

Faces of Islam

“Feminism simply means that women deserve equal rights,” I bellowed in my summer school English class. In a college class on “World Literature,” I was shocked to discover that the only writers to make it onto the reading list were men. When I had protested the first day of class, the young men seated nearby rolled their eyes. Suddenly, I felt very much in the minority. I was, in fact, the only girl in the classroom. “Are you some kind of militant feminist?” one boy asked, laughing. That’s when I defined feminism, looking daggers at the boy. The room was silent. The professor, ancient and wrinkled, explained calmly that these authors were the ones that made the greatest impact on history and literature; it just so happened that they were all men. He quickly returned to explaining the syllabus.

A young, Indonesian boy in the back of the class raised his hand. “Certainly,” he said, “female authors have contributed to literature in significant ways. The title of the course is rather inclusive, even though our focus seems to be mostly on male authors.” He smiled. The teacher looked furious and the other boys in the classroom smirked.

That summer class was a great challenge for me, but time and again the Indonesian boy named Risa, stood up to his classmates to advocate for women’s rights.

We quickly became friends. I was surprised to learn that he was a conservative Muslim after one of our first discussions. The news at the time was abuzz with images of Islam as a sexist, backward religion. Yet time and time again in class I found that Risa was outspoken about women’s rights, even if his vision of



“rights” were sometimes a little different than mine. In that class, he was my only ally.

After many long discussions in the cafeteria, I learned that Islam, like Christianity appeared in a myriad of forms. Like Christianity, it sometimes justifies horrible oppression and cruelty just as it sometimes demands the most open-minded acceptance of

diversity. In the midst of a group of American boys who dismissed me as a “feminist,” Risa saw me as a human and talked to me as an equal.

Perhaps he cannot be my face of Islam. No one can represent an entire, complex religion. However, when I think of Islam I will always think of Risa and the confident, quiet way he stood up for women’s rights in my class. Even while outrageous oppression occurs around the world, I know that it is far too simple to cast blame squarely on a religion without examining the context of each particular situation. Thanks to Risa, Islam has many faces for me.

In a world of sound bites and blurbs it is easy to make vast generalizations and adopt huge, lumbering stereotypes that have their own momentum. They walk on their own two legs, carrying us all, without facts or details, into rash judgments and shallow opinions. What luck that on occasion, a lone individual, like Risa, can fell a massive, unwieldy stereotype like the one I had about Islam.

1. What is the event or incident that makes Julie question a stereotype?
2. How does this affect her personally?
3. To what bigger ideas does this lead? What conclusions does she draw about life in general from her personal lesson?

Your Turn:
1. Event:

