



RETHINKING  
MUSLIM WOMEN  
AND THE

# VEIL

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*Challenging Historical & Modern Stereotypes*

KATHERINE BULLOCK

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Katherine Bullock

2ND EDITION



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## FOREWORD



Of knowledge, we have none, save what  
You have taught us. (The Qur'an 2:32)

The International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) has great pleasure in presenting this new edition of Dr. Katherine Bullock's treatise on Muslim women and the veil. First published in 2002, the work is a powerful critique of the popular western notion that the veil is a symbol of Muslim women's oppression. Addressing many of the key socio-political concerns which this global issue has raised, the author examines the West's historical fixation with the veil (including aspects of colonialism and fetishism with the harem), appraises feminist discourse, and offers in the final chapter an alternative theory of the veil. An important feature of the work is the voice the author has given to the views, opinions, experiences, and perspectives of a sample of Muslim women interviewed in Canada on the subject of the *ḥijāb*.

In postulating a positive theory of the *ḥijāb*, the author challenges with great sophistication both the popular culture view of Muslim women as being utterly subjugated by men, as well as the more complex arguments put forward by liberal feminists such as Mernissi, Macleod, and others who have sought to criticize women's choices to cover as ultimately 'un-liberating.' Examining and questioning the validity and accuracy of some of the latter's assumptions, the author puts forward the case that the judgment of the veil as being an oppressive feature of Islam is based on liberal understandings of 'equality' and 'liberty' that preclude other ways of thinking about 'equality' and 'liberty' which would offer a more positive approach for contemplating the wearing of the veil. The author argues that in a consumer



capitalist culture, the *ḥijāb* can be experienced as liberation from the tyranny of the beauty myth and the thin 'ideal' woman.

Little has changed since the book was first published five years ago and if anything the controversy raging around the wearing of *ḥijāb/niqāb* is entering a new phase of sensationalism and dissension. A firmly established feature of any discourse on Islam and Muslims it still continues to be seen as a symbol of women's oppression. Taking these factors into consideration it is not surprising that demand for Dr. Bullock's book continues to grow, and given this as well as the heightened nature of the debate, the IIIT has published this second edition.

Although the content remains unchanged, as valid today as when it was first written, the author has added a new Preface focusing on some of the reasoning behind the negativity and bad press which the veil receives, the advance of three broad movements which seem to be prevailing amongst Muslims concerning its adoption, as well as why it is such a flashpoint for controversy.

Dr. Katherine Bullock, embraced Islam during her Ph.D. candidacy and, interestingly, it was the experience of people's reaction to her conversion that led her to change the original topic of her doctoral thesis and choose instead the study of the veil as the subject of her Ph.D. Through careful and meticulous study into an area fraught with historical and cultural misconceptions, the author has sought to challenge some of the subjective and negative fundamentals which have come to dominate much of the discourse into this important issue today.

The IIIT, established in 1981, has served as a major center to facilitate sincere and serious scholarly efforts based on Islamic vision, values and principles. Its programs of research, seminars and conferences during the last twenty six years have resulted in the publication of more than two hundred and sixty titles in English and Arabic, many of which have been translated into several other languages.

In conformity with the IIIT in-house style sheet, words and proper names of Arabic origin or written in a script derived from Arabic, have been transliterated throughout the work except when mentioned in quoted text. In such cases they have been cited as they appear without application of our transliteration system.

We would like to express our thanks and gratitude to Dr. Katherine Bullock, who, throughout the various stages of the book's production, cooperated closely with the editorial team at the IIIT London Office.

We would also like to thank the editorial and production team at the London Office and those who were directly involved in the completion of this book: Sylvia Hunt (who made an important contribution by reducing the length of chapter one of the original manuscript which now appears as chapter two), Shiraz Khan, Sohail Nakhoda and Dr. Maryam Mahmood, all of whom worked tirelessly in preparing the book for publication. May God reward them and the author for all their efforts.

Sha'bān 1428  
August 2007

ANAS AL-SHAIKH-ALI  
*Academic Advisor*  
*IIIT London Office, UK*



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*All praise is due to God, the Creator  
and Sustainer of the Universe.*

This book is based on my Ph.D. thesis, ‘The Politics of the Veil.’ It has seen different versions since then, but I remain indebted to the members of my thesis committee, Joseph Carens, Melissa Williams and Janice Boddy for their encouragement, support and critical feedback on the initial text. *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil* would not be here today if it were not for their support during my Ph.D. years. My thanks again go to the women I interviewed for the thesis, who gave so generously of their time and thinking: about Islam, the *ḥijāb* and their personal lives. Their words are the heart of my thesis, and of this book.

Chapter One appeared as a shorter article ‘The Gaze and Colonial Plans for the Unveiling of Muslim Women’, in *Studies in Contemporary Islam* (2, 2, Fall 2000); Chapter Three, as a shorter article ‘Challenging Media Representations of the Veil: Contemporary Muslim Women’s Reveiling Movement’, in the *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* (17, 3, Fall 2000); Chapter Four as a book review of Fatima Mernissi’s *Beyond the Veil*, in the *Journal of Law and Religion* (xv, 1 and 2, 2000–2001). I am grateful to the publishers for permission to reprint these materials.

At the IIIT office, my thanks go to Dr. Louay Safi, and Dr. Anas Al-Shaikh-Ali for their backing of my project, and to Sylvia Hunt for her expert copyediting of the manuscript.

To all my friends and family, I wish to express my appreciation for their continuous support and encouragement for my project: for long conversations about issues the *ḥijāb* brings up; and for reading different versions of the text and giving critical feedback. Here also are

my apologies for often being too busy writing to take time out to reply properly to e-mails or letters.

Many long hours have gone into this book; I hope it is successful in helping dispel some myths about Muslim women and *ḥijāb*. If the book helps ease the lives of Muslim women in the West, I will feel I have done my job. May God assist us, and guide us to a path that is straight.

KATHERINE BULLOCK  
California, 2001

## PREFACE TO FIRST EDITION

*Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil* was being copy-edited for publication when the tragic attack on the World Trade Center in New York occurred. President Bush's response included an emphatic message to the American people not to attack Muslims in America in revenge. At his visit to a Washington DC mosque on September 17, 2001, Bush made a speech praising Islam and arguing that Muslim women in America who wear *ḥijāb* must feel comfortable to do so and not to feel intimidated going outside. President Bush's speech was published in *The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* (November 2001, xx, 8, pp.78–79).

This public endorsement of the *ḥijāb* by the highest political leader in the US is unprecedented. It renders obsolete that part of my argument where I suggest that the negative stereotype of the *ḥijāb* in the popular western perception is essential to US foreign policy. On the other hand, the week after the atrocities, I received in the mail a free-trial offer from *The Economist*, whose cover was a picture of a woman in *niqāb* and the heading "Can Islam and Democracy Mix?" This was an extremely insensitive and shameless attempt on the part of *The Economist* to capitalize on anti-Islamic sentiment that had been aroused in the US by the September 11th attack.

It remains to be seen whether Bush's speech marks the advent of a new era of public discourse about *ḥijāb* in the West, or if *The Economist's* cover article indicates that it will be business as usual.



## PREFACE TO SECOND EDITION

As the first edition of this book was being copy-edited, the awful events of September 11, 2001, unfolded, and I had the opportunity to note in my first preface that George Bush, Jr. had spoken publicly about his administration's desire that Muslim women in *hijāb* should not feel afraid to be in public in America, a country that purported to respect freedom of religion. I noted the negative stereotype embedded in the image of a Muslim woman with her face covered on the front of a four page *Economist* advertisement that arrived in the mail, along with the title "Can Islam and Democracy Mix?" and I wondered, were these contradictory messages a sign that things were to change for the better for Muslim women in the West, or only to stay the same?

Incredibly, and sadly, it turns out that neither was true: it appears that things have worsened, not only for Muslim women, but for Muslims in general. I had hoped that *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil* would help to dispel the negative stereotypes about Islam and Muslims which are so rich in popular western culture, and through this encourage integration and cooperation between Muslim and non-Muslim citizens of the West.

So much has happened in the 13 years since I first conducted the interviews that form the core of this book, one would assume subsequent events necessitate new interpretations, new ideas, new thoughts. And yet, as a catalogue of events comes to mind, what stands out more clearly is how all these world events have not altered one iota the main problems first delineated in this book. The events of September 11, the US invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, and Iraq; the Danish cartoon controversy; the French ban on *hijāb* in schools; the commotion in the UK over a teacher wanting to wear a



face veil to work; none of these have introduced anything new. It is rather, the more things change, the more they stay the same.

The core of the problem is this: western culture has a deeply ingrained prejudice against Islam, and Muslims. Muslim women in the West who choose to wear what they believe to be religiously sanctioned dress are the most visible symbols of Islam, and hence become a focal point for the negative sentiments about Islam. Negative secular feminist discourse about Muslim women has permeated western mainstream culture to the point that it is taken as a given that “the veil oppresses Muslim women,” even by those who have never met a Muslim woman in their lives. For those who subscribe to these ideas, there is no distinction between an elite (i.e. supposedly more informed) and an ‘unlettered’ (supposedly less informed) perspective. The negative perceptions of *ḥijāb* can be found at all levels of society. In fact, a case could be made that the uninformed mass opinion that castigates *ḥijāb* is due to the notions perpetuated by certain commentators at the intellectual level, through newspapers, and in popular culture. Any more empathetic study produced by academia or the press is unable to make inroads into this negative image.

And thus now, as then, the missing voices in this debate are the women themselves who choose to cover. One of the key contributions the first edition of *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil* made to the literature on Muslim women was in its foregrounding, its privileging, of the voice of Muslim women themselves. Academia has been fascinated with the ‘reveiling movement’ – a growing trend since the 1970s amongst Muslim women, young and old, in a diversity of countries, to adopt a modern form of religiously sanctioned dress. This action, of waking up one morning and deciding, in the context of a country that allows freedom of dress, to cover the head with a scarf, and wear wrist-length and ankle-length dress, presents itself as a puzzle needing explanation. As chapter three demonstrates, there are a myriad of reasons women make this choice. But the explanations that, “I was brainwashed,” “I was forced,” or “I am too oppressed to truly understand my choice,” while popular in certain quarters in the West, are not the whole story of *ḥijāb*, as we are commonly led to believe.

In fact, from the perspective of many religious Muslim women, the puzzle that needs explaining is not why they choose to cover, but why other women do not. When modern women in the West wear clothes that reveal most of their bodies; when the western consumer capitalist culture continues to exploit the female form in advertisements for consumer products; when ‘beauty’ magazines use sophisticated software to invent unreal prototypes of the “beautiful” (thin) feminine form; when cosmetic surgery is on the rise, as are all types of eating disorders and low self-esteem for women, the real question becomes, why do western women accept this exploitation of their feminine form? Why is there this need to “hang it all out on display” in order to claim “freedom” and “equality?”

Aminah Assilmi, an American convert to Islam, once pointed out in a lecture I attended while doing my Ph.D., that it’s a funny kind of equality when a male business executive’s formal dress code is a suit with wrist-length sleeves and ankle-length pants, but a woman’s is a high-cut mini skirt and a low-cut top. This observation holds true today. Does a woman have to display her body in order to be considered respectable, dignified, and professional? How is it that if a Muslim woman chooses to dress in a way similar to the business executive, she is not being “professional” but rather “brainwashed and oppressed?” It seems clearer that the display of the female body is more a chain, a straightjacket, and submissive to the male gaze, than is the *hijāb*.

I suspect that at this point, several objections may be made to what I have said so far: What of the Taliban? What of this-or-that horrible thing done to a Muslim woman in some country of the world? As I also made clear in the first edition of the book, I am not trying to argue that any particular Muslim woman is not oppressed. Indeed, sadly, there are many Muslim women who are oppressed. There are many Muslim women who suffer injustices, at the hands of their husbands, family, village, society, even the global society (this being a different kind of oppression, one carried through imperialism). One of my main themes in lectures I give to Muslim Student Associations is that we have to start ensuring Muslim women are treated more justly. Many of the students worry to me about the negative image of Islam and Muslims in the western media, and I point

out to them that these negative stereotypes are not phantoms. The press does not travel to a fictitious country to report on a violation of a Muslim woman's rights. They travel to real countries and find the stories of real women. Thus, while we must counter negative western stereotypes, Muslims must also do more in speaking up for justice, for women's rights, for reform. I often say that if there were an ideal Muslim society in some place on this planet, the negative stereotype of Islam would soon disappear. While, sadly, this remains an ideal, there are nonetheless, scores of good Muslims seeking to bring about justice and positive change for their communities. These stories are rarely printed in the western press. They don't make as "good" ("controversial/hot") a story for their readership.

But the truth that some Muslim women are suffering, often in the form of a male-biased cultural practice of the faith, is not equivalent to the claim that "Islam" oppresses women. It is not equivalent to the claim that the *ḥijāb* is a symbol of a Muslim woman's oppression. For to transform real Muslim women's suffering into a generalised truth claim about Islam is to negate the possibility that there are Muslim women who wear *ḥijāb* out of a freely reasoned choice that they remain satisfied with, and that they live lives of dignity inside the practice of their faith. To say otherwise is to repeat the colonial dictum that Muslim women will not be liberated until they renounce Islam.

Three new trends that have grown since the first edition of this book was published need to be mentioned. The first is the rise of young Westernised Muslim women reclaiming Islam on their terms, but rejecting "conservative" interpretations; the second is the rise of the "progressive" Muslims, who stake out an aggressive and strident anti-"conservative Islam" voice; and the third, a mini "un-veiling trend" amongst Muslim women who used to wear *ḥijāb* and are now removing it, under a new conviction that it is not in fact a religiously required dress. All of these have a bearing on understanding *ḥijāb* in modern western culture.

While each of these trends is distinctive, one of the overlaps is a view that contrary to "conservative Islamist" discourse, the head-cover, known as *ḥijāb*, is not in fact a religiously sanctioned dress, but rather a conservative reading of certain verses in the Qur'an that

do not in fact require the headdress. As an example, their exegesis of Qur'an, 24:31, in which it says to Muslim women, "draw your veils over your bosoms," is that the Qur'an is not talking about a head-cover, but rather simply asking Muslim women to dress modestly by covering the chest area. They refute the traditional interpretation of this verse, which holds that the veil (*khimar*) is already a head-cover, and what is being asked is for a woman also to draw it around her shoulders and chest area.

These alternative understandings of the faith have a bearing on how Muslim women live out their lives as Muslims in the West. They demonstrate a very wide spectrum of opinion. Unfortunately, the diversity of opinion leads to antagonism within the Muslim community, which ultimately serves the neo-conservative agenda of generating hostility towards Islam and Muslims in a general western public that does not grasp the complexities at hand. This comes via two different paths.

First, since the notion that the "Muslim woman's dress is oppressive" is already a cultural artefact, to have young, second- or third-generation individuals declaring that they are Muslim and Western, and that their religion doesn't really require them to wear *hijāb*, is to reinforce that cultural artefact. These women's voices are read gladly by the general public (and some secular feminist intellectuals). These voices can then be upheld and supported as a counter-weight to the more foreign-looking Muslim women wearing head-covers. The "native" voice merely confirms and relieves them of their having to come to terms with a dress they dislike and associate with oppression and a negative religion.

Second, the stridently "progressive" Muslim voice joins the chorus of those non-Muslim voices denouncing women who wish to wear the purportedly foreign head-covers, with the argument that the *hijāb* is nothing but the harbinger of "political Islam," a movement to be feared and resisted by the West. These voices are also gladly taken up by racist and Islamophobic voices in the West, so that there is a bizarre supportive relationship between anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant perspectives and secular Muslims normally critical of western racism. Muslims from this perspective supported the French ban on *hijāb* in schools, and the suggestion of UK Foreign Minister

Jack Straw – and later, Prime Minister Tony Blair – that Muslim women should remove their face veils if they want to integrate properly into British society. Once again, as chapter one of this book demonstrates, the western colonial desire to unveil Muslim women continues. Only the terrain is different: now we speak not of unveiling in the colony, but unveiling by the former colonial subjects in the “mother” country. That Catholic nuns still cover their hair; that a Queen of England, Eleanor of Aquitaine (1122–1204), had invented the *barbette* (a band fastening under the chin in order to secure a veil worn over the head); indeed, that women in the Middle Ages in the UK also covered their heads with veils, seemed to have been forgotten in this debate, which targeted the supposed “un-Britishness” (of this kind of) Muslim women’s dress.

I was astonished, therefore, to hear Tarek Fatah, the former chair of the Muslim Canadian Congress, declare on a national Canadian television panel about the veil issue in Britain that the Muslim woman should not be allowed to wear a face veil in the West because it functioned as a mask, and did not allow us to see her face. His arguments were eerily reminiscent of 19th century colonial and Orientalist arguments against the veil, as can be seen in chapter one.

What I wish from the reprint of this book are several things: First, from within the Muslim community, a move away from antagonism over these different opinions about women’s dress. Difference of opinion was a marked feature of the early days of Islam, and Muslims should not be afraid of differences these days. The *hijāb* is often obsessed over as if it’s the thing that makes a woman a Muslim or not. What is forgotten is that it is the *shahāda* (the declaration and belief that none is worthy of worship except God and that Muhammad is His messenger) that makes one a Muslim, and after that the most important deed is to pray on time. Prophetic tradition reminds us that otherwise observant Muslim women can be penalised in the next life if they were gossips in this life. The scale of a person’s deeds is not ours to worry over. What should concern us more than how another woman is dressed is our own behavior and deeds. So, the “conservative” side of the spectrum needs to be careful of arrogance and denouncing those who do not wish to wear *hijāb*; as does the “progressive” side in its denunciations of those

who do wish to wear *niqāb*. Above all, freedom of conscience, by both sides, should be upheld.

Second, I worry that the rise of the three “*ḥijāb* is not a religious requirement” trends mentioned above, since they are so much more happily supported by the West, are only serving to marginalise even more than ever, Muslim women who do want to wear head-covers or face veils. Their voices are now pushed to the margins by mainstream western cultural discourse, and progressive Muslim discourse. Not all of the women interviewed for *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil* wore or wanted to wear head-covers, but many did, and the overall framework of the book is supportive of the perspective that *ḥijāb* is a religiously sanctioned dress that is not oppressive and is part of a religion that gives Muslim women dignity and respect. Thus the book will hopefully serve as an alternative perspective on these debates.

And finally, even though it has not seemed to yet, I still hope the book can make a dent in the widely held negative stereotype of *ḥijāb* in the West (and also in the secularising Muslim world). For while some Muslim citizens of the West may not want to cover, may not be convinced *ḥijāb* is a religious requirement, many others do. They need to find a place in western society, just as do those women who, without their head-covers, can “blend” in more easily (albeit still needing to overcome the anti-immigrant, anti-minority issues of racism and discrimination). Western cultures place a high value on freedom of religion and conscience, and I hope that in spite of the growing backlash against Muslims, a Muslim woman’s choice to cover will be respected and not used as a hindrance to her career path, or her other needs and desires to be a part of the community in which she lives. Anti-western extremism amongst western Muslims cannot be countered by asking all Muslims to subscribe to a more familiar-looking (western-approved) version of Islam. Anti-western extremism can only be reduced by also embracing more conservative perspectives on women’s dress, as expressed in the Muslim woman’s *ḥijāb* or even *niqāb*. As my interviews reveal, subscribing to more conservative views of the faith does not preclude a Muslim woman from being a committed citizen of her western country, in spite of the claims to the contrary by progressive Muslim or neo-conservative voices.

As Nur, an undergraduate student and one of my interviewees, related in response to a question posed on TV by a reporter with the Canadian Broadcasting Commission, “Can the *hijāb* pass the litmus test of being Canadian?”

As a person who wears the *hijāb*, I think we can. We definitely pass the litmus test of being Canadian, because if a woman wears *hijāb* it doesn’t mean – she can easily be incorporated into the Canadian values. The Canadian values of tolerance, of respecting other’s culture, their religion... All those Canadian values, they’re not contradictory to the *hijāb* package at all. Or even modesty, if I’m modest then that’s not against the Canadian values, is it? No, it’s not. The respect for women or any other value of being non-sexist, non-racist, those are Canadian values that we hold very dear and the *hijāb* is not a contradiction at all. Not at all, I don’t think so.

## INTRODUCTION

In 1991 I saw a news report on the television that showed Turkish women who were returning to the veil. I felt shocked and saddened for them. “Poor things,” I thought, “they are being brainwashed by their culture.” Like many Westerners, I believed that Islam oppressed women and that the veil was a symbol of their oppression. Imagine my surprise then, four years later, at seeing my own reflection in a store window, dressed exactly like those oppressed women. I had embarked on a spiritual journey during my Master’s degree that culminated four years later in my conversion to Islam. The journey included moving from hatred of Islam, to respect, to interest, to acceptance. Naturally, being a woman, the issue of the veil was central. Despite my attraction to the theological foundations of Islam, I was deeply troubled by what I believed to be practices oppressive to women. I felt that the veil was a cultural tradition that Muslim women could surely work to eliminate. I was shown the verses in the Qur’an that many Muslims believe enjoin covering on men and women, and it seemed quite clear to me then that, indeed, the verses did impose covering. I wandered home, feeling quite depressed and sorry for Muslim women. If the verses were clear, they had no recourse: covering would be required for a believing Muslim woman. I had to put these issues aside in order to decide whether or not to accept Islam. What counted, in the final analysis, was the fundamental theological message of the religion – that there is a single God, and that Muhammad (ṢAAS)\* was His Last Servant and Messenger. After several years of study I had no doubt about that ... if only it were not for the issue of women and Islam.

\* (ṢAAS) – *Ṣallā Allāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam*. ‘May the peace and blessings of God be upon him.’ Said whenever the name of the Prophet Muhammad is mentioned.



When I finally made my decision to convert, now one and a half years into my doctorate (July 1994), I decided that whether I liked it or not, I should cover. It was a commandment, and I would obey. I warned some people in my department that I had become a Muslim, and that the next time they saw me I would be covered. Needless to say, people were quite shocked, and as word spread (and as people saw me in my new dress), I found myself subject to some hostile treatment. How could I have embraced an oppressive practice, especially when I was known as a strong and committed feminist? How could I embrace Islam? Had I not heard what Hamas had just done? Had I not heard what some Muslim man had just done to a woman? I was not quite prepared for this hostility, nor was I prepared for the different way I was being treated by secretaries, bureaucrats, medical personnel, or general strangers on the subway. I felt the same, but I was often being treated with contempt. I was not treated as I had been as a white, middle-class woman. It was my first personal experience of discrimination and racism, and made me see my previous privileged position in a way that I had never before properly understood.

My new Muslim women friends (including many converts) comforted me as I negotiated my way through my new religion and the reactions that I was experiencing from the broader community. How did my friends manage this situation, I wondered? Did they experience wearing *hijāb* (headscarf) in Toronto the same way I did, or was I just being overly sensitive? Did people really stare on the subway, or were they looking at something else? Why was I being treated with pity and/or contempt? During this difficult time I was deciding on a topic for my Ph.D. dissertation, and although I tried to avoid it for a while, it became obvious that the reaction to the headscarf was a topic worthy of exploration. Why was the 'veil' seen as a symbol of oppression in the West? Why did the West seem to malign Islam? How could I and my friends feel committed to something that we felt was liberating, and yet be in so much conflict with the non-Muslim society around us? Why did people not know our version of Islam and the scarf?

After I finished my doctoral thesis on *The Politics of the Veil*, and after the positive feedback that I received from those who read the

dissertation, I felt it was important to share my research with a wider audience. The foremost aim of this book is to challenge the popular Western stereotype that the veil is oppressive. My main argument is that the popular Western notion that the veil is a symbol of Muslim women's oppression is a constructed image that does not represent the experience of all those who wear it. That construction had always served Western political ends, and it continued to do so even in the late twentieth century. In addition, I argue that the judgment that the veil is oppressive is based on liberal understandings of 'equality' and 'liberty' that preclude other ways of thinking about 'equality' and 'liberty' that offer a more positive approach for contemplating the wearing of the veil.

#### A. THE VEIL AND FEMINIST APPROACHES

The perception that the veil is a symbol of Islam's oppression of women has different adherents who embody different assumptions and different levels of sophistication. On the one hand there is the mainstream, pop culture view: Muslim women are completely and utterly subjugated by men, and the veil is a symbol of that. This version is the most simplistic and unsophisticated view of the veil. It is underpinned by an unconscious adherence to liberalism and modernization theory, compounded by an ignorance of any actual details about Muslim women's lives. The pop culture view is found in the mainstream media and mass market 'women and Islam' books. It is the view that I encounter: when my dentist suggests that my grinding problem is caused by my scarf, and why don't I experiment by taking it off for a while?; when bureaucrats, upon seeing my Australian passport and my husband's Middle Eastern passport, whisper conspiratorally and worriedly to me, "You married a Muslim, didn't you? What's it like?;" when strangers, upon discovering that I married a Muslim, ask me worriedly, "Are you happy?;" and when I am told that I do not belong at an International Women's Day fair because I represent the oppression of women. It is the view on which Western politicians rely and which they manipulate when they need to assert their interests in the Muslim world.

A more sophisticated view is that of one school of feminists,

both Muslim and non-Muslim. They argue that Islam, like any patriarchal religion, subordinates women. They are committed to women's rights and believe that Islam does not allow women liberation. Unlike the pop culture version, these feminists are often very knowledgeable about Islamic history and practice. Though some of them do not listen attentively to the voices of covered women,<sup>1</sup> others do make an attempt to understand and present the Other's voice.<sup>2</sup> However, these writers do not ultimately find Muslim women's arguments for the meaning of covering persuasive. They remain convinced that a satisfying life in the veil is still an oppressed life. Like the mainstream view, their assumptions are also ultimately grounded in liberalism. The concepts most at play are liberal concepts of individualism, equality, liberty, and oppression. For this reason, I shall call this school of feminists 'liberal feminists'.

There is another school of feminists, both Muslim and non-Muslim, that also listens to the voices of covered women, but reaches

<sup>1</sup> Azar Tabari, 'Islam and the Struggle for Emancipation of Iranian Women', in Azar Tabari and Nahid Yeganeh (eds.), *In the Shadow of Islam: The Women's Movement in Iran* (London: Zed Press, 1982); Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society*, revd. edn. (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1987), and *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1991); Marie-Aimée Hélie-Lucas, 'Women, Nationalism and Religion in the Algerian Struggle', in Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke (eds.), *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1990); 'Women's Struggles and Strategies in the Rise of Fundamentalism in the Muslim World: From Entryism to Internationalism', in Haleh Afshar (ed.), *Women in the Middle East: Perceptions, Realities and Struggles for Liberation* (London: Macmillan, 1993), and 'The Preferential Symbol for Islamic Identity: Women in Muslim Personal Laws', in Valentine Moghadam (ed.), *Identity Politics and Women: Cultural Reassertions and Feminisms in International Perspective* (Boulder, Co.: Westview Press, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> Haleh Afshar, 'Islam and Feminism: An Analysis of Political Strategies', in Mai Yamani (ed.), *Feminism and Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives*, (Reading, Berks, (UK): Garnet, 1996); Arlene Elowe Macleod, *Accommodating Protest: Working Women and the New Veiling in Cairo* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); Leila Hessini, 'Wearing the Hijab in Contemporary Morocco: Choice and Identity', in Fatma Müge Göçek and Shiva Balaghi (eds.), *Reconstructing Gender in the Middle East: Tradition, Identity, and Power* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); Carla Makhoulouf, *Changing Veils: Women and Modernisation in North Yemen* (London: Croom Helm, 1979); Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); Nikki Keddie, 'Introduction: Deciphering Middle Eastern Women's History', in Nikki Keddie and Beth Baron (eds.), *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1991).

different conclusions about covering from those of the liberal feminists. Often anthropologists and historians, this group of feminists has been concerned to understand the meaning of a social practice from the inside. These feminists may also be grounded in liberalism to some extent, but their methodological approach leads them away from using mainstream Western liberal categories to judge the Other's voice. Many of these feminists raise the question as to whether Western feminists' issues are universally applicable.<sup>3</sup> Naming this group of scholars is somewhat problematic, because unlike the liberal approach described above, there is not an 'ism' that captures this orientation. For want of a better term, I shall call this approach the 'contextual approach'.

Writing as a practicing Muslim woman, I fall into this school of feminism.<sup>4</sup> I present the interviews of Muslim women who live and work in Toronto, Canada, as a way of better understanding the practice of covering, and as a way of puncturing the popular image of Muslim women as subjugated (Chapter Two). My argument is thus directed at two different levels. In addition to challenging the pop culture view of veiling, I also seek to challenge liberal feminists' understanding of the oppressive nature of veiling.

<sup>3</sup> Uni Wikan, *Behind the Veil in Arabia: Women in Oman* (Baltimore, Md.: John Hopkins University Press, 1982); Lila Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1986); Judith E. Tucker, 'Problems in the Historiography of Women in the Middle East: The Case of Nineteenth Century Egypt', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 15 (1983), pp.321-336, and 'Introduction', in J. Tucker (ed.), *Arab Women: Old Boundaries, New Frontiers*, (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1993); Janice Boddy, *Women, Men, and the Zar Cult in Northern Sudan* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989); Mai Yamani, 'Introduction', in Mai Yamani (ed.), *Feminism and Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives* (Reading, Berks, UK: Garnet, 1996); Elizabeth Fernea, *Guests of the Sheikh: An Ethnography of an Iraqi Village*, 2nd edn. (New York: Anchor Books, 1989); 'The Veiled Revolution', in D. Bowen and E. Early (eds.), *Everyday Life in the Muslim Middle East* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1993), and 'Foreword', in Amira El Azhary (ed.), *Women, The Family, and Divorce Laws in Islamic History* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996); Elizabeth Fernea and Bassima Bezirgan (eds.), *Middle Eastern Muslim Women Speak* (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1977).

<sup>4</sup> A practicing Muslim is one who abides by the five pillars of Islam (testament of faith, prayer five times daily, fasting during the month of Ramadan, annual charity and pilgrimage once in a lifetime). Many Muslims no longer practice their faith, just as many Christians no longer go to church and many Jews no longer attend the synagogue or observe kosher. Nonpractice does not imply nonbelief.

## B. ISLAM AND METHODOLOGY

As many commentators have observed, the study of Muslim women, indeed, Islam in general, has suffered from methodological problems not found in other areas. Until recently, the predominant methodological approach to the study of Muslim women has been Orientalist, or neo-Orientalist. Orientalism, masterfully analysed by Edward Said, has viewed Muslims through the prism of religion. 'Islam' has been seen as a static, monolithic, backward doctrine that both explains and determines Muslim behavior. Colonialists, missionaries, and secular feminists have subscribed to this view. After World War II, Orientalism was transformed into modernization theory (neo-Orientalism). This approach analyzed the non-Western world with the assumption that 'progress' required the world to evolve into Western style institutions.<sup>5</sup> The mainstream Western media and mass-market books still rely on a belief in the inherent superiority of Western ways to make the case against Islam. In colonial times, Muslim élites accepted the Western version of the meaning of the veil, and they also saw its disappearance as essential to the 'modernization' of their countries. A Lebanese woman, Nazira Zain al-Din, the "first Arab woman to publish a lengthy treatise" on the topic of veiling, wrote:

I have noticed that the nations that have given up the veil are the nations that have advanced in intellectual and material life. The unveiled nations are the ones that have discovered through research and study the secrets of nature and have brought the physical elements under their control as you see and know. But the veiled nations have not unearthed any secret and have not put any of the physical elements under their control but only sing the songs of a glorious past and ancient tradition.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Cynthia Nelson, 'Old Wine, New Bottles: Reflections and Projections Concerning Research on Women in Middle Eastern Studies', in Earl L. Sullivan and Jacqueline S. Ismael (eds.), *The Contemporary Study of the Arab World* (Edmonton, Alta., Canada: University of Alberta Press, 1991), p.131; Donna Robinson Divine, 'Unveiling the Mysteries of Islam: The Art of Studying Muslim Women', *J. of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, VII, 2 (Winter 1983), pp.5-10; Fernea, 'Foreword', p.xi; Amira El Azhary Sonbol (ed.), *Women, the Family, and Divorce Laws in Islamic History* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996), p.4.

<sup>6</sup> Nazira Zain al-Din, 'Unveiling and Veiling: On the Liberation of the Woman and Social Renewal in the Islamic World', [Beirut, 1928] in M. Badran and M. Cooke (eds.), *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1990), p.272.

Historians, and anthropologists in particular, have challenged Orientalism and modernization theory in relation to Muslim women by urging a focus on the specificity of Muslim women in order to understand them better.<sup>7</sup> They have challenged viewing Muslim women only through the eyes of a deterministic religion, and demonstrate in their work that other institutions in society make an impact on women's lives: local customs, and political and economic forces. Marsot argues that economic and political exigencies are what count, and religion/ideology is used only to legitimate whatever has been required. She observes that in wartime, women are encouraged to work outside the home, but after the war, domesticity is urged. She believes this is a universal phenomenon, and mentions Rosie the Riveter in the United States.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, it is useful to point out that women's rights frequently deteriorated under European intervention in the Muslim world, challenging the linkage of modernization and Westernization with liberation for Muslim women.<sup>9</sup> Seclusion increased in the Ottoman Empire during European penetration.<sup>10</sup> Meriwether documents the adverse impact that European economic penetration had on Aleppo, Syria, especially on urban working-class women, who lost their

<sup>7</sup> Tucker, 'Problems in the Historiography of Women', p.327; Marnia Lazreg, *The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in Question* (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp.14–15; Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, 'Women and Modernization: A Reevaluation', in Amira El Azhary Sonbol (ed.), *Women, the Family, and Divorce Laws in Islamic History* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996), p.50; Sonbol, *Women, The Family, and Divorce Laws*, p.20; Camillia Fawzi El-Solh, and Judy Mabro (eds.), *Muslim Women's Choices: Religious Belief and Social Reality* (Oxford, UK: Berg Publishers, 1994), p.2; Deniz Kandiyoti, 'Contemporary Feminist Scholarship and Middle East Studies', in Deniz Kandiyoti (ed.), *Gendering the Middle East: Emerging Perspectives*, (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996), p.9.

<sup>8</sup> Marsot, 'Women and Modernization', p.51.

<sup>9</sup> Margaret L. Meriwether, 'Women and Economic Change in Nineteenth-Century Syria: The Case of Aleppo', in J. Tucker (ed.), *Arab Women: Old Boundaries, New Frontiers* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1993); Tucker, 'Problems', and 'Introduction'; Sonbol, *Women, the Family, and Divorce Laws*.

<sup>10</sup> Divine, 'Unveiling the Mysteries', p.8. Wikan's study of Omani women is a masterful examination of women who live in seclusion. She looks at their lives through their own eyes and categories. I know that not all women experience seclusion as oppressive, and I am aware that I may be showing the same negative attitude as those who judge the veil oppressive when I write against seclusion. My aim is not to assert that these women are unhappy, or deluded by false consciousness. However, their way of life is not a vision to which I aspire, nor do I think it in accordance with Islam. See Wikan, *Behind the Veil*.

important place in the cotton industry owing to imported European twists and dyes.<sup>11</sup> Muslim women have had the right under Islamic law to own and control their own property, theoretically without the husband's involvement. In Aleppo, upper-class women were "property owners of some importance in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries... In 1770, 59 percent of all property sales involved women as either buyers or sellers; in 1800, 67 percent; and in 1840, 53 percent."<sup>12</sup> Women in Egypt were not so lucky. Muhammad Ali's (1805–1848) centralization program deprived them of economic independence. In Mamluk Egypt (1254–1811) upper- and middle-class women had actively participated in the economy. Elite women were significant property owners and tax farmers. They engaged in trade and commerce. Centralization excluded them, as Marsot documents, because the ruler gave away land at his discretion to women's detriment. In addition, the

new centralized system also introduced new institutions derived from Europe that militated against women. Banks, stock exchanges, insurance companies, et cetera, in Europe did not recognize the legal existence of women; and so they followed the same strategies in Egypt. Women were not allowed to open bank accounts in their own names or to play the stock market or to indulge in other activities in their own right.<sup>13</sup>

Marsot argues that it is only in the twentieth century that women have "recovered some of the economic activities they had had in the eighteenth century" (p.47). So, if modernization improved health and education and, after colonialism, ended seclusion, in other areas women's "social maneuverability" deteriorated.<sup>14</sup>

Hence historical study of specific women in specific places is revealing that Westernization and modernization did not always equal advancement for Muslim women. That should not actually come as a surprise to any feminist. Which of them in their analysis of their own societies ever believed that modernity was liberating for

<sup>11</sup> Meriwether, 'Women and Economic Change', p.75.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p.70.

<sup>13</sup> Marsot, 'Women and Modernization', pp.45–46.

<sup>14</sup> Sonbol, *Women, the Family, and Divorce Laws*, p.7. See also Tucker, 'Problems', p.332, and 'Introduction', pp.xi–xii.

women? On the contrary, feminists attack modernity for enshrining ‘male–female,’ ‘reason–nature,’ ‘superior–inferior’ dichotomies that suppress women.<sup>15</sup>

My study also attempts to challenge the tradition–modernity dichotomy. The veil is seen as quintessentially traditional. Colonialists, missionaries, Orientalists and secular feminists attacked veiling as a backward tradition, but it is now known that veiling became more widespread in the Middle East after Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in 1798, and increased during European occupation of the Middle East (1830–1956). Cole writes:

In an Orientalist corollary to Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle, the intrusive presence of Westerners appears to have helped produce the phenomenon [widespread veiling] that they observed. In short, the notion of tradition as a stable foil for the dynamism of modernity has been demolished, as the diversity and volatility of premodern extra-European societies has come to be better appreciated.<sup>16</sup>

So ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ are unstable categories. My book aims to break the equation: ‘modernity equals unveil’.

Committed Muslims are often criticized for discussing the status of women in ‘Islam’ in terms similar to the Orientalists: they assume religion to be the determinate force in people’s lives, and they discuss an ahistorical ‘Islam’ that liberates women. For instance, they argue that “in Islam women have the right to own property,” when in actual practice women may not have been able to own property. Lazreg notes how that approach mirrors the Orientalist: it ignores the very real oppressions that Muslim women have faced, or currently face.<sup>17</sup> Orientalists ignore specificity to claim Muslim backwardness; these Muslims ignore specificity to claim progressiveness. As I emphasize throughout this book, religious text does not determine in any causal way how people live. There are factors of interpretation of text,

<sup>15</sup> Christine Kulke, ‘Equality and Difference: Approaches to Feminist Theory and Politics’, in Joanna de Groot and Mary Maynard (eds.), *Women’s Studies in the 1990’s: Doing Things Differently?* (London: Macmillan, 1993), pp.134–135.

<sup>16</sup> Juan R.I. Cole, ‘Gender, Tradition, and History’, in Fatma Müge Coçek and Shiva Balaghi (eds.), *Reconstructing Gender in the Middle East: Tradition, Identity, and Power* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p.24; Keddie, ‘Introduction’, p.13.

<sup>17</sup> Lazreg, *The Eloquence of Silence*, p.13.



prevailing discourse, local customs, and political, economic and social considerations. Any study that purports to discuss Muslim women as they are must account for all those forces.<sup>18</sup>

Lazreg argues that unlike black women in the United States, 'Eastern' feminists frequently adopted Western feminist categories without interrogating their relevance first.<sup>19</sup> Tabari's account confirms this, as she mentions second wave feminism in the West as a guide and inspiration to Iranian feminists in the late 1970s/early 1980s.<sup>20</sup> That entailed an acceptance of modernization theory, and the view that liberal secularism was the only path for women's liberation. There are still feminists with those views. However, the 1990s has seen the emergence of two separate, but probably related, phenomena that signal a change from this: the rise of indigenous (that is, non-Western) academics who accept a feminist goal, but who seek to fashion an indigenous model that does not hold the West as its ideal model; and the increased numbers of Muslim women worldwide who have started covering. These two groups may have overlaps, although there may be some in the first who do not wish to cover, and some in the second who do not identify with feminism. The first category often includes historians and anthropologists who emphasize studying the specificity of Muslim women. Even if they are secularists, Muslim/Arab feminist scholars are insisting on a feminism that is indigenous. Yamani's collection of essays about Muslim women by Muslim and Arab women is a call for an indigenous feminism.<sup>21</sup>

The second category of women, which comprises mostly non-academic women, are those in the 're-veiling' movement that started in the late 1970s. This trend, where many young, educated women started covering even though some of their mothers and grandmothers had fought against the veil, has caught many feminist scholars off

<sup>18</sup> Nelson, 'Old Wine, New Bottles', p.141; Tucker, 'Problems', p.325.

<sup>19</sup> Marnia Lazreg, 'Feminism and Difference: The Perils of Writing as a Woman on Women in Algeria', *Feminist Studies*, 14, 1 (1988), p.82.

<sup>20</sup> Azar Tabari, 'The Women's Movement in Iran; A Hopeful Prognosis', *Feminist Studies*, 12, 2 (Summer 1986), p.353.

<sup>21</sup> Yamani, 'Introduction', p.24. See also, Tucker, 'Introduction', p.xi; Azza M. Karam, *Women, Islamisms and the State: Contemporary Feminisms in Egypt* (London: Macmillan, 1998); Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992).

guard. Why embrace a symbol of oppression? Afshar, who admits to not understanding why women embrace the veil,<sup>22</sup> writes:

The twentieth century marked the apex of Muslim women's intellectual engagement with their religion, first to denounce it and to disengage from its gender-specific prescriptions, and then to return to the texts and reclaim their Islamic rights. Faced with this unexpected *volte face* researchers have tended to take embattled positions to attack or defend the faith, and have all too often failed to engage with the realities and the situations in which women have found themselves.<sup>23</sup>

By and large, it seems that many feminists have trouble knowing how to deal with the veil, Islam, and the women who embrace it. Afshar points to the "embattled positions" that researchers take, and Keddie observes that the women and Islam field is ideologically charged and tense:

One group denies that Muslim women ... are any more oppressed than non-Muslim women or argue that in key respects they have been less oppressed. A second says that oppression is real but extrinsic to Islam; the Qur'an, they say, intended gender equality, but this was undermined by Arabian patriarchy and foreign importations. An opposing group blames Islam for being irrevocably gender inequalitarian. There are also those who adopt intermediate positions, as well as those who tend to avoid these controversies by sticking to monographic or limited studies that do not confront such issues. Some scholars favour shifting emphasis away from Islam to economic and social forces.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Haleh Afshar, 'Fundamentalism and its Female Apologists', in Renee Prendergast and H. W. Singer (eds.), *Development Perspectives for the 1990s* (London: Macmillan, 1991), p.315.

<sup>23</sup> Haleh Afshar, 'Development Studies and Women in the Middle East: The Dilemmas of Research and Development', in Haleh Afshar (ed.), *Women in the Middle East: Perceptions, Realities and Struggles for Liberation* (London: Macmillan, 1993), pp.8-9.

<sup>24</sup> Keddie, 'Introduction', pp.1-2. Keddie notes that a debate amongst feminists is whether to try to reform Islam from within, or to embrace secularism wholeheartedly (p.19). That conclusion is shared by many Muslim intellectuals, for whom secularism has great appeal. With regard to Turkey, see Yesim Arat, 'Women's Movement of the 1980s in Turkey: Radical Outcome of Liberal Kemalism?' in Fatma Müge Coçek and Shiva Balaghi (eds.), *Reconstructing Gender in the Middle East: Tradition, Identity, and Power* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994). With regard to Egypt, see Karam, *Women, Islamisms and the State*.

It is my belief that there is no doubt that Muslim women are often unduly restricted and denied their rights to attain their full potential as human beings, but I maintain that we must be very cautious about where we lay the blame for this situation. Sometimes Islamic jurists have extrapolated too much from certain verses of the Qur'an to formulate laws that restrict and discriminate against women (for example, restrictions on involvement in public life stemming from a particular understanding of verses from the Qur'an such as 4:34, that is often taken to proclaim general male guardianship over women).<sup>25</sup> Often, however, restrictions on women are based on a local community's way of 'being Muslim,' that has little reference to the Qur'an, the Sunnah, or juristic teachings, or result from women's own understanding of their role, which they then impose on others. We should always attend to how much actual practice is based upon explicit juristic rulings, and how much is based upon other factors. As I explain in more detail in Chapter Four, we should be very careful in equating 'Islam' with 'Islamic law', and indeed, especially careful in suggesting a deterministic relationship between restrictive interpretations of a particular Qur'anic verse, or juristic rulings on women in general and the resulting practices of Muslims in all centuries and all countries. Local custom and predilections are relevant, perhaps most important for an understanding of women's actual role and involvement in society.

Obviously conceptual views of women's position and role in society do count for something, and one of the burning questions of the contemporary Muslim scene is to what extent early juristic prescriptions and prescriptions for women's status and role ought to be the guiding norm for Muslims today. Several camps exist (amongst those seeking to debate these issues from inside the fold of Islam):

1. Traditionalists who argue that Islamic law is already complete and ought to be relied upon as authoritative.

<sup>25</sup> Qur'an, 4:34: "Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because God has given the one more [strength] than the other, and because they support them from their means." 'Abdullāh Yūsuf 'Alī, *The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary*, new revd. edn. (Brentwood, Md: Amana Corporation 1989). Unless otherwise noted, all Qur'anic translations are from 'A. Yūsuf 'Alī; Abdullahi An-Na'im, *Toward an Islamic Reformation: Civil Liberties, Human Rights, and International Law* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1990), pp.54-55.

2. Modernists of various types (including some feminists) who in differing ways aim to build on, extrapolate from, or sometimes negate, classical Islamic law, and reinterpret it for modern times (many of whom attempt to overcome the classical law's restrictions on women by reinterpreting Qur'anic verses in the light of the Qur'an's unmistakable commitment to male and female spiritual equality).
3. 'Salafis' calling for the end of adherence to traditional schools of law, who rely on the same early scholars as do the others, but who do not rely on the historical precedents of the total body of classical Islamic law, instead formulating new rulings on some matters, and who, in varying degrees, do and do not promote equality of the sexes (often referred to as fundamentalists or Islamists, which is confusing, since some in the modernist camp concur on the point of ending Muslims' total adherence to a particular traditional school of law).

There are also those feminists whose benchmark is liberal secular liberalism, who seek to remove all aspects of Islamic law that do not conform to a secular liberal feminist standard of equality and liberation for women.

An assumption of this book is that 'Islam' does not oppress women, and that where 'Islam' finds its expression in law, that law should not oppress or discriminate against women; and that where such burdens are to be found in law, they should be amended or removed, and that the Qur'an and Sunnah provide the legitimacy and wherewithal so to do. However, to elaborate how that could be done would be the subject of another book, not that of this book which is dedicated to challenging the notion that the veil oppresses women. My contention is that if and where veiling is linked to oppressive practices against women, such as under the Taliban's regime in Afghanistan of the 1990s, where women have been denied education, confined to the home, and barred from any role in public life, veiling may be seen as a symbol of women's oppression in that community. Nevertheless, suppression ought not to be generalized either

to 'Islam', or to 'the' meaning of the veil. The main task of this work is to disconnect such assumptions, and demonstrate multiple meanings of the veil. The focus is on the Western discourse of the veil, rather than debates inside the Muslim world.

Hence I differ from Sonbol, who argues that an important methodological problem in the field is with those scholars who accept the Qur'an, Hadith, and Sunnah as "representing the *actual* as opposed to the normative condition of women."<sup>26</sup> Her assumption is that the normative position of women can be said to be oppressive, but that actual women's lives may not have been, that actual women's lives may not have conformed to the description of a constricting 'official' doctrine: "If anything, social discourse seems to point to a position quite opposite to what the 'formal' discourse presents us. This means that the actual lives women led caused reactionary clergymen to interpret laws more conservatively. The 'looser' the women, the stricter the interpretation" (p.5). Across Islamic history, this is sometimes true. Huda Lutfi's analysis of fourteenth-century Ibn al-Ḥajj's prescriptive treatise is an example. Ibn al-Ḥajj was denouncing Cairene women's habits in no uncertain terms, arguing forcefully that they should be made to stay in their homes. Cairene women ignored such injunctions to stay home, and carried on business in the marketplace and so on as usual. Lutfi uses these women's daily lives to challenge the stereotype of Muslim women as submissive.<sup>27</sup> However, like Sonbol, her argument is that Muslim ideals found in theological literatures are restrictive and oppressive to women, and not an ideal.

Sonbol's and Lutfi's points are an important corrective to the Orientalist/religion paradigm that would have Muslim women oppressed owing to one or two verses in the Qur'an that do not seem to accord women equality and dignity. Nevertheless, I would qualify their corrective. I agree that there are interpretations of the Qur'an that normatively point to an 'ideal' that is anti-woman. However,

<sup>26</sup> Sonbol, *Women, the Family, and Divorce Laws*, p.5.

<sup>27</sup> Huda Lutfi, 'Manners and Customs of Fourteenth-Century Cairene Women: Female Anarchy versus Male Shar'i Order in Muslim Prescriptive Treatises', in Nikki Keddie and Beth Baron (eds.), *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender*, (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1991), p.118.

there are other interpretations that do not. It depends on which verse one is quoting and to which scholar one is referring. In addition, it depends on which definition of freedom or equality one is drawing upon. Hence I disagree with Lutfi's extrapolation from Ibn al-Ḥajj's text to all Islamic theology. She analyzes his text to show that "formal Islamic discourse," whether medieval or modern, seeks a patriarchal ideal order that inherently oppresses women.<sup>28</sup> My conclusion is that some Islamic discourses may result in an oppressively patriarchal order, but other Islamic discourses do not.

Berkday, a Turkish feminist, criticizes the contextual approach described above, which seeks to understand Muslim women from their own perspective, for its cultural relativism. She argues, following Tabari, "cultural relativism becomes a banner under which oppression may be made to appear tolerable."<sup>29</sup> Berkday refers to veiling as an example of the problems of cultural relativism:

This benevolent cultural relativism on the part of Western feminists sometimes goes so far as to extend a rationalisation of the segregation of women to accepting and condoning even veiling for the Middle Eastern 'sisters': 'Although universally perceived in the West as an oppressive custom, it [veiling] is not experienced as such by women who habitually wear it', writes Leila Ahmed.<sup>30</sup> Leaving aside the strength of the argument about the social construction of experience and feelings, and about how misleading it therefore is to claim a special 'authenticity' for (only some among) them, one wonders whether Western feminists, who know perfectly well that these practices spring from a theology of the maintenance of so-called female purity, would ever accept 'veiling' for themselves – and not as an 'alternative' way of life, but as something compulsory, from which there is no possibility of opting out.<sup>31</sup>

Berkday believes there is a difference between avoiding Eurocentrism, and avoiding criticism of oppressive practices in 'Other'

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.100, 118–119.

<sup>29</sup> Fatmagül Berkday, 'Looking from the "Other" Side: Is Cultural Relativism a Way Out?' in Joanna de Groot and Mary Maynard (eds.), *Women's Studies in the 1990's: Doing Things Differently?* (London: Macmillan, 1993), p.120; Tabari, 'The Women's Movement in Iran', p.356.

<sup>30</sup> Leila Ahmed, 'Western Ethnocentrism and Perceptions of the Harem', *Feminist Studies*, 8, 3 (Fall 1982), p.523.

<sup>31</sup> Berkday, 'Looking from the "Other" Side', p.123.

cultures. But as the quotation above illustrates, it would be difficult to agree on what counts as ‘oppressive practices’. She obviously finds veiling oppressive, whereas I do not. And I reject the assumption that I hold my position unreflectingly. Our different judgments about veiling have to do with differences in our worldviews and in ideological and political commitments and contexts. However, I understand Berktaý’s emphasis on seeking what is common between women of different cultures. As Moors argues, difference should not be essentialized: there are universal human values that can unite us.<sup>32</sup> What this means, though, is that it should be indigenous women themselves who define what counts as an oppressive practice for them. As this chapter shows, even amongst themselves they will not agree. What needs to be done, then, is to accept disagreement and work together on issues that coincide. There will be issues on which all women can cooperate: education, spousal abuse, humane treatment for women and so on.

Berktaý is one of the few feminists openly to challenge feminist attempts to understand the meaning of veiling from within as cultural relativism gone wrong, although I would argue that her view is the prevailing norm in most feminist studies of Muslim women (even if left unstated). Hélie-Lucas argues that feminist attempts to find liberation from within Islam will eventually reveal the limits of Islam,<sup>33</sup> and Keddie and Berktaý conclude that the ‘different-but-equal’ notion often used by Muslims to contend for the equality of women in Islam, is not equal, but inferior.<sup>34</sup> Keddie holds that even if Muslim women are treated with dignity and respect in covering, veiling is part “of a system where males are dominant and females are to be controlled.”<sup>35</sup> Hessini argues that women who choose to cover are ultimately acquiescing in male dominance by not challenging the male–female relations at their core:

<sup>32</sup> Annelies Moors, ‘Women and the Orient: A Note on Difference’, in Lorraine Nencel and Peter Pels (eds.), *Constructing Knowledge Authority and Critique in Social Science*, (London: Sage, 1991), pp.121–122.

<sup>33</sup> Hélie-Lucas, ‘Women’s Struggles and Strategies’, p.219.

<sup>34</sup> Keddie, ‘Introduction’, p.18; Berktaý, ‘Looking from the “Other” Side’, p.123.

<sup>35</sup> Keddie, ‘Introduction’, p.12. She adds, “It is true that the overall system is more important than veiling as such.” This is exactly my point: veiling can be part of a system of male dominance, but that need not be the case (ideally) and veiling is neither a cause nor a sign of male domination.

When women wear the *hijab*, they obtain respect and freedom. In this sense, the *hijab*, which is often perceived by Westerners as a tool of male domination, may ultimately be a liberating force for some Moroccan women. However, this choice is made within a patriarchal framework. It is a conditioned reaction and can exist only within prescribed norms established by men for women.<sup>36</sup>

Leila Ahmed concludes that the contemporary re-veiling movement is an “alarming trend”<sup>37</sup> because of her fear that it will be the forces holding restrictive interpretations of women’s role in society that will win over all other currents and streams of Islamic movements. We can hope that she is wrong, and be active in working for another goal. Nevertheless, we must be very careful about how elisions are made from ‘this particular Islamic movement holds suppressive views on women’ to ‘the veil is the sign of what this movement defines as women’s roles and only theirs is the meaning of Islam’.

*Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil*, then, is entering these debates over covering at two levels. First, I rely on interviews with Muslim women living in Toronto, Canada, to discover their understanding of the meaning of *ḥijāb*. I stress that I do not generalize from my small sample of interviewees to all Muslim women, though some of the sentiments expressed by some of my interviewees are in tune with views recorded by other scholars studying the ‘re-veiling’ movement. I do not claim that all Muslim women do, or should, hold opinions like those of my interviewees. The aim here is simply to listen to the voices of some Muslim women about their understandings of, and experiences with, the veil. A second level is to add a perspective that has hitherto been marginalized, namely the point of view of the believer. Because almost all my interviewees are religiously oriented, indeed, because I am religiously oriented, the book as a whole has a spiritual orientation.<sup>38</sup> This allows for a different reading of women, Islam and the veil.

<sup>36</sup> Hessini, ‘Wearing the Hijab in Contemporary Morocco’, p.54.

<sup>37</sup> Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, p.230.

<sup>38</sup> I define religiosity very broadly as believing in the existence of God, and for Muslims, the belief that the Holy Qur’an is the actual Word of God revealed to Prophet Muhammad. Differences among believers in the interpretation of the text is not a part of my understanding of what it means to be religious, although I suggest that religiosity must entail some level of practice of the faith. Because most of my interviewees and I are Sunni, the book also has a Sunni Muslim orientation. I do not speak for other Muslims.



Not surprisingly, religious belief is marginalized in Western academic circles, which have a secular orientation. Even less surprising is traditional feminist disdain for religious belief, given historic associations between religion and misogyny.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, feminist scholars are revising their total rejection of religious belief and practice for women. Young's introduction to Sharma's *Women in World Religions* finds that the feminist assumption that religion is irredeemably patriarchal is now seen as simplistic.<sup>40</sup> Carmody's *Women and World Religions* assumes that in spite of women's suffering under organized religion, many women have drawn strength from their religion, and that the world's religions offer women and men "great sources for forgiveness and renewal:"

Without denying [the] feminist critique, I would add that, nonetheless, the bottom line in virtually all the developed religious traditions is a holiness equally available to women and men. Women have suffered many disabilities in the organisational dimension of religion, but when it comes to intimacy with God and helpfulness toward other people, they do at least as well as men ... If one's self was honest, loving, and wise, one was what God or the Way wanted. So the depths of the world's religions offer an instruction as important as it is consoling. Indeed, the instruction is important precisely because it is consoling: any person may become holy and wise.<sup>41</sup>

Warne speaks of the "unacknowledged Quarantine" that has existed between feminists and religious studies, and suggests it is time to break down the barriers:

Unfortunately, there is a tendency to consider only [women's] negative experiences [with religion] as accurate, and all positive ones, by definition, as a kind of patriarchally induced false consciousness. Judgments such as these pose serious problems for scholars interested in both women and religion, because work that attempts to be more nuanced is sometimes read as betrayal, or as patriarchal co-optation.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Denise Lardner Carmody, *Women and World Religions*, 2nd edn. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1989 [1979]), p.3 and passim.

<sup>40</sup> Katherine Young, 'Introduction', in Arvind Sharma (ed.), *Women in World Religions* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1987), p.3.

<sup>41</sup> Carmody, *Women and World Religions*, p.9. Also J. O'Conner, 'Rereading, Reconciling and Reconstructing Tradition: Feminist Research in Religion', *Women's Studies*, 17, 1 (1989), pp.101-123.

<sup>42</sup> Randi Warne, 'Further Reflections in the 'Unacknowledged Quarantine': Feminism and Religious Studies', in *Changing Methods: Feminists Transforming Practice*, (eds.), Sandra Burt & Lorraine Code (Peterborough, Canada: Broadview Press, 1995), pp.97-98.

These are welcome voices. However, as Lazreg has pointed out, their force has been observed only for Judaism and Christianity. While many would still view these religions as oppressive to women, there is an acceptance of those feminist (even non-feminist) women, who seek to identify as Jewish or Christian, while simultaneously claiming liberation and working for women's equality. Muslim women have not yet been accorded such respect:

The evolutionary bias that suffuses most thinking about women in the Middle East and North Africa is expressed in a definite prejudice against Islam as a religion. Although U.S. feminists have attempted to accommodate Christianity and feminism and Judaism and feminism, Islam is inevitably presented as antifeminist. What is at work here is not merely a plausible rationalist bias against religion as an impediment to the progress and freedom of the mind but an acceptance of the idea that there is a hierarchy of religions, with some being more susceptible to change than others. Like tradition, religion must be abandoned if Middle Eastern women are to be like Western women. As the logic of the argument requires, there can be no change without reference to an external standard deemed to be perfect.<sup>43</sup>

My task, then, is to introduce respectability to the believing Muslim woman's voice, to claim liberation and women's equality inside Islam. I believe that this is an indispensable part of unsettling both the Western popular cultural view that the veil is a symbol of Muslim women's oppression, and those feminist conclusions that concur with pop culture.<sup>44</sup> I seek to challenge the assumptions Hessini, Macleod and others use to criticize women's choices to cover as ultimately un-liberating.

Differences in judgment over *ḥijāb* finally turn on a few key points. The following is a list of six themes that I have garnered from my reading in the women and Islam field. Those who criticize the veil rely on secular liberal assumptions about society and human nature. Thus veiling is supposed to be oppressive because it:

<sup>43</sup> Lazreg, 'Feminism and Difference', p.85.

<sup>44</sup> For a contemporary feminist view that is in tune with the popular cultural view, see Amy Gutmann, 'Challenges of Multiculturalism in Democratic Education', in *Public Education in a Multicultural Society: Policy, Theory, Critique*, (ed.), Robert K. Fullinwider (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

1. covers up (hides), in the sense of smothering, femininity;
2. is apparently linked to essentialized male–female difference (which is taken to mean that by nature, male is superior, female is inferior);
3. is linked to a particular view of woman’s place (subjugated in the home);
4. is linked to an oppressive (patriarchal) notion of morality and female purity (because of Islam’s emphasis on chastity, marriage, and condemnation of pre- and extra-marital sexual relations);
5. can be imposed; and
6. is linked to a package of oppressions women in Islam face, such as seclusion, polygyny, easy male divorce, unequal inheritance rights, and so on.

I address these assumptions over the course of the book. I shall argue (not in this order) that covering:

1. does not smother femininity;
2. brings to mind the ‘different-but-equal’ school of thought, but does not posit essentialized male–female difference;
3. is linked to a view that does not limit women to the home, but neither does it consider the role of stay-at-home-mother and homemaker oppressive;
4. is linked to a view of morality that is oppressive only if one considers the prohibition of sexual relations outside marriage wrong;
5. is part of Islamic law, though a law that ought to be implemented in a very wise and women-friendly manner, and
6. can and should be treated separately from other issues of women’s rights in Islam.

It will become clear that I do not necessarily dispute some of the feminist criticisms as false. However, my own world-view leads me to view those things differently (for example, male–female differences).

Critics of the Western discourse of the veil point out that the Western focus on the veil has been obsessive.<sup>45</sup> Many of those Muslim women who do not cover feel annoyed that Muslim women are reduced to their headcovers, as if there is nothing else about their identity worthy of mention. Many of those who do cover are disappointed that their own positive experience of covering is denied; and, like those who do not cover, annoyed that other aspects of their identity are ignored. In some ways by writing a book on *ḥijāb*, I am keeping alive the Western tradition of discussing Muslim women only in relation to their headcovering. My justification is that despite the Western focus on the veil, the prevalent view is that of the ‘oppressive’ nature of veiling and Islam. This is in spite of the ethnographic and historical accounts of particular Muslim women in specific times and places that challenge the stereotype of Muslim women as oppressed. There are still very few fora that provide an empathetic space for the voices of those who cover, or for a positive theory of veiling.

### C. THE VEIL, ISLAM AND THE WEST

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the topic of Islam, fundamentalism, terrorism, extremism and women’s position in Islam is on many people’s minds, from the local bus driver to the specialist scholar. The discourse in the popular mind is one of the backwardness, violence and barbarity of Islam, Arabs and Muslims. The oppression of women is a given. This makes challenging the popular Western stereotype that the veil is a symbol of Muslim women’s oppression an uphill battle, all the more so in light of certain late twentieth-century events in the Muslim world: Iran’s imposition of the *chador* after Khomeini’s revolution in 1979; the Taliban’s imposition of the *burqa*<sup>c</sup> after their accession to power in 1997; and the violence perpetrated by radical groups in the name of Islam in Egypt, Israel, Algeria and the like. Does not all this merely confirm that Islam is violent, intolerant and anti-women? My book is not an

<sup>45</sup> Lazreg, ‘Feminism and Difference’, p.85.

attempt to discuss all the socio-political problems in the Muslim world. Nonetheless, the turmoil in the Muslim world complicates my task because of the Orientalist legacy in the West (a legacy combined with wide-spread and profound ignorance of Islam). The Orientalist vision of Islam is precisely that Islam is barbaric, violent, medieval and backward. Yet when was the last time the media tarnished all Catholics with the actions of the IRA, or all Protestants with the actions of the Loyalists? The media should not thus tarnish all Catholics and Protestants: the point is that Muslims are not accorded the same degree of care and precision, there is no recognition of special, localized circumstances that intervene between 'Islam' and enactment.

While US administrations and other Western powers do not have anything against Islam as a religion in general, or against Muslims in general, I am convinced that the public rhetoric demonizing Islam is part of the Western maintenance of its global hegemony. The discourse of the veil in the West is tied to Western national interests. US policy in the Middle East is to protect its access to Middle Eastern oil fields and give unconditional support to Israel.<sup>46</sup> Because Islam is perceived as anti-West, the contemporary Islamist movements to install Shari'ah law are feared. It is thought that Muslim governments committed to implementing Islamic law will interfere with Western interests and may threaten Israel. Hence pro-Western, secular governments in the Muslim world are supported, even if they repress their own populace. The veil's association with the Islamist movements is thus the link between Western power politics and an anti-veil discourse in the West. The media and Western scholars have a stake in maintaining Western hegemony, so some Western scholars provide the intellectual justifications for this anti-Islamic diatribe.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Yvonne Haddad, 'Islamist Perceptions of U.S. Policy in the Middle East', in *The Middle East and the United States*, (ed.), David W. Lesch (Boulder, Co.: Westview University Press, 1996), p.419; Ralph Braibanti, *The Nature and Structure of the Islamic World*, (Chicago, Ill.: Int. Strategy and Policy Institute, 1995), p.5; William Quandt, 'New U.S. Policies for a New Middle East?' in *The Middle East and the United States*, (ed.), David Lesch, pp. 413-414; Edward Said, *Covering Islam* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), p.143.

<sup>47</sup> For instance, S. Huntington, 'The Clash of Civilizations', *Foreign Affairs*, 72, 3 (Summer 1993), pp.22-49; Benjamin Barber, 'Jihad Vs McWorld', *The Atlantic Monthly* (March 1992), pp.53-65.

The mainstream media carry the discourse into the popular culture.<sup>48</sup> Journalist Hoagland argues that with respect to US foreign policy, Washington DC sets the media agenda:

With international affairs it is pretty much a Washington business; it's a company town. And it is very difficult to sustain interest in a foreign policy issue if the White House and the State Department and the Executive Branch and even Congress are not interested, or are trying to downplay that particular issue... but without that kind of follow-through by some part of the government, the press itself is very weak in trying to set or sustain an agenda. You can do it for a day, or maybe for 3 days, but at the end of the 3rd or 4th day, if there's no echo, there is very little you can do to create that issue.<sup>49</sup>

However, US and Western national interests have dictated foreign policies that are interpreted by most of the Muslim and Arab populace as hypocritical and harmful to their own interests and needs: Israel is not bombed for its covert nuclear weapons program; the West remains silent over violations of Muslims' human rights (repression and torture of Muslims in Turkey, Tunisia, and Israel); and the West supports corrupt governments over democratic movements.<sup>50</sup> All these things fuel extremist groups in the Muslim world. Nevertheless, the actions of terrorists in the Muslim world, especially against Western tourists, leave the Western populace convinced that Islam and Arabs are barbaric and anti-Western and in need of strong treatment and punishment from the West. So, Westerners are afraid of Islamic parties being elected to power and act against that, and Muslims, convinced that the West is against them, are driven to more extremes. The vicious cycle continues to this day.

Hence US and Western national interests have allowed the demonization of Islam in the public mind to flourish. And ideas about Islam's oppression of women and the role of the veil in that oppression are part of this discourse. When the Western populace is predisposed to disliking Muslims and Arabs, asserting US/Western foreign policy needs is easier, because the public supports rather than criticizes the foreign policy (for example, by not condemning Israel's extra-

<sup>48</sup> Said, *Covering Islam*, pp.48 and 144.

<sup>49</sup> Jim Hoagland, in *Split Vision: The Portrayal of Arabs in the American Media*, (ed.), Edmund Ghareeb (Washington, DC: American-Arab Affairs Council, 1983), p.226.

<sup>50</sup> Said, *Covering Islam*, pp.xvi and 164.

judicial assassinations of Palestinians, or the suffering of innocent Iraqi citizens owing to sanctions.) People who consume mainstream news as their only source of information about Islam cannot know anything but the negative perspective on the veil.

The mainstream Western discourse against Islam has also made it harder for Muslim reformers to improve the status of Muslim women, because betterment has often been linked with colonization and/or Westernization.<sup>51</sup> Tucker observes that Arab feminism has had to chart a difficult course between ‘tradition’, that may be oppressive but is seen as ‘authentic’, and reform, that may be seen as Westernization and ‘inauthentic’.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, calls to protect ‘tradition’ and ‘authenticity’ have even hampered improvements that would bring women more in line with the earlier rights that women exercised under Islamic law over a deteriorated ‘tradition’. For instance, in the mid/late twentieth century, Mawdūdī, an Islamic scholar from the Indian subcontinent, decried family planning efforts as Western attempts to undermine Islam by reducing the number of Muslims, even though family planning was condoned by all four Islamic *madhāhib* (schools of law) and widely practiced in the pre-colonial era.<sup>53</sup>

Another legacy of Orientalism that complicates my task of undermining the stereotype that the veil is oppressive is the West/East dichotomy that it enshrines. It is too simplistic to label that stereotype a ‘Western’ stereotype (though easier for sake of exposition), because there are plenty of Muslims in the world who also view the veil as oppressive. Dividing the world into ‘West’ and ‘East’ is an Orientalist assumption that has worked to ensure ‘Western’ superiority and ‘Eastern’ inferiority. The duality simplifies global politics, and most importantly, erases areas of similarity between ‘West’ and ‘East’. Muslim states in the Middle East and Asia have been secularizing/‘modernizing’ for the past one hundred years. Numerous Muslims

<sup>51</sup> Tucker, ‘Introduction’, pp.x–xi.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p.xi.

