

MUSLIM WOMEN AND VEILING: What Does It Signify?

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Abstrak: Perempuan Muslim dan Penggunaan Cadar: Apa Maksudnya?.

Perdebatan mengenai perempuan Muslim dan tindakan mereka mengenakan hijab atau menutup wajah bukanlah fenomena baru. Makalah ini akan mengeksplorasi perspektif memakai hijab melalui analisis semiotik serta fenomena perempuan dan menutup wajah pada umumnya. Kajian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif, dan data dikumpulkan melalui pengamatan dan kajian pustaka. Temuan penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa kerudung melambangkan berbagai perspektif di tempat yang berbeda, budaya dan tradisi. Sebagaimana hijab sering diasosiasikan sebagai bagian agama Islam, hijab juga merupakan simbol yang dipengaruhi oleh berbagai faktor. Hijab menjadi lambang identitas, religiusitas, kesopanan dan hak pilihan. Hijab juga mengungkapkan sikap mereka dalam masalah politik dan menunjukkan struktur sosial. Meskipun cadar bisa menggambarkan keterjangkauan perempuan dalam mengambil pakaian yang mereka pilih untuk hijab, beberapa simbol perlu ditinjau kembali karena mungkin ada beberapa perubahan dalam pemotretannya.

Abstract: The debate upon women and their act of wearing hijab or veiling is not new phenomenon. This paper will explore the perspectives of wearing hijab through semiotic analysis as well as the phenomenon of women and veiling in general. This study employs qualitative approach, and the data were collected through observation and literature review. The findings indicate that veil symbolizes various perspectives in different places, cultures and traditions. As the veil often indexes as the religion of Islam, it is also a symbol which is affected by various factors. It becomes a symbol of identity, religiosity, modesty, and agency. The veil also reveals their stance in political matters and shows the social structures. Even though the veil could portray the women's affordability in taking up the clothing they choose to veil, some symbolizations need to be revisited since there might be some changes in its depictions.

Keywords: women, veiling, hijab, symbol, Muslim

Introduction

If you see a woman covering her head with hijab, will you see her as a Muslim woman, a Christian, a Catholic, a Jewish, a Hindu, a Sikhist, etc., or just a woman with a headscarf? Will you think of her as a religious person, radical, extreme, rebellious, or oppressed?

The debate upon women and their act of veiling or wearing a hijab or a cover is not new. The discussion on this issue, however, seems interesting as the veil is often seen to symbolize different meanings, even often contradictory, when seen from different viewpoints. While it might not be surprising to see how veils and women's acts of veiling are seen differently, it is important "to clarify who is speaking and by which standards they are measuring"¹ because this might affect the direction of the discussion on the veils depending on the experiential contacts the discussing person has had with the veils and veiled woman as well as the purposes for which veiling or unveiling is argued. Hence, it might be necessary to mention that, in this paper, the researcher also brings her own perspectives as a Muslim wearing hijab in doing semiotic analysis on it. She will begin by giving general statement about my own experience, in general, with veiling. She will then proceed to describe the phenomenon of women and veiling in general before presenting it as the Islam signifier. The discussion will continue on illustrating some forms of veiling and the existing meanings the veil has been argued to symbolize. She will then end the paper with some general conclusions and suggestions on how the semiotic analysis on hijab could be pursued in future studies.

The researcher writes this paper initially because of personal interest. As someone who is a Muslim wearing hijab, she always sees wearing hijab as a personal choice and as something normal. At least in Indonesia, the most populous Majority-Muslim country and where she is from, wearing hijab or not for a Muslim woman is not uncommon. As foreign as hijab to people, especially in the western hemisphere, is, she found it strange that people made this hijab thing look "problematic" and "complicated".

The researcher admits that it is sort of dilemmatic when it comes to reasoning as to why she wears hijab. The researcher feels like she should explain it in a way that will not "mar" her religion, her culture, her country, and people she kind of "represents". The researcher is a Muslim, an Indonesian, a Javanese, and a Madurese at the same time. To say that she wears a headscarf because she is a Muslim somehow does not feel right because not all Muslims all over the world (even in Indonesia) wear it. It does not feel right also because that would mean other Muslims not wearing hijab do not practice the Islamic values, which is not necessarily true. Similarly, she cannot say she does it because it's Indonesian,

¹ Daphne Grace, *The Woman in the Muslim Mask* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), p. 10; For general discussion see *inter alia*, Mhd. Syahnan *et. al.*, "Reconsidering gender roles in modern Islam: A Comparison of the Images of Muslim Women Found in the Works of Sayyid Qutb and 'Â'ishah 'Abd Rahmân," in *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention*, Vol. 6, No. 10, 2017, p. 37-42.

