

Lori Cohen and Leyna Peery

Unveiling Students' Perceptions about Women in Islam

Lori Cohen and Leyna Peery describe a literature unit using texts by and about Muslim women. Studying women's roles through a variety of genres—short story, essays, graphic novel, film—helped students broaden their understanding of women in the Islamic world.

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hen we asked our sophomore literature students to examine their perceptions about women in Islam, many responded with the following:

- > submissive to men
- > not well educated
- > covered faces and bodies with *hijab* or burka
- > can't show ankles
- > no rights
- > fragile
- > loyal and dedicated to families
- > separated from men

Students did not realize that what they called *perceptions* were actually *stereotypes*. They lumped all Muslim women into a category, boxing them in with the labels of *oppressed* and *inferior*. However, after we studied various texts by and about Muslim women, students wrote essays to reexamine their perceptions. Most students' perceptions became more fair and realistic. Of course, not all students were misinformed about Muslim women. Julian discussed how his original perceptions included the idea that there is more to Muslim women than most of his classmates thought, that these women must consist of more than the uninformed opinions and assertions of the news media and those unfamiliar with the cultural and religious norms of the Middle East. At the end of the unit, Julian felt justified in his perceptions, and the texts we read supported his initial thinking.

Eirin, however, acknowledged that she still held stereotypical images of women in Islam: "the image of women covered head to toe with clothing; the worship of Islam; the notion that most have the mind of a terrorist." Eirin's comments echo most of Western society's views of the Muslim world, especially since the tragic events of 9/11. With the fall of the twin towers and the exposure of oppressive regimes such as the Taliban, Westerners have come to view the Middle East as "the home of terrorism." Eirin adds, "Though it is still the image I carry in my mind, I realize that the Middle East has modernized, and that the majority of the Middle East is embarrassed to be recognized as the home of terrorism." In light of incidents that are still so recent, this unit was just the beginning of helping students change some of their perceptions.

We capitalized on the opportunity to uncover students' perceptions of an often misunderstood and misrepresented region because we teach the literature of the Middle East and Asia. This curriculum is part of the Humanities and International Studies Program (HISP), a rigorous honors magnet program in Sacramento, California. The sophomore curriculum focuses on world literature and cultures and is divided into two semesters—one covering the Middle East and Asia, the other Africa and Latin America. Although the HISP curriculum determines the general regions we teach, we have autonomy over literature selections and curricular foci. In teaching the Middle East, we needed to determine what was most valuable to teach students within a three-week unit. We decided to

focus on women in Islam for three main reasons. First, women's literature is already underrepresented in our culture, so to teach *any* works by and about women challenges the literary canon of secondary English classes and provides a more well-rounded education for students. Second, we realized how powerful a unit such as this could be in building understanding across cultures. Most of all, we knew that teaching underrepresented works of literature by and about Muslim women—those who have little voice or accurate representation in Western culture—could have a significant impact on students and teachers in achieving our first two aims.

Theories Guiding Text Selection

Literature selections in high school English courses today tend to reflect literature selections of forty years ago, with a relatively stable canon of works (Applebee 55). We wanted to challenge this static canon by including more selections by women. Although Joel Taxel concedes that “representations of girls and women in fiction, fantasy, folk literature, biography, and other nonfiction are richer and more varied today than was the case twenty years ago,” he affirms Arthur N. Applebee's views that “progress often is contradictory and some question the nature and the extent of the ‘progress’ actually made” (Taxel 424). Taxel continues by citing Shirley B. Ernst, who confirms, “While the *number* of females in books *has* increased, research indicates that the stereotypical behaviors with which they have been portrayed have not changed” (Ernst 68; italics in original). Knowing that students already held perceptions of the “stereotypical behaviors” of Muslim women, we wanted to ensure that the works we chose portrayed these women as different from labels usually attributed to them: victims of their respective societies (Fairbanks 40).

