Theorizing Paradox and Agency: Muslim Women between Constraint and Agency

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Abstract

This thesis analyzes critical conceptions of human agency, resistance and freedom as well as their implications for conceiving of human action and experience in complex, life affirming ways. I pursue this analysis by examining the contemporary debate surrounding the agential capacity and embodied practices of the “Muslim woman.” I argue that contemporary feminist disagreements regarding how the “Muslim woman” exercise and embody their agency belittle the possibility of paradox from entering the discursive realm. Current debates eclipse the idea that there is an essential existential tension where human agency is understood as being entangled within the terrains of creativity and constraint. Addressing paradox in the face of the worldwide cultural preoccupation with the “Muslim woman” can help reconfigure our social imagining of the practice of agency and resistance, while revealing the living paradox that we are both bound and free.
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And to everyone I mentioned here I dedicate a poem by the poet Rumi:

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field.

I'll meet you there.

When the soul lies down in that grass,
the world is too full to talk about.
Ideas, language, even the phrase "each other" doesn't make any sense.
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Chapter One
Introduction

Being free and unfree at the same time is perhaps the most common of our experiences – Zygmunt Bauman, 1990

I begin with the understanding that the spectre of paradox is part of the experience of human life in the social world. It is mediated between and in-and-through spaces of creativity (our desire to transcend and transgress the self, human relationships and the world when we feel we are deprived of our humanity and freedom) and constraint (the inevitable social limitations and cultural restrictions and control). We can understand paradox as being knotted between what Adam Phillips (2012) describes as ‘the lived life and unlived life.’ By this Phillips means that human life is an experience between two parallel lives: the one we are actively living, and the one we feel we should have had or are waiting to have. The lived life can be regarded as an interplay with the unlived life that is entangled in "the one that we wish for and the one that we practice; the one that never happens and the one that keeps happening" (Phillips, 2012, p xvii). This interchange between the lived and unlived life, like that between being free and unfree, enlightens a central facet of human life: the individual is always traveling within a complex and ambiguous space of liminality that in a simultaneous cyclical process of becoming, disappearing and evolving (Deleuze and Guattari, 2009).

It is in this exchange and coactions of the lived life and unlived life that I imagine the performance of agency and resistance to enter, and the struggle for freedom to be entrenched. One way to conceptualize agency is to understand it as being connected to the myth of our potential, wholeness and the possibility of a better and fuller life that is grounded in the substructure of transforming the past and in the whimsical vision of the
self's futurity. To exist, according to Jean Paul Sartre (2007) is to be a self-projecting and self-overcoming being who voyages *towards* a future (one that the self envisions to be and designs how he will be in it) and has the ability to consciously imagine as being *in* the future. Sartre claims that an individual can only achieve the former but not the latter. We are frustrated, deprived, unsatisfied and disgusted with the tyranny and coercion of the world. Such oppressive feelings become the inspiration for us to imagine a life and plot a future without power and systems of oppression: without patriarchy, racism, colonialism/imperialism, class struggle, enforced heterosexuality and the bureaucratization of both normality and disability. Our agony and vexation is due to the repeated exposure to the daily experience of oppressions and has resulted in a form of ‘spirit murder’ (Mazama, 2003). bell hooks (1993, p 106), explains this idea of such woundedness in the context of the historical experience of the black body:

Black people are indeed wounded by forces of domination. Irrespective of our access to material privilege white supremacy, racism, sexism, and a capitalist economic system that dooms us collectively to an underclass position wound us all. Such wounds do not manifest themselves only in material ways; they affect our psychological well-being. Black people are wounded in our hearts, minds, bodies, and spirits.

Wounds can act as a barrier to self-overcoming and for self-transcendence. Na’im Akbar (2006) points out that resistance can be stifled through the persistent tendency to “inferiorize” others, as the continued portrayal of black people as clowns, servant, crooks, lazy and incompetents further reinforces and maintains this strong sentiment of inferiority.

However, the wounds that oppression imprints can act as an impetus to kindle our agency to transform our lived life and imitate the freed and unoppressive world we imagine in our unlived life. Erich Fromm’s (1973) delineates humanity to be wedged
between discontentment and perplexity, in which the awareness of his powerlessness and limitations means that one “cannot rid himself of his body” and yet “his body makes him want to be alive” (p 225). Perhaps, this can be understood in terms of what Albert Camus (1991) calls the ‘absurd.’ The absurd, according to Camus, arises from the chasm between what we can have and what the world offers, and subsequently this gulf is both the intermediary and connection that joins the individual and the world. The absurd does not re-establish harmony; instead it points to a detachment. Camus (1991, p 30) writes:

The absurd is essentially a divorce. It lies in neither of the elements compared; it is born of their confrontation...I can therefore say that the Absurd is not in man (if such a metaphor could have a meaning) nor in the world, but in their presence together. For the moment it is the only bond uniting them.

The absurd exposes the yearning for a lost unity which can be found in the detachment, the alienation and the isolation of human beings from the world; between what is and what we expect. Separation, and the accompanying sense of oppression expresses the desire for unity and clarity, and the unsatisfaction of the lack of meaning that is eventually (possibly not) found. Our lived life becomes a site of intervention and interrogation in striving for what the world can possibly offer us. Our unlived life is a like confession of the absence of something missing or a realization of a deficiency in the midst of the way we experience our lives. Our practice of agency and desire to engage in acts of resistance is rooted within this, possibly inescapable and irresolvable paradox

1 Throughout this thesis I will use the conventional masculine terminology of ‘Man’ or ‘He’ to refer to humanity for the sole purpose of being consistent with the philosophies that I engage with. I am aware of the reasons that feminists have understandably objected to this, and the imbalance of power embedded in the term.
of mediating the constraints within our lived lives and creative acts of opposition that is hinted by our unlived self.

Let us consider these issues in relation to the “Muslim woman.”2 The West says: ‘She is veiled. She is not free. She is imprisoned. She is sexually repressed. She submits to the barbarism of Islam. She is subjugated. Her man beats her and cages her in her home or harem. Her culture inflicts violence on her humanity and subjectivity. We must save her.’ The East says: ‘She challenges Islam. She is an infidel. She wears pants, a t-shirt and make-up. She is Western. She has betrayed ‘our’ honour, faith and culture. We must redeem her.’ Undoubtedly, the “Muslim woman’s” body is crowded with conflicting and contradictory questions, concerns, projects, and avocations. Consider the following: ‘do Muslim women need saving?’ (Abu-Lughod, 2013); how can the “Muslim woman’s” voices be validated in the Qu’ran to unread patriarchy (Wadud, 1999; Barlas, 2002); the vigorous endeavors to unearth the “Muslim woman’s” sacred songs, poetry, dream-visions and mystical experiences and contribution to the heritage of Islam (Helminski, 2003); the anxious commitments to expose radical Islam and emancipate the helpless victims from the abuse of the Sharia law (Ali, 2008); understanding how the “Muslim woman” negotiate race, class and gender within the Ummah both in the West and the East (Karim, 2009; Haddad, Smith & Moore, 2006).

Despite how the “Muslim woman” problem is framed she is depicted as “missing out.” The West proclaims the “Muslim woman” to be “missing out” on living a liberated and emancipated life, whereas the East professes her to be “missing out” on her God, 

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2 In this thesis I use the term “Muslim Woman.” I am aware of the issues of essentializing the lived realities of Muslim women, as I discuss in Chapter two. However, I thought the term best suited my project as pertains more to understanding how paradox underlines and mediates agency in the context of Muslim women rather than examining their actual lived realities.
her piety, and her expected role as a “Muslim woman.” In such a notion of “missing out” there are inferences and insinuations, when critically observed, of the failure of the “Muslim woman” in living a life of satisfaction and fulfillment. In this view, the agential project of the “Muslim woman” can be understood as a project of restoration (of what she is ‘missing out’ on and justly deserves) and a project of futurity (to self-transcend into an eternal freedom). Also, the lived life of the “Muslim woman” can be interpreted to be one of paradox. The call to ‘save’ the “Muslim woman” denies voice and agency to the “Muslim woman,” while marking her silence and suffering as an agentic act of prowess and resiliency (Weir, 2012).

This thesis engages in a critical inquiry into human agency, resistance and freedom and the implications of it when conceiving of the meaning of human action and human experience. I pursue this analysis by examining the contemporary debate surrounding the agential capacity and embodied practices of the “Muslim woman,” and aim to explore the underlying conception of agency that ensues. I argue that contemporary feminist disagreements regarding how the “Muslim woman” practice, exercise and embody their predetermined agency dilutes the possibility of paradox from entering the discursive realm. The debates as currently articulated eclipse the idea that there is an essential existential tension where human agency (and perhaps experience itself) can be understood as entangled within the terrains of creativity (the capacity to negotiate, navigate and respond to ambiguity) and constraint (the limitation and restrictions imposed by norms and oppressive forces). Focusing on the concepts of paradox as expressed and denied in feminist work can help reconfigure our social imagining and understanding of the practice of agency and resistance, while enabling a pursuit of freedom as all these reveal the idea that oppression and emancipation are
entangled within our nature as both bound and free. Addressing paradox (without attempting to resolve it) in the face of the worldwide cultural preoccupation with the “Muslim woman,” I aim to complicate our climate of political thought and uphold a more existential stance that nurtures the idea that we are bound and unbound in our human experiences. Possibly, such critical engagement can help explain the idea that the exercise of agency and striving of freedom are inevitable bound to aspects of human existence and thus, transpire within limitations.

The scholarship on the “Muslim woman” can be understood as consumed and concerned with the following: first, critiquing and unpacking the racist Western representations of the “Muslim woman” (Jiwani, 2005); second, understanding the “Muslim woman” as complex and multidimensional actors who are engaged in political and feminist struggles (Mahnaz, 1995); and thirdly, offering an inquiry of the role of the “Muslim woman” question within the framework of Islamic feminism that engages with Islamic theology and relies on the Quranic interpretation of rights and justice, civil institutions and everyday life (Barlas, 2002; Wadud, 1999). Clearly, the concern for the “Muslim woman” has been circumcised by questions of veiling and deveiling, critiquing the singularization and homogenization of the “Muslim woman’s” identity and lived experiences and lastly both addressing and protesting for a gender reform in Islam.

Further, the literature on the agential capacity of the “Muslim woman” is predominately situated within two polarizing frames: secular and Islamic reform. Margot Badran (2009) points out that both discourses that are centralized in achieving gender equality differ in their strategic and ideological approach, methodology, frames of references and socio-political solution.
Nevertheless, Badran further explains that though Islamic feminism is situated in an Islamic paradigm that is in contrary to secularism both do not exist in opposition to one another but instead work “side by side in productive synergy” (p 12). However, with the discourse of the “Muslim woman” limited within these two frames she is both, split and contained within oppositional tensions, such as between theology and social issues, Islam and democracy, and Qu’ran and the universal standard. The problem is that both frames, whether rooted in Orientalism or Islam are embedded within a patriarchal and paternalistic perspective (Khan, 2002; Zine, 2004). On the one hand, a “Western genocentric,” (Lazreg, 1988) prism characterizes the” Muslim woman” within a colonial gaze, as being oppressed, subordinated, and a victim of her culture and religion, which serves to create the unitary and oppositional categories of the ‘civilized’ Western man and ‘liberated’ Western woman (Mohanty, 1998; Razack, 2011). On the other hand, fundamental Islamic rhetoric delineates and narrows gender meaning to the private realm and ties the “Muslim woman” to the androcentric and theological interpretation of Islam.

The diverse approaches to the question of the “Muslim woman” can be read as representations of conceptions of human potential. Through these different depictions of human potential what keeps slipping away from the conversation about agency and resistance in the context of the “Muslim woman” is the underlying paradox in human action. One possible reason for the lack of acknowledgment, not to mention exploration, of paradox is due to our fixation about what consists of agency and resistance and what acts (or lack therefore) contribute to being agentic actions. Much of our critical social thought about our need to exert agency is often related to field of human resiliency, and the creative act of the human spirit of negotiating between refusing and consent to
domination. For this reason, a great deal of social theory has pursued first, explaining the various modalities of resistance within structures of subordination to understand how these acts can challenge and set limits to domination (Mahmood, 2005), and second, developing ways to oppose injustices, and address dehumanizing and repressive forces that quite often preclude transcendence (Butler, 1990).

Of interest in this thesis is that the issues we find behind the question of the "Muslim woman" can also be found addressed in other traditions. Consider, for example, The Rebel (1956) by Albert Camus. Camus (1956, p 13) writes of the impetus for the human soul to rebel, and for that rebellion to awaken in the moment of transgression:

is to be found in the rebel's feeling that the other person "is exaggerating," that he is exerting his authority beyond a limit where he begins to infringe on the rights of the others. Thus the movement of rebellion is founded simultaneously on the categorical rejection of an intrusion that is considered intolerable and on the confused conviction of an absolute right which, in the rebel's mind, is more precisely the impression that he "has the right to..." Rebellion cannot exist without the feeling that, somewhere and somehow, one is right.

In this context, the "Muslim woman" can be marked as the 'rebel' of today. She is both transgressing the story of her body, whether religious or secular, while negotiating the ambiguity of her representation. In this idea of the rebel, of traveling within the parameters of being free and unfree, my project is orientated to discovering what happens if paradox was acknowledged, even nurtured within the existing thinking of agency and resistance of the "Muslim woman." If, we were to include the dialogue with paradox as the beginning and central point of examination, without aiming to dissolve or extricate ourselves from it, and accept its shadowy existence in our lives, we may be able to redeem pieces of our existence by understanding and learning how do we live
with paradox. Although Weir (2013) suggests that we should not think about identity and representation as being entrapped within paradox but rather as complex I think that if we keep denying paradox and allowing it to slip away from the forefront of our intellectual engagement we will continue to avoid our lived life as it is and persist in the “lives that escape us...loss of what might have been; loss, that is, of things never experienced” (Phillips, 2012, p xiii).

The implications of this project are to contribute not only to the discourse on agency but also problematize the current imagining regarding the “Muslim woman.” I aim to complicate the existing dialogue by interrogating our current social imagination and understanding of agency. I intend to examine how our thinking has circumcised, limited and restricted our creative sensibility and political vision surrounding the concepts of 'agency,' 'resistance,' and 'freedom.' In doing so, I hope to reinvigorate the idea of paradox as a kind of body that mediates, interrupts, disrupts and makes the whole of our existential experience, and correlate this to the concern of the “Muslim woman” in the epoch of the “War on Terror.” By the mere fact that I am engaging with a complicated concept such as paradox my intent is not to provide an answer to the “Muslim woman” question or side with a particular theoretical argument. I hope to entertain the complexities of our socio-cultural and political engagements that craft the mosaic and convoluted nooks of our social and existential experience as agentic actors.

1.1 Personal Connection

Simon Critchley (2012, p 161) asks an important question: “What kind of thing is faith and – more particularly – can someone who is nominally or denominationally faithless, such as myself, still have an experience of faith?” Often when we write about
religion we expect the author to be a devoted believer that has accepted at least one of the proposals of religion. Can a person without (the constructed idea of) faith, but who grew up in a particular faith still be compelling enough to speak about their encounter with faith? I think so, but with consequence.