Javanese, or Madurese culture because not all Indonesians, Javanese, or Madurese wear hijab, and it does not mean that they do not value the cultures.

Thus, it feels more right to say that it is her personal choice and she admits that that choice might have been affected both by the religious and cultural views she embraces, in which, there is definitely no oppression or imposition.

This study applied qualitative approach and the data were collected through observation and literature review. The literatures used are those related to Hijab (veil) and Muslim women. The observation was done to see the perspectives of wearing hijab by Muslims.

Findings and Discussion

Women and Veils

The act of veiling has existed even before the existence of Islam.² It has particularly spread in Arab cultures even in Greek and Rome.³ When Islam as a religion is concerned and related to the veil, however, it is worth mentioning that it also exists in other religions and faiths such as Judaism, Christianity, and Catholicism. The act of veiling is also taken up by women beyond Abrahamic religions such as Hinduism and Sikhism. In Judaism Islam,⁴ for example, are posted different pictures of some women of different religious affiliations. All these women are portrayed veiling themselves; and even though some forms of veiling look different from the others, some look so similar that it is hard to tell the faith or the religion simply from the veil the woman is wearing.

Nevertheless, it seems that veiling in other religions – except Islam – is not often associated with oppression. Shirazi & Mishra,⁵ for instance, illustrates the movement by Jewish women who take up the veil for modesty reasons. While this is not mandated by Jewish men but even, quite the opposite, initiated by the Jewish women, the imposition of this movement on other Jewish women does not seem to be seen as oppressive. In addition, the veil taken up by the nuns, be it in Christianity or Catholicism, does not seem questioned or problematized either. Their act of veiling is indeed considered positive attitude towards the religions as in the submission to God. As Al-Mahadin⁶ states, this phenomenon might be caused by the single and clear meaning it signifies: “the bride of Christ”.

² Fadwa El Guindi, *Veil: Modesty, Privacy and Resistance* (New York: Berg, 1999).

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Judaism Islam, “Quiz: Can You Tell Her Religion From Her Head Covering?,” 22 March 2014. Retrieved from <http://www.judaism-islam.com/quiz-can-you-tell-her-religion-from-her-head-covering>.

⁵ Faegheh S. Shirazi & Smeeta Mishra, “Young Muslim Women on the Face Veil (Niqab): A Tool of Resistance in Europe But Rejected in the United States,” in *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 2010, pp. 43-62.

⁶ Salam al-Mahadin, The Social Semiotics of Hijab: Negotiating the Body Politics of Veiled Women,” in *Journal of Arab and Muslim Media Research*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2013, pp. 3-18.

Women's Veil: Islam Signifier?

While it has been previously discussed that veiling exists not only in Islam, it seems that the veil is strictly and exclusively associated with Islam so often that the veiled women have become Islam signifier. The pictures of veiled women of different religions and faiths previously mentioned in Judaism Islam,⁷ for example, results in several comments showing “surprise” that the veils are also worn by women of other religions. This somehow indicates that people tend to relate veils to Islam and not other religions.

Another phenomenon describing the veiled women as Islam signifier is the movement of World Hijab Day. Celebrated on February 1st, the event is not only joined by Muslims but also non-Muslims who want to experience “what it feels like to cover or put on the hijab or the veil”. Some of them also participate to show solidarity with Muslim women against Islamophobia as in the case with León.⁸ What is interesting, however, is the fact that the treatment they expect to receive while covering does not solely lie on the veil itself but more on people’s assumption or thought that they are Muslim merely for wearing it.

The idea of veiling belonging to Islam or Muslims exists not only in the West but also in the Muslim society itself. Quite recently, Harian Indo⁹ reported the fuss over a picture of a woman wearing hijab with a display of a big crucifix upon the hijab covering her body. The picture was widely shared on Facebook and drew people’s attention. Some considered it offensive to Islam and Muslim communities. Some came to see that the teaching of veiling for women was also scripted in the Old Testaments of orthodox Christianity. Some other Muslims even used the event as the “opportunity” to remind other Muslim women to cover or wear hijab the way the woman in the picture did, emphasizing that it was unfortunate that even non-Muslims wear the “Islamic” hijab while some Muslim women themselves were often found “too open” with their bodies.

