A Review of “The ‘Non-dit’ in the Zenena: representations of Muslim women in Islamic canonical texts, the neo-colonial imagination and feminist response from Bangladesh.”
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Classification

**Audience:** Human rights activists

**Date of Publication:** 2006

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**Subject terms:** Women's rights and agency; Colonization, Modernization and Democratization in Muslim countries; Patriarchal Gender Relations; Islam and State; Religious-nationalism; Islamic Religious Institutions; Gendered Citizenship Rights; Civil Society Organizations.
Abstract

In his article, Syed Jamil Ahmed both examines and demonstrates how the “Muslim woman” is represented, particularly by “Western” media and feminists and Islamic apologists, two groups whose representations constitute a false binary. Ahmed does not aim to elucidate the “truth” regarding Muslim women; rather, he argues that no such “truth” exists; employing the sociological argument that one’s identity is an aggregate of representations. Instead, he aims to discuss the way in which the various representations of the “Muslim woman” are constructed and their subsequent consequences and implications. Ahmed demonstrates, through a detailing of the Qur’an and Qur’anic texts, the contradictory way women’s rights are negotiated in these texts, as well as the relation between men and women. Alluding to moments in the scripture which aim to silence women, Ahmed argues that the very existence of these texts suggests that women were not silent. On the opposite end of the spectrum, colonialists and neo-imperialists characterize Muslim women as the oppressed and silenced victims of the patriarchy. Ahmed traces the timeline of this representation in Western literature, arguing that the notion of an oppressed woman, hidden behind a veil, continues to inform characterizations of Muslim women today. In particular, he exhibits how one writer, Dalrymple, creates a narrative which, for the sake of romanticizing his historical account, excludes crucial details which indicate a power struggle, rather than pure subjugation. Finally, Ahmed cites a third representation, that of Taslima Nasreen, a 20th-century feminist writer from Bangladesh, who in her personal memoir, gives voice to the “silenced” woman, effectively subverting the false dichotomy, and existing in a space outside of it.
Ahmed’s discussion of Western and Islamic apologist discourse holds both groups culpable for subjugating and silencing veiled Muslim women. Therefore, an examination of the patriarchal structure from which the “Muslim woman” emerges and an examination of Western media and feminist thought is required in order to promote efforts to reclaim Muslim women’s rights since these two institutions perpetuate subjugation against Muslim women. Ahmed urges his readers to figuratively “read between the lines” of these representations as he did in his own analyses of various canonical texts to reveal the embedded presence the woman’s voice. Ahmed argues that by focusing on the dominant patriarchal model of Islamic culture one overlooks the voices which do not match the dominant discourse. An organization thus might expand their mode of research regarding Muslim women’s rights to consider not only the dominant discourse but also the underlying discourse.

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Synopsis

I. Introduction

A. Representations of the ‘Muslim woman’ in ‘Western’ corporate media.

   i. Secluded, unknown, mysterious, homogeneous.
   ii. Wearing of the “purdah,” a screen or veil.
   iii. Residing in the “zenana,” the part of the house set apart for the women of the family.
   iv. Advertising and marketing.
      a. Muslim women seen as mysterious, a site of eroticized desire.
   v. ‘Western’ news media.
      a. The “women in black” who carry machine guns and march in lines.

B. “Western” feminist discourse.

   i. Much of it is in agreement with “Western” media, performing double subjugation.
   ii. Construction of a binary wherein the “Western” woman is represented as liberated, in contrast to the Muslim woman, who is seen as the “oppressed Other,” and the victim of the Islamic patriarch.
      a. In response to this binary, many educated Muslim women reject “Western” feminism and perceive it as a reaction against “Western” patriarchy.
         1. They argue that “the veil” effectively acts as a symbol of their liberation, and that power which is exerted through sexuality is a form of enslavement.

