

THE VEIL IN HISTORY, POLITICS AND MODERN SOCIETY

by Sarah Marsh

The following review article is based largely on the book by Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, New Haven, CT. & London, UK: Yale University Press, 1992. Numbers in parenthesis in the article refer to page numbers in the book.

All of us who work in the Middle East have seen Muslim women wearing veils. Some may wear them only on occasion, others frequently or regularly. Perhaps some of us wear veils on occasion. The veil is also becoming more common in the West as Muslims emigrate to Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand and bring their customs with them. Do you remember the recent incident about Muslim girls in France being expelled from school for wearing veils?

What does the veil mean to Muslims and to others in their society? What does it mean to the casual Western observer? What does it mean to us who want to understand and sympathize with Muslim people, and especially with Muslim women?

Historical Development of the Seclusion & Veiling of Women.

Mesopotamia before the time of Christ.

Archeological evidence from Mesopotamia suggests that women were held in esteem prior to the rise of urban societies, and suffered a decline in status with the emergence of urban centers and city states. (p11) The importance of increasing the population and labor power led to the theft of women, whose sexuality and reproductive capacity became the first "property" that tribes competed for. Warrior cultures favoring male dominance consequently emerged (p12). [Think of the Trojans and Greeks fighting over Helen.]

The growth of complex urban societies and the increasing importance of military competitiveness further entrenched male dominance and gave rise to a class-based society in which the military and temple elites made up the propertied classes. The patriarchal family, designed to guarantee the paternity of property-heirs by vesting in men the control of women, became institutionalized, codified, and upheld by the state. A woman was designated the property of men, first of her father, then of her husband; female sexual purity became negotiable, economically valuable property. Marriages were generally monogamous, except among royalty, though commoners might take second wives or concubines if the first wife was childless (p14).

The rules of veiling were carefully detailed. Wives and daughters of nobles, concubines accompanying their mistresses, former "sacred prostitutes" now married, all had to veil, but harlots and slaves were forbidden to veil. The veil came to differentiate between respectable women and those who were publicly available. The veil signaled to men which women were under male protection and which were fair game.

Eastern Mediterranean Region in the early centuries AD

In the period immediately preceding Islam, ideas fundamental to Christianity—the intrinsic value of the individual, the equal spiritual worth of men and women and of slaves and master, and the superiority of virginity over wifely obedience (nuns, for instance)—in some ways subverted ideas fundamental to the reigning patriarchies of the age (p25-26). Byzantine women, largely Christian by this time, were nevertheless still not supposed to be seen in public. Women and young girls were only allowed to leave the house to attend marriages, births, or religious events, or to go to the public baths. Here also, the veil distinguished honest women from prostitutes. Some respectable women, such as midwives and doctors, were able to move about in public, and some dealt in retail and long-distance trade, or invested money. Byzantine practice was thus very close to that of Muslim society from the 8th to the 18th centuries (1000 years).

Arabia around the time of Muhammad

Islamic civilization developed a construct of history that labeled the pre-Islamic period the Age of Ignorance (the *Jahilia*) and projected Islam as the sole source of all that was civilized. In its rewriting of history, it used that construct so effectively that the peoples of the Middle East lost all knowledge of the past civilization of the region. It successfully concealed, among other things, the fact that in some middle Eastern cultures, women had been considerably better off before the rise of Islam than afterward (p36-37).

In the sixth century AD, Arabia formed an island, the last remaining region in the Middle East in which patrilineal, patriarchal marriage had not yet been instituted as its sole legitimate form. Khadija's marriage to Mohammed reflects customs in effect during the *Jahilia*. By contrast, after Muhammad became the established prophet and leader of the Muslim community, autonomy and monogamy were conspicuously absent in the lives of his wives, and the male guardianship of women and the male prerogative of polygyny (more than one wife) were to become formal features of Islamic marriage (p42-43). What happened to Aisha foreshadowed the limitations that would thenceforth hem in the lives of Muslim women: she was born to Muslim parents, married Muhammad when she was nine or ten, and soon thereafter, along with her co-wives, began to observe the new customs of veiling and seclusion (p43).

