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*Sexual Violence
in Muslim
Communities*

Towards Awareness
and Accountability

Edited by Samah Choudhury and Juliane Hammer

Foreword by Kecia Ali

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1

Locating Islam in the Language of Sexual Violence

Samah Choudhury

Abstract

This chapter explores how race, gender, and Islam are imagined in relation to each other and to sexual violence (SV) in places where Muslims live as a minority population. I draw attention to how sexual violence as an *idea* invokes specific gendered and racialized assumptions about Islam, namely that Muslim men seek to limit the bodily autonomy of women and are commonly violent abusers. Through the writing of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, I show how the topic of SV specifically is elevated to the status of polemic - not an argument in favor of understanding social exertions of power and control, but as a nativist argument against immigration and asylum. Islam takes on the countenance of a physical space that can now transform the so-called west into an extension of Lila Abu-Lughod's "IslamLand." In doing so, Muslims are seen not as physically "part" of Euroamerican societies despite them living there. This notion obscures the majoritarian society's own respective histories and cultures of sexual violence, a problem that can in turn only be made self-legible through likeness to Islam. These sentiments and their ubiquity force Muslim activists and survivors to respond with a multi-lensed approach that nuances the gendered and racialized dimensions of their SV experiences but is inconsistently received and acknowledged.

Entangled Conditions

The contributors to this volume write from a diversity of perspectives, but all would agree that the experiences of Muslims who face sexual violence (SV) are simultaneously unique and, in devastating truth, not unique at all. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that in the United States, for instance, 54.3 percent of women and 30.7 percent of men among the U.S. adult population have experienced some form of contact sexual violence, defined as encompassing rape, sexual coercion, and/or unwanted sexual contact (CDC 2024). With the data that is available, Muslims live a cruel congruence: the same rates of sexual violence (or even slightly more) appear among their own communities (Mohajir 2023). Juliane Hammer reminds us in her book *Peaceful Families* that these facts are not coincidental or unrelated, where an "invisible line" will connote a separation of one's material conditions along imprecise contingencies, i.e. a mainstream majority "culture" that stands apart from an unsullied (or, according to some, a sinister) Islam. We Muslims have not, alas, eclipsed the evolutionary constraints of our species to operate through bifurcated

minds. Our realities remain thoroughly embedded and “indeed enmeshed” in social conditions that co-create each other (Hammer 2019, 10).

I want to hold that fact tightly - the innocuous idea that Muslims can be both inhabitants *of* and participants *in* societal structures that are non-Muslim - in order to think about one additional dimension of public life that shows up in each chapter of this volume: anti-Muslim hostility. It is a widespread and endemic phenomenon among the majority non-Muslim populations in the U.S. and Europe and functions as a process and as policy, as unnamed feelings and as calcified systems, and it colors the backdrop against which SV is committed, permitted, and protected. That backdrop today includes the flames of genocide across Palestine, politically enshrined discrimination against Muslims in India, procedural suppression of anti-war protest and “diversity” initiatives, and invectives of terror-sympathy hurled at anyone who says otherwise. All of these instances result from the convergence of several social vectors, among which are gender and race. Indeed, as Kecia Ali writes in *The Woman Question*, we cannot escape that “the gender politics of Islam in the U.S. and globally are also always racial politics,” and that “conversely, the racial politics are deeply gendered” (K. Ali 2024). The mutual constitution of these conditions and politics is a unique characteristic of minoritized life and, once more, something that is shared across contexts.

This chapter illustrates the convergence of such politics and their conditions first by naming how dominant conceptions of sexual violence *in the abstract* already have within them components that invoke Islam in gendered and racialized ways. Using the commentary of the former Dutch politician and popular anti-Islam writer Ayaan Hirsi Ali, I point to the ways that SV specifically is elevated from being an idea to the status of polemic – an argument not in favor of understanding this violence as a social exertion of power and control, but against the more recent trends of migration and asylum-seeking by Muslims into Europe and North America. In this way, “sexual violence” becomes a cipher through which to assert that Muslims are a “new” population despite their centuries-long presence in these places. Within such discourses, Muslims are racialized as brown South or Southwest Asians, while Black Muslims see their religious affiliation relegated to a secondary status if granted it at all. This indicates that increasingly, Islam is imagined less as a set of religious beliefs, practices, or even as a culture. Rather, Islam resembles a physical entity and space, fragmented and carried through migration, that will localize Islam and transform the so-called west into an extension of the hazy “IslamLand,” as Lila Abu-Lughod has called it (Abu-Lughod 2013). In doing so, Muslims in these spaces are seen not as “part” of Euroamerican societies, but as inhabitants of that roving IslamLand. This notion is so powerful that it obscures the reality that Euroamerican societies have their own histories and cultures of SV, a problem that is made legible and taken seriously when Islam is invoked to signal the danger of “our” growing similarities to Muslim societies.