C. The task of the Essay

   i. How Muslims are represented.
      a. Ahmed asserts that the task of his essay is not to establish the “truth” about Muslim women and their social reality.

      b. Rather, he is demonstrating and examining the ways in which Muslim women are represented, and what the consequences of these representations are. He focuses on three types of representation:
         1. The “Othered object” of the “Western gaze” which is represented as oppressed and inferior;
2. “The domesticated object of a totalitarian tradition” supported and defended by Islamic apologists;
3. A space located outside of the political dichotomy, which questions the way in which identity is formed, so that neither the Western world nor Islamic orthodoxy is seen as providing the “truth”.

c. Of the first two representations, Ahmed asserts that each is the false antithesis of the other.

d. The framework for his essay.
   1. Examination of Islamic canonical texts (Qur’an and Hadith).
   2. Examination of the colonial imagination (contrasting a contemporary novel by William Dalrymple with the case of Private Jessica Lynch).
   3. Examination of a childhood memoir written by Taslima Nasreen, a late-20th century feminist from Bangladesh.

II. Narratives of Women’s subjugation and counter-memories of resistance inscribed in the Qu’ran and the Hadith.

A. Ahmed makes a detailed analysis of how women are represented within the Qur’an and Qur’anic texts, locating specific moments where women and men’s equality are stated, against other moments where women’s rights are subjugated to men’s.

   i. Ahmed argues that these contradictions within the text open up “interstices” which reveal that the texts are unfixed and incomplete, resisting closure. To erase these interstices is to create gendered interpretations of the text.
      a. These gendered interpretations effectively legitimize the patriarchy’s envelopment of women, and contribute to her silence.
   ii. Ahmed locates moments in the Qur’an in which physical violence is admissible upon even the suspicion of ill conduct.
   iii. Moments where women are represented as evil, sinful, crooked, and ungrateful, in contrast to the man, who is full of sexual energy.
   iv. There is a sense of sexual anxiety present throughout the Qur’an.
   v. The Prophet is bestowed sexual allowances not to be perpetuated by the rest of the male populous.

B. Ahmed then points to moments within the Qur’an in which women’s resistance is alluded to, or reckoned with.
i. He argues that the very fact that there exists an effort to silence women indicates that there is an unmentioned rebellion.

ii. Instead of looking at what is asserted, he urges us to look at that which is unsaid.
   a. Here we find women who act against their normative roles, who assert their rights, and are anything but silent.
   b. He argues that as long as Western feminists focus on the dominant patriarchal model of how Islamic cultural systems work; they disregard the resistance which exists outside of this model, and replicate the patriarchal subjugation of women in Islamic cultures.

### III. The neo-colonial imagination: the Muslim woman fantasy and anxiety for the white woman

**A. Ahmed argues that the neo-colonial institution which reinforces the Islamic patriarchal system’s subjugation of Muslim women is equally culpable for the subjugation.**

**B. The common Western representation of the veiled Muslim woman developed out of a history and tradition of thought.**

1. In European medieval literature, the Muslim woman was usually “a high-ranking noblewoman” who would convert to Christianity and assume a more passive femininity.
2. During the Renaissance, the Muslim woman is either seen as the empowered woman, or the damsel in distress.
3. In the 18th century, the “veil” comes into European consciousness. Muslim women are depicted as concubines, who are oppressed.
4. 18th-present day, the “veiled Muslim woman” remains, promising a sexual experience which is guiltless because she exists outside the social matrix of colonizers.

**C. White Moghuls**

1. A novel written by William Dalrymple, depicting the triangular love-story of James Achilles Kirkpatrick (the Ambassador of the English East India Company in Hyderabad) who married Khair un-Nissa, the granddaughter of a senior nobleman in Hyderabad, and her supposed romantic relationship with Henry Russell (secretary to Kirkpatrick), subsequent to Kirkpatrick’s death.
a. Ahmed demonstrates the way in which Dalrymple, for the sake of maintaining the “romance” of his story, effectively portrays a woman who is caught between two romances, and subjugated by the institutions which inscribe her.

b. Ahmed then argues that a closer examination of the text reveals not a passive woman who has been subjugated by her male counterparts, but rather, a real struggle for power.

c. Dalrymple’s story is, after all, merely a representation of the historical accounts—his story is “just another harem fantasy”.

