

# The Veil in Their Minds and On Our Heads: The Persistence of Colonial Images of Muslim Women

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Muslim women, and particularly Middle Eastern and North African women, have been among the most enduring subjects of discussion in the western media for the past two centuries. Without any doubt I can also assert that the issue of the veil and the oppression of Muslim women have been the most frequent topics of discussion I have been engaged in, often reluctantly, during some 20 years of my life in the western world (mostly in the UK and Canada). Whenever I meet a person of white/European descent, I regularly find that as soon as he/she ascertains that I am Muslim/Middle Eastern/Iranian, the veil very quickly emerges as the prominent topic of conversation. This scenario occurs everywhere, in trains, the grocery store, the laundromat, on the university campus, or at a party. The range of knowledge of these eager conversants varies: some honestly confess total ignorance of Islam and Islamic culture or Middle Eastern societies; others base their claims and opinions on their experiences in colonial armies in the Middle East, or on their travels through the Middle East to India during the 1960s; still others cite films or novels as their reference.

What I have found remarkable is that despite their admitted ignorance on the subject, almost all people I met were, with considerable confidence, adamant that women had a particularly tough time in Muslim cultures. Occasionally western non-Muslim women would tell me they are thankful that they were not born in a Muslim culture. Sometimes they went so far as to say that they were happy that I am living in their society rather than my own, since obviously my ways are more like theirs, and since now, having been exposed to western ways, I could never return to the harem!

For years I went through much pain and frustration, trying to convey that many assumptions about Muslim women were false, and were based on the racism and biases of the colonial powers, yet without defending or denying the patriarchal barriers that Muslim women face. I took pains to give examples of how western biases against non-western societies abound. In research, for example, social scientists often fail to compare like with like. The situation of poor illiterate peasant women of the South is implicitly or explicitly compared with the experiences of upper- middle-class women of western societies (Lazreg, 1988). Failing to contextualize non-western societies adequately, many researchers simply assume that what is good for western middle-class women

should be good for all other women (Mabro, 1991; Kabbani, 1986; Alloula, 1986). Frustratingly, in the majority of cases, while my conversants listened to me, they did not hear, and at the end of the conversation they would reiterate their earlier views as if our discussion were irrelevant. More recently, however, they treat me as an Islamic apologetic, which in fact silences me so that I can no longer argue.

I had assumed that my experiences were unique, and were the result of my moving in milieux that had little contact with or knowledge of Muslim communities or cultures. However, through my recent research on the integration of Muslim women in educational institutions and the labour market in Canada, which has brought me into contact with many young Muslim women, I have come to realize that these reactions on the part of the dominant group are much more prevalent than I had thought. Moreover, all members of the Muslim community, and in particular veiled women, are suffering the psychological and socio-economic consequences of these views. This situation has created a high level of anger and frustration in response to the deliberate racism toward Muslims in Canada and the unwillingness, despite ample examples, to let go of old colonial images of passive Muslim women. The assumption that the "veil" equals "ignorance" and "oppression" has meant that young Muslim women have to invest a considerable amount of energy in establishing themselves as thinking, rational, literate students/persons, both in their classrooms and outside.

In this paper I draw on historical sources, my research data on young Muslim women in Canada, and my own experience as a non-veiled Muslim woman of Iranian descent, to argue that the veil, which since the nineteenth century has symbolized for the West the inferiority of Muslim cultures, remains a powerful symbol both for the West and for Muslim societies. However, while for Westerners its meaning has been static and unchanging, in Muslim cultures the veil's functions and social significance have varied tremendously, particularly during times of rapid social change. Veiling is a lived experience full of contradictions and multiple meanings. While it has clearly been a mechanism in the service of patriarchy, a means of regulating and controlling women's lives, women have used the same social institution to free themselves from the bonds of patriarchy. Muslim women like all other women are social actors, employing, reforming, and changing existing social institutions, often creatively, to their own ends. The static colonial image of the oppressed veiled Muslim woman thus often contrasts sharply with women's lived experience of veiling. To deny this is also to deny Muslim women their agency.

The continuation of misconceptions and misinterpretations about the veil and veiled women has several consequences, not just for Muslim women but also for occidental women. The mostly man-made images of oriental Muslim women continue to be a mechanism by which western dominant cultures re-create and perpetuate beliefs about their superiority. The persistence of colonial and racist responses

to their societies has meant that Muslim communities and societies must continually struggle to protect their cultural and political identities, a situation which makes it harder for many Muslim women, who share the frustration of their community and society, to question the merits and uses of the veil within their own communities. Moreover, the negative images of Muslim women are continuously presented as a reminder to European and North American women of their relative good fortune and an implied warning to curb their "excessive" demands for equality with men. Yet all too often western feminists uncritically participate in the dominant androcentric approaches to other cultures and fail to see how such participation is ultimately in the service of patriarchy. Significantly, western feminists' failure to interrogate critically colonial, racist and androcentric constructs of women of non-western cultures forces Muslim women to choose between fighting sexism or racism. As Muslim feminists have often asked, must racism be used in the fight against sexism?

To illustrate the persistence of the social and ideological construction of the veil in colonial practices and discourses and its contrast to the lived experience of veiling, I will first briefly review a history of the veil and its representation in the west. Then by examining some of the consequences of both compulsory de-veiling and re-veiling in Iran, I will demonstrate the costs to Iranian women of generalized and unsubstantiated assumptions that the veil is inherently oppressive and hence that its removal is automatically liberating. I will then discuss some of my findings on the representation of the veil and its usage in the context of Canadian society and its consequences for young Muslim women, in their communities, and in their interaction with other women, particularly feminists. I will point out how the androcentric images and stereotypes of occidental and oriental women inhibit women's learning about and from each other and weakens our challenge to both patriarchy and western imperialism.

### The Origins of the Veil

The practice of veiling and seclusion of women is pre-Islamic and originates in non-Arab Middle Eastern and Mediterranean societies (Nashat, 1988; Keddie and Beck, 1978). The first reference to veiling is in an Assyrian legal text which dates from the thirteenth century BC, which restricted the practice to respectable women and forbade prostitutes from veiling (Keddie, 1991, p. 3). Historically, veiling, especially when accompanied by seclusion, was a sign of status and was practised by the élite in the ancient Greco-Roman, pre-Islamic Iranian and Byzantine empires. Muslims adopted the veil and seclusion from conquered peoples, and today it is widely recognized, by Muslims and non-Muslims, as an Islamic phenomenon that is presumably sanctioned by the Qur'an. Contrary to this belief, veiling is nowhere specifically recommended or even discussed in the Qur'an (Mernissi, 1991).

At the heart of the Qur'anic position on the question of the veil is the interpretation of two verses (Surah al-Nur, verses 30-31) which recommend that women cover their bosoms and jewellery. This has come to mean that women should cover themselves. Another verse recommends to the wives of the Prophet to 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). Modern

commentators have rationalized that since the behaviour of the wives of the Prophet is to be emulated, then all women should adopt this form of dress (Bedawi, n.d.). In any case, it was not until the reign of the Safavids (1501-1722) in Iran and the Ottoman Empire (1357-1924) which extended to most of the area that today is known as the Middle East and North Africa, that the veil emerged as a widespread symbol of status among the Muslim ruling class and urban élite. Significantly, it is only since the nineteenth century, after the veil was promoted by the colonials as a prominent symbol of Muslim societies, that Muslims have justified it the name of Islam, and not by reference to cultural practices (Esposito, 1988).<sup>1</sup>

Although the boundaries of veiling and seclusion have been blurred in many debates, and particularly in western writing, the two phenomena are separate, and their consequences for Muslim women are vastly different. Seclusion, or what is sometimes known as *purdah*, is the idea that women should be protected, especially from males who are not relatives; thus they are often kept at home where their contact with the public is minimized. Seclusion may or may not be combined with the veiling that is the clothing which covers the whole of women's bodies.

