The “Other” Muslim
Spatial-Temporal Cartographies of the Gendered Muslim World

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Ten years ago, in the first issue of Religion and Gender, Anne Marie Korte (2011) observed that for scholars engaging with the intersections of religion and gender studies, “the traditional hegemony of Christian theology and the classic science of religion (derived from theology) has been seriously contested, and simultaneously religion(s) have become the object of study in a variety of academic disciplines in the humanities and social sciences.” Korte prodded readers to question “how to engender an infrastructure of paradigm shift and critical practices of conversation?” Understanding religion beyond theology entails recognizing how religion is both gendered and racialized unto the bodies of those who are viewed as its bearers, particularly in political contexts that scrutinize and seek to regulate the practices of its “minorities” which are seen as deviating from a cultural ‘norm’ or tenets of what can be deemed as ‘tolerable’ (artificially constructed secular and religious binaries aside). Yet the production and reproduction of what can be understood as the “Christian European map” continues to canonize our understanding of non-Christian religions, especially for heavily politicized religions like Islam (Said, 1981) and what is construed in academic and mainstream discourse as “the Muslim world.”

I would like to thank Professor Santiago Slobodsky for specifically bringing the term “Christian map” to my attention in a joint public lecture organized by the Jewish-Muslim Relations Network at the University of Michigan entitled, “Islam, Judaism, and Decoloniality,” held online on 12th April 2020.
tures is that the location of Islam in other parts of the world with their own dynamic histories are considered negligible, or a threat to this “progressive” idea of history.

Cartographies of religion in academic literature have yet to earnestly confront, or “decolonize,” the contentious canonization of certain areas of the world as representative of major and pluralistic faiths like Islam. Global circulations of Islam as a particularly violent religion (specifically with regards to terrorism and heteropatriarchal oppression of women and queer groups) in stereotypical representations of the Middle East and Pakistan have been deployed by postcolonial countries in the Global South where Muslims are minorities.\(^2\) While many scholars of repute have wisely been attentive to how colonial legacies continue to shape representative identity politics (especially with regards to how Muslims have been racialized and gendered despite diversity within the community), it is imperative to note that for “Muslim minorities” in the non-Western world, the scope of expanding our geographical analysis brings to the fore hitherto overlooked frames of temporal, theoretical, and identity units for academic analysis—one that has been significantly informed by but also beyond the production of the European Christian map of the world and its unfolding legacy.

Temporarily, the post 9/11 political landscape undoubtedly has served as a crucial node in entrenching the global territorial and ideational framing of the so-called “Muslim World.” Countries like Afghanistan, and even Pakistan in some instances, find themselves referred to as the “Middle East” in these flexible conceptualizations of the Muslim World. Such reductive and political mapping of Muslims found their way in and through controversial discourses of the “War on Terror” which also ushered in an era of important conversations on gender and feminist politics in Muslim societies usually between Muslim feminists (a diverse group) and their interactions with those who they understood as “imperialist feminists,” “liberal white feminists,” or “native informers” (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Mahmood, 2009). Others have illustrated Muslim women and queer groups confronting cis gendered hetero-patriarchies in their own societies (with or without theology) but certainly not asking Western men,
women, and/or “homonationalist” groups to rescue them in saviour missions which echo colonial Christian civilizing and now secular postcolonial Western interventions (Badran, 2005; Puar, 2007; Sharify-Funk, 2008; Georgis, 2013). Notably these “conversations” on gender, feminism, and religion have unfolded against a background of precarious political economies for racialized Muslim migrants and citizens while several European right-wing groups have appropriated the language of feminism to marginalize Muslims (Farris, 2017).

As Nasar Meer (2013) has observed in the context of racialization and religion in the West, Islamophobia is not merely religious bigotry but an act of ascribing dehumanizing and homogenizing prescriptions to racialize Muslims. These are important perspectives to our understanding of racialization and its intersection with religion beyond physiological and phenotypical constructions of race, and how gender becomes a performative marker of racial biopolitics. In terms of long durée histories of Muslim racialization, the year 1492 is rightfully gaining recognition in the West as the seminal year of multiple colonisations, displacement, subordination, and massacres of indigenous groups in the Americas, and the persecution of Muslims and Jews in the Iberian Peninsular that entrenched “epistemic Islamophobia” worldwide (Grosfoguel, 2010). Recently, the United States of America has witnessed a burgeoning public interest in exploring the histories of Black Muslim slaves (such as the “Omar Ibn Said Collection”). Such multifaceted intellectual developments are a welcome direction in the study of religion and society including examining the phenomenon of “gendered Islamophobia” in the West and its colonial antecedents (Zine, 2006).

