

The Veil as a Site of Struggle

The Hejab in Quebec

by *Shahmaz Khan*

Afin de comprendre la signification du hejab en tant que droit humain, il est important de placer ce dernier dans le contexte des forces sociales et politiques qui cherchent à contrôler le corps des femmes musulmanes. Pour les raisons les plus diverses

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et qui sont même parfois diamétralement opposées, le hejab fait l'objet de luttes constantes. Une explication de ces raisons illustre ici les divers conflits auxquels se heurtent les femmes musulmanes qui questionnent le hejab au Canada et ailleurs.

I teach a Women's Studies class at McMaster University where I asked the students what they know about Islam and/or about Muslim women. From their comments it appeared they knew a great deal and it was all negative. For example, they said Islam is a "fanatical," violent, rigid religion which promotes terrorism, sanctions the sexism of men, and enforces the oppression of women by means of compulsory *hejab*.¹ Their response is indicative of stereotypes about Islam and about "the Muslim Woman" in particular. Such assumptions often present certain features from the lives of some Muslim women as stereotypically representative of all Muslim women. The *hejab* is one such feature. The *hejab* is the open target of colonial and now neo-colonial attack. It is ironic, that the *hejab*, which is not one of the mandatory requirements in Islam, has become for many Muslims one of the most visible symbols of the "authentic" Muslim woman and for many Muslim women, not only a spiritual response but also a personal statement about their identity as Muslims.

The Muslim woman as construct

As I have argued extensively elsewhere (Khan 1995), "the Muslim Woman" is a problematic construct that is full of clichés and is embedded with the unequal relations inherent in the colonial and now neo-colonial social formations. The gendering and the struggle for the control of the body of the Muslim Woman as well as its (un)veiling provide an example of the multiple and at times contradictory forces and determinations within the construct.

It is important for this discussion to make a distinction between traditional Islamic and fundamentalist Islamist approaches. The former uses traditional methods for explaining social and political change, while the latter wishes to use as its model the original community of Muslims who were the companions of the Prophet in seventh century Medina. There needs to be a further distinction between the orientalist racist definition of fundamentalist Islam as the religion/culture of the Muslim Other and those social/political movements which seek to impose their agendas and views on people through coercive means. Although coming from very different traditions, the Islamic and Islamist views on the role of the ideal Muslim are often complementary.²

The female body gendered and contested

In Islamic societies/communities, traditionally women and men are socialized into feminine and masculine roles with corresponding duties and obligations. A significant accompaniment of a rigid boundary between women and men is that it produces an underclass of women. However, rigid divisions between women's and men's roles are increasingly difficult to maintain in the 1990s. Instead boundaries shift and change in conjunction with the fluid economic and political situation. The body of the Muslim Woman often becomes contested terrain between competing visions of authenticity, and as such is experienced by individual women as a site of contradiction.

The politics embedded in veiling, unveiling, or re-veiling provide an example of the struggle for control between colonial (and now neo-colonial) nationalist and Islamist (or anti-colonial/patriarchal) forces. The veil, and by implication control of the woman's body, is a battle field where "the cultural struggles of post-colonial [patriarchal] societies are waged" (Abu-Odeh).³ There are often polarized positions vying for control over the bodies of women: should they be veiled or not? Women themselves have had little say in this battle.

The veil as a symbol of oppression

The veil is a major element in stereotyping, and is also among the most visible symbols of Muslim women's oppression. Patricia Jeffrey describes a veiled woman as "anonymous, a non-person, unapproachable, just a silent being skulking along, looking neither left nor right" (4). As Leila Ahmed points out:

Veiling—to *Western* eyes, the most visible marker of the differentness and inferiority of Islamic societies—

became the symbol now of both the oppression of women (or, in the language of the day, Islam's degradation of women) and the backwardness of Islam, and it became the open target of colonial attack and the spearhead of the assault on Muslim societies. (1992:152)

The veil must be cast off, it follows, if women (and by association the countries they come from) are to be civilized and become forward-looking.

