s own persona could potentially lead to more emphasis on discourse, on dialogue, and on the rational debate that Habermas encouraged. Certainly, there have been promising signs. #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, the Arab Spring, #OscarsSoWhite, Black Twitter, Academic Twitter, and less formalized examples of resistance and community seem to signal that the
online world provides effective examples of speaking truth to power and building coalitions, which may be considered the subaltern counterpublics that Fraser identifies as alternatives to the universal public sphere (Fraser 1990, 67). Some individuals use their online platform as a form of therapy, community building, and education, sharing teaching resources, viewpoints, or news stories that might otherwise have gone unreported.

Such individuals, though, need this platform for therapy because of the exhausting nature of their activism. Being active online does not remove the need for activism, education, or survival in the offline world, or the real world—keeping in mind that both terms are problematic. In a time where it is increasingly difficult to disentangle who we are online vis-à-vis “in real life,” it is not clear if we are ever fully offline or if the virtual has subsumed an eroded, problematized real, as Jean Baudrillard (1994) suggested in a different context. However, for simplicity, I use both terms here to try and demonstrate that there are dangers in our virtual and physical spaces and that these are intertwined.

The online component of activism and education, however flexible or mobile it might seem in comparison to traditional organizing, adds an extra layer of work, and once commenced, it is difficult to abandon. Even those scholars who express optimism about the virtual world as a space where identity is less of a barrier note that their optimism is necessarily cautious (Maher and Hoon 2008). Research suggests that populations that are vulnerable to harassment in real life, such as women and people of color, are also vulnerable online (Duggan 2017; Golbeck 2018). Indeed, the 2014 Gamergate controversy drove home the point that technology can be used to target women in their offline existence, to an alarming degree (Aghazadeh et al. 2018). For women, especially women of color and/or Muslim women or women whose identity is Othered, cyberspace is not a neutral or safe space. It carries some of the same entanglements, contradictions, and injustices as the so-called real world. Maeve Duggan (2017), in a report for the Pew Research Center, notes that “[s]ocial media platforms are an especially fertile ground for online harassment . . . Frequently these behaviors target a personal or physical characteristic . . . roughly one-in-ten [Americans] have been targeted due to their physical appearance (9%), race or ethnicity (8%) or gender (8%).” Religion, Duggan adds, is the reason for harassment in 5% of cases. Here, I focus specifically on the ways in which social media, particularly Twitter, can allow for the amplification of some Muslim female voices and their allies, while acknowledging that such an act carries consequences.

I use the word amplification to point out that the activism by Muslim women is not a new phenomenon, nor is the reaction we see, even if digital media makes the reach and impact of both seem greater. Certainly, the Internet has allowed voices to emerge that would otherwise be silenced, and has allowed for activism by women who might otherwise be endangered or who would not have the same reach when voicing the same opinions “in real life.” However, the digital promised land has never really come into existence, and as Hiba Ali (2020) observes, the Internet is “a space that was already colonized and under surveillance . . . a mechanism of control.”

This pattern of inequality applies as much for Muslim women as for any others, though they continue to resist. In the following section, I examine specific scenarios that highlight both the potential and drawbacks of online space as a venue for Muslim women to speak out, given that they subvert norms and expectations, or what Meyda Yegenoglu (1998) calls “colonial fantasies,” in which the women of the Orient are constructed as mysterious, silent, and inaccessible to the colonizer, who often concludes that these women must be oppressed and in need of salvation by the white man. As Yasmin Jiwani notes, contemporary media constructions of Muslim women can be traced back to this depiction and to other simplistic binaries, where Muslim women are either “unworthy, undeserving victims [of culture]” or more worthy,
heroic survivors, if they embrace Western liberation and culture (Jiwani 2010, 68). Most of the Muslim women in this study defy the binary through their open refusal of colonial/patriarchal power, and thus they are subject to continued attempts of control and silencing against them. Indeed, in Jasmin Zine’s (2009) review of the historical representation of the Muslim woman, it appears that imperialist narratives strive to erase or minimize any trace of agency, even from women whose power has been well-documented.

