

2015

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Recommended Citation

Patino, Elizabeth, "A New Perspective Through Islamophobia: The True Oppressors of Veiled Muslim Women". *The First-Year Papers (2010 - present)* (2015).

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A New Perspective Through Islamophobia: The True Oppressors of Veiled Muslim Women

Elizabeth Patino

“Uncertainty is the scariest thing in the world,” remarks Susan, an American-Palestinian interviewee of a documentary on the *hijab*.¹ It leads people to act irrationally, make assumptions, prejudice, and ultimately make hasty generalizations. Specifically, this paper explores this uncertainty on a global scale, referring to the tensions between the West and the Middle East. This uncertainty eventually evolved into hostility towards Islam, creating fear and dislike towards Muslims. In my paper, I will argue that islamophobia evokes the veil as a symbol of oppression, however, Westerners, who make up the majority of islamophobes are ironically the oppressors of veiled Muslim women.

Many unanswered questions float around this topic of discussion, but one that can be answered is: What exactly is islamophobia? S. Sayyid, Director of the Centre of Muslim and Non-Muslim Understanding at the University of South Australia, defines this term as a fear of Islam. Islamophobia is predominantly present in Western cultures, mainly including North America and Europe. People that are tolerant of Islam view the term “islamophobia” as a way to bring awareness to the injustices faced by certain Muslims, whereas those challenging Islam deem certain Islamic practices as “backwards” and shed negative light on totalitarian states.² Ultimately, it is from these beliefs, which include oppression, that Westerners regard Islam as an oppressive religion, and that anti-Muslim images and negative stereotypes are created.

Western perceptions of the veil have numerous negative connotations attached to it that support it as oppressive. Essentially, the West only sees what it wants to see. The common belief that “vision” is necessary “in order to speak”³ justifies the common Western viewpoint that covering the face is a symbol of oppression. In Western culture, the face is identified as a symbol of freedom to express oneself, thus according to many Western people, veiled Muslim women are without freedom, as covering the face equates to blindness, which equates to silence, which ultimately equates to oppression. In addition, because the veil is often associated with the Middle East, an area that many Euro-Americans regard as unsafe due to increased hostility and war in and surrounding this region, many Westerners perceive these oppressed women as being in need of salvation.⁴ In opposition to these Western thoughts and beliefs, veiled women assert that Westerners misunderstand the true reason for wearing or not wearing the veil: that it is a personal choice. Adding to its misconceptions and misunderstandings, Sahar Amer, author of *What is veiling?*, explains the polysemy of the veil, mentioning the myth that “all women who veil do so for the same reason: because they are forced to do so by a father or a husband”.⁵ Therefore, this generalization demonstrates that Europeans believe they know about veiling better than those

¹ Susan, *(Un)veiled: Muslim women talk about hijab*, documentary, directed by Ines Hofmann Kanna, (2008; Watertown, MA: Documentary Educational Resources).

² Salman Sayyid, *Thinking through Islamophobia: Global Perspectives*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 1.

³ Valerie Behiery, “Bans on Muslim Facial Veiling in Europe and Canada: A cultural history of vision perspective”, *Social Identities* 19, no. 6, (2013), 783.

⁴ Barbara Perry, “Gendered Islamophobia: hate crime against Muslim women”, *Social Identities* 20, no. 1, (2014), 81-82.

⁵ Sahar Amer, *What is Veiling?*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 175.

who practice it. More specifically, what many Western people do not seem to grasp is that veiling means something distinct to different Muslims in different places.

Contrary to Western beliefs surrounding the veil as symbol of oppression, many Muslim women would associate their veils with freedom. Sixteen-year-old Majede Najar explains from experience that wearing the *hijab* liberates her from society's ridiculous expectations of women's physical appearances.⁶ This is one example that reinforces the idea that freedom, like the veil, has different interpretations—especially in a cross-cultural context. The West views freedom not only as a liberal dress code but also as revealing one's face. Specifically, Western culture considers the face as a “hallmark of individuality”.⁷ What is implicitly conveyed is that veiled women have no identity or self-dignity. Conversely, one veiled woman forthrightly justifies her position on the Canadian campaign for freedom of expression. She explicitly criticizes the idea that Westerners can dress however they like, which is “their definition of freedom”, but that they try to implement that freedom in other places.⁸ By attempting to implement its idea of freedom in other countries, cultures, and religions, the West implies that it has the standard definition of freedom—an ideal with which many veiled Muslim women disagree. However, in addition to the metaphysical tension, there is also physical tension.

