**Veiled Voices: Western Journalism and the Muslim Women’s Oppression Fallacy**

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**Part I**: **Western Journalism and Muslim Women: A Scholarly Review**

**Chapter 1:** Introduction

**Chapter 2**: Literature Review: The Misrepresentation of Muslim Women in Western Journalism

**Part II**: **Creative Work**

**Preface**

**Chapter 3**: Mindful in Morocco: A reported personal essay

**Chapter 4**: Zahra Hankir: The Storyteller’s Stories: Voices of Arab Women Journalists

**Chapter 5**: Aida Alami: Bridging Worlds: Teaching the Next Generation

**Chapter 6**: Conclusion

**Appendix A**: Virginity Certificates

**Part I: Western Journalism and Muslim Women: A Scholarly Review**

**Chapter 1**

**Introduction**

           When I traveled to Morocco in the winter of 2019, I was 21 years old and an aspiring international reporter. After spending four months in the North African country learning and reporting, I realized my dream job entailed much more than I initially thought. Morocco is a Muslim-majority kingdom that was under the French protectorate from 1912 to 1956. According to the [World Population Review](http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/morocco-population/), 99% of Morocco’s population identifies as Muslim. I expected the stories I’d write in Morocco would shed light on Muslim women’s rights, or lack thereof. My perception was influenced by Western media; I saw their oppression as a defining factor for this population, and a topic I’d unequivocally cover as a journalist there. Yet, when I arrived and began interviewing women and following their personal stories, I found that the situation was much different than I originally anticipated. Not all Muslim view themselves as oppressed or objectified; their narratives are not singular. This realization forced me to put aside what I thought I knew about women’s rights, and listen to what sources were telling me. I knew what I learned as a journalist in Morocco applied to international journalism in the Islamic world as a whole, a fact that inspired this project.

           The focus of this project is Western media coverage of Muslim-majority countries. My research shows that, in the Western world, there is a clear lack of attention devoted to international journalism, which contributes to the superficial and often inaccurate coverage of Muslim women. Not only does low funding by Western media organizations for international coverage contribute to a mismanagement of resources for journalists, but to a poor cross-cultural understanding amongst reporters and their audiences. I conclude that often local reporters in perceived “developing” countries are dismissed by their more powerful Western counterparts, and are only used to serve the Western media, denying locals agency over their nation’s representation. This leads to poor quality reporting, contributing to poor quality stories that often misrepresent the people being featured. Such representations not only serve as an injustice to the people portrayed, but could contribute to global misunderstandings, which has a huge potential cost in terms of international understanding, diplomacy and human rights advocacy.

**Overview**

This thesis is divided into two sections: an overview of scholarly literature on Western media and Muslim women, and a creative section consisting of three free-standing pieces of journalism. Below, I summarize the sections, but first, I want to make clear two critical definitions I use throughout the thesis. In this and subsequent chapters, I use the term “Muslim” for concepts distinctly identified with the Islamic religion and employ the term “Arab” to encompass inhabitants in Arab nations in the Middle East and North Africa, defined independently of religion. I argue both Muslim and Arab female populations, while they often overlap, experience media misrepresentation.

In the second chapter, which follows this introduction, I will review existing literature to demonstrate the state of Western media representations of Muslim women, particularly in the U.S. I’ll discuss international journalism practices that contribute to the misunderstanding of the Muslim world and describe global reporting models created to combat it. The chapter will end with women in Morocco and in the Arab world who are using their voices to redefine their representation.

Part II consists of three stand-alone creative pieces that stem from my experience reporting on the sexual rights of Moroccan women, and from my interviews with prominent Muslim women journalists. The first creative product is a personal essay based on my experience as a foreign reporter covering the medical delivery of virginity certificates to young women in Morocco. The second product is a profile of Zahra Hankir, a Lebanese-British journalist who reports in the Middle East and edited the book, “Our Women on the Ground,” a compilation of essays by Arab women reporting from their homelands, including my last profile subject. The third product is a profile of Aida Alami, Moroccan foreign correspondent for The New York Times and journalism advisor to the program I was on in Morocco.

The creative process entailed delving into my personal notes from my time in Morocco and into my observations from the editing process after when I arrived back in the U.S. I touch on topics like “fixers,” translators, and the role of Islam when writing about Muslim women. The journalistic profiles of two women writers from the Arab world demonstrate how some Muslim women, both in their native countries, and those in the diaspora, are actively using their writing to combat stereotypes against them. The purpose of these profile stories, based on in-depth interviews with the subjects, is to show their contemporary responses to the misrepresentation of Muslim women in media and to show how they are challenging and attempting to repair Western journalistic practices through their own writing. By looking at their methods and the work they produce, I hope to expand the conversation on how international journalists can accurately and ethically write about the Islamic world, and about international cultures in general.

The intended audience for this work is Western media consumers, journalists and journalism educators; my goal is to offer the tools and knowledge to recognize authentic coverage of Muslim women and the Islamic world. This thesis offers new insight into the conversation by surfacing the voices of Muslim women writers who serve as direct cross-cultural bridges between these two cultures. While each of the three creative pieces are fit to be published separately, they could be re-written into one piece if that better fits a publication. Potential outlets include Newsweek or the Columbia Journalism Review.

**Justification of Approach**

I am an avid writer, so using long-form, narrative journalism for this thesis was an easy choice. It also seems fitting as Western media coverage of Muslim women’s lives most often occurs in print and photo long-form pieces; this fact would also make this content appealing to readers who engage with this issue. I also wrote my story on virginity certificates in Morocco (included in the appendix) in the same profile/feature writing format, and this creative project serves as an extension to that story, as it is what birthed this thesis.

I interviewed high-profile Muslim women journalists to show that Muslim women can be not only passive objects of international journalism, but creators of it. These women are influential players in journalism, making a real impact in the West; their work offers examples of a revised journalism model that could help international journalists more accurately report the Islamic world, complicating the common interpretation that Western white journalists impose. These women offer insight into the practice through their career and personal lives, insight I feel is needed in the conversation. I argue you don’t need to be of the same culture to write about Muslim women, but you do need to be informed and trained properly if you’re going to represent others’ lives. My personal essay, which begins the creative section, is a reflection on my international reporting experience and what I learned; it first demonstrates how such biases inspired this project, and the transition I underwent following my experience reporting and editing the story. Ultimately, this thesis follows the same model, beginning with information on Muslim women media representation and international journalism models, and ending with Muslim women journalists who are redefining it all.

**Chapter 2**

**Literature Review: The Misrepresentation of Muslim Women in Western journalism**

Through this literature review, I’ll be looking at the misrepresentation of Muslim women in U.S./Western media, and how international reporting practices contribute to it. By first covering Muslim women as a whole, and then moving into Moroccan Muslim women and those of the Muslim and Arab diaspora, I will offer new insight into how these populations have been denied agency over their representation, and how they’re working to gain it back.

**Media Representation**

There is a disproportionate amount of reporting on gender inequality in the Muslim world at large by Western news outlets. A 2017 study published in International Studies Quarterly by Rochelle Terman, assistant professor in the department of political science at the University of Chicago, looked at data from 35 years of New York Times and Washington Post reporting to test the following theory: Journalists seek out women-driven stories in Muslim countries when their rights are violated, and Muslim women are more likely to appear in the U.S. press if they live in societies with poor records of women’s rights. Non-Muslim women, on the other hand, are more likely to appear in the media in contexts where their rights are respected. Terman found that U.S. media promotes the perception that Muslim countries are inherently discriminatory against women.

Further, Terman argues this association of Muslim women with women’s rights violations and non-Muslim women with liberation and respect of their rights contributes to a Western misunderstanding of Muslim women. According to her 2017 research and analysis, the media inaccurately depicts the reality of most of these women’s lives by painting them only as suffering, oppressed individuals. Even if the country the Muslim woman is living in has a relatively clean record regarding women’s rights, the woman herself is often represented in Western media as being discriminated against, disregarding an alternative reality she may experience. This stigmatization denies Muslim women agency over their bodies and culture, while also demonizing Islam as barbaric, undemocratic, and inherently discriminatory against women — perceptions which are all seen as a direct threat to Western values. Not only does this dehumanize Muslim women, it paints a violent picture of Muslim men who are seen as nothing but cruel.

This cultural misunderstanding between the Western and Islamic worlds stems from historical contexts which can be tied to colonialism. Researchers have argued that a “colonial savior complex” characterizes international reporting in “developing” countries (Terman & Borpujari). Terman explains how the media portrayal of Muslim women can be seen as a civilizing mission to “free these oppressed women from their traditional ways of life.” Through a process she calls “gendered orientalism,” she argues that historic colonial and imperial structures affect Western-Muslim relations and foreign correspondence to this day. This savior narrative has been denounced as imperialist in the academic and public discourses I analyzed for this thesis.

Geneive Abdo, journalist and scholar on the Middle East and Muslim world, is a former correspondent in the Islamic world for the Guardian and has published books on her experiences and research in the field. In an article published in Nieman Reports in the winter of 2001, months after 9/11, Abdo said the “oppressed” Muslim woman is compared to the free Western woman in the press to demonstrate the perceived barbaric qualities of the Muslim world in comparison to the “powerful” Western world. In reality, Abdo writes, “few Muslim women are demanding a Western-style feminism that they see as failed and incompatible with their religious and personal values or a change in their attire” (Abdo, 2001, p. 48).