Westernized indigenous reformers also took up the cause of unveiling the Muslim woman. A large part of the

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emancipatory discourse of women promoted by westernized upper class male reformers focused on the veil and polygamy. For instance, Kemal Attaturk, responsible for westernized reform in Turkey, often denounced the veil, while Reza Shah in 1920 passed legislation which banned it in Iran (Ahmed).

In Canada, too, the veil is seen to be a symbol of the Muslim Woman's oppression. In Canada, a focus on the images and myths about the veil has prevented the understanding of "the social significance of the veil from the point of view of the women who live with it" (Hoodfar, 1993: 15). In a context where speaking out against the veil results in greater racialization of Muslims, such constructions by both the veil's defenders and critics, Hoodfar points out, often places women in a position of having to choose between fighting racism or sexism.

The veil as a symbol of cultural affirmation

It is true that not all who were against the veil were allied to the West and western interest. But the more western and westernized interests were against the veil, the more the nationalists, some of whom were also westernized, took up its cause. An inverse reaction was created. The veil became both a symbol of "Islamic oppression" and an icon of "Islamic resistance." For some this icon of Islamic resistance represented anti-west/anti-colonial attitudes. It is this symbolizing of the veil by *both* sides that so constrains women. This discussion illustrates how women's bodies as symbolized by the veil are used by contradictory forces to promote their agendas.⁴

Fatima Mernissi argues that increased emphasis on veiling is connected to the identity crisis which Muslims are undergoing. For instance, in the late 1970s westernized Irani women put on the veil to demonstrate against

the Shah and western imperialism. Later they fell victim to Khomeini's imposition of the veil in the name of cultural/religious authenticity (Tabari).

Veiling as a source of empowerment for women

Like Iran, Algeria also provides an example of the importance of the veil as a major symbol. Prior to the revolutionary struggle of 1954-1962, the veil was primarily worn by urban Algerian women. During the revolution, some urban Algerian women took off the veil to participate in the struggle against the French (Alloula). In the later part of the revolution, when western clad women became suspect, Algerian women put on the veil to hide explosives and take part in resisting the French. Now, with the rise of Islamism in Algeria, women once again are under pressure from the Islamic Front for Salvation to wear the veil (*Women Living Under Muslim Laws*).

Since women do not live in a vacuum, they are no doubt affected by these different agendas when they make their choice whether to veil or not. In fact, the issue is far more complex than deciding whether women should be given the choice to veil or not. Under existing patriarchal conditions, in many Muslim societies the veil not only provides safety in an environment where women are often harassed in the public space, but also gives women dignity and independence which they otherwise would not have. For instance, Fadwa el Guindi points to the increasing numbers of women in Egypt, for example, who are getting educated and are working outside the home. Here they are faced with not only the traditional male claim on the public sphere but also severe harassment not only at work but also in the public space through which they travel or shop. The veil gives women an "Islamic dignity and self-righteousness" with which to confront an increasingly hostile and sexist world (el Guindi). Abu-Odeh has noted that women who have adopted the veil in many Muslim societies are mostly young working women or students. She claims that the veil provides a certain amount of protection against sexual harassment on the street.

As a Muslim college sister [student] put it, "Some argue that *tahaghub*⁵ is not Islamic, that Muhammad's wives did not veil. But Muhammad's wives did not need to—they were not in public as we are today. Even if it is not required Islam does require it for us in the modern situation. It is more needed today than in the 7th century. (qtd. in el Guindi 482)

Homa Hoodfar's (1991) study of Egyptian women who have re-veiled supports this argument. She points out that it is dis-empowering for many westernized Egyptian women to be assertive, as it is seen as immodest and immoral. A veiled woman on the other hand can be publicly assertive without losing her reputation. Women feel powerless to change the personal and systemic sexual harassment, and veiling for these women has become a

strategy as a result. While it does nothing to weaken the structures which force women to veil in the first place, such a strategy does allow them more access to public space, and thus income from employment.