To understand the islamophobia in the context of the veil, it is important to be conscious of the roots of islamophobia, which are evident in the relationship between Western and Islamic countries, specifically the United States and France. In the case of the United States, tension has risen due to historical conflict. As Dr. Jack Shaheen⁹ explains, one of the earliest signs of the strained relations of the United States and the Middle East results from the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, as priority was given to Israel; there is no doubt that this left Arabs feeling resentful. The United States believes strongly in democracy; consequently, their mission to spread democracy since the beginning did not aid in alleviating any tensions but rather added to them. In response to U.S. involvement and support of Israel in the Yom Kippur War, OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries) proclaimed the Arab Oil Embargo of 1973, stirring negative commentary in the United States. This event caused more tension because gas price inflation affected American citizens; therefore, the government enacted special laws to offset the economic challenges and to help conserve oil.¹⁰ As a result, many Americans viewed Arabs critically and blamed them for America's economic crises. A similar sentiment evolved from the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the hostage crisis that succeeded another two years. Because of all of the hostility focused around this area of the world, each event confirmed, for Westerners, the belief that Arabs are dangerous and aggressive, ultimately adding to the growth of islamophobia and “turning Muslims into ‘usual suspects’”.¹¹ Above all, the attacks on 9/11 intensified islamophobia even more so, leading to increased racism, anti-Muslim sentiments, and panic surrounding Muslim people. More specifically, hate crime against veiled Muslim women

⁶ Majede Najar, “Why I wear a *hijab*”, TED, (lecture, Vancouver, Canada, June 25, 2012).

⁷ Valerie Behiery, “Bans on Muslim facial veiling in Europe and Canada: a cultural history of vision perspective”, *Social Identities* 19, no. 6, (2013), 782.

⁸ *Under One Sky: Arab women in North American talk about the hijab*, documentary, directed by Jennifer Kawaji, (2000; National Film Board of Canada).

⁹ Dr. Jack Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*, documentary, directed by Sut Jhally, (2008; Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation).

¹⁰ Office of the Historian, “Oil Embargo, 1973-1974”, U.S. Department of State Office of the Historian, modified October 31, 2013, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1969-1976/oil-embargo>.

¹¹ Cemalettin Hasimi, *Thinking through Islamophobia: Global Perspectives*, ed. Salman Sayyid and Abdulkaroom Wakil (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 130.

as “scape goats” developed since the veil is regarded as one of the most visible signs of Islam.¹² Because of these conflicts, it is only to be expected that many Westerners assume that the *hijab* represents a sign of danger and aggression in addition to submissiveness; hence, the West connects the dots, associating veils with the Middle East and assuming and generalizing the entire area and its people as dangerous.

Similar to the United States, the tension between France and the Middle East has been growing, but in this case, it is chiefly due to colonial history and a stronger focus on secularism. Before Algeria gained independence in 1962, France had colonized it for more than one hundred years. Post-colonial Algeria might have stored some hostile feelings toward France, a reason why France, fearing violence, makes attempts to adopt laws in support of secularism.¹³ On a side note, indirect problems related to Islamic countries have added to their suspicion and their growth of islamophobia; these would include all of the previously mentioned events their ally, the United States, underwent. Since the 1905 French law on the Separation of Churches and State, France has become more secular. It is likely that this upward trend may be associated with the expansion of liberalism, a progressive ideal. Relevant to this, many French politicians oppose any public signs of religion, therefore targeting Islam, a more visible religion. This is evident through the headscarf controversy; many French view veiling as a backwards practice and the headscarf as a symbol of aggression. Since the headscarf is viewed as a “challenge to liberalism,”¹⁴ it is equally a challenge to secularism. As a result, it seems logical that France would want to emphasize that the headscarf clashes with their secular and liberal tradition in order to expand the power of secularity and liberalism. Accordingly, France’s support of secularism in the modern context communicates feelings of superiority towards Muslims and Islamic countries, resulting in greater controversy, tension, and islamophobia.

An integral part of understanding the relationship tensions and fears of Islam is through international relations; but it is equally as important to hone in on the opinions of Muslim women on the veil as guidance to a clearer conclusion. There is no one view of the veil, which is important to note since generalization of Muslim women is a vast problem. While many Muslim women observe the practice of veiling, others do not because they view it as a personal choice and/or disagree with the practice. The documentary *(Un)veiled: Muslim women talk about hijab* exposes different interpretations of what it means to be a Muslim woman, answered by a range of diverse Muslim women who were raised in different settings and different religious and cultural backgrounds. A few of them choose not to veil because they believe the practice does not correspond with their personal beliefs. Nonetheless, the unveiled respect the decision of those that veil but reiterate that it should be a personal choice. Susan, a non-veiled American-Palestinian, opposes the *hijab* for one reason; she brings to attention the social pressure aspect of the headscarf debate, arguing that females do not make their decisions in Islam.¹⁵ It is noteworthy to mention that these women do not condone the forcing of the veil. But also, not all Muslim women find themselves in a position where they are without input in the decision to veil. Although it is true that some women are “coerced into wearing [the veil] by [...] the legal

¹² Sahar Amer, *What is Veiling?*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 183.

¹³ Christian Joppke, *Veil: Mirror of Identity*, (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Polity Press, 2009), 47.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, ix.

¹⁵ Susan, *(Un)veiled: Muslim women talk about hijab*, documentary, directed by Ines Hofmann Kanna, (2008; Watertown, MA: Documentary Educational Resources).

system, general society, or male relatives”,¹⁶ more and more women veil because they have the right and desire to do so, emphasizing that it is a choice.