My personal experience covering Muslim women in Morocco revealed there is more than one narrative for Muslim women, contrary to media representations. In other words, a Western journalist’s view of Muslim women’s situations is not the only way to view their reality. While Abdo’s article focused on the effects of poor journalistic practices on the representation of Muslim women in media, it offers insight and recommendations into how international journalism can be reshaped to better reflect authentic stories.

**International Reporting Practices**

           An increased interest in research regarding news coverage of Muslims surfaced following 9/11 (Ewart & O’Donnell, 2018). In the book “Reporting Islam,” intended for journalists, journalism educators, and journalism students in the West, the authors explain how many mainstream Western news outlets in general fall into the trap of equating cultural issues with the Islamic religion when covering women’s rights. More specifically, journalists inaccurately describe topics like forced marriage and genital mutilation — which are not inherently part of Islam — as direct consequences of Islam rather than cultural issues, leading to misinformed coverage (Ewart & O’Donnell, 2018, p. 6). In agreement with Ewart and O’Donnell, I argue the impact of such skewed reporting dismantles social cohesion by portraying the West and Islamic realms as two separate worlds, when in fact we are all under the same sphere. In fact, as Ewart and O’Donnell point out, violence against women is a global problem; inherently linking the phenomenon to Islam reinforces anti-Islamic discourse in the West (p. 87). Western media takes a role in constructing Muslim identities, and has commonly denounced Muslims as “others” (p. 32). Especially after 9/11, Ewart and O’Donnell found that ideologies surrounding the incompatibility of Western culture and Muslim societal norms prevailed in journalism.

The misrepresentation of Muslim women specifically in U.S. media connects to issues in American foreign correspondence in the Islamic world and to poor journalistic practices. The title “foreign correspondent” has long been synonymous with whiteness, maleness, and imperialism, explains Priyanka Borpujari, an Indian human rights reporter, in a 2019 Columbia Journalism Review article titled “The Problem with ‘Fixers’.” In the piece, she notes how the Western journalist often enact the colonial savior complex when reporting in the non-Western world. I would argue this effect may be exacerbated when discussing Muslim women, who have been seen by journalists in this context as inherently oppressed. Western media’s imperial power has left many journalists in the non-Western world struggling for the agency to tell their own stories.

Borpujari discusses how the foreign reporting model used by media organizations still relies on Western, white journalists who fly into developing nations and hire local journalists in what she describes as “subservient roles” to help them report. These local journalists came to be known by the derogatory term “fixers.” A fixer can provide local sources for interviews and offer in-country expertise; they rarely receive reporting credit in the published piece. While the fixer and the Western correspondent perform similar jobs, the correspondent holds higher status because of his or her geographical privilege, residing as they do in the West, while fixers, who are local journalists with similar qualifications, are seen as lower status, according to industry observers. In other words,

local journalists hired as fixers by foreign journalists are often established reporters and can offer in-country expertise in the form of helpful contacts and language skills—and, again, may well have already covered the story in question. What they lack, in comparison with the correspondents and outlets paying for their services, is the big-name cachet that in the end only money can afford. (Borpujari, 2019, para. 4)

Borpujari describes this situation as a troubling power imbalance between Western and local reporters, which manifests itself in the level of danger that fixers are exposed to, and the credit which is denied them for their work. In a survey conducted by the Global Reporting Centre in 2016 and 2017, more than half of the fixers surveyed said that they were frequently put in danger in order to execute the correspondent’s assignment (further discussed in Chapter 3). In addition, the correspondent’s ignorance of local customs may require the fixer to clean up his or her mess, or the fixer may put in hours of work only to receive no credit. In the same study, the Global Reporting Centre found 60 percent of journalists stated that they never or rarely give fixers credit in their published work, though 86 percent of fixers said they would want such acknowledgment (Borpujari, 2019, para. 12). Borpujari says:

Too often, Western journalists are the sole authors of stories about non-Western

subjects, and the inequitable relationships within journalism get reproduced in the

published work. The result is a glut of predictable and monotonous news pieces about

rape in India and war in El Salvador. (para. 18)

Susan Sontag, the American writer and political activist, has written extensively on the role of international news displaying other people’s pain by looking at Western reporters in developing nations. In her book-length essay “Regarding the Pain of Others,” she writes:

To speak of reality becoming a spectacle is a breathtaking provincialism. It universalizes

the viewing habits of a small, educated population living in the rich part of the world,

where news has been converted into entertainment—that mature style of viewing which

is a prime acquisition of ‘the modern,’ and a prerequisite for dismantling traditional forms of party-based politics that offer disagreement and debate. (Sontag, 2003, pg. 110)

She argues that Western news is more dedicated to entertainment than the truth, which in fact, “inverts” the news subject’s reality. The demands of modern Western news only admit certain types of stories, so the Muslim woman subject’s reality is distorted to fit the entertainment mold. In other words, the Western narrative, rather than the truth of women’s stories, drives the reality that is presented. Sontag positions such misrepresentation not as inaccurate, but in fact as unethical, because subject’s lives are affected by misinformed or incomplete reporting.

As an international journalist in the Islamic world writing for a U.S. audience, Abdo understood firsthand these discrepancies. In her Nieman Reports article, she describes how she realized Islamic sources were considered less credible because of their religion and because their view on life differed from those of Western readers. This, in turn, hid their voices in media, which relied on Western journalists to represent a world they’ve been alienated from. The stories produced were often inaccurate, and highly influenced public opinion and perception of this group, she explains. Later in this literature review, I will show specific examples of this misrepresentation, and their rewrites by women from the Arab world.

As Abdo shows, I conclude these discrepancies result from institutional problems rather than the choices of individual journalists. Reporters often lack preparation and knowledge due to lack of resources and understanding. They often do not travel outside the capital in a new country for sources, missing out on many of the real voices that would give the story authenticity and truth. American journalists, in fact, are discouraged from becoming political experts in their area, for fear the story will be “too sophisticated for average readers” (Abdo, 2001). Journalists are also at fault for being too versatile; news organizations expect them to be able to cover any story in any country. There is an ingrained sense among Western editors and publishers that domestic and foreign reporters are interchangeable, according to Abdo. This lack of understanding has dissuaded Muslims from contributing to Western press, she adds, not only out of fear of being misrepresented, but also due to the lack of access to contribute their voice. This superficial coverage doesn’t capture the realities on the ground; but hot button issues in the Islam world play with editors and readers, so they prevail.

Language is another key ethical concern in analyzing international journalism. English-speaking sources in foreign nations are used more often than non-English-speaking sources, even if English isn’t the country’s first language. Many researchers agree that when reporting in the Muslim world, American media still uses many of the same sources from Westernized countries rather than those of the Muslim world, denying diverse viewpoints; they use English-speaking sources over locals who do not know English. Whether it’s because of a lack of budget or prioritization, learning foreign languages is not considered a necessary practice in most newsrooms. Only a select few publications offer language lessons to foreign correspondents (Abdo, 2001). In my review of the literature, as well as my own reporting experience, it seemed clear that excluding people who speak their native tongue from contributing to the conversation creates biased and inaccurate reporting. One article for the International Journalists’ Network argues that acquiring a translator, and nurturing that communicative role between the subject and reporter, will help facilitate more meaningful and ethical dialogue. Especially in a sensitive interview—for example discussing a Muslim women’s sexuality—it is important to have a translator that both the interviewer and interviewee are comfortable with to create a meaningful interview experience, which results in higher-quality reporting (Goujard, 2017).

**Responses by Muslim Women Journalists**

Many people, including Muslim women and international journalists, have noticed this phenomenon of Muslim women misrepresentation in media. Today, women are raising their voices by calling out false news; journalists and scholars are developing updated reporting models to conduct more accurate and ethical journalism in an effort to combat the injustices taking place in the field and in newsrooms.

In an attempt to gain agency over stories of Muslim women, for instance, Fatemeh Fakhraie founded an online blog called “Muslimah Media Watch,” a platform where Muslim women throughout the world discuss misinformed international articles covering their conditions. This blog was founded in 2007 to correct inaccurate journalism and to address the problem of journalists not understanding the context of their stories, whether about women’s rights in the Muslim world or other issues relating to culture, religion, politics, social issues, etc. in Muslim nations. The group’s website describes its mission as follows:

Muslimah Media Watch is a forum where we, as Muslim women, can critique how our images appear in the media and popular culture. Although we are of different nationalities, sects, races, etc., we have something important in common: we’re tired of seeing ourselves portrayed by the media in ways that are one-dimensional and misleading. This is a space where, from a Muslim feminist perspective, we can speak up for ourselves.

One guest contributor, Aisha Jamal, analyzed news about Saudi Arabian women being allowed to drive and how news outlets like The Guardian and The New York Times misunderstood its implications for women’s rights, arguing it was not the feminist victory it was portrayed to be. Jamal explains the motive behind the political decision was to deport non-Saudi migrant workers, rather than to offer more freedom to women. She argues that the women who could actually use this newfound freedom to drive were of citizenship status and upper-class. So this did not affect or liberate lower-class women. Another unnamed contributor commented on a BBC article on Moroccan single mothers, and noted that discrimination against these women extends beyond the conservative Muslim circle and actually into the West. Hundreds of posts like these exist on the website, demonstrating the severity of this journalism discrepancy and how many women are raising their voices to correct it.

