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Lama Abu-Odeh
Georgetown University Law Center, la34@law.georgetown.edu

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Post-Colonial Feminism and the Veil: Considering the Differences

Lama Abu-Odeh*

I. INTRODUCTION

Since the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the issue of the veil has been the topic of heated debate in Muslim countries; particularly in those countries that witnessed strong fundamentalist movements. Until then, adopting the veil had been the individual choice of Muslim women. The fact that the Islamicists who took power in Iran sanctioned the veil, and penalized those women who chose not to wear it, was a seductive, or alternatively a terrifying, reminder to women in other Muslim countries of what it might be like as a woman under Islamic rule. In countries such as Jordan, Algeria, and Egypt, where fundamentalist movements have mobilized many followers, including large numbers of women who have adopted the veil to signify their initiation into the movement, the question of the legal sanction of the veil has aroused intense reactions from supporters and opponents alike.

In this paper I will try to explore the question of the veil from the complicated perspective of an Arab feminist; one who rejects the veil as a personal choice, but also recognizes its empowering and seductive effect on Arab women. My discussion will be limited to the veil as it plays itself out in an Arab context, since this is what I am most familiar with. The analysis might, or might not, be true in other non-Arab, Muslim countries. Also, my “analysis” will be more of a personal journey of exploration and reflection than a traditional academic or scientific one.

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

* Candidate for S.J.D. at Harvard Law School.
II. FROM NON-VEIL TO VEIL

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

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

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

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

It is not unusual to find the length of a girl's dress the object of family debate:
Father/Brother: “That dress is too short. No respectable girl would wear it. Ask your daughter (addressing the mother) to take it off.”

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

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

Girl: “But it’s so pretty. All my friends wear dresses this short.”

Father/Brother: “Maybe they do, but I won’t have my daughter/sister walk in the streets with a dress like that. [The girl takes it off.]

Not infrequently, Arabic newspapers carry a story structured along the following lines: S.M. stabbed his sister K. in a coffee shop across from the university campus. The police are investigating the crime. A possible scenario for the crime: the woman, a university student belonging to the middle or lower classes, is having coffee with a colleague. Somebody “tips” her brother that she is involved in sexual relations with this man. Provoked by his sister’s friendly public behavior with another man, and shamed by other people’s thinking that this public behavior has in fact led to illicit sexual contact between them, the brother kills his sister in defense of the family’s sexual honor. The time between the “tip” and the actual murder is usually very brief. More concerned with the public perception than with the actual facts, the brother rushes to protect the family honor, promptly and unequivocally. After trial, the brother may be imprisoned for only one year. There is an extenuating circumstance: he has committed a “crime of honor,” sanctioned in most Arab penal codes.

The above two stories are points on a continuum. The way the girl dresses and how she behaves have heavy sexual significance. She is continuously subject to the test of “honor” and reputation, which she never really passes. Her sense of disempowerment stems from the terror exercised over her body, death being its infrequent extreme.

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

III. THE VEIL AS EMPOWERMENT

I earlier identified the women who have adopted the veil as mostly
young, working women or students. An important part of their daily life involves walking on the streets and using public transportation to go to work, school, or the university. Public exposure of this kind has never been comfortable for non-veiled women in Arab cities. Unfailingly subject to attention on the streets and on buses by virtue of being women, they are stared at, whistled at, rubbed against, and pinched. Comments by men such as, “What nice breasts you have,” or “How beautiful you are,” are frequent. Comments may be more subtle in tone, such as, “What a blessed day this is that I have seen you.” Ordinarily, women avoid any kind of direct verbal exchange with men when they are so approached. They either give the man a look of disapproval, or simply look ahead, dismayed, and continue on their way. Whatever their reaction, they are always acutely conscious of being looked at.

Exceptionally, a woman might engage in a verbal exchange with the man; where he is insistent in his approaches, continuing to rub his thigh against hers on the bus, despite her attempts at keeping a distance from him. She might retort angrily, “Keep away from me, you pig; don’t you have any sisters of your own?” A dramatic public scene usually ensues, whereby the man may jump to his self-defense, denying the allegation. The older men on the bus may condemn such behavior as “unworthy of man who has sisters, and a sign of the corruption of youth these days.” The passengers might also chide the woman for failing to dress properly, implying that if she had, such harassment might not have occurred. The bus driver might even gallantly ask the man to leave the bus.

