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POST-COLONIAL FEMINISM AND THE VEIL: Thinking the Difference

Lama Abu Odeh

Since the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the issue of the veil has been the topic of heated debate in Arab countries, particularly those that witnessed strong fundamentalist movements. The fact that Iranian Islamicists who took power in Iran sanctioned the veil and penalized those women who chose not to wear it was either a seductive or, alternatively, a terrifying reminder to women in other Muslim countries of what it might be like for women under Islamicist rule. In countries like Jordan, Algeria and Egypt, where fundamentalist movements have mobilized many followers including large numbers of women whose adoption of the veil signified their initiation into the movement, the question of the legal sanction of the veil has aroused intense reactions from supporters and opponents alike. In this paper I try to explore the question of the veil from the complicated perspective of an Arab feminist, who both rejects the veil as a personal choice but also recognizes its empowering and seductive effect on Arab women. My discussion will be limited to the veil as it plays itself out in an Arab context, since this is what I am most familiar with. The analysis might, or might not, be true in other non-Arab Muslim countries. Also, my 'analysis' will be more of a personal journey of exploration and reflection, than a traditional academic analysis or a strictly scientific one.

For the purposes of this paper I shall use the term 'veil' to mean the current dress adopted by Muslim women in the Arab world, as followers of the contemporary fundamentalist movements. In its most common expression, the veil entails covering the woman's hair with a scarf that is ordinarily white, leaving the face to be exposed. All of the body is usually covered with a loose dress in dark colours, with buttons from top to bottom. Women typically wear Western clothes beneath this dress, which they take-off, along with the scarf, when they are in the sole company of women. These women do not usually cover their hands with gloves, nor do they wear make-up.

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From non-veil to veil

In order to make sense of the veil as a social phenomenon one needs to inspect other types of women's dress that are distinguishable from the veil. This I will do, by noting the transitional step that these women have made in their dress, historically, from non-veil to veil.

I would like first, however, to locate the women who adopt the veil in terms of class. This will be rather difficult due to the complexity of class structure in postcolonial societies. In general, these women tend to belong to the urban lower and middle classes. Professionally, they work as civil servants, schoolteachers, secretaries in private enterprise, bank employees, nurses and university students. They are usually young, in their twenties and early thirties.

In the seventies, these women walked the streets of Arab cities wearing Western attire: skirts and dresses below the knee, high heels, sleeves that covered the upper arm in the summer; their hair was usually exposed, and they wore make-up. They differed from their mothers who pretty much dressed in the same way, in that they were more fashion conscious, more liberal in the colouring of their clothing and more generous in their make-up. Their mothers usually covered their hair with a scarf when they were in public, but only in a liberal rather than a rigid way (a good proportion of their hair showed underneath the scarf in contrast to the scarf of the fundamentalist dress which showed nothing).

If one were to freeze that 'moment' in the seventies, in an attempt to understand these women's relationship to their bodies, one would find it multilayered and highly complex. In a way their bodies seemed to be a battlefield where the cultural struggles of postcolonial societies were waged. On the one hand, the Western attire which covered their bodies carried with it the 'capitalist' construction of the female body: one that is sexualized, objectified, thingified etc. . . . But because capitalism never really won the day in postcolonial societies, where it managed to cohabit successfully with pre-capitalist social formations (traditionalism), these women's bodies were also simultaneously constructed 'traditionally': 'chattelized', 'propertized', terrorized as trustees of family (sexual) honour. The cohabitation in the female body of this double construction (the capitalist and the traditional) was experienced by these women as highly conflictual. The former seemed to push them to be seductive, sexy and sexual, the latter to be prudish, conservative and asexual. Whereas the former was supported by the attraction of the market (consumption of Western commodities), the latter was supported by the threat of violence (the woman is severely sanctioned, frequently by death, if she risks the family sexual honour).