The lives of Muhammad's wives were the first to be circumscribed, and during his lifetime the verses enjoining seclusion applied to them alone. Early texts record the occasions for the verses instituting veiling and seclusion for his wives, offer vignettes of the lives of women in the society Islam was displacing, and record the steps by which Islam closed women's arenas of action. These texts do not distinguish between veiling and seclusion; they use the term *hijab* interchangeably both to mean first "a curtain," in the sense of a separation or partition, and then "a veil," as in *darabat al-hijab*— "she took the veil"—which in turn meant "she became a wife of [Muhammad]." They use the same term to refer to the seclusion in general of Muhammad's wives and to the decrees relating to their veiling (p53-54, cf. Stern, *Marriage in Early Islam*, pp. 111ff.).

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By instituting seclusion, Muhammad was creating a distance between his wives and those who thronged his doorstep: tribal envoys or members of the community seeking religious or political rulings. It was the distance appropriate for the wives of the now powerful leader of a new, unambiguously patriarchal society. He was, in effect, summarily creating in non-architectural terms the form of segregation—the *harem* quarters—that was already firmly established in such neighboring patriarchal societies as Byzantium and Iran, and perhaps he was even borrowing from their architectural and social practices (p55).

Apparently, veiling was not introduced into Arabia by Muhammad; it existed already among some classes, particularly in the towns, although it was probably more prevalent in the countries with which the Arabs were in contact, such as Syria and Palestine. There, as in Arabia, it was connected with social status. Greeks, Romans, Jews, and Assyrians all practiced veiling to some degree. It is nowhere explicitly prescribed in the Qur'an, but Sura 24:31-32 instructs women to guard their private parts and throw a scarf over their bosoms (p55).

By the 10th century, the Abbasid or Classical Age of Islam, Muslim legal thought and practice achieved final formulation. During Muhammad's lifetime and the first centuries thereafter, Arab Muslim soldiers had quickly gained great wealth, and took wives from among the conquered peoples of Persia and Syria. The capital was moved to Damascus, and then to Baghdad. The codification of the Hadith included absorbing the cultural practices of the conquered peoples as interpreted by the conquerors.

Political Significance of the Veil in Colonial Egypt.

For Middle Eastern women in general, the effects of European political and cultural encroachment in the 19th century were complicated and, in certain respects, decidedly negative. In crucial ways, however, the outcome of the process of change set in motion by these encroachments was broadly positive, because the social institutions and mechanisms for the control and seclusion of women and for their exclusion from the major domains of activity in their society were gradually dismantled (pp127-128). For the first time since Islam was established, the treatment of women in Islamic custom and law (polygamy, easy male access to divorce, and segregation) was openly discussed. From the start the discussion of women and of the need for reform was embedded in considerations of the relative advancement of European societies and the need for Muslim societies to catch up (p128). The veil emerged as a potent signifier, not only of the social meaning of gender but also of matters of far broader political and cultural import. It has retained that cargo of signification ever since.

Rashid Rida, a respected social reformer of late 19th century Egypt, commented on the changes that had taken place in women's lives. The imitation of European ways could be observed everywhere among the upper classes and "those that followed them from the people"; even the veil, he asserted, was being removed by degrees (p142). Comments made early in the new century indicate that upper-class women traveling in Europe became accustomed to being unveiled; for the most part they veiled only when at home in Egypt. Among this class the veil became lighter and more transparent, apparently in imitation of the fashions of Istanbul (p143). By the end of the 19th century, women in a

variety of dress, veiled and unveiled, openly pursuing a range of professional activities, had begun to be features of this society (p143).

Qassim Amin's *Tahrir Al-Mar'a* ("The Liberation of Woman"), published in 1899, caused intense and furious debate. The anger and passion that his work provoked become intelligible only in the light of its insistence upon the abolition of the veil, rather than the substantive reforms for women that it advocated (which were not radical by his time). In his view, changing the customs regarding women and their clothing, especially the veil, was essential to bringing about the desired social transformation. The battle of the veil in the press inaugurated a new discourse in which the veil assumed far broader significations than women's position in society alone. Its connotations now encompassed issues of class and culture: the widening gulf between the different classes in society, and the related conflict between the culture of the colonizers and that of the colonized (p145). The principle beneficiaries of the British reform measures and of increased involvement in European capitalism were the European residents of Egypt, the Egyptian upper classes, and the new middle class of rural notables and men educated in Western-type secular schools who became the civil servants and the new intellectual elite. Traditional knowledge, such as that gained at the Qur'an schools, became devalued as antiquated, and mired in the old "backward" ways.

