Veils and Vigilantes: *Burka Avenger* and Representations of Muslim Girlhood

Shirin Nadira
New York University

Figure 1. Unicorn Black Productions, Burka Avenger Promotional Poster. Their World, theirworld.org/news/the-burka-avenger-putting-education-at-the-centre-of-debate-in-pakistan

Upon awarding the Pakistani cartoon series *Burka Avenger* a Peabody Award in 2013, the Peabody committee created an online profile for the series praising its "deft handling of a deadly serious theme—the empowerment of women—in a part of the world where it has particular and timely resonance" (peabodyawards.com). By rescripting the burqa, typically associated with the worst excesses of gender inequality under Islam, as a crime-fighting superhero costume, *Burka Avenger* creates in Jiya/Burka Avenger a titular superheroine that is, in the committee's words, "part Catwoman, part Muslim ideal." The non-identity of the categories "Catwoman" and "Muslim ideal" seems obvious enough, but the unexpected apposition of the terms, possibly based on one of the series' promotional images (see Figure 1), prompts a reflexive consideration of the knotted notions of gender and religious identity that

might account for the writer's juxtaposition of the two. What kind of whole is imagined to be the sum of these parts, and how does it contribute to a reimagination of women's empowerment, specifically *Muslim* women's empowerment, today?

As an animated series targeted at children and produced in a country not exactly swimming in global cultural capital, *Burka Avenger* seems out of place in that year's roster of Peabody Award winners, which also included hit television series *House of Cards, Borgen, Scandal,* and *Orange is the New Black,* as well as documentaries by Al-Jazeera, PBS, ESPN, HBO, and the *New York Times*. Nonetheless, the Peabody's warm reception of the Burka Avenger character anticipated a notable, if still nascent, wave of narratives featuring Muslim girl protagonists that ostensibly depart from the stereotype of the Muslim woman as the "object of imperial rescue" (Abbas 45).

Although we should not discount the gains made by intersectional activism and the post-secular turn in critical discourse in breaking the monopoly of this stereotype, the most heavily circulated mainstream media narratives still overwhelmingly reduce the multiplicity of Muslim women to the single story of an oppressed collectivity, whose most recognizable faces are young, veiled, and in distress. Recall, to name just a few, the images of an unconscious, blood-stained Malala Yousafzai that made headlines around the world in 2012; Bibi Aisha, a teenage victim of facial mutilation, whose noseless face covered TIME magazine in August 2010; Nujood Ali, the Yemeni girl who at ten years old successfully petitioned for divorce from a husband more than twenty years her senior; and the countless book covers depicting neo-Orientalist images of veiled girls and women, some of whose faces are completely enveloped in burqas, others in veils allowed to slip just enough to reveal sad kohl-lined eyes.

In contrast to this unremitting parade of Muslim women as victims, Jiya/Burka Avenger might be situated within a constellation of empowered, feisty Muslim girl icons including real-life superheroine Malala, who at 17 became the youngest ever Nobel laureate when she received the 2014 Nobel Peace Prize, and Marvel's Kamala Khan/Ms. Marvel, a Muslim Pakistani-American teenager living in New Jersey. These figures herald a sorely needed diversification of Muslim representation in mainstream and popular cultural channels, while their recent success in the arena of cultural prizes suggests a corresponding receptiveness, at least among metropolitan audiences, to narratives about Muslim women in which they not only do not need saving (Abu-Lughod 2002; 2015), but in the case of Burka Avenger or Ms. Marvel are more than capable of saving others in need.

However, although we may be inclined to see this shift as a representational triumph, it also reflects the growing, and increasingly contested, investment over the past decade or so in the figure of the "girl child" in developmental discourse. Scholars in the budding field of girlhood studies have expressed reservations regarding the bipolar

construction of the girl child in the Third World as simultaneously a figure of incomparable potential and extreme vulnerability, arguing that the over-reliance on the tropes of victim and heroine obscures the complexity of girls' lives and the unresolved contradictions between juridical and philosophical approaches to maturity, agency, and autonomy (e.g. Burman 1995; Cobbett 2014; Crull 2007; Fennell and Arnot 2012).

This adds a further layer of complication to discussions about feminist agency and empowerment, which with regard to contemporary Islam already tend toward either end of what postcolonial literary critic Sadia Abbas calls the bigotry-apologia spectrum, with Muslims and especially Muslim women finding themselves "caught between the distortions, misrepresentations, and bigotries of the media-empire-neocon complex and the high-minded apologias of this configuration's left-liberal critics" (50). Among the thinkers that Abbas identifies as apologists of conservative Islam is the anthropologist Saba Mahmood. Mahmood's *The Politics of Piety* (2004) gained significant academic purchase in large part for the explanatory power of its Introduction, which engaged poststructuralist theories of subjectivity by Michel Foucault and Judith Butler to describe the seemingly paradoxical appeal that Islamic norms of piety, including *hijab*, held for middle-class, educated women in Cairo. Conversely, the sections of *The Politics of Piety* reflecting on the paradoxes of pedagogy have been comparatively underexamined. The crux of Abbas' disagreement with Mahmood's account concerns the latter's reliance on the figure of the "happy slave" in the Introduction to excuse the complicity of Muslim women in their own oppression, but I argue that Mahmood's interest in pedagogy warrants closer attention to the figure of the child as a subject in waiting, whose appeal to paternalistic imperatives is a source of constitutive tension within the Enlightenment thesis of universal rational autonomy.