It has been argued that seclusion developed among Mediterranean and Middle Eastern societies because they prefer endogamous marriages; consequently they tend to develop social institutions which lend themselves to more control of young people, particularly the women (Tillion, 1983). The argument is made even more strongly for Muslim women because they inherit wealth and remain in control of their wealth after marriage. Although a daughter's inherited share is equal to half as much as that of a son, it is also established that a father, by religion, does not have the power to disinherit his daughters. It is an irony of history that the more economic rights women have had, the more their sexuality has been subject to control through the development of complex social institutions.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, outside the well-to-do social élites, any considerable degree of seclusion was rarely practised, since women's economic as well as reproductive labour was essential for the survival of their households. In reality the majority of social classes, particularly in rural settings, practised segregation and sexual division of labour rather than seclusion. The exertion of these controls often created an obstacle but did not erase Muslim women's control of their wealth (if they had any), which they managed.<sup>3</sup>

However, as the socio-economic conditions changed, factory production and trade became the major sources of wealth and capital. Élite women lost ground to their male counterparts. The ideology of seclusion prevented their easy access to the rapidly changing market and to information, thus limiting their economic possibilities. Consequently their socio-economic position vis-à-vis their husbands deteriorated. Moreover, the informal social institutions, class alliances, and kin networks that had protected women to some extent were breaking down very rapidly. This context is an important, though often neglected, reason for women of the upper classes in the Middle East to become more radically involved in the women's movement. In Egypt, where the socio-economic changes were most rapid, the women's movement developed into an organized and effective political force which other political groups could not afford to ignore (Abdel Kader, 1988; Jayawardena, 1986; Hoodfar,

1989). As for the women in other social groups, the modern and traditional ideology of domestication of women often excluded them from better paying jobs in the modern sector, particularly those jobs that involved travelling outside their neighbourhoods and being in contact with unrelated males. Moreover, the early modernist governments which sponsored the training of many citizens in fields such as commercial and international law, engineering and commerce, closed these options to women until a much later date, thereby reproducing and occasionally intensifying the gap already existing between men and women's economic opportunities.<sup>4</sup>

### The Veil

The veil refers to the clothing which covers and conceals the body from head to ankles, with the exception of the face, hands and feet. Incidentally, this is also an accurate description of the traditional male clothing of much of the Arab world, although in different historical periods authorities have tried, with varying degrees of success, to make the clothing more gender-specific.<sup>5</sup> The most drastic difference between male and female clothing worn among the Arab urban élite was created with the westernization and colonization of Muslim societies in the Middle East and North Africa. Men, particularly, began to emulate European ways of dress much sooner and much more than women did.

Although in western literature the veil and veiling are often presented as a unified and static practice that has not changed for more than a thousand years, the veil has been varied and has been subject to changing fashions throughout past and present history. Moreover, like other articles of clothing, the veil may be worn for multiple reasons. It may be worn to beautify the wearer (Wikan, 1982) much the same way western women wear make-up, to demonstrate respect for conventional values (Hoodfar, 1991; Abu-Lughod, 1986), or to hide the wearer's identity (Fernea, 1965).

In recent times, the most frequent form of veiling in most cities is a long, loosely fitted dress of any colour combination, worn with a scarf wrapped, in various ways, around the head so as to cover all the hair. 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.<sup>6</sup> Throughout history, however, apart from the élite, women's labour was necessary to the functioning of the household and the economy and so women wore clothing that would not hamper their movement. Even a casual survey of clothing among most rural and urban areas in the Middle East and other Muslim cultures indicates that these women's costumes, though all are considered Islamic, cover the body to different degrees (Rugh, 1986). The tendency of western scholarly work and the colonial powers to present a uni-dimensional Islam and a seamless society of Muslims has prevented them from exploring the socio-economic significance of the existing variations which were readily available, sometimes in their own drawings and paintings. Similarly, scholarly studies of Islamic beliefs and culture has mainly focus on Islamic texts and use of Islamic dialogues, while overlooking the variations in the way Islam was practised in different Islamic cultures and by different classes.

Although clothing fulfils a basic need of human beings

in most climates, it is also a significant social institution through which important ideological and non-verbal communication takes place. Clothing is typically designed to indicate not only gender and life-cycle, but also social group and geographic area (Rugh 1986; Abu-Lughod, 1988). Moreover, in the Middle East, veiling has been intertwined with Islamic ethics, making it even more of a complex institution. According to Muslims, women should cover their hair and body when they are in the presence of adult men who do not belong to the specified category of close relatives; thus when women put on their veil or take off their veil, they are defining who may or may not be considered kin (MacLeod, 1991). Furthermore, since veiling defines sexuality, women, by observing or neglecting the veil, may define who is a man and who is not (Pastner, 1978). For instance, high status women may not observe the veil in the presence of low status men.

In the popular urban culture of Iran, in situations of conflict between men and women who are outside the family group, a very effective threat that women have is to drop their veil, and thus indicate that they do not consider the contestor to be a man (Hoodfar, 1991). This is an irrevocable insult, and cause men to be wary of getting into arguments with women. Similarly, by threatening to drop the veil and put on male clothing, women have at times manipulated men to comply with their wishes. One such example can be drawn from the "Tobacco Movement" of the late nineteenth century in Iran. In a meeting on devising resistance strategies against the tobacco monopoly and concessions given to Britain by the Iranian government, men expressed reluctance to engage in radical political action. Observing the men's hesitation, women nationalists who were participating in the meeting (from the women's section of the mosque) raised their voices and threatened that if the men failed to protect their country and its women and children, then the women had no alternative but to drop their veil and go to war themselves (Keddie, 1966).

### The Making of the Veil in Western Minds

It was not until the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century that the west's overwhelming preoccupation with the veil in Muslim cultures emerged. Travel accounts and observations from commentators prior to this time show little interest in Muslim women or the veil. The sexual segregation among all sects (Muslims, Christians and Jews) in Mediterranean and Middle Eastern cultures was established knowledge and prior to the nineteenth century rarely attracted much attention by European travellers. Some pre-nineteenth century accounts did report on oriental and Muslim women's lack of morality and shamelessness based on their revealing clothes and their free mobility (Tavakoli-Targhi, 1991). Others observed and commented on the extent of women's power within the domestic domain, an aspect totally overlooked in the latter part of nineteenth century (Atkinson, 1832; Tucker, 1985).

The representation of the Muslim orient by the Christian occident went through a fundamental change as the Ottoman empire's power diminished and the Muslim orient fell deeper and deeper under European domination. The appearance and circulation of the earliest version of *One Thousand and One Nights* in the west coincided with the Turkish defeat (Kabbani, 1986, p. 138). By the nineteenth century the focus of representation of the Muslim orient had



changed from the male barbarian, constructed over centuries during the Crusades, to the "uncivilized" ignorant male whose masculinity relies on the mistreatment of women, primarily as sex slaves. In this manner images of Muslim women were used as a major building block for the construction of the orient's new imagery, an imagery which has been intrinsically linked to the hegemony of western imperialism, particularly that of France and Britain (Said, 1978, 1993; Kabbani, 1986; Alloula, 1986).

Feminist and other scholars working in Muslim societies have recently begun to trace the entrenchment of the western image of the oppressed Muslim woman (Kabbani, 1986; Alloula, 1986; Mabro, 1991; Ahmed, 1992). This "commonsense" knowledge about Muslim women seeped into numerous travel books, and occasionally into historical and anthropological accounts of the region (Kabbani, 1986; Mabro, 1991).<sup>8</sup> In a century and a half, between 1800 and 1950, an estimated 60,000 books were published in the west on the Arab orient alone (Nader 1989, p. 27).<sup>9</sup> The primary mission of these writings was to depict the colonized Arabs/Muslims as inferior/backwards who were urgently in need of progress offered to them by the colonial superiors. It is in this political context that the veil, and the Muslim harem as the world of women, emerged as a source of fascination, fantasy, and frustration for western writers. Harems were supposed to be places where Muslim men imprisoned their wives, who had nothing to do except to beautify themselves and cater to their husbands' huge sexual appetites.<sup>10</sup> It is ironic that the word "harem," which etymologically derives from a root that connotes "sacred" and "shrine," has become such a negative image in the western world (Kabbani, 1986). Women are invariably depicted as prisoners, frequently half naked and unveiled and at times sitting at windows with bars, with little hope of ever being free (Alloula, 1986). How these mostly male writers, painters and photographers have found access to these presumably closed women's quarters/prisons is a question that has been raised only recently (Mabro, 1991; Kabbani, 1986).