The ownership of veiling seems to be held by Islam whether it is claimed by the Muslims themselves or given by people of other faiths. This belief is so strong that people feel the need to ask if it is okay or not if non-Muslims wear the veil or hijab. If we go and search about veiling in Google, for instance, we could find that many actually ask if it is considered offensive or respectful for Muslims. The questions asked show that non-Muslims do not feel entitled to wear the veil since it is not their possession. It is as if they needed to get the permission from Muslims before wearing it themselves. This is to say that it is a generally

⁷ Judaism Islam, “Quiz.”

⁸ Felice León, “I Wore A Hijab For A Day: Here’s What Happened,” in *The Daily Beast*, 8 February 2015. Retrieved from <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/02/08/i-wore-a-hijab-for-a-day-here-s-what-happened.html>.

⁹ Galang Kenzi Ramadhan, “Heboh Wanita Berhijab Syar’i dan Berkalung Salib: A Fuss Over Women Wearing Hijab with a Crucifix”, in *Harian Indo*, 12 January 12, 2016. Retrieved from <http://m.harianindo.com/2016/01/12/70601/heboh-wanita-berhijab-syari-dan-berkalung-salib/>

accepted fact that veil is for Muslim women that when it is worn by non-Muslim women the hijab is marked.

Nonetheless, while veiling exists in other religions and has existed long before Islam came to existence, this intrigues a question as to why veiling for women becomes Islam signifier. This might have to do with “numbers” and the exposure by the (West) media. The number of nuns, for instance, seems to be less than the number of Christian women in general choosing to cover themselves. Meanwhile, the practice of veiling is taken up by many Muslim women, many of whom are “ordinary” and without having to be a kind of “Islamic nuns or missionaries”.

Indeed, as the experiential contacts the West has revolve around Muslim countries where they have their interests, the media tend to expose, relate, and (over)generalize what they find to the Islamic values in those places, which includes the practice of veiling by Muslim women. This interest also seems to escalate especially post 9/11 tragedy, which is often associated with fundamental Islam and radical Muslims. In brief, the symbolization of the veil is often based on the whole idea of Islam against the West along with the Islamic values the West project on it, which are considered contradictory to Western values and thus often thought as the “icon of otherness”, signifying “the signified non-Western.”¹⁰

Some Forms of Veiling in Islam

The veil in Islam itself has different forms and names in its practice such as *hijab*, *chador*, *burqa*, and *niqab*.¹¹ Isai¹² and Goldman¹³ illustrate the differences between these forms of veiling. The most common form of veiling might be *hijab*, referring to a piece of clothing covering the head and showing only the face, which goes with another piece of clothing covering the body. Coming with different styles of fashion, often, hijab is also referred to headscarf. Indeed, hijab seems to be widely accepted as the general name of Islamic veils and practiced by many Muslims worldwide.

¹⁰ Grace, *The Woman in the Muslim Mask*; Kevin J. Ayotte & Mary E. Husain, “Securing Afghan Women: Neocolonialism, Epistemic Violence, and the Rhetoric of the Veil,” in *NWSA Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 3, 2005, pp.112-133; Sirma Bilge, “Beyond Subordination vs. Resistance: An Intersectional Approach to the Agency of Veiled Muslim Women,” in *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 1, 2010, pp. 9-28.

¹¹ Fadwa El Guindi, *Veil: Modesty, Privacy and Resistance* (New York: Berg, 1999); Shirazi & Mishra, “Young Muslim Women on the Face Veil (Niqab),” pp. 43-62.

¹² Vjosa Isai, “‘There are no Rules’: A Look at the Niqab and Other Islamic Coverings in Canada,” in *National Post*, 7 October 2015. Retrieved from <http://news.nationalpost.com/news/canada/there-are-no-rules-a-look-at-the-niqab-and-other-islamic-coverings-in-canada>.

¹³ Russel Goldman, “What’s that You’re Wearing? A Guide to Muslim Veils,” in *The New York Times*, 3 May 2016. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/04/world/what-in-the-world/burqa-hijab-abaya-chador.html>.