The intense debate provoked by Amin must be understood in the context of ideas imported into the local situation from the colonizing society (p149). Veiling, in *Western eyes* the most visible marker of the differentness and inferiority of Islamic societies, became the symbol of both the oppression of women and the backwardness of Islam, and the open target of colonial attack on Muslim societies.

Cromer, the British Consul General, had quite decided views on Islam, women in Islam, and the veil. He believed quite simply that Islamic religion and society were inferior to those of Europe and bred inferior men (p152). He wrote that whereas Christianity teaches respect for women, and European men "elevated" women because of the teachings of their religion, Islam degraded them; it was to this degradation, most evident in the practices of veiling and segregation, that he traced the inferiority of Muslim men. He never doubted that the practices of veiling and seclusion exercised a "baneful effect on Eastern society" (p153). Marriage in Islam was "not founded on love but on sensuality," and a Muslim wife, "buried alive behind the veil," was regarded as "prisoner and slave rather than ... companion and helpmeet." Cromer was a hypocrite, however; he opposed women's suffrage in England, and cut back the budget for women's education in Egypt. The ideas of Western feminism essentially functioned to morally justify the attack on native societies and to support the notion of the comprehensive superiority of Europe.

These ideas formed the basis of Amin's book (p155). He describes Muslim marriage as based not on love but on ignorance and sensuality, as does missionary discourse. In his book, however, the blame is shifted from men to women who become the chief source of the "lewdness," coarse sensuality and materialism that characterize Muslim marriages; since only superior souls could experience true love, this was beyond the capacity of the Egyptian wife. The fundamental and contentious premise of the work was his

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endorsement of the Western view of the inferiority of Islamic civilization, peoples, and customs. His view of women was profoundly patriarchal and even misogynist. He merely substituted Islamic-style male dominance for Western-style male dominance.

This negative Western perception spread to other parts of the Muslim world. In the 1920s the Iranian ruler, Reza Shah, went so far as to issue a proclamation banning the veil. The ban, which symbolized the westerly direction in which the ruling class intended to lead society and signaled the eagerness of the upper classes to show that they were "civilized," was quite differently received by the popular classes. Rumors of the ban provoked unrest, and demonstrations broke out which were ruthlessly crushed. For most Iranians, women as well as men, the veil was not "a symbol of backwardness," as the upper classes thought, but "a sign of propriety and a means of protection against the menacing eyes of male strangers."

Ever since then, the colonialist use of feminism to undermine native Arab culture has tainted feminism, rendering it suspect in Arab eyes and vulnerable to the charge of being an instrument of colonial domination and an ally of colonial interests. True, reforms introduced by upper and middle-class political leaders who had accepted and internalized the Western discourse led, in some countries and specifically Turkey, to legal reforms benefiting women. Atatürk's programs included the replacement of the Sharia family code with one inspired by the Swiss family code; it outlawed polygamy, gave women equal rights to divorce, and granted child-custody rights to both parents. These reforms benefited primarily women of the urban bourgeoisie, but had little impact beyond this class. Whether they will endure remains to be seen, however; even in Turkey, Islam and the veil are coming back: militant Turkish women have staged sit-ins and hunger strikes to demand the right to veil (p168, Deniz Kandiyoti, "Women and the Turkish State: Political Actors or Symbolic Pawns?"). Reforms in the laws governing marriage and divorce that were introduced in Iran in the 1960s and 1970s, though not as far-reaching as those of Turkey, have already been reversed since the Revolution.