Western representations of the harem were inspired not only by the fantasies of *A Thousand and One Nights*, but also by the colonizers' mission of subjugating the colonized. Their accounts excluded the reality of the harems and the way women experienced them. Of little interest to western readers was the fact that the vast majority of the population of Middle Eastern societies lived in rural areas, where they worked on the land and in the homes, with lives very different from the very small minority who were members of the well-to-do urban élite.<sup>11</sup> When western commentators of the nineteenth century came across a situation that contradicted their stereotype of the power structure in Muslim households, they simply dismissed it as exceptional.<sup>12</sup>

It is important to bear in mind that the transformation in the representation of Muslim women during the nineteenth century did not take place in isolation from other changes taking place in the imperial land, as Mabro (1991) has pointed out. During the same period, the ideology of femininity and what later came to be known as Victorian morality was developing in Britain, and variations on this theme were coming into existence in other areas of the Western world (Poovey, 1989; Pinchbeck, 1981). Yet Western writers zealously described the oppression of Turkish and Muslim women, with little regard for the fact that many of these criticisms applied equally to their own society. Both Muslim

oriental and Christian occidental women were thought to be in need of male protection and intellectually and biologically destined for the domestic domain. Moreover, in both the orient and occident women were expected to obey and honour their husbands.

In his book *Sketches of Persia* (1885), Sir John Malcolm reports a dialogue between himself and Meerza Aboo Talib in which he compares the unfavourable position of Persian women to European women. Meerza Aboo Talib makes a point that "we consider that loving and obeying their husbands, giving proper attention to their children, and their domestic duties, are the best occupations for females" (quoted in Mabro, 1991, p. 26). Sir John Williams then replies that this made the women slaves to their husbands' pleasure and housework. That is, of course, quite correct but as Mabro has pointed out, Aboo Talib's description and comment on Persian women was an equally correct description of women's duties in most European societies, including Britain, at the time (Mabro, 1991, p. 26).

Neither did western women travellers and writers draw parallels between the oppression of women in their own society and that of women in the orient. For instance, European women of the nineteenth century were hardly freer than their oriental counterparts in terms of mobility and travelling, a situation of which many European female expatriates repeatedly complained.<sup>13</sup> Mobile Shaman, in her book *Through Algeria*, lamented that women were not able to travel unless accompanied by men (Mabro, 1991, p. 11). Western women travellers often wrote about the boredom of oriental women's lives. It often escaped them that in many cases it was precisely the boredom and the limitation of domestic life which had been the major motivating force behind many western women's travels to the orient, an option no doubt open only to very few.<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, while western writers of the nineteenth century wrote about the troubled situation of women in polygamous marriages and the double standard applied to men and women, they totally ignored the plight of "mistresses" in their own societies and the vast number of illegitimate children, who not only had no right to economic support, but as "bastards" were also condemned to carry the stigma of the sin of their fathers for the rest of their lives. Clearly, societies in both the Muslim orient and the Christian occident practised a sexual double standard as it applied to men and women. Both systems of patriarchy were developed to cater to men's whims and to perpetuate their privileges. But the social institutions and ethos of the orient and occident that have developed in order to ensure male prerogatives were and are different. The western world embraced a monogamous ideology, overlooking the bleak life of a huge group of women and their illegitimate children. In the orient, at the cost of legitimization of polygynous marriages and institutionalizing the double standard, women and their children received at least a limited degree of protection and social legitimacy. Although the occident demonstrated little interest in the oriental images of the European world, numerous nineteenth-century documents indicate that oriental writers were conscious of the contradiction between the presentation of a civilized facade and the hideous and cruel reality of the western world for many women and children.<sup>15</sup>

Women in Qajar Iran were astonished by the clothing of western women and the discomfort that women must feel in the heavy and tight garments; they felt that Western soci-

eties were unkind to their women by attempting to change the shape of their bodies, forcing them into horrendous corsets (Tavakoli-Targhi, 1991). A scenario quoted in Mabro (1991, p. 23) has aptly captured the way oriental and occidental women viewed each other:

When Lady Mary Montague was pressed by the women in a Turkish bath to take off her clothes and join them, she undid her blouse to show them her corset. This led them to believe that she was imprisoned in a machine which could only be opened by her husband. Both groups of women could see each other as prisoners and of course they were right (1991, p. 23).

As the domination of Europe over the orient increased, it shattered Islamic societies' self-confidence as peoples and civilizations. Many, in their attempt to restore their nations' lost glory and independence, sought to westernize their societies by emulating western ways and customs, including the clothing. The cry for formal education for women was often linked with their unveiling, as though the veil *per se* would prevent women from studying or from pursuing intellectual activities. The combination of unveiling and education in one package at least partly stemmed from the élites' awareness of the way in which the veil had emerged as a symbol of the backwardness of their society in the west. An equally important factor in the emergence of the conviction that the veil and education were an unlikely pair was that in many Muslim societies, and particularly among the urban élites, patriarchal rulers had often used (and in some cases still do) the veil as an excuse to curtail women's mobility and independence, and clearly seclusion and public education were hardly compatible. Therefore, the underlying criticisms of the reformists were directed mostly at the seclusion of women in the name of the veil.

Nonetheless, given that the veil and Islamic ethics have been very closely intertwined in Muslim cultures, the combination of unveiling and formal education in one package by the reformists and modernizers was a strategic mistake. Conservative forces, particularly some of the religious authorities, seized the opportunity to legitimize their opposition to the proposed changes in the name of religion, and galvanized public resistance (though education is recommended by Islam equally for males and females), while in fact the public opposition was primarily to unveiling and not education.<sup>16</sup>

Despite much opposition from religious and conservative forces, many élite reformers (both males and females) pressed for de-veiling. In Egypt, feminist women became a visible force, intellectually and politically, during the first half of the twentieth century. They participated in anti-colonial and democratic struggles and organized themselves in groups, large and small, to debate issues related to women's position, including the origins of veiling. As Egyptian upper-class women were usually educated in Islamic matters, as well as Arabic and sometimes Turkish and Persian literature, they had direct access to Islamic sources. Many of them argued, as did Qasim Amin (1865-1908), the author of two controversial books, *Emancipation of Women* and *The New Woman*, that veiling had little to do with Islam and more to do with corrupt practices in the name of Islam designed to prevent women's advancement. By 1914, fourteen specialized magazines on women's issues, founded and edited by women, had already appeared in Arabic. Among

their important demands were universal suffrage, education for all women, and reforms to the Personal Status Law. The feminist movement managed to galvanize women of popular urban classes for nationalist issues and the improvement of the economic situation of both the nation as a whole and women in particular. Low-income women, however, remained detached from other feminist issues, most of which appeared irrelevant to their lives.<sup>17</sup>

Egyptian women had established one of the most organized and active world feminist movements by the first quarter of the twentieth century, and after a 1923 international feminist meeting in Rome, they organized and publicly removed the veil (Ahmed, 1992). Egypt thus became the first Islamic country to de-veil without state intervention, a situation which provoked heated debates in Egypt and the rest of the Arab and Muslim world. Recent assessment of de-veiling has dismissed the importance of this historical event on the grounds that veiling only affected upper-class women. But as I have argued elsewhere,

...although Egyptian women of low income classes never veiled their faces and wore more dresses which did not prevent movement, they nevertheless regarded the upper-class veil as an ideal. It was not ideology which prevented them from taking "the veil" rather it was the lack of economic possibilities (Hoodfar, 1989, p. 21).

The de-veiling movement among upper-class Egyptian women questioned not only the ideology of the veil but also the seclusion of women in the name of the veil and Islam.

