THE IDEOLOGY OF THE VEIL: FUNDAMENTALLY MISOGYNISTIC OR FUNDAMENTALLY MISUNDERSTOOD?

KARINA JOUGLA

For many Americans like me living in the post-*9/11* era, the veil is the ultimate symbol of women's oppression. In her article "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?" Lila Abu-Lughod pulls no punches in her criticism of the United States for using the "liberation" of Muslim women to justify what was a war of aggression in Afghanistan at best and an imperialist conquest at worst. I could not help but see her point. However, when Abu-Lughod suggests that the burqa is not an object of women's oppression but rather of their liberation, my instinctive reaction was to automatically reject this notion as counterintuitive. By the end of Abu-Lughod's article, I was left wondering, "But still, isn't there something inherently misogynistic about the burqa?"

For me, the moment of doubt came when Abu-Lughod cited fellow anthropologist Hanna Papanek, who described "the burqa as 'portable seclusion'" and "noted that many saw it as a liberating invention because it enabled women to move out of segregated living spaces while still observing the basic moral requirements of separating and protecting women from unrelated men" (Abu-Lughod 785). This concept of portable seclusion seemed to me irreconcilably incompatible with liberty, if not diametrically opposed to it. Seclusion denotes confinement and isolation, but liberty means freedom from restraint. From my perspective, the very fact that women in cultures where the veil is worn live in sex-segregated societies where they are expected to be covered in public spaces conveys a certain inferiority and treats these women as second-class citizens, or perhaps not as citizens at all. The notion that women must be protected outside of their homes from men also implies that if they were to go unveiled in public, they would be inviting harm upon themselves. This insinuates that there is something dangerous, shameful, and sinful about the female body and that sexuality that must be covered up to protect women from themselves. Given these implications, I set out to prove that the veil as an object is inherently oppressive of women.

However, in the process of researching the practice of veiling and reading accounts from women who had chosen to veil or not to veil, I came to realize that my initial approach had been misguided. It is not useful to ask whether veiling is fundamentally misogynistic, because the practice of veiling occurs in so many historical, political, geographical, social, and cultural contexts that even asking such an oversimplified question is hopelessly essentialist. Indeed, as Abu-Lughod cautions, "we must take care not to reduce the diverse situations and attitudes of millions of Muslim women to a single item of clothing" (786). It is telling that in English, "veil" is the only word

that exists to describe this item of clothing, but in Arabic there are over one hundred words that name the veil. When the limitations of the very language we use to communicate with each other obscure "such multivocality and complexity, we lose the nuanced differences in meaning and associated cultural behaviors" that the veil represents (Guindi 7). As a consequence, we risk conflating the vast varieties of veiling into a single "indiscriminate, monolithic, and ambiguous" stereotype (7).

To avoid such a conflation, I instead seek to understand how women's agency in choosing whether or not to veil affects the meanings that they convey with this decision. As one Muslim female scholar explains, "[social] codes . . . are represented in women's clothing," and since "[s]exual control of women is fundamental to patriarchy in both Muslim and non-Muslim societies," women's bodies are often universally the targets of oppression, whether that is through imposed clothing styles or restricted reproductive rights (Shaheed 299). When women are denied the agency to choose their own clothing and lifestyles, the meanings associated with the veil become perverted and exploited for political ends by fundamentalist extremists with a regressive agenda to defend patriarchy.

The Veil as Liberation?

The tension between oppressive versus liberatory conceptions of the veil manifests itself in a heated debate amongst feminist Muslim scholars. In her book *Questioning the Veil: Open Letters to Muslim Women*, social scientist Marnia Lazreg challenges Abu-Lughod's argument that the veil liberates women by enabling them to appear in public. According to Lazreg, the recent resurgence of the veil "coincides with an approach espoused by academic feminists that seeks to correct the notion that the veil is a sign of 'oppression,'" the very approach that Abu-Lughod advocates (Lazreg 6). Lazreg criticizes this view as apologia that "in reality makes oppression more intellectually acceptable . . . The implication is that the 'oppressed' are not so oppressed after all; they have power" (6). She argues that this naturalization of the veil excuses women from having to critically examine their personal reasons for choosing to veil. On the other side of the same coin, the ramification of Lazreg's criticism is that women who accept the veil and hail it as a source of liberation are actually oppressed but do not realize it. Proponents of Abu-Lughod's case counter that this "classic Western and secular Muslim feminist answer . . . is condescending: women who aren't bothered by veiling just don't know any better, and one day, with guidance and continued freedom, they will be enlightened and stop veiling" (Kaft 38). In this light, Lazreg's argument is equally problematic because it implies that women who do choose to veil are either submitting to oppression or do not have valid reasons for veiling to begin with.