I arrive at my thesis interest out of feelings of alienation and estrangement towards my inner and outer realities. Growing up a Muslim, yet never feeling and accepting to be a Muslim definitely confirmed to be an existential dilemma as I grew more experienced in this world. On top of that, I was a woman. Outside of cultural (both Western/Eastern) scripts I experienced conflict with my expected “role” as a woman in religion. I could not conceive of why I had to be this way or that way, or profess my truth within this prayer or that ritual. And yet, majority of those my age around me never seemed to have a problem. Every Friday they religiously prayed. They knew the Islamic-Arabic religious sayings, and better yet, they knew when to say it and for what purpose. They can tell you about God and that if one was to utter God’s teachings and follow without questioning that there was a place for you near Him (for them, God was a man). I thought all of this to be bogus and as a farce to my being. I never really understood good/evil, God/Satan, worship/punishment, nor did I believe in believing out of fear; and living one’s life according to a book. Frankly, I never accepted anything that shadowed one’s being and their freedom. Of course, I never expressed this because it was too dangerous. How could I tell people in my own extended family and community that I thought their faith held no truth for me? Infidel! Shame! Neglect! Embarrassment!

On April 23, 2010, an American rapper by the name of Napoleon (from Tupac’s group Outlawz) was scheduled to lecture at a local mosque in Toronto to speak about his recent conversion to Islam. My friend and I decided to attend since we were
interested in his reflections and stories about Tupac. I knew the mosque was gender segregated, still I decided to go anyway. I had made up my mind if anyone told me to specifically sit in the women’s section, I would refuse.

This lecture was on a Friday, taking place after faqr prayer. I was dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, with no hijab. And I had no intention of praying. As soon my friend and I arrived at the mosque several men kept redirecting me to the entrance that would lead me to the “sister’s” section. Men received the same stubborn and arrogant answer from me “No, I’m going to enter from the front.” Finally, when we got to the main entrance I was approached by a man who told me I couldn’t enter from there since it was an entrance exclusively for me. I contested. I told him that I came to watch a lecture and that sitting in the sister’s section, at the back, on the other side of the mosque, where the women cannot be seen, nor can they see the speaker would not work for me. I told him that I was aware of the politics of such gender segregation and I wouldn’t be part of my own degradation and dehumanization. Finally, they called the head of the mosque and I got into a very settle and calm argument with him. It didn’t take very long until he said that he’ll set-up a chair for me in the “brother’s section,” not apart from them but with them. I was seated with them and watched the entire lecture midst the men. I was the lone woman in this section.

Over the years of reflection I have understood this experience as not just confronting and contesting religious sexist practices but of my own struggles of negotiating the paradox of yearning for freedom within the boundary of freedom itself. You seek freedom, yet it contains you within the segregated space; and still the segregated is transgressed within the shadows of limitation. My interest in this thesis is not to critique and deconstruct how Muslim woman and Islam are represented in
relation to the current issues of colonialism, imperialism and racism. I am not concerned with questions of the religious practices of Muslim woman (i.e. to veil or not to veil) or their role in Islam. I am more interested in exploring paradox as a question relating to our current imagination and conversation on the “Muslim woman,” and not locating freedom/constraint in lone heretics acts nor over-coming acceptance, but something in-between.

1.2 Organization of the Study

This study represents the ongoing conversation on agency and resistance as it relates to the experience of the “Muslim woman.” This chapter provided an introduction to the overall study in question. I have established the possible idea that human agency and human experience are mediated and bounded by spaces of creativity and constraint, and that paradox is thus an inescapable and irresolvable experience that we learn to navigate. A brief discussion regarding how this relates to the question of the “Muslim woman” and agency was touched on, as well as the idea that the lived life of the Muslim woman is one of paradox. This chapter also included an account of my personal connection to the study in question.

Chapter two reviews the relevant literature dealing with feminist engagements with issues of the “Muslim woman’s” agency, as well as with representation, identity and resistance. I attempt to provide a synopsis of some of the significant theoretical debates on such themes, and examine how they have been in conversation with each other. Through these conversations, I explore how different feminist theoretical frameworks have analyzed, explored and understood issues relating to the “Muslim woman,” as well as how paradox has been negated and overlooked when considering the question of
the “Muslim woman.” By illustrating how paradox is made absent in our contemporary imagination I consider how paradox can also be made to enter the dialogue.

In chapter three, I explore how the concepts of paradox and agency have theoretically been articulated and thought, both in the Western and Eastern stream of thinking. In this chapter, I am mainly interested in examining the presence and absence of paradox from our imagination in order to further consider the importance of reclaiming paradox in our current imagination in relation to agency. Such ideas provide the theoretical basis of conceptualizing paradox and agency in order to move the conversation to the paradoxical relation to the issue of the “Muslim woman” and agency.

In chapter four, I delve into how the “Muslim woman” embody and utilize agency to navigate paradox in-and-through spaces of creativity and constraint. To explore these questions from the angle of paradox, I turn to art, that does not deny paradox and instead creatively finds a way to act (agency) in the face of paradox to examine how paradox as a kind of body mediates, interrupts and disrupts our existential experience through artistic engagement in the context of the “Muslim woman.”
Chapter Two
Agency, Representation, Identity and Resistance: A Literature Review

Every war and every conflict between human beings has happened because of some disagreement about names. It is such an unnecessary foolishness – Rumi, 1995

The purpose of this literature review is to provide a synopsis of some of the scholarly engagement with the underlying themes in this study. These themes include the issues of personal and social ambiguity, as well as religion and existentialism in relation to the issues of representation, identity, agency, and resistance of the “Muslim woman.” There are relatively few theoretical studies in the literature that have directly considered the paradoxical nature of the question on the “Muslim woman.” It is important to have a detailed understanding of the ongoing historical, cultural, political and theoretical discussions in the area and discern its construction and political purpose. Such an understanding will give a clear idea of what has been imagined in the field in order to call forth a re-thinking of paradox in the existing dialogue. Also, it will expand our contemporary political concern of the “Muslim woman” and its interconnection with other areas of conflict. This is important because such an exploration of the literature can illuminate the historicity and continuity of the ambiguous nature of religious warfare and the gendered, racial/ethnic and class underpinnings that has penetrated in every time, space and thought. The following review cites works which are germane, although not precisely connected to the current study but nevertheless serve to contextualize my research study.

The tragic attacks on the World Trade Centre and Pentagon on September 11,
2001 propagated a complex resurgence of the West’s preoccupation about the Islamic world and heightened interest in the “Muslim woman.” In his 2001 ‘State of the Union Address,’ George W. Bush proclaimed that “after America was attacked it was as if our entire country looked into the mirror and saw our better selves.” These words were more than a proclamation. They were a declaration on the “War on Terror” or more explicitly, the “War on Islam.” In the state of the moment, Samuel P. Huntington’s (1997) “The Clash of Civilizations” thesis revived. Huntington’s archaic idea of the unbridgeable chasm between the Islamic world and the Western Christendom, that is presumed to be infused with hostility and collision re-dogmatized in the forefront of our collective thought. Rudyard Kipling’s (1889, p 11) first two quatrains of his poetic narrative *The Ballad of the East and West*: “Oh, East is East and West is West / And never the twain shall meet”³ re-centralized itself in our social relations, our interpersonal experiences and our perceptible ‘truth’ about our existential condition. Professedly, assertively and passionately the entire world (s) took a stance: there was *Trouble with Islam* (Manji, 2004); it was now a fundamental *Battle for God* (Armstrong, 2000); we were experiencing *The End of Faith* (Harris, 2004); and lastly, we hastily needed to awaken to *Why the West is Best* (Warraq, 2011).

³ It is important to mention that it is the first half of the poem that has been popularized to create the idea of the divide between the East and the West. However, latter half of the poem has been repressed or submerged from our collective memory. The poem continues: Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God’s great Judgment Seat; But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth, When two strong men stand face to face, Though they come from the ends of the earth!” To read the full poem *The Ballad of East and West* see *The Works of Rudyard Kipling*, p 245.
In the period of a developing cosmopolitanism⁴ and maturing global community that has enabled the possibility of the interactive exchange of ideas, moral codes, economies and political ideologies, paradoxically has also facilitated, in the nook of each standpoint, the division of the world, truth, individuals and groups, religion, ideologies and meaning. With such division, benevolence, justice, liberation and freedom have been confined to one’s own group. Consequently, the project of emancipation has become an isolated project that contains the stimulus of humiliating, overcoming and ‘winning over’ our opponents⁵ and violently proclaiming the victory of a singular world, truth, group, religion, ideology and meaning.

It is precisely within this divided combat zone, which aims to deny a polysemous basis, that the question of “Muslim woman” is anchored. The Muslim woman is a desired object to be known, unveiled and deconstructed. We want to know her so we can save her. We want to unveil her so we can liberate her. We want to deconstruct and bare her exposed so we can reveal the meaning of her life. The essential yarn found in each battle, no matter from what terrain one is fighting, is the battle for making a singular meaning and to quell the conflict of interpretation. Referring to Paul Riceur’s concept of language Peter Mara (2011) explains language as the act of a speaker who brings to life an insight or reading. The speaker tells the stories and that story becomes the story for all. Even if the author of the story claims for the story to be a personal story

⁴ I adopt Kwame Anthony Appiah’s (2006) definition of cosmopolitanism. For Appiah cosmopolitanism is “the human community,” in which we “develop habits of coexistence: conversation in its older meaning, of living together, association.” (p xix). This definition is useful within this context because it exhibits the idea of interdependence and human connectivity to others who are distant but nonetheless connected in our midst of experiences.

⁵ Consider examples such as the human torture at Abu Ghrab and Guantanamo Bay.
somehow it becomes a collective story, a story that others claim and relate to. Insofar as the story makes sense, its meaning does not reside solely in the person nor the personal – but is made between people, through interaction and connectivity. Such is the paradoxical mixture of togetherness and otherness: the story of the self is a story of ‘we,’ and that reveals but the “I” and its relation to the other’s existence. We are bounded in dependence-independence, that make our stories and experiences as a result of a co-existence and mutual interdependence. As the literature review is illustrating, the story never stays private. The story of the Muslim woman is not a singular story. It is a story in which the speaker both seeks and imposes a particular meaning about her life, while at the same time revealing a particular story about the storyteller. Still, there is yet another issue. All voices speak for her but she never speaks herself. It is in the deconstructing of meaning and interpretation where the paradox of the Muslim woman can be found, and where the fight against one version of truth or the fight about names, as Rumi insists can be transformative.

The discursive articulation of the “Muslim woman” has been contested, re-contested, configured and re-constructed through centuries of dialogue, dissent, contestation and negotiation. With a great deal of anxiety over the predicament of the women in Muslim societies, the “Muslim woman” question continues to be identified, defined and framed in scholarly debates. First, the literature begins with postulating the “Muslim woman” in a canonical and generalized category. To achieve a cosmopolitanism and ascribe a unified identity among the “Muslim woman” miriam cooke (2007) coined the term “Muslimwoman.” This term collapses all Muslim women into a single category to “draw attention to the emergence of a newly entwined religious and gendered identification that overlays national, ethnic, cultural, historical and even
philosophical diversity” (p 140). Expressed as a unique experience cooke continues to explain the liminality within the term Muslimwoman, “As women, Muslim women are outsider/insiders within Muslim communities where, to belong, their identity is increasingly tied to the idea of the veil. As Muslims, they are negotiating cultural outsider/insider roles in societies where Muslims form a minority or they are under threat” (p 140). Consequently, in the attempt to challenge the totalizing of Muslim women the term “Muslimwoman” obscures the diversity of women’s class statue, ethnic origin, geographical location, and varying social and moral standards and life choices. In the effort to emphasize the “Muslim woman’s” religious experience, ironically the “Muslim woman” end up solely subjects of religious discourse that flattens their overall existential experience.

However, the West’s inquisitiveness and complex relation with the “Muslim woman” is an old engagement that has been influenced and shaped by its relationship with Islam. 6 Drawing on literary representation of the “Muslim woman” in Western texts

6Jonathon Lyons (2009) and Ian Almond (2007; 2011) contest the idea of the unbridgeable chasm between the Islamic world and the Western Christendom and dispute the presumed hostility and collision. The authors argue that we have forgotten the history of the mutual tolerance and co-existence that existed between Islam and the West. Far from romanticizing with convergences and reifying such complicated and abstract concepts of ‘Islam’ and ‘the West,’ Both emphasize the interactions, mutual influence and shared history. Drawing on the ninth and tenth centuries translation movement in Baghdad, Iraq during the Abbasid era the author notes of Muslim philosophers and scholars profound interest in translating Greek, Syriac, Persian and Indian writings, which influenced and shaped their own ideas and thinking. Interestingly, the Muslim philosophers relied on deductive and empirical thinking and were particularly immersed in Aristotle, such as al-Kindi, al- Farabi and Averroes who were curious of the translated texts at the time, and later in the post-classical era philosophers such as Avicenna (also known as IbnSina), who originated his references from Aristotle in the fourth century, and antique Greek Aristotle commentators influenced the inter-penetration of falsafa (Arabic Aristotelian and Neoplatonic philosophy) with kalam (Islamic doctrinal theology).
in her book *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman: From Termagant to Odalisque* Mohja Kahf (1999) explains that “the question of the liberty, or lack thereof, of the Muslim woman” did not enter the Western discursive realm until around the 17th century. Moreover, the image of the secluded, oppressed, veiled woman confined in a harem who is in need for was not central within the Western imagination until the 18th and 19th centuries. As Europeans relations with the Islamic world changed the Western representation of Muslim woman transformed from being termagant (an English word applied to Muslims which means quarrelsome, overbearing woman) to odalisque (an abject harem slave). Kahf argues that the representation of the Muslim woman in Western literature metamorphised in the following ways. First, the West once represented Muslim woman as the noble and virtuous woman who was an equal and respectable pious believer in the Middle Ages; to the ambiguous and varying attitude towards the Islamic world during the Renaissance; and then during, the Enlightenment period ripened the ‘seraglio’ image of the Muslim woman from one of assertiveness to one of passivity.

