

Perceptions of the Veil: (Un)Veiling the Veiled Muslim Woman

By *Rahela Nayebzadah*

Introduction

The Muslim veil is an abstract concept that cannot easily be contained under one meaning. The veil, which is also referred to as “hijab”, is both material and conceptual. As a material object, the veil is a fabric which comes in different forms, depending on the person’s cultural beliefs and practices. Some of the many different types of veiling (but not limited to) include burqa, niqab, chador, abaya, and headscarf. A burqa is an enveloping outer garment worn by women for the purpose of cloaking the entire body. It is worn over the usual daily clothing, covering the wearer’s entire face except for a small region about the eyes which is covered by a concealing net. Niqab is a type of veil that covers the face but leaves the eyes exposed. Unlike the burqa, the niqab does not have a concealing net for the eye region. A chador is a full-length semicircle of fabric open down the front, which is thrown over the head and held closed in front. It has no hand openings or closures and is held shut by the hands or by wrapping the ends around the waist. A chador leaves the entire face exposed. An abaya is a robe-like dress which covers the whole body except the face, feet, and hands. It can be worn with the niqab. Also, some women choose to wear long black gloves underneath their abaya so their arms are fully covered. And, a headscarf covers the hair and neck, leaving the entire face exposed. On another level, some Muslims do not translate the veil as an object of clothing that covers a woman’s hair and/or body, but rather view the veil as a concept of modesty in regards to dress, behavior, speech, and way of living. According to this interpretation the concept of modesty and the veil is holistic. The headscarf is a signifier as much as words are signifiers; the veil is semiotics. As an internalized act of modesty, the meaning of the veil is in the veil; the internal meaning is what gives meaning to the external, and only when the internalized modesty manifests itself through the external representation, can a Muslim believer truly represent the true meaning of the garment.

On a conceptual level, the veil is an indicator of modesty. In terms of dress, some Muslims¹ argue that they practice veiling by dressing modestly. However, issues such as what consists of “modest dress” and “immodest dress” are raised. And, who determines what is “modest” and what is “immodest” also raises concern. In terms of behavior, speech, and way of living, some Muslims may argue that they practice veiling by acting, speaking, and living according to the practices of Islam, such as praying five times a day, fasting during the month of Ramadan, taking a pilgrimage to Mecca, practicing peace and kindness towards animals and human beings, etc. In addition, others argue that a veil is a combination of both. In this thesis, I will focus on the veil as a material object that covers women’s hair and/or their bodies. My change in identity as a Muslim—from a believer that Islam degrades women to a believer that Islam liberates women allows me to contribute significantly to this field of study. Moreover, the

¹ A Muslim is an individual that practices the Islamic faith and therefore accepts *The Koran* (the Islamic holy book) and *The Hadith* (the teachings of Prophet Mohammad) as their divine source. Furthermore, a Muslim believes in the submission of Allah (an Arabic term meaning God), the oneness of Allah, and accepts Prophet Mohammad as the messenger of Allah.

construction of Muslim women's identity, particularly concepts pertaining to veiling and unveiling, is crucial to Women's Studies scholarship because it serves a great contribution to feminist studies: The veiled Muslim woman has come to represent a symbol of backwardness and oppression, and furthermore, a visual cue to bolster claims of the rise in Islamic militancy. The veil serves as an obstacle to Muslim women and their freedom, becoming an important area of debate in regard to "the woman question."

To many Muslims and non-Muslims, including myself, the Muslim veil in the West² is a way of dress that represents agency and freedom. I define agency as the state of being in which one is in action or exerting power. Hence, a veiled woman has agency because of her actions and power in redefining herself by not allowing herself to be the silenced, oppressed, and backward Muslim woman. I define freedom as the state of freely practicing veiling rather than in confinement or under physical restraint. Thus to me, the veil is only a demonstration of freedom if worn by choice. However, one might question exactly how free a choice a Muslim woman can make if she exists within a predominantly patriarchal culture, time, situation, and religion. Hence, would Muslim women veil (or veil constantly) if the notion of veiling had not been introduced by religious text or cultural practice? Exactly how free a choice does a Muslim woman have?

The concept of veiling cannot escape extreme interpretations of modesty or oppression; thus, the use of binaries and dichotomies are significant to this thesis. Moreover, one of the most significant binaries that need to be studied in this area is that of the East³ and the West as two opposing extremes: One does not have a sense of hierarchy until one has a sense of difference—an acknowledgement that the world is dichotomized between the East and the West, the "progressive" and the "backward." Hence, Muslim women only make sense when juxtaposed with Christian women, the East only makes sense when adjacent with the West, and Oriental women only make sense when put next to Occidental women. As disputed areas of debate, Muslim and non-Muslim scholars are effortlessly "unveiling" (also a sexual act) the veiled woman by revealing further narrow assumptions of certain dominant logic that appears attractive to the West. The West knows what is best for the "oppressed" Muslim; it sends messages that rely heavily on liberal feminist rhetoric. For as long as the veiled identity is always expressed within dichotomous interpretations, the believers and the non-believers⁴ of

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³ The term "the East" does not apply to any specific geographical location; instead, it is a concept borrowed by Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1987) to mean certain societies (especially Islamic) which are represented as barbaric, savage, backward-thinking, and retrogressive. Furthermore, class, ethnicity, and gender also come to play in regards to determining what constitutes as "the East."

⁴ "Believer" means one who is a believer of the veil. One must not necessarily have to wear the veil, but one must believe that the veil is instructed in *The Koran* and a "non-believer" means one who is not a believer of the veil. One must not necessarily have to be unveiled, but one must believe that the veil is not instructed in *The Koran*.

the veil will always be confronted with a dialogue of struggle, a verbal argument—the believers will demonstrate the veil is an act of freedom and agency while the non-believers will demonstrate the veil is an act of oppression and retrogression.

However, such various acts of uncovering does not allow one to straightforwardly liberate any oppressed individual, nor do they allow one to reach any transparent truth about that person, the veiled, or unveiled Muslim woman. As a result, I wish to “veil”—or in other words, deem her garment as an act of personal, and sometimes communal, form of expression and belonging that cannot be categorized under one category of meaning—the Muslim woman who has been unveiled, and therefore falsely revealed. However, I do not wish to unveil the correct answer behind why the veiled woman chooses to veil, but rather argue that no unveiling of the veiled woman can lead to one answer. Furthermore, I do not wish to position the veiled Muslim woman in the margins of society; instead, I intend to disrupt established notions of what constitutes sociality’s sacred centre. Why is the oppressed and silenced veiled Muslim woman an important image for the West? Does wearing the veil send as a strong message as not wearing the veil? Which veiled and unveiled Muslim women are represented in popular culture, and why? Why the need to dichotomize the veiled Muslim woman? For example: the veiled modest woman versus the unveiled immodest woman; the attractive unveiled woman versus the unattractive veiled woman; and, the veiled woman who is labelled as a believer versus the unveiled woman who is labelled as a non-believer. And finally, why are Muslims who sell certain stereotypes of the veil considered good Muslims whereas those who are critical of the stereotypes considered bad Muslims?

In addition, my theoretical approach will draw on anti-racist, anti-imperialist, and feminist frameworks. In my research, I will use post colonial and feminist critical theory, textual analysis on videos, diaries, newspaper clippings, etc., and rely on qualitative research methods. My research will also delve into other forms of visuals such as artwork, film, photography, and literature. Also, I will focus of life histories on veiled and unveiled Muslim women. Finally, I have interviewed ten women (five veiled and five unveiled Muslim women) living within the Greater Vancouver area.

The Veil before the Rise of Islam and Koranic and Hadith Interpretations on the Veil

Pre-Islamic Veil

The veil, which is mainly recognized as an item of clothing that signals the Islamic faith, had been present before the rise of Islam: “Indeed, prior to the nineteenth century, the veil was never viewed as a symbol of Muslim culture; the practice of the veiling and seclusions of women is in fact pre-Islamic and originates in non-Arab Middle Eastern and Mediterranean societies” (Hoodfar, 2003, p.6). Homa Hoodfar dates the veil back to

Assyrian law. In the thirteenth century BC, veiling was restricted to “respectable” women only; thus, prostitutes and slaves were forbidden to veil (2003, p.6). Hence, the rules on veiling, according to Assyrian law, are arguably clearer than the “rules” on veiling specified in *The Koran*. In *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, Leila Ahmed provides a detailed account on Assyrian law. The law specified that wives and daughters of rulers had to veil, concubines accompanying their mistress had to veil, and former prostitutes who were later married (also known as “sacred prostitutes”) had to veil (1992, p.14-5). These rules were strictly enforced so that those who did not abide by them were heavily punished: there were penalties of flogging, having water poured over their heads, and having their ears cut off (Ahmed, 1992, p.14-5). Nonetheless, the main premise of the pre-Islamic veil was to differentiate women into two categories: respectable and unrespectable, as argued by Ahmed:

That is, use of the veil classified women according to their sexual activity and signaled to men which women were under male protection and which were fair game. [...] [This division] was fundamental to the patriarchal system and, second, that women took their place in the class hierarchy on the basis of their relationship (or absence of such) to the men who protected them and on the basis of their sexual activity—and not, as with men, on the basis of their occupations and their relation to production. (1992, p.14-5)

Misogynistic practices were also evident in Byzantine and Syrian practices. In the Byzantine, “women were always supposed to be veiled, the veil or its absence marking the distinction between the ‘honest’ woman and the prostitute” (Ahmed, 1992, p.26). The shameful of sex was only targeted on the female body: “the Syrian reliefs showing a woman so heavily swathed that no part of her, not even her hands or face, is uncovered date from the early Christian era” (Ahmed, 1992, p. 35). In addition, Jews also practiced veiling to some degree (Ahmed, 1992, p.55). How the veil has turned to an oppressive Islamic uniform is worth examining, especially since the history of the veil predates misogyny.

As an Islamic phenomenon, the veil is usually interpreted as an act of modesty and the practice of seclusion. However, if the veil is a sign of modesty, this dates back to “a wide variety of communities, including most Mediterranean peoples, regardless of religion” (Hoodfar, 2003, p. 6). And, if the veil is an indication of segregation, this was “a sign of status and was practiced by the elite in the ancient Greco-Roman, pre-Islamic Iranian and Byzantine empires” (Hoodfar, 2003, p.6). According to Ahmed, segregation and the veil were even evident in the Christian Middle East and Mediterranean regions at the time of Islam (1992, p.5).

The Islamic Veil

Firstly, in order to investigate the Islamic veil, one must gain a good understanding of the term “hijab.” Fatema Mernissi’s “The Hijab, *the Veil*” describes the concept of the word as three-dimensional:

The concept of the word *hijab* is three-dimensional, and the three dimensions often blend into one another. The first dimension is a visual one: to hide something from sight. The root of the verb *hajaba* means “to hide.” The second dimension is spatial: to separate, to mark a border, to establish a threshold. And finally, the third dimension is ethical: it belongs to the realm of the forbidden. So we have not just tangible categories that exists in the reality of the senses—the visual, the spatial—but also an abstract reality in the realm of ideas. A space hidden by a *hijab* is a forbidden space. The *Lisan al’-Arab* dictionary (*Language of the Arabs*) does not help us much. It tells us that *hajaba* means “hide with a *sitr*.” And *sitr* in Arabic means literally “curtain.” So we have an act that divides space into two parts and hides one part from view. The dictionary adds that some synonyms of the verb *hide* are formed from the two words *sitr* and *hijab*. *Satara* and *hajaba* both mean “hide.” (1991, p.93-4)

As mentioned by Mernissi, the three dimensions “blend into one another,” making it difficult to arrange thoughts under each category. However, all three dimensions make specific references to the wives of the Prophet, for they are unquestionably segregated, and therefore, hidden; separated from other women in terms of their status; and, belong to the world of the forbidden, meaning only they are appointed to be the wives of the Prophet and no one else’s.

The first dimension of the veil—the visual component—which consists of hiding something from sight is often understood negatively, especially among the Sufis⁵, Mernissi explains. Among Muslim Sufism, the hijab (known as *mahjub*) has nothing to do with a curtain; instead, the hijab “is an essentially negative phenomenon, a disturbance, a disability” (1991, p.95). A veiled person “does not perceive the divine light in his soul” because their “consciousness is determined by sensual or mental passion” (1991, p.95). Thus, according to Sufism, a veil prevents a Muslim from becoming closer to Allah. In contrast, Mernissi notes that to Muslim Mystics, the opposite is true: the hijab (known as *kashf*) is the discovery to discovering Allah (1991, p.95). According to the second dimension—the spatial aspect—the hijab is “to separate, to mark a border, to establish a threshold” (1991, p.93-4). In this regard, the hijab was used as a curtain behind which the caliphs and the kings sat in order to avoid the gaze of members of their court (1991, p.94). As a divider, “the drawing of cloaks” was intended to separate those who belonged to Prophet Mohammad’s camps and those who did not, distinguishing the believer from the unbeliever (Hajjaji-Jarrah, 2003, p.192). Accordingly, the word “*hidjab*” in *The Koran* means to mark a separation: “It is the veil of the curtain behind which Mary isolated herself from her people” (Mernissi, 1991, p. 96). And, on the Day of Judgment, “the saved will be separated from the damned by a *hidjab*, which is glossed as a wall (*sur*) by the commentators” (1991, p.96). In regards to the third dimension—the ethical element—Mernissi describes the veil as a barrier which was sent down by Allah to place a border between what is forbidden, which referred to the wives of the Prophet. This is also reiterated by Sajida S. Alvi in “Muslim Women and Islamic Religious Tradition: A Historical Overview and

⁵ Sufism is generally understood to not be a distinct sect of Islam, but the inner, mystical dimension of Islam.

Contemporary Issues”: verse 53 of chapter 33 “refers exclusively to the Koranic prescriptive mode of communication between believing men and the wives of the Prophet” (2003, p.184). In this interpretation, the “*hijab*—literally ‘curtain’—‘descended,’ not to put a barrier between a man and a woman, but between two men. [...] [This] is an event dating back to verse 53 of surah 33, which was revealed during year 5 of the Hejira (AD 627)” (Mernissi, 1991, p.85). In addition, Mernissi provides the story leading to this occurrence. The Prophet was celebrating his marriage to Zaynab Bint Jahsh to which he invited the majority of the Muslim community residing in Medina. After the wedding supper, guests departed except for three men, causing the Prophet to become impatient because he wanted to be alone with his wife. However, because of the Prophet’s personality, he did not raise his concern to his guests; instead, he waited for them to leave on their own terms. Upon their departure, Allah revealed the verse on the hijab to the Prophet. As he drew a *sitr* between himself and Anas Ibn Malik, the Prophet recited verse 53 of surah 33 which reads as the following:

O you who have believed, do not enter the houses of the Prophet except when you are permitted for a meal, without awaiting its readiness. But when you are invited, then enter; and when you have eaten, disperse without seeking to remain for conversation. Indeed, that behaviour was troubling the Prophet, and he is shy of dismissing you. But Allah is not shy of the truth. And when you ask his wives for something, ask them from behind a partition. That is purer for your hearts and their hearts. And it is not conceivable or lawful for you to harm the Messenger of Allah or to marry his wives after him, ever. Indeed, that would be in the sight of Allah an enormity. (Saheeh International, *The Koran*, 1997, p. 588).

Historical accounts recall Anas hearing the Prophet murmur the following verse when he drew the curtain between them. In this situation, “the message inspired by God in His Prophet in response to a situation in which Mohammad apparently did not know what to do nor how to act” (Mernissi, 1991, p.87). Furthermore, reference to the hijab as a curtain is also mentioned in *The Hadith*. In “Hijab According to the Hadith: Text and Interpretation” by L. Clarke, he says the following: “*The Hadith* tale of Mohammad’s wedding with Safiyah tells us more about the Muslim community’s memory of the dividing curtain called hijab (or *sitr*, a synonym for hijab also sometimes appearing in the Prophetic Reports)” (2003, p.232).

Leila Ahmed also provides another similar occurrence in which either at the marriage to Zaynab or some other meal, “the hands of some of the men guests touched the hands of Mohammad’s wives, and in particular ‘Umar’s hand touched ‘Aisha’s” (1992, p.54). Furthermore, Mernissi argues that verse 59 of surah 33, which reads: “O Prophet, tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to bring down over themselves [part] of their outer garments. That is more suitable that they will be known and not be abused. And ever is Allah Forgiving and Merciful” (Saheeh International, *The Koran*, 1997, p. 590) was revealed to the Prophet as a solution to protect his wives from being confused as women who were subject to *ta’arrud*, meaning “taking up a position along a woman’s path to urge her to fornicate” (1991, p.180). Before the rise of Islam, women (particularly slaves) were subject to sexual encounters, so the hijab clearly expressed that the wives of the Prophet should not be confused with

slaves: “This was the reason Allah revealed verse 59 of surah 33, in which He advised the wives of the Prophet to make themselves recognized by pulling their jilbab over themselves” (1991, p.180). This is also argued by Homa Hoodfar: “Another verse recommends that the wives of the Prophet wrap their cloaks tightly around their bodies, so as to be recognized and not be bothered or molested in public (Surah al-Ahzab, verse 59)” (2003, p.7). Here, it can easily be misinterpreted as Allah only viewing the wives of the Prophet as worthy of any protection. However, this argument can easily be defused when *The Koran* is perceived as a story stating the life of the Prophet with solutions presented to him whenever he confronted an obstacle. Nonetheless, the wives of the Prophet needed protection because of the threat Mohammad presented to the Hypocrites.⁶ Here, Ahmed provides two accounts: (i) ‘Umar wanted the Prophet to seclude his wives from Hypocrites who were not hesitant to abuse Mohammad’s wives and then claim that they had mistaken them for slaves, and (ii) ‘Umar further insisted that the Prophet seclude his wives because his success and reputation attracted many visitors to the mosques, visitors which could be of danger to the Prophet’s, and his wives’, wellbeing (1992, p.54). Furthermore, in “The Hijab Descends on Medina,” Fatema Mernissi explains that ‘Umar strongly suggested to the Prophet that the hijab be instructed to all women. He said the following to the Prophet: “Messenger of God, you receive all kinds of people at your house, moral as well as evil. Why do you not order the hijab for the Mothers of the Believers?” Despite all the criticism of him, the Prophet persisted in not consenting to the hijab, not being of the same frame of mind as ‘Umar” (1992, p.184-5). Therefore, Ahmed argues that during the Prophet’s lifetime and toward the end of it, his wives were the only women who were required to veil (1992, p.5). Hence, seclusion was introduced, and again, this only applied to the wives of the Prophet (1992, p.53).

Koranic and Hadith Interpretations on the Veil

The word hijab is only found in *The Koran* seven times, as presented by Mernissi (1991, p.96). Furthermore, both Homa Hoodfar and Leila Ahmed argue that nowhere in *The Koran* does it specifically refer to hijab as an item of clothing which covers the hair, or the entire body for that matter. Both refer to Suraht al-Nur, verses 30-31, the only verses that deal with women’s clothing, instructing women to guard their private parts and throw a scarf over their bosoms” (1991, p.55; 2003, p.6-7). Hence, it is this verse which, Hoodfar argues “has been interpreted by some that women should cover themselves” (2003, p.7). Furthermore, in “Women’s Modesty in Qur’anic Commentaries: The Founding Discourse,” Soraya Hajjaji-Jarrah claims that the references made on hijab “retains the connotations of either a physical or a metaphorical barrier without any reference to women or their clothing. Verse 15 of Chapter 83, for example, reads: ‘Verily, from their God, that Day, they will be veiled.’ Likewise, verse 45 of Chapter 17 states: ‘When you recite the Koran. We have put between you and those who believe not in the Hereafter, an invisible veil”” (2003, p.184). However, it is important to mention that the hijab is addressed to man first, urging the following: “Say to the believing men that they cast down their looks and guard their private parts; that is purer for them;

⁶ The Hypocrites were enemies of the Prophet.

surely Allah is Aware of what they do” (Saheeh International, *The Koran*, 1997, p. 482). “[C]ast down their looks” refers to a “man’s veil,” the covering of one’s eyes from lustful and sinful images. Following thereafter, women are addressed: “And say to the believing women that they cast down their looks and guard their private parts” (Saheeh International, *The Koran*, 1997, p. 482). Here, the hijab is addressed to both genders, and therefore is understood in non-binary terms. Moreover, if the hijab is understood as a demand put forth on all women, then one must also question what the consequences are for those who fail to obey such a demand. Sheila McDonough tackles the following concern in “Voices of Muslim Women,” reaching the following conclusion: “Then I focused my attention on the two specific hijab verses, and did not find any hudud [warning of punishment] for not wearing hijab. As a matter of fact, the reason recommending it is ‘so that they will be known and not get hurt’” (2003, p.114).

The Hadith is also crucial in understanding Islam’s standpoint on the veil. In “*Hijab According to the Hadith: Text and Interpretation*,” L. Clarke provides a detailed summary on *The Hadith’s* view on the hijab. In regards to women’s dress, Clarke mentions that the canonical *Hadith* is not at all concerned with necklines; however, there are two references which address hemlines: (i) it is reported that the Prophet made the following remark: “On the Day of Judgment, God shall not look upon those who trail their robes pridefully” (2003, p.220). In response to this, Umm Salamah, one of the wives of the Prophet, asked: “What then should the women do with their hems?” to which the Prophet responded by saying, “They should let them down the measure of their forearm [*dhira*], but no more” (2003, p.220) and, (ii) The second hemline reference tells the story of how a woman approached Umm Salamah and “asked her what she should do about her train dragging over impure ground and then over the pure ground of the interior of the mosque. The question implied is: May I pull up, or perhaps shorten, my skirt to avoid dragging it through filth? Umm Salamah indicated that neither was necessary, for the Prophet had said that ‘if she [a woman] passes through an impure place, and then through a pure place, that [her garment] is considered pure’” (2003, p.220). Clarke too demonstrates that there is no clear reference to women covering their hair or their hands in *The Hadith*—“there is no warning that stray hairs should not show, that those who expose their hair will be punished, or anything of this kind” (2003, p.222)—; however, there are references made on hair, both men’s and women’s. For example, there are references made on the thickness, length, and colour of the Prophet’s hair; the dislike of “binding back (*kaff*)” hair while praying; the attention to carefully washing hair during ablutions, especially after having sexual intercourse; the proper length and style of hair for men; the undesirability of braiding hair so tight that it prevents one from partaking in proper ablution; the style of hair that is acceptable for a woman’s corpse; the rules on women adding false hair to their own; and so on (2003, p.222).

With the many references made to hair rather than the covering of the hair, Clarke argues the following: “One would think that, with so much attention paid to hair, if the covering of women’s hair were of great importance, it would certainly be mentioned. Shouldn’t we expect, in that case, not only explicit references to covering hair but even a discrete bundle of *hadiths* on the subject” (2003, p.222). Furthermore, Clarke

illustrates that in regards to the covering of the hair, *The Hadith* makes a large number of these references to men, as opposed to women. For men, the area from the thighs to the knees (also known as 'awrah, meaning the private or shameful parts) should be covered (2003, p.218). Furthermore, "despite the reference in *the Koran* to 'awrat al-nisa—'women's private parts'—and the popular tendency in our day to associate 'awrah mainly with women [...], nearly all occurrences in the *hadith* of the term where it refers to private or shameful parts relate to men's 'awrah and not women's" (2003, p.218). However, *The Hadith* is clear in its disagreement to ostentatious dress.

The avoidance of ostentatious dress is addressed to both sexes. Clarke alludes to two references in *The Hadith* which warn against wearing thin clothing: (i) in the first instance, the Prophet asks his companion to tear a robe into two: one to be used as a shirt and the other to dress (takhtamir) his wife because the clothing she was wearing was thin and revealing her form (2003, p.218); and, (ii) in the second instance, Asma, Abu Bakr's daughter (the daughter of the Prophet's father-in-law) came before the Prophet in thin clothes, to which he turned away and said, "Asma, if a woman reaches the age of menstruation, it is not fit that anything be seen of her except this and this"—and, according to *the hadith*, he pointed to his face and hands" (2003, p.220).

The Muslim Veil Today

Representations of Veiled Women in Scholarly Work

The veil is an item of clothing that is perpetually "pregnant with meanings" (Ahmed, 1992, p.166). No other item of clothing compares to the veil. The veil is always being defined, and each time it is defined, it has been distorted. The veil cannot escape egregious interpretations or dichotomous relationships: it is both an area of interest for the West and the East; the Muslim and the non-Muslim; and, the veiled and the unveiled. In "Identity and its Discontents: Women and the Nation," Deniz Kandiyoti identifies the struggles in grasping the essence of the veil:

In countries where the most prominent form of cultural nationalism is Islamic, for instance, feminist discourses can legitimately proceed only in one of two directions: either denying that Islamic practices are necessarily oppressive or asserting that oppressive practices are not necessarily Islamic. The first strategy usually involves counterposing the dignity of the protected Muslim women against the commodified and sexually exploited Western woman. It is thus dependent on a demonified 'other.' (1994, p.380)

Such a chiasmus depends on a duality: the Muslim woman in juxtaposition to the Western woman, and Islamic practices in opposition to cultural rulings. Furthermore, any binaries created because of the veil create further complications. Leila Ahmed notes the following: the "Western narrative [is] that the veil signified oppression, therefore those who called for its abandonment were feminists and those opposing its abandonment were antifeminists" (1992, p.162). Hence, such logic is not as simple as it

presents itself to be. The veil, as an entangled and misapprehended headscarf, can never be assigned one meaning or state of being.

Within mainstream interpretations (from both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars) there seems to be two opposing discourses on the veil: one negative and one positive. As the former, the veil serves to cover women's shameful bodies; hinder women's sexualities; and, seclude women from the public realm. As the latter, the veil as an act of seclusion is a political (and therefore feminist) act. In a film called *Faith Without Fear*, Irshad Manji interviews Arwa Othman, a writer who refuses to be veiled, arguing that "women are not genitalia that need to be covered" because "something that is covered is bad and ugly" (2007). Nonetheless, a similar attitude is present in the works of Fatema Mernissi, as she argues the following: "Islam took an unequivocally negative attitude towards body ornamentation, especially for women. It required pious women to be modest in their appearance and hide all ornamentation and eye-catching beauty behind veils" (2003, p.492). Mernissi's reference to ornamentation (or "adornment") is a direct reference to *The Koran's* reference of ornamentation, which states the following: "And tell the believing women to [...] [also] not expose their ornamentation except that which necessarily appears thereof [...]. And let them not stamp their feet to make known what they conceal of their ornamentation" (Shaheeh International, *The Koran*, 1997, p.482). Unlike Othman, the covering of a Muslim woman's body is not for reasons of ugliness, but rather the opposite: a female body is "eye-catching" and therefore it must be hidden. Here, one must pause and investigate terms such as "ornamentation." Ornamentation consists of two specific meanings: private parts and anything that beautifies a person. In the former, ornamentation applies to both man and woman, and in the latter, ornamentation only applies to a woman. The private parts of both man and woman are to be covered. In *The Koran*, man is addressed first: "Say to the believing men that they [...] guard their private parts; that is purer for them; surely Allah is Aware of what they do. And say to the believing women that they [...] guard their private parts" (Saheeh International, *The Koran*, 1997, p. 482). In the latter, ornamentation can mean both the female body and anything which beautifies a woman such as makeup, excessive jewellery, and certain clothing which reveals the woman's body shape and form. According to my experience as a Muslim, the female body parts that are considered as ornamentations are every body part except for the face, the hands, and the feet. Special attention was paid to the covering of the neck, the arms, and the legs (from the knee down), which is why women who only covered their hair (revealing their ears and neck) and revealed parts of their arm and legs were considered as not practicing the "proper" veil. In response to Islam's insistence on covering female ornamentation, Homa Hoodfar illustrates that some women choose to veil because it "beautif[ies] the wearer" while others choose to veil because it "hide[s] the wearer's identity" (2003, p.11), opposite reasons which are equally liberating to the wearer. However, such a view towards women's bodies lead to another view: If Islam takes a negative view on women's bodies then Islam must also take negative views on women's sexuality.⁷

⁷ By sexuality, I am not referring to the condition of being characterized or distinguished by sex; instead, I am referring to sexuality in terms of sexual activity.

Despite contrary belief, Islam does not take a negative view on sexual activity. Unlike some forms of Christianity, sexual intercourse is encouraged and seen as an act of pleasure between a man and a woman rather than just for the purpose of procreation. References to sexual intercourse is made both in *The Koran* and *The Hadith*; however, there are restrictions pertaining to sex: pre-marital sex is not permitted and sex is prohibited during menstruation, during daylight hours of Ramadhan (a month dedicated to fasting), and during pilgrimage (surah 2, verse 187 and surah 2, verse 222). A woman who performs pre-marital sexual intercourse with another man is considered a threat to the social order, and thus, she must be stopped. In "The Meaning of Spatial Boundaries," focusing on gender politics, Mernissi is critical of certain cultural practices that are imposed on women by men such as secluding women from the public realm. She asserts that a female who trespasses male space is considered "both provocative and offensive" because she is "upsetting the male's order and his peace of mind"; thus, inviting the male to commit *fitna* (sin) (2003, p.494). According to this interpretation, any occasion when a man is confronted by a woman, *fitna* is unavoidable: "When a man and a woman are isolated in the presence of each other, Satan is bound to be their third companion" (2003, p.497). In such occurrences, the male is "passive" and the female is "lust-inducing" (2003, p.492-3). However, there are exceptions: elderly women and unattractive women, "who consequently have a greater freedom" (2003, p.492-3), can go unveiled because their presence would not disrupt a man's intellect. Here, Mernissi is critical of men's interpretation in terms of which women should be veiled and which women should not be veiled. Islam's prescription on abstinence, particularly for women, is enforced because of Islam's emphasis on marital sexual intercourse, as reiterated by Mernissi: "The most potentially dangerous woman is one who has experienced sexual intercourse" (2003, p.497). In "The Seen, the Unseen, and the Imagined: Private and Public Lives," Sarah Graham-Brown explains that Islam's distrust of women is difficult to defuse because "the figure of the nun, the celibate woman who dedicates her life to God, is complemented on the ideological level by the image of the Virgin Mary, the mother figure untouched by human sexuality. In Islam, no equivalent roles have been created for women which similarly defuse the notion of sexual danger" (2003, p.504). However, the image of Virgin Mary is equally significant within Islamic belief, having an entire chapter in *The Koran* dedicated to her. This chapter is the only chapter in *The Koran* which is dedicated to a woman; thus, the image of Mary as a celibate woman who gives birth to Jesus Christ is presented within Islamic belief, except Mary takes the name "Maryam" and Jesus Christ takes the name "Issah." (Surah 19: "Surah Maryam"). Nevertheless, the veil as a piece of clothing that protects celibacy further dichotomizes the spheres: the public sphere, that which belongs to the male; and, the private sphere, that which is dedicated to the female.

In "Veils and Sales: Muslims and the Spaces of Postcolonial Fashion Retail," Reina Lewis attests that seclusion and veiling were introduced by Islam "as a border which distinguishes inside from outside, as a screen or cover, [since] women are associated with the inside, home and territory" (2007, p.62). In *Scheherazade Goes West*, Mernissi argues that in the Orient, "men use space to dominate women" (2001, p.112) and uses

Imam Khomeini⁸ as a popular example. Through veiling, Mernissi argues that women are granted access to trespass into the public sphere, but they are also accepting that they are “invisible” and have “no right to be in the street” (2003, p.493). Participating in their invisibility, Mernissi argues that veiled women in the Mediterranean practice a political statement: “Veiling is a political statement. When stepping into the street, the veiled woman agrees to be a shadow in the public space. Power manifests itself as theatre, with the powerful dictating to the weak what role they must play. To veil on the Muslim side of the Mediterranean is to dress as the ruling Imam demands” (2001, p.114). Even though these veiled women are forced to “dress as the ruling Imam demands” and perform the “role they must play” as “a shadow in the public space”, they are still active agents and participators in political acts. Under the rule of patriarchal control, these Mediterranean women are active agents; they exercise their power to enter the public realm, that which is forbidden and only reserved for men. By leaving their private domain and trespassing into the public sphere, they are going against patriarchal demands, and therefore making a political statement. The same idea is suggested by Homa Hoodfar, who not only views the veil “as a symbol of patriarchal control”, but also as “a marker of status and as a tool of emancipation, empowerment and, in some cases, a means of exerting power over those generally considered to have ultimate control” (2003, p.33-4).

In “More Than Clothing: Veiling as an Adaptive Strategy,” Homa Hoodfar pays close attention to two veiled women in terms of political action: Tahera and Mona. In an interview with Tahera, Tahera claims the following: “This scarf, that to so many appears such a big deal, at least has made others aware of Islam, and of my identity within the Canadian society” (2003, p.30). Hoodfar translates Tahera’s veiling as “an expression of particular religious currents” and “a declaration of Muslim identity in primarily non-Muslim society” (2003, p.10-11). Mona, on the other hand, responds differently. She says, “I would have never taken up the veil if I lived in Egypt. Not that I disagree with it, but I see it as part of the male imposition of rules” (2003, p.30). According to Hoodfar, Mona’s veiling would be translated as a political act because it is “a symbol of opposition to the state” and “a symbol of patriarchy and misogynist tradition” (2003, p.10-11). In either case, these veiled women demonstrate “a clear statement to parents and the wider Muslim community that [they] are not relinquishing Islamic mores in favour of ‘Canadianness’”; rather, they are publicly asserting their Muslim-Canadian identity” (Hoodfar, 2003, p.39). Both Tahera and Mona are balancing both identities equally. However, some veil for the complete opposite reasons. In *My Journey, My Islam*, a group of girls reveals that they veil for reasons of segregation. Aside from commenting on the veil as a feminist act, they make the distinction that their veil separates them from the society of miniskirts, especially since it is “a flag that says, ‘I’m Muslim!’”

In opposition, some women veil because of the advantages it provides as a “trade-off” (Hoodfar, 2003, p.29). Under such circumstances, a young woman may veil for involuntary reasons such as to satisfy their parents, especially since veiling to many

⁸ Imam Khomeini was an Iranian religious leader and politician. He was also the leader of the 1979 Iranian Revolution.

families is a “reassurance to one’s family that one’s respect for Muslim mores remain strong despite unconventional activities and circumstances” (Hoodfar, 2003, p.10-11). Here, the veil “offers a means to mitigate parental and social concerns” (Hoodfar, 2003, p.18). Thus, satisfying their families, and their community as a whole, they are rewarded by having access to greater freedom such as having the freedom to communicate with the opposite sex without being scrutinized. Onwards, in regards to communicating with the opposite sex, many veiled women would agree that “since donning the veil, it has become easier to interact with men, both Muslim and non-Muslim” (Hoodfar, 2003, p.21). Leila Ahmed also argues that veiling makes it easier for women to build relationships with men:

Wearing it signals the wearer’s adherence to an Islamic moral and sexual code that has the paradoxical effect, as some women have attested, of allowing them to strike up friendships with men and be seen with them without the fear that they will be dubbed immoral or their reputations damaged. Women declare that they avoided being seen in conversations with a man before adopting Islamic dress, but now they feel free to study with men in their classes or even walk with them to the station without any cost to their reputation. (2003, p.224).

In contrast, some veil for protection from men, as described by Ahmed: “The dress also protects them from male harassment. In responding to a questionnaire, women stated that wearing Islamic dress resulted in a marked difference in the way they were treated in public places” (2003, p.223). Also, Ahmed adds that the veil (though not the sole purpose for veiling) is economical: “For women Islamic dress also appears to bring a variety of distinct practical advantages. On the simplest, most material level, it is economical. Women adopting Islamic dress are saved the expense of acquiring fashionable clothes and having more than two or three outfits” (2003, p.223). However, there has been a shift—fashion and the veil are congruent. Muslim fashion designers, particularly in Dubai, are targeting veiled women throughout the world with their fashionable and expensive veils.

