Where Are the Muslim Feminist Voices?

A Question Asked in September 2001

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Ed. note: Fawzia Afzal-Khan is Professor of English at Montclair State University in New Jersey, the author of Cultural Imperialism and the Indo-English Novel (1993, Pennsylvania State University Press), and of numerous articles on feminism and post-colonialism, and coeditor with Kalpana Sehadjri-Cooks of The PreOccupation of Postcolonial Studies (2000, Duke University Press). Her poetry has appeared in Span and Samar. Currently she is working on a prose memoir, Sahelian (Girlfriends), the first chapter of which, “Sam’s Secret,” was published in the Nepalese journal, Himal, in July 2000. Her ongoing work on Pakistani alternative theatre is represented by her 1997 TDR article, “Street Theatre in Pakistani Punjab” (41, 3 [T155]:39–62), as well as by articles published elsewhere, including “Desiring Methodology: Performing Postcolonial Theatre Anthropology in Pakistan” in New Approaches to Theatre Studies and Performance Analysis, edited by Günter Berghaus (2001, Max Niemeyer Verlag), and “Exposed by Pakistani Street Theatre: The Unholy Alliance of Postmodern Capitalism, Patriarchy and Islamic Fundamentalism,” forthcoming in Social Text. Afzal-Khan is also an accomplished performer of North Indo-Pakistani classical singing. Before coming to the USA, she was the winner of the Amateur All-Pakistan Classical Vocalist award three years in a row. She has performed on radio and television in Pakistan, on WBAI in New York, and at venues in Manhattan and upstate New York. She also works with the Faim de Siecle theatre, performing in 2000/2001 in New York, France, and Bosnia in a multimedia production of Heiner Müller’s Medematerial.

I was at home, in Ossining, in Westchester County, New York, the morning of 11 September 2001, packing my suitcase for a week-long trip to Quebec City to perform in my theatre troupe’s production of Heiner Müller’s Abandoned Shores on the stage of the acclaimed Canadian director Robert LePage. Then the phone rang. It was 9:00 a.m., I was in a hurry, and I almost didn’t answer. The response to my irritated, “Who is it?” was an hysterical long-distance sobbing all the way from Lahore, Pakistan—my mother’s. My heart sank. This is the call we immigrants dread. I braced myself for the worst. “Has something happened to Daddy?” I said, haltingly, barely audible even to myself. “Oh my dear daughter, you are safe, Allah ka shukr hai,” was the confusing reply I got. Wondering if Mom had finally lost it, I was about to ask her to explain her bizarre call, when she blurted out, “I was so worried you might have been on one of those flights...” I was
still in the dark, but when I finally registered my ignorance over the crackling noise of the long-distance lines and her own sobbing, my mother, incredulous, responded, “Oh my dear, don’t you know? Something terrible has happened... we are watching it on CNN here... some planes have collided into the World Trade Center...”—and then the line went dead.

I spent the rest of that day, the day after, and many days that followed, in a daze, engulfed in sorrow and fear like everyone else I know. Never one for sentimental displays, I found myself weeping when greeting friends, driving the car, in the shower, waking up, in front of the computer screen, in front of my students at Montclair State University in New Jersey. But in the midst of the sadness over the horrendous loss of life that I shared with my American compatriots—whites, blacks, Arabs, Jews, Christians, Muslims, atheists—and the fear over U.S. reprisals that I shared with others all over the world, especially friends and family in my native country, Pakistan, I felt myself nevertheless, bewilderingly and frighteningly, alone. What, I find myself asking still, are the causes of my feelings of alienation?

You see, I am a feminist. I am a Muslim. I am a professor of English who studied for her PhD in an American university, even though my mother tongue is Urdu. I am a singer trained in the Indian classical tradition, which I had the good fortune to have been exposed to even though I grew up in Pakistan, the self-proclaimed antithesis of all things Indian. I also sing in the Sufi tradition, which is a Muslim one, and which women have generally been kept out of. I perform as a singer-actor with a theatre troupe I helped to found, based in Paris and New York, where I and an Arab woman are the only fully clothed performers. Who, pray tell, in the “Civilized West” or its binary opposite, “The (Uncivilized) Islamic Non–West” speaks for me?

When the bubble of illusions we’ve all been living in and have helped create (which is why I don’t believe any of us are “innocent,” really), burst on September 11th, in the Christian year 2001, I, like everyone else I should think, turned for comfort and solace and help in understanding the implications of what was happening to the people around me—friends, family, colleagues, neighbors in general—as well as, more particularly, people from within “my” community. That’s when I ran into trouble—trouble that was being reflected and produced on my television screen and in the papers. That trouble could be encapsulated in one word: “Identity.”