Significantly however, geographies of Muslim minority disempowerment are often not intertwined in our studies of Muslim racialization beyond colonial and neoliberal constructions of the Global North.3 Despite the intense persecution of Muslim minorities in certain Global South countries, the somewhat uncontested idea of the “Muslim World” commonly refers to Muslim diaspora in the Global North and Muslim majority countries in the Middle East and some parts of South Asia to the exclusion of millions of Muslims.4 It is vital to

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3 In certain recent academic works Bosnian Muslims continue to be depicted as “encountering” Europe and facing persecution after the collapse of former Yugoslavia, rather than as groups that are historically very much a part of Europe since medieval times who have faced violence as European/White Muslims. Such vocabularies and positioning of geography, ethnicity, religion, and even secularism is a telling illustration of spatial-temporal imaginations racializing religions like Islam despite racial and ethnic diversity in the community.

4 Scholars such as Kevin Fogg have noted that Indonesia, despite having the world’s largest population of Muslims, fails to be historicized and conceptualized as a country with “pious Muslims” who resisted colonialism. See: Fogg, Kevin. 2020. Indonesia’s Islamic Revolution. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
critically engage with the production of the cartography of the diverse “Muslim World,” including how the Christian European map defined and defines our approaches to the study of religion, and how religious subjection/subjugation gets repackaged in nationalist postcolonial narratives. Lost in Western centric narratives of Islamists, Islamophobia, and Muslimness (including international wars) as well as the historical and contemporary interaction of the “Western World” with the so-called “Muslim World” are Muslim minorities in Global South countries who in many instances are surviving if not facing outright genocide, occupation, detention, and statelessness in countries like China, India, Burma, and even Central African Republic. Each of these countries and their majoritarian anti-Muslim politics have been informed by colonial orientalist legacies, and some would argue that even precolonial legacies of the Crusades had demonized Muslims for centuries prior to the colonization of their lands (Heng, 2018). Simultaneously, it is important to note that in addition to Western discourses of Islamophobia, post-colonial countries have unique national trajectories of classification and enumeration of disempowered minorities. Therefore, academic disciplines studying racial, gender, religious, and other intersectional formations must examine and elucidate colonial legacies but also exercise caution in not reifying “postcolonial innocence” such that human rights abuses in any country is merely narrowed down to a crisis of historical coloniality untethered from present times.

While neocolonialism persists in economic and political interactions of the “West with the rest,” contemporary transnational politics are bringing to the fore new entanglements and even alignments between countries, denting if not tearing down the infrastructure of former Cold War alliances globally. Global South countries are not merely sites of data collection, they are also sites of theory and imaginations interacting, confronting, and/or collaborating with the rest of the world (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2018), especially in the case of “rising superpowers” such as India and China. The creation of the disposable Muslim subject in non-Muslim majority countries of the Global South reveals the complex and logical extant of Muslim dehumanization in not just politically authoritarian or single party states as is the case in Burma and China, but also when “majority-minority” dialectics deploy the coded language of secularism and couple the latter with democracy as in the case of India.

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5 In 2015 Central African Republic saw mass-scale anti-Muslim violence which the Pope had to de-escalate yet the issue did not find much resonance in mainstream conscience. Undeniably, this also speaks to the marginality of Black Muslims in dominant imaginations of the Muslim World. See: ‘Central African Republic: New Wave of Killing,’ Human Rights Watch, November 26, 2015.
Studying how Muslim marginalization in non-Western countries draws from both Western/global and social and cultural tropes specific to that polity (and its tools of religious racialization) also builds upon or brings to the fore previously ignored facets of analytical units and limited vocabularies, including their invariably gendered implications. In the study of Muslims in India for example, terms like “communalism” in South Asian academia and even “Islamophobia” in Western academia do not adequately capture both the similarities and divergences between Indian and Western anti-Muslim constructions. Troublingly, Muslims have been represented in academically distorted right-wing narratives as “medieval foreign invaders,” drawing from the legacy of the deliberately divisive periodization of India’s history under British colonialism (Mukherjee and Mukherjee, 2001). As scholars have documented, historically the majority of Muslims in India converted to Islam from Dalit (so-called ‘untouchable’) and lower caste backgrounds, but in a bid to eclipse the stigma of casteism, many adopted surnames that seemed to construe their genealogies to Central Asia or the Middle East (Delage, 2014). Tragically, such narratives have furthered the Hindu Right narrative of Muslims as foreigners against whom “postcolonial revenge” needs to be exacted for perceived medieval wrongs and the Partition of India in 1947, which in turn has enabled anti-social elements to engage in alarming rates of public lynching of poor Muslim men and organized violence (The Atlantic, 2020). Importantly, as I have elaborated elsewhere, caste based affirmative action was also institutionally denied to Muslims in postcolonial India to render them as “casteless” subjects, even though most Muslims in the country have oppressed caste or self-identified “pasmanda” backgrounds and remain extremely poor and marginalized (Umar, 2019).