However, Gita Sahgal and Nira Yuval-Davis note that:

women collude, seek comfort, and even at times gain a sense of empowerment within the spaces allocated to them by fundamentalist movements....Being active in a religious movement allows women a legitimate place in the public sphere which otherwise might be blocked to them, and which in certain

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circumstances they might be able to subvert for their purposes. (9)

While generating a certain amount of empowerment, the overall effect of joining these movements is disempowering. Sahgal and Yuval-Davis observe that women can only assert themselves within prescribed roles and that they risk censure if they overstep delineated boundaries.

While in Muslim societies, the *hejab* provides women with a certain amount of protection in the public sphere, in Canada it is different. The sense of empowerment within prescribed roles has severe implications for women when they are labelled as part of "a community" within multicultural societies. Women that I interviewed for an earlier study felt pressured to ascribe to "the correct" behaviour for a Muslim woman (Khan 1995). Often they were confused because their actual behaviour did not always coincide with what was required. This placed them at risk of social censure, and in certain cases resulted in women rejecting their communities.

Pluralist multiculturalist policies provide some conservative community leaders spaces to promote Islamist agendas.⁶ Muslim women and men pay attention to these agendas because Muslims are excluded, devalued, and marginalized in Canadian society and often need the support of alternate structures where their differences are validated.

Women as members of multicultural communities

The multiple and uneven factors in the construct of "Muslim Woman" play a significant role in the lives of individual Muslim women in contexts where multicultural policies are promoted. Women are not viewed as individuals but as members of communities. As such they are seen

in simplistic and limiting ways as part of the undifferentiated group, "Muslim Woman."

Amrita Chhachhi argues that community identities are constructed in a manner which downplays differences and emphasizes commonalities. Often becoming social forces in societies which promote pluralism, these communities perform advocacy functions for seemingly collective interests. Ethnic/racial communities are legitimized in countries such as Britain and Canada which promote multicultural policies.

Multiculturalism is based on a static ahistorical concept of "ethnic culture" and its promotion through safe encounters with the dominant culture (Corrigan). These static perceptions feed off "orientalist"⁷ perceptions of monolithic communities and respond to stereotypes about cultures. In such a manner material issues confronting individuals are reduced to one or two symbols of oppression. The pre-determined and pre-established stereotypes of Muslims and of the Muslim Woman see Islam as the cause of all problems Muslim women in Canada face (Khan 1992). Such a view denies racialization of Muslims as well as the personal prejudice and systemic barriers which diverse Muslim women face both inside and outside their communities. Muslim women are deemed to be active promoters of religious ideology, or passive recipients of prescriptions of religious texts. The history of women's struggle both in the country of origin and in Canada is denied.

Multiculturalism as a policy has both negative and positive connotations. On the one hand it reinforces visions and stereotypes of monolithic communities. Nevertheless, it also creates spaces for members of those communities to speak and be heard. In the case of Muslims, often representation has come from traditional male leaders. Recently, however, alternate voices particularly feminist voices from the Muslim community are being heard and acknowledged (Kashmeri; Hoodfar 1993). These diverse voices will no doubt help foster the notion of community as heterogeneous, varied, and at times conflictual.

The *hejab* in Quebec

A focus on recent debates in Quebec schools illustrates how received notions about the Other, in particular the Muslim Other, help (mis)form a contemporary issue. Examples of different discourses and agendas speaking for and against the *hejab* in the recent controversy in Quebec identify at least seven diverse assumptions. Jeremy Webber, Professor of Constitutional Law at McGill University was quoted in the *Globe and Mail* as saying, that the *hejab* is:

...a betrayal of French identity [in Quebec]... People should leave these badges of identification [*hejab*] behind them when they enter the public sphere and act like any other French person. (qtd. in Nasrulla A-4)

This assertion constructs a notion of French identity based on the differentness of and differentness from the Other and illustrates a mainstream perspective which promotes assimilation into dominant Québécois culture. Webber's comments about the need to reinforce French identity contain assumptions about the superiority of Québécois culture, backed by economic and political power.

Comments made by Francois Lemieux, president of the nationalist St. Jean Baptiste Society in Quebec, also reinforce western representations of the Orient. He points out that the:

Not only is "Muslim Woman" a term which comes out of colonialist and orientalist centres of knowledge production, but it is also loaded with connotations from traditional Islamist writings and legal rulings.