On the other hand, while looking slightly like hijab, chador refers to a full cloak covering the head and the body. As it has neither fasteners or hand openings, it keeps the body underneath the cover and relies on the hands to hold it in place or to make sure that the cloak covers the hair. While it is claimed to be “not obligatory in Islamic countries,”¹⁴ it is said to have been used by Iranian women.¹⁵ It commonly comes with black color, though some other colors might also be used in non-public areas.

Niqab and *burqa* are different from hijab and chador as not only do they cover the body and the head, but also the face. The difference between niqab and burqa is that niqab allows a little space to show the eyes, while burqa does not leave a single open space in the face since it utilizes a grille to cover the eyes. While niqab is often worn with *Abaya*, a loose robe covering the head and the body especially popular in Saudi, burqa is believed to be imposed by Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

While these forms of veil denotatively show the different types of veil, how and how much they cover the body, where they are worn, and what colors preferably come with each, these different forms are often taken in one wide umbrella under the name Islamic veils and thus the second-order meanings are often derived from how and why it comes to be worn by the Muslim women. It is, for example, made mandatory in one place, prohibited in another, but can also be a “fashion statement” in other places.¹⁶ One form of veiling, moreover, can be acceptable where another is prohibited as in the case with Latvia, which allows the wearing of hijab but bans the niqab or burqa.¹⁷ This obviously affects what the veil is deemed to symbolize. This symbolization on the veils as Islam signifier also differs depending on who see it, what power they have, for what interests and purposes, and definitely the experiences they have with the veil, which affect their attitudes towards it.

Veiling and Oppression

As the veil has indexed the religion of Islam, people, especially the West, tend to see it as a symbol of oppression.¹⁸ While personally this idea is not new to the writer, this is certainly overwhelming for her as she has never felt oppressed while wearing hijab. Nobody forces her to wear it and thankfully nobody forces her not to wear it. However, whenever the discussion on veiling or wearing hijab comes to the surface, the words “oppressive”, “oppressed”, “oppression”, etc. almost always come with it, whether to state it as the truth or to argue the opposite.

¹⁴ Vjosa Isai, “‘There are no Rules.’”

¹⁵ Russel Goldman, “What’s that You’re Wearing? A Guide to Muslim Veils.”

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Richard Martyn-Hemphill, “Latvia wants to Ban Face Veils, for all 3 Women who Wear Them,” in *The New York Times*, 19 April 2016. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/20/world/europe/latvia-face-veils-muslims-immigration.html?emc=eta1&_r=1.

¹⁸ Guindi, *Veil: Modesty, Privacy and Resistance*.

The veil as a symbol of oppression might have stemmed from the idea that it is imposed on women in some places where Islam happened to be the major religion. While the imposition might have been blamed on Islam as the symbol of oppression, it eventually extends to the veil as the symbol since it is seen as the tool to oppress women. The oppression itself might have been reflected in the images of women getting brutal and atrocious treatments for not wearing the veil. The images of Afghan women under the Taliban regime, for instance, shows the abuse on women.¹⁹ The barbaric punishment is horrible that the Taliban gets the women “beaten simply for accidentally letting an inch of skin show.”²⁰ This kind of images is frequently exposed to the Western audience that the relation they make to the veil in the particular place is overgeneralized to the idea of oppression symbolized by the veil in other places.

The idea of the veil symbolizing oppression might also come from the women experiencing it themselves as in the case with many Iranians.²¹ Since hijab is mandated on women in Iran, they do not have the freedom to choose whether to wear it or not. They even have to face the morality police who occasionally inspect them whether in the houses, in the streets, or other public places. The horrible experiential contacts with these police eventually make them hate the veil.

Meanwhile, the imposition of the veil on women by the regimes might have been based on the Qur’anic verses that call for women to cover and be modest. The text says:

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, ... (24: 31)

While this same text is used by Muslim women as the reason for veiling,²² this text seems to give the regimes in power an “excuse” to oppress the women. Treating the women as subordinate to men, the regimes seem to think that they have the authority to enforce the law and make sure that the women adhere to the verses according to their interpretation, instead of the women’s, by using all means including radical forces. This is to say that, while on one level the veil indexes Islam, in another level it indexes radical Muslims (even though, personally, the writer prefers calling them people who claim to be Muslims misusing and misinterpreting the Qur’anic verses).