We also made sure we focused on various genres. We feared that teaching just one text would perpetuate what Steven Z. Athanases calls “the folly of essentializing authors, characters, or readers, reducing them to mere members of particular identifying groups” (291). We wanted to expose students to as many texts and genres as we could in a limited time frame. Most of the pieces we selected were localized in a particular place and at a particular time in history. And, as we taught this unit, we reminded stu-

dents to refer to these places and time periods as they discussed their findings. Had we not been sensitive to the authors we chose, and had we not shared when and where these works took place, we might have more easily fallen into the trap of creating new stereotypical perceptions of women in Islam, leading students to essentialize these women instead of allowing students to come to new, more accurate understandings of women in this region.

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The Texts We Taught

Figure 1 lists the works that we taught in this unit. We began with “The Young Woman and Her Five Lovers” from *Tales from the Thousand and One Nights*. This work is short, humorous, and accessible, while still advancing ideas about Muslim women. Because the protagonist is a strong, bright, cunning young woman, students' perceptions were challenged from the beginning. This young woman is submissive to no man but uses womanly wiles to seduce and trick five different men to get what she wants.

We asked students to participate in a Socratic seminar about the work. One of the most debated issues was whether or not “The Young Woman and Her Five Lovers” is a feminist text. There were thoughtful arguments on both sides of the issue. Some argued that the young woman uses intelligence and cunning to outwit men and get what she wants, and that the character's ability to transcend the condescending nature of men shows the author's feminist intentions. The counterpoint was that the character's traits and actions could be read negatively, and the author could have been issuing a warning to men about untrustworthy, deceitful women.

The students also were split on whether or not this text challenged or confirmed their perceptions of women in Islam. The point of contention was whether the author intended the reader to think about the main character as a hero or a villain. Was

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FIGURE 1. Texts Selected for Women in Islam Unit

Title	Author	Date of Publication	Region of Focus	Genre	Topic
"The Young Woman and Her Five Lovers"	unknown	1954	Ancient Iraq	short story	A young woman uses her cunning and wit to entice men and get what she desires
"The Status of Woman in Islam"	Jamal A. Badawi	1971	the Muslim world	academic essay	Uses Qur'an as basis for women's equality in the Muslim world
"To Any Would-Be Terrorists"	Naomi Shihab Nye	2001	the United States and Arab/Muslim world	letter	Makes a plea to terrorists to stop the cycle of violence to combat stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims
"The Veil"	Marjane Satrapi	2003	Iran	graphic novel	An autobiographical account of growing up in Iran during the Cultural Revolution
"Jihad Is for Women, Too"	Geraldine Brooks	1995	United Arab Emirates	ethnography	Discusses the role Muslim women played in the military during the time of Muhammad and women's roles in the military in the present day
"Three Women"	Gillo Pontecorvo	1964	Algeria	film	Recounts the revolution in Algiers in the 1950s, in which Muslims retaliated against European colonialism

she a feminist before her time or a strumpet who abused her womanly wiles to get what she wanted? Because the authors of various stories in *Tales from the Thousand and One Nights* are unknown, this question is unanswerable. Students had to judge for themselves and decide whether their perceptions were altered or had remained static after this first text.

Students, however, were unanimous in their views about how women are represented in the next text, Jamal A. Badawi's academic essay, "The Status of Woman in Islam." Badawi challenges the belief that women in the Muslim world lack power in their societies: "The Qur'an provides clear-cut evidence that woman is completely equated with man in the sight of God in terms of her rights and responsibilities" (par. 23). Most of the students believed the Qur'an preaches women's submission

when it actually promotes the opposite. Students participated in a jigsaw activity, with each student an expert on one section of the essay. Students learned about historical, spiritual, social, political, and economic perspectives of women's roles and shared how Badawi undercuts Western conceptions of Muslim women as powerless. Students' most significant findings included Badawi's assertions that women had as much right to an education as men, women have economic rights in marriage and in property, and women are equals to men in the political arena. These arguments contrasted sharply with students' initial thoughts about roles of women in the Muslim world. In their final essays, most of the students discussed their surprise at the number of rights women had, especially since these rights are endorsed by a text often viewed as justifying the suppression of women.

