The Muslim Veiling: A Symbol of Oppression or a Tool of Liberation?

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Abstract
Over the past two decades the practice of Muslim women’s veiling has caught a great deal of attention of those concerned with women’s rights. The debate on the Muslim veiling has yielded two contradictory explanatory frameworks; whereas some scholars regard the practice of veiling as a symbol of women’s oppression as, they believe, it renders the women to stay out of the public sphere; the second framework, which is mostly advocated by Islamic feminists, explains the practice of veiling as a tool of “liberation” for the women as, they argue, it allows the women to get access to the public sphere in societies wherein such access would not have been possible otherwise. By taking up some of the recurrent themes in the debate on Muslim veiling, this paper argues that in order to be able to understand the practice of veiling we need to pay attention to the voices of the upholders of this practice.

Introduction: Adopting the Veil
Women’s veiling has been one of the most debated issues among scholars concerned with women’s rights. In academic circles, the whole debate surrounding women’s veiling has been shaped by two opposing discourses. First is the oppression discourse, advocated mostly by liberal feminists. This viewpoint considers veiling to be an oppressive practice which reflects the subordination of women to men in patriarchal Muslim societies. The second discourse is that of viewing veiling as a tool of liberation and resistance for women. This viewpoint is advocated by a new strand of feminism called “Islamic feminism,” which pushes for the contextual understanding of the veiling practice (Hoodfar 1993). A conflicting underlying assumption to both of these discourses on veiling is that of women’s agency. While in the oppression discourse the veiled women are considered to be devoid of agency, in the liberation and resistance discourse, the veiled women’s agency is understood in terms of viewing the veiling as a conscious practice which is upheld by women to pave the way for furthering their own interests within the society. In this paper, I take up the broader debate surrounding the Muslim veiling and argue against the oppression discourse of it. Contrary to the oppression discourse, I propose that to fully comprehend the practice of veiling it is necessary that close attention be paid to the experiences of the veiled women who adopt the veil for myriad different reasons. In doing so, I will touch on some of the recurrent themes in the debate on the Muslim veiling such as: women’s agency, internalization, resistance, false consciousness, and surveillance and control. While arguing against the oppression discourse, my point of reference is the
representation of the Other, which in this case would be the portrayal of Muslim veiled women as victims of oppression in western liberal feminist scholarship. In what follows, first I explain the two stated discourses of the veiling debate and then move on to the discussion on the above mentioned themes concerning the veiling practice.

Veiling as a Tool of Oppression

Historically, Muslim veiling has been interpreted by the majority of western liberal feminists and others as a tool and symbol of oppression. One of the first western accounts about the practice of veiling was produced by Christian missionary women, who first came in contact with Muslim societies in the early 20th century (Sommer and Zwemer 1907). Coming in contact for the first time with Muslim communities, the missionary women found that women in those communities were greatly oppressed because of their customs which, the missionaries thought, rendered them subordinate status in the society. In this way, the veiling was construed as a symbol of women’s oppression. Considering themselves being tasked with ‘liberating’ the ‘oppressed’ women and bringing light to their lives, Muslim women were rendered to be lacking freedom of choice and thus needed to be ‘saved.’ Such earlier western thoughts about the veiling can be found in the book Our Moslem Sisters: A Cry of Need from Lands of Darkness Interpreted by Those Who Heard It, published in 1907. In the very first chapter, Annie Sommer and Samuel Zwemer, authors of the book, state:

“[I]t needs the widespread love and pity of the women of our day in Christian lands to seek and save the suffering sinful needy women of Islam. You cannot know how great the need unless you are told; you will never go and find them until you hear their cry. And they will never cry for themselves, for they are down under the yoke of centuries of oppression, and their hearts have no hope or knowledge of anything better.”