¹⁹ Myra Macdonald, “Muslim Women and the Veil,” in *Feminist Media Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2006, pp. 7-23.

²⁰ United Nations in Kevin J. Ayotte & Mary E. Husain, “Securing Afghan Women: Neocolonialism, Epistemic Violence, and the Rhetoric of the Veil,” in *NWSA Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 3, 2005, pp.112-133.

²¹ Dennise Hassanzade Ajiri, “Why So Many Iranians Have Come to Hate the Hijab,” in *The Guardian*, 28 April 2016. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/28/iranian-women-hate-hijab-tehranbureau>.

²² Al-Mahadin, *The Social Semiotics of Hijab*,” pp. 3-18.

Seeing the veil as the symbol of oppression and the subordination to men eventually makes the West and the feminists against it since it does not conform with western values. Thus, they feel the need to free the women from it. The derision they feel towards the oppression and the radical Muslims leads to the rejection and the banning of the veil itself – along with the Islamic values – such as the case in France and Latvia.²³ While the hatred towards the imposition of the veil on women is understandable, some people seem to fail in seeing the oppression in it; instead, they see the oppression in the form of the veil alone.²⁴ This logic seems false since if the veil is considered oppressive for being imposed on women, it can also be considered oppressive when women are forced to take off the veil, especially when they want and choose to wear it themselves; i.e. banning the practice of wearing the veil or hijab is just another form of oppression.

Veiling and Agency

The veil, to some (Muslim) women, especially those migrating to or living in the West, gives them *agency*. Bilge²⁵ states that “agency is central to the action-model, which attempts to grasp individuals’ capacity to act independently of structural constraints, or against them”. While in some places women have no choice but to veil as it is imposed on them, in other places, they find wearing the veil quite liberating as they can wear it not because they are forced to wear it but because they can wear it when they do not have to²⁶. This agency in using the freedom or taking the autonomy not only allows them to choose whether to veil or not but also lets them decide, shall they choose to veil, which form of veiling they will take; i.e. they can choose to take up burqa, niqab, chador, hijab, or other forms of veiling. This ability to veil for a different reason, not because of the imposition or oppression, might be why some women fleeing the oppressive regimes choose to keep the veil or change the kind of veil they wear instead of unveiling. In other words, the veil indexes agency.

Furthermore, the agency lets the women use the veil as the symbol of identity.²⁷ The veil functions as a visible marker, explicitly stating and identifying them as Muslims. Indeed, in a case where they take up certain forms of veiling, the veil can also symbolize the tradition

²³ John R. Bowen, “How the French State Justifies Controlling Muslim Bodies: From Harm-Based To Values-Based Reasoning,” in *Social Research*, Vol. 78, No. 2, 2011, pp. 325-348.

²⁴ Kevin J. Ayotte, & Mary E. Husain, “Securing Afghan Women: Neocolonialism, Epistemic Violence, and the Rhetoric of the Veil,” in *NWSA Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 3, 2005, pp.112-133.

²⁵ Sirma Bilge, “Beyond Subordination vs. Resistance: an Intersectional Approach to the Agency of Veiled Muslim Women,” in *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 1, 2010, p. 12.

²⁶ Rachel Anderson Droogsma, “Redefining Hijab: American Muslim Women’s Standpoints on Veiling,” in *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, Vol. 35, No. 3, 2007, pp. 294-319; Haleh Afshar, “Can I See Your Hair? Choice, Agency and Attitudes: the Dilemma of Faith and Feminism for Muslim Women who Cover,” in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 2, 2008, pp. 411-427; Shirazi & Mishra, “Young Muslim Women on the Face Veil (Niqab),” pp. 43-62.

²⁷ Grace, *The Woman in the Muslim Mask*.

and cultures of where they are originally from. The veil lets them get recognized by other Muslims, giving them a way to connect to the Muslim communities, something they do not experience when they are not wearing the veil. One woman in Droogsma's²⁸ study affirms that while the veil has been enough to let others, even ones she has not met before, know that she is a Muslim, when she is not wearing the veil she often needs to start a conversation with them to have a bonding similar to that when she is wearing one.

In addition, the veil also symbolizes solidarity and agency against Islamophobia²⁹. Especially among the Islamophobia spreading in the West, which often causes the veiled women to get unpleasant treatments, the practice of veiling lets other Muslim women know that they are not alone. Indeed, by taking up the veil and mingle with others especially in a diverse community, it also sends a message to fight against Islamophobia in a way that says, "Look, I am a Muslim and you do not need to be afraid of me."