<sup>53</sup> Abdel Rahim Omran, *Family Planning in the Legacy of Islam* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp.206–208; See also, Basim Musallam, *Sex and Society in Islam: Birth Control before the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983). Egypt hosted the International Conference on Population and Development in 1994 amidst “antagonisms and suspicions that the ICPD as a whole was a Western conspiracy to rid the Muslim world of its Islamic values by legalizing abortion, calling for women’s equality and destroying family values.” Karam, *Women, Islamisms and the State*, p.172. Many Roman Catholics had similar fears.

are not practicing Muslims, just as a significant number of Westerners are no longer practicing Christians or Jews. (Indeed the West/East dichotomy glosses over Christians and Jews living in ‘Muslim’ countries, and Muslims living in the West.) Many Muslims are as anti-Islam as many Westerners are, convinced it is oppressive, backward, violent and so on. The legacy of Orientalism in mainstream Western media and scholarship, by leaving out these dynamics, works to reinforce the negative stereotype of Islam in the West. It fortifies the negative stereotype because the uncomplicated West/East division enables simplistic equations to be made: West equals progressive, East equals underdeveloped; Western women are liberated, Eastern women subjugated; and so on. And yet it is also widely acknowledged that these days the world is a ‘global village’. In recognizing globalization, it is possible to become a more sophisticated observer of the world. The truism the ‘veil is oppressive’ is not tenable in the face of a refined understanding of the dynamics and currents in a global village in which some Muslim women embrace the veil willingly, but others do not.

#### D. MUSLIMS IN THE WEST

The need to challenge the negative stereotype of the veil as oppressive is urgent for those Muslims who live in the West.<sup>54</sup> Anecdotal evidence demonstrates that Muslims (male and female) are hurt by the negative image of the veil and Islam. Several examples will suffice to highlight this. In 1995 some Muslim schoolgirls were expelled from school in Quebec, Canada, for refusing to remove their scarves. The schools ruled that the scarves were an ‘ostentatious symbol’ akin to a swastika. A teenage girl in Quebec who wore *hijāb* to high school was mortified to see her teacher on television proclaiming, “Islam degrades women.” “I started to cry. I couldn’t understand why someone would say something like that,” she told [Kelly]. “She knows me. She knows what I am like, and that I am not like that. How can she say that?”<sup>55</sup>

<sup>54</sup> I refer to the ‘West’ in this book because it is a recognizable shorthand for a certain part of the world and its culture, that is, the Anglo-European world and its ex-colonies (the United States, Australia, Canada, etc.). I advocate the discontinuation of the terminology even while I use it, for so far there is no agreed alternative.

<sup>55</sup> Patricia Kelly, ‘Integrating Islam: A Muslim School in Montreal’, unpublished Master’s thesis (Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University, Canada: 1997), p.103.



An Islamic advocacy group in the United States and Canada, the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR) documents harassment and discrimination against Muslims. In 1998 they reported incidents of women losing their jobs or not being hired for refusing to uncover at: Dunkin' Donuts (Boston); US Airways; Boston Market Restaurant (Sacramento, California); Taco Bell (Arlington, Virginia); Domino's Pizza (Colorado); KMART (New Jersey); and the Sheraton Hotel (Washington). In all cases the women were reinstated after CAIR intervention. Some women received apologies and compensation. Muslim men suffer from the negative discourse on the veil too. CAIR reported in November 1997 that a 13-year-old boy was hospitalized after being beaten by two or more teenagers who called him a "rag head" and "f---ing sand n-gger." Apparently the attack occurred after the father of one of the attackers called the father of the victim a "rag head" and "rag head lover."<sup>56</sup> My book, in seeking to undermine the stereotype, thus aspires to improve the lives of Muslims living in the West.

#### E. METHOD AND ARGUMENT

*Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil* straddles many academic disciplines: political theory, feminism, anthropology, sociology, history, and Middle East and Islamic studies. My method in undermining the stereotype of the veil is eclectic: there are five chapters, each using a different methodology (drawn from one or more of the disciplines mentioned above) to take a different tack in challenging the stereotype. The thread that holds the different chapters together is the tradition of political theory, the 'home' discipline of my book. Political theory, broadly conceived, aims to study the nature of power in political communities – between citizens and the State, or between citizens and other citizens – and to inquire into just and unjust, equal and unequal patterns and relations of power. In *Rethinking Muslim Women*, I mean to focus on the popular Western cultural view that the veil is oppressive for Muslim women and to highlight the underlying patterns of power behind this constructed image of the veil. In addition, I formulate a positive theory of the veil.

<sup>56</sup> Council on American Islamic Relations, *Newsletter* (Winter 1998). The incident between the boys allegedly began as a school bus dispute over spilled paint.

Chapter One traces the origins of the ‘veil is oppressive’ discourse in the West. I argue that attacking the veil was an essential part of the colonial project, necessary to break down barriers between colonial power and hidden women. The point is to stress the constructed nature of the antiveil discourse, and to highlight its link to Western political interests. I also show how the move to independence in colonized Muslim countries included a focus on the veil, as nationalist élites accepted the West’s version of the meaning of *ḥijāb* and strove to ‘liberate’ their country from backward Islamic practices. Chapter Two presents interviews with some Toronto Muslim women. Between May and July 1996, I interviewed fifteen Sunni Muslim women and one Ismaili woman to ask them about their understanding of *ḥijāb*, and for those who cover, their experiences of wearing *ḥijāb* in Toronto. The chapter draws on feminist methods of using women’s experience as a foundation of knowledge. Chapter Three is a survey of the contemporary ‘re-veiling’ movement in the Muslim world. Here I draw on contemporary anthropological, sociological and historical literatures that discuss the ‘re-veiling’ phenomenon. These surveys demonstrate that women cover for many different reasons, be they religious, social or political. Empirical reality alone challenges the Western stereotype that all Muslim women are forced to cover and that covering is oppressive. With a critique of Moroccan feminist Fatima Mernissi’s perspective on the veil, Chapter Four moves the book into theoretical grounds. Here I show that Mernissi’s analysis of the veil is based on an idiosyncratic reading of Islam. Her interpretations are based on her own negative personal experiences with veiling, but she argues that all Muslim women suffer because of veiling. I disagree with that conclusion and attempt to show why an alternative reading is possible within Islam. Chapter Five is an effort toward formulating a positive theory of the veil. I draw on two testimonials by Muslim women in newspaper articles about their positive experience of covering. The women’s arguments derive from feminist critiques of the exploitation of the female body in capitalist society to contend that covering can be a form of liberation. I end the chapter by highlighting the aspect of religious belief that is all too often left out. I shall reiterate as I proceed through the book that I am not attempting to argue that the veil is never oppressive for Muslim

women. Clearly some women experience covering as oppressive. My point is that the ‘veil is oppressive’ notion has become a paradigm in which the ‘meaning’ of the veil as oppressive assumes the status of a truth claim. I am saying that I disagree with that interpretation. In this book, I present an alternative perspective.

It is important to understand that this study is a debate at the level of ideas. I include interviews not as part of an ethnography of Muslim women who live in Toronto, but as a jumping off point for theorizing about the veil. My underlying assumption that Islam as a political theory (a theory of political community) does not oppress women guides my critiques and formulation of a positive theory of the veil. I understand that real Muslim communities may not reflect the positive normative outline that I describe. However, just as liberalism remains an ongoing aspiration for the creation of a good society that has not yet been achieved in reality<sup>57</sup> – a society free of racism, poverty, sexism and so on – so I hold to a theory of Islam that is an ongoing aspiration for the creation of a good society. Though we struggle and reform and fight as we go, we are aiming at a higher good.

#### F. TERMINOLOGY – THE VEIL

A final note on the word ‘veil’. I sought to avoid the word ‘veil’ in my writing, because the word is so laden with the negative stereotype. Part of the whole problem of the West’s focus on the ‘veil,’ as many scholars have mentioned, is precisely the simplification that the phrase ‘the veil’ entails: as if there is only one kind of ‘veil’ that Muslim women have ever worn.<sup>58</sup> This is a travesty that augments the problem of the negative stereotype. In the English language a ‘veil’ is normally “a piece of usually more or less transparent fabric attached to a woman’s hat, etc., to conceal the face or protect against the sun”

<sup>57</sup> Gutmann, ‘Challenges of Multiculturalism in Democratic Education’, pp.160–161.

<sup>58</sup> Helen Watson, ‘Women and the Veil: Personal Responses to Global Process’, in *Islam, Globalization and Postmodernity*, (eds.), Akbar S. Ahmed and Hastings Donnan (London: Routledge, 1994), p.141; El-Sohl and Mabro, *Muslim Women’s Choices*, p.9; F. El-Guindi, ‘Veiling Infitah with Muslim Ethic: Egypt’s Contemporary Islamic Movement’, *Social Problems*, 28, 4 (1981), p.374; Dawn Chatty, ‘Changing Sex Roles in Bedouin Society in Syria and Lebanon’, in *Women in the Muslim World*, (eds.), Nikki Keddie and Lois Beck (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), p.403.

[OED].<sup>59</sup> This word corresponds to the Arabic *niqāb*, the veil with which women cover their faces. As a word to convey the Islamic notion of *ḥijāb* it is totally inadequate. *Ḥijāb*, from the root *ḥajaba* meaning to cover, conceal, hide, is a complex notion encompassing action and apparel. It can include covering the face, or not. It includes lowering the gaze with the opposite sex, and applies to men as well, who must lower their gaze and cover from navel to knee. These days, *ḥijāb* is also the name used for the headscarf that women wear over their heads and tie or pin at the neck, with their faces showing. Over the centuries, and in different places, how a woman covers has varied enormously – what parts are covered, with what kind of material, texture, pattern etc. The terminology has varied also, region to region, of course. In this book, I use the word *ḥijāb* to refer to the concept of covering. The word headscarf will designate women who cover all but hands and face, and in keeping with common Muslim usage, headscarf will be interchangeable with *ḥijāb*; the word *niqāb* will refer to the face veil that some women attach to their headscarves.

<sup>59</sup> *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*. Definitions (2) and (3) are interesting, but not widely known: (2) ‘a piece of linen etc. as part of a nun’s head-dress’; (3) ‘a curtain esp. that separating the sanctuary in the Jewish Temple’. According to the OED, ‘To take the veil’ means becoming a nun. Given the respect accorded to nuns in the West, it is a pity ‘taking the veil’ has not had the same positive connotations for Muslim women who ‘take the veil’.



## *Hijāb* in the Colonial Era

When did the veil become a symbol of oppression in the West? Although I have not been able to pinpoint the origins of the idea, it is evident that by the eighteenth century, the veil was already taken by Europeans to be an oppressive custom amongst Muslims. The British Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, who traveled to Turkey with her diplomatic husband, the Honourable Edward Wortley Montagu in 1717–18, disputed the idea that the veil was oppressive. Having tried out the veil while in Turkey, she argued it gave women freedom, for it allowed them to go out unrecognized.<sup>1</sup> However, the notion of the veil as oppressive assumed a new and important focus in the nineteenth century because that was the era of European colonization of the Middle East. As Ahmed demonstrates in her book, colonialists utilized that new focus on the status of women in part to justify invasion and colonization of the Middle East.

During the colonial era, Europeans, men and women, be they colonialists, travelers, artists, missionaries, scholars, politicians or feminists, were of one mind that Muslim women were oppressed by their culture. The idea was that: “Short of Christianity, no teaching can elevate the character and position of Mohammedan women in any land; for, as long as she accepts the Koran as a rule of faith, she will unhesitatingly acquiesce in the mutilated life to which by it she is condemned.”<sup>2</sup> The veil was included as part of a fairly standard list of oppressions facing Muslim women: polygyny, seclusion, easy male divorce. In fact, the veil became shorthand for the entire degraded

<sup>1</sup> *The Complete Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, quoted in Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, p.150.

<sup>2</sup> Mabel Sharman Crawford, *Through Algeria*, [1863], quoted in J. Mabro, (ed.), *Veiled Half-Truths: Western Travellers' Perceptions of Middle Eastern Women* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1991), p.182.

status of women, and a metaphor (or sign) of the degeneracy of the entire Middle East (Orient) that fed off European cultures' Orientalist view of the Middle East.<sup>3</sup>

It was not just the West that was convinced of the veil's oppressive nature. Native élites internalized the Orientalist view of themselves. They also became convinced that they were backward, their women degraded, and that they ought to follow Western prescriptions for improvement.

"How have we become to be regarded as part of the Orient?" asked a reader who wrote to the Egyptian journal *al-Muqtataf* in 1888. "Are we not closer to Europe than to China or North Africa?" It had happened, replied the editor, because those who study us "call themselves Orientalists." But his scepticism did not last. Five years later, when he had come to know personally some of the leading Orientalists of his day, the editor was willing to accept the Orient as self-image. "It is we who have placed ourselves in this position. There is one thing that unites us all in the Orient: our past greatness and our present backwardness."<sup>4</sup>

Unveiling became a central urgency for élites attempting to 'catch up' with the West. Thus the 'veil' became a potent symbol of the progress or regress of a nation.<sup>5</sup> And since it was the upper classes leading 'modernization', the anti-veil discourse was also an attack on those classes that remained attached to the veil and its older symbolic meanings (a symbol of piety/wealth/status).<sup>6</sup> The antiveil discourse opened a gulf between the people of a nation: the Western-focused élites and others who were adopting the culture of the colonizer as well as benefiting economically and socially from colonialism, versus the rest, lower classes, traditional Muslim teachers, and others who, as well as suffering from colonialism, were not assimilating to Western ways.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Orientalism became a field of knowledge or paradigm for understanding the Middle East and Islam, which pretended to objectivity (impartiality), but which was actually based on the guiding assumption of inherent Oriental inferiority. Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 2nd edn. (New York: Vintage Books, 1994 [1979]) p.209.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1988), p.169.

<sup>5</sup> Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, p.128.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.129-130. <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.145.

Thus, the notion that the veil is oppressive is an idea born out of domination, or, at least, the will to dominate. Any argument that advances the notion that the veil is a symbol of Muslim women's oppression draws, wittingly or unwittingly, from Orientalist and colonial discourse about the veil. That is perhaps why debates over the veil can assume such furious proportions. The veil, as Ahmed remarks, has ever since the colonial period "carried" the Orientalist "cargo" of meanings.<sup>8</sup> Struggles today in the Muslim world over *ḥijāb* reflect these kinds of class/culture divisions.

#### A. METAPHYSICS OF MODERNITY

If the veil had been seen in the West as oppressive since at least the 1700s, what was it about the nineteenth-century colonial era that brought new attention to the veil? In this chapter, I argue that it is the nature of the veil as a gaze inhibitor that most contributes to it coming under attack. Though the dynamics at play started during modern colonialism, they continue to the present day, and explain contemporary attacks on the veil. My analysis extends Timothy Mitchell's argument in *Colonising Egypt* about the encounter between the European "metaphysics of modernity" with a non-European metaphysics.

*Colonising Egypt* starts with a compelling postmodern analysis of nineteenth-century (modernist) understandings of the world. Mitchell interprets modernity as an "ontology of representation."<sup>9</sup> Following Descartes' mind/body distinction, modernity splits the world into two: a material, inert world of things, and a nonmaterial world of meaning (concept/framework). The realm of meaning is experienced as being prior to the object world, giving it structure and making it intelligible. For Mitchell, however, this duality is actually an effect of the technique of representation that becomes paramount in the nineteenth century. Using the World Exhibitions as his central motif, but extending his argument to zoos, department stores, museums, urban architecture, and academic theories of culture and language, Mitchell suggests that the modern person is oriented to the world as if from the outside. At a World Exhibition, just as in a theater, the visitor is a

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p.129.

<sup>9</sup> Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, p.xv.



spectator, detached from the object, the spectacle. The exhibit claims to be a faithful representation of a real world somewhere else. Thus the Cairo exhibit at the 1889 World Exhibition in Stockholm, Sweden, reproduced a street in Cairo that even included the dirty paint (p.1). (Mitchell draws attention to the fact that the Egyptian visitors to the exhibit left in disgust.) Nevertheless, as Mitchell argues, “by its realism, [suggesting itself to be a copy of a real place elsewhere] the artificial proclaims itself not to be the real” (p.xiii). The effect of this claim on the visitor is to split the world into two: a real world (out there) and its copy, its representation, here. In addition, the exhibit is accompanied by maps (directions/guides/frameworks) on how to interpret and understand the exhibit. The map mediates between the person and the exhibit, confirming both the effect of splitting the world in two and the visitor’s sense of detachment from the material world. “The seemingly separate text or plan, one might say, was what confirmed the separation of the person from the things themselves on exhibit, and of the things on exhibit from the meaning or external reality they represented” (p.20).

Mitchell argues that when the visitors left the exhibit, they imagined that they had left the world of representation, though in fact, most aspects of nineteenth-century life were becoming part of the technique of representation: “everything collected and arranged to stand for something, to represent progress and history, human industry and empire; everything set up, and the whole set-up always evoking somehow larger truth” (p.6). So the world is an exhibit, not just metaphorically: commodities, signs of work in progress outside the home, and displayed under glass windows/cabinets in the new department stores; zoos exhibiting the world’s animals, museums of other cultures, model farms and their new machinery representing progress, cities representing a nonmaterial plan (geometric layout, street names, and numbers on houses: “Haussmann laid out the boulevards of Paris to create a precise perspective in the eye of the correctly positioned individual, who was given an external point of view by the enframing architecture” (p.59).

The technique of representation leads the individual to experience the whole world as if from the outside, as if the world were a picture: “Everything seemed to be set up before one as though it were the

model or picture of something. Everything was arranged before an observing subject into a system of signification (to use European jargon), declaring itself to be the signifier of a signified” (pp.12–13). And because the individual is detached and separate from the object-world, able to look down upon and grasp the world with a glance, this effect of representation leads to the certainty of representation, to Truth (p.7). Photographs and careful verbal descriptions of the material world are taken as the truth about that world. “The publication in 1858 of the first general collection of photographs of the Middle East, Francis Frith’s *Egypt and Palestine, Photographed and Described*, would be ‘an experiment in Photography ... of surpassing value’, it was announced in the *Art Journal*, ‘for we will *know* that we see things exactly as they are’” (pp.22–23).

#### I. THE GAZE AND THE VEIL

What I need to highlight about the modern experience of the world-as-exhibition is the priority given to looking: “‘Just now we are an objective people’, *The Times* wrote in the summer of 1851, on the occasion of the Great Exhibition. ‘We want to place everything we can lay our hands on under glass cases, and to stare our fill’” (pp.19–20). Mitchell notes that this is the modern experience of ‘objectivity’: the feeling that one is able to look down on and observe the world from a neutral place. Indeed, Middle Eastern visitors to Europe often remarked on the European propensity to stare at them. Ṭaḥṭāwī, an Egyptian scholar and administrator who had spent five years in Paris in the 1820s, had to explain (to surely puzzled fellow Egyptians, since Middle Eastern culture believed(s) in the ‘evil eye’, the ability of the look to cause harm) this European tendency to stare. “One of the beliefs of the Europeans,” Ṭaḥṭāwī noted in his book discussing the customs and manners of various nations, published in 1883, “is that the gaze has no effect.”<sup>10</sup>

What happens, then, when one encounters a world set up to deny the gaze? The gaze requires a ‘point of view’, to see but not be seen, and also that the natives present themselves as a spectacle. It is not hard to see immediately how frustrated a European visitor would

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, p.2.

be upon arrival to the Middle East, where the women covered their faces with veils. The women do not present themselves as an exhibit. Neither do the houses in which they lived (lattices were over windows that looked onto the streets), nor did male/female segregation allow for it. The veiled women violated all the requirements of the world-as-exhibition: they could not be seen; they could not be seen, but were seeing; and they were not a picture that could be read. They were mysterious beings who refused to offer themselves up to the visitor. For me, this is a key aspect of the European campaign against the veil. Europeans arrived in the Middle East with the confident knowledge of being at the apex of civilization, but this conviction was destabilized upon arrival in the Middle East. How could one be superior, or establish authority over creatures who could not be known (because they could not be seen, grasped as a picture)? What could not be seen, grasped as a spectacle, could not be controlled. Moreover, Europeans felt uneasy about the veiled women: the Europeans knew they were being watched by women who were themselves unseen. That gave the women some power over the Europeans. That was a reversal of the expected relationship between superior and inferior – to see without being seen. And so – and here is the crux of my argument – the Europeans retaliated. They attacked the veil, they tried to rip it off; they tried everything they could to see the women. They exposed women in paintings, photographs, etc., by portraying them naked, or otherwise undressed. I shall elaborate by looking at some travel books written by European visitors to the Middle East.

## 2. INVENTING WOMEN: MALE DESIRE

Europe already knew the Orient as an exotic, cruel, barbarous, but also delightfully sensual, indulgent and licentious place. The image had been impressed upon European consciousness by a wide variety of sources for several centuries. There were the folktales and scholarly pieces from the Middle Ages about ‘Mohamet the magician’, the crazed lunatic with his followers proclaiming a new religion;<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> David A. Pailin, *Attitudes to Other Religions* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1984), pp.91–92, and passim; R. W. Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962); Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image*, 2nd revd. edn. (Oxford, UK: Oneworld Publications, 1993 [1962]); Sari J. Nasir, *The Arabs and the English*, 2nd edn. (London: Longman, 1979 [1976]).

Middle English Romances with a common theme of the chivalrous Western gentleman saving brutalized Oriental women;<sup>12</sup> Dante who placed Muhammad on the lowest level of Hell;<sup>13</sup> Shakespeare with his shifty Turks;<sup>14</sup> the stories of the Thousand and One Nights, the *Arabian Nights*, enormously popular in Europe, filled with tales of kings, princesses, magic, devils, and beheadings;<sup>15</sup> the exotic harem scene paintings of Ingres;<sup>16</sup> and the like.

Although there were women artists and writers contributing to a Western image of the Orient, the imagery was shaped by men and their (heterosexual) desire.<sup>17</sup> The fascination with the Orient was a fantasy about women: the exotic beauty behind the veil; the sex objects in the Oriental man's harem (were they envious?). The image of the Orient beckoned the European men, who, looking for the exotic,<sup>18</sup> flocked to the Middle East to see/meet the famed beauties of the East:

The kasbah! This magic word intrigued me when I was a child ...  
The kasbah! I only knew that bloody fights between Arabs and soldiers took place there at night, and also that women were to be found there. Which women? I had no idea. Undoubtedly they were unnatural creatures, quite different from all other women. I imagined a den of danger and enchantment, straight from the Arabian nights ...<sup>19</sup>

<sup>12</sup> R. Kabbani, *Europe's Myths of Orient: Devise and Rule* (London: Macmillan, 1985), pp.15–17.

<sup>13</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, p.68.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p.60 and passim.

<sup>15</sup> Kabbani, *Europe's Myths of Orient*, p.24. Introduced in 1704, although Kabbani argues that many of the stories had been known to Europeans since the fifteenth century. Disney's *Aladdin* and the *Return of Jafar* are the late-twentieth-century's recycling of the Orientalist vision of the Orient.

<sup>16</sup> Joanna de Groot, "Sex" and "Race": The Construction of Language and Image in the Nineteenth Century', in *Sexuality and Subordination: Interdisciplinary Studies of Gender in the Nineteenth Century*, (eds.), Susan Mendus and Jane Rendall (London: Routledge, 1989); Maxime Rodinson, *Europe and the Mystique of Islam.*, trans. Roger Veinus (Seattle, Wash.: University of Washington Press, 1987 [French edn., 1980]), p.39.

<sup>17</sup> Malika Mehdid, 'A Western Invention of Arab Womanhood: The "Oriental" Female', in *Women in the Middle East: Perceptions, Realities and Struggles for Liberation*, (ed.), Haleh Afshar (London: Macmillan, 1993), p.46; De Groot, "Sex" and "Race".

<sup>18</sup> Rodinson, *Europe and the Mystique of Islam*, p.59.

<sup>19</sup> *L'Algérie de nos jours* [1893], quoted in Mabro, *Veiled Half-Truths*, pp.31–32.

Men's published travel accounts are full of detailed descriptions of women and the men's trips to see dancers and to brothels. The men are amazingly (or not so amazingly?) preoccupied with women as sexualized beings. For example, Klunzinger describes an occasion when he and some companions walked past a veiled woman and how they both turned around to look at each other afterwards. "Our eyes again meet, and the two large black beaming orbs betray to us that under the uneasy covering a heart warm as our own is beating, perhaps beating for us."<sup>20</sup> Bayle St. John wrote that in the expression in Egyptian women's eyes (the eyes being all he could see) "there is a promise of heaven."<sup>21</sup> A woman glanced at Richard Burton, he returned the glance, and "Seeing that my companions were safely employed, I entered upon the dangerous ground of raising hand to forehead. She smiled almost imperceptibly, and turned away. The pilgrim was in ecstasy."<sup>22</sup>

The Orient itself was feminized. Swimming in the Red Sea was, wrote Flaubert, "as though I were lying on a thousand liquid breasts."<sup>23</sup> Women authors reproduced the dominant male discourse. When Gertrude Bell wrote about her travel experiences in Persia, she described her sentiments in classic Orientalist language:

The East is full of secrets and because she is full of secrets she is full of entrancing surprises. Many fine things there are upon the surface [but] its essential charm is of more subtle quality ... [suddenly] the East sweeps aside her curtains, flashes a facet of jewels into your dazzled eyes, and disappears again with a mocking little laugh at your bewilderment; then for a moment it seems to you that you are looking her in the face but while you are wondering whether she be angel or devil, she is gone.<sup>24</sup>

When 'Eastern' women were not the objects of fantasy, they were still dehumanized by all sorts of adjectives used to describe them and the ways in which they dressed. Women in *niqāb* were usually compared unflatteringly to various types of animals, to ships, balloons, or

<sup>20</sup> Klunzinger, *Upper Egypt: Its People and Its Products* [1878], quoted in *ibid.*, p.60.

<sup>21</sup> St. John, *Village Life in Egypt* [1852], quoted in *ibid.*, p.67.

<sup>22</sup> Burton, *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to al-Madinah and Meccah* [1855], quoted in *ibid.*, p.99.

<sup>23</sup> Flaubert, quoted in De Groot, "Sex" and "Race", p.105.

<sup>24</sup> Bell, *Persian Pictures* [1894], quoted in Mabro, *Veiled Half-Truths*, p.49.

to ghosts and the dead.<sup>25</sup> So be it an exotic beauty, or a ghost, the Muslim woman was preserved as a spectacle, an object by those viewing her. The veil, and the women who wore it, became the metaphor for the entire East, and all that was both alluring and fearsome about it.

### 3. BEHIND THE VEIL

The whole genre of works contributing to the popular Western image of the veil as the symbol of the licentious, cruel, exciting Orient is another aspect of the world-as-exhibition delineated by Mitchell. Europeans were busy trying to re-create the Orient of their imaginations. For example, many European men went to the Orient, imagining themselves to be one of those gallant knights playing the savior to the exotic beauty. They were often disappointed to find that their efforts were stymied. John Ormsby on his encounter with a veiled woman, lamented:

If only I could have represented her as young and lovely, escaped from the harem of some cruel and elderly Moor, and with large tearful eye imploring the sympathy of the Christian, what a valuable incident it would have been, and how well “Fathma the Victim” would have read at the top of this page! But truth compels me to say that there was nothing in this lady’s expression or appearance to warrant any pleasant theory of this kind.<sup>26</sup>

Or, Leon Michel:

Whatever has been written about the Orient, French men happily believe that they will meet the famous odalisques, as beautiful as the morning star and just waiting to be loved. The European man thinks that he will find in Africa beautiful palaces with a balcony over the door to the street, where a charming prisoner will be waiting for a gallant French knight in shining armour to rescue her. They forget that the harems are well guarded and that the *moushrabias* at the windows make it impossible to communicate, even to exchange glances.<sup>27</sup>

These quotations show the writer’s disappointment at not being able to enact an Orientalist fantasy about the European Christian

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., pp.51–63.

<sup>26</sup> Ormsby, *Autumn Rambles in North Africa* [1864], quoted in *ibid.*, p.59.

<sup>27</sup> Michel, *Tunis* [1883], quoted in *ibid.*, p.32.

saving a beautiful damsel in distress, though Michel's quotation ultimately saves the Orientalist fantasy, by implying that the women are constrained by outsiders, that is they would come to the Christian if only it were not for the guards at their window.

No wonder then, that travelers, men and women, were annoyed at the face veil that prevented them from seeing the famed beauties of the Orient. How could they find the exotic beauty readily seen back in Europe, where the veil was never an obstacle to seeing an Oriental woman? (Indeed in European representations the veil was often a sensual addition to a picture of a woman.)<sup>28</sup> The *niqāb* was a real piece of cloth that actually prevented people from seeing the beauty underneath. This frustration led to attacks against that which was preventing them from fulfilling their desire, their gaze: the *niqāb*. Bradley-Birt wrote of the Persian type of *niqāb* that it was "the most unpicturesque, ungraceful costume that the most jealous of husbands could devise. No stranger may look upon the Persian woman and see the beauty that many a poem and romance would lead one to believe lies behind those close-drawn veils."<sup>29</sup> Doughty disliked the veil because it prevented him from seeing "the women's faces, which God created for the cheerfulness of the human world."<sup>30</sup> Fanon reports that a European lawyer visiting Algeria, who had had occasion owing to the nature of his work to see some unveiled women, commented that Algerian men were "guilty of concealing so many strange beauties. It was his conclusion that a people with a cache of such prizes, of such perfections of nature owes it to itself to show them, to exhibit them. If worst came to worst, he added, it ought to be possible to force them to do so."<sup>31</sup>

Sometimes the European travelers arrived with such high expectations that they were disappointed in the women they did manage

<sup>28</sup> Berger's study of "the Nude" genre of oil paintings highlights how many of these works depict female nudity in Biblical and Oriental scenes. These paintings must have reinforced the notion that the European gazer had privileged access to the Oriental female body. John Berger, Sven Blomberg, Chris Fox, Michael Dibb and Richard Hollis, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC and Penguin, 1972).

<sup>29</sup> Bradley-Birt, *Through Persia* [1909], quoted in Mabro, *Veiled Half-Truths*, p.53.

<sup>30</sup> Carroll Pastner, 'English Men in Arabia: Encounters with Middle Eastern Women', *Signs*, 4, 2 (1978), pp.314-315.

<sup>31</sup> Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1967; [French edn., 1959]), p.43.

to see, and another common theme became how ugly Middle Eastern women really were. As a traveler confirmed as late as 1955: “Eastern women, even the young, are more often hideous than not, whatever legends may have been suggested by their seclusion and the dark eyes under the voluminous veil.”<sup>32</sup> And some European travelers even praised or recommended the veil when they found the women too ugly: “If only they would adopt the Moslem fashion, and hide their repulsive features, it would save one many a shock,” wrote an English woman living in Algeria.<sup>33</sup>

Europeans were so frustrated at being denied a look at women without their veils that they went to extraordinary lengths to see. Jane Dieulafoy, a Frenchwoman travelling in Iran in the 1880s with her husband, describes how they overcame this problem:

In the centre of a courtyard the head of the household was chatting with two young women, doubtless his relatives. Unaware that they were being observed, they had left their faces uncovered...[I hid] behind part of the wall, asked my husband to pass me the cameras, and set them up as quickly as possible, delighted to have captured such a charming interior and one so jealously guarded in Persian circles.<sup>34</sup>

Mme Pommerol, annoyed at being denied the chance to see the Mozabite women of the Sahara, waited in an alley one day until a woman passed. Mme Pommerol caught up with her, and after telling her how beautiful she was, tried “very gently, of course, to draw aside her veil.” For this effort she received a “staggering blow,” and as the woman ran away, Mme Pommerol “debated in [her] mind how [to] achieve [her] object by less violent means.”<sup>35</sup> These veiled women were an affront to the European visitors who felt they had a right to see behind the veil.

In fact, the travelers’ resentment of being denied a look at what they had come to see was more than a mere passing frustration. It

<sup>32</sup> Cleugh, *Ladies of the Harem* [1955], quoted in *Veiled Half-Truths*, p.90. Also Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, p.45.

<sup>33</sup> Mrs. G. Albert Rogers, *Winter in Algeria, 1863-4*, quoted in Mabro, *Veiled Half-Truths*, p.257. Also, pp.85, 86.

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Sarah Graham-Brown, *Images of Women: The Portrayal of Women in Photography of the Middle East, 1860-1950* (London: Quartet Books, 1988), p.77.

<sup>35</sup> Pommerol, *Among the Women of the Sahara* [1900], quoted in Mabro, *Veiled Half-Truths*, p.244.



struck at the core of their being, and of their reason for traveling and observing. The Orientalists' world-as-exhibition had already given them the Orient. They had merely come to see the real thing that had been represented back home in paintings, pictures, books, and folklore. The world-as-exhibition had also taught them the hierarchy of nations, and the knowledge that they, the Europeans, were at the pinnacle of civilization. The Orient was a timeless place, unchanged since biblical times, here for them to travel through and, above all, to see. The effect, described above, of being the spectator in the exhibit, was that of power over a spectacle. To be denied the opportunity to see was to be denied the power of the superior over the inferior. It was to be denied the spectacle, and thus, since reality was only grasped as a picture, they were denied seeing reality, the Orient that they had come to see. Moreover, seeing is a form of possession. The veil obstructed possession of the women (literally, for men, and figuratively, as colonialists, male or female). So, the attempts to render the unveiled women in pictorial terms were attempts to 'own' in perpetuity the 'reality' of veiled women, to render them visible for the gaze always: thus to deny the veil.

Something else was going on, too. The travelers, expecting to see, became aware that while they could not see the women, the women could see and observe them. Although their own tourist handbook told them about wearing veils so as to see without being seen, they could not have expected to experience the reverse, to be the spectacle, not the spectator. As Fanon wrote: "The woman who sees without being seen frustrates the colonizer. There is no reciprocity. She does not yield herself, does not give herself, does not offer herself."<sup>36</sup> John Foster Fraser describes his feelings on meeting veiled women:

A side-glance, and each woman peeping over the veil seemed to be looking at me with great liquid eyes, fixing upon me the bold glance of one conscious she could see without being seen. Often I felt there was something uncanny about those great eyes of the solemn women, always bright and always black. Big, unblinking, dreamy, sensuous eyes which filled one with a nervous curiosity as to what their owners were thinking about.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, p.44.

<sup>37</sup> Fraser, *Land of the Veiled Women* [1911], quoted in Mabro, *Veiled Half-Truths*, p.46.

Women travelers felt as discomfited by the veiled women as men. As Lucie Paul Marguerite wrote: “beside these women wrapped up from head to toe, whose eyes cannot always be seen but are always seeing, I have the feeling of being naked.”<sup>38</sup> Note here their comments that the women were able to see without being seen, and the discomfort that caused those looking at them. Perhaps the best example is De Amicis’ description of his visiting Moroccan men: the women of the house would hide behind upstairs balconies and watch the men avidly. “The house ... had been converted into a theatre, and we were the spectacle,” he exclaimed.<sup>39</sup> “We,” the ones who had come to see the real world promised by the exhibit, “we were the spectacle.”

In *Writing Diaspora*, Chow suggests that it is this knowledge of being seen that creates the colonizer’s subjectivity, not the other way around, as in Mitchell’s account:

Contrary to the model of Western hegemony in which the colonizer is seen as a primary, active “gaze” subjugating the native as passive “object,” I want to argue that it is actually the colonizer who feels looked at by the native’s gaze. This gaze, which is neither a threat nor a retaliation, makes the colonizer “conscious” of himself, henceforth “reflected” in the native-object. It is the self-reflection of the colonizer that produces the colonizer as subject (potent gaze, source of meaning and action) and the native as his image, with all the pejorative meanings of “lack” attached to the word “image.”<sup>40</sup>

Chow is making a persuasive point, though I submit, based on my use of Mitchell, that the colonizer does really experience the gaze as retaliation: the exhibit is not supposed to stare back. What happens when the spectacle becomes the spectator, or in Chow’s framework, when the colonizer reaches the moment of self-consciousness, is explored in the next section.

#### 4. SYMBOLIC REVENGE

Mitchell argues that for the European, reality is to be grasped through its representation, its picture.<sup>41</sup> What if, like the veiled women, reality

<sup>38</sup> Marguerite, *Tunisiennes* [1937], quoted in *ibid.*, p.50.

<sup>39</sup> De Amicis, *Morocco*, n.d. [1877], quoted in *ibid.*, p.45.

<sup>40</sup> Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* (Bloom., Ind.: Indiana Uni. Press, 1993), p.51. <sup>41</sup> Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, p.60.

does not allow itself to be represented? The European, unable to have veiled women (except in brothels), sets up the representation so he can have her. He describes her body, he paints her naked, he photographs her. Thus the illusion that he can have her is maintained. This is his “symbolic revenge.” (I use the masculine gender, because as mentioned, the Orientalist imagery was largely male driven, though European women also participated in this unveiling.)

Alloula’s study of French colonial postcards highlights these dynamics perfectly. The French colonial postcards present the ‘Algerian’ woman in various states of undress. Pictures of women reclining on woven mats, their breasts exposed, are common. One postcard depicts a woman in the usual *niqāb*, but with her breasts showing through the folds. Alloula’s critique of the photographer describes so well the world-as-exhibition effect Mitchell delineates:

The opaque veil that covers [the Algerian woman] intimates clearly and simply to the photographer a refusal ... Draped in the veil that cloaks her to her ankles, the Algerian woman discourages the *scopic desire* (the voyeurism) [original emphasis] of the photographer. She is the concrete negation of this desire and thus brings to the photographer confirmation of a triple rejection: the rejection of his desire, of the practice of his “art,” and of his place in a milieu that is not his own.<sup>42</sup>

Alloula is talking of the photographer, but he may as well be talking of all the European visitors who came seeking the ‘Orient’. In fact, the dynamic is the same today, with the veiled woman affronting the gaze of the modern person taught to gaze. Veiled women, writes Alloula, were “not only an embarrassing enigma to the [French colonial] photographer but an outright attack upon him”:

Thrust in the presence of a veiled woman, the photographer feels himself photographed, having himself become an object-to-be-seen, he loses initiative: *he is dispossessed of his own gaze* ... Algerian society, particularly the feminine world with it, threatens him in his being and prevents him from accomplishing himself *as gazing gaze*. (p.14) [original emphasis]

Not to be outdone, the photographer proceeds to capture ‘the Algerian woman’. He cannot have the real one, so he hires prostitutes

<sup>42</sup> Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*, trans. Myrna Godzich and Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1986 [French edn., 1981]), p.7.

as substitutes. Since he is forced into this, his revenge is a “double violation: [the photographers] unveil the veiled and give figural representation to the forbidden” (p.14).

Alloula has been severely criticized by feminists for reproducing the French colonial postcards. Lazreg is critical of Alloula because she believes he, as a male Algerian, is the one who desires the woman and sees her as part of a harem, and that he is merely projecting his own feelings onto the French. Chow also criticizes Alloula for making the women subject to a “second gaze:” “the Algerian women are exhibited as objects not only by the French but also by Alloula’s discourse.”<sup>43</sup> Lazreg and Chow are without question correct in observing this double violation of the Algerian women “by making titillating pictures available to a wider audience than the original” (students in Lazreg’s class bought his book for its “pornographic” content, not the intellectual message.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, the English copy of Alloula’s book in Robarts Library at the University of Toronto in Canada, has several photographs carefully removed). And yet here is a dilemma: Alloula’s arguments about the French representation of Algerian women are compelling, and all the more so for those not familiar with the postcard images, because of their reproduction. I make use of Alloula in this chapter for that reason.

Photographing Middle Eastern women and men was big business by the 1860s.<sup>45</sup> It catered to soldiers, sailors, tourists, pilgrims, and Europeans resident in the Middle East.<sup>46</sup> However, it was difficult to obtain close-up shots of people, and impossible to photograph women who veiled without their veils. So a “substantial proportion of nineteenth-century photographs were taken in indoor or outdoor studio sets even though they purported to be ‘real-life’ scenes.”<sup>47</sup> The women models were most likely prostitutes. Thus the image of ‘Eastern’ women confirmed for the West was actually a fabrication of the photographer’s studio, albeit presented as a technique of representation, as a snapshot of ‘reality’. The fabrication is easily demonstrated.

<sup>43</sup> Chow, *Writing Diaspora*, p.39.

<sup>44</sup> Lazreg, *The Eloquence of Silence*, p.191.

<sup>45</sup> Graham-Brown, *Images of Women*, p.38.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.44 and 45.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p.39.

A series of photographs from Bonfils' Beirut studio shows a "woman who appears in one ... photograph as 'an Armenian woman of Jerusalem' [and who appears] in a later photograph in the series in the same costume, but this time carrying a fan, as an 'Egyptian woman.'"<sup>48</sup> In a postcard series from French colonial Algeria, the same model in the same clothes in the same location appears in photographs taken by the same photographer as "Young Bedouin woman," "Young Woman from the South," and "Young Kabyl Woman!"<sup>49</sup> "In the absence of real Algerian subjects, the postcard thus creates its own version of the 'truth' about Algerian women, and society."<sup>50</sup> The postcard also plays upon the racism that denies individuality to the 'Other' – one woman is just like another.

The postcards reinforced the link between the harem and the veil as images of both the captivity and sensuality in which the Westerners already believed (see section B). The photograph allowed them to 'see' what their imagination had constructed via reading about harems and veiled women. One of the series of French colonial postcards depicts "Moorish" women in their homes. The entire postcard is taken up with the image of women behind big prison-like metal bars. In some of this series of postcards, the women are naked from the waist up, standing in their 'homes' behind prison-like bars. Alloula argues the image of the 'woman behind bars' is the

conjoined play of reverse logic and metaphorical contamination, both determined by the initial frustration. If the women are inaccessible to sight (that is, veiled), it is because they are imprisoned. This dramatized equivalence between the veiling and the imprisonment is necessary for the construction of an *imaginary scenario* [original emphasis] that results in the dissolution of the actual society, the one that causes the frustration, in favor of a phantasm; that of the harem.<sup>51</sup>

So not only was the revenge a double violation, unveiling what ought to be veiled, it was also a twofold revenge: the photographer unveils the women and places them behind bars. He places them

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p.120.

<sup>49</sup> Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*, p.62.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p.17.

<sup>51</sup> Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*, p.21.

behind bars because he is the one who is barred from seeing. Already expecting ‘the harem’, thanks to Orientalism, placing women behind bars is nothing but an enactment of that expectation. Since lattice windows and guards barred the real women from him, again he resorts to pictorial representations of what he believes to be the reality, even though he has to fake it. The colonial postcard is the vulgar “caricature” of the European harem fantasy.<sup>52</sup> It is also a way to confirm the men’s belief in their own desirability and superiority over the native men. With the women behind bars (that is, denied agency), the myth that they would choose a Western, Christian savior over their cruel master is preserved.

Photography was just a new technique of an older process of symbolic revenge. Alloula analyzes the postcard, though his conclusions apply to travel writers who describe women’s bodies in detail in books, to painters painting the harem bath scenes and so on. Even missionaries used these images in their books about Muslim women. A photograph in *Our Moslem Sisters* of “A Bedouin Girl from North Africa” depicts a young woman with one breast exposed. This photograph appeared after the author had informed us that Moroccan women were not yet ready for liberty because they need educating and preparing “with propriety and true modesty” before taking their “rightful place.”<sup>53</sup> The photograph must have confirmed in the readers’ minds the wantonness of Muslim women.

In fact, symbolic revenge was followed in places by real unveiling.<sup>54</sup> The sex tourism industry grew as the European men flocked to the Middle East. French travel agencies promoted the northern Algerian town, Bou Saada, which was renowned for its female belly dancers, as a destination and the French authorities insisted that the women, who used to dance fully clothed, appear naked before their new audience. Later, modernizing native élites would conduct their own (sometimes forced) unveiling campaign (see section C).

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p.4.

<sup>53</sup> Annie Van Sommer and Samuel M. Zwemer (eds.), *Our Moslem Sisters: A Cry of Need from the Lands of Darkness Interpreted by Those Who Heard It* (New York: The Young People’s Missionary Movement, 1907), p.100.

<sup>54</sup> Lazreg, *The Eloquence of Silence*, pp.31–32.

## B. THE HAREM AND COLONIAL CONTROL

Showing how the veil frustrated the European gaze that led to attacks upon the veil is only one part, albeit extremely important, of my argument about the veil being constructed in European discourse as a symbol of Muslim women's oppression. Another crucial part is to examine the broader discourse during the colonial era about the status of Muslim women in general. So, even though such an examination would not focus on the veil *per se*, it is essential to unpacking the notion of the veil as oppressive. This is because of the nineteenth-century discourse on the hierarchy of civilizations and the belief of the Europeans in their own superiority and in the necessity of their conquest of the Middle East. The status of women became the benchmark of the rank a civilization had in the hierarchy. Islam was placed below Christianity (with Eastern Christianity itself placed below Latin Christianity), but above pagan Africa and the native peoples of the colonies (North America/Canada/Australia). The veil was the sign of the Muslim woman. The veil was the metaphor for the entire Middle East. So even if the topic at hand was a discussion of other aspects of Muslim customs and manners, the veil could be invoked as shorthand for all the disabilities that Muslim women and men faced because of their religion.

The point of the discourse on women was that a nation could not advance while its women were backward. Women as mothers were seen to play a crucial role in educating their children, and thus perpetuating the civilization. Christian mothers (the European mothers) exerted a healthy civilizational influence on their children. Muslim mothers did not. So colonialists, missionaries, and feminists, as well as native élites trying to 'modernize' their countries, all hoped to have access to the Muslim woman in order to influence her, so that the nation might progress. However, Muslim women were segregated from men, and many women in the upper classes were secluded. In the colonial era, seclusion, symbolized by the harem, assumed a central place in the discourse on women, Islam, and progress. The harem was also linked in the European imagination to the veil. Like the veil, the harem was seen as a barrier to progress.

The inaccessibility of women was particularly troublesome for the

modernizing state (native or colonial), for it inhibited its ability to control and police the population. Bowring, friend of Bentham, advisor to Muhammad Ali, and writer of a report on Egypt for the British government, wrote: “The difficulties of making anything like a correct estimate of the population are much heightened by the state of Mahomedan laws and usages, which exclude half of society from the observation of the police. Every house has its harem, and every harem is inaccessible.”<sup>55</sup> The harem had to be penetrated, the veils lifted.

### I. HAREM

The Western construction of the image of the harem could be a whole book in itself. I will confine myself to some brief remarks. First, in the Western discourse, the veil and the harem were linked in two ways: (a) owing to the veil being the symbol of Muslim woman’s degradation, whatever the kind of degradation (marriage practices, harem, etc); and (b) because the veil was seen as an extension of the harem mentality when the woman was outside her home. Wilson’s statement captures this sentiment well: “Wives in this corner of the globe,” he wrote in his *Travels in Egypt and the Holy Land* (1823), “appear to be in a complete state of captivity. They are slaves to their husbands, and allowed to see no other persons at home than their families or relations, and when they do appear in the streets, their faces are completely veiled.”<sup>56</sup> Veiling is a sign of captivity in the home (the harem). Even to many of today’s feminists the veil is seen as the extension of the walls of the harem when the woman is outside. (For instance, Badran’s introduction to Huda Shaarawi’s autobiography: “When [the women] went out they veiled their faces, thus taking their seclusion with them.”<sup>57</sup>)

<sup>55</sup> Bowring [1840], quoted in Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, p.46.

<sup>56</sup> William Rae Wilson, *Travels in Egypt and the Holy Land* [1823], quoted in Mabro, *Veiled Half-Truths*, p.197.

<sup>57</sup> Margot Badran, ‘Introduction’, *Harem Years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist (1879–1924)* (London: Virago, 1986), p.7. See also Hessini, ‘Wearing the Ḥijāb in Contemporary Morocco’: “The veil therefore is a symbol of interiority. Because a woman’s space is interior, she is permitted to move through the exterior only if she remains separated from it”, p.47.



Second, the European notion of the harem was already an idea predicated on the ages-old Orientalist fantasy of the exotic Middle East. A harem is simply the women's quarters in a house, or a man's wives, but paintings of women in a harem, for example, depicted scores of women lying around naked in the baths. The women appeared as captives, lying about just waiting for their male master's sexual indulgence. This harem fantasy drew on the Middle Ages Christian polemic against Islam that was revived in the nineteenth century. Islam was supposedly an overly indulgent religion that scandalously allowed divorce, remarriage, and polygyny. For Christians, medieval and modern, this was proof of Islam's status as a false 'religion'.<sup>58</sup> According to this argument, Prophet Muhammad had used sexual pleasure as a way to gain converts; the Islamic Paradise supposedly stressed the sensual and sexual delights awaiting believers, and encouraged believers to indulge in this life also.<sup>59</sup> For the nineteenth-century Christians, the 'harem' was proof that Muslim marriage was based not on love and partnership, but on sensuality.<sup>60</sup> Muslim men and women were degraded by the "lewdness" encouraged by their religion. So, colonialists and missionaries discussed the baneful effect the (European notion of the) harem had on the Middle East's inhabitants. (Melman's study of European women writers finds an altogether more humane and normal view of the harem as the women's quarters.)

Third, there was something else going on as well. In his *Modern Egypt*, Cromer, the British Agent and Consul-General of Egypt from 1883 to 1907, had pointed out: "The European would not reside in Egypt unless he could make money by doing so."<sup>61</sup> Colonialism required productive and industrious citizens. Since the colonials believed that the Oriental was inherently unproductive, irrational, lazy and the like, it was essential that the natives be taught European ways. For this, the "healthy and elevating influence" of women as wives and mothers had over their husbands and children was para-

<sup>58</sup> Rodinson, *Europe and the Mystique of Islam*, p.66; Daniel, *Islam and the West*, pp. 168-169.

<sup>59</sup> Daniel, *Islam and the West*, p.174, and passim.

<sup>60</sup> Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, p.154.

<sup>61</sup> Evelyn Baring Cromer, First Earl of, *Modern Egypt*, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1908), vol. 2, p.432.

mount.<sup>62</sup> Thus the concern for the status of women was hardly a concern for women. (Cromer was, after all, a founding member and a President of the Men's League for Opposing Women's Suffrage in England.<sup>63</sup>) Rather, it was more the state's need to transform its inhabitants. This sense of the need to transform the Oriental was given in advance by Orientalist discourse.<sup>64</sup> Cromer: "The position of women in Egypt [is] a fatal obstacle to the attainment of that elevation of thought and character which should accompany the introduction of European civilisation. [This civilisation would not succeed if] the position which women occupy in Europe is abstracted from the general plan."<sup>65</sup> Cromer's putative focus on women supports Ahmed's conclusion: "Whether in the hands of patriarchal men or feminists, the ideas of Western feminism essentially functioned to morally justify the attack on native societies and to support the notion of the comprehensive superiority of Europe."<sup>66</sup>

So, whether it was in English or French colonies, the strategy was the same: make the man monogamous, teach the woman to inculcate 'Western/Christian' virtues in her children, and the society would advance. Cromer argued:

The European reformer may instruct, he may explain, he may argue, he may devise the most ingenious methods for the moral and material development of the people, he may use his best endeavours to "cut blocks with a razor" and to graft true civilisation on a society which is but just emerging from barbarism, but unless he proves himself able, not only to educate, but to elevate the woman, he will never succeed in affording to the man, in any thorough degree, the only education which is worthy of Europe.<sup>67</sup>

The reconstruction of Egyptian villages exemplifies this colonial aim of focusing on women in order to transform society. Father Ayrout, a Jesuit working in rural Egypt in the early twentieth century, noted, "No model village can be realized or kept presentable unless

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p.540.

<sup>63</sup> Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, p.153.

<sup>64</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, p.95.

<sup>65</sup> Cromer, *Modern Egypt*, vol. 2, pp.538–539, from Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, p.III.

<sup>66</sup> Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, p.154.

<sup>67</sup> Cromer, *Modern Egypt*, vol. 2, p.542.

the architectural enterprise is linked with teaching, education and instruction; in short one should work with the fellahin [peasants]. The reconstruction of the Egyptian village demands the re-education of its inhabitants, and first of all of women. We must work from the inside out.”<sup>68</sup>

Missionaries also focused on ‘working from the inside out’, targeting women in their conversion campaigns. Zwemer, a well-known missionary to the Middle East, argued: “Owing to the fact that the mother’s influence over the children, both boys and girls ... is paramount, and that women are the conservative element in the defence of their faith, we believe that missionary bodies ought to lay far more emphasis in work for Moslem [*sic*] women as a means for hastening the evangelization of Moslem lands.”<sup>69</sup> In *Our Moslem Sisters*, an author argues that “the primary object of Mission schools for girls was to lead them to Christ, ‘If you get the girls for Christ, you get Egypt for Christ.’”<sup>70</sup> Missionary-school teachers tried to persuade daughters to defy their parents and not wear the veil. (“Thus a trail of gunpowder would be led into the heart of Islam.”<sup>71</sup>) In Algeria some French colonial women paid Algerian students to ensure attendance at their schools.<sup>72</sup>

Melman has challenged arguments such as the one I am making above, about the European image of the harem, for ignoring the ‘heteroglot’ of European views on the harem.<sup>73</sup> Melman argues that women travelers to the Middle East presented a different view of the harem from the mainstream (male) view that I have been treating so far. Of course, men did not have access to real harems, so had to rely on Orientalist fantasy in their conceptions of the harem. Women, on the other hand, did have access to the harems, the women’s quarters of

<sup>68</sup> Quoted in Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, p.93.

<sup>69</sup> S. M. Zwemer, *Moslem Women* (West Medford, Mass.: Central Committee of the United Study of Foreign Missions, 1926), p.170. See also Van Sommer and Zwemer, *Our Moslem Sisters*, p.15.

<sup>70</sup> Van Sommer and Zwemer, *Our Moslem Sisters*, p.59. Zwemer states mysteriously that the identity of the authors of the chapters in this book are kept anonymous “for obvious reasons” (p.6).

<sup>71</sup> Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, p.154.

<sup>72</sup> Lazreg, *The Eloquence of Silence*, pp.64–65.

<sup>73</sup> Billie Melman, *Women’s Orients: English Women and the Middle East, 1718–1918. Sexuality, Religion and Work*, 2nd edn. (London: Macmillan, 1995 [1992]), p.315.

Muslim residences, and this, Melman believes, led to a different kind of view of the harem.<sup>74</sup>

There are two points to be made here. First, certainly Melman is right to stress the ‘heteroglot’ rather than monoglot of European views on the harem. Her study looks at an unrecognized genre of women’s literature on the Middle East, what Melman calls “harem literature.” In this genre, European women did present the women and the harem more as ‘sisters’, than as alien Other (p.310). In their hands the harem became the “image of the middle-class ‘home:’ domestic, feminine and autonomous” (pp.100–101). The harem seemed to embody the Victorian ideal of separate spheres particularly well: “If woman is the conservator of the home in the West, guarding it strictly from innovation and change because it represents to her permanence, and is veritably her throne, the woman of Egypt is even more completely synonymous with her home-life, since it is her Kingdom,” wrote Elisabeth Goodnow in 1915 (pp.140–141). Nor was the veil always seen as a symbol of women’s subjection, but sometimes as a liberty, a tool of feminine charm and seductive powers, or as a protection from male harassment (*ibid.*, pp.120–121).

Second, although this harem literature presented a different picture of the Orient from the one on which I focused earlier, and although some of the European women criticized “male representations of the domestic sphere” (*ibid.*, p.75), in its essence, women’s harem literature played the same role as did colonial and missionary discourse on Muslim women. The European women were still convinced that Western civilization was superior to the East, even if some of them did not present the Muslim woman as an alien Other (*ibid.*, p.17). Key features of the colonial discourse against Islam polygyny, segregation, and the veil were not by and large approved of by the women writers. The ‘angel in the home’ aspect Melman presents as challenging the male-stream harem discourse was really just another version of the familiar targeting of women for changing the society. Incredibly, Melman overlooks this political aspect completely, to the point of declaring ‘harem literature’ “apolitical” (p.20). Nevertheless, the secular

<sup>74</sup> European women’s access to women’s quarters was not always automatic. Some women visitors paid to visit a women’s quarters as part of their tour of a city. Mabro, *Veiled Half-Truths*, p.7.

writers shared with missionaries and colonialists the idea that “Given the right education [that is, European education] any Muslim woman should be able to mitigate the corrupting influences of the world and elevate her children and husband, or master to a spiritually, generically feminised sphere” (ibid., p.141). Secular European feminists urged Muslim women to fight seclusion, polygyny and the veil;<sup>75</sup> the women’s effort to reform the ‘Eastern’ woman, to persuade her to fight in accordance with nineteenth-century domestic ideals is hardly different from that of male colonizers and missionaries. In any case, whatever the women traveler’s alternative harem image might have been, it had little impact on the mainstream cultural discourse of the harem and Muslim women’s degradation.<sup>76</sup>

Some women were especially in tune with colonial conquest and its mentality:

Were [the Muslim women] in sympathy with me? No, not in the least. Widely separated races never can be in sympathy with each other in any true sense of the word. And for this particular race which cringes, steals, sulks and shuffles, cheating and deceiving us on every possible opportunity, we feel a latent contempt, such as conquerors feel for the conquered.<sup>77</sup>

## 2. CIVILIZER

Said emphasizes that it is a mistake to view colonial discourse as simply a rationalization of power: “To say simply that Orientalism was a rationalization of colonial rule is to ignore the extent to which colonial rule was justified in advance by Orientalism, rather than after the fact.”<sup>78</sup> Mitchell’s work shows that too. For Orientalism taught the European that s/he was living at the apex of civilization. Europeans felt a ‘duty’ to bring this Western civilization to the other nations of the world. Europeans were needed, in Cromer’s words, to introduce the “light of Western civilisation”<sup>79</sup> into the Orient. The

<sup>75</sup> For example, Eugeni Le Brun’s urging of Huda Shaarawi to unveil. Badran, *Harem Years*, p.80. See also Graham-Brown, *Images of Women*, pp.221–223.

<sup>76</sup> Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, p.150.

<sup>77</sup> Pommerol, *Among the Women of the Sahara* [1900], quoted in Mabro, *Veiled Half-Truths*, p.243.

<sup>78</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, p.39

<sup>79</sup> Cromer, *Modern Egypt*, vol. 2, p.110.

French poet, Lamartine, neatly expressed the European vision when he wrote that the Ottomans were “nations without territory, *patrie*, rights, laws or security...waiting anxiously for the shelter” of European occupation.<sup>80</sup> The connection was thus always between colonial control and superior Western knowledge. In Morocco, the French enforced the language of French above Berber and Arabic, not only because that was the “means of extending the grip of France upon the country,”<sup>81</sup> but also as Lyautey, the Résident-Général of the French-Moroccan protectorate from 1912 to 1925, put it, because French was the “véhicule de toutes pensées nobles et claires, expression d’un idéal toujours plus haut [vehicle of all noble and clear thoughts, (the) expression of an always loftier (or nobler) ideal].”<sup>82</sup> Cromer argued, “the new generation of Egyptians has to be persuaded or forced into imbibing the true spirit of Western civilisation.”<sup>83</sup> Removing the veil was thus seen as a crucial part of the West’s *mission civilisatrice*.

Nevertheless, the *mission civilisatrice* was also an attempt in practical terms to subjugate and control, that is, to colonize a foreign country. The colonial enterprise, however much it conceived of itself as dutifully civilizing a backward nation, also required the ability to control and direct its subjects. As a French military officer wrote after putting down an insurrection in 1845–46:

In effect the essential thing is to gather into groups this people which is everywhere and nowhere; the essential thing is to make them something we can seize hold of. When we have them in our hands, we will then be able to do many things which are quite impossible for us today and which will perhaps allow us to capture their minds after we have captured their bodies.<sup>84</sup>

Capturing their minds was also a way to capture their bodies, and capturing the body was done by attacking the local customs and manners that prevented colonial control and access: the veil and the harem.

<sup>80</sup> Quoted in De Groot, “Sex” and “Race”, p.98.

<sup>81</sup> Robin Bidwell, *Morocco Under Colonial Rule: French Administration of Tribal Areas, 1912–1956* (London: Frank Cass, 1973), p.237.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p.238.

<sup>83</sup> Cromer, *Modern Egypt*, vol. 2, p.538.

<sup>84</sup> Quoted in Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, p.95.

C. THE MEANING OF *ḤIJĀB* FOR  
MODERNIZING ELITES

The French military officer spoke of “capturing the minds” of the natives. This was done very effectively by the introduction of European schooling into the colonized countries. The Oriental people, awed by Western power (economic and military) over them and puzzled at the Orient’s weakness, was thus predisposed to listen and learn from the West. Western schooling introduced to the natives Orientalism’s ideas about themselves. “[L]ike any set of durable ideas, Orientalist notions influenced the people who were called Orientals as well as those called Occidental, European, or Western; [so] Orientalism is better grasped as a set of constraints upon and limitations of thought than it is simply as a positive doctrine.”<sup>85</sup> Orientalism was (is) a body of knowledge, with its own language, rules, metaphors, and images that constrained(s) not only Westerners but also native peoples themselves, who learned about their own country through Western academic disciplines. Thus in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the élites and rulers in Muslim countries were “inspired ... [by their] intense exposure to new western ideas.”<sup>86</sup> Knowing themselves through the lens of Orientalism meant an acceptance of the European diagnosis of the problems of the dilapidated Orient, and an acceptance of the European cure. They attempted to ‘modernize’ their countries by imitating the West.<sup>87</sup>

The degraded position of Oriental (especially Muslim) women had demonstrated the women’s position as a central barrier to Oriental advancement (civilization), as shown in the section above. Native élites focused on the issues identified by the colonizer as the most important problems holding their countries back: veiling, seclusion, and polygyny. The first magazine for women established in Egypt by a Syrian Christian in 1892, declared in its editorial its dedication

<sup>85</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, p.42.

<sup>86</sup> Naila Minai, *Women in Islam: Tradition and Transition in the Middle East* (New York: Seaview, 1981), p.49.

<sup>87</sup> Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, p.129; R. Sayigh, ‘Roles and Functions of Arab Women: A Reappraisal of Orientalism and Arab Women’, *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 3, 3, (1981), p.263.

to ‘advancing’ the women of “Egypt along the path that European women were taking.”<sup>88</sup> Lebanese writer Nazira Zain al-Din published a book in 1928, discussing amongst other things the issue of the veil. She concluded: “I have noticed that the nations that have given up the veil are the nations that have advanced in intellectual and material life. Such advancement is not equalled in the veiled nations.”<sup>89</sup>

Qassim Amin’s famous book on Muslim women, that was published in Egypt in 1899, inaugurated the debate over the veil in the Arab press.<sup>90</sup> However, his argument was an echo of the West’s prognosis of the ‘illness’ of the ‘backward’ East. Convinced of the West’s inherent superiority and Muslims’ inherent backwardness, Amin argued that the veil was “a huge barrier between woman and her elevation, and consequently between the nation and its advance.”<sup>91</sup> Amin criticized the European (male) fantasy of the harem. He argued that in the Egyptian home it was women, not men, who were powerful.<sup>92</sup> Thus, just as the missionaries, colonialists, and feminists had argued, Amin believed women were the key for remolding society and making it ‘progress’: “The grown man is none other than his mother shaped him in childhood... *this is the essence of this book... It is impossible to breed successful men if they do not have mothers capable of raising them to be successful*” [original emphasis].<sup>93</sup> In Turkey, Atatürk claimed that “the failures in our past are due to the fact that we remained passive to the fate of women.” He elaborated: “woman’s most important duty, apart from her social responsibilities, is to be a good mother. As one progresses in time, as civilisation advances with giant steps, it is imperative that mothers be enabled to raise their children according to the needs of the century.”<sup>94</sup> These quotations are noteworthy both for their resemblance to Cromer’s, the missionaries’ and European feminists’ statements seen in the section on the harem, and for their betrayal that again, the concern is not really for ‘improving’ the status of women, but for aiming at the key of society: successful men.

<sup>88</sup> Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, p.141.

<sup>89</sup> al-Din, ‘Unveiling and Veiling’, p.272.

<sup>90</sup> Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, p.145.   <sup>91</sup> Ibid., p.160.

<sup>92</sup> Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, p.113.

<sup>93</sup> Quoted in Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, p.156.

<sup>94</sup> Quoted in Humari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (London: Zed Books, 1986), p.36.



Elite reformers with varying degrees of relentlessness focused on reshaping their societies in the Western mold. Turkey under Atatürk (1920–38) provides one of the most ferocious examples, as he replaced the Arabic alphabet with Latin script, tried to purge Turkish of Arabic/Persian words, and abolished the Caliphate, replacing it with a civil code modeled after Switzerland's.<sup>95</sup> Atatürk passed decrees on dress reform. Men had to stop wearing the fez and other traditional Turkish clothing and don European clothes; he mocked Turkish men who continued to wear Turkish clothes: "Would a civilised man put on this preposterous garb and go out and hold himself up to universal ridicule?" He declared: "We will wear boots and shoes, trousers, waist coats, collars, ties... we will dress in morning coats and lounge suits, in smoking jackets and tail coats. And if there are persons who hesitate and draw back, I will tell them that they are fools."<sup>96</sup> Atatürk encouraged women to adopt European dress, and his wife Latife Hanım was unveiled at their wedding and continued to be unveiled at public appearances.<sup>97</sup> An "inquisitional committee was formed, called the Tribunal of Independence, which went from village to village punishing those who did not conform to the new dress regulations."<sup>98</sup> He also attempted to reform his citizen's customs and manners; for instance, he had them learn ballroom dancing.<sup>99</sup>

Reformers across the Muslim world agitated for similar kinds of changes in their societies. In Egypt Huda Shaarawi and Seza Nabarawi, returning from the International Women's Alliance Conference in Rome in 1923, made the famous and dramatic gesture of casting off their face veils after stepping off the train. In Iraq, Jamal Sudki Azza Khawiy was jailed for advocating abolition of the veil;<sup>100</sup> Queen

<sup>95</sup> Minai, *Women in Islam*, pp.64–67.

<sup>96</sup> Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism*, pp.38–39.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.13, 36. Whether or not Atatürk actually banned the veil is apparently debatable. Abadan-Unat argues it is a misconception of the West that he banned the veil. Instead, he favoured persuasion through public address. My Turkish friends and I have been unable to confirm or deny this. Nermin Abadan-Unat, 'The Impact of Legal and Educational Reforms on Turkish Women', in *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender*, (eds.), Nikki Keddie and Beth Baron (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1991).

<sup>98</sup> Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism*, pp.39–40.

<sup>99</sup> Minai, *Women in Islam*, p.66.

<sup>100</sup> Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism*, p.13.

Suraya of Afghanistan appeared unveiled in public in 1928, while the King argued for the veil's abolition;<sup>101</sup> and in Iran, Reza Shah banned the veil in 1936. His wives appeared unveiled in public, government employees were forbidden to enter a cinema if their wives wore a *chador*, and taxi drivers could be fined if they accepted veiled women passengers. Again, the Shah emphasized in his speeches that women should take up the banner of modern civilization for they were to be "the educators of the coming generation."<sup>102</sup> The ban was vigorously enforced by the police who were instructed to shred a woman's veil with scissors if she was caught wearing it in public.<sup>103</sup>

#### D. CONCLUSION

In sum, the "metaphysics of modernity," where meaning is grasped as a distinction between a material thing and the non-material structure that it represents, with its emphasis on the gaze, led European visitors to the Middle East to attack the veil. The veil was a barrier to the European carrying through to completion the project promoted by the Orientalist vision of the Orient: namely the inherent inferiority of the Orient and the need for the West to civilize it. Colonial discourse also introduced ideas about Oriental inferiority and the focus on women's status as the benchmark for progress into the colonized's discourse. Native élites seized upon the European understanding of certain practices, such as the veil and the harem, in their efforts to 'modernize'. To the older pre-modern meanings of the veil, as a symbol of piety, wealth or status were added the meanings that the veil symbolized oppression and backwardness. The new meanings did not displace the older meanings, just created a new layer that was attached to one's class position. Thus grew the divide between the Westernized élite minority and the non-Westernized non-élite majority. As Ahmed argues, the discourse over *ḥijāb* is "tainted" with the "history of colonial domination and resistance and class struggle around that."<sup>104</sup> These dynamics are animating the struggles in the Muslim world today.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p.72.   <sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Fatemeh Givechian, 'Cultural Changes in Male-Female Relations', *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs*, 3, 3, (1991), p.526.

<sup>104</sup> Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, p.130.

In the West, the Orientalist vision of the Orient lives on in a couple of ways. First, at the level of imagery: modern technology, TV, cinema, photography, cartoons and so on have inherited and reinforced the Orientalist vision of the Orient as an exotic, dangerous, exciting, violent, timeless, magical, backward, and scary place.<sup>105</sup> Although the veil as exotic beauty has mostly been replaced with the veil as oppressive, or as the harbinger of terrorism, the exotic image is just below the surface: the 1987 Brooke Shields movie, *Harem*, for example, the story of a New York woman kidnapped by an Arab sheikh and taken back to his harem in the Arabian desert; or, the June 1997 cover of the Canadian Automobile Association's magazine *Leisureways* that depicts a woman in a face veil, her lovely eyes beckoning. The caption reads: "Yemen: Lifting the Veil on a Colorful Nation."