...hejab is not a fundamental principle of Islam. Where it is more promoted is in cultures where the church and state are one, for example in Saudi Arabia and Iran. (qtd. in Nasrulla A4)

Although Lemieux is correct in pointing out that the *hejab* is not a fundamental requirement in Islam, his comment also has other connotations. It seems to reinforce the orientalist assumption that westerners can know the Orient better than the Orient can know itself. Such a notion does not acknowledge the fixation on the *hejab* as icon of the Muslim woman's identity, whether desirable or undesirable. It also ignores the intensity of the struggles between the players.

Orientalist perceptions include the determination that the European colonizer did not venture forth as an exploiter. Mr. Lemieux informs us that: "...wearing hejab is related to the part of Islam where polygamy exists. It is seen for the sexual exploitation of women" (Qtd. in Nasrulla A4). Lemieux's statement draws upon colonialist assumptions in which Europeans are set up as liberators of Muslim women from Islam. Frantz Fanon argues that perceptions of "Other" men oppressing their women made the colonizer feel civilized in comparison to the backward colonial. Colonial rule of "Third World" countries was legitimized through this difference, and the white European male was set up as the defender of colonial women against oppression by their own men (Mohanty).

Not only is "Muslim Woman" a term which comes out of colonialist and orientalist centres of knowledge production, but as a site of meaning it is also loaded with connotations and associations from traditional Islamic and now increasingly fundamentalist Islamist writings and legal rulings. Movements promoting fundamentalist Islamism arose in conjunction with the failure of the

religious establishment to respond to challenges posed by colonization and industrialization and became a method of coping with the challenges of modernity (Khalid).

Within Islamist discourse, the *hejab* often helps reinforce the notion of authenticity for the Muslim Woman. This association was substantiated by Ridwan Yusuf, the principal of the Muslim School of Montreal. He was quoted as saying that compulsory *hejab* for students as well as staff is needed: "...because young Muslim students need an environment that reinforces Islamic values" (qtd. Nasrulla A4).

Although Yusuf claimed to be talking about all Muslim students, it is only female students who must wear a prescribed head covering. Such gender-biased prescriptions allow Islamism to extend patriarchal power to control and regulate women's morality in the larger Islamic community in which the women live. This link between community morality and the authentic Muslim Woman's morality is crucial to Islamism. The Muslim Woman's morality can then be used to reproduce or mother, biologically and culturally, the *Umma*, the nation of Muslims. As I have argued elsewhere (Khan 1995) Muslim identity, particularly in North America, is moving increasingly towards Islamism. Hence, for the Muslim school the veiled Muslim woman/girl is crucial in maintaining and reinforcing this identity.

Islamic identity as it moves towards Islamism gets reinforced within beleaguered Muslim communities in North America. Yolande Gaedah of the Montreal's Centre d'Étude Arabe pour le Développement points out that:

...in the case of the chilly nationalism that seems to be rising lately in Quebec, the developing polarization of 'us and them' only serves the interests of fundamentalist forces. (qtd. in Mackie)

The pressure to conform to community expectations focuses on women's roles as keepers of morality, which in turn generates a need to continue to adhere strictly to prescribed sexist codes of behaviour. Insecurities generated by the immigration process and the exclusion from mainstream life which is legitimized by multicultural policies appear to make traditions very attractive. The focus on increasingly conservative traditions in Muslim communities in the West often parallels the rising influence of right-wing movements in Muslim countries. For many Muslims, religion provides an answer:

Islam is, among other things a set of psychological devices about self-empowerment and making oneself at home everywhere around the globe, in unfamiliar as well as familiar surroundings, without having to know the language or the culture. (Mernissi x)

For Muslim minorities in Canada, Islam is not only a spiritual experience, but also a grounding device in an uncomfortable, alienating culture. Family based kin groups

and the concept of *Umma* provide security in uncertain times or spaces such as the conditions created by the exclusion that Muslims face in Canada. For many women, ambiguity about their status in religious texts is reinforced by increased rigidity in community expectations.

