WOMEN IN ISLAM: A STUDY OF

ASRA Q. NOMANI'S *STANDING ALONE IN MECCA* AND

KHADIJA MUMTHAS' *BARSA*

Dissertation Submitted to the Jawaharlal Nehru University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Award of the Degree of

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CERTIFICATE

This dissertation titled **"Women in Islam: A Study of Asra Q. Nomani's *Standing Alone in Mecca* and Khadija Mumthas' *Barsa***"** submitted by **Miss. Shafana Shaffi**, Centre for English Studies, School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy**, is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of any University or Institution.
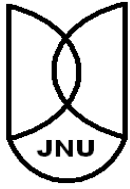
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Declaration by the Candidate

This thesis titled "Women in Islam: A Study of Asra Q. Nomani's *Standing Alone in Mecca* and Khadija Mumthas' *Barsa*" submitted by me for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy, is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any other degree, diploma of any university or institution.

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Introduction

Women's role in Islam and their 'invisibility' in the social and cultural sphere of the Muslim world has been much discussed and theorized upon, especially from the last decades of the twentieth century. Works have been written on and debates have ensued regarding the women's 'condition' in Islam and almost every work and everyone convincingly argues about the root of the problem or even whether it is a problem or not. When many view "Islam as the main cause of women's subjugation, or as the panacea for women's problems" others claim that it is infact the Muslim societies that have "denied women their rightful status" (Mir-Hosseini 1999: 3). There is a tendency among people at large to relate the state of women in Muslim societies to Islam and its scriptures, not that they are not interconnected but to what extent is the question. Hence, whether true or not, a very disturbing picture of Islam emerges and there are more tags like 'violent', 'intolerant' and 'anti- modern' that get attached to it as when the situation comes up. So are the Muslim women in different parts of the world in a poor and oppressed state because of Islam? My objective therefore in undertaking this research is to understand more about the visibility/ invisibility of women in and the status accorded to her by Islam and to see how women are treated by the societies that supposedly follow Islamic ideals. But instead of approaching the core texts like the Quran or hadiths and their various interpretations, I am more interested to study Muslim women's take on Islam. Hence in this research I will be dealing with two works, namely *Standing Alone in Mecca: A Pilgrimage into the Heart of Islam* by Asra Q. Nomani and *Barsa* by Khadija Mumthas.

Despite the fact that Nomani's work is a memoir in English and Mumthas' work a novel in Malayalam, both seems to share common concerns and viewpoints. Both the works address the question of women in Islam and in a larger light portray the religion in its diversity and complexity. The Indian edition of Nomani's work was published in 2007 and it was in the same year that Mumthas' *Barsa* got published; five years down the line both the interest in and readership of the works have peaked. While conversing with a bunch of postgraduate students in Kerala about *Barsa*, one randomly

said that she read the book because it was the first of its kind written in Malayalam by a woman that boldly addressed and problematised Islam. True it is and the plus point of *Barsa* sure is that it places women in the centre, and not just portrays them strong and articulate enough to raise questions about practices in the name of religion but also encourages the rise of critical Muslims. The novel presents a series of questions about Islam and women that the protagonist Sabitha seems to ask herself in moments of confusion; these are questions that unsettle the mind of the readers as well.

This research began with my first reading of *Barsa* in 2009 and the questions asked in it kept taking me to books, to people and to libraries. *Standing Alone in Mecca* came in to my life much later, maybe during the first chilly days of 2011 and I could not help but notice a striking similarity. Now since both Asra Q. Nomani and Khadija Mumthas are unfamiliar names to the expected audience of this thesis, allow me to give some background information of the authors. The information however has been taken from internet sites and books and is no piece or part of original research.

Asra Q. Nomani – (born 1965) is an Indian- American journalist who after being born in Bombay, moved to the United States at the age of four. She is widely known as an activist who works for Muslim reform and is one whose name is attached to Islamic feminist movements. At present, she teaches journalism at the Georgetown University and is a co-director of the Pearl project, one that looks into the kidnap and murder of *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl. She herself is a former *Wall Street Journal* correspondent and she has also worked with Salon.com in Pakistan post 9/11. She has authored two books of which *Standing Alone in Mecca* is the second, first titled *Tantrika: Traveling the Road of Divine Love* talks about a woman whose world travels and spiritual journey bring her face-to-face with the most fundamental dichotomy of her identity. And she has also authored many articles in different magazines.

Khadija Mumthas – (born 1955) is a doctor by profession. She was born in Thrissur and is at present Professor at the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology in Government Medical College, Kozhikode. Dr. Mumthas had worked for seven years at Mecca and it is the life that she saw around that gets reflected in her works. She has

authored novels and memoirs. Her memoir is titled *Doctor Deyyamalla*. *Barsa* was published in 2007 and it won the Kerala Sahitya Akademy Award for fiction, her latest work is titled *Aathuram* and was published in 2011.

It is but fair to begin the introduction to my work by looking at the preface each writer has written for her work, it is the perfect entry point to my works as it seems to invite the readers to the debate on women in Islam and gives him/her an idea of what to expect in the coming pages. Asra Nomani begins the prefatory note by calling her work "a manifesto of the rights of women based on the true faith of Islam" (2007: 11). She also puts forward the view that there are contradictions about the religion that she fails to comprehend. When terrorists kidnap and kill in the name of religion they, according to her, perform namaz five times a day and observe all other religious practices. So did the man who loved her and later abandoned her. She gives these instances and more that leave us pondering whether men such as these are true adherents of Islam as they claim to be and as to whether religion in any way silently sanctions their actions. Therefore it is Islam that is brought under the scanner at the very beginning and Nomani does admit without awkwardness that she "was very much at odds with my [her] religion" (11). From Islam she directs her pen to the state of women in it and claims to redeem the present state of religion by walking in the path of the great women in Islam, by following their "struggles, strengths and triumphs" (12). And the note on which she ends her preface is that it is indeed not the religion but the ways in which history, religious clerics and men who are more interested in power that have caused the present pitiable plight of Muslim women. She therefore in her preface summarises all what she has to convey to her readers, and, hence, by taking these points into account I will in my research, look at how she has approached each area.

In *Barsa*, there is a preface, a foreword note written by A. P. Kunjaamu and an introductory chapter before the tale formally begins. I did not, when I read the novel for the first time, find it unusual or to be frank, note it; back then it just seemed normal and a style which went with the structure. But while I was re-reading the novel for research I was intrigued by the elaborate pattern of 'introducing' a subject thus. It was as

if she is explaining as to why she chose the particular area for her novel, trying to give a convincing reason behind her action, trying to say again and again that she is not a misfit, nor one who is acting against the religion. The preface introduces the 'contradictions', to use Nomani's usage, that is voiced by others and that she finds in her religion. Then she brings in a comment or two about the works that shares her concerns and speaks about Barlas and Mernissi and how scholars like them also feel the need like her to view religion from a woman's angle. And as an answer to her would-be-critics she makes it clear that her knowledge of Islam and its holy texts is not shoddy and she even gets to preparing a list of her readings that she had gone through before writing the novel and peppers it further by saying that "I am not a scholar (in matters relating to Islam). But (apart from the books she has read) experiences in life and intuitions guide me further in writing" (Mumthas 2007: 8; translation of all comments and dialogues of this work are mine).

The preface begins with Iranian thinker Abdul Karim Soroush's words which deal with the agony and dilemma that reformers of religion have to face. Mumthas in the preface confesses that she faces the dilemma, that she is anxious whether she will be convincing enough and that she fears she will be outcasted and ousted by others in the society. She narrates her experience of having attended a Muslim- non Muslim debate in Kozhikode and the query raised by a person takes hold of her thoughts. The question was: "The terrorist who believes in complete Islamic rule as the one answer to all problems, who slaughters others to attain the objective; the pious and peace loving Muslim believer who extends a helping hand to all in need; and the Muslim secularist who believes in unity and brotherhood among all religions vouch in unison that their beliefs and actions are based on the Quran. Why is so huge a disparity present in Quranic interpretations? If indeed there exists such contradictions in it then why don't people like you, who claim to be intellectuals, attempt to re-write or re-interpret the text according to the age and culture involved?" (7; translation mine) Mumthas who shares the thought attempts in this work of hers to read and to re-interpret the Quran, not to get to the roots of terrorism or intolerance associated with the religion but to get to the roots of gender as explained or envisioned by the Quran.

Now, this attempt of hers or of Nomani's or to say of anyone like Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, Fatima Mernissi or Saba Mahmood need not be one which will go well with the sentiments and beliefs of all Muslims, or even all Muslim women; yet it is an attempt indeed to reclaim women's right to have a say about her role and place in her religion, to not having to give way to other's thoughts and judgements about her without a fight.

A. P. Kunjaamu's foreword is structured as to render a certain sense of credibility to Mumthas' views. He shares his thoughts on women as explained by the Quran and portrays the different ways in which hadiths talks about them. He further complicates the question of women in Islam by talking about the contradictions in the history and interpretations relating to them. By comparing the main character Sabitha to Hajar, Aishah and Sukaina, he elevates her position to one who is fit to speak about religion and to question it when necessary. He further explains as to how Mumthas' work is different from the works that has had Muslim women as protagonists. While the works of Basheer, N. P. Muhammed and those of M.T.Vasudevan Nair portrayed the life that these women lead in the societies, none actually ventured deep into the spiritual life of the characters. *Barsa* however he says, is a Muslim woman's reading of Islam and by reading it they are attempting to embrace it.

Both the works therefore utilize the spirit of free inquiry that Islam encourages and the works are therefore a journey through Islam, the cultural diversity that exists in it and the quest for the rightful position of women in it. The primary texts taken for study are Asra Q. Nomani's *Standing Alone in Mecca: A Pilgrimage into the Heart of Islam* and Khadija Mumthas' *Barsa.* However, articles on women and Islam that have come in various magazines and online journals like *Al Jazeera*, *Foreign Policy* and *Guardian* has been read and followed to get a general outlook of the recent state of women in different parts of the world. The methodology I have followed throughout the study is one of textual analysis. I have read the two works closely and between the lines to relate it to the theories at hand.

Secondary sources directly pertaining to the novel was next to nil when I started with the research. I say so because *Barsa* is now a widely discussed and debated novel in Kerala and the interest it generates in the academic circles of Kerala and outside has increased manifold. Hence, though all the secondary materials I had while formulating my arguments was the interview that Khadija Mumthas gave to Myna Umaiban in the *Mathrubhumi* weekly and some articles that had come in the weeklies and periodicals like *Malayalam*, *Madhyamam* etc. and reviews and comments in Malayalam blogs, I believe that more academic articles are at the moment being churned out. Secondary materials on *Standing Alone in Mecca* was even more scarce and all that turned up was two or three reviews in different blogs which either deemed it very good or made it appear an extremely nasty work. This research however has been significantly influenced and shaped by Peter Mandaville's *Transnational Muslim Politics: Reimagining the Umma*, and Dale F. Eickelman and James Piscatori's *Muslim Politics.* Works such as these helped me detach Islam a bit away from its religious side and view it as an influencing factor in shaping the political side of Muslims. Works like Amina Wadud's *Quran and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Texts from a Woman's Perspective* and *Inside the Gender Jihad*, Fatima Mernissi's *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry*, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, Asma Barlas' *"Believing Women in Islam": Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of Qur'an* has played a pivotal role in shaping my understanding of women's place in Quran and has also greatly helped in understanding the angle from which the writers approached Islam.

And apart from literature I was greatly influenced and charged up by some relevant books on sociology, anthropology and internal studies. It was they that largely helped me in placing my theoretical positions right. To name a few, Tala Asad's *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* and *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*; Dale F. Eickelman and James Piscatori's *Muslim Travellers: Pilgrimage, Migration, and the Religious Imagination*; Bobby S. Sayyid's *A Fundamental Fear: Eurocentrism and Emergence of Islamism*;

Fazlur Rahman's *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* have been particularly helpful.

Chapter Outlines

This introduction contains background information about the texts and authors and the research in general

Chapter one entitled "An Old Story: A New Beginning" starts by questioning whether Islam is a monolithic entity as argued by Samuel Huntington and the likes. Their views are infact the old story about Islam which got strengthened with time and which gained popularity post 9/11. This chapter attempts to strike a new beginning by discussing some widely misunderstood concepts like umma, relationship between religion and politics, Muslim identity and Islam's association with modernity. I would employ the above same points to contest the monolithic nature accorded to Islam.

Chapter two is entitled "Islam and Women: A Re-Reading" and the chapter in detail discuss the role and status that women have in Islam, by saying so I mean the role that the Quran guarantees to them. It elaborates on how a hierarchical gender system that holds its sway in most societies in the world establishes male as the normative human being and thereby restricts or sidelines women to a secondary inferior status. This politics of difference though not upheld by Islam is followed by the patriarchal male order in the Muslim republics. This leads to the poor state of women in such societies and their condition are worsened when the Quran itself gets interpreted from a patriarchal perspective. This chapter therefore brings about the discrepancies in the status given to women and voices the need for an egalitarian reading of the Quran.

Chapter three entitled Travel and Transformation talks in detail about travel as a transformative tool and seeks to understand how translocality influences the theory of Islam. I argue that it does so greatly and that the position of women gets influenced as a result of it. Pilgrimages as I see it, are invested with meaning and I discuss how pilgrimages greatly transform the idea that a person has about Islam and how this changed perception motivates them later in life.

Chapter One

An Old Story:

A New Beginning

Verily never

Will God change the condition

Of a people until they

Change it themselves….

(Quran, 13: 11)

For Europe, Islam was a lasting trauma.

(Said 1979: 59)

It was almost two decades back that Samuel P. Huntington wrote about "The Clash of Civilizations". His 1993 article entitled "The Clash of Civilizations?" was published in the then Summer edition of *Foreign Affairs* and was later modified and published as a book in 1996. He expressed his views on what can be called 'the next pattern of conflict'; a conflict that he said would be witnessed by the post Cold War world. The new world will no longer be facing wars based on ideological or economical conflict said he, but would face the ones that are cultural. The new wars he claimed would be along "the fault lines between civilizations" (Huntington 1996: 32) and after having placed West against Islam, stated that the latter along with Confucianism will arise as the major threat to the former.

But what Huntington failed to attend to was the conflict that goes on within each culture or, to use his terminology, civilization, and the senselessness behind

homogenizing Islam. It is "downright ignorance" as Said writes, to not spare enough time "for the internal dynamics and plurality of every civilization, or for the fact that the major contest in most modern cultures concerns the definition and interpretation of each culture" (2001). "This 'essentializing' of civilizational traditions" says Eickelman and Piscatori, "deflects attention" from the "internal and historical variations" of Islam and from "the vigorous internal debate among their adherents" (2004: 162). "Hegemony in its Western guise is not the only obstacle contemporary Islam need to negotiate; there is also hegemony within it. Across the plurality of Islamist thought *Islam* is still undoubtedly the master signifier, but there is an enormous conceptual diversity as to the proper relationship between this signifier and its signified(s)" (Mandaville 2001: 81-82; emphasis in the original). Hence the idea put forward by Huntington was, to start with, deceptive. The first decade of the twenty first century, beginning with the terrible events of September 2011, has brought Islam back to the debate hall, but for wrong reasons and the tendency to view it as a sealed, non porous entity has increased. I would like to, with the aid of two works I am dealing with, take the readers through the uneven cultural terrains in Islam and would work to question and thereby deconstruct some popular notions about Islam as a monolithic entity.

Asra Q. Nomani has very thoughtfully worded the title of the Indian edition of her book as *Standing Alone in Mecca: A Pilgrimage into the Heart of Islam*, and *Chicago Tribune* has appreciatively reviewed the work as "the ideal introduction to contemporary Islam" (2007: back cover). If not for the catchy title and glossy cover of the work, the potential reader would be tempted to reach for his/her purse after reading the book's blurb which states that it "is a personal narrative…bringing the *changing face of women in Islam* into focus through the unique lens of the hajj"(1; emphasis added). Now why does 'contemporary Islam' and women in Islam perpetually remain under the scanner and why do they get more political and academic attention than say 'contemporary Hinduism' or state of women in Christianity? I consciously avoid, in this study, resorting to Islam's classical texts to understand more about 'contemporary Islam' or 'women in Islam', though they are the most authentic resources to refer to. Instead, I choose to agree with Peter Mandaville who claims that "we learn very little about Islam as a lived experience

by going straight to the books; we learn a great deal, however, if we go to the texts *through the people who read them*." (2001: xii; emphasis original) Hence my study would be concentrating less on Islam per se but "more on the Muslims who, on a daily basis, negotiate the complex, ambiguous circumstances of their lives through Islam" (xii).

Both my works offer to view Islam through Muslim women's eyes; they attempt to interpret it, critique it and live it. Asra Q. Nomani's *Standing Alone in Mecca* details a personal history and journey as the author tries to sort out "the contradictions about religion" (Nomani 2007: ix) and she states that she had started out "very much at odds with" her religion (ix). Nomani's memoir cum travelogue quite 'innocently' brings to us earlier in the book a young Muslim girl in America who immigrated from Mumbai; one who claims to have "lived by most of the hudud*"* (26) till she was twelve, and then who when entering into adulthood dared to challenge and resist "traditional Muslim boundaries"(28). She shares with the readers her junior high journal for Mrs Wendy Alke's English class at Evansdale Elementary School in Morgantown wherein she chronicled her "biking accidents, the kickball games and the other adventures"(26) that vouch for her free spirited character. The journal note would have remained a snippet of her life but for the comment that follows. She writes

> These would have been ordinary childhood stories except that in my life they were also symbolic of the freedoms my parents allowed me as a girl. *In traditional Muslim cultures around the world*, girls aren't allowed to ride bikes in public; they aren't allowed to play baseball with their brothers; and they most certainly aren't allowed to walk home alone. (27; emphasis added)

Her narrative therefore comes as an explanation as to why she resisted and challenged "traditional Muslim boundaries" when entering adulthood. Her lines, as we notice here, are layered with a certain amount of prejudice that she has towards the condition of Muslim women in the less blessed corners of the world and she states, subtly though, that America has had a great say in freeing her from such restrictions. Her pride at being an American and therefore better off than other Muslim women is evident throughout the

book, and it is from this high pedestal that she views Muslim culture and traditions before her life altering journey to Mecca-Medina.