However, despite contrary belief, many scholars argue that the veiled woman is a symbol of power. Reina Lewis discusses in detail the power of the veiled woman, particularly in the West. Lewis mentions that “for the European subject, there is always more to the veil than the veil” (2007, p.42). The veiled woman offers a threat to unveiled Western women because “*the veiled woman can see without being seen*” (2007, p.43). For the Western woman, “instead of being looked at, the object now looks at” (2007, p.62-3). This becomes threatening for the following reasons: “It is the veil which enables the Oriental other to look without being seen. This not only disturbs the desire of the Western/colonial subject to fix cultural and sexual difference, but also enables the colonial other to turn itself into a surveillant gaze” (2007, p.63). The power of looking without being looked at, hence their “omnipresence” causes “frustration” (Alloula, 1986, p.13). As a surveillant gaze, the West wishes for nothing but to dismantle this image. Therefore, it is assumed that certain Muslim women who are dressed in veils must be hiding something:

The veil gives rise to a meditation: if they wear a mask, or masquerade or conceal themselves, then there must be a behind-the-mask, a knowledge

that is kept secret from us. The *mystery* that is assumed to be concealed by the veil is *unconcealed* by giving a figural representation to this mask and to the act of masquerading as an enigmatic figure. However, what is thus concealed, i.e., the ‘masquerade’, the ‘veil’, is the *act of concealment itself*. The veiled existence is the very truth of Oriental women; they seem to exist always in this deceptive manner. (Lewis, 2007, p.45)

Such “mysteriousness” that the veiled woman displays immediately transforms to deception in the eyes of the viewer. Her deception becomes entertaining: “The Oriental woman/Orient is so deceptive and theatrical” (Lewis, 2007, p.45). According to Nietzsche, Lewis mentions that the veiled woman is “deceptive because she has no essence to conceal” (2007, p.52). Furthermore, in *The Colonial Harem*, Malek Alloula presents “a sort of ironic paradox: the veiled subject [...] becomes the purport of an unveiling” (1986, p.13). According to Alloula, the veil, symbolizing “the closure of private space [...] [,] signif[ying] an injunction of no trespassing upon this space” (1986, p.13) tempts the “trespassers”—the Western gaze—to trespass upon this space by “unveiling” the veiled woman. Here, the act of unveiling, and arguably an act of violation, becomes a sexual encounter: “she [the veiled woman] is nothing but the name of untruth and deception. If the Oriental is feminine and if the feminine is Oriental, we can claim that the nature of femininity and the nature of the Orient are figured as one and the same thing in these representations. This equivalence positions the Orientalist/Western colonial subject as masculine: the other culture is always like the other sex” (Lewis, 2007, p.56). Nonetheless, after being unveiled, the veiled woman is finally able to be represented.

In “The Muslim Woman: The Power of Images and the Danger of Pity,” Lila Abu-Lughod makes the following argument pertaining to veiled Muslim women: “Our lives are saturated with images, images that are strangely confined to a very limited set of tropes or themes. The oppressed Muslim woman. The veiled Muslim woman. The Muslim woman who does not have the same freedoms we have. The woman ruled by her religion. The woman ruled by her men” (2006, p.1). Such stereotypical images have entered mainstream thought, reinforcing demeaning narratives on a culture.

Representations of Veiled Women in Literature, Film, Photography, and Art

Veiled women are almost always portrayed as flat characters. As characters that reveal only one or two personality traits, they are depicted as two opposite extremes: either they are fundamental and closed-minded individuals, or they are a silenced, oppressed, and submissive group of women. Thus, characters which do not qualify in either category are an exception—they become the tolerant and acceptable Muslim women; thus, they are the heroines of the story. As the former, two credited autobiographical Muslim writers and “experts” are accredited for their expertise in depicting one-dimensional characters: national bestseller Marjane Satrapi and Nawal El-Saadawi. In Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* and *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return*, Marji, the protagonist, is caught struggling between two different worlds: the rational and forward-thinking world of the West, in juxtaposition to the stubborn and

backward-thinking world of the East. Set during the Iranian Revolution, Marji is placed in situations where she struggles to assert her individuality. One example is when Marji inserts her will to exercise her sexuality in a classroom filled with traditional women. She says, “Can you explain to me what’s indecent about making love with your boyfriend? Shut up yourself! My body is my own! I give it to whomever I want! It’s nobody else’s business!” (2004, p.149). Furthermore, in Nawal El Saadawi’s *Memoirs From the Women’s Prison*, Dr. Saadawi, the main character, is also placed in a similar situation as Marji. As a political prisoner recognized for her prison writing, Saadawi shares insights on other prison mates. The memorable characters, serving as foils to Dr. Saadawi, are Boduur and Fawqiyya. Boduur is described as “a young woman of about 30 who wore a niqaab. She would chant the Qu’ran in tones which reminded [one] of Qu’ran recitation at a funeral” (1986, p.36-7) and Fawqiyya, an unveiled woman is portrayed as a woman that “placed a veil over her mind and could not imagine that there exist people who think in ways different from hers. [...] Fawqiyya resembled Boduur in her blind faith in one idea, believing that anyone who did not believe as she did was an infidel” (1987, p.37-8). Nonetheless, Dr. Saadawi recalls being in a conversation with Boduur in which Boduur reminds her of her duties as a Muslim woman:

‘Get up and wash so you can perform the prayer, and don’t say that you’re ill! Prayer cures you of sickness. It is God who heals. Don’t write any complaint to anyone. God is present. If you are innocent, God will make you victorious. Do not say that you didn’t do anything wrong: you must have done something sinful in your life and then forgotten about it. God could not possibly expose you to pain or torture or prison or beating without a sin on your part. [...] You absolutely must stay up all night to pray—the five obligatory prayers are not enough. [...] It is important, though, that you keep God in your mind and speech, day and night. Staying up at night to pray is better and more enduring than sleep. You went to the correction cell because you were not staying up at night to pray and because you haven’t memorized the Qur’an. I’ve told you more than once that you must learn two chapters of the Qur’an by heart every week. This is a sacred duty. Whoever does not fulfill it must have her feet whipped fifty times. Who knows, maybe it was God’s will that you were beaten by the hands of others so you would atone for your sins. It’s not enough that you cover your face with a *niqaab*. You must cleanse your heart of Satan’s whisperings. Woman is nearest to Satan than man—through Eve, Satan was able to reach Adam. Woman was created from a crooked rib and she becomes straightened only through blows which hurt. Her duty is to listen and obey without making any objections—even a blink or a scowl.’ (1986, p.131-2)

In this long conversation, Budoor not only reinforces misconceptions pertaining to Muslim women, but she also depicts Allah as misogynistic and vengeful towards women, the root of all evils. Furthermore, Saadawi provides an illustrated account on veiled women as a whole, degrading them to animals: she says women who wrap their heads make themselves appear “like the heads of crows as they stay carefully in single file, with their white handkerchiefs raised above red eyes or waving through the air around their black heads as they utter the harsh, sharp calls which convey the public

expression of grief” (1986, p.36-7). However, to Saadawi, hope for these women is possible upon the lifting of their veils. She says, “Even those faces hidden under the black veils...when the niqaabs were lifted I could see faces that were shining, clear, overflowing with love, a cooperative spirit, and humanity” (1986, p.39).

The silenced veiled woman is a common representation. Irshad Manji, a “Muslim Refusenik,” a term which she coined to mean a Muslim who “refuse[s] to join an army of automatons in the name of Allah” (Manji, 2003, p. 3) is known for degrading Muslim women, particularly veiled Muslim women. As a Muslim living in the West, she makes it clear that her significant presence is the *reason* to why she is still a Muslim. She says, “No need to choose between Islam and the West. On the contrary, the West made it possible for me to choose Islam, however tentatively. It was up to Islam to retain me” (2003, p.21). By referring to Islam and the West as two separate entities, she further separates the two by electing the women of Islam as a subject of difference to the women of the West. In an interview with George Stroumboulopoulos to promote her film *Faith Without Fear*, Irshad Manji presents veiled women as backward and frozen in time and space. She says the following about the burqa⁹: it “eras[es] independent thinking” (2007). Furthermore, in her film, she elaborates on the veil, saying it effects women negatively because their “personal expression takes a back seat to the pressures of conformity” (2007). Observing veiled Yemeni students in a classroom setting, she makes the following remark: “unity looks a lot like uniformity” (2007). Later, she tries to experience the “veiled experience” by purchasing and roaming around the streets in a burqa, which she is not hesitant to ridicule. She says, “What’s demeaning is that it erases my individuality” (2007). Upon purchasing the burqa, Manji implicitly ridicules a Yemeni man who tries to sell her a burqa in which he describes it as “the modern Yemen” (2007). To this, she repeats twice, questioning, “This is the modern Yemen? This is the modern Yemen?” (2007). She makes fun of him further by saying, “You realize I’ve always wanted someone to dress me” (2007). Here, her sarcasm is used to demonstrate the complete opposite: unlike the women of Yemen, who lack personal and “modern” expression due to their adherence to Islamic dress code, she is free to express her personal expression; thus, not wanting someone to dress her. Furthermore, as he is dressing her, she tries even further to express the confinement of the veil, saying, “Wooh. That’s tight. [...]. I’m having a hard time breathing” (2007). Here, not only is she expressing the veil as an attire that suffocates her individuality, but also her breathing, demonstrating the confinement of the Muslim veil.

Furthermore, Ayaan Hirsi Ali is also accused of portraying Muslim women as silenced and submissive women. Her acclaimed, short film, *Submission*, used the female body as a canvas to portray the oppressed Muslim woman that is subject to rape, violence, injustice, and incest. The film, which caused a great uproar within the Muslim community in the Netherlands—leading to the tragic murder of Danish filmmaker, Theo van Gogh, by a Muslim extremist, Mohammad Biyar; the world-wide circulation of prophetic caricatures; and, the burning of mosques and Muslim schools—is a film that

⁹ A burqa is an enveloping outer garment worn by women in some Islamic traditions for the purpose of cloaking the entire body. It is worn over the usual daily clothing. The burqa covers the wearer’s entire body and face except for a small region about the eyes which is covered by a concealing net.

cleverly mashes all the stereotypes based on veiled Muslim women. Koranic verses are printed all over the female's body (a strategy that has possibly been borrowed by Shirin Neshat, a female Iranian visual artist), verses which prove Allah's "injustice" towards women. An example of a verse that is used from *The Koran* is "men are the protectors and maintainers of women." This particular verse is used to show the dominance Muslim men have over their women. Here, Ali uses a certain verse of *The Koran* to distort its meaning, transforming it into a negative and misogynistic verse. Another distorted example, as voiced by the protagonist of the film, is the following verse:

Just as you demand of the believing woman, I lower my gaze and guard my modesty. I never display my beauty and ornaments, not even my face or hands. I never strike with my feet in order to draw attention to my hidden ornaments, not even at parties. I never go out of the house unless it is absolutely necessary, and then only with my father's permission. When I do go out I draw my veil over my bosom, as you wish. Once in a while I sin. I fantasize about feeling the wind through my hair or the sun on my skin, perhaps on the beach. And I daydream about an extended journey through the world, imagining all the places and people out there. Of course I shall never see these places or meet many people because it is so important for me to guard my modesty in order to please you, oh Allah (2004).