In another attempt to offer solutions to poor Western journalistic coverage of Muslims, Jacqui Ewart, co-author of “Reporting Islam,” helped lead the Reporting Islam Project. It ran from 2014 to 2018, when funding from the Commonwealth of Australia ended. The project developed what Ewart called the Transformative Journalism Model, explained below, which was informed by three international studies, and attempts to correct unethical practices in the newsroom. The authors referred to a study conducted by Verica Rupar in 2012, which attributed the inaccurate conflation of Muslim faith and national culture, so common in European media, to systemic problems in newsrooms — including financial struggles, overworked reporters, time pressures, and a lack of training and knowledge on Muslim culture. These issues influenced the Transformative Journalism Model, which articulates that newsrooms could and should revise their models despite the other pressures listed above. It says:

Journalists needed to report factually and accurately on acts of racism and intolerance;

reporters should be sensitive when covering tensions between communities; journalists should avoid derogatory stereotypical depictions about religions and their adherence; and reporters should actively challenge the assumptions underlying intolerant remarks made by speakers in the course of interviews, reports and discussion programs. (68)

In addition, Rupar suggests journalists “familiarize themselves with anti-discrimination legislation, use broader networks of expert sources, ensure facts were put in context, avoid negative labels, portray people as human beings instead of members of an ethnic or religious group, organize in-house trainings and adopt internal editorial guidelines” (67). Rupar’s article was one of the many studies that influenced the Transformative Journalism Model outlined by Ewart’s book. Both examples here agree that reporting on Muslim women needs to be put into context. Muslimah Media Watch shows how women can rewrite their narratives and gain agency over their stories by correcting misinformed reporting; Reporting Islam demonstrated not only the need to correct unethical reporting from the Islamic world, but how to do so. These two groups work together to show how it is possible to change this phenomenon of misrepresentation, similar to how the Muslim women below are using their writing to combat stereotypes and preconceived notions of their identities.

**Moroccan Women Writers: Emerging Practices**

Efforts like Muslim Media Watch and the Reporting Islam project offer critiques of current media and propose practices to improve. Meanwhile, individual journalists from Muslim-majority countries are finding their own ways to develop more ethical journalism practices. Aida Alami, whom I profile in Chapter 3 of this thesis, attempts to incorporate the historic context and background of Morocco into her stories, to make clear she is writing about a specific, local institution of culture, rather than making sweeping statements about a massive religious group. As a Moroccan Muslim woman, she has strong feelings on the representation of this population in Western media, which is why she writes the stories she does — offering to correct and rewrite the narrative.

Alami’s reporting approach, she says, is akin to the book, “Do Muslim Women Need Saving?” by Lila Abu-Lughod. In the book, the author and anthropologist debunks the Western story of blaming Islam for Muslim women’s oppression. It is common to see Western reporters comment on Muslim women’s conservative clothing as a sign of oppression and lack of agency, which Western feminists often see as an opportunity to claim and fight for, denying Muslim women the opportunity to speak up for themselves on how they actually feel about these discussions. Abu-Lughod says such forms of perceived discrimination rise not from the Islamic religion but governments and other such modes of power, like their police and military sectors mistreating women. She asks: “How is the current moral crusade to save Muslim women authorized? What worldly effects do well-meaning concerns have on the suffering of women else-where in the world? How does the proposition that such women live caged in their cultures undergird fantasies of rescue by ‘the world community’?” (26). Here she is touching on the colonial appropriation of women’s voices, similar to the colonial savior complex theory discussed earlier in this chapter.

In her articles on human and women’s rights for The New York Times and elsewhere, Alami often makes a point to explain that Morocco is a country shaped by French colonialism, emphasizing how this has influenced their policies and social climate, rather than pointing to Islam as the sole reason for social and cultural circumstances.

Alami herself demonstrates that Islamic women do not fit into an easy stereotype — she identifies culturally as a Muslim but not in religious practice. Born in Morocco, she attended the Columbia School of Journalism and reports in a way that reflects ethical journalistic practices. Now living in Rabat, she writes about climate change in the Middle East and how young activists are making a difference there, citing sources who are actually from the places she’s discussing (Alami, 2019). She writes about burqas and how Moroccan women actually view their conditions and clothing options, noting that Western feminism is not the sole lens from which to see all women’s issues. Alami also mentors young American writers writing about Morocco on how to report on the nation in an accurate way.

Laila Lalami, who lived in Rabat until graduate school, takes a different approach. In her journalism and creative writing, she shows sources and characters of Muslim background that represent an accurate account of their lived experiences. She focuses on literary criticism, political analysis, cultural commentary and memoir. After earning her B.A from Mohammed V University and M.A. from University College London, Lalami moved to California at the age of 24 to pursue a PhD in linguistics and now teaches at the University of California, Riverside.

In an article Alami wrote on Lalami for the Middle East Eye titled, “Whoever tells the story controls the world,” Lalami describes her transition to writing in English as a tool to tell stories. Alami writes, “Lalami eventually decided to unburden her writing of colonial baggage…She eventually became extremely aware of how languages shape our views of the world” (Alami, 2019, para. 22-23). Moroccan novels are written in Modern Standard Arabic, which is learned in school, not spoken at home. Because Lalami attended a French school in Morocco from a young age, she was never properly trained to write Standard Arabic. Before moving to the U.S., she solely wrote in French, a language equated with success in Moroccan universities and businesses due to French colonialism roots; she later noted that her colloquial Arabic suffered as a result of it. It wasn’t until she transitioned to writing English that she recognized how “colonial baggage” still controls narratives. English is spoken in the Western world and it allows her writing to reach that audience, so she ditched her French, and English prevails in her writing today.

She uses the tool of language to comment on Western perspectives of Muslim women and American politics. She has written pieces like “Chronicles of the Veil,” published in the Los Angeles Review of Books Quarterly Journal in 2014, which looks at books in Morocco about Muslim women versus books in the U.S. about Muslim women — concluding there is a large difference between the two. She writes, “There came a moment when I realized that there are two distinct kinds of conversations taking place around Muslim women — one in Muslim countries and one in Western countries.” She concludes in her writing there is a misunderstanding of Muslim women’s oppression in the mainstream media, which fails to acknowledge factors like legal, educational, and economic mechanisms contributing to their states. She asks whether Western readers understand how their own culture contributes to their position, writing “Can they [Westerners] point to the role their own governments sometimes play in perpetuating these mechanisms?” She continues that Western media consumers “feel ‘concern’ about these women, feel that these women need to be ‘saved’ somehow, and probably also feel relief that they are not among them.” This furthers the “they” versus “us” construct Sontag and Ewart discuss in their research on world power dynamics and its implications for how Westerner’s see “others.”

**Conclusion**

The literature indicates a clear cultural divide between Western journalists and their subjects, resulting in inaccurate accounts of Muslim women’s experiences being told by foreign journalists. My research concludes this divide arises from international politics with a deeply rooted history in religious and social discourses. Because most media portrayals fail to acknowledge this history, there is a disconnect between unethical journalism practices by Western media correspondents and the lived experience of Muslim and Arab women. Often, stories written by Western journalists on foreign populations exclude sources from that culture by instead only including predominantly Western voices. These stories often offer false narratives, attributing all gender equality issues in the Muslim and Arab world to Islam, when, in fact, they commonly stem from cultural and social norms rather than solely religion. By merging ethical international reporting practices and rethinking media perceptions of Muslim women, more accurate accounts may find their way into Western news media. Accurate accounts of foreign populations may well lead to more productive, cohesive discourse in correspondence amongst the Western and Muslim populations.

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**Part II**: **Creative Work**

**Introduction to Creative Section**

In this section, I offer three articles that attempt, through narrative journalism, to show the complex dynamics at work in Western coverage of women in the Middle East. Starting with myself as a young journalist trying to learn, moving to a seasoned reporter and member of the Muslim diaspora practicing journalism and writing about other journalists, and ending with an international journalist now teaching new and better ways of reporting foreign cultures. While these three are meant to fit together as a whole, each is written as a stand-alone piece that could run independently. Thus, readers of this thesis will see some overlap of material between these articles, and between the creative section and the literature review in Chapter 2. It is my intention to submit these pieces for consideration to outlets including Newsweek or the Columbia Journalism Review, either as separate articles, or woven together more completely as a longer piece.

**Chapter 3: Mindful in Morocco**

*Author’s Note: I begin this creative section with my own reported essay, to show how even well-meaning reporters from the West can be led astray by preconceptions — and that such errors can be corrected with wise guidance and teaching.*

Our journey began in Tetouan, a rugged and mountainous city in Northern Morocco. Just a few miles due south of the Strait of Gibraltar, the region’s obscure terrain was once the floor of the Mediterranean Sea. Apart from the geographically distinct landscape, the north is generally considered by Moroccans as more conservative than the south, a sociocultural phenomenon I had been oblivious to before I arrived in Morocco for a study abroad program in January 2019.