In other countries, such as Iran and Turkey, it was left to the state to outlaw the veil. Although the rhetoric of de-veiling was to liberate women so they could contribute to build a new modern nation, in reality, women and their interests counted little. Rather, they had become the battlefield and the booty of the harsh and sometimes bloody struggle between the secularists and modernists on one side, and the religious authorities on the other. The modernist states, eager to alienate and defeat the religious authorities who historically had shared the state's power and who generally opposed the trend toward secularization,<sup>18</sup> outlawed the veil and enlisted the police forces to compel de-veiling without considering the consequences of this action for women, particularly those outside the elite and middle classes of large urban centres. Atatürk (1923-1938), who represented the secularist, nationalist movement in Turkey, outlawed the veil and in fact all traditional clothing including the fez; the Turks were to wear European-style clothing in a march towards modernity. Iran followed suit and introduced clothing reform, albeit a milder version, but the stress was put on de-veiling. The feminists and women activists in Iran were less organized than their counterparts in Egypt and Turkey. Debates on women's issues and the necessity of education were primarily championed by men and took place in the context of Iran's modernization and efforts to regain its lost glory.<sup>19</sup> In these discussions, women were primarily viewed as the mothers of the nation who had to be educated in order to bring up educated and intelligent children, particularly sons, and the veil was often singled out as the primary obstacle to women's education.

### The Veil On Our Heads: Iran, a Case Study

De-veiling, particularly without any other legal and socio-economic adjustments, can at best be a dubious measure of

women's "liberation" and freedom of movement, and it can have many short- and long-term consequences. To illustrate this point, I will review the experiences of my own grandmother and her friends during the de-veiling movement in the 1930s, and then compare this with some of the trends that have developed with the introduction and strict enforcement of compulsory veiling under the current Islamic Republic of Iran.

In 1936, the Shah's father, as part of his plan to modernize Iran, decided to outlaw the veil and passed a law that made it illegal for women to be in the street wearing the veil (*chador*) or any other kind of head covering except a European hat.<sup>20</sup> The police had strict orders to pull off and tear up any scarf or *chador* worn in public. This had grievous consequences for the majority of women who were socialized to see the veil and veiling as legitimate and the only acceptable way of dressing. Nonetheless, it is important to note the impact of the compulsory de-veiling for rural and urban women, younger and older women, as well as women of different classes. As the state had little presence in the countryside and since most rural women dressed in traditional clothing, the law had only a limited impact in the countryside. The women of urban modernist elites welcomed the change and took advantage of some of the educational and employment opportunities which the modern state had offered to them. Women of the more conservative and religious social group experienced some inconvenience in the early years of compulsory de-veiling but they had the means to employ others to run their outdoor errands. However, it was the urban lower middle classes and low-income social groups which bore the brunt of the problem. It is an example of these social groups which I represent here.

Contrary to the assumptions and images prevalent in the west, women generally were not kept in the harems. Most women of modest means who lived in urban households often did the shopping and established neighbourly and community networks which, in the absence of any economic and social support by the state, were a vital means of support during hard times. Many young unmarried women, including some of my aunts, went to carpet weaving workshops, an equivalent activity in many ways to attending school. Attending these workshops gave the young women a legitimate reason to move about the city and socialize with women outside their kin and immediate neighbours. Learning to weave carpets in this traditional urban culture was, however, fundamentally different from the crocheting and embroidery engaged in by Victorian ladies. Carpet weaving was a readily marketable skill which enabled them to earn some independent income, however small, should they have need for it.

The introduction of the de-veiling law came at a time of rapid social change when the national economy was in turmoil. In search of employment, thousands of men, especially those with no assets or capital, had migrated to Tehran and other large cities, often leaving their families behind in the care of their wives or mothers, since among the poor, nuclear families were the prevalent form of household. Those men who did not migrate had to spend longer hours at their jobs, usually away from home, while leaving more household responsibilities to their wives. My grandmother, a mother of seven children, lived in Hamedan, an ancient city in the central part of Iran. By the time of de-veiling, her husband, whose modest income was insufficient to cover the

day-to-day expenses of his family, had migrated to Tehran in the hope of finding a better job and she carried sole responsibility for the public and private affairs of her household. According to her, this was by no means an exceptional situation but was in fact common to many women. Evidently this common situation had encouraged closer ties between the women, who went about their affairs together and spent much time in each others' company.

The de-veiling law and its harsh enforcement pushed the women to stay home and beg their male relatives and friends' husbands and sons to perform public tasks women normally carried out themselves. My grandmother bitterly recounted her first memory of the day a policeman chased her to take off her scarf, which she had put on as a compromise to the *chador*.<sup>21</sup> She ran as the policeman ordered her to stop; he followed her, and as she approached the gate of her house he pulled off her scarf. She thought the policeman had deliberately allowed her to reach her home decently, because policemen had mothers and sisters who faced the same problem — neither they nor their male kin wanted them to go out "naked." For many women, it was such an embarrassing situation that they just stayed home. Many independent women became dependent on men, while those who did not have a male in the household suffered most because they had to beg favours from their neighbours. "How could we go out with nothing on?" my grandmother asked us every time she talked about her experiences. Young women of modest income stopped going to the carpet weaving workshops. Households with sufficient means would sometimes set up a carpet frame at home if their daughters were skilled enough to weave without supervision. Gradually, however, the carpet traders started to provide the wool, the loom, and other necessary raw materials to the households with lesser means and, knowing that women had no other option, paid them even smaller wages than when they went to the workshops. Moreover, this meant that women lost the option of socializing with those outside their immediate kin and neighbours. Thus, young women were subject to stricter control by their families.<sup>22</sup> Worse yet, male relatives began to assume the role of selling completed carpets or dealing with the male carpet traders, which meant women lost control over their wages, however small they were.

Apart from the economic impact, de-veiling had a very negative impact on the public, social, and leisure activities of urban women of modest means. For instance, historically, among urban Shi'ites, women frequently attended the mosque for prayer, other religious ceremonies, or simply for some peace and quiet or socializing with other women. They would periodically organize and pay a collective visit to the various shrines across town. The legitimacy of this social institution was so strong that even the strictest husbands and fathers would not oppose women's participation in these visits, although they might have asked an older woman to accompany the younger ones. My grandmother, and women of her milieu, regretfully talked about how they missed being able to organize these visits for a long time, almost until World War II broke out. She often asserted that men raised few objections to these limitations, asking, "Why would they, since men always want to keep their women at home."

One of the most pleasant and widespread female social institutions was the weekly visit to the public bath, of which



there were only a few in the town. Consequently, the public bath was a vehicle for socialization outside the kin and neighbour network. Women would go at sunrise and return at noon, spending much time sharing news, complaining about misfortune, asking advice for dealing with business, family, and health problems, as well as finding matches for their marriageable sons, daughters, kin and neighbours. At mid-day, they would often have drinks and sweets. Such a ritualized bath was especially sanctioned within Muslim religious practices which require men and women to bathe after sexual intercourse; bathing is also essential for women after menstruation before they resume the daily prayers. A long absence from the public bath would alarm the neighbours of a possible lapse in the religious practices of the absentee. Therefore they had to develop a strategy that would allow them to attend to their weekly ablutions without offending modesty by "going naked" in the street, as the de-veiling law would require them to do.

The strategies they developed varied from bribing the police officers to disappear from their routes, to the less favoured option of warming up much water in order to bathe and rinse at home. Due to the cold climate in Hamedan, and the limited heating facilities available, this latter option was not practical during the many cold winter months.<sup>23</sup> One neighbour had heard of women getting into big bags and then being carried to the public bath.<sup>24</sup> Thus, women of the neighbourhood organized to make some bags out of canvas. The women who were visiting the public bath would get into the bags, and their husbands, sons or brothers would carry the bags (with the women inside) over their shoulder, or in a donkey or horse-driven cart, to the public bath where the attendant, advised in advance, would come and collect them. At lunch time the women would climb back in the bags and the men would return and carry them home.<sup>25</sup>

Although this strategy demonstrates how far people will go to defy imposed and senseless world views and gender roles envisaged by the state, it is also clear that in the process women have lost much of their traditional independence for the extremely dubious goal of wearing European outfits. One can effectively argue that such outfits, in the existing social context, contributed to the exclusion of women of popular classes and pushed them towards seclusion, rather than laying the ground for their liberation. The de-veiling law caused many moderate families to resist allowing their daughters to attend school because of the social implication of not wearing a scarf in public. Furthermore, as illustrated above, women became even more dependent on men since they now had to ask for men's collaboration in order to perform activities they had previously performed independently. This gave men a degree of control over women that they had never before possessed. It also reinforced the idea that households without adult men were odd and abnormal. Moreover, not all men collaborated. As my grandmother observed, many men used this opportunity to deny their wives the weekly money with which women would pay their public bath fare and the occasional treat they would share with women friends. Other men used the opportunity to obtain complete control over their household shopping, denying women any say in financial matters.

