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The Motivations Behind Westerners' Obsession with the Islamic Veil

Abstract

In a world where we are constantly bombarded with countless images of Islamic terrorism, violence, and danger, it is not surprising that we have come to associate all aspects of Islamic society with malevolence. This destructive way of thinking has impacted the way we—as Westerners—think about, portray, and perceive Muslim men and women. While Muslim men are often depicted as hostile, cruel, and savage-like, on the other hand, Muslim women are usually depicted as powerless, obedient, and docile. These stereotypical representations of Muslim men and women have harmful consequences—consequences that not only promote Western ignorance, but also tarnish the mindsets of individuals, encouraging a shallow, one-dimensional view of Muslim women as oppressed. Consequently, every aspect of Muslim women's lives, including what they wear, has been analyzed and manipulated by Westerners in order to serve as evidence to explain Muslim women's oppression. For this reason, according to Westerners, Muslim women wearing the hijab (veil covering the head) have become a symbol of Muslim women's oppression, ultimately preventing Muslim women from escaping their religion. As a result, Western media has tended to focus on the veil, often linking it with Muslim women's oppression.

Interestingly, however, Westerners' obsession with the veil has not been a recent occurrence. In fact, Westerners' infatuation with the veil and rendering of it as a tool of Muslim women's oppression arose during the colonial period and was used as part of colonial discourse in order to serve the purposes and goals of Westerners—the goal of taking over the lands of the Muslim world to impose their own culture and values. For these very same reasons, the West is currently still using the veil for neocolonial purposes; however, recently, there have been attempts by Muslim women to reappropriate the meaning of the hijab in order to challenge Western stereotypes and misconstruals of the symbol of the veil. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Muslim, Veil, Islam, Hijab

Disciplines

Anthropology | Gender and Sexuality | Islamic Studies | Near and Middle Eastern Studies | Race and Ethnicity | Religion | Social and Cultural Anthropology | Sociology of Religion | Women's Studies

Comments

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The Motivations Behind Westerners' Obsession with the Islamic Veil

by Claire Alexander

Although many of us, as Americans, may not be proud of it, we have all probably done it at some point or another. Regardless whether we are boarding a plane, train, or subway, taking a walk through a park, shopping for groceries or clothing at a local department store, going to a restaurant for dinner, or taking a trip to a museum, at the sight of a woman covered in black from head to foot, we instantly make split-second stereotypical assumptions about women who are perceived to be Muslim. Whether we choose to avoid eye contact, walk in the opposite direction, or pretend to mind our own business, one thing is probably common for all of us. When we take notice of this individual, the first emotion that will most likely course through our body is fear—fear that she might be a terrorist. As she appears to be harmless, the second emotion that runs through our body is sorrow—sorrow that she is so oppressed while we, as Westerners, are “free” from such subjugation.

In a world where we are constantly bombarded with countless images of Islamic terrorism, violence, and danger, it is not surprising that we have come to associate all aspects of Islamic society with malevolence. This destructive way of thinking has impacted the way we—as Westerners—think about, portray, and perceive Muslim men and women. While Muslim men are often depicted as hostile, cruel, and savage-like, on the other hand, Muslim women are usually depicted as powerless, obedient, and docile. These stereotypical representations of Muslim men and women have harmful consequences—consequences that not only promote Western ignorance, but also tarnish the mindsets of individuals, encouraging a shallow, one-dimensional view of Muslim women as oppressed. Consequently, every aspect of Muslim women's lives, including what they wear, has been analyzed and manipulated by Westerners in

order to serve as evidence to explain Muslim women's oppression. For this reason, according to Westerners, Muslim women wearing the *hijab* (veil covering the head) have become a symbol of Muslim women's oppression, ultimately preventing Muslim women from escaping their religion. Western media has tended to focus on the veil, often linking it with Muslim women's oppression.

Interestingly, however, Westerners' obsession with the veil has not been a recent occurrence. In fact, Westerners' infatuation with the veil and rendering of it as a tool of Muslim women's oppression arose during the colonial period and was used as part of colonial discourse in order to serve the purposes and goals of Westerners—the goal of taking over the lands of the Muslim world to impose their own culture and values. For these very same reasons, the West is currently still using the veil for neocolonial purposes; however, recently there have been attempts by Muslim women to reappropriate the meaning of the *hijab* (veil) in order to challenge Western stereotypes and misconstruals of its symbolism.