Part One of the book entitled 'Embarking on the Journey: January 2001 to February 2003' bring before us the personal and religious anxieties of Nomani, who had been a polished and well placed journalist at *Wall Street Journal* for twelve years and later at *Salon* magazine, and her struggle to come to terms with her American self and Muslim roots. She narrates how she leaves her American Lutheran boyfriend who "fully loved her" (33) to marry a Pakistani man only because "Muslim guilt set in" (33). And then when later, after her divorce, she conceives following a relation with her Pakistani boyfriend who eventually leaves her and does not support her decision "to keep the baby" (40), she records her mental angst thus

> *Within me was an American woman* who believed in free will and thus knew that I had the right to keep my baby and raise him with my head held high. But the *voices of my religion's traditions* also spoke strongly inside of me. I was consumed of the shame of ignoring the rulings of shari'a, the 'divine Islamic law'."(40-41; emphasis added)

The 'Muslim guilt' that convinces her not to marry a non Muslim man and her choice to go 'against the religion' to bear her son, are all decisions more personal and individual than religious. She attempts to, in the first part of the book, find a place for women in Islam but has preconceived notions about their helplessness; and it is quite clear from her generalized statements that she has not given Islam and its 'complicated stands' much thought before. Her journey is a journey in search of a religion that she wants to own, but one that would not conflict much with her American self.

Khadija Mumthas' *Barsa* on the other hand, presents a newly converted Muslim woman's encounter with the religion she has embraced; the novel is the chief protagonist Sabitha's journey to find the true soul of Islam. In this work too, the protagonist travels far from her native land to Mecca; but for better job prospects. So the women travel and they travel to the heart land of Islam, but they are what Mandaville calls "culturalist" (2001: 110) Muslims. The term according to him refers "to those people whose… roots

qualify them as Muslims, but who do not regularly practice their religion."(111)   And therefore they are people "whose sense of identity is not usually strongly informed by Islam."(111) Mumthas' work brings before the readers the heterogeneity of Islam as a religion and brings to us the intra cultural conflicts within the religion. Nomani and Sabitha are self proclaimed "modern Muslim women" (Nomani 2007: 32) whose Muslim identity is different from and are at loggerheads with the Muslim identity of the women they meet.

Umma: Then and now

But before going into the nuances of identity, allow me to turn the chapter a bit more turbulent by introducing a concept that more or less made Huntington speak of an 'Islamic whole' and that which brought in new experiences in the lives of the protagonists. The second part of *Standing Alone in Mecca* titled 'Starting the Pilgrimage: February 2003' begins with Nomani's encounter with *umma* (emphasis added), a term which refers to "the world community of Muslims…that had its initial incarnation in the original group that accompanied Muhammad on the hijra in 622" (Mandaville 2001: 71). The history of Islam marks September of year 622 as the month when Prophet Muhammad "followed several dozens of his followers from their native city of Mecca on the hijra (migration) to Medina….The umma of Medina was originally a sort of 'defence pact' which united the city's clans in a pledge to protect Muhammad and his followers" (70) from the rival clans of Mecca who sought to murder the Prophet.

However the idea of umma cannot simply be chained down to history, as it emerged and fashioned itself to suit the times. Changing times and shifting politico-cultural scenarios made umma egress its 'strictly religious' garb and imbibe political character. In the process it became more flexible and heterogeneous; sects came up and offshoot groups emerged, "many territorial dynasties were established" and "'Islamic' capitals" came up in places as varied as Baghdad, Damascus, Cairo, Constantinople, among others (73). "This geographic plurality was accompanied by a new diversity in religious thought. Islam's initial schism, that between Sunni and Shi'a, became more

complex as subdivisions within these approaches began to develop. In the Sunni tradition, for example, there eventually emerged four distinct systems of jurisprudence, each with its own founding father and chain of disciples" (73).

Umma thence materialized as a complex system which had both religious and political significance, and this modified structure played a great role in "'reawakening' Muslim conscience" and unity in the wake of European imperialism (74). But, to rally against colonial powers behind the larger banner of umma can indeed be seen as placing one's "loyalties" more on it than on "the nation state"; and it will not be overtly wrong to call such a tendency "implicitly anti-national" (77). Mandaville, however, points out in his work that "those who advocated umma" did so by potraying it as "an autonomous alternative with no European ideological baggage (i.e. a non-Western form of modernity)" (77). All the murmurs criticizing the system had to therefore give in, for the final prize it sought to win was the same as nationalism. Umma thereby rose as a political community, but not the one that was at the Prophet Muhammed's time; the "Islamic political community" of his time "ceased to exist and *Muslim* political community – as a space of negotiation – came to take its place" (73).

Nomani expresses her amazement at the sight of Sudanese, Afghan, Indian and Palestinian Muslim women, who have all, like the American women in her group, come together for a common purpose – to perform hajj. When the awe that fills her at the first sight of umma settles in, another aspect captivates her – its "plurality" (Nomani 2007: 59). She writes, "Although Islam is rooted in the Arab world, fewer than 15 percent of the world's Muslims are Arab, and half of the world's Muslims live in South Asia and Southeast Asia. The countries with the largest Muslim population are Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Egypt, Turkey, Iran and Nigeria" (60). But the bond she has with the women around, she realized, was pre-decided and bound by the community they belonged to. Nomani sees unfamiliar and new faces all around her and her prior experience with her local community, she says, was never quite enriching as there was absolutely no scope for conversations (159). Her intimidation however comes down as she sees markers that gives her the sensation that she did belong there with them. "The

modest uniformity" of hajj dress symbolized for her the community's "entry into a state of purity and spirituality" (61), then the insight that they were all "privy to the same rites of ritualistic prayer" (65) and profundity of the fact that women "separated by culture, language and economy, were both making a proclamation of faith at precisely the same moment" invigorated Nomani. However, the experience of Sabitha is a bit different as she gets to meet the larger Muslim community in the hospital in Mecca, where she works as a doctor. Doctors, specialists and nurses from various countries including India, Sudan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia share the work space and the patients are not only the affluent and the not so affluent Saudi Muslims, but also poor illegal immigrants from Nigeria, gadamas (maids) from Indonesia and Philippines and immigrants from other countries. Though a recent convert, Sabitha gels well with the community and she take it upon her to understand Islam better and to critique it from a Muslim woman's perspective.

Nevertheless, both the works introduce us to tensions between the political and the religious and what happens when the two intertwine. Sabitha in Mumthas' work is once penalized by the Saudi traffic police for travelling in a taxi with an unrelated male. It is the law of the land bound by Wahhabism that no woman shall travel with a male with whom she does not have blood relation. And earlier in her book, Nomani writes that her first attempt to go for hajj failed as she did not have a *mahram* (emphasis added). She is told that "in Saudi Arabia… a Muslim woman must do hajj with a mahram, either a husband or an adult male escort who can't legally marry her – her father, son or brother. Uncles and cousins do not qualify."(Nomani 2007: 30) And she also fears that she would be judged as a "law breaker" in Saudi, for the "countries' strict interpretation of sharia" (48) would raise charges of zina against her which would send her straight to be stoned.

Readers are constantly pushed to ask the question as to whether indivisible and undying bonds *still* exist between politics and religion in Islam and as to whether it will serve well for the well being of the larger community (emphasis added). Early days of Islam saw Prophet Muhammad as the spiritual leader and chieftain of the political community, and it is true that "the defense of the institution of Caliphate was also predicated on the belief that religious and political power needed to be combined in one

office" (Eickelman and Piscatori 2004: 46). But as Eickelman and Piscatori rightly points out, historical records of Islam show that the political and religious had become separable "not long after the death of the Prophet and the establishment of the dynastic rule" (46). A quite valid instance of this was the rift in the legal system. Diwan al- mazalim (board of grievances) started functioning alongside shari'a courts and this incident "came close to the notion of a division between secular and religious courts"; for the institutions represented two different authorities, that of God and the ruler (Coulson 1964: 128-129).

Then how did Islam started getting politicized? How did the impression that Islam hardly makes any division between its religious and political realms influence the thought process of the society? And afterall, is this indivisibility beneficial to the umma? Ayatollah Khomeini was a great supporter of politico-religious unity and he popularized the idea of Islamic republic with the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Khomeini's will said : "As for [those] who consider Islam separate from government and politics, it must be said to these ignoramuses that the Holy Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet contain more rules regarding government and politics than in other matters" (cited in Eickelman and Piscatori 2004: 49). He also suggested that ruling and implementation of laws of the county's subjects cannot be merely entrusted on the kings but that the "Islamic government requires a governor who knows the shari'a – *the* sole law – and is just" (49). Shari'a was hailed as divine and hence was to be protected, obeyed and upheld according to Khomeini. Though this was so, this union of religion and politics was strongly opposed by many.

When heads of the nations of Malaysia and Tunisia spoke against the intermingling of religion and politics, Islamic scholars like Fazlur Rahman saw "the injection of politics into the religious sphere" as "deleterious" (1982: 140). He argued that instead of a true and faithful adherence to the shari'a for effective political governance, political groups and elites are exploiting Islamic concepts and distorting it for their personal gain. "The slogan 'in Islam religion and politics are inseparable' is employed to dupe the common man into accepting that, instead of politics or the state serving the long-range objectives of Islam, Islam should come to serve the immediate and

myopic objectives of party politics" wrote Rahman (140). In *Barsa* a character named Abdu shares his experience as a cleaning worker in the Haram mosque. He narrates how in the month of Muharram in Hijara 1400 (1979 C.E.) Haram was seized by a group of fifty who condemned socially and religiously the then regime and who wanted to free the holy space from such a repressive rule. Here we see the religious space being used to express the discontentment with the political rule, even and at the expense of one's life. Secularism was seen by many, including theorists like Nurcholish Madjid, as the one saving concept when the likes of Ayatollah Khomeini opposed it. And finally, Eickelman and Piscatori state that it is highly debatable as to whether the union of politics and religion is beneficial; they come up with three points as to prove otherwise:

> "First, it exaggerates the uniqueness of Muslim politics. Religion is obviously central to the political life of peoples around the world…. Second, the emphasis on *din wa-dawla* inadvertently perpetuates 'Orientalist' assumptions that Muslim politics, unlike other politics, are not guided by rational, interest-based calculations….Third, the *din wa-dawla* the assumption contributes to the view that Muslim politics is a seamless web, indistinguishable in its parts because of the natural and mutual interpenetration of religion and politics" (2004: 56-57, emphasis original).

However Saudi Arabia, where both the works in this study are centered, is a near perfect example of a society wherein religion and politics forms a strong indivisible bond. Nomani's statement "I had to admit something: I was afraid for my safety. I was in a country that was totally defined by the repressive ideology that I was learning about, Wahhabism"(2007: 67).

In the mid-eighteenth century, Muhammad al-Saud (r. 1745-65) was a local prince and Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-87) a zealous but unsuccessful puritanical reformer until they "concluded a *mutually advantageous alliance*" (Eickelman and Piscatori 2004: 60; emphasis added). This alliance, says Eickelman and Piscatori, propelled the Saudis to control of most of the Arabian peninsula and solidified "Wahhabism" as a major reform movement in modern Muslim history. "In the present period, the symbiotic relationship continues between the political and religious

establishments: the monarchy needs the cooperation and approbation of the *ulama* to enhance its legitimacy, while the *ulama* need royal support and patronage to maintain their privileges and, to a lesser extent, to wield influence over policy making" (60). Hence the union of religion and politics has a much wider dimension than mere adherence or reverence to Islamic laws.

Identity and Identification

It goes without saying that umma as a Muslim political community is subject to constant pressure from religion and politics of the locality that seeks to mould it and define it. Here, the 'political' should not be equated with the activities that "fall within the remit of state structures (i.e. politics = the state)", but it can mean to include "countless daily social practices" which may have some political aspects (Mandaville 2001: 8-9). But the question worth asking is as to what significance does umma has in the lives of Muslim women? When umma is to be understood as a large community, does it mean that it is to be understood as an imaginary 'nation' unmarked by political or geographical boundaries but 'shadow lined' by a common faith? If so, how far is the identity of its women a marker of the identity of umma and what role does the latter play in shaping the identity of the former? Herein I would like to bring in the argument of Lila Abu-Lughod who says "women have become potent symbols of identity and visions of society and the nation" and that "in India, not just Muslim but Hindu communities have made women symbols of identity and debated their *proper roles* in light of specific visions of the nation and society" (1998: 3-4, emphasis added).

Identity in the humanistic model is a simple, uncomplicated concept: a unique and stable idea that defines one's self better; a woman, an Indian, a Muslim, a student, single, are all terms that define me. But what is important is that these words singly or wholly are not what I am, they diverge and converge to define the person I am at different times and at different situations. However, in the wake of recent happenings like terror attacks and religious fundamentalism "the view propagated in western scholarly writings, as well as by many Muslims, is that religion is the defining element of Muslim identity. Other dimensions of identity-formation such as class, gender or national belonging are

treated as secondary to religion" (Ismail 2004: 615). And it is quite a commonly felt sentiment that Tabish Khair voices when he says, "Muslim is *not* the only thing I can call myself. And yet, over the years I have had my nose rubbed into this one 'identity' more often than I wish to recall" (Verma 2008: x, emphasis original). But what is worse, says Peter Mandaville, is the "increasing attempt to explain the acts of violence, unleashed by those claiming Muslim identity, by reference to something called Islam. It is not just the Western media but also the 'analysts' and observers who increasingly popularize the trend" (2001: xi).

The protagonists in the works chosen for study are both Muslim women who from America and India travel to Middle East. Their identity is shaped not just by the nation they belong to but also by the regional culture they were brought up in, and not just by the religion Islam but also by the way Islam was practiced by them. It was stated earlier that both Nomani and Sabitha are 'culturalist' Muslims; so how was their identity shaped by the travel and by their exposure to umma in Middle East? Their journey and their sojourn places them beyond national boundaries, and hence grants them an "interstitial identity"—a 'third space' if to resort to Homi Bhabha's terminology – in which the "politics of the majority society is not embraced, but neither is that of the 'homeland'" (151). John Eade in his essay *Reconstructing Places*, writes about interstitial identity by saying that the individual(s) "navigate the disjunctures between different political and cultural formations" while trying to make sense of the differences in modes "which do not necessarily conform to a specific tradition. Their journey" he writes "is largely an imaginative, reflexive movement where they can draw on traditions in other parts of the world and in the process construct their own translation" (1997: 128). This interstitial identity gives them a hawk's vision, which aids them not only to analyse the present and changed state of affairs but also to compare it with what was back at their homeland. And here we must keep in mind that though they are not willingly embracing the politics of the majority society they cannot help being unaffected by it; what follows is an endless conflict of ideas.

Hence before evaluating the question asked earlier as to how the contact with umma as a Muslim political community shape the identity of women, attention should be paid to explaining the state they are in and the conflict they are undergoing. As the works of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe suggests, social 'antagonism' ends up being the result in most cases. Antagonism implies to a condition "in which the differentiation of identity – the split between us and them—begins to appear as something more than just difference. In such an antagonistic situation, one identity (the self) comes to see the other as a force seeking to negate its identity" (Mandaville 2001: 9). "From that moment on," writes Mouffe, "any form of us/them relationship – whether it be religious, ethnic, economic or other – becomes political" (1994: 108). Hence antagonism is a product of the constant conflicts between identities, wherein one identity is forced to negotiate with the other. Mouffe is of the view that:

> Looking at the issue of identity in this way transforms the way we think of the political. The political can no longer be located as present only in a certain type of institution, as representative of a sphere or level of society. It should rather be understood as a dimension inherent in all human society which stems from our very ontological condition (108).

In the works in question, we see that it is the women who are more affected by this politics of identity. Though Rasheed and Zafar Nomani share the journey and sojourn, it is in fact Sabitha's and Asra Nomani's life that turn tumultuous; men as we see in both the works are never asked to conform to the rules of the society. The very first day in Vilada hospital introduces Sabitha to the silent and invisible rules and expectations that she has to keep upto. When Dr. Waheeda comments that "it won't be advisable to show your hair off like this", Sabitha wonders whether anyone and everyone around don the garb of uprightness to guard the other from going astray (Mumthas 2007: 28, translation mine). It is not the dress alone or the few strands of hair slipping out of Sabitha's hijab that launches a furore in the hospital. Even the medical case sheets written by her in English invites criticism; when the Saudi nursing staff complains and later advises her to start writing in Arabic, they take extra care to add that the other doctors like Waheeda and Shaheen, who also are from India have learned to do so. When Sabitha retaliates

saying that "since the case sheet is in English, the orders too can be written in English", the nursing staff take down the translated orders and leave (97-98). The readers feel that their unasked question stays heavy in the air till the end of the novel: If others can learn the language and the culture and conform to them, then why can't you? For Sabitha, her views are good enough to fight for and she lives and behaves to do justice to her 'rights and wrongs', but this attitude is constantly put to test throughout the work.

It is here that we understand the idea of political identity by Chantal, Mouffe and Mandaville better. "The ontological dimension of the political" writes Mandaville, "is related to one's assertion of a particular identity because that assertion is, in effect, a claim to 'be' – to exist according to one's construction of a particular identity – and, furthermore, to have that existence recognized by the other" (2001: 10). As in the case of Sabitha, antagonism arises when the "recognition is withheld" and "when the other attempts to force a discrepant identity" (10).

"The second possible manifestation of the political", writes Mandaville, "involves ethical claims" (10). Such claims can rise when one has a notion that whatever one does is indeed 'the good' and 'the right'; the result of this being the politicisation of identity which in turn "constructs (new) political identities" (10). "A politic*ised* identity" is therefore, "a political identity which has been placed in a situation of antagonism such that its ethical claims are challenged by counter-claims from other political identities" (10; emphasis original). The identities of Sabitha and Nomani are hence being constantly politicised and they are made to stand for their views and rights at every juncture. In *Barsa,* Khadija Mumthas brings in this antagonistic state quite clearly when she says that a "silent yet prominent division" emerged between the Saudis and foreigners when the number of Saudi doctors increased in the pediatric and gynecology sections. Saudi women saw themselves as ideal and morally upright when the others, who were not as strict as them regarding their dress and behavior, were seen as 'loose' women (2007: 140, translation mine). Sabitha who did not cover her ears with the hijab is seen to be at first given a 'hint' when Dr. Rahila advises her saying, "Doctor, even when the ear piece of the stethoscope is placed over the hijab can you hear properly. We all are doing so. You

should give it a try!" (140). And when she declines the idea, Sabitha is given a vision of the punishment she will have to face in her after life in hell. Intervening in another's personal freedom is sanctioned when the intention is to lead her through the 'right path', and when the intrusion is subtly rejected the reaction turns more or less ugly. The antagonism between two oppositely placed political identity can be seen when the relatively "modern" Dr. Iqbal comments to Sabitha that, "A niqab; think you too can don one, doctor" (141). She could read beyond the banter in his tone, all which directed to mean that I am 'speaking for your own good'! Hence a particular form of politics is portrayed to be in action in Saudi society which is directly opposed to the one the protagonists are used to. Same is the sentiments expressed by Asra Nomani in the chapter 'The Devil's in the Details'; she writes of an elderly woman from Sudan who snapped at Nomani's mother saying "Your hajj is not accepted. You are showing your hair" when she emerged from shower with wet, loose hair (2007: 162). These are examples of essentialist ways of cementing one's political identity.