As a woman, I found myself caught between Abu-Lughod and Lazreg. On one hand, I would be accused of being apologetic for and complicit with oppression if I accepted Abu-Lughod's notion of the veil as liberatory, but on the other hand, I would

be condescending and self-righteous if I disagreed. Many Muslim women similarly find themselves in this untenable position between irreconcilable views. They are presented with the impossible choice between betraying their culture or acting as willing accomplices in their own oppression. When feminists argue over the veil, neither side wins; but the clear losers are the women at the center of the debate. The root causes of their oppression become obscured by the distracting controversy surrounding the veil. This ongoing argument inevitably leads to an impasse that is counterproductive to the ostensible goal shared by both sides of advancing women's rights.

However, one thing that both sides can agree upon is that "veiling itself must not be confused with, or made to stand for, lack of agency" (Abu-Lughod 786). Instead of arguing over whether the veil is a tool of oppression or liberation, feminist scholars like Abu-Lughod and Lazreg should draw attention to firstly who is manipulating the veil to strip women of agency and, secondly, for what ends. Ultimately, centering the debate on veils and the bodies they cover distracts from the underlying causes of oppression embodied by fundamentalist patriarchies.

Understanding the Reasons Behind Veiling

Before considering the crucial element of free choice (or the lack thereof) in the practice of veiling, it is necessary to understand the reasons that Muslim women cite for deciding to veil or not to veil. These reasons range from religious piety and modesty to protection from sexual harassment and preservation of cultural identity. Marnia Lazreg explores these justifications at length in her open letter "Questioning the Veil." In addressing the origins of veiling in religion and in notions of modesty, Lazreg explains that one interpretation the Quran instructs, "tell the believing woman to lower their gaze and be modest, and to display of their adornment only that which is apparent, and to draw their veils over their bosoms and not to reveal their adornment" (21). According to Lazreg, the translation of the word "modest" is disputed and may have originally meant roughly "to cover one's private parts," which would contradict the interpretation that equates moral modesty with covering one's entire body (21). Lazreg asserts that "[m]odesty is not reducible to the veil" and suggests that modesty of character is separate from clothing as she challenges, "What if a woman is modest in her dress but immodest in her speech and actions?" (23). In addition to conveying modesty, many women wear the veil to symbolize their commitment to Islam similarly to the manner in which Christians wear crucifixes or Jewish men wear yarmulkes. However, Lazreg questions why covering herself is the only way a Muslim woman can demonstrate her piety, and instead proposes that women's religious expression should not be limited to an article of clothing.

In addressing the "protection" reason for veiling, Lazreg criticizes the "fiction that the veil is an antidote to sexual harassment" (48). She claims that, realistically, women who practice veiling are just as likely to be sexually harassed by men as women who

do not veil. Lazreg argues that, even though a woman's sexual purity is supposed to be safeguarded by the barrier of the veil, "When a man says that the veil prevents sexual harassment, he implies . . . [that] the veil protects his sexual identity by signaling to other men that his wife, sister, or . . . daughter is off limits" (51). The implication is that women are not being protected from strange men but rather from their own sexuality, which is seen as a dangerous invitation to commit sexual sin. However, some women counter that beyond potentially safeguarding against sexual harassment, the anonymity created by the veil gives them a sense of safety as they are able to "see without being fully seen" and "know without being known" (Kaft 30).

Another common reason that women give for choosing to veil is a desire to express their cultural identity, especially in the context of non-Muslim cultures or in countries where veiling is banned. Indeed, the veil "has emerged as an increasingly attractive method for women from Muslim communities in Europe and North America to display pride in their culture" (Lazreg 54). In countries like France where headscarves and face coverings have been outlawed, many Muslim women report feeling that lawmakers have violated their rights to cultural expression, and these women have reacted to defend their cultural freedoms (Gauthier-Villars). Contentious cases like this have driven a wedge between Muslim and secular "Western" feminists. Lazreg concedes that, "Feeling comfortable in one's culture and asserting its worth is one thing," but cautions that "reducing the essence of that culture to the veil is another. A woman who lives in a non-Muslim society but does not wear a veil is no less proud of her culture than the woman who wears one" (Lazreg 61).

There are a multitude of reasons given by women both in favor of and against veiling, but these rationales become irrelevant when women do not have a choice in the matter. Political extremists have abused these very reasons to deprive women of the ability to choose identities for themselves, making women the focal point of ideological battles.

Women's Right to Choose

Abu-Lughod attests that images of Afghan women forced to wear the burqa by the Taliban provided propaganda for the American invasion of Afghanistan, but the reality is that women have not always been forced to veil and, in recent history, they have actually been forced to unveil. In her essay "From Her Royal Body the Robe Was Removed," Mohja Kaft explores how, for much of the twentieth century, governments banned veiling as part of a modernization agenda in parts of the Middle East from Turkey to Iran to Syria. Instead of being arrested for going out in public uncovered, women were being persecuted for wearing veils. In one instance in 1982, Turkish troops forced women to unveil at gunpoint in the streets of Damascus as a theatrical state demonstration of "'progressive' secular ideology" (Kaft 35). As Kaft frames the incident, "imagine having your blouse removed while passerby watch, or your

underwear. Such a parallel is a realistic translation of a hijabed [veiled] woman's mortification at being unveiled in public" (34). It is one thing to condemn forced veiling, but what about forced unveiling? In both instances, the veil is exploited as a political issue at the expense of a woman's agency to choose for herself whether or not to practice veiling. This suggests that the veil itself is not oppressive, but its imposition or prohibition constitutes the denial of women's right to self-determination of their lives and identities. As Kaft asserts, "power is not given or taken away from Muslim women by the absence or presence of the veil, but by the presence or absence of economic, political, and family rights" (39). Ultimately, women are not oppressed by the veil itself—women's rights are denied by their patriarchal social, political, and economic institutions.