Even feminist books about Muslim women reinforce the Orientalist view of Muslim women: excerpts of Brooks's *Nine Parts of Desire*, published in *The Australian Magazine*, are accompanied by a photograph of a woman wearing a full head-to-toe veil walking in the snow with a small child, the caption recycles Guy de Maupassant's quip describing the Arab women whom he met in the streets during his travels in North Africa in 1890: "Death out for a walk;"<sup>106</sup> the cover of Fatima Mernissi's *Beyond the Veil* recalls the French colonial postcard of the Algerian woman behind bars. The cover depicts three women looking into the distance from behind a prison-like barricade (the French colonial postcard was looking into the women's home through bars, Mernissi's is looking out of the women's home through bars, the difference is significant, that is, supposedly the point of view of the women). Mernissi's autobiography repeats the motif: the illustration accompanying most chapters are pictures of Moroccan women behind doors and fences.

Second, the veil can still stand as a metaphor for the entire Muslim world. Newspapers frequently use the image of a veiled woman to evoke terrorism or fundamentalism. The women's position is still used as the benchmark of the progress of an entire nation, with the Western

<sup>105</sup> De Groot, "Sex" and "Race", p.93; Said, *Orientalism*, p.26.

<sup>106</sup> *The Australian Magazine* (February 25-26, 1995), p.22. Maupassant quip: *La vie errante*, 1890, quoted in Mabro: *Veiled Half-Truths*, p.51.

model representing the pinnacle. Here is Peterson reporting on the status of women in the Gulf States in 1989:

The tendency toward neoconservatism among many women is clearly displayed in the return to the *hijab*, or traditional confining dress. This return to traditionalism occasionally produces an ironic effect, as when a liberal minister in the Kuwaiti government was introduced to a prospective female employee in his ministry and reached out to shake hands – she refused to touch him. The consequences of neoconservatism, however, are far more serious. The emergence of a modern role for women alongside men in the developing countries of the GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council] is in danger of being terminated prematurely. Women would not be the only ones to suffer in such a situation; the entire development of the states would be victimized as well.<sup>107</sup>

The entire development of the Gulf States is threatened by women covering and not shaking hands with men?

For the Muslim world, the dynamics initiated by colonialism continue. The élites still campaign against *ḥijāb* as if it were an anti-modern dress. (Popular Western discourse is unaware of their like-minded compatriots in the Muslim world who are as much against the veil as any Westerner can be.) In Tunisia in 1989, to clamp down on the Islamic revival, a law was passed banning government workers and school/university students from wearing *ḥijāb*. In arguments reminiscent of the colonial era, the law proclaims, “The wearing of the head covering seems to negate the spirit of the modern era and progressive advancement, and is in fact abnormal behaviour.” Included is a diagram drawn up by headmasters of high schools, depicting acceptable female dress.<sup>108</sup> In 1992, the Dean of a Kuwaiti School of Medicine banned women students from wearing *niqāb*, the face veil.<sup>109</sup> In Turkey a 1988 Constitutional Court decision reaffirmed the 1980 Dress Regulation that prohibits “all male government employees from wearing beards, moustaches, and baggy trousers, and females from wearing headscarves and veils.”<sup>110</sup> Muslim women are

<sup>107</sup> J. E. Peterson, ‘The Political Status of Women in the Arab Gulf States’, *Middle East Journal*, 43, 1 (Winter 1989), p.50.

<sup>108</sup> Shahed, ‘Under Attack in Tunisia’, p.1.

<sup>109</sup> Goodwin, *Price of Honor*, p.160.

<sup>110</sup> Abadan-Unat, ‘The Impact of Legal and Educational Reforms’, p.187.

still fighting for the right to cover at universities, and in 1998 the military junta “sacked military officers who did not divorce their wives who refused to give up the *hijāb*.”<sup>111</sup>

The veil-as-a-symbol-of-Muslim-woman’s-oppression discourse has its roots in a Eurocentric vision of the world that would have the West as superior and the non-West as inferior. The current Western concern that the veil oppresses women masks these disreputable origins and conceals a further irony. Today, many of us are outraged at the forcible covering of women in Iran or Afghanistan. Nobody likes to be forced to do something against his or her will, and liberalism’s concern to protect individuals from such impositions is laudable. However, this concern over individual choice and state law exists in an uneasy tension with the West’s Orientalist heritage. First, the concern masks the irony that it was in the interest of state control over women that the ‘veil is oppressive’ discourse was first launched.<sup>112</sup> I have spent this chapter trying to flesh out how and why colonial and native élites strove to persuade women to unveil: as a mark of progress; as a way to penetrate the harem; as a way to civilize; and as a way to ensure state control over the individuals of a nation. The colonial governments in particular were concerned to break down the Muslim patriarchal family, segregation, veiling, and any practice that stood in the way of them having control over their colonial subjects. Native political élites continued this practice, for indeed, it is the hallmark of modern political power. The campaign against the veil was not one initiated by women, unlike, as Ahmed points out, Western feminist campaigns against bloomers or bras.<sup>113</sup> Neither was the campaign against the veil initiated in the name of women’s choice. Rather, it was part of élite men’s (and then women’s) attempt to fashion a new modern state.<sup>114</sup> To veil or not to veil is an issue manipulated for state ends; women’s choice has little to do with it.

Second, it is far too easy for the concern over women to mutate into an attack on an entire religion and its adherents. The legitimate

<sup>111</sup> World News, *Islamic Horizons* [USA] (January/February, 1998), p.18.

<sup>112</sup> Deniz Kandiyoti, (ed.), *Women, Islam and the State* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press, 1991), p.8; Jayawardena: *Feminism and Nationalism*, chapter 3.

<sup>113</sup> Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, p.167.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p.165.

concern over Muslim women turns into an (Orientalist) assumption that Islam has degraded morals and customs, and that women should be saved from Islam's grip upon them, forcefully if necessary (that is, ban girls in *ḥijāb* from school). It is a short step from rightfully worrying about the fate of Afghan women, to Islam oppresses them, to the veil is a symbol of that, to not tolerating women in the West choosing to cover since they represent oppression. Indeed, this is the logic behind a case in Germany, in which a German woman of Afghan parents was refused a teaching job unless she removed her headscarf. Although the Principal of the School "has only good things to say about his former teaching assistant" [label for people who have finished studying and are preparing to be hired] being convinced of her "intergrity," the Baden-Württemberg Minister for Culture, Annette Schavan, was firm in her decision. According to *Der Spiegel*, Schavan

argues that a teacher with a scarf on her head at a public school cannot be adequately neutral in her position as an example for others. To this believing Catholic the scarf is not a symbol of religious persuasion. She claims that the wearing of a scarf is not a religious duty for a Muslim woman. More so this symbol is ambiguous, not like the Christian cross or the Jewish 'kippa'. Schavan points to the inner Islamic discussion according to which the scarf is also interpreted as a symbol of segregation and suppression.

*Der Spiegel* carried an interview with the teacher in question, and the interviewer (who remains unnamed) suggested to her that she should not wear *ḥijāb* because it was a symbol of intolerance: "But the strictness with which the mullahs of Iran or the Taliban in Afghanistan insist on adherence to the dress code can also be considered to be a sign of a lack of tolerance and oppression."<sup>115</sup> Thus public policy in the West continues to be informed by Orientalist views on *ḥijāb*.

<sup>115</sup> 'The Last Battle', *Der Spiegel* [Germany] (July 20, 1998). (Many thanks to Sonja Mann for e-mailing me the translation of this story while on holiday in Germany.)



# Perceptions and Experiences of Wearing *Hijāb* in Toronto

About three months after I started wearing *hijāb*, a 13-year-old girl in Montreal, Quebec, Canada, was sent home from school for refusing to remove her headscarf in class. In November another Montreal schoolgirl was told to transfer to a different school if she wanted to wear *hijāb*.<sup>1</sup> The incidents sparked a debate across Canada about the meaning of *hijāb* and its place in Canadian society. The controversy in Canada about the meaning of the headscarf was based on its being an ‘alien’ practice that Canadians had to decide whether or not they would accept as ‘authentic’. The Canadian Broadcasting Commission (CBC) aired an investigative report into the issue in 1995. At the end of the show, the CBC reporter asked the question: “Can the *hijāb* pass the litmus test of being Canadian?”<sup>2</sup> That the girls who were expelled were Canadian (born and bred) seemed irrelevant. The headscarf was still too new to be considered anything other than foreign.

Jeffery Simpson’s opinion piece in *The Globe and Mail*, which argued that Muslim women should have the right to wear *hijāb* if they so desired,<sup>3</sup> sparked an angry response from two women citing that *hijāb* was ‘clearly’ a sign of Muslim women’s oppression. Mona LeBlanc wrote:

... Simpson’s argument against opponents of the *hijab* is careless at best, dishonest at worst .... leaving aside the connection between the *hijāb* and women’s oppression, which is obvious but will, no doubt be picked up by other readers, I fail to see the [Sikh’s] turban and the

<sup>1</sup> The Quebec issue followed the expulsion of schoolgirls wearing *hijāb* in France in 1989. Naturally, there are connections between French and Quebec culture.

<sup>2</sup> Canadian Broadcast Commission, *Prime Time News*, July, 1995.

<sup>3</sup> Jeffery Simpson, ‘The Current Objections to Muslim Clothing are Simply Wrong-headed’, *Globe and Mail* (Toronto, Canada: December 28, 1994), p.A16.



[Mennonite's] bonnet as threats of holy wars against those who do not share their wearers' beliefs. And yet, there is such a link between the *ḥijāb* and jihad. Rest assured that neither I nor most other "wrong-headed objectors," I'm sure, believe for one minute that all *ḥijāb*-garbed females are gun-toting terrorists at heart. That is not the point. The point is the ill-advised and ill-timed use of a highly loaded symbol when many in the West are growing weary of the rise in fundamentalist Muslim violence.<sup>4</sup>

This is classic Orientalism:

- Jihad equals depraved Muslim violence (against innocent people because they are not Muslim).
- *Hijāb* is a symbol of Islam, hence the presence of *ḥijāb* implies that its wearer wishes to conduct jihad against non-Muslim Canadians.
- *Hijāb* is a symbol of women's oppression.

No one in his or her right mind would welcome such symbolic meanings into Canada. Many Muslims saw these kinds of negative responses to *ḥijāb* as just another example of Western racism.<sup>5</sup>

What was obscured in these popular debates was the voices of covered Muslim women themselves. The CBC reporter did interview one of the girls concerned, plus other Muslim women about covering, but covered Muslim women's voices are still not heard by many Canadians (or if they are heard, they are not well comprehended). This chapter attempts to fill that gap by presenting the voices of some Muslim Canadian women who cover. Asking the question "Can the *ḥijāb* pass the litmus test of being Canadian?" from the point of view of those who cover reveals very different responses than that of the frame-story of the CBC report.

If the voice of the Muslim woman in *ḥijāb* is little known in Western popular culture, the situation in the academic literature is more complex. The trend has seen the emergence of a voice that has been largely absent in the women and Islam field, but a voice that is still largely represented by a skeptical literature that questions

<sup>4</sup> LeBlanc, Letters to the Editor, *Globe and Mail* (Wednesday, January 4, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> See *Islamic Horizons* (USA: November/December 1994) and *The Message* (Canada: January 1995).

whether or not the act of covering represents acceptance of patriarchy.<sup>6</sup> Certainly there are few academic studies of Muslim women who cover and live in the West.<sup>7</sup> Naturally, any trend that gives Muslim women positive space is a good one, though much more needs to be done.

#### A. FEMINIST METHODOLOGY AND ḤIJĀB

Feminists know first hand the feeling of being misrepresented and excluded from mainstream discourse. They have spent much energy challenging academic representations about women, their 'nature', their role in society and the like. Feminists have done this because their experience, their feeling about themselves was not captured by 'mainstream' discourse. In the early days of (second-wave Western) feminism (1970s), women's experience was made the bedrock of knowledge. As Dorothy Smith wrote: "the remedy is to take women's experience into account so that the balance can be achieved and women's perspectives and experiences can be represented equally with men's."<sup>8</sup> The exclusion of Muslim women's voices from the prevalent discourse of the meaning of the veil as oppressive is of the same nature. It is necessary to rectify this by listening to the voices of women who cover willingly, to find out their motivations, perceptions and experiences. Again, Dorothy Smith: "It is only when as women we can treat one another, and ourselves, as those who count for one another that we

<sup>6</sup> Pat Mule and Diane Barthel, 'The Return to the Veil', *Sociological Forces*, 7, 2 (June 1992), pp.323-332; Hessini, 'Wearing the Hijab in Contemporary Morocco'; Macleod, *Accommodating Protest*.

<sup>7</sup> The papers by Watson and Reece are the only ones that I have found which look at covered Muslim women in the West. Helen Watson, 'Women and the Veil: Personal Responses to Global Process', in *Islam, Globalization and Postmodernity*, (eds.), Akbar S. Ahmed and Hastings Donnan (London: Routledge, 1994); Debra Reece, 'Covering and Communication: The Symbolism of Dress Among Muslim Women', *The Howard Journal of Communications*, 7 (1996), pp.35-52. Several unpublished theses examine women's experience with ḥijāb in Canada: Carmen G. Cayer, 'Hijab, Narrative, and the Production of Gender Among Second Generation, Indo-Pakistani, Muslim Women in Greater Toronto', unpublished Masters' thesis (Dept. of Social Anthropology, York University, UK: 1996); Kelly, 'Integrating Islam'; Shahnaz Khan, 'Muslim Woman: Interrogating the Construct in Canada', unpublished Ph.D. thesis (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Canada: 1995); and J. Zine, 'Muslim Students in Public Schools: Education and the Politics of Religious Identity', unpublished Masters' thesis (Dept. of Education, University of Toronto, Canada: 1997).

<sup>8</sup> Dorothy E. Smith, *The Every Day World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology* (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1987), p.62.

can break out of our silence – to make ourselves heard.”<sup>9</sup> In this chapter, I am presenting, as positively as possible, the voices and experiences of some Muslim women who have chosen to wear *ḥijāb* in a country in which they did not have to cover, and indeed often face difficulties if they choose to cover. I am using their experiences to contest the negative representation of themselves as oppressed.

Speaking of women in general, Stanley and Wise argue that:

... to say that women share ‘experiences of oppression’ is not to say that we share the same experiences. The social contexts within which different kinds of women live, work, struggle and make sense of their lives differ widely across the world and between different groupings of women. We argued that the experience of ‘women’ is ontologically fractured and complex because we do not all share one single and seamless material reality.<sup>10</sup>

When it comes to Muslim women, there may be a danger in accepting the notion that women’s experience is ‘ontologically fractured’: the danger of assuming an essentialized difference, the alien ‘Other’. Nevertheless, the general point can be claimed. Muslim women are not a homogeneous group. They do not experience wearing *ḥijāb* in the same way. Though Muslim women may share ‘Islam’, they come from a wide variety of class, race, and ethnic backgrounds. Muslim women wear *ḥijāb* for different reasons. They experience wearing *ḥijāb* differently. They have very different lifestyles, ambitions, and self-understandings. This applies both to Muslim women cross-nationally and also to Muslim women intranationally. The meaning of *ḥijāb* for a woman in Iran can be completely different than the meaning of *ḥijāb* for a woman in Toronto, Canada; the meaning of *ḥijāb* can be different for a woman from Tehran (the capital of Iran) and a woman from Qom (another city in Iran), as it can also be different for a woman in one apartment and her neighbor in another apartment. Of course, the meaning and experience of wearing *ḥijāb* for these women could be the same, or similar – the point is not to assume that just because they look similar, they are similar. Each woman needs to be treated as an individual case. The point here is to

<sup>9</sup> Smith, *The Every Day World*, p.35.

<sup>10</sup> L. Stanley and S. Wise, ‘Method, Methodology and Epistemology in Feminist Research Processes’, in Liz Stanley (ed.), *Feminist Praxis* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp.21–22.; also Smith, *The Every Day World*, p.108.

challenge and hopefully change, the idea that ḥijāb 'is' necessarily an oppression for Muslim women. That some women experience ḥijāb as oppressive is known, but the received wisdom about the veil (it is oppressive) fails to recognize the possibility that some women may not experience ḥijāb as oppressive (especially in popular culture, and books/newspaper articles written for the mainstream);<sup>11</sup> to emphasize 'fractured experience' is to emphasize perspective on ḥijāb.<sup>12</sup>

Dorothy Smith holds that "[a] feminist method of inquiry... [must] insist on preserving the subject as active and competent and as the knower of inquiry, the knower to whom our texts should speak,"<sup>13</sup> yet as so many feminists have shown, Third world, black, and Muslim women have precisely been denied such agency. Cast forever as 'the' victim, as 'the' submissive, oppressed Muslim woman, negative stereotyping has denied that Muslim women have agency, that they have autonomy, and even that they have any 'critical perspective'<sup>14</sup> on their own situation.<sup>15</sup> Any support for Islam and its prescriptions is frequently taken as an example of 'false consciousness'.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, the recent spate of women journalists' exposé books/articles on the 'truth' about the women 'behind the veil.' Geraldine Brooks, *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women* (New York: Doubleday, 1995); Jan Goodwin, *Price of Honor: Muslim Women Lift the Veil of Silence on the Islamic World* (New York: Plume, 1994); Deborah Scroggins, 'Women of the Veil: Islamic Militants Pushing Women Back to an Age of Official Servitude', *The Atlanta Journal/The Atlanta Constitution* (Sunday, June 28, 1992), pp. P1-12. I like Watson's comment about this: "The plethora of books about women behind, beyond or beneath the veil may give the impression that Muslim women's main activity and main contribution to society is being in a 'state of veil'" (*Women and the Veil*, p. 141).

<sup>12</sup> In studies of Egyptian women returning to ḥijāb concern for 'respectability' in the public space and the saving of money from not having to follow fashions are frequently cited. These were not the reasons given by the women whom I interviewed. See, El-Guindi, 'Veiling Infatih'; Homa Hoodfar, 'Return to the Veil: Personal Strategy and Public Participation in Egypt', in *Working Women: International Perspectives on Labour and Gender Relations*, (eds.), Nanette Redclift and M. Thea Sinclair (London: Routledge, 1991); Watson, *Women and the Veil*; John A. Williams, 'A Return to the Veil in Egypt', *Middle East Review*, 11, 3, (1979), pp. 49-59; Sherifa Zuhur, *Revealing Reveiling: Islamist Gender Ideology in Contemporary Egypt* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992).

<sup>13</sup> Smith, *The Every Day World*, p. 142.

<sup>14</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 'Introduction', in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, (eds.), C. Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 29.

<sup>15</sup> Williams is a rare exception. Puzzling over why they started to cover again after a period in which most of them wore Western dress, he writes: "Egyptian women, it has been shown, are no sheep. No one is likely to persuade them to exchange the cooler, more comfortable modern dresses for *zayy shar'i* (lawful [Islamic] dress) unless they wish to do so" ('A Return to the Veil', p. 53).

I hope to demonstrate that in choosing an Islamic identity, women are not imbibing the potent brew of an Islamic ‘monster’.<sup>16</sup> The interviews will show what women say about their own identity, their notion of self and the meanings they ascribe to their actions. The women will talk about what it is like wearing *ḥijāb* in Canada, and whether they feel contradictions between being ‘Canadian’ and being ‘Muslim’. Although there are problems in taking ‘experience’ at face value, the first task is to hear these women’s voices, and only then to interpret them.<sup>17</sup>

#### B. THE INTERVIEWS

Initially I had twenty-one women on my list to interview. After sixteen interviews, I realized that I had more data than I could present, so I stopped at number sixteen. The initial plan included interviews with Muslim women from different sects in Islam: Sunni, Shia, Ismaili, etc. The end result was interviews with fifteen Sunni women and one Ismaili. The interviews took place between May and July 1996. My interviewees lived in the greater Toronto area, Ontario, Canada. They were mostly women whom I had met through student groups, various Qur’anic study circles that I attended, and religious festivals. The women were, consciously or unconsciously, part of the Islamist movement in the sense that they did not follow a *madhhab*, nor practice Sufism, and most had something negative to say about the way traditional Islam had not given women all their Islamic rights. They all wore modern, not traditional, forms of *ḥijāb*. Some of them were active in the Toronto Muslim community, giving lectures, appearing on TV to discuss Islam, or working in various non-profit community organizations; some of them were active in attending the mosque regularly for study circles, prayer and children’s playgroups. Some of them worked outside the home and some of them did not. Of the sixteen, six were converts to Islam. Ten wore *ḥijāb* all the time (of which five were converts), and five wore *ḥijāb* sometimes. Only two of these women did not aspire to wearing *ḥijāb* full-time at some point in the future. Of the fifteen Sunni Muslims, only one did not perform

<sup>16</sup> Helié-Lucas, ‘The Preferential Symbol for Islamic Identity’, p.391. She goes as far as to compare ‘fundamentalists’ to the Nazis.

<sup>17</sup> Personal Narratives Group, *Interpreting Women’s Lives*, pp.261–262.

the five daily prayers, so the rest (including Noha, the Ismaili, who was active in her religious community) were what other people considered ‘religious’.<sup>18</sup> This made them part of a tiny minority amongst Muslims in North America who are active mosque participants (about 1–5 percent), according to scholars of Islam in North America.<sup>19</sup> This was a qualitative, not a quantitative study: I do not generalize from their views to ‘all Muslims’. My aim was simply to gain a thorough understanding of what a few Muslim women thought about *ḥijāb*.

The interview with each woman was conducted either on campus, or in the woman’s home. I had a list of open-ended questions (see Appendix Four) and the interviews were taped and transcribed. They lasted between 1.5 and 3 hours, and if I was in the woman’s home, I was usually invited to stay after the interview for lunch, or for tea and cake, depending on the time of day. If I was in the woman’s home, neither she nor I covered our hair, and as it was summertime, she would often be wearing short sleeves. If the interview fell near one of the prescribed times for Muslims to pray, we would also pray together after the interview had ended. In order to preserve the anonymity of my interviewees, I have given them pseudonyms.

### C. PERCEPTIONS OF *ḤIJĀB*

#### I. WHY *ḤIJĀB*?

Muslim women in *ḥijāb* are sometimes told by Canadians “This is Canada. You’re free here. You don’t have to wear that thing on your head.” Being the target of such comments can be amusing or upsetting, depending upon the style in which this information is delivered. My Tunisian friend, Wardia, received this kind of ‘reassurance’ one day from a white middle-aged woman in a public washroom. The woman was surprised and embarrassed when Wardia responded

<sup>18</sup> I say “other people” because most of the interviewees, even though they observed the five pillars of Islam, did not consider themselves “religious.” They felt they would have to pray more or read more of the Holy Qur’an to be truly religious.

<sup>19</sup> Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, ‘Arab Muslims and Islamic Institutions in America: Adaptation and Reform’, in *Arabs in the New World: Studies on Arab-American Communities*, (eds.), Sameer Y. Abraham and Nabeel Abraham (Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Centre for Urban Studies, 1983), p.75.

enthusiastically that she wore *hijāb* willingly for religious reasons, it was not a cultural obligation: “[I]n my country I get thrown in prison for wearing it [*sic*].”<sup>20</sup> In fact, Wardia had started wearing her headscarf five years after coming to Canada.

Nur, an undergraduate from South Asia,<sup>21</sup> on the other hand, had a more traumatic encounter in the library cafeteria one day, when she was approached by an older woman who demanded in a hostile manner why Nur was “bringing the backwardness to Canada.” The woman emphasized that they had “worked really hard in Canada for women’s rights,” and wearing the *hijāb* would “destroy all that.” Once Nur pointed out that she was not making a statement to attract attention or make herself “one of the easy targets for hate,” it was “more a religious thing,” the woman “seemed ... to calm down,” though “she was still not convinced,” presumably thinking that Nur should not wear *hijāb*, whatever the reason.

Both Wardia and Nur gave religious reasons when trying to explain to the non-Muslim Canadian women why they wore *hijāb* in Canada. All of my interviewees, even Fatima, who rarely covered and, unlike the other women who were not covering full-time, did not aspire to do so one day, thought that wearing *hijāb* was part of the religion. When I asked them what made them think it was part of the religion, they all replied along the lines of “it’s in the Qur’an,” “God commands it in the Qur’an,” and so on. Bassima, an English convert to Islam, also referred to the “hadiths that say when a woman reaches puberty you should see nothing but the face and hands.”

Nadia, a Canadian whose family originated from the Caribbean, started wearing *hijāb* at the age of 14, and found it to be a very natural step. She had been much influenced by some older girls at the mosque who wore *hijāb*, and had great respect for their modest dress and behavior. Nadia also felt very comfortable in wearing *hijāb*, believing that it was the “proper Islamic way to dress for women.” Although

<sup>20</sup> In 1989 the Tunisian government passed a law banning *hijāb* from schools/universities and workplaces. Omar Shahed, ‘Under Attack in Tunisia: Laws Restrict Islamic Practices’, *The Muslim Voice* [Campus newspaper, Uni. of Toronto, Canada] (December, 1994), p.1. Summary of Muhammad al-Hadi Mustapha Zamzami, *Tunis: Al-Islam al-Jarib* [Tunisia: Injured Islam.] (np.: 1994), pp.191–194. According to Wardia, veiled women are taken to the police station to sign a form agreeing not to wear the veil again.

<sup>21</sup> See Appendix One for brief biographies of the interviewees.

she now considered 14 to be a young age to start covering full-time, she did not regret it, because she thought that if she had not worn it then and had waited till she was older, she might never have started to cover full-time.

Nur had started wearing *ḥijāb* when she was 13. She said that it was not a very difficult step for her, because she had been brought up to practice Islam, and had been taught that *ḥijāb* was “part of the Islamic package.” She was encouraged to ask questions about her religion and to discuss issues. Wearing *ḥijāb* was something that she started to do gradually, that is, wearing it when she prayed, then to the mosque, and then full-time. Nur appeared very comfortable with *ḥijāb*, and that was probably because she “accepted *ḥijāb*” when she accepted the “Islamic package.” It meant that she agreed to “do certain things.” At the time, other women in her family did not wear it: for them *ḥijāb* symbolized “narrow-mindedness and backwardness.” However, her grandmother started wearing *ḥijāb* when she was 65, and her mother shortly before the interview.

Among the women who did not cover full-time, four believed that they should be covering full-time, and hoped to do so one day. Khadija, aged 50 and from the Middle-East, thought that it was her upbringing that was making it so hard for her to cover, although the intention to wear *ḥijāb* full-time remained continuously in her mind. She grew up in the Middle East during the last years of European occupation. During that time, the élite attempted to imitate the British and looked down on anything Islamic: “[T]he influence of the British was really strong there” and this was reflected even in the movies of the late thirties and early forties, in which “the actresses were wearing really revealing dresses.” Thus wearing fashionable Western dress emphasized one’s high social status, which meant that “*ḥijāb* was out of the question” because it did not “look European.”

*Hijāb* came to be seen as a low-class dress, and as a symbol of poverty, backwardness and ugliness. Khadija described the two classes of the time: “those élite ... what is compared to the ladies and lords of Britain ... who dress very elegantly and so on to the highest European fashion. The other group who would dress modestly and cover and so on, these are the poor people who worked for those. So that makes the difference, if you ... wear it [*ḥijāb*], you are from the other class.”



For Khadija *hijāb* symbolized “determination, strength, courage, dedication to your religion Islam.” But she was nervous of attracting attention in public when she put on *hijāb* to go to the mosque and had to wear it while walking across the street from her car to the building. She really thought that what was holding her back was her childhood memories of the class distinction attached to one’s dress. “We were brought up in [my country] to always look perfect, ... so suddenly looking totally different is very difficult, very difficult.” Nevertheless, Khadija always praised women who covered, and supported her two teenage daughters’ decision in 1994 to wear *hijāb* full-time.

Iman, Fatima’s daughter, and an undergraduate in her early twenties, covered when she prayed and attended Islamic events, and she believed that the Qur’an made covering a full-time obligation for believing Muslim women, and hoped to cover full-time some day. What was holding her back? Iman was worried that if she wore *hijāb*, people would not interact with her in as friendly a manner as they currently did. Her Muslim women friends told her stories about the comments that they received from people about their *hijāb*, and she thought that being continually stared at would be “unnerving.” Iman was feeling the pressure of assimilation and was worried that *hijāb* “sets you apart” as “different.” Also, she was worried about the political overtones associated with *hijāb* in the Western mind: “I’m not a political person, I don’t want people to think that my scarf, for example, is a political statement.” So Iman was being held back from wearing *hijāb* largely because of the possibility of hostile reactions from the broader Canadian society. Her concern over the political ramifications of *hijāb* was important, given the image that Westerners have of the *hijāb* as an anti-Western political statement (remember LeBlanc above?).

Only Fatima, in her late forties, and Noha, mid-twenties and of Asian/African heritage, were not covering, nor did they wish to cover some day. Fatima grew up in Central Asia, where Islam was derided as backward, and an attempt was made to ‘modernize’ the country along Western lines. Her experience was similar to that of Khadija’s country, where *hijāb* came to be seen as a symbol of poverty and backwardness. Fatima’s daughter Rania covered full-time (see below), and as we have seen, her other daughter, Iman, hoped to do so.

However, Fatima herself seemed to oscillate between two positions: she was a believing Muslim and felt sad that she did not practice Islam more fully; at the same time, she was still convinced by the arguments against *ḥijāb* and other Islamic practices of her upbringing. Although the people of her country had supported their President's aim to create a strong, modern nation, she had noticed that religion was being ignored, particularly in the towns and cities, where there was no longer any interest in wearing *ḥijāb*, although it was still worn by most people in the villages. However, there seemed to be a religious revival among the younger generation, which worried Fatima, for she thought that it might lead to criticism of the President, who had done so much to modernize the country. She emphasized that although they were modern, they still had their values.

Fatima asked her daughter about *ḥijāb*, and she also asked me why it was considered important for a woman to cover her hair. She said that she thought about covering sometimes, but would not unless she really believed that it was "so important," and seemed worried that covering was too difficult, especially if a woman wanted to work, and that she would encounter too much staring and questioning on the subway. Nor was Fatima persuaded by a typical Islamic argument, made frequently, that covering makes male–female interaction easier by removing physical attraction from the situation. When I asked her why she thought that Muslim women covered their hair, she replied that it was "part of religion," and that men found women's hair attractive. She had never been troubled by harassment from men because she had never given them any encouragement, but had always followed the high moral standards of her upbringing.

Fatima joked that in her country people would sometimes say that if your husband asked you to cover and you did not, then it was not his fault later on, for he had done his share: "You're going to answer to God as to why you didn't cover your hair." She said that her husband had never asked her to cover her hair, for he thought that it should be her decision. Nevertheless, she admired and praised women who covered for being "good Muslims ... I always have a very warm feeling about them," although it was a struggle for her when her daughter Rania decided to cover full-time (see below), even though her own mother and other women in the family covered.

As an Ismaili, Noha had a different understanding of the Qur'an and Sunnah. Noha said that in the 1940s the Imam gave Ismaili women permission not to cover if they did not wish to do so. Noha's views on *hijāb* were a mixture of Muslim views and typical Western views. She thought that *hijāb* probably used to be men's way of controlling women, but that these days she saw it to be more a "feminine thing ... expressing yourself." Noha had several Sunni and Shia friends who wore *hijāb*, and she understood it to be an obligation for them, as well as their expression of their Islamic identity in Canada. She said that she sometimes contemplated covering out of curiosity, but that in general she did not like to "stand out ... I like to blend into the woodwork."

Believing that one's religion requires a certain act, and actually doing it are two separate things. Some women, especially the converts, found it a struggle in the beginning to cover. Ellen, a black-Canadian convert, who started covering when she was 35, admitted that it was difficult for her to start wearing *hijāb* because her hair was a source of pride for her. She had grown up wearing a small scarf over her hair, like other women in her church, but her stumbling block as an adult was having the courage to wear it to work. After extensive research into all the available information on *hijāb*, Ellen finally decided that it was more important to obey God than to attempt to please the people. In the beginning she wore *hijāb* to the mosque and other public places without any difficulty. However, "the point of wearing it to work and having to work all day with *hijāb* on, I found that difficult."

Elizabeth, an Anglo-Canadian convert, had started wearing *hijāb* full-time when she was 25, but was so uncomfortable with the negative reactions of her workplace colleagues that she stopped wearing it two weeks later. When I asked her when and why she started to wear *hijāb*, she replied that she had wanted to wear it from the beginning and finally did so on returning to Toronto after a trip overseas. However, her fiancé, an Arab Muslim, disapproved of her converting to Islam and even more so of her wearing *hijāb*, so she could not wear it in his presence. Elizabeth had always felt different from other people, and found that Islam was "something that had completed [her]." She wanted to wear *hijāb* because she thought that it was "the right thing to do: I don't think there's a question about it."

Even though Raneem had seen *ḥijāb* as the solution to her problems at work, she found it rather difficult to wear at first because she still had some negative perceptions of Muslims and Arabs, and did not want others to associate her with Arabs or Muslims. Like many new converts, she also felt that she was an ‘ambassador’ for Islam, and was concerned to be on her best behavior all the time. At first Raneem wore *ḥijāb* only for the Friday prayer. She admitted that it took her six months to accept the idea of wearing *ḥijāb* without worrying too much about other people’s reactions, and another six months to remove the overwhelming feeling of guilt and responsibility of being a Muslim: “After that, it just went away. I cannot be perfect overnight ... I was feeling a little bit overwhelmed by that in the beginning.” Raneem’s fear of being mistaken as an Arab (though she later married an Arab) shows the extent to which racist stereotyping of Arabs in Western media can even affect those who become Muslim.

Halima had been married for several months before she converted to Islam. Before she started covering full-time, she had been covering part-time in “non-threatening situations” such as places where she would not know anyone, or when her husbands’ friends visited. She admitted that part of the reason why she first wore *ḥijāb* was to please her husband, who preferred it when his friends came to the house, and she did not mind doing so at home. However, there was no coercion on her husband’s part. They both believed that a Muslim should do an act only for the sake of God, not for the sake of a human being, so when her husband “always said don’t do for him, do it for Allah,” Halima understood that although he would like her to wear *ḥijāb*, he wanted her to do so only if and when she felt it was the right thing to do. Halima wore *ḥijāb* off and on, until she started to feel hypocritical, wearing *ḥijāb* sometimes and not wearing it at other times. It was in reflecting over being a hypocrite that she decided that since the Qur’an commanded women to cover full-time, she ought to do it: “[I]f you don’t obey, how much do [you] really know? ... if you really believe, then it should be your life, it shouldn’t be ... half your life or part of your life. ... I felt like a hypocrite and I didn’t want to be a hypocrite.”

Sometimes the struggle is not with oneself, but with one’s family members: those who do not wish a woman to cover. Safiyah had wanted to wear *ḥijāb* in Canada, but her husband had prevented her.

The struggle over *ḥijāb* was more his than hers. Safiyah was a North African woman in her mid-twenties and had been living in Canada since the early 1990s. Safiyah had started wearing *ḥijāb* in her country when she was 19, because she believed *ḥijāb* was one of the “rules in my religion.” Her mother and sisters covered, and they and her friends supported her decision. She married when she was 24, and six months later was in Canada and under pressure from her husband to stop wearing *ḥijāb*. Even though the women in his family covered, her husband did not like the headscarf: In his view, it was not logical, for all women were the same, so why should Safiyah cover? Since Safiyah believed that the Qur’an prescribed *ḥijāb*, I asked her how her husband responded to that argument? She told me that her husband did not understand much about Islam. She was trying to persuade her husband to be a more practicing Muslim, to pray, and observe other “rules” of the religion. Had Safiyah enjoyed wearing *ḥijāb*? When I interviewed her, it was two and a half years since she had stopped wearing it and she missed it immensely. Even though her husband had not seemed to mind her wearing *ḥijāb* back home, in Canada he was emphatic that she should not do so. When Safiyah arrived she did not feel strong enough to resist him because she was in a strange country far from home and family. Now she felt stronger and, although she had not put a time limit on it, Safiyah said that she had kept all her clothes and reminded her husband repeatedly that she would wear *ḥijāb* again and that he would come to believe in it.<sup>22</sup> Safiyah’s story is the inverse of the stereotypical view of men forcing their wives to cover.

For Rania, the struggle was with her mother Fatima, who, coming from a secular background as we have seen, was reluctant to see her daughter put on the *ḥijāb*. Her objections were that Rania, being a young unmarried woman about to enter medical school, would not be taken seriously in her profession by other people and that she was “not going to marry somebody who’s decent.”

Fatima’s objections to her daughter wearing *ḥijāb* obviously stemmed from her upbringing, as mentioned above, but they also stemmed

<sup>22</sup> In Ramadan 1997 (February), Safiyah put on *ḥijāb* again. Her husband did not speak to her for ten days inside the home, by which time she could not bear his silence any longer, so she took off the *ḥijāb* again.

from her love for her daughter and her desire that she should succeed in her career. When Rania first told her that she wanted to cover full-time, Fatima said that she was not happy, but at the same time thought that Rania probably was not too serious about it, and that since it was hard to cover in Canada, that Rania would change her mind.

Fatima and her husband were worried that a woman in *ḥijāb* could not be a leader in her field, nor in *ḥijāb* would she be able to ask questions, as they had the impression that in *ḥijāb* a woman was not supposed to talk confidently. Even though part of Fatima admired her daughter for being more religious than she was, she was worried that Rania would not be able to get married. All she could think was that *ḥijāb* was something which “village women,” not educated women did, and she was worried that a family who would accept a woman in *ḥijāb* would have to be less educated and that this would cause problems for her daughter, and that the husband’s family would make life hard for her daughter to work, and to live happily. She was also worried that people would wonder why, if her daughter covered, she was not covering herself. Although the issue caused some upset in the family, Rania was determined to go ahead and wear *ḥijāb*, so her mother felt that there was no option but to accept the situation: “this [is] her decision, she’s old enough.”

## 2. TRADITIONAL (I.E., MALE-BIASED) INTERPRETATION?

Women scholars who do not themselves cover have authored most of the studies on the re-veiling movement. Many of them cast aspersions on their interviewees’ assertions that the Qur’an mandates covering. From these scholars’ point of view, the Qur’an simply requires modest dress, not the kind of covering that the Islamists describe. Framing their studies in this way is a disservice to the women whom they have interviewed for their scholarly articles, for it implies that they are better able to interpret the Qur’an than their interviewees. A better way to approach the differences in interpretation is modeled by Karam’s study of Egyptian feminism. While she disagrees with the Islamist women’s interpretation that covering is mandated in the Qur’an, she feels a profound respect for their methodology: “It was a classic catch-22 situation: I was unable, as a Muslim woman

who grew up with Islamic convictions, to deny the legitimacy of their Islamic basis (that is, the Qur'an), whilst I could not accept the interpretations they used with their consequent social implications."<sup>23</sup> Karam points out that both those who cover and those who do not are convinced that the Other is deluded by false consciousness.<sup>24</sup>

The notion that women who choose to cover are suffering from false consciousness is very strong in the West. When I started to wear *hijāb* to university, one of my classmates told my friend, "Doesn't she know she is oppressed?" However, no woman can choose to cover these days, especially having grown up in the West, without being aware of all the debates both inside and outside the Muslim community surrounding the practice. Covering has a long tradition in the Muslim world. The current debates over it are relatively new, having been sparked by the colonial encounter with the West. It is common to find in a single family older women covering and younger women not. Living in Canada, it is not an easy matter to decide to wear *hijāb*, given the negative assessment of it by the broader community and the experiences of harassment and discrimination that generally come with it. The women whom I interviewed had not made the decision to cover – and to keep wearing it day after day – without some real thought about why they would wear it. Scholars of the re-veiling movement found that there were many different motivations for women to put on the *hijāb*, from political protest, to economic reasons, to piety (see Chapter Three). There are no easy generalizations. Macleod found that piety was not a major factor in her study, but Zuhur did so in hers.<sup>25</sup> Certainly in my study, religious reasons were a strong motivating factor for the decision to cover, or for the belief that a Muslim woman should be covering. This is not surprising, given that all of my interviewees, except Fatima, were praying regularly. My interviewees had considered various interpretations of the Qur'an, and chosen that which made most sense to them. They all believed that the Qur'anic verse asking women to cover their hair was straightforward. Nadia captures the women's position

<sup>23</sup> Karam, *Women, Islamisms and the State*, p.133.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p.139.

<sup>25</sup> See Chapter Three, note 40.

well: “I have to say that when I read the ayah that says take your head-dress and put it over your bosom [24:30–31], it’s pretty clear to me that there is an assumption that you’re wearing a head-dress, and that’s part of the Islamic dress.” The women also referred to several Prophetic statements about *ḥijāb* as being persuasive for them, particularly the one which states that when a woman reaches puberty she should cover everything but her face and hands.<sup>26</sup>

Even those who did not cover full-time, but wanted to, believed that the Qur’anic verse was clear. Khadija said that the reason why she thought about, and hoped one day to wear, *ḥijāb*, was: “I believe it is in the Qur’an, like the verse that says the head-cover should also cover the bosom, so obviously there is a head-cover.” She knew that some academics were trying to argue that the verse did not mention a head-cover. She argued: “It’s not right. I don’t believe so, and ... there is a hadith from the Prophet, when women reach maturity only the face and hands should show, so what does that mean? ... Even if I choose not to stress too much on hadith, I mean the Qur’an was clear. It’s one verse – every verse is [as] important as the others.”

Clearly, other women like Karam, Hessini, and Zuhur draw other conclusions from the same verses, but that is reasonable. Each one of us should be able to come to her own conclusion about the issue of *ḥijāb*. The essential is that each one of us is respected, and not derided as having chosen blindly, been brainwashed, deluded by false consciousness, and so on.

If the women believed that covering was mandated by the religion, did they see any disadvantages to covering, as the rest of Western society saw in *ḥijāb*? When asked about this, the women gave answers mentioning the way in which others react to them, “like you’re from outer space or something” (Sadia), the *ḥijāb* as a “stumbling block” in interactions (Rania), being hot in summer, the lack of opportunity to exercise, since Canada’s facilities are mixed-sex, and Muslim women cannot participate unless women-only hours are set aside for them, not being able to wear makeup (Elizabeth), and that it was hard to wear during a 12-hour shift at work (Nadia).

<sup>26</sup> See Appendix Two for the Qur’anic verses and hadith to which the women referred regarding women’s dress.



None of these disadvantages had altered the positive attitude that the women had to *ḥijāb*. They felt that the advantages of wearing *ḥijāb* outweighed any disadvantages and so made wearing *ḥijāb* acceptable in spite of the disadvantages. As my friend Huda put it when I mentioned this to her, “When I fast I get hungry, but that doesn’t stop me from fasting.” Raneem stated that she understood the problems that *ḥijāb* solved to the point where she believed that even if *ḥijāb* were just a cultural thing (that is, not mandated by the religion), “it’s a good thing to do.”

Three main advantages of wearing *ḥijāb* appeared as themes in my interviews: that *ḥijāb* improved male–female relations, was beneficial for society, and that it protected women.

### 3. THE ADVANTAGES OF ḤIJĀB

#### 3.1 *Male–Female Interactions*

Westerners are often puzzled to see Muslim women covering their bodies more than Muslim men do, and see that as a proof of the woman’s inferior status. Actually, traditional Islamic law lays down a dress code for both male and female believers, although the requirements for covering are different: a man is to cover from navel to knee, and wear opaque, loose clothing in this region (tight jeans are out of the question); women cover more, everything but face and hands.<sup>27</sup> All of the women whom I interviewed, except Fatima and Noha, believed that these differences were due to inherent differences between men and women. They subscribed to the notion that men are more easily aroused visually than women. Covering acts as a block to the male gaze. The point of covering is not that sexual attraction itself is bad, simply that it should be expressed only between a husband and wife inside the privacy of the home. A public space free of sexual tensions is seen as a more harmonious and peaceful place for human beings, men and women, to interact, do business, and build a healthy

<sup>27</sup> A minority believe that the face is to be covered, and some of them believe that the hands are also to be covered. See Abu Bilal Mustapha Al-Kanadi, *The Islamic Ruling Regarding Women’s Dress: According to the Qur’an and Sunnah* (Jeddah, Saudi Arabia: Abul-Qasim Publishing House, n.d.). Some of the women whom I interviewed thought that men should cover their hair as well, as a sign of religion and humility.

civilization. Hence, these women see *ḥijāb* as a benefit to society, as a protection for women, and as a source of inner peace.

Rania expressed this well: “I [would] feel much more comfortable if I knew that my husband was ... going to a workplace, where Muslim women were working that were covering. I feel much more comfortable about that than, you know, your average sort of workplace ... [I] feel that ... my husband’s not going to be distracted or tempted by some things.”

Rania started covering when she was 18, and said that she noticed a difference in the way men approached her afterwards: they were more respectful, and did not try to flirt with her, or make “leering” comments. Several women, especially the converts who started covering in their twenties, commented that in *ḥijāb* they felt men approached them more respectfully, and treated them as ‘persons’ instead of ‘sex-objects’, allowing them to concentrate on the task at hand, rather than being sidetracked by having to deal with male harassment.

Raneem had been working in the computer industry and was in her mid-twenties when she converted to Islam and started wearing *ḥijāb* full-time. Because she used to work almost exclusively with men, she found that she received a lot of unwanted attention from them, and had been searching for a solution. Raneem believed that she had come to the Islamic position on *ḥijāb* before she ever heard about Islam, and had already decided to wear long, conservative clothes to work, cut off her hair, and “look like a professional lady.” She was “quite surprised and happy” with the result: the attention that she now received was different, for it was as if the men were “talking to a person,” rather than to a sex object.

Although Nur saw the *ḥijāb* as a kind of “sexual harassment policy,” as God’s “helpful hint” for women, she understood the differences between male and female dress quite differently from most of the other women whom I interviewed:

All Muslim women are told to wear [*ḥijāb*], regardless of their beauty, so it’s not a function of beauty. ... In Muslim societies men also used to cover their hair. It was part of their humility and modesty, but it was not an ... obligation, ... they used to do it as a Sunnah, the practice of the Prophet, ... symbolizing that [they were] Muslim. ... if you are

female and accept the religion, you have to accept [*hijāb*] – it’s part of the package that it comes in.

Noha, the Ismaili, did not see that wearing *hijāb* was relevant to male–female interactions at all. She thought that a guy could “be turned on even wearing that thing [*hijāb*].” Nevertheless, she noticed the difference in the behavior of her men friends toward her and toward her friends who covered. They were markedly more reserved with the Sunni Muslim girls who wore *hijāb*, but more casual and open toward Noha.

Noha resented this differential treatment, but on behalf of her friends. She thought that the men were being unfair to be more reserved with her covered friends, who “are just as friendly as I am.” She sometimes found the men’s attention unwanted, but said, “all you have to do is say a couple of nice little remarks to them, they’ll leave you alone, mind you, they’ll think you’re a really nasty person after that, but they leave you alone after that.” I suggested to Noha that another way of looking at *hijāb* was to see it as the protection of women against such unwanted male attention. She replied that she did think about wearing *hijāb* for that reason, though she felt that male attention also depended on the way she approached them, and thought that if she was more reserved, they would treat her more respectfully, irrespective of her clothes. However, Noha considered it rather hypocritical of people to treat you more respectfully just because you wore long clothes. When she began to wear a long skirt instead of a short skirt to the mosque, her “reputation from being a slut to being a perfect girl, was like an overnight change!” Noha found this reaction extremely funny, for, as she pointed out, she was still the same person underneath.

### 3.2 *Hijāb is a Benefit for Society*

Muslim women are aware of the feminist assertion that women who cover to help men not feel distracted are accepting a patriarchal argument that masks the self-sacrifice of women for the sake of men. The women whom I interviewed, however, did not agree with this interpretation. For them, Muslim women and men were brothers and sisters in faith, and they found nothing wrong with the idea that

women could help men practice their faith better. They believed that society benefited by having sexual tension between men and women reduced in the public space. As Zainab said, “Women have been exploited so much, and men make such silly fools of themselves over women, that I really think it’s a good thing for the men that women wear *ḥijāb*. Why encourage jealousy or envy or anything like that? Why encourage the negative emotions?”

Rania argued that *ḥijāb* was a benefit for both men and women. *Ḥijāb* protected women from “unwanted” male attention, and *ḥijāb* helped husbands not be attracted to women other than their wives. “If we’re going to be a healthy, just society, then why aren’t we helping each other out? Why can’t I do something that makes it easier for the opposite sex?” she asked. She continued: “I think we need to be concerned about everybody in our society, and ... men may be attracted or tempted by physical features when they don’t want to be. ... So it’s more of a situation where we’re trying to help each other, rather than saying, ‘Oh, you know, they can’t control themselves.’”

Nadia agreed that *ḥijāb* benefited society by helping both women and men. She believed that *ḥijāb* protected women from male advances, and that it protected men from feeling “lust.” Nadia “downplayed” this aspect of *ḥijāb*, because “[although] we’re actually protecting our brothers [in faith]” by wearing *ḥijāb*, “Canadian society feels that we’re bearing the brunt of the responsibility in that way, and I think in a way we are, but I’ve integrated it to be part of what I [am] ... being Muslim, or practicing Islam, ... so it’s not a hardship on me. But I think that the feminist point of view that ... we’re being oppressed to save men ... is out there.”

She joked that when the *ḥijāb* was “bothering” her, she thought that men did not appreciate the sacrifice that she was making for them. However, Nadia would probably agree with Nur that ‘male lust’ was not the ultimate explanation for the wearing of *ḥijāb*, for she admitted that many young girls, including herself, did not consider themselves pretty and were therefore unlikely to attract male attention anyway.

Halima, who started wearing *ḥijāb* full-time when she was 23, argued: “*Ḥijāb* is more for men than for women,” and thought that society was healthier when sexual desires were controlled more strongly, rather than currently in Canada, where she thought that sex

was everywhere, on TV, in the mall, and so on. “In this society it’s harder for our husbands [than it is for us]. No matter where they look, they see women who are uncovered, so that’s ... a test [from God] for them.” In her view, if everyone were covered, it would be easier for men, who would not have to be constantly averting their eyes and exerting self-control. Zainab added that *hijāb* was also a benefit for society in that it made the display of wealth (that is, jewelry etc.) more difficult. She thought that it “eliminates negative feelings on other people’s part that may not be as well off as you are. It sort of makes everybody equal.”

### 3.3 *Hijāb Protects Women*

One theme which is evident from the quotations above is that most of the Muslim women whom I interviewed viewed *hijāb* as a form of protection – for society, for men, and for women. The idea that *hijāb* was a protection for women was stressed by almost all the women. Halima noticed a difference between the way non-Muslim men treated her before she converted and wore *hijāb*, and afterwards. They would apologize if they swore, and were more timid in approaching her. She also pointed out that male–female interactions were based on more than just the clothes. *Hijāb* is not just clothes, but a mode of decorous behavior as well, “when you’re covered, you’re not going to be a flirtatious person.” However, Halima believed that even though a woman in a miniskirt would attract more attention in the street than a woman in *hijāb*, *hijāb* was not “a protection against rape” because “rape isn’t about beauty, it’s about power.”

Yasmeen disagreed with the argument that a man would rape a woman even if she were covered. She really considered *hijāb* to be a protection for women, even against rape. Yasmeen argued that men who raped were “sick,” but the sight of an uncovered woman encouraged them and made it easy for them. She pointed out that in a society where the women covered, there were men who would hassle women and that was bad enough. However, a woman’s lack of *hijāb* could make matters far worse, depending upon the man’s state of mind.

Elizabeth thought that *hijāb* should protect a woman from sexual

harassment and rape, and referred to the Qur'anic verse which says that *ḥijāb* is to protect women from “being molested” (33:59). This verse made a lot of sense to her, because she had found that when she wore *ḥijāb*, “men don't look at you ... if they look at you it's a very quick glance and then away because they, if they're Muslim, they probably won't look anyway, and if they aren't, they just think ‘who is this woman?’ and they don't even bother looking at you!” Elizabeth thought that men did not have to cover as much as women, because even “if we [women] look at them [men] lustfully, or whatever, which we shouldn't do, we can't do any harm to them.”

Ellen emphasized the notion of protection in her understanding of *ḥijāb*: “[M]y dress is not complete without my head cover, my *ḥijāb*.” She no longer had to suffer whistles and catcalls in the street, unlike her non-Muslim friend who wore a miniskirt and makeup. For Ellen, *ḥijāb* was “a blessing” and she felt “really good about wearing [it].” When she thought about why she was wearing it, “it just becomes easy and natural, when you look at it, ... well, I'm doing this to please Allah.”

Sadia, 15, Yasmeen's daughter, had started wearing *ḥijāb* at Islamic school around the age of 11 or 12. She highlighted other things when she stressed that *ḥijāb* was a protection for her: “[It] protects you from everything that's bad outside” such as going to unsuitable movies or mixing with unacceptable people like drug-takers. Sadia clearly saw her *ḥijāb* as protecting her from the negative peer influences that exist in high school to become involved in drugs and sex, and had her view confirmed when, while attending an all-girls Islamic high school for one year, she noticed uncovered young girls with problems being brought to the school: “Their parents just bring them there to get fixed up or something. I see them wearing all these nice clothes.” However, she also saw them talking to boys, so “they're not really that strong.” One 15-year-old girl “came to the school after having an abortion, so her Mum found out and she sent her there, maybe she'll learn a couple of things.” Sadia doubted it, though, because “she brags about” her abortion.

So, the women in my sample firmly believed *ḥijāb* to be a benefit for society. They believed that it ‘cleaned up’ male–female interaction because men harassed them less; that they felt treated as persons, not

‘sex objects’; and that negative feelings of envy and jealousy would be lessened in a society in which the women covered, for they would not feel jealous because of their husbands looking at, or desiring other women, nor feel jealous about one another’s wealth and ‘designer clothes’. They also believed that *hijāb* helped men be more peaceful because they were not always being tempted by other women.

#### 4. EQUALITY?

Many feminists argue that to believe in male–female differences is to accede to women’s oppression, because it is these differences that have been used to stop women from realizing their potential. The Muslim women whom I interviewed did not agree that believing in male–female difference was to believe that women and men were unequal; they were all convinced that women and men were equal in Islam. For these women, the principal definition of equality was how human beings stood in relation to God. They argued that in Islam, everyone was considered equal in the eyes of God, and what differentiated people was their piety. The Qur’an unequivocally states that men and women are equal in the eyes of God. Men and women were created from a single soul, and are both the trustees of God on earth (2:30), individually responsible and accountable for their actions. The interviewees referred to verses like the following to support their point:

For Muslim men and women – for believing men and women, for devout men and women, for true men and women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who humble themselves, for men and women who give in charity, for men and women who fast (and deny themselves), for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage much in God’s praise – for them has God prepared forgiveness and great reward. (33:35)

My interviewees held that no distinction was made between male and female for all of the most important matters of Islamic faith: a woman must make the *shahādah* (the Muslim statement of faith: “I testify that there is no God but God, and Muhammad is His Messenger”); perform the five daily prayers; pay the zakah (annual poor due, calculated at 2.5 percent of assets); make the pilgrimage to

Makkah once in her lifetime if she can afford it; and fast the month of Ramadan. Similarly, no distinction is made between male and female in matters of divine reward and punishment: “If any do deeds of righteousness – be they male or female – and have faith, they will enter Heaven and not the least injustice will be done to them” (4:124). This is the understanding of equality that the women had, and they found such verses very reassuring. As Yasmeen said, this fact made her feel “comfortable” because she felt that God was not preferring one over the other: “Like brother and sister, they treat each other with respect.”

The women concluded that men and women in Islam were equal but different; that they had different natures and complementary roles on earth. They thought that women were more nurturing than men, and hence better suited to care for children. They believed that because of the woman’s childbearing role, it was men’s responsibility to provide for the household. They did not believe that male/female differences included notions of men being more rational or intelligent than women. Nor that a woman’s childbearing nature meant she could not be in the workforce, nor that a man’s duty to support his family financially meant that he should not do household chores. The women referred to the Sunnah of the Prophet, who used to mend his clothes, sweep his house, and perform other chores.<sup>28</sup> The husbands of the married women amongst my interviewees (nine), in varying degrees, cooked, cleaned the house, did the laundry and minded the children. (Four married women worked outside the home, two were homeschooling, one was a freelance writer.) This view that men and women have inherent differences is a source of the conflicting understanding of women’s position in Islam between those who hold that Islam subjugates women and my respondents. These women argued that equality did not have to mean sameness, and criticized liberal presumptions that if men and women were not doing something in an identical manner, then they must be unequal.

Of course, what I have just outlined is these women’s theoretical ideal of the equal relationship between men and women in Islam. Clearly not all Muslims subscribe to the same views of equality.

<sup>28</sup> Three of the four schools of Sunni Islamic jurisprudence consider that housework is not part of a wife’s marital obligations: Hammuda Abdalati, *The Family Structure in Islam* (Plainfield, Ind.: American Trust Publications, 1979).



My interviewees considered these people to be misguided in their understanding of Islam. Many women pointed out that while women and men were equal in Islam in theory, it was not always like that in practice. Safiyah, talking about her country, highlighted the discrepancy between what the Qur'an taught and what Muslims did, emphasizing that it depended on how people were raised. In her country, "they prefer boys than girls, and when we have boys, there is a big ceremony." However, when a baby girl is born, no one even wants to mention it. Fortunately, this was changing as girls were now receiving the same education as boys, and the younger generation were "challenging these old ideas."

Yasmeen agreed, and believed that the "calamity of Islam these days, is that people often take their interpretation of Islam from the 'mouths' of Muslims, not from the 'source', the Qur'an." She said, "Even the act of Muslims it doesn't explain Islam, because unfortunately in many ways, they act very bad, they act against Islam, and they say this is Islam." She pointed out that when Muslims followed the Islamic law, women would be treated justly, but "if they put ... their desire or tradition [onto Islamic law], it will not be fair. ... if they change what God [said] or they interpret [it] in a wrong way, so maybe it will hurt women." Here Yasmeen referred to her recent surprising discovery that in her country's history women had once been denied access to university. She had not known that the generation prior to her mother's had been prevented from attending university: "[T]hey are claiming they are Muslim and they are against Islam ... [Islam says women] should be educated as men, ... and even ... the Prophet's hadith ... to men: "treat your daughters equally as boys." Because women were being treated differently, Yasmeen continued, the Prophet promised "a good hereafter" to the man who treated one, two, or three daughters equally to the son. Her final thought on the issue was: "I don't know, maybe this was [the] nature of the people to be against women."

##### 5. FREEDOM?

The women's views about male-female relations and society strike many observers as views that accept the patriarchal version of male-female relations and women's place in society. Mule and Barthel

consider the decision to cover as one that does offer women “a practical solution to the problem of men’s harassment. It allows them to cross gender boundaries without being penalized as intruders.” Nevertheless, Mule and Barthel follow Mernissi’s view of what *ḥijāb* means in a Muslim society: that women are seen as powerful because of their sexuality, “a sexuality which is seen as irresistible and disruptive. As a source of corruption and a jeopardy to the social order, women’s sexuality must be held in check, and women confined in a separate sphere, excluded from the world of men.”<sup>29</sup> In Mernissi’s own words: “[The veil] can be interpreted as a symbol revealing a collective fantasy of the Muslim community: to make women disappear, to eliminate them from communal life, to relegate them to an easily controllable terrain, the home, to prevent them from moving about, and to highlight their illegal position on male territory by means of a mask.”<sup>30</sup> The issue is one of Islam’s respect for women and women’s freedom.

We have seen in Section 3 above that when asked to explain why they cover, many of the women referred to removing women’s sexual attractions from the public sphere – in this they may concur with Mernissi’s interpretation of *ḥijāb* as a device to cloak/hide/mask women’s sexuality in the public sphere. However, they strongly disagreed with the rest of Mernissi’s conclusions about the implications of the covering up. They did not believe that *ḥijāb* was a sign of women’s “illegal position on male territory,” nor a device to “keep them from moving about” outside the home. For the women I interviewed, *ḥijāb* was seen as a device to facilitate Muslim women’s movements outside the home. Nadia expressed the sentiment well when she pointed out that if one were covered “Islamically,” then there was no reason to stay home because the attractive aspects of one’s body and the attention that they might draw to oneself had been removed. Therefore, one was free to go out and make a contribution to society, based on one’s abilities, not on one’s looks.

Yasmeen, who had worn *niqāb* in Canada for six months, agreed

<sup>29</sup> Mule and Barthel, ‘The Return to the Veil’, p. 328.

<sup>30</sup> Fatima Mernissi, ‘Virginity and Patriarchy’, in *Women and Islam*, (ed.), Aziza Al-Hibri (Oxford, UK: Pergamon Press, 1982), p. 189. “Mask” here must refer to *niqāb* or “veil” – the piece of cloth used to cover a woman’s face – for it is hard to imagine that a headscarf leaving the face exposed can be viewed as a mask.

with Nadia that “*ḥijāb* is for the opposite, for going outside, because while you are home, you are free to be ... dressed as you like, but for going outside you have to wear *ḥijāb*, so *ḥijāb* [is] for outside, not for inside, so it’s a way for women to interact with society.”

Not only did the women disagree with the interpretation of *ḥijāb* as a symbol of women being forbidden from going outside, they were impatient or angry with those, like Mernissi, who argued in this way. Zainab emphasized that neither the Qur’an nor the Hadith restricted women’s outings: “I think that is ... ridiculous. ... a question like that to me<sup>31</sup> doesn’t make any sense and it is senseless comment and commentary and questions that really sometimes test my patience. Why [should] *ḥijāb* ... restrict [the] freedom of a woman?”

My interviewees knew that there were Muslim interpreters of the Qur’an and Sunnah who argued that Muslim women should not leave the home unless absolutely necessary, authors that confirmed (happily) Mernissi’s interpretation of Islam’s view of women and society.<sup>32</sup> However, my interviewees believed that these Muslim authors were wrong about women’s role, and were annoyed when feminist scholars like Mernissi took one scholar’s (bad) point of view on Islam, rather than looking at other scholars’ points of view (who offered positive arguments about women.) Iman said that she felt “very angry when she [heard] that [views like Mernissi’s].” Iman concluded that Mernissi must be basing her argument on Muslim authors and cultural interpretations of Islam that do argue that women should not be outside much. She referred to Mawdūdī, in particular: “Mawdūdī says this, I mean this is his opinion as a scholar, ... it should not be considered on the same plane as what the Qur’an tells us, and the Qur’an does not allude to this. ... I really resent what [Mawdūdī has] done, and what he said ... because ... he’s stopping women’s potential.” Iman further highlighted the danger that “a man who wants his wife to be very subservient will take this and ... make sure she believes it.”

The women argued that the idea that *ḥijāb* meant that women

<sup>31</sup> Interview question no. 36. See Appendix Four.

<sup>32</sup> For example, Abul A‘lā Mawdūdī, *Purdah and the Status of Women in Islam* (Lahore: Islamic Publications, 1972); Maryam Jameelah, *Islam and the Muslim Woman Today* (Lahore: Mohammad Yusuf Khan, 1978).

should not go outside was contradicted by the Sunnah: during his lifetime women played an active part in the community, in business, in fighting wars, in scholarship, and so on. In this my interviewees' views on *ḥijāb* are a challenge to both feminist interpretations that *ḥijāb* is a symbol of subjugation, and some Islamic interpretations that severely restrict women to the home.

My interviewees did not consider the *ḥijāb* a restriction on their freedom, though they were frequently ambivalent about whether or not they felt less free than their non-Muslim Canadian women friends. There was a surprising range of answers, depending upon the definition of freedom being considered. When freedom was conceived of as freedom of thought, or freedom 'from' things, or freedom of movement, many women felt they were as free as, if not freer than non-Muslim Canadians. Nevertheless, a few women, when they conceived freedom in terms of physical mobility, felt that they were in fact less free than non-Muslim women. Feeling less free, however, was not seen as a result of wearing *ḥijāb*, but as the result of other factors pertinent to the mixed-sex nature of life in Canada.

Nadia was ambivalent about freedom, depending on how it was defined. *Hijāb* did impose limits on outdoor sports activities like swimming. However, it also prevented entry into un-Islamic places and occupations, and Nadia agreed that this could be defined as a "restricted freedom", although in another sense she was "gaining" because, as a Muslim, she "would prefer to be rejected [by Canadians than do those things]."

Halima argued that while Muslims were "less free" in one sense than non-Muslim Canadians (who were "free to do anything"), Islam itself was freedom. She pointed out that because Muslims believed that they were accountable to Allah, they were restricted in what they did. Therefore, because this made Muslims guard their behavior more, Islam made them live within healthy limits, and thus society was better off, and people were freer. Yet Halima was also ambivalent about freedom because she thought that living in Canada as a Muslim woman sometimes "feels oppressive." However, she did not think that was 'Islam', rather a misfit between Muslim women's needs and the structure of Canadian society.

Halima was expressing a finding of other scholars' studies of

Muslim women living in the West. Western assumptions are that to live in the West is “by definition liberating or at least less oppressive for females than developing or Third world countries.”<sup>33</sup> Yet sometimes women’s lives are more restricted here than they would be in their home country. If the parents/husband believe that the West’s values/practices are too ‘loose’, they/he can become overprotective of the women in the family. Professor Suad Joseph learnt that when she visited the Lebanon, she had been raised “according to the standards of female modesty in Lebanon at the time [my parents] had left it in 1949 ... Many of my cousins had had a more liberal upbringing in Lebanon than I had had in the U.S.”<sup>34</sup> Carmen Cayer’s Master’s thesis studying second-generation Indo-Pakistani Muslim women living in greater Toronto, found that the parents’ fear that the daughter might marry a non-Indo-Pakistani Muslim or a non-Muslim led to stricter controls on her movements, plus a propensity to arranged marriages.<sup>35</sup> A more innocuous, but not insignificant, example that a few women mentioned was the lack of opportunity to exercise, since Canada’s facilities are mixed-sex, and Muslim women cannot participate unless women-only hours are set aside for them.

Clara Connolly, on behalf of a group called Women Against Fundamentalism, argues that at the “heart of the fundamentalist agenda is the control of women’s minds and bodies.”<sup>36</sup> *Hijāb* is indicated as the way in which men control women’s sexuality. In fact the WAF critique echoes many feminist critiques of Islam and is partially true. Islam does control a woman’s sexuality, in that Islam condemns sex outside marriage. However, the women whom I interviewed rejected the negative connotation of the feminist critique. After all, as some women pointed out, Islam controls men’s sexuality as well: they are

<sup>33</sup> Louise Cainkar, ‘Palestinian-American Muslim Women: Living on the Margins of Two Worlds’, in *Muslim Families in North America*, (eds.), Earle H. Waugh, Sharon McIrvin Abu-Laban, and Regula Burckhardt Qureshi (Edmonton, Alta., Canada: University of Alberta Press, 1991), p.291.

<sup>34</sup> Suad Joseph, ‘Feminization, Familism, Self, and Politics: Research as a *Mughtaribi*’, in *Arab Women in the Field: Studying Your Own Society*, (eds.), Soraya Altorki and Camillia El-Sohl (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1988), p.36.

<sup>35</sup> Cayer, *Hijab*, pp.48 and 85. The young women were resisting such parental attempts at arranged marriage. One strategy was to adopt *hijāb*, since Islamic law gives women the right to say no to a suitor.

<sup>36</sup> Clara Connolly, ‘Washing Our Linen: One Year of Women Against Fundamentalism’, *Feminist Review*, no.37 (Spring 1991), p.72.

not to have sexual intercourse outside marriage either. Moreover, several women argued that the order to cover comes from God in the Qur'an, so it is not from men, and thus is an unbiased, non-sexist command. Sadia said, "If they knew it was from God, they wouldn't say that, I guess." Yasmeen expanded on this idea by pointing out that God created men and women and, being fully aware of human nature, knew what was best for humankind so as to develop a "good society" to match the perfection of the rest of His creation.

As with the question about *ḥijāb* making women unfree, Zainab was impatient with the idea that *ḥijāb* was men's way of controlling women: "I think that is so ridiculous it doesn't even deserve an answer." She said that farm women had been wearing scarves to protect their hair for years. "I'm really lost for words because how does a kerchief first of all control you for one thing? You can still do whatever you want to do whether you've got a kerchief on your head or not." Zainab thought that the chastity belt was a more appropriate example of control of women's sexuality: "now that is what I call control, you know, but a piece of cloth? No, I don't call it control."

Several women did believe that in Muslim countries, and in Muslim history, some men had tried to control women, and that they used *ḥijāb* as a tool for doing that. However, the women did not believe that such behavior was appropriate for a Muslim man, and believed that it was a negative cultural interpretation of Islam, or male use of religion as an excuse for oppressing women. Nur, who had lived in Saudi Arabia for nine years, thought that Saudi Arabia was "a prime example" of a country, among many others, which used religion incorrectly, in particular *ḥijāb*, to suppress women by keeping them indoors, silencing their voices, and, in the past denying them an education. "Though it was never meant [because] if you read the sources of the Qur'an and the Hadith, or ... the different accounts of the Prophet's time, you would see that 'Ā'ishah [the Prophet's wife] did go out. Women were ... very dynamic, very active in society."

Rania believed that Iran was another country where Islam was being misused religiously. She felt that there, *ḥijāb* could symbolize oppression because it was imposed on women by a political system. She pointed out that "in the Qur'an it says there's no force in Islam, I mean, people have to do things from their own will." Rania felt

sorry for Iranian women because they were “getting the wrong idea of Islam.”

Safiyah was very angry with the way Muslims in her country were behaving in their attempts to fight the government and implement ‘Islam’. She thought that they were doing things the “wrong way” by using violence. “Islam is not [imposed] by force, ... you have to believe in it. If you don’t believe in it, you can’t love it, or you can’t follow it. They push people to hate Islam, ... they are killing, they are raping, ... if they are really Muslims, they don’t have to do this, it’s against the religion ... they [have] even killed children. ... I don’t think they are Muslims ... I don’t know what they are.”

#### 6. SOCIALIZATION OR COMPULSION?

When Canadians tell Muslim women they are “free” here and should take off their headscarves, they are expressing the conventional wisdom that the ‘veil’ is oppressive because it is imposed. Even when it is understood that the women are covering not because of a state-imposed law, the assumption remains that the women have been brainwashed by their families/culture into believing in *ḥijāb*, and that they have not had the mental wherewithal to question their customs. One woman who told this to a friend of mine was quite shocked to learn that my friend had converted to Islam in her twenties, and had not started covering until she was 33. The point is that everyone grows up in a particular culture that attempts to socialize its citizens into acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Many Muslims try to socialize their children to believe that wearing *ḥijāb* is a good thing. Many of those who do not agree that *ḥijāb* is a good thing seem to conclude that women are being brainwashed to believe in covering. However, even if one does not agree with the Muslim interpretation of *ḥijāb*, socialization that *ḥijāb* is a good thing is not the same as compulsion. After all, most Westerners are themselves socialized to consider *ḥijāb* oppressive. As Nadia,<sup>37</sup> a woman whom Helen Watson interviewed,

<sup>37</sup> Nadia was the eldest daughter of a second-generation British-Asian family. She was studying medicine at university and is the first woman in her family to have an education beyond high school level. She had started wearing *ḥijāb* when she was 16. Watson, ‘Women and the Veil’, p.148.

said: “[Wearing *ḥijāb* is] not so very different from deciding to wear a bra at a certain age or a wedding ring to show that you are married. Most girls I know wouldn’t question either of those things.”

### 6.1 *Negative Muslim Reactions to Ḥijāb*

In fact, while the general perception in the West is that Muslim women are forced to cover by their families, usually the father or husband, many Muslim families, particularly middle- and upper-class families, are as opposed to *ḥijāb* as are Westerners. For the last hundred-odd years, the trend in many Muslim countries has been to secularize along Western lines. Secularization implied that many Islamic practices were remnants of a pre-modern, even backward, way of life, and *ḥijāb* was shed by many committed to ‘progress’ (see Chapter One). Muslims who grow up in Canada often object to *ḥijāb*, taking on the Western perception of the meaning of *ḥijāb*: a second-generation Muslim woman complained to Abu-Laban, “I hate it when I see those scarves. They make people look so ignorant.”<sup>38</sup>

Muslim objections to *ḥijāb* now revolve around issues of class, marriage, and beauty. As we saw in the interviews with Khadija and Fatima, Muslim élites, who tend to be more Westernized and secularized than their fellow country-people, can view *ḥijāb* as a sign of backwardness and low-class status.<sup>39</sup> Elizabeth discovered this attitude from her fiancé’s objections to her desire to wear *ḥijāb*. For him and his family, *ḥijāb* was worn by the lower classes or old women, not young women in their prime. In addition, they viewed *ḥijāb* as

<sup>38</sup> Sharon McIrvin Abu-Laban, ‘Family and Religion Among Muslim Immigrants and the Descendants’, in *Muslim Families in North America*, (eds.), Earle H. Waugh, Sharon McIrvin Abu-Laban, and Regula Burckhardt Qureshi (Edmonton, Alta., Canada: University of Alberta Press, 1991), p.28. She is second generation, wave 2. See also Barazangi for similar views from first and second wave immigrants: Nimat Hafez Barazangi, ‘Arab Muslim Identity Transmission: Parents and Youth’, in *Arab Americans: Continuity and Change*, (eds.), Baha Abu-Laban and Michael W. Suleiman (Massachusetts: The Association of Arab-American University Graduates, 1989), and ‘Parents and Youth: Perceiving and Practising Islam in North America’, in *Muslim Families in North America*, (eds.), Waugh, Abu-Laban, and Qureshi (Edmonton, Alta., Canada: University of Alberta Press, 1991).

<sup>39</sup> A Pakistani woman explained to Cayer that many Pakistanis cannot shake off the association of *ḥijāb* with backwardness, which is why it is difficult for upper- and middle-class families when a woman starts covering. This woman’s husband was not pleased when she started wearing *ḥijāb* in Canada after migrating here from Pakistan. Cayer, *Hijab*, p.100.



unattractive.<sup>40</sup> Yasmeen remembered that when she was a teenager in her country, wearing *hijāb* was not very common. She recalled that a 12 or 13-year-old girl was punished daily in school by the principal for wearing *hijāb*. When the girl was asked why she was wearing it, she replied that the sheikh teaching the class at the mosque told them that it was in the Qur'an and therefore obligatory. Yasmeen thinks "later she took it off."

Marriageability and beauty are the second set of reasons why Muslim families dislike *hijāb*. Many Muslims believe that Muslim women who cover are unattractive, and being so, will not be able to get married.<sup>41</sup> Yasmeen remembers her struggle to wear *hijāb* back home. She started to cover when she attended university, when she was almost 17. As mentioned above, at that time in her country *hijāb* was not very common. Yasmeen wanted to wear *hijāb* because she felt that her religion required it, that the university was an environment where there was much sexual innuendo and flirting, and that the *hijāb* would be a protection for her. Her family was completely against it and she was the target of numerous lectures from all her relatives. "They couldn't understand, so in fact ... I forget about it for one year." However, when Yasmeen went to university, she noticed male/female behavior she found unacceptable. She became friends with other practicing Muslims, who gave her the support to go against the wishes of her family. This time, she said, "my family couldn't ... resist."

Nadia's mother also was unhappy with her daughter's decision to wear *hijāb* for the same reasons as Yasmeen's and Rania's families: that she would not be able to get married. However, Nadia was not subjected to the same level of pressure and criticism as Yasmeen and Rania. In fact, Nadia's mother started to wear *hijāb* six months after Nadia did so. In her early twenties, Nadia had formed a relationship with a man introduced to her by her family. However, he objected to her wearing *hijāb* and, Nadia said, "I came to terms with the fact that

<sup>40</sup> Now Elizabeth was adamant that her husband should be someone who would not be "embarrassed" if his wife covered, but instead supportive. She wanted him to think that wearing *hijāb* was a "good thing," and be "really happy and ... proud ... I want him to say, you know, that's my wife and good for her, and especially if it is in this culture, you know, there she is, and I'm happy that she wears it."

<sup>41</sup> Some of Cayer's interviewees said that that was the reason why they did not cover, *Hijab*, p.106.

he wasn't really into this and so that relationship broke off." Nadia remembered that at the time her mother was asking her to consider him as a future husband and therefore to think carefully about continuing to wear *ḥijāb*.

We have seen that Muslim women want to cover their hair, and choose to do so. The image of the Muslim woman in the West, though, is usually the image of the woman with her face covered. Perhaps people can be persuaded that women who cover their heads are not brainwashed, but what about those who cover their faces?<sup>42</sup> Even in that situation there are some Muslim women who want to cover their faces, and who do so. Yasmeen decided that she wanted to cover her face after she got married, because even though she was covering her hair, she felt that when she was in the crowded streets and public transportation system, people were continually staring at her face, "like they eat my face." She did not like that and decided to cover her face so that no one could do that any more. Her husband was not keen for her to start covering her face because they were coming to Canada. He said to wait and decide after arriving in Canada. "I said 'No, I want to cover my face,' and he said 'OK.'" So I covered and I came here while covering my face." Yasmeen said that Canadians were shocked by the way she was dressed, they stared, and sometimes said nasty things to her. Her husband was very uncomfortable to be seen with her in public. Yasmeen decided that it was not necessary to cover her face in Canada because people were not staring at her face in the same way as back home. She was also worried that she was giving Canadians a bad impression of Islam, so she took her *niqāb* off about six months after they arrived.

## 6.2 *The Reactions of Converts' Families*

Because Islam is not well understood in the West, some converts have serious difficulties with their families, friends, and colleagues about becoming Muslim and about wearing *ḥijāb*. Raneem admitted, "My

<sup>42</sup> See for instance, Lemon, who argues she can accept the headscarf in Canada, but draws the line at accepting the *niqāb*. She argues that women in *niqāb* ought not to be allowed to "promenade in this country as slaves ... It is an affront to the rest of us; to human dignity and self-respect." M. Lemon, 'Understanding Does Not Always Lead to Tolerance', Facts and Arguments, *Globe and Mail*, Tuesday, January 31, 1995.

brother didn't speak to me for about six months. My mother was very, very stressed." Raneem's mother was worried lest the neighbors regarded her as "a bad mother because she didn't succeed in keeping [her daughter] in the Catholic religion." Raneem's father pretended that it didn't "bother him," though he would make silly comments about clothes and refuse to be seen in public with his daughter in *hijāb*.<sup>43</sup>

Later Raneem's mother felt slightly better about her daughter's conversion. She had had a conversation with a priest on a bus trip one day. On asking him if Islam was a good thing, he replied, "Yeah, yeah, we work with them, the only thing is that they don't believe in the Cross." Apparently this helped her mother be more accepting.

Bassima reported two kinds of family reactions: "those who said, 'You look like a bloody foreigner', ... 'Think what you like, but why do you have to dress this way?' ... [whereas] my brother actually thought it was quite cool to walk down the street with me wearing a scarf and shalwar kameez, cause it was so freaky that all his friends'd say, 'Hey, what's that?'"

Zainab's family seems to have taken her conversion in its stride, although her son and daughter accepted her conversion better than her mother, who was unhappy about all organized religions. Her daughter told her, "Just don't preach to me, you've always been sort of weird, so why should you be different in your old age?" Zainab said that her 6-year-old grandson was very proud of his grandmother. She was teaching him and his sister about Islam, and described how he had completely baffled his schoolteacher in class one day when, on being asked to do something for the next day, he replied, "OK, *inshā' Allāh* [God willing]."

### 6.3 Positive Muslim Family Reactions to *Hijāb*

Because the image in the West that families force their women to wear *hijāb* is so strong, I have spent some time outlining and explaining

<sup>43</sup> Raneem's story was the worst of those whom I interviewed, although some of my friends had sadder stories to tell. One friend, 19, was told to take off her *hijāb* or to leave home. She left, and then was not allowed to visit her family because they did not want the neighbors to see her. Another friend has to deal with her family telling her that Islam is an "evil 'religion'." In fact, male converts have to deal with these familial responses too. According to Elizabeth, a 16-year-old youth in Toronto had to leave home after his conversion to Islam.

negative Muslim family reactions to *ḥijāb*. The women who struggle to wear *ḥijāb* against the wishes of their families thus have a dual battle. They must deal with the reactions from the broader non-Muslim Canadian society that believes they are forced to cover and are oppressed because they cover. On the home front, where they most need the support in order to cope with the negative public reactions to *ḥijāb*, they are coping with similar pressure.

Of course, not all families object to their female members wearing *ḥijāb*. Many expect them to cover, and teach them that this is the right way to dress. Depending on the daughter's belief, she will experience that teaching as natural, or as pressure. We have already seen Nur's acceptance of her family's teachings about *ḥijāb*. Sadia was another girl who had been taught that covering was part of Islam, and accepted it when the time came to wear it. Sadia started wearing *ḥijāb* full-time when she was young (11/12ish), but stressed to me that she wore *ḥijāb* willingly and because she believed that the Qur'an asked her to cover: "... I did have a choice: ... if you're not going to wear it for [the sake of] Allah, then what's the point? ... nobody ever forced me to do it. I did it on my own. There was a choice."

## 7. ḤIJĀB AND SELF-PERCEPTION

An aspect of *ḥijāb* that came through strongly in the interviews was how wearing it had given these women sources of inner strength and a high level of confidence and self-esteem. Rania believed that this was another benefit for society in general, not just for the woman concerned: "Children grow up ... seeing that women can be successful and respected without having to be beautiful or flirtatious or whatever." In fact, even though Nur's point that wearing *ḥijāb* is not a function of beauty is true (because plain women cover too), the argument that women are covering their 'charms' and 'beauty' with *ḥijāb* is frequently made. This idea comes through in Halima's attempts to answer her 3-year-old son's questions about why Muslim women and men do not cover in the same way. Halima and her husband tell their young son that they do not "want the men to see *ummi* [Mum] because women are beautiful. ... I think on some level he understands, but not really."

Many women stressed how comfortable they felt wearing *ḥijāb*, and how it made them feel good about themselves. Ellen stressed that in *ḥijāb* she felt: “like I am doing something to please Allah, you know ... it makes you feel good about yourself. Makes you feel different from everybody else, but you feel different in a good way, because you’re not exposing yourself and you know, you’re not exposed to many things like you would be if you’re not covering.”

Rania felt “very comfortable” in her *ḥijāb*: it gave her a sense of pride and security knowing that people would take her seriously. She believed that it was “the best way to dress.” When wearing *ḥijāb* in public places, Rania liked to think that she was showing that Muslims did live like normal human beings, and thus she was “representing [a positive] presence of Islam to people.”

Nur liked wearing *ḥijāb* because she found that fellow students often approached her to ask for her notes, or to seek help on school-related questions, or for her opinion on philosophical questions such as “what do you think a soul is?” She really enjoyed this, and laughed that she was Mother Thesesa: “I like to be helpful.”

Yasmeen said that she enjoyed life, and that being religious was not how some people back home perceived it, as a kind of torture. Wearing *ḥijāb* brought her inner peace and greater self-respect because she was not concentrating on her beauty and fashions: “I feel comfortable because this is what God want[s] from the human being.”

Some women have found wearing *ḥijāb* a liberating experience. This perception of *ḥijāb* coincides with (maybe derives from) the feminist critique of the commodification of women’s body in capitalist society. The idea here is that wearing a headscarf and long, loose clothing is liberating because in *ḥijāb* a woman is not judged by her external appearance and conformity (or non-conformity) to a fashionable beauty ideal. This is an interesting angle on the critique of ‘woman-as-sex-object’, since one reason Mernissi and other feminists are so strongly opposed to *ḥijāb* is their conviction that it is *ḥijāb* (not the absence of *ḥijāb*) that signals the view women are regarded merely as sex objects. (I pursue these differences more in Chapter Five.) Bassima had been covering for about thirteen years (since she was 18), and found *ḥijāb* “liberating,” especially having grown up in the West where the pressure was to be thin and fashionable. Bassima

found *ḥijāb* “humanizing” because it took away the “sex-appeal nonsense” and one becomes just a “face,” not a “sexual object.” “It may be a bit disconcerting for those on the other end!” she added. “*Ḥijāb* [has] become part of my identity now ... I don’t think I could go out without a *ḥijāb* on, I’d feel naked.”

Naturally, those who do not wear *ḥijāb* full-time see it differently. Iman “always [felt] self-conscious” in *ḥijāb*, even at Islamic events. She said that she thought that if you wore *ḥijāb*, you would be “stared at a lot, which would be kind of unnerving.” However, Bassima also pointed out that this did not necessarily happen: “[W]hen you first wear *ḥijāb*, you’re very self-conscious and you feel as though everybody is staring at you, but once you get used to it, and you feel more at ease in your new identity, ... you realise they’re not all staring. Some do, but not all of them. Quite a lot of people take you as they find you.” She thought that the adjustment period depended upon one’s own personality: it would be quicker for those with “the courage of [their] convictions.” It was also influenced by one’s own attitude toward other people: “Sometimes you get what you’re expecting. It’s like a confidence issue.”

Nadia, with an exhibitionist twist, concurred: “I think that I have a bit of stubbornness ... and ... individuality in me. ... although I don’t like ... the limelight, ... I think wearing *ḥijāb* definitely puts you in that place, and although I shun it, in a certain way I guess I like it.” She agreed that it would not be easy for those who did “not want any attention, just want[ed] to go about their business.”

#### D. WEARING ḤIJĀB IN THE WEST – EVERYDAY EXPERIENCES

Muslim women in the West who cover suffer daily indignities from the people around them because of the way they dress. The Western image that they are oppressed, or represent a terrorist religion, makes it difficult for them to be accepted easily by the Canadian community. For example, a 1996 article in the *Toronto Star* had a photograph of two Muslim women, one with her face covered, and the other wearing a headscarf. The title read: “An act of faith or a veiled threat to society? To some, wearing the *ḥijāb* is an expression of piety and modesty.

Others detect a more political motive.”<sup>44</sup> I want to conclude this chapter by looking at the experiences of wearing *hijāb* in a society that is uneasy about women’s public commitment to Islam. What is it like to cover in such an environment?

#### I. REACTIONS FROM THE BROADER COMMUNITY

Many of the women whom I interviewed stressed to me that overall they did not receive too many hostile reactions, and some of them also experienced positive reactions from non-Muslims. They thought that Toronto was so multicultural that people were used to seeing all different kinds of dress. Also, those with the least amount of interaction with the non-Muslim community had the fewest problems. Zainab had no nasty interactions. She walked with a cane, and said that before she wore *hijāb*, people would hold open elevator doors for her, but that mostly stopped after she put *hijāb* on. On one occasion in the elevator in her apartment building, just after she started wearing *hijāb* experimentally (before she converted, to test ‘being Muslim’), a lady expressed sympathy for her earache, thinking that was why Zainab wore a headscarf in the summer. Zainab explained why she was wearing it and the lady “just sort of looked at me in a strange way.”

Raneem had a funny story to tell. She was walking along a downtown street when she was about nine months pregnant. Somebody evidently mistook her for a nun, came up to her and said, “Way to go, Sister! Way to go!”

Nice stories notwithstanding, Muslim women are often harassed by strangers because of the way they dress. Bassima told of an occasion when she was travelling on the subway with her mother (who is not Muslim) and 4-year-old daughter who “had one of those sweat-shirts on with a hood that she insisted on keeping up, so it may have looked as if she was in training.” Sitting next to them was a couple having a loud discussion in English about religious indoctrination and “how people shove religion down people’s throats.” From the context, it was clear that Bassima and her family were the subject of the conversation, the couple assuming that they did not understand English. “So I turned round, smiled sweetly and asked for directions

<sup>44</sup> *Toronto Star* (Sunday, May 14, 1996), p.F5.

in perfect fluent English with a slight [foreign/Western] accent and they changed the subject after that!”

Despite this, Bassima regarded Canada as a relief after her experiences back home. There, she had people yelling at her on the street that she was a “— race traitor.” Her sense of humor and courage sustained her through most of these exclamations. When people yelled at her: “Go back to where you come from,” she would reply in the right accent: “It’s a bloody long walk to — Shire!” “It freaks them out!” she added.

Several women reported being sworn at by strangers: a young man driving past Yasmeen in his car, yelled, “Smelly —,” to her; Raneem walking downtown was approached by a woman who told her, “You go — yourself;” Sadia was in Shoppers Drug Mart with her father and a man told her, “— you.” Of course, there is no way of knowing whether or not these people said that because they were Muslim, but the fact that the question arises is enough to make Muslims feel uncomfortable.

Other kinds of harassment are clearly related to the woman being Muslim (or at the very least, foreign). Khadija, who had lived in Canada for 27 years, recalled an occasion when she had dropped her daughter at the university and was then pursued relentlessly to the parking lot by a woman who screamed at her, “You just go back to where you came from.” Another time, while she was with a community and race relations group, they had to deal with complaints from different churches about an Islamic calligraphy display in the Civic Centre. When the Mayor (who was on the community group’s committee) asked why the church groups wanted the display removed, he was told that Muslims were bad people, unwilling to work, and terrorists, etc. Despite a petition from the churches and being given “a hard time” by the city, the community group fought back and managed to have the display restored. Khadija admitted, however, that the whole episode was “an eye-opener. I didn’t realize how bad we’ve been portrayed [in the media].”

Nadia reported that while standing waiting for an elevator at her hospital one day, a man walked by and said, “Where do you think we are, in the — Middle East?” She laughed that most abusive comments were made obliquely: “They don’t say it to you right in front of your



face, they say it as you're walking by, and then you're ... looking around, ... 'I guess that was directed to me!'"

Sadia said that people looked at her as though she was from "outer space." After school one afternoon, while Sadia was walking toward the elevator, a woman waiting for the elevator started telling her to go away and when the elevator arrived, the woman quickly got into it, closing it on herself, leaving Sadia behind. Sadia thought that the woman was thinking, "I'm gonna kill her or do something bad to her. I was kind of upset and then started laughing 'cause I realized how stupid she was."

## 2. WHEN BEING MUSLIM IS IRRELEVANT

Muslim women also have problems with people in situations where their identity is really irrelevant to the current situation. Nadia found that one of the disadvantages of wearing *hijāb* in the West was that people, especially when you met them for the first time, frequently focused on the "the novelty" of *hijāb*, rather than the business at hand. When she was talking to people, she noticed that they were not really listening or they might ask her if she had been born in Canada and "change the subject completely," preferring to talk about Nadia instead of the business topic.

Some women had faced a difficult situation when visiting the doctor. For example, Halima found herself dealing with the doctor's disgust that Halima had converted to Islam: "It wasn't what [the doctor] said, it was her face, [laughing] like she just looked like she was totally disgusted and shocked by the fact that I would take as Islam as my religion." Zainab had similar problems. When she was a patient at a major Toronto hospital (the same hospital where Nadia worked), the doctor asked why she had wanted to become "a second-class citizen," that is, a Muslim. "Don't you know how badly women are treated in Islam?" Zainab expressed surprise that a man of his education should believe that. "'But if you read the Qur'an,' I said, 'you should realize that women are not second-class citizens. In fact, as far as Prophet Muhammad is concerned, I consider him the first feminist.' [But the doctor] was just so negative about everything."

This story is surprising because Zainab was a patient in the same hospital where Nadia worked, a hospital that was supposed to be

emphasizing cultural respect and diversity. In fact, a couple of days later, a Muslim doctor came by to see Zainab, to see if she wanted to attend the Jumu‘a prayers that were held every Friday in the hospital. The first doctor’s negative comments about Islam were surprising and worrying; not only was he repeating the usual stereotypes about Islam and women to the patient, but also the question arises, how did he interact with Nadia and other Muslim women doctors and nurses?

Rania, who is a doctor, found that she had similar problems from patients when she did her residency in small-town Ontario. She was on call, and was summoned to the emergency room at three in the morning to attend to an 88-year-old man accompanied by his daughter. The elderly patient was more interested in asking inquisitive questions about Rania’s headscarf (“Do you have hair under there?”) than in describing his medical problem for assessment by a tired doctor. On another occasion, Rania was asking an older woman patient what type of cough she had, and the woman asked her, “Where are you from?” So Rania replied she was from [Ontario], and they continued with the consultation until the woman asked her, “What type of national costume is this?” Rania explained that her clothes were Canadian and she wore a headscarf because she was Muslim. The woman said, “Oh, we have some nice Muslims in England.” Rania found this “so condescending, ... and I felt as if she wanted just to parcel me into a category of culture.” Rania added: “There’s the time to explain and then there’s the time to just give a brief answer and go on to other things ... I mean you may look like a Muslim, but you have a job to do, and let’s talk about why you’re here, and I’m the doctor, and you’re the patient, okay?”

### 3. SCHOOL REACTIONS

Only two of the women whom I interviewed wore *ḥijāb* while attending high school in Canada, and Sadia had been at an Islamic school. Although Nadia attended a Catholic high school, she did not have any problems as serious as those of Quebec in 1995, when girls were asked to leave school if they did not take off their scarves. Boys would tease Nadia about her scarf and tug at it. Once one succeeded in pulling it off, but he seems to have been as mortified as Nadia was, and apologized. She did not remember having any problems with the

teachers. She thought that they did not know “what to do” with her, and she thought that even though she “was walking around telling people I was a Muslim ... [that] they probably thought I had done this outside of my family, that probably my family were Christian, they had put me in a Catholic school, but I was being rebellious and just calling myself a Muslim, I don’t know.” One day, however, the Principal noticed that Nadia was wearing *ḥijāb* (in the school’s colors), and reminded her that it was “not really school regulations.” Not knowing who he was, Nadia gave a “flippant” answer (“How do you know?”) and the matter was never raised again: “Which I think now, ... I really got away with a lot!”

#### 4. CONVERTS’ WORKPLACE EXPERIENCE

The women who have converted to Islam experience different kinds of problems from those born Muslim. This is probably because the workplace colleagues have to deal with the changes in a person. Elizabeth started in a new placement after returning from overseas, and wore *ḥijāb* for the first two weeks. She was so shocked and unnerved by the reactions from colleagues and clients that she took it off. She thought that one reason why she was not able to handle the reactions well was that as a white woman she had never experienced discrimination before. What kinds of things happened? Most colleagues were puzzled as to why she was wearing a scarf on her head. She would explain that she was wearing it for religious reasons, “that [it’s] prescribed by God ... and it’s to protect women from the glances of men and to protect their chastity and their piety.” Oddly, after this explanation her colleagues responded with “Well, why don’t just you take it off?” Once a (white Canadian) client refused to let her stay in the booth where she and a co-worker were consulting with him. Elizabeth created waves at work by asking that her workload be altered so that she did not have to visit men’s houses alone, or be alone with male clients in booths, seeing these as important practical aspects of her new faith. Her manager said “no way” and decided that she needed counseling. She called the counselor, only to find that the counselor was quite ignorant about Islam, thinking that Elizabeth was coming to work with her face covered. Elizabeth was very angry about the whole experience, for as she told her manager, “[T]his is

my religion and I'm perfectly fine with it. The problem is that you're not giving me the opportunity to work around it." When Elizabeth removed her *ḥijāb*, her colleagues were very happy. "Oh, you look so much nicer with it off!" one woman told her. Elizabeth's story is particularly troubling, since as a government worker, she ought to be in a proactive environment that is setting the pace for the rest of the workforce. If government employees face discrimination, what can we expect for the rest of the workforce? Moreover, her co-workers dealt with Muslim women as clients all the time. If they could not treat a Muslim woman co-worker with respect, how did they deal with their clients?

Zainab was still working when she embraced Islam. She said that over time she lost her connection with most of her of non-Muslim acquaintances and colleagues. She thought that they were very uncomfortable with her being Muslim and were "afraid that I was going to talk to them about Islam too much." Like Elizabeth, her co-workers knew little about Islam. "They knew about the four wives and the amputation of the hands, and terrorists and things like that, and – they were afraid of me." Her co-workers were "ashamed of me, they didn't want to be seen with anybody that wore *ḥijāb*" and started to find excuses – or even declare outright that they could not go out with her "dressed like that."

Ellen said that the first day that she wore *ḥijāb* to work was a "hard day for them. That wasn't a hard day for me. For me it was a strengthening day, because ... it gave me so much strength." Ellen had worked there for eight years, and her co-workers knew she had converted to Islam and about *ḥijāb* because she talked about it to them, but it seems that some of the co-workers were not prepared when she came in wearing *ḥijāb*. It was treated as a joke, especially by the supervisor. Ellen reminded the supervisor that her grandmother also wore a long dress and covered her hair, and a co-worker kindly produced a photograph of that time to prove Ellen's point. The supervisor declared, "You're the one who's going to have to put up with the criticism." However, Ellen stated firmly that she could handle the situation: "From the very first day I wanted to make clear to them that what I was doing was my choice and I wasn't afraid of what any of them said, ... and I think I did that."

Raneem was working for a professor at a university when she embraced Islam. Her professor was a staunch Catholic and he informed Raneem that she must not mention Islam during business hours, even if asked about it. Raneem said she wouldn't proselytize, but refused to ignore other people's enquiries about her faith. Soon after, she decided to leave. She changed jobs and found a different problem: after six months she realized that her co-workers did not know that she was Muslim! When she asked one why he thought that she covered, he replied that he thought it was for "fashion."

#### 5. PRESSURE TO ASSIMILATE

Given these kinds of negative reactions to *hijāb*, it is not surprising that many Muslims try to hide their Islamic identity. The pressure for Muslims to assimilate to "modern" Western dress is very great. Safiyah was under such pressure from her husband to "look Canadian." Although her husband did not understand why a Muslim woman should cover, it seems that the problem for Safiyah was that they were living in the West, where there is such a bad impression of *hijāb*. He did not seem to mind her wearing *hijāb* back home, presumably because there other women wear it. During their first six months in Canada, however, so many people stared at them that he felt uncomfortable with her in *hijāb*. Safiyah did not mind the stares, but her husband did so. If he was in a restaurant with Safiyah wearing *hijāb*, the stares that they attracted made him feel uncomfortable. He told her that when he went out, he wanted to look Canadian, like everyone else.

In fact, Nadia believed that because it was easier for Muslim men to assimilate than Muslim women, men were losing their Islamic identity faster than were Muslim women: "Being Canadian society, Muslim men are so easily lost to the society around us, I think Muslim women are tending to hold to the thread faster, or hold on harder than men do, and I don't see that same level of commitment from brothers all the time."

#### 6. BEING MUSLIM AND BEING CANADIAN

So the Muslim women whom I interviewed had had varying kinds of trouble from the non-Muslim society around them. All were unhappy

with the mainstream Western interpretation of Islam, and most blamed the media for it, as Khadija aptly put it: “The media has tarnished us all, over and over ... we have come to the stage where we are nothing but terrorists and bombers.” How did these experiences impact on the women’s identification with Canada? Did they feel alienated by their environment? Did they feel any conflict between being Muslim and being ‘Canadian’?

Some studies of Muslims in North America demonstrate that most children born of immigrant parents identify as American/Canadian depending upon the context. The ‘religiosity’ of the women in my sample sets them apart from the majority of North American Muslims.<sup>45</sup> Halima pointed out: “Nationalism isn’t suppose[d] to be part of Islam,” and all the women, except Noha, agreed, thinking of themselves as Muslim first, with nationality secondary, or irrelevant. (Noha thought that she was Canadian first, then Ismaili, then Muslim.) Zainab was in her early twenties when she came to Canada from Europe, but she did not feel ‘[European]’ because she had spent forty-five years in Canada. She felt that having to designate her citizenship was just having to obey governments who “insist on these foolish questions.” As a Muslim, citizenship for her was irrelevant, Islam was the “only religion [that she had] come across, which makes no boundaries ... Allah didn’t create countries [so] it doesn’t matter what language you speak, what color you are, what foods you eat.”

Several women expressed displeasure at having to ‘box’ and label themselves in these terms. Iman said that her identity was made up of being Muslim, being Canadian, and having Central Asian ancestry. She did not like being a hyphenated ‘Central Asian’-Canadian,

<sup>45</sup> Barazangi’s study of 15 Arab Muslim families across North America, investigating generational variations in perceptions of Islam, found four principal identity associations, depending on the context: either Islamic/Muslim, Syrian/Lebanese/Iraqi etc.; Arab; or American/Canadian. Barazangi, ‘Parents and Youth’, p.134. Lovell’s study of Muslims of Arab descent in 25 North American cities found that although fairly assimilated, third-generation women interviewed still identified to some extent with Arab/Muslims, depending on the context: “When they are among the Arab Muslims, they feel like Christians. When they are with American Christians, they feel more like Arabs – and, perhaps, even Muslims. [In one family of three], the oldest said that, if she claims a religion, it is Islam. The youngest said she ‘usually’ considers herself a Muslim. The other said she considers herself Muslim ‘once in a while’.” Emily Kalled Lovell, ‘A Survey of Arab-Muslims in the United States and Canada’, in *Islam in North America: A Sourcebook*, (eds.), Michael A. Köszegi and J. Gordon Metton (New York: Garland Publishing, 1992), p.70.

because although being Central Asian was part of her identity, she did not identify much with, or mix frequently with the Central Asian community here. It was a similar thing for Elizabeth. Her mother was Eastern European, and her father an Anglo-Canadian. She saw herself first and foremost as a Muslim woman, and then perhaps as a Canadian, but not a hyphenated 'Eastern European'-Canadian, since she had little to do with these communities. Iman and Elizabeth were both 'white' and this had an impact on the way they discussed identity in these terms.

An interesting part of the interview with Ellen was her resistance to being labeled as a 'black' Canadian, even though she did not find the label offensive: "I do not think of myself as a black person, or as a Muslim person, but ... as a person who deserves respect from other people and ... as somebody who has to set a good example to other people. ... I look at myself as ... someone who has been lost for a number of years and who has been guided by Allah. I feel I'm on the right path."

I did not probe Ellen's resistance, but Nadia's reaction made me wonder if Ellen resisted because she had been made to feel that she was not properly Canadian. Nadia came to Canada at a very young age from the Caribbean. However, she said that she did not feel 'Caribbean', nor did she like to think of herself as a hyphenated 'Caribbean'-Canadian. Like Elizabeth, Nadia's family did not socialize a lot with the Caribbean community while she was growing up, and she identified herself more as a Muslim. She would like to identify as a Muslim first, and a Canadian next. However, she did not think that Canadians would accept her as Canadian, rather a "hyphenated [Caribbean]-Canadian," even though she had lived in the country for 24 years and felt Canadian because it was her "frame of reference in life."

Nadia's answer contrasts starkly with Elizabeth and Iman, who also had not been closely connected with their 'ethnic' communities while growing up: although Elizabeth and Iman never thought about doubting their 'Canadian' credentials, Nadia had been made to feel that she would not "get away with" being "Canadian-Canadian."

Yousif's study of Muslims in Ottawa argued that Canada's freedom of religion laws and multicultural policies had helped Muslims

retain their Islamic identity while adapting to Canadian society. Those who were strongly committed to practicing the five pillars thought, “It is easy to practice Islam in Canada.”<sup>46</sup> This is despite the racism/discrimination that Muslims feel that they face, as mentioned above. Yousif’s respondents believed that the government’s multiculturalism policies were attempts to fight racism/discrimination.<sup>47</sup> The women whom I interviewed would concur with Yousif’s conclusions. They all referred to Canada as a multicultural and multifaith society in a positive way, and they appreciated the liberty and protection that Canadian law gave them to practice their religion like any other group.<sup>48</sup> The women all understood the rhetoric of secular liberal multiculturalism, and thought, as did Halima, that if people had the freedom to go out in public almost naked, why should a Muslim woman not also have the freedom to wear *ḥijāb*, which would not hurt anyone.

So, my interviewees did not see any conflict between being Canadian and being Muslim. As Yasmeen pointed out, Canadians were part of the human race and therefore part of God’s creation like anyone else. Canada contained people of different colors from different countries and having different ideas. *Ḥijāb*, however, was for all human beings, it was from God. “I think the [reporter’s] question [“Can the *ḥijāb* pass the litmus test of being Canadian?”] is wrong.”

Rather, it appears that it is the non-Muslim community that assumes there are ‘problems’ in being both Muslim and Canadian. It was a high school in Quebec that expelled the teenagers for wearing *ḥijāb*. It was the CBC reporter that asked the question, “Can the *ḥijāb* pass the litmus test of being Canadian?”

The negative experiences that Muslim women face confirm a suspicion Elizabeth had about mainstream society’s acceptance of other peoples. Even though the government is formally committed to anti-discrimination, Elizabeth thought that mainstream Canadian society

<sup>46</sup> Mrs. Khatija Haffajee, Carleton Board of Education, former chairwoman of the Ottawa Muslim Women’s Auxiliary, quoted by Ahmad F. Yousif, *Muslims in Canada: A Question of Identity* (Ottawa: Legas, 1993), p.41.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p.75.

<sup>48</sup> Compares with Cayer, *Hijab*, whose interviewees expressed conflict between Indo-Pakistani identity and Canadian identity. Some did say “Islam is my home,” so it is possible that the difference was due to the way the question was phrased.



was being forced to accept minorities against its will: “It was evident to me at work that there were a couple of people who were a really big problem with other groups ... you know anything in the ‘Other’ category, and I think that our society is becoming increasingly racist and intolerant.” In her view, a result of “all this political correctness ... [was] a lot of hate out there and dislike and ignorance,” even if it was not always obvious. Elizabeth’s suspicions evidently resonate with some sectors of Canadian society, as another Anglo-Canadian convert to Islam told me that when she started wearing *ḥijāb* to work she was told, “You look like a g—damn immigrant.”

#### E. CONCLUSION

The last section discussing the experiences of wearing *ḥijāb* in Toronto demonstrates that Muslim women face considerable discrimination based upon the way they dress. The public perception of Islam is that it is a bad religion, promoting violence and oppression of women. For the women in my study, however, *ḥijāb* symbolized, not oppression nor terrorism, but “purity,” “modesty,” a “woman’s Islamic identity,” and “obedience, or submission to God and a testament that you’re Muslim.” Halima added that it symbolized “the woman’s power to take back her own dignity and her own sexuality.” They felt peaceful in their *ḥijāb*, and enjoyed wearing it. If feminist methodologies and epistemologies of experience as a foundation for knowledge are to mean anything, these meanings of *ḥijāb* should be taken seriously, and the women not derided for holding ‘false’ beliefs. People need not agree with the women’s view of *ḥijāb*, but in order to engage in a debate over the merits or demerits of *ḥijāb*, both parties need to understand properly the other’s position. My task here has been to make these covered Muslim women’s side of the debate intelligible to a Western audience.

## Multiple Meanings of *Hijāb*

Under the influence of the colonial and national élites' conviction that the veil oppressed women, Muslim veiling practices have undergone change. In some countries the change has been dramatic – by the late 1960s *hijāb/niqāb* in many Muslim countries had all but disappeared (small villages or lower-class women excluded). In other countries, the change has been less dramatic, but evident none the less. In the late 1970s another change in the practice of covering occurred: women whose mothers did not cover, indeed, whose grandmothers and mothers may have fought to uncover, started wearing *hijāb* and *niqāb*. This trend has turned into a women's movement that encompasses the entire Muslim world, from Arabia to Asia to Muslims living in the West. It is called the 're-veiling' movement, although it is not really a 're'-veiling movement because the women mostly concerned are covering for the first time, and they are mostly adopting *hijāb*, not *niqāb*.

The most prevalent image in popular Western culture about women not covering and then covering is that of Iran or Afghanistan, where women are forced by state law to cover; or in Algeria or some other Muslim country, where women are said to cover owing to the threat of physical violence for not covering. Westerners rightly find such violence frightening and tragic for the women concerned. The conclusion that the veil is a symbol of women's oppression seems a fairly logical one under those circumstances. The problem is that this idea of covering is almost the only notion known to popular Western culture. It is nearly the only viewpoint given play by Western media. The focus on the veil in Afghanistan or elsewhere is frequently used to fit into an already existing Orientalist framework that provides meaning to Muslim behavior (backward, violent, oppressive). The

voluntary re-covering movement is given little space in Western media, and while there is a smattering of articles that allow some Muslim women to explain their positive views on covering,<sup>1</sup> more often than not the image of the veil is a negative one, associated with violence and oppression. (Recall the article in the *Toronto Star*, that discussed re-covering in Egypt, asking, “An act of faith or a veiled threat to society?”<sup>2</sup>) More importantly, Orientalism gives a singular meaning to the practice of covering: it is coerced and oppressive. All Muslim women in the West (and elsewhere) who cover are viewed through that lens.

Stanley and Wise, as mentioned in Chapter Two, argue that feminist methodology should take account of women as “ontologically fractured.”<sup>3</sup> While hesitant to embrace that notion in its entirety, I mentioned that the general point could be asserted: women’s experience of the world is not unitary. This applies to the wearing of *ḥijāb/niqāb*. Women wear it for different reasons. Different societies invest covering with different meanings. Some women cover from custom, others owing to state law, others in a secularizing society for various personal reasons. In times past, women wore the *niqāb* as a mark of wealth and status.<sup>4</sup> (Non-Muslim women have worn and wear *ḥijāb/niqāb* too.<sup>5</sup> In one Muslim tribe, the Tuareg, men, not women, wear face veils.<sup>6</sup>) In other words, like any piece of clothing, the social meaning of the *ḥijāb* depends upon the context in which it is worn.<sup>7</sup>

The sociological complexity of covering is not captured by the conventional wisdom in the West that holds that ‘the’ veil (as if there

<sup>1</sup> For example, ‘Their Canada includes *hijab*’, *Globe and Mail* [Toronto, Canada], (August 22), 1994, A1.

<sup>2</sup> *Toronto Star* [Toronto, Canada], May 14, 1996, F5.

<sup>3</sup> Stanley and Wise, ‘Method, Methodology and Epistemology’, pp.21–22.

<sup>4</sup> Thus, when peasant women moved to the city, they were anxious to veil to demonstrate their new wealth. El-Guindi, ‘Veiling Infitah’, p.475.

<sup>5</sup> Hindu women in northern India veil, as did Assyrians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Jews and Christians before Islam, see H. Sharma, ‘Women and their Affines: Veil as a Symbol of Separation’, *Man*, 12, 2 (1978); Emile Marmorstein, ‘The Veil in Judaism and Islam’, *Journal of Jewish Studies*, 2 (1954); Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*.

<sup>6</sup> Robert F. Murphy, ‘Social Distance and the Veil’, *American Anthropologist*, 66, 6 (December 1964).

<sup>7</sup> Andrea B. Rugh, *Reveal and Conceal: Dress in Contemporary Egypt* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1986), p.128.

was just one type) is a symbol of women's oppression in Islam. My concern in this book is to challenge the common Western presumption that every woman wearing a scarf is doing so out of force or coercion, and that the scarf represents her oppression in Islam. This chapter focuses on the multiple meanings *ḥijāb* holds, in order to demonstrate that an observer should not read a single meaning into it and to highlight the injustice done to women in the West who suffer from the imposition of the "the veil is oppressive" meaning (for example, girls who are expelled from school in France and Quebec, and Muslim women who suffer from job discrimination or harassment because they cover). Practices of Muslim women in other countries are analyzed here in order to demonstrate the multiple meanings of *ḥijāb* that shift according to context and individual differences. I have synthesized seven core themes from academic studies of covering to capture women's differing motivations for covering: Revolutionary Protest, Political Protest, Religious, Continued Access to Public Sphere, Statement of Personal Identity, Custom and State Law. Naturally there is some intersection among the themes that I have identified and more than one may apply to the same woman. For some reason, most of the studies have been conducted in Egypt, so there is now a good understanding across classes as to why women there have started covering, but there are too few studies of other countries. This is an area where more diverse research is needed. In the section to follow I present the themes of covering taken from these studies. Section B discusses these themes briefly. In Section C I look at the meanings that the contemporary Western media commonly ascribe to *ḥijāb*. This allows for telling demonstrations that the image of *ḥijāb* in the West that is generated by the media is overwhelmingly negative, with little relevance to women's perspectives.

## A. REASONS FOR COVERING

### I. REVOLUTIONARY PROTEST

The most dramatic re-covering phenomena of the twentieth century have been those associated with anti-colonial and revolutionary struggles. During the Algerian fight for independence in the 1950s, and in Iran in the 1970s, women who had previously not covered donned

the veil/*chador* to help overthrow oppressive governments. Because colonialists and the native élite had targeted *hijāb* for elimination, as Chapter One showed, the headscarf became a potent symbol of resistance during anti-colonial and revolutionary struggle. To don a headscarf was to demonstrate that one was against colonialism or against the Western sympathetic élite regime and all that it stood for.

### 1.1 *Algeria*

Algerians began their struggle to oust the French in 1954.<sup>8</sup> Women of all ages from across the socio-economic spectrum joined in the nationalist struggle, and came to play a crucial role.<sup>9</sup> French-educated middle-class urban women, who had been born in the 1930s and who had lived until then without covering, decided to cover to help in the urban guerrilla warfare. As Fanon wrote: “spontaneously and without being told, the Algerian women who had long since dropped the veil once again donned the *haïk*, thus affirming that it was not true that woman liberated herself at the invitation of France and of General de Gaulle.”<sup>10</sup>

The veil served a symbolic and practical role in the Algerian revolution. Its use was dictated by the tactics needed at the time: some women wore European dress so that they could walk around the European city without suspicion, other women put on a veil when it was needed to carry messages or military equipment from place to place without being detected. Celebrating the ‘non-traditional’ use of the veil, Fanon writes:

A new technique had to be learned: how to carry a rather heavy object dangerous to handle under the veil and still give the impression of having one’s hands free, that there was nothing under this *haïk*, except a poor woman or an insignificant young girl. It was not enough to be veiled. One had to look so much like a “Fatma” that the soldier would be convinced that this woman was quite harmless.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> The French conquered Algeria in a brutal war of occupation (1830–1880). Lazreg, *The Eloquence of Silence*, p.43.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.122–123.

<sup>10</sup> Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, p.62. A *haïk* is the traditional Algerian ‘veil’, a big square piece of cloth covering the whole body.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 61. ‘Fatma’ was the French stereotypical name for Algerian women.

Women, alongside their male compatriots, were imprisoned, tortured, and killed by the French during this struggle.<sup>12</sup>

The French tried to enlist Algerian women by promoting the idea that they would be emancipated under continued French rule, not by a return to their ‘oppressive’ Islamic law. In 1957, three years after the revolution began, they made real efforts for the first time to bring Islamic family law in line with French family law.<sup>13</sup> French-Algerians, campaigning for Algeria to remain part of France, re-enacted colonial attempts to ‘liberate’ Algerian women by making them remove their veils: on May 13, 1958, the French army brought a hundred women into a public square and unveiled them to the cries of “*Vive L’Algérie française!*”<sup>14</sup> After this, about a thousand Algerian men, who had been bussed in from nearby villages to watch, sang the *Marseillaise* and the military *Chant des Africains*. Apparently not much is known about the women: Lazreg reports that one commentator said that they were “acquiescent Muslim women,” the FLN that they were maids of the colonial government and prostitutes, and Fanon that they were “poor women, servants under the threat of being fired, and prostitutes.”<sup>15</sup>

Thus the veil became the national symbol of resistance to the French.<sup>16</sup> Because of French colonial emphasis on transforming Algeria into a French state (at the level of consciousness as well as materially), which included the French campaign to unveil Algerian women, the veil became a potent symbol of rejection: “[In Algeria] the veil was worn because tradition demanded a rigid separation of the sexes, but also because the occupier *was bent on unveiling Algeria*” [original emphasis].<sup>17</sup>

## 1.2 *Iran*

The veil (*chador*<sup>18</sup>) also played an important symbolic and practical role in the 1979 Iranian Revolution against the Shah, Mohammed

<sup>12</sup> Lazreg, *The Eloquence of Silence*, p. 124.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>14</sup> Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, p. 62.

<sup>15</sup> Lazreg, *The Eloquence of Silence*, p. 135.

<sup>16</sup> Hélié-Lucas, ‘Women, Nationalism and Religion’, p. 108.

<sup>17</sup> Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, p. 63.

<sup>18</sup> The *chador* is a head-to-toe black cloak held under the chin, leaving the face uncovered.

Reza. The 1979 revolution was not an effort to oust a colonial power, but an effort to oust a corrupt and repressive Western-backed Shah and the Westernization campaign that he had spearheaded.<sup>19</sup> Once a sign of wealth, by the 1970s the *chador* was seen by the upper/middle classes as backward and old-fashioned. They wore the *chador* only occasionally, such as when attending a mosque, funerals, or other religious ceremonies. Working-class women in cities and small towns, and middle-class women connected to the religious establishment and bazaar merchants continued to wear the *chador* as part of normal outerwear. Peasant women wore the *chador* when they came to town and a scarf when in the fields.<sup>20</sup>

The *chador* became a rallying cry for two powerful opponents to the Shah, the Fedayeen,<sup>21</sup> and the Mujahidin.<sup>22</sup> These groups, ideologically opposed, the Fedayeen being a Marxist group, and the Mujahidin an Islamic group (with Marxist leanings), joined forces to oust the Shah. Islamic intellectual Shariati's critique of women's position under capitalism (the use of women's bodies for selling commodities, the competition amongst women to be beautiful to attract men's attention) appealed to secular leftists, feminists, and religious Iranians, and gave an impetus for women to return to the *chador* as a way to counter that.<sup>23</sup> The *chador* came to be regarded as a leveler of gross income inequality, as a protector against male harassment, and to confer dignity on a woman so that she would be regarded as a person, not as a sex object.<sup>24</sup> Thus the Fedayeen and Mujahidin were able to find common ground in their fight against the Shah: fighting Western

<sup>19</sup> Minou Reeves, *The Female Warriors of Allah: Women and the Islamic Revolution* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1989), pp.93–94.

<sup>20</sup> A veil indicated one could afford all the material required to sew one, and that one did not have to work. Farah Azari, 'Islam's Appeal to Women in Iran: Illusions and Reality', in *Women of Iran: The Conflict with Islamic Fundamentalism*, (ed.), Farah Azari (London: Ithaca Press, 1983), pp.43–45.

<sup>21</sup> Tabari, 'Islam and the Struggle for Emancipation', pp.9–11.

<sup>22</sup> The Mujahidin withdrew support for Khomeini's regime in 1981 and now operate a Parliament in exile in Britain. In 1993 they elected a woman as President-Elect. T. Ibrahim, 'Veiled Bodies and Unveiled Discourse: Women's Participation in the Mojahedin Movement of Iran', unpublished paper (Toronto, 1997), p.12.

<sup>23</sup> Azari, 'Islam's Appeal to Women', p.51. Nahid Yeganeh, 'Women's Struggles in the Islamic Republic of Iran', in *In the Shadow of Islam: The Women's Movement in Iran*, (eds.), Azar Tabari and Nahid Yeganeh (London: Zed Press, 1982), p.33.

<sup>24</sup> Azari, 'Islam's Appeal to Women', p.51

imperialism, the loss of national identity, and women's position under capitalism. Wearing a *chador* symbolized that a woman was anti-Shah, anti-imperialism, anti-corruption, anti-moral decadence and against capitalism's exploitation of the "modern consumer woman." Secular women donned the *chador* in street demonstrations to show their anti-Shah solidarity.<sup>25</sup> As in Algeria, the *chador* allowed women to carry guns and messages secretly from place to place. Many such women were imprisoned and tortured.<sup>26</sup>

## 2. POLITICAL PROTEST

Political protest against élite Westernization programmes and Western neo-imperialism has assumed less dramatic forms than revolutionary coups. Several studies of re-veiling found that women put on *ḥijāb* as a signal that they were not happy with the current political situation, either with policies pursued by the state and/or with the "commercial, technological, political, and social" invasion of their countries by the West.<sup>27</sup> The 1967 Arab defeat at the hands of Israel was a shock to many Muslims. One can date the rise of the Egyptian Islamic movement and the replacement of Arab nationalism with Islam as the ideology of dissent from this event.<sup>28</sup> There the re-covering movement began in the late seventies amongst university students. Middle-class and élite families were shocked and at first did not take the *muhajjabāt* seriously,<sup>29</sup> but by 1985 *ḥijāb* had spread

<sup>25</sup> Tabari, 'Islam and the Struggle for Emancipation', p.13. According to Tabari, many came to regret it later, when the veil was made compulsory. Tabari believes that their wearing of the veil was a "confused acceptance ... of the veil as a sign of solidarity on the mass demonstrations" (p.14). On March 8, 1979, they marched to protest against rumors of compulsory veiling. Some Mujahidin women joined in, and the Prime Minister, Bazargan, apparently assured the women that there would not be compulsory veiling. However, it came into law by the summer of 1980. Tabari: 12-15.

<sup>26</sup> Sima Bahar, 'A Historical Background to the Women's Movement in Iran', in *Women of Iran: The Conflict with Islamic Fundamentalism*, (ed.), Farah Azari (London: Ithaca Press, 1983), p.185. The veil continues to serve as a facilitating instrument for war. According to Goodwin, Kuwaiti women resisting the 1990 Iraqi occupation donned full-length *abayas* to help smuggle arms and Resistance documents: *Price of Honor*, p.159.

<sup>27</sup> Zuhur, *Revealing Reveiling*, p.108.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., pp.51, 55; Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, 'Islam, Women and Revolution in Twentieth Century Arab Thought', *The Muslim World*, 74, 34 (July/October 1984), p.140; Rugh, *Reveal and Conceal*, pp.95-96.

<sup>29</sup> *Muhajjabāt*: the veiled ones, headcover; *munaqqabāt*: the veiled ones, wearing *niqāb*. Zuhur, *Revealing Reveiling*, p.53.



through most of the lower middle classes and to younger government employees.<sup>30</sup> It is important to understand that the type of outfit which these women adopted differed greatly from that of their grandmothers, that of the peasant, and that of the *bint al-balad*, the traditional lower-class urban woman whose roots are in the rural villages. The new dress was called *al-ziy al-sharʿī* (the Lawful Dress), and signaled an intent to conform to Islamic Law, as well as an assumption that other forms of covering had/did not.

Williams' 1978 study of re-covering tried to explain why Egyptian women, whose grandmothers/mothers had led the Arab world in throwing aside the veil, and some of whom had continued to pray, fast, and otherwise think of themselves as pious Muslims, even while wearing Western dress, were adopting *al-ziy al-sharʿī*. After all, he wrote, "Egyptian women, it has been shown, are no sheep. No one is likely to persuade them to exchange the cooler, more comfortable modern dresses for *ziy sharʿī* unless they wish to do so."<sup>31</sup> He concluded that the women had multiple reasons including the feeling that they were "solving problems,"<sup>32</sup> and making a personal statement in a modernizing Muslim country that was "usually connected with [their] faith."<sup>33</sup>

However, Williams found that "[e]ven those who tended to defend their dress on fundamentalist grounds ('I am a Muslim woman; this is what my faith demands of me.')

responded somewhat differently when asked what had occasioned their response to a demand that, after all, Islam has appeared to have made for a long time, and which has not always been so clearly heard." The women advanced several reasons as to what had made them to decide to cover now:

<sup>30</sup> El-Guindi, 'Veiling Infitah', Hoodfar, 'Return to the Veil', p.112,

<sup>31</sup> Williams, 'A Return to the Veil', p.53. Scholars differ over their assessment of the comfort of *al-ziy al-sharʿī*. Rugh, *Reveal and Conceal*, argues that Western dress is more restricting and stifling than traditional folk *jalābiyyahs*, which are loose enough to allow for air convection systems to cool the body. Moreover, rather than being made of cotton, Western dress tends to be made of hotter synthetic nylons and knits (p.119). Macleod, *Accommodating Protest*, puts forward the same argument about the new veiling, pointing out that they are hot because they are made of polyester fabrics favored by the middle-class (p.138). This is changing with more cotton *jalābiyyahs* now appearing.

<sup>32</sup> Williams, 'A Return to the Veil', p.53.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p.51.

- “I did it to reject current behaviour by young people and contemporary society;”
- “Until 1967, I accepted the way our country was going. I thought Gamal Abd al-Nasser would lead us all to progress. Then the war showed that we had been lied to; nothing was the way it had been represented. I started to question everything we were told. I wanted to do something and to find my own way. I prayed more and more and I tried to see what was expected of me as a Muslim woman. Then I put on *shar‘i* dress ...”
- “Once we thought that Western society had all the answers for successful, fruitful living. If we followed the lead of the West, we would have progress. Now we see that this isn’t true; they (the West) are sick societies; even their material prosperity is breaking down. America is full of crime and promiscuity. Russia is worse. Who wants to be like that? We have to remember God. Look how God has blessed Saudi Arabia. That’s because they have tried to follow the Law. And America, with its loose society, is all problems.”<sup>34</sup>

The majority of the younger covered women whom Zuhur interviewed in her 1988 study of Cairene women saw the *ḥijāb* as a symbol of change. “This change was not only a personal and moral decision, but represented a social sisterhood to them.”<sup>35</sup> Zuhur concluded that for the covered women in her survey, *ḥijāb* symbolized a rejection of the “guiding principles of state policy regarding women over the last thirty-five years. Their rejection implies a relinquishment of the principles of secularism and Western models and ideals in general.”<sup>36</sup>

Watson (1994) interviewed Fatima, a 70-year-old widow who sold vegetables in Cairo and who had an interesting angle on *al-zīy al-shar‘ī*:

Why have young girls started to cover themselves in this new type of veil and dress like old women? I think that it is just a trend, a fashion like any other ... I do not think that this new veiling is a religious duty.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., pp.53–54.    <sup>35</sup> Zuhur, *Revealing Reveiling*, p.76.    <sup>36</sup> Ibid., p.109.

A woman's modest conduct is more important than what she wears. The new veils are expensive. I could not afford to buy them for my daughters, they have to be satisfied with the peasant women's scarves which just cover the hair. Does this endanger their modesty? 'Rubbish,' I tell them when they raise the issue of the new veil, 'hijab is not about any one type of dress, it's about your behaviour and what's in your mind, so give that your greatest attention.' Although I have this opinion about the new veil being a trend which is not an essential part of Islam, I am not against what it stands for if it means that society is becoming more concerned with morality and turning against some of the modern ways and Western values which started to take hold ... it is important for the Arab people to rediscover their own traditions and take pride in themselves. Our ways of dressing can even be part of this ... it seems very important when you see how the world has changed for the worse ... we have become used to seeing Western women almost naked in our streets, and if because of this, our women want to cover themselves in the new veil, then it is a welcome protest against indecency and our overwhelming past interest in all things foreign. The women who adopt the new veil do so for a number of reasons, but it should not be a matter of law but one of personal choice ... for instance now it is important to think about how you appear to strangers and to know why you have chosen to safeguard modesty by an extreme measure. I have made my own decision and my personal views may explain why I have started to wear the new style of veil, even though I am an old woman.<sup>37</sup>

Hessini observed a similar spreading of *ḥijāb* when she visited Morocco in 1989. She became intrigued after she noticed the *muhajjabāt* were often the most outspoken/articulate in class and found that that contradicted the Western belief that Muslim women were subservient, so she decided to investigate further. Between 1989 and 1991 she interviewed educated and professional urban women living in Rabat and Casablanca. As in Egypt, the outfit that these women adopted differed from the traditional Moroccan covering.<sup>38</sup> Her interviewees stressed that they had not been taught true Islam, and were part of a movement to try and change society so it better reflected true Islamic principles. These motivations, as in Egypt, signal a relinquishment of the secular path Morocco has been following for the

<sup>37</sup> Watson, 'Women and the Veil', pp.150–151.

<sup>38</sup> Hessini, 'Wearing the Hijab in Contemporary Morocco', p.42.

past decades. The secular paradigm exists uneasily with the indigenuous value system, and the women feel “they have no control over the systems that are shaping their lives and that the influence of Western values is pernicious” (ibid., p.51). The women told Hessini: “only Islam can create a functional society, they asserted repeatedly that capitalism leads to chaos, communism is passé, and that secularism as practised in Tunisia, is against divine will” (ibid., p.49). As one woman, Jamila, put it: “practising the true Islam is the only thing that can save us” (ibid., p.49). Their ideal is the society that existed during the time of the Prophet. Hadija said “the *ḥijāb* is a way for me to retreat from a world that has disappointed me. It’s my own little sanctuary” (ibid., p.50). *Hijāb* is their way of “project[ing] a Muslim identity and refut[ing] an imitation of the West” (ibid., p.51).

### 3. RELIGIOUS

Clearly part and parcel of the political protest against Westernization and secularization is a conviction about Islam as an alternative political, social, and economic system. This international movement, ‘Islam is the solution/alternative’, has included calls for men and women to observe the Islamic dress code. Many women have decided to cover based on these invitations to practice Islam ‘better’. Williams noted in his study of Egyptian women’s re-veiling, that those adopting *al-ziy al-shar‘ī* “claim that its wearing is a religious gesture; [and] that it conforms more to the religious law of Islam than any other available dress.”<sup>39</sup>

Zuhur’s study of Cairene women found that *ḥijāb* and *niqāb* wearers saw covering as a sign of religious identity, as did 40 percent of the uncovered women.<sup>40</sup> The covered women believed covering was an obligatory religious duty (*fard*) for Muslim women, and “[t]he young veiled women especially wanted to make sure that I understood the immutability of the Islamic message; that they did not approve of

<sup>39</sup> Williams, ‘A Return to the Veil’, p.50. Zuhur, *Revealing Reveiling*, saw some young women wearing the headscarf, but also tight jeans and makeup (p.59). The male version was to dress in baggy trousers with loose shirts in off-white, and sandals. They would grow a beard. El-Guindi, ‘Veiling Infitah’, p.474.

<sup>40</sup> Zuhur, *Revealing Reveiling*, p.74. This contrasts with Macleod, *Accommodating Protest* (p.114), and Hoodfar, ‘Return to the Veil’ (p.119), who found only a minority seeing *ḥijāb* as a sign of religiosity.

reform or amendment to particular historical circumstances.”<sup>41</sup> The uncovered women disagreed that covering was obligatory (ibid., p.77), though some indicated that they were thinking seriously about wearing it, some said they would wear it after marriage (ibid., p.59). Some younger uncovered women felt that the *ḥijāb* required some moral preparation. One woman exclaimed: “To wear *ḥijāb*, a woman must behave like an angel” (ibid., p.77).<sup>42</sup>

Zuhur found that age and social class had an important effect on receptivity to the new Islamic message. She found an inverse correlation between covering and age, with the younger women more likely to cover than older, and a direct correlation between covering and social class, the lower income groups being most likely to cover: that is, *ḥijāb* was a way to “escape social and economic limitations in a hierarchical society through a visible levelling process and the wearing of a uniform, and by verbally emphasising social equality” (ibid., p.13). She noted, however, that existing theories that explained covering solely by referring to socio-economic category were not adequate, since they could not explain the appeal of *ḥijāb* to upper-middle class or elite women (ibid., p.61).

In Morocco, Hessini’s interviewees mentioned similar notions. The women whom she interviewed stressed their adoption of *ḥijāb* as a religious choice, an expression of adhering to “true Islam.” Sou’al: “My mother has always worn the veil, but she knows nothing about Islam. She wore the veil out of tradition, whereas I wear it out of conviction.”<sup>43</sup> Wafa: “Women who wear *ḥijāb* are ‘true believers,’ whereas women who wear another type of veil may do so out of habit” (ibid., p.42). All her interviewees stated they had not been taught proper Islam either by their parents or their society, so there is a sense that these women feel they are part of a new movement of people practicing “true Islam,” believing, like Jamila, that “practicing the true Islam is the only thing that can save us,” and hoping to be models for others to follow (ibid., p.49). Houria: “It is important that women who wear the *ḥijāb* pursue advanced studies and obtain high positions [as doctors, lawyers, etc.]. If we do so, we will project a good image

<sup>41</sup> Zuhur, *Revealing Reveiling*, p.75.

<sup>42</sup> Egyptian pronunciation of the Arabic ‘j’ as ‘g’ has been ignored. (Ed.)

<sup>43</sup> Hessini, ‘Wearing the Hijab in Contemporary Morocco’, p.42.

and set a good example for others. We will show others how to practise the real Islam. I would like to influence others into wearing the *ḥijāb*” (ibid., p.47).

The appearance of the new *ḥijāb* in the Middle East has surprised some observers, but its appearance in Indonesia is even more dramatic, because there is no tradition of covering there. (Only old women who may also have been on hajj, the pilgrimage to Makkah, tended to cover).<sup>44</sup> In 1993 Brenner interviewed thirteen urban, educated women in their twenties in Java to try and understand why they were adopting the new *ḥijāb*. She found that the women were experiencing a “conversion” where they came to believe that good Muslim women should be covering their hair. They believed that those opposed to the new *ḥijāb* (devout Muslims included) were not properly aware of Qur’anic injunctions to cover. The new *ḥijāb* is criticized by parents, husbands, and friends, for whom it “conjures up a picture of fundamentalist extremism that is as culturally dissonant for them as it is for many Westerners” (ibid., p.674). Not being part of ancestral traditions, which are very important in Indonesia, the new *ḥijāb* is seen as a foreign, Arab import, out of sync with local customs.

### 3.1 *Make Society Better*

Along with the themes of rejecting Westernization and secularization, and adopting Islam as an alternative, is the pervasive one that women who don *ḥijāb* feel that they are being proactive about improving society. In this view, *ḥijāb* ideally represents a leveling of the social classes, and Zuhur argues that in Egypt, the flexibility/adaptability of the Islamist message enables women of differing socio-economic classes similarly to adopt a new ideology.<sup>45</sup> Williams found that women felt that they were wearing *ḥijāb* as a way to remedy society, to stop it from falling apart, to stop *inḥilāl* (dissoluteness, disintegration):

There are so many problems in Egypt today that we don’t know how to solve. It seems that only God can solve them ... we have problems

<sup>44</sup> S. Brenner, ‘Reconstructing Self and Society: Javanese Muslim Women and the Veil’, *American Ethnologist*, 23, 4 (1996), p.674.

<sup>45</sup> Zuhur, *Revealing Reveiling*, p.2. Zuhur found this ideal contradicted by the Yves St. Laurent line of headscarves available for purchase. See also Hessini, ‘Wearing the Hijab in Contemporary Morocco’, p.50.

of housing, budgets, schools, transportation, electricity, gas and water, and the telephone doesn't work. When we put on *zayy shar'i*, we can feel that at least here is one problem we can help solve for our family and society by ourselves. At least we've done something.<sup>46</sup>

The Moroccan women whom Hessini interviewed also saw *hijāb* as a sign of an attempt to improve society, to make a more egalitarian, just society.<sup>47</sup> As in Egypt the new *hijāb* is not like the traditional Moroccan veils which used to show class distinctions. Now the *hijāb* stands as a “unifying symbol shared by Muslim women.”<sup>48</sup> Nadia: “My religion saved me. In a world where there is no justice, I now believe in something that is just. I now have something I can count on.”<sup>49</sup>

Brenner argues that the young Indonesians' decision to cover is part of the broader Islamic movement in Indonesia that is putting Islam forward as an alternative to Westernization and secularization. She finds the movement to be thoroughly modern, in that it represents a break with the past and is forward-looking:

As a symbol of the modern Islamic movement, the veil represents for some Javanese Muslims both self-reconstruction and the reconstruction of society through individual and collective self-discipline. The notion of reconstruction here does not mean reviving the indigenous past, it means tearing down and building something new, distancing oneself from local history in order to create a more perfect future for oneself and other members of society. The goal is to effect religious and social change through the individual and collective actions of members of the Islamic community. In covering the sins of the past, so to speak, veiling here signifies a new historical consciousness and a new way of life, weighed down neither by Javanese tradition nor by centuries of colonial rule, defined neither by Western capitalism and consumerism nor by the dictates of the Indonesian political economy. It stands for a new morality and a new discipline, whether personal, social, or political – in short, a new Islamic modernity.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Williams, 'A Return to the Veil', p.54.

<sup>47</sup> Hessini, 'Wearing the Hijab in Contemporary Morocco', p.50.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., pp.41–42.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p.51.

<sup>50</sup> Brenner, 'Reconstructing Self and Society', p.690.

## 4. CONTINUED ACCESS TO THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Not all of the women who have started to cover in recent years have done so out of religious conviction. Hoodfar notes that her interviewees had not become more religious after covering, and only one woman in her sample prayed and she had prayed for four years before adopting *ḥijāb*. The number of women in Macleod's survey who prayed regularly was a "tiny minority."<sup>51</sup> And the number of women who discussed *ḥijāb* as a religious form of dress was small.<sup>52</sup> These women have found that *ḥijāb* facilitates access and movement in the public sphere: seeking employment; gaining respect; and combating male harassment.

4.1 *Continued Access to Employment*

The Egyptian women in these studies who started wearing the new *ḥijāb* in the mid-1980s are usually low-income first-or second-generation urban dwellers, possibly the first women in their family to be educated. They find themselves congregated in overstuffed government offices with promotion based on a system that does not take performance into account.<sup>53</sup> Egypt's economic crisis has hit these women and their families hard, their income has eroded with inflation, and the cost of employment has rendered holding a job not always a financial gain. Transport, childcare and clothing costs absorb much of a woman's salary. As Hoodfar notes, under these circumstances, low-income women have a "vested interest in reinforcing the existing sex roles and sexual division of labour, while at the same time trying to minimise the constraints that such ideology places on them" because they can then claim their Islamic right for the husband to maintain them, regardless of their own income.<sup>54</sup> Thus adopting *ḥijāb* is a way these women solve the dilemma of keeping gains from modernization (working for wages), while keeping at the same time the benefits of their traditional Islamic rights as wife/mother.<sup>55</sup> Sommayya was having trouble with a fiancé and his family

<sup>51</sup> Hoodfar, 'Return to the Veil', p.119; Macleod, *Accommodating Protest*, p.110.

<sup>52</sup> Macleod, *Accommodating Protest*, p.114.