Now, three months later in early April, I was traveling there with my reporting partner Zakaria El Kouzani, a Moroccan native from the southern city of Agadir; we were in pursuit of elusive interviews for a reporting project. I had booked us two rooms at the Hotel Marina for 433 Dirhams, the equivalent of $45. Upon checking in, we were placed in rooms on separate floors, something we initially paid little attention to. Our big interview was the following morning, so we decided to refine our game plan that night in Zakaria’s room. Shortly into our meeting, a sudden, violent and persistent knock began thundering from the door. We both froze. A short man with dark hair who appeared to be the manager was shouting at Zakaria — I couldn’t understand a word of his Darija, the colloquial Moroccan Arabic dialect.

The shouting really only lasted about two minutes, but with every passing second I could feel myself growing progressively numb, my mind’s attempt to distance me from the situation as much as possible. The language barrier and cultural norms I was isolated from made me feel helpless. My eyes widened as Zakaria turned around to look at me.

The manager, he told me, was concerned we were violating the “no sex before marriage” rule by being in the same hotel room. Once Zakaria explained we were colleagues planning out a project, the manager asked us to leave the hotel door open if we were together. Zakaria couldn’t shake the way he was spoken to: “That’s not how you talk to people,” he kept repeating. He assured me that nothing like this had ever happened to him before. We switched hotels the next day, but the experience foreshadowed the difficulties to come.

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When I’d first ventured to Morocco in January, I was a fresh-faced 21-year-old, eager to immerse myself in a new country and become a temporary international journalist. Writing had always been a passion of mine, and so had the topic of women’s rights, as I had found in my studies at the University of Colorado Boulder. I wanted to write a story that gave voice to the voiceless; I thought I could do that by writing about Moroccan Muslim women. Over the next three months, I would discover how complex of a task this was.

I enrolled at the Center for Cross Cultural Learning (CCCL) in Rabat, the capital city. The Center is located in the heart of the medina, the old part of the city, and I often became disoriented in the walled and narrow, winding streets. Luckily the extraordinary number of stray cats made for good company. In Rabat I lived with a host family, including my host mom, Nezha, my host dad Rachid and Halima, my 16-year-old host sister. Their home was a short walk from school. I slept in the living room with a curtain for privacy at night. We spoke broken French to each other and shared a large bowl of couscous every Friday at 1 p.m.

Morocco is a Muslim-majority kingdom in North Africa, and is considered a more stable nation than other Arab countries in the Middle East. Under the French protectorate from 1912 to 1956, the Moroccan government today has a notorious record of corruption and brutality. I wanted to write about how the country’s laws and societal norms affected women; based on U.S. media coverage, I believed these women to be systematically oppressed, veiled by their hijabs and lack of rights. In Morocco, sex outside marriage is illegal and it is socially expected that men and women remain sexually modest before marriage. That *really* interested me. Growing up in relatively liberal suburb near Chicago and now attending school in the even more progressive Boulder, I was interested in the sexual culture of a conservative country, especially one so far away from home.

Virginity testing for the purpose of obtaining a medically approved virginity certificate is a custom widely practiced in Morocco. I first learned this in a narrow lecture room adorned with mosaic tiles at the CCCL presented by Dr. Adessamad Dialmy, a sociologist of sexuality, gender and religion. He discussed the sociocultural origins of the norm, presenting the continued social significance of the certificates as a historical function of a ubiquitous theme in Islam: the preservation of a female’s sexual purity prior to marriage. For many Moroccans, virginity certificates serve as proof for potential husbands that the sanctity of marriage will be retained in accordance with the principles of the Quran. After providing a holistic depiction of the custom’s religious genesis, Dr. Dialmy, a distinguished-looking professor with thick, dark eyebrows and classically intellectual glasses, proceeded to describe the importance of the certificates from the female perspective; this included a discussion regarding the common reliance of Moroccan women on hymen reconstruction surgery. In detailing the overlap of the social norm with traditional Islamic conceptions of marriage, as well as the value women themselves place on such sanctity, Dr. Dialmy unveiled my own virgin eyes to the complexity of the issue I had initially opposed so passionately.

Many of the program’s advisors warned me of the difficulties of covering the sensitive topic of Muslim women’s virginity. This made sense given the background Dr. Dialmy provided; not only would it be extraordinarily difficult to find women willing to talk given the sensitivity of the issue, but also many Moroccan women support the practice along with the associated religious values. Yet I decided to pursue the story anyway — it felt like there was something left unsaid about the certificates.

The program partnered me with Zakaria, who was 22 years old at the time and a student at the Connect Institute in Agadir, a post high school or college institution aimed at empowering the region’s young adults. Agadir is along the Atlantic Coast and 45 minutes from the city of Oulad Teima, a metropolitan area of about 80,000 people. The day we met he told me he dreamed of reforming Morocco’s education system. I asked him if he’d want to help me with a story on virginity certificates. To my surprise, he didn’t seem reluctant at all. He said he was up for the challenge, or “mission” as he called it, with a broad grin. A few weeks later, Zakaria and I were working relentlessly trying to secure interviews with women who had undergone virginity testing and obtained a certificate — and, most importantly, who were willing to talk about it.

In early April, Zakaria contacted a women’s rights organization in Tetouan who promised us interviews with women who fit the bill. We were ecstatic. With stipend money from the CCCL, I was able to fund our travel. That’s how we ended up in the hotel where the manager’s reaction to our collaboration so vividly illustrated the culture.

Once we’d moved to a new hotel, we spent hours walking around Tetouan’s city streets the next day trying to find the organization — it had no address we could locate. Zakaria called them dozens of times and no one answered. When we finally found the organization (about three frantic taxi rides later), the door was locked. It appeared closed. I was too tired to even feel the full defeat of it.

We went back to the new hotel empty-handed. That night, Zakaria’s contact told him our topic was inappropriate and that the women had changed their mind about the interviews. In the morning Zakaria traveled back home to Agadir, a 14-hour bus ride, and I to Rabat, around two and a half hours via bus and train.

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I’d hoped to be transcribing interviews the next day, but instead I found myself still researching the certificates. I went to my favorite spot in Rabat at Hotel Oudais — practically the only solid Wifi hub I’d found in the whole city. I practiced ordering in Arabic: *bghit atay binaenae bilah sukkar?* (Can I have mint tea without sugar?). I browsed the internet and sipped the scorching hot drink. I felt my pulse quicken and my focus sharpen as my eyes stopped on a new piece of information: that blood was traditionally used as an indicator of virginity the night of Moroccan weddings, and if a woman didn’t bleed on her wedding night, Moroccan men have the right to annul the marriage. There are accounts of women in rural families who were ostracized from their family and community based on such evidence. This new information only further demonstrated Dr. Dialmy’s earlier complex outline of the relationship between Moroccan culture’s heavy emphasis on virginity and traditional Islamic thought.

While Zakaria was back in Agadir, I traveled to Casablanca to interview Rachid Aboutaieb, doctor of urology and head of the Moroccan Association of Sexology. In February 2018, the organization called on the Moroccan Ministry of Health to forbid the medical distribution of virginity certificates to young women. Dr. Aboutaieb and I were able to conduct our interview in English, where he shared the following with me:

A 12-year-old Moroccan girl was pulled into his office by her mother early last winter at a hospital in Casablanca. She had fallen down at school and something landed between her legs. After a check-up, he reported to the woman that her daughter was “just fine.”

Yet, the mother feared the injury took her young girl’s virginity. She asked Dr. Aboutaieb to check again more thoroughly, this time to see if her daughter’s hymen, the thin piece of tissue that surrounds or partially covers the external vaginal opening, was still intact.

Aboutaieb said he didn’t want to traumatize the young girl from the invasive virginity test. So, he told the mother she’d have to go to another doctor.

“She’s young, she has to go back to school and not think about this,” he said.

The girl and her mother left Aboutaieb’s office. He doesn’t know whether the woman found another doctor; he says he knows of colleagues that are asked to write virginity certificates two to three times a week.

I left his office having a clear idea on the negative consequences of the practice — but no closer to finding women’s voices to include in my story.

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Two weeks after our failed interview expedition and with just two weeks before the end of the semester, Zakaria called me via WhatsApp with good news: He had found women for us to interview near his home. The next day I took a four-hour train to Marrakech followed by a three-hour bus to Agadir.

Upon arrival, Zakaria took me to a women’s shelter where we were greeted by the director, Aicha Belhssain. I didn’t see much of the space as we were rushed to a small room with a big brown couch. Aicha was surprised when she heard our topic, but still eager to help. She called in two women to speak with us, who each asked to remain anonymous. Both avoided eye contact while speaking; we later learned this was largely because Zakaria, a man, was in the room as translator. Their stories were of sexual assault, and how they had been ostracized from their communities since the attacks. I didn’t understand the full gist of their stories until Zakaria transcribed them later to me.

“For women, our vagina is our honor,” one of the woman in the shelter had said. Eyes red with tears, her voice was barely audible over the hum of conversation in the hallway. Her fiancé drugged and assaulted her months before their wedding. She got a certificate to prove she was still a virgin and could get married. She ended the interview after disclosing this information. At the time I couldn’t understand what she was saying, but I felt the interview abruptly end. My heart sank towards my toes.

I learned the double standards around virginity and sexual assault play off each other. Criminalizing sex outside marriage is a barrier to women reporting rape, who risk prosecution as criminals themselves if they admit to premarital sexual intercourse, even if it were forced up on them. Some doctors are paid off by the defense to give virginity certificates to prove the accused innocent. Plus, Morocco’s narrow definition of rape leaves out that there are other ways to be raped besides vaginal penetration.

