

# Gendered orientalism and the agency of Syrian, Muslim women refugees

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➤ Orientalist discourses have long recirculated the idea that Muslim women are oppressed victims of Islam; an idea that has denigrated Muslims and positioned white, Christians as superior. For Muslim women *refugees* specifically, the gendered orientalist discourse of victimization has reappeared on both sides of the debate on Syrian refugee resettlement in the United States (U.S.) (and other Western states). Within anti-resettlement circles, the narrative of Muslim women as oppressed victims has been leveraged as a reason to stop Syrian refugee resettlement; based on a rationale that their lifestyles and values are incompatible with liberal, Western societies. Pro-resettlement circles, on the other hand, often position Muslim women's victimization as a reason to resettle them, because these women need to be 'saved' from both war and gender oppression. In other words, the same homogenizing essentialism that positions Muslim women as victims has been used to both reject and to support Muslim refugee resettlement. Yet the representations of Muslim women as oppressed victims of Islam exist in stark contrast to the strong, capable, and resilient Syrian Muslim women refugees scattered across Southwest Asian and North African (SWANA), Europe, the U.S., and elsewhere. Building from postcolonial and feminist literature, I illustrate the ways that gendered orientalism has fueled both sides of the Syrian refugee resettlement debate. Then, I review literature on Islamic feminism and Muslim women's agency, noting its divergences from mainstream Western feminism. Lastly, drawing from interviews I conducted with Syrian Muslim women refugees in Jordan, I highlight the disconnect between the discourses on Syrian refugees in the U.S. and the lives of these women who are coping with the traumas of war and displacement with incredible strength and determination; and they have done so in part through their faith.

Keywords: Islamic feminism, pinkwashing, refugee resettlement, victimization, patriarchy

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## Introduction

In the summers of 2014 and 2015, during the height of Syrians' mass displacement and Europe's so-called 'refugee crisis' (Holmes & Castaneda 2016; Skop & Culcasi 2019; Squire 2022), I was conducting field work in Jordan on the many ways that Syrian refugee women were coping with displacement. The Syrian refugee women I met had seemingly insurmountable obstacles. They were struggling with the intersecting traumas of war, death, destruction, displacement, and impoverishment, as well as the loss of many of their political and human rights. Nevertheless, these women exuded amazing strength, resilience, and ingenuity. They were enduring and rebuilding their lives and the lives of their families. Many of them charged forward with fierce determination to improve their situations, which often included learning new job-related skills and becoming the primary income earners for their families (Culcasi 2019). Many of the women I met said that their faith was not only helping them to cope with the trauma of war and displacement, but also that Islam assured them gender equality and the right to lead and rebuild their lives.

I returned home to the U.S. in the summer of 2015 to a country riled in debate over Syrian refugee resettlement. On the campaign trail for the upcoming 2016 presidential election, Donald Trump called for a complete ban on Syrian refugees entering the U.S. and the removal of Syrians already within its borders (Beydoun 2018; Tesler 2018; Aswad 2019). Spewing lies and hate speech about Muslims, Syrians, and refugees more broadly (Nagel 2016; Gokariksel & Smith 2017; Bose 2022), he drew on a longstanding gendered orientalist discourse that Muslim men are backward and violent; and more specifically that Syrian Muslim men might be terrorists.<sup>1</sup> Syrian refugees were also framed as burdens to the U.S. economy and as taking federal funds from U.S. citizens who deserved the money more (Gorman & Culcasi 2021; Bose 2022), and sometimes as being cowards for fleeing war. Trump and many of his supporters supplemented their argument that Syrian male refugees were a security threat by asserting that Muslim women are oppressed victims of Islam and Muslim men. As such, pundits construed Syrian Muslims women and their lifestyles as incompatible to the United States' culture and values (Rettberg & Gajjala 2016; Stone 2017; Yigit & Tatch 2017; Tesler 2018; Aswad 2019). The argument follows that as potential neighbors and colleagues, Muslim women are victims-who-are-threats and therefore must be denied resettlement. On the other side of the debate, there were news agencies and humanitarian organizations that asserted that Syrian refugees needed and merited assistance and resettlement. Women and children, as seemingly less threatening and more helpless than adult men, are commonly featured in pro-resettlement narratives (Malkki 1996; Johnson 2011). Indeed, Syrian refugees broadly, and women and children specifically, were represented in left leaning media and pro-refugee resettlement reporting as victims of a horrific war (Terman 2017; Aswad 2019; Chen *et al.* 2022). In some instances, Syrians' victimization due to war was supplemented with the gendered orientalist discourse that Syrian women were also victims of Islam and of Muslim men (Alhayek 2014; Athamneh *et al.* 2021; Gorman & Culcasi 2021). As such, Syrian Muslim women were framed as victims-to-be-saved not only from war, but also from oppressive Islamic practices. While starkly different in their goals, both the anti- and pro-resettlement sides of the debate in the U.S. drew on gendered orientalist discourses that essentialize Islam and the gendered practices of Muslims. In other words, the same homogenizing essentialism that positions Muslim women as victims of Islam has been used to support and to reject Syrian Muslim resettlement in the United States.