Liberal views promoting the status quo were also evident in the newspapers:

Let the hejab remain a personal statement, but if it becomes a political one within a secular school system, then the system has every right to respond....Respect for minority expressions or reli-

Many women's lives are set up in such a way that the hejab is the only logical choice. Their families expect it of them, and the community they belong to reinforces the notion of the authentic Muslim Woman as one who wears the hejab.

gious statements should not extend to forcing others to change their pattern of behaviour or upsetting entire institutions. (Simpson)

Simpson's statements are based on assumptions that despite the often antagonistic political forces using the *hejab* as a site of struggle, the *hejab* can remain only a personal statement for the women who wear it. The women who observe the *hejab* do not live in a vacuum, however, and even those for whom it is a spiritual statement are no doubt influenced by the fixation on the *hejab* by diverse forces. Simpson's statements also contain the message: Don't let *your* views, and lifestyles change our system. Let the system and the status quo which it supports remain intact.

At a workshop on fundamentalism at a 1992 anti-racism and feminism conference, the panellists who were women living in Muslim countries argued:

that women in Muslim fundamentalist countries live under governments critical of pluralism, where heterogeneous interpretation of religious texts are not allowed and where they must adhere to prescribed gender roles... For these women the hejab was used not just to swathe their bodies, but also to muffle their voices. A Professor of Sociology at the workshop was quoted as saying "There are political implications to what women in North America are doing. Women in North America are helping to oppress the women in the East." She believed that women in North America are not making a spiritual choice but affirming their identity in a racist society. (Hasan 7)

For Hasan, a Muslim woman, who lives in North America, wearing the *hejab* is a spiritual choice. She claims

that in this workshop her voice and voices of others like her were appropriated.

For the panellists, women in North America who don this symbol of silence—the hejab—are supporting the oppression of women in the East. But their discussion of these women was in the third person, defining their experiences without seeking out their voices. The few women wearing the hejab in the room were silent, their voices muffled by these women.

Issues raised in Hasan's article identify feminist/activists as a heterogeneous and not a homogenous group and illustrate the differences, contradictions, and struggles among women. These are reflected in women's responses to the *hejab*.

The debates on the *hejab* illustrate the controversy in Quebec, and point to the *hejab*'s role in defining and creating a space for the Muslim Woman. These debates and the political positions of the speakers and writers are diverse and at times antagonistic to each other. Although the debates are about the *hejab*, they are also indicative of the image and assumptions about the Muslim Woman as a site of contradiction.

In Canada, Hoodfar points out that

many Muslim women have taken up the veil not only from personal conviction but to assert the identity and existence of a confident Muslim community and demand fuller social and political recognition. (1993:15)

Multicultural policies in Canada often draw upon and reinforce a stereotypical homogenous notion of community which has been institutionalized by state funding. Hence, often wearing the *hejab* not only has a spiritual significance, but also gives many women a sense of identity as part of "a community."

Many women choose to wear the *hejab*, but for many their lives are set up in such a way that the *hejab* is the only logical choice. Their families expect it of them, and the community they belong to reinforces the notion of the authentic Muslim Woman as one who wears the *hejab*. Spiritual choice notwithstanding, the questions that need to be put forward are: why do Muslim women have to turn to ghettoized communities to find acceptance? Why is there no acceptance of Muslim women in the dominant culture?

Conclusion

The *hejab* is a spiritual choice for some but not all women, neither are all women are not coerced to wear the veil. Veiled or unveiled, many Muslim woman are subjected to the antagonistic discourses which are fixated on the veil. Colonial/orientalist arguments want to liberate Muslim women from Islam. Within such a view the

Muslim woman's life is seen to be totally determined by religion and she is deemed to be more oppressed than women from supposedly secular societies in non-Muslim countries. To be liberated from Islam she needs to unveil.

While there are those who would unveil the Muslim woman, there are also those who want to encourage the *hejab* as mark of "authenticity" for the Muslim woman. The recent Canadian film *Voices of Islam* (funded by the Islamic Foundation) only portrays women who wear the *hejab* as Muslim. Such a selective portrayal ignores the thousands of women in Canada and the millions around the world who do not wear the *hejab*. The message of the film appears to be that there is an Islamic community in Toronto to which people can belong if they follow the prescribed requirements.