Few students, however, discussed the sexism underscoring Badawi's arguments. Although he speaks in favor of Muslim women, he attributes differences between men and women as "psychological and physiological" and implies that women are the "weaker sex" because they are emotional. Badawi argues that the reason most women do not hold positions of political power is that women's monthly menstrual cycle inhibits them from making rational decisions, "a requirement which does not coincide with the instinctive nature of women" (par. 61). Although only a few students picked up on this contradiction, some might have believed Badawi's arguments were sound since they were justified by the Qur'an. Or perhaps Badawi's concluding statement allows for differences between the sexes, because "the difference implies rather the 'complementary' roles of both the sexes" (par. 62).

The third text we examined was by Arab American poet Naomi Shihab Nye. Her letter entitled "To Any Would-Be Terrorists" was one of the few texts we included that was by and about an Arab American woman. The letter discusses the classification of all Arabs as terrorists. The letter pleads with the terrorists of 9/11 and any other Arabs who may be involved with terrorist acts to realize "they wounded a huge community of people in the Middle East, in the United States and all over the world" (par. 1). Nye movingly describes her life with an American mother and an Arab father, saying, "Sometimes I wish everyone could have parents from different countries or ethnic groups so they would be forced to cross boundaries, to believe in mixtures, every day of their lives" (par. 5). When describing her cousins in Texas who have "beautiful brown little boys," Nye defines the horror of 9/11, saying, "now they have this heavy word to carry in their backpacks along with the weight of their papers and books" (par. 7). The power of this letter lies in Nye's masterful rendering of the humanity of her family and her people.

Nye's piece was a pivotal part of our unit because she is an Arab American author writing about terrorism, a subject with which all students are familiar. Many students were moved by the piece because it appeals to both the Arab and the Western worlds in its balance and fairness to all parties who were involved in the 9/11 tragedy. The students who included Nye's letter in their essays

saw her opinions as a plea to both Americans and Arabs. The lesson one student, Karen, took from the letter was how "[h]asty generalizations that all Middle Easterners are the same will only cause more bitterness and feed into a cycle of terrorism."

We approached Nye's letter as the perspective of an Arab woman, but we also acknowledged that her identity as an American influences her work. Throughout the unit we encouraged students to take into account the regions authors are from as well as the perspectives from which they write. It was especially important to take these factors into account when dealing with Nye's work because her ethnic and cultural backgrounds—and thus the influences on her opinions and work—are complex. These complexities of "To Any Would-Be Terrorists" had two effects on students' work. First, it was easy for students to understand Nye's perspective because it was familiar to them. On the other hand, it was difficult for some students to fit Nye's work into their frame of understanding of women in Islam because she is also American. We believed this piece was valuable in the unit because it offered yet another perspective on women in Islam and the Arab world.

Since our goal was to cover a range of texts, both print and visual, we then taught "The Veil," the first chapter of Marjane Satrapi's graphic novel *Perspolis*, an autobiographical account of the Cultural Revolution in Iran in 1979. In that year, Ayatollah Khomeini required that women wear the veil, something that had been optional in prior years. Women's rights were more restricted as a result of the Cultural Revolution, and Satrapi uses images and text to show how divisive the new laws were to women in Iran.

First Satrapi depicts how children, including herself, were unaware of how to behave under these new laws. One of the first images in the chapter shows children using the veil as a jump rope, wearing it as if they were monsters aiming to scare each other, or tossing it aside because it is too hot outside to wear it (3). Subsequent images depict some women fighting adamantly to wear the veil while others defend their right not to wear it. The chapter continues with Satrapi sharing her struggle with

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wanting to become "the last prophet" (6) and ends with her desire to "be justice, love and the wrath of God all in one" (9), traits usually attributed to Muslim men, not Muslim women.

Students marked images they thought were significant, and as a class we discussed what made these images stand out. Most students were surprised that women in Iran were not required to wear the veil until 1979. They believed all women in the Muslim world were required to wear a veil and that this law had been in place since the publication of the Qur'an. Several students were intrigued by the

image of women fighting for and against the veil. Those who marked this image either said they were surprised women had the right to fight against the veil or said they were surprised some women *wanted* to wear it. Many students also marked images that depict Satrapi's declaration of being "the last prophet." They had believed that prophets

were only men, so it was unheard of for a young girl to be a prophet. In their final essays, students explored these observations and noted the contrast to what they originally thought of Muslim women.