D. Orientalist Seduction Fantasies

i. In Orientalist seduction fantasies, it is the white male who seduces (or is seduced) by the native woman.
   a. Even if the scenario is one of rape, it is the implicit approval of Imperial power which legitimates the rape.

ii. However, this narrative shifts to a “rape fantasy” when the characters are inverted: “the rape of the white woman by the bestial native”.
   a. This fantasy emerges out of deep-rooted colonial fears of a “man of color” posing a sexual threat to a white woman.
   b. There exist several unsubstantiated accounts of native men taking advantage of white women, ones which are “invariably accompanied by invocation of white masculinity”.

E. The case of Jessica Lynch

i. This sense of sexual anxiety re-emerged in the case of Army Private First Class Jessica Lynch, who was captured by Iraqis, and was held in a hospital for nine days as a prisoner of war.

ii. The story that was told about the occurrence was greatly exaggerated.
   a. Lynch was said to have been shot multiple times in the battle with Iraqi forces, and that she was fighting to the death.
      1. In reality, Lynch would explain that she hadn’t been abused in any way during her captivity, and that in fact, the Iraqi doctors were responsible for saving her life by performing surgery. Additionally, they treated her kindly.
      2. Ahmed cites the story which was propagated in Western media (in contrast to the real story) as an indication and manifestation of the white man’s sexual anxiety for the white woman. Jessica Lynch’s story was effectively inflated into a rescue drama.
IV. Encourage increased participation among women in public life

A. Ahmed draws upon the writer Taslima Nasreen, as an example of someone who circumvents both the Western and Islamic apologist representation of the “Muslim woman” by offering her own story/voice.

i. Her story is one which describes the sexual abuse suffered by woman at the hands of male elders in her family.

B. By telling her story, she gives voice to the “silence” attributed to “Muslim women,” and creates fissures in that overall representation. She effectively places all women in Bangladesh in a provocative terrain, one which was reacted upon by the patriarchy—she was exiled by her homeland.
I. Introduction

A) “...this essay does not seek to establish the ‘Truth’ regarding Muslim women as it exists in the world of social reality. Rather, it seeks to examine how various representations of Muslim women, as networks of signs where the signified is infinitely delayed, are constructed and to what effects and consequence these representations are mobilized” (432).

UTILITY

A. Activists are encouraged to think about more subtle representations of Muslim women as opposed to simply mainstream portrayals which are often unrepresentative of the realities of Muslim women

B. Acknowledgement that there exist many realities of Muslim women which are not focused upon in mainstream discourse is necessary for proper implementation of programs aimed at increasing Muslim women’s rights. Without this acknowledgement, some Muslim women’s needs may go unaddressed if their reality is pushed to the side. Thus, it is important for activists to keep in mind that there is not one single truth that will encompass or represent all Muslim women adequately as many differences exist between them. But as a starting place it is useful to target the blatantly false representations made by outside Media and Feminists and Islamic Orthodoxists. For example, Muslim women are the property of men in their society.

Think about

• What subtle representations of women exist in the society you are working in?

B) “…both representations of the ‘Muslim woman’ cited above are constructions: the Othered object of the ‘Western’ gaze, ‘essentialised to represent “the East” and stereotypically represented as oppressed, inferior, traditional, backward, mysterious and hidden behind the veil’ and the domesticated object of a totalitarian tradition which Islamic apologists strive hard to defend and urge believers to adhere to unquestioningly. Each of these dichotomous positions is the false antithesis of the other” (432).

UTILITY
It is important to keep in mind that the reality of Muslim women is often the opposite of their portrayal. This is dangerous as it encourages inaccurate portrayals of Muslim women to Western society.

C) “...this essay seeks the non-dit (i.e. the unspoken) in an alternative ‘third space of enunciation’ - a distinct political stand located outside the axis of the dichotomy and, rephrasing Spivak, it questions the privileging of identity so that neither the ‘Western’ media and feminists nor Islamic orthodoxy is seen as the receptacle of the ‘Truth’” (432).

UTILITY

Raising an awareness of the falsity of some outside media portrayals, for example, Western media and feminists as well as Islamic Orthodoxy about Muslim women can prove a vital task in reshaping the view of Muslim women both in the West and in Islamic societies to one that is a more representative.