The extant research has mainly preoccupied itself with deconstructing and critiquing the “odalisque” image. Postcolonialism feminism and critical race feminism have problematized the strategic appropriation of the rhetoric about the “Muslim woman.” They have revealed the hidden operation of Western imperial subtext in the representation of the “Muslim woman” that orbit around discourses of Orientalism, colonialism, imperialism, modernity and modernization and patriarchy (Razack, 2007; Thobani 2003; Jiwani, 2005). Marina Lazreg (1988) argues that a “Western genocentric” prism has characterized the quintessential Muslim woman within a colonial gaze, as being ‘oppressed,’ ‘subordinated,’ and a ‘victim’ of her culture and religion, and who is
need of saving from her secluded and regressed life by the Western world. For example, the culturalized practising of the veil and hijab in Islamic societies\(^7\) has intensified the debates surrounding the policing and surveillance of the “Muslim woman” body. The idea of the veil in the Western imagination has been associated with the lack of agency, traditionalism and backwardness of the Muslim woman. Such sentiments are illustrative in Nazira Zain al-Din remarks on veiling who imagines humans as bounded by cultural material and imagines material in a singular meaning:

I have noticed that the nations that have given up the veil are the nations that have advanced in intellectual and material life. The unveiled nations are the ones that have discovered through research and study the secrets of nature and have brought the physical elements under their control as you see and know. But the veil nations have not unearthed any secret and have not put any of the physical elements under their control but only sing the songs of a glorious past and ancient tradition (As cited in Bullock, 2002, p xviii)

Hoodfar (1993) appeals that the “Muslim woman” not only suffer from the portrayal of the colonial images but the practice of veiling remains an inert emblem of inferiority that has resulted from the West’s dismissal of the veil’s multiple meanings and social and cultural significance in various Muslim cultures. Razack (2007) historicizes this understanding in the relationship between Islamic/Muslim societies and colonizing

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\(^7\) I interpret the veil as a metaphor that refers to the existential condition of human beings in which the Sufis understood as being veiled from the ultimate Truth and/or having the consciousness as being hindered by mental and sensual passion that distracts the quest and clarity for Truth. This definition has been eliminated from our current social understanding and instead has evolved into a cultural practice for women, and for others is linked to a religious obligation. Fatima Mernissi in her book *The Veil and the Male Elite* (1987) refers to the hijab to mean “curtain,” which the Prophet Muhammed drew down between himself and another man that was at the foot of his nuptial entrance. As she further explains, “the word hijab is three-dimensional...to hide something from sight...to separate, to mark a border, to establish a threshold...the forbidden” (p 93). On the other hand, Hoodfar (1993) defines the Arab tradition of veiling as clothing designed to cover a woman’s body from the head to the ankles.
Western powers. She argues that the underpinning of these binary dialogic are rooted within a secular/religious and modernity/premodernity distinction. As a liberal autonomous and secular subject is the mark of modernity and Western feminism, such notion situate Islam and the “Muslim woman” as the ultimate obstacle and threat to Western civility and modernity. Such narratives are representative of what some scholars have called the “new racism” in which a language of cultural difference is used to mark and enforce racial difference and, further to mark this as a form of inferiority.

This “new racism's” rigid attitude towards the “Muslim woman” and the Islamic world is entrenched within the concept of Orientalism. Edward Said (1979) theorized Orientalism as a system of knowledge that is cultivated by the European imagination that understands the non-European world through its fear and desire as the inferior, or as the “Other.” Narratives of Orientalism depend on the notions of the asymmetrical power dynamic between the East (Orient) and the West (Occident), in which Western hegemony is achieved through its conquest of the Orient. In specific, the West actualizes its power and hegemony on the body of the Orient woman as it penetrates the understanding of her as seductive, mysterious, fecund, devious and vulnerable.

Such Oriental imaginary and mythologizing of the “Muslim woman” is maintained through the exnomination of power and the White Gaze that colonization itself produces. Jiwani (2010) explains the power of exnomination to be located within its power not to be named, defined, traced and rendered invisible. It is the power that has lucidly created an invisible backdrop in which all ‘Others’ subjectivity and beings are evaluated, validated, profiled and made known or unknowable. Accordingly, the binary relations of oppositions and polarization of the two ‘different’ worlds is predicated on a base grammar of race. Such grammar is situated around the power to coordinate and
disseminate colonial discourses about colonized others: to naturalize and dehistoricize differences; to the negate and dismiss history; to fix relations of power, in which domination is produced and secured in its reproduction by the inferiorization of the Other (Hall, 1997).

The power of exnomiation is central to the White gaze. The material image of the White gaze as it casts itself upon the object of its sight bares the complex ‘doing’ of its look; the Other that is produced through the gaze and its complete preservation in subjectification; the panopticism of the dominant culture that situates the Other as objects, not agents; observed, not observers; passive, not active; and lastly, the sense of humanity and existential being that is denied and rendered invisible within the obscure shadows of the onlookers world. Fanon’s (2008) concept of ‘historico-racial schema’ traces the manufacturing of the inferiorizing and subjugating White gaze in the violent colonial encounter that engulfed and erased the colonized and imprisoned the black identity by essentializing it through its imposed mythological narratives. The White gaze not only organizes and confines the ‘Other’ within its fixation but it functions as a racialized disciplinary mechanism.

Fanon’s (2008) concept of the racial-epidermal schema is an entry point into the creation of the black identity through the contours of the white imagination that presses onto the social consciousness and materializes in our social relations and culture. However, these discourses and mythologies imprint themselves into the racial machinery that disfigures the ‘Other’ body as a site of discipline. For instance, as the child in Fanon accounts exclaims, “Look! A Negro,” (pg 109) she not only calls the body as the focus of attention but marks the body as that of being anomalous, threatening, and delinquent that must be re-positioned, brought back within the confines and
regulated within its gaze by merely calling it out and causing an altering attention to it. The Others’ body becomes a site to exercise and affirm White power and dominance by disciplining it within its position through the command of its gaze (Razack, 1998). Fanon continues, “I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects. Sealed into the crushing of objecthood” (p 109). Similarly, the objecthood of Muslim woman seems to says, “Look a veil.” She is completely known by the presence of cultural material and dispersed by the reading and interpretation of others. In this crush of objecthood Fanon suggests that though one may beseechingly turn to others, but even in this turning there is not complete or whole self to return to. Instead, there is the self that is split up that cannot be reconciled.

Nevertheless, there is a double working within the White gaze as the ‘Other’ internalizes it and begins to see itself objectively within the third person and through an invert consciousness. The ‘Other’ is aware of its own blackness as the central image within the lookers sight; it is aware of its causing of discomfort and caution to others, and recognizes its own sense of inferiority and powerless existence. As Ralph Ellison (1995) writes in his landmark book Invisible Man, “I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me...When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves or figments of their imagination, indeed, everything and anything except me (p 5.).” Such correlates with Fanon admitting of his own relationship with his body and the world, and within this the giving up of the self as the object to the force of domination. Accordingly, the ‘Other’ self-disciplines and surveillances itself, even when it is outside the gaze. It is never forgetful of the gaze and its inferior position within it, and the white mythological narratives that have been imposed on it, as a
continuous reminder and managing of its limitation and dependent existence on the dominant.

In Fanon’s critical text, *A Dying Colonialism* (1965, p 37-28) he exposes the strategic politicizing of the ‘outward appearance’ of the Algerian woman:

This enabled the colonial administration to define a precise political doctrine: “If we want to destroy the structure of Algerian society, its capacity for resistance, we must first of all conquer the women; we must go and find them behind the veil where they hide themselves and in the houses where the men keep them out of sight.” It is the situation of woman that was accordingly taken as the theme of action. The dominant administration solemnly undertook to defend this woman, picture as humiliated, sequestered, cloistered…With infinite science, a blanket indictment against the “sadistic and vampirish” Algerian attitude toward women was prepared and drawn up. Around the family life of the Algerian, the occupier piled up a whole mass of judgements, appraisals, reasons, accumulated anecdotes and edifying examples, thus attempting to confine the Algerian within a circle of guilt.

Accordingly, the body of the “Muslim woman” has become the colonial and imperial terrain in which racial, religious and cultural notions of authenticity and otherness are enacted to rationalize the civilizing thesis. As the Western hegemonic discourses view “Islamic” gender politics as one of the main difference between the West and Islam, the control and regulation of the “Muslim woman’s” identity establishes the zone between “us” and “them,” and regulates the boundaries of barbarism/civilization, West/Islam and secularism/religion (Zine, 2006; cooke, 2007). This also works to establish itself in the state of invisibility of the Muslim woman. There is the recognition of invisibility of the Other; that in the onlookers sight the invisible Other is still somehow seeable, visible and is grasped and captured, yet the sight only acknowledges the invisible Other as the Invisible.

Returning to Ralph Ellison’s book *Invisible Man* (1995), a person becomes invisible because another refuses to see him. This willful avoidance of seeing and
confronting a sort of truth – the inability to see what they wish not to see, or what their prejudice doesn’t allow them to see. Therefore, the Other, with it being considered and presented as another entity, an alternative to one who is not the Other, is not supposed to be seen or within sight. And so invisibility is only possible in absence and alienation, or exploitation and manipulation of the representation and image of the Other. This is such a paradox to the state of invisibility. The regulation of the Other’s body and creation of boundaries can be read as a relation to the paradoxical relation to creativity and constraint. The colonizer wants to find them where “They hide themselves and they are hidden by men,” which devastatingly creative rendering of Algerian women constrains the meaning of nation, gender, religion to a little discardable knot of wastable lives. But now the colonizers energies are “spent” dealing with discardable knots.

Further, many scholars have noted how the Oriental framing of the Muslim woman has served to create the oppositional categories of the ‘civilized’ Western man and ‘liberated’ Western woman (Thobani, 2007). In her article, *White Wars: Western Feminisms and the ‘War on Terror’* Thobani (2007) critically examines the War on Terror and the US Empire, and the West’s relationship to the Muslim Other. She argues that Western feminist theorists reproduce whiteness and colonial understandings of the Muslim Other by reaffirming their privileged locations as white women. Consequently, by constituting whiteness as being ‘vulnerable,’ they re-endorse the West as endangered by the hatred and violence of its Islamist Other. For example, Thobani is highly critical of Phyllis Chesler’s defense of the ‘War on Terror’ in her book *The New Anti-Semitism: The Current Crisis and What We Must Do About It* (2003). In this book, Chesler argues that Israel and the United States together face a deadly enemy: Muslims, and the ‘terrorist’ politics they believe. However, Thobani argues that this
stance reproduces the paradigm of the ‘Clash of Civilizations’ and frames the conflict as one between the civilized West and barbaric Islam, and a feminist discourses that is rooted within the discourse of ‘terror.’ Coinciding with Thobani’s problematization of Western feminism is the significant point that Grewal and Kaplan (1996) make of ‘global womanism.’ In order to counter patriarchy and account for a similar oppression, Western feminism re-endorse the proposition of a universal and authentic woman within the framework of ‘global womanism,’ and subsequently under this banner diffuse and equalize power relations between themselves and “Third” world women. Nevertheless, such ‘global womanism’ is situated within a colonial paradigm and the clash of the civilization thesis, which demarcate ‘First’ and ‘Third’ world women. Such divisions are a way to reproduce whiteness and situates it within the center, in which Western Feminism functions as a strong force within imperial conquest. For example, it is in contrast to white women’s ‘global sisters’ and outside of the Western borders they can position themselves as the liberated and autonomous subject by reconfiguring the ‘Third’ world woman and the Muslim Other as oppressed and imprisoned in their ‘Third’ uncivilized world.

Other scholars have complicated the discourse of the “Muslim woman” within the field of resistance and have examined how the “Muslim woman” contest issues of identity and representation within a ‘third space,’ that is beyond the Western and of traditional Muslim communities’ imagination (Khan, 1998; Mishra & Shirazi, 2010). The ‘third space’ is a way to examine questions of culture in volatile epistemic/material, political and representational shifts. “Third” refers to the constructing and re-constructing of identity and denotes an unclear space where we negotiate identity and also refers to a place of resistance that is, according to Ulrich Beck is embedded in cosmopolitanism.
since it rejects “the either/or alternative between territorial-bounded national and ethnical identities without denying the historical narrative behind them” (As cited Ikas & Wagner, 2009, in p 22). Accordingly, the ‘third space’ is an ‘in-between space’ that engenders new possibilities of being by challenging essentialist positions of representation, identity and the perception of singularity.

The “Muslim woman” is continually actively (re) constructing, contesting and rejecting the dominate representations of their identity. Consequently, recent theorization of ‘third space’ centralizes it within a religious site by exploring these women’s relationship with Islamic identity (Haddad, Smith & Moore, 2006). They have pointed out that much of the discursive framing of the “Muslim woman” identity and representation is restricted within the dichotomous frames of Orientalism and fundamental Islam, both being rooted within a patriarchal and paternalistic perspective (Zine, 2004). Therefore, the idea of how the subject resists within its own exercise of agency is overlooked and unexamined. The issue has been noted as being threefold: first, these discourses compromise agency and alternative formation of identity and subjectivity are stultified; second, these regulatory discourses serve as ‘epistemic violence’ (Spivak, 1988); and third, the larger political interest/agenda to purposefully create identity mythologies in the social imagination is often ignored. Such totalizing dialectics, singularize, essentialize and homogenize the Muslim woman but also reduces their identity, gender, religion and being. These ‘descriptions” are, in word and deed, the making (creating) of a version of human that comes with many constraints (both for authors and for who/what is authored). Behind the Oppressor/Oppressed, Colonizer/Colonized is (today) a version of human that is inhumane, steeped in an anti-
blackness, and behind these “descriptions” are also “prescriptions” or lessons on how to relate, a pedagogy in the descriptions of the problem of how to “see” problems.

Shahnaz Khan’s (1998; 2002) research illustrates the various modalities of agency and the complexity of resistance beyond its entrapment within the binary of resistance/subordination to grasp the shift in social relations of power that influence resisters, as well as those who dominant. Her research examines how the third space has allowed some Muslim women to exercise agency, which demonstrates elements of resistance to issues of identity, and navigation of sexism and racism. Such recognizes that the “Muslim woman’s” existence and experiences are shaped not solely by religion but also by a complex web of class, ethnic, gender, and regional factors, as well as the cultural and social influences (Ghorashi & Moghissi, 2010). It is within this negotiated space of being critical that has allowed the Muslim woman, who feel trapped within the two dichotomies to re-articulate, re-construct and actively reject domination notions of identity. Thus, understanding the Muslim Other as complex, multidimensional actors engaged in political and feminist struggles we can re-understand them as challenging and navigating dominant narratives. And when a text denies or kills such a possibility, this becomes a creative constraint, creating a violation that is done onto being. Avital Ronell (2009) points out, “the minute you think you know the Other you are ready to kill them” (As cited in Taylor, 2009, p 49). In other words, ‘knowing’ or engaging in an interpretation of the Other is a way to disturb and infringe on the Other’s entire connection to life, and their self. This relation between knowing and control and even death is further developed in the work that directly theorizes agency, to which I now turn.
Diverse strands of feminisms have profoundly engaged in exploring the subjectivity, agency, and embodied practices which can be made use of when considering the resistance of the “Muslim woman.” Judith Butler (1990; 1992) understands agency and understands the formation of the subject through power relations but specifies that subjects are formed specifically through ruptures in language and discursive elements that frame the power relations. Butler begins with the assumption that there no longer exist sovereign powers, but a multiplicity of power relations that produce themselves through language. In essence, Butler argues that language acts as a system of signification through which power relations and thus subjects are in fact produced. However, subjects are produced not through the existence of the power relations but are formed through the productivity of language. For example, giving or imposing a different meaning onto a prevalent discourse disrupts the discourse itself, which discloses its failures. Thereby, through the reconfiguration of language, the subject can gain the agency to assert his or her will because the subject is now able to reassemble power relations in relation to other interests. This is not a unencumbered actor freely doing what they will but, instead, there is a limit to self-sufficiency, and its within such a limitation that human beings can relate their subject production and agentic practices as relational and interdependent.