Not infrequently, Arabic newspapers carry a story structured along the following lines: 'S.M. stabbed his sister K. in a coffee shop across from the university campus. The police are investigating the crime.' A possible scenario for the crime: the woman, a university student belonging to the middle or lower classes, is having coffee with a

It is not unusual to find the length of a girl's dress the object of family debate:

Father/brother: This dress is too short. No respectable girl would wear it. Ask your daughter (*addressing the mother*) to take it off.

Mother: Come on, let her be. Girls these days wear things like that.

Brother: Let her take it off. My friends follow girls on the streets who wear dresses that short. I won't have my sister going around dressed like that!

Girl: But it's so pretty. All my friends wear dresses that short.

Father/Brother: May be they do, but I won't have my daughter/sister walk in the streets with a dress like that.

The girl takes it off.

colleague. Somebody 'tips' her brother that she is involved in sexual relations with this man. Provoked by his sister's friendly public behaviour with another man, and shamed by other people's thinking that this public behaviour has in fact led to illicit sexual contact between them, the brother kills his sister in defence of family sexual honour. The time between the 'tip' and the actual murder is usually very brief. More concerned with the public perception than with the actual fact of the sister's conduct, the brother rushes to protect the family honour, promptly and unequivocally. After trial, the brother is imprisoned for one year only. His extenuating circumstance is committing a 'crime of honour', sanctioned in most Arab penal codes.

The above two stories are pointers on a continuum. The way the girl dresses and how she behaves have heavy sexual significations. She is continuously subject to the test of 'honour' and reputation, that she never really passes once and for all. Her sense of disempowerment stems from the terror exercised over her body, death being its not infrequent extreme.

The ambivalence that these women felt about their bodies in the seventies was resolved by adopting the Islamic fundamentalist dress in the eighties. The length of her dress was no more the object of family debate, nor would she be caught having coffee with a colleague in public, thereby risking her own death. Rather than being engaged in keeping the impossible balance of the 'attractive prude' or the 'seductive asexual', these women chose to 'complete' the covering of their bodies, and 'consummate' their separation from men. I deliberately use the words 'complete' and 'consummate' because the veil was only the concealment of an already ambivalently covered body, rather than the radical transition from 'revelment' to 'concealment'. Likewise, the segregation of the veil was only the completion of an already ambivalent separation between the sexes.

The veil as empowerment

I had earlier identified the women who adopt the veil as mostly working women or students, and young. An important part of their daily life is walking the streets and using public transport to go to work or to school and university. Public exposure of this kind has never been comfortable for women in Arab cities. Unfailingly subject to attention on the streets and on buses by virtue of being women, they are stared at, whistled at, rubbed against, pinched. . . . Comments by men such as, 'what nice breasts you have', or 'how beautiful f you must be', or something more subtle in tone such as, 'what a blessed day this is that I have seen you', are not infrequent. Ordinarily, women avoid any kind of direct verbal exchange with men when they are so approached. They either give the man a look of disapproval, or simply look ahead dismayed, and continue their way. Whatever their reaction, they are always conscious of being looked at. Exceptionally, a woman might engage in a verbal exchange with the man, such as when he is insistent in his approaches (he continues to rub his thigh against hers on the bus despite her attempts at keeping a distance away from him). She might retort angrily, 'Keep away from me you pig; don't you have sisters of your own?'. A dramatic public scene usually ensues, whereby the man jumps to his self-defence by denying the allegation, and the men on the bus condemning such kind of behaviour as, 'unworthy of a man who has sisters, and a sign of the corruption of youth these days'. The passengers might also chide the woman for not dressing more properly, implying that if she did, such kind of harassment might not have occurred. The bus driver might even gallantly ask the man to leave the bus.

A woman's willingness to raise objections to such male intrusions is notably different when she is veiled. Her sense of the 'untouchability' of her body is usually very strong in contrast to the woman who is not veiled. Whereas the latter would swallow the intrusions as inevitable and part of her daily life, trying to bypass them in all the subtle ways she can muster (by looking at the man angrily and moving away from him), the veiled woman on the other hand is more likely to confront the man with self-righteousness, 'have you no fear of Allah treating his believers in such a shameless fashion?' Public reaction is usually more sympathetic to her, the men on the bus making comments such as, 'Muslim women should not be treated like that. Young men should pray more and read the Quran.' It is also true to say that veiled women's exposure to male intrusions in the first place is considerably less than the others.