The ubiquity of these sentiments means that Muslim activists, victims, and survivors walk a perilous tightrope when discussing and advocating against sexual violence. Their approaches to these efforts are nuanced and multi-lensed, accounting for racialization and racism, gendered Islamophobia, and very problem of sexual violence itself (Hammer 2019). Reception of that nuance, however, is often limited. Indeed, when Muslim women exhibit their autonomy in these contexts, they are often met by an audience that is both skeptical to their claims and remiss to its own complicity in the very conditions that harm said women.

This can be seen in the ways that the language of feminism and queer rights has been marshalled by, for example, a public antisemitism campaign in the United States which intimates that homophobia and violence against women are elemental to Palestinian society (and liberation). Only by conducting an intersectional analysis can we see how these seemingly disparate discourses about Islam and sexual violence are not just related, but how much they rely on one another to germinate, subsist, and spread (Kimberlé Crenshaw [sandylocks] 2024; McGuire 2017; Feldman 2017).¹

Muslim Violence as a Baseline

The first point I'd like to address is how commonly dialogue surrounding sexual violence will invoke Islam even when the violence is abstract and not specific to any case or incident of actual SV. In her 2013 book *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, Lila Abu-Lughod notes how quickly the language of "culture" and "culture practices" is cited when describing the condition of Muslim women's lives (Abu-Lughod 2013).² The immediate connection to their dress is not unlike the disturbing tendency in American parlance to ask "well, what was she wearing?"; the distinction, instead, is that a Muslim woman's dress (hijab or no hijab) signals a lack of personal autonomy that shapes what she looks like, where she goes, what she says, what she does, and even *how* she goes about doing those things. A good example of this appears in the writing of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who titled her third book *Nomad: from Islam to America* (a dimension-jumping migration from religion to nation?) and narrates, safely now afar in the United States, just how dangerous and oppressive women's lives are in places that brandish Islam as the foundation for their social structures.³ According to Hirsi Ali, the level of control exerted by Muslim men at every level of society, from one's immediate family to schools to the police to the judges to the upper echelons of government, means that women's autonomy in *any* space under this dominion is imaginary and requires a prison break. Oppression in these cases is also always tinged by the specter of SV across the private and public lives of Muslim women. "In the name of Islam, women are denied the right to their bodies," says Hirsi Ali in another book called *The Caged Virgin*. "They cannot choose whether to have children or how many to have. They have no rights to abortion, and often they die trying to get one. They cannot own property, trade, or travel without the risk of robbery or

¹ Though Kimberlé Crenshaw is associated most prominently with theorizing this framework, hers is not the final say on how interlinked oppressions work – indeed, this is something that other feminists such as June Jordan have reckoned with and impatiently insisted must take precedence in the fight to build power through global solidarities with oppressed others, an act that is incumbent especially on people who dwell in the heart of American empire.

² Abu-Lughod gives examples from Bangladesh, Egypt, India, Afghanistan, and the United States, among others, to illustrate the dissonance between how Muslim women talk about their struggles and autonomous efforts to improve the conditions of their homes, workplaces, public spaces, legal codes, and countries, and how mediatized discourses in English would in turn talk about them.

³ Hirsi Ali is a well-known personality in the realm of anti-Muslim politics and punditry. Originally born in Somalia, Hirsi Ali speaks and has published widely about her traumatic experiences growing up in Somalia, which she attributes to the dominance and strictures of Islam. She was a member of the Dutch parliament until 2006, when she relocated to the United States to work at the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative U.S. think tank.

rape” (A. H. Ali 2006, 163). The narratives have received a warm reception by Euroamerican audiences and institutions over the decades, a telling sign for where the safe alternative haven for Muslim women must be. Activists like Hirsi Ali still mince no words in naming that place as the decidedly non-Muslim “West.”

