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[Article] “Who Are We Thinking of When We Talk About Muslim Women? The Unveiling of Our Colonized Mentality”

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# Who Are We Thinking of When We Talk About Muslim Women? The Unveiling of Our Colonized Mentality

By Cynthia Hernández González

*The dominant discursive construct of the 'Global War on Terror' has articulated strong underlying racialized and gendered narratives. As Laura Shepherd and Richard Jackson posit, this discourse makes the West a "masculinized, modern, peaceful and civilized" force superior to that of the Muslim world presented as "feminized, medieval, violent and savage."*

- Sunniya Wajahat

## Introduction

In April 2017, decolonial studies Muslim scholar Sirin Adlbi Sibai presented in Mexico City, *The Prison of Feminism*; a work that seeks to highlight the impact of coloniality in the production of Islamophobia, as well as its perpetuation through various types of campaigns that seek to "liberate" Muslim women wearing the hijab or Islamic veil (Adlbi 2016). Subsequently, in *Beyond Islamic Feminism: Redefining Islamophobia and Patriarchy*, the author defined the "hijab-wearing Muslim woman" framing as:

*a non-subject and passive object of study and intervention, with well-defined characteristics: underdeveloped, illiterate, sexually repressed, poor, oppressed, alienated, etc. As construct outside of Western-colonial-imperial logics and reason, this view would come to exemplify the Other par excellence of those Others par excellence women of the so-called Third World. (Adlbi, 2018: 6)*

Given that Adlbi Sibai created this concept to refer to people racialized as Muslims and gendered as women living in Muslim-majority lands and in the global North, it is my intention to problematize the outcome of this complex colonial structuring through the experience of Damaris\*, one of my ethnographic collaborators whom I met in Los Angeles, California, while I was doing fieldwork for my doctoral research.

Damaris\* is a 25–30-year-old Muslim trans(\*) woman originally from Virginia, in the United States, who was adopted in her late teens by a Christian family of Honduran origin. I met her at a mosque in Koreatown, Los Angeles on March 15, 2019, after the funeral prayers for those killed in the attack on a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand ended. It was then that Damaris and I began to see each other on different occasions in her university and one time at a fundraising dinner organized by another Muslim community during the month of Ramadan – the Islamic month of fasting – in 2019. My interest in including Damaris as a trans(\*) Muslim woman in my doctoral research arose when, during the aforementioned dinner, one of my Latin American ethnographic collaborators began to ask me numerous questions about this “person” who was next to me during the event.

The questions revealed to me — in a politically correct way — the incomprehension, even the disdain, that my colleague felt towards women who are gendered male at birth. The questions implicitly stated that Damaris was simply an impostor, since her facial features showed that she was not “a real woman” (despite presenting herself as any Muslim woman who dresses in a Muslim modest attire). Damaris\* had attended the event in a black dress, with subtle colorful floral designs that perfectly matched her veil; however, as the clothing seeks to represent and convey a “true” and “real” genitality and unambiguous woman (Bettcher, 2012), my Latin American colleague perceived Damaris's\* clothed experience as a contradiction.

The way in which my colleague compared the visible and the invisible through Damaris's\* body, made me question the way in which Islamic cosmology contemplates the world. On the basis of this cosmology, it is possible that the subjective essence, *bātin*, and the internal dispositions, *shawakīl*, of people are different from their external anatomical appearances, *zā'aqīl* (Abdou, 2019). However, given the medical and psychological changes that being a trans woman entails, the divine unforeseen, *alghayb*, and intentions, *niyya*, of Muslim trans(\*) persons are not considered valid in Islam. For this reason, it is necessary to briefly review how the idea of gender and the sexes was conceived in Islam, explore the experience of Damaris\* as a trans(\*) Muslim woman and by extension that of transgender people, as well as the ways in which “gender” was understood in pre-modern Islam.

## Unveiling the Sexualization of Bodies According to the Modern/Colonial Gender Binarism

Although some discussions around gender propose that it is merely a cultural construct and something prosthetic, few people have questioned what it is that characterizes men or women specifically (Stryker, 2017; Preciado, 2002). Even if they challenge the social roles that are based on sexual difference, the most naturalized perspective since colonial times and the rise of imperialism has been one that aligns gender with sex. However, as the Eurocentric “universal” history we are familiar with tends to ignore social practices of groups considered “savage,” “barbaric” or “uncivilized,” I find it crucial to recognize that the way in which genders are determined is highly fluid since it changes over time and depends on multiple factors and beliefs (Stryker, 2006). This means that gender, as we understand it in the present time—from a white gaze, colonial perspective and modern point of view— cannot be taken out of the context of the political economy and evolutions of spiritual and cultural dynamics and, therefore, sex and gender does not signify the same thing for people living in this world (Stryker, 2017).