The importance of these daily experiences and their 'existential' effect on women, both veiled and non-veiled, is best understood when put in the context of Arab women's relationship to their bodies as I have tried to explore it above. Public sexual harassment seems to reinforce the non-veiled woman's ambivalence about her body making her powerless in the face of unwelcome intrusions. The problem doesn't seem to exist for veiled women, since adopting the veil was meant among other things to shield them from such sexual approaches, so that

when they are actually made, they are looked upon as being simply outrageous, both by the veiled women and the public.

The veil as disempowerment

As I wrote down the title of this section, I thought to myself that there are surely a hundred million ways in which the veil is disempowering to women. But as I searched in my mind for such examples, I discovered that those instances of disempowerment that I was thinking of reflected my own normative assumptions of how the world should be. In other words, they reflected my position as a feminist. Paradoxically enough, and feminist as I am, instances of the disempowerment of the veil did not present themselves to me as self-evident. Whereas it was obvious to me that the veil remedied the situation of sexual harassment on the street, by discouraging men from invading veiled women's space and by empowering them to raise objections when such invasions took place, it wasn't equally obvious to me that the veil actually weakened women and disabled them from confronting an uncomfortable daily experience. Even when I activated my own normative assumptions about how the world should be, instances of disempowerment did not become any more self-evident. For instance, my normative assumptions, as an Arab feminist, are based on the premise that Arab women should be able to express themselves sexually, so that they can love, play, tease, flirt and excite. In a social context, such as the one in the Arab world, where women can incur violent sanctions if they express themselves sexually, such acts carry important normative weight to me as a feminist. In them, I see acts of subversion and liberation.

But loving, teasing, flirting and seducing was not the way these women normatively saw their sexuality. If in all these acts I saw pleasure and joy, they saw only evil. For them, a society in which the sexes interacted thus was undoubtedly corrupt. They therefore experienced the veil as normatively necessary: precisely because women should not go around seducing men (except the ones they are married to), then they should be veiled (from other men). The disempowerment of the veil that I reflected on seemed to express merely my panicked feminist self, one that saw the veil as threatening to its normative world and sexuality.

Unless I engaged in intellectual élitism by accusing these women of false consciousness and not knowing their own good, there was no way that I could point to instances of the disempowerment of the veil. What it all sounds like so far is a hopeless clash of normative visions.

In a conversation with a veiled fundamentalist woman in her late twenties, who is single, I ask, 'But don't you have sexual needs?'

She: Sure I do.

I: What do you do with them?

She: Sure I have sexual needs, but nothing that is absolutely overwhelming and impossible to deal with. I occupy myself all the time. I read books. I love to read books on Islam. To be 'pure' as a single woman is my absolute priority. I do not let these things preoccupy my thinking. It is simply not an issue for me.

In my late twenties and single myself, that was nothing my confused postcolonial feminist self could identify with.

As I wrote the above paragraph about my own normative vision of sexuality, I was fearfully conscious of my father's reaction.

Father: What is this you're writing? Women going around seducing and teasing??!!

I:

Father: Wipe it off. Do you want to shame me?? That's all I need!! My own daughter declaring to the world that she wants women to go around seducing and teasing! How can I show my face to the world??

I:

Father: So this is what you want?? This is what your feminism is all about?? Women going around whoring??

I, desperately searching for words that might fit into his conceptual scheme and finding none, remain silent.

Preaching to the unconverted

What about those who are unconverted, neither feminist nor veiled? Those whose bodies and sexuality have not been constructed by the veil discourse, nor by the feminist one? What about those whose 'moment' in the seventies has lingered, whose ambivalence about their bodies has not been 'resolved' by the adoption of the veil? What does a feminist such as myself have to offer them and how do I fare in comparison with those who preach the veil? How could what I have to offer them be empowering?

