As we have seen, critical discussions of postcolonial immigrant narratives tend to fall into two categories: those that ignore religion and those that ignore everything other than religion. We might mention some additional (and sometimes contradictory) tendencies within the second category: treating all Muslim women as one group with similar backgrounds and motivations; treating Islam as a phase which the successful immigrant grows out of; treating Islam as a redoubt against vapid capitalism; treating Islam (and especially those Muslim women who put on the veil) as “naturally” feminist. Miriam Cooke indulges in several of these tendencies in her provocative essay, “Deploying the Muslimwoman,” which opens by suggesting that “So extreme is the concern with Muslim women today that veiled, and even unveiled, women are no longer thought of as individuals: collectively they have become the Muslimwoman” (91). Cooke criticises this reductionism—but she also insists that while some women “reject the Muslimwoman identification […] others embrace it” (91). According to Cooke, this latter group recognises the “Muslimwoman” identity as the marker of a collective subjectivity, a way to enunciate the emergence of a new “cultural standard for the umma [sic]” and the creation of counter-narratives that oppose Orientalist depictions of Islam (92). Digital technology, she argues, has made it possible for the Muslimwoman to enter into a transnational community and transcend the limits of local existence. One important aspect of this global community, reveals Cooke, is that its members participate in a “shared culture” resting on a cosmopolitan rhetoric that “involves conscience, self-consciousness, and receptiveness to differences that might instruct and perhaps transform” (98). This “new kind of cosmopolitanism marked by religion” paves the way for the Muslimwoman to claim a gendered Muslim identity that is empowering and politically active (92). Cooke concludes that even
traditional markers of female subjection can now be understood as revolutionary: once thought of as a “cage,” restricting female visibility in the public space, the veil is now re-appropriated as “a platform for action” from which Muslim women “are speaking out” (93, 98).

This discussion can be recognised as part of an ongoing scholarly debate about the Islamic veil, which has long been among the most controversial symbols of Islam. The traditional position is familiar: “for the Western media,” Majid summarises, “the picture of the veiled woman visually defines both the mystery of Islamic culture and its backwardness” (111). Cooke’s essay is part of a more recent attempt to rethink this position and provide a different account of Islam and gender; a central symbolic figure in this project is the Muslim woman who willingly adopts hijab, but does so while remaining opposed to patriarchal and colonial oppression. This particular woman, the argument goes, has re-cast the veil as an emblem of resistance—both against male domination and also against Western feminism, which tends to homogenise female experience. Yet the critical desire to offer a corrective, to validate the choices of a Muslim woman, has occasionally overridden proper caution and led to precisely the same inattention to difference between various communities of women that Cooke and others criticise. Therefore, although Cooke rightly recognises Muslim women’s movements towards political activism and their efforts to construct a form of “womanism that is not at all a replica of Western feminism,” her generalisations replicate the very problems she sets out to solve (Ghazoul). Besides her privileging of (one form of) Islam as a “foundational” identity and her insistence upon Muslimwomen’s “uniformity across gulfs of difference,” Cooke’s eagerness to imagine Muslimwomen as cosmopolitan bodies unified around the idea of change leads her to overlook the vast differences between various Muslim communities (93, 91). She is only partially correct in arguing that the veil provides a “platform” which unifies “women from the tropical societies of Southeast Asia […] [with] women in the Arabian deserts [and] in the cooler climes of Europe” (93). Those “tropical societies” and continental populations are themselves extraordinarily diverse and often deeply divided—even amongst the veiled populace. Is a veiled member of the House of Saud living in Riyadh really on the same “platform” as a veiled villager in Arar or a journalist in Jeddah—let alone that of a veiled “foreign worker” from Bangladesh or Indonesia working in Mecca?

This is all a way of saying that sweeping statements about international solidarity often fail to take into account uneven economic, educational and technological conditions on the ground. Nor is it