

The Modern Hijab: Tool of Agency, Tool of Oppression

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The Islamic veil has long stood as a symbol of oppression to the “Western” observer. The increasingly popular practice of veiling among Muslim women, particularly those living in countries that seemingly do not forcibly coerce the practice, has therefore become a source of confusion and intrigue. Across the world, Muslim women are proudly donning the veil, sometimes even in opposition to governmental regulations or the wishes of their families. This clearly raises the question of whether one can consider the veil oppressive if so many Muslim women view it favorably and wear it willingly. Even feminist scholars remain divided on this issue, as some now see the veil as an instrument of agency, while others consider it inherently oppressive. Those who tend toward the former often criticize feminism’s universalizing tendencies, charging it with insensitivity to cultural specificity. The latter concede that women may choose to wear the veil of their own volition, but point out that many battered women also choose to remain in their abusive relationships.

Feminist critiques of the veil cannot remain restricted to simple questions of choice — whether or not external limitations (e.g., legal sanctions) allow women to reject or adopt the veil. For choice itself is constrained and shaped by cultural and religious norms, as are the very subjects who do the choosing. This issue requires a more nuanced understanding of the religious controversy surrounding the veil, the reasons behind women’s decisions to wear the veil, and the contexts in which they make their choices. This paper will look briefly at the pro- and anti-veiling discourse, and women who veil in three diverse cultures:

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American, Egyptian and Bedouin. In agreement with Nancy Hirschmann, I conclude “that the veil is *both* a marker of autonomy, individuality, and identity, *and* a marker of inequality and sexist oppression” (Hirschmann 472). The veil can facilitate women’s assertion of independence, but this assertion nonetheless occurs on male-defined terms and within male-oriented contexts.

It seems that (male) Muslim religious and legal scholars have reached a general consensus that Islam requires women to veil, though the interpretations of what it means to do so vary considerably. A primary rationale for this prescription concerns the disparity between male and female sexuality. The official line holds that men have particularly unruly sexual appetites, and therefore God instituted the practice of veiling to curb men’s desire and guard female honor (Read and Bartowski 39). Authorities cite a number of Koranic passages to support the use of the veil. For example, Sura 24:31 admonishes women “not to display their beauty and ornaments;” Sura 33:53 insists believers remain separated from the Prophet’s wives by a screen or curtain (*hijab*); and Sura 33:59 orders believing women to “cast their outer garments over their persons (when abroad).” Defenders of the veil also list a number of extra-Koranic reasons for the practice. They argue that the veil symbolizes piety, sets a clear barrier between women and men, reminds women they belong first and foremost in the home, and indicates the rejection of immodest Western values (Read and Bartowski 399).

This last reason is of particular importance, for it points to the context from which pro-veiling discourse emerged. The Islamic revolutionary movements in countries such as Iran and Egypt employed the veil as a tool of protest against colonialism by reaffirming and re-imagining traditional values. The veil came to stand for the reclamation of cultural and religious “purity.” Just as Europeans had engaged in the stereotyping of Muslim women as the oppressed exotic other, 19th century Muslim men stamped European women as the evidence and source of Western depravity. Therefore, in many ways, the reclamation of the veil arose in response to the perceived immorality and sexually licentious behavior of unveiled Western woman (Hirschmann 468-70).

The most vocal opposition to veiling has surfaced among Muslim feminists. In arguing against the veil’s necessity and legitimacy, they first point to the fact that veiling did not originate in Islam. Therefore,

they regard it as a human artifact rather than a divine institution. Given that the practice of veiling existed long before the birth of Islam, they ask, how can it stand as a measure of a Muslim woman's religiosity? Many Muslim feminists also disagree with the Koranic exegesis previously mentioned. They contend that no single verse ordains the veil, but rather that the Koran simply demands modesty of all Muslims — both male and female. They also highlight the context of passages such as Sura 33:53, which refers specifically to the Prophet's wives, not to Muslim women generally (Read and Bartowski 401).

The most widely used term for the Islamic veil, *hijab*, does not actually denote a woman's veil in the Koran. Rather, it means "curtain" or "barrier," as used in Sura 33:53. The term *hijab* appears repeatedly throughout the Koran, as that which separates the household of the Prophet from outsiders, Mary from her family before the announcement of her miraculous conception, or the Prophet from the unbelievers. In other words, it designates a sacred space. Yet this term now invariably refers to a Muslim woman's dress, and has even come to replace other (non-Arabic) terms for the veil, such as the *chador*. The term cuts across cultural barriers by reverting to the language of the Koran. *Hijab* is now used pan-Islamically to denote and often embrace the woman's veil (Berger 103-4).

Indeed, women across the globe have taken up the *hijab* in greater numbers, and many even offer passionate defenses for their desire to do so. In the United States, a theoretically secular nation, there has been a notable shift in the past few years toward adoption of the *hijab*, particularly among high school and college students (Syed 515). They often decide to don the veil at an early age after studying Islam, relatively independent of family pressure (Syed 517-8). However, a study of immigrant Muslim women in America reveals that the pro-veiling discourse of the Muslim elite has certainly influenced their decisions. For example, women who chose to veil considered it their responsibility to guard themselves from men's allegedly natural hypersexuality. They understood the veil as the divine solution to this sexual predicament. For example, one woman states, "Islam is natural and men need some things naturally. If we abide by these needs [and veil accordingly], we will all be happy" (Read and Bartowski 404). Many women felt the veil clearly marks them as Muslims, helps them to form a tight-knit

community, and prevents their absorption into mainstream culture — all reasons which adhere to the prescribed purpose of the *hijab*. One participant in the study declared, “The veil keeps us [Muslim women] from getting mixed up in American culture” (Read and Bartowski 407).

However, the women also gave reasons for veiling that departed considerably from and even contradicted official rationales. Interestingly, many of the women interviewed perceived veiling as a means to engage in pursuits in the public sphere, as opposed to a reminder that they should remain at home. They insisted they felt more comfortable in mixed-sex settings with the veil, for men would not judge them according to their sexual appeal. One young woman claimed, “If you’re in *hijab*, then someone sees you and treats you accordingly. I feel more free. Especially men, they don’t look at your appearance — they appreciate your intellectual abilities. They respect you” (Read and Bartowski 407). The veil also provides these women with a sense of security, believing it protected them from wandering eyes and even sexual assault (though no evidence exists to support this claim). Many also used the veil to visibly assert their religious and ethnic identities in a dominantly white culture (Read and Bartowski 405-6). Clearly, the perceived benefits of the *hijab* do not conform to the purposes outlined by religious scholars. These women use the veil to facilitate, rather than limit, their movement in the public world. They wear the veil to assert their identity more than to maintain their humility and modesty.

In Egypt, women have donned the veil for reasons quite similar to those of American immigrants. Egyptian adolescents have even defiantly worn the *nikab*, which covers the entire body except for the eyes. The government prohibits the *nikab* in schools, yet the girls retort that their dress should concern no one else, for it is their *nikab* and their business. Paradoxically, they self-righteously assert their individuality through their invisibility (Berger 109). In Cairo, Western dress is fairly common, yet women who work outside the home often still choose to wear the veil. Those who work typically do so out of economic necessity, yet they still face cultural and religious enmity for abandoning their prescribed gender role. By wearing the veil, Egyptian women can make it known that they are good, pious Muslims, thus deflecting criticism from their society as well as jealousy from their husbands. The veil also makes them feel less vulnerable to sexual assault, for they believe it commands respect as a

statement of modesty (Hirschmann 478-80).

In Arab Bedouin culture, veiling is also theoretically optional. Women perceive veiling and seclusion as a mark of honor, which in this context is virtually inextricable from modesty and obedience. The veil serves to set a woman apart, for it signifies her independence by suggesting she does not require the company of men. The woman who wears the veil proudly demonstrates her stoic autonomy — she does not need emotional or sexual gratification. She stands alone in her purity (Hirschmann 474).

On the surface, it appears that Muslim women in diverse cultures use the veil as an instrument of agency. It allows women in America to assert their religious and ethnic identities, navigate the social world without fear or shame, and draw attention to their abilities in a body-oriented culture. Egyptian high schoolers wear the veil as an act of teenage defiance; Egyptian women wear the veil to reconcile traditional values with the need to work and to demand respect from Muslim men by proclaiming their piety. Bedouin women don the veil to publicly demonstrate their independence and display their honor. However, “the fact that women choose the veil does not of itself make it a free action, or even a protest. Indeed, it could be a sign of the closed circularity of women’s political disempowerment and colonization” (Hirschmann 485). Though women creatively use the veil as a tool of agency, thus subverting the expressed aim of the veil, they inevitably affirm the very power structures that disempower them in the first place. Adopting the veil implicitly affirms androcentric rationales for its existence.

Women may wear the veil to facilitate their movement in the public sphere, but in doing so they subscribe to the notion that this space belongs to men. They must adjust their dress to avoid criticism, unwanted attention and even sexual assault. Yet contrary to the claims about protection, the veil has actually become a symbol of eroticism in certain contexts. For example, Hindi films have displayed a notorious fondness for scenes of veiled women caught in sudden downpours that conveniently reveal their physiques (Shirazi 177). By wearing the veil, women accept responsibility for their own sexual victimization, instead of placing the blame squarely on their potential aggressors. They must proclaim their honor, moral integrity and religiosity at the expense of

their sexual agency. The values that define proper Muslim womanhood entail a renunciation of sexual identity, while granting men the privilege of an unquestioned overactive sexuality. Muslim women must not only adhere to the parameters of a sexuality laid out by men, but must staunchly defend it if they are to receive any degree of autonomy. In fact, Muslim women are often the first to criticize a woman for overt displays of sexuality (Hirschmann 476).

Because Muslim cultures uphold modesty and obedience as the highest virtues of womanhood, women will inevitably desire to embody these ideals to achieve status and respect. (In theory the ideals of modesty and obedience apply to both women and men; in practice, women are subject to them far more strictly.) For “this is exactly how social control works, through the colonization of desire and will...[and] it not only coerces individuals, but redefines such coercion as freedom and choice thereby denying individuals to see the control they are subject to, and making them instruments of their own oppression” (Hirschmann 477-478). That some women vigorously defend the veil as their own choice does not mean their choice somehow occurred in a vacuum, free from coercion. Some Muslim women also defend and support men who beat their “unruly” wives (Hirschmann 475), yet one would clearly not consider this just.

The fact that many Muslim women view the veil as merely a religious symbol, analogous to a cross or *bindi*, or even as fashionable, demonstrates how the political origins of the veil have been displaced. In the documentary *My Journey, My Islam*, one woman explains how she chose to wear the veil upon realizing the incompatibility of her religious values with immodest luxuries such as Western dress and French perfume. One then watches this woman enter a shop full of fashionable, colorful, silken *hijabs*. As she tries one on before a mirror, one can hardly help but notice the same vanity and consumerism she had shown disdain for only moments before (Rasool). Conceptions of the veil as a benign religious symbol or fashion statement seemingly challenge claims of oppression, but they actually blind women to the veil’s political significance (Hirschmann 482).

Historically, Muslim women have had no hand in establishing the official parameters of Islam. Only men have had access to positions of power and influence within the tradition; they have interpreted religious

texts, laid out and enforced prescriptions and proscriptions. One can and should call attention to women's agency within this context, but must not lose sight of the fact that their choices and actions remain bound to this context. Wearing the veil seemingly affords women a degree of autonomy and respect, but it fails to challenge the norms that work toward their overall disadvantage. Muslim women often can only legitimately assert themselves by adhering to the androcentric construction of a good Muslim woman. They must conceal themselves if they are to be taken seriously, accept responsibility for male sexuality, and deny their own sexuality in the process. Unfortunately, the Muslim women who do demand equality on their own terms are often accused of being sympathetic to Western, and therefore un-Islamic, ideals (Hirschmann 471). In many Muslim contexts, women can defend and accommodate themselves to, but not create or criticize, norms.

Given the sensitivity surrounding the treatment of Islam since September 11, people are quick to draw a line between the good, "authentic" Islam, and the bad perversions of its true form. Hirschmann, in her otherwise insightful article, makes a point to distinguish religion from its cultural contexts: "A feminist perspective can help us recognize that many women's unfreedom stems not from Islam itself, but from the *use and interpretation* of Islam to feed into and support overtly political agendas and purposes, which are in turn developed by and for men and serve patriarchal interests" (Hirschmann 487). But how can one extricate Islam from its context, particularly its patriarchal context? What precisely is the difference between Islam and its use and interpretations? This is a highly artificial distinction that serves to place religion in a safe zone, beyond the reach of critical inquiry. However, one cannot rip (any) religion apart from its use and interpretations, disembodiment it, as it were. Religion is not a thing one can wield for good or bad purposes, but rather an integral part of power structures. There is no pristine Islam (or Christianity, or Buddhism, etc.) that one can set in contrast to its so-called perversions. Refusing to call certain kinds of religion "authentic" simply because they propagate injustice leaves us with very little that we can term "religion."

Islam, like arguably every other religion, serves to establish the parameters of gender. It authenticates certain constructions of gender and rejects others. Veiling is but one of the many institutionalized

practices that strengthen the androcentric gender divide. It is both fully religious and fully cultural, and therefore must be examined as such. And while modern women have reappropriated the veil to subvert its original aims, they ultimately reinforce the very power structures that oppress them. This does not mean that the veil has not served as a powerful tool for Muslim women, or even that the veil is somehow more inherently oppressive than, say, a string bikini. In Muslim contexts, the veil simultaneously serves as a means to gain honor and independence and denies women sexual agency. In Western contexts, bikinis may allow women to rebel against age-old demands of modesty, but they also reinforce the sexual objectification of women. The veil, like many clothes for Western women, has been used to subvert patriarchal power structures, but this subversion feeds back into and reinforces those structures.

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