Saba Mahmood offers a unique perspective on agential capacity and free will and forces a re-thinking of human agency and how it exceeds to acts beyond the contestation of social norms. In her book, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (2005) Mahmood poses a series of conceptual challenges to feminist theory and secular-liberal thought concerning the concept of agency and its relation to resistance and subordination. Drawing upon her investigation of the *dawa* (piety)
movement in Egypt she argues that existing feminist accounts of the agency of religiously defined women tend to reinstate the secular subject of feminist thought in ways that erase the religious subjectivity and agency of Islamic women. Mahmood takes a step away from the liberal dichotomy of agency and subordination to argue that subject’s agency and thus effectiveness in resistance can be formed through subordination to and inhabitation of various authoritative and cultural norms and traditions. In other words, she is asserting that the very processes and conditions that secure a subject’s subordination and inferiority are also the means by which she becomes a self-conscious identity and subject.

Mahmood suggests in re-considering agency beyond the secular ideas of self-fulfillment and self-empowerment in order to ruminate agency in religious terms of virtue, fear and hope. For example, drawing on Boddy’s (1989) and Abu-Lughod’s (1990) work on the counter-hegemonic practices of the “Muslim woman” and project of restoring their humanist agency, she points out two key ideas: first, that there is a preoccupation of locating agency within the binary of resistance/subordination; and second, that the analysis is guided by a presumption that there is an innate and universal desire to engage in acts of resistance in order to achieve freedom. Mahmood’s work constitutes an important intervention at a point in time when secular feminist discourses are increasingly instrumentalized across the political spectrum and put to use in or representative of anti-Muslim discourses in the ‘Western’ world. Mahmood proposes that the women’s interest in the mosque movement to be devout, submissive and their quest to achieve an Islamic spiritual state that is centralized around God’s Will is itself an agentic act and practice that has re-configured nationalist, statist and other kinds of secular-liberal projects. She insists that the attachment of
Islamist women in the mosque movement to patriarchal forms of life and their self-avowedly stance provides the necessary conditions for both their subordination and agency. Mahmood states that speech acts are inclusive of text, oral and bodily acts, and seemingly a bodily practice, such as veiling is a symbolic act must be understood between the subject’s exteriority and interiority, in which the very “human presence and outward human conduct” (p 157) allow one to express his or her desires and emotions freely, thus gaining a sense of agency.

An example that can historicize and strongly support Mahmood’s argument of bodily practices that aim to develop a virtuous self is the spiritual practices of Sufi women in Islam. Women in Islam have historically exerted Sufism as a spiritual ground to reaffirm their agency and thereby, indirectly challenge their subordinate position in patriarchal societies. Schimmel’s book *My Soul is a Woman: The Feminine in Islam* and Helminski’s work in *Women of Sufism: A Hidden Treasure* illustrate Sufi women’s active engagement and participation in communities and public arenas. For example, women participated in Sufi circles of remembrance and worship with men, while others spiritually devoted in seclusion, and many also acted as spiritual guides/teachers (shakya) to both women and men (Helminski, 2003). These created social spaces where women engaged in social activities with each other and with men, such as such as attending weddings, funerals, public baths, musical festivities and visiting tombs where “sometimes the women remained out overnight...walked about at night visiting tombs in the company of men...even allowing their faces to be uncovered and talking and laughing with strange men,” (Ahmed, 1992, p 119). Keeping in mind that many of these activities and the public visibility of women and their interaction with men was prohibited and controlled, women used Sufism as a spiritual space that not only allowed
them to actively participate but it gave an opportunity to challenge the dominate mores and customs of the society and counter and resist patriarchal domination and imposition. Similarly, Mernissi (1977) work on the powerful role of women and saints in Sufi sanctuaries demonstrates how women have been able to challenge patriarchal definitions of women by not only creating an anti-orthodox and anti-establishment arena that encourages women to speak up and talk back in solidarity to the injustices they experience but they have been able to regain control and power over their sexuality and reproduction. This work thus demonstrates that constraints are never only nor simply constraints, they are also the material that women work with, through, even against so as to create new possibilities, possibilities that are nonetheless tied back and in relation to cultural constraints from which they derive and in relation to which they can be read as responding.

Spivak (1988) too addresses the concern of agency asking to which degree qualitatively does or can the (post) colonial subjects enjoy, practice and exercise agency. In her influential essay “Can the Subaltern Speak” Spivak (1988) explores this concern by asking if the subalterns can speak for themselves, or whether they are condemned only to be known, represented and spoken by those who exploit and dominate them. She problematizes the constitution of the colonized subjective agency and reveals of an “epistemic violence” that is imposed by colonialist and imperialist discourses on the colonized native subjectivity and, consequently the denial of native subjectivity. In her essay, she comes to the conclusion that “the subaltern cannot speak...there is no space from which the subaltern can speak” (p 271-313). To further justify and explain, Spivak (1988, p 289) says:
By ‘speaking’ I was obviously talking about a transaction between the listener and the speaker. That is what did not happen in the case of a woman who took her own body at the moment of death to inscribe a certain kind of undermining... a certain kind of annulment of all the presuppositions that underlie the regulative psychobiography that writes sati.... And even that incredible effort to speak did not fulfill itself in a speech act. And therefore, in a certain kind of rhetorical anguish after the accounting of this, I said, ‘the subaltern cannot speak!’

Drawing on Deleuze and Foucault, Spivak claims that in their attempt to deaden the Enlightened idea of Man (western, liberal, bourgeois, sovereign, male subject) both thinkers reconfigured a utopian subjectivity, consequently falsely positioning the colonized subject (i.e. women, Third World peoples, etc.) within a space where they can “speak for themselves.” With Western intellects ascribing a voice to the subaltern can be problematic, however, in two significant ways: first, such intellectuals are themselves representing, speaking on behalf of and standing in for the subaltern. Thus, it’s the Western subject that authenticates, validates, and claims a voice for the subject that it has colonized. Second, the constitution of the colonized subject as agentic subject capable of speaking is still underpinned by Western modes of cultural analysis and representation and institutions of knowledge. Drawing on the British colonial rule in India Spivak illustrates how the British used the voices of Indian women in regards to the practice to sati to ‘prove’ how Indian men oppressed Indian women. By doing this, the British were able to legitimatize and extend colonial domination in the name of protecting the Indian woman from the oppressive Indian man. Seemingly, on the basis of Indian woman’s ‘speech,’ the British were able to codify and claim an opposition to Indian men that justified the colonial rule, and in turn did very little to address the actual oppression of Indian women.(Spivak, 1988).

However, Spivak in this particular point in her essay over-emphasizes the destructive power of a combined, all-powerful colonial-patriarchal force, as well as its
silencing effect on the subaltern subject. This subject is then portrayed as the helpless, ‘voiceless’ victim of this ‘epistemic violence’, with no recourse to any form of agency, her voice only to be mediated by the intellectual. Nevertheless, because the dominate rule historically has ‘stolen’ the speech of the oppressed to justify its domination Talal Asad (1996) points out that “many devotees of "agency" fail to recognize that there are circumstances in which some people have more agency than others... One must never forget that, right through the nineteenth century, the establishment and extension of colony and empire meant that one side won something and the other lost. If we are to agree that both sides were agents, we must also agree that the agency of one eventually gave it an empire and the agency of the other lost it--that major political, economic, and moral principles were gradually taken by the colonized agent from the colonizing.” For this reason, it is important to turn to critiques of agency that have expanded the issue of agency to the conditions of agency itself.

Haideh Moghissi wrote a critical book *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism: The Limits of Postmodern Analysis* (1999) in which she problematizes the acceptance of Islamic feminism as a new liberatory project in Islamic societies. She claims that postmodernism/poststructuralism enable and strengthen the nexus between feminism and fundamentalism by embracing a convoluted idea of cultural difference/relativism, which promotes values or truths as being culture-specific and as having no universal measures or criteria to evaluate them. Seemingly, she exclaims that within a postmodern framework the “Muslim woman's” Islamic identity is uncritically embraced, which services power and the universal domination of patriarchy. She states that the Islamization of gender relations not only upholds an oppressive patriarchal structure that cannot be contended by a legal reform. In particular, she argues that postmodern
notions of agency and subjectivity and cultural relativism, that has legitimized Islamic feminism or feminism as practiced in a religious framework has refused to be critical of the Islamic project and feminism in Islam. With cultural difference/relativism understood as the centre poststructuralism it eradicates the concept of domination and replaces it with the concept of difference. Consequently, such a version of poststructuralism thinking turns into an obstacle to serious intervention in the status quo. The world is not, in this view, divided into powerless and powerful blocs. Every individual, every woman, wields power. Power is not hierarchically organized; there may be a “centre” and a “margin” of power, but there are no relationships of domination and subordination (Mojab, 2001).

Accordingly, Moghissi (1998) claims that postmodernists and postructuralists’ are perpetrators of the following: first, they ignore the role of Islamic legal institutions and practices in maintaining patriarchal orders; secondly, they falsely validate women’s voices and lives as the unanimous expression of ‘women in Islamic societies; and lastly, they abandon the secular democratic vision of feminism. The culturalization of power and oppression translates into acceptance, or even legitimation, of oppression in “other” cultures or societies. Consequently, it carelessly totalizes the use of the term Muslim women, which flattens the diverse material conditions and ideological configurations experienced by diverse Muslim women.

In this tradition of thought, Moghissi (1998) and Mojab (2001) claim that agency of some the Muslim women is damaging to feminists’ struggles for gender equity, dignity, and basic human rights. Consequently, the feminist sociological project of agency has been to celebrate the independent power of individuals in relation to constraint and oppression, which even in the compliance to rules or norms agency can
be manifested. However, Moghissi (1998) and Mojab (2001) both argue that agency also should not be redefined in such a broad sense that it erodes the importance of conscious resistance against domination. They propose that feminism represents a moral vision and a movement central to which are the struggles for personal and social transformation and activism on behalf of individual women and women as a group to change legal and cultural constraints and gender practices in favour of women. That is, agency is acting not only by but for women. Besides, the question of who benefits from women's agency should be of particular importance in the context where agency is thought to be acting on behalf of women as a group. Otherwise, women’s expression of agency is celebrated each time they leave the house to participate in religious practices or in demonstrations, or they follow orders or rules set by religious leaders or the state, or even when they function as auxiliaries or agents of patriarchal domination and control.

I have attempted to provide a synopsis of some of the significant and relevant theoretical debates and analysis on the issue of the “Muslim woman” agency and representation, and how they have been in conversation with each other. The aim of such an undertaking was twofold: first, to put across how historical and contemporary imaginaries have explicated, elucidated and possibly attempted to resolve (or not) questions and issues related to the “Muslim woman;” and second, illustrate how paradox keeps slipping away and “missing out” in the conversation. Now that we understand the appearance of how issues of agency and representation has been initiated and its relation to the necessity of intercepting the paradoxical relation between creativity and constraint in the existing dialogue of the “Muslim woman,” it is necessary to turn to further understand how have the concepts of paradox and agency have
theoretically been articulated and thought of. An examination of both paradox and agency, in the next chapter, will allow us to consider how paradox has been defined, by considering how its presence and absence is part of in our thinking. The following chapter will also consider why it is important to reclaim paradox in our current imagination while exploring how paradox and agency are related. By developing a firm understanding of their relation we will move the conversation closer to the paradoxical complexity of the issue of the “Muslim woman”.
Chapter Three
Reclaiming Paradox: Agency and Representation

Perhaps we are permanently enraged, taking revenge on ourselves for not being sufficient for ourselves, and taking revenge on others for never giving us quite what we want – Adam Phillips, 2012

The above epigraph speaks to the human experience as being wedged in a liminal space of the lived life and unlived life, between the tension of frustration and satisfaction, and lastly within a hallucination and the reality of the outside world. Phillips renders the human experience as existing amidst unhappiness and a wishful futurity that is embedded in the triangulation of pleasure, happiness and (uncompleted) desires. Somehow, and somewhere in our creative imagination we have extrapolated the idea that justice and a world without wretchedness and calamity is owed to us. Possibly, the act of self-persuasion has made us believe and accept as true that we are special and chosen beings and that the world, as a site of exploitation and manipulation was made for us to engineer and creatively contour to our desire. In the pursuit of a fuller humanity, I envision our humanistic agency and motivations of resistance to begin in the admittance that there has been an unjust failure done and that we are living with what belongs to us (i.e. justice, redemption, recognition, feeling of worthiness and so forth). Paradoxically, attached to this conviction is that the void or what we are currently missing out on can be overcome through human intervention.

The paradox of uncompleted desires and self-redemption is that we are subjected to operations of power. Simone de Beauvoir (1989) emphasized that body is a social situation where language, activities and normative social practices and expectations are subscribed and imposed onto the body. The subject is embedded in
power relations as actualized through social relationships, is the subject whose individual desire and the possibility of fulfilling them are also shaped by those powers. Judith Butler (1990) argues that the idea that ‘one’ exists is an illusion – individualism is an illusion. In other words, she suggests that there is no intrinsic self because the subject itself is never complete and secure. The subject is eternally in the process of becoming and can never be complete, and it is in this instability that agency appears. The ambiguity and vagueness of the experience of human life unfolds in our subjectivity being a production of oppression and both our resistance to it and reproduction of it. However, in the agentic fight for freedom we are bonded to our fear of liberation. Paulo Freire (2000, p 28) hinted at this paradox of the oppressed:

The oppressed suffered from the duality which has established itself in their innermost being. They discover that without freedom they cannot exist authentically. Yet although they desire authentic existence, they fear it. They are at one and the same time themselves and the oppressor whose consciousness they have internalized. The conflict lies in the choice between being wholly themselves or being divided; between following prescriptions or having choices; between being spectators or actors; between acting or having the illusion of acting through the action of the oppressors; between speaking out or being silent, castrated in their power to create and recreate, in their power to transform the world. This is the tragic dilemma of the oppressed...

In this chapter, I aim to engage with this ‘tragic dilemma’ of agency. In order to develop a mutual understanding of the central concepts of paradox and agency that are central to this thesis, I will provide an overview of a theoretical understanding of both. It is crucial to have a grasped picture of how both paradox and agency (as interrelated and separate ideas) have been conceived in our historical and contemporary social thinking. Such will serve as a foundation of how agency as paradox can possibly enter in the conversation on the question of the “Muslim woman.”
1.3 Theorizing Paradox

Paradox has had a strong presence in sociological, psychological, philosophical and literary thought in both Eastern and Western traditions. In general, paradox denotes the idea that a rational conclusion can contradict the premise yet is not illogical or obviously untrue, or it can justify two opposite conclusions in which some sort of truth pierces. In Greek, paradox is a composition of two words: *para*, meaning either ‘with,’ ‘against,’ or ‘contrary to’ and *doxa*, which is translated as ‘opinion,’ or ‘expectation’ from *dokein*, which means “to appear, seem, think” (Santos, 2003, p 3). Paradox can also be traced in the ancient Chinese history of InYo (yin and yang) that dates back to 700 B.C in the I Ching (Books of Changes). The principle of yin and yang eludes energy (*qi*) as a force that relies on interdependent and interchangeable opposite poles (i.e. male and female, positive and negative, light and dark and so on). Yin that produces form and yang that produces energy synchronizes and balances human existence and keeps everything in a constant, yet changing balance. The concept of yin and yang should not be confused for a dualism. On the contrary, yin and yang emphasize the coexistence and cosmic harmony of human life, nature and the universe (Tsu, 1967).