By 1910 or so, unveiling was distinctly on the increase in Egypt (p172). The literary, intellectual, and social life of women in fact went through a period of enormous vitality. Huda Sha'rawi (1879-1947) founded the Egyptian Feminist Union. After attending a conference in Rome in 1923, she and Saiza Nabarawi removed their veils, presumably in a symbolic act of emancipation, as they stepped off the train in Cairo. For Sha'rawi it was the fulfillment of a childhood dream. She had been guided by her friend and mentor Eugenie Le Brun and shared her belief that "the veil stood in the way of Egyptian women's advancement" (p177).

Where Sha'rawi espoused a Westward-looking feminism, already in the 1900s and 1910s, Malak Hifni Nassef was articulating the basis of a feminism that did not automatically affiliate itself with westernization. Nassef was opposed to unveiling, and her views in this matter suggest the differences between her perspective on feminism and culture and that of Sha'rawi, as well as give some sense of the incisiveness of Nassef's thought and the precision of her understanding of the new varieties of male domination being enacted in and through the contemporary male discourse of the veil (p179).

Nassef (1886-1918) took up the subject of the veil within a decade or so of the publication of Amin's book advocating unveiling. Nassef explained that she felt bound to comment, for the subject continued to provoke such a "battle of the pens." She was opposed to unveiling, though not for the usual conservative reasons. She neither believed that religion dictated anything specific on the matter nor that women who veiled were more modest than those who did not, for true modesty was not determined by the presence or absence of a veil. Men based their views on the veil on their "imaginings," she said, but she based hers on "observations and experience." In the first place, she points out, women were accustomed to veiling and should not be abruptly ordered to unveil. Egyptian women were too "ignorant" and the men of such "corruptness" that unveiling and the mixing of the sexes was for the present a bad idea. What was essential was not for intellectuals to debate the veil but for "you men" to give women a true education and rectify how people are raised, and to improve your own moral character.

The Political and Social Significance of the Veil in Modern Society.

Veiling first reappeared among university students in major urban centers, such as Cairo, Alexandria, and Assiut in the 1970s. It is among these, and young professionals of both sexes, that formal or informal affiliation with the Islamist trend, indicated outwardly by veiling among women, became most prevalent. Although the term veiling is commonly used in English to refer to the new "Islamic" dress (in Arabic the women are referred to as *mutahajibat*, "veiled ones") the clothing women wear often in fact does not include a veil, in the sense of a face covering, but rather a variety of styles of headgear and face coverings which mask it to a greater or lesser degree—if worn at all. The garments, of whatever style, are intended to conform to the Islamic requirement that dress be modest, that is, not sexually enticing; the mandate applies to both men and women. It is generally taken to mean robes, or loose-fitting, long-sleeved, ankle-length garments that do not reveal the contours of the body. Both men and women conforming to this code have developed styles of dress that are essentially quite new. They do not copy the traditional dress of Egypt or of any other part of the Arab world, or the West, although they often combine features of all three. The term "Islamic dress" means that they fulfill the Islamic requirement of modesty, not that they are derived from an Islamic society of the past.

Men complying with the requirement of modesty may wear Arabian-style robes (rather than Egyptian robes), sandals, and sometimes a long scarf on the head, or they may wear baggy trousers and loose shirts. Women wear robes in a variety of styles, all of which resemble Western styles more than traditional peasant dress, except that the skirts are ankle length and the sleeves long. Along with the robes they wear an assortment of headgear, ranging from scarves, hats, and bonnets to what might be described as wimples and fabric balaclavas. Depending on how they interpret the requirement for modesty, some wear face-veils which come in a variety of styles, thicknesses and lengths. Finally, some also wear gloves. Traditional dress also fulfills the Islamic requirement of modesty, but in modern times it has come to be confined to the lower classes and the peasantry. It therefore identifies the wearers with that class, whereas "Islamic" dress, *al-ziyy al-islami*, which might be seen as a democratic dress, erases class origins (p221).

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Women who wear Islamic dress usually joined an Islamic group in their late teens or early twenties, and were usually studying in fields that require the highest grades. They are for the most part of the new middle classes, and more typically of the lower middle classes, and often have a rural background or come from families that have recently migrated to urban centers. A study was conducted among veiled and unveiled women at Cairo University. It showed that a majority of veiled students came from families in which other women were veiled, especially their mothers. That is, their adoption of Islamic dress did not entail innovation and conformity to new, socially accepted codes of dress, but rather the adoption of a "modern" version of the conventions of dress to which they and their families were accustomed (p222).