Wearing the *chador* remained illegal, although the government eventually relaxed the enforcement of the de-veiling law. In the official state ideology, the veil remained a symbol of backwardness, despite the fact that the majority

of women, particularly those from low and moderate income groups and the women of the traditional middle classes<sup>26</sup> in the urban centres continued to observe various degrees of *hijab*. The government, through its discriminatory policies, effectively denied veiled women access to employment in the government sector, which is the single most important national employer, particularly of women. The practice of excluding veiled women hit them particularly hard as they had few other options for employment. Historically, the traditional bazaar sector rarely employed female workers, and while the modern private sector employed some blue collar workers who wore the traditional *chador*, rarely did they extend this policy to white collar jobs.<sup>27</sup> This discrimination was bluntly indicated in the policies covering the use of social facilities, such as clubs for civil servants provided by most government agencies or even private hotels and some restaurants, which denied service to women who observed the *hijab*.

This undemocratic exclusion was a major source of veiled women's frustration. To demonstrate but a small aspect of these problems for women who observed the *hijab* I will give two examples from among my own acquaintances. In 1975 my father was paid a visit by an old family friend and her daughter to seek his advice. The family was deeply religious but very open-minded, and the mother was determined that her daughters should finish school and seek employment before they marry. She argued that there is no contradiction between being a good Muslim woman, and being educated and employed with an independent income. After much argument, the father agreed that if the oldest daughter, who had graduated from high school, could find a job in the government sector, he would not object to her working. Since, as a veiled woman, she had little chance of even obtaining an application, she asked an unveiled friend to go to the ministry of finance and fill out the application form. With the help of neighbours, the mother managed to arrange an interview for her. Their dilemma was that should she appear at the interview with the *chador* or scarf on her head, she would never get the job and all their efforts would be wasted. It was finally agreed that she would wear a wig and a very modest dress and leave for the interview from a relative's house so that the neighbours would not see her. After a great deal of hassle, she finally was granted a position and convinced her father not to object to her wearing a scarf while at work. Thus she would leave her house wearing the *chador* and remove it, leaving just a scarf on her hair, before she arrived at work. To her colleagues, she explained that because she lived in a very traditional neighbourhood, it would bring shame to her family if she left the house without a *chador*.

A similar example can be drawn from the experience of a veiled woman I met at university in Iran. She came from a religious family of very modest means. She had struggled against a marriage arranged by her family, and managed to come to university always wearing her *chador*. She graduated with outstanding results from the department of economics and taught herself a good functional knowledge of English. She hoped, with her qualifications, to find a good job and help her family who had accommodated her untraditional views. In order to satisfy the modesty required by her own and her family's Islamic beliefs, and the need to be mobile and to work, she designed some loosely cut, very smart, long dresses for herself. But her attempt to find a job

was fruitless, though she was often congratulated on her abilities. Knowing that she was losing her optimism, I asked her to come and apply for an opening at the Irano-Swedish company where I worked temporarily as assistant to the personnel manager. When she visited the office, the secretary refused to give her an application form until I intervened. Later, my boss inquired about her and called me to his office. To my amazement, he said that it did not matter what her qualifications were, the company would never employ a veiled woman. I suggested that since the company had Armenians, Jews, Bahai's and Muslims, including some very observant male Muslims, why could we not also employ a practising female Muslim, especially since her skills were needed. He dismissed this point, saying that it was not the same thing. He then told the secretary not to give application forms to veiled women as it would be a waste of paper. My friend, who had become quite disappointed, found a primary teaching job at an Islamic school with only one-eighth of my salary while we both had similar credentials.

A few years prior to the Iranian revolution, a tendency towards questioning the relevance of Eurocentric gender roles as the model for Iranian society gained much ground among university students. During the early stages of the revolution this was manifested in street demonstrations where many women, a considerable number of whom belonged to the non-veiled middle classes, put on the veil and symbolically rejected the state-sponsored gender ideology. In 1980, after the downfall of the Shah and the establishment of the Islamic Republic, the Islamic regime introduced compulsory veiling, using police and para-military police to enforce the new rule. Despite the popularity of the regime, it faced stiff resistance from women (including some veiled women) on the grounds that such a law compromised the democratic rights of women.<sup>28</sup> The resistance led to some modification and delay in the imposition of compulsory veiling. After more than a decade of compulsory veiling, however, the regime still is facing resistance and defiance on the part of women despite its liberal use of public flogging, imprisonment and monetary fines as measures of enforcements of the veil. The fact is that both rejection of the Shah's Eurocentric vision and the resistance to the compulsory veil represents women's active struggles against the imposed gender role envisaged for women by the Iranian state.

The Islamic regime has no more interest in the fate of women per se than did the Shah's modernist state. Women paid heavily and their democratic rights and individual freedoms once again were challenged. The Islamic regime, partly in celebration of its victory over the modernist state of the Shah and partly as a means for realizing its vision of "Islamic" Iran, not only introduced a strict dress code for women but also revoked many half-hearted reforms in the Iranian Personal Law which had provided women with a limited measure of protection in marriage.<sup>29</sup> The annulment meant wider legal recognition of temporary marriage, polygamy, and men's right to divorce at will. Return to the *shariah* (Muslim law) also meant that women were prevented from becoming judges. The new gender vision was also used to exclude women from some fields of study in the universities.

These new unexpected changes created such hardship, insecurity and disillusionment for many women, regardless

of whether they had religious or secular tendencies, that they became politically active and tried to improve their lot. However, strategies that women with religious and Islamic tendencies adopted are very different from those of secular women's groups.

The impact of compulsory veiling has been varied. There is no doubt that many educated middle-class women, who were actually or potentially active in the labour market, either left their jobs (and a considerable number left the country) voluntarily, or were excluded by the regime's policies. However, these women were replaced by women of other social groups and not by men. Labour market statistics indicate that contrary to the general expectation of scholars, the general public and the Islamic state itself, the rate of female employment in the formal sector has continued to increase in the 1980s even during the economic slump and increased overall unemployment (Moghadam, 1988). Similarly, the participation of women in all levels of education, from adult literacy to university level, has continued to increase (Mehran, 1991, 1990).

Significantly, whether women believe and adhere to the veiling ideology or not, they have remained active in the political arena, working from within and without the state to improve the socio-economic position of women. Iranian women's achievements in changing and redefining the state vision of women's rights in "Islam" in just over one decade has been considerable. For instance, the family protection law which Muslim women activists lobbied for and Ayatollah Khomeini signed in 1987, offers women more actual protection than had been afforded by the Shah's Family Code, which was introduced in 1969, since it entitles the wife to half the wealth accumulated during the marriage.<sup>30</sup> More recently, the Iranian parliament approved a law that entitles women to wages for housework, forcing husbands to pay the entire sum in the event of divorce.<sup>31</sup>

Although, as in most other societies, the situation of Iranian women is far from ideal or even reasonable, the lack of interest or acknowledgement of Muslim women activists' achievements on the part of scholars and feminist activists from Europe and North America is remarkable. This disregard, in a context where the "excesses" of the Islamic regime towards women continues to make headlines and the subject of Muslim women and religious revivalism in the Muslim world continue to be matters of wide interest, is an indicator of the persistence of orientalist and colonial attitudes towards Muslim cultures (Said, 1976, 1993). Whenever unfolding events confirm western stereotypes about Muslim women, researchers and journalists rush to spread the news of Muslim women's oppression. For instance, upon the announcement of compulsory veiling, Kate Millett, whose celebrated work *Sexual Politics* indicates her lack of commitment to and understanding of issues of race, ethnicity and class (although she made use of Marxist writings on development of gender hierarchy), went to Iran supposedly in support of her Iranian sisters. In 1982 she published a book, *Going to Iran*, about her experiences there. Given the atmosphere of anti-imperialism and anger towards the American government's covert and overt policies in Iran and the Middle East, her widely publicized trip was effectively used by the Iranian government to associate those who were organizing resistance to the compulsory veil with imperialist and pro-colonial elements. In this way her unwise and unwanted support and presence helped to weak-



en Iranian women's resistance. According to her book, Millett's intention in going to Iran, which is presented as a moment of great personal sacrifice, was not to understand why Iranian women for the first time had participated in such massive numbers in a revolution whose scale was unprecedented, nor was it to listen and find out what the majority of Iranian women wanted from this revolution. Rather, according to her own account, it was to lecture to her Iranian sisters on feminism and women's rights as though her political ideas, life expectations and experiences were universally applicable. This is symptomatic of ethnocentrism (if we don't call it racism) and the lingering implicit or explicit assumption that the only way to "liberation" is to follow western women's models and strategies for change. Consequently, Third World women's, and particularly Muslim women's, views are entirely ignored (Mohanty, 1991; Lazreg, 1988).