However, the truth is that identity cannot be simplified thus by standardizing it. It is interesting to note the distinction that Gerd Baumann gives to the 'dominant' and 'demotic' discourses on culture and community. He says that the dominant discourse aims towards "closure", it seeks to "reduce cultural complexity to the simple equation: Culture = community = ethnic identity = culture" (1997: 214). Whereas demotic discourse, according to Baumann, does not simplify culture for it sees "cultural identity as contingent and negotiable" (214). Hence what we have in the works of Nomani and Mumthas is a display of the dominant and demotic discourses on culture, and the critique of the popular, all encompassing versions of political and cultural identity.

What strikes us the most then, is the fact that it is not just the likes of Huntington who held essentialist monolithic views on Islam and identity. What we have in the texts are not a Westerner's view of the Other, but on the other hand the 'Other' is the majority or the dominant group here. As seen from the texts they do hold unilateral view of 'the good' and 'the right'. And these views form the impetus behind their action and direction. Pnina Werbner in her essay on essentialisation writes that "A moral

community is not a unity. It is full of conflict, of internal debate about right and wrong…Such debates…involve competition for the right to name: Who are we? What do we stand for? What are we to be called? Are we Muslims? Democrats? Pakistanis? Socialists? Blacks? Asians?" (1997: 239). One method, according to Lila Abu-Lughod, to avoid "essentialist modes of analyzing culture is to 'write against culture'. By this, she means that we need to move away from conception of culture as something that can be fixed, measured off and described – in short, we need to stop using culture as an ascriptive category" (cited in Mandaville 2001: 41). It is in *Barsa* that we are introduced to the concept of 'good' Muslim; Sabitha is called so by Ashique. The novel brings in the conflict between the good and bad ways of being a Muslim, how to, what to and what not to do to be classified as a good one in the eyes of others. We see Sabitha arguing with others like Dr. Aayisha and Dr. Tahira that being a 'good' human being is more important than winning the title of a 'good practicing' Muslim. When the category of 'good' is created, then automatically we are pushed to think about the alternate side of the coin. So, who is a bad Muslim? Throughout the work Sabitha has to undergo a lot of criticism and ridicule for her difference in ideas, thoughts and practices, but towards the end we see her being called a 'good' Muslim. Does it mean a reversal of ideas? Does it, to the least extent, sow the idea that being a non-conformist is better than being a conformist? By setting Sabitha as the bench mark does the novel intend to study the other women, women who despite their education are not as enlightened and as 'modern' in outlook? Before addressing the question on modernity allow me to tie the last loose thread of this section – how does umma and the society of Middle East influence the protagonists and how their identities are moulded.

When introduced to the umma and conflicting identities, the protagonists are pushed to reconsider their religious position, and in a Muslim diaspora where they, as the 'modern' ones, are the minority, have their thought process affected and altered. In *Barsa* it is not just Sabitha who enters into this conflict mode but also her husband Rasheed. We see them resorting to diverse ways of adaptation, which infact represents to us the two ways in which people are absorbed into a new society. Rasheed, though born a Muslim was never that close to Islam as now; Haram and Mecca instills in him a strong desire to

study and read more about Islam. His encounter with his mysterious friend from past opens for him new paths and routes to enter the heartland of Islam and he gets immersed in the experience. Sabitha's narration paints for us a picture of Rasheed who spends his time reading more on Islamic history and the religious texts, who goes travelling to all the places that Prophet Muhammad had once been in or gone to, and whose study limits the time he spend with the kid. Rasheed is seen to adapt to the new society particularly with the aid of his religion and its accepted and given norms; his association with the latter and harmony with the former is seen to strengthen over the time. But Sabitha chooses a different path, rather than adopting and accepting the values of the society and teachings of the books, she re-reads and re-asserts the texts. This results in re-interpretation, or rather as she says, the true understanding of the religious texts. It is the new society and the antagonistic identities around her that prods her to read and go searching; the result is a reading and an understanding of Quran and hadith from a woman's perspective. And as Mandaville suggests, this is the way in which "new interpretations of the classic texts are used to encourage and legitimise a more prominent position for women in the public sphere" (2001: 110). Hence identities are not just redefined and asserted but umma also gives the protagonists a chance to understand the religion and community they belong to.

How possible is the impossible: Islam and Modernity

Eventhough the displaced state relegates the protagonists, Sabitha and Nomani, to a minority status; they are seen to be perceived by others with a mixture of respect and tolerance. They are presented as women who think, who question, who criticize; more and above, as ones who do not conform to all the otherwise accepted norms of the society. Now, Nomani as I wrote before, is a self proclaimed 'modern' woman and, as we understand from the text, her 'Americanness' has much to do with this proclamation. Even Sabitha is different from the lot, she reads to understand more about the religion she has embraced and does not skip any chance to present her doubts before the readers or the other characters in the novel. She is also one who does not give in to emotions, whose views about people are objective and measured, and simply put, one whom the word 'rational' seems to suit the most. There are also many more instances in *Barsa* where the

words 'modern' and 'modernity' comes in; all to mark out and describe some exceptional characters. Dr. Iqbal, the Sudanese doctor, who has earned supposedly the highest degree in gynecology from England, is described at the beginning of the novel as a person nurturing a 'modern' outlook. But then later in the novel this man opts for an arranged marriage and breaks up with his English girlfriend citing 'cultural difference' as a grave problem. His advice to Sabitha to don a niqab is mused over by her and she feels that his modern outlook has waned over the years; and that the holy city and falling years has reoriented his viewpoints (Mumthas 2007: 141). Being 'modern', having 'modern' outlook are all hence highly regarded in both the works. So, if we conclude from the words and views of the writers, a modern person is one who upholds certain standards in his/her life, whose decisions are guided not by tradition or religious ideologies but by reason. He/she is not one who is cramped by customs, nor is the person's growth proportional to the space allotted to by the accepted norms of the society.

What draws me to this discussion on 'modern man/woman' and 'modern society' are some lines in the two works. Sabitha who is a recent convert is asked earlier in the novel as to "how she feels" (47) in the new place and culture. She answers saying that she has "doubts, confusions too" (47) and wonders whether it will be blasphemous to speak them out. Though lightly, she adds on the question as to whether "Muslims have the might to stand criticisms?" (47) When Dr. Muhammed explains to her the evolution of Islam, she voices a commonly felt doubt: "Isn't it because we still adhere to the old strict rules and prohibitions of the religion that we are being labeled 'old fashioned' and unprogressive? Isn't that a reason why we are being ridiculed?" (49, translation mine). She is tried to be pacified by pointing out that "Islamic laws and the adherence to it has indeed stopped Muslims from slipping into the whirlpool of Western materialism and capitalism". Here we see that Dr. Muhammed does not stop her when Sabitha says that Muslims stick to the age old customs and practices, nor does he stop her when she says that such a tendency can pull them ages back in this fast moving world. All he says is that traditions keep Muslims away from Western trends. So to put it simply, does it not mean that Islam is not modern or that it is keeping away from being modern by holding on to

its traditions? And does the conversation not hint to the readers that by being traditional we are saved from some of the appendages of modernity, say materialism and capitalism?

As Eickelman and Piscatori points out in their work, "'Mecca or mechanization' was the phrase that epitomized modernization theory as applied to Middle Eastern and Muslim societies" (2004: 22). Many including the late Shah of Iran were of the view that Islam as a religion can never be modernized for its stringent traditions and rules. So what is meant by being 'modern'? In everyday life, we imagine that to be 'modern' is generally to be up to date, progressive, liberal and rational. The imagination of 'modern era' is formed by particular characteristics; rational thinking, capitalism, the emergence of nation-states, industrialization, improvements in communications and transport, formation of individuated identity, the control of violence by the state, surveillance, constant political struggle, an increasingly urban way of life, turbulence and continuous change and more importantly the decline of tradition and of religious conviction (Thomas 2004: 2, Giddens 1991: 15).

Huntington too furnishes his readers with some handy indicators as to what modernization means, according to him it "involves industrialization, urbanization, increasing levels of literacy, education, wealth and social mobilization, and more complex and diversified occupational structures" (1996: 68). The present global scene however gives us a picture that all of the above pointers or atleast most of them are present even in the so called Islamic republics. To talk about Nomani's work for instance, in the chapter 'House of Saud, House of Donuts' she casually suggests that "vanity was universal" (2007: 78) for she sees billboards of Rado watches and advertisements of Toshiba laptops, also those of Sealy mattresses and Pepsi! She expresses her surprise by saying that "I had so wondered what it would feel like to enter Mecca. It felt quite familiar. I could have been entering any other urban capital of the world" (78). Fourteen-story Mecca Sheraton hotel, house of donuts, KFC, it was all there; just as in Los Angeles or California or New York she adds. So is it just the trapping of 'tradition' that is problematic?

It is also interesting to note the words of Ayatollah Khomeini, who is often presented as "a medieval cleric, removed from the modern world and committed to 'turning back the clock of history'" (cited in Sayyid 1997: 89). Imam Khomeini's will said:

> The claim that Islam is against modern (technical) innovations… is nothing but an idiotic accusation. For, if by manifestations of civilization it is meant technical innovations, new products, new inventions, and advanced industrial techniques which aid in the progress of mankind, then never has Islam, or any other monotheist religion, opposed their adoption. On the contrary, Islam and the Holy Qur'an emphasize science and industry (cited in Eickelman and Piscatori 2004: 22).

Such antagonistic claims thus dispel the view that modernity in its entirety is rejected by Islam or those strict traditions that Muslims hold on to. What it is to be therefore understood is that modernity was (or *is*) neither spatially nor temporally homogeneous (Thomas 2004: 3; emphasis added). For many, modernity refers "to a historical, empirical instance", which emphasises 'modernity' as "a historical social formation" (Wagner P 2001: 3). Some uses modernity as "a philosophical one", which, according to Tomas, "refers to a phase of history that succeeded the medieval era in the West" (Tomas 2004:2). Hence, the term 'modernity' inevitably carries a double connotation; it is always both philosophical and empirical, or both substantive and temporal (Yack 1997), or as used by Peter Wagner it is "both conceptual and historical" (Wagner P 2001: 3). However, along with economic specialization, the traditional got displaced and religion was pushed out of public life. And as Black rightly observed, "If one thinks of modernization as the integration or the reintegration of societies on the basis of new principles, one must also think of it as involving the disintegration of traditional societies" (1966:27).

To take Saudi Arabia for instance, the continuing influence of Islamic ideologies in the educational and legal system along with the strong intermingling of religion in the politics of the nation has reduced it to the stature of a "fundamentalist state" in the eyes of numerous Western writers (Asad 1993: 208). The "official

commitment to upholding 'traditional Islam' in a society undergoing rapid modernization is regarded by Western observers as the source of serious tensions" for they believe that "*refusal to change* is the essence of tradition" (209, emphasis added). Eickelman and Piscatori also share the view that there is an ongoing tendency among both Muslims and non Muslims to believe that the Islamic traditions are "fixed" (2004: 28). 'Refusing' to change was cited by many as not a "reasoned criticism" of the system but simply as an "irrational rejection of everything 'modern'" (Asad 1993: 209). But how can it be? If innumerable techniques like that of "paved roads, new modes of building and printing, electricity, new medicines and types of medical treatment" were adopted by Saudi Arabia from foreign lands does it not mean that every change is not blindly opposed? In this light we can view Mumthas' description of the medical facilities that are made available to the patients in the hospitals in Mecca and compare it with the deplorable conditions of government run hospitals in Kerala.

When the common belief is that the traditions are unchanging, the reality is that it is also in a state of 'break and make' like all other systems. But unlike others, the changes in tradition happen gradually and over a span of time. "Under the guise of" returning to "a more legitimate earlier practice", traditions can be "profoundly and consciously modified and manipulated" and can even be "created through shared practice" (Eickelman and Piscatori 2004: 28). The changing economic and political trends can also have a great say in bringing about a change in the traditions, as witnessed in Iran during the Iranian Revolution. And as the works of Nomani and Mumthas tries to clarify, 'a journey into the heart of Islam' i.e. a hajj pilgrimage, can be transformative beyond words; the journey brings them to an alternative and better understanding of Islam and what follows is a struggle against the existing system to change it and to bring it in line with what they think is more 'appropriate'. As the next chapter puts forward, the writers quote the lives of women characters in Quran to support their claims, the past is therefore revisited and materials are unearthed and brought back to life to prove the claim that their argument is much more 'genuine' and 'traditional' than the existing ones. Hence traditions also can be changed if the change is undertaken to bring about a 'more legitimate' practice.

As Hobsbawm puts it rightly, the invention of tradition is the "process of formalization and ritualisation, characterized by reference to the past" (1983: 4-5). Invented traditions, says Eickelman and Piscatori, can emerge from the shared practices of extended families, neighborhoods, and tribes; they can develop more formally (as in court etiquette or merchant guilds); or they can be bureaucratically initiated and codified (2004: 29). "Less attention has been given to a critical awareness of how such traditions – claims as to what is *really Islamic*, for example – are affected by political and economic circumstances and changing modes of transmission" (29, emphasis added). Here we see the reorientation of patterns, from strict and unchanging traditions in Islam that is all binding to changing traditions in the name of Islam; the authenticity of which no one can vouch for. Every revisionist claim is theorized and backed up with 'evidences' from past, traditions therefore no longer remain within strict boundaries, but merge and remerge to suit the times and places. Modes of transferring traditions include oral, unwritten traditions are passed on by local authorities, and then there are also traditions learned from state-controlled television and official texts such as schoolbooks (29).

The invention of tradition occurs at all times and in all places, but Hobsbawm indicates, "We should expect it to occur more frequently when a rapid transformation of society weakens or destroys" older social patterns or produces "new ones to which they were not applicable" (1983: 5). This is what happened in Saudi Arabia with the rise of Wahhabism, in Iran after the 1979 revolution and in most other so called Islamic republics. There is an instance in *Barsa* wherein the Indian doctors including Sabitha try to convince a group of Saudi female doctors that veil is not strictly practiced in India; they try to convince them that hijab is more a matter of choice than they think it is. Since India had been under the British rule and never under 'the regime of an Ayatollah Khomeini', its traditions are more aligned with that of the West. It's a whole different story as to how our traditions were hugely altered by the centuries long British rule. Therefore it should be kept in mind that traditions alter and quite contrary to the popular view that traditions in Islam are fixed, "redefinition of sharia'a rules (religious laws) has been amply documented in the history of Islam, even prior to direct European intervention in the Middle East" (Asad 1993: 211).

Another popular view is that shari'a is beyond any form of criticism and this is cited as the reason why it rejects modernization. As I had written earlier in the chapter, Sabitha voices this commonly felt 'doubt' in the form of a rhetorical question; seeming to say to the readers that the answer is already known and well sought out. Talal Asad in his work *Genealogies of Religion* addresses this area and says that though "criticism (naqd) with its adversarial overtones" are discouraged, "advice (nasiha)" is appreciated and it, to this day, remains as "something called for by the shari'a as a precondition of moral rectitude (istiqama)" (1993: 212). He adds by saying that "even in a nonliberal (illiberal) state such as Saudi Arabia, then, there is a tradition of social criticism that is open and institutionalized" which finds its popular expression in "the Friday sermon (khutba) delivered in the larger mosques, but is also practiced in the form of theological lectures in the Islamic universities"(213). Such a mode of criticism was also widely discussed and popularised in the land by the well known khatib and lecturer, Al Za'ayr who was greatly influenced by the hadith entitled "Religion is integrity". What is notable about Za'ayr's lecture, says Asad, is that although it is delivered as a formal exposition of a theological concept, it is at the same time "an exhortation urging upon Muslims the *duty* of criticizing political authority. This stands in sharp contrast to the Enlightenment view of criticism as a *right*, whose exercise is therefore optional" (1993: 214-215, emphasis original).

But the common man's understanding is clouded, for they proceed with the popular notions of relating either traditionalism or fundamentalism with Islam. I am not claiming that the above said ideas of hadith or lectures of Al Za'ayr are finely put into practice nor am I arguing that they are not, but neither the popular ideas nor the selfish doings of some should be the factors on which Islam is defined and understood. It is a fact that European Enlightenment is one of the major points in history from were West perceives the Rest, and as and when the latter's distance from the values propagated during Enlightenment increases, more is it judged to be slipping towards cultural obscurity. Reason as a determining factor became powerful whereas religion got imposed with limits during Enlightenment. And Immanuel Kant enthusiastically proposed back then "what might be called the contract of rational despotism with free reason" wherein he said that "the public and free use of autonomous reason will be the

best guarantee of obedience, on condition, however, that the political principle that must be obeyed itself be in conformity with universal reason" (Foucault 1984: 37). However Talal Asad is of the view that the so called 'universal reason' is a dicey factor; for with the changing socio political conditions, reason may also acquire changing shades of colour. He draws our attention to this by pointing towards the instance when free reason stops contracting with rational despotism and instead contracts with "imperial rational despotism" (Asad 1993: 228). Rationality as such is determined by Western values, then as to what fate awaits the Rest when rationality wears the garb of imperialism? The very colonial project will then be established as a rational and logical solution to the problems around the globe. An answer with respect to the Muslim world is furnished by the famous Middle East scholar Leonard Binder:

> From the time of Napoleonic invasion, from the time of the massacre of the Janissaries, from the time of Sepoy mutiny, at least, the West has been trying to tell Islam what must be the price of progress in the coin of the tradition which is to be surrendered. And from those times, there remains a substantial number that steadfastly argue that it is possible to progress without paying such a heavy cultural price. (1988: 293)

The attack on traditionalism by the rational and secular had its own effects, for it was seen as an attack unleashed on the non Europeans to restructure their lives. "Islamic fundamentalism" says Asad, rose "in response to that power, then… even more thoroughly, … did the intellectual currents called 'modernist Islam' (which is concerned to adapt theology to the models of Christian modernism) and 'Muslim secularism' (which is preoccupied less with theology than with separating religion from politics in national life)" (1993: 228). Not just that, but "progressivist movements in literature and arts, politics and law"(229) have also risen in Muslim societies. Therefore it is not true that Islamic traditions are the major hurdles in the path of modernization of Muslims, traditions as we have seen can be created and re-structured.

However, my aim in this section is not to give a detailed account of the history of the concept of modernity, but rather to study as to how modernity both as a philosophical concept and historical construction influenced the writings of these two

authors and their characters. In addition, how modernity has 'deconstructed', 'reconstructed', 'reconstituted' the meaning of religion, and how these debates constructed a dichotomy between 'public' and 'private' sphere. I will argue that modernity has never been successful enough to 'privatize' the sphere of religion, and religion always was, and is, and will be an important factor in determining the social, political and cultural factors in many societies. Even for all their criticism of the Enlightenment, Adorno and Horkheimer also shared the view that religion must decline as enlightenment progresses. That secularization is part and parcel of modernity and, closely linked to the rise of rational-critical discourse (Calhoun 1992: 36).