COLONIAL FANTASIES, VIRTUAL FREEDOMS

There are a few relatively recent uses of online media that highlight the twinned potential and peril for Muslim women who seek out spaces to express resistance. The first is the #MosqueMeToo movement, in which Muslim women highlight the ways in which they have been harassed and assaulted in places of prayer, including during Hajj, using the hashtag #MosqueMeToo. The Egyptian journalist and activist Mona Eltahawy, who currently resides in the United States, sparked the movement when she responded to a post from a woman who spoke about sexual harassment in the mosque. Eltahawy shared her own story of harassment and encouraged others to do the same (Bawa 2018). The second is the widely covered case of Rahaf Mohammed, the Saudi teenager who used social media to attract international attention to the abuse she suffered at the hands of her family, and was subsequently accepted into Canada as a refugee under emergency conditions. The third is the use of social media by Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib, representatives to Congress in the United States, as well as the treatment and construction of these women in the same media. And finally, I look at the case of Ayesha Malik, the Instagram influencer of Pakistani descent who refused to be silenced in her attempt to challenge the Indian actress Priyanka Chopra. In all of these cases, we see a form of online activism that could serve as proof that Muslim women resist, as they always have, the continued attempts to silence them, and yet it is also a space where Muslim women are subject, as they so often have been, to competing pressures, threats, and misrepresentations of what they are actually resisting. Colonialism, sexism, and racism are as present in digital space as they are in any other type of space.

I have selected these cases in part because of the publicity they garnered, usually at a transnational level, making them noteworthy examples of Muslim women who attempt to break down barriers of discourse and perception. My analysis here is not exhaustive by any means: I have selected a few examples of commentary on Twitter that show how these women respond to instances of inequity with regard to religion, race, and/or gender. Borrowing from Teun van Dijk’s techniques and rationale for critical discourse analysis and using a post-colonial feminist lens, I look at particular uses of language that demonstrate power imbalances (in terms of race, religion, gender, nationalism) as well as attempts to address these (Van Dijk 2008). I also particularly look for signs that indicate how social media—in this case, Twitter—allow Muslim women to present their ideas without continued reference to their embodied identity, in terms of their religiosity, nationalism, piety, sexuality, or other markers of difference.

In the first case, I look to Naeema Bawa’s 2018 study, in which she conducted an analysis of tweets from Muslim women using the hashtag #MosqueMeToo to challenge unacceptable behavior that has gone unpunished through other means, and also demonstrating the fact that there are no safe spaces. Bawa found that these women received negative reactions online from some Muslims and non-Muslims. While non-Muslims were happy to have their suspicions about Muslim men confirmed, some Muslims blamed the survivors for any harassment and/or assault, suggesting they must have provoked the attack (Bawa 2018). Again, the obsession
with Muslim women’s performance of gendered piety emerges: even though the Internet theo-
retically grants these women some form of anonymity and has the potential to remove the
obsession with physicality, it does not take long before those posting #MosqueMeToo stories
are accused of being promiscuous, of exposing too much skin, of inviting the attack, of being,
as Jiwani (2011) has put it, unworthy victims.

Bawa notes this challenge, quoting Eltahawy’s suggestion that Muslim women are
captured between a rock and a hard place, where

the “rock” [is] the Islamophobic right wing whereby Muslim men are demonized by
Western media in connecting misconduct by Muslim men to their religion, rather than
the forces of systematic gendered oppression at large. The “hard place” . . . is the
Muslim community that defends Muslim men against accusations of sexual violence,
and urges that Muslim women do not reveal their experiences of sexual violence so as
not to further demonize Muslim men. (2018, 24)

#MosqueMeToo represents this longstanding double bind (Zine 2006), and the
challenge of an intersectional identity (Crenshaw 1989), quite clearly. Islamophobes used
#MosqueMeToo as a way to validate misconceptions about abusive, sexist Muslim men, and
some Muslims (male and female) rejected the accounts of sexual assault, insisting that it was
impossible that Muslim men would have comported themselves in such a way in a holy place.
Writing in the Washington Post, Eltahawy (2019) acknowledges the potential for her activism to
be used against her community, but also asserts that she has a responsibility to continue expos-
ing such transgressions, saying, “I will never ally with Islamophobes and racists. But in the
choice between ‘community’ and Muslim women, I will always choose my sisters.”

The manifestation of #MosqueMeToo on Twitter indicates the extent of the ongoing
obsession with the Muslim woman’s appearance and covering. Some women feel compelled to
comment on whether or not they cover, while others turn the tables on their critics, noting that
their appearance has no bearing on the accusation of sexual assault:

#MeToo before I started wearing hijab and after. Sexual assault has nothing to do with
clothes.