I find that my position, and that of other feminists, is not devoid of ambivalence. We obviously fare worse when it comes to empowering women on the streets. If what we have as remedy is a long agenda of changing the laws, claiming our rights to walk the streets without harassment, and raising consciousness about the 'equality' of men and

women, then what we have is terribly unattractive. It is long term (when the veil as remedy is immediate), sounds hopelessly utopian and demanding of women to engage in what sounds like difficult and impossible personal/political struggle. But what is even more serious than all this, in contrast to the look of social respectability that the veil bestows on those who wear it (sort of like the respectability of a woman dressed like a nun), we seem to offer women a discourse that will make them socially conspicuous, questionable and suspect. For the ambivalent woman of the seventies, already dogged in her pursuit for good reputation, what we offer her looks not only unattractive, but almost socially suicidal.

The situation is aggravated further by the fact that most such feminists are upper- or middle-class women, with material resources that enable them to avoid, to a great extent, uncomfortable experiences on the streets (most of them drive their own cars). They also invite instinctive hostility in lower-class women by virtue of their class position.

Even more, feminist discourse sounds quite foreign. It uses concepts such as 'equality' and 'freedom', which are on the one hand indeterminate and could be easily appropriated ('equality between men and women means that men should be women's superiors because they are more qualified'), but they are also concepts that need yet to become discourse in the postcolonial context ('why should women be free when men are not free either?'). Liberalism, which postcolonial feminism seems to be based on, has yet to win the day in these societies.

Regrettably for the feminist, the importlike quality of her discourse weakens her case even further. Seen as a Western product, feminism doesn't have an obvious list of victories the postcolonial feminist can lean on. Rape, pornography and family disintegration in the West are flaunted in the face of such a feminist as she proceeds to preach her politics. Rather than seeing feminism as a political response to these social phenomena, feminism is seen as its cause. It is because Western women have become 'emancipated' that they are on the streets to be raped, morally corrupt to be playmates, and selfish about their own lives to cause the disintegration of the family. In a crude, superficial, partial, empirical way, that might be true. But before the postcolonial feminist steps in to explain the complexity of the situation in the West, she finds herself silenced by the immediate, simple, straightforward almost magical rhetoric of the veil. But even if she is allowed to speak, she suddenly finds herself in the uncomfortable position of 'defending the West', an anomaly in itself in the postcolonial Muslim societies of the day.

Solidarity with the veiled

So far I have constructed the veiled position and the feminist one as being sharply contrasted. I had indicated earlier that they seemed to me

to represent a hopeless clash of normative visions. But let me step down a little bit and reshuffle the positions I have constructed. Who wants to talk about normative visions anyway? They often seem to lead nowhere.

Perhaps the feminist path and the veiled one criss-cross. Perhaps they do so to an extent that they are no longer singularly identifiable as such. To show how they might possibly do that we need to break them down and attack their coherence.

The coherence of the veiled position breaks down like this: the contemporary veil seeks to address sexual harassment on the street. It seeks to protect women on their way to work and to school. Its female subjects are socially conspicuous *a priori*: they are not women who are staying locked indoors. It has come to remedy the uncomfortable daily lives of single, young women, who are leaving the house seeking work and education. But the veil as rhetoric assumes that women should ideally be inconspicuous. They should be locked indoors out of men's way so as not to seduce them. They should not go out to work, their rightful place is in the house as wives and mothers, not as wage workers.

The veiled position thus seems to be self-deconstructing. If it seriously pursues its normative vision by inviting women to stay at home, then it loses its attractiveness and therefore its effectiveness as a tool. For it was women's conspicuousness that prompted them to adopt the veil in the first place.