Think about

- What actions can activists take to help shape a more realistic perspective of Muslim women than that portrayed by Western media and feminists for example?

- How can activists ensure that this new perspective is truly representative given the vast diversity that exists amongst Muslim women?

II. Narratives of women’s subjugation and counter-memories of resistance inscribed in the Quran and the Hadith

A) “These contradictions force open interstices, which, in turn, reveal that the texts are unfixed and in-between, emphasize incompleteness and liminality, and resist closure. By erasing these interstices and fissures, Islamic scholars and theologians facilitate gendered meanings” (434).

UTILITY

Islamic Scholars and theologians can use the gap in the literature to create gendered
meanings. However, it must be observed that this is not done in a way to facilitate discrimination towards women.

**Think about**

- By what method can activists strive to fill in the gaps in literature in a non-discriminatory manner?

B) “By now the contradictions within the canonical texts have widened into fissures and the representation of the Prophet as the normative role model cracks. If he is the ideal for believers to emulate, then why create special privileges for him and condone his failures by indemnity clauses? A plausible reason, one suspects, is that women in early Islamic society challenged the normative role model” (436).

**UTILITY**

It may be useful to acknowledge that interpretation of Quranic texts may have been performed in such a way as to hamper women’s rights or to silence their voices. This will be an important task because it shows that Muslim women have rights grounded in Quaranic texts.

**Think about**

- How can activists tackle discriminatory interpretations of Quranic texts?

C) “These references seriously dispute the assumption that mute(d) women in early Islamic society, despite their restriction behind the purdah and in the zenena, remained silent” (436).

**UTILITY**

A. There can be doubt that women’s voices were in fact always silenced during the time of the Prophet Muhammad. This possibility could lay the groundwork or foundation upon which grassroots organizations can build their case concerning the need for open and free voices of Muslim women.

B. It will be important to keep in mind that the perception of the silenced women in early Islamic society is deeply embedded and routed in many Islamic societies and thus an organization need not be discouraged by the difficulty of the task of facilitating the open voices of Muslim women in a given society.
Think about

• What procedures could activists take to provide Muslim women with avenues to express themselves?

D) “This is the unspoken ground of the unsaid on which patriarchy traces the narrative of women’s subjugation: the existence of a deep-seated and insubordinate – almost subversive – consciousness directed against the patriarchal order” (438).

UTILITY

The control of women by men is a reality of a long-standing patriarchal system. An acknowledgment of this reality is necessary as addressing Muslim women’s rights in this context will require looking at the routes to greater equality of the patriarchal system in a particular society and often targeting areas which do seem readily applicable to a given problem at first glance.

Think about

• What areas of society would activists target when promoting the rights of Muslim women?

• How could a general target of a patriarchal system as a whole reach a goal of gender equality (as defined by the particular working group for a given society)

• What methods could an activist group pursue to target thoroughly embedded patriarchal beliefs within a given society?

E) “So long as we confine our conception of the political to activity that is openly declared we are driven to conclude that subordinate groups essentially lack a political life or that what political life they do have is restricted to those moments of popular explosion. To do so is to miss the immense political terrain that lies between quiescence and revolt and that, for better or worse, is the political environment of subject classes. It is to focus on the visible coastline of politics and miss the continent that lies beyond (Scott 1990: 199)” (438).

UTILITY

Political life consists not only of the public and open political acts but also many other actions and discourse which occur in a more passive fashion; such as, discussions in
mosques, in educational institutions and other community gathering points which are not part of the mainstream political arena. In order to fully understand the political atmosphere of the society one is conducting activism in, it will be optimal to keep this reality in mind.

Think about

• What more passive acts of politics occur in your society or the society you are working in?

• How can one give more effect and prominence to these more subtle political acts?

F) “Contrary to the argument of the theorists of the Muted Groups, the important issue is not whether Muslim women are (or were) able to say all that they wish(ed) to say, where and when they wish(ed) to say it. Rather, it is necessary to argue that as long as ‘Western’ feminism remains focused on the dominant patriarchal model of how Islamic cultural systems work, and ignores the possibility that women in Islamic cultures might have a different understanding of the ways in which their cultures operate – deliberately or unwittingly, do not mention the unmentionable, calculatingly disregard boives that do not match the dominant discourse and the categories of the dominant – ‘muted’ women, behind the purdah and in the xenana will always appear silent, or silenced” (438).