While such narratives are not new nor necessarily surprising, the victim discourse on Muslim women broadly, and of Syrian Muslim women refugees specifically, stand in stark contrast to the lived experiences of the strong, capable, and pious Syrian Muslim women I interviewed in Jordan. In this paper, I illustrate the contradiction between the dominant discourse in the U.S. on Syrian refugees and the lives of some of the Syrian women I interviewed. My goal is to help dispel the harmful discourses that circulate within the U.S. (and elsewhere), about the lives and status of Muslim women and Syrian, Muslim women refugees more specifically. That is, I seek to expose 'the gap' between the representation of Syrian Muslim women and their daily reality (Taha 2018). While I focus on the U.S., gendered orientalism is a global discourse that circulates in other states like France, Australia, the Netherlands, China, and India and has similar impacts (Dunn & Hopkins 2016; Hancock & Mobillion 2019; Najib & Hopkins 2019, 2020a; Razack 2022; Shaker & Ahmadi 2022; Chaoui 2023).

I work towards my goal by first describing and critiquing gendered orientalist discourse and how it intersects with discourses on refugee resettlement in the United States. In doing so, I highlight that Muslim women refugees have been framed as both victims-who-are-threats and victims-to-be-saved. Secondly, I build from postcolonial, feminist literature broadly and from Mahmood's (2005) theory of 'modalities of agency' specifically, to discuss some ways that Islamic feminism and Muslim women's agency is practiced. This discussion includes an overview of 'Islamic feminism' and some of the main debates within it and about it. In the third section, I draw on my research with Syrian refugee women in Jordan to illustrate the many ways that these women's lives contradict the gendered orientalist and refugee resettlement discourses that were circulating in the United States. I conclude by stressing that there is a vital need to reject gendered orientalism, to recognize forms of feminism that do not conform to mainstream Western feminist values, and to see Muslim women, and Muslim women refugees, in all their complexity.

### **Gendered orientalism and Syrian refugee resettlement debates in the U.S.**

Orientalism, broadly, is a field of study that evolved within Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It focused on the vague region of the 'Orient' – which includes much SWANA. In general, most orientalists embraced an essentialist, cultural explanation of the Orient that denigrates the vague region (including its dominant religion of Islam) and perpetuates a trope of Western superiority (Fernandez 2009). Within orientalism, there is a commonplace gendered discourse that frames Muslim women as the victims of Islam and of backward and violent Muslim men (Said 1997; Kahf 1999; cooke 2000; Steet 2000; Razack 2004; Shaheen 2008; Holt & Jawad 2013; Mohammad 2013; Szanto 2016; Khan & Aurangzeb 2018). While there are countless challenges and critiques to this homogenizing, biased, and partial framing, as I discuss in much of this paper, there remains a common perception in Western states that Islam is exceptionally oppressive towards women and, thus, that Muslim women are victims of their religion and Muslim men (Holt & Jawad 2013; Terman 2017). This gendered orientalist view was recirculated and leveraged within debates on Syrian refugee resettlement in the U.S., albeit for two very different goals.