The agency that women have via the veil has also been argued to allow them to use it as a symbol of resistance towards Western hegemony.³⁰ This resistance is especially strong in refusing the Western way in objectifying women's bodies for their looks and appearance through their fashion industry, which is also believed as a form of capitalism leading to consumerism, all of which reflects commodification of women's bodies. It is argued that, by wearing the veil, Muslim women do not need to be concerned about outer looks and appearance as they can focus more on their inner values. The veil gives them freedom "from the restrictions normally placed on women's appearance" and gives them a protection from the West "fashion standards...that exploit women."³¹

While this might be true, it might be necessary to revisit these ideas of resistance towards the West. First, if the idea of freedom in religion and speech is identified as the West, using it as a reason to veil itself actually shows their embracing this very West value, despite using it to resist other values of the West. Second, while the veil might resist the fashion of the West, it is worth noting that Muslims have developed their own fashion. With the steady growth of hijab fashion coming with different styles and models, though it is not always deemed as a standard, there is a possibility that Muslim women will also fall into consumerism of the capitalistic industry, which they try to avoid. Nonetheless, this ability to establish their own fashion or standards instead of succumbing to what has been settled in the West implies the very notion of Muslim women's agency at the same time.

In addition, even though the veil has empowered women to have some agency in expressing their identity, showing solidarity, or resisting the unwanted values of the West

²⁸ Droogsma, "Redefining Hijab," pp. 294-319.

²⁹ Shirazi & Mishra, "Young Muslim Women on the Face Veil (Niqab)," pp. 43-62.

³⁰ El-Guindi, *Veil: Modesty, Privacy and Resistance*.

³¹ Droogsma, *Redefining Hijab*, p. 310.

as discussed earlier, some still argue that women who opt to veil are “devoid of agency.”³² This argument is solely based on the idea that the veil is a symbol of oppression. One argument in Bilge³³ states that “Agency involves free-will; no woman freely chooses to wear the veil because it is oppressive to women; thus veiled women have no agency”. It is further claimed that the veiled women choose to veil not because they have free wills to choose, but because they develop a false consciousness, in which they are still under the influence of the oppressive regimes. This is to say that when women choose to veil, they are actually carrying the idea of their oppressors, not their own. The women are considered unable to develop their own agency possibly also because the veil was assumed to constrain “their mental and moral development.”³⁴ These reasons might justify the act of unveiling campaign or the banning of the veil itself.

Some points need to be made, however, regarding this view in false consciousness and the retardation of veiled women. If, for instance, the consciousness of the veiled women is considered false solely on the assumption that the idea of veiling is planted by the regimes in a long time during the oppression, the same logic can be applied to those having this consideration. It could be argued that they have false consciousness for thinking that the veil symbolizes oppression solely based on the images exposed to them. That is because the images represent the practice of veiling only in one place, in which the oppression takes place. The images do not reflect the practice of veiling in other places, where there is no oppression. This logic fails to see that during those times, the women could still opt to veil for various reasons, which is the case in other places.

The argument that the women choosing to veil are retarded is also disputable. Some women who choose to veil are actually some intellectuals dynamically engaged in interpreting the Qur’an and “defining their rights.”³⁵ They are critical in assessing women’s rights and even assertive in positioning themselves equally to men, just like feminists in the West. A more recent and best example of an intellectual Muslim woman would be Malala Yousafzai, an education activist and Nobel Peace Prize winner. She is a Muslim and she wears the veil; while it cannot be generalized that her achievements are caused by the veil, it is highly arguable to say that her moral and mental development is constrained by the veil.

Veiling and Politics

Macdonald³⁶ affirms that the focus on veiling in Islam has been more political than

³² Bilge, “Beyond Subordination vs. Resistance,” p. 14.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

³⁴ Cromer in Kevin J. Ayotte, & Mary E. Husain, “Securing Afghan Women: Neocolonialism, Epistemic Violence, and the Rhetoric of the Veil,” in *NWSA Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 3, 2005, p. 118.

³⁵ Haleh Afshar, “Can I See Your Hair?,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 2, 2008, p. 424.