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

The importance of these daily experiences and their “existential” effect on women, both veiled and non-veiled, is best understood when put in the context of Arab women’s relationship with their bodies. Public sexual harassment seems to reinforce the non-veiled woman’s ambivalence about her body, making her powerless in the face of
unwelcome intrusions. The problem does not seem to exist for veiled women, since adopting the veil was meant to shield them from such sexual approaches; when such approaches are actually made, they are looked upon as being simply outrageous, both by the veiled women themselves and the public.

IV. The Veil as Disempowerment

As I wrote down the title of this section, I thought that there are, surely, a hundred million ways in which the veil is disempowering to women. But as I searched in my mind for such examples, I discovered that those instances of disempowerment of which I was thinking reflected my own normative assumptions of how the world should be. In other words, they reflected my position as a feminist. Paradoxically enough, and as feminist as I am, instances of the disempowerment of the veil did not present themselves to me as self-evident. While it was obvious to me that the veil remedied the situation of sexual harassment on the street by discouraging men from invading veiled women’s space and by empowering the women to raise objections when such invasions took place, it wasn’t equally obvious to me that the veil actually weakened women and disabled them from confronting an uncomfortable daily experience.

Even when I activated my own normative assumptions about how the world should be, instances of disempowerment did not become any more self-evident. For instance, my normative assumptions, as an Arab feminist, are based on the premise that Arab women should be able to express themselves sexually, so that they can love, play, tease, flirt and excite. In a social context, such as the one in the Arab world where women can incur violent sanctions for expressing themselves sexually, such acts carry important normative weight to me as a feminist. In them, I see acts of subversion and liberation.

But loving, teasing, flirting, and seducing was not the way these women normatively saw their sexuality. If in all these acts I saw pleasure and joy, they saw only evil. For them, a society in which men and women interact sexually was undoubtedly corrupt. They therefore experience the veil as normatively necessary. Precisely because women should not go around seducing men, they should be veiled. The disempowerment of the veil that I reflected on seemed to express my panicked feminist self, one that sees the veil as threatening to its normative world and sexuality.

In a conversation with a veiled fundamentalist woman in her late twenties, who is single, I ask:

*I:* “But don’t you have sexual needs?”
*S*: “Sure I do.”
*I:* “What do you do with them?”
*S*: “Sure I have sexual needs, but nothing that is absolutely over-
whelming and impossible to deal with. I occupy myself all the time. I read books. I love to read books on Islam. To be 'pure' as a single woman is my absolute priority. I do not let these things preoccupy my thinking. It is simply not an issue for me.”

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

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

Father: “What is this you’re writing? Women going around seducing and teasing??!!”
I: “....”

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

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

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

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

V. PREACHING TO THE UNCONVERTED

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

I find that my position, and those of other feminists, is not devoid of ambivalence. We obviously fare worse when it comes to empowering women on the streets. If our remedy for male domination is a long agenda of changing the laws, claiming our right to walk the streets without harassment, and raising consciousness about the “equality” of men and women, then what we have proposed is terribly unattractive. It is long-term (while the veil as a remedy is immediate), sounds hopelessly utopian, and demanding of women to engage in what sounds like a difficult and impossible personal/political struggle. But what is even more serious than all this, in contrast to the image of social respectability that the veil bestows on those who wear it (analogous to the respect afforded a woman dressed like a nun), we seem to offer women a discourse that will make them socially conspicuous, questionable, and sus-
pect. For the ambivalent woman of the seventies, already dogged in her pursuit of a good reputation, what we offer her looks not only unattractive, but almost socially suicidal.

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

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

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

VI. SOLIDARITY WITH THE VEILED

So far I have constructed the positions of the "veiled" and the feminist as being sharply contrasted. I had indicated earlier that they seem to me to represent a hopeless clash of normative visions. But let me step down a little bit and reshuffle the positions I have constructed. Who wants to talk about normative visions anyway? They often seem to lead nowhere. Perhaps the feminist path and the veiled one crisscross. Perhaps they do so to such an extent that they are no longer singularly identifiable as such. To show how they might possibly do that, we need to break them down and attack their coherence.
The coherence of the veiled position breaks down like this: the contemporary veil seeks to address, among other things, sexual harassment on the street. It seeks to protect women on their way to work and to school. Its female subjects are socially conspicuous a priori; they are not women who are staying locked indoors. It has come to remedy the uncomfortable daily lives of single, young women, who are leaving the house seeking work and education.