In "Dress Codes and Modes: How Islamic Is the Veil?" Aisha Lee Fox Shaheed examines the interplay between politics, fundamentalism, and patriarchy that deprives women of the right to choice and self-determination. Critics of the veil are quick to blame Islam as the culprit responsible for imposing veiling upon women, but as Shaheed instructs, "contemporary debates around the veil should begin with politics rather than theology, as both state-level and non-state groups further their own [political] agendas by exercising control over people's clothing in the name of religion, culture, and authenticity" (Shaheed 293). These politics of dress are closely linked to fundamentalist movements, which arose in reaction to social changes that challenged the patriarchal status quo. Even though many of these reactionary movements espouse a fundamentalist brand of Islam, they are not religious—they are political movements masquerading under the metaphorical "veil" of Islam (296).

As the trend toward modernization gained momentum in many predominantly Muslim countries, their governments undertook reforms to reduce inequalities between men and women by opening opportunities for education and participation in the workforce to women. Fundamentalist movements then sought to reestablish old social hierarchies based on sex by demonizing female sexuality in a backlash against the threat that empowering women posed to men's dominant place in the social order. In some countries such as Afghanistan, the veil was reinstituted and made compulsory. The consequence of such laws ("made by men, not God") is that "A woman does not face a man as an equal being; she faces him as a fundamentally different being whose difference must be given the symbol (the veil) of inequality" (Lazreg 106, 107). One could argue that fundamentalism also oppresses men—for example, Afghan men were forced by the Taliban to wear salwar kameez (trousers and tunic), turbans, and beards in the 1990s—but within fundamentalist regimes, women are still subordinate to men and suffer greater consequences (Shaheed 298). Shaheed explains,

> As collective cultural identities are formed and re-formed, women's sexuality is controlled through legal impediments (such as access to safe abortion), through

> violence (such as so-called honor killings . . .), and through their public appearance (such as enforced veiling). (299)

This subjugation of female sexuality is not unique to Muslim countries under fundamentalist rule; women's rights to control their own bodies are also restricted in other societies where extremism exists, such as the restriction of reproductive rights under Christian fundamentalism in many Western countries. Women's shared experiences of oppression by patriarchal fundamentalism can provide common ground for women to build global feminist coalitions across cultures.

It will take nothing short of a powerful global feminist movement to truly liberate women from the bonds of fundamentalist patriarchy, and according to Abu-Lughod, this will require the universal "acceptance of the possibility of difference" within feminism (787). A feminist movement is emerging in many Muslim countries to gain equality for women within the framework of Islam, but many Western proponents of women's rights are skeptical of this brand of "Islamic feminism." Abu-Lughod posits that Islamic feminism is a "viable movement forged by brave women who want a third way"—women who seek an alternative to the "polarizations that place feminism on the side of the West" and everyone else in opposition (788). In order to forge a global movement, feminists must make room amongst ourselves for different kinds of feminisms, and accommodating difference means accepting women's free choice to wear (or not wear) the veil. When a woman makes the informed, independent, and uncoerced decision to take up or take off the veil, she has the agency to define the meaning of her action. The veil itself should not be seen as an object of misogyny, but its exploitation by male political and religious authorities in order to preserve patriarchal structures is undeniably misogynistic. Rather than being oppressive, the veil is often just misunderstood and misconstrued. For Lazreg, "Rehabilitation of the veil cannot dispense with a hard look at the subversion and transformation of the meanings of the veil, ranging from a tool of confinement to one of purported liberation" (102). For Muslim women, this rehabilitation of the veil will require a process of reconciling the contradictory identities symbolized by the veil and renegotiating women's roles in society on an equal basis with men. On a larger scale, the birth of a global feminist movement will require a parallel reconciliation between different types of feminisms and a renegotiation of Islam's place within the movement in order to truly liberate women from patriarchy everywhere.

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KARINA JOUGLA '16CC is majoring in Comparative Literature and Society with a concentration in Statistics. She is a John Jay Scholar in the Columbia Undergraduate Scholars Program. Interested in social justice issues including education, climate change, and gender equality, Karina is involved in America Reads, Barnard Columbia Divest, and the United Nations Foundation's Girl Up campaign. Karina grew up in Carpinteria, California, and her favorite book since childhood is *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* by Betty Smith.