#MosqueMeToo proves that sexual assault has nothing to do with dressing modestly.
It’s not about the clothes, it’s about how men are taught to perceive women. (Cited in
Bawa 2018, 27–8)

This response is as notable as the criticism. Some women are anxious to demonstrate
that they were behaving virtuously and should not be blamed for their assault, but in the posts
above, the women clearly reject attempts to restore the state of silence and passivity that so
many associate with Muslim women, and while they are aware that their criticisms can be used
to validate stereotypes about Muslim men and gender relations in Islam, they refuse to be held
responsible for this issue.

This narrow box within which Muslim women are expected to fit is also visible, meta-
phorically, in the seemingly different cases of Rahaf Mohammed and United States
Representatives Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib. Mohammed’s use of social media to appeal
publicly for help as she sought liberation from an abusive family in Saudi Arabia resonated with
the public in many countries, including Canada, which accepted her almost immediately as a
refugee. International media lavished praise on her; different countries volunteered to take her
in; Canada’s Foreign Minister welcomed her at the airport in Toronto; and all of this happened against the backdrop of the refusal of the President of the United States to condemn Saudi Arabia for the death of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, and increasingly strident anti-immigrant discourse throughout North America.

Is Mohammed a brave young woman who deserves her freedom? No doubt. But did she receive all of this attention and accommodation because her story affirmed an age-old paradigm of barbaric Muslim men, victimized Muslim women, and a white savior (Jiwani 2011; Yeğenoğlu 1998)? In an interview, Mohammed, who categorizes herself on Twitter as a “Liberal-feminist-ExMuslim” (@rahaf84427714) says, “We are treated as an object, like a slave. I wanted to tell people my story and about what happens to Saudi women.” (BBC 2019). A piece in The Globe and Mail from Phil Robertson, the deputy Asia director of Human Rights Watch, titled “Why I helped Rahaf Mohammed,” further solidifies the savior paradigm (Robertson 2019), as does a New York Times story, “Saudi teenager who fled family embraces all things Canadian.” (Porter 2019). Mohammad’s removal of her head scarf, her apparent desire to embrace the freedoms of the West, and her denunciation of her religion all combine to make her the epitome of a colonial fantasy: here is a “native informant” validating all of the stereotypes, eagerly accepting the helping hand of the West (Porter 2019; Yeğenoğlu 1998). This reading is not intended as a critique of Mohammed, whose use of social media to achieve her escape is courageous. However, the framing of this escape lends itself to a familiar, simplistic narrative, one where Muslim women are good or bad, and a woman is either a feminist or a Muslim, or a liberal or a Muslim, but never both (Jiwani 2010; Zine 2009). In this narrative, few questions are raised about the fact that Canada, among others, continues to sell arms to Saudi Arabia despite the alleged abuse against young women like Mohammed or the widely publicized murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. The rescue of one woman is seen as cause for celebration, masking the continued existence of broader structures such as patriarchy and a military-industrial complex that seeks to profit from arms sales to the same countries under critique. This echoes the narrative of the purported rescue of Muslim women as the impetus for the so-called War on Terror; Muslim women are frequently placed at the centre of a conflict, but not as autonomous individuals (Jiwani 2010; Zine 2006).