Typically these women are educationally and professionally upwardly mobile, and are confronting bewildering, anonymous, cosmopolitan city life for the first time. There, vivid inequalities, consumerism and materialism, foreign mores, and unscrupulous business practices linked to the foreign presence, whether Western or Arab, are glaringly apparent. They are generally the first generation of women in their family to emerge socially into a world where men and women intermingle on the university campuses, in the crowded transport system, and in the professions. In the face of such stresses and novelties, preserving the conventions of dress that prevailed at home, while adopting the version of that dress that proclaims educational and professional upward mobility appears to be a practical coping strategy, enabling them to negotiate in the new world while affirming the traditional values of their upbringing (p222-223).

For women, Islamic dress also appears to bring a variety of distinct *practical* advantages. On the simplest, most material level, it is economical. One is saved the expense of acquiring fashionable clothes and having more than two or three outfits. It also protects 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. It declares their presence to be in no way a challenge to, or a violation of, the Islamic sociocultural ethic. It thus has the paradoxical effect, as some 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. In an age in which arranged marriages are disappearing and women need to find their own marriage partners, clothes that enable women to socialize with men to some degree and at the same time indicate their adherence to a strict moral code (which makes them attractive as wives) are advantageous in very tangible ways.

The adoption of Islamic dress thus legitimizes women's presence outside the home rather than declaring their place to be in the home. Consequently, it appears that the prevalence of Islamic dress among women coming of age in the 1970s and 1980s—women of the second phase—should not be seen as a retreat from the affirmations of female autonomy and subjectivity made by the generation immediately preceding them (p224).

Recently, however, there have been some *backward steps* in regard to veiling and women's emergence into society

Iran after 1979: Immediately upon taking power, Ayatollah Khomeini began a campaign to “drive women back into the sphere of domesticity.” Their mere presence in public was described as ‘seditious’ and “they were required to don the Islamic *hijab*, covering them from top to toe.” Defiance of the rule to wear the hijab was punishable by 74 lashes (p232).

Pakistan.: In 1980 Zia Ul-Huq issued the first of a series of directives ordering all women government employees to veil (p233).

Egypt: 67% of the veiled university students responding to the questionnaire agreed to the proposal that *Sharia* law should become the law of the land, and 53% of the unveiled women agreed. It is surely extremely doubtful that either group has any idea of the extremes of control, exclusion, injustice, and brutality that can be legitimately meted out to women in the name of Islam (p234).

The reemergent veil is an emblem of many things, prominent among which is the rejection of the West. In the 19th century, under the influence of Western thinking, it became the symbol of backwardness, and Muslim women sought advancement through unveiling. Today, the symbol is still there, but it has become an expression of cultural resurgence. Muslim women are again “veiling” in order to take stronger roles in their own society.

THE GOOD TUNISIAN GIRL

Factors To Consider When Trying To Reach Young Tunisian Women With The Gospel

by Katherine Conrad

“I want to marry Leila.” Ahmed informs his mother. It is one of his most decisive steps on the pathway to being able to marry the woman of his life. *“I first want to find out if she is a good girl,”* his mother responds, rather skeptically.

During the weeks that follow, Ahmed’s mother contacts Leila’s relatives, neighbours and other acquaintances, to find out what kind of girl she is. They ultimately confirm that she comes from a respectable, well-to-do family—and that she is a “good” girl. Ahmed and Leila can now happily be united.

But what is it that makes Leila a “good” girl? By what standards is she judged? To what set of measurements is she subjected? To which role must she conform, in order to be accepted in her family and in society? And—what kind of self-image does she develop while trying to behave in this “right” way?

The Status of Women in Tunisian Society

“Good” Tunisian girls are identified mostly by what they are *not*, or *do not do*. Because women are generally considered to have less worth than men, a good Tunisian woman is one who does not take for herself rights which are reserved for men. Practically this means that she should not decide things for herself, do things on her own, or try in any way to be independent. For example, she is not granted the right to decide about her future (what