### Veiled Women in the Western Context

The veiling and re-veiling movement in European and North American societies has to be understood in the context not only of continuing colonial images but also of thriving new forms of overt and covert chauvinism and racism against Islam and Muslims, particularly in these post Cold War times. Often, the uncritical participation of feminists/activists from the core cultures of western Europe and North America in these oppressive practices has created a particularly awkward relationship between them and feminists/activists from Muslim minorities both in the West and elsewhere.<sup>32</sup> This context has important implications for Muslim women, who like all other women of visible minorities, experience racism in all areas of their public lives and interactions with the wider society, including with feminists and feminist institutions. Muslim women, faced with this unpleasant reality, feel they have to choose between fighting racism and fighting sexism. Their strategies have to take account of at least three interdependent and important dimensions: first, racism; second, how to accommodate and adapt their own cultural values and institutions to those of the core and dominant cultures which are themselves changing very rapidly; and, third, how to devise ways of (formally and informally) resisting and challenging patriarchy both within their own communities and in the wider society without weakening their struggle against racism.

To illustrate how these three factors come together to restrict the choices of Muslim feminists in North America, and to create painful and difficult situations among women, I will refer to a recent conflict between non-Muslim feminists in Montreal and Iranian women. This conflict demonstrates how racism, in the form of colonial images of Muslim women and Muslim societies, has been appropriated as a tool to fight sexism. In early May 1993, I discovered that the Simone de Beauvoir Institute, a feminist institution in Montreal offering a program in women's studies, intended to co-sponsor a fundraising event for a feminist shelter for assaulted women. The key speaker was to be Betty Mahmoody, author of *Not Without My Daughter*, a book (and film of the same name) which has been welcomed in the West as a confirmation of all its prejudices and colonial assumptions.<sup>33</sup> I expressed my reservations to the organizers, and later conveyed the concerns of the Iranian women's association, the Iranian community, and several Iranian schools by pointing out how Ms. Mahmoody's book/film

has promoted racism against Iranian people and particularly against young school children, many of whom are suffering severe psychological consequences from racism in schools. I was told that in Canadian society, and universities especially, freedom of speech and thought is valued highly (as though this had never crossed my mind over 22 years of life in different western universities) and I should not expect to cancel the fundraising event. I pointed out that as exiles (voluntary or otherwise), all Iranian women support freedom of speech; however, when tickets are sold at \$36, effectively only the rich can afford to have a voice. Moreover, if the exercise was to promote dialogue and political awareness of the workings of patriarchy, then we should at least give 15 minutes at the podium to an Iranian feminist, so as to direct attention to patriarchy and prevent the debate from taking a racist tone. The organizer said that I was being unreasonable, since the event had not been organized by Iranian women. As a last resort, I requested that I be the welcoming speaker on behalf of the Institute, where I could elaborate on some of the issues which were the legitimate concerns of the Iranian women.<sup>34</sup> To my utter shock, I was treated by my erstwhile allies as if I had lost my mind. In spite of being the only professor at Concordia University who had worked on feminist movements in the Middle East and whose research focussed on Muslim women in Canada, as well as being a longstanding member of the Institute and hence not an unusual introductory speaker, my feminist colleagues suggested that I was acting out of "hysteria."<sup>35</sup>

The event took place as planned at Concordia, complete with armed guards and a celebrated Quebec feminist journalist, Francine Pelletier, as guest of honour. Betty Mahmoody was lauded once again for skilfully denigrating Iranian culture, painting a picture of Iranian women as passive victims who happily accept their lot, and associating her unhappy marriage with oppressive Iranian and Islamic cultures, thereby reaffirming North American moral superiority.<sup>36</sup> The whole event was essentially a no-win situation. The objective was presumably to understand the phenomenon of wife battering, but the focus was on Iranian culture as if in looking there, one had hit upon an important cause of women being beaten up. In fact, Betty Mahmoody presented no evidence (nor does there exist any other cross-cultural study that suggests) that Iranian men beat up women any more than North American or any other group of men do. It seemed to have escaped both her and her audience of several hundred people that violence against women in conjugal relations is a universal problem. An Iranian woman, herself a graduate student of the Institute, went to the audience microphone and asked Betty Mahmoody's advice. She said:

The Iranian people helped you to "save" your daughter whom you thought would be better off in America. Why would you then make a film that promotes racism (which was the primary cause of your husband's return to Iran) as a result of which hundreds of our children, just in Montreal and Toronto alone, have been subject to ridicule and racism by their school friends and, unfortunately, sometimes by their teachers. In this democratic country these children's dignity and basic human rights are violated every day, causing psychological problems for them.

With her voice trembling, she finished her statement by saying, "Your daughter was one daughter, our daughters are

hundreds."

The impatient organizers rushed to announce the end of the session without consideration for many, including myself, who were waiting to speak and as we were leaving the hall, another Iranian woman commented:

We suffered in the name of progress, then in the name of revolution, then in the name of Islam, later through immigration and racism, and now we have to suffer also in the name of *feminism*!

The last word was pronounced with utter contempt.

That night, while everyone else went to have a drink with the speaker, I, like many other Iranian women, had difficulty sleeping after yet another betrayal. I could not understand why we should promote racism to fight sexism, why feminists should raise funds at the cost of minority women and children. I questioned my affiliation with the Institute under such circumstances.

It is in such a context that veiling in the west should be examined. In my ongoing research on young Muslim women in Montreal, the majority of whom were brought up in Canada and feel a part of Canadian society, I was impressed by how the persistence of the images of oppressed and victimized Muslim women, particularly veiled women, creates barriers for them within Canada.<sup>37</sup> Consequently, many now do not even try to establish rapport with non-Muslim Québécoises and Anglo women. One college student was angered by my comment that, "when all is said and done, women in Canada share many obstacles and must learn to share experiences and develop, if not common, at least complementary strategies." She explained to me:

[I]t is a waste of time and emotion. They [white Canadian women] neither want to understand nor can feel like a friend towards a Muslim. Whenever I try to point out their mistaken ideas, for instance by saying that Islam has given women the right to control their wealth, they act as if I am making these up just to make Islam look good, but if I complain about some of the practices of Muslim cultures in the name of Islam they are more than ready to jump on the bandwagon and lecture about the treatment of women in Islam. I wouldn't mind if at least they would bother to read about it and support their claims with some documentation or references. They are so sure of themselves and the superiority of their God that they don't think they need to be sure of their information! I cannot stand them any more.

Another veiled woman explained the reasons for her frustration in the following manner:

I wouldn't mind if only the young students who know nothing except what they watch on television demonstrated negative attitudes to Islam but sometimes our teachers are worse. For instance, I have always been a very good student but always when I have a new teacher and I talk or participate in the class discussion the teachers invariably make comments about how they did not expect me to be intelligent and articulate. That I am unlike Muslim women....What they really mean is that I do not fit their stereotype of a veiled woman since they could hardly know more Muslim women than I do and I can not say there is a distinctive model that Muslim women all fit into. Muslim women come from varieties of cultures, races and historical backgrounds. They

would consider me unsophisticated and criticize me if I told them that they did not act like a Canadian woman, because Canada though small in terms of population is socially and culturally very diverse.