This virulent strain of post-9/11 discourse has sprouted additional legs, arguing not just for the containment of the SV that Muslims produce to their own societies but to actively combat its presence within the non-Muslim midst. Hirsi Ali’s 2021 book *Prey: Immigration, Islam, and the Erosion of Women’s Rights* draws a straight line between European and American asylum policies and the sexual violence befalling European and American women in the present. “In my life, I have experienced, in mild forms, the sexual discrimination, harassment, and violence that are commonplace in Muslim-majority countries such as Somalia and Saudi Arabia, as well as in some Muslim communities in the West,” she discloses in the introduction. “I have also, on more than on occasion, had to fend off the unwanted attentions of sexually overbearing Western men. I can tell you which problem is the worse one. Indeed, telling you that is a large part of the purpose of this book” (A. H. Ali 2021, 3). Muslim sexual violence is unmatched, it would seem, and those that have since engaged Hirsi Ali’s work brazenly correlate dots that (in this case at least) even she does not. The Hoover Institution’s Peter Robinson, formerly a speechwriter for Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush, proposes in an interview with Hirsi Ali that “these are some very raw statistics. France has 17% increase in rapes from 2017 to 2018... Germany... these victims have risen by 41% in 2017 alone. Sweden a 12% increase in reported sex offenses in 2016 and you also note a sharp increase in sexual crimes in England and Wales. Young Muslim males arrive and sexual crimes increase”(A. H. Ali and Robinson 2021).

There is much that could be said about the implications behind such strident jingoistic rhetoric, and I admit that Ayaan Hirsi Ali’s absolutism is at times so flimsy it might seem like easy pickings. It is not to deny the very real problem of SV perpetrated by Muslim men, either – indeed, this volume includes several chapters that demonstrate its entrenched reality. Rather, I wish to attend to Hirsi Ali’s absolutism because it is a siren call for a much broader societal anxiety. For our purposes, especially, I would like to draw attention to the spatial predilection within it.

Dangerous Idea or Dangerous Place?

When Zareena Grewal writes that “Islam is a foreign country,” she borrows Salman Rushdie’s observation (which is in turn an improvisation of the opening lines of L.P. Hartley’s *The Go-Between*) that the present moment “is foreign, and that the past is home, albeit a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time”(Grewal 2013, 33; Rushdie 1982). The imaginary containing “lost homelands and lost glories” is a recognizable piece of many American Muslim identities. For those removed by a generation or more from cross-oceanic relocations, many young Muslims yearn for an Islam (a “thriving rich civilization, all lost to the rise of the West and its subsequent imperial domination of the East”) that is both geographically and temporally out of reach (Grewal 2013, 34). Islam is also that hybridized “thing” in Hirsi Ali and Robinson’s imagination, but inverted: not an aspiration, but a menace. In this imaginary, a thriving and rich Islam is a fount of danger and discord because it

contests western dominion. In fact, when Islam is made a place, it also becomes a setting – something against which a scripted series of events unfold. In that “IslamLand,” as Abu-Lughod has termed it, sexual violence is a natural phenomenon carried out by Muslim men and borne by Muslim women on the daily (Abu-Lughod 2013). To hold that SV is fundamental to IslamLand would indicate that, in return, there is also something granularly Muslim or Muslim-ish about SV itself. When Islam is a place slung across your body, atop your head, or over your back – an experience others might more simply call being racialized as a brown-skinned Muslim – then one can only ever be a participant “in” this new place with an asterisk, foreign and conditional.

The invisibilizing of American as host to its own culture of sexual violence was on full display in June of 2022, when the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the landmark 1973 decision that guaranteed constitutional protect of women's abortion rights, *Roe v. Wade*. Given how controversial the issue of abortion has been in the contemporary United States, the Court's ruling sent a shockwave across the U.S. populace, drawing vocal condemnation and protest throughout the country. It did not take long for one particular strain of discourse to emerge among those furious over the Court's infringement on women's bodily autonomy: how very *Muslim* a move this was. “Women in South Dakota, Missouri, or even Texas, will have the exact same rights as women in Afghanistan under the Taliban,” marveled Trevor Noah on the *Daily Show* after news of the decision was leaked. “Isn't it amazing, after all these years, of the right screaming about the threats of sharia law, it turns out they were just jealous!” (Comedy Central 2022). Actors like Barbra Streisand and Mark Ruffalo were more concise. “Time to fight like hell in any way you know how,” Ruffalo tweeted. “The American Taliban has taken over the Supreme Court” (Barbra Streisand 2022; Mark Ruffalo 2022). Fox News and partisans to the decision took immediate umbrage at the parallel. “In Afghanistan, the Taliban calls on women to 'only show their eyes and recommends they wear the head-to-toe burqas.' according to the United Nations,” says one news clipping after covering Streisand's comments about the “American Taliban” on Twitter (Sabes 2022). The article did not bother to offer any additional commentary; its own pithy illustration as to just how *obvious* it is that Islam hates women and their autonomy. Tazeen Ali notes that “treating Islamic references as synonymous with extreme human rights violations detracts from a deeper reckoning with America's deeply rooted white Christian nationalism that underpins the dissolution of the protections under *Roe v Wade*” (T. Ali 2022). What's more, it reinforces a spatial outsidersness that Muslims in the U.S. cannot overcome without relinquishing their agency to *be* Muslim in the first place.