Representatives Rashida Tlaib and Ilhan Omar, however, are individuals who exercise clear agency and undergo relentless scrutiny. Tlaib, a Palestinian American who represents Michigan in the US House of Representatives, attracted a storm of publicity when a statement she made at an event for MoveOn.org—“we’re going to impeach the mother****er”—went viral online. The remark elicited criticism from Republicans and Democrats alike, with President Donald J. Trump calling it “disgraceful” and saying she had “dishonored her family.” However, Speaker Nancy Pelosi refused to condemn Tlaib. She noted she herself would not use such profanity but argued that the president’s language was equally problematic or worse, a point echoed by Congresswoman Maxine Waters (Ragu, Lander, and Herb, 2019). Tlaib herself responded by tweeting defiantly that she “will always speak truth to power #unapologeticallyMe” (@RashidaTlaib, Twitter, January 4, 2019), indicating that she would not be intimidated by attempts to silence her. Her choice of hashtag is noteworthy here as well: Tlaib knows that her identity makes her a rarity and that she will always be under scrutiny, but she serves notice that she will continue to express herself. Nonetheless, the criticism emphasized aspects of Tlaib’s identity that would continue to draw attention: if the language was problematic, this was not simply about Tlaib but also about “honor” and “family,” two concepts that are frequently assumed to define, and used to control, Muslim women and their lives (Jiwani 2010).
The controversy was an early taste of what would await Tlaib, who was later branded as part of a small “squad” of women of color in Congress, including Omar, Ayanna Pressley, and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Members of the squad have been frequent targets for conservatives, expressed most succinctly in President Trump’s tweeted remark that they should “go back and help fix the totally broken and crime infested places from which they came” (@realDonaldTrump, Twitter, July 14, 2019). Tlaib, in fact, was born in the United States, though her Palestinian descent presented a difficult problem for her when Trump pressured Israel—successfully—to bar her and fellow Congresswoman Ilhan Omar from an official visit to the West Bank. Israel then decreed that Tlaib could visit her 90-year-old grandmother if she agreed in writing not to promote any boycotts against Israel during the trip. Tlaib initially consented but was subject to such heated criticism from Palestinians and others that she reversed course:

Silencing me and treating me like a criminal is not what [my grandmother] wants for me. . . . I have decided that visiting my grandmother under these oppressive conditions stands against everything I believe in—fighting against racism, oppression & injustice. (@RashidaTlaib, Twitter, August 16, 2019)

Again, the classic double bind applies: as a prominent politician representing people of Palestinian descent, she was criticized both on the left and the right, with an overall negative impact on her personal life. In her response, however, Tlaib states clearly that she will not be silenced, and also names the racism, oppression, and injustice that she knows to be at work in the West Bank, despite the prevailing viewpoint in the United States in which Israel is rarely portrayed as an oppressor.

Perhaps because of their refusal to adhere to political talking points, both Tlaib and Ilhan Omar are treated consistently as major threats by conservatives. This sense of threat may also stem from the power of their identity. As the first two Muslim women to serve in Congress, they are breaking down barriers, demonstrating their heritage and faith with pride. Tlaib wore traditional Palestinian dress to her swearing-in ceremony, for which she used a Quran, and Congress changed a 181-year headwear ban in order to allow Omar to wear her hijab (Smith 2019). They do not fit into the colonial fantasy narrative or images of the exoticized Muslim woman (Kabbani 1986; Lewis 1996). As such, both women attract rampant criticism.

This is particularly true of Omar. This may be tied to the very limited parameters within which Muslim women are permitted to operate, which Omar continually defies. Notably, too, Omar is of Somali descent, wearing a hijab, in an American society which struggles to accept Muslims generally and is particularly suspicious of women in hijab and where colorism, the privileging of light skin over dark skin like Omar’s, is a fact (Tharps 2016). Invoked frequently as an enemy by President Trump, Omar has been the target of death threats, including tweets from Republican congressional primary candidate Danielle Stella suggesting that Omar should be “hanged” for “treason,” a comment that caused Twitter to suspend Stella’s account and is particularly inflammatory given Omar’s positionality as a black American Muslim (Sullivan 2019). More recently a Republican Congressional candidate in Florida, George Buck Jr., sent out a fundraising email suggesting that members of the squad were anti-American traitors, that Omar is a “foreign agent,” and that all four should be hanged. This happened at the same time that Buck’s campaign Facebook page posted links to news stories about Omar, criticizing her “rhetoric” (Duster 2019). A man who called Omar’s office asking if she was a terrorist and threatening to put a bullet in her skull was arrested in 2019. Nonetheless, Omar has maintained a strong voice online. Accused of anti-Semitism for tweets suggesting (in 2012) that Israel had “hypnotized the world,” and that the strong support for
Israel in the United States was “all about the Benjamins baby” (in 2019), Omar apologized and deleted the tweets, and also posted a statement on Twitter:

Anti-Semitism is real and I am grateful to Jewish allies and colleagues who are educating me on the painful history of anti-Semitic tropes. My intention is never to offend my constituents or Jewish Americans . . . We have to always be willing to step back and think through criticism, just as I expect people to hear me when others attack me for my identity [emphasis mine]. This is why I unequivocally apologize.