But studies and realities around us show that the earlier assumption that religion will tend to disappear with progressive modernization has been more or less discarded, and growing number of studies "have made it plain that religion is by no means disappearing in the modern world" (Asad 2003:1). The role of religion is most aptly put forward by Ali Sharyati, the Iranian sociologist and Islamic reformer, who says "Religion is an amazing phenomenon that plays contradictory roles in people's lives. It can destroy or revitalize, put to sleep or awaken, enslave or emancipate, teach docility or teach revolt" (Cited in Hazleton 2009: 191). Yet many are of the belief that religion should be more or less limited to our private sphere and those who bring it into the discourse of public sphere are not modern.

Barsa brings before us, as I discussed before, the cultural diversity among Muslims around the globe. Sabitha the narrator protagonist studies the characters and by presenting herself against them gives the readers a double shaded picture. We cannot help but notice a pattern that runs throughout the novel, the ones who are *excessively* religious condescend to give Sabitha moral lessons on right and wrong while she, by presenting them as caricatures, highlights her view that the display of religiosity is not what will make them right or good. Somehow the characters who wear their religion on their sleeve are the ones who are presented as highly hypocritical and hollow, while the likes of Dr. Muhammed who believe, who practice, yet who keeps his religion strictly to himself are the ideal beings according to Sabitha's narrative. Dr. Aboobacker from Tamil Nadu falls

into the first category. He leads a fine tuned life, and his every action is in accordance with hadith and moral teachings but he makes it a point that this uniqueness in his nature is noticed, appreciated and followed by others. Aboobacker, with whom the couple stay for a short while, has the habit of discussing religion and imparting moral advice at the dinner table (Mumthas 2007: 44-45). Later in the novel we are given third party information that Aboobacker plans to remarry to keep up with the 'designs of the religion'.

Sabitha is highly critical of Dr. Aasiya and the likes of her for talking and displaying religion at every step and she feels that this indirect and implicit imposition of religion on others will not do anyone any good. Aasiya took special interest in coordinating religious discussions and study classes and talks to women belonging to the Indian-Pakistani family circles (142). She went to Haram every week to offer her prayers and she unofficially gave rise to an exclusive group of doctors in the hospital who talked religion and who spent their free time discussing and debating on the right way of practicing it. Sabitha disagreed with this mode of religiosity and she found it extremely disconcerting when Aasiya started shirking her hospital duties to attend religious study classes. Finally she speaks out saying "Doctor, I believe that committing oneself to one's duties and implementing it perfectly is the best way to exhibit one's faith and belief" (142, translation mine). By presenting the overtly religious in black and white shades, Mumthas has succeeded in presenting Sabitha as what a Muslim should be. It is not that there is a problem in valourising one's protagonist, but the prose works to support the relegation of religious expression from public space.

Though this is what the novel suggests, theorists like Craig Calhoun notices a growing sense that the religion matters more in public. This idea is reinforced by the growth of both Islam and Christianity around the world, including in Middle East, the former Soviet Union and East Asian countries (2011: 118). To elaborate this debate on 'public sphere' and 'private sphere', the dichotomy and the position of religion in it, we have to revisit the 'classical discourse' on public sphere spearheaded by German philosopher Jurgen Habermas.

The concept of the 'public sphere' soared up to academic significance during the 1990s, mainly after Thomas Burger's English translation of Habermas's thesis *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1991 [1962]). Here he begins the debate on public sphere by bringing two categories of Greek origin, up on which the theory was built up. He says "in the fully developed Greek city, state of the sphere of the *polis,* which was common (*koine*) to the free citizens, was strictly separated from the sphere of the oikos, in the sphere of the *oikos,* each individual is in his own realm *(idia)*" (Habermas 1991: 3)*.* In this work he discusses that public arenas like coffee houses, literary clubs, journals, and 'moral weeklies' helped to create an open and egalitarian culture of participation (Henfer 2000: 11). The role of reason is important in the formation of public sphere and that will set the foundation of public discussion and opinion. Alev Cınar argues that Habermas' account of the ideal public sphere is founded on three principles. First, Alev Cinar says, it is "constituted by rational-critical debate on common issues that, subjected to reason, are expected to yield policies that serve the common good" (2005: 35). Quoting Craig Calhoun's reflection on Habermas' public sphere, Cinar makes the second point that, "particular interests and status differences belong to the realm of the private, and therefore should be bracketed out of public debates, because they will work only to distort and obscure the attainment of rational solutions and "common" ideals" (35). Lastly, "the ideal public sphere is inclusive; 'access is guaranteed to all citizens' " (35).

Habermas' concept of public sphere has been celebrated by many social scientists, but at the same time, it has met with a great deal of criticism from many angles, especially in the field of feminist studies (Fraser 1995) and studies on Islamic societies (Asad 1993, Salvatore 2007). Critics argued that the concept did not adequately reflect the historic practices and institutions external to the European social worlds upon which the theory was built. Some critics also pointed out that Habermas' public sphere significantly underplayed the role of religious traditions in its formation, and that it systematically excludes the various kinds of people: women, subjects without property, and members of religious minorities (Calhoun 1997, Salvatore 2007: 2). Craig Calhoun argued that the idea of a single, uniquely authoritative public sphere as presented by

Habermas needs to be questioned and the manner of relations among multiple, intersecting, and heterogeneous publics needs to be considered, simply because it is one of the illusions of liberal discourse to believe that in a democratic society there is a single uniquely authoritative discourse about public affairs (Calhoun 1997: 75-102). Even in public sphere, religion is, for good or bad, a major cohesive force, and in Durkheimian sociological viewpoint religion is crucial provider of "social integration". However, in public sphere power and dominance plays an inevitable role. Moreover, as noted by Talal Asad, "public sphere is a space necessarily articulated by power". He continues by saying that "and everyone who enters it must address power's disposition of people and things, the dependence of some on the goodwill of other" (Asad 2003:184).

The two works, along with the above discussed ideas on identity, modernity and cultural diversity make us wonder how shaky political theories like that of Huntington are. But it is sad that post September 9, 2011 "the basic paradigm of West versus Rest" (Said 2001) has come back in discussion quite insidiously. Said writes

> The carefully planned and horrendous, pathologically motivated suicide attack and mass slaughter by a small group of deranged militants has been turned into proof of Huntington's thesis. Instead of seeing it for what it is-- the capture of big ideas by a tiny band of crazed fanatics for criminal purposes-- international luminaries from former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto to Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi have pontificated about Islam's troubles, and in the latter's case have used Huntington's ideas to rant on about the West's superiority, how "we" have Mozart and Michelangelo and they don't (Said 2001).

Theories such as Huntington's and its revisitations at such troubled times have the potential of generating Islamophobia. It is quite right what Fred Halliday states in his review article titled *Islamophobia Reconsidered* that the term 'Islam' cannot brief how billions of Muslims, living in more than fifty different countries, following different ideologies and belonging to different social groups "relate to the contemporary world, to each other or to the non Muslim world."(Halliday, 1999: 893) If the concept is as coherent as this, then why aren't we moving away from such generalizations?

Even many historical and anthropological studies show that Islam is not a monolithic entity and it is currently represented by divergent views. Such studies highlight that the liberal, secular and modern principles and values can be found in an Islamic framework and it exists in many societies where Muslims are numerically high in number and where they co-exist peacefully with other communities. However, why did people still buy thesis like that of "Clash of Civilization" and "Islamophobic writings"? Why do many believe that, the essential principle of Islam is barbaric, and it has nothing to do with modernity, and all Muslims are terrorists?

An answer to these questions will be more interesting when understanding the basics of knowledge production discussed by Marx in his seminal work on German Ideology. Where he very interestingly pointed out, "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force" (Marx and Engels 1970 (1846): 46). Marx further argued that those who has the means of material production at their disposal, "control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it" (46). Here the major western medias, corporate and empires are producing a type of knowledge that helps them to maintain their ideologies, to say, dominant ideologies, in societies. For instance, who funded Samuel Huntington's work on *Clash of Civilizations*? According to Lewis H. Lapham (2006), it was a big corporate like Bradley Foundation, Smith Richardson Foundation sponsored the project. These "corporate philanthropists" (a term used by Arundati Roy, Hamid Dabashi and many other critics) believe that "there is no frigate like a book" and "books bring new ideas to the public square, where they affect the climate of opinion, change the cultural milieu, and move policy" (Miller 2002).

This work also shows a clear nexus between the corporate and Western empires interest on a particular kind of knowledge production and its effects on national policies. Such corporate philanthropist knowledge production forces projects 'Islam' or 'Muslim' identities and societies as 'inferior', 'ignorant', 'anti-modern' and 'anti-democratic'. Through such a systematic knowledge production and its popularization through media,

academics and other means they have turned and controlled our consciousness into what Spivak calls "worlding of the West as world" (Spivak, cited in Andreotti 2007: 69) in which Western interests, ideologies and knowledge are projected as the World's interests and become naturalized in the rest of world (69).

Chapter Two

Islam and Women:

A Re-Reading

> The sheikh [of the land of Halba] removed his turban and rubbed his hand across his head, then put it back and said. 'Freedom is the sacred value accepted by everyone.' I protested. 'This freedom has overstepped the boundaries of Islam.' 'But it is also sacred in the Islam of Halba.' Frustrated, I said, "If our Prophet were to be resurrected today he would reject this side of your Islam.' 'And were he, may the blessings and peace of God be upon him, to be resurrected', he in turn inquired 'would he not reject the whole of your Islam?'
>
> (Naguib Mahfouz, *The Journey of Ibn Fattouma*)

Mahfouz presents here not just the diversity that exists within Islam and the social antagonism that arises as a result of this diversity, but also ignites the debate as to what 'real' Islam is. Both *Barsa* and *Standing Alone in Mecca* reveal that along with the narrator/protagonist's identity, it is also her understanding of the religion that is put before the question mark. Two or more of the characters implicitly suggests this by telling Sabitha that her understanding of Islam is "incomplete". They also make it a point to add, "Why don't you attend the evening religious classes atleast on days when you have morning duty? We will help you" understand Islam better (Mumthas 2007: 144; translation mine). So what infact is 'real' Islam, more importantly, is there something called 'real' Islam and what place does a woman have in it?

'Real' Islam

Many scholars including Hamid El-Zien have worked with the aim to uncover 'real' Islam and have reached at different conclusions regarding it. El-Zien's study on five anthropological works makes him conclude that since there is no unity in the practices relating to Islam, the matter of unity in religious meaning is highly questionable. So if divergent discourses are associated with a single religion, can there still be a single Islam? Due to this "ability of Islam to be used in a variety of contexts" El-Zien reaches the conclusion that "there is no such thing as Islam, but that there are only Islams" (cited in Sayyid 1997: 37). He further declares that

> neither Islam nor the notion of religion exist as a fixed and autonomous form referring to a positive content which can be reduced to universal and unchanging characteristics. Religion becomes an arbitrary category which as a unified and bounded form has no necessary existence. 'Islam' as an analytical category dissolves well (El-Zien 1977: 254).

A similar view is voiced by Aziz al Azmeh in his work, *Islams and Modernities* and by Tariq Ramadan. And the likes of Edward Mortimer tread the ground carefully by stating that "[f]or me, in my condition of *jahiliyya* [pre- or non- Islamic ignorance], there is no Islam, in the sense of an abstract, unchangeable entity, existing independently of the men and women who profess it. There is only what I hear Muslims say, and see them do" (Mortimer, 1982: 396; emphasis original). The wide body of thought on Islam indeed makes it problematic to identify a 'real' Islam and it won't be wrong to say that the different interpretations and re-interpretations of the religious texts present diverse angles for understanding the religion across equally diverse socio-cultural contexts. However, El-Zein's and Azmeh's suggestion of 'Islams' is not what I quite agree with, for to mark diversity as a marker of plurality will result in the rise of multiple monolithic divisions spreading confusion and ending in disillusionment.

Instead I would agree with Bobby Sayyid who suggests that Islam can most effectively be viewed as a master signifier, with Islamist project gathering information regarding the ways in which the religion functions in different discourses. He writes that,

The master signifier functions as the most abstract principle by which any discursive space is totalized. In other words, it is not that a discursive horizon is established by a coalition of nodal points, but rather by *the use of a signifier* that *represents the totality of that structure*. The more extensive a discourse is, the less specific each element within it will be: it will become simply another instance of a more general identity. The dissolution of the specificity and the concreteness of the constituent elements clears the path for a master signifier becoming more and more abstract, until it reaches a limit at which it does not have any specific manifestation: it simply refers to the community as a whole and it becomes the principle of reading that community. (Sayyid 1997: 47; emphasis added)

This suggestion would therefore acknowledge the heterogeneous nature of Islam and would place Islam as a totalizing abstraction which includes within itself the divergent meanings and practices related to it. Sayyid's view, which is greatly influenced by Zizek and his idea of the 'nation-thing' as the marker of identification more and above any concrete manifestation (1990: 51-52), is therefore a more viable option than the geographic boundary marked understanding of 'Islams'. Hence Islam can be inferred as a broad category, the boundary wall of which is constantly broken and remade to include newer perspectives and interpretations that aid in a better understanding of the religion. Hence as argued by Mandaville, there is but one Islam; but that fact need not necessarily have any "direct correlation with the lived experience of being (or making oneself to be) a Muslim, nor does it have to impart any essence or teleology to the religion" (2001: 56). Interpretations of the classical religious text in the light of diverse socio-cultural conditions therefore do not result in the breakdown of Islam as religion, but add to the meaning and understanding of the text and thereby of the religion. Talal Asad captures this idea well when he writes:

While narrating history does not have to be teleological, it does presuppose an identity ("India", say) that is the subject of that narrative. Even when that identity is analysed into its heterogeneous parts (class, gender, regional divisions etc.), what is done, surely, is to reveal its constitution, not to dissolve its unity. The unity is maintained by those who speak in its name, and more generally by all who adjust their existence to its (sometimes shifting) requirements. (1993: 16-17)

Hence an 'authentic' or 'real' Islam is an elusive concept and is only possible by the correct interpretation of the religious text and exegesis; but interpretations as we know are greatly influenced by time, place and the other factors which rule a human life. It therefore presents its believers with a set of meanings, but as argued by Veena Das, these meanings are "not to be interpreted once, and correctly, but continually reinterpreted, for meanings assigned to the word of God by human efforts can only be approximations" (cited in Mandaville 2001: 56). A major trouble with such fluidity is that a lot many things which are not remotely related to Islam but are entirely culture specific gets labeled and perceived as 'Islamic'. Just as it is easy to call Islam monolithic, so is it easy to ignore the fine line between Islam and individual cultures and existing social customs that influence the interpretations. Since the present study is on the women in Islam, it is vital to understand how the different interpretations of the religious texts influence our understanding of Islam and in turn influence the condition of women in it.

Allow me to begin with the dual idea inherent in the title itself. When a person talks about women in Islam, it most naturally brings to our mind the role and position that a woman has in Muslim cultures or in a country or area with a predominant Muslim population. Now who is a Muslim? (S)He is one who practices a particular religion, Islam. But as argued above, the person's practice of the religion is deeply influenced by the socio-cultural conditions that s/he is exposed to. Hence it need not necessarily be that a woman in a particular Muslim society is living or made to live in conditions that are Islamic. The work is, as the title suggests, a study into women's rights and role in Islam and as to how it is in direct contrast with what they experience in real life.

To interpret the true essence of Quran and to understand it in its fullness is a task that one should put oneself into, but conflicts are bound to happen with the existing religious and cultural practices in the society. My aim in this chapter would be to bring out this discrepancy and to argue that Muslim women, according to the Quran are entitled to more rights and an equal position in the society than what the popular notions about women's inferior status in 'Islam' seems to say. According to Fazlur Rahman, "Islam has been bloated by intransigent theologies which have little or nothing to do with the ethical

core of Muhammad's message" (cited in Mandaville 2001: 182). What is worse is that these dogmas, he says, are equated with the words of God and hence deemed all powerful and beyond question. There is thus "a need to distinguish between what Rahman terms 'normative Islam' (Muhammad's true message) and 'historical Islam' (the codification of these norms by various political hegemonies)" (182). He further says that "if the spark of modernization of old Islamic learning and for the Islamisation of the new is to arise, then the original thrust of Islam—of the Quran and Muhammad—must be clearly resurrected so that the conformities and deformities of historical Islam may be clearly judged by it" (Rahman 1982: 141). After all the talk on "going back to the original and pristine Islam" both Wahhabis and modernists fail to imbibe the teachings of the text for they, says Rahman, are caught up at a point in time from where they will not budge (141). And this historicity has nothing to do with Islam per se, except that it defines the Muslim cultures better.

Muslim women, as understood from the two works taken for study, are not considered as important as men in most Muslim majority communities; in *Barsa*, the Saudi Muslim women are either portrayed as ones who visit the hospital periodically with pregnancy or as the ones who fret that their husbands will move on to the next woman at hand if they fail to keep him physically satisfied and keep producing children. Though these women are fully aware and knowledgeable of the rights guaranteed to them by the State, we see them quite at ease with the domination they are subjected to at their home front. The novel talks about Saudi women filing complaints and approaching law for their rights, but never once do we see them collectively raising their voice against the oppressive patriarchal system they are in (Mumthas 2007: 82- 84, 149-150). They are seen to take it all as their fate and are seen to spot it all as being Islamic and hence unquestionably right. To agree with Amina Wadud, "if the definitive basis for what Islam means is determined by what Muslims do, then women and men are not equal" (1999: ix). In this chapter I will be arguing that what Muslims do are what they are conditioned to do or what is in accordance with hierarchical order of the society they live in, and most times than not no explanations for such actions can be found in the Quran.

What is gravely problematic is the politics of difference employed to understand the position of men and women in Islam. "The underlying presumption that the male person is the normative human being restricts women from full consideration in the construction of ethical-spiritual and socio-political postulates in Islamic thought" says Wadud (xi). Hence when women are regarded nowhere close to a normative human being, the question of them having an agency is pushed beyond the frame. The women thence are relegated to being mere puppets in the hands of the man who can assign them a position, a role and restrict the same. Therefore, "are women the same as men; different or distinct from; alike and unequal to; or unlike and equal to? Each of these questions", says Wadud, "rests on a single rhetorical flaw – that women must be measured against men – that inadvertently reinforces the erroneous notion that men are the standard bearers, which, by extension, means that *only men are fully human*" (xi; emphasis added). In *Barsa* there is an instance where Sabitha raises her voice against an injustice done to her at the hospital. She speaks sternly against the senior male doctor Iqbal for extended working hours heaped only on her. Though the episode passes without any change in the senior's decision, we are told that it was because Sabitha demanded and not requested (read, pleaded) to the doctor that he made no changes in the duty list. He says "Afterall she is a woman. But how stern and intense was her talk! *A woman is not supposed to talk to a man in that manner*. And that is why I decided that I will not make any changes regarding the duty" (Mumthas 2007: 179; translation mine, emphasis added).