(Sommer and Zwemer 1907:16)

This western understanding of the veiling and gender roles in the Muslim communities had been influential in shaping the colonial policies regarding women in the colonized Muslim communities. While the veiling was considered to be a “backward” practice which keeps women out of the public sphere, colonizers upheld the notion of separation between public and private sphere for the western women visiting colonies. In Java, the colonizers prevented western women from entering the public sphere for the sake of maintaining the purity of white race (Stoler and Strassler 2000).

On the contrary, colonization was justified on the grounds of these very practices which were considered “backward” and oppressive. This approach towards the veiling became more radicalized in the post 9/11 scenario. Muslim women were portrayed as victims of oppressive patriarchy which serves nothing but subordination of women. The speech of then-First Lady, Laura Bush, addressing the nation in 2001 resonated with the colonial discourse of the veiled women, as she stated: “Because of our recent military gains in much of Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned in their homes. They can listen to music and teach their daughters without fear of punishment” (Whitehouse Archives 2001). While in this case, the discourse oppression was used to legitimize intervention of international forces into Afghanistan, this discourse has also been used to devise laws and
policies within western countries, which are aimed at “liberating” Muslim women from the male oppression by making them visible and having them heard in the public sphere of society. France is a good example of this where, in 2004, veiling was banned in public. The banning of the veiling in France is often linked with their earlier colonial attitude towards the practice of veiling in Algeria (Al-Saji 2010). In this way, there seems to be a continuity of colonial attitudes towards customs and practices of the colonized, which persists even in the present day.

Veiling as a Tool of Resistance and Liberation

This viewpoint is mostly advocated by Islamic feminists who urge that there can be many different meanings of the veiling depending on context. According to this point of view, women use veiling as a tool to further their own interests in a society where they have no other means of doing so. In this way, veiling provides women with an opportunity to have access to public sphere of society which otherwise is inaccessible to them. Advocates of this point of view have been able to identify different meanings of the veiling for women across different societies. Among other different perspectives, advocates of this discourse have associated veiling with personal choice, a tool of personal and cultural identity formation, a symbol of modesty, an adaptive strategy, a resistance against western hegemonic culture, personal piety and a bargaining strategy within patriarchal societies (Alvi 2013, Franks 2000, Hirschmann 1998, and Laborde 2005). Seen from this perspective, the veiled women considered to make conscious choice of whether or not and for which purpose to veil. These scholars argue that the upholding of the practice of veiling in non-Muslim, especially western, societies hints at the fact that a personal choice of women is involved in it.

Most of the studies conducted on the Muslim veiled women in western societies are persistent in the finding that majority of Muslim women in those societies adopt veiling as a marker of their own cultural and religious identity and as a way of resistance to western culture by making themselves distinct from it (Franks 2000). Some of these studies also found that some of the Muslim women in western societies use veiling as a symbol of resistance to the objectification and commodification of women’s bodies in those societies. By donning the veil, these women not only get access to the public sphere but also convey a message about their specific religious and cultural identities (Bullock 2002). The understanding of the veiling practice in this discourse resonates with Deniz Kandiyoti’s idea of patriarchal bargaining, which he defines as women’s strategies “within a set of constraints…to maximize security and optimize life options with varying potential for active or passive resistance in the face of oppression” (Kandiyoti 1988: 274). From this perspective, veiling can be thought of as a strategy for Muslim women to achieve any specific “goal” by complying with their cultural norms (read as constraints). While Islamic feminists’ perspective on the veiling and Kandiyoti’s idea of patriarchal bargaining hint at the possibility of choice and women’s agency in the practice of veiling, western discourse on the veiling render the veiled women as passive, and hence devoid of agency. In the following paragraph I take up the issue of women’s agency in the practice of veiling.
**Women's Agency**

My discussion on women's agency in the practice of veiling is based on Paul Kokelman's conception of agency. Kokelman (2007) differentiates between two different kinds of agencies: one he calls "residential agency" and the other he terms "representational agency." Residential agency, which Kokelman (2007) argues, is closest to the concepts of "power" and "choice," and he defines it as:

"the degree to which one can (1) control the expression of a sign (e.g., determine where and when it may be expressed), (2) compose a sign-object relation (e.g., determine what object a sign stands for and/or which sign stands for that object), and (3) determine what effect the expression of the sign will have so far as it stands for that object." (ibid: 376)

Contrary to the residential agency, Kokelman (2007) identifies representational agency, which he argues is closely related to the concepts of "knowledge" and "consciousness." He defines representational agency as:

"the degree to which one can (1) thematize a process (e.g., determine what we talk about), (2) characterize a feature of this theme (e.g., determine what we say regarding what we talk about), and (3) reason with this theme-character relation (e.g., determine what we conclude from, or use to conclude, what we say regarding what we talk about)." (ibid: 376)

The core difference between residential and representational agency is that between power and knowledge, while the former is all about having power over social processes and actions, the latter is knowledge about social processes and actions which informs the course of one's action (in this case, representational agency/power). Kokelman (2007) proposes that agency may often not concern the individuals but rather the social institutions within which the individuals undertake any social action. In this way, exercising agency in any action involves two strategies, composition and commitment, both of which can be attained through "choice" or "invention." While the "choice" refers to choosing from the given options for a course of action, the "invention" refers to adopting a new course of action which is culturally unavailable to one.

Contrary to Kokelman's concept of agency, in the western discourse of the veiling, agency has been taken to mean freedom of choice regardless of any social context. In the western discourse, free will seems to be the defining feature of agency. Having painted agency as freedom of choice, veiled Muslim women are seen as passive because their choice of donning the veil is seen as an imposition of the patriarchal system in a sense that the women have to choose from very limited options. From this perspective, women might have limited options regarding the type of veiling (i.e. whether to cover the whole body or certain body parts), but they often do not have the choice of not adopting the veil. The important point to note here is that by associating agency with the freedom of choice, we are making an underlying assumption that an individual is an independent entity who can freely choose without any regard to the social and cultural milieu of which s/he is part of.

This underlying assumption may hold true for the western cultures where, historically, human rights are defined much in terms of individual freedom and choice. On the contrary, in Muslim societies, the concepts of freedom and choice (or agency for that
matter) are defined in entirely different ways. Muslim societies have been often understood as the ones where communal needs are given preference over individual needs (Mutua 2001). In this sense, the concepts of agency and freedom in the context of Muslim societies should be analyzed in relation to their communal aspects, instead of individual agents. Given this difference, analyzing the practice of veiling through the lens of agency taken as freedom is very simplistic which fails to comprehend the complexity of the practice of veiling.

Seen from Kokelman’s conception of residential agency, veiled women do seem to be exercising agency in the practice of veiling. Thinking of the veil as a social or cultural sign, the whole practice of veiling satisfies all the three components of Kokelman’s residential agency. Taking each component one by one, the first component of residential agency is that of the control over the expression of a sign, or the degree to which one can determine where and when a sign be expressed. The majority of the studies which focused on life experiences of the veiled Muslim women have shown that the women have much greater control over the use of the veil in terms of deciding which type of veiling to do in any certain kind of situation and whether or not to veil altogether in any specific time or place (Bartkowski and Read 2000). Closely related to it is the second component of residential agency, the degree to which one can determine what object a sign stands for. As mentioned earlier, the veil has myriad different meanings depending on the context, and women can adopt it for a wide range of different reasons. In this sense, the veiling can be used for achieving certain kinds of ends. The ends to be achieved through adopting the veil vary for women across the globe. For instance, as mentioned before, the rationale behind adopting the veil maybe to mark one’s cultural or religious identity (the case of Muslim veiling in the west) or it can be adopted as a sign of one’s personal piety. In the given two rationales for the veiling, the veil stands for something else (cultural identity and piety) which is of greater value to the wearer. Whatever ends to achieve or whatever aspect of one’s life to signify through the veiling depends on the personal motives of the wearer within a specific cultural context. This point also satisfies the third component of residential agency i.e., the degree to which one can determine what effect the expression of the sign will have, which in this sense is clear from the rationale behind adopting the veil for achieving certain ends. The very fact that there can be different reasons or motives for adopting the veil is an indication that the wearer is mindful of what their veiling signifies and consequently how it is seen by others.