Anti-Syrian, Muslim refugee groups and right leaning media employed gendered orientalist logics to both men and women. Syrian men were commonly portrayed as dangerous threats to national security and to the average American's safety (Park 2015; Rettberg & Gajjala 2016). In a study of 47,388 articles from online U.S. media about Syrian refugees from 2011–2021, Chen and co-authors (2022, 8) found that 'right-leaning media' casted Syrian refugees as opportunistic young men "who could be armed and dangerous Islamic terrorists." On the campaign trail in 2016, Trump regurgitated this view by regularly asserting that Syrian men refugees could be terrorists. Reviewing anti-Syrian refugee statements that Trump made during his campaign, De Genova (2018, 370) found that Trump referred to Syrian refugees as being "devious vipers...inchoate menace- potential terrorists, rapists, and criminals...". Trump fueled concerns about Syrian refugee resettlement by falsely claiming that most Syrian refugees coming to the U.S. are single, military-age men. Thus, he sent a message that Syrian men are not only security threats, but also that Syrian refugees are mostly men (Gomez 2017). However, according to the State Department, as of November 2015, only 23% of Syrian refugees in the U.S. were adult men (*ibid.*). While Muslim men are much more likely to be perceived as terrorists, Muslim women have also been increasingly configured into the anti-immigration trope that relies on the fear that Muslims could be terrorists (Tayyen 2017; Khan & Aurangzeb 2018; Ghumkhor & Pardy 2021).

While Trump did not make comments about Syrian women publicly, many of his supporters and pundits in the anti-Syrian Muslim refugee circle did. They invoked the discourse that Muslim women are victims of Islam and that their cultural practices were incompatible to the values and way of life in the United States. For example, in an interview with President Trump on Fox news in January 2015, Daniel Horowitz, of Conservative Review, stated that:

I would agree with the president. We're not at war with Islam. But the problem is – is there a clash of cultures, if you grow up in a country under shari'a law, where women can't drive and must cover themselves and women can't go out in public without a male relative or four male eyewitnesses are needed for rape – is there a conflict of cultures that makes it very difficult.... (FOX News 2015).

The script of incompatibility with Western values has long drawn on the image of 'covered' Muslim women. The hijab, a female hair covering that pious Muslim women often wear, has long been viewed in both orientalism and Western feminism as a symbol of Muslim women's oppression, of Muslim women as 'the other,' and of Islam's incompatibility with Western values and society (Hopkins 2009; Cainkar 2021). Indeed, images of Syrian women refugees wearing a hijab significantly affected opinions about Syrian refugee resettlement. Partain and Weaver (2022, 2410) tested how the hijab affected views of people in the U.S. and found that their participants were "less emotionally and attitudinally sympathetic and felt higher levels of threat toward Syrian refugees" after seeing an image of a Syrian woman wearing a hijab. The hijab, they explain, contributes "to designating Syrian refugees as an outgroup, which in turn reduces participant emotional and attitudinal support for Syrian refugees and increases perceived levels of threat," and thus rendered them "less desirable for resettlement" (*ibid.*, 2422).

Another way that Syrian Muslim women were construed as victims-who-are-threats was through a cognate argument that focused on them as biological (and cultural) reproducers. Due to their high birth rates, the argument goes, Syrian woman refugees could 'plant seeds' and become 'population bombs' in the U.S. (Gorman & Culcasi 2021). In other words, resettled Syrian women refugees could have so many Muslim children that the Muslim population in the U.S. would 'grow' or 'explode' demographically to a point that Muslims would replace white, Christians. Further, as a new majority in the U.S., Muslims could take over the political and legal systems and implement shari'a law for all people in the United States. In this argument, orientalist framings intersect with the 'great replacement' theory (a white nationalist conspiracy theory that states that nonwhite individuals will 'replace' white majorities) to claim that Muslim women, as biological reproducers, are a threat to the white, Christian majority in the U.S. Therefore, Syrian Muslims must be excluded from resettlement.