At the same time, I reaffirm the problematic role of lobbyists in our politics, whether it be AIPAC, the NRA or the fossil fuel industry. (@IlhanMN, Twitter, February 11, 2019)

As the statement implies, Omar has accepted the criticism that she must be more thoughtful about using anti-Semitic tropes, but she also hits back at those who express apparent concern about potential anti-Semitism rather than Islamophobia. She also claims the right to maintain her skepticism of lobbyists and of Israel. When President Trump criticized Omar for having “deep seeded” anti-Israel views and suggested that she resign, Omar tweeted in response, “You have trafficked in hate your whole life—against Jews, Muslims, Indigenous, immigrants, black people and more. I learned from people impacted by my words. When will you?” (Twitter, February 13, 2019) (Groppe 2019).

Responding to the online death threats from Republican candidates, Omar tweeted:

This is the natural result of a political environment where anti-Muslim dogwhistles and dehumanization are normalized by an entire political party and its media outlets. Violent rhetoric inevitably leads to violent threats, and ultimately, violent acts. (November 29, 2019)

This came a few days after she was criticized on sites such as Breitbart News for allegedly reciting a Muslim prayer in a Catholic church service, and responded with “Actually it was a bipartisan multi-faith prayer service attended by Members of Congress of all faiths. Your Islamophobia is showing!” (Twitter, December 2, 2019). Again, she names anti-Muslim racism, accuses all Republicans of complicity in promoting it, and challenges them to consider the consequences. It is rare to see American politicians call out racism and particularly Islamophobia so consistently.

Equally uncowed by the “send her back” comments, Omar responded with pictures on social media of herself and Speaker Nancy Pelosi walking hand-in-hand through the “Door of Return” in Ghana, captioning them “They said ‘send her back’ but Speaker Pelosi didn’t just make arrangements to send me back, she went back with me” (Twitter, August 1, 2019). This message addresses several themes of the criticism and coverage Omar was receiving: it allowed her to show that she remains a valued member of a unified Democratic Party, and also indicated her pride in her blackness and heritage.

When the man who called in a death threat to her office was due to be sentenced, she tweeted out a letter that she had written to the sentencing judge, requesting compassion and suggesting that it was necessary to show love, rather than handing down a harsh sentence that would further increase his anger and resentment (November 19, 2019). On December 5, she tweeted “Black and brown girls are told that their hairstyles are ‘distracting.’ That their behavior is ‘disruptive.’ That they don’t belong in school. That’s why I’m proud to co-sponsor @ AyannaPressley’s Ending PUSHOUT Act to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline. Our girls
deserve better” (Twitter, December 5, 2019). On the same day, responding to news stories about an Israel-based group that used Facebook pages to spread disinformation about Omar and Tlaib, Omar tweeted “How to silence and demonize Muslim voices 101.” Many conclusions could be drawn even from this small sampling of Omar’s Twitter activity. Despite the harassment she attracts online and elsewhere, Omar will not be silenced. She defends her positions, explains their ethical underpinnings, and she speaks out for vulnerable populations. Omar explicitly names hate, racism, sexism, and Islamophobia when she sees it. She does this knowing that, in contemporary American politics, she is more likely to receive criticism for her perceived anti-Semitism than concern for the effect that Islamophobia has on her well-being and safety. While Omar uses a more measured tone than Mona Eltahawy, they are alike in their refusal to tolerate sexism or racism, or to allow others to pretend these forms of discrimination do not exist, as evidenced by an older quote that Eltahawy retweeted on December 6, 2019: “I do not have the luxury, or the privilege to sit there and be civil with people who do not acknowledge my full humanity” (@monaeltahawy).

In a very different context, Instagram influencer Ayesha Malik seems to agree that civility will not work when it comes to advocating for those who have been purposefully silenced. Her own silencing came in a literal way, when she dared to challenge the Indian actress Priyanka Chopra’s political views. The Pakistani American Malik happened to be attending a conference where Chopra was speaking, not long after Chopra had sent a tweet (“Jai Hind #IndianArmedForces”) that expressed support for India and the Indian army. This occurred during a highly volatile period in Kashmir, and Malik was incensed by what she perceived as warmongering, particularly by an actress who has presented herself to the world as a humanitarian and a global citizen. Malik asked Chopra to explain her views, explaining why she herself found them to be problematic, and was cut off when a staffer at the conference took her microphone away. Chopra then responded:

*Whenever you’re done venting . . . got it, done? Okay, cool. So, I have many, many friends from Pakistan, and I am from India, and war is not something that I am really fond of, but I am patriotic. So, I’m sorry if I hurt sentiments to people who do love me and have loved me, but I think that all of us have a sort of middle ground that we all have to walk, just like you probably do, as well. Girl, don’t yell. We’re all here for love. Don’t yell. Don’t embarrass yourself.* (Radhakrishnan 2019)

The exchange quickly went viral, helped by Malik posting it on Twitter (@Spishaa, August 11, 2019) to demonstrate what she saw as a direct conflict with Chopra’s professed desire to empower and educate girls. While Chopra fans and Indian nationalists rushed to her defense, dismissing Malik in tweets and news articles, Malik’s social media following grew substantially. Manjusha Radhakrishnan (2019) suggests that Malik, whose Twitter account was primarily intended for her friends, had about 600 followers before the exchange with Chopra—as of December 2019, she had nearly 52,000. Her Instagram following also jumped from 95,000 in August 2019 to 138,000 in December 2019, and she used that reach to mount an information campaign about Kashmir and the fears that Pakistanis have about the secretive events unfolding in that region, and to explain why she was frustrated by Chopra’s contradictory presentation of herself as a human rights advocate. In a tweet that garnered over 121,000 likes, she introduces herself as “the girl that ‘yelled’ at Priyanka Chopra,” and goes on to say that Chopra’s Indian Army tweet took Malik back to “when I couldn’t reach my family because of the blackouts and how scared/helpless I was. She gaslit me and turned the narrative around on me being the ‘bad guy’—as a UN ambassador this was so irresponsible” (@Spishaa, Twitter, August 11, 2019).
Clearly angered by the attempt to silence her, Malik also comments on a video where Chopra advocates for girls and their ability to change the world, responding, “I totally agree with you. Now let them speak truth to power without snatching the mic away from them” (Twitter, September 3, 2019). On October 1, she tweeted a picture of herself standing in front of the United Nations headquarters, noting that she “vented my way into the UN.” Malik uses this platform to raise awareness about the situation in Kashmir and the Muslim internment camps in China, and has also used it to urge followers to join real-world protests outside the United Nations. She refuses to be intimidated by the power and influence of a figure such as Chopra, or by opinionated men in her own family who applaud her critiques of India but express anger when she criticizes Pakistan (@Spishaa, Twitter, September 8, 2019). She consistently argues that women have a right to speak and in particular on behalf of the oppressed and unheard.

What conclusions might be drawn from the different-yet-similar activity of these women on Twitter? Their voices are important, and social media allows them to be heard—although social media also allows for virulent criticism of them. They are all activists in their way, activists who use the power of social media to educate about and advocate for causes of transnational importance. They contend with constant policing, critiques, and silencing, and their refusal to conform to any particular trope of Muslim female identity seems to form part of the reason for critics’ outrage.

WHERE THE RESISTANCE HAPPENS: EVERYWHERE

These women might be seen as the natural successors of the resistance fighters described by Frantz Fanon (see Yeğenoğlu 1998), but at the same time they do not—arguably—fit the role of what I call the Muslim femme fatale. The figure of the Muslim femme fatale is mysterious, exotic, sometimes sexualized, sometimes veiled, and could represent a threat at any given time, even if she appears to be fully integrated into Western society. There is an opacity that makes this woman particularly dangerous and yet open to interpretation. While the Muslim femme fatale is not always veiled, her unwillingness to reveal herself seems to draw objections, often cloaked in the language of feminism and liberation: “Since the veil prevents the colonial gaze from attaining such a visibility and hence mastery, its lifting becomes essential.” (Yeğenoğlu 1998, 12). The Muslim activists described here find an ability to express themselves online but also become targets of backlash. I would argue that their ability to command attention on all ends of the socio-political spectrum is due in part to their refusal to play a familiar role, similar to the contested acts of agency that Jasmin Zine (2006) identifies on the part of Muslim feminists.