<sup>53</sup> Hoodfar, 'Return to the Veil', p.119.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p.110.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p.111; Macleod, *Accommodating Protest*, p.121.



who did not want her to work after marriage. She solved the problem by wearing *ḥijāb*:

if I have only two sets of clothes I can look smart at all times because nobody expects *muhaggabat* (the veiled ones) to wear new clothes every day. This will save me a lot of money. It will also prevent people from talking about me or questioning my honour or my husband's. In this way I have solved all the problems, and my husband's family are very happy that he is marrying a *muhaggaba*.<sup>56</sup>

Macleod's conclusions are in line with Hoodfar's reading of the situation for lower middle-class Cairene women, and her respondents make statements similar to those quoted here from Hoodfar's study. For Macleod, the new "veiling is a protest of an erosion of power women experience at the intersection of household and workplace, and an attempt to maintain the gains women have made with the opened political space of the employment experience."<sup>57</sup> She sees it as an attempt to recoup the lost dignity of the wife/mother role that they "have somehow been cornered into abandoning" owing to their economic need to work. *Hijāb* solves the tension of the work versus household dilemma.<sup>58</sup> All the scholars found that

veiling is primarily women's idea and women's decision; the new movement is a voluntary movement initiated and perpetuated by women. Its popularity rests in this ability to resolve the question of whether women can work outside the home, yet resolve it in a way that satisfies the economic values of lower-middle-class families and pacifies disturbed gender beliefs.<sup>59</sup>

*Hijāb* circumvents their cultural beliefs that a good Muslim woman should not work, because as a *muhajjabah* the woman is saying that she is a good Muslim woman, but forced to work in an effort to help her family, a socially laudable goal.<sup>60</sup> Section C will highlight the distance between this scholarly perspective and the Western popular cultural notion that 'veiling' is spreading via male fundamentalist coercion.

<sup>56</sup> Hoodfar, 'Return to the Veil', p.114.

<sup>57</sup> Macleod, *Accommodating Protest*, pp.136–137.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.132, 136, 121. <sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p.121.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*; Williams, 'A Return to the Veil', p.54; El-Guindi, 'Veiling Infatih', p.481.

Moroccan women are also using the *ḥijāb* as a guarantor of their continued access to the public realm, although the professional women of Hessini's study are not facing the same economic dilemma as low-income Cairenes. For the Moroccan women, *ḥijāb* is seen more as a way to facilitate women's movement outside the home, rather than solving the work versus household crisis. Theirs represents a more radical challenge than that of the Egyptian women because it challenges the notion that a 'good Muslim woman' should not work. Remember, the women said that they were practicing the 'real' Islam. As Nadia said, "Wearing the *ḥijāb* shows that women have a role in the society. Of course I am for women who work outside the home. If not I wouldn't be for the *ḥijāb*, because inside their households, women don't wear the *ḥijāb*!"<sup>61</sup>

#### 4.2 *Gain Respect*

The issue of female employment is still an area of hot debate in the Muslim world, with many holding the view that women should not work because being so much in the public realm compromises their modesty and honor. The 'career' woman, the dominant role model for the élite, middle-class, and some members of the *petit-bourgeoisie*, has also not been an attractive one to other low-income groups. Sommayya's dilemma (the Egyptian woman mentioned above) was that none of the women in her fiancé's family had been educated or worked, and they were worried that she would not fulfill her wifely duties properly. *Ḥijāb* signaled to them that she was a respectable woman who would care for and respect her husband and home, despite her unconventional economic behavior.<sup>62</sup>

Other Egyptian women have similar stories. Soheir, a single woman who had to work because her father had died when she was young, found that her job kept her out late at night and people treated her badly. She started wearing *ḥijāb*, which signaled to people that she

<sup>61</sup> Hessini, 'Wearing the Hijab in Contemporary Morocco', p.47.

<sup>62</sup> See also Rugh, *Reveal and Conceal*, pp.122-123 and Sawzan El-Messiri, 'Self-Images of Traditional Urban Women in Cairo', in *Women in the Muslim World*, (eds.), N. Keddie and L. Beck (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), p.532: The *bint al-balad* "considers the government employee conceited, superficial and neglectful of her wifely duties. This explains why she spends her salary only on selfish and superficial pleasures."

was a respectable woman and had a legitimate reason for being out late. "Since then I have had more peace than ever before."<sup>63</sup> Now she concentrates on studying so as to achieve her goal of becoming a white-collar worker. Samiha's family objected to her attending university, afraid that her behavior would undermine her and her family's honor. She took up *hijāb* and the objections disappeared. "By adopting the veil she demonstrated that she was committed to protecting her honour. Thus, there was no longer any reason to prevent her from going to university or from teaching, both of which are socially legitimate goals." Her family and her neighbors think highly of her.<sup>64</sup> This is akin to women in the West's adoption of a female version of the male suit in order to gain respect and be treated as an equal by men in the office and professional environment.<sup>65</sup>

#### 4.3 *Combating Male Harassment*

A common theme about the positive aspect of *hijāb* as noted by those who wear it is that it means women are treated for "their personality and their minds," not as sex objects, nor are they available to be judged by their physical appearance, dress, or jewelry.<sup>66</sup> The *hijāb* takes away that sexual ambiguity/tension that exists between the sexes. As one woman told Mohsen in her 1977 interview:

Before I wore the veil, I always worried what people might think when they saw me speak to a man in the cafeteria or outside the class. I even wondered what the man himself thought of me when I spoke with him. Since I wore the veil, I don't worry anymore. No one is going to accuse me of immorality or think that we were exchanging love vows. I feel much more comfortable now and do not hesitate, as I did before, to study with men in my class or even walk with them to the train station.<sup>67</sup>

Male harassment of women in the streets, on buses, in the workplace, etc., is a widespread behavior the world over. Some of the

<sup>63</sup> Hoodfar, 'Return to the Veil', p.118.      <sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p.119.

<sup>65</sup> Macleod, *Accommodating Protest*, p.181.

<sup>66</sup> Hessini, 'Wearing the Hijab in Contemporary Morocco', pp.50-51.

<sup>67</sup> Safa K. Mohsen, 'New Images, Old Reflections: Working Middle-Class Women in Egypt', in *Women and the Family in the Middle East: New Voices of Change*, (ed.), Elizabeth Warnock Fernea (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1985), p.69.

women whom I interviewed for Chapter Two mentioned that a feature of *ḥijāb* which they enjoyed was the increased respect and good treatment they received from men, even non-Muslim men. Women in other countries also mentioned this aspect of wearing *ḥijāb* as a positive feature that they enjoyed.<sup>68</sup> They find that the *ḥijāb* succeeds in having men keep their distance because it creates a space cushion around a woman, even for a non-Muslim man who has no understanding of the reasoning behind *ḥijāb*. In the Muslim context “wearing a veil represents purity of intention and behavior. It is a symbol affirming that ‘I’m clean’ and ‘I’m not available’”.<sup>69</sup> The effect of this personal space barrier gives women more freedom to travel through the public realm in peace, and in those Muslim countries that have an ideology of honor, husbands’ jealousy, and parents’ concerns are vitiated by *ḥijāb*, giving the women more freedom to move around.<sup>70</sup> As Hoodfar points out, this is a challenge to the traditional Islamic and Western association of veiling with seclusion.<sup>71</sup> Women who adopt *al-ziy al-shar’i* are severing Islamic law from customary practice, and demonstrating that they can participate in public life, while maintaining the Islamic dress code.

Wearing *ḥijāb* can give a woman a sense of power and hence self-esteem. Zuhur noted that “denying men the ability to comment on their figures or silencing the ‘eyes of wolves’ gave the younger respondents some satisfaction.”<sup>72</sup> Halah told Hoodfar that covering had helped her be more assertive in the office:

I used to dream of the day I would finish my studies and work to earn enough money to buy the nice clothes I never had because we were poor. When finally I had a good wardrobe and managed to look nice after years of waiting I had to take up the veil. I did it because in the office men teased us women and expected no answering back. If we answered they would start to think we were after an affair or something. That was difficult. All my life I always returned any remark a man made to me without being accused of immorality. In the office,

<sup>68</sup> Hoodfar, ‘Return to the Veil’, p.116; Hessini, ‘Wearing the Hijab in Contemporary Morocco’, p.53; Williams, ‘A Return to the Veil’, p.53.

<sup>69</sup> Hessini, ‘Wearing the Hijab in Contemporary Morocco’, p.53.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p.54; Givechian, ‘Cultural Changes in Male–Female Relations’, pp.528 & 530.

<sup>71</sup> Hoodfar, ‘Return to the Veil’, p.121.

<sup>72</sup> Zuhur, *Revealing Reveiling*, p.102.

whenever I would do that, my husband would get upset because he would hear what other men said amongst themselves [he was her colleague too]. But my veiled colleagues were always outspoken and joked with our male colleagues, and they were never taken wrong or treated disrespectfully. So I took up the veil. It has made my life easier and I feel freer to answer back, express my opinion, argue or even chit-chat with men. My husband is also much happier.<sup>73</sup>

Givechian concludes similarly for Iran, that many working women are pleased with wearing *hijāb* because not only has it saved them from the expense and hassle of trying to dress fashionably, the *hijāb* can also “materialise their abilities and potential, without too much worry about their clothing or appearance:”

... The unveiling of women ... imprisoned women in their look and clothing thus exaggerating their ascribed status as women, [while] the veiling of women has given rise to expectation of achievement and work. It has freed women from fascination of men with their look and also has forced them to compete if they are to enjoy their rights as human beings. The aggressiveness and professionalities of many of the new veiled women generation are a pleasant welcome to the passive and patronized unveiled women of modernised generation.<sup>74</sup>

Western women often bridle at the suggestion that in order to counteract male harassment, women have to cover up. Certainly it is unfair to have women cover, while not tackling the issue of male harassment. Zuhur reports that leaders of the Islamic movement in Egypt, as well as many of the young women she interviewed, are aware of the problem of male harassment and are working to eradicate it as well. They believe that men can be reeducated as “long as the family remains strong enough to inculcate a stronger sense of moral values in its sons.”<sup>75</sup> The prevalence of sexual harassment in the workplace in the West suggests that such reeducation can be a long time coming. In the meantime, for many Muslims, covering is an acceptable strategy to counteract such male behavior.

<sup>73</sup> Hoodfar, ‘Return to the Veil’, p.117. See also Mohsen, ‘New Images, Old Reflections’, p.69.

<sup>74</sup> Givechian, ‘Cultural Changes in Male–Female Relations’, p.530.

<sup>75</sup> Zuhur, *Revealing Reveiling*, p.130.

## 5. EXPRESSION OF PERSONAL IDENTITY

Another reason for wearing *ḥijāb*, especially for Muslim women in the West, is to make a statement of personal identity. This is what Cayer found in her interviews of first- and second-generation Indo-Pakistani Muslim women living in Toronto. Many of the second-generation women had chosen to wear *ḥijāb* against the will of their families (some first-generation women started covering in Canada against the will of their husbands), and against the prevalent view of the West that their *ḥijāb* was a sign of oppression. They were also protesting against the Indo-Pakistani culture of their parents, which the second-generation women viewed as more or less un-Islamic,<sup>76</sup> most particularly the practice of forced marriages, and the focus on the beauty of the wife as an important feature of her ‘marriageability’ (p.184). “By wearing hijab second generation women are stating that they are no longer accountable to the first generation for their status and position, but rather, only to Allah ... hijab is their resistance to first generation control over them and their identity” (ibid., p.169).

The sense of needing to assert one’s Islamic identity in a non-Muslim environment holds true in Britain and France as well, as the experiences of Nadia and Maryam respectively, exemplify. Nadia is a second-generation British Asian woman who started covering when she was sixteen:

My cultural background and my family’s roots are in another part of the world. These things are very important to me and make me feel special. It is important to me not to lose these parts of my life. My decision to wear the veil also ties into my feeling of coming from this different kind of background. We are a British family but because of Islam and our links with Pakistan we have different values and traditions from the families of my non-Muslim friends ... I would feel completely exposed without my veil. It is liberating to have the freedom of movement and to be able to communicate with people without being on show. It’s what you say that is important, not what you look like. My non-Muslim friends are curious about what it feels like to wear the veil. They ask what it’s like to be invisible. But in my experience it can be just the opposite if you are the only person in a

<sup>76</sup> Cayer, *Hijab*, pp.77 and 113.

room full of students wearing western dress. The point is that it's what wearing a veil feels like for the girl that is important, not what kind of veil it is, or what she looks like. For me it's important to have a kind of uniform appearance which means that I don't draw attention to myself or my figure. At the same time wearing the veil makes me feel special, it's a kind of badge of identity and a sign that my religion is important to me.<sup>77</sup>

Maryam's story reflects several of the themes already mentioned about why women choose to cover, but since she is an Algerian immigrant living in France, it is personal identity in a non-Muslim environment which overshadows the other reasons she likes *ḥijāb*. Maryam works in a textile factory:

I did not think to wear the veil as a younger woman at home in Algiers, it was not important then. At that time my mother, my aunts and sisters wore a western style of clothes and did not cover their hair or face. Most women did not think about *hijab* twenty years ago. Times have changed a lot of things in my life, and all Muslim women have had to face numerous changes, especially women like me who end up living in a Western country. They were blind and deaf, not realizing how dangerous the world was becoming, how politicians and the wealthy classes were becoming greedy for money, corrupt and westernized ... Immorality and corruption had a serious impact on poorer families like my own and on the health of the whole society. But thankfully we woke up after we saw what happened in Egypt and experienced the aftermath of the war with Israel and other conflicts with the West. Then there was the big example of Iran and the people's struggle to throw out their corrupt ruler, rid the country of all the ill-effects of Western influences and make a better society. These things all had the result of making me more aware of the importance of Islam and my conduct and duty as a mother and wife for the future of the next generation... When my husband and I came to France we faced a lot of hardship. When money was short because things did not turn out as we had expected I had to find employment ... there was no question that I would not wear a veil ... it is difficult enough to live in a big foreign city without having the extra burden of being molested in the street because you are a woman. It is important to me to keep my appearance private and not to be stared at by strange men and

<sup>77</sup> Watson, 'Women and the Veil', p.148. Nadia is the first woman in the family to have a post-secondary education. She is currently studying medicine at university.

foreigners. My husband was happy with my decision to take the veil. Once I am dressed in this way it makes it easier for him. He doesn't have to worry about my journey to and from work and being outside without him. There is nothing for him to be concerned about when I am veiled and it allows me more freedom and shows that I am a woman concerned about her modesty. The experience of being in a foreign place is unpleasant and difficult, and wearing the veil eases some of the problems. It is not frightening to walk through the streets for one thing. Being *hijab* also makes it clear that the person is Muslim and that is also important to me. We cannot forget that we have a different way of life, one which has different concerns and priorities with regard to morality from those of the French people. Sometimes wearing the veil means that you attract the attention of the French people who hate Islam, but experiences like this make me more proud of being an Arab and a Muslim ... you also feel safe when wearing the veil in any kind of situation – it is a protection as well as a sign of love of Islam.<sup>78</sup>

Like Muslims in the West who cover as an expression of personal identity, many Saudi women wear the veil for the same reason. Ramazani's interviews with Saudi women in 1985 found that "one encounters American-educated Saudi women who declare that they wear the veil with pride, as it is a manifestation of their native traditions and culture."<sup>79</sup> AlMunajjed's interviews confirm this view:

A 35-year-old teacher, married with two children and holding a BA in education from the United States, said: "Yes, I wear the veil out of conviction." "On what do you base your conviction?" I asked. "I am attached to my traditions. Wearing a veil is part of one's identity of being a Saudi woman. It is a definite proof of one's identification with the norms and values of the Saudi culture ... and I will teach my daughter also to wear it."<sup>80</sup>

For one 29-year-old single woman who has spent most of her life in Europe, gaining an MA in social sciences in London, the veil is not a sign of oppression: "I think that it is very wrong to believe that the veil for the woman of Saudi Arabia is a sign of oppression or retardation or

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., pp.149–150.

<sup>79</sup> Nesta Ramazani, 'The Veil – Piety or Protest?' *Journal of South-Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, 7, 2 (Winter 1983), p.28.

<sup>80</sup> M. AlMunajjed, *Women in Saudi Arabia Today* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), p.47.



subjugation as the West believes ... and it does not mean at all that we hold a secondary status as all the Westerners want to believe. These are all false assumptions built against us.” She added: “I wear the veil, because for me it is a sign of personal and religious choice. It is because I lived in the West, and I saw all the corruption and immorality in their, as they call it “liberated society” of illicit sex and drug abuse, that now I am more convinced of our local traditions and I am more attached to them. I want to preserve my Arab-Islamic identity, and for me, this is a way to show it.”

### 5.1 *Social Status*

Personal identity is asserted in another way: as a way to declare one’s position in the social hierarchy. This is how covering has traditionally been used, with different social classes using different styles, patterns, and materials. The new covering initially was a rupture in this kind of social meaning since it was a sort of uniform, stressing the egalitarian aims of the Islamic movement. Perhaps it is inevitable that as covering becomes more widespread people will use it as a way to distinguish themselves from others.<sup>81</sup> Macleod suggests that in Egypt the new *ḥijāb* is partly an expression of the lower-middle classes’ attempt to differentiate themselves from the lower classes in the hopes of being ‘middle-class’. As one woman told her: “This dress is not the same as those *baladi* women wear! You see the way the scarf comes over my head, and the pin I use to hold it on. And also the soft colours and material. This *ḥijāb* is not the same at all; this is the dress that women of the middle-level, the middle-class, wear.”<sup>82</sup> Or, as Hoda told Hoodfar:

It is terrible that we had to move to this area [a cheap neighbourhood on the outskirts of the city] because we couldn’t afford to stay in a better area. After all these years of studying I had to move to an even worse area with all these *falabeen* and illiterate women...it is much better that I am veiled because if I wore European clothes to work, they would accuse me of being loose ... even in the neighbourhood I would

<sup>81</sup> Evidence for this came from the Egyptian studies, so there is no way of knowing how it applies to other countries. Certainly this use of *ḥijāb* contravenes the Moroccan women’s statements as well as the earlier egalitarian stress of the new veiling in Egypt. El-Guindi, ‘Veiling Infatih’, p.476.

<sup>82</sup> Macleod, *Accommodating Protest*, p.134.

never go out looking the way they do. Wearing the veil makes them respect me and accept that I am not one of them.<sup>83</sup>

Wearing the new *ḥijāb* as a mark of middle-class status represents a dramatic change from earlier decades. Then, middle-class status was achieved by wearing Western dress, that is, skirt, blouse, two-piece suits, knit dresses, stockings, high-heeled shoes, and purse; for men, shirts, pants, suits, socks, and shoes.<sup>84</sup> In a telling moment, an Egyptian University Dean refused a request by Islamist students that they be allowed to wear the traditional folk *jallābiyyah* on campus. The Dean “explained that galabiyas were not appropriate dress for the educational environment ... Foreign dress is believed to reflect the greater sophistication of its wearer, who has had his mind opened by education.”<sup>85</sup>

#### 6. CUSTOM

Many in the West believe Muslim women cover because they are forced to by their culture. While this describes only Iran since the 1979 revolution and Afghanistan since the Taliban, many believe that all Muslim societies are the same, so that where covering is a customary practice it is seen as “sinister pressure” (a phrase used by one of my university professors). However, this is to mistake a coercive environment with the normal processes of socialization that exist in any society about proper dress. Even in the West, where there is a great deal of freedom about what to wear, there are standards about clothing to which people are socialized: jeans are accepted attire for weekend wear, but not appropriate for an office or a formal dinner dance, where other kinds of dress are required.

The belief that a culture exerts “sinister pressure” on its women to wear *ḥijāb* also ignores the fact that in these societies people are well aware of the debates surrounding the practices of covering: clothing is not worn unreflectively. Makhlof’s study of the upper and middle strata of the inhabitants of Sana’a (the capital of Yemen) provides a good illustration of this. At the time of her fieldwork in 1974/1976, the veil was a matter of national discussion and debate. Makhlof

<sup>83</sup> Hoodfar, ‘Return to the Veil’, p.120.

<sup>84</sup> Rugh, *Reveal and Conceal*, p.118.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p.119. No date given. Her research was conducted during the mid to late 1970s and early 1980s.

found that typically a young girl would start to veil (*niqāb*) around the age of 10. Different social classes wore different materials and styles, and foreigners, rural women, low-class women, or Yemeni women born in East Africa did not veil. In addition, the women of Sana'a who wore *niqāb* at home would not wear it when they travelled overseas.<sup>86</sup>

At the time when Makhlouf was in Sana'a (then the capital of North Yemen), there was a national debate about women and Islam, major daily newspapers promoted national and religious ideology that women were citizens, that Islam gave Muslim women rights and duties, and that they should be educated and contribute to national development.<sup>87</sup> The veil (*niqāb*) was part of these debates. Makhlouf concluded that people's attitudes towards *niqāb* were ambivalent. Both the men and women of Sana'a were aware of the "contingency of the practice," since the veil was not worn by all women, but none of Makhlouf's informants viewed the veil as a

cause or manifestation of the female's inferior social status. The women did not seem to think in these terms, even when directly questioned about the idea. Those who disapproved of veiling did not relate their position to the idea of the veil as a symbol of inferiority. They objected to the veil because they considered it cumbersome, meaningless, and an obstacle to sincere interaction between the sexes.

Other women whom she interviewed were in favor of the veil, saying that it protected them "against the looks of men." The President of the Yemeni Woman's Association, who had studied in Cairo, wore *niqāb* and said that the veil "still provided some protection in a traditional society and that the costs of taking it off would be too high." She saw the veil as secondary for the moment, and considered other issues such as early marriage, high fertility, illiteracy, and lack of any activity outside housework and *tafrīta*<sup>88</sup> as more significant.

<sup>86</sup> Although Makhlouf contemplated covering at one point, she was discouraged by the women who laughed at first, and then told her seriously, "No, you are a foreigner, you should not do that, people would laugh at you". Makhlouf, *Changing Veils*, pp.37–38.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p.91.

<sup>88</sup> *Tafrīta*: a regular female social gathering. It is an afternoon visit, where women congregate in someone's house to sing, chat, eat, dance, and chew *qāt* (a small shrub, whose leaves are chewed to produce a state of mental alertness, wakefulness, and a pleasant stimulation of the senses). *Qāt* chewing is a subject of great controversy (*ibid.*, pp.22, 48).

Makhlouf found that social pressure to cover the face was great, as one woman who had tried to uncover had not lasted more than a year. Sana'a was not yet ready for women to uncover their faces, as another woman said, "Men generalise about women and if one unveiled woman [*mutabarrija* or *fatsha*] is dirty and behaves improperly, they would think that all unveiled women are the same. So when all women unveil, we shall unveil too, but this will take time" (ibid., p.37). The Head of the Nursing School (a woman) pointed out: "Men themselves are undecided about the veil: some may agree in theory that it should not exist, but when it comes to women of their own family, they enforce the traditional norm." Nevertheless, women also enforce traditional norms. When Makhlouf asked "whether some girls did in fact take off their veils, some of my informants replied that this was impossible, or if it really happened, then the girls must be 'mad' [*majnūn*],<sup>89</sup> or stupid [*mā fi 'aql*]."<sup>90</sup>

With the revolution in 1962, and the impact of television since 1975, Sana'a society underwent some rapid changes. Makhlouf noted the changing practices of the veil. For instance, some girls' schools may have had a male teacher before whom the girls would not wear *niqāb*. At Sana'a University she saw veiled women chatting with male students or studying with them. Breaches and manipulations of the veil increased, she thought, as more and more girls walked in the streets with the veil lifted, their faces covered only by the *lithma*.<sup>91</sup> In addition, a new type of outdoor garment appeared, replacing the *sharsaf* and *sitāra*:<sup>92</sup> a *balto* (adaptation of the Russian word for coat),

<sup>89</sup> Literally, 'possessed by jinn.' Jinn are believed to be creatures invisible to the human eye. They, like human beings, have free will. Some are Muslim and some are not. The devil is a jinn.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p.37. *Mā fi 'aql*: does mean 'stupid', though in a specific way. Here it means that she "has no social sense," that is, she lacks understanding of her place in society and the propriety that she must exercise at all times so as to avoid offending others and making them feel uncomfortable and embarrassed. The same description is used of men who behave badly towards others – a socially relevant 'other' is always implied in this phrase. (Janice Boddy, editorial comment.)

<sup>91</sup> *Lithma*: the indoor veil, a brightly colored thin material or muslin. Makhlouf, *Changing Veils*, p.30.

<sup>92</sup> *Sitāra*: a large piece of cotton material printed in red, blue and green, and covering the head and body. To this is added a piece of ornamented black batik covering the face transparent enough to let the women see through. Worn mainly by lower social classes. *Sharsaf*: consists of a long pleated skirt worn over the dress, a waist length cape covering the head and shoulders, and a piece of thin muslim to cover the face. Worn mainly by the upper social classes.

which is a long-sleeved ankle-length coat worn over trousers, with a scarf on the head. Even traditional Sana'a society conceded that, in theory, the *balto* was in conformity with the requirements of modesty (ibid., pp.67–68). Several mothers who were strict about their own veiling said that their daughters would not veil when 10, including one mother who was the wife of a prominent tribal sheikh (ibid., p.77).

Other countries where women cover owing to custom and tradition have seen similar changing practices over veiling. Wikan's study of Suhari women in Oman, based on fieldwork conducted in 1974 and 1975–76, found a debate over the need or not for Suhari women to continue to wear their unique face covering, the *burqa*<sup>c</sup>.<sup>93</sup> Suhari Arab women usually assumed the *burqa*<sup>c</sup> upon marriage (around early teens), and only those of very high or very low status or of non-Suhari origin did not wear the *burqa*<sup>c</sup>. Some Suharis said that when "Sohar becomes modern with electricity and a *korniche* [a paved road that runs by the sea], the *burqa*<sup>c</sup> will be discarded because old-fashioned [*sic*]." Many agree that the wives of tomorrow (schoolgirls of today) will not come to wear it, "for they will work and earn a living."<sup>94</sup> And just like during colonial times, sometimes their husbands force these changes upon women. One Suhari man, Ali, compelled his wife to stop wearing the *burqa*<sup>c</sup> with the threat of divorce. "In this he is representative of only the most modern of Sohari men at present. Yet he may have marked a path for others in the future" (ibid., p.98).

Saudi Arabia is another country in which *niqāb* is traditional dress. As a 34-year-old uneducated woman told AlMunajjed: "I don't just wear the veil ... I was born in it, and I grew up with it ... It is all a matter of customs and traditions."<sup>95</sup> The Western media usually present the view that all Saudi women cover unwillingly, but empirical fieldwork suggests the situation is more complex. A Saudi woman doing her Ph.D. in anthropology at Oxford remarked to Alireza for her *National Geographic* article in 1985, "I'm a Saudi woman. I like my veil."<sup>96</sup>

<sup>93</sup> *Burqa*<sup>c</sup>: leather mask shaped to cover a woman's forehead, nose, cheekbones and mouth, leaving other parts of the face visible.

<sup>94</sup> Wikan, *Behind the Veil*, p.108. <sup>95</sup> AlMunajjed, *Women in Saudi Arabia Today*, p.47.

<sup>96</sup> M. Alireza, 'Women of Saudi Arabia', *Nat. Geographic*, 172, 4 (Oct. 1987), p.445.

Saudi Arabia's "modernization" has been quite different from that of most Muslim countries in that the wholesale imitation of the West has never been a state policy. Women's education expanded in the 1960s and a growing female-only employment sector developed. There are women-only banks and colleges/universities, and women run private businesses such as real estate, restaurants, hairdressing and beauty salons, and boutiques. The Head of a Teachers' Training College in Riyadh with a Ph.D. from Michigan State University "smile[d]" when Ramazani "asked whether she [found] wearing the veil a hindrance. She point[ed] out that she [was] pursuing a challenging and fulfilling career, that she [was] not actually veiled 'on the job', and that obviously the veil (hanging on a coatrack in a corner of her spacious office) has been no hindrance."<sup>97</sup> Hence, Ramazani concludes for these women, "the veil, as such, is not the issue. As long as women have access to education, and can have a choice of working or not working, they have no objections to wearing the veil."<sup>98</sup>

However, as in Oman and Yemen, veiling is a matter of great debate in Saudi Arabia, and veiling practices are undergoing gradual changes. A 40-year-old woman with elementary-level schooling told Al-Munajjed: "I don't like it [the veil] at all, and I wish the custom would change ... I think that the custom was established here in Saudi Arabia during the Ottoman occupation ... I hope my daughter will not have to wear it, but society still demands it."<sup>99</sup> Altorki, on the other hand, found in her study of thirteen elite families in Jeddah, that women veil their faces less and less.<sup>100</sup> She believes that this is the result of a combination of travel abroad, education for men and women, younger women's greater autonomy in marriages, and the

<sup>97</sup> Ramazani, 'The Veil', pp.24-25.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., pp.23-25. One friend who went to high school in Saudi Arabia, and who covers in Canada, but not her face, said she did not mind wearing the face-veil while in Saudi Arabia. She said it was light enough to allow the air to circulate. Another friend who went to high school there, and who now works as a doctor in Canada, said that she feels more constrained in Canadian society, where the mixed-sexed institutions cramped her more than the female-only institutions did in Saudi Arabia.

<sup>99</sup> AlMunajjed, *Women in Saudi Arabia Today*, p.48.

<sup>100</sup> Based on field research conducted in 1971, 1974-1976 and off and on until 1984. Soraya Altorki, *Women in Saudi Arabia: Ideology and Behavior Among the Elite* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p.1.

move away from extended families residing in the same house to more nuclear families. In mixed gatherings of “‘close friends’ [a] *haute couture* dress of ‘decent cut’ is acceptable by those whose very presence at the gathering indicates their liberal view of such matters, although that view does not extend beyond the confines of the shared privacy which the occasion provides” (ibid., p.37). In the traditional marketplace the veil is still worn, but elsewhere, especially in the Western-style shopping centres, no *niqāb* is worn. Unmarried women continued to observe the veil strictly, but Altorki found that even for them the rules were relaxing. Women continue to wear *ḥijāb*.<sup>101</sup> It is also interesting to note that Altorki found that “In all families studied, religious fastidiousness has declined over the three generations” (ibid., p.41). Only the older generation of men and women performed all five obligatory daily prayers, with the younger generation of men and women praying seldom, or only during Ramadan. Men’s drinking, once considered “a tabu that must be observed by men in private and public” is now condemned only if it is “excessive” (ibid., p.15). This reinforces the point made in Section Four, that covering is not always worn out of religious conviction.

The national debates in Yemen, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and other Muslim countries about the practices of veiling indicate that people are aware of why they do what they do. Even if a woman chooses to wear a *niqāb* in a society in which this is the expected dress, this is not evidence of unnatural or ominous pressure. In the West, teenagers wear jeans. However, wearing jeans is a kind of uniform for teenagers, a “must have” item to be with the “in crowd,” and yet, no one would suggest that a teenager who “chooses” to wear jeans under these conditions is doing so because of “sinister pressure.”

### 6.1 *Honoring Custom*

One aspect of covering due to custom that I should highlight is many women’s sense of respect and honor for the tradition of covering. In choosing to continue their culture’s practice of covering, the women derive pride from honoring the family’s and the culture’s traditional practices. This notion of honoring family and tradition is not familiar

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., pp.36–38, 68–69. I think that this was changing by the late 1990s, with the emphasis again on *niqāb*.

to many in the West, especially as its liberal culture emphasizes questioning and challenging tradition and family in the name of individual autonomy, more than it emphasizes honoring it. However, the quotations from the Saudi women, included in Section Five above, show the women's sense of pride in honoring Saudi customs as well as showing that they wore the veil as a statement of personal identity. The two Saudi women quoted above both mention that wearing the veil is their way of demonstrating attachment to and identification with Saudi customs. Wikan's description of the face mask worn by the Suhari women with whom she worked in Oman also refers to this theme of respect: "A prime symbol of feminine grace and modesty, and the woman's identification with her husband, the *burqa*<sup>102</sup> projects nothing but an image of proper and honorable conduct."<sup>102</sup>

Abu-Lughod's study of veiling in a Bedouin tribe in Egypt, the Awlad Ali, is exemplary of this theme of covering as an aspect of respect for heritage. In the Awlad Ali, honor is primarily a matter of blood. One's ability to act morally is largely dependent on the nobility of one's ancestral origins. (Thus, men and women of the Awlad Ali considered themselves superior to the Egyptians, who were seen as having ignoble origins.<sup>103</sup>) Abu-Lughod found that veiling was part of a pattern of female and junior male deference to older male kin. However, veiling was not enforced, nor followed passively by the women. The women covered as a sign of self-respect and honor for the tribe, as a sign of their noble origins and ability to act in a proper moral manner. When a woman felt that her male kin did not deserve her respect, she would not cover in front of him, quite an insult.<sup>104</sup> Veiling for these women demonstrates their political agency.

## 7. STATE LAW REQUIREMENT

The previous six themes have discussed various reasons why Muslim women cover their heads/faces/bodies with scarves/veils/cloaks. All these themes relate to voluntary covering. However, there is one reason for covering that has nothing to do with choice: covering

<sup>102</sup> Wikan, *Behind the Veil*, p.96.

<sup>103</sup> Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments*, pp.45-48.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p.159.



required by state law, such as in Iran after the 1979 Revolution, and Afghanistan after the 1997 accession to power by the Taliban. Compulsory covering is one of the West's fears of Islam, and one proof against Islam that it is a religion that oppresses women and ignores their fundamental human rights. Under these regimes the covering law is often part of a package that restricts (or obliterates in the case of the Taliban) women's access to employment, political power, and other civil and political rights.<sup>105</sup>

Compulsory covering is virtually the only reason for covering known to Western popular culture. This is why *hijāb* is seen as a sign of oppression. Since other reasons for covering, such as those explored in this chapter are rarely discussed, coercive covering has come to stand for covering *per se*. Groups hostile to Islam, or journalists and scholars wishing to promote anti-Islamic discourse in the West, exploit coercive covering for all its worth. An international group of Iranian exiles (International Campaign in Defense of Women's Rights in Iran) working to overthrow the Islamic Republic of Iran, declares that it represents millions of women in Iran who protest against the oppressive Iranian regime that has "made life hell for millions in Iran."<sup>106</sup> Their images encourage the notion that Islam is a barbaric religion that forces its women to cover.

My point here is not to defend state laws on covering. The aim of this chapter is to emphasize the sociological complexity of covering. I am trying to break the equation that exists in the Western popular mind that 'compulsory covering is oppressive is the meaning of the veil'. Also, while I share Western outrage at the violence and coercion perpetrated against women in an attempt to enforce covering on them, I am uncomfortable with the anti-Islamic, racist tone that often accompanies the reporting of these reprehensible acts. Media images of covering imposed by state law, as well as unsophisticated

<sup>105</sup> Several scholars of women's status in Iran argue that under Rafsanjani and other moderate leaders, the position of women has improved considerably. In the 1992 *majlis* elections, nine of the 268 elected delegates were women. Nesta Ramazani, 'Women in Iran: The Revolutionary Ebb and Flow', in *Islam: Opposing Viewpoints*, (ed.), Paul A. Winters (San Diego, Calif.: Greenhaven Press, 1995), p.75. See also, Afshar and Mir-Hosseini in *Feminism and Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives*, (ed.), Mai Yamani (Reading, Berks, UK: Garnet, 1996).

<sup>106</sup> 'International Campaign in Defense of Women's Rights in Iran', flyer collected at an International Women's Day Fair, Ryerson University, Toronto, Canada, 1998.

academics, usually focus on the theme of coercion and force, implying by extension that Islam is a violent, oppressive religion.

Even in Iran, where the women cover owing to state law, the situation is more sociologically complex than assuming, as do many Westerners, that all women there cover against their will.<sup>107</sup> I have seen no data that could assert that they represented all Iranian women. Several Iranian academic women have made clear their opposition to the *chador*,<sup>108</sup> and Bahrampour's report of her trip to Iran in 1994 describes how, when they can, many women let their *chadors* slip, suggesting non-compliance/disagreement with state covering laws.<sup>109</sup> Other women would continue to cover whether or not there was a law. Givechian's fieldwork in 1986 led her to conclude that covering was "appealing to the bulk of Iranian people."<sup>110</sup> She found that those opposed to covering were urbanized Iranian women who had experienced half a century of uncovering under the Shah, and who disliked both covering *per se* and the obligation to cover under the Islamic Republic, but most particularly the obligation to cover. Givechian believes urban women opposed to the *chador* are a minority, and that for the majority of Iranian women, who live in small cities or in rural areas, "veiling has never been an issue because they kept wearing what they had previously been wearing regardless of revolutionary change" (p.529). Some women support the law on covering: Mrs Taleghani, the head of the Society of Islamic Revolutionary Women told a *New York Times* reporter: "It is only Western propaganda that claims the chador is something that causes the degradation of women. It is simply a type of dress. Those who believe in tradition keep the chador, just as Indian woman [*sic*] wear the sari."<sup>111</sup>

<sup>107</sup> For example, Reece, 'Covering and Communication.'

<sup>108</sup> For example, Tabari, 'Islam and the Struggle for Emancipation' and Azari, 'Islam's Appeal to Women'.

<sup>109</sup> Cited by Paul Winters (ed.), *Islam: Opposing Viewpoints*, p.63.

<sup>110</sup> Givechian, 'Cultural Changes in Male-Female Relations', p.528.

<sup>111</sup> Quoted in Ramazani, 'The Veil', pp.31-32. Ramazani rightly points out that Iranian women do not have the choice whether to conform to tradition or not. A reviewer observed that given Taleghani's position as Head of the Society of Islamic Revolutionary Women, one would hardly expect her to say anything else. However, is her credibility thus completely undermined? Here again is a thorny issue: how independently-minded are the women who support the regime? I have no interview data for Afghanistan, so I do not know how women feel about the veiling law in that country.

## B. DISCUSSION OF THEMES

Based on her 1980–84 survey of women in Egypt, Jordan, Oman, Kuwait, and the United States, Haddad elaborated the following reasons why women in the Middle East were re-covering. My summaries of themes for covering are obviously consistent with Haddad's:

*Religious*: an act of obedience to the will of God as a consequence of a profound religious experience which several women referred to as being “born again.”

*Psychological*: an affirmation of authenticity, a return to the roots and a rejection of Western norms (one woman talked about the “end of turmoil” and a “sense of peace”).

*Political*: a sign of disenchantment with the prevailing political order.

*Revolutionary*: an identification with the Islamic revolutionary forces that affirm the necessity of the Islamization of society as the only means of its salvation.

*Economic*: a sign of affluence, of being a lady of leisure.

*Cultural*: a public affirmation of allegiance to chastity and modesty, of not being a sex object (especially among unmarried urban working women).

*Demographic*: a sign of being urbanized.

*Practical*: a means of reducing the amount to be spent on clothing (some respondents asserted that others were receiving money from Libya and Saudi Arabia for the purpose).

*Domestic*: a way to keep the peace, since the males of the family insist on it. [Haddad ought to have mentioned the role that mothers and mothers-in-law play in insisting on *hijāb* too.]<sup>112</sup>

Interestingly, it is the unveiled women in Zuhur's study who accepted El-Guindi's interpretation of *hijāb* as a psychological response to crowded urban space and as an economic tactic in times of hardship, and Rugh's interpretation that some wore *hijāb* as a fashion item. However, Zuhur, while finding her conclusions in line with Haddad's study too, is not happy with Haddad's ‘economic’ category:

The veiled respondents simply did not offer that sort of explanation for their orientation, and they clearly were not ladies of leisure. Even

<sup>112</sup> Haddad, ‘Islam, Women and Revolution’, p.158.

though I feel strongly that economic factors contributed to the growth of *ḥijāb* wearing, they ought to be corroborated in a tangible manner by the women directly involved. Unveiled women would agree that there is an economic explanation for veiling, because they believed veiled women seek to hide their lower-class origins. They combine that category with the motivations in Haddad's "practical" category ... but socioeconomic and political insecurities as an explanation cannot be proven because this analysis must be based on the verbal evidence presented by the respondents. Most declared piety and a new realisation of the meaning of Islam.<sup>113</sup>

Rugh noticed this also: "From my conversations with those wearing even the modified forms of fundamentalist dress, I would be reluctant to underestimate the strength of piety that underlies its use."<sup>114</sup> The veiled women in Zuhur's study completely disagreed with these scholars' conclusions and older women especially disagreed with Rugh's interpretation. The veiled women

said that *ḥijāb* did not make travelling through public spaces easier for them personally, although they acknowledged that such an assumption was reasonable at a superficial level. It was difficult to understand why they would hedge on this point. I decided that it was because they wished me, as an observer and recorder, to interpret their decision to veil as one based upon piety and self-control rather than on practicality and pressure from other men and women.<sup>115</sup>

As pointed out in Chapter One, there is clearly a class dynamic influencing the wearing of and pronouncements upon *ḥijāb*. In Zuhur's study most of the upper and upper-middle classes are opposed to veiling, or unhappy with it. Pursuing the secular model of the 'modern woman', a model promoted by the state, many unveiled women consider the *muḥajjabāt* as threats.<sup>116</sup> Others worry that the new *ḥijāb* is the result of Saudi influence.<sup>117</sup> In lower-middle-class households,

<sup>113</sup> Zuhur, *Revealing Reveiling*, pp.83, 104-105. Haddad pointed out, when she read my thesis manuscript, that several quotations in my 'Continued Access to Employment' category contained references to wearing *ḥijāb* for economic reasons, that is, wearing *ḥijāb* saves money on clothes.

<sup>114</sup> Rugh, *Reveal and Conceal*, p.156. <sup>115</sup> Zuhur, *Revealing Reveiling*, p.78.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p.133.

<sup>117</sup> Williams, 'A Return to the Veil', p.53. Bahraini women who mostly wore Western dress spoke worriedly to Ramazani about "retrogressive ideas from Saudi Arabia" entering Bahrain, 'The Veil', p.29.

covering can be objected to for not being modern. Aida's fiancé was not impressed when he heard his future wife declare her intention to wear *hijāb* after their marriage. He exclaimed, "Why wear these clothes? They are ugly and not necessary. These are modern times!"<sup>118</sup> Many uncovered women think covered women are seeking to conceal their class origins, a seemingly patronizing comment from some higher up the social ladder.<sup>119</sup>

Popular Western culture and some feminists often take the increased numbers of women covering as evidence for a global threat of a growing Islamic movement (an idea, as we shall see in Section C, caricatured by the media as women's coercion by fundamentalist men). Watson concludes that while each of her interviewees has differing personal reasons for covering, what they have in common "is that they are making an active politicized response to forces of change, modernity and cross-cultural communication." She concludes that their political act is "an Islamic example of the global trend of reaction against change experienced as chaotic or challenging, which takes the form of a renewed interest in fundamental principles of social and moral order."<sup>120</sup> Haddad characterizes the women in her study as part of an Islamist movement that "becomes ... a kind of moral rearmament in which women are spearheading the construction of a new social order and playing active roles in the anticipated vindication of the Muslim people."<sup>121</sup> However, Macleod cautions against making such generalizations. The lower-middle-class women in her study were

quite negative about the beliefs or actions of Islamic groups and called the followers "bad Muslims" or even "criminals." They saw such groups as political, not religious, organizations and as inappropriate areas or activities for women in general ... Rather than participating in an overtly religious revivalism, these women express a general sense that people in their culture are turning back to a more authentic and culturally true way of life, and they perceive the veil as part of this cultural reformation.<sup>122</sup>

<sup>118</sup> Macleod, *Accommodating Protest*, p.2.   <sup>119</sup> Zuhur, *Revealing Reveiling*, p.78.

<sup>120</sup> Watson, 'Women and the Veil', p.156; Macleod, *Accommodating Protest*, p.116.

<sup>121</sup> Haddad, 'Islam, Women and Revolution', p.159.

<sup>122</sup> Macleod, *Accommodating Protest*, pp.110–111. Macleod is skeptical about the women's use of *hijāb*, because she says while the women may not choose to remember

Macleod emphasizes that for the women in her study “the idea of being Muslim has more to do with their role as wife and mother in the family, than with expressions of nationalism or anti-western feeling.”<sup>123</sup> Rugh would concur. At the time of her study, *al-ziy al-shar‘ī* was largely a middle-class phenomenon. Lower-middle-class women wore a folk dress similar to middle-class dress, but their “motives are more related to community norms than to pretensions of piety. Lower-class women may be conscious of a certain kind of dress appropriate for Muslims, but vague about Koranic verses and specific requirements.”<sup>124</sup> Zuhur notes that while the Islamic ideal is a reaction to the model of the uncovered secular woman, upper-class covered women still have more in common with uncovered women in their own class than they do with the *baladī*.<sup>125</sup>

Rugh suggests that lower-class *al-ziy al-shar‘ī*, when compared with middle-class *al-ziy al-shar‘ī*, shows an “inattention to the stricter interpretations of Islamic dress requirements that ask for more sober colors, opaque materials, and a complete concealment of the hair. The middle class usually claim that the lower classes are ignorant of religious meanings and implications even though they may comply with some of the formal requirements of Islam.”<sup>126</sup> Rugh found that there is a great range of outfits in Egypt, and what one village considers immodest, another may not. She views the new *ḥijāb* either as a generational rebellion against the liberal, pro-Western, middle-class values of parents, or for socially mobile children of lower-class parents who still maintain more traditional values, the new *ḥijāb* is a transitional outfit, less startling than other middle-class styles (that is, Western dress), but still signaling the acquisition of educated status for the young woman.<sup>127</sup>

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the negative aspects long associated with veiling, others will, and the veil’s prevalence will make it easier for them to invoke other traditions of the past, such as seclusion (p.152). The women thus reinscribe their own subordinate status (pp.153–154).

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., p.115.

<sup>124</sup> Rugh, *Reveal and Conceal*, p.155.

<sup>125</sup> Zuhur, *Revealing Reveiling*, p.15. In Egypt, *baladī* carries the sense of ‘hick’, ‘red-neck’, etc.

<sup>126</sup> Rugh, *Reveal and Conceal*, p.148.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., p.154.

For those societies where traditional veiling is undergoing slow change, a point to highlight is the people's acceptance of changing practices over the *niqāb* so long as the changes are gradual. This reflects flexibility (rather than rigidity, which is often assumed in popular Western consciousness about these cultures) in their understanding of the norms that required veiling in the first place (modesty, shame, and religion for instance). Thus while they were not ready to imagine women not veiling at all at present, they could be in the future.

Clearly the *ḥijāb* has become a mine of meanings, and we should proceed very carefully if summarizing or generalizing about what *ḥijāb* 'means'. As Brenner's study of Javanese women shows, conclusions relevant to the Middle Eastern context of re-covering are not relevant to Java. Javanese culture has no tradition of male/female segregation and no problem with women working outside the home, so covering for economic reasons, or to secure respect in order to work, such as the Egyptian studies revealed, have no resonance with the Javanese women's decision to cover.<sup>128</sup> At the very least, the presence of so many differing motivations for covering should forever expel the simplistic notion prevalent in the West that 'the veil' 'means' that a woman is oppressed. 'The veil' obviously 'means' many different things, depending upon the context and, to some extent, upon the individual. In the 1950s in Algeria it could mean that one was anti-French colonialism; in 1970s Iran it could mean that one was anti-Shah; in 1990s Iran, it meant that one had no choice about covering, in 1990s Egypt it could mean that one was recognizing the law of one's faith, or seeking an acceptable solution to the problems of work and family; in 1990s Indonesia, Britain, France, and Canada it could mean an assertion of one's religion and unique cultural identity.

### C. THE MEANING OF ḤIJĀB – WESTERN MEDIA VIEWPOINT

It is fairly easy to demonstrate the differences between the sociological complexity of the motivations for and meanings of covering and the standard Western media image of the motivations for and

<sup>128</sup> Brenner, 'Reconstructing Self and Society', p.674.

meanings of covering. For the Western media, *ḥijāb*, by and large, stands for oppression and as shorthand for all the horrors of Islam (now called Islamic fundamentalism): terrorism, violence, barbarity, and backwardness. This is a predetermined mold into which the empirical details are made to fit. As Chapter One highlighted, fitting empirical details about Islam and Muslims into a predetermined image that satisfies the needs of the West has a long and illustrious history. Daniel and Southern studied that phenomenon for the Christian medieval period, and Said named that scholarly practice Orientalism. It is evident that in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, media-driven images of Islam have been reproducing the Orientalist vision of the world, Islam, and Muslims. As Said notes, “television, the films, and all the media’s resources have forced information into more and more standardized molds.”<sup>129</sup> Many scholars, policy-makers, popular writers and citizens share what Daniel called for the medieval writers a “communal mode of thought,”<sup>130</sup> and what Said calls a Western “cultural consensus.”<sup>131</sup> Key features of Orientalist discourse are at play: the rigid West/East dichotomy, confirming Muslims as the alien ‘Other’; the superiority of the West, with its liberal democratic values that non-Westerners lack; the silence (or perhaps incoherence) of the Orient, its mysteriousness and its inability to speak for itself; the need for its practices to be given meaning by the superior West; Western knowledge as book knowledge; and the veil as the metaphor for the entire ‘Orient’ and as shorthand for all the horrors of Islam. In this predetermined frame there is no space to capture the sociological complexity of covering described in Sections A and B. Mass-market books and newspaper articles about Islam and Muslim women, analyzed in this section, purportedly aim to inform us about contemporary politics in the Muslim world. What they really do is scare Western readers and confirm for them the violence and backwardness of Islam, and hence the legitimacy of Western politicians seeking to keep their hegemony over the Muslim world.

<sup>129</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, p.26.

<sup>130</sup> Daniel, *Islam and the West*, p.302. At times, a rare scholar criticized travelers with creating false impressions of ‘other’ religions owing to the travelers’ ignorance of the language and customs, and the short duration of their stay. Pailin, *Attitudes to Other Religions*, p.17.

<sup>131</sup> Said, *Covering Islam*, p.48



The Islamic Empire was once a real threat to Christendom, for in the Middle Ages it spread from Spain to China. This threat has remained in the Western subconscious ever since. Said notes that “Islam remained forever the orientalist’s idea (or type) of *original* cultural effrontery, aggravated naturally by the fear that Islamic civilization originally (as well as contemporaneously) continued to stand somehow opposed to the Christian West.”<sup>132</sup> These days, Islam has replaced the ‘Red Menace’ of the Soviet Union to become the ‘Green Menace’ threatening Western civilization.<sup>133</sup> In the media, Islamic fundamentalism, like communism in the 1960s, is said to be poised to sweep across the world, from “the gaudy mosques of the Indian subcontinent to the shadeless deserts of North Africa,” writes journalist Scroggins.<sup>134</sup> Tehran aims to establish “a chain of theocratic states from Sudan to Algeria,” argues Goodwin in her mass-market book on Muslim women, *Price of Honor*.<sup>135</sup> Goodwin engages in scaremongering by linking a worldwide chain of Islamic fundamentalists to the World Trade Center bombing, stating that in the United States, Islamic fundamentalists are recruited on university campuses.<sup>136</sup> Terrorist attacks on Western tourists in the Muslim world only confirm this notion for the average Western reader.

This “fundamentalism” is seen to be “fighting to keep a half-billion Muslim women in legal bondage to men [Scroggins],”<sup>137</sup> or is “determined to remove every small gain women had made and plunge them back into the Dark Ages [Goodwin].”<sup>138</sup> “Saudi Arabia’s grim reality,” writes Brooks in her mass-market book on Muslim women, *Nine Parts of Desire*,

<sup>132</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, p.260.

<sup>133</sup> For example, Huntington, ‘The Clash of Civilizations’, and Barber, ‘Jihad Vs McWorld’.

<sup>134</sup> Scroggins, ‘Women of the Veil’, p.1.

<sup>135</sup> Goodwin, *Price of Honor*, p.125.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.7, 12, 17. Goodwin tries to separate “devout Muslims” (p.8) from fundamentalists, nevertheless, her argument that the Prophet himself was one of the “world’s greatest reformers on behalf of women,” and that Islam was probably the “only religion that formally specified women’s rights and sought ways to protect them” (pp.29–30), is overpowered by her emphasis on treacherous behavior meted out to women in the name of Islamic fundamentalism. Her linkage of the scarf with fundamentalism will only reinforce extant negative Western stereotypes about Islam and Muslims.

<sup>137</sup> Scroggins, ‘Women of the Veil’, p.1.

<sup>138</sup> Goodwin, *Price of Honor*, p.144.

is the kind of sterile, segregated world that Hamas in Israel, most mujahedin factions in Afghanistan, many radicals in Egypt and the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria are calling for, right now, for their countries and for the entire Islamic world ... [they want] Saudi-style, theocratically enforced repression of women, cloaked in vapid clichés about a woman's place being the paradise of her home".<sup>139</sup>

The fear created by these images and arguments is palpable, both in the authors writing, and in Western audiences reading. The scary discourse about the threat that Islam poses to the West is predicated on the Orientalist's rigid division between West and East. So, Goodwin's *Price of Honor* starts out by establishing the Orientalist division between West and East, between 'us' and 'them': "Just as we learned with Japan, Islam is an ancient culture, one that is rigidly traditional, and one that was essentially closed to the Western world for centuries. It has its own way of doing things, its own philosophies, and, most important, its own religion."<sup>140</sup> This statement is inaccurate, however. The boundaries are, and always have been more porous. For instance, Muslims preserved and studied the ancient Greek philosophers, and bequeathed that knowledge along with other important sciences, such as medicine and mathematics (algebra, Arabic numerals) to the West. Scholars flocked from all over the world to Cordoba, Baghdad, and other metropolitan centers to learn, helping move the West out of the "Dark Ages."<sup>141</sup> However, any recognition of a joint heritage undermines the anti-fundamentalism argument that these authors present (as well as similar assertions of separation by some Islamists). The horror of fundamentalism rests absolutely on the thinking of fundamentalists as alien 'Others'. Western superiority and self-praise relies on dichotomizing: we are superior, civil, sane, rational, modern, women-loving; but 'they' are fundamentalists, fanatic, extreme, anti-liberty, anti-women, and inferior.<sup>142</sup>

Journalists and other Westerners can be bewildered when Muslims challenge this kind of reporting of politics in the Muslim world: are

<sup>139</sup> Brooks, *Nine Parts of Desire*, p.177.

<sup>140</sup> Goodwin, *Price of Honor*, p.25. Some Muslim leaders are saying the same thing, such is the insecurity and fear of Western domination.

<sup>141</sup> Southern, *Western Views of Islam*; Daniel, *Islam and the West*; Rodinson, *Europe and the Mystique of Islam*.

<sup>142</sup> Said, *Orientalism*; Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes', p.353.

there not anti-Western Muslim terrorists killing innocent tourists? Are there not Muslim leaders also preaching an absolute dichotomy between 'East' and 'West', calling for the killing of Americans worldwide? Is the West not perceived as a threat that must be fought? Do these leaders not promote Islamic superiority and Western inferiority, calling Westerners loose, immoral, devils, and Muslims, just, moral, God-fearing? Indeed, there are these kinds of leaders, and followers who believe them. The problem is, as this whole chapter is dedicated to showing, that these kinds of Muslim leaders, followers, and beliefs are only one segment of a much more complicated society. There are other Muslim leaders and peoples who are pro-Western, or neutral, or seeking to fashion an interreligious dialog and harmony with the West. Unfortunately, these groups are left undiscussed (or rarely discussed) in the media, hence the process is the same as I have already described for the veil. The media (usually) focus only on the 'fundamentalists', who come to represent Islam (all Muslims). This is the meaning of fitting empirical details into the predetermined Orientalist image of Islam; what cannot be squeezed in to confirm the negative message is left out.

Just as in colonial times, when the veil was the metaphor of the entire Orient, in the 1990s the word 'veil' is shorthand for all these horrors of Islamic fundamentalism. Headlines proclaim: "The Veiled Threat of Islam;"<sup>143</sup> "Women of the Veil: Islamic Militants pushing women back to an age of official servitude;"<sup>144</sup> "Foulard. Le Complot: Comment les Islamistes Nous Infiltrèrent [The Veil. The Plot: How the Islamists are Infiltrating Us];"<sup>145</sup> "Islam's Veiled Threat;"<sup>146</sup> "An act of faith or a veiled threat to society?"<sup>147</sup> "Muslim Veil Threat to Harmony in French Schools, Minister says;"<sup>148</sup> "The New Law: Wear the Veil and Stay Alive;"<sup>149</sup> "Women Trapped Behind Veils."<sup>150</sup> Even those who are not focusing on *hijāb* in their reports use the word 'veil'

<sup>143</sup> *New Statesman* (March 27, 1992), cover page.

<sup>144</sup> *The Atlanta Journal/The Atlanta Constitution* (June 28, 1992), Section P.

<sup>145</sup> *L'Express* [Québec] (November 17, 1994), cover page.

<sup>146</sup> *Le Nouvel Observateur* (September 28, 1994).

<sup>147</sup> *Toronto Star* (May 14, 1996), p.F5.

<sup>148</sup> *Vancouver Sun* (September 15, 1994), p.A18.

<sup>149</sup> *Montreal Gazette* (April 11, 1994), p.B3.

<sup>150</sup> *Toronto Star* (December 15, 1996), p.F4.

in their titles: Scroggins' article is called "Women of the Veil," and Goodwin's subtitle is "Muslim Women Lift the Veil of Silence on the Islamic World."

In many of these popular articles/mass-market books the *ḥijāb* is not the central focus, but serves as a symbol of a range of oppressions women are alleged to suffer under Islam. Thus *ḥijāb* is linked to assertions about women's inferiority within Islam. The 'veil' is assumed to be a "blatant badge of female oppression,"<sup>151</sup> forced on unwilling women by various methods — bribery,<sup>152</sup> or threats of and actual violence.<sup>153</sup> Goodwin emphasizes how uncomfortable *ḥijāb* is in the heat, and that wearing it can bring diseases from lack of sunlight.<sup>154</sup> When Brooks' colleague adopts *ḥijāb*, Brooks writes:

The Islamic dress — *hijab* — that Sahar had opted to wear in Egypt's tormenting heat signified her acceptance of a legal code that valued her testimony at half the worth of a man's, an inheritance system that allotted her half the legacy of her brother, a future domestic life in which her husband could beat her if she disobeyed him, make her share his attentions with three more wives, divorce her at whim and get absolute custody of her children.<sup>155</sup>

(Compare with Hoodfar: "Whatever might be said for or against veiling, the veil is nonetheless a socially sanctioned style of clothing, and most veiled women feel that the advantages it offers outweigh any inconveniences it may present."<sup>156</sup>)

However, as we saw above, many women in Muslim countries wear *ḥijāb* willingly and with conviction. In Scroggins, Goodwin's, and Brooks' hands, these women come across at best as silly, duped, or bizarre, and at worst, as Islamist ideologues equally responsible and culpable as men for supporting an anti-woman ideology:<sup>157</sup>

<sup>151</sup> Scroggins, 'Women of the Veil', p.3.

<sup>152</sup> Goodwin, *Price of Honor*, p.262.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.55, 78–79, 81, 98, 101, 107–109, 293, 300; Scroggins, 'Women of the Veil', p.3.

<sup>154</sup> Goodwin, *Price of Honor*, p.56. Note the double standard: 'we' Western women are advised to cover-up in the sun (Janice Boddy, editorial comment).

<sup>155</sup> Brooks, *Nine Parts of Desire*, p.8.

<sup>156</sup> Hoodfar, 'Return to the Veil', p.116.

<sup>157</sup> Goodwin, *Price of Honor*, pp.112, 161, 186–187, 217, 247, 342. Goodwin presents some women who cover as not fundamentalists and fearing fundamentalism, p.85; Scroggins, 'Women of the Veil', p.2.

... and the rise of fundamentalism in Islamic countries marks dramatic and detrimental changes in the lives of women. It is recognized, of course, that women do join the radical movements voluntarily, as happened in Iran at the beginning of Khomeini's revolution. Such women frequently become fundamentalists because they were among the disenfranchised who gained access to power for the first time, or because they are genuine believers in the ideology. Others felt that under fundamentalism, and if they are completely veiled, they will receive more respect and be less harassed by men. But in the *vast majority of cases*, women are forced to adhere to fundamentalism either because the men in their families require them to or because of threats of violence from Islamists in their communities. [My emphasis]<sup>158</sup>

The youth who featured prominently in the academic studies of covering discussed above, are presented in Goodwin's study as easily attracted to "extremism" owing to their age and their socioeconomic conditions.<sup>159</sup> Her "vast majority" obviously escaped being interviewed by those scholars cited above. In Brooks' hands they are presented as the herald of a bleak future leading their country backward in time, proclaiming an Islam that is "the warped interpretation promoted by the wealth of the Saudis. I hated to think of a generation squandering its talent in the service of that repressive creed."<sup>160</sup> None of the caveats/nuances of the scholarly studies exist, such as Macleod's observation that the new veiling in lower-class Cairo is not directly linked to the Islamic movement in Egypt, or Zuhur's and Rugh's emphasis on piety, not socioeconomic conditions, or Brenner's perception of Javanese women as forward-looking, rational and modern women seeking to re-discipline themselves and improve their society.

When covering is the central focus of an article, the image is not much better. Two representative, if scurrilous, examples are Michèle Lemon's piece in the *Globe and Mail*, and Katherine Govier's in the *Toronto Star*.<sup>161</sup> Lemon, who has an MA in Islamic Studies from McGill University, discusses her reaction to seeing a woman in *niqāb*

<sup>158</sup> Goodwin, *Price of Honor*, p.15.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.137, 175.

<sup>160</sup> Brooks, *Nine Parts of Desire*, p.165. See also pp.152, 166.

<sup>161</sup> Lemon, 'Understanding Does Not Always Lead to Tolerance'; K. Govier, 'Shrouded in Black', Opinion, *Toronto Star* (Monday, September 25, 1995), p.A19.

while she is waiting for a bus: “I feel I’ve been punched in the stomach.” Lemon concludes that headscarves should be allowed in Canada, but not *niqāb*. Her reasoning is based on the well-worn notion that women in *niqāb* are oppressed:

I see a premedieval spectre before my eyes ... her oppression, for oppression it is, becomes a symbol of the difficulty all women once faced and a startling reminder that the struggle for equality has not ended. I understand all too well why she wears this hideous costume, but I despise it nonetheless. How could anyone defend the outfit as preserving anything but the low regard and true unimportance of women, all protestations to the contrary? This woman is a walking billboard that proclaims public space is reserved for men.

The others at the bus stop titter, and laugh to one another. Lemon writes “I want to tell them that this is no laughing matter, that under that forbidding costume there lurks a defaced human being ... I arrive home feeling shell-shocked. I say that people who want to promenade in this country as slaves should not be allowed to do so. It is an affront to the rest of us; to human dignity and respect.”<sup>162</sup> What I want to highlight here is Lemon’s confident assumption that the woman wearing *niqāb* is oppressed, indeed her insistence on this (“for oppression it is”) just in case anyone might beg to differ. Lemon proclaims these judgments without even talking to the *niqāb*-wearing woman herself and without knowing anything about her. Here we have the Orientalist, in the guise of a Western feminist, telling us the true meaning of a practice (no matter what anyone else, especially the woman herself might say: “I understand all too well why she wears this hideous costume, but I despise it nonetheless”). Chandra Mohanty critiqued attitudes like Lemon’s a full fourteen years ago for their colonizing nature. Such an attitude constitutes women as a group outside any contextual social/political/economic relations in which they live, and then universalizes “the” oppression of women to apply to all women. All that is needed is to find a group of powerless women to “prove the general point that women as a group are powerless.”<sup>163</sup>

<sup>162</sup> Boddy (editorial comment) makes an intriguing suggestion that the concept of “face” in Western culture also plays a role in attacks on *niqāb*, namely, Lemon’s “defaced human being”: with makeup “one puts on one’s face”; one “faces” the world, hardship, the future ... and so on. Without a “face,” (that is, unveiled), one is lost.

<sup>163</sup> Mohanty, ‘Under Western Eyes’, p.338.

The veiled woman is taken by this approach to be the example *par excellence* of the powerless woman: “Her oppression ... becomes a symbol of the difficulty all women once faced.” Further, the operative word here is “once,” with the implicit assumption that some women (Western women, Lemon) are no longer oppressed, but others (the veiled premedieval spectre) still are.

Lemon argues that women who wear *niqāb* have:

[A]ccepted on some level the argument of those who claim that society must be protected from chaos and anarchy. One of the greatest dangers to social harmony is the temptation women present to men. The way to ensure that lust is not acted upon, runs this facile logic, is not to work on civilizing or restraining a handful of men who cannot be trusted to control themselves, but by making women believe that they are the source of evil and must be made non-existent if they wish to venture out of doors ... It is not the woman I despise, but her compliance in a charade that can in no way be defended on religious grounds, that handy refuge of the desperate authoritarian ... a woman with a covered face will always be a shocking spectacle of subservience to men ... I have read too many soul-destroying stories about crimes of honour and young men ordering their much older female relatives about for me to look at this woman with anything even approaching equanimity.<sup>164</sup>

Remember Yasmeen from Chapter Two, who, while in her own country had insisted that she wear the *niqāb*, but who took it off after six months in Canada because of reactions like those of Lemon?

Katherine Govier discusses her reaction to seeing women in *niqāb* representing Yemen at the Beijing conference on Women: “What are these figures? Bank robbers? Egyptian mummies in full drag? Escapees from the executioner’s chamber?” She articulates the conventional Western view that women in *niqāb* are oppressed. A woman in *niqāb*, she writes is “masquerading – as a non-person:”

To present this walking black pyramid, a negation of a human figure, as a delegate, is gallows humor ... When I first saw the photo [Yemeni woman’s identity card photo] I was choked with anger. Who enforces

<sup>164</sup> Note that she says that she has “read” stories, implying a “book knowledge” of Muslims rather than first-hand experience. Again, this is the Orientalist methodology that relies on texts for its understanding of the Orient.

this walking jail on women? Or how do they get away with it? This is not to denigrate the individuals inside that cloth ... But what a tragedy that they are forced to represent their fellow Yemeni women in this dehumanizing way.

Recall Section A above, and Makhlouf's study of Sana'a women. Govier evidently did not sit down and discuss with them what they perceived as more pressing social problems for women than the veil: "early marriage, high fertility, illiteracy, and lack of any activity outside housework and *tafrīta*."<sup>165</sup> Govier says of these women:

Some women report to like the veil. We read all about that, several decades ago, when the veil first came into question by feminists. It's liberating, wrote some eastern women, because you don't have to feel vulnerable all the time as men stare at your body. That is tantamount to arguing that a 7 p.m. curfew would be liberating for women because you wouldn't have to worry about men attacking you after dark ... It's a life I guess. But not much of a life.

Again, here we have the Orientalist questioning the ability of the native to understand her own practices. ("Some women report to like the veil" [implies: if only they could understand its true oppressive nature].) Govier wonders why nations tolerate this dress.

Do we mistake this cloaking and negating of the essence of women for worship. But it is a social dictate, enforced by men who regard women as chattels; it is for nothing but the protection of property, and to prevent women's participation in all but the most private spheres of life...and why does this pass unremarked? Where are those among us who will stand up and cry enough to the practice of extinguishing women with black cloth?

Chapter One went into the colonial image of *ḥijāb* in some detail, but it will be illuminating to make some more direct comparisons here. Scroggins, Goodwin, Brooks, Lemon, and Govier's pieces are not so very different from colonial representations of Muslim women. In 1900 Hume-Griffith lived in Persia and Arabia for several years while her husband was employed as a doctor for a Christian Medical Mission. Her book also capitalizes on the word veil, being entitled

<sup>165</sup> Makhlouf, *Changing Veils*, p.36.



*Behind the Veil in Persia and Turkish Arabia.* Her version of Muslim women is the same as that presented by Goodwin, Scroggins, Brooks, Lemon, and Govier 90 years later. Here is Hume-Griffith's description of Muslim women in *niqāb*:

When Mohammed, acting under what he declared to be a revelation from Allah, introduced the use of the veil, he swept away for ever all hope of happiness for Moslem women. By means of the veil he immured them for ever in a living grave. "Imprisoned for life" is the verdict written against each Moslem woman as she leaves childhood behind her."<sup>166</sup> [cf. Govier: "Who enforces this walking jail on women?"]

What these authors all share is the assumption that Western women are better off, and ought to come to the aid of Muslim women:

How often I have said to these women, "Alhamd'lillah (thank God), I am not a Moslem woman!" and the heartfelt answer has always been, "Yes, indeed, you may thank God; but it is naseeb" (fate). The longer I live amongst Moslem women the more my heart yearns with love and pity for them, and the more thankful I am that their lot is not mine.<sup>167</sup> [cf. Govier: "It's a life, I guess. But not much of a life."]

Ought not the cries of distress and agony from the poor women of Persia so to rouse us, their sisters in England, that we shall determine to do all that lies in our power to lighten their burdens and to bring some rays of light into the dark lives of our Eastern sisters?<sup>168</sup> [cf. Scroggins: "Wherever we went, Jean and I always wished Islamic women would ask us the questions we imagined they had about American women. For example, we were eager to discuss why we were free to travel without our own male guardians." (p. 12)]

Poor, blind, misguided Moslem women of Mosul and other Mohammedan lands! [cf. Lemon: It is not the woman I despise, but her compliance in a charade ...] How my heart aches for them! Will no one heed the cry of anguish and despair which goes up from their midst? As we think of their lives our cry can only be, "How long, O Lord, how long will these things be?"<sup>169</sup> [cf. Govier: "Where are those among us

<sup>166</sup> M.E. Hume-Griffith, *Behind the Veil in Persia and Turkish Arabia: An Account of an Englishwoman's Eight Years' Residence Amongst the Women of the East* (London: Seeley, 1909), pp. 222–223.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 223.    <sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.    <sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 235.

who will stand up and cry enough to the practice of extinguishing women with black cloth?”]