What analytical frameworks does the study of Global South Muslim minorities in countries such as India offer to our understandings of Muslim identity formation beyond theology? The testimony of the success of this postcolonial endeavour to subsume caste among non-Hindus to forgotten histories and precarious political economies also lies in the fact that caste still does not get the attention in dominant understandings of South Asian Islam/Indo-Islamic identities, and when it does, it often gets mapped onto Muslim societies in unnuanced ways such that there is a failure to observe that caste hierarchies among Muslim do not operate along similar social prescriptions and genealogical constructions as Hindus (Kumar, 2017). For many lower caste and Dalit Muslims and Christians, conversion was and is an act of resistance, often in defiance of upper caste and privileged groups in the faiths they converted to (Viswanath, 2014), although some elites still strive to maintain casteist norms in non-Hindu religions including Islam (Anwar, 2005). Nonetheless, the distinctions between caste and race hierarchies and how they have been constituted onto Muslim
bodies in Indian and Western understandings of Islam offers important perspectives to scholars on how the lexicon of religion operates, morphs, and mutates categories of analysis that either get overlooked or simplified.

Significantly, Muslims in India have become gendered embodiments of nationalist anxiety, and there are lessons to be learned by scholars in gender and religion studies from India’s “casteist Islamophobic” discourses of gendered Muslim bodies. In several instances of mass scale anti-Muslim violence of the 21st century, Muslim women have been subjected to rape as well as appalling “symbolic” mutilations of their bodies by right-wing forces (Sarkar, 2002). Forces who today manipulatively posit themselves as a saviour of Muslim women from Muslim patriarchal practises (such as instant divorces), while also using those grounds to exclusively criminalize Muslim men against which Muslim feminists have registered their protest (Bebaak Collective, 2017). Notably in recent times, certain provinces in India have banned conversion from Hinduism to Islam while mass “reconversion” to Hinduism programs have been launched in endeavours that directly negate the ‘secular’ constitution of the country (Datta, 2015). It beckons to be asked when Muslim women face mass-scale sexual assault: is it transpiring in a context where they are being targeted as “outsiders” to India in ethnonationalist narratives, or is it encoded in “insider” logics of casteism, specifically a caste informed Islamophobia, whereby the rape or threat of sexual assault of Dalit women was/is a common feat to policing caste hierarchy and order (Paik, 2009)? How do conceptions of caste power, conversion histories, and religious dynamics complicate our understandings of gendered Islamophobia? The answers to these bewildering and disconcerting ties between sexual violence, caste, and religion lie in layers of histories known and unknown, and how power performs itself on bodies through multiple frontiers—including in how the postcolonial Indian State has demarcated caste and religion through the gendered-racialization of the country’s Muslim minorities. Notably, in the conflict-ridden Muslim majority zone of Kashmir, Indian nationalists have sought the endorsement of European far right leaders despite the UN condemning India’s ongoing lockdown and escalating crackdown on human rights in the region (BBC News, 2019).

Bearing these broad contemplations and specific examples in mind, I propose that the unstable categories of religion and gender underscore the salience of temporalities, spatialities, and analytical lenses that go into the very definition and silences of how we understand the Muslim World—informing the Christian European map but also beyond it—towards challenging neoliberal assumptions of area studies and associated tropes of the Muslim World. In the process, rich theoretical and analytical possibilities will emerge or gain further currency to unpack the seemingly universal construction of the unde-
sirable Muslim, without rendering the agency of certain Global South countries partaking in such transnational discourses as secondary or uninfluential.

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