Here, the concept of sin within Islamic belief has also been exaggerated by saying that the fantasizing of wind through one's hair, or the sun on one's skin is sin. The main character, whose name is not provided, possibly as a result of her invisibility, is a naked Muslim woman who is praying on the prayer mat. Here, Ali is using nakedness to play with notions of modesty which is associated with the veil. Also, nakedness is used as a response to the female body that is supposed to be covered during prayer time. Nonetheless, the protagonist (also the victim) is a woman who is in love with a man named Raman, but she is forced to marry a religious and strict man named Aziz who constantly abuses her, rapes her, and accuses her of fornication. Furthermore, she is later raped by her uncle, Hakim, and is now carrying his child, an act that is not taken seriously by her parents. Throughout the film, the character makes it clear that she has been betrayed by Allah. She says, "we thought your holiness is on our [her's and Raman's] side" and "The verdict that has killed my faith and love is in your holy book. Faith in you. Submission to you. Feels like self betrayal. Oh Allah, giver and taker of life. You admonish all who believe to turn toward you in order to attain bliss. I have done nothing my whole life but turn to you. And now, that I pray for salvation under my veil, you remain silent, like the grave I long for" (2004). However, regardless of her mistreatment, she is still submissive to Allah. She says, "but I submit my will to you" and "So, I cheerfully do as you say and cover my body from head to toe, except when I am in the house, with family members only. Generally, I am happy with my life" (2004). Here, Ali is reinforcing the damned Muslim woman image that submits to Allah because of fear. Nevertheless, it is this particular oppressed image of the veiled woman that leads to representing Muslim women as women who need rescuing (read: colonizing). Such unveiling of the veiled women also leads to a sexual fantasy, just as the act of unveiling implies.

The act of unveiling the veiled woman cannot escape the harem fantasy, a place which Reina Lewis in *Gendering Orientalism* has explained to be the place where “veils were removed on arrival since there is no prohibition on women seeing each others’ faces” (1996, p.155). Reina Lewis explains that the veil “is one of those tropes through which Western fantasies of penetration into the mysteries of the Orient and access to the interiority of the other are fantasmatically achieved” (2007, p.39) because for the male viewer, there is the “desire to penetrate, through his surveillant eye, what is behind the veil” (2007, p.62). The veil, as an off-limits sign, is turning into a fabric that must be unravelled because the veiled woman presents the Western male with a mask, a mask that leaves the male “troubled,” “threatened and seduced at the same time” (2007, p.45). The sexual undertone of the veiled women is beautifully portrayed in Malek Alloula’s *The Colonial Harem*, where he has collected and compiled harem postcards of Algerian women (where “[h]istory knows of no other society in which women have been photographed on such a large scale to be delivered to public view” (1986, p.5)) that were taken and distributed by Western tourists. In these postcards, Algerian women are partially naked, reinforcing concepts of Orientalism. Furthermore, the Western female is also involved in the harem fantasy, not just the men, because Western women in harems succeed “in penetrating deep into the heart of the other, its mysteries, its true nature, its essence” (Lewis, 2007, p.90). Furthermore, her look is just as violating as the male’s, leading the women’s gaze to turn “into a masculine gaze. She takes up the masculine, phallic position and employs his frame in enjoyment, wickedly” (Lewis, 2007, p.90-1).

Other forms of modern day art also further reinforce the sexualized image of the veiled women. In “Mask,” the New York solo debut exhibition of Justine Reyes, Justine displayed photographs of herself in different masks, masks which take the shape of a veil. Part Mexican and part Italian, she has often been mistaken for being from an Islamic nation (2006, p.1). As a result of the aftermath of 9/11, Reyes has taken on this assignment to demonstrate the newfound mysteries the veil has projected on her and others. Reyes “observed firsthand the duality of the veil, as something that can protect a woman from unwelcome leers and also eloquently provoke desire” (2006, p.2). In regards to the former, the veil as a protection, she relies on images of violence that veiled women are associated with, saying, “Through gauzy nylons and lace, they peer with unblinking directness wantonly out at any taker. She is your willing victim, perhaps, who owns you; or the one who kills you, slowly, to your infinite pleasure” (2006, p.1). Hence, some of her masks take the form of gas masks and hazmat gear to further represent the fear and aggression that has been associated with the veil post 9/11. On the contrary, the veil is also represented as danger rather than a protection as it leads to their rape: In some of the photographs, one would think of the veiled woman as a “kidnapper’s mewling prisoner, silenced as she is raped, struggling to breathe” (2006, p.2). In addition, fulfilling the latter part of the duality, Reyes notes the following about the veil: “The mystery that the veil or mask creates is one that is highly sexualized. There is a tension created by veiling. Some people are afraid of not knowing what lies beneath the veil. In this work, I use the mask to explore issues of identity, veiling and the gaze in relationship to power and sexuality” (2006, p.3). With the emphasis on sexuality, the hand-sewn pantyhose veils and the nylons make appropriate choices of

fabric for this project. However, according to Lewis, regardless of the attempts in trying to represent the Oriental veiled women, the “more the Orientalist subject has tried to know and conquer the zone of darkness and mystery, the more he has realized his distance from ‘authentic,’ ‘real’ knowledge of the Orient and its women” (2007, p.73). Thus, leaving “the very act of representing the veil is never represented; the desire that represents the veil cannot be represented” (Lewis, 2007, p.47). However, due to such representations one should consider the following question: Why the fear and the reluctance to accept the veil?

Why Such Hatred toward the Veil?

According to Fatema Mernissi, the image of the veiled woman serves of great significance because “[a]ll debates on democracy get tied up in the woman question and that piece of cloth that opponents of human rights today claim to be the very essence of Muslim identity” (1991, p.188). Here, the veil is used as a distraction. The critique of the veil is a way to use these women as a human shield so that one does not have to talk about any other issues such as the Western reaction to it. Focusing mainly on Quebec’s response to the veil, in “Perceptions of the Hijab in Canada,” Sheila McDonough provides readers with a few responses as to why many are unwilling to accept the veil. In general, McDonough claims that Canada’s distrust of the veil is “linked with this memory of a long history of religious leaders opposing changes in the status of women” (2003, p.122). However, concentrating only on Quebec’s intolerance towards the veil (rather than Canada as a whole) since Quebec, according to McDonough, is arguably the main province in Canada that displays such unacceptance for the veil is due to the following account: “The fact that negative reaction to the hijab¹⁰ may be strongest in Quebec may be linked to the fact that female suffrage and the legal guarantees of women’s rights came later in that province than in the rest of the nation” (2003, p.126). Furthermore, the veil is distrusted because it resembles a uniform and “the sight of uniformed young people awaken bad memories in European society of an association of youth in uniforms with fascist groups” (2003, p.127). This uniform, to many Westerners, is a suffocating item of clothing that prevents women from movement, as mentioned by Homa Hoodfar: “Nonetheless, the imaginary veil that comes to the minds of most Westerners is an awkward black cloak that covers the whole body, including the face, and which is designed to prevent women’s mobility” (2003, p.11). The veil as a uniform is also touched on by Alloula, who says the veiled uniform homogenizes women, leaving them indistinguishable from one veiled woman to another (1986, p.7). Also, the veil is frustrating to many because it “instills uniformity,” and “disappointment and deficiency of expression” (Alloula, 1986, p.11). Such distrust towards the veil makes associating the veil with cynicism easy.

One must question why the urge to distinguish the Muslim veil as something iniquitous. Negative portrayals of the veil make it easy, as argued by Lila Abu-Lughod, for the West to think of the Muslim world incongruent to the Muslim women (2006, p.2). I argue that such a label is necessary in order to constantly have the world divided into two: the East

¹⁰ Here, Sheila McDonough is using the word “hijab” to mean the Muslim veil.

and the West; the progressive and the retrogressive; the Orient and the Occident. Meyda Yegenoglu argues that such a divide is “a process in which both the ‘Western subject’ and the ‘Oriental other’ are mutually implicated in each other and thus neither exists as a fully constituted entity” (1998, p.58). The veil, in particular, is the ultimate symbol by which the West can distinguish the Oriental woman from the Occidental (Lewis, 2003, p.536), creating a further divide between the Oriental repressed woman and the Occidental freed woman. Nonetheless, the veil has “[become] the open target of colonial attack and the spearhead of the assault on Muslim societies” (Ahmed, 1992, p.152). Viewing the veil as a forced garment forced on women by men invites hate towards Muslims and Islam. Furthermore, if Islam equates evil, then there must be an alternative, or in other words, another way to show men and women the correct path; hence, another divide is created: Islam equates immorality and Christianity equates morality.

In “Muslim Women and Islamic Religious Tradition: A Historical Overview and Contemporary Issues,” Sajida S. Alvi illustrates the difficulty the West has when trying to understand Islam: “In search of a typology for Islamic ideology, social scientists and humanists have coined various terms and labels such as ‘secularism,’ ‘Islamic modernism,’ ‘fundamentalism,’ ‘radical Islamism,’ ‘Islamic totalism,’ ‘traditionalism,’ ‘neo-traditionalism,’ and more currently using the term ‘Islamism’” (2003, p.170). Also, in “Perceptions of the *Hijab* in Canada,” Sheila McDonough provides readers with three occurrences which speak Islamophobia: (i) in the first account (on April 21, 1995), an editorialist, Claudette Tougas, for the newspaper *La Presse* wrote an article indicating that no one was to blame for the Oklahoma bombing. However, a cartoon by another (showing a Muslim on his knees before a donkey, together agreeing that “the thinkers and the intelligentsia are the enemies of God”) placed right next to the editorial clearly demonstrates that even though the editorialist is arguing that no one is to blame for the bombings, Muslims may be to blame for the Oklahoma bombing (2003, p.129-30); (ii) in the second example, McDonough provides a case in 1993 in which a judge expelled a woman from a courtroom because she was wearing a veil (2003, p.123-4); and, finally, (iii) the third example is dated from 1995 when the CEQ (the federation of Quebec teachers) “agreed by majority vote that no ‘*signe ostentaire*’ should be permitted in Quebec schools” (2003, p.124). The phrase, “*signe ostentaire*,” McDonough explains, is also used in debates which take place in France for advocating the veil ban (2003, p.124). Furthermore, more recently, Dutch parliamentarian, Geert Wilders, made a movie titled *Fitna* (2008) which is also Islamophobic. In this short film, he compares Muslims to the Germans during the Nazi period. He uses very selective Koranic verses to “justify” his arguments and he shows Muslim protestors holding signs which say “Freedom Go to Hell,” “Islam Will Dominate the World,” and “God Bless Hitler” (2008). Moreover, he ends his film with the following:

For it is not up to me, but to Muslims themselves to tear out the hateful verses from the Quran. Muslims want you to make way for Islam, but Islam does not make way for you. The government insists that you respect Islam, but Islam has no respect for you. Islam wants to rule, submit, and seeks to destroy our western civilization. In 1945, Nazism was defeated in

Europe. In 1984, communism was defeated in Europe. Now, the Islamic ideology has to be defeated. Stop Islamisation. (2008)

Muslim women suffocated underneath their veils are the particular images that lead many Westerners to pity Muslim women. Lila Abu-Lughod argues the following: “If one constructs some women as being in need of pity or saving, one implies that one not only wants to save them from something but wants to save them for something—a different kind of world and set of arrangements” (2006, p.5). Nonetheless, the image of the pitied Muslim woman must defuse in order to recognize their agency.

Doing Away with the Pitied Muslim Woman Image

I agree with Leila Ahmed’s statement on veiled women: “My argument here is not that Islamic societies did not oppress women. They did and do; that is not in dispute. Rather, I am here pointing to the political uses of the idea that Islam oppressed women and noting that what patriarchal colonialists identified as the sources and main forms of women’s oppression in Islamic societies was based on a vague and inaccurate understanding of Muslim societies” (1992, p.166). Unfortunately, Muslim societies, along with many other societies, have and continue to degrade women. However, Islam is the only religion constantly attacked; Islamic women have become a popular subject of debate and critical interrogation. The veiled woman is always categorized into a very limited category. The veiled woman is always represented for. The veiled woman can never escape extreme interpretations. I agree with the following comment Fatema Mernissi makes on the veil: “Reducing or assimilating this concept to a scrap of cloth that men have imposed on women to veil them when they go into the street is truly to impoverish this term, not to say to drain it of its meaning [...]” (1991, p.95). Furthermore, Leila Ahmed questions why many are willing to attach the veil but hesitate to question society:

It would be unreasonable to fault the young women of today for adopting Islamic dress, as if the dress were intrinsically oppressive—which is how the veil, at least, was viewed by the former colonial powers and by members of the indigenous upper and middle classes who assimilated colonial views. It would be even more unreasonable to fault them for adopting Islamic dress as a means of affirming the ethical and social habits they are accustomed to while they pursue their education and professional careers in an alien, anomic, sexually integrated world. (1992, p.230)

Women who don the veil should not be blamed or questioned for wearing the veil because to do so would be a human rights violation. Moreover, as mentioned by Lila Abu-Lughod, the veil “must not be confused with, or made to stand for, lack of agency” (2006, p.3). As a dress granting agency, veiled women are not secluded from society, but rather the opposite, as eloquently explained by Ahmed: “The adoption of the dress does not declare women’s place to be in the home but, on the contrary, legitimizes their presence outside it” (Ahmed, 1992, p. 224). Hence, sometimes the reliance on analogies is needed in order to prove that the veiled woman, and furthermore, Islam as a religion, is not a threatening and dangerous subject.