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The following morning Zakaria and I took the 45-minute taxi ride from Agadir to Oulad Teima to interview a handful of women at a local women’s club in town, where some worked as cooks and others as seamstresses.With one interview under our belts, we came better prepared: this time we’d bring along a female translator, a friend of Zakaria’s named Fatima who would meet us there.

While cramped into the front passenger seat with Zakaria, I looked outside the taxi’s window — not only to avoid breathing on his face, but to also situate myself with the changing surroundings. My eyes flashed over Moroccan villages, each a dynamic and uniquely vibrant hub of people, their children, and animals interspaced with open land. Zakaria and I had another 20 minutes remaining on our 45-minute ride when a heavy-set woman in the backseat hollered in Darija for the taxi driver to pull over at the curbside of what appeared to be a portable outdoor market fully decorated with bodies of chickens. She handed him 10 Dirhams (about $1) and we set off on our way again.

I readjusted my maroon scarf and green jacket, wondering why Zakaria and I were staying in our front row seats even though the car now had an empty seat in the back. Zakaria didn’t usher me to move so I stayed put, unsure of how to navigate the shared taxi culture. Zakaria’s hands were resting on his slim-cut blue jeans. From time to time we’d converse on music or our plan for the day in English, but we let silence dominate the majority the stuffy ride.

The landscape grew increasingly urbanized as we drew closer to our final destination. Zakaria swiftly said *shukran*, thank you, to the taxi driver as we exited. We puzzled through some winding streets to meet up with Zakaria’s friend, Fatima Ezzahra Larheryeb. She was wearing a grey hijab and a long black dress; her eyes were big, brown and soft; she greeted me by kissing my left cheek and then my right. A friend of Zakaria’s and a nearby resident of Oulad Teima, she had no experience in translating, but had generously offered to do her best.

As we approached the women’s club, which looked vastly different than the shelter in Agadir, filled with chatty voices and outdoor leisure, I explained to Fatima the nature of the story and thanked her countless times for her help. I explained that the women at the club only spoke Darija — having a female translator was essential to facilitate meaningful and authentic dialogue, especially on the sensitive topic of Muslim women and their sexuality. Though we had just met a few minutes ago, Fatima would be my major link to these women and their stories. It felt fast. As a man, Zakaria waited outside for hours while we did our work.

As I began the interviews, time and distraction fell away. Nothing else mattered in that moment but my recorder, pen and paper. I didn’t drink water or think of anything else — it was the most present I’d been in this country, almost in my life. Fatima and I were ushered into the club director’s office. Just outside of it women of all ages were talking and praying and eating in the open air common space. Most of them wore djellabas, the long, loose, traditional dress I’d seen my host mom wear most days.

I sat down with five women over the course of two hours. I started a new recording on my iPhone for each interview — some were five minutes; some were 35 minutes. I asked Fatima to ask them to describe their virginity examination at the doctor, to tell me about their relationship with their husband, and their opinions on the practice and organizations trying to stop it. Fatih Alaoui, Ghizlan Machouch, Khadija Akroro, Fatima Argaz and Fatima Maata Lah all independently shared similar ideas to me: they saw nothing wrong with virginity examinations.

In fact, quite the opposite, they told me. I learned that many Moroccan women find empowerment in the practice and choose to undergo the examination as a form of protection from annulment. Khadija, 31, said, “All girls should get it for themselves — to guarantee you are good person.” More stories emerged as we spoke, but none of the women expressed discomfort or disapproval of the examination or the certificate. In response to my questions, several of the woman asked me this: If the government were to suddenly make certificates illegal, how would they protect themselves and prove their purity?

I asked Fatima to be as accurate as possible when translating their shared words so as to ensure proper quotations in the piece. Still, I could tell by the fourth or fifth interview some of the dialogue was being simplified in translation. The women were discussing their marriages and experience growing up in a small town; It became difficult for both of us to balance the translation while also trying to be sensitive to the women and their time. But we did it to the best of our ability, all of us beginners to the situation.

After our interview, the club director sat Fatima, Zakaria and I down for tea and cookies. I finally gulped water and relaxed my shoulders from my ears. Then I began to think: If Morocco banned the certificates, where would women go for protection? The problem, I began to see, was not about the legality of the certificates; it was the fact that sex before marriage is illegal, and social norms of purity have stemmed from that, enforced by decades of colonial input. Banning certificates wouldn’t make a difference if women’s sexuality were still stigmatized. Legal change wouldn’t help without social change. I had found my angle on the story, and had Fatima and Zakaria to thank for it. Through our experiences we had developed a friendship that extended far beyond my stay in the country.

On the taxi ride home from the interviews, Zakaria looked at me. “Mission accomplished,” he said, with a wide toothy smile. Instead of looking out the window, we spent the ride home sharing headphones and listening to his favorite Arabic music. I felt relief in that moment, feeling like I proved all those who warned me wrong — I got the interviews.

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As it turned out, however, getting the interviews was just the beginning. The writing required a new level of intercultural understanding. Holding these women’s stories in my heart and trying to write about them was an emotional experience, and much more difficult than I had expected. I found that not one source explained what was going on. Dr. Dialmy’s background on the subject was valuable, but not representative of the actual realities on the ground, for these women. I also found that you couldn’t base the entirety of the story off the Quran, the Islamic sacred text.

My early drafts, I quickly learned, didn’t strike an accurate balance. Even though I now knew better than to equate Muslim religious practices with local national culture, I still found myself conflating the two. Aida Alami, Moroccan New York Times foreign correspondent and journalism advisor at the CCCL, firmly edited me, removing correlations of Islam to the practice of virginity certificates. Aida explained to me how the common misrepresentation of Muslim women in Western news is because cultural and social issues are blamed on Islam, when the Quran has little to do with it — the oppressive government and social expectations influence practices such as virginity certificates and premarital sex laws.

In other words, while the basis of the oppressive laws can be connected to religious ideals as Dr. Dialmy pointed out, the current practice is a consequence of oppressive government interests. Yet, if the government made certificates illegal, the practice would probably go underground and be performed in unsanitary conditions unless social changes were first implemented to reduce the stigma surrounding women’s virginity. In the editing process, I learned how to balance what I’d observed with an understanding of cultural and religious norms.

I opened the story with the physical and emotional discomfort of the inspection, and how many Moroccan women reported it to be invasive. I added the voice of activists and doctors who reject the practice. Then I transitioned, adding the voices of the five women I interviewed in Oulad Teima. Following Aida’s advice, I tried to let their voices speak for themselves. Western feminists often project the assumption that journalism is a way of saving Muslim women through sharing the injustices they experience with the world. But these injustices are often presented in direct comparison to Western notions and conceptions of society, and do not truly depict the women’s subjective experience of the topic. My own view of virginity certificates, and especially the means by which I initially intended to present the topic, drastically changed when I listened to the women share their side of the story.

It was tough love learning the way I first wrote the story was not an accurate representation of the lived Muslim women experience, but with help from my advisor (and many revisions later), the finished piece felt authentic and true, a sensitive story told entirely from Muslim women themselves. (That piece, included as an appendix to this thesis, has been provisionally accepted by Newsweek). This process changed my outlook on judging the lives of others, especially when they are from a culture that is not my own. It opened the doors for me to think about how all it takes to understand to is to ask, and more importantly, to listen.

**Chapter 4**

**Zahra Hankir**

**The Storyteller’s Stories: Voices of Arab Women Journalists**

*Author’s Note: In reporting the virginity certificate story in Morocco, I was inspired by the work of Zahra Hankir, who was one of the first Arab woman reporters to cover Lebanese hymenoplasty. The following profile demonstrates how she got there, and how she came to write a book about Arab female journalists covering war and tragedy in the Middle East.*

Bravery. And then guilt.

That’s the typical emotional trajectory of a female journalist from the Arab world, according to Zahra Hankir, author of the critically acclaimed 2019 book, “Our Women on the Ground.”

“There’s always this feeling you’re not doing enough,” said Hankir, a Lebanese-British journalist who has written for BBC News, VICE News, Al Jazeera English and the Los Angeles Times, among others. “That guilt stays with you; I think particularly if you cover the Arab world because there’s so much tragedy, complexity and nuance.”

Born in the United Kingdom in 1984 after her newlywed parents fled the Lebanese civil war in 1980, Hankir represents a crossroad not only between Western and Muslim reporting, but also between the identities of a local and a foreign journalist. In her own journalism, and in that of the journalists she’s written about, she bridges cultural understanding and brings nuance to portrayals of the Arab world, showing how Western reporters can follow suit to accurately cover Arab and Muslim women.

**Women on the Ground**

Though she grew up in Belfast as a British citizen, her parents instilled in her immense love for Lebanese and Arab culture. With phone lines often down in Lebanon, the news became her family’s only way of knowing what was happening back home. News became an important aspect of Hankir’s identity and connecting with her homeland.

“I always used to think of journalists as heroes,” Hankir said. “I used to watch the news thinking, wow, these people are committed to telling the truth of what is happening in various regions across the world.”

There was no doubt in her mind that journalism would be her career. She thought, perhaps naively, that she would find fulfillment from it.