Our final two texts delved into how women fight for their countries and communities—in the past and present. In the first of these two texts, "Jihad Is for Women, Too," from *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women*, Geraldine Brooks explains how women in United Arab Emirates were recruited into the army during the Gulf War. Brooks argues that the idea of Muslim women serving in the military is not new; women were soldiers in the time of Muhammad, and some of his most formidable enemies and allies happened to be women. Students read about Hind bint Urbah, one of Muhammad's fiercest opponents, and Nusaybah bint Kaab, one of Muhammad's most-

Brooks argues that the idea of Muslim women serving in the military is not new; women were soldiers in the time of Muhammad, and some of his most formidable enemies and allies happened to be women.

celebrated allies. Brooks also discusses how women in United Arab Emirates were shy when they first entered the military because they had always been taught to "lower their gaze and be modest" (112), but as they grew accustomed to the responsibilities of the army, they became soldiers with their "shoulders . . . squared, their heads tall" (113). This section of the chapter ends with women practicing their shooting on a firing range. Brooks writes how "bullet after bullet slammed home, right smack in the center of the target" (114), much to the chagrin of a male lieutenant colonel who was skeptical of women being in the military. When discussing this text, most students expressed surprise about women serving in the military, both in the time of Muhammad and in the present. They had never heard of Hind bint Urbah or Nusaybah bint Kaab and did not know women traded their veils for guns to help defend their country. This idea shattered students' previous notions of women as submissive or docile.

Our last text also investigated the sacrifices Muslim women are willing to make to defend their nations and their communities. "Three Women," a clip from the film *Battle of Algiers*, directed by Gillo Pontecorvo, chronicles the strife between Europeans and Muslims in Algiers in the 1950s, although much of the content is still relevant. We chose a clip that illustrated how three Muslim women worked for the Algerian Liberation Front (FLN) in retaliation for a European bombing of the Muslim Quarter.

This text deals with Islamic terrorism and is important because there are so many different ways a viewer could react to the scenes. Following the events of 9/11, in the United States Muslims are largely perceived as terrorists, and students saw Muslim women as the submissive backdrop for terrorist men. In "Three Women," the female characters are neither

backdrops nor submissive. They play a pivotal role in the Muslim revenge on the Europeans as they place bombs in bustling public places filled with men, women, and children.



We also used this film clip to begin a discussion of how women in the Islamic world are portrayed in the media and whether or not this portrayal is fair. There were mixed feelings about whether Muslims were shown fairly. The clip begins with graphic scenes of the horrific clean-up after the Europeans bombed the Muslim Quarter in Algiers. The clip, in turn, ends with graphic scenes of the horror inflicted by the bombs planted by the three Muslim women. Many students believed that this balance showed a fair representation of what each side had done to the other. Some students believed the women were justified in their retaliation. Many students, however, believed that the portrayal was unfair because the clip shows the Europeans alive and happy just before the women plant their bombs. The effect is that the audience views the women as cold and heartless, having no regret about what they are about to do. In contrast, the European bombing takes place at night, and the viewer sees only dead and injured Muslim people without ever having seen them alive. Students argued that the Europeans were more humanized by the film, while the Muslims were dehumanized. This film clip truly provoked the students' thinking. Discussions of the clip appeared in many essays as a text that challenged and changed students' first perceptions of women in Islam.

Results and Reflections

One of our curricular goals is to encourage students to widen their worldviews by thinking about cultures outside their own. We teach students about world cultures, ask students to attend cultural events each semester, and extend as many opportunities as possible to spark new perspectives. Our Women in Islam literature unit was taught in conjunction with a broader survey of the Arab and Islamic cultures in the students' history class. And, just as we had hoped, students now have a broader view of the Islamic world.