But the question worth noting is as to whether Islam upholds this politics of difference or to put it more correctly, are men and women viewed on the basis of difference alone; here by 'Islam' I mean the religion propagated by the Quran and other exegetical works. There is no denying the fact that there has been a "long history of discrimination against women" in Muslim communities, but to point this and "Quran's alleged advocacy of sexual inequality" as reasons to "read Islam as a misogynistic and uncompromising and overtly paternalistic religion" can lead us astray (Barlas 2002: 4, Hussain 1994: 118). To speak about the 'long history of discrimination' we have to consider how gender issues were deliberated upon by Muslims. Gender thinking as Etin Anwar writes, "refers to the process of producing and reproducing public perception of

the truth of how men and women's roles are appropriated in the Muslim world" (2006: 16). We have a strong sense of right and wrong, acceptable and unacceptable, valid and invalid and also the norms of "Quran, hadith, Shariah and Muslim's diverse interpretations of them" says Anwar, and this sense is from where the public perception arises (16). Despite the cultural variations and local influences, Islam as master signifier underlies the lives of Muslims. Hence, many of the public perceptions though formed by culture and locality get interpreted as religion.

"The gendered vision of the public perception of truth is not an Islamic invention", it seems to have started much before Islam propagated in seventh century Saudi Arabia (16). The pre- Islamic Arabs of the jahiliyya period supposedly had a very poor notion of the moral qualities of women and hence "the character of women is [was] exactly the opposite to that which the Arabs considered as the model of the perfect men" (Renan 2000: 157). It is this attitude which then later permeates into the general fabric of Islam and generates a division between men and women. Etin Anwar writes:

> What is at stake here is that the resilience of the pre-Islamic and local cultures with which Islam had been in contact perceived men and women as morally different. Women were categorized as the opposite of men (who were perfect), with the result that men had the power to define what was appropriate for women. This gender thinking has since been fixed in the Muslim mind, producing and reproducing relevant interpretations of the Qur'an and selective recall of Prophetic tradition. Added to this gender thinking is a misogynistic attitude toward women that frequently addresses women as the other (2006: 17).

It must be this seventh century trend fattened with time that recently made Mona Eltahawy write in her feature for The Sex Issue of *Foreign Policy* that "Yes: They [Middle Eastern men] hate us. It must be said" (May/June 2012). She enumerates instances of injustice and ill-treatment that Arab women have to face at the hands of men: female circumcision better called genital mutilation, sexual harassment; forceful implementation of hijab, very poor male – female ratio in parliaments and the way the ones present are expected to be silent and thereby 'good' women. Though she gives us an

account of atrocities that women have to put up with, there are some blaringly biased and floating remarks about Islam and Islamists. She writes:

> *The Islamist hatred of women* burns brightly across the region [Saudi Arabia] – now more than ever. In Kuwait, where for years *Islamists fought women's enfranchisement*, they hounded the four women who finally made it into parliament, demanding that the two who didn't cover their hair wear hijabs. When the Kuwaiti parliament was dissolved this past December, *an Islamist parliamentarian* demanded the new house – devoid of a single female legislator – discuss his proposed "decent attire" law (FP 2012: ; emphasis added).

Eltahawy's article is sensationalistic and at times even Islamophobic. Though her heart to fight for Muslim women and to garner support for the fight is appreciable, her feature does not quite hit the target; on the contrary, it makes us think about the reader circle the the work caters to and the overnight fame and attention that the writer gets for her piece. When the likes of Samia Errazzouki reacted to the feature saying 'she doesn't speak for everyone', it should be remembered that "sadly, there are too many readers in the West today," as Khaled Abou El-Fadl writes in the foreword to Amina Wadud's work *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam,* "who hope to find a self-hating Muslim blathering or spewing venom about the countless evils inflicted upon the author's poor suffering Muslim soul by a religion he or she supposedly chooses to follow".

Foreign Policy published by the FP Group, a division of The Washington Post Company, was lauded along with Eltahawy, and at the same time criticised for this feature. I do not deny that women in Middle East are discriminated against and I also argue so in the wake of the works I have taken for study, nor do I deny that Quran can be read and interpreted in a manner privileging males over females. But my point is that discrimination by men who cite certain markers and references taken out of context from Quran cannot be and should not be termed Islamic nor they as Islamists even when they vehemently label themselves and their 'moral' actions so.

It is quite interesting to see how Islam gets tagged as "*the* explanatory variable of any given sociocultural condition" (Mandaville 2001: 57; emphasis original). Mandaville

rightly points out that when women in any predominantly secular society (like the United States or the United Kingdom) face discrimination; the culprit is usually "something called 'patriarchy', however similar discrimination in predominantly Muslim societies is usually immediately ascribed to Islam" (57-58). Can't we call the above narrated instances by Eltahawy as predominantly caused by a rigid patriarchal order that resort to a skewed reading of Quran to support its actions? I believe so, as there are no verses in Quran that calls for mutilation and mutation of women. "In this sense, Islam often offers the easy way out, both for analysts seeking a quick explanation and for the policy-makers of the societies in question who want to sidestep the structural causes of gender inequality and the mistreatment of women by referring to 'cultural' causes which are conveniently 'out of their hands'" (58).

Earlier in this chapter I had written that Quran can be read and interpreted in a manner privileging males, and this automatically leads to the question as to whether the text support inequality and oppression of women. Or "does it privilege men over women in their biological capacity as males, or treat man as the Self (normative) and woman as the Other, or view women and men as binary opposites, as modern patriarchal theories of sexual differentiation and inequality do?" (Barlas 2002: 1). Etin Anwar tells us that such a trend was prevalent in pre-Islamic times and for sure, still has its influence in the hearts of many. But Quran, it should be understood, can be read and perceived in more than one ways and no reading of it can be completely objective and clinical. "Each exegete makes some subjective choices" and "some details of their interpretations reflect their subjective choices and not necessarily the intent of the text" says Wadud (1999: 1). Hence as Nomani and Mumthas attempts, a new mode of understanding Islam is possible and genuine; and a sacred text like the Quran which "has been ripped from its historical, linguistic, literary and psychological contexts and then been recontextualised in various cultures and according to the ideological needs of various actors" needs to be interpreted and studied afresh (Arkoun cited in Barlas 2002: 5).

In *Barsa*, the narrator tells us of instances where women do not oppose the polygynous relationship of their husbands. Some are even seen to accompany the second

or the third wife during her pregnancy tests and medical checkups; and a curious Sabitha asks one such Saudi whether she has no emotional qualms regarding her husband's second marriage. The woman coolly answers "Why should I be sad? Ever since she has come, I get good rest at night. Or else, wouldn't I be the one who had to labour every night?" (Mumthas 2007: 100). A similar mentality is seen in a nursing assistant of the hospital who says that she is fifty and tired; she welcomes her seventy year old husband's decision to marry a nineteen year old girl who belongs to a very poor background and seems to take the decision as an act of kindness. Such instances as these seems to tell us that the women are so conditioned by the system that they hardly find it oppressive or rather do not realize that they are being oppressed and exploited. Conditioning women thus by the society enables in the smooth functioning of the patriarchal order and many a tool, along with religion, is employed to obtain the desired result.

Gender therefore, unlike sex is an "achieved status: that which is constructed through psychological, cultural and social means" (West and Zimmerman 1987: 125). In the case of females, gender is more often than not attributed to them by the males and it is, says West and Zimmerman, a "routine, methodical, and recurring accomplishment" (126). Slowly and steadily the thought that men's superiority is marked by their "biological origin as the primary creation" (Anwar 2006: 19) roots in and women are made to feel and are taught that this superiority marks them as secondary beings. This tendency permeates into the domestic sphere, where women are expected to bear children, take care of the family and the household chores; not just this but to make them believe that men and women are not equal not just biologically, but that the former is superior to the latter in all respects.

Though this is so, "certain structural arrangements, for example, between work and family, actually produce or enable some capacities" (West, Zimmerman 1987: 126). In both *Standing Alone in Mecca* and *Barsa*, the protagonists are successful and well placed in their career front and this provides them with a certain level of mobility that enables them to think beyond gender and to analyse the roots of, presence and absence of gender systems in the Quran. The works make us realize that it is the exposure to the mix

of culture and the diverse ways of practicing a religion, that enables Sabitha and Nomani to read, understand, explore and critique the patriarchal readings of the Quran.

While women regularly contributed to the maintenance of gender hierarchy and the "public perception of the truth" that men hold a superior position to women, they have not actively participated or "been involved in the production of the knowledge that has shaped the epistemological status of women in Muslim societies." (Anwar 2006: 19). The Quran and hadith have been interpreted by "Muslim jurists, mystics, theologians, and scholars—who are mostly men. Muslim women" however, says Anwar, "have not assertively produced their own interpretation; instead, they have become the object of male power, authority, and knowledge, whose effects are imprinted on their bodies" (19). Amina Wadud too shares a similar view, she says "what concerns me most about 'traditional' tafsir [exegetical works] is that they were exclusively written by males. This means that men and men's experiences were included and women and women's experiences were either excluded or interpreted through the male vision, perspective, desire or needs of woman" (1999: 2).

Majorie Procter-Smith in her work, *In Her Own Rite: Reconstructing Feminist Liturgical Tradition,* writes about the significance of inclusion and exclusion of women in religious interpretations and dialogue. Women are mainly excluded and made to believe that they are inferior or secondary creatures who lacks moral refinement to do exegetical works; by doing so, the so called 'authorities of the text' are cutting out divergent voices and views and are moulding the text to suit the 'dominant' or 'normative' man. Women's "voicelessness during critical periods of development in Quranic interpretation has not gone unnoticed, but it has been mistakenly equated with *voicelessness in the text* itself" (2; emphasis added) and it is this silence by women that has allowed a universal and all penetrative image of Muslim woman as one who has to walk in the line of tafsir carved and perfected by men. On the basis of such interpretations, women were either deemed inferior or sympathized as subjects with no agency; both views leading to one conclusion – the Quran and hadiths, and hence Islam itself is patriarchal and to a certain sense, misogynistic.

Another study concerning Quranic interpretations came from the West and the feminists there. The main handicap of such studies were that they did not go into reading or understanding of the Quran, instead based their studies on the patriarchal readings of the text that had already been present in theory and practice. They related the interpretations to the 'condition' of Muslim women and concluded their studies by saying that Muslim women were oppressed by the religion and all customs present in it. Hence the attack was directed to the messages that they deemed Quranic. For instance, Hideko Iwai is of the view that Western scholarship on women tend to

> . . . accentuate certain specific practices in society, and to examine them using their own Western framework or value concepts. These studies often conclude that Muslim women are discriminated against, subordinated and ill-treated . . . These studies are so concerned with actual practices and specific matters in Muslim society that they often confuse Islam at practical level and Islam at "ideal" level. Thus they portray the image of women in Islam only from deduction, that is, they describe Muslim women based on Western viewpoint (quoted in Anwar 2006: 7).

Egalitarian Reading of Quran

Though these are the widespread and the popular reactions to the text, I propose to follow a different path in my study. I would see if "a 'reading' of the Quran from within the female experience and without the stereotypes which have been the framework for many of the male interpretations" (Wadud 1999: 3) is possible and as to how such a reading is employed in both my works. Simply put, my study will be on women in Islam by Muslim women. Asra Nomani in the preface to her work *Standing Alone in Mecca* writes, "This book is a manifesto of the rights of women based on the true faith of Islam. It seeks to herald a revolution in the Muslim world of the twenty-first century. My book is about sorting out the contradictions about religion" (11). She also adds later in the preface that "I was very much at odds with my religion. But instead of turning away from Islam, I decided to find out more about my faith" (11). A. P. Kunjaamu's foreword to *Barsa* is titled "A Muslim Woman Reads Islam, and also Life"; he thereby tries to tell the readers at the onset of the book that Islam is an inevitable factor of a Muslim woman's

life and hence is her duty and right to have a proper understanding of the text that has a say in her life, rather than be a silent and passive part of someone else's views on it. He adds that the main protagonist Sabitha is with her narrative trying to open her heart to Islam and with this open heart, she wishes to make a journey through Islam (13).

But before interpreting or rather, re-reading Quran from 'within the female experience', it is essential to expose the current established "hierarchical gender system" (Anwar 2006: 3) and the glaring patriarchal strategy embedded in it. Centuries of practice have infact ingrained the gender system into the thought process of many and have given it an 'authentic' glow. "All the revealed scriptures have held the same concept of woman, and thousands of years have passed without its ever having been doubted. It is only in modern times" says Maulana Wahiduddin Khan "that it has been challenged by the women's liberation movement" (1995: 32). Hence most hierarchically gender minded Muslims do not perceive the problems underlying the system and its variations that exist in different societies; following the various studies they staunchly believe that "a woman's role in Islamic society is clearly, at base, to rear children and create a wholesome and happy home" (Rahman 1989: 3). Any departure from this maxim was actually seen as a 'problem'. Al-Sheha says that "It is stunning and surprising, however, to hear such calls in Islamic societies where women have been fairly treated and were given rights more than fourteen hundred years ago, and without any calls made by them, or rather by their advocates" (2000: 4). But the truth is, if fair treatment was what the women received for the past fourteen centuries, then the hue and cry about their present pathetic state would have been absent. So, when it is true that women of the past received rights without even requesting or struggling, somewhere down the lane it was taken away from them in the name of rights and 'religion'.

Hence, it is more than important for the women to reexamine the real cause of their 'problems' rather than suffer silently with the idea that it is what their religion and God burdens them with. Patriarchy rampant in the society can be spotted as one main reason that brings about the miserable plight of women. To borrow Johnson's definition of patriarchal culture, patriarchy is one that has male in the dominant, defining position

and where everything is "male identified and male-centered" (2000: 29). Patriarchal culture, he adds, "includes ideas about the nature of things, including men, women, and humanity, with manhood and masculinity most closely associated with being human and womanhood and femininity relegated to the marginal position of 'other'" (29-30). And given that a woman's exposure to patriarchal order is so acute, they end up contributing and perpetuating the system as their own as are seen from the works taken for study. Hence the adherence of the hierarchical gender system shapes what Fergusson calls "the self process" (quoted in Anwar 2000: 2), which includes ways of doing, thinking and feeling. A woman is thereby constructed and shaped gradually as and when she is exposed to the system. Patriarchy and the hierarchical gender relationships, along with the status that is attributed to the Muslim women end up determining the course of her life; but what is sad is that all these factors are wrongly interpreted and justified by the Muslim states and clerics in the name of Islam.

On the readings of the "conservatives", says Asma Barlas, "male superiority is both ontological, since woman is said to have been created from/after man and for his pleasure, … since God is alleged to have preferred men in the completeness of mental ability, good counsel, complete power in the performance of duties and the carrying out of (divine) commands" (2002: 7).

Verses in Quran such as An-Nisa, 4:34, Al-Baqarah, 2:282 are the ones commonly cited by such conservatives to support their claim of gender hierarchy.

> Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has given the one more than the other, and because they support them from their means. Therefore, the righteous women are devoutly obedient, and guard in absence what Allah would have them guard. As to those women on whose part ye fear disloyalty and ill-conduct, admonish them (first), refuse to share their beds, and chastise them; but if they return to obedience, seek not against them means: for Allah is Most High, Great. (4:34)

> And get two witnesses, out of your men, and if there are not two men, then a man and two women, such as ye choose, for witnesses, so that if one of them errs, the other can remind her. (2:286)

Mumthas and Nomani quote these verses at different instances in their texts, and wonder whether such lines should be regarded as misinterpretations of Quran or as fragments misquoted with no particular concern of the specific historical and cultural contexts they actually belong to (Mumthas 2007:150). Sabitha expresses her concern for the well being of Muslim women who are schooled to internalize such verses, who are also taught to believe that they *enjoy* freedom and rights just as men (150; emphasis added). Her narration brings to our mind the image of machines, specially programmed to carry out certain functions; the symbol is apt, for women are oppressed by the society with the belief that they will remain 'obedient' and all forgiving as according to the edicts schooled to them. Muslims who are hierarchical gender minded justify the existing system of patriarchy by resorting to the male centred interpretations of the Quran and the hadith. It is interesting to note the words of likes like Maududi and Vajidi regarding woman and her role in Islam, as interpreted by their superior male consciousness. For Maududi, women are but "*tragic beings* [whose] sex functions and physiology makes her *unfit for any work or activity except child bearing*" (Maududi in Khan 1983: 21; emphasis added) and for Vajidi, women's "*natural functions* oblige her to be subjected to man, by which alone she can have any meaningful identity" (Vajidi in Khan 1983: 129; emphasis added). According to the latter, "a woman's anatomy" is her "pre-destiny", that suggests that nature itself "has given man superiority over woman" (173). The lines make us wonder whether a lot of culture specific ideas have not gone into these men's view/ interpretation of Quran. Whether such a trend is to maintain the existing patriarchal order or is it to maintain the power structure is a question worth pondering.

Deniz Kandiyoti explains such readings by saying that "the treatment of women and Islam has for a long time been dominated by ahistorical accounts of the main tenets of Muslim religion and their implications for women" (1991: 1). A similar view is also voiced by Barlas who argues that "Muslims have not read the Quran as both a 'complex hermeneutic totality' and as a 'historically situated' text" (2002: 8). Instead, "they have relied on a 'linear-atomistic' method that takes a verse-by-verse approach to the Quran. With most Muslim exegetes, the basic unit of Quran study is one or few verses taken in isolation from the preceding and following verses" (Mustansir Mir quoted in Barlas 2002:

8). And as Amina Wadud also argues, the exegetes of the classical period "begin with the first verse of the first chapter and proceed to the second verse of the second chapter… Little or no effort is made to recognize themes and to discuss the relationship of the Quran to itself, thematically (1999:2). Quran as a text is single and beyond revisions and reworkings, this mainly has led to the rise of a number of interpretative texts written by many and at different times. These interpretations hold and propagate divergent views about how a man and woman should be and behave.