#### D. CONCLUSION

The negative stereotype of the veil is flourishing in the Western media’s attempts to describe events in the Muslim world. In the last few years there are signs of change, with several high profile newspapers publishing more positive articles from covered Muslim women’s perspective: “Their Canada includes *hijab*,”<sup>170</sup> “Not a Fashion Fad, But a Way of Life;”<sup>171</sup> “Don’t Let the Scarf Fool You;”<sup>172</sup> “My *hijab* is an Act of Worship – and None of Your Business;”<sup>173</sup> “The Power Behind the Veil;”<sup>174</sup> “Muslim Women Try to Debunk Myths About Women;”<sup>175</sup> “My Body is my Own Business,”<sup>176</sup> “Islamic Sisterhood Challenges Stereotypes,”<sup>177</sup> though the full weight of the mainstream view is as yet untouched. Just as in colonial times, the word ‘veil’ is a synonym or shorthand for Muslim women’s oppression and the inscrutability of that world as constructed by the West. The word ‘veil’ stands for the entire culture of the Muslim world, and encompasses everything done to women. For the popular media, *ḥijāb* is foreign, alien, a sign of Other, of violent, backward, and inferior foreigners trying to drag the civilized world down. This image of *ḥijāb* serves journalists well – it is sensational, controversial, jingoistic, and exciting reading. *Ḥijāb* is also something visible, a tangible symbol on which to hang these meanings, something that ‘pictures’ well (recall the importance of the gaze for giving meaning). It should be obvious how different is that journalistic image from the sociological studies examined above.

The popular media’s presentation of *ḥijāb* as foreign is especially problematic for Muslim women in the West, who are challenged to

<sup>170</sup> *Globe and Mail* (August 22, 1994), p.A1.

<sup>171</sup> *Globe and Mail* (August 27, 1994), p.D7.

<sup>172</sup> *West Australian* (November 16, 1994), You, p5.

<sup>173</sup> *Globe and Mail* (February 15, 1995), Facts and Arguments.

<sup>174</sup> *The Weekend Review* [Australia] (July 22–23, 1996), Features, p.3.

<sup>175</sup> *Toronto Star* (July 30, 1996), p.E3.

<sup>176</sup> *Toronto Star* (February 17, 1998), p.C5.

<sup>177</sup> *The Seattle Times* (January 24, 1999).

prove that wearing *hijāb* does not violate Western [civil as opposed to barbaric] values. When (as mentioned in Chapter Two) the CBC broadcast its documentary about Muslim women and *hijāb* after the expulsion of the Quebec schoolgirls in 1994, not only did the reporter typically evoke fear by linking the wearing of *hijāb* to the violence in the Muslim world (“events in the Islamic world cast a shadow over events in Quebec. Algeria forced women to wear *hijāb* or face reprisals”), she also framed the story in the rigid West/East term that is a hallmark of Orientalism. The reporter asked the audience “how much we [a ‘we’ not including Muslims] as a society can and should accommodate? ... So far the furore over the *hijāb* has not spilled over Quebec’s borders but it has raised questions that face the entire country about who we are and what we believe in. Can the *hijāb* pass the litmus test of being Canadian?” Geraldine Brooks, on her way home to Australia after a stint of covering the Iran–Iraq war, finds Indonesian women in *hijāb* waiting in the airport lounge. “A swift, mean-spirited thought shot through my jet-lagged brain: “Oh, please. Not here too.” She wonders if Muslims would “see that Australia, where atheists routinely got elected prime minister, was a much fairer, gentler society than the religious regimes of places like Saudi Arabia and the Sudan? Or would they, as their numbers increased, seek to impose their values on my culture?”<sup>178</sup> Her book closes with the argument that “in an era of cultural sensitivity, we need to say that certain cultural baggage is contraband in our countries and will not be admitted ... [we should send a signal to Muslim countries] that we, too, have certain things we hold sacred: among them are liberty, equality, the pursuit of happiness and the right to doubt” (pp.238–239), leaving a scared reader convinced that such values hold no place in Islam.<sup>179</sup> The CBC’s questions and Brooks’ arguments leave no room for Canadian/Australian-born Muslims, or for Canadian/Australians who convert to Islam in adulthood. Are they imposing foreign values when they practice Islam? Are not secular liberal Westerners supposed to be neutral about how people live their lives? Apparently not when it comes to *hijāb*:

<sup>178</sup> Brooks, *Nine Parts of Desire*, p.236.

<sup>179</sup> The Qur’an promotes the flourishing of human abilities and human dignity as do liberalism and other philosophies. The desire of Prophet Abraham (pbuh) for proof of God’s ability to “give life to the dead” (2:260) is a beautiful story of doubt leading to knowledge and belief.

Reece argues that *ḥijāb* is a “classic example” of Muslims who have not “fully assimilated psychologically” in the United States.<sup>180</sup> Discrimination, assault, and even murder of Muslims living in the West are the results of these ways of thinking.<sup>181</sup>

<sup>180</sup> Reece, ‘Covering and Communication’, p.37.

<sup>181</sup> See Nabeel Abraham, ‘The Gulf Crisis and Anti-Arab Racism in America’, in *Collateral Damage: The New World Order at Home and Abroad*, (ed.), Cynthia Peters (Boston, Mass.: South End Press, 1992), and ‘Anti-Arab Racism and Violence in the United States’, in *The Development of Arab American Identity*, (ed.), Ernest McCarus (Ann Arbor, Mich.: The University of Michigan Press, 1994); Zuhair Kashmeri, *The Gulf Within: Canadian Arabs, Racism and the Gulf War* (Toronto, Canada: James Lorimer, 1991); W.A.R. Shadid and P.S. van Koningsveld, ‘Blaming the System or Blaming the Victim? Structural Barriers Facing Muslims in Western Europe’, in *The Integration of Islam and Hinduism in Western Europe*, (eds.), W.A.R. Shadid and P.S. van Koningsveld (Kampen, The Netherlands: KOK Pharos Publishing House, 1991); CAIR (Council on American Islamic Relations), *A Rush to Judgement: A Special Report on Anti-Muslim Stereotyping, Harassment and Hate Crimes Following the Bombing of Oklahoma City’s Murrah Federal Building, April 19, 1995* (Washington, DC: CAIR, 1995), and *The Price of Ignorance: The Status of Muslim Civil Rights in the United States* (Washington, DC: American-Muslim Research Centre, 1996).

## Mernissi and the Discourse on the Veil

If there is one author who is widely consulted in the West about the ‘meaning’ of the veil, it is Moroccan feminist, Fatima Mernissi. Her two books, *Beyond the Veil* and *The Veil and the Male Elite* are widely cited authoritative sources for scholars in the West. In both books, Mernissi argues that the veil is a symbol of unjust male authority over women. To date, apart from book reviews, I have not seen an extended academic critique of Mernissi, despite her importance in the West. Academic writers seem to use her as an authority, rather than subjecting her work to sustained criticism.<sup>1</sup> The farther they are from the field of women and Islam, the more they take her word to be the ‘truth’ about Islam. An example is Mina Caulfield’s article, “Equality, Sex, and Mode of Production,” a Marxist critique of liberal feminist’s use of the concept of equality. Caulfield notes Nelson and Olesen’s paper suggesting that ‘equality’ be replaced by the concept ‘complementarity’:<sup>2</sup> “[T]hey lose credibility in my eyes by choosing as their example the roles of women and men in Muslim society. As Fatima Mernissi makes clear in her study of male–female dynamics in Muslim society (1975), the kind of ‘complementarity’ instituted by Islam between men and women was that of master and slave.”<sup>3</sup> Caulfield is representative of an uncritical use of Mernissi. The absence of a widely known alternative in the West to Mernissi’s interpretation of the veil is disappointing, and makes urgent an extended critical examination of her works. Since my book is aimed at undermining the stereotype of the veil as oppressive, a critical refutation of Mernissi’s

<sup>1</sup> Mule and Barthel, ‘The Return to the Veil’, Reece, ‘Covering and Communication’.

<sup>2</sup> Nelson and Olsen: ‘Veil and Illusion: A Critique of the Concept of Equality in Western Thought’, *Catalyst*, 10–11 (1977), pp.8–36.

<sup>3</sup> Mina Davis Caulfield, ‘Equality, Sex, and Mode of Production’, in *Social Inequality: Comparative and Development Approaches*, (ed.), Gerald D. Berreman (New York: Academic Press, 1981), p.205.

main arguments is essential. In this chapter I discuss Mernissi's arguments about the meaning of the veil as presented in her two books, *Beyond the Veil* and *The Veil and the Male Elite*.

#### A. MERNISSI AND METHODOLOGY

The personal trauma that Fatima Mernissi seems to have experienced growing up in Morocco is never far from the surface of most of her writings. It is not hard to be moved to empathy by her autobiography, or other autobiographic details that she intersperses into her various works. She grew up in a harem during the French occupation and World War II. The harem was guarded by a man at the gate, from whom you had to ask permission in order to leave;<sup>4</sup> she recalls the painful way that she was taught the Qur'an;<sup>5</sup> and her surprise at having escaped the illiteracy to which other women of her class were doomed because of male control over them. In *Doing Daily Battle* she writes:

My father adored me. He used to take me on his mule to the mosque for Friday prayers, and he kept me by his side during long hours of reading or discussions with his friends. The books that he loved and regularly pored over were histories of Muslim civilisation, which was his passion. Nevertheless, my father, who adored me, who was immersed in our heritage and impassioned by our civilisation, bought me a *djellaba* and tried to force the veil on me at the age of four. For him there was no contradiction between civilisation, refinement, and immuring alive, physically and mentally, a child of the female sex.<sup>6</sup>

Another anecdote from Mernissi's autobiography illuminates her relationship to covering very well. During World War II (Mernissi was not yet nine) Mernissi says that she and her playmate cousins, Samir and Malika, were trying to work out why the French and Americans were in Morocco. Cousin Malika suggested that "the blond-haired tribes were fighting the brown-haired people" [the Germans versus the French]. The young Samir and Fatima were terrified when an older

<sup>4</sup> Fatima Mernissi, *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite*.

<sup>6</sup> Fatima Mernissi, *Doing Daily Battle: Interviews with Moroccan Women*, trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (London: The Women's Press, 1988), p.13.

cousin, Zin, confirmed Malika's theory, that Hi-Hitler "hated dark hair and dark eyes and was throwing bombs from planes wherever a dark-haired population was spotted." Samir begged his mother to dye his hair with henna (that is, red), and Mernissi started wearing one of her mother's scarves:

I ran around with one of my mother's scarves tied securely around my head, until she noticed it and forced me to take it off. "Don't you ever cover your head!" Mother shouted. "Do you understand me? Never! I am fighting against the veil, and you are putting one on?! What is this nonsense?" I explained to her about the Jews and the Allemane, the bombs and the submarines, but she was not impressed. "Even if Hi-Hitler, the Almighty King of the Allemane, is after you," she said, "you ought to face him with your hair uncovered. Covering your head and hiding will not help. Hiding does not solve a woman's problems. It just identifies her as an easy victim. Your Grandmother and I have suffered enough of this head-covering business. We know it does not work. I want my daughters to stand up with their heads erect, and walk on Allah's planet with their eyes on the stars." With that, she snatched off the scarf, and left me totally defenceless facing an invisible army that was running after people with dark hair.<sup>7</sup>

Mernissi's mother and other women of her generation fought and gradually changed covering and veiling practices in Morocco. They switched from huge body wraps (*haïk*) to long pyjama-like dresses, and their daughters wore Western dress. After independence in 1956, the women returned from a nationalist rally one day, faces and heads uncovered. "From then on, there were no more black *litham* to be seen covering young women's faces in Fez Medina; only old ladies and young, newly migrant peasants kept the veil" [as a sign of moving up the social ladder].<sup>8</sup> In the face of this, could a young child develop anything other than an ambivalent (or negative) attitude to covering? Could a young woman decide that she wanted to cover without being seen as backward or anti-nationalist?

Mernissi is obviously still traumatized by these memories, and her whole corpus is evidently a search for the cause of her pain, as a way to change and remedy it. Who would not condemn such a system? That

<sup>7</sup> Mernissi, *Dreams of Trespass*, p.100.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p.120.

women of her class had to veil (*niqāb*) when they were allowed outside makes her equation of veiling with women's oppression seemingly self-evident. The problem is that Mernissi equates her experience of veiling in the Moroccan system as 'the' experience of veiling, 'the' inherent or true meaning of veiling. As I explain in more detail later, Mernissi fails to recognize both the multiplicity of Islamic practices around veiling (and hence their meanings as described in Chapter Three), and the multiplicity of Islamic discourses around veiling. She pursues an ahistorical approach that equates the twentieth-century Moroccan social/political/economic system with the seventh-century Arabian system with the idea that what resulted in Morocco by the twentieth century is what Prophet Muhammad envisioned as a positive ideal of Islam. She also equates what resulted in Morocco with what resulted in the entire Muslim world, to the extent that she discusses the meaning of veiling in 'the' Muslim social order, as if Indonesia, Bangladesh, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and so on, are systems identical to that of the first Muslim community in seventh-century Arabia:

The Prophet's religious vision, his personal experiences, and the structure of society he was reacting against all contributed to the form Islamic society took. The assumptions behind the Muslim social structure – male dominance, the fear of fitna, the need for sexual satisfaction, the need for men to love Allah above all else – were embodied in specific laws which have regulated male–female relations in Muslim countries for fourteen centuries.<sup>9</sup>

So, my principal disagreements with Mernissi are two: (1) an ahistorical approach to the meanings of religious symbols that fails to contextualize how people enact Islam differently in different times and places; and (2) a reductive approach that does not acknowledge the multiplicity of discourses around veiling. Mernissi neglects to analyze how religion can be used and manipulated in many ways, and that religion is but one institution of many that interacts in complex ways in a society to produce social, political, economic, and individual behavior.<sup>10</sup> As I mentioned in the Introduction to this book, one

<sup>9</sup> Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil*, p.82.

<sup>10</sup> Lazreg, *The Eloquence of Silence*, pp.14–15.



approach in counteracting such ahistorical generalizations is to hone in on a particular time and place and provide contextualized data on Muslim women. This is the historical/ethnographic/anthropological approach. Practitioners of this method are wary of making any kind of assertion about 'Islam' as a religion.<sup>11</sup> Lazreg: "It is misleading and simplistic to look upon Islam as a text that is learned and faithfully applied by all members of the society in which it is practiced."<sup>12</sup>

To counteract the negative stereotype that *hijāb* is a symbol of Islam's oppression of women, I do not think that it is enough only to provide detailed glimpses of the lives of some Muslim women (although that is essential too). There is an appropriate debate to be had at the level of ideas. Lazreg is right to point out that in practice Muslims may not 'learn and faithfully apply Islam as a text' in their daily lives. Nevertheless, Muslims do often justify their behavior with reference to 'what Islam requires'. It is pertinent to ask if 'Islam' requires the kind of society Mernissi condemns as hostile to women, or if there are alternative visions that are more favorable to women. Here, then, is my second area of disagreement with Mernissi: her failure to interrogate traditional Moroccan practices/meanings of veiling to see if they reflect the only possible vision of Islam; that is, if some of these Moroccan practices are suppressive of women, to investigate whether the Qur'an can yield other nonrestrictive readings. In this chapter I shall argue that Mernissi's arguments about Islam's view of women are contradicted by the very sources of Islam, the Qur'an and Hadith (sayings of Prophet Muhammad).

Mernissi lives at a time when the meaning of Islam is being debated fiercely in the Muslim world. The debates contain both restrictive and nonrestrictive interpretations of women's position in Islam. Mernissi appears to ignore the latter, and promote the former as authoritative, even though she aims to be an agent for positive reform from within the Islamic fold. My debate with Mernissi is not to deny that Muslim societies embody repressive practices or discourses on women. My dispute with her is about normative Islam (is the Qur'anic vision anti-woman or not?). An interpretation of a Qur'anic vision

<sup>11</sup> For example, Wikan, *Behind the Veil*; Lazreg, *The Eloquence of Silence*; Boddy, *Wombs and Alien Spirits*.

<sup>12</sup> Lazreg, *The Eloquence of Silence*, p.14.

that is favorable to women counteracts both Mernissi's point of view, and any other Qur'anic interpretation that is suppressive of women. Before I elaborate this argument, I lay out Mernissi's positions on the veil as developed in her two books, *Beyond the Veil* and *The Veil and the Male Elite*.

B. WOMEN IN *BEYOND THE VEIL*  
AND *THE VEIL AND THE MALE ELITE*

*Beyond the Veil*, first published in 1975, is about the effects of modernization on traditional Moroccan society, and on the relations (especially sexual) between men and women. Mernissi's basic argument is that modernization is a rapid, unstable, but welcome change to traditional Moroccan male/female roles. Traditional roles emphasized women's subjugation to men, their seclusion in the home and to enforced domesticity: "Fundamentalists are right in saying that education for women has destroyed the traditional boundaries and definitions of space and sex roles. Schooling has dissolved traditional arrangements of space segregation even in oil-rich countries where education is segregated by sex, simply because, to go to school, women have to cross the street!" (p. xxviii). Mernissi contends that in Islam, 'woman' is seen as a dangerous creature needing control. Veiling, seclusion, and the like are the Muslim social order's attempt to deal with the threat that women pose (*fitnah*), the threat of the anti-divine, and to the male's communication with God (pp.19 and 44). Women are thus excluded from the community of believers. She concludes that modernization is a threat to the Muslim social order because modernization encourages heterosexual love between husband and wife, whereas the Muslim social order wants to prevent such love (p.8): "Sexual equality violates Islam's premiss, actualized in its laws, that heterosexual love is dangerous to Allah's order. Muslim marriage is based on male dominance. The desegregation of the sexes violates Islam's ideology on women's position in the social order: the women should be under the authority of fathers, brothers, or husbands" (p.19). *Beyond the Veil* is divided into two parts. Part One attempts to establish that in 'the Muslim social order' women are viewed as a threat needing containment, and Part Two is a look at

contemporary Moroccan society, which is supposed to reflect ‘the Muslim social order’ outlined in Part One. Part Two is based on interviews conducted in 1971 and on a study of letters received by a Moroccan State television’s religious counseling service. The letters and interviews support her conviction that Moroccans are unsettled by the changes that modernization has brought to traditional Moroccan life.

Whereas in *Beyond the Veil* Mernissi believed that “women were much happier before the Prophet’s time” (p.17), by the time she wrote *The Veil and the Male Elite* some twelve years later, she seems to have changed her mind: “When I finished writing this book I had come to understand one thing: if women’s rights are a problem for some modern Muslim men, it is neither because of the Koran nor the Prophet, nor the Islamic tradition, but simply because those rights conflict with the interests of a male élite.”<sup>13</sup> She says that she found in the Prophet’s community strong, intelligent, and active women who spoke out, and participated in the political, economic, and social affairs of the community.

*The Veil and the Male Elite* is an attempt to return to the first Islamic community and the sources of Islam to reinterpret *hijāb*, using the traditional methods of Islamic scholarship: the science of Hadith, and Qur’anic interpretation focusing on the *‘asbāb al-nuzūl* (the reason for a verse’s revelation). This approach marks something of a turnaround in Mernissi’s attempt to examine women’s rights in Islam, though, as I shall show, the book contains important continuities with *Beyond the Veil*, leaving the end result no more satisfying. *The Veil and the Male Elite* elaborates an argument that pits the Prophet against ‘Umar, one of his closest companions, his father-in-law and the second Caliph after the Prophet’s death. Mernissi suggests that the Prophet was a kind of feminist dedicated to women’s rights, and ‘Umar, a misogynist dedicated to controlling women. At a crucial moment in the first community’s history, the years 3–8, years of military defeat and scandals associated with his wives, the Prophet, Mernissi contends, gave in to ‘Umar’s misogynist demands for instituting the *hijāb* (p.162). She holds that in this way male supremacy won out

<sup>13</sup> Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite*, p.ix.

over the women Companions' (such as ʿĀ'ishah's and Umm Salama's) struggles for equality, and the *ḥijāb* is a symbol of that fight between men and women, "the vestige of a civil war that would never come to an end" (p.191).

Naturally these two books contain a wealth of material with which to engage in dialog. Since my interest in the works is related to my concern over the notion that *ḥijāb* is oppressive, I confine my examination only to those themes that are relevant to *ḥijāb*. Thus I leave out her discussions in *Beyond the Veil* on marriage practices (divorce, polygyny), intrafamily relations, the role of the mother-in-law, etc., and in *The Veil and the Male Elite*, her examination of Hadith about women and leadership, and all the ins and outs of her history of the first community.

*Beyond the Veil* lays several thematic foundations (continued in *The Veil and the Male Elite*) relevant to a study of *ḥijāb*, in spite of the fact that the book only briefly mentions covering. First, Mernissi is convinced that Islam views women as a threat to the social order. Second, that Islam considers femaleness as antidivine. Third, that owing to these notions about women being a threat and antidivine, they are a distraction to men and male piety and communication with God. Fourth, that because of that potential for distraction, women are excluded from the community of believers (the Ummah), subjugated by men via polygamy, repudiation, seclusion, segregation of the sexes, and veiling. Lastly, the veil is the symbol of Islam's control of and contempt for women. Elucidating the first theme makes the second, third, fourth, and fifth themes self-explanatory.

#### THEME 1: WOMEN AS A THREAT TO THE SOCIAL ORDER

Mernissi reaches her conclusion that Islam views women as a threat to the social order via her understanding of the Islamic view of women's sexuality. She believes that Muslim society contains contradictory theories of sexuality: an "explicit theory" of female sexuality, found in some contemporary Muslim writers such as Abbas Mahmud al-Aqqad's *Women in the Koran*; and an "implicit theory" of female sexuality epitomized by the 11th-century writer, al-Ghazālī's *Revival of the Islamic Sciences*. According to Mernissi, al-Aqqad argues that the Qur'an establishes male supremacy and dominance over women,

and that women's nature is masochistic, enjoying their defeat by the male. In the explicit theory, women are passive, men active.

However, Mernissi does not dwell on al-Aqqad, or the 'explicit' theory, because she believes that it is the implicit theory, as seen in al-Ghazālī's *Book of Marriage*, in which it is women who are active, hunting out the passive male prey, that is "driven far further [than the explicit theory] into the Muslim unconscious."<sup>14</sup> For Mernissi, 'the entire Muslim social order' is constructed around the notion of active and dangerous female sexuality. In al-Ghazālī's work, women are presented as desiring beings with a sexual drive. Mernissi attributes to al-Ghazālī "awe of the overpowering sexual demands of the active female" (pp.39–40) from his view that men have a duty to satisfy their wives sexually. Al-Ghazālī writes: "If the prerequisite amount of sexual intercourse needed by the woman in order to guarantee her virtue is not assessed with precision, it is because such an assessment is difficult to make and difficult to satisfy." Mernissi concludes from this paragraph that al-Ghazālī views female sexual demands with awe, and that he "admits how difficult it is for a man to satisfy a woman" (p.40). Since women are recognized to be desiring creatures, their not being satisfied by their husbands makes them a threat to the social order because one could go 'on the prowl' for a man, thus tempting him and making him committing illicit sex (p.39). Thus Mernissi's conclusion that in Islam "[w]hat is attacked and debased is not sexuality but women, as the embodiment of destruction, the symbol of disorder" (p.44).

Mernissi translates these ideas into the notion that Islam views women as active sexual aggression turned outward. "The Muslim woman is endowed with a fatal attraction which erodes the male's will to resist her and reduces him to a passive acquiescent role. He has no choice; he can only give in to her attraction, whence her identification with *fitnah*, chaos, and with the anti-divine and anti-social forces of the universe" (p.41). Mernissi is playing up the feminist critique of the *femme fatale* that she here attributes to Islam's view of women.

Mernissi seems to take offense at al-Ghazālī's concern over women's 'virtue' because she interprets concern over virtue as an

<sup>14</sup> Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil*, p.32.

attempt to control female sexual self-determination. Like many other feminists, Mernissi apparently views marriage and bans on pre- and extramarital sex as an oppression of female desire:

The panorama of female sexual rights in pre-Islamic culture reveals that women's sexuality was not bounded by the concept of legitimacy. Children belonged to their mothers' tribe. Women had sexual freedom to enter into and break off unions with more than one man, either simultaneously or successively. A woman could either reserve herself to one man at a time, on a more or less temporary basis ... or she could be visited by many husbands at different times whenever their nomadic tribe or trade caravan came through the woman's town or camping ground. (p.78)

Islam changed these marriage practices, and made marriage of a woman to one husband (at a time, she is allowed to divorce and remarry) the only legitimate marriage. Mernissi puts this down to fear of female sexual self-determination, and it underlines her conclusion that "[t]he entire Muslim social structure can be seen as an attack on, and a defence against, the disruptive power of female sexuality" (p.45).

The second, third, fourth, and fifth themes (female is equivalent to the antidivine; women distract men; women are excluded from the Ummah; on the veil) simply follow on from this first theme that women are a threat to the social order. (2): For Mernissi, the idea that women are desiring beings who can be satisfied lawfully only inside marriage is also the reason why Islam equates women with the antidivine. (An unsatisfied woman leads to seduction, and destruction of the social order, akin to antidivine destruction of the social order.) (3): She argues that women are seen merely as ways for men to satisfy their sexual appetites, so that men may return to their contemplation of God. For these reasons, she contends that Islam views heterosexual love between men and women as a threat, since heterosexual love challenges man's allegiance to and attention to God (pp.8, 13, 45). In addition, she argues that Muslim men and women are socialized to be enemies, kept apart by segregation, with the women placed under the domination of the male (p.20). (4): As the agent of social chaos, a satanic force, the sexually active woman must be contained and controlled: "Since women are considered by Allah to be a destructive

element, they are to be spatially confined and excluded from matters other than those of the family. Female access to non-domestic space is put under the control of males” (p.19). Locked up in the home, she concludes women are not considered part of humanity and are thus excluded from the community of believers – the Ummah. (5): The veil is the symbol of that exclusion.

#### THEME 5: ON THE VEIL

The importance of Mernissi’s assumptions about Islam’s view of women as ‘antidivine,’ with an aggressive sexuality needing control, are highlighted in her view of the veil, and linked to her understanding of segregation and its relationship to space. Mernissi argues that the social institutions regulating male–female interaction that were put in place divided social space into territories: “the universe of men (the *umma*, the world religion and power) and the universe of women, the domestic world of sexuality and the family” (p.138). The two universes have a spatial dimension, with the male universe equivalent to everything outside the home, women’s universe being confined to the domestic sphere. Women’s presence outside the home, while seen as sometimes necessary, is deemed an “anomaly, a transgression” (p.139).

For Mernissi, requiring women to veil when outside the home is to ensure that the male and female universes are not transgressed. Veiling is a “symbolic form of seclusion” (p.140), and “an expression of the invisibility of women on the street, a male space *par excellence*” (p.97). The veil “means that the woman is present in the men’s world, but invisible; she has no right to be in the street” (p.143). The veil protects men against the woman’s power to create social chaos:

A woman is always trespassing in a male space because she is, by definition, a foe. A woman has no right to use male spaces. If she enters them, she is upsetting the male’s order and his peace of mind. She is actually committing an act of aggression against him merely by being present where she should not be. A woman in a traditionally male space upsets Allah’s order by inciting men to commit *zina*. The man has everything to lose in this encounter: peace of mind, self-determination, allegiance to Allah, and social prestige. (p.144)

*The Veil and the Male Elite*, first published in 1987, attempts to answer the following question:

Is it possible that Islam's message had only a limited and superficial effect on deeply superstitious seventh-century Arabs who failed to integrate its novel approach to the world and to women? Is it possible that the *hijab*, the attempt to veil women, that is claimed today to be basic to Muslim identity, is nothing but the expression of the persistence of the pre-Islamic mentality, the *jabiliyya* [pre-Islamic times of Ignorance] mentality that Islam was supposed to annihilate? (p.81)

To answer the question just posed, whether or not *hijāb* is a sign of *jabiliyyah*, Mernissi goes back to the Prophet's community, to examine the occasions for revelation that led to the verses requiring Muslim women to cover. As already mentioned, this is a completely different methodology from *Beyond the Veil*. Nevertheless, *The Veil and The Male Elite*, in spite of the new methodology, reaches the same conclusions about Islam's view of women: women are associated with the antidivine and excluded from the Ummah. Women's sexuality is less at issue in this text.

In *The Veil and The Male Elite*, Mernissi re-establishes her theme that Islam views women as antagonistic to the divine. She does this in her discussion of a hadith narrated by Abū Hurayra: "The Prophet said that the dog, the ass, and woman interrupt prayer if they pass in front of the believer, interposing themselves between him and the *qibla*" (p.64). Mernissi points out how important the *qibla* is to Muslims, since it orients one's prayers wherever one is in the world, it is a unifying feature of our Ummah. She writes:

The *qibla* makes the universe turn, with an Arab city as its center. Excluding women from the *qibla*, then, is excluding them from everything – from the sacred dimension of life, as from the nationalist dimension, which defines space as the field of Arab and Muslim ethnocentrism ... Since the whole earth is a mosque, aligning women with dogs and asses, as does the Hadith of Abu Hurayra, and labeling her a disturbance, amounts to saying there is a fundamental contradiction between her essence and that of the divine ... (pp.69–70)



Mernissi uses Abū Hurayra, whom she presents as a misogynist, in order to argue that Islam considers the female to be sullyng: “To understand the importance for Islam of that aspect of femaleness, evoking disturbance and sullyng, we would do well to look at the personality of Abū Hurayra, who, as it were, gave it legal force” (pp.70–71).

To reiterate her theme that Islam wishes to exclude women from the divine, and hence from the Ummah, Mernissi next discusses the linguistic meanings of the word *ḥijāb*. The word *ḥijāb* is derived from the root, *ḥajaba*, meaning “to cover, veil, screen, shelter.” Mernissi notes that depending on the context, it has different uses. The examples she gives are that: Arab princes used to veil to escape the gaze of the entourage, and to protect onlookers from the radiance of the Prince; Sufis use *ḥijāb* to indicate those distracted by earthly delights, unable to see God; anatomically, *ḥijāb* denotes boundary and protection: eyebrows, *al-ḥajiban*; diaphragm, *ḥijāb al-jawf* (*ḥijāb* of the stomach); hymen, *ḥijāb al-bukūriyya* (*ḥijāb* of virginity.) In the Qur’an, the word *ḥijāb* is used in several ways including the notion of *ḥijāb* as a veil between men and God (pp.93–97).<sup>15</sup> Mernissi takes offense at this:

So it is strange indeed to observe the modern course of this concept, which from the beginning had such a strongly negative connotation in the Koran. The very sign of the person who is damned, excluded from the privileges and spiritual grace to which the Muslim has access, is claimed in our day as a symbol of Muslim identity, manna for the Muslim woman. (p.97)

She ends the chapter by reiterating a central theme of *Beyond the Veil* – that the *ḥijāb* cuts women off from God. The *ḥijāb* segregated the sexes, and “the veil that descended from Heaven was going to cover up women, separate them from men, from the Prophet, and so from God” (p.101).

Having demonstrated that Islam is against femaleness, Mernissi

<sup>15</sup> The word *ḥijāb* is not used in the Qur’an to describe women’s clothing. That is why some people argue that the Qur’an does not impose covering. *Ḥijāb* actually refers more to a state of being, including modest clothing, lowering the gaze, and so on, and it applies to men as well. From the late twentieth century, the headscarf that Muslim women wear is also called a *ḥijāb*.

goes on to discuss the reasons for the revelations that instituted covering. The first verse is the ‘verse of the *ḥijāb* (curtain)’, as the *fuqahā* (theologians/lawyers) call it, revealed at the reception following the Prophet’s wedding to Zaynab:

O you who believe! Enter not the Prophet’s houses – Until leave is given you – for a meal, [and then] not [so early as] to wait for its preparation: but when you are invited, enter; and when you have taken your meal, disperse, without seeking familiar talk. Such [behaviour] annoys the Prophet: he is ashamed to dismiss you, but God is not ashamed [to tell you] the truth. And when you ask [his wives] for anything you want ask them from behind a screen: that makes for greater purity for your hearts and for theirs. Nor is it right that you should annoy God’s Messenger, or that you should marry his widows after him at any time. Truly such a thing is in God’s sight an enormity. (Qur’an 33:53)

On this occasion, some male guests had overstayed their welcome, and the Prophet, being too polite to ask them to leave, had waited in ‘Ā’isha’s house in frustration until they left. Anas ibn Mālik goes to fetch the Prophet after the guests leave, and as they return, the verse is revealed. Anas reports that with one foot in his house, and the other out, the Prophet let fall a curtain between Anas and himself. Mernissi makes much of this event, emphasizing that the curtain was falling between two men, not men and women, and her point is that what was originally intended to separate two men got mutated by misogynist Muslim law into being imposed on women.

Mernissi goes on to discuss the Prophet’s family life, relations with women, and military wars, in order to present her final version of *ḥijāb*: the triumph of male supremacy over a brief moment of feminist history in the first Muslim community. She presents the Prophet as profeminist, revolutionizing male–female relations, by giving, for instance, women the right not to be inherited in marriage, and the right to inherit goods (where previously they had no such rights), and by trying to abolish slavery (pp. 104, 120–125). She discusses one of the verses revealed in response to Umm Salama’s question about women not being in the Qur’an, mentioned below in section C, and says:

The answer of the Muslim God to Umm Salama was very clear. Allah spoke of the two sexes in terms of total equality as believers, that is, as members of the community. God identifies those who are part of his kingdom, those who have a right to his “vast reward.” And it is not sex that determines who earns his grace; it is faith and the desire to serve and obey him. The verse that Umm Salama heard is revolutionary ... (pp.118–119)

So revolutionary, in fact, that Mernissi thinks the men were unhappy with this new religion, which up until then had left their pre-Islamic family customs untouched (pp.120, 142). Mernissi suggests that the women, “emboldened” by this victory, then asked for a share in the war booty and for the men this was pushing things too far (p.129). Mernissi argues the men found in ‘Umar a champion of their grievances against the rights of women. According to Mernissi, ‘Umar was able to pressure the Prophet until he finally capitulated on his revolutionizing efforts, and the following verse was revealed: “Men are in charge of women, because Allah has made the one of them to excel the other, and because they spend their property [for the support of women]” (Qur’an 4:34).<sup>16</sup> She says that the Prophet finally agreed to ‘Umar’s insistence on the veil because the Prophet and the community were worn down both by personal scandals in the Prophet’s life (hypocrites were harassing his wives, ‘Ā’ishah was accused of adultery), and after having been under siege from its enemies (pp. 163, 167, 172). For Mernissi this verse represents a “double retreat” from Muhammad’s previously egalitarian message, which was compounded by the institution of *hijāb* on the rest of the believing women: “the *hijāb* incarnates, expresses, and symbolizes this official retreat from the principle of equality” (p.179). The institution of the veil was, she argues, the “exact opposite” of what the Prophet was aiming for (p.185). Thus, it was not only the wives of the Prophet who had to cover, but all (free) believing Muslim women (33:39): “O Prophet! Tell thy wives and thy daughters and the women of the believers to draw their cloaks close around them [when they go abroad]. That will be better, that so they may be recognized and not annoyed.”

<sup>16</sup> I prefer: “Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because God has given the one more [strength] than the other and because they support them from their means ...” ‘Abdullah Yūsuf ‘Alī (trans.), *The Meaning of the Holy Qur’an* (4:34).

Mernissi contends that ‘Umar did not understand the Prophet’s desire for “civility and politeness” in everyday life, with desire being controlled by one’s will. At the time, men were harassing women in the streets, urging them to sleep with them. According to Mernissi, ‘Umar’s solution was to “put up barriers and to hide women, who were objects of envy.”

Unfortunately for Islam, the conflict and debate on this question took place at the end of the Prophet’s life, when he was growing old and when he was being militarily tested and challenged in the city where he had hoped to realize all his aspirations. The reaction of ‘Umar, for whom barriers constituted the only way to control the violence, reflected the horde mentality that was the pillar of the ethics of the Arabia of the period of ignorance (*al-jahiliyya*). (p.185)

The Prophet succumbs to ‘Umar’s insistence that women should be veiled. For Mernissi, as for many other feminists, this is a backward step, imposing burdens on women while leaving men free from having to control themselves. The *hijāb* “was the incarnation of the absence of internal control; it was the veiling of the sovereign will, which is the source of good judgment and order in a society” (p.185). The *hijāb* thus represents the “triumph of the Hypocrites:”

In the struggle between Muhammad’s dream of a society in which women could move freely around the city (because of the social control would be the Muslim faith that disciplines desire), and the customs of the Hypocrites who only thought of a woman as an object of envy and violence, it was this latter vision that would carry the day ... The *hijab* reintroduced the idea that the street was under the control of the *sufaha*, those who did not restrain their desires and who needed a tribal chieftain to keep them under control. (p.187)

Mernissi considers *hijāb* a male supremacist victory, because the feminist victory would be to have men control themselves, plus a campaign to make the streets safe for women, rather than having women cover.

### C. DISCUSSION OF THEMES

Mernissi’s account of the traditional Muslim view of women’s sexuality and their place and role in society certainly captures one

dimension of some Muslim women's experience. Indeed, as her autobiography shows, her account captures her own experience of growing up in Morocco in the 1940s. There is a feminist critique to be made of cultural views of women in the Muslim world that arguably overly sexualize the female presence, leading to controlling and containing women (for example: complete *purdah*, that is, seclusion; barriers in mosques between men and women's prayer areas, or having the women's prayer area in a separate room or on a balcony; sexualizing the voices of women, requiring them not to talk, or only to whisper in the presence of strange men; complete segregation in restaurants, buses, banks, and so on). It is these cultural views that Mernissi is attacking and analyzing in her works. The problem is, as I mentioned above, Mernissi is conflating what she finds in Morocco with normative Islam. Not all Muslim societies, nor even all classes, have secluded, segregated, or veiled women, and the extent to which Muslims view women as sexualized beings needing male control is a topic for anthropological/sociological study of particular groups of people in specific times and places, not for a theory about 'Islam's' view of women. In *Beyond the Veil*, Mernissi discusses Moroccan folk customs, Qur'anic verses, Prophetic Hadith, and al-Ghazālī as evidence for her theory about the Islamic view of women. There is a problem, however, in discussing these sources as if they all had equal status as legitimate statements about Islam. In a sociological study all forces that mold people's ideology and culture require even treatment. Scholars may consider a folk-tale to be a foundational source that does provide people with a worldview. Yet that applies only to understanding people as they live their lives. As an account of Islam as normative vision, folk-tales are barely admissible as a source for guidance. If Mernissi had restricted herself to arguing, "this is how Islam has been enacted in Morocco, and I wish there were some changes around the practices relating to women," she would have been on safe ground, and would have the support of many religious Muslims the world over, myself included. But she does not. She does not even argue, as does Ahmed, that Islam (as the Qur'an) has an ethically egalitarian message that was overlooked in the patriarchal historical elaboration of Islamic law. Mernissi argues: "This Morocco is what Islam requires a society that follows its laws to look like."

There exist Moroccan customs that are contrary to both the letter and spirit of Islam (keeping women illiterate is an excellent example). And as she highlights, some Moroccan folk-tales (as in the West) do embody antiwomen sentiments (“Women are fleeting wooden vessels whose passengers are doomed to destruction”).<sup>17</sup> However, she has got the Qur’an, the Hadith, and even al-Ghazālī wrong.

#### I. WHAT IS ISLAM?

Thus my most important critique of Mernissi dwells on the question “What is Islam?” In *The Veil and the Male Elite*, Mernissi offers the following definition of being Muslim:

I define being Muslim as belonging to a theocratic state. What the individual thinks is secondary for this definition. Being Marxist or Maoist or atheist does not keep one from obeying the national laws, those of the theocratic state, which define the crimes and set the punishments. Being Muslim is a civil matter, a national identity, a passport, a family code of laws, a code of public rights. The confusion between Islam as a belief, as a personal choice, and Islam as law, as state religion, contributed greatly, I believe, to the failure of Leftist movements, and of the Left in general, in Muslim countries.<sup>18</sup>

This is a decidedly strange definition of being Muslim. By her definition only Iranians are Muslims, because Iran is the only Muslim country that is a theocracy – in the sense of ‘rule by a priestly order’ (OED). Nor am I sure how Jews, Christians, atheists, or anyone else would take to being defined as “Muslim” simply because they live in Morocco and abide by its laws. In fact, we may be at the heart of the matter here. If Mernissi does not mean ‘theocracy’ in the most accurate sense of the term, but rather in the sense of public policy

<sup>17</sup> Even regarding folktales, Mernissi is reductive. See Bergman for a more sophisticated and nuanced study of Moroccan proverbs. Bergman discusses how women use certain proverbs to make at times discreet social criticism, at other times to claim power due to them as mothers of sons, and as queens of the home. Elizabeth M. Bergman, ‘Keeping It in the Family: Gender and Conflict in Moroccan Arabic Proverbs’, in *Reconstructing Gender in the Middle East: Tradition, Identity, and Power*, (eds.), Fatma Müge Coşek and Shiva Balaghi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

<sup>18</sup> The failure of the Left is the failure to understand people’s resistance to secularization, to treat that process as normal and uncontestable. Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite*, p.21.

informed by Shari‘ah law, then she implies that Islam is what a state enacts in its laws: ‘state religion’ as she calls it. In so doing, she overlooks the possibility that ‘state religion’, that is, the laws and the customs of the people, might not conform to the intent of the Lawgiver, God, or that the ‘state religion’ embodies only one of many possible interpretations of the Lawgiver’s intentions, or, that the laws and the practices of the people might contradict unambiguous commands.

Linguistically a “Muslim” is one who submits to the will of God. (One cannot be an atheist and a Muslim; an atheist is a *kāfir*, one who covers up/denies the existence of God.) The question is, to what is a Muslim submitting? To traditional practice? To unambiguous, or ambiguous text? To certain scholars’ interpretations of text? The answer to this puzzle is complicated. There are several levels of explanation required here.<sup>19</sup> First and foremost, the individual is submitting to the will of God that is embodied in the Qur’an. The Qur’an is held by believing Muslims to be the actual words of God, revealed to Prophet Muhammad via the archangel Gabriel. There is no disagreement amongst Muslims (Sunni, Shia, etc.) over the authoritative text of Islam – it is the Qur’an (although there is plenty of disagreement over the interpretation of the text).<sup>20</sup>

The Qur’an is God’s guidance and commandment to humankind. Its message is meant to be universal and timeless. It is the first source for determining ‘what Islam requires’. This does not mean that ‘what the Qur’an requires’ is always obvious, or not open to difference and

<sup>19</sup> The following discussion is based on Mohammad H. Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence* (Selango Darul Ehsan, Malaysia: Pelanduk, 1989); Abu Ameenah Bilal Philips, *The Evolution of Fiqh*, 2nd edn. (Riyadh: Tawheed Publications, 1990), and *Usool At-Tafseer, The Methodology of Qur’anic Explanation* (Sharjah, United Arab Emirates: Dar Al Fatah, 1997); Abdal Hakim Murad (T.J. Winter), ‘The Problem of Anti-Madhhabism’, *Islamica* [UK], 2, 2 (March 1995), pp.31–39; Murad Wilfried Hoffman, ‘On the Development of Islamic Jurisprudence’, *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, 16, 1 (Spring 1999), pp 73–92; Ahmad von Denffer, *‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān: An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur’an* (Leicester, UK: The Islamic Foundation, 1989); Ṭāhā Jābir al-‘Alwānī, *Source Methodology in Islamic Jurisprudence* (Herndon, Va: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1994).

<sup>20</sup> According to von Denffer, the ‘*Ulūm al-Qur’ān*, the science of the Qur’an, establishes that the text which we have today is identical to that of the Prophet. A copy of the Qur’an from the time of the Third Caliph, ‘Uthmān, time is in the Topkapi museum in Istanbul, Turkey. ‘Uthmān took office twelve years after the death of the Prophet (pbuh) and ruled from 644–656 AC. Von Denffer, *‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān*, Plate 2.

disagreement. The Companions of Prophet Muhammad, scholars of *tafsīr* (explanation of the Qur'an), and *fuqahā'* (lawyers), did, and do still, differ over the meaning of some verses. That is why, traditionally, no one interpretation has been held to be authoritative. Naturally, too, the interpretation, while guided by the rules of Arabic grammar, the spirit of Islam, and the example of the Prophet (that is, how he himself implemented the Qur'anic injunctions) also depends upon an individual's own judgment. Context does count. For instance, nowadays some scholars interpret certain verses as upholding the 'Big Bang' theory of the origins of the universe. Evidently these verses meant something different to pre-Big Bang theory readers.

The second source for 'what Islam requires' is the Sunnah of the Prophet.<sup>21</sup> The Qur'an instructs people to "obey the Messenger" several times; that is why his example is paramount. The Sunnah includes what the Prophet said, did, and observed others doing but did not comment on. Muslims believe the Sunnah to be preserved in the Hadith collections and in the *Sīrah*, the biography of the Prophet. Once it became obvious that people were fabricating hadiths, the scholars set themselves the task of devising a science of Hadith that would establish criteria for acceptance/rejection of a hadith. Hadiths are classified as authentic, good, weak, and fabricated.

Third, "what Islam requires" has meant, until the nineteenth/twentieth/twenty-first centuries, the body of laws developed by Islamic jurists over the last 1,400 years. Islamic jurisprudence recognizes other sources of law after the Qur'an and Sunnah, including the actions and opinions of the Companions of the Prophet, the generation after them, juristic consensus, local custom (where it does not contravene explicit Qur'anic/Sunnah practice), analogical reasoning, considerations of the public good, and so on. This is not the place to discuss in detail the sources of Islamic law. The only point I am making is that the *madhāhib* (schools of law) have been seen to define 'what Islam requires' legally. Indeed, during the Middle Ages, jurists concluded that all issues of law had been resolved, and prohibited

<sup>21</sup> As mentioned in Chapter Two, because the Ismailis follow their Imam, they do not really have a concept of 'Sunnah'. The Shia have a concept of Sunnah, although their sources are often different from those of the Sunnis. My book is from the Sunni perspective.



large-scale systematic reforms as “inadmissible innovation.”<sup>22</sup> This conclusion has been challenged in the nineteenth, and twenty-first centuries by the Salafi, Wahhabi, and other movements who argue that the *madhāhib* have enshrined laws that are contrary to Islam. They call for a return to the ‘pure’ Qur’an and Sunnah practices. Once we are at this level, we have really entered the realm of difference. As Kamali observes, “by far the greater part of *fiqh* (law) consists of rules which are derived through interpretation and *ijtihād* (independent reasoning).”<sup>23</sup> Because the early scholars recognized that there was no way of adjudicating between differing reasonable interpretations of the Qur’an and Sunnah, the understanding between them developed that no matter the differences in legal opinion, each was said to be correct. A saying of the Prophet established that “when a judge exercises *ijtihād* and gives a right judgement, he will have two rewards, but if he errs in judgement, he will have earned one reward.”<sup>24</sup> That is why different schools of legal interpretation and rulings exist (a conclusion disputed by modern Salafi scholars, who aim to unify the *madhāhib* and develop a single Islamic legal code).<sup>25</sup>

Now, Mernissi might be analyzing a system in Morocco that reflected the application of Islamic law as jurists understood it. It is possible that the law developed in ways that unfairly restricted women. It is also possible, however, that Moroccan practice was not based on explicit legal texts either. The practice of keeping women illiterate directly contradicts the hadith: “Seeking knowledge is compulsory on every Muslim, man or woman.”<sup>26</sup> Thus a sociologist/anthropologist would have to consider that Moroccan practices concerning women embody a combination of the Qur’an/Sunnah legislation via *madhāhib*, plus local traditions. Understanding economic and political factors would also be crucial in understanding how local traditions evolved, how *madhāhib* laws evolved, and how they interacted (or did not). The impact of colonialism, Westernization, and the importation of Western statutory law into Moroccan law

<sup>22</sup> Hoffman, ‘On the Development of Islamic Jurisprudence’, p.75.

<sup>23</sup> Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence*, p.109.

<sup>24</sup> Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan*, III, 1013, hadith no. 3567, cited in *ibid.*, p.471.

<sup>25</sup> For example, Philips, *The Evolution of Fiqh and Usool At-Tafseer*.

<sup>26</sup> Reported by Anas, collected by al-Bayhaqī in *Shu‘ab al-Imān*, and others, cited in Philips, *Usool At-Tafseer*, p.6.

would be essential. This is what Bouhdiba means by pointing out the social plurality of Islam: “there is no one Muslim society, but a multiplicity of social structures all claiming allegiance to Islam.”<sup>27</sup>

These last points mean that ‘what Islam requires’ ought never to be read straight from ‘what Muslims do’. There are simply too many relevant factors to extract from the actions of a people the normative requirements of a religion. If a group of Muslims are found legally to endorse drinking alcohol, does that mean that Islam allows drinking? No, for a clear text of the Qur’an prohibits drinking.<sup>28</sup> In addition, ‘what Islam requires’ cannot simply be read straight from what Muslims do as a response to manuals developed as Islamic law either, since manuals of Islamic law disagree over so much,<sup>29</sup> and also Muslims can enact laws imperfectly. The predilections of a community can influence which manual is relied upon (if at all), and in what way it is applied in practice (if an effort is being so made). Mernissi, rather than developing a feminist critique of ‘the Muslim social order’, ought to have paid attention to these kinds of complex interactions. In what follows, I aim to rebut Mernissi by developing an argument that interprets the Qur’anic vision as a positive one for women.

## 2. WOMEN AND SEXUALITY IN THE QUR’AN AND SUNNAH

I noted above that the question I would pursue in this chapter was to investigate if Mernissi’s conclusions about Islam’s negative view of women could be upheld by the primary sources, the Qur’an and Sunnah. Since Mernissi’s foundational themes revolved around the Islamic view of women’s sexuality (dangerous, therefore needing to be controlled), it is appropriate to investigate what the Qur’an and Sunnah say on women’s sexuality (and sexuality in general).

<sup>27</sup> Abdelwahab Bouhdiba, *Sexuality in Islam*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, 1985), p.104.

<sup>28</sup> “O you who believe! Intoxicants and gambling, [dedication] of stones, and [divination] by arrows, are an abomination of Satan’s handiwork; eschew such [abomination], that you may prosper. Satan’s plan is [but] to excite enmity and hatred between you, with intoxicants and gambling, and hinder you from the remembrance of God, and from prayer: will you not then abstain?” (Qur’an 5: 90–91).

<sup>29</sup> Hoffman quotes Muhammad Asad, *This Law of Ours and Other Essays*: “There is practically not a single problem of law, great or small, on which the various schools and systems fully agree” (p.20), ‘On the Development of Islamic Jurisprudence’, p.89.

As Winter notes, Islam has a “sex-positive attitude,” exemplified by Imam Nawawī’s statement: “All appetites harden the heart, with the exception of sexual desire, which softens it.”<sup>30</sup> There is nothing in the Qur’an about women as dangerous sexual beings. Rather, there is the notion that men and women are fundamentally alike, being created of a single soul, and being both recipients of the divine breath:

O humankind! Reverence your Guardian-Lord, Who created you from a single person, created, of like nature, his mate, and from them two scattered [like seeds] countless men and women; reverence Allah through Whom you demand your mutual [rights] and [reverence] the wombs [that bore you]: for Allah ever watches over you ... (Qur’an 4:1)

It is He Who created you from a single person and made his mate of like nature, in order that he might dwell with her [in love]...(Qur’an 7:189)

But He fashioned him [the human, or *insān*] in due proportion and breathed into him something of His spirit. And He gave you [the faculties of] hearing and sight and understanding: Little thanks do you give! ... (Qur’an 32:9)<sup>31</sup>

Notice how important this last verse is. Mernissi had claimed that Islam viewed femaleness as antidivine, or sullyng, but as a recipient of Divine Breath, that hardly makes sense.

The Qur’an and Sunnah provide that sexual desire is part of God’s creation of the human being, something both men and women have. Thus it directs believing men to “lower their gaze and guard their modesty” (24:30) and in the next verse, believing women to “lower their gaze and guard their modesty” (24:31). Lowering the gaze implies that both men and women can become aroused by a look. Ahmed points out that the Qur’anic story of Zuleika, the wife of the ‘Aziz, who tried to seduce Prophet Joseph is presented with sympathy. Joseph was so handsome that she could not resist him, but he resisted her, and the society women started to gossip about Zuleika. Zuleika

<sup>30</sup> T.J. Winter, ‘Desire and Decency in the Islamic Tradition’, *Islamica* (UK), 1, 4 (January 1994), pp.11–12.

<sup>31</sup> Jamal Badawi, *Gender Equity in Islam: Basic Principles* (Plainfield, Ind.: American Trust Publications, 1995), pp.5–6.

invites them all to dinner, and while they are eating, she brings Joseph out for them to see. They are so struck by his beauty that they cut their hands with the knives they are eating with: “And she said (to Joseph), ‘Come out before them.’ When they saw him, they did extol him, and (in their amazement) cut their hands: they said, ‘Allah preserve us! No mortal is this! This is none other than a noble angel!’ She said: ‘There before you is the man about whom you did blame me!’” (Qur’an, 12:31–32). Ahmed aptly concludes: “Thus while Zuleika’s conduct was wrong, it is portrayed as understandable, and the tale does not imply that female sexual desire is in itself evil.”<sup>32</sup> Support from the Sunnah for this point that female sexual desire is seen as natural and not evil is the hadith that records women asking the Prophet if they were required to make ablutions after nocturnal emissions, just as men have to do. He replied that they did if they noticed a discharge.<sup>33</sup> (That is, he answered their question normally without condemning this proof of their desires.)

Sexual desire is not evil. The Qur’an describes husbands and wives as garments of each other: “Permitted to you, on the night of the fasts, is the approach to your wives. They are your garments and you are their garments ... associate with them, and seek what Allah has ordained for you ...” (Qur’an, 2:187). Obviously the word ‘garments’ implies many things, including warmth, protection, and ornamentation. It also implies sexual intimacy, and thus the verse is saying that God has ordained husbands and wives to “associate” with each other sexually, and to think of the husband–wife relationship as mutually caring, loving, and beautifying.

The Hadith only confirm this. Marriage is recommended: “Marriage is my Sunnah and whoever leaves the Sunnah is not of me.”<sup>34</sup> Not only is marriage recommended, but the sexual act inside marriage is considered a charity that is rewarded by God:

<sup>32</sup> Leila Ahmed, ‘Arab Culture and Writing Women’s Bodies’, *Feminist Issues* (Spring 1989), p.48; Bouhdiba, *Sexuality in Islam*, pp.20–28.

<sup>33</sup> Ahmed, ‘Arab Culture’, p.47; Bouhdiba, *Sexuality in Islam*, points out that the impurity here does not inhere in the person, but in bodily discharges (p.14): “Whatever emerges from the human body, gas, liquid or solid, is perceived by the fiqh as impure ... The body’s excreta are all impure and disgusting: gas, menstrual blood, urine, faecal matter, sperm, blood, pus” (p.45).

<sup>34</sup> Ibn Mājah’s hadith collection, *Nikāh*, 1, cited in Winter, ‘Desire and Decency’, p.111.

God's Messenger said: "In the sexual act of each of you there is a *ṣadaqa*" [charitable act]. The Companions replied: "O Messenger of God! When one of us fulfils his sexual desire, will he be given a reward for that?" and he said, "Do you not think that were he to act upon it unlawfully, he would be sinning? Likewise, if he acts upon it lawfully, he will be rewarded."<sup>35</sup>

Each spouse is required to ensure the other is sexually satisfied, as the story of Umm al-Dardā' and Abū al-Dardā' makes clear. Salmān went to visit his friend Abū al-Dardā' and he finds his friend's wife dressed shabbily. He asks her "why she was in that state," and she replies, "Your brother Abū al-Dardā' is not interested in (the luxuries of) this world." Salmān discovers that Abū al-Dardā' has taken to excessive fasting and nightly praying. He reprimands him, saying "Your Lord has a right on you, your soul has a right on you, and your family [that is, wife] has a right on you; so you should give the rights of all those who have a right on you." Abū al-Dardā' recounts the story to the Prophet, and the Prophet tells him: "Salmān has spoken the truth."<sup>36</sup> Umm al-Dardā', by dressing shabbily was sending a message to Salman that she was not making any effort to beautify herself, an implicit message that her husband had lost interest in her. Salmān's response shows that he understood the message, and that it was a wrong to be righted.

Not only is sexual satisfaction an obligation of spouses, but there is an etiquette of sex: the husband in particular is counseled to make sure he does not fulfil himself before the wife experiences pleasure: The Prophet said, "Not one of you should fall upon his wife like an animal; but let there first be a messenger between you.' 'And what is that messenger?' they asked, and he replied: 'Kisses and words'."<sup>37</sup> Al-Ghazālī advised: "Once the husband has attained his fulfillment, let him tarry until his wife also attains hers. Her orgasm may be delayed, thus exciting her desire; to withdraw quickly is harmful to the woman."<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Muslim's hadith collection, Zakah, 52, cited in *ibid*.

<sup>36</sup> al-Bukhārī, *The Translation of the Meanings of Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī*, vol. 3, trans. Muḥammad Muḥsin Khān (Madinah, Saudi Arabia: Islamic University, n.d.) p.107, hadith no.189.

<sup>37</sup> Daylami's Hadith collection, cited in Ruqqayah Waris Maqsood, *The Muslim Marriage Guide* (London: Quilliam Press, 1995), p.86.

<sup>38</sup> Madelain Farah, *Marriage and Sexuality in Islam: A Translation of al-Ghazālī's Book on the Etiquette of Marriage from the Ihya* (Salt Lake City, Ut.: University of Utah Press, 1984), p.107.

So, Mernissi's view that intimacy during the sexual act between a husband and wife is a threat to a jealous God, because the man's mind is taken away momentarily from worship is patently false. She argues that in "coitus, the male is actually embracing a woman, symbol of unreason and disorder, anti-divine force of nature and disciple of the devil."<sup>39</sup> All of what I have said contradicts Mernissi's view. Her proof is the Qur'anic verses that believers are encouraged to recite (seeking refuge in God from Satan) before intercourse, and to praise and thank God afterwards. For Mernissi, this is proof of the "antagonism between Allah and the woman." She writes, "The Muslim god is known for his jealousy, and He is especially jealous of anything that might interfere with the believer's devotion to him. The conjugal unit is a real danger and is consequently weakened by two legal devices: polygamy and repudiation."<sup>40</sup> However, women recite these verses too. Besides, if marriage is Sunnah, how can it be seen as taking believers away from God?

Mernissi's contention that Islam is against heterosexual love between husband and wife is easily refuted with reference to the Qur'an and Sunnah.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, there are so many verses in the Qur'an stressing mutual marital love and harmony, it is a wonder that she has overlooked them. The following verse is a favourite for Muslim wedding invitations:

And among His signs is this, that He created for you mates from among yourselves that you may dwell in tranquillity with them, and He has put love and mercy between your [hearts]; verily in that are signs for those who reflect. (Qur'an 30:21)

<sup>39</sup> Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil*, p.113.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p.15. Polygyny and repudiation are controversial issues outside the scope of my book on *hijab*. Even if from one point of view it is the case that polygyny and repudiation make a monogamous marriage unstable (though surely it is unstable for other reasons too, for example, extramarital affairs), that does not imply that the monogamous conjugal unit is a danger to God. After all, it is God Who has permitted polygyny and divorce. The Qur'an also instructs men to treat their wives fairly, otherwise to marry only one; and a hadith states: "Verily, the most hateful to Allah of the lawful things is divorce." Abū Dāwūd and Ibn Mājah Hadith collections, cited in Omran, *Family Planning*, p.17.

<sup>41</sup> This is a tribal affectation and has to do with the loyalties that a man and a woman might come to feel for each other rather than for their respective natal families (Boddy: editorial comment).

The Qur'anic picture of mutual love, consideration, compassion, and harmony between husband and wife is a far cry from Mernissi's view: "the Muslim order condemns as a deadly enemy of civilization: love between men and women in general, and between husband and wife in particular."<sup>42</sup>

So, to emphasize, in Islam there is nothing evil or undesirable about the body and its desires. Woman, although partaking in the Fall, is not held responsible for the expulsion from Paradise (Adam is). There is no original sin (God forgave them straightaway), and no impurity attached to her because of this act, as in other religious traditions. Desire *per se* is neither of the devil nor intention to virtue. It is the context that determines virtue. That is, fulfilling sexual desire in marriage is encouraged and rewarded; fulfilling sexual desire outside marriage is discouraged and punished. Every act in a believer's life can be an act of worship, if it is done with the right intention. So, sexual intercourse, rather than expressing antagonism between Allah and women, is an act that brings both men and women rewards from God, when it is a lawful act. Thus Bouhdiba's observation that in Islam, the "sexual function is in itself a sacred function."<sup>43</sup>

It is also worth pointing out that unlike Christianity, which enshrines the masculine principle in the image of 'God the Father' and Jesus the 'Son of God', or goddess religions that sanctify the feminine principle in the image of the Divine, in Islam, neither masculine nor feminine principle is enshrined in the Divine. God is neither the Father, nor the Mother, nor the Son. In the Arabic language, God, Allah, literally means al-Lah, the God. It is a gender-neutral term. The *shahā dah*, the testament of faith: *lā illāha illa Allāh*, literally means: "There is no god, but The God."<sup>44</sup> Femaleness and maleness are attributes of creation, not the Creator. And as females partake of the divine breath as much as males, there can be no sense in asserting that God degrades the female.

<sup>42</sup> Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil*, p. 107.

<sup>43</sup> Bouhdiba, *Sexuality in Islam*, p. 14. See also pp. 82, 87.

<sup>44</sup> Some might object that God refers to 'Himself' as a 'He' in the Qur'an. This is true, although it does not change the basic point. God also refers to 'Himself' as 'We' in the Qur'an, although 'He' is One (that is, a royal 'we'.) For a book aiming to address real societies in all eras, most of which have been patriarchal for most of their history, the pronoun 'He' seems to make sense, if The Book is to appeal to patriarchal men (holders of societal power).

Focusing on the Qur'an and Hadith is enough to demonstrate Mernissi's misguided view of women's sexuality in Islam, though it is worth briefly showing how she reaches her misguided view: it stems from a misreading of al-Ghazālī, the eleventh-century theologian. (Al-Ghazālī was an important theologian in the Islamic canon, whose works are still consulted today for guidance.) Mernissi's whole story of the veil as a way to control women's dangerous sexuality stems from an interpretation of al-Ghazālī that is really puzzling for its errors. She understands the positive Islamic view of sexuality that I have just described.<sup>45</sup> A close reading of her text suggests that her error comes in her next step. She turns to Qasim Amin's nineteenth-century book on veiling. Remember, he was the Egyptian who opened the controversial veiling debate in Egypt by campaigning against seclusion and the *niqāb*. He argued that seclusion of women demonstrated that men felt afraid of their own ability to control their desires, as if at the mere sight of a woman, men would lose their minds.<sup>46</sup> Hence women are perceived as *fitnah*, disturbing the social order. Now Mernissi takes Amin's idea of woman as *fitnah* as a statement of fact about Islam, and reads this back into al-Ghazālī.

Mernissi notes that al-Ghazālī begins his work by "stressing the antagonism between sexual desire and the social order." She thinks that what al-Ghazālī really means here is the antagonism between female sexuality and the social order. She writes: "[Al-Ghazālī] sees civilization as struggling to contain women's destructive, all-absorbing power. Women must be controlled to prevent men from being distracted from their social and religious duties. Society can survive only by creating institutions that foster male dominance through sexual segregation and polygamy for believers."<sup>47</sup> The problem is that here she reads into al-Ghazālī Amin's idea of the *femme fatale*. Nowhere does al-Ghazālī discuss specifically female sexuality in relation to the social order or to civilization, and Mernissi herself offers no textual evidence here.

Now al-Ghazālī's *Book of Breaking the Two Desires* does begin with his view that sexual desire "contains evils which may destroy

<sup>45</sup> Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil*, p.27.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p.13.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p.32.



both religion and the world if it is not controlled and subjugated, and restored to a state of equilibrium.”<sup>48</sup> However, al-Ghazālī is talking about sexual desire in general (and really about male desire, since the book is written for male readers). Mernissi’s serious oversight is to neglect al-Ghazālī’s Sufi predilections (Sufis are ascetics who, like monks, priests, and nuns, renounce the earthly world and its delights for the sake of worshipping God), and to disregard his being a theoretician of the soul, and the Greek intellectual heritage upon which he draws extensively.<sup>49</sup> These influences should have alerted Mernissi to al-Ghazālī’s orientation. Al-Ghazālī is not attacking sexuality as debasing, as Mernissi recognizes. He is discussing sexual desire in a Platonic manner – dividing the soul into three parts, the rational, the spirited, and the appetitive, and holding that the good can be achieved only by subjugating the appetitive part to the rule of the rational part. Following Aristotle, al-Ghazālī expounds the virtue of the mean, the middle path between excessive and limited sexual desire. Al-Ghazālī does not condemn women. He condemns excessive or insufficient sexual desire. (Again, he is directing his work to men. It is by extension that we understand he would condemn excessive/limited desire in women.) In fact, in so doing, he is concerned to protect the rights of women to sexual enjoyment:

Excess in the matter of sexual desire, then, causes the intellect to be overcome to this degree, which is very much to be condemned. Insufficient sexual desire, however, leads to an indifference to women, or to giving them insufficient pleasure, which is also to be condemned. Sexual desire is a praiseworthy thing when it stands in a state of equilibrium, obedient to the intellect and the [Islamic] Law in all its movements. Whenever it becomes excessive, it should be broken with hunger and marriage.<sup>50</sup>

Nevertheless, Mernissi asserts that al-Ghazālī sees woman’s “power as the most destructive element in the Muslim social order, in which the feminine is regarded as synonymous with the satanic.”<sup>51</sup> Again there is no textual evidence for this view of al-Ghazālī (she

<sup>48</sup> *Al-Ghazālī on Disciplining the Soul and on Breaking the Two Desires – Books XXII and XXIII of The Revival of the Religious Sciences (Ihyā’ Ulūm al-Dīn)*, trans. T.J. Winter with an Introduction and Notes (Cambridge, UK: The Islamic Texts Society, 1995) p.165.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p.li.

<sup>50</sup> Farah, *Marriage and Sexuality in Islam*, pp.169–70.

<sup>51</sup> Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil*, p.33.

would not find any). However, she does provide textual support later in the chapter by trying to argue that al-Ghazālī is overwhelmed by female sexual desire that appears insatiable (and hence a threat). Again, Mernissi is stretching al-Ghazālī to fit her argument. The textual support for this assertion is, as mentioned earlier, al-Ghazālī's discussion of the husband's duty to satisfy his wife sexually. She uses just one paragraph from al-Ghazālī's *Book on Marriage* to make her case (a paragraph that in her text is interspersed with her own comments, disguising the fact that in al-Ghazālī it is only one paragraph, making it look like a more extended discussion on his part). In Part Three of the *Book on Marriage*, the 'Etiquette of Cohabitation,' the tenth etiquette of cohabitation on the etiquette of intimate relations, al-Ghazālī is addressing the husband on how to be a good sexual partner. He counsels him to praise God before beginning intercourse, to engage much in foreplay, and to make sure his wife has an orgasm as well. He advises on the best days of the week for intercourse, and the days when it should be avoided (menstruation). It is the following paragraph, which she intersperses with her own comments, that Mernissi uses to make her argument:

It is desirable that he should have intimate relations with her once every four nights; that is more just, for the [maximum] number of wives is four which justifies this span. It is true that intimate relations should be more or less frequent in accordance to her need to remain chaste, for to satisfy her is his duty. If seeking intimate relations [by the woman] is not established, it causes the same difficulty in the same demand and the fulfillment thereof.<sup>52</sup>

The last sentence is a little confusing, though the translation of the last sentence in Mernissi's *Beyond the Veil* is clearer: "If the prerequisite amount of sexual intercourse needed by the woman in order to guarantee her virtue is not assessed with precision, it is because such an assessment is difficult to make and difficult to satisfy." Mernissi concludes from this paragraph that al-Ghazālī views female sexual demands with awe, and that he "admits how difficult it is for a man to satisfy a woman."<sup>53</sup> Such extrapolations are not warranted by the

<sup>52</sup> Farah, *Marriage and Sexuality in Islam*, p.107.

<sup>53</sup> Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil*, p.40.

text. Read in the context of the chapter, this short paragraph simply says that women have a sexual drive that men have a duty to satisfy, and that it may be hard for a man to know (if he is not told by his wife) when she is not sexually satisfied. Here it is useful to recall that al-Ghazālī thinks that both men and women are “burdened with the weight of sexual desire.”

Al-Ghazālī is concerned about the virtue of both men and women, and he must be understood within the Islamic framework so as not to be misinterpreted. This means that a sexual relationship outside marriage is a terrible sin. When al-Ghazālī hints at the wife’s need to remain chaste (as he does here, and in a footnote to the second advantage of marriage<sup>54</sup>), he is implying that unsatisfied women can seek fulfillment outside marriage, something that is dangerous to the social fabric of a Muslim society. Here is Mernissi’s “women are destructive to the social order” notion. However, while many feminists find these notions of chastity a kind of patriarchal control of women, who should be free to flirt, sleep around, and not be constrained by marriage,<sup>55</sup> many others, who do not condone sex outside marriage, will understand al-Ghazālī here. Al-Ghazālī is of the opinion that men seeking sexual fulfillment outside marriage are also dangerous to the social fabric: the arousal of the male’s private parts “is an overwhelming affliction for you when it rears its head; neither reason nor religion can withstand it. Although it is fit to induce the two forms of life we spoke of earlier [the continuance of the species, and the bliss of sexual enjoyment], nevertheless it constitutes Satan’s most powerful weapon against mankind.”<sup>56</sup> That is why marriage is recommended.