For this reason, I interpret the concept of paradox as having a dialectic nature, in which social categories and human experiences are organized, understood and lived in-and-through its opposite instead of being reduced to binary categories. The oppositional does not exist as a force or clash of contradiction. On the contrary, it holds the contradictory propositions as both true and as being entangled and inseparably weaved together. A paradox functions as a medium where the contradictory propositions merge and unite, and brings forth the possible impression that human experience is stuck within an in-between space that reconciles human experience through constraint (the
limitation and restrictions imposed by norms and oppressive forces) and creativity (the capacity to negotiate, navigate and respond to ambiguity).

The Christian existentialist thinker Soren Kierkegaard conceived human reality as a clash of opposites, in which he perceived the self as a tension between the temporal and the eternal, or facticity and transcendence. In this Christian orientation of paradox, the essential conflict is derived from the belief that the eternal can exist in time, and that the infinite can be incarnated as a finite being. Thereby, the self is entrapped in a tension between the temporal and the eternal, or facticity and transcendence, and must struggle and navigate with what it already is and the capacity naturally inhibited in it to transcend this existence. Kierkegaard’s insistence on paradox as a determination of existence is based on the mere fact that we ‘exist’ in bondage between time and eternity which cannot be understood as a possibility but that “there is nothing for speculate on to do except to arrive at an understanding of this impossibility” (As cited in Guignon & Pereboom, 2001, p 4).

Similarly, for Hegel philosophical truth, the nature of reality and speculative thinking is born of paradox. Critiquing Kant’s assumption that contradictory phenomena are products of transcendental illusion, Hegel (1975, p 48) accepts contradictions as pointing to a positivity when he writes:

According to Kant…thought has a natural tendency to issue in contradictions or antinomies, whenever it seeks to apprehend the infinite. But Kant...never penetrated to the discovery of what the antinomies really and positively mean. The true and positive meaning of the antinomies is this: that every actual thing involves a coexistence of opposed elements…The old metaphysic,…when it studied the object of which it sought metaphysical knowledge, went to work by applying the categories abstractly and to have the exclusion of their opposites.
Accordingly, contradictions are products of an inconsistent reality in which Hegel continues to state: “He who claims that nothing exists which carries in it a contradiction as an identity of opposed determinations is at the same time claiming that nothing alive exists. Indeed the force of life and, even more, the power of the Spirit, consists in positing the contradiction in itself, in enduring and overcoming it” (As cited in Sorensen, 2003, p 307). For this reason, Hegel says human existence “can find no peace” because life is an experience of emptiness or a lacking that can never be fulfilled. Nevertheless, in Hegelian thought paradox is mediated or reconciled by the Absolute Spirit (Reason), which means that the Absolute Spirit is engaged in an eternal process of self-realization that happens through a dialectical process of rational reflection that influences our ways of thinking about things and transforms our behaviour, our projects and our institutions. Contrary to rational mediation, Kierkegaard perceived paradox or the profound tension of contradiction as irresolvable and irreconcilable since our human efforts are not surmountable to transform such an existential situation (Guignon & Pereboom, 2001).

Nietzsche (1996, pg 12) was bothered by the insoluble paradox in Human, All Too Human when he wrote: “Almost all the problems of philosophy once again pose the same form of the question as they did two thousand years ago: how can something originate in its opposite: for example rationality in irrationality, the sentient in the dead, logic in unlogic, disinterested contemplation in covetous desire, living for others in egoism, truth in error?’ Similar, concerns appeared in Beyond Good and Evil as he questions: “How could anything originate out of its opposite? For example, truth out of error? Or the will to the truth out of the will to deception? Or selfless deeds out of selfishness? Or the pure and sun like gaze of the sage out of lust?” (As cited in
Wilkerson, 2006, p 104). Nevertheless, in his earlier work *The Birth of Tragedy* he proposed a possible understanding to paradox. Drawing on the origin of Greek tragedy, in which he situated as emerging from within the opposite yet complementary artistic divinities and creative energies of Apollonian/Dionysus. The Apollonian represented the composed, ordered, controlled and beautiful world of illusion, and the Dionysus signified the wild, disordered, raw and brutal-reality itself. Both correspond and conflict in order to produce a holistic experience of life itself (Wicks, 2002). Drawing from Schopenhauer's theory of art Nietzsche (Wicks, 2002, p 2) states:

Two art worlds that differ from each other in their deepest essence and highest goals. Apollo stands before me as the transfiguring genius of the *principia individuation* is [principle of individuation], through which alone, redemptive release by means of illusion is to be achieved; whereas through Dionysus's mystical cry of jubilation, the spell of individuation is broke, and the way to the mother of being, to the innermost kernel of things, is laid open.

Accordingly, he stated that this is why the Greeks stressed the necessity of illusion. The Apollonian phenomena, which shields us from the full truth of human suffering which otherwise, would crush with its magnitude, and fling humanity into the depths of grief and throbbing sorrow. Thus, boundaries, or a paradox had to exist to in order to keep the healthy function of society, and prevent a collective collapse into nonexistence. Experience could not be just one way or another but rather had to be balanced and made tolerable through contradictory forces. Thereby, the individual is always traveling within a space of liminality, which is always dialectical, reciprocal, and always in a process of becoming and disappearing (*Deleuze* and Guattari, 2009).

Heidegger emphasized the etymology of the word ex-ists, which means to always be “out there” and “standing outside,” beyond being mere entities within the presence. In other words, he regarded humans as never really being engaged with the
world and regarded detachment as a central feature of human experience (Olson, 1962). This too makes space for a consideration of paradox because it reveals that human life as liminality - the liminal experience of never fully being inside experience but somehow always experiencing life from the outskirts itself.

The notion of the inner-outer existential experience can also be found in Eastern philosophy. Life is perceived as an interpenetrating voyage in-and-through and between existential, metaphysical and aesthetic sites. In exploring Mahmud Shabistari’s interpretation of an Arabic saying, “the human being is the symbol of all existence” (al-insan ramz al-wujud) Henry Corbin (1998) located life within an etheric/incarnate and exterior/interior paradox in which he called *Mundus Imaginalis* (Imaginable World). He claimed that the physical human body was a transient paradox that acted as a mediator to reconcile the inner-reality (al-batin) and outward reality (al-zahir). Thus, the inner-penetration of the spirit was shaped by our sense of the outer-self/bodily experience and our inner-self/spiritual experience, that both co-existed and manifested simultaneously “on the visible and in the soul” (*afaq wa anfus*) (Nasr, 2007). Many of these philosophers articulated the soul as a fallen and polluted deity that was incarcerated in the body. The body that acts as a garment for the soul, confines it within finite human temporality. The spirit is from elsewhere, and the body knows this. Its entire purpose becomes inner-transformation or inner-metamorphoses to re-connect to what it has been separated from.

Given these differing depictions of paradox, it can be described as grounding the will to act between what we can have and what the world offers and exercising agency within the parameters of what is available to us and its limitations and accepting the experiences and life that escapes us. Given this it is all the more perplexing that
paradox, under contemporary conditions, starts to disappear. A major contribution to the disappearance of paradox in our current imagination is that we have contained our experiences within multitudes of binaries of either/or and this/that. However, if we were to move away from such dualism into a decompartmentalized analysis of paradox it would divulge how paradox is still vital in our modern experiences.

1.4 The Disappearance of Paradox in our Collective Thought

Paradox is often represented as central to human experience. Considered an abstract and inaccessible concept that is remote or absent from our perception we no longer think with and through a paradox as an existing lived experience. Paradox that was once articulated as the sphere of existence was regarded as having a doubly aspect: first, the tragic affirmation of life that is based on human suffering; and second, the recognition that the self is an ongoing struggle that is entangled within a continual agitation between the cumulativeness of the past and the directionality of the future, and between the facticity of human existence and its desire for transcendence from suffering. Although, human existence, as considered by many, was still considered a struggle the individual became regarded as a Rational Being, who was able to rise above the struggle and paradox through self-preservation and the desire of personal and social improvement.

The repression of paradox is largely due not to the emergence of modernity and the modernization of our existential and socio-political thinking but rather our tailored interpretation about modernity itself. Modernity, according to Foucault (2003) is as an attitude rather than a period in history. By this he meant that modernity had more to do with the way of thinking and behaving, and "a mode of connecting to contemporary
reality’ (p 309) rather than a periodization or origin in time and space. In critiquing Baudelaire’s view of the “heroization” of the moment in modernity and as discontinuous in time, Foucault states that man is not the self-invented subject (as proposed by Baudelaire’s modernity thinking) but rather is a modern man that is forming a relation with the present as well as himself. In this notion of modernity Foucault suggests that man does not liberate his own being but rather compels him to produce himself.

Essentially modernity was a shift to a contracted idea of Man. Since Weber’s proclamation of the “disenchantment of the world” our attitude towards the human condition orbited around the rigid dogmatization of rationalization and a positivist approach to understanding reality. In the pursuit to marking a new beginning, free from the errors caused by reliance on past religious authority the new human subject was now regarded as a Rational Being who had escaped God’s mystical grand metanarratives and in turn, was rescued and saved by a ‘new’ mode of engagement: science and objectivism (Drolet, 2003). Modern identity distinguished the subject by its cerebral quality, its desire for the unity of humanity and nature, and its disdain for religious piety and self-transcendence. This ‘new’ non-religious idea considered Man to be born into an empty, godless universe who created his/her own essence through the choices the individual was capable of freely making.

Au courant to the modern world the subject was re-invented to be dominated by logos and detached by the irrational mythos. Logos is the rational and pragmatic mode of thought that enables the individual to gain mastery and control over their existence, their environment and their function in the world. Mythos, on the other hand, corresponds to the unattainable reality that is beyond human rationality that is psychologically and spiritually grasped through myths and metaphoric stories. Karen
Armstrong (1993) indicates that modernity’s greatest crumbling and distortion was severing the interconnected pathways of *logos* and *mythos*. The co-existence of both acted as conduits for the individual to experience life in totality utilizing all faculties of their ability. Consequently, with the modern world’s aim to dictate the re-invented being with the former by eliminating the latter it condensed and compacted human existence and human experiences.

With the human subject fallen into absolute *logos* Fromm (1997, p 174) states that “the real fall of man is his alienation from himself, his submission to power, his turning against himself even though under the guise of his worship of God.” The fall can be read as a situation between the self and the self as transforming as an object to itself. Using Fromm, Paulo Freire (2003) relates ‘the fall’ to the power of necrophilic behavior. Citing Fromm in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* Freire (2003, p 77) contrasts biophilia, the love of life and living things, with necrophilia which is the root cause behind oppression as the means of absolute control.

While life is characterized by growth in a structure functional manner, the necrophilous persons loves all that does not grow, all that is mechanical. The necrophilous person is driven by the desire to transform the organic into the inorganic, to approach life mechanically, as if all living persons were things. Memory, rather than experience; having, rather than being, is what counts. The necrophilous person can relate to an object – a flower or a person – only if he possesses it; hence a threat to his possession is a threat to himself, if he loses possession he loses contact with the world. He loves control, and in the act of controlling he kills life.

Interestingly, the paradox of the absence of paradox in modern thinking itself is that modernity and its conception of Man is of ambiguous nature. Cornel West (1999) extrapolates the paradox of modernity:
The great paradox of Western modernity is that democracy flourished for Europeans, especially men of property, alongside the flowering of the transatlantic slave trade and New World slavery. Global capitalism and nascent nationalisms were predicated initially on terrors and horrors visited on enslaved Africans on the way to, or in, the New World. This tragic springboard of modernity, in which good and evil are inextricably interlocked, still plagues us. The repercussions and ramifications of this paradox still confine and circumscribe us—in our fantasies and dreams, our perceptions and practices—in these catastrophic times.

West’s engagement in a genealogy analysis of modern racism corresponds to modernity’s hegemonic cultural ideals and brutal racist practices of European/White supremacy. Consequently, the very structure of modern discourse and its re-evaluation of ‘humanhood,’ (which include the notions of rationality, scientific, objectivity, and cultural ideals) produced and supported the ideology of White supremacy. As the Western philosophical concept of subject and Self evolved, they represented two significant shifts: the new idea of universal subjectivity, which constituted an objective world, and secondly the cultural redefinitions of European goodness, truth, beauty, morality, science and the arts. It demarcated and isolated European culture and White subjectivity from the non-European world, and additionally was instrumental in the capitalist, colonial and imperial expansion. In his reflection on ‘blackness,’ West concluded that such fractured and distorted Black culture, self-recognition, and socio-political positionality produced Only did the European shifts dilute and decimate Afro-American culture, practices and selfhood but also it was wedged in-between the making of an American national identity isolated from Europe, and the influence of European culture and thinking.

The inconsistency of modernity is that it functions as a paradox while effortlessly either reducing or abolishing it completely from our central social experiences. Paradox
is not valued, is not dwelt on, but it is often regarded as a problem in need of solution, even if one of dissolution. Interestingly, the modern imagination of the rational human subject is embedded in the notions of egalitarianism, equality and freedom, yet modernity’s emphasis on the individual naturalizes the selfish egoism, in which self-serving competition, individual gain and the inevitable ‘every-man-for-himself’ principle obstructs both individual and collective justice. The absence of paradox itself and the constricted idea of Man functions to conceal inequities. The dissolution of paradox, denial of its value as grounds for human action has implications for the question of agency within modernity.

1.5 The Paradox of Agency

What does it mean to reclaim paradox in our thinking? Why revisit a forgotten concept like paradox that expresses ambiguity, absurdity, and the possible irresolvable conflict of the human condition? How does paradox relate to agency? The answer: Agency as paradox is quite often omitted and eclipsed within a myriad of agency theories, such as postmodern/poststructuralist, anti-racism and critical race feminism (as discussed in Chapter two). The symbiotic realities of oppression and emancipation are often disregarded and unobserved. As Fromm (1997) reminds us “the disharmony of man’s existence” is unsettled and knotted in the dichotomy of his existence that is in a constant disequilibrium, yet his drives and needs has him “to strive for the experience of unity and oneness in all spheres of his being in order to find a new equilibrium” (p 158). Appropriately, agency can be construed as functioning and reconciling with the inevitable social limitations and cultural constraints that is condemned upon the individual. The tension of agency within the site of cultural constraints exists between
the attempt to exercise a willful agency and the agents’ capacity to become aware of various conditions and restrictions on their activities and cognition, while being convicted and bounded by external forces and oppressive social structures that are designed to deny agency. By reclaiming paradox in our social thinking in relation to agency we can get a sense of how paradox as a kind of body mediates, interrupts, disrupts and makes whole of our existential experience as agentic actors.