In this paper, I use *Burka Avenger* and its play on the superhero genre as an entry point to consider anew questions of feminist agency and empowerment. Since visual narrative genres like the cartoon series are especially conducive to theorizing forms of agency available to children—subjects who are, by definition, unemancipated—I bring my close reading of *Burka Avenger* into dialogue with the critical debates between Saba Mahmood and Sadia Abbas over Muslim girlhood, freedom, and autonomy. I begin by demonstrating how *Burka Avenger* marshals the resources of the superhero genre and the abstracted quality of cartoon imagery to cultivate a formal naivety that is central to the text's pedagogical and ethical projects. The transformation of the burqa into a superhero costume in *Burka Avenger* attempts to critique the limits of the liberatory-oppressive binary in relation to *hijab*, but its premise and aesthetics also suggest that considering the figure of the child as a counterpoint to that of the slave may usefully shift the terms in which autonomy and emancipation in general have often been discussed. By way of conclusion, I reflect on another Pakistani superheroine, 2014 Nobel

Peace Prize winner Malala Yousafzai, to consider how we consume actual media representations of Muslim girlhood.

Part Catwoman, Part Muslim Ideal

I single out the Peabody Award's description for critique not because it is an especially egregious misreading of the show, but because the Peabody participates in what James English (2008) dubs the "economy of cultural prestige," whose institutions bear significantly upon how cultural products from outside the established markets of Europe and North America are marketed and circulated. Cultural prizes also offer useful snapshots of the historical conjuncture and political moment at their point of origin; the description of the Burka Avenger superheroine as part Catwoman, part Muslim ideal is more reflective of the critical impasse regarding Muslim womanhood than it is of the series itself. While Haroon's decision to title the series *Burka Avenger* inevitably implicates the show within ongoing debates over sexual politics and embodied agency, the show itself refrains from explicit mention of Islam. Analyses of the portrayal of Islam on *Burka Avenger* are therefore reactions to the aesthetic cues—burqas, robes, turbans, outlandish claims of supernatural ability and avowed desires of world domination—that mediate our understanding of "Islam" as the primary antagonist of Western civilization.

The very notion of a "Muslim ideal" is highly contentious, especially as it pertains to Muslim women. How do particular dispositions, behaviors, or practices come to define a "Muslim ideal," and to what authorities do such efforts at definition appeal? The award committee's praise for the series' context-sensitive approach to the theme of women's empowerment avoids an assimilationist definition of the ideal Muslim as one whose Muslim difference is privatized to the point of imperceptibility. However, citing a "Muslim ideal" without further clarification risks ceding too much ground to orthodox interpretations of Islam that, as is also the case for many other religious traditions, tend to align with patriarchal and socially conservative views. Especially in juxtaposition to Catwoman, a character known for her flirtatiousness and hyper-sexuality, the phrase risks reproducing stereotypes of the Muslim woman as passive and submissive to existing norms.

On that note, it is difficult to see what Burka Avenger has in common with Catwoman aside from superficial similarities of gender and costuming. Although Catwoman shares Burka Avenger's deep-seated indignation about the ubiquity of vice and corruption, she is nevertheless a canonical villain who uses her gifts to criminal and self-interested ends, and she certainly does not share Burka Avenger's unwavering commitment to social justice. The consequently strained comparison seems symptomatic of a certain understanding of empowerment that tends to locate feminist agency primarily, if not exclusively, in oppositional

modes of behavior and thought. In other words, while the aspects of Burka Avenger/Jiya that make her a specifically "Muslim ideal"—her Pakistani background, her generally demure demeanor, her selfless devotion to family and community—may recommend her to a cultural mainstream that is eager to embrace a Muslim protagonist as part of its commitment to representational diversity, such alterity must be tempered by a healthy dose of the kind of rebellious individualism that "Catwoman" is made to stand for here. Even the similarity in costuming only goes so far. Jiya dons the burqa to hide her identity in the few scenes per episode when she engages villains in armed conflict, but the vast majority of the time, she is depicted unveiled and usually clad in a *shalwar kameez,* a suit comprising a long shirt and loose trousers, a popular and unremarkable form of cultural dress throughout South Asia.

Of course, although I refer to them above as "superficial" qualities, gender and costuming are second only to terrorism in dominating the conversation about contemporary Islam. Given the overdetermination of the burqa and its instrumentalization in liberal discourses of women's emancipation, reviews of the show have understandably focused on this particular artistic choice, whether to commend its challenge to ignorant stereotyping of the practice of veiling as a sign of religious oppression, or to sound a note of concern that the show functions as an apology for misogyny and oppression perpetrated under the banner of Islam. As Sadia Abbas notes, "the figure of the Muslim woman for whom the metonym is increasingly the veil" has become "the discursive site upon which the central preoccupation of our time — how do you free yourself from freedom? — is worked out" (45).

Under conditions of globalized modernity, this preoccupation with the burqa extends beyond Western media sources. Former Pakistani ambassador to the US Sherry Rehman tweeted that if the point of the costume was to make the show relatable to its local audience, "a dupatta could have done the job," referring to the long scarf often worn by South Asian women—and which Jiya does in fact wear in the series. In 2013, India's NDTV news channel ran a segment on *Burka Avenger* in which Haroon was invited as a respondent alongside two guest commentators, Pakistani writers and journalists Bina Shah and Mahvesh Murad. The debate centered mostly on the symbolism of the burqa; while Murad praised the show's creative subversion of the burqa and notes that Jiya spends most of her productive time not wearing the burqa anyway, Shah contended that having the superheroine wear a burqa at all perpetuates the idea that Pakistani women "need to don the burqa in order to be able to go out and do the work that they need to do," undermining the show's otherwise progressive messaging. Women cannot be invisible, she argued, if they are to make a real difference in society.