Given that sex is considered the origin of gender, I think it necessary to expose, according to the transfeminism perspective, that “sex” — and, therefore, “gender” — are not natural categories, since they respond to the establishment of a technological and socio-political colonial, Euro-Cartesian [1], white and heterosexual global character (Preciado, 2002). This perspective reveals that the binaries we consider “natural” — such as body / spirit, nature / technology, and others — are part of a mechanism through which people are stigmatized, excluded, and oppressed and considered “abnormal” (Preciado, 2002). Since this term [sex] is used to define what the body signifies, what its limits are, and how it should be interpreted, the “sex” construct is not arbitrary (Stryker, 2006). Although some studies seek to find a way out of the problematic of sex, such as those based on the essentialist or constructivist models [2] what is less likely to be concluded is that sex is a construct. For there exists “the belief that the body entails a zero-sum referent or that it represents the ultimate truth, a biological matter foregrounded by the genetic

code, the sexual organs, and its reproductive functions as a given evidence of its indisputability as natural (Preciado, 2002: 126).

According to this theory, it is clear that sexual categories are part of a system that proposed an ideal as a way to regulate bodies, which simultaneously allows to escape from its fixed designation (Guerrero, 2020). As the creation of the sexes seemingly presents itself as a “natural” event, it becomes logical to think that there are only two categories: that of “men” or “women” which are acquired through displays of “masculinity” or “femininity” (Guerrero, 2020) (op. cit.). This way of understanding the world is a social compromise, because the sexual dichotomy dictates that when one is a “woman” one cannot be a “man” and vice versa; a fact that cast people — who “change sex” or who assume a different gender from that assigned at birth — as “unnatural” (Bettcher, 2012).

As Guerrero Mc Manus posits, philosophies that criticize colonialism, or those that seek its total disappearance, recognized that “diverse cultures understand and set categories of male and female, or other gender arrangements, in different ways” (Guerrero, 2019: 9). Therefore, when the way in which white supremacy operates is known, it can be discovered that — through the process of conquest and colonization — people of color not only suffered but continue to suffer from the imposition and internalization of racial and generic-binary categories. The colonial mentality continues to demonize the different ways in which the body, gender, and its various expressions in relation to desire; a fact that has led to the creation of the present *cis(gender)/cis y trans(gender)/trans(\*)* dichotomy.

### **Unveiling the Cis-Heteronormative Construct of the Subject Called “Muslim Woman”**

The majority of my ethnographic collaborators from Muslim-predominant countries think that sexuality is a foreign import. This way of thinking evokes the perspective of Massad (2015) — a scholar of Jordanian-Palestinian origin — who articulates that sexuality derives from a set of medical, juridical and social categories that formed in Western Europe and the United States in the late nineteenth and early

twentieth century. According to Massad (2015), thanks to these classifications, the category “homosexual” emerged alongside the hierarchization between the “sane” and the “pathological,” which led to the formation of the Anglo-Saxon LGBTIQ+ movement.

Through the assimilation of a set of identities of Anglo-European origin, the emergence of homosexuality, lesbianism, bisexuality, and the emergence of transgender(\*) identifications, the LGBTIQ+ movement is understood to also be a Western imposition into predominantly Muslim societies as a way to destabilize social and cultural existing norms about “male” and “female.” This is why Massad (2007 and 2015) and Abdou (2019) assert that those who are active in academia to defend these segregated categories are beings co-opted by the Eurocentrism, imperialism, and liberalism ideology; particularly when these kinds of struggles re-affirm the cultures of whiteness, the normalization of homosexuality in a homo-patriarchal sense and to the re-colonization of land.