Within Islamic feminist discourse of the veiling, the notion of agency has been understood in terms of Kandiyot’s idea of patriarchal bargaining. Compliance with the practice of veiling is seen as a strategy of furthering one’s interests and this strategy has been associated with the availability of choice within specific cultural limitations. The compliance with the practice of veiling has also been understood as the exercise of agency within systems of subordination, by subverting hegemonic patriarchal order of society and manipulating cultural customs for their own interests. Saba Mahmood’s (2001) study of Muslim women’s religious groups in Cairo, Egypt, illustrates this point of view very well. While men’s religious groups are a norm in all Islamic societies, Mahmood (2001) found it striking that women’s religious groups in Cairo was something new where the women would provide one
another religious sermons. The emergence of the women’s religious groups, Mahmood argues, was only possible because the women had formed such groups without having breached the moral code of conduct which required them to have modesty by adopting the veil. Hence, by complying with the “patriarchal” religious norms of their society, these women succeeded in subverting a patriarchal order, getting access to a religious sphere of the society which was previously defined as a solely male sphere. From this perspective, the viable option for the women to further their own interests within patriarchal society is the strategic manipulation of the local customs rather than a naked opposition to those customs, as is suggested by the western discourse.

It is, however, the representational agency which seems to be lacking in the practice of veiling. Simply put, representational agency is the degree to which one can determine what and how something is being represented and what others infer from what is being represented. In this sense, representational agency is problematic in the practice of veiling as the wearer does have a control over what she wants to represent through her veil, but she does not have a control over how others interpret the intended representation of her veil. The wearer might have adopted the veil to mark her identity, for instance, but could be interpreted in entirely different way by the observer. This seems to be the case with the western discourse on the veiling, where the practice of veiling has been taken to represent women’s oppression without taking the possibly different rationales of the women for adopting the veil into account. It is important to note here that to have representational agency then means to have control over the production of knowledge and how that knowledge is used to achieve certain ends. It is apparent that representational agency has more to do with the representation of the Other by creating metanarratives about them through knowledge production. In the following paragraph, I shall discuss the issues of the representation of the Other and the production of knowledge, which I believe are inherent to the debate of the veiling in western context.

**Representation of the Other and Knowledge Production**

Stuart Hall defines representation as “a process by which meaning is produced and exchanged” and it “involves the use of language, signs and images which stand for or represent things” (1997:15). The construction of specific categories and the association of certain types of signs and symbols with a specific idea or a category of people can lead to essentialist views. In this way, the representation of the veiled Muslim women as oppressed in the western discourse has led to the creation of a specific knowledge, not only about the status of the veiled women, but also about overall Muslim societies. Veiling has been conflated with the marginalized status of women in the Muslim societies where it is thought to have challenged the idea of gender equality and individual freedom, notions which are considered fundamental to western democratic values and global human rights. In western discourse, the veil has been taken as an essential part of the Muslim women’s identity and a “typical” Muslim woman is depicted through the image of a veiled woman. The construction of the “oppressed” veiled Muslim woman is a consequence of judging the Other
(in this case Muslim women) based on the western standards. The creation of the Other on the basis of one’s own standards marginalizes the Other, as Chandra Mohanty (1984) argues that in the western discourse, the oppressed Other is successfully constructed by reference to western women who are presented as educated, modern, and autonomous. Here it is useful to use the distinction between “intentional” and “constructivist” approaches to representation, as outlined by Hall (1997:20). While in the intentional approach the presenter has control over the meaning of what s/he presents, in the constructivist approach, the presenter does not have any control on the meaning of what is presented, rather, meaning is given to it by others, based on their existing constructed knowledge. Viewed from this perspective, the practice of veiling seems to have been understood in terms of the constructivist approach of representation in the west. This further hints at the hegemonic nature of western democratic values and individualistic nature of human rights which are primarily based on the western concept of individualism.