Judith Butler observes with regard to sexuality and visibility that hegemonic cultural ideas prescribe "hyper-visibility" (48) as a criterion of freedom, especially sexual freedom. Discourses of "outness" have enabled legal struggles against discriminatory treatment of sexual minorities, but at

the price of installing a template for political agency and visibility that requires the once private matter of sexuality to be made public in order to be defended as a human right. Any abstention from this imperative to render one's sexuality public—by not "coming out," or by dressing in ways that play down one's sexuality—is either attributed to external coercion or read as a form of self-betrayal, precluding the possibility of cultural variation in how "free expression" is defined. As a rejection of the mandate of hyper-visibility, the burqa has become the definitive and possibly most over-analyzed sign of the oppression or self-incurred backwardness of Muslim women. Yet the normative weight accrued to the ideal of sexual freedom tends to obscure its critics at home in "the west" and its deployment in the service of imperialistic ventures abroad, especially in Islamicate regions.

It bears emphasizing with regard to the latter that such cynical abuse of the discourse of rights in no way excuses gendered inequality and oppression within Islamicate regions and communities themselves. However, to suggest that Haroon's burqa-wearing superheroine might somehow indoctrinate its child audience into wearing the burqa or supporting its enforcement altogether misconstrues the work that art does in the world. Shah's reservations about *Burka Avenger,* in an inversion of the praise offered by the Peabody awarding committee, assume a simplistic, perhaps propagandistic, relationship between aesthetic and political practice, in which artistic objects function primarily as vehicles of ideology and whose political effects are, consequently, direct and unambiguous.

Jacques Rancière's identification of the "primary aesthetics" at the heart of politics offers a more compelling way to conceptualize this relationship. Art has a political valence for Rancière insofar as it intervenes in what he terms the "distribution of the sensible," how sensory experience is ordered so as to allow certain questions and connections to come into view while occluding others. The examples he offers of the nineteenth-century French novel and of so-called abstract or anti-representational painting suggest that modern art redistributes the sensible by enabling new kinds of community to be envisioned whose relationship to sanctioned, authorized forms of political community cannot be determined in advance. And while "canonical forms and consecrated images" (18) exist, artistic reproductions of these images always contain the potential to be either faithful to or subversive of their traditional usages.

Burka Avenger's stylization of the burqa as superheroine costume transgresses the burqa's canonical form. The *Burka Avenger* theme song, entitled "Lady in Black," drives this point home:

> Lean, mean, covered from her head to her toes
> In a one-piece, slick invisibility cloak
> She got her eyes visible so she can give you the look
> And lay the smack down on all these dirty killers and crooks
> Like a panther going in for the attack and the win

> The lethal weapon in her hands is a book and a pen
> The silent ninja, vigilante in the dark of the night […]

This description reclaims the very attributes of the burqa that have lent it its negative connotations of confinement and invisibility — its blackness, its total concealment of the entire female body except for the eyes. These traits account for the utilitarian appeal of the burqa, which is reimagined as a spin on the crusader's cape or the ninja's shinobi shozoku.

While denying that *Burka Avenger* endorses modest dress codes for women in the name of religion, especially when such codes are enforced by politico-religious authorities, Haroon has also explained that it was his express intention to portray a female superhero without objectifying her or playing up her sex appeal, as has conventionally been the case for female characters in the superhero genre. In fact, in an interview with the Associated Press, he mentions Catwoman as an example of the type of hypersexualization he wants *Burka Avenger* to avoid, arguing instead that Jiya wears the burqa to hide her identity the way superheroes do.

He does concede in a separate interview with CNN that by wearing a burqa, Jiya "is showing she is a Muslim woman and superhero. And that she stands for all the good things of Islam and the real Islamic values — which are equality, women's rights, education and peace — rather than the way Islam has been hijacked by radical elements." Haroon's attempts to defend the series from accusations both that it is too apologetic about orthodox or fundamentalist Islam (because its protagonist wears a burqa) *and* that it too readily replicates derogatory stereotypes of Islam propagated by Western media (e.g. its Taliban-esque villain Baba Bandook) suggest that "Islam" in the show's Pakistani context is standing in for what is ultimately a postcolonial predicament: how to render cultural difference in a manner that invites empathy while respecting its alterity. A description like "part Catwoman, part Muslim ideal" tries to resolve this tension by conjuring up a hybrid entity that might appease proponents both of Islamic codes of female modesty and of hypervisible sexuality. In contrast, the series interrogates these codes, challenging Islamic hegemonic discourses concerning the Muslim female subject without finding recourse in the imperialist paradigm of unveiling as a metaphor for female emancipation. The Burka Avenger character is neither Catwoman nor a Muslim ideal, at least not in any way that endorses a gendered, exclusivist interpretation of how a Muslim ideal would look and act.

Instead of discussing the depiction of the burqa in the context of debates over freedom of expression and religious extremism, I argue that it can be more profitably read as part of the series' adaptation of the familiar pop cultural trope of the superhero, paying particular attention to the intertextual relationship between *Burka Avenger* and Batman. The trope of the superhero itself offers a new perspective on the issue of veiling not as a plot point—as previously noted, Jiya spends most of her

time unveiled—but because it problematizes the equation of agency with public visibility.

The most cursory survey of the history of fashion reminds us that clothing has long served a very important social function as markers of one's public self, even if the hegemonic view today increasingly regards fashion less as a codified system than a means of individual self-expression. Consequently, the idea that a change of clothes can correspond quite literally to a change of self is not at all a singularly Islamic notion. The same principle is discernible in the residual implementation of dress codes and, more to the point, in the trope of the superhero costume.