³⁶ Macdonald, “Muslim Women and the Veil,” in *Feminist Media Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2006, pp. 7-23.

just about religious sentiment or cultural identity. She then argued that both the action of taking up the veil and the reason behind its ban and unveiling campaign has been “hijacked and belittled” and its debates around women’s position becomes centralized “only because colonial patriarchs had made it so.”³⁷ In a case of veiling debates in France, El Hamel³⁸ suggests that:

The French media and their political officials have determined how one sees the *hijab* in France: the media demeaned the scarf when French newspapers such as *Le Monde* pictured the hijab in caricatures that were deliberately exaggerated to produce grotesque effects in the reader’s imagination.

This is to say that the images of women being oppressed could have been exposed intensively in purpose to define their position and create their subordination for particular political agendas. Ayotte & Husain³⁹ even state that the “oppression of women in foreign lands”, depicted in the atrocious images, “has often been a discursive tool of statecraft seeking to justify military invention”. However, instead of protecting the Afghan women, as exemplified, the action merely attempts to fight the oppressive regimes and topple their power. To take it further, this might explain why the affiliation of women veiling in Christianity is left out and not cited since Christianity is a part of the West, when Islam is not.

The ban on hijab, moreover, has been prosecuted in attempts to secularize Muslim women instead of liberating them from the oppression.⁴⁰ They assume that since the veil signifies Islam and brings religious Islamic values, allowing women to veil is preventing them to assimilate and “be one” with the society in the nation they are residing. This is why the policy regarding hijab differs depending on the places. UK and US, whose political stance is multiculturalism, for instance, allows the citizen to practice their own cultural traditions, which is different from France, whose political policy is assimilation.⁴¹

The practice of veiling, accordingly, symbolizes women’s political statement, where they refuse to be under control of the government in power, which tries to make unveiling imperative. This might be why Muslim women are often labeled political agents of Islam, carrying the mission of fundamentalist propaganda, by keeping the values associated with the religion and refusing the western values demanded of them. This is then considered a threat to the established western values, which instills the fear that the Islamic propaganda will replace the current values.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

³⁸ Chouki El Hamel, “Muslim Diaspora in Western Europe: The Islamic Headscarf (hijab), the Media and Muslims’ Integration in France,” in *Citizenship Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 3, 2002, p. 299.

³⁹ Ayotte & Husain, “Securing Afghan Women,” p. 122.

⁴⁰ John R. Bowen, “How the French State Justifies Controlling Muslim Bodies,” pp. 325-348.

⁴¹ Sevgi K yl c, “The British Veil Wars,” in *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State and Society*, Vol. 15, No. 4, 2008, pp. 433-454.

Veiling and Modesty

For many Muslims, the veil symbolizes modesty.⁴² This is because they refer to the same Qur'anic text cited in the previous section. It is worth noting, however, that the word hijab is not the Arabic word for "veil"; instead, the word hijab refers to modesty.⁴³ Indeed, in the early time of its revelation, the veil was actually taken up only by the wives of the Prophet (PBUH). That Muslim women choose to take up the veil to practice their being modest might be due to their will to express their religiosity in submitting to God and following the footsteps of the (wives of the) great Prophet (PBUH).

In addition, while in the previous section it is discussed that the veil is seen as a symbol of oppression and women's subordination to men since it looks as if only the women were demanded to cover and be modest, giving the men more power or higher status, El Guindi⁴⁴ argues that the order to be modest is actually given equally to both sexes. In fact, the command for modesty for men is mentioned first in the preceding verse, which says: "Tell the believing men to lower their gaze and *conceal their genitals*; for that is purer for them. God knoweth what *they* do."⁴⁵

Derived from these verses, the word hijab in Arabic is often meant a curtain, a cover, or to cover; basically a barrier protecting women from the unwanted gaze or the unrighteous gaze. Al-Mahadin⁴⁶ defines the gaze as "the anxiety of the subject as s/he seeks meaning and sense...first and foremost one of fear and apprehension; two emotions that construct and weave narratives to allay anxiety". She further argues that while the hijab is initially intended to hide the body from the gaze, it actually instills the curiosity as the hijab does not give access to the beauty displayed beneath. For the same reason, the banning of hijab or the veil might have also originated from the fear for the veiled women who can see but cannot be seen. Indeed, some women think that the male gaze is "oppressive" and the hijab helps them to "take control of" their body.⁴⁷

Nevertheless, it is important to note that this call for being modest does not apply only to the clothing, but also extends to modesty in manner and speech. The women in Droogsma's⁴⁸ studies, for instance, claim that the hijab they wear also functions as "behavior check". The same idea is also confirmed by several comments in Judaism Islam.⁴⁹ They state that when they wear hijab, they become more careful with how they behave and what they say. The

⁴² El Guindi, *Veil: Modesty, Privacy and Resistance*.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

⁴⁶ Al-Mahadin, "The Social Semiotics of Hijab," p. 6.