Pro-refugee resettlement groups commonly represent refugees as powerless victims of war and displacement and whom need to be saved (Malkki 1996; Owens 2009). Indeed, numerous studies have shown that aid organizations like the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and Oxfam regularly portray refugees as victims who are weak, dependent, and without agency (Rajaram 2002; Johnson 2011; Hoffmann 2016). Representations of Syrian refugees during the height of their mass displacement mirrored this traditional practice as being portrayed as victims-to-be-saved. For example, Aswad (2019) found that the *New York Times* often took a pro-resettlement position towards Syrian refugees and concurrently framed them as 'victims' of war and displacement. Chen and others (2022) likewise found that 'left-leaning' media tended to highlight the struggles that Syrian refugees have encountered, and generally represented them as 'child victims' who deserve sympathy and assistance. This victimization discourse can be an effective way to acquire donations and support for refugee resettlement, however, it concomitantly homogenizes and denigrates refugees by stripping them of their individuality, agency, and capabilities. Moreover, the effectiveness of 'the victim' representation is debatable. Two recent studies that focused on representations of Syrian refugees found the victimization imagery that is common in pro-resettlement groups actually had a *negative* impact on people's support for resettling Syrian refugees in the United States (Partain & Weaver 2022; Lui 2023).

Male refugees are featured as victims of war in pro-resettlement circles in general, but women and children, as seemingly more vulnerable and weaker than men, are more commonly the focus of pro-resettlement imagery (Rajaram 2002; Johnson 2011). For Muslim women refugees specifically, the framing of them as victims of war has occasionally been buttressed by the gendered orientalist view that frames them as being victims of Islam and Muslim men. Thus, the message is that Muslim women refugees need to be saved from war and displacement as well as from oppressive religious practices embedded in Islam (Semati 2010; Culcasi & Gokmen 2011; Fluri 2011; Khalid 2017). For example, Alhayek (2014) found that both global media and social media activists advocating for Syrian refugees commonly portrayed Syrian women as being victimized by their own religion and cultural practices. Female Syrian refugees, Alhayek continues, were repeatedly represented as powerless victims of men in their families, men who would sell off their daughters as commodities for sexist men and would force young women and girls into both temporary marriages and child marriages. This view of Muslim women as victims of Islam who need saving is also a part of mainstream Western feminism (which I discuss in the next section). When pro-resettlement and humanitarian groups portrayed Syrian

Muslim women as victims-to-be saved from their religion, they are engaging in a form of 'pinkwashing' that not only assumes Western, Christian superiority (Puar 2017; Smith 2020), but also that it is the Western, Christian world's responsibility to liberate Muslim women from their oppressive religion (Razack 2022). In doing so, they are using gender issues to promote Western ideals and power.

While using the victimization discourse and engaging in a form of pinkwashing in support of refugee resettlement is problematic, the groups that do so are generally working in an earnest attempt to support refugees who were seeking resettlement. On the other hand, when anti-resettlement circles represent women as victims of Islam (such circles do not often represent them as victims of war) these women are rendered as threats to the values and demographics in the U.S., and therefore Muslim women must be excluded from resettlement. While starkly different in their goals, both sides of the debate of Syrian refugee resettlement have homogenized and essentialized countless Syrian Muslims whom, as I elaborate in the next two sections, have diverse experiences with gender relations and their faith, and whose lives and experiences readily contradict the discourses of victimization.

### **Islamic feminism and multiple modalities of agency**

There are many forms of feminist thought and practice (e.g. Western, Islamic, transnational, intersectional, and black feminisms). While each form has its own approaches and concerns, they all share the view that gender issues and inequality stem from patriarchal norms and practices. Their goals are similar as well, typically seeking to end gendered violence and oppression, and to improve the quality of women's lives. Feminisms also similarly assert that women should have their own agency, meaning that women should make decisions and act on their own accord.<sup>2</sup> In this section, I provide an introduction to 'Islamic feminisms' and Mahmood's articulation of 'multiple modalities of agency' in order to better understand the experiences of Syrian Muslim refugees in Jordan, which stand in contrast to Western feminism, and gendered orientalist discourses of Muslim women.