**Local Reporting**

Hankir moved to Lebanon as the civil war subsided in 1994 when she was 10 years old, and later, in 2002, enrolled in the American University of Beirut. She became the editor of her university’s newspaper, which further instilled her desire to become a journalist upon graduation. She found her calling covering politics, culture and society, and the realities of what was going on around her.

Although a British citizen, Hankir never thought of herself as a foreign reporter in Lebanon — she was just a journalist covering news in Lebanon for a local media outlet. That’s where she saw the contrast between a local and foreign journalist, and the difference, she says, is in insight and access. Insight refers to knowledge of the culture, while access is in speaking to local sources accurately. Still, as her career progressed, she noticed that those qualities sometimes weren’t appreciated by Western newsrooms.

“There's always this feeling that I didn't have the worthiness of some of the other people in the newsroom who might have been white or male,” Hankir said. “This was very much a reality for me, particularly when observing who was commanding the narrative on the Middle East. I always felt like locals were almost sidelined, or people with that background were not treated on the same level as Westerners, even though I myself am a native speaker of English.”

**Covering Women from the Muslim and Arab World**

She returned to England for a year to earn her masters in Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Manchester in 2006. After completing her degree and returning to Lebanon, Hankir wrote an article in 2007 for a now-defunct Lebanese digital news outlet, NOW News. The piece, titled “A Second First Time,” covered hymenoplasty, the restoring of the hymen, which is a common practice among Lebanese and Arab women. She knew it was taboo to discuss virginity in their conservative society but wanted to investigate why women were undergoing the procedure.

“I think myself being a Lebanese woman and a Muslim woman from a conservative society who is also quite liberal, many of the women felt they could speak to me quite candidly and quite openly about not only the reasons they chose to do it, but also their fear about having done it,” Hankir said.

She spoke to many Lebanese women anonymously to not only ask what compelled them to do it, but what societal factors were involved. She interviewed gynecologists offering the procedure, asking about its logistics. The main reason for the procedure, Hankir found, was so the woman could bleed during intercourse the night of her wedding — a sign of pure virginity. She discussed the social consequences versus religious ideals inflicting the wide use of the procedure.

“That story was one of the most meaningful ones I’ve ever written,” she said. Since the story’s publication over 12 years ago, Hankir has received over 100 emails from women thanking her for illuminating their voices in the story. She continues to receive them to this day.

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In 2008, Hankir won a Jack R. Howard Fellowship in International Journalism to study at the Columbia School of Journalism in New York, where she covered the Muslim community of Queens. She moved to Dubai in 2010 to work as a reporter and editor at Bloomberg News, and then returned to London in 2013 while continuing with Bloomberg. Until 2016, she covered economies and markets of the Middle East and North Africa for the publication, routinely traveling all around the region, from Cairo to Jordan to Morocco.

When the Arab Spring erupted in 2011, Hankir reported the uprisings for Bloomberg. She became acutely aware of the difference between herself, mostly reporting from the office, and the women reporters on the ground. She was inspired to give these women from the Arab world a platform to share their stories, and “Our Women on the Ground” was born.

Hankir edited the stories of 19 Arab woman writers covering war and tragedy in the Middle East, and explains how her own privilege loomed over the compilation of the book, which was published in August 2019.

“I never really faced challenges that the women in this book faced,” she says. “I’m quite lucky in that.” She emphasizes the importance of knowing the differences across the Middle East region in terms of press freedoms and women’s rights. Lebanon has certain liberties in journalism that are unheard of in other nearby countries like Syria and Iraq, but there is still some self-censorship, especially when covering the Lebanese government. She did experience sexual harassment on the job, but she explained she was never in danger of losing her life.

At that point, she decided these women on the ground deserved a book of their own.

“Our Women on the Ground” has received international praise for uniting the stories of female journalists from the Arab world in an authentic way.

Dwight Garner, book critic for The New York Times, calls it, “A stirring, provocative and well-made new anthology . . . that rewrites the hoary rules of the foreign correspondent playbook, deactivating the old clichés.”

Hankir’s book allowed the truths of each of the 19 women — who are not only of Muslim faith, but of all backgrounds and religions from the Arab world — speak for themselves.

One of the contributors, Nada Bakri, former foreign correspondent to The New York Times, felt hesitant to contribute, as she hadn’t been on the ground for quite some time. In the end, though, she decided to anyways because she felt the book could help make change.

“My initial reaction, though, was how important and essential this book is at a time when the market continues to be saturated with stories about the Arab World written by foreign journalists,” Bakri said. “It would be the first time that Arab female journalists will have the chance to tell their own stories in their own words.”

In the book, Bakri wrote about the death of her husband, reporter Anthony Shadid of The New York Times, who died while on assignment in Syria in 2012 under unclear circumstances. Bakri’s story wasn’t just about losing him, but how all the different aspects of the Arab Spring also affected her life in a deep way, leaving her almost hopeless. In the book she said she left journalism, left her home in Beirut and moved away from everyone and everything familiar. “Along the way, I became someone I don’t recognize,” she wrote in the anthology.

“I think the book helped to dispel misconceptions about our part of the world and celebrated the very essential work that we do. Without our women on the ground, countless stories would have never been told,” Bakri said.

Hwaida Saad, Lebanese war correspondent to The New York Times and contributer to Hankir’s book, agrees. Like Bakri, she was uncertain when Hankir first presented the project to her; she had covered uprisings in Syria for the past nine years and wasn’t sure what she would include and what she would exclude.

“But Zahra was determined,” Saad said. Hankir told Saad to take her time and think about it. “She was super patient and encouraging,” she added. “I didn’t know how important my stories were; she knew.”

Hankir’s didn’t set out to challenge Western media narratives of Muslim and Arab women, but inevitably the voices in her book spoke their truths and revealed a pattern of misconceptions.

“There are no two women that are alike, which is sort of an obvious thing to say, but I think given the depictions of Muslim women and Western media, they tend to be quite, let's say, simplistic,” Hankir said.

She wanted to demonstrate the successes and resiliency of Arab female journalists, but also not stray away from the oppression they face.

The stereotypes are rooted in some realities, she says. Women across the region face challenges that are quite dire, but Hankir wanted to redirect the focus from these women needing to be repaired or “saved” from the West, and instead shed light on their realities of courage and bravery required in journalism.

**Western Reporting**

Today, over a decade into her career, her thoughts have shifted on the state of journalism and its representation of Muslim and Arab women — and the guilt that comes from being on the other side of it.

To represent women of Arab backgrounds accurately in Western media, Hankir says to start with the way international journalists and foreign correspondents conduct their work.

Hankir believes misinformed coverage and biases are rooted in post-colonialism and orientalism — and that such it needs to be challenged. She says it starts by recognizing who currently controls the Arab world narrative.

“For so long it has been Westerners and it has been males,” Hankir said. But more recently, there are far more women on the ground in the Middle East of Western origin and far more Arab bylines in Western press, she adds.

She says women have proved they can do this type of work, which is why she invited CNN chief international correspondent and British-Iranian journalist Christiane Amanpour to write the foreword for her book. Hankir argues she was one of the first woman to become high profile after doing substantial reporting over a period of decades.

**“**If you see certain success in the field, others will follow. That’s not to say that women were not doing that work before, but I think they were just given more attention and that has a domino effect,” Hankir said.

While Hankir believes there is still more work to be done, the response from her book shows the movement is gaining momentum.

“I get messages from young Arab women and women of color frequently telling me how inspired they feel and how they'd like to pursue journalism,” Hankir said. “I think it’s also been celebrated because there is a recognition that these are women who need to be valued in a way they haven’t previously, and celebrate and acknowledged.”

Hankir believes things are starting to change ever so slowly. “I can’t deny that the publication of this book [Our Women on the Ground] was also a significant step forward, because these voices have been amplified and that has a knock on effect too,” she said.

She hopes the domino effect will continue to empower Western journalists and Arab women alike to work together and create informed coverage, truly capturing the realities on the ground.

**Chapter 5**

**Aida Alami**

**Bridging Worlds: Teaching the Next Generation**

*Author’s Note: For me, Zahra Hankir Represents the kind of journalist I would like to be, one who doesn’t let preconceived notions shield the real voices of her subjects, and tries to let them tell their own stories. The next profile of Aida Alami demonstrates how Muslim women are teaching others, including students like myself, how to practice such techniques of ethical reporting.*

Aida Alami wanted to teach journalism differently. As a Moroccan Muslim woman and foreign correspondent to The New York Times since 2011, she’d seen skewed representation of Muslim women in Western media.

While covering human rights and politics in Morocco, she’d noticed that what Western reporters defined as “Muslim” practices or traditions were often local cultural norms, adding that it’s hard to generalize or explain behavior through the sole lens of religion. She’d noted how coverage on bans of burqas and burkini in France were presented as a women’s rights issue with little regard to Muslim women’s views. She’d even noticed how domestic violence was described as a crime of honor in Muslim societies compared its more “normative” counterpart in Western nations. All this had made her increasingly uncomfortable with how Muslim women’s experiences were portrayed in media.

So in 2012 when she got a call from her hotel room in Rome from a woman named Mary Stucky, inviting her to help start a study abroad program in Morocco that educates young American journalists, she said yes. She was based in Casablanca at the time, but spent most of the year traveling and freelancing.