Typically, the concept of agency has been explained as: “atomistic, asocial, ahistorical, emotionally detached, thoroughly and transparently self-conscious, coherent, unified, rational, and universalistic in its reasonings” (Friedman, 2003, p 82). The myriad of agency consists of multitude streams of thought, which include: the exercise of free will (Sartre, 2007); individual acts (Taylor, 2007); social and collective actions (Giddens, 1979); as produced and conditioned by discourses and social relations (Foucault, 1984); a mode of performance (Butler, 1990); as a capacity of act that is in relation to subordination and outside the desire of emancipation (Mahmood, 2005); and lastly as religious transcendence (Nasr, 2007). Assumed to be naturally inhibited in the subject’s capacity of action and the subject’s competence, according to Nietzsche agency is devised as: “self-knowledge, voluntarist ‘spontaneity,’ self-realization, autonomy, freedom from external constraint, morality, rational agency, authenticity, ‘non-alienated’ identification with one’s deeds, power to do what one desires” (As cited in Gemes & May, 2009 p 69).

However, when thinking about agency in relation to paradox of agency it can be related back to the interconnected pathways of human experience of *logos* and *mythos*. Both in religious and secular thinking the “modern” individual is imagined as a sovereign and self-expressive being, who has the self-knowledge, self-control and self-discipline
to influence, constrain and determine the gestures of action. As explored earlier, \textit{logos} presumes the subject to be an anthropocentric being that can command and act as authority to one’s own life, nature, environment and relation with the world. Interestingly, \textit{mythos} as confined to mystical, spiritual and religious experiences has a strictly similar undercurrent. The Judeo-Christian and Islamic belief that man was created in the image of God is an expression of human beings relation to power and sovereignty. The will to act, the will to do, the will to become, and the will to create was all inspired from God.

Let us take into consideration the etymology of the word \textit{inspire}. Throughout history there have been conceptions of human creativity and imagination have always been considered to be Divine or qualities and characteristics that had been transmitted to the created from the Creator. Greeks thought of creativity as being a Divine Substance. They believed that anything created whether in form (visual art) or in formless (music) was emanated from a source from beyond. Every inspiration was Divine, as the word ‘inspire’ comes from Latin which means ‘to breathe in,’ suggesting a belief that the artist literally breathed in the spirit of God, who then used the individual and the mode of art to speak through (Armstrong, 1993). This ‘breathing in’ concurs with the Islamic credence of the origin of human existence; the oneness of human-God. They say that the body is a manifestation of the breath of God, as stated in the Qu’ran, “I blew into him/her of My own spirit” (Surah: 15:29). The ‘blowing’ is the spirit, in which the body is manifested form of the soul that is formless, and that is used as a site of contact. The paradox of this is that even religious agency expresses itself to have the sovereign capacity to ‘know’ and to ‘feel’ God. The religious believer submits to obedience, submission and a Divine command, yet paradoxically as Avicenna points out, this situates peoples’ humanistic capacity to create a connection with God while
adhering to the dogma that God lay outside the realm of sense perception and logical thought (Nasr, 2007).

Interestingly, in both secular and religious experience human beings have imagined themselves to be agentic actors that had either the rational/cognitive or mystical/spiritual access or connection to power, will and the autonomy to transform. Such notations of the human belief to be created in the image of a power or the idea that the human subject can ‘know’ and has access to the ‘unknown’ by rationally revealing all the world mysteries through science illustrates that we have consciously thought of ourselves as possessing agency.

However, Nietzsche disputed the belief that human beings were conscious actors. Claiming that much of human behavior was provoked by causes that operated ‘below’ consciousness, he declared in *Daybreak* (1997, p 120):

'I have no idea what I am doing! I have no idea what I ought to do!' – You are right, but be sure of this: you are being done! [du wirst gethan] at every moment! Mankind has in all ages confused the active and the passive: it is their everlasting grammatical blunder.

Contrary to Descartes impression of human being as a *thinking being* and his famous concept of *cogito ergo sum*, “I think, therefore I am,” Nietzsche explains human behavior to be guided by drives that subjects of which we are often not self-conscious. He refers to drives as a psychic state which include the drive: to imagine metaphors, to nature, to logic, to fight, to distinguish oneself, to create art, to avoid boredom, to possess knowledge, to witness appearances, to religious, to freedom, and to avoid or enact domination (p 422). Relating action to desires, impulses, and emotions Nietzsche proposed that action is relative to a person’s character, a practice, a custom, a morality, a value, a way of life which stimulate and motivate the drives. Accordingly, the agent’s
experience of the world is affected in two ways. First, certain features of the agent’s environment impresses upon the agent (some at the core and some on the periphery). Second, some features of the environment distort the particular way the agent may experience the environment as it is contingent to specific drives and affects that they agent may harbor.

We can understand this as constructing desire itself which is influenced by and influences relation to social categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, (dis)ability, and culture. Judith Butler (1990) understands agency as situated in the performativity of daily life and understands the formation of the subject through power relations but specifies that subjects are formed specifically through ruptures in language and discursive elements that frame the power relations. Butler begins with the assumption that there no longer exist sovereign powers, but a multiplicity of power relations that produce themselves through language. Butler argues that language acts as a system of signification through which power relations and thus subjects are in fact produced. However, subjects are produced not through the existence of the power relations but are formed through the success and failure of language. For example, giving or imposing a different meaning onto a prevalent discourse disrupts the discourse itself, which discloses its failures. Thereby, through the reconfiguration of language, the subject can gain the agency to assert his or her free will because the subject is now able to reassemble power relations in their best interest. This is not a unencumbered actor freely doing what they will but, instead, there is a limit to self-sufficiency, and its within such a limitation that human beings can relate their subject production and agentic practices as relational and interdependent (Butler, 2013).

With this understanding, we encounter paradox in the conversation of agency as
the subject revealed as an ambiguous individual, who is not isolated and disconnected to others and the world. Instead the subject can be re-imagined as being developed as a result of the interaction with others and the world. According to Bauman (1990) the self is a dissipated self that is severed between the “Me”/external self (the socialized part of the self that is shaped by others and the world) and the “I”/internal (the centre and ‘authentic’ author of the self that realizes that it differs from others and the world and tries to reclaim its authenticity). Echoing this concept is Freud’s specification on the two conditions that are inherent in being human: the limitation of the individual and its ability to master the self that is shaped by the need to share satisfactions with others, and the ‘tragic essence of life’ that corresponds to the restriction, repression and censorship imposed by ‘civilization’ that limits the individual to realize and fulfill desires.

To better understand this we can turn to Bauman’s idea of the human subject being concurrently being free and unfree and use a passage from Richard Wright’s autobiographical text *Black Boy* (1944) with paradox in mind as an example to better understand how we utilize and employ our agency to navigate paradox. In this text, Wright explores the insidious and violent effects of race and class struggles during Jim Crow, and the residue of despair, hopelessness, anxiety and suffering that became an embodied site of experience. In the text below, Wright contemplates of the nebulous hope and redeeming of his existence that remained alive despite the suffering and oppressive forces. The passage reads:

My mother’s suffering grew into a symbol in my mind, gathering to itself all the poverty, the ignorance, the helplessness; the painful, baffling, hunger-ridden days and hours; the restless moving, the futile seeking, the uncertainty, the fear, the dread; the meaningless pain and the endless suffering...A somberness of spirit that I was never to lose settled over me during the slow years of my mother's unrelieved suffering, a somberness that was to make me stand apart and look upon excessive joy with suspicion, that was to make me keep forever
on the move, as though to escape a nameless fate seeking to overtake me…a conviction that the meaning of living came only when one was struggling to wring a meaning out of meaningless suffering. The spirit I had caught gave me insight into the sufferings of others, made me gravitate toward those whose feelings were like my own, made me sit for hours while others told me of their lives, made me strangely tender and cruel, violent and peaceful…it made me love talk that sought answers to questions that could help nobody, that could only keep alive in me that enthralling sense of wonder and awe in the face of the drama of human feeling which is hidden by the external drama of life (p 100).

Wright simultaneously expresses hibernating between the spaces of ‘tender and cruel, violent and peaceful…[and of being] skeptical of everything while seeking everything, tolerant of all and yet critical.’ Contrary to being oppositional, neither one nor the other, none of the ends alone can ultimately serve as a unified experience or encapsulate the totality of meaning that is hoped to be dragged out of the experience. Both “this and that” are needed to intermingle within the existential tension of the conscious need to struggle as suffering has a way of making our existence known, felt and made alive with intensity; with an unconditional passion to eliminate, violate and overcome that very suffering. There is an undertone of a spiritual debilitation recognizing that at the center of the nihilistic consciousness is a sense of loss, emptiness, solitude and despair. It seems that such can drive one to rebellion, or to exercise a will to power; yet still continue to gaze at life with suspicion. Nevertheless, Wright’s text highlights how the suffering of others can act as liberation for the self but how within the wretched experiences one can condemn themselves, thereby condemn oneself as a living being.

Wright’s text is an exemplary demonstration of how the self is an encounter with the ‘Other’. The human subject is in constant communion and engagement with human
plurality.\(^8\) Thereby, the self is constructed, and acts upon as a defense against external impingement, while the agents organic interiority is rebirthing, discovering and continually engages with its freedom and limitations. Kant may refer to this as ‘expanded mentality,’ Jung as ‘collective unconsciousness,’ and Pascal as ‘humanity’ but nevertheless the common thread in these concepts is that the self-other are in communication, in which according to Arendt (1998, p 179) both the self and other are “implicit in everything somebody says and does.”

Let’s take further explore this in how the ‘Other’ that paradoxically creates, shapes and reclaims both the agentic subject and initiates agency itself in Franz Fanon’s *Black Skin White Masks* declaration of “Look! A Negro!” This statement can be read in several ways. The material image of the White gaze as it casts itself upon the object of its sight bares the complex ‘doing’ of its look; the Other that is produced through the gaze and its complete preservation in subjectification; the panopticism of the dominant culture that situates the Other as objects, not agents; observed, not observers; passive, not active; and lastly, the sense of humanity and existential being that is denied and rendered invisible within the obscure shadows of the onlookers world. Fanon’s (2008) description of a historico-racial schema traces the manufacturing of the inferiorizing and subjugating White gaze in the violent colonial encounter that engulfed and erased the colonized and imprison the black identity by essentializing it through its imposed mythological narratives. As the child in Fanon’s (2008, pg 112) accounts exclaims, “Look! A Negro,” she not only calls the body as the focus of attention but

\(^8\) I am utilizing Hannah Arendt’s usage of plurality. For Arendt, “Plurality is the condition of human action”: it drives from human “natality,” the fact that every human life represents a new beginning, and that “nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live” (The Human Condition, 1958, p 8-9)
marks the body as that of being anomalous, threatening, and delinquent that must be re-positioned, brought back within the confines and regulated within its gaze by merely calling it out and causing an altering attention to it. The Others’ body becomes a site to exercise and affirm White power and dominance by disciplining it within its position through the command of its gaze (Razack, 1998). There is thus a double working within the White gaze as the ‘Other’ internalizes it and begins to see itself objectively within the third person and through an invert consciousness. The ‘Other’ is aware of his/her own blackness as the central image within the lookers sight. The Other is aware of how his/her body causes discomfort to others, recognizes his/her own sense of inferiority and powerless existence. Such correlates with Fanon admitting of his own relationship with his body and the world, and within this the giving up of the self as the object to the force of domination. Accordingly, the ‘Other’ self-disciplines and surveillances his/her own body, even when it is outside the gaze. He/she is never forgetful of the gaze and its inferior position within it, and the white mythological narratives that have been imposed onto him/her, as a continuous managing of his/her limitation and reminder of the one who dominates.

Power and agency are related, but not in a cause and effect fashion. Power operates as a mechanism for limiting agency and causing misrecognition but one’s agency can also act as symbolic domination as it is continually in the achievement of the mastery and domination of the self. The question from chapter two remains: can the subalterns speak for themselves, or whether they are condemned only to be known, represented and spoken by those who exploit and dominate them? For instance, with the Western intellects ascribing a voice to the subaltern it is becomes contradictory in two significant ways: first, such intellectuals are themselves representing, speaking on
behalf of and stand in for the subaltern. Thus, it’s the Western subject that authenticates, validates, and claims a voice for the subject that it has colonized; and second, the constitution of the colonized subject as agentic subject capable of speaking is still underpinned by Western modes of cultural analysis and representation and institutions of knowledge (Spivak, 1988). Such acts as a paradox as the agent internalizes the goals, objectives and tools of dominate forces, which it tries to resist and overcome. This can be read and understood as an existential imbalance in which the agent constantly seeks meaning, recognition and a sense of overcoming only to end up in a state of indifference or a state of nothingness because the agent never really overcomes or achieves its aim or desire as we realized in chapter two.

In this chapter, I engaged with diverse theoretical conceptions on how both paradox and agency have been articulated, and attempted to draw the relation between the two. The purpose to delineate paradox and agency is to first, complicate both notions in our imagination and secondly, develop a thorough understanding of how as social actors we are ambiguously situated in our social and political experiences in order to draw out the complexity of how we navigate and negotiate between the spaces of creativity and constraint. Drawing on both concepts, in the next chapter, will allow us to revisit the current dialogue of the “Muslim woman” by exploring the underlying paradoxical nature on the contemporary debate surrounding their agential capacity and embodied practices.
Chapter Four
Theorizing Paradox and Agency: Muslim Women between Creativity and Constraint

In the last chapter, I demonstrated how paradox is sometimes made an inert concept in our modern thinking and also acts as a kind of body that mediates humanistic agency. Having argued that feminist discourses obscure the possible idea that paradox underlies the exercise and practice of agency, in this chapter I am interested in exploring how the “Muslim woman” embody and utilize agency to navigate paradox in-and-through spaces of creativity and constraint. Often, the mode of storytelling liquefies a sundry of nuances and symbolism. I am interested in how else the story of the “Muslim woman,” different from the ways in which we currently understand it can be told. If we were to re-tell the story beginning from the space of paradox what new possibilities might be revealed? Can paradox disclose an imagining that we haven’t engaged in before, or have not allowed ourselves to consider? How does paradox wrestle with the question of the “Muslim woman,” and what else can be divulged about the meaning of agency, resistance and freedom?

By subsuming paradox in the current discourse of agency and representation it will tell of the various ways in which the question of the “Muslim woman” keeps becoming emptied of the complexity and multiple over-layers from our contemporary imagination. Re-imagining paradox into the conversation can nurture the idea that an existential liminality structures the exercise of the “Muslim woman’s” agency. My intention here is not to question the validity of a particular theoretical standpoint of agency and the profound transformation that the discourse of emancipation has enabled in the lives of the “Muslim woman,” but to draw attention to the ways its presuppositions
have come to be naturalized in the scholarship on agency and resistance, and how paradox has been emptied out so that I might be part of a new story, or at least tell an unfamiliar one regarding Muslim women and our agency.