So, Mernissi bases her most important assumption about Islam’s view of women, an assumption crucial to her case against *ḥijāb*, since

<sup>54</sup> This is a footnote that does not appear in Farah’s translation. Al-Ghazālī is concerned that a woman’s marriage to an impotent man “leaves the woman unfulfilled and is wasteful of her inasmuch as she fails to achieve her own purpose—a situation fraught with an element of danger”, al-Ghazālī, *The Proper Conduct of Marriage in Islam*. Book Twelve of *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*, trans. Muhtar Holland (Hollywood, Fla.: Al-Baz Publishing, 1998), p.18.

<sup>55</sup> See Lama Abu-Odeh, ‘Post-Colonial Feminism and the Veil: Considering the Differences’, *New England Law Review*, 26, 4 (Summer 1992) for the view that freedom for women means living in a world where “women should be able to express themselves sexually, so that they can love, play, tease, flirt and excite”, p.1531.

<sup>56</sup> al-Ghazālī, *The Proper Conduct of Marriage*, p.23.

it is the veil that covers and hides a woman's threat to the social order, upon a puzzling misreading of al-Ghazālī. This is not to suggest that al-Ghazālī is beyond reproach. Indeed, he is not. As with every human being, his work has its flaws and he is also a creature of his patriarchal times. Ghazālī sometimes takes a dim view of women's role, even though his views on women's sexuality and the etiquette of sex are admirable. For example, he considers marriage "a kind of slavery" for women, for the wife "owes her husband absolute obedience in whatever he may demand of her, where she herself is concerned, as long as no sin is involved."<sup>57</sup> Mernissi is not wrong to be critical of an Islamic scholar; she is wrong to misread him and then to equate his single voice with Islam in its entirety.

I have made the case that the Qur'an and Sunnah do not view women as an antidivine threat to the social order that needs containing. Nevertheless, Mernissi does mention several hadiths that appear to contradict my argument:

The Prophet saw a woman. He hurried to his house and had intercourse with his wife Zaynab, then left his house and said, "When the woman comes towards you, it is Satan who is approaching you. When one of you sees a woman and he feels attracted to her, he should hurry to his wife. With her, it would be the same as with the other one."

When a man and a woman are isolated in the presence of each other, Satan is bound to be their third companion.

Do not go to the women whose husbands are absent. Because Satan will get in your bodies as blood rushes through your flesh.

Mernissi uses these hadiths to cement her argument that woman is "identified with *fitna*, chaos, and with the anti-divine and anti-social forces of the universe."<sup>58</sup> But these hadiths do not mean, as Mernissi believes, that the woman is equated with Satan. To understand why not, it is essential to understand the Islamic cosmology, and what 'Satan' is.

After creating the human being, God commanded the angels to

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p.89.

<sup>58</sup> Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil*, p.41.

bow down to him. Iblīs refused. God asked him why he did not bow down, and Iblīs told him, “I am better than he: You created me from fire, and him You created from clay” (38:76). God ordered him out of the heavens for having disobeyed, and Iblīs asked God to give him “respite until the Day the (dead) are raised” (38:79). God gave him respite, and Iblīs told him, “Then by Your Power, I will put them all in the wrong – except Your servants among them, sincere and purified [by Your Grace]” (38:82–83). God replied to him, “Then it is just and fitting – And I say what is just and fitting – That I will certainly fill Hell with you and those who follow you – every one” (38:84–85).

Certain key features of this story differ from the Christian version. First is the notion that God gives permission to Satan to try and way-lay the believers from the Straight Path; and second is the understanding that Satan has no power over a believer, unless the believer chooses to ignore God and follow Satan. There are not two competing poles of Good and Evil that have equal power. God is Omnipotent, so has power over Satan. Satan has power to do only what God lets him do. (Otherwise there would be two Gods.) In another passage in the Qur’an, God tells Satan to “lead to destruction those whom you can among them, with your (seductive) voice, make assaults on them with your cavalry and your infantry [Satan has an army of helpers]; mutually share with them wealth and children and make promises to them. But Satan promises them nothing but deceit” (17:64). Thus Satan and his army try everything they can to mislead the human being from the path of God. Whispering in the ear, making suggestions. For example, if I am asked to donate to a charity, Satan might whisper in my ear, “If you give charity you won’t be able to afford that trip, you might become poor;” if I hear the alarm for the dawn prayer, he may whisper in my ear, “Oh, aren’t you sleepy, and isn’t the bed cosy and comfortable.” And so on. If I listen to him, I am deflected from the path of righteousness. However, if I say, “*A‘ūdhu billāhi min al-shaiṭān al-rajīm* [I seek refuge in God from Satan the Rejected],” then I can overcome the whispering and give to charity, or get up and pray.

Satan is allowed to test us, whisper to us, and pull us away from the path of righteousness. He will seize upon any of our emotions and weaknesses. When the Prophet tells men to beware when a woman approaches, ‘it is Satan approaching,’ he is not saying that the woman

is Satan. He is saying that the heterosexual man should beware that Satan may play upon his sexual desire and make the woman seem appealing to him. The man is being warned to be on his guard. Of course he could see her, talk to her, and feel nothing. If Satan chooses to whisper, however, then the man is to be on guard. Although feminists may feel annoyed that the hadith is directed to men, it applies to a woman as well if she were to feel desire at seeing a man.

Moreover, the first is actually a hadith that wives can appreciate, because it is a message to a man that his wife is as good as any other woman. It is a message of the fundamental equality of women, a message that denies a hierarchy of women based upon their beauty. To the man who feels he has seen a woman who is more beautiful than his wife, one whom he thinks may satisfy him more, it is as if the Prophet is saying, "That's an illusion of Satan designed to tempt you into illegal intercourse. Your wife is the same as any other woman; she has what the other has. So be faithful to your wives." ("With her, it would be the same as with the other one.") The last two hadiths reinforce the idea that sexual temptation between unrelated men and women is enhanced when they are alone together, and thus should be avoided as much as possible. They talk about Satan entering both the man's and the woman's bodies. Mernissi misses this when she comments on the last hadith: "The married woman whose husband is absent is a particular threat to men"<sup>59</sup> – the man is a threat to that woman too.

### 3. WOMEN AND EXCLUSION FROM THE UMMAH

So, the Qur'an and Sunnah do not see women as a threat. Women are endowed with normal, natural sex drives that must be fulfilled in marriage to be lawful. The only significant assertion of Mernissi's left to consider is the notion that women are excluded from the Ummah. In fact, Mernissi's assertion that women are not considered part of the community of believers is not a new one. During the time of the Prophet, Umm Salamah, one of the wives of the Prophet, felt the same as Mernissi. Umm Salamah was worried that the Qur'an seemed to be addressing only the men. She asked the Prophet, "O Messenger of

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p.42.

God! The Qur'an speaks of men but does not speak of us women."<sup>60</sup> According to the early Islamic scholars, al-Ḥākim and Tirmidhī, three verses were revealed in response to her question, verses which ought to lay to rest forever the notion that women are not considered part of the community of believers:

And their Lord has accepted of them and answered them: Never will I suffer to be lost the work of any of you, be he male or female: you are members, one of another; those who have left their homes, or have been driven out therefrom, or suffered harm in My cause, or fought or been slain – verily I will blot out from them their iniquities and admit them into gardens with rivers flowing beneath: a reward from the Presence of God and from His Presence is the best of rewards ... (Qur'an 3:195)

And in nowise covet those things in which God has bestowed his gifts more freely on some of you than on others; to men is allotted what they earn and to women what they earn: but ask God of His bounty for God has full knowledge of all things ... (Qur'an 4:32)

For Muslim men and women – for believing men and women – for devout men and women, for true men and women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who humble themselves, for men and women who give in charity, for men and women who fast [and deny themselves], for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage much in Allah's praise – for them has Allah prepared forgiveness and great reward ... (Qur'an 33:35).<sup>61</sup>

Women believers are indeed part of the Ummah; they are equally responsible and accountable for their deeds as men. They are not, as Mernissi asserts, obstructing men from worshiping God, for they are busy (ought to be busy) with their own worship of God. The Qur'an considers men and women to be 'brothers and sisters' in faith, as the Prophet said: "Women are but sisters (*shaqā'iq*, or twin halves) of men."<sup>62</sup> Indeed, Mernissi's discussion of this very event in *The Veil and the Male Elite* is puzzling. How can she continue to assert that

<sup>60</sup> Hasan Turabi, *Women in Islam and Muslim Society* (London: Milestone Publishers, 1991), p.7.

<sup>61</sup> Von Denffer, *Uhum al-Qur'an*, p.100.

<sup>62</sup> Badawi, *Gender Equity in Islam*, p.30.

women are excluded when she recognizes the “revolutionary” nature of God’s answer to Umm Salama’s question? The headscarf that women wear, that Mernissi sees as the sign of “the person who is damned, excluded from the privileges and spiritual grace to which the Muslim has access,”<sup>63</sup> is the very scarf they wear while praying – is not praying a way to spiritual grace? And is not the woman praying while wearing her headscarf?

As for her assertion that men and women are taught to view each other as enemies, that may be a feature of Moroccan society (though I doubt it), it would be in spite of Islamic precepts, not because of them. The Qur’an describes Muslim men and women as “protectors” of each other (9:71), and it also instructs husbands to be kind to their wives:

O you who believe! You are forbidden to inherit women against their will. Nor should you treat them with harshness, that you may take away part of the marital gift you have given them, except when they have been guilty of open lewdness; on the contrary, live with them on a footing of kindness and equity. If you take a dislike to them, it may be that you dislike a thing through which Allah brings about a great deal of good ... (Qur’an 4:19)

Why any particular community restricts the role of women is the subject, as I mentioned, of careful sociological/historical/anthropological study. However, the locking up at home/exclusion from public life that Muslim women face normatively in some Islamic discourses and in practice, is not based on Mernissi’s ideas about woman as a threat to the social order, but upon restrictive interpretations of a few verses in Qur’an, such as 4:34, 33:33 and 33:53, that Mernissi does not even discuss. These verses proclaim male guardianship over women (4:34), a command for the wives of the Prophet to “stay quietly in your houses, and make not a dazzling display, like that of the former times of ignorance (33:33),” and a command to speak to the wives of the Prophet from behind a curtain (33:53) (this verse is to be discussed below). Unfortunately, many jurists, past and present, interpret these verses as commanding men to rule over women (hence women’s absence from public life), and for women to live a retiring life

<sup>63</sup> Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite*, p.97.



away from the public sphere,<sup>64</sup> (including the mistaken notion that even a woman's voice is not to be heard by strange men and sometimes taken to an even more extreme level by an assertion the woman should almost never leave the house). To the extent that people's actions are attributable to Islamic law manuals, these "(over) interpretation[s]," as Hoffman notes, have "had very adverse effects for the mobility of Muslim women and their chances of participation in public affairs."<sup>65</sup> A full refutation of these restrictive views is not possible here. Nevertheless, I am convinced that other verses in the Qur'an such as those proclaiming male/female equality, men and women as protectors of each other, and both enjoining good and forbidding evil, in conjunction with the example of women in the first community, who went to battle, engaged in business, medicine, jurisprudence, spoke out in the mosque, and so on, and who gave their oath of loyalty in person to the Prophet, all indicate the rightness of women's full participation in the community.

#### 4. THE VEIL AND THE MALE ELITE

Thus far I have mostly focused on refuting the arguments that Mernissi raises in *Beyond the Veil*. Even though the same themes are evident in *The Veil and the Male Elite*, I left *The Veil and the Male Elite* until now because my criticisms of *The Veil and the Male Elite* are special to the methodology that Mernissi adopts to make her case. I mentioned in the introduction above that in *The Veil and the Male Elite* Mernissi tried to use traditional Islamic methodology to make her case against *hijāb*. In *The Veil and the Male Elite*, Mernissi focuses only on the Qur'an and the Hadith; there are no folk-tales, nor interviews, nor reliance on a single scholar. Even the use of the Hadith is different in this book. In *Beyond the Veil*, she brings the Hadith without discussion as surface proof that Islam is anti-women. In *The Veil and the Male Elite* she understands that Hadith study has its own science with rules of interpretation. She attempts to prove, not from the content of any hadith, but from the science of deciding authenticity, that certain hadiths that can be used against women

<sup>64</sup> An-Na'im, *Toward an Islamic Reformation*, pp. 54–55, and passim.

<sup>65</sup> Hoffman, 'On the Development of Islamic Jurisprudence', p. 81.

(such as the one declaring that women should not be leaders of a nation) ought to be rejected from the Hadith corpus. This is an acceptable and admirable attempt on her part to investigate some hadiths that appear anti-women. The problem is that she goes about this in a way that is unacceptable to Islamic methodology – she engages in backbiting, gossip, and slander in her attempt to discredit the character of two hadith narrators who were Companions of the Prophet. I am not going to go into great detail about this, for it is outside the scope of my book on *ḥijāb*. I shall confine myself to Mernissi's use of the hadiths of Abū Hurayra in her attempt to assert that Islam views women as 'sullyng'. Although I have already demonstrated the falsity of this assertion, I think it necessary to highlight her errors of interpretation in this book also. As with much of my critique of her above, I find her arguments and procedure quite strange.

The hadith in question here is the one narrated by Abū Hurayra, mentioned above, about a woman breaking a man's prayer by passing in front of him. Mernissi uses this hadith to reestablish her theme about Islam finding femaleness sullyng. Mernissi attempts to discredit the hadith by attacking Abū Hurayra's character. However, the reason why her discussion of this particular hadith is so strange, is that there is another hadith narrated by 'Ā'ishah, the wife of the Prophet, disputing Abū Hurayra on this point: "You compare us now to asses and dogs. In the name of God, I have seen the Prophet saying his prayers while I was there, lying on the bed between him and the *qiblah*. And in order not to disturb him, I didn't move."<sup>66</sup>

Now the science of Hadith developed highly sophisticated methods to clarify the meaning of seemingly contradictory hadiths (linguistic, textual, legal, and historiographic techniques).<sup>67</sup> Mernissi discusses 'Ā'ishah's correction to Abū Hurayra's version, and she points out that the Hadith scholars determined that 'Ā'ishah's report was more authentic than that attributed to Abū Hurayra (because, they argued, the Prophet had always striven to dispel superstition).<sup>68</sup> So, in the language of Hadith, Abū Hurayra's hadith really is irrelevant, and

<sup>66</sup> Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite*, p.70.

<sup>67</sup> Murad, 'The Problem of Anti-Madhabism', p.33.

<sup>68</sup> Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite*, p.41.

thus cannot be used as part of an argument that Islam sees women as anti-divine. Why does Mernissi discuss it so much, using it as proof that Islam regards women as sullyng? Why engage in character assassination when the scholars decided that ‘Ā’ishah was more correct? Why use traditional Islamic methodologies to slander a Companion of the Prophet, when that very methodology records the Prophet asking Muslims: “Honour my Companions, for they are the best among you, and then those who follow them and then the next generation, and then corruption will proliferate after that”?<sup>69</sup>

##### 5. ‘ASBĀB AL NUZŪL

My final critique of *The Veil and the Male Elite* is Mernissi’s recourse to the method of ‘*asbāb al-nuzūl*, the occasion of revelation, to understand why *ḥijāb* was imposed on women. She looks first at the ‘verse of the *ḥijāb* (curtain)’, that descended after the Prophet’s wedding to Zaynab, where the Prophet let fall a curtain between him and his male companion Anas, and then at the verses requiring believing women to cover.

There is not actually much to say about the first verse that Mernissi discusses. Her interpretation of the verse is peculiar. As already mentioned, the occasion for the verse is as follows. Zaynab was waiting inside her apartment after her wedding celebration. As the Prophet crosses the threshold to join her, he receives a revelation and then drops a curtain between him and Anas. This is the verse that is used by many Muslims to argue that women should cover their faces with a veil. For Mernissi this is an unintended interpretation of the verse, which was really about separating two men by a curtain, not women from men. The fact that Zaynab is also in the room seems irrelevant to her, as does the fact that the verse says, “And when you ask of them [the wives of the Prophet] anything, ask it of them from behind a curtain. That is purer for you and for their hearts.” ‘Ask from behind a curtain’ implies the curtain is between the man and the wife of the Prophet. And yet I have seen Western scholars use this strange point of Mernissi as part of their argument about the veil being oppressive.

<sup>69</sup> al-Tabrizi, *Mishkat*, III, 1695, hadiths nos.6001 and 6003, cited in Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence*, p.302.

In her piece on the veil, Reece writes:

Mernissi devoted considerable space in her book to the origins of the *hijab* in Islam, explaining that originally the descent of the *hijab*, or curtain, was carried out to put a barrier between two men, not between a man and a woman. The event leading to the key verse in the Qur'an pertaining to *hijab* (Surah 33:53) involved the lowering of a curtain to protect the intimacy of Muhammad and his wife, and to exclude one of Muhammad's male companions. Mernissi continually expressed dismay that one incident in Muhammad's life would split the Muslim concept of space in two.<sup>70</sup>

Since, after this verse came down, the Prophet's wives started covering their faces, we can only assume that Muhammad, his wives, and the whole first Islamic community misunderstood a commandment from God, and God neglected to correct them before the Prophet died. Did no one else notice this error before Mernissi?

Mernissi's argument that the Prophet succumbed to 'Umar's pressures to institute *hijāb* on the rest of the believing women is little better than her interpretation of the verse of *hijāb*. As mentioned above, Mernissi holds that the Prophet was resisting 'Umar's pressures to institute *hijāb*, but after personal family scandals and military defeat, the Prophet, old and tired, cannot resist 'Umar any more, so institutes *hijāb*. The essential point that I want to examine here is her implication that 'Umar persuaded the Prophet to do something which, Mernissi argues, the Prophet did not want to do: ask women to cover. The problem is that the Islamic methodology of *'asbāb al-nuzūl*, which Mernissi is using to discuss *hijāb*, requires the assumption that the Prophet himself did not write the Qur'an, but that it is the actual word of God, dictated to the Prophet by the archangel Gabriel:

Narrated 'Ā'ishah, the mother of the faithful believers (RAA): Al-Ḥārith bin Ḥishām (RAA) asked Allah's Apostle (pbuh) "O Allah's Apostle! (pbuh) How is the Divine Inspiration revealed to you?" Allah's Apostle (pbuh) replied, "Sometimes it is [revealed] like the ringing of a bell, this form of Inspiration is the hardest of all and then this state passes off after I have grasped what is inspired. Sometimes the Angel comes in the form of a man and talks to me and I grasp whatever he

<sup>70</sup> Reece, 'Covering and Communication', p.40.

says.” ‘Ā’ishah added: Verily I saw the Prophet (pbuh) being inspired Divinely on a very cold day and noticed the sweat dropping from his forehead [as the Inspiration was over].<sup>71</sup>

Thus someone utilizing Islamic methodology cannot argue that ‘Umar persuaded the Prophet to institute a verse, because that implies that it was the Prophet writing the Qur’an. If ‘Umar did try and persuade the Prophet on a course of action (and we know that he did advise the Prophet on what to do), once the course of action is part of the Qur’an, then it is a commandment of God. ‘Umar’s contribution is either irrelevant or prescient, since he advised the Prophet to do something that God confirmed in the Qur’an as the right thing to do. However, let us say that Mernissi is right and that ‘Umar persuaded the Prophet to include verses of *ḥijāb* in the Qur’an, it is still unclear how this actually helps women. Once the sentiment is a verse in the Qur’an, standing for a commandment from God, how does this help women campaign against the veil?

Mernissi’s choice to accept Islamic methodology to make a case against *ḥijāb* creates for her a central paradox she cannot resolve. Other Muslim women, unconvinced that *ḥijāb* is a religious requirement, choose the strategy of arguing that covering is not in the Qur’an. For a Muslim who wants to argue against *ḥijāb*, that is the wisest strategy. By accepting that the Qur’an requires covering, Mernissi’s choice leads her to a dead end: if covering is in the Qur’an, it is a commandment to be obeyed. As a perceptive book reviewer observed:

Since Muslims have to follow the Qur’an as God’s revelation to his Prophet, verses like these also have to be respected ... Though she attacks many hadiths as being misreported, which is acceptable in Islam, Qur’anic verses are God’s own words and cannot be doubted. She also opens herself up to criticism by implying that the Prophet ignored God’s dictates when she claims that he did not apply them in his own life.<sup>72</sup>

Mernissi, by arguing that ‘Umar persuaded the Prophet to accept a misogynist practice, is also opening herself up to the criticism that she

<sup>71</sup> al-Bukhārī, ‘The Book Of Revelation’, vol. 1, p.2.

<sup>72</sup> Marlene Kanawati, ‘The Veil and the Male Elite, Book Review’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 25, 3 (1993), p.502.

is saying that God did not intend good to women by asking them to cover, whereas believing Muslims hold that God only asks or commands us to do that which is good for us: "God wishes for you ease and He does not wish difficulty for you" (2:185). Moreover, the Qur'an commands believers to accept the whole book and not to dispute about its verses: "It is not fitting for a believer, man or woman, when a matter has been decided by God and His Messenger, to have any option about their decision: if anyone disobeys God and His Messenger, he is indeed on a clearly wrong Path" (33:36).

In fact, Mernissi is using Islamic methodology from a secular point of view. Therefore, she will persuade only those who do not understand this argument of mine. I too shall be misunderstood, as a review of *The Veil and the Male Elite* demonstrates:

In Islam more than in either of its predecessors, Judaism and Christianity, the original ideas of the founder concerning women were incontestably revolutionary ... [the] veil confined women to a private existence shorn of public responsibility. Only by exploring these contradictions as deviations from the Prophet's intent can one make an argument for emancipation without rejecting the faith ... The book, part of a growing reform literature in Islam, will not convince those who are committed to the received tradition, for reasons she herself makes clear [they "have a vested interest in blocking women's rights in Muslim countries"<sup>73</sup>]. But many who are troubled by the outcome of Muhammad's mission will be grateful for Mernissi's formulation of a persuasive alternative.<sup>74</sup>

#### D. CONCLUSION

In Mernissi's *Doing Daily Battle*, a book of interviews with Moroccan women about their daily lives, Mernissi castigates the Moroccan government for using foreign aid agencies in implementing a family planning strategy and for not consulting women themselves on the issue. The book is dedicated to bringing Moroccan women's experience and voice to the surface: "So I can be proud of my interviews in that they give me a feeling of fidelity to the reality of women's

<sup>73</sup> Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite*, p.vii.

<sup>74</sup> Daniel S. Lev, 'The Veil and the Male Elite, Book Review', *Women and Politics*, 12, 1 (1992), pp.80-81.

experience that no statistical table has given me.”<sup>75</sup> In view of this, it is strange to see Mernissi write about *ḥijāb* without taking into account women’s experiences with it. Though *Beyond the Veil* did include interviews with people, they were not focused on *ḥijāb*.<sup>76</sup> The interviews for that book were conducted in 1971, before the current re-covering movement, so it contains dated opinions. The new preface to the revised edition of *Beyond the Veil* that was published in 1987 brings her up to date with the re-covering movement, but still, covered women’s voices are silent. In the preface, Mernissi identifies only two significant groups that have emerged in the postcolonial era: fundamentalists and unveiled women: “But while the men seeking power through religion and its revivification are mostly from newly urbanized middle- and lower-middle-class backgrounds, unveiled women on the contrary are predominantly of the urban upper and middle class.”<sup>77</sup> However, she does not even mention veiled women. For her, the fundamentalists are men and they stand opposed to women, who are unveiled.

*The Veil and the Male Elite*, also published in 1987, does not utilize any interviews, though neither does it give voice to the perspectives of covered women. In both books, covered women are silent, denied agency, and treated as passive victims of men. Nevertheless, as Chapter Three of this book discussed, there were educated and professional urban Moroccan women donning *ḥijāb* in the 1990s. Hessini decided to interview some because she had been impressed by their articulate, outspoken, and confident behavior in the classroom. Although Hessini makes clear her own view that these women are accepting a patriarchal view of women, at least she lets the women’s voices and agency come through in her text. Her interviewees did not find Islam or covering oppressive or antiwomen. Remember Hadija, who said, “The *ḥijāb* is a way for me to retreat from a world that has disappointed me. It’s my own little sanctuary.”<sup>78</sup> Having been a professor at a university, Mernissi cannot be ignorant of these women.

<sup>75</sup> Mernissi, *Doing Daily Battle*, p.18.

<sup>76</sup> She asked them, “What do you think is the main change that has taken place in the family and in women’s situation in the last decades?” *Beyond the Veil*, p.89.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xi.

<sup>78</sup> Hessini, ‘Wearing the *Ḥijāb* in Contemporary Morocco’, p.50.

Mernissi's argument that the veil excludes women from the faith, from public space, and so on, is refuted by the opinions and actions of women examined in Chapter Three and by my interviewees in Chapter Two. A key feature is the sense that they cover so that they may continue to have access to the public space, be it education or employment. These women did not see a contradiction between covering and working – they did not feel that their scarves were a symbol that public space was a male-only space. It is also worth pointing out that the Javanese women did not see covering in this way at all, because women in Java always had access to public space. Mernissi's focus on access to space ought to be heavily contextualized. In addition, the studies of re-covering show that the covered women did not view the *hijāb* as showing that men were their enemies. For instance, those who were part of the 'new veiling' in Egypt, regarded men and women as 'brothers' and 'sisters' in faith. El-Guindi noted:

Addressing each other as brother and sister ideologically unifies the membership, which is physically dispersed on the campuses of schools and universities, and verbally expresses two fundamental features which characterize the Muslim ethic: egalitarianism and sexual separation. The veil, or rather the entire *ziyy Islami*, is a symbol both of this ethic and for the Islamic model.<sup>79</sup>

Mernissi seems oblivious to these women's experiences. Rather, she casts the re-covering as a campaign by men who are trying to solve a postcolonial Muslim identity crisis by forcing women back to the veil, putting the "accent on the confinement of women as a solution for a pressing crisis. Protecting women from change by veiling them and shutting them out of the world has echoes of closing the community to protect it from the West."<sup>80</sup> She ignores some of the devotional literature accompanying the re-covering movement that is favorable to women. This view regards the traditional Muslim view, depicted in Mernissi's *Beyond the Veil*, that women should stay indoors, as a deteriorated Muslim society. These scholars and their readers argue that the model that Muslims should emulate is that of the first community. The Qur'an, Sunnah and other historical

<sup>79</sup> El-Guindi, 'Veiling Infitah', p.474.

<sup>80</sup> Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite*, p.99.



evidences together demonstrate that women did play a part in the community and they were actively engaged outside the home (as well as inside) in trade, worship, scholarship, war, and so on. Many of these scholars view the history of the Ummah since the first community as a story of decline, and the lowering status of women is seen as one aspect of that decline.<sup>81</sup> These scholars' works provide a foundation for viewing Muslim women as dignified human beings. Then, the symbolism of the *ḥijāb* changes too. In this reading, *ḥijāb* can be a symbol of a woman whose religion dignifies her. Thus the re-covering movement is a challenge to Mernissi's analysis, to the Western stereotype about the meaning of the scarf as oppressive, and also to some Muslim countries' traditional view of women and their role, as well as an assertion that the Islamic dress code does not necessitate women's retirement from the public space.

In ignoring covered women's voices and in reducing them to passive victims, Mernissi is only reinscribing the colonial and Orientalist view of the 'veiled woman'. Her vision is reductive, ignoring the sociological complexity of covering. Remember Hume-Griffith's view of *niqāb*?

When Mohammed, acting under what he declared to be a revelation from Allah, introduced the use of the veil, he swept away for ever all hope of happiness for Moslem women. By means of the veil he immured them for ever in a living grave. "Imprisoned for life" is the verdict written against each Moslem woman as she leaves childhood behind her.<sup>82</sup>

This is not so very different from Mernissi:

[*Hijab* is the] very sign of the person who is damned, excluded from the privileges and spiritual grace to which the Muslim has access, [and]

<sup>81</sup> Lois Lamyā' al-Fārūqī, *Women, Muslim Society and Islam* (Plainfield, Ind.: American Trust Publications, 1988), p.10. See also: Badawi, *Gender Equity in Islam*; Huda Al-Khattab, *Bent Rib: A Journey through Women's Issues in Islam* (London: Ta-Ha Publishers, 1997); Hoffman, 'On the Development of Islamic Jurisprudence'; Aisha B. Lemu, *The Ideal Muslim Husband* (Alexandria, Va.: Saadawi Publications, 1992); Aisha B. Lemu and Fatima Heeren, *Woman in Islam* (London: The Islamic Council of Europe, 1976); Maqsood, *The Muslim Marriage Guide*; Fathi Osman, *Muslim Women in the Family and the Society* (Los Angeles, Calif.: Minaret Publications, n.d.); Turabi *Women in Islam*; Amina Wadud-Muhsin, *Qur'an and Women* (Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Fajar Bakti Sdn Bhd, 1992).

<sup>82</sup> Hume-Griffith, *Behind the Veil*, pp.222–223.

is claimed in our day as a symbol of Muslim identity, manna for the Muslim woman.<sup>83</sup>

The veil that descended from Heaven was going to cover up women, separate them from men, from the Prophet, and so from God.<sup>84</sup>

Mernissi has codified for the academic world a popular cultural view of Muslim women as dangerous beings needing control. In so doing, however, she has failed to say that that is what she is doing. It is not that Mernissi does not capture elements of the ‘vulgar’ unread Muslim view of women. There are indeed mosques that do not allow women access; there are indeed places where women are excluded, where women are kept illiterate, bound to the home, and so on. The problem is her acceptance of those practices as truly Islamic ones, with no interrogation of them, and with no careful analysis of the complex relationship that exists between actual cultural practices and the Qur’an. Mernissi actually knows very well the point that I am making. She makes it herself in *The Veil and the Male Elite*. At the end of her discussion of the hadith by Abū Hurayra, discussed above, Mernissi writes:

Islam stresses the fact that sex and menstruation are really extraordinary (in the literal meaning of the word) events, but they do not make the woman a negative pole that “annihilates” in some way the presence of the divine and upsets its order. But apparently the Prophet’s message, 15 centuries later, has still not been absorbed into customs throughout the Muslim world, if I judge by the occasions when I was refused admittance at the doors of mosques in Penang, Malaysia, in Baghdad, and in Kairwan.<sup>85</sup>

In other words, she is pointing to the differences, already discussed, between Islam’s (as Qur’an and Sunnah) embodiment of a positive vision for women, and Islam as culturally enacted practice.

So why does she argue otherwise? Because she relies on the assumption ‘that in Islam there is a contradiction between femaleness and the divine’ to explain why Islam requires *ḥijāb*. She then objects to *ḥijāb* for its symbolizing the degradation of women. The problem

<sup>83</sup> Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite*, p.97.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p.101.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.74-75.

with her argument is that if Islam does not view women in the way she suggests (as I argue in its textual essence that it does not), then the *ḥijāb* can carry a different meaning.

# An Alternative Theory of the Veil

One of the points of this book is to show that social context influences meanings ascribed to *ḥijāb*. In this chapter, I aim to develop a positive theory of the meaning of *ḥijāb* for the consumer capitalist culture of the twenty-first century. I argue that because of capitalism's emphasis on the body and on materiality, wearing *ḥijāb* can be an empowering and liberating experience for women. I start by presenting two newspaper articles written by Muslim women who have found wearing *ḥijāb* liberating. I move to an analysis of feminist arguments about the male gaze and capitalism's commodification of the female body to argue that *ḥijāb* is a powerful way to resist the detrimental aspects of both. In Sections C, D, and E, I refute some common critiques of *ḥijāb* as a dress that smothers femininity, renders women sex objects, and denies them choice. The chapter closes with Section F that presents *ḥijāb* as a gateway into a faith tradition that assists its adherents to withstand the corrosive effects of modern materialism.

## A. *ḤIJĀB* AND LIBERATION

In Chapter Two, Bassima, an English convert to Islam, talked about how she had found wearing *ḥijāb* liberating. Naheed Mustapha and Sultana Yusufali are two Muslim women who also explain *ḥijāb* in terms of liberation. Both have written newspaper articles about why they have chosen to cover.

Naheed Mustapha, an Honors graduate in Political Science and History from the University of Toronto, Canada, and a journalism graduate from Ryerson University, Canada, wrote an article about *ḥijāb* for a national Canadian newspaper, *The Globe and Mail*, in 1993. She opens by referring to two competing popular discourses about the meaning of *ḥijāb* in Western culture: "I often wonder whether people see me as a radical, fundamentalist Muslim terrorist

packing an AK-47 assault rifle inside my jean jacket. Or maybe they see me as the poster girl for oppressed womanhood everywhere.”<sup>1</sup> She then argues for a third interpretation: *hijāb* means that she is a “Muslim woman who believes her body is her own private concern. Young Muslim women are reclaiming the *hijāb*, reinterpreting it in light of its original purpose – to give back to women ultimate control of their own bodies.” For Mustapha, wearing *hijāb* gives her “freedom:” “Wearing the *hijāb* has given me freedom from constant attention to my physical self. Because my appearance is not subjected to public scrutiny, my beauty, or perhaps lack of it, has been removed from the realm of what can legitimately be discussed.” Mustapha points out that in the West, women “are taught from early childhood that their worth is proportional to their attractiveness.” And she mentions spending her teen years a borderline bulimic, trying to attain the impossible Western cultural beauty standards. She observes that women who try to bow out of the beauty game, by not shaving their legs, or not wearing make up, or covering, face “ridicule and contempt” from men and women in society. However, she considers her choice to cover a better way of reaching women’s equality than the feminist argument for exposing the body: “Women are not going to achieve equality with the right to bare their breasts in public, as some people would like to have you believe. That would only make us party to our own objectification. True equality will be had only when women don’t need to display themselves to get attention and women need to defend their decision to keep their bodies to themselves.”

Sultana Yusufali, a 17-year-old high school student, in another Canadian newspaper, *The Toronto Star*, wrote an article “My Body is My Own Business” in 1998.<sup>2</sup> She echoes Mustapha’s points. Like Mustapha, Yusufali posits a third alternative meaning for the *hijāb* other than the two typical Western versions: “[W]hen most people look at me, their first thought usually is something along the lines of ‘oppressed female’. The brave individuals who have mustered the courage to ask me about the way I dress usually have questions like

<sup>1</sup> N. Mustapha, ‘My Body is my Own Business’, *Globe and Mail* (Tuesday, June 29, 1993), Facts and Arguments.

<sup>2</sup> S. Yusufali: ‘My Body is My Own Business’, *Toronto Star* (Tuesday, February 17, 1998), p.C:1.

these: ‘Do your parents make you wear that?’ or ‘Don’t you find that really unfair?’” Yusufali wonders why the Quebec schoolgirls were expelled: “It seems strange that a little piece of cloth would make for such controversy. Perhaps the fear is that I am harbouring an Uzi underneath it. You never can tell with those Muslim fundamentalists.”

However, in wearing *hijāb* Yusufali positions herself as a rebel: “I probably do not fit into the preconceived notion of a ‘rebel’. I have no visible tattoos and minimal piercings. I do not possess a leather jacket.” What is Yusufali rebelling against in choosing to cover? Against Western culture’s emphasis on physical beauty for women. *Hijāb* is “one of the most fundamental aspects of female empowerment. When I cover myself, I make it virtually impossible for people to judge me according to the way I look.” Yusufali is rebelling against the cultural emphasis on external appearance, on judging people “on the basis of our clothing, jewelry, hair and makeup.”

When people ask me if I feel oppressed, I can honestly say no. I made this decision out of my own free will. I like the fact that I am taking control of the way other people perceive me. I enjoy the fact that I don’t give anyone anything to look at and that I have released myself from the bondage of the swinging pendulum of the fashion industry and other institutions that exploit females.

She believes that *hijāb* is more conducive to women’s equality than Western culture’s allowing women’s bodies to be exploited for commercial purposes:

Why do we [women] allow ourselves to be manipulated like this [used in advertising]? Whether the 90’s woman wishes to believe it or not, she is being forced into a mould. She is being coerced into selling herself, into compromising herself. This is why we have 13-year-old girls sticking their fingers down their throats and overweight adolescents hanging themselves.

Next time someone sees her in *hijāb*, she concludes, “don’t look at me sympathetically. I am not under duress or a male-worshipping female captive from those barbarous Arabic deserts. I’ve been liberated.”

B. *HIJĀB* AND THE MALE GAZE

Mustapha and Yusufali present *hijāb* as a liberation from oppressive aspects of Western popular consumer culture. In so doing, they make use of two kinds of feminist analysis: first, the objectification and commodification of women's bodies in capitalist culture, and second, the theory of harm done to women by the promotion of a beauty ideal.

Orbach, Bordo, Wolf, Ussher, MacKinnon, Dworkin, and many other feminists have analyzed in detail Western cultures' images of women. They examine the problem of the objectification of the female body and its use in advertising, pornography, art, film, and so on (anywhere there occurs an image of a female body). The main argument is that women's bodies are presented in such a way as to satisfy a (heterosexual) male gaze and a (heterosexual) male desire: the woman is beautiful and her body sexually arousing. In art (especially the genre of the female nude) and pornography, the woman is frequently passive, often reclining, offered as a possession for the man to take her<sup>3</sup> (or actively asking to be subjugated by the man<sup>4</sup>). In the case of a picture/film the 'taking' is visual, although some feminists argue that this visual objectification has effects in the real world, that it "constructs women as things for [male] sexual use."<sup>5</sup> Moreover, this positioning of the female body is not confined to art, it is ubiquitous in imagery everywhere there are pictures, most especially in advertising: a woman's body in a bikini stroking a car exhaust system; a woman's body reclining behind books; a woman's legs sticking out of a cereal box ('Get more kicks out of Kix').<sup>6</sup> The relationship between the product being sold and the woman's sexualized body is nil; the body is there to attract attention. It also excites the heterosexual man, and

<sup>3</sup> See Berger et al., *Ways of Seeing*.

<sup>4</sup> A. Dworkin, 'Pornography is a Civil Rights Issue', in *Debating Sexual Correctness: Pornography, Sexual Harassment, Date Rape, and the Politics of Sexual Equality*, (ed.), Adele M. Stan (New York: Delta, 1995), p.27.

<sup>5</sup> Catherine A. MacKinnon, 'Sexuality, Pornography, and Method: "Pleasure Under Patriarchy"', in *Feminism and Philosophy: Essential Readings in Theory, Reinterpretation, and Application*, (eds.), Nancy Tuana and Rosemarie Tong (Boulder, Co.: Westview Press, 1995), p.142.

<sup>6</sup> Michael F. Jacobson and Laurie Ann Mazur, *Marketing Madness: A Survival Guide for a Consumer Society* (Boulder, Co.: Westview Press, 1995), pp.84-85.

reinforces the lesson that women's bodies are objects. This kind of objectification, it is argued, dehumanizes women, turns them into objects and denies their personhood.

John Berger's study of the female nude in the history of Western painting includes a succinct summary of the phenomenon of the male gaze that is deservedly oft quoted:

*[M]en act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight. [Original emphasis.]*<sup>7</sup>

Not only does the woman internalize the male gaze and judge herself with the eyes of his desire, but also women then turn to one another and judge one another with those male eyes. Both men and women are gazing at women through the eyes of 'the male gaze'. Rossiter's analysis of her child's dance party, which produced anxiety in the girls, makes this clear. The children, aged 10 to 13, organized a party at someone's house, and the boys told the girls not to wear sweat pants. Rossiter argues that for the young girls, the dance party was a defining moment in their transition to womanhood: they had learnt a first lesson about dressing/behaving to please a male gaze. She notes that none of the boys experienced the same anxiety, as did the girls. The girls were learning the cultural script that "organizes the identity of the girl/object at the dance party through (1) the right way to talk, (2) the right way to dress, and (3) the right way to dance."<sup>8</sup> The girls made the transition from "I am dancing" to "I am being watched while I'm dancing" (p.4). The desire to do all these things right, to have a desirable appearance (for the boys looking on) "produces obedience in subjects. In such a way, the internalised male gaze produces girls' 'consent' to their positioning as objects" (p.7). The failure to dress, dance, and talk right produces shame, and "with [it a] threat of abandonment and rejection by others" (p.8).

<sup>7</sup> Berger et al., *Ways of Seeing*, p.47.

<sup>8</sup> Amy B. Rossiter, 'Chips, Coke and Rock-'N'-Roll: Children's Mediation of an Invitation to a First Dance Party', *Feminist Review*, 46 (Spring 1994), p.5.



Not only does this fear produce obedience in women, and “‘consent’ to their positioning as objects,” it turns other women into competitors and judges. At the party their girlfriends became repositioned as their “harshest critics and potential sources of abandonment” (p.9). Because the boys could be dismissed for being like pesky brothers, it was their girlfriends who were endowed with the ability to judge their appearance as conforming or not to the culturally defined image of beauty. This is because of the girls’ “cultural history” that had internalized the male gaze – that is, their learning through teen magazines and other cultural images what is ‘beautiful’ for a woman (p.17).<sup>9</sup> Rossiter argues that this transitional moment for the adolescent girls is painful, and one not experienced by the boys, who treat the party as a place to learn and practice “cool” behavior (pp.12–13). It is painful for the girls because the “preoccupation with appearance can be read as a self-defeating attempt to seize control at a time when bodily control has disappeared with the installation of girl as object” (p.16). A woman can never reach the ideal (even models feel they fall short),<sup>10</sup> and thus begins the lifetime experience of aiming high and falling short, and the concomitant self-hate and low self-esteem that grips many women in Western culture.

There are several kinds of ‘male gaze’. There is the cultural “script”<sup>11</sup> promoted in the woman-most-pleasing-to-man imagery, enforced by both men and women on women (women on themselves and each other), and there is the individual male gaze that whistles, stares, shouts at, or otherwise harasses women. All have deleterious effects on women’s self-esteem and body. It is an important part of the feminist project to change and ameliorate this. However, feminists disagree over both the nature of the male gaze and how to fix it. Is it innate? Or is it socially constructed? If the latter, how can we re-socialize men? The majority of feminists argue for social construction and hence social change, with only radical and cultural feminists (a minority) arguing for some kind of sexual essentialism and social change based on celebration of these essences.

<sup>9</sup> See also, Jane M. Ussher, *Fantasies of Femininity: Reframing the Boundaries of Sex* (London: Penguin, 1997).

<sup>10</sup> Elle Macpherson: “I don’t particularly like the way I look, to tell you the truth ... when you’re trying to sell how beautiful you are and you don’t think that you’re that beautiful, it’s a bit scary.” Quoted in Ussher, *Fantasies of Femininity*, p.62.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.9.

Not only is the method for amelioration contested, but also the cause of the problem, for there is disagreement amongst feminists about the nature of women's objectification. Some feminists challenge the idea that media/art/film images objectify women as simplistic and dangerous for its potential to censor free speech. Women models, porn stars and those women producing erotica/pornography have spoken in defense of their industries and careers. Feminist attempts to change the fashion and porn industries are seen as 'prudish', as denying women the right to explore and exhibit and flaunt their sexuality, or as dangerous precedents for censorship. Images of beautiful women are not the problem so much as the aim and intent behind the images.<sup>12</sup>

Clearly Mustapha and Yusufali are convinced by the commodification/objectification feminist position. They view *hijāb* as a way out of this trap, as something that gives women back their personhood. In addition to believing that *hijāb* removes the deleterious effects of the male gaze by de-objectifying women, Mustapha and Yusufali argue that *hijāb* is liberating because it saves women from the ravages of the beauty game. The beauty game is women's attempts to make themselves into the images of beautiful women that they see all around them.

Bordo, Wolf, and other feminists have explored the relationship between the billion-dollar fashion and cosmetic industry that encourages women's attempts to make themselves into the image of beautiful models, and the possible connections with the tragedy of anorexia, bulimia, compulsive eating, and dangerous body-altering cosmetic surgery. It is not hard to demonstrate that Western culture promotes a homogenizing image of the ideal woman, against which women measure and "correct" themselves.<sup>13</sup> Advertisements, films, TV, magazines, anywhere a female image can be found, all promote a specific kind of female body as ideal. To be sure that ideal has undergone changes: the voluptuous 1950s, "skinny and flat chested with

<sup>12</sup> Naomi Wolf, *Fire With Fire: The New Female Power and How it will Change the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Random House, 1993), p.105; Marcia Ann Gillespie, 'Where do We Stand on Pornography? A Ms Roundtable', in *Debating Sexual Correctness: Pornography, Sexual Harassment, Date Rape, and the Politics of Sexual Equality*, (ed.), Adele M. Stan (New York: Delta, 1995), p.59.

<sup>13</sup> Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, pp.24-25.

long straight hair”<sup>14</sup> in the 1960s, and skinnier and skinnier until the 1990s version of the skinny, but “tighter, smoother [and] more contained [that is, less flabby] body profile.”<sup>15</sup> The point is, as so many feminists emphasize, that whatever the image, women strive to achieve it, no matter what their own body shape is, and no matter the low self-esteem and self-loathing that develop as a result of the inevitable failure to achieve the ideal. (This is especially true nowadays when the image is retouched, airbrushed, or actually assembled from different models.)<sup>16</sup>

Thus Bordo concludes that in capitalist consumer cultures, where women have more physical freedom, and work and educational opportunities than in other cultures or at anytime in history, women’s subordination takes on a different, subtler form. Bordo argues that the social system promoting the ‘tyranny of slenderness’ keeps women “docile,” preoccupied with their bodies and locked into a subordinate position where female desire (unlike male desire) is not given free reign; rather it is controlled and restrained by the need to be slim.<sup>17</sup> According to a magazine article in 1999 on the growing problem of eating disorders on college campuses,<sup>18</sup> women’s relationship to their bodies (and increasingly men, as their bodies are also being presented in idealized forms) has been worsening, not improving. It is now agreed that in the 1990s low self-esteem, body dissatisfaction, and eating disorders reached epidemic levels,<sup>19</sup> and were affecting all classes, ethnic groups and both sexes.<sup>20</sup> Veron-Guidry and Williamson

<sup>14</sup> Susie Orbach, *Fat is a Feminist Issue: A Self-Help Guide for Compulsive Eaters* (New York: Berkeley Books, 1979), p.8.

<sup>15</sup> Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, p.188.

<sup>16</sup> Jacobson and Mazur, *Marketing Madness*, p.75.

<sup>17</sup> Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, pp.18, 211.

<sup>18</sup> ‘Out of Control: Weight-Obsessed, Stressed-out Coeds Are Increasingly Falling Prey to Eating Disorders’, *People*, April 12 (1999), pp.52–72.

<sup>19</sup> Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, p.57. See also, Steven C. Abell and Maryse H. Richards, ‘The Relationship Between Body Shape Satisfaction and Self-Esteem: An Investigation of Gender and Class Differences’, *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 25, 5 (1996), pp.691–703. Orbach, *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, p.52.

<sup>20</sup> Eating disorders used to be found predominantly in white, middle- and upper-class, Western women. Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, pp.62–63. Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women* 2nd edn. (New York: Anchor, 1992), pp.288–299. Although the emphasis has traditionally been on women, cultural images now emphasize the physical appearance of men too, which is leading to an increase in male body-

found eating disorders in “prepubertal children, as well as a preference for thinness and body dissatisfaction among children as young as 6 years old.”<sup>21</sup> Muslim women (and men) who grow up in Western culture are not immune from these dominating pressures. The teenage girls want to follow fashion and conform to the beauty ideal as much as any non-Muslim Western girl. (Boys want to conform to ‘cool’ behavior.)

As the excerpts from Mustapha and Yusufali above show, they are convinced that adopting *ḥijāb* is to opt out of the beauty game. In putting on long, loose clothing, and covering their hair with a scarf, they feel liberated from the “bondage of the swinging pendulum of the fashion industry and other institutions that exploit females” (Yusufali). In opting out of the beauty game, they are embracing as liberating a symbol from their own Islamic heritage that others in other contexts may have found oppressive. So in choosing *ḥijāb*, they are constructing a Muslim identity, a minority identity, in the face of the dominant (Western) culture’s messages about women – about the need to dress fashionably, and be slim and beautiful. They use their Islamic heritage as a way to resist, rebel against and counteract these powerful images of ideal beauty. For these and other like-minded Muslim women, *ḥijāb* is a countermeasure in the West. They even have their own version of false consciousness: recall Mustapha’s statements “Women are not going to achieve equality with the right to bare their breasts in public, as some people would like to have you believe,” thus turning the tables on those feminists who would view the young women’s support for *ḥijāb* as false consciousness.

*Hijāb*, when viewed from this perspective, is a way of saying ‘treat me as a person, not as a sex object’. It is a tool to counter the male-gaze

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dissatisfaction and eating disorders. A survey of fifth and sixth graders in the U.S. in the late 1990s found that 43 percent of boys wanted to be thinner. While both men and women are trying to conform to Western cultural messages about ideal masculinity and femininity, there are differences between the sexes in their body-dissatisfaction and eating disorders. Men tend to be dissatisfied with their body for not looking ‘masculine’ enough – that is, a low proportion of muscle to weight, whereas female dissatisfaction is the opposite – that is, too much weight. Michelle Stacey, ‘The Thin Man’, *Elle*, 12, 12 (August 1997), p.178.

<sup>21</sup> Staci Veron-Guidry and Donald A. Williamson, ‘Development of a Body Image Assessment Procedure for Children and Preadolescents’, *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 20, 3 (1996), p.287; Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, p.215.

aspects of the patriarchal capitalist culture in which we find ourselves. Wolf points out that a woman who speaks out against the beauty myth is penalized by having her own appearance scrutinized. Women are either too “ugly” or too “pretty” to be believed. She continues: “For us to reject the insistence that a woman’s appearance *is her speech*, for us to hear one another out beyond the beauty myth, is itself a political step forward.”<sup>22</sup> As Mustapha argued, Muslim women’s *ḥijāb* can be embraced as just such a political act.

### C. *ḤIJĀB* AND FEMININITY

Rugh pointed out in her study of Egyptian folk dress, that in “the long history of Western fashions,”

it is rare to see unwaisted styles. The allure of dress for women is to display the figure attractively which requires fitted rather than loose unstructured style. In the last two hundred years, the major unwaisted styles have been the Empire dress which was the fashion during the period of the first Empire (1804–1814) in the Napoleonic era, and the boyish look of the flapper era in the first decades of the twentieth century.<sup>23</sup>

From the perspective of those used to displaying the female body as right and appropriate (“If you’ve got it, flaunt it” is a common message for women in Western culture), ‘covering it’ seems to suppress femininity and beauty. The often drab-looking garments of covered Muslim women give the appearance that their femininity and sexuality are being denied. In this section, I advance four points in order to rebuff the assumption that *ḥijāb* smothers a woman’s femininity and sexuality. In the first place, women do not wear *ḥijāb* all the time. Although it is often portrayed this way, *ḥijāb* is not a public/private dress, it is related to the presence or absence of unrelated or related men. So, when a woman is with all women, or men from her family, she does not cover. Similarly, outside, if she is free of the gaze of unrelated men, she need not cover. One of the coups of a summer vacation is to find a secluded beach or lake where she can go swimming without *ḥijāb*. Second, women are encouraged to dress up

<sup>22</sup> Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, pp.274–275.

<sup>23</sup> Rugh, *Reveal and Conceal*, pp.18–19.

and beautify themselves, to exult in their bodies, with and for their husbands. Third, because most socializing is done in a segregated fashion, women frequently congregate with no men present. For these occasions many women love to put on makeup, and wear fancy and fine clothes. One of the most spectacular events is a bridal shower for the bride, with women wearing their most beautiful outfits. At some of these events women spend time decorating each other's hands with henna patterns. Singing and dancing are common. I have seen elderly women dancing, clapping, and shaking their hips, urging on a shy, restrained bride to shake her hips and body with more vigour. And fourth, to highlight similarities between *hijāb* and other women's strategies for coping with the male gaze in public space.

Many anthropologists have noticed that in all-women gatherings, women are very relaxed and enjoying themselves. This is no surprise. Western feminist research observes that often in mixed gatherings, men dominate the conversation and women are quieter. Here are some of Makhlof's observations about the women of Sana'a:

In a society marked by strict seclusion and rigidly defined sex roles, one would expect to find that the behaviour of women is extremely constrained. In fact, one of the most striking features of female society in Yemen is the atmosphere of relaxation which seems to prevail during work and leisure time.<sup>24</sup>

Women have a separate sphere over which men have little control, which may constitute a source of support and even of power. Moreover, a cultural ideology which presents women's participation in society as insignificant does not necessarily result in self-devaluation for the women. Rather, the subjective reality of women's lives may contradict this view. In fact, for the outsider expecting constrained and repressed female types as a result of seclusion, it is a most agreeable surprise to find that San'ani women do not seem nearly as tense or inhibited as women in some other cultures. Almost always the atmosphere at women's gatherings is pleasant and relaxing.<sup>25</sup>... (They are wearing their best clothes, rich velvets and brocades, talking, eating, dancing and chewing qat.)<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Makhlof, *Changing Veils*, p.21.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p.25.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p.23.

Wikan's study of Suhari women in Oman described similar behavior. Sexuality was the favourite topic of conversation at women's gatherings, accompanied by joking and pantomime:

Women constantly tease each other about how desired they are by their respective husbands, how they enjoy intercourse, and they illustrate, with gestures and postures, how the objects of the teasing supposedly engage in intercourse. It is a striking and consistent pattern that whereas conjugal life is treated with a tactfulness so rigorous that any reference to it is avoided, this is not true of physical sexuality. Such matters are the object of unrestrained banter of the most intimate nature – but generally of an outrageous, jocular, and clearly fabricated kind and never genuinely indiscreet or vicious.<sup>27</sup>

The autonomy of the women's world is marked. Makhlof noted that in Sana'a society, if a man wished to enter his own home, he must give "early warnings" and call 'Allah' loudly while climbing the stairs to give the women a chance to cover before he arrives."<sup>28</sup> This autonomy led Leila Ahmed to joke that Saudi Arabia, a society where the separation of the sexes is most rigid, best exemplified separatist feminists' dream of setting up women-only communes; that "commune-minded American feminists should go immediately to Saudi Arabia (if they can persuade the Saudis to grant them visas) not to study Arabian women as scientists study insects, but to study as apprentices and disciples of their women's world."<sup>29</sup> Of course, she says this tongue in cheek, as a corrective to the distorted Western concept of secluded women as degraded and repressed. She recognizes that an autonomous female homosocial world is not a substitute for access to the centers of decision-making in society. I present these examples not to say anything positive about seclusion, but to emphasize that just because women cover in public, or in front of men, does not mean they have no avenues to display themselves, exult in, play with, and have fun with their beauty.

Doubleday, observing women in Herat, Afghanistan (pre-Taliban), dressing up and enjoying "showing themselves off to one

<sup>27</sup> Wikan, *Behind the Veil*, p.127.

<sup>28</sup> Makhlof, *Changing Veils*, p.28.

<sup>29</sup> Ahmed, 'Western Ethnocentrism and Perceptions of the Harem', p.531.

another,” remarked how “strange” this seemed to “us” (Westerners).<sup>30</sup> The implicit question is ‘Why bother to get dressed up when there are just women around? What is the point, if there are no men around?’ A very revealing question, is it not? For it assumes that the ‘point’ of women’s dressing up, of displaying one’s beauty is for the sake of men, that is, for the male gaze.

Western culture places a high premium on physical attractiveness for both sexes. Social science research demonstrates that “[a]ttractive people are perceived more favorably on a variety of dimensions – such as social competence, psychological adjustment, and intellectual competence – than are less-attractive people.”<sup>31</sup> Researchers have also identified the “what is beautiful is good” stereotype. Regan found that people tend to accept the fairy tale notion that “the morally righteous are physically flawless, and this combination guarantees benefit in the form of interpersonal happiness and social status, while the morally corrupt inevitably sport warts, blemishes, or a variety of other socially undesirable characteristics, and are effectively denied access to the same resources.”<sup>32</sup>

Feminists are critical of this emphasis on valuing women for their appearance over other aspects of their persons, and yet the cultural messages about women’s beauty seem to have a strong grip on people. Cash’s survey of 122 undergraduate women found that holding feminist ideals did not ‘protect’ women from having a poor body-image: “Messages about the importance of women’s appearance, both in general and in developing and maintaining intimate relationships with men, may be so ingrained and socially reinforced that the acquisition of feminist ideology has little impact on these core beliefs. In effect, these views may be experienced by women as ‘separate issues.’”<sup>33</sup> The Muslim women interviewed by Cayer (for her study of Indo-Pakistani women in Toronto) thought that this emphasis on a woman’s beauty devalued women, made women competitors of each

<sup>30</sup> V. Doubleday, *Three Women of Herat* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1988), pp.84–85.

<sup>31</sup> Linda A. Jackson, *Physical Appearance and Gender: Sociobiological and Sociocultural Perspectives* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), p.81.

<sup>32</sup> Pamela C. Regan, ‘Sexual Outcasts: The Perceived Impact of Body Weight and Gender on Sexuality’, *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 26, 20 (1996), pp.1803–1804.

<sup>33</sup> Thomas F. Cash, Jule R. Ancis and Melissa D. Strachan, ‘Gender Attitudes, Feminist Identity, and Body Images Among College Women’, *Sex Roles*, 36, 7/8 (1997), p.442.



other, and made women dependent on men for their sense of self and identity. Sherifa captured this point well:

I have a friend who dresses really provocatively. She would wear close to nothing ... so she's put this on and if she got a reaction [from a man] she'd say, "Good, I'm looking fine." She'd really question if these men weren't gawking at her ... that's pathetic right? That's how you judge your beauty, by the reactions of men? ... What Muslim women, and especially Muslim women that cover ... are automatically saying ... is I don't care what you think of me. You shouldn't make a judgment if I'm attractive or not. Why am I dressing for your satisfaction? This has nothing to do with you ... I don't establish my worth or my beauty by your reaction, only by the reaction of Allah ... the only person you want to please, that's Allah (*Subhanahuwataallah*) and when you do that you think, wow, the world's mine, it's in my hand.<sup>34</sup>

As one of my Muslim women friends says, "*Hijāb* is a way of giving dignity to a woman's femininity by making her beauty unavailable for public consumption." Consider now *hijāb* in relation to Western women's experience in mixed-sex public space.

Western women know that there are problems associated with being female while in the public space. For every reformed man, there are others that continue to whistle at and harass (not to mention rape and violate) women. Women, while continuing to work at changing men, have also devised various methods with which to de-sexualize themselves, making it easier to enter the public space.<sup>35</sup> These include the professional business woman's suit, the results of eating disorders: anorexia/bulimia, or compulsive eating, and shaving off one's hair.

When women started entering the workforce in great numbers in the seventies, they found that "women who wore business suits were one and a half times more likely to feel they were being treated as executives – and a third less likely to have their authority challenged by men. Clothing that called attention to sexuality, on the other hand

<sup>34</sup> Sherifa, an international relations student, not covering at the time of the interview. Cayer, *Hijab*, pp. 118–119, 120–121. *Subhānahu wa Ta'āla*: 'May God be praised and may His transcendence be affirmed'. Often mentioned after the name of God has been pronounced.

<sup>35</sup> Elizabeth Grauerholz, 'Sexual Harassment in the Academy: The Place of Women Professors', in *Sexual Harassment in the Workplace: Perspectives, Frontiers, and Responsive Strategies*, (ed.), Margaret S. Stockdale (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1996), p.46.

– women’s or men’s – lowered one’s status in the office.”<sup>36</sup> John Molloy, whose survey reached that conclusion, wrote a book that became a best-seller, *The Woman’s Dress for Success Book* (1977). The professional suit that Molloy promoted sold well. However, as Molloy predicted, the fashion industry was unhappy with this new suit. He told his readers that the fashion industry would be “alarmed” at women adopting a work “uniform:” “They will see it as a threat to their domination over women. And they will be right.”<sup>37</sup> Faludi and Wolf argue that part of the backlash against working women has been a backlash against the suit. In the mid-1980s Molloy was rebuked for promoting “that dreadful little bow tie,” pushing “the boring navy blue suit,” and making women look like “imitation men.”<sup>38</sup> By the mid-1990s we can see that there was more variety in fashion, both long and short skirts could be ‘in’. Nevertheless, as Wolf argues, women have a fine line to tread between the demands to be business-like and feminine at the same time, women have to “work harder to be ‘beautiful’ and work harder to be taken seriously.”<sup>39</sup>

Altering one’s dress to facilitate a woman’s negotiation of mixed public space is not alien to non-Muslim women, although naturally, they would not adopt *hijāb*. The following quotation captures, for me, the essence of this aspect of *hijāb*, although it is made by a non-Muslim woman who would probably think *hijāb* is oppressive. A sexual harassment case in Australia in 1992 led to a nationwide discussion, and a well-known novelist wrote about the case while pondering its ramifications. Here, she is interviewing a university woman about the college balls, at one of which the harassment was alleged to have occurred:

Once I went to the Ormond ball ... it was held that year at the Metro Nightclub – awful place, I hated it. I wore a short black skirt and high heels – and I was amazed at the way blokes I’d seen round all year suddenly started behaving towards me in a different way. Afterwards I threw out the clothes. It’s not that I don’t want to be seen as attractive

<sup>36</sup> Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Crown, 1991), p.175.

<sup>37</sup> Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, p.44; Faludi, *Backlash*, p.176.

<sup>38</sup> Faludi, *Backlash*, p.177.

<sup>39</sup> Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, p.45.

or sexy. It's more that I don't want that response from people I don't want to appeal to. Some women – I don't understand it but they seem not to feel *worthy* unless they're being treated that way. I could always deal with the sexism at Ormond. I dress so as to be treated the way I want to be treated.<sup>40</sup> [Original italics, my underlining]

The last sentence highlights the theory of *ḥijāb* that I am developing: in a consumer capitalist culture, where women's beauty is for the male gaze, dress affects the way people (especially men) react to you. This girl changed the way she dressed so as not to provoke unwanted male sexual attention. *Ḥijāb* is the same kind of dress.

Some feminists working with women with eating disorders argue that women engage in pathological eating behaviors in order to de-sexualize themselves. Compulsive eating, bulimia, or anorexia can make a woman so fat, or so thin, as to be seen as undesirable by men. Based on her work with women with compulsive eating problems, Orbach believes that many of these women purposely become fat in order to deny their female sexuality: "To expose their sexuality means that others will deny them their personhood."<sup>41</sup> These women found that by being fat, they were no longer treated as sexual objects, particularly at work, as one woman said, "the fat made me one of the boys."<sup>42</sup> Orbach argues: "when [working women] lose weight, that is, begin to look like a perfect female, they find themselves being treated frivolously by their male colleagues. When women are thin [the image of the ideal woman], they *are* treated frivolously: thin-sexy-incompetent worker."<sup>43</sup> Anorexics, on the other hand, she argues, become very thin, in order to achieve the same effect: "The quick 'once over' evaluation done by both men and woman establishes the anorectic (and the obese woman) as outside the status of a sex object."<sup>44</sup> The obese woman's fat is an "an unconscious attempt to hide her curves just as the starving anorectic attempts to disguise her form by ridding it of substance."<sup>45</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Helen Garner, *The First Stone: Some Questions About Sex and Power* (Sydney, Australia: Picador, 1995), p.134.

<sup>41</sup> Orbach, *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, p.52. <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p.38. <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p.13.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.173–174. Bordo's *Unbearable Weight* suggests that this might have changed in the 1990s, when obesity came to symbolise lack of restraint, laziness, and lack of managerial capabilities, p.195.

<sup>45</sup> Orbach, *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, p.170. Bordo proposes another aspect. The anorectic and the obese are extreme resolutions of the conflicting messages of a consumer culture: the

So women have devised various strategies to de-sexualize themselves and make public space easier to negotiate. Another such strategy was the trend in the 1980s for some feminists to shave their heads. The preferred method of some Muslim women is to adopt *ḥijāb* as a way to counter these kinds of cultural pressures. Zuhur observed in her study of ‘re-veiling’ in Egypt that “denying men the ability to comment on their figures or silencing the ‘eyes of wolves’ gave the younger [covered] respondents some satisfaction.”<sup>46</sup> For these and other Muslim women, *ḥijāb* is a strategy that they consider advantageous. It is healthier, allowing one to eat without counting calories or doing excessive exercise. It is also less drastic than shaving one’s hair, since once shaved, women cannot enjoy long hair until it grows back, whereas *ḥijāb* allows women that enjoyment, simply limiting it to the private sphere. For working women, *ḥijāb* is an Islamic version of the professional woman’s business suit, a message to men that they are serious about their work.

To sum up, *ḥijāb* does not smother femininity or sexuality. Rather, it regulates where and for whom one’s femininity and sexuality will be displayed and deployed. In the home, in women’s gatherings, and with one’s husband, Muslim women can dress up, play with, display and otherwise enjoy their beauty and sexuality. Beauty/sexuality is something special, not to be enjoyed by strange men. The woman is not oppressed by her inability to display herself for the public gaze, she is keeping her specialness private. *Hijāb*, then, rather than being a constriction upon a woman’s femininity, can be seen as a liberator of her being judged in comparison with a narrow and impossible ideal of beauty or with real beautiful women. It allows her to be her own God-given body, without cosmetic, surgical, dietary or other kinds of alteration, to be relieved of the public scrutiny of her figure and body, and to concentrate on putting her energy into more productive avenues than working constantly to make herself ‘beautiful’. She can

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anorectic as an extreme capacity of the producer self (“the work ethic in absolute control”), and the obese as an extreme capacity of the consumer self (“consumerism in control”): *Unbearable Weight*, p.210. She also argues that some women see the slender body as an empowering way to escape the traditional feminine domestic domain, and the chance to “embody qualities-detachment, self-containment, self-mastery, control” that are “highly valued” in Western culture, although valued as ‘masculine’, not ‘feminine’ traits, p.209.

<sup>46</sup> Zuhur, *Revealing Reveiling*, p.102.

celebrate her femininity and sexuality outside the public sphere, and use *hijāb* as a way to enter the public sphere free from male intrusion on her self.

#### D. *HIJĀB*, SEXUALITY AND ESSENTIALISM

Liberal and poststructuralist feminists both assume that human behavior and desire are socially constructed nature. Any strategy, like *hijāb*, that appears to cement traditional male–female differences is suspect. When Hessini and Macleod argued that *hijāb* might be liberating in the ways Mustapha and Yusufali described, but that ultimately *hijāb* would not liberate women, they were relying on social constructionist assumptions and concerns: that patriarchy has used false male/female distinctions to keep women subjugated, and that anything that looks like acceptance of fundamental male/female difference (that is, *hijāb*) is oppressive for women. This critique of *hijāb* relies on liberal assumptions about human nature, the meaning of sexuality, liberation, oppression and equality. Although these strands are intertwined, they need to be examined individually to understand all the nuances of this kind of critique of covering.

I shall start by affirming that at some level the wearing of *hijāb* might posit some kind of essentialized male–female differences. Men do have an Islamic dress code, but it is different from women’s (and not made the focus of discourse, Muslim or non-Muslim, as is women’s *hijāb*). Jamal Badawi’s *The Muslim Woman’s Dress: According to the Qur’an and Sunnah* has the rules for men too: “It should be noted that the basic requirements of the Muslim woman’s dress apply as well to the Muslim man’s clothing with the difference being mainly in degree.”<sup>47</sup> That is, clothing should be loose, opaque, cover the area of the navel to the knee, and “not be designed in a way to attract attention. The basic rule of modesty and avoiding ‘show off’ [*sic*] applies to all believers, men and women.” In addition, men are not to wear silk or gold. Nevertheless, the question remains, why is it that men’s dress is so different? What can explain the difference in dress if not some fundamental assumption of male–female difference?

<sup>47</sup> Jamal Badawi, *The Muslim Woman’s Dress: According to the Qur’an and Sunnah* (Kuwait: Ministry of *Awqaf* and Islamic Affairs, n.d.), p. 12.

The Qur'an itself does not offer detailed explanations for its commandments to cover, nor about differences in male/female dress. However, it does offer two brief explanations that might be enough. In Surah 33:59, God says: "O Prophet! Tell thy wives and daughters, and the believing women, that they should cast their outer garments over their persons [when abroad]: that is most convenient, that they should be known [as such] and not molested. And God is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful." (Pickthall's translation: "O Prophet! Tell thy wives and thy daughters and the women of the believers to draw their cloaks close around them [when they go abroad]. That will be better, that so they may be recognised and not annoyed. Allah is ever Forgiving, Merciful"). In other words, the Qur'an is arguing that in the public arena there is something about male-female relations that can be harmful to women, and that wearing an outer garment might alleviate. The Qur'an leaves unanswered exactly how or what the garment might help, but when read with a verse in Surah 24, I assume that the Qur'an is pointing to the phenomenon of the male gaze already analyzed above and positing the primacy of sight for male sexuality: "Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty: that will make for greater purity for them: and God is well acquainted with all that they do" (24:30). The following verse tells the believing women to lower their gaze and guard their modesty, and then suggests that that is best achieved by 'drawing the veil over the bosom'. Read together, I suggest that the Qur'an is arguing that along with lowering the gaze there is something about wearing long, loose garments that helps women protect their modesty in the face of the male gaze. (I talk about the 'public space' because that is the occasion most obviously requiring covering, although, as mentioned above, *ḥijāb* is not a public/private dress. The argument does not change with the move inside, what counts is the presence/absence of unrelated men.)