“There is an assumption that Western principles should be the norm. If other countries don’t fit under the same principles or values, there is something wrong with them,” she said over the phone from the UAE, where she was working on a journalism assignment. She wanted to help change that, and training young journalists seemed a good place to start. In many ways her entire life had prepared her for the role.

Alami grew up in Marrakesh, Morocco, the fourth biggest city in the North African kingdom, and moved to New York City at 18 years old to pursue her education. She got her BA in media studies from Hunter College. During her junior year at Hunter, she started her own newspaper on campus called The Word Print. She said the existing publication at her school was very partisan, and she wanted to create an outlet for students like herself to do unbiased reporting. Plus, she wanted to take on the challenge.

“I wanted to create an outlet for students like me who just wanted to do neutral reporting and not be connected to any student political party,” she added.

Passionate about her journalism experience at Hunter, she went on to get her master’s in journalism at Columbia University, the leading journalism school in the United States. During that time, she began to notice the misrepresentation of women from her country. Muslim women were often associated with not having agency or rights in U.S. media.

“White men and women reporting on these countries through their lens and their own understanding and their own biases and values miss a lot of nuances,” Alami explained. “I think the biggest issue is this need to save Muslim women.”

Alami became aware of persistent issues like those described in the book “Do Muslim Women Need Saving” by Lila Abu-Lughod. In the book, the author and anthropologist debunks the Western narrative blaming Islam for Muslim women’s oppression. Western reporters, she argues, often comment on Muslim women’s conservative clothing as a sign of oppression and lack of agency. Western feminists often see this as an opportunity to claim and fight for, denying Muslim women to speak up for themselves on how they actually feel about these discussions.

“Not to say there aren’t excellent journalists that cover this region,” Alami said. Nevertheless, she adds, most reporters interpret what they see in Arab countries “through a lens that sometimes doesn’t even understand the culture they’re talking about.”

After grad school, Alami moved back to Morocco and started working for a magazine in Casablanca that was soon after shut down by the government for violating strict press laws. That’s when her freelancing career began. With her journalism education, she soon found herself freelancing for The New York Times, NYR Daily, Middle East Eye, Al Jazeera English and Foreign Policy, among others.

She also worked with other Western journalists as a “fixer,” serving as a local guide to help arrange a story. For Alami, this was a positive experience: she found that Western journalists respected her background and her Columbia Journalism school credentials. She soon won her own bylines. But she saw other local journalists experience a more negative side of the fixing arrangement — often they were taken advantage of by putting in long hours and receiving no reporting credits for their labor.

Such exploitation of fixers, she learned, was not unique to her colleagues. A survey conducted by the Global Reporting Centre in 2016 and 2017 showed a wide discrepancy between Western and in-country reporters. The survey included 450 people from 70 countries: Some 60 percent of journalists surveyed stated that they never or rarely give fixers credit in their published work, though 86 percent of fixers said they would like for that to happen.

Priyanka Borpujari, a human rights reported based in India, wrote in the Columbia Journalism Review, “Too often, Western journalists are the sole authors of stories about non-Western subjects, and the inequitable relationships within journalism get reproduced in the published work. The result is a glut of predictable and monotonous news pieces about rape in India and war in El Salvador.”

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Over the years, Alami saw these problems increase, as newsrooms began cutting back on foreign bureaus after the implosion of the journalism business model in the early 2000s. Parachute journalism, the practice of dropping reporters into an area where they have little to no experience, became more common in newsrooms with tight deadlines and budgets. Alami noted the quality of reporting decreased as reporters took less time learning about the country.

Even worse, she noted that less-informed reports tended to take a civilizing tone, imposing Western ideals on a culture the reporter often did not fully understand. This was especially common in the coverage of women.

A 2017 study found that a disproportionate amount of Western news reporting about the Muslim world focuses on gender inequality. Author Rochelle Terman, assistant professor in the department of political science at the University of Chicago, looked at 35 years of The New York Times and Washington Post reporting and found that Muslim women are more likely to appear in the U.S. press if they live in societies with poor records of women’s rights. Terman argues that U.S. media spreads the perception that Muslim countries are inherently discriminatory against women.

Such inaccurate depictions of Muslim women, Alami says, harms public discourse surrounding the Islamic world.

“For instance, when we talk about domestic violence, in France every other day a woman is killed by her husband. It’s called domestic violence and that’s it,” Alami said. “When we talk about brown people, it becomes a crime of honor, which is a very problematic word. There’s always this kind of exotizing of the ‘other.’”

Such narratives further the notion of the “other,” making it easier for journalists in the West to reduce Muslim women’s experiences as something “exotic” to realities in the West. In fact, this dilution furthers colonial ideologies. If something is the “other,” it is not close to home or the heart.

This colonial savior complex reveals contrasting standards and expectations of the Western sphere and Islamic nations.

Susan Sontag, the American writer and political activist, has written extensively on the role of international news displaying other people’s pain. In her book-length essay, “Regarding the Pain of Others,” she discusses the “they” versus “us” construct and its implications on world power dynamics. Sontag explains how the Western journalism’s modern mandate to entertain, not just inform, skews the reporting of outsiders’ stories to fit the entertainment mold. She calls such distortion of the truth not only inaccurate, but unethical.

Alami continued to observe these shortcomings first-hand as she grew her international reporting career, covering immigration and the Arab Spring. Then, in 2012, she suddenly had a chance to help fix the problems.

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In 2012, Mary Stucky, founder and executive director of Round Earth Media, a program of the International Women's Media Foundation, was reading — a lot. She was searching for the best journalism written in Morocco. She had funding to launch a new study abroad program, in partnership with the School of International Training (SIT), for young journalists, with the goal of covering under-reported stories from neglected regions of the world. They wanted to partner American early-career and student journalists with in-country peers to create a new, more ethical reporting model.

It didn’t take Stucky long to find Aida Alami. She was impressed with Alami’s talent at finding powerful, important stories reported with depth, nuance, context, compassion and careful attention to the facts. When she learned the Moroccan native was also a Columbia Journalism alum, she picked up the phone.

Stucky invited Alami to help start a journalism program in Rabat, Morocco, the nation’s capital, to educate young American journalists on how to report on other cultures, and help alleviate media discrepancies that exist especially when covering the Middle East.

**“**With the decline of global newsrooms, it's more important than ever to train the next generation of global reporters while mentoring them to produce journalism for audiences in the United States and in country (assuming a free press),” Stucky says.

Alami found that interesting and challenging. She signed on immediately, vowing to teach her journalism students how to treat their sources fairly and not rob them of their voice. The ethics of journalism became the core of her mission, and the core of the study abroad program.

Working with Stucky, Alami put together a program where students would live with a host family, take language lessons, and learn the specifics of international reporting, including how to work with an in-country reporting partner, or fixer, and how to manage language barriers when reporting without losing authentic dialogue.

Meanwhile, under Alami’s guiding, students would pursue their own independent reporting projects. Student began tackling topics including prostitution in Tangier and art in Casablanca. Their work began to be published in major outlets like Newsweek. Each semester more showed up to be mentored by Aida and other colleagues she brought in. To date, almost 200 students have studied abroad on the Field Studies in Journalism and New Media program through SIT.

“Aida taught me the importance of social media, of language comprehension, of cultural immersion and more,” said Shelby Kluver, Spring 2019 student from Chicago. “But most importantly, observing her taught me the strength that must come with bravery. That truth must be fought for all over the world. And that it IS possible to make a Western audience care about international events.”

Alami has seen her work making a difference, as she’s helped publish their work, ranging from children trying to immigrate from Morocco to Spain to the growing “American” landfill in Morocco’s economic hub.

As a participant in the program during the Spring of 2019, I spent a semester covering young Moroccan women’s health and sexuality. As my editor, Alami encouraged the inclusion of social and cultural norms of Morocco that extend beyond Islam in my story. She made sure I had a firm grasp of Moroccan history and culture on top of knowledge of the specific topic I was covering.

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While teaching Western students how to report in a more culturally informed way, Aida has continued her own journalistic work covering human rights, politics, immigration and racism and frequently reporting from North Africa and France.

She has written about climate change in the Middle East and the difference young activists are making there, citing sources who live in the places she’s discussing. She’s written about burqas and how Moroccan women view their conditions and clothing options, noting that Western feminism is not the sole lens from which to see all women’s issues. In her teaching and writing, she adopts a central philosophy: “Let people tell their stories and try to not assume things,” she said. And she tried to provide readers with a more nuanced understanding of the countries she’s covering.

For instance, in her 2017 New York Times article, Alami explained Morocco’s ban of the sale of burqas, noting, “Morocco, a Muslim-majority country and former French protectorate where the influence of Western secularist ideals remains, has been trying to foster more moderate expressions of Islam and subtly warn Islamists not to go too far, though acts of extremism remain rare.” By seeding her articles with the history and cultural context of Morocco’s colonial history, she offers a nuanced look at what a Western reporter might deem as a women’s rights violation. For contrast, she compared the prohibition to a similar ban affecting Muslim women in France, stopping the sale of burkinis, a full-body swimsuit. Her sources explain the burqa is worn less in Morocco than in other Middle Eastern countries, and many see it as a neocolonial import.

Alami has also put her philosophy into practice when she covers countries she is less familiar with. In 2018, she covered the #MeToo movement and sexual violence in Haiti for Public Radio International. She says by taking the time to learn the language and talk to locals, she was able to produce more authentic stories that more accurately represent their subjects.