It is unsurprising that villains would don costumes and masks to hide their public identities, as it makes sense that they would want to evade capture and penalty for their criminal activity. That superheroes too would be obliged to conceal themselves despite the ostensible moral justness of their cause, on the other hand, demonstrates the inability of the law to guarantee the extension of its protections in spite of advancing a sovereign claim to judgment and punishment. The refashioning of the burqa as crime-fighting costume undermines the equation between (public) personhood and power by emphasizing the precarity of the vigilante superhero, whose effectiveness depends upon remaining anonymous and in some sense invisible. In the language of comic books and superhero narratives, Bruce Wayne rather than Batman is the "secret identity," even though — or precisely because — Bruce Wayne is the face the public sees.

What we learn about Jiya from the pilot episode of *Burka Avenger* echoes elements of the Batman origin story. Both Jiya and Bruce Wayne lose their parents to crime and are thus orphaned as young children, and neither possesses any superhuman abilities, although they cultivate martial arts skills in order to take up the cause of vigilante justice. Just as the Batman mask and the anonymity of his superhero alter ego allow Bruce Wayne to attempt to use his fortunes for good without being constrained by legal channels that serve the interests of efficiency and power over those of justice, the pilot episode sees schoolteacher Jiya driven to invent her Burka Avenger alter ego because legal means of saving the girls' school from being shut down are foreclosed by a multifaceted network of corruption. The *Burka Avenger* pilot opens on the image of a masked, caped figure silhouetted against a city-scape, an iconic shot that engages Batman from the outset as an important visual intertext and inspiration (Figures 2 and 3), although the insertion of local touches like the minaret subtly highlights the show's contextually specific adaptation of the superhero narrative's generic conventions.

The construction of superhero universes as permanent states of exception or emergency accounts for the abiding preoccupation of superhero narratives with the relationship between justice and the law. These narratives offer fictive complements to critiques of sovereignty such as Giorgio Agamben's, which describes the sovereign as marking "the point of indistinction… the threshold on which violence passes over into

law and law passes over into violence" (32). In the fictional Pakistani setting depicted in *Burka Avenger,* the historical grounds for the state of exception are revealed to lie not only in the inherently ambiguous status of the sovereign, but also in the particular upheavals wrought by European colonialism and its subsequent sublimation in post-World War II neoliberal discourses of development. While local venality and the cynical manipulation of superstition and religious faith are certainly to blame for the problems confronting Halwapur's residents, the series also points to the role of global inequality in enabling and exacerbating these tendencies. Consider, for instance, the added complications of Third World vs. First World vigilantism: Halwapur has Gotham's crime and corruption without its well-developed financial and technological infrastructure, Jiya/Burka Avenger shares Bruce Wayne/Batman's commitment to fighting for justice without the cushion of the Wayne family fortune or the aid of butlers, sidekicks, or Batmobiles.
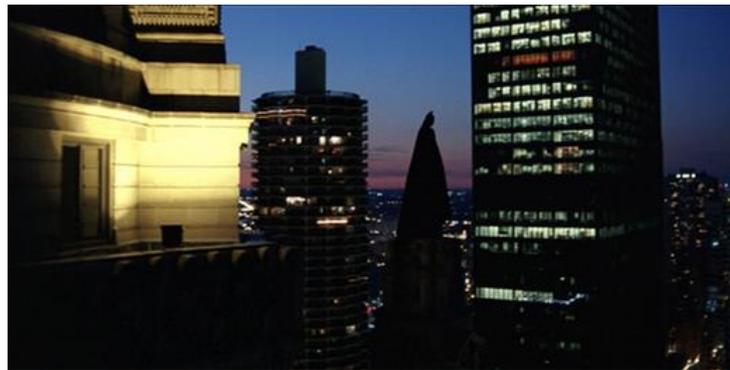

Figure 2. Screenshot of Batman watching over Gotham City from Christopher Nolan's *Batman Begins,* 2005. (The Cinema Archives)

Figure 3. Screenshot of Burka Avenger watching over Halwapur from Burka Avenger Episode 1—Girls' School is Shut (Unicorn Black Production, 2013).

Of the coterie of villains introduced in the *Burka Avenger* pilot, Baba Bandook (literally "Father Gun"), a bogus magician and megalomaniac,

becomes Burka Avenger's principal adversary. Bandook's characterization, from his attire to the worldview he espouses, is clearly intended to evoke the Taliban. It is Bandook who announces and enforces the closure of the girls' school, sneering: "Do these girls want to be modern? What will girls do with education?" However, the episode reveals that Baba Bandook's actions are sanctioned and indeed ordered by the town mayor Vadero Pajero, who gloats: "Those charity fools gave me money to run the girls' school. I am not going to waste money on those worthless girls. The money will stay in my pocket. Once the school is shut you can have your share too." Gender inequality in education, often used to evince the backwardness of Islam, is thus resituated among a wider set of evils resulting from the fraying of sovereignty and the rule of law in the postcolony, an endemic problem in which even the best liberal impulses, philanthropy included, are implicated.