Some western feminists have such strong opinions about the veil that they are totally incapable of seeing the women who wear them, much less their reasons for doing so. Writing in the student newspaper, one McGill University student said that she could not decide whether it is harder to cope with the sexism and patriarchy of the Muslim community, or to tolerate the patronizing and often unkind behaviour of white feminists. She then reported that her feminist housemate had asked her to leave the house and look for other accommodations because she couldn't stand the sight of the veil, and because she was concerned about what her feminist friends would think of her living with a veiled woman, totally disregarding the fact that she though veiled, she was nonetheless an activist and a feminist (Jalabi, 1992).

The stereotypes of Muslim women are so deep-rooted and strong that even those who are very conscious and critical not only of blatant outright racism but also of its more subtle manifestations in everyday life, do not remain immune from it, as the incident at Concordia shows. To the western feminist eye the image of the veiled woman obscures all else. One of my colleagues and I were discussing a veiled student who is a very active and articulate feminist. I made a comment about how intelligent and imaginative she was. While he admiringly agreed with me, he added (and I quote from my notes):

She is a bundle of contradictions. She first came to see me with her scarf tightly wrapped around her head...and appeared to me so lost that I wondered whether she would be capable of tackling the heavy course she had taken with me....She, with her feminist ideas, and critical views on Orientalism, and love of learning, never failed to amaze me every time she expressed her views. She does not at all act like a veiled woman.

Apparently, she is a "bundle of contradictions" only because she wears the veil, consisting of a neat scarf, while she is otherwise dressed like most other students. In this way, she has to overcome significant credibility barriers. The fact that at the age of 19, without language proficiency or contacts in Montreal, she came to Canada to start her university studies at McGill has not encouraged her associates to question their own assumptions about veiled women. Neither has anyone wondered why Muslim women, if by virtue of their religion they are so oppressed and deprived of basic rights, are permitted by their religious parents to travel and live alone by themselves in the Western world.

I had thought that part of the problem was that the veil has become such an important symbol of women's oppression that most people have difficulty reducing it simply to an article of clothing. However, I discovered that the reality is much more complicated than the veil representing a visible marker. For instance, a Québécoise who had converted to Islam and observed the veil for the last four years, said she had no evidence that wearing the veil was a hindrance to a woman's professional and educational achievements in Canada. In support of her claim, she told me of her recent experience at work.<sup>38</sup>

When I was interviewed for my last job, in passing I said

that I was a Muslim and since I wear the veil I thought they made note of it....I was offered the job and I was working for almost nine months before I realized nobody seemed to be aware that I was a Muslim. One day, when I was complaining about the heat, one of my colleagues suggested that I take off my scarf. To which I answered that as a practising Muslim I did not want to do that. At first he did not believe me, and when I insisted and asked him and others who had joined our conversation if they had seen me at all without the scarf, they replied, no, but that they had thought I was following a fashion!

She then added that while she was very religious and believed that religion should be an important and central aspect of any society, the reality was that Canada is a secular society and that for the most part people care little about what religious beliefs one has.

While her claim was confirmed to varying degrees by a number of other white Canadian veiled women who are converts to Islam, my own experience, and that of other non-white, non-anglo/French Canadian veiled women is markedly different. Here is a recent experience. Last year, my visit to a hair dresser ended in disastrously short hair. I was not accustomed to such short hair and for couple of weeks I wore a scarf loosely on my head. While lecturing in my classes I observed much fidgeting and whispered discussions but could not determine the reason. Finally, after two weeks, a student approached me to asked if I had taken up the veil. Quite surprised, I said no and asked what caused her to ask such a question. She said that it was because I was wearing the scarf. Since I was always saying positive things about Islam<sup>39</sup> the students thought I had joined "them." "Them?" I asked. She said, "Yes, the veiled women." Perplexed, I realized that what I discuss in lectures is not evaluated on the merits of my argument and evidence alone but also on the basis of the listener's assumptions about my culture and background.<sup>40</sup> My colourful scarf, however loosely and decoratively worn, appears to my students as the veil, while the more complete veil of a practising but culturally and biologically "white" Muslim who had worn the veil every day to work is seen as fashion!

The main conclusion that I draw from these incidents is that by itself the veil is not so significant, after all. Instead, it is who wears the veil that matters. The veil of the visible minorities is used to confirm the outsider and marginal status of the wearer. Such incidents have made me realize why many young Muslim women are so angry and have decided against intermingling with Anglo/Québécoise women. After all, if I, as a professor in a position of authority in the classroom, cannot escape the reminder of being the "other," how could the young Muslim students escape it?

Many Muslim women who are outraged by the continuous construction of Islam as a lesser religion, and the portrait of Muslims as "less developed" and "uncivilized," feel a strong need for the Muslim community to assert its presence as part of the fabric of Canadian society. Since the veil, in Canadian society, is the most significant visible symbol of Muslim identity, 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.

In the context of western societies, the veil can also play a very important role of mediation and adaptation, an aspect that, partly due to colonial images of the veil, has totally been overlooked by western feminists. The veil

allows Muslim women to participate in public life and the wider community on their own, without compromising their own cultural and religious values (Hoodfar, forthcoming). Young Canadian Muslim women I have interviewed have sometimes seen the veil as an opportunity to separate and challenge some of the patriarchal values and cultural practices which have been enforced and legitimated in the name of religion. For instance, several women in my sample had successfully resisted arranged marriages by establishing that Islam had given Muslim women the right to choose their own partners. In the process, not only did they secure their parents' and their communities' respect, but they also created an awareness and a model of resistance for other young women of their community.

Wearing the veil has also often defused the resistance against young women going away to university and living on their own, since the veil indicates to the parents that these young women are not about to lose their cultural values and become "white Canadian." Rather, they are taking what is an essential ingredient and positive aspect of Canadian society and blending it in with their own cultural values of origin.<sup>41</sup>

Many Muslim women have become conscious of carrying a much larger burden than their male counterparts of establishing their community's identity and moral values. The great majority of these men wear entirely western clothes and do not stand out as members of their community. Yet frequently when they are criticizing some of the cultural practices of their own community and the double standards which are often legitimized in the name of Islam, they are accused of behaving like Canadians and not like Muslims. They are further silenced and disarmed by the equally negative images of Muslim and Middle-Eastern women held by white Anglo/Québécoise women, images that restrict the lives of both groups of women (Nader, 1989).

## Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to demonstrate how the persistence of colonial images of Muslim women with their ethnocentric and racist biases have formed a major obstacle to understanding the social significance of the veil from the point of view of the women who live with it. By reviewing the state sponsored de-veiling movement in the 1930s in Iran and its consequences for the women of low-income urban strata, and the re-emergence of veiling during the anti-Shah movement as an indication of rejection of state Eurocentric gender ideology, I see veiling as a complex, dynamic and changing cultural practice. It is invested with different and contradictory meanings for veiled and non-veiled women as well as men. Moreover, by looking at the re-introduction of compulsory veiling in the Islamic Republic of Iran under Khomeini and voluntary veiling of Muslim women in Canada, I argue that while veiling has been used and enforced by the Iranian state and by men as a means of regulating and controlling women's lives, women have used the same institution to loosen the bonds of patriarchy imposed on them.

Defiance of the patriarchy can be seen in the de-veiling organized by the Egyptian feminist movement in the 1920s, and the more current resistance to compulsory veiling in Iran. But viewed as a lived experience, the veil can also be a site of resistance, as in the case of the anti-Shah movement



in Iran. Similarly, some Muslim women in Canada have used the veil and reference to Islam to resist some of the cultural practices, such as arranged marriages, or have been able to continue their education away from home without alienating their parents and communities. Many veiled Muslim women employ the veil as an instrument of mediation between Muslim minority cultures and those of host cultures. Paradoxically, Western responses to Muslim women, filtered through an Orientalist and colonialist frame, effectively limit how Muslim women might creatively resist the regulation of their bodies and their lives.