Nevertheless, Massad’s sharp critique of “the Gay International” [3] has its limitations. As Abdou’s research in 2019 shows, the discourses of the LGBTIQ+ movement are welcomed, challenged, and used strategically by those who could be interpreted as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans(\*), intersex, queer or otherwise, in predominantly Muslim populations. It seems to me, then, that the issue surrounding “the Gay International” is not based on the different ways of loving and sexing, nor on the ways of self-definition, but in the way in which the LGBTIQ+ movement creates static and stable identities, within a homo-normative framework and homo-relational framework. This, in turn, will ultimately legitimize the oppression of those who choose not to join this kind of Eurocentric, imperialist and liberal “struggle.”

Although I can understand people’s resistance from Muslim-majority countries towards trans(\*) people and the LGBTIQ+ movement, I consider, as a general rule, that all people who suffered the conquest, colonization and occupation of their lands are subject to live as cis(gender) and heterosexuals. This means that as people identify as “males” or “females” based on their biological sex, they have the obligation to establish sexual and emotional relationships within a heteronormative framework. Nevertheless, within and outside of Muslim territory, there are many people that are transgender and

with multiple sexual orientation that have abandoned the constrictions of the binary category which they consider a limitation to their sexual identity (Stryker, 2017). This is similar to Damaris'\* lived experience in multiethnic Islamic communities in the United States.

In this excerpt, she recounts her experience as a trans-Muslim woman:

*I have always had a home in Islam. There are some interesting moments here and there, but — at the end of the day — Muslims have been much nicer to me than Christian people.*

*In my experience, most of the more conservative Muslims are more relaxed with me than Christian's conservative are about transgender issues than they are about queer issues. But, either way, most people I've encountered say the same thing, including some imams or religious leaders I've spoken to. A good majority Muslims tell me that this issue is between myself and Allah, whether we agree or disagree. They say: "This is between you and Allah, and what is in your [heart], Allah alone has the right to judge it, and only Allah, no one on earth has the right to judge it. At the end of the day, what is in your heart is what counts." At the first mosque I went to in Virginia, I had problems after a while, but for the most part people were good to me. I prayed with the sisters every time I went there and, slowly, I started to come out of the closet. I was getting a good reception from the sisters. At that time, I had not yet come out to the head sister, but she told me that the president of the mosque wanted to talk to me.*

*At first, I thought it was because of my conversion, because I had recently converted in April 2017. But apparently, what happened was that a smaller mosque in Blacksburg, Virginia, had recently closed and I was given the details of the other mosque. When I was researching Islam and learning more about Islam, I was probably in the middle of my transition, but I was not wearing the hijab or veil at the time. I tried to do the best I could with my street clothes that came down to my knees because I grew up homeless, on the margins. When I converted, many sisters gave me Muslim and modest clothes and I am very grateful for that. When I went to this little mosque and was looking for answers about Islam, I was the only woman at the time and all the girls and boys were playing in the middle of the mosque. They were going in and out of that room and another rooms, and*

*every time they were in the other room, I could hear them trying to find out about me. I didn't know what prompted it. It's as if the girls and the boys had always known. They would say, "Oh, is it her or him?" until somebody said, "It's transgender!" they exclaimed, "Yeah, that's what it is, oh my God!". Then the next thing that happened was that the president of the mosque came in and said, "Is this true?" and I said, "Yes." And he had told me the same thing. He said to me, "Every time you do it, if you convert, just choose which gender you're going to represent." To which I said, "I'm already presenting myself as a woman!"*

*Then, I don't know who told them, but somehow, the biggest mainstream mosque found out and the president called me to this meeting. The head sister was there-and I hadn't told her yet so, she said to me, "Is this true?". I was trying not to look at the head sister, but I said, "Yes, ma'am, it's true." If she hadn't been there, I would have run away and never come back to Islam [laughs]. I had so many bad conversations like this in Christianity, that, at that point, I felt very uncomfortable. He was trying to catch me at the time, "Okay, we still see you as a woman, as a sister." But, in my opinion, they were older and more conservative men because, ultimately, all the sisters I hung out with and prayed with didn't care. In fact, they recommended that I continue to pray with them, but — even so — the president of the mosque was trying to get me to pray in a small corner of the library, in the back left corner of the girls' and boys' space. To get to the place that I had been assigned, I had to go through the girls' and boys' space so, I was like, "I'd rather pray downstairs alone in the basement." But the basement also started to fill up, because it was the place where other sisters were taking their sons and daughters. There were still some people praying with me down there. I was trying to learn, but it was difficult because I couldn't be with all the other people in the other place where I was really going to be able to listen and learn. They also tried to make room for me in the space at the top of the stairs a couple of times, but they got in trouble for it... At the Muslim Student Association in Virginia Tech, they were always very good about it. All the people knew everything, and they would tell me, "If you're a sister, go pray with the sisters."*