UTILITY

A. Western feminists and Western media need to acknowledge that their perceived views regarding gender issues are not universal and should in no way be imposed onto others. It is of particular importance to target Western feminists because they are an influential group in the feminist movement and their perceptions and interpretations are often adapted by non-Western feminists.

B. Cultural differences should be taken into account when developing any gender initiative program as representations of equality is often different when viewed from an external or internal perspective of a given society.

Think about

• How can activists communicate effectively with Western feminists regarding their misperception of important issues surrounding Muslim women’s rights? Activists should think about funding and solidarity movements as a starting point.

• What relevant cultural differences exist between Western feminism and Islamic feminism that should be taken into account by activists for Muslim women’s rights?
G) “The resistance of early Muslim women was made manifest in their tenacity in holding on their own conception of the world, even when faced with the apparatus of patriarchal coercion that condoned physical violence. It is precisely because their insubordination was powerful, and because it is still deemed to be powerful, that the patriarchy mobilized (and still mobilizes) so many verse in the Qur’an and recorded so many Hadith seeking their subordination” (439).

“The very act of attempting to mute women in Islamic canonical texts is proof that resistance exists and its degree must be judged by the degree of control that patriarchy seeks to exert” (439).

**UTILITY**

Modern day activists can draw upon instances of non-silence of Muslim Women of the past to invoke rights for modern day Muslim women.

**Think about**

• How can modern day activists use the history of Muslim women to promote their present day rights?

**III. The neo-colonial imagination: the Muslim woman fantasy and anxiety for white woman**

A) “Underpinning the examination given below is the argument that if the Islamic patriarchal system (and by extension, Islamic religious formations) is incriminated for its attempted subjugation and muting of women, then the condoning or incognizance of colonial and neo-colonial complicity in reinforcing the subjugation is equally culpable” (439).

**UTILITY**

Conditions, other than Islam; such as, colonialism and neo-colonialism, also contributed to the subjugation and muting of Muslim women. As such, activists may want to consider targeting Muslim women’s rights not in isolation; rather, in the overarching framework of a patriarchal system.
B) “Before engaging with colonial discourse, it is necessary to be reminded that the ubiquitous representation of the veiled Muslim woman that is etched in ‘Western’ imagination is not timeless, but, as Said argues ‘has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that gave given it reality and presence in and for the West (Said 2001: 5)” (439).

UTILITY

Activists may want to consider attempting to formulate a more realistic portrayal of Muslim women to Western society keeping in mind that a single portrayal cannot adequately represent all Muslim women.

C) “Since then, right through to the 20th century, colonial imagination never exorcised the fantasy of ‘the veiled Muslim woman secluded in the zenana’. This woman promises a sexuality that is more libertine and less guilt-ridden because of her being placed outside the social matrix of the colonizers. Hence, she becomes the site of guiltless sexual fantasies and is instilled with untiring sensuality, unlimited desire and deep generative energies” (440).

“Dalrymple could have mobilized all these gaps and slides in history for the creation of a historiographic metafiction, in which he could have conscientiously presented history for the problematization of the past and creation of a feeling of estrangement in the reader. The White Moghuls, thereby, could have been a struggle to, borrowing from Er, ‘rehistoricize the text and retextualize history’ (Er 2005: 234). Instead, by narrating a tragic love story that he claims to have grasped ‘fully formed’ with his historical documents, he gives the impression of producing a historical piece that seeks to capture the ‘Truth’. He chooses the slippery borderland between fiction and history that offers him immense space to create his representation of the veiled Muslim women” (442).

