

The Muslim Veil in America

Sid Ahmed Zakaria SELMI, Dr. Tahar MOULAY University of Saida, Algeria.

Abstract

After the terrorist attacks of September 11th, the Image of the Muslim women who wear a veil has been presented negatively by the U.S media and the term veil is often seen as a kind of oppression to women by their families who confiscate their personal freedom and it is also seen as a symbol of terrorism.

Despite all these problems many Muslim women insist to wear the veil as a form of resistance and commitment to their religion. This paper intends to shed light on the importance of the veil in the Islamic religion, the different issues surrounding the act of wearing veil in America and how the Americans look at the veil including the U.S media.

Key words: Image, Muslim, Veil, terrorism, Issues, U.S media américains.

ملخص

بعد الهجمات الإرهابية في 11 سبتمبر، تم عرض صورة النساء المسلمات اللواتي يرتدين الحجاب بشكل سلبي من قبل وسائل الإعلام الأمريكية. وغالبا ما ينظر إلى الحجاب على أنه نوع من الاضطهاد للمرأة من قبل أسرهم التي تصادر هويتهم الشخصية وأنه يعتبر كذلك رمزا للإرهاب. على الرغم من كل هذه المشاكل الكثير من المسلمات تصر على ارتداء الحجاب كشكل من أشكال المقاومة والالتزام بدينهم. وتنوي هذه الورقة إلى تسليط الضوء على أهمية الحجاب في الدين الإسلامي، ومختلف القضايا المحيطة بارتداء الحجاب في أمريكا وكيف ننظر الأميركيين في الحجاب بما في ذلك وسائل الإعلام الأمريكية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: صورة، مسلم، الحجاب، والإرهاب، مشاكل، وسائل الإعلام الأمريكية.

1. Introduction:

Nowadays millions of Muslims live in USA from different ethnicities and races but this Muslim community is being watched closely and differently especially when some acts of Muslims are linked most of the time with terrorism and it seems that there are many challenges for the Muslims living in USA in order to prove their innocence and to gain their civil liberties and to show that their religion is not a violent one and doesn't have anything to do with terrorism, however the negative attitude towards Muslims seems to be persistent especially towards veiled women who are seen weirdly and asked to remove their veil or hijab which is often associated with terrorism and here it seems that there is a clash of cultures and a misunderstanding between different civilizations because the veil is so important for women in the Islamic religion, it is considered as a symbol of identity and commitment to their religion and also a symbol of the conservative Muslim family. The veil for Muslim women is a choice and a way to prove that they are strong in spite of the daily harassments made especially by the U.S media which portrays the veil negatively to the Americans.

2. The Importance of the Veil for Muslim Women:

For non-Muslims the word veil or hijab can be simply understood as a piece of cloth or anything which covers the head but for Muslim women it is more than a cover since it is mentioned in the Quran the holy book for all Muslims in the world that all Muslim women should wear a veil as in this verse from the Quran translated by Yusuf Ali ⁽¹⁾ as well as in many other English Quran translations ⁽²⁾ available in internet.

And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husband's fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women, or the slaves whom their right hands possess, or

male servants free of physical needs, or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex; and that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments. And O ye Believers! turn ye all together towards Allah, that ye may attain Bliss Quran (24:31).

There are different names and dress styles for the term hijab or veil, but there is something common between these terms is that the veil is a cover for Muslim women in order not to show their beauty and also to obey god, however, not all Muslim women look to the hijab as an obligation and this is the difference between Sunni Muslims who are considered as too conservative and Progressive Muslims who are trying to be more independent by challenging many traditions .while many women still wear the hijab out of religious conviction, there are also women who reject the hijab (Moussa, 2.). One of the most famous novels which dealt with this topic is Mohja Kahf's novel. The girl in the Tangerine Scarf which tells about the story of an American woman from an Arabic origin who challenged the traditional Muslim Sunni beliefs about the veil and many other topics by following a more progressive view of Islam which suits more to the American culture and beliefs, however this veil has recently become a symbol of identity and a way to take a stand against the racist image linking between terrorism and Islam, "...Many women see wearing the hijab as indicative of their desire to be part of an Islamic revival, especially in countries where the practice of Islam is discouraged or even forbidden..."(Aicha, Stacey, 2009). For many Muslim women nowadays the veil is the story of struggling against stereotypes and Islamophobia, it is also a way of rejecting western capitalism and supporting a program of social justice. (Scott, 2011, p. 118). It is a way to denounce the bad interpretation of veiling by westerners looking to the veil as a sign of women's oppression.

3. The Image of the Veil after 9/11:

The events of 9/11 have made the veil a very complicated issue in America. The image of the veiled woman changed after the attacks of 9/11 from oppressed women who needed help and liberation from tyrant regimes like Taliban and the Iraqi one (Davis, 2003) to become a real threat to the American national security and plotters in the different attacks and bombings happe-

ning in the U.S, they became subjects of aggression and social prejudice and a source of public fear, this kind of social discrimination banned the veiled women from practising their religious freedom in the land of freedom but one should define the meaning of freedom for westerners especially for the Americans, maybe freedom for them is to unveil women because 'lifting the veil has become a metaphor for freedom and democracy' (Zeiger 2008:266) and here it seems that there is a misunderstanding to the other's culture and to the Islamic religion because veiled women are often seen as whether terrorists or women who need to be saved but 'do Muslim women really need to be saved?' (Abu Lughod, 2002) or is it just a choice that should be respected?