While Mona Eltahawy’s public persona certainly has performative aspects to it, she appears to have chosen the parameters within which she will operate: she packages herself as controversial, lacing her presentations and Twitter posts with profanity, rejecting the criticism that she should focus on gender inequity elsewhere and not in Middle Eastern communities. She presents herself as a fighter, one who refuses to be intimidated. Sample (re)tweets, all taken from December 5, 2019, include “I’m not one of the good girls. Patriarchy MUST fear me!”; “They told me I’m a savage and dangerous woman. I told them the truth is savage and dangerous. And I speak the truth!”; and one that attracts ongoing outrage: “How many rapists must we kill before men stop raping women?” The reference to savagery is unlikely to be coincidental: Edward Said’s work on Orientalism notes the prevailing stereotype that those from the East/global South are savage and barbaric, whereas those from the West/North are surely a civilizing force (Said 1978). One article refers to Eltahawy as “Egypt’s angry young
woman,” a brand that she appears to have embraced, emphasizing again that she is no passive victim or mysterious femme fatale (Penny 2012).

Similarly, Ayesha Malik, whose profile information identifies her as a Pakistani immigrant living the American dream, is difficult to place in an identity box. She appears to resist simple binaries, advocating for freedom for Kashmiris but refusing to suggest that all Pakistani causes are virtuous. Her status as an Instagram influencer who posts beauty videos and promotes activism makes it difficult to dismiss her as an oppressed Muslim woman. Rashida Tlaib presents herself as a legislator who believes passionately in social justice and is willing to advocate for it while displaying her Palestinian roots. Her own use of profanity likely came under attack because it is inconsistent with notions of how Muslim women do/should conduct themselves. Ilhan Omar has also been under attack for her choice of words, but the accusations of anti-Semitism are all too familiar to Muslims who dare to criticize Israel (Karim 2000; Said 1997).

If virtual public spheres or subaltern counterpublics do still hold political promise, it is because they allow all of these different voices to come forward. The fact that such diversity is possible—diversity of nationality, of religiosity, of viewpoints, of approaches—is notable, and this is based only on a small sampling of strong Muslim female voices. Others abound. In this digital society, Muslim women continue to use all of the tools at their disposal to speak out and to counter hegemonic expectations, a necessary but perilous task in Islamophobic times. Digital space allows for the voicing of dissident sentiments among Muslim women, including those who might be marginalized in explicitly religious physical spaces, but it does not erase the restrictions that society places on Muslim women, including a double bind in which their experiences may be co-opted and used against their communities. Regardless, Muslim women have found ways to participate meaningfully in all kinds of societies, to speak truth to power, to gain entry to the hallways of power. Digital communication has helped amplify this ability to speak out and to talk back.

However, one should not underestimate the difficulties these women encounter as they work to overcome the restrictions of the medium. The digital public sphere, like television or the press, does not lend itself to a clear, thoughtful explanation of the ways in which condemnation of a specific country’s particular form of repression is not the equivalent of condemning an entire religion. A tweet can easily be taken out of context, as can an image, or a video clip. There is no escape from the oppression and threat of the physical world. Digital media do not remove fear—they can actually foment it. All of these women know what it means to be harassed offline as well as online. They seek out circles of support and they persist in the face of hostility. Digital media, then, can be emancipatory for those who have the ability, support, and resilience to persist. Not everyone does.

While conservative and sometimes even liberal critics assail the presumed silence and oppression of Muslim women, it seems that they are even more perturbed when Muslim women subvert their expectations, and thus Muslim women bear a particularly fraught burden of representation. How far can they move outside of a tightly demarcated box that defines what it means to be sufficiently Muslim, modest but not oppressed, progressive but not promiscuous, a sister who supports other sisters without attacking brothers who already exist on the margins of many societies?

But for those of us who seek equitable treatment and representation of Muslim women, we need to find solutions to racism, sexism, and Islamophobia, and so, at last, I suggest that we consider digital tools in their proper context. These women have taken the promise and peril of technology and wrestled with it to try and accommodate the real needs they see before them, but this involves working, organizing, and networking in the physical world, not only the virtual one. It means that there is real, possibly life-threatening risk. If we look back at the
feminist histories that scholars like Leila Ahmed, Fatima Mernissi, Meyda Yeğenoğlu, and others have documented, finding a safe space within which to speak and advocate for change is a longstanding quandary, and Muslim women keep finding ways to work through it (Ahmed 1982, 1999; Mernissi 1986, 1996; Yeğenoğlu 1998) While these digital public sphericules or counterpublics remain highly contested, and often narrow spaces, the spirit of resistance these women inspire, through their raised voices, is far-reaching (Cunningham 2013; Fraser 1990).

REFERENCES