Apart from these, records of the "Prophetic traditions" are considered important to understand the Quran and are taken as "second authoritative source of Islamic teaching" (4). But what is problematic is that when Quran was written during the time of Prophet Muhammad, hadiths were written after the death of the Prophet. So since "a direct consultation with the Prophet was not possible, many of the hadiths came up after the consultation with people who were closer to the Prophet during his lifetime" (5) on accounts of what the Prophet had done and would have done on certain occasions. As Etin Anwar writes "the recollection of the hadith was juxtaposed to situations of chaotic political dissension leading to civil wars (656-60 and 680-92)" (2006:24). And Mernissi describes the introduction of hadith thus:

> With the historical events as background, we can now appreciate in their true measure the two contradictory tendencies that were at odds with each other in elaboration of the Hadith: on the one hand, the desire of the male politicians to manipulate the sacred; and on the other hand, the fierce determination of the scholars to oppose the elaboration of the fiqh (a veritable science of religion) with its concepts and its methods of verification and counterverification (1991 a: 43).

The matter that went into the hadith therefore had immense historical links and to quote them out of context might lead to different and wrong understanding of the texts. Since the tendency to "validate and/or invalidate" one's behaviour and political gains on the basis of hadiths is very high, Anwar suggests that the "memory, intellectual rigour, personal integrity, and virtue of the Prophet's sahabah [first generation of Muhammad's friends] were [are] of paramount importance to the validity of the hadith" (2006: 24).

The history also reveals that Muslims have acquired the misogyny and discrimination that are not limited to them alone. Practices of female circumcision, polygyny, wife battering and veiling were a part of the ancient cultures of many including Greeks. Leila Ahmed has vividly explained in her work *Women and Gender in Islam* how the 'pre-existing' misogyny was integrated into Islam during the Middle Ages. Stowasser details a similar discrepancy in the existing exegesis by pointing out that exegetes (many include Christian and Jewish coverts) have introduced into Islam, ideas originating in "Biblical traditions by way of their exegesis of the Quran and the hadiths"(1994: 45). Therefore, it will not be wrong to say that Quran's teachings are eclipsed by an exegesis that misrepresents it in numerous fundamental ways. A reading of Quran that places the verses in its right contexts and that which studies them in an egalitarian background is what is necessary. Many of the questions and doubts voiced by the writers like Nomani and Mumthas regarding female circumcision, polygyny and divorce can be answered and explained by such an interpretation.

"A liberal hermeneutics of the Quran and a liberatory theology must begin", says Barlas, "by recognizing that, since there is perfect congruence between Divine Ontology and Divine Discourse, we need to connect God to God's Speech by making God's Self-Disclosure the hermeneutic site from which to read the Quran" (2002: 18). To begin with the creation of human beings, secondary religious texts assert that Eve was created from Adam's rib and propagate the idea that since being created from and after him, is inferior to him; but this finding has nothing to do with Quran which teaches that creation originated from a single nafs (self). It does not state that man was created before woman or that she was a product of his body. In the Quranic account of creation, Allah never planned to begin the creation of humankind with a male person; nor does it ever refer to the origin of the human race with Adam says Fazlur Rahman (1982: 7).

There are then two major concerns that are generally ignored while talking about women in the Quran; the first being the division of verses and ayats across both Meccan and Medinan period and the second being the specific historical contexts wherein the women are mentioned. A grave fault is committed when the readers approach Quran

seeking literal, straight forward directions to life, by keeping their critical faculties away from the reading but their preconceived notions of life and women intact. Wadud says that "readers who interpret the significance of the women cited in the Quran often come to the text with notions of appropriate functions for women" (1999: 32). When such notions of theirs appear to be supported superficially by the Quranic portrayal of women, nothing is further looked at or tried to be understood. Often the examples given in the holy text are overlooked and marked unnecessary to be studied closely. "This has led to a great deal of oversimplifications and contradictions when the perspective of the individual exegete is superimposed on to the Quran itself" (32).

Quran, according to Wadud, is in most cases read and interpreted to fit the already cemented views of people. The text for instance, has not addressed women by their names except for Mary, the mother of Jesus. Wadud points out that this was an "important cultural idiosyncratic" method back then to demonstrate respect for women; their names were kept away and instead, titles were given to them. Hence women are never mentioned by names but are referred to as the wife of someone, sister or mother or daughter of a male already mentioned. Hence one or more of the Arabic words like nisa (women) or zawj (spouse), imra'ah(woman) are used along with the name of a particular male; for example Eve as the zawj of Adam. Even an unmarried woman was therefore linked with some male; but this cultural and historical way of expressing respect was lost in the time flow and later, the exegetes pointed at this absence of female names and called it a sign of male superiority. The ones who studied and interpreted Quran cite this as an example to point that the text was indeed patriarchal. Yet another response to naming came from feminists. They approached this with discomfort and concluded that traditional texts made women invisible. In *Barsa,* we find the protagonist Sabitha thinking about this odd system of naming and find her knowingly or unknowingly associating it with the jahiliyya period (107). Hence the protagonist is of the view that such a system of naming was acquired from past and was not really introduced by Islam.

"The Quran" says Wadud, "focuses on woman as an individual because the Quran treats the individual, whether male or female, in exactly the same manner: that is,

whatever the Quran says about the relationship between Allah and the individual is not in gender terms" (1999: 34). With regard to individual potential or with regard to personal wishes, Quran does not categorise women differently from men. This is important to be understood and regarded for "in every society, in every century, people have assumed that males and females are different not merely in basic anatomy, but in elusive qualities of spirit, soul and ability. They are not supposed to do the same things, think the same way, or share the same dreams and desires" (34).

When social systems judge the physical differences between man and woman as a sign of possessing different values and capacities, Quran does not categorise women thus. Wadud writes in her work as to how the male exegetes and interpreters went onto describe women as inferior to men but never once was able to relate their studies to Quran. She discusses the views of Sayyid Qutb, Al-Zamakhshari and Al- Aqqad. Sayyid Qutb, for instance, says that "the fitrah [primordial nature] makes the man a man, and the woman a woman' but goes no further to explain his view. Al-Zamakhshari on the other hand, says that men are 'preferred' by Allah over women in terms of 'intelligence, physical constitution, determination and physical strength' but fails to cite any place from the text to support his claim" (quoted in Wadud 1999: 35). Following a similar line, "Al-Aqqad says that men deserve preference over women" (35). Excluding the claims, no relevant details suggest that their demands are anyway related to the Divine Will.

Wadud says that interpreters as these chalk out distinctions and differences between males and females and give "values to those distinctions" (1999: 35). This then leads to the rise of man as a normative human being and women as being "less human" than man (35). Such interpretations, says Wadud "encourage the stereotypes about women and men which severely hamper the potential of each. In addition, these interpretations justify the restrictions placed on the woman's right to pursue personal happiness within the context of Islam" (35). What is most disturbing is that such studies are directly related as being Islamic or attributed to the Quran, but never rightly traced back to the authors. Hence the edict that says 'All men are equal' leaves women out and works to place them out always.

In the prefatory section of *Barsa*, we are presented with Sabitha's conflicting thought process that sets the stage for the entire novel. When during her obligatory run from Safa to Marwah, she is reminded of Hajar who before centuries had run at the same place from one mount to another in search of water for her son Ishmael. Sabitha looks around and sees men running with all vigour and passion at a distance far ahead, but the women with her long cloaks are much behind, trying to adjust the length of the dress so that they will not fall, minding their little kids, but yet trying to complete the run. She says "holding the kids by the hand and lifting their long cloaks a bit high, they are also making the run with much difficulty. To reach near the men who are way ahead, to not lose count of the times they cross Safa and Marwah… to reach the heavenly abode guaranteed to the believers, even atleast behind the men…" (2007: 17; translation mine). Similarly she adds some snippets relating women which she writes is from the hadiths, "I peeped into paradise once and it was abound with virtous men and then peeped into hell, and women were more in number (they had been disobedient to men!). Never be disobedient!" (19) Her supposed reading of a verse from hadith goes thus, "Live in love and peace with the other women, be it wives or slaves, that your husband brings home. If so, you can find a place next to your man in heaven and can live with him in luxury and happiness. No, not with him, for he will get beautiful women who are soft and smooth like velvet" (19). But then what about women, who were his earthly companions? Sabitha goes on to add that nothing whatsoever is guaranteed to the women and as an after thought adds: "Nothing is said about what you (women) will get. Afterall it needs no special mention for what merit you have to deserve attention?"(19) These lines express the mental angst of the protagonist who is struggling to prove that Islam is not what misinterpreted hadiths are all about.

When Sabitha's narration is just a teaser to raise our consciousness against the misogyny involved and to question whether the discrepancy is in the text or in its interpretation, it is interesting to note Nomani's encounter with 'misogyistic' hadiths. She in her work, in the line of Etin Anwar, speaks about the importance of knowing the real worth and virtue of the Prophet's sahabah to judge the validity of the hadith. And she adds that the hadiths by Abu Hurayrah are extremely problematic for he "in the name of

the Prophet objectified, margianlised and hypersexualised women" (2007: 306). She further adds:

> He said that the Prophet declared women were made from a crooked rib, making us more deficient. He was the one who said the Prophet declared we [women] would be the majority of the inhabitants of hell in part because our menstrual cycle made us more deficient – and thus worth only half the witness of a man (306)

Nomani cites scholars like Dr. Khaled Abou El Fadl according to whom Abu Hurayrah's "record of the Prophet's sayings were often some of the most virulently anti-women elements of the religion" (305). Abu Hurayrah is a late convert to Islam who having spent just three years with the Prophet, much less a time than Abu Bakr (the first caliph), Umar (another caliph), Ali (the Prophet's son-in-law) and Aishah (his wife), "transmitted more statements by the Prophet than any other companion"(305-306). For that reason the authenticity of his hadiths is highly questionable and has been criticized for centuries. Sad story however is that it is Abu Hurayrah's hadiths that has been oft quoted by media and men at large, the former to criticize 'Islam's anti-woman' stands and the latter to oppress women in the name of religion. And since the verses are widely propagated, they are mostly the ones that people have come to relate the religion with.

Therefore is the need for a better reading and a better historical understanding of the Quran and hadiths. In this study it is Wadud's reading that I approach more often and it is interesting to read her analysis on the verse that refers to the 'hereafter'. She begins by saying that the hereafter is discussed at length in the Quran and it is deemed "better" (93: 4) and "longlasting" (87:17) than the earthly life. And at various places in the Quran, one of the guaranteed pleasures is that of some sort of a companion. She along with Fatima Mernissi adds that these verses have been 'written' about at great lengths by male centric exegetes to specify the nature and number of companions. The verse however has to be studied historically, for "during the Meccan period, the first thirteen years of revelation, the Quran spoke primarily to an audience of prominent patriarchs in a patriarchal society" (Wadud 1999: 54). Patriarchs such as them had to be convinced and lured to change their way of life and thinking. Therefore the Quran attempted, says Wadud, to:

1. to convince them of the authenticity of the message; 2. to demonstrate its relevance and significance; 3. to indicate the shortcomings and weaknesses of the existing status quo; and 4. *to persuade or entice them through offers and threats that appealed to their nature, understanding, and experience* (54).

Hence the images and promises employed by the Quran reflect the audience to whom the text was first introduced to. Therefore with regard to the after life, Quran attempted first to convince them that the images were real and then strived to make them follow the path and to strive for it by presenting them with promises that they can say 'no' to. The verses written in the Meccan period says that men will be given companions who will be none other than huris. The term hur-al-ayn or huri meant something specific to the Jahili Arab says Wadud. Huri was "so called by the Arabs of the desert because of her whiteness or fairness or cleanness", she was a woman of clear complexion and skin (Wadud 1999: 54-55). "The descriptions given of the huri are specific and sensual – youthful, virgin females with large eyes, white skin, and a pliant character – 'while nowehere… are found similar descriptions detailing, if not the beauty, at least the modest or even perhaps hidden assets of earthly wives" (Sabbah quoted in Wadud 1999: 55). The newly converted men in Mecca were all too familiar with this beautiful image and hence was it seen as the best incentive to make them walk the right path. "It is impossible" otherwise says Wadud, "to believe that the Quran intends white women with large eyes to represent a single universal description of beauty for all humankind" (55).

The image and promise of a huri however fades in the later verses of the Quran written in Medina. After the Meccan period, never was the term used, but it was replaced by the term azwaj which means spouse (either male or female). For instance in Al Imran, Quran says: "for the righteous are Gardens in nearness to their Lord, with rivers flowing beneath; therein is their eternal home; with azwaj (Companions) pure (and holy); and the good pleasure of Allah" (3: 15). When Quran plainly states zawj and adds no descriptions to it, interpretations take a fancy step ahead and say "the use of zawj has been interpreted in such a manner that a man has the power to directly determine the fate of his spouse" (Smith, Haddad 1975: 45). This is a clear case of misinterpretation and here we can see

how the image of a woman is subverted according to her use by a man. There are more verses in the Quran which combines an individual with his azwaj and sees them as a whole. When Wadud desperately tries to convince the readers that azwaj is someone who is a person's partner, comfort and friend in Paradise, the truth is that the idea of azwaj is drowned in many of the interpretations and huri takes the centre stage. *Barsa*, which introduces this image of huri in the preface of the novel seems to say to the readers that the perceptions about women are fixed; one has to be beautiful, obedient and docile to suit the imaginations of man or else, the paradisiacal image of huri will be what men aspire for in their after life.

It is indeed our "earthly existence" that "transforms our perceptions of the text and is equally potentially transformed by the text" (Wadud 1998: 62). Many indeed are of the view that Quran does not grant its women the right to work or to go out in public or to take part in administrative affairs and so on. But verses in the Quran and hadiths contradict such an interpretation and understanding. Prophet Muhammad's first wife Khadijah was a successful and rich businesswoman when he married her. She was older to him, and she continued her business after marriage and it was she who gave financial assistance and emotional support to the Prophet. Hadiths sites the Prophet speaking high of her and never was he averse to the fact that she worked or earned. Mumthas and Nomani speak of Khadijah bint Khawaylid. Asra Q. Nomani narrates the incident of the Prophet's conversation with his wife Aishah. The Prophet always had the highest regard for his first wife and whenever the Prophet talked about Khadijah, it was in terms of the highest praise. He is told to have been said to Aishah that:

> I have not yet found a better wife than her [Khadijah]. She had faith in me
> when everyone, even members of my own family and tribe did not believe
> me, and accepted that I was truly a Prophet and messenger of Allah. She
> converted to Islam, spent all her wealth and worldly goods to help me
> spread this faith, and this too at a time when the entire world seemed to
> have turned against me and persecuted me (cited in Ghandafar 2000: 28).

Nomani even describes the Prophet as "the Muslim world's first feminist" (12) for the freedom and equality that he granted to his wives. But conservatives including Maududi

has spoken with authority that bearing children and rearing them are the primary functions of a woman, and also that 'fragility' is inherent in her being and hence she has to be protected and 'preserved'. But Wadud's reading of the Quran says that a "woman's primary distinction is on the basis of her child bearing ability" but that there is "no term in the Quran which indicates that child bearing is 'primary to a woman". She adds by saying that "no indication is given that mothering is her exclusive role. It demonstrates the fact that a woman (though certainly not all women) is the exclusive human capable of bearing children" (1999: 63-64).

Quran is hence interpreted by many on the basis of personal experiences and individual mindset and this give way to anti-egalitarian readings of the text. Women are introduced to treatment based on such readings early in her life and hence she gradually gets moulded in the pattern with the belief that her religion demands her to be second grade beings. Nomani and Mumthas call for a change in women's condition and they do so by portraying to us the present pathetic condition of Muslim women in Saudi Arabia under the Wahhabi tradition. And as a direct contrast to it, they bring to us the life and conditions of women during the early days of Islam – the days of the Prophet and his wives and sahabas. Women like Hajar, Khadijah, Aishah, Fatima, Umm Salmah and others are called from past and their lives are retold to inspire the readers and to make them aware of a rich Islamic tradition of female participation.

Sabitha and Nomani identify and relates themselves to these characters and feel that they are walking in the shade of great women as these who fought and lived as equals of men. Such links that they consciously establish with the women in Quran and hadiths in a way validate their claim for an egalitarian reading of the text. Nomani for instance identifies herself with Hajar, the slave girl to whom Ishmael, the son of Ibrahim was born. History of Islam speaks of Sarah and Hajar as the two women who gave birth to two world religions. When Sarah gives birth to Issac, Hajar gives birth to Ishmael; the Jewish tribe flourishes from the former whereas it is the Muslim tribe that flourishes from the latter. Nomani is a single unmarried woman with a child born out of a love affair with a Pakistani man whom she expects to marry. But that does not materialize and she is left

with the child; her lone struggle in the world for her child and for her selfhood makes her qualify herself with Hajar. Both the texts speak about Hajar as a fighter with staunch belief in God and a strong will to survive; who despite the injustice done to her, struggles to keep her child alive.

Even in *Barsa* comparisons and identifications continue. Sabitha is compared to three women in the Islamic traditions and Quran. Her struggle to keep her family intact in the distant land of Saudi Arabia makes her a shadow image of Hajar, the scandal and the aftereffects of it that she had to face for travelling with a non relative, Abdu, makes her no less than an innocent Aishah and finally, her fight for freedom with a bared face and heart qualifies her to stand next to Sukaina, the daughter of Hussein and the great granddaughter of the Prophet Muhammad whom the Arabs described as 'barsa' – the one who does not cover her face, who does not cower down. Female images in the Quran are the ideal examples and models for Muslim women, says Barbara Stowasser. If that is the case, then women in Muslim traditions are asked to stand up and fight for their rights and to be active in all spheres of life. Nomani writes in the preface to her work that the journey to Saudi Arabia and her hajj pilgrimage brought her face to face with a brand of Islam that was unknown to her, she calls it the true form of Islam where women are given rights and freedom at par with the men. She writes:

> On my journey, a remarkable transformation happened in my understanding of my religion. I uncovered the hidden secrets of the strength of Muslim women in the earliest years of Islamic history. I discovered the legacy of Muslim women who marched into battle with spears, challenged the Prophet and sculpted the society that was the first Muslim society. They prayed, worked and pioneered a new community with men, empowered by their leader, the Prophet Muhammad, to contribute fully and express themselves completely (Nomani 2007: 12).

Islam is thus seen from a new light wherein the position of women is reclaimed as according to its old tradition.

Chapter Three

Travel and Transformation

You may be shocked by these words coming from me. But on this pilgrimage, what I have seen, and experienced, has forced me to re-arrange much of my thought patterns previously held, and toss aside some of my previous conclusions.

-- The Autobiography of Malcolm X as told to Alex Haley(2006: 347)

Whereas the hajj is a culmination for most pilgrims, it felt more like a starting point to me.