A Balancing Act on Multiple Fronts

Muslims are so cognitively and materially conscious of this association with SV in minority contexts that it colors even their most immediate reactions to the act when it occurs. In *Peaceful Families*, Hammer recalls the case of Aasiya Zubair, who in 2009 was killed by her husband Muzzammil Hassan. The murder provoked a range of reactions in U.S. media, but a few choice themes and keywords about *culture* floated to the surface of those discourses: “murder, honor, and culture” (Hammer 2019). American Muslim activists and anti-domestic violence advocates were already operating under and against the premises set out by the dominant anti-Muslim hostility around them and thus were quick to point out that

Zubair's life and death bore characteristics consistent with a domestic violence murder: documented instances of physical and psychological abuse as well as legal measures like a restraining order, separation, and petition for divorce. They drew attention, rightly, to the dynamics of power and control that resulted in this tragedy. But there was another conference of ideas running parallel to these arguments, and it was circulating a narrative that not only claimed the couple's Muslim identity was central to the story but was its chief cause. "Are honor killings simply domestic violence?" asked a bewildered Phyllis Chesler, while Marcia Pappas, president of the National Organization for Women, characterized what happened to Zubair as "a terroristic version of an honor killing," and "a murder rooted in cultural notions about women's subordination" (Hammer 2019, 30). Once more, sirens are set off to warn of a spatially expansive entity called Islam. American Muslim women, conditional residents that they are, have brought with them an Islam that has the capacity to engulf a place where SV and violence towards women is more generally considered an aberration of individual psychology or a man's personality. Muslim agency is forfeited in the presence of a locus-based "culture" like Islam, which Hammer writes is "approached as affecting people and not as much as continuously being produced and constructed by the very same people" (Hammer 2019, 51).

In minoritized environments, Muslim survivors exercising their agency can be met with a patronizing tack. Much has already been said – and historically shown – about the desire to save the poor, oppressed Muslim woman from IslamLand and its male inhabitants, given that her lack of agency means she cannot extricate herself. These desires are couched in the language of comradery and sympathy indicating an earnest wish to share what western women so fortunately already have. Outside of IslamLand, however, where now ostensibly "free" Muslim women use their freedom to still choose Islam, that sympathy turns sour. The reverse may also hold true, in which fellow Muslims chastise and discipline survivors for speaking "freely" about their abusers and supposedly defying Islamic etiquette on privacy, forgiveness, and marital responsibility. Attesting to these realities are the vociferous responses to and deafening silences surrounding much of the sexual violence detailed in this book, from the so-called "ISIS wives" to patients seeking medical care from Muslim healthcare professionals to sexual coercion into marriage. 15-year-old Shamima Begum was roundly mocked in British media after she was groomed online and traveled to Syria to marry an ISIS fighter. Maryyum Mehmood demonstrates how media coverage was dismissive of her abuse as a minor and instead platformed calls for her to be stripped of her British citizenship and deportation "back" to Bangladesh (a place she had never been) – these being the types of punishment that she "deserved" (Mehmood 2024). Mariam Khan's chapter describes the case of a woman patient whose Muslim psychologist told her that her husband should be praised for exhibiting *sabr*/patience at the lack of sex in their marriage. The patient's desire to try dilator therapy to ease penetration was shot down as an "unnatural" practice by husband and doctor. When she still decided to pursue the therapy and shared her successes with her husband, he divorced her and cited "distrust" of her and their relationship (Khan 2024).