Although the veil is often associated strictly with Muslim women, there are many other individuals from monotheistic religions, including Hasidic Jewish women and Christian nuns, who have adopted veiling practices. Seemingly, however, what distinguishes the Islamic veil from the latter two veils is that the Islamic veil has commonly been perceived as something that is disempowering and oppressive rather than empowering. In the article titled “Re(Envisioning) the Veil” (2013), Samantha Feder discusses how all of these types of veils— The Jewish *sheytl*s (wigs) and *Tikhls* (scarves), the Christian veil, and the Islamic *haikchador*, and *hijab* (different forms of headscarves)— serve as forms of resistance, allowing women to challenge sexual objectification as well as gain access to the public sphere. Acting as forms of resistance, the author argues that veils have been used to challenge and silence those who threaten their

religious identity. The author also discusses how veils are used not only to escape Western conceptualizations of beauty norms and standards, but also “shift the emphasis away from their bodies” to avoid sexual exploitation (452). In regards to gaining access to the public sphere, the author discusses that, in all three religions, the veils allow these women to gain legitimacy and respect in public spheres (454-55). Furthermore, veiling has been used to protect one’s modesty and respectability—important values rooted not only Islam, but also Christianity and Judaism. In Christianity and Judaism, hair, like Muslim women’s bodies, was viewed as sexual. For this reason, Christian nuns and Hasidic Jews who covered their hair and Muslim women who covered their bodies, were viewed as most pious and were considered to be the ideal representative of their religion (Tariq 2013, 497-98). Though all three types of the veils serve the same purpose, in my paper I want to examine why Westerners have not only become obsessed solely with the Muslim veil, but also why the Muslim veil is viewed as both destructive and oppressive whereas other forms of veils are not viewed in the same manner.

Coined by Edward Said, the term “Orientalism,” which refers to the way in which the West depicts and portrays the East, has served to promote Westerners’ obsession with the veil. Orientalism involves emphasizing, exaggerating, or even distorting the differences between Western and Eastern societies and cultures in order to validate and rationalize Western domination, intervention, and authority over the both the “Orient” and the East (Winder 1981, 615). In other words, through Orientalist discourse, Westerners have attempted to define the “oriental” world as different, separate, and distinct from the West. Westerners have depicted the West as superior, thus rendering the East and Eastern society as inferior. In order to make the divide between the East and West salient, according to Lentin, Westerners often “signify the Oriental women as mysterious and exotic ... feminine, always veiled, seductive and dangerous”

(1998, 155). By portraying the oriental woman as strange and mystifying, Westerners began to associate every aspect regarding the life of the oriental woman as wicked. Since the veil, in particular, was viewed as something that differentiated the “bizarre” Eastern woman from the “superior” Western woman, the veil ultimately became portrayed as an object that has led to both the Orient’s oppression and her inferior state. As a result of the consequences of Orientalism, due to the belief that Westerners are superior over Easterners, there arose a vested interest in veiling, which has served as justification for Westerners’ desire to civilize, dominate, and control Eastern communities.

According to Myra Macdonald, due to values embedded in Orientalism, during the colonial period, Westerners began to grow their obsession with veiling to a new obsession over “unveiling”—the desire to “unveil alien cultures”— to bring them into conformity with Western culture and values (2006, 9). That being said, clearly, Westerners believed that their culture was superior to Muslim cultures. They used this attitude to justify intervening in Muslim societies in order to impose their own culture on their peoples. However, “unveiling” did not just refer to the desire for Easterners to conform to Western culture, but also “this metaphoric notion of ‘unveiling’ slipped unobtrusively into a pathological antipathy to the actual adoption of the veil by Muslim women” (9). In other words, Westerners’ obsession over the “unveiling” of alien cultures to make them more Westernized later became transposed into a desire to uncover the veiled Muslim women to make her more visible (9). Therefore, veiling became synonymous with Muslim women’s oppression. In order to reduce Muslim women’s oppression, Westerners believed that Muslim women needed to stop wearing the veil. Because of the adoption of Orientalist values, and as a result of this obsession over veiling, Westerners began not only to

believe that they had the right to colonize the East, but also that they had a right to control what Muslim women were wearing.