I am going to illustrate these issues at work using a poem by Mohja Kahf (2003) “My Body is Not Your Battleground.” The purpose of using Kahf’s poem is twofold: first, to creatively examine how paradox as a kind of body mediates, interrupts and disrupts our existential experience through artistic engagement in the context the “Muslim woman;” and second I turn to art to demonstrate, unlike much of our theorizing, does not deny paradox but instead finds a way to act (agency) in the face of paradox. Art is useful for my project because, as a meaning-making activity, not only does it express our convictions, curiosity and attempts to understanding the world, the self and others, but it also acts as a mode to both revealing and navigating the complexity, confliction and uncertainty of human experience.

It is important to mention that for the purpose of this chapter, my analysis is influenced by psychoanalytic oriented theorists. The reason why I decided to incorporate psychoanalysis in some areas of the discussion is because I think it will help to explain the complex and conflicting relationship between the self and the other, and it assist me in drawing out the hidden paradox within the relations, and its connection to agency in the context of the “Muslim woman.” Also, I find psychoanalysis beneficial for this chapter because it assists in developing an understanding of how the self-and-other are shaped through interaction, which can possibly elucidate the idea that we are free and unfree (as explored in the earlier chapters) because the self-and-other are shaped, limited and constrained by one another.

For Winnicott (1971, p 19-20), creativity, that “arises out of being” is the ability to
create the world but within the restriction that “we only create what we find.” I take this to mean that art is a dance between the artist’s illustration of how they interpret the world – their convictions, curiosity and attempts to understanding the world, the self and others - and how they hope the world to be – their wishes, hopes and dreams of future possibilities. In other words, art is an expression of the unlived life “that we wish for” and lived life “that we practice” (Adam Phillips, 2012, p xvii); and between being ‘free’ within the prism of creativity (exercising the agentic act of self-assertion, an expression of freedom and self-authenticity) and being ‘unfree’ within the prism of constraint (the limitation that is inflicted by the mere fact that we exist in relation to the other and the world). Take for example the function of storytelling. Chinua Achebe (1997, p xi) says, “The story is our escort; without it, we are blind. Does the blind man own his escort? No, neither do we the story: rather it is the story that owns us and directs us.” Along these lines, Isak Dinesen says, “All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them” (As cited in Arendt, 1998, 175). In this view, we can consider artists, such as storytellers, poets, and literary writers to illustrate past and present imaginations and actions, while at the same time suggest future possibilities of human ambition and model of the world.

I interpret the chasm between what we can have and what the world offers to be embedded in the complex relationship between the self and the other. Contrary to Sartre’s claim of freedom as an inescapable aspect of human experience when he writes, “everywhere she turns she encounters her freedom” and the Husserlian idea that we are the source to our own life, as we are shaped and constituted by our own interpretation (Sartre, as cited in Guignon & Pereboom, 2001, p xxvi & p xxvii) when we consider the self-and-other we come to realize that in order to exist, one has to exist for
and with the other. The tension we feel is an experience between two parallel lives: the one we are actively living, and the one we feel we should have had or might yet have, can be traced to our realization that we are being-for-others. By this I mean that we realize that we are not isolated and disconnected beings but rather that our own freedom and subjectivity is a serving ground that is shaped and violated by others, where “self-being is only real in communication with another self-being... only in communication with others can I be revealed (Jasper, 1975, p 147).

In this context it is possible to understand art as an ‘in-between’ space, “the zone, the zone of no-thing, of the silence of silences...the source” (Laing, 1990, p 38) stuck between the one extreme of freedom and other extreme of constraint that expresses the frustration of the tyranny of social conventions, and what we are ‘missing out’ on - justice and a world without wretchedness that we think is owed to us. Accordingly, art is the intermediate area where the self-and-other interact; the space that we realize that our ‘living’ and the self is shaped and limited through the interaction and contact with the other. As Drake (2005, p 59) points out when speaking of Sartre’s issue of conflict of freedoms that “Because we live in a world with others...we are condemned to live in a conflict of freedoms. The other threatens my freedom and makes me aware that the world is not my own. He steals the world away from me. He takes over my projects and gives them meaning, his meaning. He rewrites my script.” For this reason, I view art to be a dialectic experience of our shared humanity where our frustrations and satisfactions are embedded in interaction with each other, where “I do not experience your experience. But I experience you as experiencing. I experience myself as experienced by you. And I experience you as experiencing yourself as experienced by me. And so on” (Laing, 1990, p 23).
Let’s consider these ideas through the poem by Mohja Kahf (2003) “My Body is Not Your Battleground.” In the poem, Kahf elucidates the “lived” body of the Muslim woman as a cultural and political “battleground,” in which war, imperialism and patriarchy is both enacted and justified by others, and the “Muslim woman’s” ‘wished-for’ life to be free from the oppression coerced by the other. If we were to re-read the poem with paradox in mind we might be able to re-conceive of the body of the Muslim woman existing to be entrapped within a complex and ambiguous space of liminality, that is shaped by the other and the world. The poem reads:

My breasts are neither wells nor mountains,  
Neither Badr nor Uhud

My breasts do not want to lead revolutions  
Nor to become prisoners of war  
My breasts seek amnesty: release them  
so I can glory in their milk tipped fullness,  
so I can offer them to my sweet love  
without your flags and banners on them

My body is not your battleground  
My hair is neither sacred nor cheap,  
neither the cause of your disarray  
nor the path to your liberation.  
My hair will not bring progress and clean water  
if it flies unbraided in the breeze  
it will not save us from our attackers  
if it is wrapped and shielded from the sun.  
Untangle your hands from my hair  
so I can comb and delight in it,  
so I can honor and anoint it,  
so I can spill it over the chest of my sweet love...

My body is not your battleground  
Withdraw from the eastern fronts and the western  
Without these armaments and this siege  
so that I may prepare the earth  
for the new age of lilac and clover,  
so that I may celebrate this spring  
the pageant of beauty with my sweet love.
Using poetry to counteract the dominant narratives and resist the recurring story on the “Muslim woman,” Kahf creatively articulates and re-devises a different storyline, that which we normally hear, that can be read as revealing an underlying paradox in the current imagination of the “Muslim woman.” Kahf addresses the issue of the “Muslim woman’s” body as the ‘battleground’ for both Muslims and non-Muslims, who have crowded her body with conflicting and contradictory stories that has been imagined, written and told by many. Everybody has a story about the “Muslim woman.” Secular feminists tell the story of her silence and lack of agency. Islamic feminists tell the story of her voice and fruition of agency. And there are other (loved and disdained) storytellers who tell the story of her unshackled existence. Then, there are the many concerns about the “Muslim woman.” Narrated as living paradox, let us consider the following typical and repetitive story lines: ‘Do Muslim women need saving?’ (Abu-Lughod, 2013); how can the “Muslim woman’s” voices be validated in the Qu’ran to unread patriarchy (Wadud, 1999; Barlas, 2002); the vigorous endeavors to unearth the “Muslim woman’s” sacred songs, poetry, dream-visions and mystical experiences and contribution to the heritage of Islam (Smith, 2001; Helminski, 2003); the anxious commitments to expose radical Islam and emancipate the helpless victims from the abuse of the Sharia law (Ali, 2008; Sultan, 2011); understanding how the “Muslim woman” negotiates race, class and gender within the Ummah (Chloe, 2009), in the West (Haddad, Smith & Moore, 2006), and in Islamic countries (Jamal, 2013).

First, I must point out that there is an inconsistency to storytelling. Storytelling is about the other. According to Arendt (1998) because people exist in a web of relationships they create and produce stories about each other, which are produced and re-produced through multiple creative mediums of storytelling. Such is paradoxical
because though stories bind people together, creating a space for the self-and-other to engage in a similar experience, nevertheless, not only does a story create an experience for the other (without their consent), but the experience between the self-and-other is never “one” since the timbre of each other’s intentions, meanings, and internal/external experiences differ. In this view, in the activity of telling the story about the other violates and objectifies the other, revealing a hidden secret of the other, while claiming to ‘free’ their being paradoxically captivates their freedom in the control of the storyteller. In this case, the Muslim woman never really gets to tell her story. Her story is a story for the other to tell; for the other to frame as a ‘problem;’ for the other to speak of her as she is not, to transform her where she does not will, while at the same time denying the “Muslim woman” her story ‘outside’ of the other.

Although Kahf’s poem contests the “Muslim woman’s” body as a “battleground,” it also is a slippage of expressing the “Muslim woman’s” body as an extension of the others existence. For example, exclaiming against the obsession of her hijab and her veil Kahf declares:

My hair is neither sacred nor cheap,
neither the cause of your disarray
nor the path to your liberation.
My hair will not bring progress and clean water
if it flies unbraided in the breeze
it will not save us from our attackers

We can understand this passage beyond Kahf’s protest for the “Muslim woman” to be freed from those who have trapped her existence within the confines of the hijab or veil. Instead, we can possibly re-read this passage and Kahf’s take on the body of the Muslim woman as a ‘battleground’ to be a dialogue about the relationship between the one who has dominated/conquered and the participation of the Muslim woman in her
own submission. Understanding this as a dialectic relation, or common consent (expressing an act of agency from both sides) it can maybe reveal the idea that the desire to be free is bounded with the desire to submit and be obedient to authority. Referring back to the notion that the self not only understands and defines itself through the eyes of the others, but it also justifies its own existence in relation to the other, we can consider the dominator to understand the body of the Muslim woman to be distinct and separated from him, yet also shaped by him, as he is shaped by her. In his own narcissism he sees everything as an extension of himself and his power – anything that encounters he owns and possesses. He affirms and denies the existence of the Muslim woman. Paradoxically, to affirm her he must recognize and acknowledge her being, which also means to deny a part of him. At any time we are forced to reflect upon the self or “I,” we are compelled to see the limitations of the self. Thereby, to preserve his identity and power he demeans and instrumentalizes the body of the Muslim woman as a site he can exercise his will, agency and enact his own freedom. To him, reality is not a ‘shared reality’ of mutual co-existence but a split existence of him and everybody else (subsequently, that he does not name as a way to dehumanize, or more strongly bring death to their existence).

For instance, the body of the Muslim woman is placed in a ‘battleground as she is wedged within the contradictions that are implicit in the debate of veiling and unveiling. For some the veil is merely a cultural habit, of no relevance to Islam or to religious piety, while on the other hand, the abolition of the veil has symbolized social and political transformation (Ahmed, 1992). Yet, her freedom is bounded in the absence of her appearance in the public. Consider the unjust public banning of wearing the hijab in France and Turkey. The banning violated the “Muslim woman’s” freedom of religion
and belief, education and political expression. The de-veiling of the “Muslim woman” not only took away their freedom to practice and expression their choice of religion but it forced them into the private realm by taking away their freedom of participating as social actors in the public realm. For instance, during the 1930s de-veiling movement to modernize Iran veils women refused to attend the mosque, weekly social gathers (i.e. the public bath) or universities since they refused to appear in the public without their veil (Hoodfar, 2008).

Keeping this example in mind, we can interpret the “Muslim woman” to be without of what Fromm (1994) calls ‘free activity of the self’ – the spontaneous act of creating one’s world one’s way, yet she is still with her independent choice and action as she is continually in negotiation and battle of existing for herself, without the absence or elimination of the other.

Let’s consider this with the paradox of domination in mind in relation to the body of the Muslim woman being a ‘battleground.’ He does not desire to publically alienate her. If he completely negates her and obliterates her existence he achieves absolute control and domination, and overcomes the desire for power. He cannot do this because to wholly control and eliminate the Other ceases to be feasible for him. And so he controls and enforces his rule of law by giving and taking her freedom, at the same time. He bans the veil to exercise his rule of law. He wants to show her the strength of his mastery. Yet, he allows her to keep her freedom within constraints – just enough for her to be recognized and denied at the same time. Nonetheless, the Muslim woman’s body as a ‘battleground’ is an indestructible battleground and war. To be in war on a battleground is to aim to completely alienate the enemy. The paradox in this case is that if he destroys her, she ceases to exist for him, which in turn, he ends up killing himself
by losing his exercise of power. With this, we can consider the body of the Muslim woman as a ‘safe’ battleground because he needs her for the practice of his own agency and will, while not denying her agency, but rather enforcing his power to create the parameters of how far within the field she can exercise her agency.

And yet, the “Muslim woman” needs him. Often feminists have underrated the issue of submission by framing the problem of female vulnerability and inferiority being an outcome of masculine aggression and alienation. However, in the context of paradox we can understand her self-awareness as being shaped and sharpened by her sense of him. He provides the possibility of a political purpose and a sense of freedom of struggle that she is continually engaged in to overcome. In this case, she pursues the practice of her agency from the injustice that he has brought forth. He does not allow her to veil. So she veils. He does not allow her to veil. So she fights the battle to reclaim her human rights to veil. Thereby, her political project begins from what he has taken away from her. Without this doing of injustice she cannot affirm herself in entirety because her existence in bounded and knotted with him, as his is with hers. To better understand this complexity, Winnicott (2005, p 106) discussing the context of early childhood experiences:

The subject [patient] says to the object [analyst]: I destroyed you,” and the object is there to receive the communication. From now on the subject says: “Hullo object!” “I destroyed you.” “I love you.” “You have value for me because of your survival of my destruction of you.” “While I am loving you I am all the time destroying you in (unconscious) fantasy.

In order to resolve the intermediary and paradoxical realm between subjective and objective, Kahf hopes to bring the “Muslim woman” alive – outside the story of her hair, her hijab, her veil – reminding us that she is, first and foremost, a being. A being that is beyond “the eastern fronts and the western.” I interpret this as Kahf’s attempt to
resolve the tension between ‘what is’ and ‘what is hoped.’ In other words, Kahf uses art
to distance herself from reality in order to make sense of reality itself. It reveals the
unresolved struggle and tension between the self and the world that resists
interpretation and withdraws from scrutiny. Through her poem Kahf re-imagines a
freedom for the ‘Muslim woman” that does not exist materially but can be experience
artistically. Kahf dreams the Muslim woman to “withdraw these armaments and this
siege, so that [she] may prepare the earth for the new age of lilac and clover, so that
[she] may celebrate this spring the pageant of beauty with my sweet love.” However, the
paradox is that art offers itself as a place of redemption and freedom but ends up
betraying the artist itself. It frames itself as a transformative tool that can redeem the
world from its injustice, wanton destruction and needless suffering yet it is dependent on
that very ache and suffering as a source of motivation, passion and inspiration. For
instance, Kahf’s creative body of text both aids him to reveal of his oppressive
experiences that impacted his psyche, emotions and spirits so deeply, but it also
entraps him within that revealing and emotions. Seemingly, Kahf’s use of art is
dependent on the imagination’s capacity to produce adequate forms of experiences
derived from the sublime. For instance, art relies on qualities of matter/tangible that are
unpresentable in order to present the unpresentable. The paradox here is that the very
faculty which enables artists to create artworks to begin with – the imagination – can be
powerless in what it aims to do in the presentable world.

