

The Trope of the Oppressed Veiled Woman: A Colonial Legacy.

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Abstract: This paper traces the representation of veiled women in selected Western travel writings of the mid-nineteenth century and modern feminist writings. At the centre of these narratives is the image of a secluded (invisible), powerless, agentless and victimised Muslim woman. The paper argues that the modern feminist take on the veil and veiling, which by and large echoes nineteenth century women travellers' position on the subject, is a colonial and Orientalist legacy. This paper essentially focuses on the relationship between the veil and oppression. It highlights the problematic of agency or lack thereof. The oppressed, veiled and enslaved Muslim woman operates as a foil for the enlightened western woman and all what she has achieved. But it should be highlighted that contrary to the Orientalist/feminist trope which posits that the veil rendered veiled women invisible and 'agentless', veiling places Muslim women at the very centre of scrutiny literally as well as figuratively.

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Introduction: The ongoing impassioned debates on veiling/unveiling of Muslim women are located in the Western obsession with vision. Visibility and seeing are prerequisites for gaining knowledge of and access to the realm of accepted and absolute truth in Western canonised discourse. Ironically, Muslim women's in/visibility is what placed, and still places them, at the centre of scrutiny and curiosity. Myra Macdonald (2006) explains that the modern Western obsessive fixation on the veil is by and large a colonial and Orientalist legacy. It is closely related to a Western cultural context that privileges "ocular-centric or vision-based" epistemology. With "the seen", taken as a primary ground of knowledge in Western thought, "seeing" has become in many cases a metaphor for perspective" writes Barbie Zeliger(2001:1) for her part.

The recent flourishing literature on the veil's controversy and debate in the West builds on this centrality of vision in Western discourse and focuses on Islam's incompatibility with Western secular values. Drawing parallels between past and present representations of the veil, this paper argues that the modern feminist stance on the veil largely reflects the Orientalist assumption that this attire is the emblem, *par excellence*, of Muslim women's oppression and subjugation. Modern Western feminists revert to Orientalist narratives about the demeaning status of Muslim women. The latter are essentialised and constructed as one single category

and their bodies are staged as foils for civilisation, progress and human rights. The paper draws on a number of women travel writings to Algeria in the mid-nineteenth century and some modern feminist writings. It focuses, mostly though not exclusively, on the following texts: *Through Algeria* (1863) of Mabel Sharman Crawford, *A Winter in Algeria* (1865) by Ellen Rogers, *Last Winter in Algeria* (1868) of Mary Lloyd Evans and Canadian writer's "Shrouded in Black" (1995). These texts are textually and critically analysed. This paper is mainly informed by Edward Said's Orientalism as it helps probe into colonial attitudes towards Muslim women. It will also appeal to Mohanty Chandra Talpade's essay "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses"(1984) to help understand the intransigence of the veiled woman as a symbol of submission and subjugation in modern Western feminist discourse.

The Unholy Alliance of Feminism and Colonial Politics:

The situation of women was, and is still, used to gauge the progress of any given society on the scale of civilization. General Bugeaud, for instance, once said that the 'native' Algerians were a mystery because they concealed their women from the colonial gaze. George Hardy, another French colonialist, was of the same opinion when he wrote, "Our great misfortune in Muslim countries is...that we do not quite know what women think. The day when a large enough number of solid friendships develop between French and native households, we will be saved"(qtd in Marie-Paule Ha,2014 :67). These colonialists used the idea of liberating Muslim women

from the veil to justify the dismantling of native cultures, religions or modes of dress for the purpose of westernizing them. The abandonment of native culture was posited as the solution for women's oppression. By the same token, many modern feminists saw the War on Afghanistan as an opportunity to free the "poor oppressed" Afghan women from an archaic and patriarchal religious regime. In this respect, Marit Nybakk, Norwegian politician for the Labour Party, states,

This is a war of liberation and also a war to liberate Afghanistan's women. So the aspect of women's rights is crucial for me. For many years I have been greatly concerned about the extreme oppression of women under Taliban rule. Here in the West we close our eyes to the grotesque treatment women are subjected to because it does not affect us (qtd in ibtimes 2011).