Westerners' construal of the veil has been manipulated by Western society to serve as evidence to justify the colonization of Muslim countries. As Valerie Behiery writes, "[C]enturies before the colonial era, there already existed in Europe an association between woman and culture and a desire to conquer the Muslim world" (2016, 398). Over the duration of the colonial period, the image of the Muslim woman would change, but would nonetheless still serve as justification to colonize the East. During the medieval period, Muslim women were often depicted in Muslim discourse as powerful figures; however, this image of a Muslim woman threatened Western societies because it challenged Western conceptions of femininity. For Westerners, the ideal "feminine" women did not represent a figure that was powerful, but rather passive. This divergence in Western and Eastern sentiments regarding appropriate gender roles provided further motivation to colonize the East. However, after the medieval period, the image of the Muslim women changed (Behiery 2016). No longer would the Muslim woman be portrayed as a powerful being but, rather, as weak and helpless—a figure that needed to be "saved" from her oppressive state. As Behiery claims, "The veil [was] a major actor in this terrible game, constitu[ting] the necessary visual 'proof' of 'the inherently oppressive and unfree nature of the entire tradition of Islam and Oriental cultures'" (389). Therefore, in order to convey to the Western world that the Muslim woman needed to be "saved," the image of an oppressed woman in a veil was reproduced. These two clashing images of a Muslim woman, which both serve as Western motivation to colonize the Islamic World, demonstrates that "representations [of Muslim women] are constructions, contingent upon time, place and culture, that cannot be disentangled from issues of political and economic hegemony" (389). That being said, the

meaning of the veil has been manipulated by Western society to perpetuate the image of a Muslim woman who needs to be “saved.”

During the colonial period, the concept of “saving” Muslim women perpetuated the image of Muslim women as weak and oppressed. As a result, Westerners felt that it had become their responsibility and duty to take on a movement to rescue oppressed Muslim women from both their culture and their religion. Consequently, many missionaries, who worked for the church, took it upon themselves to “liberate” and “free” the “poor,” “helpless,” and “oppressed” Muslim women through their attempts to convert the women from Islam to Christianity, according to Yvonne Haddad (2007, 260). To their dissatisfaction, many missionaries found it difficult to actually get Muslim women to convert to Christianity. For this reason, many decided to establish schools in order to teach Muslim women about appropriate gender roles—roles that would teach them to be good housewives and mothers—to purge them of their “oppressive” Islamic values and instead replace them with “superior” Western values (261). Other Western women, who sympathized with Muslim women, believing that these women suffered from oppression and needed to be saved, began to advocate unveiling. The obsession over “unveiling” which led to a desire to “save” Muslim women from their religion, motivated many people to join a crusade to “unveil” the Muslim women.

The West has become obsessed with veiling, beginning during the colonial period; however, even today, the West still has an obsession with the veil, using its presence to justify neocolonial purposes. In the aftermath of 9/11, Islamophobia, hatred or strong prejudice against Muslims, began to spread. Films, television shows, books, news reports, all acting as a catalyst for this hate, tended to portray Muslims in a negative light, focusing on mistreatment and oppression of women as well as Muslim violence. Though Islamophobia was present prior to

September 11, this event definitely directed people's Islamophobia towards the hijab. For example, after 9/11 the Bush administration, in order to gain support for military campaign in Afghanistan against al-Qaida and the Taliban, tried to appeal to the public by promising that this campaign would, as Haddad puts it, "bring civilization to uncivilized Muslims," and also lead to the "empowerment of Muslim women" (2007, 255). In other words, this campaign led to the belief that the War on Terror was somehow connected to Muslim women's oppression. Although the hijab was still viewed as a symbol of obedience and oppression, in neocolonial times it also came to represent a threat to American safety (263). Lila Abu-Lughod argues that, due to ideology stemming from colonial thought, Westerners believed that "the ultimate sign of the oppression of Afghan women under the Taliban-and-the-terrorists is that they were forced to wear the burqa" (2002, 785). That being said, the resurgence of "and apparent obsession with the veil was perceived by many Muslims as the re-emergence of a centuries-old Western effort to liberate Muslim women from Islam" and "thus, the perennial issue of 'the veil' was placed once again the center of the debate between Muslims and their 'tormentors'" (Haddad 2007, 256).

For this reason, even in the postcolonial era, the West still regards the veil (and thus, the culture) as oppressive to women. As a result, most Westerners believe that we still need to "save" Muslim women from their oppression. This notion of "saving" Muslim women is problematic because it not only implies that Muslim women both want and need to be saved, but also promotes the idea that they can only be saved if they adopt Western cultural values (Abu-Lughod 2002, 788-89). Thus, during the neocolonial period, Westerners often justify military intervention as beneficial because it will lead to both the "liberation" and "freedom" of Muslim women. For reasons similar to those in existence during the colonial period, the West continues to have an obsession with the Muslim veil as justification for the occupation of foreign lands.