Stucky says Alami’s involvement in educating young Western journalists has given undergraduate students an unprecedented opportunity to be mentored and produce high quality journalism.

“There are no other global journalism programs like ours and in Morocco, Aida is the essential ingredient,” Stucky said.

Down the line, misinformed coverage can encourage invasions and justify wars as civilizing missions, Alami adds. The importance of informed coverage of Muslim women and the Arab world is vital to ethical global diplomacy.

“Know the culture,” she advises, “before you even start reporting.”

**Chapter 6**

Conclusion

After returning home from my semester wearing the hat of an international reporter in Morocco, I wasn’t sure how to translate what I learned onto paper. I struggled to synthesize my experience into words I could myself understand, an essential step in sharing this story with others. This thesis serves as a roadmap to my unweaving and subsequent comprehension of my experiences abroad. While I knew I wanted to share my observations with others, I simultaneously desired a more complete understanding of the role of Western journalism in the Muslim world; more specifically, I wanted to learn how to holistically evaluate my topic of interest in the most accurate manner possible so as to ultimately make a statement on how we can better correct what I saw was missing in the journalism world: accurate, ethical coverage in the West on Muslim women.

Once I changed my perspective, it was clear to be there was skewed representation of Muslim and Arab women in Western Media. I saw this firsthand as I came to recognize my own biases and misunderstandings of the Middle East and North Africa — a region I had seen so poorly portrayed through violence and war. It wasn’t until I was in Morocco that my preconceived notions were shattered. Though many issues of corruption in the Moroccan government affect social and cultural norms, the country was not one of fear and violence — my experience living there showed me it was the opposite.

In my literature review, I looked at research and articles from Muslim women journalists and academics in addition to American and European scholars on the Islamic world. I looked into theories on the “colonial savior complex” and confronted by own misconceptions of what I thought I knew about this culture that wasn’t my own. I confronted the histories of the Western world and combined that with the newfound knowledge I was learning about the Arab world. I found that the two could work together in peace if we, journalists and Western community members alike, spoke to and about Muslims and Arabs with authenticity and compassion.

Revisiting my own experience reporting in Morocco on women’s health and sexuality helped me track my progress unlearning and learning again what it means to be an international reporter. Profiling Zahra Hankir, who reported in Lebanon on hymenoplasty, and Aida Alami, my former teacher, helped me understand my experience on a broader scale. These women are doing the work on the ground and demonstrate ways we can report on Muslim and Arab women in the media in a way that honors and respects them. I wrote the story on virginity certificates in Morocco (Appendix A) before delving into this research and academic discourse, but I knew I was onto something through the revisions of that story. It started off as a Western tale, and my goal in the end was to turn it into a human one.

Appendix A

**Virginity in Morocco**

Bouchra, 20, took her “virginity test” when she was only 14, six months before her wedding night. Terrified of the result, tears fell down her cheeks when the doctor instructed her to spread open her legs at a hospital in Boujdour, southern Morocco. She says her test involved a female doctor inspecting her hymen, the thin tissue at the vaginal opening.

“I was so afraid,” said Bouchra, eyes fixated on her hands. The tall young woman with her black hair in a bun asked us not to use her last name to protect her privacy.

Morocco, alongside countries like Afghanistan, Brazil and Egypt, is one of 20 countries where “virginity certificates” are a long-standing practice. In the Moroccan penal code, where sex outside of marriage is illegal, men can cancel marriages if they suspect their wife-to-be is not a virgin.

In October 2018, the World Health Organization, Human Rights Council and United Nations Women called for a ban on the certificates, questioning their validity and adding that they “are based in patriarchal systems of gender discrimination and violence against women.” In February 2018, the Moroccan Association of Sexology, an academic group representing doctors, sociologists, psychologists and lawyers promoting rights and liberties in relation to sexuality, also called on the Moroccan Ministry of Health to forbid the medical distribution of virginity certificates to young women.

“Doctors should be required by law to perform their medical practice in respect to the fundamental rights of girls, and not in respect to societal norms,” said Rachid Aboutaieb, urologist and head of the Moroccan Association of Sexology.

But the certificates have not been banned. The Ministry of Health released a statement in a press conference explaining there is no legal framework in Morocco that requires women to undergo a virginity test — which is true. But, they aren’t forbidden either and so the practice continues, even though many experts believe the hymen’s appearance is [not a reliable indicator of vaginal sex.](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4965672/) The number of virginity certificates given is undocumented due to its extreme secrecy.

Many Moroccan women admit virginity certificates are their only option to combat virginity accusations and protect against social isolation and even arrest for violating laws against sex outside marriage. During [a news conference](https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2015/07/162257/i-would-rather-resign-than-decriminalize-sexual-relations-out-of-marriage-minister/) in 2015, Mustapha Ramid, former Moroccan Minister of Justice and current Minister of Human Rights, said he’d rather resign than legalize sex before marriage.

In reality, the law only ostracizes women for breaking it, which is why preserving the female virginity is a sign of honor in traditional Moroccan families, said Najia Labrim of the Moroccan Association for Human Rights.

Bouchra says she and her family wanted the certificate (which costs from 5 to 30 U.S. dollars) as a form of insurance to protect her from her husband questioning her virginity the night of the wedding. She says her mother also wanted the certificate, which was granted, to preserve her standing in the community.

“I was so happy and relieved, I started jumping,” said Bouchra.

In the last study conducted by the Ministry of Health in 2007, 36 percent of Moroccan men and 15 percent of Moroccan women reported to have had premarital sex. But many of those women avoid vaginal penetration to preserve their hymen, said Yasmine Essakhi, a graduate student at University of Mohammed V, whose studies focus on the sexual culture of Moroccan youth.

“Most girls my age think virginity is proof they are good girls,” said Essakhi. “It is common to lie about it. I think it’s about education.”

At the age of 23, Khadija Akroro made the decision to get a certificate before her arranged marriage. For her, the examination wasn’t uncomfortable — in fact, she says it was a relief.

“All girls should get it for themselves to guarantee you are good person,” said Akroro, 31, a seamstress in Oulad Teima, a small town in southern Morocco. “Whether it’s legal or not, doctors should give certificates.”

As she smoothed her floral hijab, Akroro added it’s bad to think about what would happen if a man questioned a girl’s virginity.

“People will describe it as your life being ruined,” said StephanieWillman Bordat, international human rights lawyer and founder of Mobilising for Rights Associates (MRA), an international nonprofit women’s rights organization based in Rabat, commenting on the ramifications if a husband suspects his wife it not a virgin the night of their wedding.

“Abusive annulment based on alleged nonvirginity is a form of violence,” Bordat said. She advocates for using the official divorce process to end a marriage, rather than using suspected nonvirginity as grounds for annulment. Bordat says that with a legal divorce, the husband will have to go through the court and pay financial support. With annulment, the husband would not have to pay anything, the woman’s family becomes a victim of scandal and the woman herself experiences shame and dishonor, according to Bordat.

13 percent of Moroccans identify as not religious, according to a 2019 report by [Arab Barometer](https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/ABV_Morocco_Report_Public-Opinion_Arab-Barometer.pdf), up from under 5 percent in 2013. The topic of virginity in Morocco, as a majority Muslim country, is certainly influenced by religion, but is rooted as a social and cultural standard. But Bordat says the Moroccan government has an obligation to create laws to protect women.

“It wouldn’t be enough to just eliminate or forbid the virginity certificates. You’d have to provide some sort of alternative or get rid of their usefulness to really eliminate it in practice,” she said.

Even if the Ministry of Health banned the certificates, the practice would go underground and be performed in unhygienic environments, adds Loubna Rais, member of the #Masaktach movement (translated as “I will not keep silent”). The #Masaktach movement brings awareness to cases of violence against women.

“It’s humiliating to reduce the value of a woman to a membrane,” said Rais. “Without the proper work to change behavior, change communication and raise awareness, women’s bodies will always belong to the community and not themselves.”

Last August, Bangladesh’s government removed the requirement for women to declare their virginity on marriage certificates. As in Morocco, Bengali society places value on a woman’s virginity, but with their newfound legal rights, activists say the door is opened to create social change.

Bouchra Assarag, 48, a public health doctor, says that during her medical training at a hospital in Casablanca, almost every Saturday night families and their distressed, crying daughters would rush into her office begging for virginity certificates.

“Families would present the girls like they were criminals,” said Assarag.

Assarag wrote the certificates but she refused to perform the examination. She says she would bring the woman into her office, wait a few minutes, sign the paper and send her on her way.

That was during her training. Today, Assarag says she’s still asked to write certificates but now she agrees with the global campaign to ban them and she declines. Instead, she advocates for sexual and reproductive health education for the families.

“Now, I tell the families the girl is a human being,” she said, adding that virginity should remain confidential between the couple.

Bouchra repeated the main reason she needed the certificate was for security. “It was stressful. I was afraid my husband might deny I’m not virgin after the marriage,” she said, emphasizing the validation virginity certificates give women.

Just two months after her wedding night and eight months after passing her virginity test, Bouchra’s marriage ended. She refused to tell us why. Bouchra was 15 years old.

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*I spent several months on an SIT Study Abroad program in Morocco and produced this story in association with Round Earth Media, a program of the International Women’s Media Foundation. Zakaria El Kouzouni contributed reporting.*