-- Michael Wolfe, *The Hajj: An American's Pilgrimage to Mecca* (1993)

The works taken for study not just bring to the readers women who view Islam critically and rationally but who also are seen to be travelling across continents, who cross geographical boundaries and whose routes incidentally or otherwise lead them to the holy cities of Islam. When Asra Nomani goes on a pilgrimage to Mecca, Sabitha of *Barsa* gets appointed in the Vilada hospital of Mecca by sheer turn of fate. It is the travel and also the holy city that gets them to think about the roots of their religion and transforms their understanding of it. Each of them in great detail narrates the local variations of Islam they encounter during the course of their journey and stay. Sabitha is subjected to a whole host of 'Islamic' cultures which she was otherwise alien to and as I mentioned in the first chapter, her work place introduces her to people from all around the globe. Hence from the somatics of prayer to the conflicting views about practicing ones religion and the attire to be donned by Muslim women, every minute difference that existed across nations and cultures is attended to and narrated. But what is of utmost

interest to note is that both Nomani's and Sabitha's personal version of Islam seep into the narration and take positions diametrically opposite to the ongoing popular version. And their journey to the heart land of Islam becomes not only a journey wherein many popular notions about the religion are questioned, but also one where their notions about Islam undergo a sea change.

Hence, as Mandaville points out, "theory travels"; the understanding of something that "which 'is' in one place elsewhere becomes undone, translated, reinscribed" (2001: 84). The protagonists' understanding of Islam, when it comes in contact with the local cultures and practices of people visiting and living in the holy cities, gets questioned, thought upon and finally worked on. In both the works therefore Mecca is the site where different cultures meet and merge, exchange as well as contest the ideas of others. Mecca or the holy cities are hence the ones what we can aptly call the "translocal spaces", for they are the "sites through which a great many cultures travel" (85). Not only do "people and their 'theories' pass through translocalities, they also travel within these spaces" and the cultural diversity and complexity within these spaces "is such that it often becomes easy for meanings to move, shift or slip" (85). Therefore not just are the books and bags of the traveler portable, but also are his ideas and as Said says "ideas and theories also travel: from person to person, from situation to situation, from one period to another" (1984: 226). 'Travelling Theory' is the title of an essay by Edward Said that appeared in his 1984 work *The World, the Text and the Critic* and he argues in it that a person's intellectual life is greatly based on ideas that he formulates and acquires and that which circulate during his time. "In this sense the movement of theory is often a precondition for intellectual creativity. Said's main concern is with the ways in which theories change when they become translocal" (Mandaville 2001: 85).

In the first chapter of this research I have written at great detail about identities and the antagonism that emerges when divergent identities comes in contact with each other. Here I argue that it is not just the identity of a person that is put to test but also his ideas and theories; in the present case, those concerning Islam. Said in his essay writes about four stages that he regards as applicable to most cases were theories

travel, I shall however use it in the reverse in my chapter. The first stage is called the point of origin, and as the name suggests it is the point from where the discourse is first elaborated. But here, I shall see it as the discourse that the protagonist is familiar with at her point of origin; so it may be understood as the socio-cultural environment of the countries to which the protagonists belong and wherein they are for the first time introduced to Islam. The second stage is the very act of travelling or "the distance traversed… in which a theory or a set of ideas move from the point or origin into a different time and space" (85). Ideas travel along with the people who cross national boundaries, it is also transferred via books and publishing houses and even via media. The travelling individuals bear with them the ideas that are specially flavoured by the culture of the nation they belong to and with the distance traversed and cultures encountered the ideas shape out differently.

Third stage is when "our itinerant theory… encounter[s] a set of conditions which mediates its acceptance, rejection or modification in a new time and place" (85). In both the works taken for study, the set of conditions that brings in the conflict is the encounter with the Muslim 'other'. When Nomani from America and Sabitha from India, both of whom are self proclaimed modern women, get in touch with the 'age old' traditions and cultures of Saudi Arabia, they enter into a mode of conflict to preserve their views and egalitarian mode of Islam. Hence "the conditions which Islam as a travelling theory encounters are not only determined by non-Muslim cultures, but also by competing interpretations of Islam" (86). The final and last stage of the travelling theory is what finally emerges as a result of association with divergent cultures. And it is the last stage of theory that is of great interest to Said, he says:

> What happens to it when, in different circumstances and for new reasons, it is used again and, in still more different circumstances, again? What can this tell us about theory itself – its limits, its possibilities, its inherent problems – and what can it suggest to us about the relationship between theory and criticism, on the one hand, and society and culture on the other? (1984: 230).

Though the stages appear all too simplistic and commonsensical, it is exactly the pattern that both *Standing Alone in Mecca* and *Barsa* follow. Their journey to the state of origin of Islam is away from their own received discourses of Islam and their understanding of it. Nomani begins her memoir with elaborate descriptions of her childhood and life in America, and though through subtle remarks she makes it obvious that whatever independence and freedom she enjoys is on account of her Americanness and her large hearted family rather than her Indian roots or Islamic beliefs she holds on to. The beginning pages describe America as the saving grace that protected her from the conditions that women had to face in the "more traditional Muslim culture[s]" (2007: 27). The readers are told that she was "very much at odds with my [her] religion" (11) and the initial chapters of her work reveal to us that the theory of Islam that Asra Nomani had at the beginning of her journey was that of a religion which did not give much breathing space to the women in it. She speaks of the conditions of her cousins in India and the other women whom she had met in the course of her work and the picture drawn for us is inevitably grainy, grey and gloomy. America and her upbringing has moulded her into an independent and knowledgeable journalist for whom Islam was a concept less explored and as I wrote earlier, something that she was at odds with. But she, like Sabitha in *Barsa,* does not turn away from Islam, but instead decides "to find out more about my [her] faith" (11). The journey was hence more of a search for the roots of Islam and to understand the theory behind it.

In the case of Sabitha, Islam was a religion that she converted to after her marriage to Rasheed. Before her marriage, her only link to Islam was her close friendship with Muslims in her locality and their culture; and after her marriage, it slowly developed into knowledge of some important prayers and Arabic alphabet (Mumthas 2007: 151-152). It was her journey abroad and her posting in Mecca that prompted her to acquire more knowledge and a clearer perspective of Islam. The understanding of Islam that both the protagonists held before their journey was hence purely cultural and it was this understanding that comes into a conflict with when they arrive in Saudi Arabia. Both therefore find their faith being questioned and scrutinized by a variation of a supposedly 'purer and real' form of Islam. Hence their theory of Islam when they travel or get

'transplanted', as in the case of Sabitha, is subjected to profound changes; new ideas are added on to it and the existing theory is modified, enriched or chiseled out. As Vertovec and Peach notes, "one mode of modifying meanings occurs through a particular kind of self-consciousness which the conditions of 'borderlands'… or minority status stimulates" (1997: 38). Truly enough, both Nomani and Sabitha are relegated to minority status but unlike most cases of Muslim diaspora they are not Muslim minority in a Western land, instead they belong to the minority of critiquing 'culturalist' Muslims in the land of austere practicing Muslims. This leads them to re-read and re-interpret the Quran and hadiths inorder to re-assert their position in Islam, or to put it rightly, re-assert the position of women in Islam. And by doing so, women's position and their role in public sphere are legitimised.

Hence as Mandaville claims, when Islam travels not just conversations and debates within societies and cultures ensue but important dialogues take place within Islam itself or to use his words, "engagement with the Muslim 'other'" follows. This indeed "constitutes a politics of cultural negotiation in which different conceptions of Islam are mediated and new critical capacities emerge" (Mandaville 2001: 110). The writers along with the books bring to us therefore the aspects of travelling Islam and an image of Islam that is flexible in thought and practice materialize. But this can only be realized only when the protagonist travel back in order to retrace the journey of Islam. As El Moudden suggests, the travellers have always been aware of the community of faith and goals that ties them to fellow travellers but it was in this age of globalisation that they have come into direct contact with the real differences of language, sect, race and customs that unavoidably make up the umma. "Contrary to the conventional wisdom of the Western social scientists, therefore, the encounter with the Muslim 'other' has been atleast as important for self-definition as the confrontation with the European 'other'" adds El Moudden (Eickelman and Piscatori 1990: xv).

Now we have seen in detail in the second chapter as to how both Nomani and Sabitha interpret the Quran and hadiths from the perspective of women. Their views, in line with that of the Islamic feminists present to the readers an alternative and egalitarian

reading of the holy texts wherein women are deemed at par with men in terms of freedom and rights. I will therefore in this chapter look at how the travel or rather the pilgrimage and sojourn at Saudi Arabia are recorded by the writers. Well it goes without saying that travel narratives were earlier an appropriate medium to spread orientalist views about domains other than the West. Later it shed its colonial baggage and became works that made people re-imagine the world around by re-presenting it to them in a different light. About the new additions to the genre, James Duncan and Derek Gregory says that "at its very best, it raises urgent questions about the politics of representation and spaces of transculturation, about the continuities between a colonial past and a supposedly post-colonial present, and about the ecological, economic and cultural implications of globalising projects of modernity" (1999: 1). Though all the above mentioned elements cannot be related to the works under study, we sure can learn a great deal about the politics of representation and as to who the expected audience is.

As was mentioned at the beginning of the first chapter, the subtitle of the Indian edition of Nomani's work is *A Pilgrimage into the Heart of Islam* and it was published in 2007. But the work's International edition had come out in 2005, but then with the title, *Standing Alone in Mecca: An American Woman's Struggle for the Soul of Islam.* Well, a work that is published not many years later than 9/11 claiming to save the soul of Islam and the 'bold' step taken by none other than an American woman is bound to raise interest. And as I had written a number of times before, Nomani makes it a point to highlight her Americanness throughout the work. We are tempted to presume that the book was solely for an American audience maimed by the terrorist attack and who saw Islam or, to be more right, fanatical Muslims as the culprit. Nomani's work speaks about terrorism in the name of religion, about Wahhabism and as to how removed it is from Islam and about the stringent laws in Saudi Arabia which are not present anywhere in America.

The very blurb of her book begins with the lines "As President Bush prepared to invade Iraq, a *Wall Street Journal* correspondent for fifteen years, Asra Q. Nomani embarked on a *dangerous* journey from Middle America to the Middle East to join more

than two million fellow Muslims on the hajj" (emphasis added). While we wonder as to why going on a pilgrimage is described as dangerous, the next line complements it by saying that it is a "journey *perilous enough* for any American reporter". It is only later in the memoir that we are introduced to the fact that the author was a close friend of Daniel Pearl whom she addresses in her book as Danny. After her first attempt to go for hajj gets bombed, she tries to go as a reporter the second time and that too on a rather fancy 'project'. She writes: "this time I had a potential assignment from *Outside*, an outdoor adventure travel magazine, to experience the hajj in the most adventurous way that I could". Stephanie Pearson, the editor of *Outside*, writes Nomani "envisioned me doing hajj in the path of the Prophet Muhammad, camping out and trekking through the hajj, just as a caravan might have done at the time of the Prophet" (2007: 36). As we cringe at the childish glee she attaches to her way of performing hajj, we are also forced to wonder about her real motive behind going on a pilgrimage to which she attaches no special religious sentiments. She further supplements her excitement with the lines: "For years as a Wall Street Journal reporter, I had thought I could do an unconventional profile on the big business of the pilgrimage. *It amazed me that you could do the hajj and also get Hilton honour points*" (34, emphasis added).

Nomani stands in stark contrast to the millions who aspire to go on a hajj pilgrimage to fulfill the fifth pillar of Islam and thereby they believe to get a step closer to God and heaven. The greatest irony is that it is a person like Nomani who then attempts to champion the struggle for the betterment of women in Islam. Her theory of Islam is next to nil and knowledge about it is rudimentary. Earlier in the work her interest to go for hajj was to 'know more' about the religion she was at odds with, but later after the birth of her son she feels the need to find a place for herself in the religion, to rub off the guilt she was bearing within her for having committed *zina*. Thence she relates herself with Hajar who had to protect and fend for her child alone against all odds. But we are pushed to question as to what grounds Nomani has to relate herself to a woman like Hajar who had to fight bitter battles to keep her son and herself alive. Nomani's journey towards her religion and her 'pilgrimage into the heart of Islam' is over sensationalized in the work though she argues for the cause of women in Islam quite ardently.

Another aspect of both the works is the creation of a double, a marked out dichotomy between the narrator and the narrated. There is an undertone of conflict that runs throughout Nomani's work where we are intentionally or unintentionally presented with a double shade—a smart, sophisticated and modern Muslim woman, Asra Nomani, who 'challenges and questions' the norms, against a burqa clad and hence faceless Muslim woman with an always present male figure in the background who speaks for her. We are also presented with stereotypical caricatures throughout the book, either good and liberal Muslim women, always from the West or traditional and narrow minded ones. When Zarqa Ekram from Atlanta, Georgia or Zakia Zikria, an Afghan American pilgrim from Alexandria, Virginia understand and agree that "life isn't that simple" when Asra reveals her single mother status, the unnamed stern faced elderly woman from Sudan in the chapter "The Devil's In The Details" snaps at her mother by saying "Your hajj is not accepted. You are showing your hair" when some loose wet strands peeks out. There are more stern elderly faces coming up in various parts of the book essentially criticizing and reprimanding. But why are those who criticize always left unnamed and always from non-Western lands?

Though emotion surges out at various points in the book and though she claims that the book is for women and men of all faiths in all corners of the world, her prejudices about the land and people overshadows her efforts to be a spokesperson for the entire Muslim womanhood. In *Barsa* however, the overemphasis on Western Muslim women that we witness in Nomani's work is absent. Here it is solely Sabitha who is placed against a whole host of women from different lands including India. Though this is so we are presented with a clear notion of the difference between the narrators and the other Muslim women observed and narrated by them. When both Nomani and Sabitha are presented as epitomes of rationality and sensibility, the other women are either weak and conditioned by the circumstances they are in or are blind and unquestioning, not to mention, austere practitioners of rigid traditions that has nothing to do with Islam. *Barsa* presents its women in three sets, Sabitha who is strong enough to stand up against all modes of suppression and sidelining and who can very well be compared with the Quranic women like Aishah and Sukaina for her spirit to fight back and reason out with

people. The second set of women are either silent supporters of Sabitha's actions or they are mere onlookers who have not much say in the course of the novel. The third group however has the women whose actions and words are at direct conflict with Sabitha's; they are portrayed as being all powerful and who have the system in their hands but it is Sabitha who is always the just one, the more sensible one. When the second group is spared from criticism in the text, it is the third that keeps the novel alive with their bickering and gossip giving the central protagonist Sabitha enough space and reasons to prove herself right.

And as rightly suggested by Mary Louis Pratt 'Othering' is achieved through language choices:

> The people to be othered are homogenized into a collective 'they', which is distilled even further into an iconic 'he'. This abstracted 'he'/'they' is the subject of verbs in a timeless present tense, which characterizes anything 'he' is or does, not as a particular historical event but as an instance of a pregiven custom or trait (quoted in Mills 1991: 88).

Nomani has her work smeared consciously or unconsciously with these markers of othering; though she does not do so with the objective of degrading the other she surely marks them out by comparing herself to them. In her first attempt to go on hajj pilgrimage, she goes into the Saudi Arabian airlines office, near the Lucknow neighbourhood of Hazratganj. Nomani is asked to come with a mahram who would accompany her on the pilgrimage and then she begins to scrutinize her case. She thinks: "I was thirty-five years old….I'd driven motorcycle through the Himalayas. I'd interviewed President Bill Clinton in the Rose Garden of the White House. Surely, I could take care of myself." (Nomani 2007: 31). Precisely then another woman comes in with a man, presumably to get their tickets for the pilgrimage. The way Nomani narrates her appearance marks the woman out as a direct opposite to the modern journalist that she is. Her words are:

> My thoughts were interrupted by my physical mirror image – a woman walked inside the office *shrouded* in a black burqa, *a kind of graduation*

gown with a loose ninja hood; only her eyes were visible. A man came
with her. She flipped open her passport. The picture inside showed her
face, but her hair was still completely shrouded. I wonder what identity I
would have to assume to make this journey. *Did I have to become her?....* I
left frustrated (31; emphasis added)

The description of the burqa for instance, makes us wonder for whom Nomani is writing
the book. It is an exaggerated and to a great extent a ridiculing comparison that she
comes with. And it is weird that a woman arguing for other women in the world
assuming that the burqa clad one cannot do any of the marvelous feats that the author has
attained. Though the words are not spelt out, the very way the comparison goes indicates
it and afterall she calls her her own "mirror image". There are nameless Saudi and Third
World women everywhere in her memoir who need saving, who need to be told that an
interpretation of Quran can be done, whose fate can greatly be altered by relentless
efforts of modern Muslim women like her.

While writing about Nomani and the clichéd Orientalist usages that she
comes up with, I am thoroughly reminded of Hamid Dabashi's article on the New York
Times columnist Nicholas Kristof. Dabashi's article was posted in the online site of *Al
Jazeera* (English) under the title *Kristof: The Journalist as Tourist* and it speaks about the
"seemingly unconscious invocation of some of the oldest and most tiresome orientalist
clichés in his (Kristof's) recent columns in the *New York Times*, following a short visit to
the beleaguered Islamic Republic" (AlJazeera 3 July 2012). And as rightly added by
Dabashi, such usages and references are "revelatory" but they say very little about "the
orientalised, but reveal a lot about the orientalist" (ibid). In a similar fashion Nomani
'explores' Saudi Arabia with the eyes of a traveller cum pilgrim cum journalist, amazed
at times, shocked and at other times disgusted.

Contemporary travel writing may well be attempting to find a new way to
encounter the world, based on less exploitative and hierarchical relations
than those enacted in earlier periods, but traces of imperial endeavor haunt
the very vocabulary, grammar, form, and subjectivities available to the
Western traveler, which, in turn, makes possible the continued power,
influence, and effect of imperial modes of experiencing and narrating
difference (Gilbert and Johnston 2002: 24).

The Second Part of Nomani's book entitled "Starting the Pilgrimage: February 2003" is where we find the most number of such comments. The very first sentence is: "As we stepped into the visitor's lounge at the Jeddah airport, *a sea of poor, dark-skinned men and women* from Sudan floated before me"(2007: 59, emphasis added). She adds to the description by saying that: "In contrast to American Muslims, Muslims in Sudan live under political, religious and social repression" (59). She does not stop with that but some pages later writes: "A *dark-skinned man* in *bare feet* stood near us. 'Hajj Committee Bihar', my father read from his bag. Bihar is one of India's poorest states. *The joke in India goes that Pakistan could have the disputed Indian- controlled state of Kashmir if it took the state of Bihar with it as well*" (63, emphasis added). The word 'dark-skinned' in a way is not merely a marker of the race but also of economic condition, for the phrase is always associated with something that showed the financial condition of the person being talked about. And about the 'joke' on Bihar, what can be said more about it than suggesting Nomani to have some better sense of humour and if it doesn't hurt, to learn or atleast read a bit more about the geography and history of the country she claims to be from. The sentence might have been placed there for some 'comic relief' but it is the most annoying and repulsive statement in the whole book.