Liberal views want to promote a tolerance for "Other" cultures. An atmosphere of cultural relativism is created, and often the practices which they are tolerating are not examined. Communities are seen as monolithic and struggles within communities, particularly women's struggles which challenge and resist patriarchal norms, are not acknowledged.

Even among women there is no monolithic position on the *hejab*. The politics of the women or the group to which they belong inform their attitudes to the *hejab*. Such controversies prevent an understanding of the implications of the *hejab* from the positions of the women who live it (Hoodfar 1993).

The notion of women as thoughtful and independent agents, whether veiled or unveiled is an important human rights issue. The contemporary controversy over the *hejab* needs to be viewed as an index of the social and political context in which the struggle for the *hejab* takes place.

Quebecois identity in the 1990s is in the process of redefining itself. This presents minority groups in Quebec, including Muslims an opportunity to challenge ideas and assumptions about Other cultures, as well as the fixation on *hejab* as a symbol of the Muslim Woman.

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¹Although not a mandatory requirement in Islam, the *Qur'an* advises that the wives of the Prophet cover their bosoms and jewellery (Chapter 24:30/31) and wrap their cloaks around their bodies (Chapter 33:59). This advice was institutionalized in Muslim countries as an ideal for all Muslim woman. Although recommended for all women, only urban women from the upper or middle classes can afford to observe the *hejab*. Rural women rarely wear the *hejab* which varies from a head scarf in parts of the Middle East to a total head to toe covering in India and Pakistan. For a discussion on the origins of the *hejab* see Hoodfar (1993).

²For further discussion of Islamism and how it impacts on women see Khan (1995). For a discussion of women's roles in Islamic (conservative) and Islamist (fundamentalist) visions see Stowasser.

³Although Lama Abu-Odeh uses the word post-colonial, I prefer to use neo-colonial. Post-colonial seems to indicate that unequal relations of colonial times is a thing of the past. However, as Samir Amin demonstrates, colonialism has taken a new form through the unequal development of the "Third World."

⁴Ironically, my decision to do this analysis is an aspect of my own collusion with those who are fixated on the veil as a totalizing emblem of identification of the Muslim Woman.

⁵The act of veiling.

⁶An example is the recent request by the Canadian Society of Muslims to have *Shari'a* (Islamic religious law) in Canada (Khan 1993).

⁷My use of the word "orientalism" in this instance is meant to imply static perceptions based on bodies of literature and appropriation of voices of traditions other than Islamic.

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NATHALIE STEPHENS

convoquée

rappelle-toi le temps où le
désir te fréquentait
le choc familier du billard le regard
muet
les corps humides au moindre toucher

rappelle-toi le temps où
l'amour t'échappait
par hasard ou par nécessité l'odeur
moite des
femmes masturbées
les miroirs embrumés des
toilettes où tu admires ton
propre reflet

dis-toi le temps où
l'extase te provoquait
au fond d'un verre à bout de
souffle
le regard égaré
le corps récalcitrant malgré
le verbe aimer
et les néons violets

dis-toi le temps où la vie
t'égorgeait
tu as les doigts niqués d'y avoir
tellement gratté
les bouteilles font la
queue devant toi cadavres
enragés et les mégots brûlent
toujours
histoire de t'exercer

rappelle-toi le temps où le
désir te convoitait
les paroles avalées au
profit des gémissements que
tu connais
la porte claquée sur la
sensibilité la sueur
plaintive d'avoir tellement ignoré le
battement de tes paupières contre
le vent glacé

rappelle-toi l'impossibilité du
corps dégage le cynisme né de
l'usure

dis-toi le cri du sexe détaché par
hasard ou par nécessité le temps
de l'anticipation refusée

arrache-toi au fil de ta pensée

arrache-toi
encore

et encore
je te reviendrai

natalie stephens est poète et écrivaine lesbienne. Ses écrits ont déjà paru en français, en anglais et en créole dans Arcade, les cahiers de la femme, Prairie Fire, Quarry et West Coast Line.