Students realized that their perceptions were more like stereotypes and their new discoveries about women in Islam shattered their preconceived notions. Some students, such as Sarah, raised many important questions:

Was I aware that women in Iran fought to wear the veil? No. Did I have any idea that the Qur'an entitled women to their own property and decline

any marriage they do not find satisfying? No. Was my view of women formulated from the various media presented images of American propaganda? Yes. But before [these texts] I would not have had the knowledge to even ask these questions.

Other students' essays also recalled much of what we discussed in class:

Although women may be perceived as inferior, tranquil, and modest, they are actually just as liberated as women of other faiths are. (Jason)

Women with guns, cunning abilities of persuasion, and revolutionary ideas and actions seems to play out as more of a Wonder Woman than any stereotypical Muslim woman. But these characteristics are real and not just a comic book fantasy. (Tiffany)

Students' essays also supported much of our reasoning behind teaching a unit such as this one:

The unit on Islamic women surprised me and changed my views on the role of Islamic women, and thus my world view. Because my beliefs were challenged and I found out that my perceptions were not correct, I now have a new outlook on the Islamic world. (Thomas)

The average American's perception of Muslim women tends to be incomplete because we do not take the time to do our own deeper research and instead satisfy ourselves with what the media offers as undeniable truth. We then expand this small insight into Islamic culture and arrive at an inaccurate generalization for the people we refuse to befriend. We continue to see the veil, the burkha, the hijab instead of the unique people hidden behind them. (Karen)

Many students, such as Sarah, experienced drastic changes in the ways they view women in Islam, while other students, such as Julian and Eirin, learned a lot about Muslim women but retained their initial perceptions. We consider both types of students to be success stories. Whether or not students' perceptions changed, they thought critically, examined their biases and, most importantly, learned something new. These transformations are evident in the final essays the students produced, and we are confident that this unit was successful and useful to us as teachers and to the students.

So, Now What?

We call this unit a success, but we also realize that in the future we may approach some foci differently.

Whether or not students' perceptions changed, they thought critically, examined their biases and, most importantly, learned something new.

Works we selected were effective in allowing students to examine their perceptions of women in Islam, but sometimes we let our literature selections have too much authority over changing students' perceptions. Had we pushed students to

think further about the biases inherent in Badawi's work, fewer students might have been so willing to accept completely his writing as truth. Although Badawi's article does promote women's equality in the way that some works do not, we wonder if there is something that better represents women's roles as supported by the Qur'an. Perhaps we should have tapped our resources at the university level as well. We are close to two large public universities where there are professors who teach these topics in more depth than we do. If we had made connections with some of these instructors, they might have prompted us to think about other authors whose works speak more strongly to Muslim women's issues.

We would most likely teach many of these works again. In their essays, many students referenced "The Veil" from *Persepolis* and "Three Women" from *Battle of Algiers*, two texts with a visual component. In a time where visual literacy is foregrounded in our language arts classrooms, we need to continue to teach these texts as part of our literature units, especially since students successfully read these texts with the same seriousness as printed works. Although we could do more to equip students with better tools for examining visual texts, we feel we are breaking ground in including these texts as part of a range of representative works by and about women in Islam.

We cannot allow ourselves to remain static in our literature selections. Applebee's research reminds us how easy it is to lapse into the canon, to teach the classics because we are confident in their merits. And

although the canon clearly has its merits, we cannot ignore the growing body of literature that better represents the changing global society we live in. English teachers do not have much time to read new works of literature or to explore new ways of examining classic works with a multicultural lens. But we need to stop making that excuse. We need to be critical of the literature we are teaching, and we need to be willing to change as our society changes. We will probably teach many of these selections about women in Islam again, because we realize it takes work to create a literature unit; but we will keep our eyes open for other works as well, so that we may constantly challenge ourselves to include those who deserve a more prominent voice in the body of works we read.

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Lori Cohen has been teaching English and humanities for six years and recently completed her MA in education from the University of California, Davis. She works with the Area 3 Writing Project as a teaching consultant. *email*: lcohen@bayschools.org. **Leyna Peery** recently completed her teaching credential at the University of California, Davis, and she is working on her MA degree in education. One of her goals in teaching is to encourage students to examine their worldviews and think in alternative ways. *email*: lmperry@ucdavis.edu.