The assumption that veiling is a static practice which symbolizes the oppressive nature of patriarchy in Muslim societies has prevented social scientists and western feminists from examining Muslim women's own accounts of their lives, hence perpetuating the racist stereotypes which are ultimately in the service of patriarchy in both societies. On the one hand, these mostly man-made images of the oriental Muslim women are used to tame women's demand for equality in the Western world by reminding them how much they are better off than their Muslim counterparts. On the other hand, these oriental and negative stereotypes are mechanisms by which western dominant culture re-creates and perpetuates beliefs about their superiority and dominance. Western feminists, by buying into a racist construction of the veil, and taking part in daily racist incidents force Muslim women to choose between fighting racism or fighting sexism. The question is why should we be forced to choose?

## Notes

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1. Of course, this is not to say that there have not been other historical attempts to control women's dress and clothing, rather that these attempts had not been in the name of Islam. See, for example, Ahmed, 1992.

2. The situation of Nambudiri Brahmin women through whom the family property passes from one generation to the next and who are carefully secluded, provides a good example. See the discussion in Douglas, 1966, pp. 140-158.

3. Much of the property that women held, such as gold and agricultural land, could be managed from within the household. This was a widespread practice for both males and females of the elites during the Ottoman period.

4. For more discussion, see Tucker, 1986.

5. For instance, a law in 1293 forbade women to wear *imamas*, a style of head-covering, and other masculine clothing (Ahmed, 1992).

6. In 1991 I conducted an informal survey among my western acquaintances and students. They invariably described the veil as this all-enveloping black robe. Some added that it is designed to prevent or hamper women's mobility.

7. Also known as *The Arabian Nights*, this work is a collection of folk fairy tales orally narrated in coffee houses; it has come to represent the Middle Eastern world view in the west.

8. By no means is this process limited to Muslim and Middle Eastern societies; rather the process of making the lesser others exotic or primitive is a common thread in the history of all colo-

nized societies.

9. This figure is conservative: it does not include articles and other shorter references to the Arab world, nor does it take into account works on the non-Arab orient.

10. Recent research indicates that the harem is imagined to be, not a brothel, but a private sex house for the husband or master where women are kept to perform sexual services. Often when it happens that I go somewhere with my husband accompanied by a number of women friends this image is evoked, and people comment that my husband is travelling with his harem.

11. In the nineteenth century, for example, over 85 percent of the population lived in rural areas.

12. For instance, when M. Michaud, in 1830, entered a peasant home and heard the wife shouting at her husband in rage, he was very surprised and considered the woman as an exception to the rule because the Qur'an says women should be obedient (Mabro, 1991, p. 14). See also Tucker, 1985.

13. See, for example, Eberhardt, 1987.

14. The nineteenth century literature on European women contains ample examples of women's frustration on being limited to domestic activities (Poovey, 1989). Those who desired to do otherwise were treated as deviant and often suffered severe depression, as was the case with Charlotte Brontë and Florence Nightingale.

15. Here I paraphrase a comment by the oriental Rajah, a character in the novel *One of Our Conquerors* (1891) by George Meredith, on visit to London (quoted by Mabro, 1991, p. 17).

16. For instance, the walls of all adult literacy classes in Iran after the Islamic revolution were decorated by posters reiterating the Prophet's comments, such as Muslim men and women are to go to China (which was then the furthest centre of intellectual activities) in search of knowledge.

17. Polygamy was rare among the poor since few men were able to support two families. The cost of marriage and payment of maher, the Islamic bride price which is paid to the bride at any time during or at the termination of marriage, practically prevented easy divorce. As far as education was concerned, neither men or women of low-income groups could afford its economic burden.

18. A major reason for the religious authorities' resistance was that it would deprive them from their centuries long uncontested monopoly over education.

19. For a summary of the debate, see Sanasarian, 1982.

20. Until the fall of the Shah in 1979, the anniversary of the day of introduction of this law was celebrated as Women's Liberation Day in Iran.

21. Suratgar (1951) who had been travelling in Iran at the time writes about how he observed policemen shredding any headgear that women wore.

22. Moreover, this new form of organization created an expectation that all women in the household had to work on the carpet, making their workload much greater.

23. Most traditional houses in Iran did not include a bathtub in those days.

24. In fact, they had heard of this strategy from a woman whose husband was a policeman who had learnt about it at work. The rank and file police officers, who were primarily the popular classes opposed the practice, but failing to impose the law would mean the loss of a lucrative job in hard economic times.

25. For some similar stories, see Bamdad, 1977.

26. The middle classes in Iran are divided into two broad categories. One category includes those who are modernist and are

mostly associated with the government sector; sometimes this group is referred to as "westernized." The second category includes social groups such as bazaar traders and producers, and religious leaders who adhere to the traditional Islamic/Iranian world-view and value system.

27. Moreover, the situation was aggravated by the fact that many traditional families, including those who disapproved of the state, would only accept employment in the government sector for their daughters/wives because it was thought that there was less sexual harassment in this milieu.

28. In 1981 I interviewed Muslim women activists; some of them argued that the compulsory veiling law was un-Islamic because only God should judge Muslims, and that there was no precedent of officially punishing women if they did not adhere to the Islamic dress code. This position was especially supported by the Mujahedin-khalq, a major Islamic opposition political organization.

29. The advantage of these reforms was mostly in their message, which indicated that ideologically the state did not approve of polygamy and divorce at the whim of the husband. Its utilitarian benefits were not particularly advantageous since the reforms had so many social and legal loopholes that almost any husband could ignore them.

30. Very shortly after the success of the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini cancelled the Shah's Family Law on the grounds that it was un-Islamic (see Tabari and Yeganeh, 1982).

31. See *The New York Times*, December 14, 1992.

32. Awkwardness and strained relationships exist between Western feminists/activists and those of all minorities (bell hooks, 1981, 1988; Mohanty, 1991); however, here I confine myself to the example of Muslim minorities in Canada.

33. An autobiography, the book describes the situation of an American woman who went with her Iranian husband to visit his family in Iran, shortly after the revolution. The husband, who had experienced anti-Iranian racism to the point of losing his job, decided to remain in Iran and demanded that their daughter remain with him. The book chronicles the struggle of the mother to leave the country with the child.

In this book, Mahmoody admits that she cultivated friendships with Iranians, particularly Iranian women, in order to take advantage of them and maximize her chances of escaping Iran. She totally ignores that in a situation where even officials of her own government refused to help her, it was the Iranians who risked their lives and smuggled her and her daughter out of the country while they had no guarantee that she would ever pay back the considerable cost of this operation. Despite the ordeal that she went through, and given this context, it should be the Iranians, or at least those men and women who helped her to escape, who should emerge as the real heroes of the story. However, in her book she capitalizes on Western anti-Iranian and anti-Islamic sentiments, and by creating illusionary correlations between her experience and the Iranian and Islamic culture, she overtly denigrates them and their culture (Hilton, 1993). The book is an excellent example of the modern construction of the "uncivilized other."

34. Those who wish to obtain more information on the nature of the Iranian community's reservations and their correspondence in this regard may contact the Montreal Iranian Women's Association, P.O. Box 354, Station "A," Montreal, Quebec, H3G 2L1.

35. The rejection of me as a welcoming speaker was mainly because I wanted to bring up some of the Iranian women's concerns about issues of racism and I was not prepared to deliver a speech already drafted by others. I naturally asked myself whether the rules of freedom of thought and speech equally apply to minorities.

36. According to her own book, it was racism that forced her husband to return to Iran where she had no intention of living. Furthermore, according to her, until that moment he had been an excellent husband and a good and attentive father for their daughter and her two sons from her previous marriage.

37. Based on participant observation and in-depth interviews, my current research examines young Muslim women's methods of, and responses to, integration in Canadian society. To date, 92 interviews have been completed.

38. However, she did say that she had problems with her family who, as Catholics, were very upset that she had become a Muslim and a veiled woman.

39. For example, I had pointed out in class that Islam had given women the right to control their own property. On another occasion, in a discussion of post-modern anthropology, I remarked (referring to the works of Rana Kabbani [1986] and Malek Alloula [1986]) that the representation of the Muslim "harem" says at least as much about the gender relations of the colonizers, as it does of the colonized nations.

40. For more discussion of teaching as a minority woman, see Hoodfar, 1992.

41. This is not to say that they do not have to compromise in the process but rather to point out that the process of adaptation can be less stressful and more harmonious through strategies that steps from within a community.

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