Even more paradoxically, fundamentalist ideology, as the inspiration for the rhetoric of the veil, assumes that women should work only out of necessity, preferably work in professions that are considered feminine such as teaching and nursing, and once at the workplace they should minimize their contact with men to the greatest extent possible. Whether during their working hours, or during break-time, individual women and individual men should not be left alone. Men are presumed to be the leaders in any context, whether at work or at home. Women, who have adopted the veil for its empowering effect on the street as they go to work, can find themselves seriously disempowered if the veil carries its 'logic' to the workplace. Spatial and functional segregation between the sexes, as the fundamentalist ideology of the veil envisages for the workplace, could seriously affect the career prospects of veiled women. Since they live and work in a world where men are already the decision-makers, and the higher situated in the hierarchy of the workplace, minimizing contact between women and men could only possibly result in isolating women further from the positions of power and decision-making.

The ambivalence of their position as veiled women seeking work could be effectively utilized by feminists. Seeing this as a golden opportunity for joining hands with veiled women, feminists can offer their politics as remedy for the disempowerment veiled women can experience at the workplace. Liberal feminist demands such as equality in the distribution of responsibilities between men and women based on the qualifications of the individual, equality of promotion opportunities between the sexes, daycare facilities for women to nurture their

children, can be offered to these women as empowering political rhetoric for them as wage workers. Such demands will undoubtedly resonate deeply in veiled women's experience at the workplace. Feminism could thus become the empowering politics of veiled women at work.

The ironic side about all this for feminists, is that all of a sudden they could find themselves joining hands with veiled women as 'comrades' in political action. The coherence of the feminist position could thus be open to question. Far from finding the beneficiaries of its rhetoric female subjects engaged in a struggle for free and equal interaction with men in a free play of sexuality, postcolonial feminism will have to adjust itself to the fact that its empowered subjects are veiled women. In other words, feminist women and veiled women are now sisters.

Veiled and divided: the battle over the body

I have so far talked about the veiled body as if it were monolithic. And even though I believe that the rhetoric of the veil seeks to construct a monolithic female sexuality for its followers, I do not however think that, on closer inspection, the community of the veiled reveals any such single construction. Veiled sexuality, it seems to me, reveals a multiplicity that is beyond the feminist's wildest expectations.

True, there are those who can be described as 'ideology incarnate'. Their relationship with their body replicates ideology so well that a shift in this construction looks almost hopeless. They are the leaders, the preachers, the passionate believers, the puritans. They are the ones whose public veiled self takes over, even when they are in the private quarters of women. Their bodies seem to adopt the daily rituals of the veil, where they come to look, for the more colour-loving aesthetic eye, rather bland, insipid and otherworldly. It is the body of the virtuous.

But there are also those in the community of the veiled who are tentative and wavering. Once secure in the company of women, they reveal bodies that are more colourful, lively and sexual. One is surprised at the shift their bodies make when they take the veil off. The bland face becomes colourful with creative make-up. The loose dress of the veil, once taken off, reveals underneath fashionable clothing, making a more individual and personal statement than the collective public one of the veil. Their sexuality appears to be more forthcoming, assertive and joyful. Once together, their interaction with each other is not devoid of seductiveness and flirtation. Their private bodies are almost unrelated to their public ones.

And there are also those whose private more colourful bodies, shyly but daringly, push to become more public. They wear make-up with the veil. They are more creative, fashion-conscious in public, constantly attempting to subvert the blandness of the veil. They invent a million ways to tie the scarf on their heads, which itself becomes more varied in colours than the more standard white. The loose dress of the veil

suddenly becomes slightly tighter, more colourful, more daring in emulating Western fashions, even if it doesn't explicitly reveal more parts of the female body. One also notices them on the streets conversing with men, strolling with them, subverting the segregation that the veil imposes on the sexes.

And there are those who wear the veil, but retain a fiercely ambivalent relationship with it, so that wearing it is a conscious decision that is made almost every day. It is not uncommon to find them wearing it some days and taking it off others. 'Wearing the veil, I find sometimes encourages me to binge on food since my whole body is covered in public, and I tend to lose touch with it. I feel I need to take it off sometimes. I need the public voyeur's gaze to control myself.'