Here I was, a 43-year-old Pakistani-American-Muslim-feminist-English–professor-singer-actor-scholar-critic-wife-mother-of-two being asked to choose sides, to reduce the complexities and contradictions of my multiple identities to one or the other label: Muslim or secular, Islamicist or feminist, Pakistani or American—and the whopper of them all: “pro-terrorist” or “pro-civilization”!!!!! And sadly—not for the first time, certainly, but perhaps most unambiguously—I have been forced to realize that the sense I have wanted to cling to, of a community more “mine” than others, a “Pakistani American” community, and a larger pan-Islamic one, is nothing but a mirage: a tenuous identity at best, a falsehood at worst. Why?

I think the answer or answers reside, at least partially, in the problem with identitarian labels in general. These labels conceal more than they reveal, for in the attempt to “unify” people holding diverse and often mutually contradictory points of view into one “whole” as defined by nation, religion, sexuality, ethnicity, gender, race, etc., such labels—as much for the edification and reassurance of those “outside” of the labeled group as those “inside” it—suppress the heterogeneity of dissenting, questioning voices; the voices of people like myself, who are both “inside” and “outside” the Orwellian whale(s).

What does it mean to be both “inside” and “outside” the metaphorical beast?
My take on Salman Rushdie’s assertion in his famous essay, “Outside the Whale,” in which he categorically refutes George Orwell’s notion that a whale, a womb, a place of refuge, exists, is that his anti-Orwellian political stand—one with which I am in basic agreement—is a performance. Orwell’s quietist stance—symbolized by his desire to retreat, like Jonah, to the “safety” of a womblike space “inside” the whale—is also a performance. The question I find myself asking is, “What do these performative acts signify?”

To me it seems quite clear that both Orwell and Rushdie are performing specific identities. The identity most clearly being performed by Orwell is that of the bourgeois English white male intellectual in support of a conservative status quo that would allow him to maintain a sense of his “community,” intact, “whole,” unthreatened by political, historical, cultural changes. Rushdie, through his assertions to the contrary, performs his identity as a postcolonial critic speaking on behalf of the community of “common folk” from the Third World who hastened the demise of colonialism and neocolonialism in their countries (India, Nicaragua, Iran) by being actors noisily outside of, and in contradistinction to, the resigned Jonahs and Orwells “inside” of the whale. So what comfort does this notion of identity—as-performance give me?

Very little, I’m afraid. In the wake of reactions, events, discussions, teach-ins following the deadly attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, I find myself increasingly angry and ultimately despairing of a way out of the pressures generated by the world at large, peopled by folks like you and me, to perform the complexities of identity reductively, simplistically, jingoistically, erasing performativity in the name of authenticity, forcing on us all the terrorism of the “real.”

Thus, when my seven-year-old son tells me that a neighbor has asked him, “Are you American or what? How come you don’t fly the American flag outside your house?” I feel angry and alienated. Is flying the flag the required way now to perform my Americanness? When I visit my Egyptian American friends and see a huge American flag covering the entire front of their house, I feel depressed. When Pakistani American friends I visit for a dinner party a week after T Day tell me to fly the flag, as they all are, “in gratitude for what this country has given us,” I feel angry and alienated and, somehow, ashamed for them. Whatever happened to the Other performances—of protest, of dissent, of questioning—the performances Outside the Whale? When I am invited to give a talk on “Islam” to enlighten my Christian minister friend’s parishioners, I accept in gratitude for her kindness and interest, but feel angry and alienated to have been put in a box not of my making.

Why am I now a spokesperson for Islam? Playing a role not of my choice, I am forced to realize that the parts available to me either “inside” or “outside” the proverbial whale, whether the whale be America or the Islamic world, are as limited and limiting as the stages available to perform them on. The leading male actors on the stage of the Western alliance are telling me I must choose either to play a Heroine of Civilization or a Scarf-Toting Terrorist. When my Arab American Muslim friend, who has accompanied me to the church, decides to help me out by whipping out her headscarf and putting it on to indicate to the audience the “purity” Islam enjoins upon women, I feel angry and alienated on the stage within the Islamic whale, a community whose identitarian performances also leave me with few role choices. Whose Islam are we performing? I want to scream. Does anyone care? And what, ultimately, does the present crisis have to do with Islam? Which Islamic text is being performed, and for which audience, where?

“This attack on America is an attack by Islamicists who hate the values of tolerance and democracy and liberal secularism that this country stands for,”
writes an esteemed colleague on the MSU Discussion email list. This leading
man’s opinion is echoed by a Chorus, and when I find myself issuing a rejoinder,
pointing out that there are many varieties of “Islamicists” out there, that the term
is hardly reducible to the fanatical extremism of the Taliban, I once again feel an-
gered and alienated because I have been reduced to “taking sides” in what is, in
the final analysis, a setup—a completely bogus, morally bankrupt, utterly disingenuous “choice.”