⁴⁷ Droogsma, "Redefining Hijab," p. 305.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 304.

⁴⁹ Judaism Islam, "Quiz,"

hijab makes them respect themselves more than when they do not take the veil. They affirm that by wearing hijab they gain more respect from both Muslims and non-Muslims.

Naturally, the idea of the veil symbolizing modesty cannot be generalized to all women who choose to cover either. Al-Mahadin⁵⁰ found that the veiling practiced by women in her study was not always “modest” in a sense that, along with the heavy make-up, they still wear jeans or tight dresses that, instead of covering their body, still display the curves and the beauty despite the hijab that covers the head. This is “understandable”, however, because the meaning of the word “modesty” itself is relative and susceptible to multiple interpretations. This is to say that what one considers modest might not be modest enough for others, and vice versa. This might be why, even among the Muslim women themselves, the different forms of veiling are practiced differently. Hijab, for instance, is considered a must to show the modesty but niqab (the face veil) is considered unnecessary by some women.⁵¹

Veiling and Socioeconomic Factors

The practice of veiling for some women can lie behind socioeconomic factors. The women often choose to veil because that is the demand in the society. By fulfilling this demand, the women can have better opportunities for their societal investment. In her study, al-Mahadin,⁵² for example, reveals that the veiled women in Jordan are not so different from the British women. She argued that while the British women wear “cheap clothes”, drink, and hang out on the weekend to find a man, the Jordanians opt to veil because it allows them to be seen and favored by “prospective mother-in-law”, which indicates their seeing the veil as the capital, an investment, or a tool to get a husband. This is because the social norms tend to see the women with the veil as better people, often based on religious considerations, and thus preferable.

Economically, the veil is considered affordable. A modest dress and a veil keeps the women from succumbing to the industrialized fashion standards, which are often expensive. However, as the hijab fashion now gets more popular, this economic factor needs to be reconsidered. This is because, if the society demands that the women keep up with the fashion, the choice to stick with the modest dress will depend on each individual. While for those wearing a simple veil the economic value remains unaffected, for those striving to meet the social demand in hijab fashion can be burdensome. Instead of being a viable choice, it is possible that the veil can be economically unaffordable.

⁵⁰ Al-Mahadin, “The Social Semiotics of Hijab,” pp. 3-18.

⁵¹ Shiraz, & Mishra, “Young Muslim Women on the Face Veil (Niqab),” pp. 43-62.

⁵² Al-Mahadin, “The Social Semiotics of Hijab,” p. 15.

Conclusion

What the veil symbolizes varies in different places with different cultures and traditions. While the veil often indexes the religion of Islam, the veil as a symbol is affected by various factors. Often, the symbolization of the veil relies on the power of the dominant cultures where the veil is practiced. The domination and the imbalanced power between those who support the practice of veiling and those against it determines the portrayal of how the veil is seen and how it should be dealt with. When the West is concerned, moreover, the rejection of the veil might originate from the idea of Islam as the religion the veil indexes, which is considered as “the icon of otherness” and does not have western values. As Al-Mahadin⁵³ puts it, the idea of veiling as a symbol of oppression might reflect “a self-projected oppression against the western self which feels suffocated by the hijab as if it is wrapped around its own head”.

Meanwhile, the veil for Muslim women often becomes a symbol of identity, religiosity, modesty, and agency. The veil can also reveal their stance in political matters as in resisting “another form of oppression” the people in power try to impose on them by banning it. The veil can also show the social structures including what is socially demanded regarding the veil. Indeed, in some cases, the veil could portray the women’s affordability in taking up the clothing they choose to veil. However, some symbolizations need to be revisited since, while the debates about veiling continues, there might be some changes in its depictions. It is also necessary to look into the symbolization of the veil in other registers veiling is practiced such as in other faiths and religions and other Islamic domains, where the notion of the West versus Islam as the other is not portrayed.

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⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

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