The oppression of Afghan women is used by Nybakk, along other feminists, to argue that the war on Afghanistan was morally justified as human rights, and particularly women's rights, are a global concern.

In *Revue Africaine*, devoted to things Algerian, Augustin Bernard wrote in 1912 that the Muslim Algerian family was a mystifying and closed sanctuary that was forbidden to the curiosity and gaze of non-Muslims. This inhibition of the gaze in the form of seclusion and the full veil was really a challenge to the colonial authorities' attempts to expand their control on the local society. From the onset of the invasion, the French were denied the right to gaze and to see native women and what was behind Algerian closed doors.

Yeğenoğlu argues that “the loss of control does not imply a mere loss of sight, but a complete reversal of positions: the Muslim woman’s body completely invisible to the European observer except for her eyes, the veiled woman can see without being seen”(1998:54). This frustration is also expressed by many women travellers to Algeria in the nineteenth century. Mrs Rogers (1865:196) considers the situation of Muslim women hopeless since their society exercised a religious and social tyranny on them. Women travellers to Algeria resort to the same male imperialist rhetoric which postulated that the Algerian society was uncivilized because of the way it treated its women, particularly their seclusion and indolent life. Because it supposedly restrained and disguised these women’s identities, the veil was singled out and vilified. “Rend[ing] the veil from these degraded” women and ending their seclusion was the first step towards freeing them, Mrs Rogers (Ibid: 59) writes.

The invisibility of veiled women, even when they are outside, is constantly stressed by women travellers. The idea of the “ghost-like form of the veiled Moorish woman” (Sharman, 1863: 18) is omnipresent. Mabel Sharman writes,

Only that ghosts do not frequent public thoroughfares in broad daylight, one might suppose yon Moorish woman was an inhabitant of a tomb; for her eyes acquire a preternatural glare from the thick white veil above which they show, whilst the long winding-sheet-like scarf which covers her head, and shrouds her form, imparts to her looks a truly ghost-like character (Ibid, 9).

This trope is used to justify these travellers' attack on the veil and to draw attention to its incongruous nature from a western perspective since it disrobes women of their humanity and sense of self and identity. Sharman who calls the Moorish veil (Hayek) ugly and unflattering, marvels at the capacity of the Moorish woman to recognise herself and writes, "If, when thus arrayed, she stands before a glass, her perceptive faculties must be keen indeed if she can recognise herself." (Ibid, 46) Sharman's words are echoed in radical feminist Kate Millet's outrage and unhidden disgust at the sight of women clad in black when she visited Iran in the wake of the Islamic Revolution. 19th century Orientalist patronizing attitude is revisited and endowed now not with Christian overtones but with nationalist sentiments echoing the strained relations between the United States and Iran,

The first sight of them was terrible .like black birds, like death, like fate, like everything alien, Foreign, dangerous, unfriendly. There were hundreds of them, specters crowding the barrier, waiting their own. A sea of chaddori, the long terrible veil, the full length of it, like a dress descending to the floor" (Qtd in Bullock, 2007:2).

The Agentless Muslim Woman and the Need for Rescuing

The construction of Muslim women as beasts of burden and downtrodden secluded and oppressed victims is a necessary discursive strategy of women travellers and modern feminists alike to pose themselves as the savers of less privileged women. Saving the oppressed Muslim woman

was a staple topic of conversation in Orientalist writings. This trope has, it seems, lost neither its urgency nor appeal and still pervades Western debates to this day. Lila Abu-Lughod (2013) writes that Western women have taken it upon themselves to rescue the Muslim woman from the diktat of a misogynist and patriarchal society. She writes,

A moral crusade to rescue oppressed Muslim women from their cultures and their religion has swept the public sphere, dissolving distinctions between conservatives and liberals, sexists and feminists. The crusade has justified all manner of intervention from the legal to the military, the humanitarian to the sartorial. But it has also reduced Muslim women to a stereotyped singularity, plastering a handy cultural icon over much more complicated historical and political dynamics.