The term 'Islamic feminism' generally refers to a form of feminism that works toward women's advancement, agency, and equality within an Islamic framework (Mizra 2002; Moghadam 2002; Badran 2009; Abaday 2023). Since the early 1990s, Islamic feminism has evolved into different forms, yet generally, as cooke (2000, 93) summarizes, it has a "double commitment: to a faith position on the one hand, and to women's rights" on the other. More specifically, Islamic feminisms draw on parts of Islamic doctrine that underscore that men and women are guaranteed rights and equality. As Abu-Lughod writes, Islamic feminisms use Islamic texts to underscore that Islam enshrines "justice, equality, human dignity, and love and compassion among humans and in the family" (Abu-Lughod 2013, 192). Islamic feminism typically asserts that it is not Qur'an or other religious texts that oppresses women, but the patriarchal interpretations of the texts by men and male clergy (Kynsilehto 2008). In contradiction to gendered orientalist discourse, Islamic feminism see that oppression and violence against Muslim women is caused by "insufficient knowledge" or "incomplete adherence" to Islam, not Islam itself (Abu-Lughod 2013, 192).

Islamic feminism – the term, its theories, and praxis – have been subject to substantial debate (Mojab 2001; Barlas 2008; Kynsilehto 2008; Badran 2009; Gökariksel 2018). Western audiences who have been indoctrinated by longstanding gendered orientalist discourses that position Islam as uniquely oppressive towards women have often viewed Islam as incompatible with mainstream Western feminism, which has different forms, but broadly, is a white, liberal, and secular based movement (Valoy 2015; Beck 2021). Some Western sceptics of Islamic feminism have quipped that the term is a 'contradiction' or 'oxymoron' (Mojab 2001; Badran 2009). Western feminism, like gendered orientalism, commonly espouses the belief that for a woman to be liberated from patriarchal oppression that she must adopt Western feminist ways of thinking, norms, and practices. This is patently obvious in Western mass media when Muslim women are represented as 'liberated' when they remove their hijab or burqa and adopt Western style clothing (Culcasi & Gokmen 2011; Fluri 2011; Navarro 2015; Ranjbar 2021).

Mahmood's 2005 book *The Politics of Piety* is a groundbreaking book that makes the powerful argument that we need to revise and 'uncouple' ideas of agency (and concomitantly liberty, freedom, subversion, and resistance) from of normalized Western feminist, secular, and liberal views. Stemming

from her ethnographic fieldwork on the women's pious movement in Cairo, Mahmood asserts that women have "different modalities of agency" (*ibid.*, 167), but Western feminism has ignored forms of agency that do not fit within its own values and goals. She highlighted that while the women in her study had different opinions and experiences with gender and piousness, that these women all shared the goal of being devout Muslims and maintaining or increasing their agency in their families and communities. Mahmood asserted that these women are not passive nor victims, but active agents. She shows that their acts of piousness can (re)create women's subordination (18) and the movement's "participants typically accept the patriarchal assumptions at the core of the orthodox Islamic tradition" (*ibid.*, 153), including acts that are commonly deemed 'oppressive' in western terms (e.g. male guardianship or prohibition of women from leading worship). Nevertheless, the women in Mahmood's study believe that Islam assures their equity as human beings, and they use Islamic texts to justify and to assert their agency. Thus, these women's modality of agency is not about subverting or resisting gender expectation, nor about changing conservative social structures of male domination, but instead to be agents in control of their own religious practice and to take actions that allow them to live pious lives (*ibid.*). Moreover, for some of the women in Mahmood's study, being pious conflicted with secular leaning policies of the state and with less religious members of their families. In such cases, these pious women were asserting their agency to be devout against secular political structures and family members (*ibid.*).

The women in Mahmood's study were not espousing feminist ideologies, nor did she label them 'Islamic feminist,' but nevertheless these women worked towards securing their agency within an Islamic framework. That the label 'feminism' is not a descriptor of the pious movement in Cairo signals a debate within 'Islamic feminism.' More specifically, that term is rejected by some scholars and activists (and surely women outside those circles too) for two reasons. First, those people who argue that Islam guarantees equality means that 'feminism' is a moot label. As Barlas (2008, 22) explained:

The Qu'ran contains principles of gender equality and wider issues of social justice, thus laying grounds for challenging patriarchal traditions. Therefore, for some scholar-activists, referring to feminism in order to challenge patriarchy would not be necessary.