The emphasis at the level of global policy-making on expanding girls' education in underdeveloped and impoverished parts of the world grants donor-funded NGOs and transnational corporate initiatives a significant degree of political influence in these regions that isn't balanced by a commensurate level of accountability to either the local population or some international regulating body. In practice, the show suggests, such a setup often comes at the expense of resources being channeled towards the development of strong and sustainable local infrastructures in beneficiary countries, a charge borne out not only by scholarly critics of developmentalism (e.g. Escobar 1995), but even by one of the UNESCO-run International Institute for Educational Planning's own reports, which acknowledged:

> [the] possible contradictions between capacity development as a developmental paradigm and NGOs' role as gap fillers [that] correspond to the tensions between the new and traditional roles of NGOs. This raises two related issues: what impact does NGO action have on governments' capacities? Also, how do NGOs interpret the capacity development concept? (Ulleberg 9).

In other words, the report identifies and proposes strategies for managing NGOs' activities in order to mitigate the risk of dependency entailed in a previous model that bypassed states considered weak or corrupt. A blanket push for the expansion of girls' access to education should likewise be complemented by critical attention to who provides this education and in what it consists. Indeed, the questions posed by the report address a fundamental tension that has long preoccupied thinkers interested in philosophies of education and child-rearing; namely, how do we conduce another person or party to autonomy without thereby undermining autonomy itself?

Education, Pedagogy and the Problem of Autonomy

Unlike Bruce Wayne, Jiya actually has to work for a living. While the theme of women's empowerment is indeed a key component of *Burka Avenger*'s ideological agenda, the reclamation of the burqa is of secondary importance in this regard compared to the symbolic importance of the elementary schoolteacher-as-superheroine. Whereas Bruce Wayne's billions facilitate his vigilantism, Jiya's reluctant vigilantism facilitates what she perceives as her real social purpose: education.

Given the series' unequivocal endorsement of the importance of education, the references to corruption and the misuse of charitable funds meant for the funding of girls' schools in Halwapur are not presented as reasons to oppose girls' right to education. Nor is the mean, self-important Vadero Pajero by any means a sympathetic character. Nonetheless, his mocking reference to "charity fools" raises a pertinent point about the reliance of developmental discourses on the goodwill of benefactor governments and groups. Maintaining the flow of goodwill and money requires constant appeal to what Sara Ahmed has called "charitable compassion" (192) on the part of potential donors, a sensibility most effectively stoked by images and narratives of girls as victims of oppressively patriarchal cultures. Aside from encouraging the propagation of such one-dimensional narratives, the apparatus of global philanthropy also locks recipient countries into a position of structural indebtedness that replicates, with greater subtlety, hierarchies of power that once required more overt forms of imperial or colonial domination.

Burka Avenger thus points to "girls' education" as something of a red herring that distracts from its manipulation as a marker distinguishing the (civilized, developed) North from the global South. From the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI) to child's rights' group CARE International, advocates of gender equality in education have adopted variations on the African proverb "If you educate a woman, you educate a nation" as campaign slogans, although it also bears pointing out that the proverb is increasingly modified to say "girl" rather than "woman," thereby acknowledging that throughout the global South, many "girls" (defined as those below the legal age of maturity) attain markers of female adulthood much earlier than their counterparts in the global North. Proponents of "girl-centered design" (Engebretsen et. al., *GIRLS FIRST!*) in the arena of poverty reduction also consider access to education and the eradication of child marriage as goals to be pursued in tandem, since the greatest obstacle to girls' self-determination is the adult, and obviously gendered, burdens of childrearing, housekeeping, and caregiving.

The enthusiastic transnational corporate sponsorship of campaigns for girls' education is nonetheless an obvious indication that the salient meanings of education and self-determination here refer to the training of future *economic* actors. According to Nike's Girl Effect and the wording of UN Resolution 66/170, which declared in 2012 that October 11 would henceforth commemorate the International Day of the Girl Child, the "empowerment of and investment in girls" has as its objective the "achievement of all Millennium Development Goals, including the

eradication of poverty and extreme poverty." A basic command of literacy and numeracy skills would give individual girls the possibility of financial independence, and thus the ability to resist cultural and religious pressures to marry and bear children. Over time, advocates argue, greater economic participation for women will translate into self-ownership, legal autonomy, and political agency. The priority given to the acquisition of basic literacy and numeracy skills esteemed necessary for economic productivity comes at the expense of education's cultural dimensions (as captured for instance in the German *Bildung*) whose sense encompasses the rigorous cultivation of not only an intellectual but also a cultural and social self.

In Islamicate contexts, religious difference often becomes shorthand for cultural difference. The issue of gender inequality in education, even when it has obvious socioeconomic explanations, tends to be framed by claims of Islam's intrinsic unassimilability to accepted norms of multiculturalism, secularism, and liberalism. Even if we leave aside the situation in many Muslim-majority countries in the global South, where widespread rural poverty severely downgrades the value of formal education for girls, contestations throughout Europe over the permissibility of *hijab* in public schools[1] reveal that a chief priority of mass education is not the individual's emancipation but her socialization into a given national or communal culture.

The immature and unemancipated figure of the (girl) child to be educated offers a counterpoint to the more obviously problematic figure of the slave that haunts attempts, like Saba Mahmood's, to develop an understanding of freedom and autonomy that makes room for cultural difference without sliding into sheer moral relativism. Mahmood argues that "uncoupling the notion of self-realization from that of the autonomous will" (14) is necessary in order to begin to imagine desires and political forms, most urgently the revival of Islamic orthodox religiosity, that may not accord with the norms or goals of secular-liberal feminism. The very ritual conventions and religious-cultural apparatus perceived as oppressive towards her Muslim women subjects, she notes, scaffold their sense of selfhood and the agential capabilities they exercise.