Because of their pretended lack of intelligence and sophistication, Muslim women need the benign intervention and assistance of their more 'enlightened' Western 'sisters'. Modern feminists, as Abu-Lughod argues, deny agency to Muslim women and perpetuate clichéd ideas about veiled Muslim women's lack of freedom and bodily autonomy. Western discourse on Muslim women is often simplistic and reductionist. Western writings engage in a dangerous rhetoric of homogenisation of the Muslim women regardless of their class and space (urban and rural). They are reduced to a single fixed category and are almost invariably equated to powerless victims

who undergo in silence the tyranny of bullying and unenlightened Muslim men.

Veiling is not always synonymous with lack of agency and powerlessness. Fadwa ElGuindi (1999) writes that whilst some women, due to some social and cultural pressures, are coerced into wearing the veil, most of them view it as liberating and a highly positive experience which denotes their ability to make an active choice and create for themselves a unique identity. This is a fact acknowledged by Mabel Sharman herself. She is quick, though, to dismiss this as a sign of false consciousness and says that the naïve Muslim woman “accepts the Koran as a rule of faith, [and] unhesitatingly acquiesces in the mutilated life to which by it she is condemned” (1863:54). Mrs Evans, who visited Algeria in the 1860s, is convinced that it is the women themselves who encourage the life of mutilation and seclusion that they lead. She writes that the mother of an Algerian Caid (an Algerian colonial official) warned him “If I find you corrupting your wife with your new French ideas, I shall just stick my dagger into her heart, rather than see our honour thus degraded” (1868:123). Such examples, according to these travellers, clearly show that Muslim women themselves participate in perpetuating their own oppression and enslavement without even realising it. The Muslim woman, thus, is not only oppressed but is also oblivious to her own oppression and is actively implicated in the continued oppression of fellow women.

Modern feminists are usually quick to point this Marxist notion of false consciousness whenever a woman expresses her wish to cover herself

out of religious and intellectual conviction. Fatima Mernissi's, the Moroccan feminist writer, dismisses veiled women as silent/silenced, agentless and passive victims who, inadvertently, acquiesce in their own oppression and subjection. In this manner, these 'deluded', veiled women suffer from the Stockholm Syndrome.

Mernissi reinscribes the Orientalist scholarship of 19th century anti-Islamic discourse of women travel writers like Rogers, Evans and Sharman by giving it a validation stamp as a Muslim woman who claims that she and other female family members were victims of the seclusion system. Mernissi engages in the same colonial discourse and contemporary Western feminist thought that view the veil as oppressive and degrading. Such a vision is reductive and marginalising to women who choose to cover. It is perhaps not surprising then that Mernissi's work has been canonised and hailed in Western feminist and liberal circles for its insightful and vanguard approach to Muslim women's ongoing victimisation and subordination.

In the same vein, American journalist and author Deborah Scroggins gives the veil a "blatant badge of female oppression." Her article "Women of the Veil: Islamic Militants Pushing Women to an Age of Official Servitude"(1992), bears uncanny resemblance to Mrs Rogers, Mrs Evans, and Mabel Sharman's framing of the caged existence of the Moorish women. These travellers compare the position of these women to the state of slavery in which American blacks were held. The motif of the enslaved and caged Moorish women as caged is used by these travelers to fashion themselves as fulfilled, free and happy Western women. This is what

Inderpal Grewal (1996:66) refers to as “the mobile—immobile, free—unfree opposition” in the rhetoric of empire. Mrs Rogers (1865:58) writes in this respect,

Few positions in life, not even excepting American slavery, can be so utterly wretched as that of the very poor Arab woman. Among the richer Moslems the degradation of the women is mental and moral. Superadded to this, amongst the poorer classes the husband lays upon the shoulders of his wife, every conceivable burden.

The theme of saving Muslim women, we have said, is central in our travellers’ writings. Mrs Rogers (1865:58) writes sympathetically, but still in a very condescending way, about the poor veiled creatures. The latter are, as it is to be expected, veiled alike in mind and body, and bound in chains which none but the enlightened and privileged Christian women can break. She tells the reader that she laments their fate and longs to help them, but such hopes are mere wishful thinking because of linguistic barriers.