The veiled women in many cases are facing discrimination based on false stereotypes and an understanding from one side which once was called *New Orientalism* ⁽³⁾ by Edward Said.

4. Issues of veiled women in America:

In U.S.A there are many laws which protect religious freedom and civil rights, Muslim women who wear the hijab or veil have the right to participate equally in the American society and this is what was confirmed by President Obama during his 2009 speech in Cairo, Egypt. Speaking to a large crowd at Cairo University Mr. Obama said,

"Moreover, freedom in America is indivisible from the freedom to practice one's religion....That's why the United States government has gone to court to protect the right of women and girls to wear the hijab and to punish those who would deny it."
(Brothen, 2010)

This is what is being said officially, but in reality it is completely something else. The veiled women in America struggle everyday to keep their conservative dress in a society which has completely a different lifestyle, they try to be American citizens who are not perceived differently or considered as a second class citizens by taking act in all fields of life, the thing which seems to be difficult and challenging, the American civil liberties union (ACLU) ⁽⁴⁾ in 2007 stated that

“Muslim women have been prohibited from wearing their headcoverings in a number of contexts. They have been harassed, fired from jobs, denied access to public places, and otherwise discriminated against because they wear hijab. Because of their visibility, Muslim women who wear hijab face particular exposure to discrimination and have increasingly been targets for harassment in the aftermath of September 11”

The veil is most of the time seen as a sign of difference between Muslims and non-Muslims in America, this difference may back up the idea of Samuel Huntington the ‘clash of civilizations’ the theory which considers Islamic countries and the west as two different worlds opposing each other in a lasting war between liberties and oppression which is maybe an imaginary thing based on the wrong understanding of the other ‘*underwriting the binary of freedom and oppression and the modes of gender and subjectivity through which the west maintains its imaginary borders*’ (Al- Saji, 2010:878).

So, it seems that Muslim women have to do more to present themselves in a good way to the others to make them change their negative picture that they have about the veil.

5. The Veil and the U.S Media:

One of the great issues to the veiled women and the Muslims in general is the negative presentation of Islam by the U.S media, the Muslims are often recognized as terrorists and a threat to the west as John Esposito says ‘... *Islam is often equated with holy war and hatred, fanaticism and violence, intolerance and oppression of women*’ (Esposito, 1992).

The stereotypes of the veiled women are often the result of a knowledge which comes from the U.S media because the people are not involved in real life nowadays, most of them are busy and absorbed by their jobs, for this reason the media is considered as the eyes and the ears of people, it can also have a great influence and it can transmit a negative picture about Islam and Muslims, because the same information can be transmitted in different ways. According to Lippmann ‘...*words are turned over and over again, to evoke one set of images today, another tomorrow*’ (Lippmann, 2007). So, one should

be clever enough to filter different information.

6. Conclusion:

Veiled women are often seen from western perspectives and presented to persons who have little knowledge or a little contact with an Islamic culture.

This distant and negative portrayal which often does not show reality and enforces a lasting cultural misunderstanding between the east and the west and between Muslims and non-Muslims is the outcome of many reasons, but the most important ones are the ignorance about the other cultures and the U.S media which are shaping the American perception of Islam and veiled women.

The U.S media had better focus on the achievements of the veiled women and promote a culture of peace in which people from different religions and races go hand in hand to construct a bright and a peaceful history for U.S.A.

Notes:

(1) Sir Abdullah Yusuf Ali was a British-Indian Islamic scholar who translated the Qur'an into English.

(2) The holy Quran, retrieved on December 7 2016 from
<http://corpus.quran.com/translation.jsp?chapter=24&verse=31>

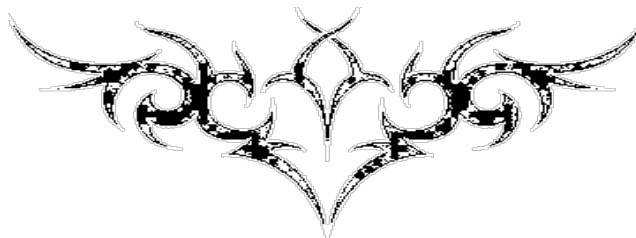
(3) is a way of seeing that imagines, emphasizes, exaggerates and distorts differences of Arab peoples and cultures as compared to that of Europe and the U.S. It often involves seeing Arab culture as exotic, backward, uncivilized, and at times dangerous
retrieved on December 7 2016 from

<http://www.arabstereotypes.org/why-stereotypes/what-orientalism>

(4) The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) is a nonpartisan, non-profit organization whose stated mission is «to defend and preserve the individual rights and liberties guaranteed to every person in this country by the Constitution and laws of the United States. », retrieved on December 17 2016 from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Civil_Liberties_Union.

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