Westerners' obsession with the veil has had some major consequences for Muslim women; in fact, this obsession has led to increased stigmatizations, stereotypes, and misconceptions regarding the veil. With discourse that portrays the veil as a symbol of oppression and terrorism, in certain contexts, these stigmatizations have led to the discouragement of wearing veils and even bans against veils in schools (Bihery 2016, 391). Additionally, some Muslim women, especially after September 11, out of fear of assault, violence, stereotyping, and harassment, decided to remove their veils (Haddad 2007, 263). Western infatuation with the veil has led to the disturbance in Muslim women's lives, forcing them to live a life full of fear and anxiety.

Although during the colonial period, the veil was viewed as a symbol of Muslim women's oppression, the veil was also viewed as a sign of political resistance as Muslim women began to display agency in order to challenge Western stereotypes regarding the veil. In order to understand how the veil became viewed as a tool of political resistance, it is necessary to look at a concrete example of a society that was impacted by colonialism. According to Behery (2016), the French used Orientalism, feelings of superiority, and the veil in order to justify their occupation of Muslim countries, including Algeria. Once they attained control over parts of Algeria, the French began an unveiling campaign to try to force and persuade women to unveil despite the fact that they knew the veil was culturally and religiously significant for the Algerian women. Furthermore, according to Bihery who draws on Fanon, "[p]remised on the idea that women represent the innermost core of a culture, [the unveiling campaign] was a tool of domination: 'Converting the woman, winning her over to the foreign values, wrenching her free from her status, was at the same time achieving a real power over the men and attaining a practical means of deconstructing Algerian values'" (2016, 390). By inhibiting the Algerian

women from wearing their veils, the French knew that they were destroying their culture, which allowed the French to more easily dominate and take over Muslim lands. However, in response to the unveiling campaign, many Algerian women resisted Western attempts at colonizing and, instead, began to increase veiling (390). This demonstrates that the Western obsession has actually stimulated a desire in some Muslim women to combat Western stereotypes against the veil by demonstrating that veils are empowering.

Despite Western attempts to eradicate the veil, many Muslim women have decided to revolt against Western criticism and have attempted to reappropriate the meaning of the veil. As Haddad writes, “[S]ome young American-born Muslim women appear to have appropriated a century old view of the *hijab* as a symbol of solidarity and resistance to efforts to eradicate the religion of Islam” in order to “return to authenticity” (2007, 254). For these individuals, the veil is consciously utilized to display their public identity as a Muslim. Like the Muslim women of Algeria, whom I mentioned before, Muslim women everywhere who have decided to wear the hijab as a sign of protest, and have urged the public to challenge stereotypes regarding Muslim women and veils, claiming that the veils may not necessarily be signs of their oppression. For these women, the veils have become an important “symbol of resistance and the rejection of alien values,” representing more than just a piece of cloth that is wrapped around the head (258). Westerners’ obsession over the veil has met much resistance as Muslim women have attempted to reappropriate the veil in order to convey that veils are not necessarily harmful or oppressive, but rather, at times, empowering, acting as a symbol of resistance.

In this paper, I have discussed how Westerner’s obsession with the veil, which stemmed from periods of colonization, has also followed suit in the neocolonial era. Through neocolonialism, Westerners seek to maintain their power, control, and influence over the Muslim

world. For all of the same reasons that Westerners used to justify colonialism during the colonial era, Westerners also used these reasons to justify neocolonialism. In this sense, Western colonialism still continues, even today. During the colonial period, through the notion of Orientalism, Westerners were led to believe that both they and their culture were superior to individuals from the East. While Muslim men were viewed as domineering, aggressive, and violent, Muslim women were viewed as docile, quiet, obedient, and oppressed. For this reason, the Oriental woman's veil, which contributed to the division between the East and the West, began to be associated with Muslim women's oppression. Westerners used the image of an oppressed woman who needed to be "saved" in order to justify taking over and imposing their own culture on foreign lands. In neocolonial times, especially after 9/11, American leaders used the same justifications that Westerners from the colonial period used in order to gain support to increase military campaigns in Afghanistan. Overall, veiling is a very complicated situation. While there are certainly some Muslim women who believe that the veil is oppressive, other Muslim women believe that it is empowering. However, in order to truly understand whether or not the veil is viewed as oppressive or empowering, one must not only take into consideration the context of the woman, but also, in my opinion, ask Muslim women whether or not they find comfort in wearing the veil. Although there is no easy way to eradicate misconceptions and stereotypes about the veil, I believe that we have to stop using cultural differences to justify rendering the West as superior and the East as inferior.

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