UTILITY

Authors who can also act as activists need to be weary of their representations of fiction lightly based on history or the representation of a fiction that could easily be misinterpreted as a history since it is likely to have an effect on the reader and those the reader encounters especially if the story reinforces potentially harmful gender stereotypes. Activists and others that read these works need to take a critical approach and understand that the portrayal of Muslim women in these works is inaccurate. This is important because it addresses the spread of false representations about Muslim women.
D) “Dalrymple uses this impression of ‘the true historian’ and a ‘scholar of history’ who ‘brings back to life’ the story of Khair un-Nissa, as he acknowledges, ‘with only fleeting glimpses’, ‘see[ing] her only obliquely, reflected through the eyes of her lover, her husband, her mother and her children (Dalrymple 2004: 343)’” (443).

**UTILITY**

The perspective of the Muslim Women herself (in this case Khair un-Nissa) is often absent from a telling of their story. Activists can strive to include the voices of the women ‘at-issue’ in programs aimed at securing a life with more equality for them. Self-perspective may often be the most important perspective and at least one that is not to be ignored.

**Think about**

- Through what methods can activists collect the input of the women their activism is aimed at helping?

E) “If one were to compare both representations of Khair – the one drawn with James and the other with Russell – it would be possible to detect some common ingredients. In both cases, Khair is the willing, sighing, desiring, and inviting veiled woman, who displays supine malleability and vulnerability to ‘trap’ or be ‘trapped’ by the white man” (444).

“This is Dalrymple’s history representing late-18th and early-19th century colonial South Asia in the early 21st century. The story is underpinned by a struggle for power over the woman’s body, which, in this instance, is fought over by the colonizers, the indigenous elite (men in both cases) and denizens of the zenana” (444).

**UTILITY**

The concept of the woman's body as property existed since at least the early 21st century in South Asia. This is important because it shows that in order to secure greater rights for women in South Asian societies activists will be confronted with challenging a system of inequality that has existed for a very long time. Thus, activists should examine historical contexts to give them a deeper understanding of the issues modern day women in South Asia are facing.

F) “Beyond Dalrymple’s representation of Khair un-Nissa, one can reconstruct yet another: an elite Muslim woman of colonial India who transgresses the norms twice – first, having married against the grandfather’s wish, and secondly, being unfaithful to the memory of her
deceased husband. She succeeds in her first transgressive act but is reduced to being a concubine in the second. Because her second fault/failure is deemed to be a greater sin in patriarchy, her lover, the government of Hydrabad and the colonial government all reject her” (445).

**UTILITY**

Societal norms often govern acceptance or disapproval of an act within the family and the greater society as a whole. Thus, activists are encouraged to look at what sorts of norms exist in their society; but also, the types of norms which exist in family units within their society to develop the most relevant programs that address the particular norms of a given society.

G) “The White Mughals is a tale told by a ‘true scholar’ of history showing how the veiled Muslim woman, the object of orientalist desire, is re-orientalized. Ironically, for all his marvelous craftsmanship and scholarship, the woman remains beyond textual grasp, and the ‘essence’ of what lies behind the veil remains elusive, in his case at least, she is non-existent – literally inaccessible – and hence must remain non-dit” (445).

**UTILITY**

It can be useful for an author and activist writers to give Muslim women embedded identities in their writings so she does not remain simply and only an object of desire. By embedded identities it is meant humanistic and personality characteristics as opposed to simply a portrayal as a sexual object. Dialogue with authors about the influence their writings may have could prove a useful step in promoting greater rights for Muslim women.

H) “In orientalist seduction fantasies, it is the white male who seduces (or is seduced by) the inviting veiled woman. As Indira Karamcheti argues after Nancy Paxton (1999), the orientalist seduction fantasy shifts to the colonialist rape fantasy when ‘the emphasis shifts from the native woman and the white man to the rape of the white woman by the bestial native’ (Karamcheti 1999: 126)” (445).

“Underpinning the scenario of the first pair is approval of the Imperial power to actuate the rape and colonial discourse to legitimate it” (445).

“The paranoia over apprehended sexual threat from sensual natives occasionally exploded into public outcry, as in 1883, when a ‘native’ was reported in the press to have entered a
white woman’s bedroom at night and touched her knee (*the Friend of India and Statesman*, 28 July 1883, cited in Sen 2002: 22). As Sen shows convincingly, these fantasies were generated not only by ‘deep-rooted colonial fears of a sexual threat from men of colour’, but also ‘by male anxieties regarding the white woman’s sexuality’ (Sen 2002: 21)” (445).