We can also think of paradox to not only exist in the words but how the poetic
words and language are creatively used, expressed and penned. According to Brooks in
his essay “The Language of Paradox” (1947) he explains that a paradox is a literary
device and a poet’s method of critical interpretation which involves divulging,
expressing and communicating apparently contradictory statements in order to draw conclusions to reconcile them or to explain their presence. He emphasizes that paradoxes emerge from the very nature of the poet`s language because of the poet`s lack of usage of notation. The poet, within limits, has to take from language in order to make up his or her language as he or she goes. The internal/inner experiences of impoverishment surface within the passage to draw attention to how on the outer/external actuality copes and manages and re-constitutes his/her being and the meaning of his/her life through those experiences.

Such reconstituting of being reveals and conceals several experiences of the Muslim woman, and our relation to her. First, it reveals our obsession with the body of the Muslim woman. Questioning the social obsession of the black woman’s body, Ann duCille (1997, p 21) writes that the fascination and fixation had:

led me to think of myself as a kind of sacred text. Not me personally, of course, but me black woman object. Within and around the modern academy, racial and gender alterity has become a hot commodity that has claimed black women as its principal signifier...Why are they so interested in me and people who look like me (metaphorically speaking)? Why have we – black women – become the subjected subjects of so much contemporary scholarly investigation, the peasants under glass of intellectual inquiry…

Perhaps, the preoccupation with Muslim woman is what bell hooks (1992, p 21) calls “the commodification of Otherness” or “eating the Other.” “With commodity culture,” she writes in Black Looks, “ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture.” Mass culture, then, in hook’s view, perpetuates the notion “that there is pleasure to be found in the acknowledgment and enjoyment of racial difference.” Similarly, Sara Ahmed (2000, p 5) calls this strangeness ‘stranger fetishism,’ which is a process through which the stranger is transformed into
an abstracted, universalized figure that “invests the figure of a stranger with a life of its own insofar as it cuts ‘the stranger’ off from the histories of its determination.”

Nonetheless, there is a “strangeness” of visibility and invisibility that is concealed in the fascination with the “Muslim woman.” Visibility and invisibility occur within a slippery space of recognition (which makes the subject visible to others, and invisible to the self) and alienation (which denies the subject). The fact that there is recognition of the Other who is perceived to be “invisible” reveals the subject to be still somehow visible. In the onlooker’s sight the ‘invisible’ Other is still seeable, visible, and is grasped and captured within the prism of the eye, yet the sight only acknowledges the ‘invisible’ Other as the Invisible. Therefore, the Other, who is ‘seen’ as an alternative to one who is not the Other, can paradoxically exist in absence and alienation, yet through recognition. For example, the body of the Muslim woman is ‘seen’ to be the most oppressed, most marginalized, most dangerous and the quintessential site of difference. She is invisible as she has been marked by the dearth of her agency and sovereignty. We do not see ‘her’ as ‘her’ but rather we see her through the stories about her, which ironically make her visible. Perhaps, the reason we see her hijab first because it is so visible and so obvious, yet it conceals and this can make us think of the ‘mystique’ of the veil and to wondrously imagine ‘what is under.’ To fulfill our curiosity, we reveal the Muslim woman’s hijab and veiled body in newspapers, TV coverage and academic articles to render her being invisible, yet her ‘difference’ as a site of visibility. Speaking on the colonial fantasies of the Orient Yegenoglu (1998, p 39) writes:

Erecting a barrier between the body of the Oriental woman and the Western gaze, the opaque, all-encompassing veil seems to place her body out of the reach of the Western gaze and desire. Frustrated with the invisibility and inaccessibility of this mysterious, fantasmatic figure, disappointed with the veiled figure’s refusal to be gazed at, Western desire subjects this enigmatic, in
Copjec’s terms, “sartorial matter,” to a relentless investigation...there are countless accounts and representations of the veil and veiled women in Western discourses, all made in an effort to reveal the hidden secrets of the Orient..."like the unveiling of an enigma, makes visible what is hidden."

For this reason, the West tells the tale of her not being free: she is veiled. She is not free. She is imprisoned. She is sexually repressed. She submits to the barbarism of Islam. She is subjugated. Her man beats her and cages her in her home or harem. Her culture inflicts violence on her humanity and subjectivity. We must save her.’ Yet, her invisibility is also trapped within the Eastern gaze: she challenges Islam. She is an infidel. She wears pants, a t-shirt and make-up. She is Western. She has betrayed ‘our’ honor, faith and culture. We must redeem her.’ Clearly, the Muslim woman has been other-ed in both cultures. However, such ‘Othering’ and marking of invisibility is for both the Western and Eastern subjects to produce, as Yegenoglu (1998, p 41) argues “...an ‘exteriority,’ a ‘target or threat,’ which makes possible for that subject to ‘postulate a place that can be delimited as its own and serve as the base...to produce himself vis-a-vis an other while simultaneously erasing the very process of this production” (Yegenoglu, 1998, p 41)

For this reason, I would like to suggest another possibility of imagining the situation of the Muslim woman. What if the story of the “Muslim woman” is not exclusively about her? What if the anxiety of her “missing out” is a projected anxiety and fear? Ironically, despite the clash of the secular and Islamic feminists regarding the question of the “Muslim woman”, the body of the Muslim woman is the source in which others have come to understand their own existential conflict and condition. Hannah Arendt (1998, p 184) declares that the narratives of a storyteller “tell us more about their subjects, the ‘hero’ in the center of each story, than any product of human hands ever
tells about the master who produced it.” However, it is quite intriguing, and yet paradoxical how the story of the Other not only becomes the story of the self but also, functions as a force (at times sadistic) where the Other is used, even to death as the self is created, where each individual tries to prove the certainty of the self in the life-and-death struggle, where one gives in and the other establishes himself over the other. Here, we encounter paradox in the conversation of agency as the subject is revealed as an ambiguous individual, who is not isolated and disconnected to others and the world but instead the subject can be re-imagined as being developed as a result of the interaction with others and the world.

Referring back to Sartre’s concepts of ‘being-seen-by-the other- and ‘being-for-others,’ Miller (1988, p 215) clarifies that Sartre’s meaning of the other and the gaze: “from the moment this gaze exists, I am already something other, in that I feel myself becoming an object for the gaze of others. But in this position, which is a reciprocal one, others also know that I am an object who knows himself to be seen.” Accordingly, the self-and-the-other are part of a human sociality. The self is not isolated from the other, as the other is not isolated from the self. On the contrary, both constitute an ontological structure of human reality, in which the familiarity and consciousness of oneself is embedded and relational to otherness. The paradox of being is that it is bounded in an otherness and togetherness. The self is not only consolidated or disrupted because of intrinsic conflict, but also because its need to distinguish itself from the world of others, while accepting the need to find cohesion and mirroring in the other.

To better understand this more psychoanalytic concept of the self let’s turn to Saidiya Hartman’s work *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and the Self-making in 19th Century America*. Hartman explains what happens when the Others suffering and
pain is made one’s own. Examining the racial subjugation and black performance during slavery Hartman (1997, p 19) states that “in making the other’s suffering one’s own, this suffering is occluded by the other’s obliteration.” Hartman reveals how “Negro enjoyment,” that was inextricably entangled with terror was not only a symbolic tool for the master class to assert its power and assiduously deny the inherent violence of slavery, but it was also a way for the master class to alleviate self-guilt and their own unconscious pain through the slave body. For example, Hartman explains that scenes of enjoyment were actually social rituals that reinforced the dialectic of power. Slave biographies like Solomon Northrup’s *Twelve Years a Slave* that illustrated quotidian forms of coercive cruelty, such as slaves being compelled to dance, fiddle, and laugh before their masters were symbolic reenactments of the original act of transforming free persons into slaves, and the burden of the master class freeing the slaves. However, the pain and suffering of the slave body was not recognized and validated until the master class made claimed it as its own. Reflecting on a letter written to a slaveholder, Hartman states that “in making the slave’s suffering his own, Rankin begins to feel for himself rather than for those whom this exercise in imagination presumably is designed to reach” (p 19).

In relation to the “Muslim woman,” the staged photos of Turkish harems (Alloula, 1986) to ‘feminists hawks’ that agree for the use of coercion to ‘free’ Muslim woman from burkas (Winter, 2006) to the horrors of flogging in Pakistan (King and Mubashir, 2009) and the honor killing of the Fadmine Sahindal (Hassanpour & Mojab, 2003) and the Shafia sisters (Mojab, 2012) can be read as sadistic scenes in which an interconnection of pleasure, satisfaction and domination and freedom is achieved. By inflicting violence on the body of the Muslim woman – by degrading and humiliating her
there is forged a way for the sadists not only discover the Other but to be also discovered and recognized by the Other. The sadist wishes to be reached, penetrated and possibly loved by the Other. In order to achieve this, he must bring the body of the Muslim woman outside her private space into his public space to, first claim her body as his. In doing so, he not only displays her body as he wishes but he unconsciously reveals of his own deprivation, frustration and hostility within himself, as he expresses it through the enjoyment of the public torture of the Muslim woman. In this abuse, he feels a sense of erotic union with the Muslim woman, where he not only claims her pain but justifies his project to ‘free her’ as a way of keeping her within sight, while keeping her body distant.

With this in mind, we can possibly read Kahf’s proclaim to, “Untangle your hands from my hair/so I can comb and delight in it, so I can honor and anoint it so I can spill it over the chest of my sweet love” as a way to as a way to restore the “Muslim woman’s” being and agency. Here, if were to enter a different kind of space that is more complex than the visible/invisible and the gaze/absence of the Other we can reconceive and embrace the marginalized position of invisibility (understood as a cultural force imposed onto a body considered to be the Other) as a site of power. For example, Fanon (1994, p 107) illustrates how the “Muslim woman,” from the place of invisibility have exercised their agency, without the wish to be seen.

The unveiled Algerian woman, who assumed an increasingly important place in revolutionary action, developed her personality, discovered the exalting realm of responsibility. The freedom of the Algerian people from then on became identified with woman’s liberation, with her entry into history. This woman who, in the avenues of Algier or of Constantine, would carry the grenades or the submachine-gun chargers, this woman who tomorrow would be outraged, violated, tortured, could not put herself back into her former state of mind and relive her behaviour of the past; this woman who was writing the heroic pages of Algerian history was, in so doing, bursting the bounds of the narrow in which
she had lived without responsibility, and was at the same time participating in the destruction of colonialism and in the birth of a new woman.

We can understand “the birth of a new woman” who enacts mode of agency that acknowledges rather than metaphorizes material suffering, difference and embodiment. The Muslim woman cannot be the subject she was, one disciplined by visibility. And so, she either decides to be seen on her own, within her configured terms, or she will remain invisible when she is seen – entrapped within the gaze of objectification.

Read with a psychoanalytic sense of the self, Kahf’s poem is exemplary of how agency functions and reconciles with the inevitable social limitations and cultural constraints within which the individual is confined. The tension of the agency within the site of cultural constraints exists between the attempt to exercise a willful agency and the agents' capacity to become aware of various conditions and constraints on their activities and cognition, while always being convicted and bounded by external forces and oppressive social structures that are designed to deny agency. Power operates as a mechanism for limiting agency and causing misrecognition but one’s agency can also act as symbolic domination as it is continually in the achievement of the mastery and domination of the self. Such acts as a paradox as the agent internalizes the goals, objectives and tools of dominate forces, which it tries to resist and overcome. This can be read and understood as an existential imbalance in which the agent constantly seeks meaning, recognition and a sense of overcoming only to end up in a state of indifference or a state of nothingness because the agent never really overcomes or achieves its objective.
Acknowledgements

Now that I have narrated how the question of the “Muslim woman” relates to the larger question of agency, and one that can potentially reveal how we are paradoxically situated in our human experiences, where do we go from there? Given everything we have written what now? Where does it put us in relation with the “Muslim woman” agency and representation? For now, I will reflect on my own research journey and discuss future directives and questions for research.

What has my journey been like? When I first started writing my proposal for this thesis I was guided by my inner voice that wanted to speak with a spark of candor and sincerity about being a woman that grew up in an Islamic, yet not so Islamic household. This internal voice drew me into conversations with myself about my own struggles and issues of never really belonging and identifying with my religion, culture and role as a woman altogether. The conversations with myself were difficult because I had to be candid. Being candid meant that I had to admit and accept that I will always be an insider/outsider in my own community and the pragmatic consequences of resistance. This journey has been full of frustration and anxiety. Often when a question is pursued it helps the seeker overcome or resolve what is being sought. However, in my situation, when speaking of paradox and coming to a closure that is possibly can be irresolvable did not eliminate the frustration and anxiety but instead it helped me arrive at a place of acceptance.

As I wrote this thesis, I felt incomplete and ill-equipped to conduct this research at times. Referring back to Simon Critchley’s question: What kind of thing is faith and can someone who nominally or denominationally faithless, such as myself, still have an
experience of faith?” Although, I knew the answer to this question, this question still overshadowed my research as I struggled to write. Who was I, someone who was so close yet distant to religion, to speak about the issue on Muslim woman? I was more concerned with how my story and experiences would be perceived and interpreted rather than the truth of my thinking and experiences. One of the most difficult aspects of this journey was the fact that it was rooted in something that I was once connected to, but eventually ended up leaving. Though I had grown up within a close proximity to religion, I, nevertheless found it very difficult to find my way apart from me. I had never questioned myself prior to undertaking this journey because I so sure of myself.

Throughout the nervous writing and questioning I came to the conclusion that all stories and experiences undergo recognition and neglect. In order to acknowledge nonconformity and concede the emerging of a new subjectivity I had to shake off the old skin to seek my own agency and reclaim my own humanity. In the words of Ralph Ellison (1995, p 580):

> Once I thought my grandfather incapable of thoughts about humanity, but I was wrong. Why should an old slave use such a phrase as, “This and this or this has made me more human,” as did my arena of speech? Hell, he never had any doubts about his humanity – that was left to his free offspring. He accepted his humanity just as he accepted the principle. It was his, and the principle lives on in all its human and absurd diversity. So now having tried to put it down I have disarmed myself in the process. You won’t believe in my invisibility and you’ll fail to see how any principle that applies to you couple apply to me. You’ll fail to see it even though death waits for both of us if you don’t. Nevertheless, the very disarmament has brought me to a decision. The hibernation is over. I must shake off the old skin and come up for a breath.

This leaves us to think about questions such as, what now or where do we go from here with the question of the “Muslim woman” and agency and representation. Precisely, it is in the words of Ralph Ellison where I find the answer: “[we] must shake off the old skin and come up for a breath.” If we move our conceptions of agency and freedom outside
and beyond a dualism that we seem to be stuck in we cannot truly grasp the complexity and often conflicting existential experiences. Moving towards with paradox in mind can move us into a space of acceptance and be more receiving and realistic about how to navigate and negotiate ourselves within the bounds of paradox.
Bibliography