And, there are those who use their bodies and dress as a statement of opposition. They differentiate themselves in their environment by wearing the veil, and using it as a statement on female subordination in nonfundamentalist (pseudo-secular, pseudo-religious) Arab households in which they find themselves. Wearing the veil allows them to have a singular and individual voice: 'You are all not wearing the veil, but I AM. I am powerful enough to do it, and this is how I carve myself a space that you cannot reach. I disapprove of what you are, who you are, and what you think!'

Of course, a veiled woman is not necessarily either this or that. She could shift from one position to the other. At times colourful, other times bland, seductive and prudish, public and private. A veiled woman's subjectivity appears to be much more complicated than the simple word of the veil can possibly convey.

For the feminist, such multiplicity of veiled sexuality could be very exciting and promising of rich interaction and dialogue with veiled women. Her position accordingly could become more nuanced and multiple. Instead of dismissing them as the enemy, the threat, the falsely conscious, she could see them as the varied, divided, seemingly united, female community trying to survive in an environment that is hostile to them as much as it is to her. It is a multiplicity that invites conversation between the 'same', rather than the apartness of the 'other'.

The feminist resituates herself

In the section below, I shall refer to the 'rhetoric of the veil'. What I mean by it is the fundamentalist construction of the veil, as it is circulated ideologically. A woman who decides to wear the veil is usually subjected to a certain ideological indoctrination (by a fundamentalist preacher), about how every Muslim woman needs to cover her body so as not to seduce men, and how in doing this she obeys the word of Allah. Otherwise, she would face his wrath on the day of judgement. I have already tentatively referred to it in the section entitled 'Solidarity with the veiled'. It is in relation to, and at the same time by means of, this

'official' rhetoric that the different women I have just described construct their position of ambivalence or subversion.

In my construction so far, I have largely ignored the question of power. What I mean by power in this context is the power attached to a particular discourse as the only possible representation of 'reality', to the exclusion of others. This is a particularly important issue for the postcolonial feminist who is interested in understanding and possibly impacting the female community of the veiled. The excitement over the multiplicity and richness of such a community for the postcolonial feminist might be immediately dampened by the ideological power of the veil over that community. This will still be the case, despite the variety and richness of veiled women's lives that could be read as subverting the rhetoric of the veil.

It is interesting to note that since the veiled women of the contemporary fundamentalist movements have adopted the veil as a political act (they were not born into it), the rhetoric of the veil has a strong hold over them, since it provided the rationale for their act. In articulating their lives and their relationship with their bodies, they can only engage in such rhetoric. This seems to have the effect, at the end of the day, of reifying the 'reality' of their daily lives, by disabling them from seeing the subversions and variations that exist or could exist to disrupt the ideology of the veil.

This seriously complicates the position of the feminist. In order to have a hearing with these women, she needs to 'hook up' with their conceptual system (rhetoric). But she also needs to do it in a way that subverts it and allows conceptual openings in it, through which veiled women can start to see their lives differently. This is a slippery road since she will always risk being overwhelmed by the 'logic' of the rhetoric, and thereby end up being rendered ineffective and immobilized by it. She will also find herself in the uncomfortable position of having to say things that she 'doesn't really mean' in order to have a hearing in the first place. Conscious of having to keep the balance of being both inside and outside the system, the feminist risks being pushed one side or the other.

The feminist: I like the way you wear your scarf. It's creative and most unusual.

Veiled woman: Thank you. I get bored with the way I look if I wear it the same every day.

The feminist: I thought the whole point was to wear it the same every day so that you don't attract attention to your body.

Veiled woman: It's just that I think that people need to look beautiful to others. That doesn't mean they have to seduce them. Allah is beautiful and He likes beauty.

The feminist: I agree with you. I think women can look beautiful without having to appear as if they are out to seduce men. I believe that women can look both proper and beautiful. In my opinion, you can do that either wearing the veil or even Western clothes. I, personally, feel more comfortable wearing the latter. The veil appears to me rather exaggerated.

Veiled woman: Except that Allah commanded us to wear the veil. But I've always believed that the important thing is how we feel inside. The important thing is that we feel pure inside, no matter what we wear, whether it is Western clothes or the veil.

Notes

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