The construction of the Other is not merely a categorization rather; it helps shape a whole set of behaviours and notions which are directed towards the Other. In this sense, the representation of the Other involves knowledge production about them. The idea of knowledge production ties into Kokelman’s idea of representational agency wherein the self-representation of the Other is interpreted by observers on the basis of their own existing knowledge about the presenter. Justifications for the “true” representations are drawn from the epistemological understanding of the Other rather than resorting to the ground realities. The failure to be wary of cultural specificity and acting on the basis of self-constructed ideas about the Other lead to the rejection of any idea which has essentially been associated with the Other.

In the case of veiling, the idea of the Other (read as veiled Muslim women) has not only led to rejection of the veiling as a “backward” practice but it has also served to justify western intervention in “oppressive” Muslim societies. As was the case in colonial discourse, the non-western societies are often thought of as “static” which remain “backward” unless “helped” by the west (Mitchell 1990). Portrayed as “oppressed,” the veiled Muslim women are constructed in a way that they need to be saved and thus saving them is the responsibility of the west which lives by the “superior” values.

There are two aspects to the idea of saving: saving from something and saving to something (Abu-Lughod 2013). The western intervention in Muslim societies is aimed at saving the veiled Muslim women from the “oppressive” practice of veiling to the “liberating” western values and to do so; violence is justifiable as it is thought to be aimed at achieving well being of the people who cannot think better for themselves (Li 2007). The approach of “saving” the “oppressed” women towards “liberating” western values is based on the underlying assumption of the universal notion of justice and liberty which applies to everyone across the globe. However, this is a very simplistic idea hiding the complexity of the notions such as, justice, liberty, and freedom across different cultures.

Similarly, the assumption about the universal nature of such notions renders the veiled Muslim women as a monolith and denies variation in their experiences. The fact that there is no single category of the Muslim women and that their experiences vary
depending on their race, ethnicity, nationality, and social class, draws our attention to importance of being mindful of all these different aspects which shape life experiences of the women differently. Put another way, the resulting complexity of the life experiences of the women cannot be separated from their habitus, which is shaped by their life histories and cultures (Bourdieu 1977).

Given the complex nature of the life experiences of women deeply rooted in their cultures, the assumption of the western discourse that “liberating” the “oppressed” women is possible by “saving” them to western ideals of women’s rights is hence flawed. Similarly, the assumption that Muslim women can be “liberated” by making them leave the veiling seems to be contradictory to the ground realities, as in most Muslim societies, the veil is associated with modesty and it confers high status on the wearer. Thus, making the women leave the veil would come at the expense of their high status associated with the veil. James Ferguson (1994) argues that an effective change comes only when the critique comes from within rather than from outside. Hence, only working within their own cultural limitations and constraints can these women be able to challenge patriarchal norms of their society.

### Veiling as Patriarchal Surveillance

The practice of veiling can be thought of as patriarchal surveillance of women’s bodies. In Muslim societies, men’s honour is associated with women’s behaviour. In this sense, men’s honour is embodied in women’s modesty, which is further associated with the control of women’s bodies. I follow Foucault’s (1978) idea of power for this line of argument. For Foucault, power is not essentially a tool of oppression, rather it can be also be productive. Thinking of surveillance as a form of power to monitor the conduct of individuals provides a unique understanding of how individual conduct can be related to communal wellbeing. The western discourse on the veiling suggests that the veiled women have internalized the customs of their patriarchal society, which consequently have made them think of their own status as “natural.”