Essentialism is dangerous when it enshrines 'male/female superior/inferior', and can be used, as it has been, over the centuries to deny women fundamental rights to life, education, the vote and so on. However, the Qur'an does not posit these kinds of male-female differences. Indeed, I suggest that it declares an essential sameness between male/female, as in the verse 4:1 that says that men and women

are created from the same soul, of “like” nature, or 38:72, which says that when God created the human being (male and female), He breathed into it of His *rūh* (spirit). On the other hand, the Qur’an announces that God created all things in pairs: “And of everything We have created pairs” (51:49), and differentiated between them: “and in no wise is the male like the female” (3:36). As Wadud-Muhsin argues, then, the Qur’an “establishes the origin of all humankind as a single *nafs*, which is part of a contingent pair-system: that *nafs* and its *zawj*. In practical terms, this essential pair is man and woman.”<sup>48</sup> What particular qualities we should ascribe to the pair is not explicitly stated, and are filled in by culturally based speculation.

Mainstream liberals, feminists, poststructuralists, and others committed to the primacy of culture in organizing human behavior have argued that socialization is the key to making the public space safe for women. Change the way men behave.<sup>49</sup> Anything less than men changing themselves (that is, women behaving in some kind of restrained way like covering) is oppressive for women. Women’s liberation means that women should be able to do whatever they want, be whatever they want, to express themselves however they want, be treated with respect by men (within ‘reasonable’ limits, that is, not harm others). Here is Naomi Wolf, a liberal feminist:

A woman wins by giving herself and other women permission – to eat; to be sexual; to age; to wear overalls, a paste tiara, a Balenciaga gown, a second-hand opera cloak, or combat boots; to cover up or to go practically naked; to do whatever we choose in following – or ignoring – our own aesthetic. A woman wins when she feels that what each woman does with her own body – unforced, uncoerced – is her own business.<sup>50</sup>

Wolf’s liberal feminist call for a woman to be able to wear whatever she wants is to argue that there is nothing salient about femaleness in the public sphere. Liberal feminists, when encountering Muslims who evidently do believe that femaleness is a relevant feature of women’s experiences in the public sphere, conclude that Muslims

<sup>48</sup> Wadud-Muhsin, *Qur’an and Women*, p.22. *Nafs*: self, soul. *Zawj*: (male) mate or spouse, pair.

<sup>49</sup> Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, p.154.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p.290.

endorse a premodern, patriarchal view of women. Makhlouf's study of Sana'a, Yemen, exemplifies this. She hails the disappearance of *niqāb* as the disappearance of tradition, and the evolution into (liberated) modernity:

In other words, sex no longer permeates all male–female encounters but rather becomes one element in a relationship, and one which may, temporarily if not definitely, be bracketed and put aside. It becomes possible in principle to separate the components that are directly relevant to the particular situation, since part of the rationale of the veil is that it is a protective device separating “mankind” from “woman-kind,” the emergence of role specific relations between the sexes is bound to make it lose some importance.<sup>51</sup>

In their article on the veil, Mule and Barthel endorse liberalism's “faith in individual rights” and look forward to “a world in which all persons are both equal in rights *and* equally respectful of each other's rights.”<sup>52</sup> Their endorsement underscores their view that in choosing to veil, Muslim women are not working toward abolishing “sex typing throughout society”<sup>53</sup> but reinforcing the boundaries of the sexes: “in the invisibility [that the veil] purports to give women in men's public sphere, it symbolically reaffirms that women's proper space is in the home.”<sup>54</sup> Macleod criticized the Egyptian women's use of covering as a de-sexualizing strategy for the office because it failed to promote the notion of the neutrality of the sexes, giving the signal that offices, though predominantly female, are the preserve of men.<sup>55</sup> Reece suggested that the “need to cover” would disappear when the concept of public space automatically included women.<sup>56</sup>

Liberal assumptions about the neutrality of the sexes are paralleled by postmodern “gender skepticism.”<sup>57</sup> Drawing from deconstructionism and poststructuralism, gender skepticism criticizes feminist theory for forcing women (and men) into a male/female dualism that is every bit as suppressive as the old patriarchal one. The aim is for an

<sup>51</sup> Makhlouf, *Changing Veils*, pp.68–69.

<sup>52</sup> Mule and Barthel, ‘The Return to the Veil’, p.325.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. <sup>54</sup> Ibid., p.328. <sup>55</sup> Macleod, *Accommodating Protest*, p.139.

<sup>56</sup> Reece, ‘Covering and Communication’, p.39.

<sup>57</sup> Susan Bordo, ‘Feminism, Postmodernism, and Gender Skepticism’, in *Theorizing Feminism: Parallel Trends in the Humanities and Social Sciences*, (eds.), Anne C. Herrmann and Abigail J. Stewart (Boulder, Co.: Westview Press, 1994), p.459.



indeterminate self that is multiperspectival and not bound by anything material, be it race or sex.<sup>58</sup> Bordo rightly questions this gender skepticism by reminding us that the body is always located somewhere, even if it wishes to be an indeterminate self. Right now, she argues, the female body is located in a masculinist public space. She contends that gender remains a useful generalizing category – that there is something about the locatedness of the female body that joins women to women in a way not altered by other different aspects of our identities, and that does not join women to men, no matter what other similarities they may have.

Indeed, researchers into sexual harassment in the workplace have concluded that for men, women are still ‘women’ first, before they are ‘colleagues’. Watson’s interviews with men about such sexual harassment led her to conclude: “Almost two decades after Farley’s study (*Sexual Shakedown*), her assertion that men view women workers as sexual objects rather than employees remains a wholly accurate conclusion in relation to these [Watson’s] research findings.”<sup>59</sup> Wolf herself reports in a “survey of 114 undergraduate men these replies emerged:

I like to dominate a woman. 91.3 percent  
 I enjoy the conquest of sex. 86.1 percent  
 Some women look like they’re just asking to be raped. 83.5 percent  
 I get excited when a woman struggles over sex. 63.5 percent  
 It would be exciting to use force to subdue a woman. 61.7 percent.”<sup>60</sup>

The 1981 *Ms.* magazine survey of date rape on college campuses that reached more than seven thousand students at thirty-five schools turned up statistics that included: “fifty-two percent of all the women surveyed have experienced some form of sexual victimization; and, one in every twelve men admitted to having fulfilled the prevailing definition of rape or attempted rape, yet virtually none of these men

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p.467.

<sup>59</sup> Helen Watson, ‘Red Herrings and Mystifications: Conflicting Perceptions of Sexual Harassment’, in *Rethinking Sexual Harassment*, (eds.), Clare Brant and Yun Lee Too (London: Pluto Press, 1994), p.81; L. Farley, *Sexual Shakedown: The Sexual Harassment of Women on the Job* (New York: Warner, 1980).

<sup>60</sup> Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, p.165.

identified themselves as rapists.”<sup>61</sup> Other social science research shows that men more frequently misinterpret women’s friendliness as seductive or sexually inviting.<sup>62</sup>

In the light of this, then, I argue that what the Qur’an is offering us is a description of the durable dangers to be found for women in the public arena. Covering for women is argued for more as a strategy than as a statement of essentialized female/male identity. After all, older women are allowed to uncover: “Such elderly women as are past the prospect of marriage – there is no blame on them if they lay aside their [outer] garments, provided they make not a wanton display of their beauty, but it is best for them to be modest: and God is One Who sees and knows all things” (24:60). In contrast to the liberal/postmodern position which hopes that socialization will eventually eliminate male harassment of women, the Qur’an is suggesting that this is an enduring feature of human existence. This need not imply biological determinism, XY chromosomes means harasser of woman: most men treat women well. It is rather that socialization makes this kind of male behavior constantly replicated and replicable: following Bordo: “it is a blindness created by [men’s] acceptance of and identification with the position and privileges [and insecurities] of being male in a patriarchal culture.”<sup>63</sup> The Qur’anic position implies that patriarchal male socialization is going to be a stronger force than any counterforce can be. Accepting the continued salience of ‘femaleness’ and ‘maleness’ in society is a persuasive and legitimate understanding of relations between the sexes, not a backward nor suppressive view of women’s status in society. Those who criticize *hijāb* for accepting the relevance of the locatedness of the body as proof of women’s acceptance, accommodation, or acquiescence in their own subjugation under patriarchy are missing the point.

Nature/nurture is an enigma never to be solved. However, I have dwelt on it because it is the liberal assumptions of the primacy of

<sup>61</sup> Adele M. Stan (ed.), *Debating Sexual Correctness*, Appendix B, p.285.

<sup>62</sup> Grauerholz, ‘Sexual Harassment in the Academy’, p.41; Frank E. Saal, ‘Men’s Misperceptions of Women’s Interpersonal Behaviors and Sexual Harassment’, in *Sexual Harassment in the Workplace: Perspectives, Frontiers, and Responsive Strategies*, (ed.), Margaret S. Stockdale (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1996), p.69.

<sup>63</sup> Bordo, ‘Feminism, Postmodernism, and Gender Skepticism’, p.475.

nurture in the debate which automatically assume that *hijāb* is a symbol of belief in the primacy of the nature side of the debate. I consider the imputation of essentialism to be one of the main feminist misinterpretations of *hijāb* that lead to negative critiques of covering. I have just shown why and how I relate the essentialist argument to covering. Feminist judgments of *hijāb* as oppressive frequently rely on assuming *hijāb* signifies dangerous essentialism, so I will expand some more on my critique of this position.

When one assumes that liberation for women means they should be able to do whatever they want, and that men should change their behavior to women, *hijāb* looks like a practice that expressly denies this call. It follows that *hijāb* means women are always temptresses, men always innately unable to control themselves, hence absolved of their responsibilities to women, with women bearing the brunt of this innate male failure, having *hijāb* imposed on them by men for the sake of men. Afshar's comments are representative of this type of feminist reaction to the *hijāb*:

Behind the rhetoric of honour and sedition there lies a deep conviction, not of the vulnerability of women, as publicly stated, but of the fragility of men. It is because men are thought to be eminently susceptible to "female lures" that the [Iranian] regime insists on making women invisible. This conviction about men's weakness makes it imperative for women to wear the *hejab* in order to "eradicate" both "adultery and sodomy."

The stated assumption of the regime is that the only fundamental threats to male sanity and rationality are anger and sexual arousal; the latter caused exclusively by women. The mere presence of women is said to undermine men's better judgement. It is not only a woman's body, but also her face, her movement, the tone of her voice and even the colour of her garments which can arouse men ...

The imposition of *hejab* is hailed as a timely check imposed on "loose women," apparently to "check their dishonourable ways" and "shield their honour." But in reality this "trench of modesty" is imposed, not to protect women, but to prevent the endangered male species from total annihilation at the mere sight of women.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Haleh Afshar, 'Women, Marriage and the State in Iran', in *Women, State and Ideology: Studies from Africa and Asia*, (ed.), Haleh Afshar (London: Macmillan, 1987), p.74. See also Macleod, *Accommodating Protest*, p.83; Brooks, *Nine Parts of Desire*, p.24.

Afshar's condemnation of *ḥijāb* captures some aspects of women's lived reality in some Muslim societies, where women are sometimes viewed as beings whose mere presence is thought to distract men, although here her argument is a caricature of arguments in favor of covering. She makes fun of male sexuality, and views *ḥijāb* from the point of view of men only, forgetting the kinds of arguments that I have made about *ḥijāb*'s usefulness for women. I think the point here is one of degree, for surely in mocking men she is not suggesting that they are not aroused and attracted to women? If one takes male attraction for women as normal, then all *ḥijāb* is suggesting is that men find it easier to lower their gaze when a woman is wearing *ḥijāb*. As I argued in Chapter Four, the assumption is not that this makes all women temptresses to be condemned and smothered in a "trench of modesty," but that what is passing between the two, man and woman – sexual attraction – can be dangerous and troubling (even if enjoyable) for both. The *ḥijāb* is a barrier to these sexual transactions. As well as protecting women from the worst aspects of the male gaze – self-deprecation, objectification, and commodification – analyzed above, *ḥijāb* can also help women lower their gaze. The feel of the scarf on the head and around the chin can be a reminder for them to try to behave modestly, and restrained male behavior can create a reciprocal restraint. Restrained male behavior also creates a sense of security that one's private space is safe from intrusion, as does walking around a city free from catcalls and whistles, stares, and other kinds of male harassment. (Even if *ḥijāb* draws attention to oneself in a Western environment where people stare as though at a curiosity, the absence of sexualized staring can be experienced as a relief that affirms one's self-esteem. The pain arises from the anti-Islamic harassment to which one is now subjected.) The psychological satisfaction of these aspects of *ḥijāb* seems to me to be very important and always overlooked in feminist condemnations of *ḥijāb*. *Hijāb* may mean at some level 'woman is a sex object', meaning an object sexually interesting to men, but it is not the same kind of 'sex object' that she becomes under the constant scrutiny of the male gaze. Nor does *ḥijāb* deny that men can be a 'sex object' for women, meaning an object sexually interesting to women. Muslim women are also commanded to lower their gaze.

In considering *hijāb* from a condemnatory feminist angle, it might follow from the preceding argument that women's sexuality is somehow denied in this transaction (they are covered up, but men not so much). Liberal feminists like Wolf are keen to point out that women look too, that they objectify and use men as objects when they indulge in sexual flings, read pornography, and enjoy watching male strippers. I find it remarkable that she asserts women's equality via celebrating women's objectification/commodification of men. But no matter. Her point is that women's sexuality is often denied/repressed/misrepresented in patriarchal culture. A conviction that Western society suppresses women's sexual desire, making women feel that they step outside the bounds of proper womanhood by being desiring beings is a recurring feminist critique of Western culture. Janet Holland discusses the "dominant [Western] version of female sexuality" as "passive." She writes: "any discourse which legitimates her pleasure, acknowledges her sexual knowledge, values her performance and places it under her control, is potentially threatening to his masculinity."<sup>65</sup> Bordo: "the management of specifically female desire, therefore, is in phallogentric cultures a doubly freighted problem. Women's desires are by their nature excessive, irrational, threatening to erupt and challenge the patriarchal order."<sup>66</sup> This is the view of female desire that Mernissi and other feminists attribute also to Islam. From this perspective, as in Afshar's quotation above, *hijāb* looks like another male device to control women so that they cannot express their sexuality. Nevertheless, as I discussed at length in the last chapter, and in Section C of this chapter, Islam does not view female sexuality in this way. In the Western context, the suppression of female desire appears as a Christian legacy – the cult of virginity, and the suppression of desire as a way to come closer to God. In Muslim cultures, the disapproval of female desire exists as an unread, vulgar, folk-cultural aspect that is a legacy of who knows what cultural influences. However, a Muslim culture based properly on the kind of Qur'anic normative ideal that I am promoting, would not have such an attitude toward female desire. As long as it is in the context of marriage (and

<sup>65</sup> Janet Holland, 'Power and Desire: The Embodiment of Female Sexuality', *Feminist Review*, 46 (Spring 1994), p.30.

<sup>66</sup> Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, p.206.

for those feminists who think that confining sex to marriage is oppressive, then it must be true here that Islam controls female desire), women's desire would be encouraged. Al-Ghazālī recounts a story from al-Aṣmaʿī: "I once saw among the Bedouin a woman wearing a red skirt and made up with dye, carrying prayer beads in her hand. 'How incongruous!' said I. But she said; 'I do not neglect my duty to Allah, but fun and games are my duty too.' Then I realized that she was a virtuous woman with a husband for whom she was adorning herself."<sup>67</sup> Al-Ghazālī continues by instructing the woman that when her husband is away she should be chaste (as should he be), but when he returns, "she should get back to playfulness, relaxation and everything that gives pleasure."<sup>68</sup> Perhaps some feminists will worry that this makes a woman's desire subservient to her husband's. It must be remembered, however, that men are instructed to give their wives sexual pleasure as well. So, my argument is that *ḥijāb* does not deny a woman's sexuality. Only that society is better served by keeping male and female sexuality in check, inside and outside the home, and especially in the public sphere.

So deep is the feminist conviction that patriarchy inhibits female sexuality, while letting male sexuality run amok, so deep is the suspicion that *ḥijāb* is a signal that men do not have to control themselves, that women are bearing the brunt of the 'keep sexuality in check' burden. Remember Mernissi's verdict that the Prophet's imposition of *ḥijāb* on women was a signal that the street was a place where men were allowed to harass women, and a signal that internal male self-discipline was not required?<sup>69</sup> I am often asked by non-Muslims if *ḥijāb* means that men are absolved from all responsibility. Is *ḥijāb* a message that it is all right to harass a woman not in *ḥijāb*? That 'boys will be boys'? In presenting an argument that *ḥijāb* frees women from the negative effects of the male gaze, I am not arguing that *ḥijāb* is a magical device that halts all male aggression against women. That would be to deny the feminist insight that male aggression against women is often an expression of power (not sex). Male harassment of women is, sadly, a worldwide phenomenon, and Muslim men (also sadly) are no exception. However, these are men lacking

<sup>67</sup> al-Ghazālī, *The Proper Conduct of Marriage in Islam*, p.94. <sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite*, p.185.

the proper Islamic etiquette of male/female relations and are no more representative of the Islamic ideal than are Western men who harass women exemplars of a Western Judaeo-Christian or secular-liberal ideal. For some reason, critics of *ḥijāb* often misunderstand this point. In her study of the contemporary re-covering movement in Egypt, MacLeod concludes about *ḥijāb*: “Rather than placing the blame, and the need for change in behavior, onto men, women accommodate by altering their dress to fit the prevailing norm that men should not be tempted by women.”<sup>70</sup> That is, MacLeod is critical of *ḥijāb* because she mistakenly assumes that men are considered absolved from responsibility as with respect to their behavior toward women. My point is that normatively, the Qur’an places as much emphasis on male responsibility as (probably more than) on women. Let me expand with reference to the Qur’an and Sunnah.

First, as mentioned, the Qur’an commands men to “*lower their gaze and guard their modesty*” (24:30) [my emphasis]. ‘Lowering the gaze’ means that if a man sees a woman (no matter how she is dressed, full head-to-toe *ḥijāb* or naked), he should lower his gaze. That means, do not look, do not whistle, do not touch, do not harass or attack her. Lowering the gaze leads to “greater purity” for men. Second, several hadiths emphasize the importance of men lowering their gaze. Al-Bukhārī records a hadith on the authority of Abū Sa’īd al-Khudrī:

The Prophet (pbuh) said, “Beware! Avoid sitting on the roads.” They [the people] said, “O Allah’s Apostle! We can’t help sitting [on the roads] as these are [our places] where we have talks.” The Prophet (pbuh) said, “If you refuse but to sit, then pay the road its right.” They said, “What is the right of the road, O Allah’s Apostle?” He said, “Lowering your gaze, refraining from harming others, returning greeting, and enjoining what is good, and forbidding what is evil.”<sup>71</sup>

Tirmidhī, Aḥmad and Abū Dāwūd record the following hadith: “O ‘Alī, do not follow the first [involuntary] look with a second, for the first one is for you [you are not accountable for it], but the second is not.” Abdul Rahman Doi includes a narration from Jarīr: “Jarīr says, “I asked the Prophet (pbuh) what I should do if I happened to

<sup>70</sup> MacLeod, *Accommodating Protest*, p.139.

<sup>71</sup> al-Bukhārī, vol. 8, book 74, hadith no.248.

cast a look [at a woman] by chance. The Prophet (pbuh) replied, ‘Turn your eyes away.’”<sup>72</sup>

Third, model men are those who resist their temptations. Al-Ghazālī relates several stories of men resisting desire by way of exhortation to his readers. He reports an anecdote recorded by al-Bukhārī. It is the story of three men who were trapped in a cave by a stone blocking the entrance. As each man recounts a good deed, God moves the stone for him. One man’s good deed was that a niece, whom he had once tried to seduce but who had refused him, came to him after a year of drought, needing help. He agreed to give her money if she “put herself at my disposal. This she did. But when I was upon her, she said, ‘Fear God! Break not the seal, save in a lawful way!’ So I refrained from going into her, and went away, even though she was dearer to me than all else, leaving her with the gold which I had given her. O Lord God! If I acted thus for thy sake, then deliver us from our plight!”<sup>73</sup> Al-Bukhārī also recorded a hadith narrated by Abū Hurayra about seven people whom God will “shade” on the Day of Judgment, one of whom is “a man who refuses the call of a charming woman of noble birth for an illegal sexual intercourse with her and says: ‘I am afraid of Allah’.”<sup>74</sup> So, Hessini is wrong to conclude about *ḥijāb*: “the idea that women must be covered in order to merit respect is rooted in the division of space and in assumptions about fundamental differences between men and women.”<sup>75</sup> Muslim women do not cover in order to merit respect. They merit respect anyway. If women (Muslim or non-Muslim) are not treated with respect because they are not covered, then the fault lies with the man, not with the lack of *ḥijāb*.

*Hijāb* regulates the expression of male and female sexuality and is part of a social system that prohibits strange men and women from touching each other, and discourages them from aimless social chit-chat. In contrast to Western culture, which teaches men and women that it is acceptable for men and women to look at and be aroused by

<sup>72</sup> Abdul Rahman Doi, *Women in the Qur’an and the Sunnah* (London: Ta-Ha Publishers, 1990), p. 12.

<sup>73</sup> *Al-Ghazālī on Disciplining the Soul*, p. 187 (al-Bukhārī, *Buyu’*, 98).

<sup>74</sup> al-Bukhārī, vol. 2, book 24, hadith no. 504.

<sup>75</sup> Hessini, ‘Wearing the *Hijāb* in Contemporary Morocco’, p. 53.



women and men (pornography, advertising, movies, television, and other visual media that are full of images of half-naked and attractive women and men), the Qur'an teaches men and women that it is not acceptable to look at women and men. This is an ideal that many strive to implement. Many of the practicing Muslim men that I meet look at their shoes, or over my shoulder when talking to me. (This is quite unnerving at first, especially when one is used to the direct stare.) They do not shake my hand, nor do they touch me on the arm or shoulder during conversation as is common in Western culture. My physical space is safe from their intrusions. Naturally they should behave like that whether or not I wear *hijāb*, and whether or not I am Muslim.

Western liberal feminists are often unnerved by these stringent divisions between men and women and, returning to their fear of damaging essentializing, worry that such a division essentializes male behavior in a negative way by suggesting erroneously that men 'only have one thing on their minds'. Western liberal feminists do not believe that sexuality is such a strong and overpowering force between men and women. The point here is not that all touching/looking between men and women is intended by the person as sexual. There are nonsexual looks and touches. The point is that sometimes there is that sexual innuendo or uncertainty, and rather than leaving the situation ambiguous ('Did s/he mean to smile at me/touch me in *that* way, or is s/he just being friendly?'), Islamic etiquette cuts such ambiguities off at the root. There is no need to spend hours wondering whether or not a person intended that touch to be sexual, or dealing with the fallout from a misinterpreted nonsexual touch – there is no touch. It is clean and simple. The idea behind such clean separation between men and women is that whatever *could* lead people to a major sin (that is, illegal sexual intercourse) is to be avoided as much as that thing itself.<sup>76</sup> Does this separation of male and female lead to a loss for both sexes, a loss that is ultimately detrimental for women's equality? I believe that when carried to an extreme, male/female segregation is a loss that restricts women and inhibits healthy male–female

<sup>76</sup> Yusuf al-Qaradawi, *The Lawful and the Prohibited in Islam*, trans. Kamal El-Helbawy, M. Moinuddin Siddiqui and Syed Shukry (Kuwait: International Islamic Federation of Student Organizations, 1993), p.28.

relations by removing opportunities to share insights and perspectives with each other. Extreme mixing, however, also leads to a loss in the form of too many dangers for women's security. The challenge is to find the middle ground between each path.<sup>77</sup>

There remains one last point to refute: Geraldine Brooks' idea, common to many feminists: "And under all the talk about *hijāb* freeing women from commercial or sexual exploitation, all the discussion of the *hijāb*'s potency as a political and revolutionary symbol of selfhood, was the body: the dangerous female body that somehow, in Muslim society, had been made to carry the heavy burden of male honor."<sup>78</sup> For her, as for many feminists, in spite of all that is positive said about it, *hijāb* is really a symbol of a culture that sacrifices women's freedom and sexuality at the altar of male sexuality and honor. *Hijāb* as a symbol of male honor was a pervasive theme of feminist literature on Muslim women in the 1960s and 1970s (surviving today only in mass-market material). This version of *hijāb* captures an Arab cultural view (as distinct from a Qur'anic view) of women and men: that male honor is determined by women's behavior.

Abu-Lughod and Wikan are two anthropologists who have explored the concept of honor and women's roles. Their analyses challenge the older sixties and seventies paradigms. They both point out that in some cultures, while a man's honor is affected by the behavior of 'his' women, it is also affected by his own behavior and that of the other men of his tribe. In Suhar, Oman, if the man cannot perform sexually on his wedding night, he is given five days, after which he is divorced and shamed. Wikan emphasizes that the anthropological literature is mistaken to assume that women do not also have honor themselves. "Within her own small scale world of home and neighborhood, the woman's honor is not at all a mirror reflection of her guardian's, however much he might like to think so. It depends upon her ability to excel in those valued acts of behavior that her female friends and neighbors deem worthy of merit."<sup>79</sup> Among the Awlad

<sup>77</sup> I borrow this idea from Maliha Chisti's talk on 'Muslim Women and Community Involvement: An Overview' (Toronto, Canada: Institute of Islamic Thought, Nov. 21, 1998).

<sup>78</sup> Brooks, *Nine Parts of Desire*, p.2.

<sup>79</sup> Wikan, *Behind the Veil*, pp.72-73.

Ali, honor is also a matter of blood, applicable to both men and women.<sup>80</sup>

The cultural phenomenon of women's behavior being policed to protect male honor is not really relevant to *ḥijāb*, despite Brooks' and other feminist's assumptions making such a link. The idea that it is women's behavior that determines family honor is an idea not confined to Arab culture, being in general a phenomenon of the Mediterranean basin.<sup>81</sup> Although the wearing of *ḥijāb* may be part of society's control of women, it is only in an instrumental way, since in these cultural contexts, women's behavior is regulated whether or not they wear *ḥijāb*. *Ḥijāb* as a sign of male honor is an idea with no basis in the Qur'an.

#### E. *ḤIJĀB* AND CHOICE

Scholars of the re-covering movement, as well as Westerners in general, are suspicious of women's "choice" to cover. There remains a deep-seated conviction that women are coerced or subtly brainwashed into "choosing" to cover. The idea is something like: 'if you have chosen to cover, well, you have been socialized to believe covering is a good thing. However, if you really knew your interest as a woman, you would know that it is not good to cover, so your decision to cover is a sad indication of your being brainwashed.' Certainly this is how I thought before I became Muslim.

Hélie-Lucas explains Muslim women's embrace of covering by arguing that they had no choice at the identity level (that is, to be accepted as a "Muslim" woman, one is forced to conform to the "fundamentalist" definition of "woman," a definition that "confine[s] women into a model of society, way of life, dress and behavior as close as possible to the historical model born in the Middle East fourteen centuries ago").<sup>82</sup> Macleod explains how the women in her study make the "choice" to cover, by arguing that they "choose" from a

<sup>80</sup> Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments*, pp.45–48.

<sup>81</sup> Regarding honour and Greek women, see, Mary Castelberg-Koulma, 'Greek Women and Tourism: Women's Cooperatives as an Alternative Form of Organization', in *Working Women: International Perspectives on Labour and Gender Relations*, (eds.), Nanette Redcliff and M. Thea Sinclair (London: Routledge, 1991).

<sup>82</sup> Hélie-Lucas, 'The Preferential Symbol for Islamic Identity', pp.393, 400–401.

narrow range of culturally sanctioned roles, leaving aside other equally possible roles that are not culturally sanctioned.<sup>83</sup> Afshar suggests as a plausible explanation for re-covering: “Research on the psychology of oppressed persons tells us that one strategy for dealing with their situation is to adopt the rules of the oppressor and obey them unquestioningly.”<sup>84</sup> Macleod, Hélie-Lucas and Afshar thus challenge the ‘choice’ (of women living in the Middle East) to cover.

The relationship between an individual’s culture and his or her ability to choose is complex, for choice is always circumscribed by the range between what a culture considers acceptable and unacceptable. Even in the West, as I argued in Chapter Three, where a great deal of freedom exists, there are parameters to people’s choices. Most Western societies still expect women to cover their breasts in public (except in space-specific places like a nudist beach/camp). No one would really argue that women are being forced by their culture to cover their breasts just because of this sanction against toplessness. Most women accept the restriction and feel they are “choosing” to cover their breasts when they dress themselves. It is the same with *ḥijāb*: it is a culturally approved dress in many Muslim societies that Muslim women can choose to adopt (though there are other societies that do not condone *ḥijāb*, Turkey being a notorious contemporary example.) Of course, what I am arguing applies only to societies that allow women true choice, not places like Iran or the Taliban’s Afghanistan, where women are prevented by law from uncovering, or during periods of social unrest in the Muslim world, where *ḥijāb* is seen as a marker of allegiance and violence is perpetrated against women to force them to cover. This kind of violence against women is unacceptable. I mean to speak here only of the relationship of *ḥijāb* to choice in societies where there is the genuine freedom to adopt or not adopt *ḥijāb*.

The liberal/Western concern over cultural pressure to cover makes sense only where covering is not seen as a ‘good’. It is not that in other contexts Westerners do not condone social pressure, nor indeed, state

<sup>83</sup> Macleod, *Accommodating Protest*, pp. 150–151.

<sup>84</sup> Afshar, ‘Fundamentalism’, p. 315. Afshar seems to have developed the ability to adopt a covered woman’s perspective with sympathy. See her article in Mai Yamani (ed.), *Feminism and Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives* (Reading, Berks, UK: Garnet, 1996).

law to persuade (or coerce) individuals: the ‘Don’t Drink and Drive’ campaign, the ‘Smoking is Hazardous for your Health’ campaign (including a law to ban smoking in public places, aeroplanes etc), the laws banning hate literature, and so on. These are social pressure campaigns to change what most people see as detrimental and to encourage good behavior. Publicity campaigns in favor of *hijāb* are similar. The mere existence of nonviolent social pressure to cover should not be seen as “sinister.”

One of Brenner’s concerns about the Javanese women adopting *hijāb* whom she studied highlights this concern over coercion well. She understands in her analysis that the women who choose to cover, are choosing and not being brainwashed. However, she remarks that she noticed how strictly the veiled women ‘policed’ one another and enforced the *hijāb* on one another, after she observed women telling their friends if their neck or hair was showing through their scarf. It is easy to see how an outsider can view that as ‘enforcing’ a strict policy of covering because the outsider is not convinced of the covering. Let me show how this is not coercion by reconstructing the scene in the Western context. A woman’s middle button on her blouse has popped open, you lean over and tell her and she quickly and embarrassedly re-buttons it. Has she been coerced into a strict cover-your-breasts behavior? Or is she grateful that someone mentioned her open blouse to her, because she does not want people to see her bra?

#### F. *HIJĀB* AND RELIGIOSITY

My positive theory of *hijāb* posits that in the consumer capitalist culture of the twenty-first century, with its objectification and commodification of the female body, *hijāb* is an empowering tool of resistance. I have argued that *hijāb* does not smother femininity, nor does it signal lack of choice. The final piece of the theory is to highlight *hijāb*’s role in rejecting the materialism of contemporary capitalist cultures.

Because of its religious sanction, and when worn consciously by a Muslim woman for reasons of piety like many of my interviewees in Chapter Two, *hijāb* acts as a portal into the Islamic faith. Like other major world religions, Islam’s teachings emphasize the afterlife, and caution believers not to be seduced by the allure of this-worldly goods.

Thus Islam acts as a counter to the materialism of capitalism. In adopting *ḥijāb*, Muslim women tap into a deep faith tradition that provides physic resources to counter materialism's corrosive effects.

I have already discussed in great detail the psychological benefits of *ḥijāb* as a rejection of capitalism's beauty industry. *Hijāb* does have its own fashion trends, its high-class, brand-name versions, and so on, and Muslim women do compete with and judge one another's beauty. Nevertheless, this is an infiltration of the religious by the material world. There is a strong internal resistance to these kinds of permeations, as evidenced in the public rhetoric about *ḥijāb*: that it must be loose, not made of eye-catching material, not intended for "fame, pride and vanity," and so on.<sup>85</sup>

In addition, the Qur'an directs people's minds to the Day of Reckoning, where each soul will have its good and bad deeds weighed on a scale. Piety, we are reminded constantly, is more important than this-worldly objects, and dress is included in this. So, even though wearing *ḥijāb* as a pious act can be empowering, it is really only a preliminary level. Allah says in the Qur'an:

O Humankind! We have created you from a single [pair] of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other [not that you may despise each other]. *Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of God is [she who is] the most righteous of you.* And God has full knowledge and is well-acquainted [with all things]. (49:13) [my emphasis]

O ye children of Adam! We have bestowed raiment upon you to cover your shame, as well as to be an adornment to you. *But the raiment of righteousness – that is the best.* Such are among the signs of God, that they may receive admonition! (7:26) [my emphasis]<sup>86</sup>

A hadith in *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* says: "Allah does not look at your appearance or your wealth but at your hearts and deeds" (no.2564).

These verses put the whole issue of dress into a different perspective: one that reminds believers not to forget that what counts for Allah is their piety. This message is a strong antidote to capitalism's

<sup>85</sup> Badawi, *The Muslim Woman's Dress*, p.11, passim.

<sup>86</sup> Watson, 'Women and the Veil', is the only Western commentator on *ḥijāb* who has drawn attention to this aspect.

materialist culture that places success firmly in the material world, and that teaches people to be a slave to their desires, and to make pleasure their end goal (“Obey Your Thirst” proclaims a soft-drink commercial). Teenagers in the West can be killed for their Nike shoes, an indication of just how far capitalism has corrupted the human soul.

Another way *ḥijāb*, when adopted as a statement of religiosity, can counter capitalism’s materialist culture is the Qur’an’s message about the perfection of the human body. Eating disorders and body dissatisfaction are reaching epidemic proportions in the West, yet this is possible only in a culture that no longer believes that God causes all things, including one’s body shape. It may well be that the body is a site of cultural practice and formation, such that there is no such thing as a ‘biological body’.<sup>87</sup> It is also true, however, that one cannot change one’s body structure too much without recourse to surgery. Although one can diet and exercise, if one is staying within healthy limits (that is, not anorectic/bulimic), there is only just so much tinkering to be done. The Qur’an’s message is to be happy and content with one’s body because God created our shapes: “He it is Who shapes you in the wombs as He pleases (3:6);” and He created us “in the best of moulds” (95:4). The Prophet used to advise people to be healthy, and consume and exercise in moderation.

Finally, Islam’s prohibitions against pictorial representation of the human being have prevented the ubiquitous spread of the use of the female body for corporate purposes. Advertisements do not feature a superfluous female body there to titillate potential buyers. In advertisements for women’s clothing, the clothing is often displayed on a dressmaker’s dummy with a blank face under the headscarf, or if a photograph, with the face whited out. Because nothing of the woman’s shape/hair can be seen, her image is not advanced as an ideal to which other women should aspire. Hence the use of images of women (and men) does not promote the phenomenon of self-correcting and self-policing, as is the case with the use of images in mainstream Western culture. In moving in this Muslim cultural milieu, women can be spared much of the agonies of comparing themselves unfavourably with images of (airbrushed and retouched) beautiful

<sup>87</sup> Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, p.290. Also pp.246–247, 275.

women that they would like to resemble.<sup>88</sup> All this can be experienced as relief and liberation, as evidenced in Mustapha's and Yusufali's articles. These women conclude that they are taken for their personalities and actions, rather than their looks. Mustapha writes that *hijāb* is "simply a woman's assertion that judgement of her physical person is to play no role whatsoever in social interaction." And Yusufali that: "My body is my own business. Nobody can tell me how I should look or whether or not I am beautiful. I know that there is more to me than that."

#### G. CONCLUSION

The argument advanced in this chapter is that *hijāb* acts as an empowering tool of resistance to the consumer capitalist culture's beauty game of the twenty-first century that has had such a detrimental impact on women's self-esteem and physical health. *Hijāb* is also a religiously endorsed dress, and its link to religion gives its wearers a gateway into a faith tradition that elevates self-esteem by reminding people that their worth is not based on appearances, but on their pious deeds. From this perspective, *hijāb* is a symbol of a religion that treats women as persons, rather than as sex objects. This is the exact opposite conclusion to a common feminist conception that *hijāb* is a symbol that Islam views women as a sex object, that she must be covered up because she is thought of reductively as 'female' whose only important attribute is her sexuality that threatens the social order.

<sup>88</sup> This is not to say that in Muslim cultures a woman's looks are considered irrelevant. Women grate against the emphasis placed on their looks by men and families looking for wives, with different cultures emphasizing different features as 'beautiful' or 'not beautiful' (light skin and green eyes are valued in Muslim Asian cultures.) In cultures where covering is widespread, only women have access to other women's beauty, so it is they who can police one another and enforce the cultural male gaze on one another, even if they are women who wear *hijāb* outside the home. There is often a pronounced competition in class and beauty: the costliness of a woman's clothes or jewellery; the amount of silk, gold, or silver that she is wearing. My argument is that *hijāb* ought (that is, ideally) to imply the absence of this kind of beauty and class competition, since the aim is to deemphasize judging a woman by her appearance. In my experience, such competition in class and beauty is often absent among women who are conscious of the Islamic ideal not to judge people in this way.



## Conclusion

My book began with my attempt to understand why a secular liberal society that is supposed to be neutral about how individuals pursue the good, reacted badly to my becoming Muslim and adopting *ḥijāb*. My quest has taken me on a journey back to colonial times when Europeans first encountered *ḥijāb*, to contemporary times, where after abandoning *ḥijāb*, Muslim women are wearing it again. I have presented the voices of some Muslim women living in Toronto who cover, and analyzed the emphatic voice of a woman opposed to *ḥijāb*. Finally, I have tried to articulate a positive theory of *ḥijāb* for the capitalist cultures of the twenty-first century.

*Hijāb* is a philosophy about male and female dress, and an etiquette for male/female relations. However, it is the piece of cloth that covers a woman's body to varying degrees, also known as *ḥijāb*, that is the focus of hostility in the West, as well as a site of a bitter struggle in the Muslim world. In Turkey and Tunisia, laws banning *ḥijāb* are enacted in the name of 'modernity', a modernity that sees Islam as backward, anti-civilization, barbaric, and oppressive to women. At this point, the common Western view of the veil as oppressive and the Muslim world's attempts to banish *ḥijāb* converge.

The 'modernity' to which the secular Muslim world appeals in its judgments about the veil and Islam is a view of 'modernity' that originated in the West. It is the survival of the Orientalist view of Islam. Orientalism posits Islam and Muslims as an essential Other, an Other that has stagnated in backwardness and shown itself unable to progress in tune with 'modern' notions of liberty, equality, and democracy. Orientalism has a hold on the minds of many élites and intellectuals in our global village, Muslim and non-Muslim. It also has a hold on popular culture in general, Muslim and non-Muslim.

In the furore over a French high school's expulsion of young

Muslim women for refusing to remove their headscarves, much of the French Left saw *ḥijāb* in Orientalist terms: “Islamic cultural constructions were equated with religious oppression and Western social practices were defined as the secular emancipatory norm.”<sup>1</sup> Intellectual and feminist Professor Badinter saw *ḥijāb* as an act of subordination, which “could not possibly be an act of political insubordination.”<sup>2</sup> She commented:

Young people are generous, tolerant, they don’t like exclusion. Who complains? But I believe that if one explains to them why the veil is really something other than an article of clothing, they will understand it very quickly. The veil, it is the symbol of the oppression of a sex. Putting on torn jeans, wearing yellow, green, or blue hair, this is an act of freedom with regard to the social conventions. Putting a veil on the head, this is an act of submission. It burdens a woman’s whole life. Their fathers or their brothers choose their husbands, they are closed up in their own homes and confined to domestic tasks, etc. When I say this to the young people around me, they change their opinions immediately.<sup>3</sup>

“And who would not?” as Moruzzi asks. Badinter rehearses all the typical stereotypes about *ḥijāb*.

In practice, then, the liberal-secular theory of choice and neutrality coexists uneasily with old Orientalist attacks upon Islam. On the one hand, there are liberals seeking to guarantee secularism’s commitment that any citizen can determine the content of his or her life, and if that solutions include covering, they will help Muslim women in that endeavor. On the other hand, however, as Badinter’s argument highlights, individual choice is a doctrine that coexists with the notion that Western ways are superior, and sometimes those Western ways must be enforced ‘for the good of the poor immigrant’ (or ‘for the good of our backward fellow citizens’), who cannot know any better.

*Ḥijāb* is oppressive. This is a standard notion in the ‘West’ (and ‘East’). It is a reigning truth assertion that flattens out the diversity of women’s experiences with *ḥijāb*, as Chapters Two and Three demonstrated. Historically, Muslim women have taken up different positions

<sup>1</sup> Norma Claire Moruzzi, ‘A Problem With Headscarves: Contemporary Complexities of Political and Social Identity’, *Political Theory*, 22, 4 (November 1994), p.661.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. <sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp.661–662.

with respect to covering. Assia Djebar, a well-known Algerian writer who grew up in French-occupied Algeria, just before Algerian independence, looks at the veil in a similar light as Mernissi. For her the veil represents the “need to blot out women’s bodies.”<sup>4</sup> Like Mernissi, she regards herself as somehow having miraculously been saved from the doomed fate of other women of her culture (illiteracy, seclusion, and veiling):

My father, a tall erect figure in a fez, walks down the village street; he pulls me by the hand and I, who for so long was so proud of myself – the first girl in the family to have French dolls bought for her, the one who had permanently escaped cloistering and never had to stamp and protest at being forced to wear the shroud-veil, or else yield meekly like any of my cousins, I who did deliberately drape myself in a veil for a summer wedding as if it were a fancy dress, thinking it most becoming – I walk down the street, holding my father’s hand. Suddenly, I begin to have qualms: isn’t it my ‘duty’ to stay behind with my peers in the gynaeceum? Later, as an adolescent, well nigh intoxicated with the sensation of sunlight on my skin, on my mobile body, a doubt arises in my mind: ‘Why me? Why do I alone, of all my tribe, have this opportunity?’<sup>5</sup>

In Turkey, Minai remembers the reaction to her throwing away her grandmother’s scarves. She was 8 years old and had just learnt about Huda Shaarawi’s tossing her veil into the Nile (1923):

I had grown up viewing this custom as normal for old ladies, but now I itched to liberate her from the chador, which was surely uncomfortable in warm weather. One spring afternoon my younger sister and I gathered up all of her scarves and veils into a basket and marched down to the nearby Bosphorous [and threw them in.] That evening grandmother looked in vain for her favourite Spanish mantilla to wear with her lace-trimmed dress. We told her where it was. She was furious. Some women just do not want to be liberated.<sup>6</sup>

The ban against the veil in Iran in 1936 was welcomed by younger middle-class/upper-class women who had been engaged in agitating

<sup>4</sup> Assia Djebar, *Fantasia, An Algerian Cavalcade*, trans. Dorothy S. Blair (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1993), p.180.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.213.

<sup>6</sup> Minai, *Women in Islam*, pp.89–90.

for the emancipation of women since the 1920s.<sup>7</sup> However, older Iranian women did not welcome the ban. In fact, some women did not leave home during the entire seven years of the ban.<sup>8</sup> Hoodfar recounts her grandmother's bitter memory of the day she went out with a scarf covering her hair – a compromise for not wearing the *chador*: “She ran as the policeman ordered her to stop; he followed her, and as she approached the gate of her house he pulled off her scarf. She thought the policeman had deliberately allowed her to reach her home decently [but he was following state orders to remove scarves forcibly from women in the street] ...”<sup>9</sup>

Some women experience forced uncovering as painfully as other women might experience forced covering. Farmaian, the founder of modern social work in Iran, who grew up in the harem of her aristocratic father, describes her mother's reaction to Reza Shah's banning of the veil:

[The Shah's banning the veil was] something that [my mother] Khanom, along with millions of other devout Iranian women, knew they could never forgive ... [When] the Shah ... outlawed the veil [w]ith his usual incisiveness, he let it be known that the heads of old society families like ours risked his serious displeasure if they did not show their wives in public, and in Western garb.

When my mother had learned she was to lose the age-old modesty of her veil, she was beside herself. She and all traditional people regarded Reza's order as the worst thing he had yet done – worse than attacking the rights of the clergy; worse even than his confiscations and murders. [My father] Shazdeh, however, realized that he did not dare disobey.

I am sure that this was not an easy decision for him. For a Persian aristocrat to allow strange men to gape at his wives in public was shameful in the extreme. Having made up his mind to comply, however, my father resolved that for the sake of the family's safety, his wives would be the very first of the old aristocracy to appear formally in Western dress. He sent to the Avenue Lalezar for hats for all his

<sup>7</sup> Yeganeh, ‘Women's Struggles in the Islamic Republic of Iran’, p.30; Azari, ‘Islam's Appeal to Women’, p.45.

<sup>8</sup> Givechian, ‘Cultural Changes in Male–Female Relations’, p.526.

<sup>9</sup> Homa Hoodfar, ‘The Veils in Their Minds and On Our Heads: The Persistence of Colonial Images of Muslim Women’, *Resources for Feminist Research*, 22, 3–4 (1993), p.10.

wives in the compound and told them that the next day they were to put them on and ride with him in the open droschky. To my mother, it was exactly as if he had insisted that she parade naked in the street. Only her respect for his wisdom and her fears for his safety could have enabled her to submit to such degradation.

The next day, weeping with rage and humiliation, she sequestered herself in her bedroom with Batul-Khanom [her co-wife] to put on the hat. "First Reza Shah attacks the clergy," my mother sobbed, "and now this. He's trying to destroy religion. He doesn't fear God, this evil Shah – may God curse him for it!" As she wept she struggled futilely to hide her beautiful masses of waist-length black hair under the inadequate protection of a small French cloche. There was nothing my stepmother could do to console her.<sup>10</sup>

"Some women just do not want to be liberated." For those of us caught up in the *hijāb* debate – is it, or is not it, oppressive? – the psychological costs can be devastating. Minai notes:

Generations of girls ... grew up with an either-or mentality, convinced that to be Western was to be free and to adhere to tradition and Islam was to remain enslaved. North Africans went so far as to adopt their former colonial master's jargon in describing this attitude, indiscriminately referring to everything French as "évolué" (evolved), as if their own traditions were a primitive state from which they had to rise up.<sup>11</sup>

Many Muslim families who object to their women members covering evoke just this struggle. *Hijāb* will make them look stupid, unable to have a career, unable to get married, unable to enjoy life. Can the reader imagine how it must feel to believe in the inferiority of one's own traditions and people? To be convinced that the only way up is out (to abandon one's heritage)? As Said declares: "For almost every Muslim, the mere assertion of an Islamic identity becomes an act of nearly cosmic defiance and a necessity for survival."<sup>12</sup> Some survive by hiding their religious identity.

To date feminist paradigms have not captured covered women's

<sup>10</sup> Sattareh Farman Farmaian, *Daughter of Persia: A Woman's Journey from her Father's Harem through the Islamic Revolution* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1992), pp.95–96.

<sup>11</sup> Minai, *Women in Islam*, p.240.

<sup>12</sup> Said, *Covering Islam*, p.72.

positive experience with *hijāb*, nor have they captured the diversity with respect to covering that prevails in the entire world. As I mentioned in the Introduction, this is changing, although the predominant paradigm (that *hijāb* is oppressive) reigns and infiltrates even many of those studies committed to bringing forth the voices of covered women. I attended a talk by a prominent Western scholar of the Middle East about the different kinds of feminisms that exist in Egypt. She attended to the debates, the differences, the variety amongst Muslim women, and then at some point at question time she remarked: “I wanted to put on a headscarf while I was in Egypt, but if you’re married to a Muslim, once you put it on, you can never take it off.” The audience nodded sympathetically. I was appalled. What about my friends whose Muslim husbands would not let them cover? What about my friends who were dropped by Muslim boyfriends unhappy with their conversion to Islam? What about the fact that if the scholar is not Muslim, her husband could not even expect her to cover, since Islamic laws do not apply to non-Muslims? However, the comment and its acceptance by the audience speak volumes about the grip that the Orientalist (in feminist clothing) view of Islam and women has on people’s minds. (If the comment is true in her experience, why not say ‘my husband wouldn’t let me take it off’, rather than the generic ‘Muslim’ man?)

*Hijāb* is oppressive, it closes them up, muffles their lives, and turns them into nonpersons. Actually, it is the regnant Orientalist/feminist discourse that effaces Muslim women. It is the feminist, no matter if she is a Muslim or not, who, being hostile to Islam or *hijāb*, turns covered women into silent dummies, unable to speak for themselves, needing outsiders to speak for them and to interpret the meaning of their traditions for them. Indeed it is an odd experience, after immersing oneself in the ‘women and Islam’ field to read some Western feminists writing about their own culture. The women and Islam field as a whole (a Western field of knowledge), despite reflexivity and despite the presence of the indigenous researcher, still gives the impression that Muslim women are the only remaining group in the world to suffer oppression, or that they are the most oppressed of the women in the world. By keeping her self and her culture out of the research (that is, by not making comparisons of similarities, focusing

only on difference), the Western writers give the impression of living in a society that does not experience women's oppression. However, turn to feminist works on the West, and the story is completely different: the message is one of the continued oppression of women, as if the culture still has a long way to go. Shifting from one subgenre to the other is an experiential shock.

"Do we mistake this cloaking and negating of the essence of women for worship (Govier)?" Any early eagerness that I had about my ability to undermine the popular Western stereotype about the veil was dashed after several years of research. There are already many books pointing out the simplicity of the stereotype, many scholars seeking a more sophisticated and nuanced view. Why have their versions not reached the mainstream? Why has the simplistic view survived? I really do not know. However, I suspect that it has to do with a complicated mix of the survival of Orientalism that may be held subconsciously and the effect of the experience of reading in the women and Islam field that I have just described. Although there are scholars working against the popular Western stereotypes, there is a counterforce, a counterforce that has to do with a conviction in the superiority of the West and its ways. It has to do with failing to recognize that all of us have our identities and world-views formed by the various discourses to which we are exposed while growing up, and with which we are living as adults. It has to do with the illusion that social science research has an 'objective' point from which to study others, that it is possible to look at a society and say, 'that particular custom is oppressive'. It has to do with the inability of the predominantly liberal-oriented mainstream from recognizing their own positionality with respect to their own culture and that of others. It also has to do with the fact that many Western intellectuals rely on the media, just as any ordinary person does, for information about the world. If that intellectual has never met a Muslim, never studied Islam, or only studied Islam via Orientalist/feminist works, then that intellectual is just as likely to hold to stereotypes about Islam and Muslims as any other. As Said highlights, scholarship/writing frequently does not distinguish itself from the received wisdom. Rather it confirms and perpetuates that 'wisdom'.

As far as the media go, in spite of the odd positive article, the

overall image that one has of Islam and Muslims is dismal: Muslims are barbaric, they blow up innocent people, they kill for no reason, they oppress women. A survey conducted in 1980 in the United States (but which could represent any Western country) found that:

a large percentage of the respondents feel that the Arabs can be described as “barbaric, cruel” (44%), “treacherous, cunning” (49%), “mistreat women” (51%) and “warlike, bloodthirsty” (50%). Furthermore, when asked how many Arabs are described by a long list of traits, a large percentage view “most” or “all” Arabs as “anti-Christian” (40%), “anti-Semitic” (40%) and “Want to Destroy Israel and Drive the Israelis into the Sea” (44%). All of these traits imply hostility and, when considered in combination, an anti-Christian, anti-Semitic hostility. As many Americans consider their country to be a Christian nation, such an attitude is apt to be seen as anti-American.<sup>13</sup>

Even though the survey was conducted in 1980, events in the 1990s, such as the immediate assumption that Muslims were responsible for the destruction of Oklahoma City’s Federal Building in 1995, indicate that Slade’s survey still reflects mainstream Western opinion.

The role of power politics in the continuation of the *hijāb*-oppressive stereotype cannot be overlooked. In many ways the anti-*hijāb* discourse is linked to the project of Western hegemony, even if that hegemony is seen as natural and not the result of this or that specific foreign policy. Badinter’s reactions to *hijāb*, indicative of many Western reactions, intellectual or not, reflect a fear of Islamic fundamentalism, that bogey haunting the Westerner as much as communism did in the 1950s. Like the Orientalist in the colonial period, the fear is of a breaking down of the barriers that keep Islam at bay, as Said argued. No wonder the appearance of *hijāb* inside the West appears like a cancerous growth needing elimination.

Nevertheless, some will protest. And rightly so. In many Muslim societies, women have been and are secluded; they have been and are forced to cover. *Hijāb* has been part of a package limiting women’s

<sup>13</sup> Although most Muslims are not Arabs, and many Arabs are not Muslim, many Westerners perceive ‘Arab’ and ‘Muslim’ as synonymous. Of the total respondents in this survey, 74 percent felt that “most” or “all” Arabs were Muslim. It is appropriate, therefore, to cite these statistics here as an indicator of the image of Muslims in the West.



potential, proscribing their roles in severe or not so severe ways. *Hijāb* has been part of a system that denies women education, employment outside the home, and the vote. It is no wonder that, like Mernissi, many Muslim women campaign against *hijāb* and celebrate its disappearance. It has only been forty-odd years since this system was dismantled and women left the home, had an education, and found employment. No wonder, too, that the reappearance of *hijāb* makes many secular-oriented Muslims and commentators nervous. Many of the people attracted to the new *hijāb* have not lived through the system that their grandparents fought to dismantle. They have only abstract ideas about what an Islamic state would be like.

The new covering movement is a radical challenge to both the Western stereotype of oppression and some traditional Muslim (Arab) practices. The return to the Qur'an and Sunnah movements (of which there are several versions) contain within them many forces. There are those, including myself, who see the Qur'an and the Sunnah, the Prophet, and the first community as embodying equality and justice for women and men, but a way of life distorted by cultural accretions over the last 1,400 years. These Muslims, men and women, are asserting that *hijāb* (ought to) be divorced from oppressive traditions of the past, such as seclusion, and that those oppressions wrongly kept women from their rightful participation in the affairs of the community. They are demanding education, work, political input, and the *hijāb*. Forty years is not a long time, however, and there are other forces along with the return to 'pure' Islam that are fostering restrictive interpretations of the Qur'an and Sunnah. If these take hold, the traditional package could reassert itself. There are indeed dangers for women. Nevertheless, scholars and the media tend to focus only on the dangers, on the negative, without giving a full context and without giving the full story. The dangers-for-women story effaces other stories, and positions the dangers-for-women story as 'authentic Islam'. However, these kinds of negative forces are just like those in the West, where feminists talk of a 'backlash', where women are still battling to have equal pay, have sexist rape laws amended, to end domestic violence, child abuse, and so on.

My book has been an attempt to present another story of the veil: the story of those, like myself, who find peace and joy in Islam, and

who do not believe that Islam suppresses women, or that *hijāb* oppresses them. Naturally, I believe that my positive story is the ‘authentic Islam’, one that ought to reign over all other interpretations. My book is an attempt to open the lines of communication with those who are willing to listen. It is a request that Muslim women who enjoy wearing *hijāb* be treated with respect, be listened to gracefully, and disputed with in the spirit of goodwill. We may agree to disagree over certain issues, although at the very least, we should be able to disagree and still remain partners in the global village.

## APPENDIX ONE

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### *The Interviewees*

#### BASSIMA

Bassima, early thirties, Caucasian-European, converted to Islam in the 1980s, and later married a Muslim, homemaker and freelance writer.

#### ELIZABETH

Elizabeth, single, mid-twenties, Caucasian-Canadian, converted to Islam in the 1990s, professional.

#### ELLEN

Ellen, Black-Canadian, late thirties, married a Muslim and converted to Islam in the 1970s, industry.

#### FATIMA

Fatima, mid-forties, migrated to Canada with her husband from Central Asia, homemaker and schoolteacher.

#### HALIMA

Halima, Caucasian-Canadian, late twenties, married a Muslim and later converted to Islam in the 1990s, homemaker.

#### IMAN

Iman, single, early twenties, daughter of Fatima, student.

#### KHADIJA

Khadija, mid-forties, migrated to Canada with her husband from the Middle East, professional.

#### NADIA

Nadia, single, late twenties, Caribbean, professional.

#### NOHA

Noha, single, mid-twenties, Asian/African, student.

**NUR**

Nur, single, mid-twenties, South Asian, student.

**RANIA**

Rania, married, late twenties, daughter of Fatima, professional.

**RANEEM**

Raneem, early thirties, Caucasian-Canadian, converted to Islam in the 1980s, and later married a Muslim, homemaker.

**SADIA**

Sadia, teenager, daughter of Yasmeen, student.

**SAFIYAH**

Safiyah, mid-twenties, migrated to Canada with her husband from North Africa, homemaker.

**YASMEEN**

Yasmeen, late-thirties, migrated to Canada with her husband from the Middle East, homemaker.

**ZAINAB**

Zainab, early sixties, European, widow, converted to Islam in the early 1990s, professional, retired.

## APPENDIX TWO

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# *Qur'anic Verses and Hadiths on Covering: Interviewees' References*

### QUR'AN

And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what [must ordinarily] appear thereof; that they should draw their *khumūrihinna* [usually trans. as veils] over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women, or the slaves whom their right hands possess, or male servants free of physical needs, or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex; and that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments. And O ye believers! Turn ye all together towards God, that ye may attain bliss. (24:31)

O Prophet! Tell thy wives and daughters, and the believing women, that they should cast their outer garments over their persons [when abroad]: that is most convenient, that they should be known [as such] and not molested. And God is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful. (33:59)

### HADITH

Abū Dāwūd has transmitted on the authority of ʿĀ'ishah [the Prophet's wife] [that] Asmā' the daughter of Abū Bakr [and ʿĀ'ishah's sister], once came to the Prophet (peace be on him) wearing transparent clothes. The Prophet (peace be on him) turned his face away from her and told her, "Asmā', when a woman begins to menstruate, nothing should be seen of her except this and this," and he pointed to his face and hands.

Source: Yusuf al-Qaradawi, *The Lawful and the Prohibited in Islam*, trans. Kamal El-Helbawy, M. Moinuddin Siddiqui and Syed Shukry (Kuwait: International Islamic Federation of Student Organizations, 1993), p.157.

## *How do the Interviewees Want Others to See Them?*

BASSIMA

“I’d like them to see me as an intelligent human being, not a down-trodden minority. I want them to think that *hijāb* is a respectable thing, not degrading or oppressive.”

ELIZABETH

“I really don’t care what they think [...] I just hope that they wouldn’t have thoughts of ... hatred ... towards me.”

ELLEN

“Just that I am an ordinary person, just like them. [A] person who deserves to be respected and treated as a human being.”

HALIMA

“I don’t know – I haven’t really thought about it. I would like them to respect our choice and not [...] exclude women who wear *hijāb* from certain things [as] in Quebec [...] the one they didn’t want her in the court, and the other, they didn’t want her in the school, I mean this truly oppression, they say the women is oppressed because she’s wearing the *hijāb*, but the true oppression is preventing somebody from going school because they have a scarf on their head, the larger issue is we’d like everybody to know about Islam so more people would accept it.”

IMAN

“I like them to recognise that I am a Muslim, that I believe in One God; that this is dress that God has asked us to wear, and that we respect God enough to do it, even though there are a lot of societal pressures to do otherwise ... I definitely hope there weren’t any hostile feelings, they may feel indifferent and that’s okay too, that doesn’t bother me.”

KHADIJA

“I like them to think the way I think [that *hijāb* symbolizes determination, strength, courage, dedication to your religion Islam], and to respect them [women who cover] the way I respect the nuns.”

NADIA

“I’d like people to judge me for the person I am and not be caught up in how I look.”

NUR

“Just to think that this is a nice person [not] a hostile person ... just a person practicing her faith.”

RANEEM

“Just take me as I am you know, like they should accept me for who I am, not for the way I look and that goes for everybody.”

RANIA

“I don’t want them to focus on ... the fact that I’m wearing *hijāb*. What I hope that I show to people is that and what I would like to be is a good person, a fair person, someone who is friendly.”

SADIA

“That I’m a Muslim, so I want them to know that, I’m doing this because I’m obeying Allah, and it’s a free country and I can do what I want. And that I don’t care if I’m accepted by them or not, I’m going to do it anyway.”

SAFIYAH

“It’s my decision, and I want them to respect my decision.”

YASMEEN

“I like them to understand Islam more, because ... if they look to me [as] a terrorist or ... a woman her husband forces her to do that, or [oppressed]. I liked them to know more about Islam from the Qur’an, not from what people said about Islam ... and even the act of Muslims, it doesn’t explain Islam, because unfortunately, in many ways, they act very bad, they act against Islam [and then they will] look forward to do as me, like me. I don’t know.”

ZAINAB

“I like them to think that these are believing Muslims, but I know that they won’t.”



## APPENDIX FOUR

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### *Interview Questions*

#### I

(All)

1. What do you spend the most time and energy doing: your job/being a parent/homemaker/public or charitable activities/studying?
2. Which role gives you the most satisfaction?
3. What reactions have you experienced from family/friends/co-workers about your decision to work/study/stay home?
4. Do you think of yourself as a ‘Muslim-Canadian’, [country] – Canadian or something else?
5. Do you consider yourself to be a religious person? Why?
6. Do you consider the people you live with to be religious?
7. What is your definition of a “Muslim”?
8. What kind of involvement do you have with the Islamic community in Toronto?

#### II

(*Those who cover*)

9. Do you cover full-time? Why/why not?
10. How old were you when you decided to cover?
11. What factors led to your decision to cover?
12. How did your family/friends/colleagues react?
13. Have you received positive or negative feedback?
14. What kind of reaction have you received from the broader community – Muslims and non-Muslims?
15. Do you feel that you are less accepted by the Canadian community than are those Muslim women who do not cover?
16. Did you/do you ever feel pressured to cover? From whom?

17. Did you/do you ever feel pressure not to cover? From whom?
18. What kind of covering do you wear?
19. How did you view covering before you decided to do it yourself?
20. What have you been taught about *ḥijāb* from your family? School? Society?
21. Do the women in your family cover?  
(If a mother, What do you teach your children about *ḥijāb*?)
22. What does it feel like to cover? (can prompt)
23. What are the advantages/disadvantages of covering?
24. Does wearing *ḥijāb* have any noticeable impact on your daily life at home/work/in broader environment, etc?
25. Do people comment on your *ḥijāb*? What kinds of things do they say?
26. Do you receive special attention on the subway/streets?
27. Do you feel you are treated differently because you cover?
28. What does the *ḥijāb* symbolize for you?
29. What would you like people to think when they see you in *ḥijāb*?
30. What do you think they see?
31. How do you feel about women who wear *ḥijāb*? About Muslim women who do not wear *ḥijāb*?
32. Why do women cover more than men?
33. Some people think that the *ḥijāb* is men's way of controlling women – their movements and their sexuality – what do you think of this claim?
34. In Canada, you do not have to cover. Does covering here mean that you are less free than your Canadian women friends?
35. The CBC once did a story about the *ḥijāb* issue in Quebec, and the reporter asked the question, 'Can the *ḥijāb* pass the litmus test of being Canadian?' How would you respond to that question?
36. Fatima Mernissi argues the *ḥijāb* means that women should not be outside much. What do you think of this claim?

## III

(*Those who do not cover*)

37. Have you ever covered? When and why?
38. [If yes to 37] How old were you when you decided to cover?
39. What factors led to your decision to cover?
40. Do you experience positive and/or negative feedback from your family/friends/colleagues about your decision to cover in the context in which you do cover/not cover (full-time)?
41. What kind of reaction have you received from the broader community – Muslims and non-Muslims?
42. Do you feel you are more accepted by the Canadian community than are those women who cover?
43. Have you/do you ever feel pressured to cover? From whom?
44. Have you/do you ever feel pressure not to cover?  
From whom?
45. If you decided to cover, what kind of covering would you wear?
46. Have you ever considered wearing *hijāb* more often/full-time?  
Why/why not?
47. What have you been taught about *hijāb* from your family?  
School? Society?  
(If a mother, What do you teach your children about *hijāb*?)
48. Do the women in your family cover?
49. What are the advantages/disadvantages of covering?
50. Do you think wearing *hijāb* would have any noticeable impact on your daily life at home/work/in broader environment etc?
51. What do you think it feels like to cover (full-time)?
52. Do you think that people would comment on your *hijāb*?  
What kinds of things do you think they would say?
53. Do you think you would receive special attention on the streets?
54. Do you feel you would be treated differently because you cover?
55. What does the *hijāb* symbolize for you?
56. What would you like people to think when they see you not covering/covering? (What do you think they see?)

57. How do you see covering related to being Muslim?
58. How do you feel about women who wear *ḥijāb*? About Muslim women who do not wear *ḥijāb*?
59. Why do women cover more than men?
60. Some people think that the *ḥijāb* is men's way of controlling women – their movements and their sexuality – what do you think of this claim?
61. In Canada, women do not have to cover. Do you think those who do cover here are less free than their Canadian women friends?
62. The CBC once did a story about the *ḥijāb* issue in Quebec, and the reporter asked the question, 'Can the *ḥijāb* pass the litmus test of being Canadian?' How would you respond to that question?
63. Fatima Mernissi argues the *ḥijāb* means that women should not be outside much. What do you think of this claim?

## IV

*(Converts)*

64. Why did you convert to Islam?
65. What kind of changes has becoming Muslim brought to your life?
66. What effect has your choice to be Muslim had on your relationship with parents/siblings/friends/colleagues?
67. (If married) What role did your husband play in your conversion?<sup>1</sup>

## V

*(All, questions modified as appropriate for the interviewee)*

68. What is the relationship between men and women in Islam? (Are they equal?)
69. Do men and women have different natures? If yes, what are they?

<sup>1</sup> Many people assume that women convert to Islam because of their husbands or boy-friends. This is true of some women (for example, Ellen, at first). However, there are others who, while married, convert out of their own belief and volition (for example, Elizabeth; Ellen, later; and Halima), and others who convert while single (for example, Bassima; Raneem; and Zainab.)

70. What are (would be) your husband's responsibilities at home, and what are (would be) yours? What do you hope for in a future mate?
71. Some people think that Muslims pose special problems for liberal democracies because Islam and liberal democracy are incompatible (e.g., Islam does not recognize the separation of church and state). What do you think of this claim?
72. How do you feel about the way Muslims are talked about in the media in Canada?
73. How do you feel about the current drive to establish an Islamic state in some countries? How do you think this will affect women?
74. If you could design a utopia, a society where everything is just as you would like it to be, what would it look like?
75. Is there anything you wish to add? Have I forgotten to ask something that you feel is important? Do you have any questions to ask me?
76. Would you be available for a follow-up interview if necessary?

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Until now the bulk of the literature about the veil has been written by outsiders who do not themselves veil. This literature often assumes a condescending tone about veiled women, assuming that they are making uninformed choices about veiling that makes them subservient to a patriarchal culture and religion. *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil* offers an alternative viewpoint, based on the thoughts and experiences of Muslim women themselves.

This is the first time a clear and concise book-length argument has been made for the compatibility between veiling and modernity. Katherine Bullock uncovers positive aspects of the veil that are frequently not perceived by outsiders.

*Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil* looks at the colonial roots of the negative Western stereotype of the veil. It presents interviews with Muslim women to discover their thoughts and experiences with the veil in Canada. The book also offers a positive theory of veiling. The author argues that in consumer capitalist cultures, women can find wearing the veil a liberation from the stifling beauty game that promotes unsafe and unhealthy ideal body images for women.

The book also includes an extensive bibliography on topics related to Muslim women and the veil.

*“The Veil is a flashpoint in the current Islamic discourse. Many interesting pieces have been written, but few from insiders with feminist credentials. This book is must reading for those engaged in the current Muslim scene, East or West. Dr. Bullock’s book deserves serious attention as it challenges the most deeply rooted assumptions we in the West have about the veil and its meaning.”*

*Shaykh Hamza Yusuf Hanson,  
Founder and Chairman of the Board of Directors, Zaytuna Institute*

*“This is a timely book, more so than when originally published. The author’s perspective is of a ‘Western’ woman who had misgivings about ‘the veil’, who then began wearing the hijāb when she became a Muslim. It is a refreshing read, well-written, honest and genuinely interesting. Unlike much attention usually given to this issue the author has actually listened to Muslim women’s experience of wearing hijāb and lets them speak in their own words. I hope that this book will inform new readers so that they can reflect for themselves on this issue”.*

*Julian Bond,  
Director, Christian Muslim Forum*

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