**UTILITY**

The belief about white woman’s sexuality in colonial times may have had repercussions for the way native women were to be treated by their communities regarding concepts of sexuality. Thus, activists should examine the historical context to give them a deeper understanding of the issues modern day Muslim women are facing.

**Think about**

- What are the perceived repercussions for Muslim women because of the belief about white women’s sexuality?

1) “Patriarchy in colonial and neo-imperial landscape operates by stereotyping, exoticizing and legitimizing the appropriation of the Other woman but, haunted by the fear of rape and anxieties regarding female sexuality, it maintains strict control over a woman’s body. This struggle over a woman’s body is perfectly in line with the Islamic patriarchal system’s hyper-anxiety to hide the body under the purdah and rigorously ensure monopolic possession over it...One cannot fail to perceive how much common ground it shares with Islamic patriarchal systems” (447).

**UTILITY**

An Activist targeting Islamic patriarchal systems may look to case studies from women’s movements in colonial studies since some commonalities are sure to exist and some insight might be gained through this process albeit the many differences which exist between colonial society and Islamic patriarchal systems.

**Think about**

- What strategies can activists use to overcome the perception that women’s bodies are the property of men
IV. Transgressive and subversive counter-discourse: a Muslim woman in Bangladesh speak the Non-dit

A) “By asserting that these incidents represent the ‘Truth’, Nasreen causes fissures and cracks in the monolith of silence, sheltered by which patriarchy can play its game of subjugation” (450).

“By exposing the continent that lies beyond the visible coastline of politics and ‘the immense political terrain that lies between quiescence and revolt’ (Scott 1990: 199), Nasreen has situated women in Bangladesh in an extremely provocative, vulnerable and contentious terrain. She has also turned herself into a site of struggle for power between Islam and Hindu fundamentalist formations” (451).

UTILITY

The problem of targeting women’s silence is not as simple as requesting that they speak up. It should be kept in mind that this act could result in the voiced woman being ostracized from her society. Thus, a targeting of the overall patriarchal system may be necessary to adequately address the issue of silenced women.

V. Epilogue: speaking the silences and seeing the invisible

A) “…the Islamic canonical texts represent women as negative, inessential and abnormal; she is the Other and her Otherness is seen to lie outside the patriarchal conceptual system” (451).

UTILITY

This perception has led to Muslim women being viewed as an “other” as in a person who lies outside the patriarchal conceptual system. This perception should be kept in mind when developing programs for women’s rights in societies which are dominated by patriarchal systems.

B) “In orientalist seduction fantasies, colonial/ neo-colonial imagination represents veiled Muslim women as waiting to be penetrated by the white male; but when the sex of the participants is inverted, it cries out in outrage as rape of the white woman by the bestial
native. It is by reading both terrains in conjunction that the operation of patriarchy is made visible. If the Islamic patriarchal system is incriminated for its attempted silencing of women, then disregarding colonial and neo-colonial complicity is stereotyping, exoticizing and reinforcing the subjugation of Muslim women must be equally incriminated” (451).

**UTILITY**

An understanding of where stereotypes regarding the sexuality of veiled women have developed may be useful to a full understanding of present day gender dynamics. With this understanding activists will have a good idea of where gender stereotypes are spread and reinforced and thus, activists will develop insight on what areas their work should target

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<td>• What are some stereotypes regarding veiled women that activists should strive to overcome?</td>
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C) “By failing to concede this ground and claiming instead that the Qur’an is the eternal and universal Truth from Allah and the Hadith is the exemplary emulation for believers, Islamic apologists as well as defenders of the Faith impose a totalizing regime of truth that seeks to absorb all available ground and refuse any oppositional site. Contradictions in the canonical texts, as shown in the first part of this essay, dismantle their claim” (452).

**UTILITY**

Gender biases are embedded in interpretations of Islamic Canonical Texts; thus, alternate interpretations are possible that would provide for greater rights for Muslim women.

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<td>• What conditions seem to encourage these interpretations as opposed to others?</td>
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