This belief in the agentlessness of the ‘oppressed’ Algerian Muslim women calls to mind Edward Said’s assertion (1978:3) that the Orient is not considered “a free subject of thought or action” and is unable to speak for itself. It is the Westerners’ moral and civilisational duty to describe, guide and teach Orientals because they are not capable of accomplishing such a task themselves. By the same token, these Algerian Muslim women needed the intervention of their Western ‘sisters’ to lift the shackles of cultural and religious tyranny. The discourse of universal sisterhood permeates many

women travel writings of the period, but this sisterhood is imperial and hierarchal. This shows that Western women travellers have not produced an alternative understanding or space where they and native women met on equal footing. Instead, they have produced an accomplice Orientalist discourse and were, as true dutiful daughters of the empire, keen on giving 'silenced' Otherised women a voice.

This subject of "saving the poor veiled woman" is not limited to nineteenth century women travellers but is still in the minds of feminists and animates and debates in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries both in the West and inside Muslim countries themselves. While Mrs Rogers, along with her fellow women travellers, posited Christianity as the way to salvation, when she wrote "oh, Christianity, haste to tear the fetters, and rend the veil from these degraded [women]" (1865:58), modern Western or westernised feminists offer modern Western liberal values as the way out of this 'enslavement'. This condescending rhetoric shows, as Alison Donnell argues, that Western discourse has, so far, failed to transcend the Orientalist trope of the veiled woman as an icon of oppression and as a visual reminder of the civilisational and cultural rift between Western and Islamic societies. (2003)

In her article "Shrouded in Black" (1995), Canadian writer Katherine Govier tackles the issue of the full veil (the burka) in Toronto (Canada). She considers that women wearing it no matter what they might say about it being a free choice or of its liberating effect are always deluded. Her article

reflects another feminist, Polly Toynebee's (2001), stance on the veil. Toynebee considers that the burka,

is more than an instrument of persecution, it is a public tarring and feathering of female sexuality. It transforms any woman into an object of defilement too untouchably to be seen. It is a garment of lurid sexual suggestiveness...in its objectifying of women, it turns them into covering creatures demanding and expecting violence and victimization.

Such stances are based on what Chandra Mohanty calls assumptions of privilege and ethnocentric universality (1984). More often than not, Western feminists engage discursively in dehistoricising, essentialising and homogenising the oppression of women. In this sense, modern Muslim women are no different from the poor veiled women of Orientalist writings and are constructed as a homogenous and powerless group who are solely defined by a supposed victimhood and a systemic oppression of misogynist and patriarchal societies and cultures. The Muslim woman's supposed imprisonment and oppression symbolically stands for the oppression of every woman, throughout history, and is a reminder that Western women need to use their privileged positions to further the rights of less fortunate sisters.

The discursive strategies Mrs Rogers uses to compare the 'poor' Moorish women to black slaves finds their echo in Govier's article. Govier asserts that neither tolerance nor sympathy should be spared to women who

live in Canada dressed as slaves (1995). For her, women roaming Western streets with their full veil are an outrageous disregard and affront to Western liberal values and the hard-won rights of Western women. As victims of a false self-consciousness, these ‘powerless’ dehumanised veiled women lack the intellectual maturity and bravery to free themselves. In fact, they are happy the way they are, and are convinced that “public space is reserved for men”, laments Govier (1995). They are, in short, like the secluded nineteenth century Muslim women Mabel Sharman (1868:55) describes and who readily accept the aimless and strenuous existence to which their religion and culture condemned them. Mabel Sharman laments that Muslim women are too weak to loosen their shackles, and Mrs. Rogers is convinced that these women need their imperial sisters to break their bonds. Likewise, Govier claims that veiled women are too brainwashed to free themselves without the help of Western women. These latter self-represent themselves as having bodily autonomy and possessing the intelligence and agency to lead free and fulfilling lives. In contrast, veiled women hide their sexuality and bodies behind the disguise of their garments. Govier carries on her argument to say,