Second, some reject the term 'feminism' because of its connotations to Western feminism, which is not only secular, but has also too often perpetuated a cultural imperialism that – as noted above – assumes that all women, otherwise known as the 'global sisterhood,' will find liberation and agency by adopting Western values and practices (Barlas 2008; Abaday 2023).

The pious women in Mahmood's study may have lifestyles and gendered practices that do not fit squarely within Western feminism, but these Muslim women do share the broad feminist goals of securing women's agency and equality. The divergences within different forms of feminism and within movements, practices, and ideologies that don't use the term 'feminism' but still seek equality and agency for women are significant, but nevertheless, they all share that same goal – that of equality and agency. And as I illustrate below, Syrian Muslim women refugees in Jordan did not use the label 'feminism' nor 'Islamic feminism,' but nevertheless these women are quite pious and exert incredible strength and agency.

### **The agency of Syrian, Muslim women refugees**

Despite the common Western perception that Syrian Muslim refugee women (and Muslim women in general) are victims of Islam, nearly all Syrian women I interviewed have demonstrated incredible resilience, adaptability, ingenuity, and agency, whilst maintaining their faith. Between 2014–2018, I conducted a research project on how Syrian refugees in Jordan were coping in displacement, but I focused on women and particularly women who worked for an income. The 45 women I formally interviewed all faced immense trauma and loss as a direct result of the brutal war that led to their displacement. As is commonplace in war, some women have also been subjected to increased gender-based violence, whether at the hands of soldiers, other refugees, or men within their households (Cooke 2000; Mertus 2000; Al-Ali & Pratt 2009; Abu-Assab 2017; Asaf 2017; Ayoub 2017; Freedman *et al.* 2017; Ezer 2019). While my participants had all been victimized, they were not merely victims. In

contradiction to representations circulating in the U.S., these strong and capable women were overcoming incredible challenges. For example, many worked for an income inside and outside the household to support their families. Some were the heads of their households, caring for family members and providing financially. A few had started businesses of their own, many learned new job-related skills, and a few earned new degrees. Many of the women I met were also active in their new communities in Jordan. Some organized Syrian women support groups, many helped each another to find paid work, and some created spaces in which they could practice and study their religion together. None of these 45 women referred to themselves as feminists of any form, but, as I elaborate on below, many of their actions and their views on gendered roles, practices, and inequality mirrored those of Islamic feminism.

The Syrian women I interviewed live in a highly patriarchal society in which traditional gendered roles are typically assumed. Several of the women I met shared stories with me of their experiences with gender inequality, both inside and outside of the home. And in nearly all such instances, they explained that gendered inequality stems from old, patriarchal views and/or men's misinterpretation of Islam. For example, Laila, 36-year-old mother of four children, who was from a rural area outside of Damascus, and who worked as a schoolteacher in Jordan, said her husband was "a strict traditional man and hard to talk to." He had been working in Kuwait for nearly a year, so this woman had a lot of responsibilities and independence in Jordan. As a result, she felt strong and confident. But Laila was scared, because her husband was so patriarchal, that he would disapprove of her working outside the home. Therefore, she kept her working outside the home a secret from him. Laila later explained that some Muslims – like her husband – don't understand their religion correctly, but if men did, women would have more freedoms like working outside the home. She continued that gender issues are not because of Islam but because "society misunderstands the real concept of Islam." Paraphrasing from the Qur'an, she said that "Allah gave the female absolute power over her life" and a bit later she asserted that "the Qur'an guarantees us equal rights."

Manal, a 44-year-old woman from Homs, who was a widow, a mother of three boys, the head of her household, and a children's counselor, referred to herself as independent both financially and emotionally. She had also just learned English when I met her so that she could "communicate with the world and become successful." Yet her extended family was not supportive of her taking on non-traditional gender roles. Reflecting on her experiences with her family, she explained that their resistance "... is not about religion per say, it is about the inherited patriarchal traditions." She later explained that women are treated equally when Islam is properly understood, because Islam believes that "we humans should treat each other with love and respect." This view that it is the practices of men and not Islam that is oppressive was also evident in the controversial gendered issue of 'temporary marriages' to Saudi men. The mistreatment of some Syrian women at the hands of Saudi men who came to the Za'atari Syrian refugee camp to 'buy' Syrian women (see Alhayek 2014) was explained to me by a few women as being anti-Islamic. One woman asserted that it was not only against Islam to do such a thing, but that if these men really understood Islam, it would not be happening.