There are many similar comments, less scathing though, directed at Saudi Arabia and the people who belong to the country. When still at the airport terminal, she writes: "I thought I was going to be *disgusted* being in Saudi Arabia, but ironically I felt just fine" (63, emphasis added). Elsewhere she adds, "I was also afraid, because Saudi Arabia is so *notoriously repressive*" (72, emphasis added), "'This country *haunts* me', I wrote in my notebook" (74, emphasis added). Why does a woman who has never been to Saudi Arabia have so strong an aversion to the country? It is never said that the country or the officials threatened her, an American journalist, when entering their country. Then why? The only reason we can presume is the presence of Shibli, her son born out of the wedlock. A child outside marriage makes her a culprit of the crime zina according to sharia and the punishment given to the perpetrator is stoning by death. Nomani from the very onset of her journey fears discovery, she fears that she will be labelled a criminal by the Saudi Arabian law and would be condemned to death. This fear has been expressed at

sometime earlier in the work but then once the journey commences fear gets masked by a strong sense of aversion towards the country as a whole.

It is this insecurity, I believe, that make her reiterate the comparison to Hajar. By self anointing herself thus, she gives a certain sense of credibility to her position; she becomes the victim of patriarchy, the scapegoat of a man's ego and spinelessness and not a criminal of any sorts. But what is interesting is that Nomani is not a weak and meek person and it is never that she fought for her child's right to have a father or stopped the person from walking out on her. Much later in the work, after she gets back to her home from hajj she gets more involved in the cause for Muslim women. On confronting the cases of zina and on hearing the punishment given to the women, she has just one thing to say: "I felt good about one thing. I wasn't going to be lashed. I was in West Virginia. There I had the support of loving parents and was shielded by the progressive laws of a country where religion and state are constitutionally separated and where consensual adult sexual behaviour has largely been decriminalized" (224).

There is also a mention about the facilities enjoyed by likes of her from America who have both money and name. She writes that the Islamic Society of North America provided them with air-conditioned buses for travel, lodging at Mecca Sheraton and buffets and carry outs from nearby KFC. She calls herself and her family very rightly the 'fat-cat pilgrims' from America who had pristine and immaculate accommodation at the Sheraton. And one day she goes out on a small adventure to find her first cousin who has come for hajj from India with her husband. They stayed in the accommodations that the Government of India had secured for its pilgrims. She writes: "Most countries had similar accommodations, with buildings designated by nationality. I crept inside, gingerly. Oil streaked the walls near a gas stove that the pilgrims used to cook meals. Here there are no Sheraton buffets. My cousin stood in front of the fire, frying an omelette" (131-132). And they were put up in a small room with half a dozen cots.

Nomani expresses her surprise and wonder on seeing shopping malls and Inter- Continental hotels. In the chapter titled "House of Saud, House of Donuts" she writes "we passed a billboard for Rado watches and an advertisement for Toshiba

computers. Sprinklers shot water into the air on the side of the road. We hit a business district with storefronts advertising Sealy mattresses, Pepsi and Farnas Rent-A-Car" (78). She adds saying that she felt the locale quite familiar. That "I could have been entering any other urban national capital of the world. It was a mix of traditional ways and Western trappings" (78), it even had she says, 'House of Donuts' and 'Kentucky Fried Chicken' and that the rooms at Sheraton was like any other hotel rooms in New York to Los Angeles, California. Later in the book she speaks in wonder and adoration about the different facilities that shopping malls in Mecca have. MTV and Avril Lavigne's picture in the newspaper astonishes her. And she does not mince words or excitement at having found that the "newspaper's TV guide listed The Oprah Winfrey Show, with all of its mini-documentaries on American societal drama, on Star World" (130). Her narration makes us wonder as to what she expected to see in the streets of Mecca. Did she expect to see poverty around? Or did she think that technology and luxurious lifestyle was a thing of the West alone?

The idea of travel or journey is embedded in the culture relating to most of the religions. Whether in the form of pilgrimage or visit to some place for mental or spiritual comfort, travel is a part of one's life and as Mandaville says, "the general idea" behind it all are "the same: movement from one place to another becomes vested with meaning" (2001: 111). He adds that in the movement of this sort a transformation of some form happens, it may involve a shift from ignorance to enlightenment, or from 'profane to sacred space'. He is of the view that "there is more than only travel in religion, for religions travel themselves. They move and settle, then become displaced and migrate again, a process repeated across space and through time" (112). Sabitha, for instance, in *Barsa* begins her journey as a new convert with a whole set of doubts and apprehensions about the religion she is embracing, she is then translocated to a different cultural background and along with her the theory she holds of Islam also travels. A new definition and a better understanding of the religion dawns on her as a result of interaction and study; the journey she begins therefore slowly directs her life and she adopts the religion in totality. But then when all seems steady and settled, Sabitha journeys back to the culture she had left behind seven years ago. The life in her homeland

amidst a different Muslim cultural background is for sure going to reshape her theory and beliefs of Islam. Hence as Stuart Hall writes, "I view this as a constant process of breaks, interruptions and reorganizations, in which the religious formation is reordered, rearranged, dislocated and repositioned, so as to provide new historical realities" (quoted in Mandaville 2001: 112). But these so called 'new historical realities' are to be understood to be as shifty and fluid as the theory the protagonists held on to before their travel, the damage is done when the new theory gets "reduced, codified, and institutionalized" (Said 1984: 239).

Islam in itself encourages its believers to travel and it explicitly marks some such journeys as enriching and much needed for the advancement of humans. Infact the hijra, the emigration of the Prophet Muhammad and his followers from Mecca to Medina in 622 makes travel a welcoming idea to many Muslims. They are encouraged to make certain travels among which hajj holds the prime position; it is obligatory to every Muslim to perform hajj atleast once in his or her lifetime provided both health and financial situation of the person comply. "Visits to local or regional shrines (ziyaras) and travel in search of knowledge (rihla) provide further examples of religiously inspired travel" (Eickelman and Piscatori 1990: 5). Other forms of travel that effectively mixed travel for trade purposes and those in search of knowledge were common in the past.

Mecca, the 'holy city', 'spiritual centre' or 'cultural hub' in Saudi Arabia, or what Owen Rutter calls on as 'a gigantic cosmopolitan club' is closed to all but Muslims. Muslims travel to Mecca mainly to perform hajj, the fifth pillar of Islam and *umrah*, a *sunnah* pilgrimage to Mecca. The point of Hajj journey, according to Wolfe, has always been the same, which he says is "to detach a representative number of people from their homes and, by bringing them to Islam's birthplace, to emphasize the unity of all human beings before their Creator" (Wolfe 1999: xiii). In addition, it fulfills one the most important rites of a Muslim.

The literatures on hajj pilgrimage are not only cultural artifacts, but can also be seen as works on 'transformative learning'. In such works, we can see the author's understanding of Islam undergoing a transformation after the pilgrimage and also through

the interaction with other pilgrims. In addition to it, each stage of the Hajj, according to Nasr and Reem Al Faisal (2009), brings the pilgrim closer to the objective of self-knowledge. Attainment of self-knowledge depends on each person's natural ability and desire, they argue, and no two hajj journeys are ever alike, and hajjis leave the great journey as persons greatly altered from what they were before the pilgrimage (Nasr and Faisal: 2009). Hence, throughout history, much critical theorization has been done on the writings on hajj pilgrimage. Saida Miller Khalifa in her work *The Fifth Pillar* raised the claim that, as far as her knowledge is concerned, "all previous accounts in English have been written by men, so a feminine viewpoint may be timely" (Khalifa M Saida 1977: XXVI). This claim however drew much criticism and ones like Marciah Ermansen argued that Saida Khalifa's claim is inaccurate since Lady Evelyn Cobbold wrote about her Hajj in the 1930s (Marciah 1999: 69), and her work was entitled *Pilgrimage to Mecca*. Asra Q. Nomani's work therefore would very well be an addition to the list of writings on Hajj pilgrimage by women.

American scholar Michael Wolfe's work *One Thousand Roads to Mecca* (1999) gives us a detailed account of travel writing on Islamic pilgrimage. In this work, he gives twenty-three anthologies of the annual pilgrimage to Mecca, a "supreme expression of Muslim religion" (Wolfe 1999: ix). Such literatures on hajj pilgrimage and the autobiographies written by people after the pilgrimage show that, it was the pilgrimage and the cultural interaction with people from diverse cultural backgrounds that worked to bring about a change in the parochial mentalities of the people. It is also that which motivated many 'radical' thoughts to become 'more radical'. For many others hajj was a 'realization point' wherein they started believing in the role of the pilgrim as a 'uniting force of diverse identities'. For instance in *Triumphant Pilgrimage,* the author reminisces:

> Now that I've been to Mecca I'm more convinced than ever. I tell you that place is like a gigantic cosmopolitan club. Turks, Chinese, Malays, Afghans, Syrians, Africans are all friends and brothers there, rubbing shoulders with one another. I never saw a row. Never heard a harsh word even. How can they be brought together like that? Only by the power of Islam (Rutter 1937: 18).

There are many similar narrative stories on Mecca pilgrim writings. Asra Nomani's 'activism' to fight against sexism and intolerance in her local mosque and to fight for the rights of modern Muslim women, is yet another product of such experiences.

Even though it is not a new beginning on hajj writing and "after journey activism", Nomani's work is a significant addition to the large number of documents by American Muslims on their participation in the hajj. Among such works, the most important and widely discussed narrative is that of an American Muslim called El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, popularly known as Malcolm X. For him the journey was a chance to embrace "true Islam" by abandoning his previously held secluded thoughts. After performing his hajj, while he was sitting and resting in a tent on Mount Arafat, some people asked him as to "what about the hajj" impressed him the most, and he replied saying that it was the 'transformative power' that hajj had on human thoughts and actions. Like Rutter, he describes his sense of wonder at hajj: "The *brotherhood!* The people of all races, colors, from all over the world coming together as *one! It has proved to me the power of the One God"* (Malcolm X 2006 [1965]: 345, emphasis added).

The transformation in Malcolm's life after hajj is significant and it is what makes a pilgrimage worth noting. While performing hajj, he met whites who were untouched by racist tendencies and hence were unlike any whites he had met and known so far; such a cultural interaction forced him to believe that all whites categorically do not support racial hatred. The cultural exposure that he received from Mecca and the impact it had on his outlook can be understood better on analyzing the letter that he wrote to his wife, sister and friends. Malcolm X writes in one of such letters that, in the Holy City of Mecca,

> we were all participating in the same ritual, displaying a spirit of unity and brotherhood that my experiences in America had led me to believe never could exist between the white and the non-white… America needs to understand Islam, because this is the one religion that erases from its society the race problem. Throughout my travels in the Muslim world, I have met, talked to, and even eaten with people who in America would have been considered 'white'-but the 'white' attitude was removed from their minds by the religion of Islam. I have never before seen sincere and

true brotherhood practiced by all colors together, irrespective of their color… (2006 [1965]: 346- 347).

What made Malcolm X, Muhammad Asad, Rutter Owen and Asra Nomani change their "perspectives", "attitudes" and thoughts about Islam after performing hajj? What is so peculiar about this journey? What are the conditions that facilitate scholars like Ebrahim Moosa to argue that after Hajj, people become more humble? The answers to these questions would be available only when we accept the fact that Islam is not a monolithic form of religion; and is instead a religious tradition. It is this understanding that the hajj pilgrimage facilitates. Islam, taking the definition of Sayyid Husain Nasr "is at once a religion, and a civilization and social order based upon the revealed principles of the religion. It is an archetypal reality, residing eternally in the Divine Intellect" (1981: 1-2). The social order and civilization is not only set on the revealed principles of the religion, but it is heavily influenced by the cultural and historical context in which it is situated. Talal Asad defines Islam in this line by saying that, "Islam is neither a distinctive social structure nor a heterogeneous collection of beliefs, artifacts, customs and morals. It is a tradition" (Asad 1986, 14). But tradition, as I argued in the first chapter, does not entail an unchanging or unitary set of principles but "an instituted practice (set in a particular context and having a particular history) into which Muslims are inducted *as* Muslims" (21). This tradition and way of life has many local versions and historical circumstances in which the local religions, rituals, customs, practices and morals may have had some effects. We cannot define such rituals, customs and practices *always* on the basis of Islam or any other religion. Here we can just say that, as noted by Starrett, religions do have an important influence on people's lives and their sense of identity, but many other beliefs, motivations, concepts, and activities influence their social life, besides those of religion (1997: 282).

Muslim identity and its expression is also not the same everywhere, it varies according to the cultural and social contexts in which the individuals are situated. When we acknowledge the idea that Islam is not a monolithic religion, we further should understand that Muslims, who though they adhere to Islam, live in diverse social, historical and cultural contexts and have their life shaped according to these factors as

well. However, diversity in beliefs, rituals, customs and practices within Islam does not mean that there are *Islams,* but it only means that there are Muslims who read the Quran and interpret it differently according to the historical and cultural contexts and ideological setup in which they live in.

Mecca, as the centre of Islam's sacred geography, accepts all such differences and local variations. Even though the "official" practices and rituals in Saudi Arabia and the Great mosques are dominated by Wahhabi ideology, it never restricts the entry of Muslims to the Holy city by categorizing them on their ideological and cultural differences. Such a mixture of cultural traditions, religious variations, ethnic differences and language differences open a new way of thinking among the pilgrims. Realisation that the Islam they practice is not the only Islam dawns on them, and they come to terms with the fact that many other Muslims around the globe practice Islam in ways different from theirs. By saying this, it is not that I am ignoring the alternative side of thought, that some groups and individuals will think that how their religion is "corrupted" how it has been "diluted" in different societies. In the case of Malcom and Nomani the journey was a realization point, a realization point which gave them to realize the "true" meaning of Islam. It gave Nomani strength to challenge things that remained unchallenged; it gave her a strength to interpret the religion the way that according to her view is "true Islam". Muhammad Asad journeyed to Mecca to understand and embrace Islam; at the end of his journey, he answered the question as to what Islam stands for by saying that "my very first experience as a Muslim among Muslims was one of brotherhood" (Asad 2004: 346). For Nomani, ironically, it was how this brotherhood defined and controlled the sisterhood.

Nomani takes inspiration from the hajj pilgrimage and her new found understanding of Islam and invests the knowledge and strength she attained to fight sexism and oppression in the local mosque in Morgan town. Back in her local mosque, as in any other mosque, women were not allowed to share the main hall with men. The main hall and the inner sanctum of a mosque was out of bounds for women who had to pray and perform namaz in a small dingy side hall. Her argument was however that if men and

women could share the same hall and pray side by side during hajj pilgrimage and inside the Haram mosque then why was she not allowed to do so in her local mosque. Nomani cites this as an outgrowth of the patriarchal order and claimed that it got nothing to do with Islam or scriptures. She gets ready to fight a single person fight against this sexism and later finds support flowing in to meet her. At the beginning she drafts a seven point 'Manifesto for Equal Participation' that "included equity in access, accommodations, facilities and services"

When her demands are turned down, she takes the battle to a new level by organizing support and spreading awareness about women's participation in religious activities. She writes that she "found overwhelming scholarly evidence that mosques that bar women from the main prayer space aren't Islamic. They more aptly reflect the age of ignorance, or Jahiliya, in pre-Islamic Arabia" (260). Hence her action was directed to reclaim the history of Islam and to reclaim the rightful position and space that women had in it. Though she and her supporters faced disappointment after disappointment, they never gave up the fight. And finally they managed to organize a woman led prayer and had the local mosque treat its women with more respect. Her memoir speaks of the struggle that she continues with to bring awareness to larger number of Muslim women across the globe. Hence she is one who drew inspiration from the pilgrimage and who tried to imbibe the values of it into her life. And she writes: "I realized that standing in front of the Ka'bah had had the profound effect of showing me that I needed to stay true to a point of focus in my life. At the moment of the hajj, it was manifested upon my chest… It was at that moment, I realized, that I had made a commitment to dedicate my life to good causes" (371). Whether or not Nomani's theory of Islam was purely based and rooted in the holy texts at the beginning of the pilgrimage, it sure did transform with the journey and it evolved to become one which aided her in doing good for the Muslim women. And that I believe is the real and true objective of religion.

Conclusion

I'm astounded whenever I finish something. Astounded and distressed. My perfectionist instinct should inhibit me from finishing: it should inhibit me from even beginning. But I get distracted and start doing something. What I achieve is not the product of an act of my will but of my will's surrender. I begin because I don't have the strength to think; I finish because I don't have the courage to quit. This book is my cowardice.

(Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*)

Let me begin by saying that this dissertation is not my cowardice, but instead it is my courage; this dissertation and the very act of writing has strengthened my heart and my will to keep going against all odds. Confusion gave birth to this research and to confusion I give it back; not that I haven't learned and got illumined in the process, but fresh doubts have found the place of the old. I believe that is the success of it for there are new questions to be answered, new solutions to be found. The journey from page one to this last page has been anything but smooth and as my last chapter argues, travel does transform the theory. Ideas have evolved and died down between pages and nights, and what I have is a crude form of what I think.

My work started by contesting the monolithic idea of Islam propagated by the likes of Samuel Huntington. Islam is too large and too diverse a concept to be compressed into one single glass cauldron. Instead it is like mosaic, many different pieces all fitted together to form a large beautiful pattern. Islam has within it cultures that are incompatible with each other and these cultural differences result in numerous ways of perceiving the single religion. But to denounce one version and to propagate another is what results in conflicts; what is to be understood is that the local variations of religion

are largely influenced by the history and socio-cultural norms of the society and hence is a complex web that cannot be easily detached.

Just as the concept of Islam is fluid, there can thence be no single Muslim Woman. She is moulded by the society and culture and even greatly by the gender systems prevalent in the society. To confuse the treatment of women in Muslim societies with the treatment guaranteed to her by the religion is the flaw that most people commit. Islam in its original self, I conclude, is pro-women but the skewed interpretations of the Quran and exegesis label it as being misogynistic in nature. Only by re-interpretations and proper study of the holy texts can we obtain for the Muslim women that which was originally guaranteed to her by the texts.

Lastly I argued that translocality and translocal spaces influence the theory of Islam greatly. And as Mandaville rightly claims, when Islam travels not just conversations and debates within societies and cultures ensue but important dialogues take place within Islam itself or to use his words, "engagement with the Muslim 'other'" follows. This indeed "constitutes a politics of cultural negotiation in which different conceptions of Islam are mediated and new critical capacities emerge" (Mandaville 2001: 110). Along with the positive transformation of Islam the women in it will attain greater freedom and status, and it will give them a stronger claim to demand for their rights and to fight for it.

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