Juxtaposing this idea of internalization to the panopticon, used by Foucault (1995), helps in analyzing the whole idea surveillance. The idea of internalization is based on the premise that the individual is unaware of what has been internalized and hence any surveillance concerning the internalized custom, idea, or anything for that matter, is dismissed as natural. The idea of the panopticon, on the other hand, suggests that the individual constantly thinks (or is made to think) that s/he is under surveillance. Bringing to this the issue of surveillance in the veiling, the societal surveillance seems to be more of panoptical surveillance. As mentioned earlier, being aware of where and when a sign (veil in this case) be expressed and what kind the sign stands for, indicate that these women recognize a constant societal surveillance of their behaviour. The realization of women that their every behaviour would be securitized leads them to make conscious choice regarding their “proper” behaviour. This is in contrast to the assumption of western discourse on veiling: that the veiled women either unconsciously adopt the veiling or develop a false-consciousness regarding their “oppression” caused by the veiling.

The idea of power and surveillance is even more complicated in the case of the practice of veiling. In her study on Egyptian Bedouin women, Lila Abu-
Lughod (1990) found that the women enacted constant resistance against different patriarchal orders which helped them alter the power relation between men and women, and paved the way for the women to attain a certain level of power over men. However, as found out by Mahmood (2004) in the case of women’s religious groups, the Egyptian Bedouin women are able to enact resistance by complying with the societal norms. In this sense, the veil, which is understood in terms of communal wellbeing, becomes a tool of personal advancement within the community. This in turn provides a window of opportunity for women to get access to the otherwise prohibited public sphere. It is important to note the conflicting nature of locating oneself in the public and private sphere, as here getting access to the public sphere is understood in terms of the personal advancement and remaining in the private sphere is understood in terms of the communal wellbeing. Being located within both the public and private sphere of society, these women have a greater tendency of challenging the gendered power relations. Sarab Abu-Rabia-Queder’s (2008) study on Palestinian Bedouin women found that the conformity of women to the patriarchal norms of the society allowed them to get an education. Once these women got educated, the gendered power relation with the community started to change and the women’s position was greatly improved in the subsequent years.

Conclusions

The practice of veiling can best be understood if analyzed through the lens of the idea of honour and modesty in the Muslim societies. In Muslim societies, safeguarding the sexuality of women is considered to be the responsibility of men. Analyzing the honour code provides a better understanding of why the veiling practice is strictly followed in some Muslim societies. The modesty of the women is intrinsically associated with the respect of the men, and hence, in order for men to earn respect in the society it is essential that they constantly monitor the behaviour of the women (Baxter 2007). In this sense, the men’s honour is embodied in the women’s bodies and to protect this honour, women’s bodies are concealed through the veil. Seen from this perspective, it is the ideology of honour which puts the responsibility of regulating, monitoring, and disciplining women’s bodies on men. While the honour code is concerned with a wide range of behaviours and actions, it is more strictly followed in terms of women’s dress. Thus, the honour code further complicates the whole discussion on the veiling. From the connection between the veiling and the idea of controlling women’s bodies, it is likely that one infers that the veiled Muslim women do not have control over their own bodies. This point of view, again, is very simplistic as it denies the fact that it is the women who bear the brunt of the breach of the honour code. Hence, the women tend to be more careful about their bodies as compared to the men, consciously choosing to adopt the veil.

However, this does not mean to suggest that surveillance in the case of veiling is always aimed at the wellbeing of overall society. In certain cases where the idea of surveillance goes so far so as to lead an imposition of an idea or practice on women, it does constitute violence against women. Being sensitive to cultural specificities in no way means that blind eye be turned to customs which do oppress women. Instead, it means that one be aware of his/her own experiences.
by acknowledging different experiences of others. Doing so allows much deeper understanding of the lives of others, and only then can one come up with culturally appropriate solutions to different issues. By focusing on the practice of veiling and exploring different issues surrounding it, I tried to illustrate the importance of understanding of any issue in its social context.

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