But the veil as rhetoric assumes that women should ideally be inconspicuous. They should be locked indoors, out of men's way so as not to seduce them. They should not go out to work, their rightful place is in the house as wives and mothers, not as wage workers.

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

Even more paradoxically, fundamentalist ideology, as the inspiration for the rhetoric of the veil, assumes that women should work only out of necessity, and only in professions that are considered feminine, such as teaching and nursing. Once in the workplace they should minimize their contact with men to the greatest extent possible. Whether during working hours or during break-time, individual women and individual men should not be left alone. Men are presumed to be the leaders in any context, both at work and at home.

Women who adopt the veil for its empowering effect on the street as they go to work, could find themselves seriously disempowered when the veil carries its "logic" to the workplace. Spatial and functional segregation between the sexes, as the fundamentalist ideology of the veil envisages for the workplace, could seriously affect the career prospects of veiled women. Since they live and work in a world where men are the decision makers, and where men are situated higher in the hierarchy of the workplace, minimizing contact between men and women could only result in further isolating women from the positions of power and decision making.

The ambivalence toward their position as veiled women seeking work could be effectively utilized by feminists. Seeing this as a golden opportunity for joining hands with veiled women, feminists can offer their politics as a remedy for the disempowerment veiled women experience at the workplace. Liberal feminist demands, such as equality in the distribution of responsibilities between men and women, equality of promotion opportunities between the sexes, day-care facilities for women, can be offered to these women as empowering political tools for them as wage workers. Such demands will undoubtedly resonate deeply in veiled women's experience at the workplace. Feminism could thus become the empowering politics for the veiled women at work.
The ironic side about all this for feminists, is that all of a sudden, they could find themselves joining hands with veiled women as “comrades” in political action. The coherence of the feminist position could thus become open to question. Post-colonial feminism will have to adjust itself to the fact that its empowered subject are veiled women, not female subjects engaged in a struggle for free and equal interaction with men in a free play of sexuality. In other words, feminist women and veiled women are now sisters.

VII. VEILED AND DIVIDED: THE BATTLE OVER THE BODY

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

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

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

There are also those whose private, more colorful bodies shyly, but daringly, push to become more public. They wear make-up with the veil. They are more creative and fashion-conscious in public, so that they constantly attempt to subvert the blandness of the veil. They invent a million ways to tie a colorful scarf on their heads, supplanting the more standard white. The loose dress of the veil suddenly becomes slightly tighter, more colorful, and daring in emulating western fashions, even if it doesn’t explicitly reveal more parts of the female body. One also notices them on the streets conversing and strolling with men, subverting the segregation that the veil imposes on the sexes.
There are also those who wear the veil, but retain a fiercely ambivalent relationship with it; wearing it is a decision that is made almost everyday. It is not uncommon to find them wearing it some days and taking it off others. These women might say, “Wearing the veil, I find sometimes encourages me to binge on food since my whole body is covered in public, and I tend to lose touch with it. I feel I need to take it off sometimes. I need the public voyeur’s gaze to control myself.”

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

Of course, a veiled woman is not necessarily either “this” or “that.” She might shift from one position to another. At times colorful, other times bland, seductive and prudish, publicly and privately. A veiled woman’s subjectivity appears to be much more complicated than any meaning the word “veil” could possible convey.

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

VIII. THE FEMINIST RESITUATES HERSELF

In this section, I shall refer to the “rhetoric of the veil”; that is, the fundamentalist construction of the veil as it is circulated ideologically. A woman who decides to wear the veil is usually subjected to a certain ideological indoctrination (by a fundamentalist preacher), in which she is told that every Muslim woman needs to cover her body so as not to seduce men, and that in doing this she obeys the word of Allah. Otherwise, she will face Allah’s wrath in the day of judgment. (I have already briefly referred to this in the section entitled “Solidarity with the Veiled.”) It is in relation to, and at the same time by means of, this “official” rhetoric that the different women I have just described construct their position of ambivalence or subversion.

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

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

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

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

_Veiled Woman_: "Thank you. I get bored with the way I look if I wear it the same way everyday."

_Feminist_: "I thought the whole point was to wear it the same everyday so that you don't attract attention to your body."

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

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

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