Postcolonial literary critic Sadia Abbas, on the other hand, takes issue with how "conceptually fundamental" the figure of the slave is to Mahmood's interpretation of the pious Muslim woman as feminist subject. As a result of the traction gained by *The Politics of Piety* and other scholarship that Abbas considers excessively exculpatory of Islamic orthodoxy, the "secular Muslim woman, now inconceivable as Muslim outside an economy of collaboration and treachery, disappears; and the pious woman who ostensibly desires her own enslavement, thus freeing herself from "Western" freedom, is hypervisibilized" (4).

Abbas contends that Mahmood relies on the analytic philosopher John Christman's discussion of the "happy slave," who opts to remain in servitude even when external constraints have been lifted, to "illumine the behavior of a woman who does not want to be free" (23). Following a

critical appraisal of *The Politics of Piety* and Joan W. Scott's *The Politics of the Veil,* both ethnographic studies of orthodox Muslim women who veil and participate in piety and proselytization (*da'wa*) movements, Abbas questions the imputation of agency to the decision to veil by pointing out the possible "coercion involved in girls younger than eighteen wearing the headscarf" (47). The keenness of this intervention is premised upon the implication that there are *un*happy slaves sidelined in accounts (like Mahmood's and Scott's) of supposedly happy ones. Even if we allow that some women willingly choose their enslavement, the broad consensus that slavery itself is morally irredeemable surely obliges us, Abbas argues, to focus instead on those slaves who *do* want to be free. By invoking the example of girls younger than eighteen, she implies that even if Muslim women don't need saving, perhaps Muslim *girls* do.

Considering that turning eighteen does not magically confer immunity to external pressure or coercion, Abbas' appeal to think of the children reproduces the equation, that Mahmood and Scott's work seek to disrupt, between legal adulthood and the attainment of autonomy. In other words, even if it could be shown that girls younger than eighteen *were* coerced by parents into wearing the headscarf, it wouldn't make them any more or less free in light of their structural position of minority vis-à-vis their parents, which gives the latter virtually unfettered rights to raise their children as they see fit. From this perspective, the veil is merely one of the more spectacular instantiations of a familial or cultural norm that acquires political baggage due to the crystallization of factors — worldwide concerns about Islamist terrorism, migration flows, economic contraction, and others — particular to a given geopolitical moment.

In fact, Abbas misrepresents the significance of the slave in Mahmood's argument. Mahmood cites Christman's discussion as an example of a *loophole* within liberalism that allows even obviously illiberal actions to be justified. When, as in classical liberal thought, freedom is linked exclusively to individual autonomous action, the result is a procedural rather than substantive definition of autonomy: we have to accept that a slave is theoretically "free" despite her legal unfreedom if she can, rationally and persuasively, account for her choice to remain enslaved. Mahmood's aim is not to show, by analogy with the happy slave, that the women in her study are in fact realizing "their own" desires in reading devotional literature, frequenting the mosque, veiling, or performing any number of conservative and conventional roles; rather, she questions the ascription of a clear boundary between one's "own" desires and desires marked by social conditioning or coercion.

The pivotal figure in Mahmood's chapter on freedom is not the slave but the aspiring virtuoso pianist, who subjects herself to drudgery and discipline in order to develop mastery. The pursuit of artistic virtuosity is an analogy for the process of cultivating the properly virtuous self. The pietist apparently beholden to the self-denying asceticism of Islamic rituals and rules of dress is similar to the musician who submits herself to hours of arduous and repetitive practice in order to attain her desired level

of mastery and excellence; to castigate either pietist or pianist for her irrational devotion to objective standards outside of her "own" or "true" desires would altogether miss the point. The homology between virtue and virtuosity is key to Mahmood's understanding of the value ascribed by the Egyptian pietists to embodied ritual behavior and provides a way of thinking about freedom beyond rationalist or voluntarist definitions of agency.

Despite the transdisciplinary success and influence of *The Politics of Piety,* few critics have attended to the book's interest in pedagogy, not in the narrow, institutionalized sense of a science of teaching, but as the attempt to theorize "education" as the formation of self, encompassing schooling as well as the inculcation of discipline, social manners, and moral conduct. Mahmood's engagement with the problem of agency through the pedagogical rather than master-slave relationship articulates her contextually specific discussion of Muslim practices of ritual piety to related efforts, most notably Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus,* to grasp bodily dispositions as the nexus of (social) structure and (individual) action. A deeper engagement with pedagogy in this sense has obvious implications for an approach to development that singles out education as the route to women's empowerment while favoring fairly instrumentalist, and thereby measurable and quantifiable definitions of education in terms of literacy and numeracy skills.

Burka Avenger foregrounds the aporetic quality of autonomy as a state of self-possession that is nevertheless cultivated within culturally particular contexts and parental/pedagogical relationships. Such relationships, even when inherently hierarchical, serve umbilical functions fundamental to the development of pre-rational agential capacities that in turn determine the types of choices that seem conceptually available at the discursive level.[2] The focus on education and on the child as subject and/or intended audience also enables the texts' explicitly pedagogical goals; *Burka Avenger* is unabashedly didactic, each episode focusing on a current issue of local importance and concluding with a moral lesson related to said issue. This speaks to the series' pedagogical aspirations; creator Haroon stated in multiple interviews that he flirted with other forms, such as feature-length films and mobile gaming platforms, before finally opting to develop *Burka Avenger* as an animated television series because of the popularity and accessibility of the genre. Moreover, he intended the series to address the Pakistani situation in which "a lot of young children who don't get the opportunity to get a great education need programming which is entertaining and also educational" ("Lady in Black") instead of imported productions with little social or cultural relevance. Although the show's nuanced characterization, especially of its villains, is likely to strike a chord with adult audiences (as all great "children's literature" tends to do), its orientation toward a child audience accounts for the significant tonal difference between *Burka Avenger* and Batman despite the similarities highlighted in the previous section.