*They never cared. Same thing with the Muslim Student Union (MSU) at the University of Southern California. They are quite friendly and respectful. I never had a problem with the Muslim Student Association (MSA) or MSU until I came to this school... In Santa*



*Monica there is an MSA, a couple of friends I met told me there was an MSA here. I didn't know, but they added me to their group chat. Before I was able to attend a meeting and talk to the people in the group chat — within 5 minutes of joining the group chat — people found out that I was transgender and a whole big fight started; especially among the board members... But at the mosque where I met you, they know I'm transgender and that's my favorite mosque out of all the mosques I've been to so far. I feel like the imam there, when I would speak to him, had the same thoughts that I have, which is very interesting because I didn't expect that. He said to me: "Well, if Allah made you that way, that's how Allah created you." It was like, "I can't say anything, whether I agree with you or not." After this meeting, I said to him, "So does this mean that I can still pray with the sisters?" He then said to me, "Yes, why wouldn't you pray with the sisters?"*

This personal narrative gives the impression that Damaris\* experience as a trans(\*) person was welcomed in Virginia's mosque. However, had this been the case, the mosque-to-mosque alert messages would not have been issued to warn of possible "inconveniences" her presence could cause. Although Damaris\* reports that she was told at these Virginia mosques that it was wrong to criticize her because "only Allah could judge her," the questioning of her gender identity suggests a contrary mentality to that proposed by Islamic cosmology.

This is because her brothers and sisters interpreted that there was "something wrong" with her —given the discordance between what the people in the mosque believed to be her subjective essence (*bātin*), her internal dispositions (*shawakīl*) and her external anatomical appearance (*zāhir*) (Abdou, 2019). Had it been the opposite, no one would have questioned "which gender she was representing," particularly since she was already living as a woman. These situations indicate, therefore, that both communities transgressed the divine unforeseen (*alghayb*), as well as Damaris\*'s own intentions (*niyya*), by associating her transition from gender to gender with a possible lack of emotional — and, even, spiritual — certainty (Abdou, 2019). This is further evidenced by the location allocated for Damaris\* in the mosque. In order not to disturb the "natural" segregation, as well as the "naturalness" of the cis-hetero/patriarchal/paternalistic/normative "naturalness" of the relationships between men and women, she was placed in the hidden corners of the mosque. She had to be out of sight from women and children.

On the other hand, although Damaris,\* with the help of some of her sisters of faith, started to adopt Islamic practices assigned to her gender, the familiarity that existed between these women and Damaris\* did not help in getting the board of directors of the Virginia mosques to support her rights as a new sister of faith. Although the space for women existed, Damaris\* was confined to different areas of the mosque which prevented her from learning Islam within these communities. As Damaris\* recounts, these types of negative experiences also happened at her university after she moved to California. However, the reception and response that Damaris\* experienced between Virginia and Los Angeles are radically different. She was not only told that “she could not be judged” but was told that “no one had the right to question the nature that Allah had given her.” That is why Damaris\* expressed surprise that the imam had come to the same conclusions as her; a fact which influenced her decision to move to Los Angeles.

### **Unveiling the multiplicity of “genders” in pre-modern Muslim societies**

Since I intend to point out the foreign character of “gender” to Islamic premodern society, I employ gender as an analytical category within quotation marks. This way, we can understand the different ways that people related to each other prior to the advent of modernity, which goes beyond traditional biological interpretations (Scott, 2008). Without pretending to provide a reading specifically around sexuality, I explore existing power relations because my interest is not to interpret “masculine masculinity” or “feminine masculinity,” but to demonstrate that in pre-modern Muslim societies there existed other descriptors of “gender” that developed in an historical context in contrast to the contemporary gaze.

Before the arrival of Europeans in the 19th century, gender, sexuality, desire, marriage, family, and society were understood differently in the Islamic world. It is important to recall that the colonial Victorian moral system introduced then were part of the white, liberal, humanist culture that was adopted by intellectuals, the elite and those who lived in Western cities. The adoption of the new moral was to “correct” their supposed “deviations” and “inappropriate behaviors” around what was then called “sex” and “sexuality” (Geissinger, n.d.; Massad, 2007). This is not to say that the rest of the population was outside this violent internalization/assimilation process. After all,

European colonial forces and their institutions erased, little by little, the diversity of practices and experiences that are now known as “sexual” and “gender” as well as the fluidity of bodies, of non-binary categories of “gender” and notions of “feminine” and “masculine” that were intimately related to the work of the land (Lewis, 2016).