Masking Sexual Violence and Death

There seems to be a sense of dictatory entitlement over Muslim women's lives, held by Muslims and non-Muslims alike, with little equivalent desire to own up to their roles in the conditions that curtail those lives. This has crudely resurfaced in the context of the war on Gaza, where the premise for Palestinian death – especially that of women and children – is abstracted into “culture war” talking points. Let me illustrate this with an observation from my own life. There are a series of bright magenta-pink billboards downtown in the city of Chicago that I drive past every week. Before October 7th, they usually displayed playful quips and affirmations about Jewish American life, like “we don't care which half of you is Jewish,” or “come for your girlfriend, stay for the lack of hell” (Pearson 2023).⁴ The pink notes have appeared on my Instagram and Twitter feeds, as well. On occasion, but especially over the last year, the online account and its physical billboards have turned to defending Israel's war on Gaza, the quips now dripping with an anti-Muslim animus legitimized through the language of feminism and gay rights. In 2021, after the ice cream brand Ben and Jerry's announced they would no longer sell their products in the West Bank because of opposition to Israel's illegal occupation, the familiar pink square appeared on my feed emblazoned with the following: “Israel can't have Ben and Jerry's. But Iran, where they hang gay people, can. Odd choice. #EndJewHate”(JewBelong 2021). Other billboards and posts by the group insinuate that the cause for Palestinian liberation is mired in Muslim homophobia and rape apologies, another distinct brew of Islamophobia. “How can there be 'Queers for Palestine' when you can't even be Queer in Palestine?” says one. On another: “So you're a feminist who defends rapists if the women are Jewish. Is anyone else confused?” The billboard by my home was changed to “Don't be naïve. Hamas is your problem too,” though in other cities a more graphic version went up - “don't be naïve,” it said. “Hamas would chop your head off, too” (Barbuti 2023). Meanwhile, IDF soldiers continue to document their exploits in Gaza while wearing the clothes and underwear of the Palestinian women they have displaced or killed. All the while thousands of other Palestinians languish in detention facilities without charge or representation, facing daily threats and acts of abuse and rape (eman 2024; Younis Tirawi 2024a; 2024b; Kingsley and Shbair 2024; Boxerman 2024; Boxerman and Bigg 2024; Borger 2024).

The dissonance between these acts of sexual violence and the discourses that mask them is vast. And why would it be otherwise? In American newspapers, missiles rip through journalists who are “killed” by a phantom distinguished only through “shells” that are finally named as Israeli (*Reuters* 2023). The sexual assault of Palestinian girls by unidentified rapists may be a “credible allegation,” but sexual violence against Israeli women is explicitly committed by “Hamas attackers” and unequivocally condemned as “systematic and intentional” (Borger 2024). Grammar is powerful and the passive voice is a weapon, says Elena Dudum. “What's happening today in Palestine against the Palestinian people is not complicated. It's a revolting violation of human rights. It is active and precise” (Dudum 2024).

⁴ The JewBelong campaign and its billboards are in several major cities across the United States, not just Chicago.

Trees in the Forest

We would do well then to actually *not* see the forest for the trees, but to pay heed to the ways that these trees seed, root, bend, and sway - in relation to each other as well as to that which is not so readily visible against their canopy. “There is an urgency to explore the multiple, intersecting systems of power that shape violence in the public sphere,” Sabrina Alimohamed-Wilson insists, some which we recognize and others purposefully obfuscated (Alimohamed-Wilson 2017, 74). IslamLand may be where Muslim men cause sexual harm, but when assailants do not bear its mark, the violence Muslim women face becomes a matter of shadow theater. Perpetrators are “invisible subjects” in an “invisible pattern of violence,” leaving the experiences of these women to be classified as “isolated incidents” and unworthy of the grandeur of salvation. Rather, Sidrah Maysoon Ahmad argues, “Muslim women are constructed as ‘only’ being capable of being victimised by men within their community, and not by systems of patriarchy and misogyny that exist within western societal contexts” (Ahmad 2019, 59). Spatializing Islam is therefore a useful imperial tool to ensure that while Muslims may be *in* these spaces, they are not representative *of* them. Euroamerican culture may deal with SV, but it is seen as a matter of individual psychologies, not cultural pathologies. The problem is indeed imbued with political urgency, especially as conspiracies of replacement theories about a looming white genocide gain fervor and powerful enthusiasts. Muslim presence in these minoritized contexts therefore embodies an almost mythical wormhole, where IslamLand is simultaneously over there and, more concerningly, *right here now*, further texturing the experiences of Muslim victims and survivors across the globe.

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