Many of the women I met said that practicing their faith helped them to cope with the traumas of war and displacement. It also gave them a sense of community and sense of purpose in this time of extraordinary hardship. A thirty-year old single woman told me that "Allah says that we should be patient and that is what we are trying to do. We go to mosques and we pray and cry." Another woman, in her mid-twenties, said that praying helps her to feel better and cope with the loss of her brother. She stressed that displaced Syrians "need to rebuild their faith" in order to move on. Laila, the 36-year-old mother of four quoted above, explained that "our prophet was forced to leave Mecca, even though he loved it." She continued that he migrated and soon found:

a new place where he could share his thoughts peacefully without fighting, and it became his homeland. Therefore, I feel that I can live anywhere, because land is not your home, home is the place where you can serve others and do something beneficial.

While the lives of all the 45 women I interviewed challenge the common portrayal of Muslim women as victims of Islam, I chose to include a story of one Syrian woman's experiences of displacement, agency, and faith to demonstrate this point. Asma was the only woman I interviewed that wore a

burqa in public. Afghan women were required to wear burqas under the Taliban's first rule, and this covering is commonly equated in Western states as proof that Muslim women are oppressed victims of their religion. Thus, in commonplace Western views, Asma is the quintessential image of an oppressed, victimized Muslim woman. Her life and experiences as a displaced woman, however, indicate quite the opposite. I met Asma in the summer of 2014, on a day that the temperature soared to 108 degrees Fahrenheit (42 degrees Celsius). My research assistant Dima and I had been waiting outside Asma's small, meager apartment building in Irbid for our scheduled interview. Soon enough, we saw her turn the corner swiftly and walk right toward us in her black burqa, which covered her body from head to toe, including her eyes. While hair coverings are very common for Muslim women in Irbid, and for Muslim women from southern Syria, where Asma was from, full black burqas are quite uncommon in both these places.

Asma was originally from Homs, Syria, but had lived much of her adult life in Kuwait. She was married to a Syrian man who worked in Kuwait and the two of them started their family together abroad. She told me that her life in Kuwait was great. Their financial status was strong; she had a maid, and her children went to private schools. But she and her husband had a fight and her husband divorced her and sent her back to Syria to live with her family there. Her move back to Syria happened just before the Syrian war erupted. One year into the war, she decided to seek refuge, with her six kids, to Jordan. Once in Jordan, she struggled with being a divorced woman, a displaced woman, and a single mother of six. After a few months in Jordan, her savings ran out and, as she explained, her "life started getting harder and harder." Working outside the home to earn money, she realized, was necessary for her to care for her children. So, she started working, and she worked a lot. She established her own beauty salon in Irbid, taught private lesson on Islam to several students in her home, worked as a seamstress with a sewing machine that she obtained from a non-governmental organization in Jordan (she specializes in wedding dresses), and she made pickled foods to sell at local markets. Asma accomplished all this income-generating work while also caring for her six children, and without the support from their father. Moreover, she was coping with the traumas of war and displacement, and lacked both political rights and the right to work in Jordan.

Asma did not label herself a feminist nor an Islamic feminist, but she is a successful, confident, and independent woman. Living as a single, woman refugee in Jordan, she had the agency to make decisions about her and her children's lives. She felt that her primary responsibility was not only to care for her family in the household, but to provide for them financially too. Asma is deeply religious and pious. Working for an income outside the home is atypical of for women in any traditional, patriarchal society, but it was not, she explained, against Islam. Instead, Islam helped her justify her working because she was working to care for her family. She wears a burqa in public regardless of scorching temperatures for privacy and modesty from other men, but her burqa was not oppressive to her because she wore it by choice. Like Islamic feminists, she knew that Islam gave her rights as a human being, and as a woman. She explained that her husband's unequal power to divorce her was not because of Islam, but because of patriarchy. Asma embraced Islam also to find peace, meaning, and direction as she faced many challenges as a displaced, single mother with six children. Her victimization was due to the direct impacts of war and displacement, and lack political rights and the lack of the right to work legally in Jordan, not, as Western feminism and gendered orientalist discourses assume, because of Islam or her burka.