I am grateful then, that Fatema Mernissi’s Scheherezade Goes West has seren-
dipitously found its way to my bedside table, giving me a little succor. Mern-
issi’s—and by extension, Scheherezade’s—Islamic feminism becomes a ray of
hope in an otherwise increasingly dark landscape. Here, in Mernissi, is a woman,
learned and wise in the secular and religious traditions of both “West” and “East,”
the Judeo-Christian world and the Islamic one, who is able to point out the
similarities between Immanuel Kant, the voice of Western secular enlightenment,
and Imam Khomeini, the Iranian avatar of so-called Islamic Fundamentalism. It
takes her predecessor, a “Muslim” woman named Scheherezade—utilizing the
power of her formidable intellect and knowledge of science and art—to chal-
lenge, successfully, the strictures of patriarchal control embodied in her husband,
Prince Shahrayar, the Bluebeard of the Islamic Orient. In her willingness to
sacrifice herself and confront the murderous king in the hopes of stopping him
from further killing young virgins like herself, “Scheherezade,” claims Mernissi,
“can be seen as a political hero, a liberator in the Muslim world” (2001:46). I
would like to argue that her heroic potential is, or could be, far more global in
reach.

As in Brecht’s “Epic” theatre, we have here a female hero aware that her very
life, and that of others, depends on her ability to perform a multiplicity of
roles, none of which can succeed within the confines of the conventional, “re-
alistic” stage. We learn to identify with her only through the mirror of alienation
she holds up to us: “Can you,” she seems to taunt us, “change the mind of a
criminal who is intent on killing you simply by telling him stories?” We are awed
when we realize that in order to succeed at her task, she has had to master “three
[very difficult] strategic skills: control over a vast store of information, the ability
to clearly grasp the criminal’s mind, and the determination to act in cold blood”
(47). The first skill is of an intellectual nature, the second of a psychological one,
and the third, perhaps most important one, “is her cold-blooded capacity to
control her fear enough to think clearly and lead the dynamic interaction with
the aggressor instead of being led” (48). All three skills underscore the power of
her mind, for, as Mernissi shows us, “Scheherezade only survives because she is
a super-strategist of the intellect.” Yet, the intellect that she uses is tied to the
mysteries of the heart, and it is precisely because she enacts this marriage of mind
and body, reason and emotion, that she finally wins redemption through linking
humanism with feminism.

Taha Hussein’s retelling of the Scheherezade tales emphasizes such a redemp-
tive aspect. Mernissi, reading Hussein (an influential Egyptian thinker of the
1940s) tells us how the king in Hussein’s retelling symbolizes men’s incompre-
hensible and tragic craving for killing. It is only after listening to his captive—
his “Other” for years—that he finally comes to understand that she embodies a
secret—one which, if grasped, might help him grow into a compassionate human
being finally at peace with himself and the world:

Shahrayar: Who are you and what do you want?
Scheherezade: Who am I? I am the Scheherezade who offered you the
pleasure of listening to my tales for years because I was so terrified of you.
Now, I have reached a stage where I can give you love because I have
freed myself from the fear you inspired in me. What do I want? I want my lord, the King, to have a taste of serenity. To experience the bliss of living in a world free of anxiety. (Hussein in Mernissi 2001:50)

By finally getting a murderous king to admit “that a man should use words instead of violence to settle his disputes,” Scheherezade becomes the “symbol of the triumph of reason over violence” and her stories, “a modern civilizing myth” (51). She teaches her husband, the king, and us, her readers, that “there is a need to confront the different other, and to insist on the acknowledgment and respect of boundaries if dialogue is to be achieved” (52).

Hers is the voice/story we must listen to now, the performance we should watch attentively, when we are harangued by the mind-numbing monologues of bearded mullahs of the Taliban variety, or the suited reverends of Falwellian persuasion, whose dangerously binaristic views of the world are echoed by political leaders across the spectrum. It is a voice and a persona that is cloaked neither in a hijab of the mind (contra CNN and the New York Times) nor superficially revealed in the scantily clad bodies that inhabit the Western harem; indeed, as Mernissi wittily points out, “she [Scheherezade] would have been killed if she had disrobed like a Hollywood vamp or Matisse’s odalisque and stretched out passively in the King’s bed, [for he] is not looking for sex, he is looking for a psychotherapist” (48)!! Scheherezade’s is, above all, then, the voice of a woman of passionate intellect and reason, a woman whose fight for life is not personal but collective, the voice of a woman who wants to see justice, not murder, meted out to other oppressed women like herself, a woman not afraid to voice her dissent with the powerful, when that power becomes abusive and unjust.

Scheherezade’s is the voice of a Muslim feminist. Assigned that label by those of us still caught in a play not yet of our making, as a totem to help us to perform our solidarities and our resistances both inside and outside the whale, she has mastered the art of performing identity fluidly. In fact, it is the performance of that complexity that saves her life. It is time to invite Scheherezade to perform once again, so that the world, watching her, can save itself.

References

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