The act of covering one's hair as an indication of modesty is not accepted by many Canadians, as discussed by Sheila McDonough (2003). However, whether the veil is a marker of modesty or not is not important; what is important is why is the veil as an indication of modesty troubling for many to accept when "one or two generations ago, hats were commonly worn by women in churches" (2003, p.141). Furthermore, also looking back in history, Ahmed comments on the following: "It was never argued, for instance, even by the most ardent nineteenth-century feminists, that European women could liberate themselves from the oppressiveness of Victorian dress (designed to compel the female figure to the ideal of frailty and helplessness by means of suffocating, rib-cracking stays, it must surely rank among the more constrictive fashions of relatively recent times) only by adopting the dress of some other culture" (1992, p.244). How is it possible that a culture which disapproves of tight and see-through clothing be accused of pressuring their women to wear veils which disrupt mobility when generations ago, women were confined to tight-fitted corsets even through pregnancy and were not labelled with the negative accusations that Islam is so easily accused of? Because of the negative connotations the veil has been associated with, Lila Abu-Lughod asks: "why are we surprised when Afghan women don't throw off their *burqas* when we know perfectly well that it wouldn't be appropriate to wear shorts to the opera?" (2006, p.3). Why must the West expect Muslim women to dismiss their veils? It would be absolutely inappropriate to ask a nun to not be in her uniform, or ask a priest to not be in his. Also, if it is incorrect to say that Muslim women should abandon their cultural ways in order to adapt to those of the West, then why is it incorrect to say that "Arab and Muslim women need to reject (just as Western women have been trying to do) the androcentrism and misogyny of whatever culture and tradition they find themselves in, but that is not at all the same as saying they have to adopt Western culture or reject Arab culture and Islam comprehensively" (1992, p.166). To further "send the message home," "The Guerilla Girls," a group of women artists dressed in gorilla masks to fight against discrimination, have dressed up two dolls and described them as having the following characteristics to demonstrate the ridiculousness that is attached to Muslim women: Scheherazade¹¹, "the harem girl," is described as the following:

She's a curvy, bare-naveled Muslim woman who lives in either a lantern or a harem. The model, when rubbed, appears and disappears to grant wishes. The harem model is one of many wives of a rich and mysterious sheik. She spends all day lounging around with the other wives, hoping to be chosen as the sex object for the night! In her free time she does belly dancing and peels grapes. We based Scheherazade on paintings by 19th-century European artists like Delacroix and Ingres, and on the 1970s TV series, *I Dream of Jeannie*. Scheherazade wears a halter top, harem pants and a sexy veil that reveals more than it hides. Accessories include toe rings, tons of eye makeup, and heavy jewellery that makes noise when you move her. (2003, p.14).

In addition, Nizreen, the "Good Muslim Wife," is described as the following:

¹¹ Scheherazade is a legendary Persian queen and the storyteller of *One Thousand and One Nights*.

Unfortunate Nizreen! Her father couldn't find a rich man to marry her so he shipped her out to a fundamentalist who keeps her silent, repressed, invisible, and illiterate! Practically all you can see of her under those robes are her sad, sad eyes! She would never dream of demanding an education, a job, or any rights at all. But she does dream of having a son or daughter who will become a suicide bomber! Comes with brightly colored burka or somber chador. Beneath, dress her any way you like! (2003, p.14).

In the cases of Nizreen and Scheherazade, upon the usage of humour, a message is delivered effectively. Nevertheless, in regards to Islam as a religion that mistreats, Lila Abu-Lughod makes the following statement:

Even if we are critical of the treatment of women in our own societies in Europe or the United States, whether we talk about the glass ceiling that keeps women professionals from rising to the top, the system that keeps so many women-headed households below the poverty line, the high incidence of rape and sexual harassment, or even the exploitation of women in advertising, we do not see this as reflective of the oppressiveness of our culture or a reason to condemn Christianity—the dominant religious tradition (2006, p.6).

However, rather than blaming certain dominant religions, or in this case “reduc[ing] the diverse situations and attitudes of millions of Muslim women to a single item of clothing” (Abu-Lughod, 2006, p.4), we should concern ourselves with “the humane and just treatment of women, nothing less, and nothing more—not the intrinsic merits of Islam, Arab culture, or the West” (Ahmed, 1992, p.168).

Veiled and Unveiled Perceptions

Regardless of the different forms and types of veiling such as the burqa, niqab, chador, abaya, and headscarf, the Muslim veil has turned into one of the most visible symbols that represent the Islamic faith. Becoming a widespread phenomenon, the veil has sparked a lot of controversy and debate. Thus, it comes as no surprise that the reasons for veiling and unveiling have entered the minds of many Muslims and non-Muslims, including myself. For my research, I interviewed five veiled and five unveiled (ages 20-60) Muslim women who reside within the Greater Vancouver area.

I took the following factors into consideration to ensure that I was interviewing women from diverse backgrounds: age, marital status, education background, occupation, and cultural background. The interviews were done all within a three month time period. No interview took longer than forty-five minutes and every interview was held in a place suggested by the participant (either in their home or in a public setting such as a coffee shop). The women were asked to share their reasons for choosing to veil or unveil, their perceptions on Islamic women who veil and unveil, and Western conceptions of veiled and unveiled women. The participants were asked to choose an anonymous name, which many did, while some used their actual names (first names only).

The five veiled women interviewed were Mary (21, Afghani descent), Zara (22, Iranian descent), Rabia (29, Iranian descent), Farzana (34, Afghani descent), and Roqia (51, Afghani descent). Mary is a Pharmacy Technician. Currently engaged, she is still living with her parents. She has been veiled for fourteen years and has been living in Canada for nine years. Before that, she lived in Afghanistan and Iran. Zara is an Assistant Manager at a movie theatre. The highest level of education she has completed is high school. She is single and therefore living at home with her parents. She has been veiled for the past five years. Zara has been living in Canada for ten years and before that, she used to live in Iran and Pakistan. Rabia, a mother of two (one daughter, one son) who is living with her husband and children, has completed her undergraduate degree in Biology and Psychology. Currently, she is a homemaker. She has been veiled for the past ten years and has been living in Canada for twenty years. Before that, Rabia was living in Iran and in Pakistan. Farzana, a mother of three (two sons, one daughter), is a married woman living with her husband and children. With a Bachelor of Arts Degree, Farzana is currently a fulltime mother. She started veiling at the age of nine. She has been living in Canada for sixteen years and previous to that, she used to live in Afghanistan and Iran. Roqia lives with her husband, son, and daughter. With an MA in Persian Literature, she is now the owner of a childcare centre located in her very own home. She took the veil two years ago. She has been living in Canada for the past eleven years. She also used to live in Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan. All the five veiled women practice veiling in the form of a headscarf: their hair and neck are completely covered but their faces are exposed. Also, their hands and feet are also exposed.

The five unveiled women interviewed were Fatema (21, Afghani descent), Zora (23, Iranian descent), Anna Belle (24, African descent (Ivory Coast)), Leila (29, Afghani descent), and Amelia (29, Afghani descent). Fatema is a single woman living at home with her parents. Completing only her high school graduation, she currently works for a day care. She has been residing in Canada for ten years. Before that, she used to live in Afghanistan and then in Pakistan. She has been unveiled for ten years; the only time she was veiled was when she was attending school in Pakistan. Zora has completed her third year university degree in Social Work and she now is a homemaker. She has been living in Canada for twenty-one years, and before she arrived to Canada, she used to live in Iran, India, and Pakistan. She is married and has a daughter. Anna Belle, a woman who has openly been dating her interracial boyfriend of six years, resides with her parents. Completing her Bachelor of Science in Nursing, she is currently a Registered Nurse. At the age of fifteen, she moved to Canada. Before that, she was born and raised in Africa (Ivory Coast). Leila, a twenty-nine year old woman living with her husband, is a Senior Accountant. She is studying business and accounting. Her journey consists of being born in Afghanistan and then moving to Iran. From Iran, she moved to Pakistan, then to India, and then to Canada. Amelia, a twenty-nine year old mother living with her husband and son, is studying to become a Certified General Accountant. She has been living in Canada for nine years. Before that, she used to live in Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, and India.

I experienced some minor difficulties upon interviewing which were easy to overcome. Though the majority of the veiled and unveiled women were very open about their experiences, there were a few who were reserved and uncommunicative, and therefore needed encouragement to continue a little further, especially in terms of elaboration. Without trying to appear forceful, I would ask participants to elaborate. I made it very clear that they could take their time upon responding to each question. I waited patiently for a response after every question and sometimes during questions. Through the use of body language, a few participants demonstrated their discomfort; however, as the interview progressed, the participants were feeling more comfortable, leading to a more engaged interview. One woman in particular later revealed that she disclosed information that she should have not disclosed, and therefore asked me to omit it from the interview, which I willingly did.

Reasons for Veiling

In regards to veiling, the participants, both veiled and unveiled, provided the following reasons as to why the veil is worn: submitting to Allah's command; non-conformism to unjust systems of thought such as universalized ideas of femininity and sexuality; indicator of modesty; deviating from the wrong path; and, participating in political acts. One interpretation of the veil is that it is an immediate response to Allah's commandments. Every veiled women interviewed agreed that the wearing of the veil is stated in *The Koran*. Obeying deity commands, both Rabia and Zara feel a closer connection to Allah, a connection that not only allows them to become better Muslims, but also better human beings. Rabia says, "The reason why I am still wearing my hijab¹² after ten years is the fact that I know I am closer to Allah than I was [unveiled]." However, executing such instructions to wear the mandated attire is not expressed in oppressive terms; quite the contrary. Being veiled for the past two years, Roqia says the following about her veil: "Since I have worn a veil I feel more comfortable and I think I am free and I can do what I want and it gives me a feeling of inner peace like I am doing something to please Allah by not exposing myself to other things like I would be if I were not covering." Although Roqia is trying to insert her freedom, Roqia leaves room for speculation by saying "I think I am free." Exactly how "free" are these women for wearing a veil that they have been advised to wear? Would these women choose to veil if the veil was not "advised" in *The Koran*? Nonetheless, when these veiled women were asked to provide scriptural support that supports the veil, a few of their answers were vague: Zara said, "[Veiling] is in *The Koran* but I do not know exactly where in *The Koran* it says this"; Rabia said, "All of what I have said is in *The Koran*"; and, Mary said, "Wearing hijab is something that covers female modesty." Roqia and Farzana, on the other hand, were the only veiled woman who gave reference to a surrah.¹³ One would think that the majority of these women, if not all—especially since they have been veiled

¹² During interviewing, some of the women used the word "veil" and "hijab" interchangeably. Arguably, though the hijab to many Muslims is considered a concept of modesty, as opposed to the visual covering of the hair, the hijab is also used to indicate the Muslim veil.

¹³ A chapter from *The Koran*.

for many years of their life—would be able to provide *actual* scriptural support rather than just asserting that it is mentioned in *The Koran*.