Originally created in 1939 by DC Comics, Batman has inspired screen adaptations for well over half a century. In that time, Batman has evolved from a lightly slapstick, campy character to the eponymous dark knight of Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* trilogy of films, whose final instalment came out in 2012. Nolan's trilogy, widely credited with revolutionizing the genre, introduced a darkness in content and style that has since become characteristic of contemporary superhero narratives. The films' psychologizing interpretation of Batman results in a depiction of the character as isolated, devoid of family or any profound social connections, driven as much by vengeance and rage at the loss of his parents as by a desire for justice.

In contrast, the emphasis on education as socialization in *Burka Avenger* gives rise to its portrayal of a superheroine whose rootedness in and sense of responsibility towards her community runs deep, as her day job attests. The depiction of education in *Burka Avenger* stresses relationality rather than individual self-actualization. Aside from Jiya's commitment to her charges, the series pilot also introduces us to the close relationship between Jiya and her adoptive father, Kabbadi Jaan, which stands in stark contrast to Bruce Wayne's almost complete seclusion following the death of his parents when he was only eight years old. Kabbadi Jaan is both Jiya's father and her coach, training her in the skills she needs to be Burka Avenger, whereas Bruce Wayne acquires most of his abilities in detective work, tracking, and fighting from criminals and assassins, many of whom return to his life as adversaries. The first scene after the opening credits of the *Burka Avenger* pilot shows Kabbadi Jaan coaching her in a martial arts training session, gently rebuking her and helping her to refocus her attention when her anger at the prospect of the girls' school being shut down causes her to falter at the delicate task at hand. This affirmative rendering of a father-daughter relationship is atypical of mainstream coverage of Muslim girlhood, which tends to fracture portrayals of Muslim families into a supportive, suffering sisterhood on one hand and exploitative patriarchs on the other, narratives implicitly reproduced in girl-centric policy discourse and campaign rhetoric.

Conclusion

Critical responses to the case of real-life superheroine Malala Yousafzai, who was only fourteen years old when she was shot by the Pakistani Taliban on a bus ride home from school, illustrate the conceptual and ethical challenges of writing analytically about Muslim lives and subjectivities when Muslim girl-children are made both the targets and avatars of the struggle against gender inequality in Islam and the Islamicate world.

Solicited for her opinion on the incident in a 2013 interview with Deena Dajani, Saba Mahmood responded: "Malala was veiled, yet she did not stand against women's education; she laid her life down for it. We should really in this moment rethink the standard consensus that to be veiled is to be nothing other than a fundamentalist Muslim." While Mahmood's intention in drawing attention to Malala's appearance was to challenge popular prejudices about Muslim women who veil, her claim that Malala "laid her life down" for education instead of against it problematically attributes political agency to Malala's quotidian activities of attending school and writing about her experiences. Furthermore, however well intentioned, Mahmood's defense of Malala and other veiled women against the charge of being "fundamentalist Muslim[s]" contradicts her painstaking description in *The Politics of Piety* of the veil as a performative rather than a symbolic practice.

Abbas, in turn, writes in her concluding chapter that the Taliban's attack on Malala is exactly the kind of neo-orthodox Islamist misogyny that ends up getting a free pass when liberal guilt over the manipulation of minority rights to justify wars and foreign intervention motivates "prophylactic" (210) efforts to explain (and thereby excuse) conservative interpretations of Islam. She cites Pakistani novelist Kamila Shamsie's op-ed on Malala in *The Guardian,* in which the latter invokes

> Malala Yousafzai, standing in for all the women attacked, oppressed, condemned by the Taliban. What role have women played in creating the Taliban? Which of their failures is tied to the Taliban's strength? What grave responsibility, what terrible guilt do they carry around which explains the reprisals against them? (qtd in Abbas 210)

Although Abbas' sympathies are clearly with Malala, neither her description of Malala as a "Pakistani child activist" nor the quote she curates from Shamsie's article make any reference to the cause which Malala so vocally espoused and brought her to the Taliban's attention in the first place, as if Malala had been targeted for her gender rather than agenda. Abbas criticizes the redirection of attention away from "what is being done to women, and why it is being countenanced, to the question of how the Western media, policy circles, and the wider apparatus of bellicose justification together manipulate that issue" (210). Apart from noting that such a sharp distinction between reality and representation is not always easy to sustain, especially as representations produce real material consequences and as anti-West revendication drive some of the more spectacular acts of terrorist violence associated with political Islam, I would also argue that Abbas' citation of the Malala vs. the Taliban narrative as archetypal of political or fundamentalist Islam's violent misogyny glosses over the specificity of education as an ideological battleground in the so-called culture war between East and West.

Burka Avenger and other works of visual culture like the Ms. Marvel comic reboot and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* produce counternarratives of Muslim girlhood that do not revolve exclusively around gendered oppression and religious extremism. In contrast, for all

the facticity of Malala's experience, her story loses some of its singularity in the process of being overwritten by the template of the vulnerable, yet salvageable girl-child turned heroic spokesperson. This has had the effect of provoking a backlash in Pakistan toward her steady accumulation of symbolic capital as a lackey of the "West," at the expense of recognizing the dilemma which a figure like Malala poses in a postcolonial space. Some Malala skeptics like Mirza Kashif Ali, the Pakistani teacher behind "I Am Not Malala Day" and the polemical tract *I Am Not Malala: I Am Muslim, I am Pakistani,* a riposte to Malala's bestselling autobiography *I Am Malala*, endorse gender equality in education but reject Malala as a suitable representative of the cause.[3] Being able to acknowledge, simultaneously and genuinely, the necessity of supporting the cause of gender equality in education and the skepticism of those for whom the language of rights and freedoms is perceived as a Trojan horse smuggling in a pretext for foreign intervention, requires greater sensitivity to the avenues of inquiry opened and foreclosed by a girl-centric discourse.