Although we cannot know all of the descriptors of “gender” that existed before modernity, there are legal sources that confirm that in pre-modern Islamic times there was a type of social “gender” ambiguity that fell along the male-female continuum (Ali, 2006). It is, then, within Islamic jurisprudence that we may find the opinions of Islamic scholars regarding the determination of the “gender” of some people, since — on many occasions — this was not done automatically. Genitalia were not always aligned with that which we call “masculine” or “feminine” (Ali, 2006). This and other facts allow us to assert that the ambiguity of “gender,” the fluidity of “gender,” or, as stated by Alipour (2017), “the problematic of the third gender,” has been present in Islamic scholarship since pre-modern times. According to the modes of organization of the society in which one lived and the relationship one had with the land, I therefore consider it relevant to emphasize that genders are shifting social categories that can include different types of bodies; a fact that prevents the pre-modern and modern/post-modern perspectives and classifications from being considered equal (Lewis, 2016).

## **Final reflections**

As demonstrated by the events in Afghanistan in August of 2021, Islamophobia is a producer/product of a war on terror that continues to perpetuate violent colonial racialization and gender discrimination. In order to continue oiling the economic system that derived from the appropriation and colonization of American lands since 1492, Islamophobia aims to divide populations and generate multiple types of “resources” (Adlbi, 2016). However, given the establishment and naturalization of the hierarchical and classificatory system that divides “races” and “genders,” people outside Afghanistan tend to focus on the issues of so-called “women,” rather than on how they *can be* women. Instead of contemplating how coloniality continues to affect all human and non-human beings around the world, it seems that colonial independence reinforced this set of colonial belief systems.

Since both sex and gender are modern and colonial constructs that operate in tandem with racialization, in my view, it is necessary to question who we are thinking of when we speak of “Muslim women.” In other words, the Muslim female subject does not exist in isolation since the imperial Islamophobic campaign generated an indispensable being that needs to be “liberated” through white feminism and/or the LGBTIQ+ movement in order to give her a “humanity” that was revoked from her since her colonization. For this reason, I find it imperative to recover the pre-modern Islamic discourses around gender identification in order to transcend the binaries and non-binaries of modern colonial *being*, as they can lead us to a different path in which all human and non-human beings might be included.

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1. Since the beginnings of Anglo/European colonization, the Cartesian perspective has been the dominant view of how we understand the world. This is why we give so much importance to the material— that which we can see and touch— and we negatively value other ways of obtaining knowledge (Stryker, 2006). According to Muñoz Contreras, “[the] Cartesian binarism of gender identity generates a stark and disembodied conception of it by considering it a property that is given inside

the mind or, failing that, as an attribute emanating from a culture that resides in the mind" (2018: 206).

2. According to Preciado, "these two positions depend on a Cartesian idea of the common body, in which consciousness is thought of as immaterial and matter as purely mechanical. [...] What interests me is precisely this promiscuous relationship between technology and bodies. It would then be a matter of studying in what specific ways technology "incorporates" or, in other words, "becomes a body" (2002: 127).
3. In Massad's terms, the international gay movement is the multiplicity of Orientalist and assimilationist discourses and actions, which are intermingled with the politics of human rights. To this end, supporters of Gay International's missionary activities produced two types of literature on the Muslim world in order to propagate their cause: an academic literature produced primarily by white, European or American gay scholars, who "describe" and "explain" what they call "homosexuality" in Arab and Muslim history up to the present, and journalistic accounts of the lives of so-called "gays" and, to a lesser degree, "lesbians" in the contemporary Arab and Muslim worlds. The former is intended to unravel the mystery of Islam to a Western audience; while the latter, has the "benevolent" task of informing white homosexual tourists in search of a sex experience about the region to help "liberate" Arab and Muslim "gays and lesbians" from the oppression under which they supposedly live. The results of such imperialist approach would transform them into practitioners of same-sex contact with subjects they identify as "homosexuals" and "gays" (Massad, 2007: 162)