## **Conclusions: Recent Gendered Orientalism in the US**

The mass displacement of Syrians during the 2014–16 period happened far from the borders of the U.S., yet the possibility of Syrian Muslims being resettled in the U.S. was at the center of political debates for years, and it had significant political and personal consequences. Most notably was the 2016 presidential election, during which time Trump and many of his allies fueled anti-Syrian Muslim refugee rhetoric that Muslim men are potential terrorists and that Muslim women were threats to U.S. values and the harbingers of a demographic shift in the U.S. that could eventually lead to the implementation of shari'a law (Considine 2017; Kishi 2017; Beydoun 2018; Bose 2022). Arguably, this orientalist positioning helped Trump to win the election, and immediately afterward, he issued an



executive order banning Syrian refugees (as well as Muslims from six other Muslim majority states) from entering the United States. Concurrently, Muslims across the U.S. experienced a spike in hate crimes, microaggressions, and discrimination (Itaoui 2020). Muslim women often bear the brunt of such hostilities, because they are often highly visible through their modest dressing practices (Dunn *et al.* 2007; Gokariksel 2017; Jamal 2017; Azam 2018; Beydoun 2018; McGinty 2020; Najib & Hopkins 2020b; Cainkar 2021). While pro-resettlement groups did not view Syrian women as threats, such groups still commonly engaged in a form of pinkwashing that perpetuated the gendered orientalist stereotype of Muslim women being victims of Islam and of the West being able to save them from both war and their faith.

While some Muslim women, including some Syrian Muslim women refugees, have been victimized and oppressed by patriarchal interpretations of religious doctrine (Mernissi, 1987; Abu-Lughod 2013), the gendered orientalist view that Muslim women are uniformly oppressed by their religion is challenged by robust literature on Islamic feminism (and cognate literature that does not use the term 'feminism'). Likewise, the lives of the Syrian refugee women that I interviewed in Jordan – women who exude strength and resilience amongst struggles and difficulties, and who do so while embracing their faith – contradict the victim narrative. The recycling of the old, homogenizing discourse that Muslim women are oppressed victims is more indicative of U.S. politics, culture, and biases than it is telling of Syrian Muslim women refugees (Butler 2017). Likewise, the decisions about who to grant refugee and asylum status to compared to who is labeled a security or cultural threat reveal more about the perspectives and goals of those in power and those creating the discourse, than it does about refugees, Syrians, or Muslims. While there are some groups and people that are critical of gendered orientalist views of Muslim women, there is a crucial need to expand and mainstream such views (Falah & Nagel 2005; Nusair 2009; Schenk *et al.* 2022). As feminist scholar Abu-Lughod (2013) has asserted, it may be difficult, but it is crucial to reconcile the dominant discourses circulating in 'American media' about Muslim women, with their actual lives and practices.

In summary, we need to see Muslim women and Muslim women refugees in all their complexity, to reject gendered orientalism, and to not apply Western feminist values to all women. Such a view can have material consequences. For example, the U.S. has recently resettled 80,000 Afghans since its withdrawal from Afghanistan in late August 2021 and there are now tens of thousands Afghan women and girls – who are for the most part pious Muslims – remaking their lives in the U.S. (Waddell 2021). Rejecting gendered orientalist discourse and seeing these women and girls in their complexity can garner respect and understanding that can hopefully reduce any further trauma that they might experience as they adapt to their lives in the U.S.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The term, idea, and production of the categories men and women typically exists as a binary. While I use these terms in this manner in this paper, this is a problematic simplification as gendered identities and performances, which are much more complex, overlapping, and intersectional.

<sup>2</sup> For discussions about what is meant by 'agency' within the SWANA region, see Sadiqi and Ennaji (2011) and Ghabrial (2016).

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