　　A more complex portrait of Malala than that found in the mainstream media is offered by Malala herself in the autobiography co-authored with journalist Christina Lamb, whose rather blunt title *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood up for Education and was Shot by the Taliban* belies its richly detailed presentation of Pakistani history and the nuances of Malala's cultural background. In addition, the biographical information about Malala's parents shows how the girl-powering of discourse, by focusing on the desires and ambitions of individual girls, tends to occlude the salutary role family can play not just in inculcating love of learning, personal responsibility, and self-reliance, but more vitally in contextualizing the import of these principles within the cultural sensibilities and epistemology of a given society.

　　Malala's autobiography recounts that her mother, Tor Pekai, had been unusually lucky for a girl in a rural Pashtun village to have had a father and brothers who actively encouraged her to attend school:

> She was the only girl in a class of boys … But every day she would leave behind her girl cousins playing at home and she envied them. There seemed no point in going to school just to end up cooking, cleaning, and bringing up children, so one day she sold her books for nine annas, spent the money on boiled sweets and never went back. Her father said nothing […] Besides, he had seven other children to think about.
>
> It was only when she met my father that she felt regret. (32)

The reverse edge of girl power is the expectation that all girls possess a certain individualistic ambition, inhibited only by the imposition of social norms by conservative elders and male relatives. Girls content to aspire toward traditionally female roles, girls who are bright yet unmotivated— girls, that is, who exercise their freedom to embrace a choice that by our contemporary accounting renders them unfree—complicate this picture, as does the anecdote's implication that in some cases, girls in the global

South are less "empowered" than they are simply *left* to make these choices and bear the consequences of their choice.

Davis Guggenheim's documentary film adaptation of the Lamb autobiography, more intriguingly entitled *He Named Me Malala,* hones in on the relationship between Malala and her father Ziauddin Yousafzai, who is praised by Malala supporters for his progressive (especially by Swati or Pakistani standards) views on gender equality and the importance of girls' education, and decried by Malala skeptics for using his daughter as a kind of ventriloquist's puppet for his own ideological program. The documentary depicts news coverage of the public prayers and memorial gatherings held for Malala in Pakistan in the immediate aftermath of her shooting, but also includes recent interview snippets in which people interviewed on the streets of Pakistan seemed more circumspect about what Malala represents. One interviewee says: "Her father wrote everything for her. That's why she's so famous." Another opines that Malala "is just [the] name of a character. It can be anyone. She's a girl, she don't know anything (*sic*)."

With the ideological construction of the girl-child becoming an increasingly dominant lens through which knowledge about the global South, its problems, and the solutions to these problems is framed, these dissenting views touch on the not-insignificant inconsistencies of consecrating individuals as global spokespersons and advocates of a cause while also asserting the right to innocence and irresponsibility they enjoy by dint of their minority. The provocation of *He Named Me Malala* shares an affinity with that of *Burka Avenger* and Saba Mahmood's *The Politics of Piety* as I have tried to frame them. In different ways, each of these productions grapples with the pedagogical relationship as "enabling violation" (Spivak 1999: 217n33).

In my reading of *Burka Avenger,* I have tried to show that the second interviewee is certainly wrong to claim that Malala does not "know anything" simply because she is "a girl." But in her dismissive remark that Malala is the name of "a character" who could "be anyone," the interviewee arrives, maybe inadvertently, at a true and quite useful observation. As an icon of the cause of girls' education, her mediatization through televised speeches and interviews and much-publicized, exhaustively photographed meetings with fellow global civil society celebrities including Angelina Jolie and Barack Obama, has rendered Malala a "character" after the fashion of the reality television "star." Our responsibility as literary critics, not to mention in the analysis of power that forms the cornerstone of critical theory, is to be alert to how and by whom this character of the girl-child is scripted, and to what effects.

Notes

1. For example, France promulgated a law in 2004 regarding the respect of "public service neutrality." This law bans the "Islamic veil" (as

well as other "conspicuous" religious symbols like Christian crosses, Jewish stars or skullcaps, and Sikh turbans) from being worn in primary and secondary schools in France. Notably, however, the veil is permitted in universities, illustrating the mutual imbrication of public/private and minor/adult distinctions.

2. In her critique of the methodological assumptions that undergird developmental agendas, Naila Kabeer problematizes the indicators used by policy-making institutions to evaluate women's empowerment. She argues that the voluntaristic language of "choice" and "agency" must be qualified by critical attention to what Bourdieu refers to as "doxa", or beliefs existing beyond discourse, that prevent certain choices from being perceived as "material and cultural possibilities" (441).

3. It does bear noting that Ali's book presents a selective and thus incomplete view of the Malala and Lamb autobiography, which provides considerable historical detail about Pakistan and of the relationship of Malala's hometown, Swat, and her Pashtun community to the Pakistani nation-state. *I Am Malala*'s descriptions of Pashtun identity destabilizes the narrow-mindedly nationalist rhetoric of *I Am Not Malala* and offers clearer insight into the nature of the conflict in Swat.

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