The veil, to every veiled women interviewed, has meant non-conformism to unjust systems of thought, specifically designing one's body for a man. Such universalized ideas of femininity and sexuality are what these women take issue with. Thus, the veil becomes their safeguard and body shield, providing them protection, safety, and relaxation. To Farzana, her veil keeps her from becoming an object of sexual gratification. She says the following:

By wearing hijab, I find a voice to express my being the way I want, the way I think, the way I believe. I feel like wearing hijab is like breaking the silence, the silence that has been imposed on being a woman in the West because the Western social expectation from a woman is for her to put on makeup, to wear specific types and styles of clothing, to be in certain ways in order to be accepted and liked by the society. This expectation, I believe, suffocates a woman's thinking power; she becomes a machine that tends to just follow the social order. In fact, she is being silenced. Her actual self is being silenced. When I wear hijab, I find a voice. I am not a passive follower of the pre-molded roles anymore. I prove to the society that I control my life. I have freedom to actively practice my power in choosing the way I want to be.

Farzana's understanding of the veil is similar to Mernissi's perception of the word "hijab" in which she describes as three-dimensional and all three dimensions overlapping one another. To Farzana, the female body is a body that needs to be hidden from sight (the first dimension); a body that needs to be separated from the body that is a "passive follower of the pre-molded roles" (the second dimension); and, a body that is a forbidden space (the third dimension). Thus, her understanding of freedom is understood in binary terms. She differentiates herself from the "Western woman" that is "silenced", "suffocate[d]", and "pre-molded." She categorizes the women living in the West as one category—those subject "to put on makeup, to wear specific types and styles of clothing, to be in certain ways in order to be accepted and liked by the society." Depending on this binary, she assumes that veiled women have a voice and unveiled women are silenced. Farzana is disinclined to believe that veiled women can also "become a machine that tends to just follow the social order." Moreover, this sense of freedom that Farzana described and the "breaking [of] the silence" that Farzana argues a veil guarantees allows a woman to become an autonomous subject; she will be appreciated for her intellectual qualities, and her physical appearances will subordinate to her intelligence and personality, a view expressed numerous by Rabia. She says:

It means that I am not being listened to because of the short shorts I wear. I know that if I accomplish something whether in the work place, at school, or anywhere else it would be because of my capabilities and intelligence and not for any other reason. I am not saying that any other women not covering their hair will not advance in life because of their revealing outfits, but when a woman gets a promotion in the West, everyone says 'oh she probably slept with the boss'; However, if a Muslim women who follows the Islamic conduct of hijab were to get a promotion at work, none of her

friends or family or colleagues would say that she got the job because she slept with the boss, but they will say she got the position because of her capabilities. Before wearing the hijab, I used to feel the eyes follow when I walked on the streets, however now I know men do not do this to me any longer, which means I am being treated as a human being and not a piece of meat.

Like Farzana, Rabia also exercises her freedom by seeing herself in opposition to women living in the West. However, whereas Farzana's perception was that unveiled women were suspected of conforming to roles of femininity, Rabia's perception is more extreme because she associates sexual promiscuity and lack of "capabilities" with unveiled women. As the interview progresses, Rabia's guarantee of sexual freedom is again discussed: "Like I said the hijab to me is a form of freedom. I am judged for my actions and not for what I wear. I know when I go to a job interview that I got it based on my abilities and not for how much cleavage I was able to show." Again, the dichotomy between the veiled and unveiled woman is emphasized, presenting a problem: just as the belief that veiled Muslim women are the ultimate symbols of backwardness and oppression, the image of the Western provocative, promiscuous, and immoral female has also not been destroyed. Also, not having to rely on her sexuality, Rabia feels a greater sense of freedom and protection when walking down the streets, knowing that men's violating eyes will not follow her. A similar response came from Zara: "You're more comfortable walking home in the middle of the night knowing that no one will approach you or pass a vulgar comment." The following response is also presented by Leila Ahmed who argues: "The [veil] also protects them from male harassment. In responding to a questionnaire, women stated that wearing Islamic dress resulted in a marked difference in the way they were treated in public places" (2003, p.223).

The veil, as a protection from universalized ideas of femininity and sexuality, has been left as an indicator of modesty (in terms of dress). Because of the symbol of modesty attached to the veil, Reina Lewis argues that "there is no single garment that equates to the veil: different versions of clothing that are held suitably to preserve modesty in gender-mixed environments have been adopted by different countries" (2003, p.428). In surrah 24, verse 31 of *The Koran*, the following is said: "And say to the believing women that they cast down their looks and guard their private parts and do not display their ornaments except what appears thereof, [...] and let them not strike their feet so that what they hide of their ornaments may be known; and turn to Allah all of you, O believers so that you may be successful" (Shaheeh International, *The Koran*, 1997, p.482). It is this section that many Muslims use as a defence to argue that the veil is a marker of modesty. According to my Muslim community, which consists of the Afghani community that resides within the Greater Vancouver area, the forbidding of the striking of one's feet has been translated by some as the covering of one's feet and/or as the forbidding of women dancing in the presence of a man. And the insistence of hiding one's "ornaments" has been translated as covering one's beauty (see chapter three) and therefore going unnoticed.

In opposition, many argue that the veil only provides the illusion of modesty and serves to absolve men of the responsibility for controlling their lustful behaviour. Samira

Ahmed, the narrator of the film, *Women and Islam: Islam Unveiled* (parts I and II), takes her viewers on a journey of struggle as a Muslim woman living in the West. Born in Iran and now living in London, Samira is intrigued as to why many Muslim women “are interpreting their religion this way” (2006). She believes that the veil invites more attention—even sexual attention—rather than prevents attention. Anna Belle and Amelia, both unveiled women, also agree that the reasoning behind the veil is to cover up female beauty; however, they do not agree with this reasoning. Amelia argues that to wear the veil in Western countries is irrational because it defeats the purpose of veiling: rather than diverting the attention elsewhere, Muslim women are attracting attention to themselves, because the veil is something new and foreign to the West. Here, Amelia is assuming that any form of attention is bad; some attention may be sparked because of curiosity rather than the kind of attention Muslim women are trying to prevent, which is lustful, and therefore sinful behaviour from men. Also, Amelia is assuming that the West is completely ignorant of the veil’s existence.

Not attracting sexual attention, the veil is an effective barrier which prevents these women from wrongdoings. The veil, to Zara, is a constant reminder of Judgment Day, allowing her to live her life patrolling her behaviours and actions. Accordingly, to Rabia, her veil helps her to follow the correct path:

I know wearing the hijab has changed my life, if not drastically, but there are many changes that I myself notice. First of all my physical appearance: I no longer wear revealing clothes; I no longer dance in parties where both of the sexes are present, and I watch how I behave or speak because I do not want people to judge my religion based on my behavior. I don’t want anyone to say so this is how Muslims are in a negative form. I try to be the best to represent the Muslim women not only in my clothing, but also in my speech, behavior, manner, and all the other aspects to the best of my ability.

To her, wearing the veil is a great responsibility because she feels that she has to set positive examples in order for veiled Muslim women to be accepted in a positive light. And, the idea that the veil is a barrier that prevents sin from occurring is also expressed by Zara. She says, “I am able to have conversations with men knowing that I will be guarded. And, my parents trust me having male friends because they know I won’t act on it.” Homa Hoodfar and Leila Ahmed also present this viewpoint. Hoodfar mentions that when communicating with the opposite sex, many veiled women agreed that “since donning the veil, it has become easier to interact with men, both Muslim and non-Muslim” (Hoodfar, 2003, p.21). Zora, an unveiled woman, also reaffirms this belief, arguing that had she been veiled, she would have led a wiser and less rebellious life: “I am quite certain that being veiled would have affected whom I would have associated with and what I would have been doing with these people. I do feel that being veiled would have almost encouraged me not to slide so far off the path.” Nevertheless, just as it is important to consider why Muslim women choose to veil, it is equally important to consider why Muslim women do not choose to veil. Finally, veiling was practiced because it demonstrated political action. To Mary, the veil gives her freedom because there is less attention directed to her. She says, “I am fine wearing my hijab. I feel like I am free because less people pay attention to me because

I am covered.” Her practice of seclusion is a political act. Her seclusion is seen positively. This concept of seclusion due to veiling that is accepted as something positive is also demonstrated by Fatema Mernissi: “The seclusion of women, which to Western eyes is a source of oppression, is seen by many Muslim women as a source of pride. The traditional women interviewed all perceived seclusion as prestigious” (2003, p.493).

Reasons for Unveiling

In regards to choosing to go unveiled, the five unveiled women provided the following reasons: veiling is not mentioned in *The Koran* and they are not ready for the “it” factor. Four out of the five unveiled women claimed that there is no reference of the veil in their holy text. Like the veiled women, they too did not provide actual scriptural support: Leila said, “I have read *The Koran* and did not interpret that women are required to wear a veil. I interpreted that women are required to dress with modesty, but where do you draw the line? I only found evidence in *The Hadith*, which are somewhat interpretations of *The Koran* which could have an element of culture at that time than religion”; Amelia said, “I am more comfortable in not wearing a veil because it gives me a sense of freedom, equality (not only to men, but to successful women of my generation), confidence, and self-fulfillment”; and, Anna Belle said, “None that I can think of. All of my reasoning [for believing the veil is not mentioned in *The Koran*] comes from my head.” Whereas Amelia and Anna Belle do not even answer the question, Leila answers the question without providing full details. Leila says that modesty is a factor without providing a specific verse from *The Koran*, and she says that the veil is evident in *The Hadith* without providing a specific teaching. Zora and Fatema, however, are the only two unveiled women who admit that the veil is a command placed on every Muslim woman. Zora says, “I am not going to say that I have Islamic support on why I am not being veiled. I am just going to say that it is my own personal flaw in not being strong enough to be veiled and to be confident in being veiled.” Though she states that she cannot provide an actual surrah or verse that demonstrates her view, she makes it clear that the veil is mandated: “I know that in *The Koran* it says that women must be veiled as Prophet Mohammad’s wives were veiled.” However, she too is confused since she questions what the “correct” form of veiling is: “I do still wonder what the correct form of veiling is? Which Islamic culture has gotten the correct form of being veiled? Is it a burqa, a scarf, or is it just to be plain conservative with no headpiece? Sometimes I wonder if all forms are right.” Fatema, on the other hand, is able to provide scriptural support on the veil even though she does not veil herself. She alludes to two verses, but claims that she cannot remember the second one: “In *The Koran* it said that women should draw their veils over their heads so they do not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, and their sons. This is so that other men do not draw attention to them in a wrong way. And, there is also another verse in *The Koran* in which the veil is mentioned, but I am not sure which one it is.”

Another common reason for not veiling is because some of these women are not ready for the “it” factor. According to Rabia, the veil is a huge responsibility because it affects one’s life in numerous ways (ie. dress, behavior, sexuality, actions, etc...). She claims that one has to be brave with their identity in order to practice the veil, saying, “A Muslim

woman in the West that keeps her hijab shows that she is a strong individual and is confident about herself and her identity, and if she is able to fight with the West in order to keep her identity, then she can fight for all of her other rights as an individual." The brave identity that is demonstrated by veiled women is also expressed by Zora, as she demonstrates her weak character in juxtaposition to veiled women. She says, "I have seen several people I love treated negatively or differently just because they have worn the veil. I do not feel that I am a confident and strong individual to take on these prejudices thrown specifically towards myself if I were to be veiled." Again, Zora alludes to her lack of bravery when asked if she could provide scriptural support for her position in not veiling, she says, "But the point is I am not going to say that I have Islamic support on why I am not being veiled. I am just going to say that it is my own personal flaw in not being strong enough to be veiled and to be confident in being veiled." Zora's fear in veiling is that the veil would make her feel insecure and uncomfortable because of how her husband and her in-laws may treat her and how the veil may affect her career choices. Even more, she worries that her child's friends or her child's friend's parents may treat her differently. On the contrary, Amelia's reasons for not veiling have led to her brave character. She says, "Not wearing a veil has contributed to my self-respect, confidence, personal, and career success."