Do we mistake this cloaking and negating of the essence of women for worship. But is a social dictate, enforced by men who regard women as chattels; it is nothing but the protection of property, and to prevent women’s participation in all but the most private spheres of life...and why does this pass unremarked? Where are those among us who will stand up and cry enough to the practice of extinguishing women with black cloth? (Quoted in Bullock, 2007:131)

Govier, like women travellers, points an accusing finger at these women and their religion without having a deep understanding of the different complex factors behind their veiling. Texts such as Govier's article exercise a form of hegemonic oppression, and the secular values they aggressively uphold are as uncompromising as the supposedly dogmatic and archaic religious beliefs Muslim women cling to. In this way, all talk about equality and freedom of belief seems to find in the veiled woman an exception. Rather than helping the veiled Muslim women, Govier's text can eventually be counterproductive and contribute to their stereotyping, stigmatisation and victimisation because of who they are. It may also result in their rejection of mainstream society and its values because they are constantly under scrutiny and attack. As a result, many non-veiled women may turn to veiling and exaggeratingly adhere to ethnic and cultural specificities to overcome feelings of non-acceptance and to forge for themselves a new identity and a sense of belonging to an accepting and likeminded community. Susan Rasmussen (2013) explores the often tumultuous and complicated relationship between the West and its minorities, particularly Muslims. She calls for a greater tolerance, acceptance and openness towards the seemingly different "Other". Accepting covered women is a way towards such ideals. She argues,

legal, political, social, and symbolic aspects of the[veil] controversy in cultural encounters and "borderlands" reveal a key human rights issue today: namely, determining how to accept, accommodate, and

tolerate, even celebrate diversity, in particular, Muslim religious observances in countries where Islam has a large presence but remains a minority religion thus far...devout Muslim women who express their religious and/or cultural and/or ethnic identity through external signs such as covering, for example, headscarves and veils, are often subject to negative stereotyping, restrictions, including limits on some rights.(Ibid)

The critique of Western feminism and westernised “indigenous” feminist elites has been the subject of Chandra Talpade’s now classical essay “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse” first published in 1984. She criticises the former because it is hegemonic and the latter because they fail to formulate a real plan of feminist actions and issues that pertain to the specific geography, culture and history of their societies. In this way, there is no distinction between feminists who are culturally or geographically from the West and native feminists who merely copy Western strategies in their efforts to address issues facing women in their countries. She also objects to the claim of universality and cross-cultural validity of such discourse(s). In this sense, Govier’s Eurocentric feminist discourse, which tends to homogenise non-Western women’s realities and experiences is similar to the discourse of the nineteenth century Orientalist travel literature which is organically and ideologically based on hegemony and hierarchal power relationships and Western structural domination. Chandra highlights the ideological implications of the Western feminist discourse and rejects the

claim that it is innocent of any manipulating schemes or that it is agenda free. She writes,

The necessary and integral connection between feminist scholarship and feminist political practice and organizing determines the significance and status of Western feminist writings on women in the third world, for feminist scholarship, like most other scholarships, is not the mere production of knowledge about a certain subject. It is a directly political and discursive *practice* in that it is purposeful and ideological. It is best seen as a mode of intervention into particular hegemonic discourses. (Ibid, 53)

Modern feminist writings and women travel writings reflect their writers' own subjectivity, experiences and stereotypes. The former participated in the imperial production of knowledge and stereotyping of the 'Other', and the latter continue to exercise a former of patronising liberal hegemony on Muslim women in the name of human rights and gender equity. Knowledge is not value-free and is culturally and ideologically loaded. In this sense, these travellers and modern feminists' production of knowledge about Muslim women is influenced, shaped and sustained by the culture, personal experiences and interests of its producers.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, visions and conceptions of the veil and veiled women in the West and even in Muslim countries themselves resonate with the Orientalist rhetoric about the veil and Islam. Muslim veiled women are still

looked upon as victims to be pitied and individuals without any agency over their bodies, lives and choices. Veiled women are often seen as individuals who suffer from a false consciousness and who are unaware of their own subjugation and victimisation. Recent attacks on veiled Muslim women in the West are as much a consequence of the ignorance and bigotry of its perpetrators as the result of decades, if not centuries, of continual mobilisation against the 'Other' and the false representations.

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