However, it is this great responsibility, which I call the "it factor," that a few of these unveiled women are not ready to take on. Both Zora and Fatema have claimed that they are not ready for "it." Fatema reveals: "I don't wear a veil simply because I am not ready for it." Later she says, "I don't mind wearing one at all it's just that it isn't so easy carrying it out." At first, I wondered what this "it" meant, but as they continued to speak, it became clear to me that they were referring to the accountabilities that come with wearing the veil. Thus, the fear in wearing the veil also leads to the fear in "wearing" the other qualities that proceed with the veil, such as the change of dress and the change of one's actions and behaviours. However, though Fatema does believe the veil is prescribed to every Muslim woman, she also says, "I do not think that not wearing a veil makes a big difference" because to her, she does not believe that by wearing the veil she will become a better person. She says, "There is much more to be done before I would wear a veil." However, Fatema is not against wearing the veil in the near future. Fatema says she may take the veil after marriage and Zora prays to have the courage of veiling one day in her life. She says, "I do pray and hope that Allah will eventually instill and encourage the blessing of such a practice upon me." Besides the ongoing debate as to why a Muslim woman should veil or should not veil, another area of investigation worth examining is another ongoing debate: is the veil oppressive or liberating?

The women who are veiled argue that the veil is liberating while the women who are unveiled argue that the veil is oppressive. Zara, in particular, expresses herself through a song titled "Free" by Sammi Yousuf, an Afghani singer and songwriter, to which she claims the song perfectly expresses her feelings towards the veil. She advises me to search for this song, and I discover that her reasons for veiling are quoted directly from the song. She says, "I'm truly free and this piece of scarf on me I wear so proudly to preserve my dignity, my modesty, and my integrity." Thinking back, I remember the

words coming out of Zara's mouth like a song. On the contrary, Anna Belle and Leila feel a greater freedom in comparison to veiled women because they have advanced in their careers. Anna Belle says, "Not wearing the veil has probably affected me in a positive way and by that I mean that I probably got jobs that I potentially would not have gotten had I been wearing the scarf." And, later she shares: "I do feel like I have more freedom over women who wear the veil because I have family members who have been denied jobs because they wear the veil or have had to entirely switch careers because of the veil, so yes I do feel like women who wear the veil are oppressed." Leila too feels unrestrained; she says that not wearing a veil "opens up more opportunities for girls in terms of career advancement." Additionally, Anna Belle feels more freedom for the following reasons: "It probably has also spared me problems crossing the border to the US or somewhere else. And, I'd bet my hand that it has spared me thousands of looks and judgments." Hence, for these three unveiled women, their freedom is understood in opposition to veiled women, thus creating a binary: the veiled woman who does not succeed in terms of career advancement and the unveiled woman who does succeed.

The only exceptions are Zora and Fatema, who feel that being veiled or unveiled does not signify oppression or liberation. Zora says, "Personally, I don't think I see either freedom or oppression in the action of veiling or unveiling. However, what I do see is that there are situations around women that entail actions of freedom and actions of oppression. However, I see this in all of women (regardless of being veiled or unveiled)." Fatema, on the other hand, says, "Do I feel any freedom from not wearing a veil? No, none whatsoever." In spite of her claim, Fatema contradicts herself, arguing that it is easier to find a job when one is unveiled. Furthermore, the veil as an expression of liberation or oppression is not the only subject that is disputed amongst these women; the age in which veiling has to be practiced is also stirring controversy. Rabia argues that females are to wear the veil at the age of nine, covering their entire body except for the face, the hands, and the feet. Mary, on the other hand, took on the veil at the age of seven, explaining "that is the time that God has asked girls to be covered." According to my experience, I recall that age did play a factor in veiling, but not always. The moment a female entered her menstruation cycle, she was required to veil. For some girls, menstruation occurred at a younger age, and for some menstruation occurred at an older age. However, some members of my family veil their daughters at a really young age (at the age of five or six), so that by the time they reach that age where they are supposed to veil (whether it being younger than the age of nine, or older), they have already adjusted to the pressures of the veil. Also, this is done so that when they reach an older age—where they are capable of making their own decisions—they will not rebel and take their veils off because they have been conditioned to wearing the veil at a young age. Furthermore, some women veil upon entering marriage, upon old age, or after they have made a pilgrimage to Mecca.

The Discriminated Women

Discrimination was another serious area that was examined. Veiled women were asked if they were either treated poorly or well for veiling both within their own Islamic

community¹⁴ and outside of the community.¹⁵ Similarly, unveiled women were also asked if they were treated poorly or well for unveiling both within the Islamic community and outside of the community. What was interesting to find was that all of the five veiled women faced equal discrimination, both within and outside of their communities. Even though all five were greatly respected for veiling amongst older generations and other women who were also veiled, the only form of discrimination these women received were from Muslim women who were unveiled. Zara comments that her veil is a popular area of discussion, saying, “As a Muslim who veils, there are those Muslims who don’t veil and tell you ‘why do you hide behind that scarf?’ It’s heartbreaking sometimes to see your fellow Muslims trying to talk you into taking off your scarf.” Being persuaded into taking her veil off by individuals who categorize outside of the Muslim community is not mentioned by Zara; only her “fellow Muslims” place such pressures on her. However, with those who are veiled, Zara feels welcome and a sense of belonging, saying, “When I see someone who is veiled as I am, we always say ‘salam alaykum’ [a way of greeting] even though we do not know each other. It’s a really nice feeling. It’s like being amongst people you know.” Meanwhile, Roqia is not pressured by her Muslim community to unveil; instead, she is treated as backward. She says, “A small number of people think that I am a low class or a villager.” Farzana, on the other hand, discusses that her Islamic community views her as overtly religious and fundamental.

Not all of these unveiled women share negative views on veiled women. Anna Belle, Zora, and Fatema have associated veiled women with bravery, admiring their courage for veiling in Western societies. Anna Belle notes on the following:

“Don’t get me wrong, despite the fact that I don’t wear [the veil], I have immense respect for women who do because that shows me the amount of commitment they have to their religious beliefs, especially when it’s thirty degrees and they are hanging out at the park wearing their veils. Kudos to them! Of course that is assuming that they made the choice to wear the veil because I’m sure the majority of women who wear the veil did not have a choice.”

Furthermore, Zora says, “I usually view women who are veiled as strong individuals. I think they are able to stand for what they believe, and they show it in their daily practice.” Fatema says, “For the people who do wear them, hats off to them because I am sure it isn’t easy. It’s extremely hard to find a job and it’s also hard fitting in.” This concept of bravery that is associated with the veiled woman is also reaffirmed by both Roqia and Rabia. In terms of prejudices faced outside of their communities, all of these women were victims. Rabia explains her mistreatment for veiling because of people’s lack of education; Mary explains her unjust treatment because the veiled woman is associated with terrorist activities; Roqia explains her ill-treatment due to the fact that the veiled woman is represented as backward; and, Farzana explains her debasement because she is viewed as fundamentalist. Nonetheless, Leila explains why discrimination is present within these women. Pitying veiled women, she explains that

¹⁴ Here, I am not identifying the Islamic community as one homogenous entity. The “Islamic community”, like any other community, is diverse in ethnicity, class, etc.

¹⁵ The term “community” is a complex term and is diverse in ethnicity, class, etc. However, I will not be focusing on class; I will be focusing just on the veil.

they are constantly marginalized because “of the never ending struggle to convince people that they are not a stereotype, essentially one of those who are predominated by men and are not allowed to go to school, work, etc., but rather are capable of taking any career challenges.” However, even though Roqia is treated poorly outside of her community, she is also accepted, saying, “Fortunately, Vancouver is so multicultural that people are so used to seeing all different kinds of dress.” Furthermore, just as veiled women are treated poorly for veiling among Muslims who do not veil; unveiled women are also treated poorly for unveiling among Muslims who veil.

All of the unveiled women, except for Anna Belle, have faced discrimination for unveiling within their communities. Leila, Amelia, and Zora are perceived as unreligious in comparison to veiled women: Leila says, “By not wearing a veil, people in my community judge me as one that has deviated from the path of the Islamic religion, and most of the time the judgment comes without understanding”; Amelia says, “Of course the Muslim community is biased in favor of people who wear a veil; and, Zora says, “I feel that the Muslim community sees me as unreligious because I am unveiled.” Zora, however, also admits that she herself discriminates against unveiled woman, saying:

Women who are Muslim and unveiled, I perceive them as not as religious as women who are veiled. Maybe I pass this very ridiculous judgment because that was what I was told growing up (by my family and my Muslim community). Or, maybe because it reflects my own life, because I am unveiled and I am not as religious as other veiled women, so I might assume that is the case for other unveiled women.

And, Fatema, in particular, is constantly asked by Muslims as to why she goes unveiled, especially since the majority of her family members are veiled, leaving her noticeable. She even claims that her suitors keep insisting that she veil. Anna Belle is neither treated poorly nor well for unveiling. She says, “My Muslim community equals my family here and I am treated normally for unveiling, because half of the women in my family do not wear the veil, so I have no problems there.”

Not all of the veiled women interviewed had negative views of unveiled women. Rabia answered in the following when asked how she perceives unveiled women: “This is not a proper question to ask of the Muslim community.” And, Mary said the following: “I don’t care [if unveiled women choose not to veil]. Everyone has their own way of living, so I respect everyone’s beliefs.” Meanwhile, none of the five unveiled women are scrutinized for unveiling outside of the community: Amelia claims that she is “supported” and “respected”; Leila states that she is looked upon as a “mentor and role model”; Zora is seen as “more similar to them [people belonging outside of the Muslim community]”; Anna Belle is treated “fine”; and, Fatema is “not bothered.”

Conclusion

Veiled women are represented as retrogressive, fundamental, homebound, silenced, and oppressed in popular culture and certain areas of scholarship whereas unveiled women are represented as progressive and forward-thinking. Thus, veiled and unveiled women are seen as two separate entities: the good Muslim versus the bad Muslim.

Images of the oppressed and silenced veiled Muslim women are an important image for the West because it is a distraction. The critique of the veil is a way to use these women as a human shield so that one does not have to talk about any other issues such as the Western reaction to it.

Interviewing all ten participants, I have come to the conclusion that there is not one specific reason for choosing to veil or unveil. Furthermore, I have also come to the conclusion that the demonstration of agency through veiling or unveiling cannot be represented in one way. Agency, a term I defined as the state of being in which one is in action or exerting power, is evident in Muslim women's reasoning for veiling. However, each veiled women's experience of their own agency differs from those of other veiled women's experience of agency. Whether a women veils for reasons of protecting herself from male sexual behavior, or excluding herself from unjust systems of thought such as universalized ideas of femininity and sexuality, she is claiming her agency by demonstrating that she is in action and exerting her power. However, veiled women's experience of their own agency differs from those of unveiled women; hence, just as veiled women veil to demonstrate their agency, unveiled women choose not to veil to demonstrate their agency. By choosing to unveil, unveiled women demonstrate their agency over veiled women by arguing that they are in a greater position of power because they are granted more job opportunities than veiled women. Also, they are recreating the stereotypical Muslim woman image that is retrogressive, homebound, and secluded in the confines of her veil, an image that is not suitable for a woman living in the West. Hence, women wearing the veil and women not wearing the veil both send strong messages.

Nevertheless, the goal of this project is not to argue who has more agency—veiled women or unveiled women—rather, the goal of this project is to argue that veiled women's expression of agency does not differ much from unveiled women's expression of agency. Both women, veiled and unveiled, claim their agency in different ways. Furthermore, Western women's sense of agency is also no different from veiled women. Instead, it is the perception of the lack of agency by Western Others that is the real problem for veiled women and not the veil itself. However, one might question exactly how free a choice a Muslim woman can make if she exists within a predominantly patriarchal culture, time, situation, and religion. Regardless of the demonstration of agency veiled women convey through the veiling, I argue that a Muslim woman would not veil if the notion of veiling had not been introduced by religious text or cultural practice. Hence, a Muslim woman does not have that much of a free choice for veiling because she exists within a patriarchal culture, time, situation, and religion.

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