From the point of view of many Muslim women who cover, the veil is rejected as a symbol of oppression. The two main reasons many Muslim women state for wearing the veil are modesty and piety. Majede Najjar shares her belief that wearing the *hijab* is a sign of modesty by noting the morphology of the word *hijab*, which the derivation is ‘to conceal’.¹⁷ Contrary to the belief that veiled women are chaste or pure, modesty is actually the meaning behind covering their bodies. The latter relates to the religious facet of the veil and the varying interpretations of the *Qu’ran*. Although it embraces the avoidance of indecent appearance or behavior, it does not exclude sexual activity. We can compare this to chastity, which strictly adheres to maintaining one’s virginity. It would be illogical to assume that covered women are chaste especially as there is evidence, authentic explanations from veiled Muslim women, that disproves it. A French high school student interviewed about her decision to wear the *hijab* expressed that “in [her] religion, it is clear that you should do things for God and not for people”,¹⁸ underpinning the importance of piety in relation to the veil. Each woman interprets the religious scripture differently, disproving the generalization that all Muslim women fight the same battle. Contrary to this generalization, there is no one image of Muslim women because they personally decide what does and does not correspond with their bodies and beliefs. Other equally plausible reasons to veil are fashion, political expression, resistance to Western stereotypes, and opposition to women’s objectification. These may all create a sense of identity for veiled Muslim women, rejecting the Western notion that their freedom of expression is denied. Although some veiled women admit that others are forced to veil, or that either husbands or male family members heavily influence their decision, it is certainly generalizing to say that veiling is a symbol of oppression by basing evidence solely on extreme cases. Because of this “oppressive” symbol, many Western places, such as France, attempt to “unveil” Muslim women. In response, and in rejection of this idea, agitated Muslim women try to convey the concept that compulsory unveiling is the same as compulsory veiling; both force something upon a people.¹⁹ It is worth mentioning that the law on the rights of humans insists on “freedom of thought, conscience and religion [... and] to manifest his religion or belief in worship, teaching practice and observance”.²⁰ Ultimately, what the majority of veiled Muslim women communicate is that veiling is not a symbol of oppression; it is their human right to wear what they wish. Personal values and religious interpretations heavily influence the decision whether or not to wear the veil, but the generalizations and stereotypes are even more influential on the function of the veil.

As a result of islamophobia, negative Western attitudes portray the veil as oppressive. This is evident by analyzing American media portrayals, which display Western ignorance and assumptions of Muslim people. First, the Hollywood films that display images of Muslims to the world are so powerful that they have swayed some people to perceive Arabs as evil, barbaric terrorists. These images convey Islam as the enemy, and as inferior to Western culture by branding Muslims as beasts. Specifically, the lyrics to the opening song in *Aladdin* portray Arabs

¹⁶ Khola Hasan, *Islam and the Veil*, ed. Theodore Gabriel and Rabiha Hannan, (London, UK: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), 126.

¹⁷ Majede Najjar, “Why I wear a *hijab*”, TED, (lecture, Vancouver, Canada, June 25, 2012).

¹⁸ Sahar Amer, *What is Veiling?*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 178.

¹⁹ *Under One Sky: Arab women in North American talk about the hijab*, documentary, directed by Jennifer Kawaji, (2000; National Film Board of Canada).

²⁰ Rajnaara C. Akhtar, *Islam and the Veil*, ed. Theodore Gabriel and Rabiha Hannan, (London, UK: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), 157.

as violent: “where they cut off your ear/ if they don’t like your face/ it’s barbaric, but hey, it’s home”.²¹ This Disney movie influences kids from a young age to think of Arabs degradingly. These stereotypes create one-sided depictions and assumptions of Arabs that heavily influence Western views on the Muslim world, persuading audiences that Arabs are less than human. Evidently, Arabs are not seen as regular human beings that participate in similar social activities or that share common family values with the West. Additionally, the media focuses “on topics buttressing an ‘Islam is the problem’ discourse [that] continue[s] to depend heavily on images of fully veiled Muslim women”.²² By doing this, it is easy for Westerners to identify Muslims. This is the reason for which much of the West associates the veil with fundamentalism and terrorism, and thus develops the relationship between veil, Islam, and terrorism.

Secondly, upon analyzing the Western reasons behind branding the veil as a symbol of oppression, little reason is found, but rather ignorance and assumptions. A common misconception and generalization among many Westerners is that the veil restricts women’s sexual freedom since covering relates to chastity, asexuality, and conservativeness. Westerners fail to understand, or even listen to, the position of veiled Muslim women, most claiming to veil for modesty and piety, as explained earlier. In addition, much of the West views veiling as a “patriarchal cultural practice [...] allowed to go unchecked”.²³ This assumption does not accurately represent the religious and cultural practice because many women independently make the decision to wear the veil, as mentioned previously in this paper. Despite this, many Westerners still adhere to their theory that Islam promotes chastity, patriarchy, and oppression. Since the veil is seen as the most obvious sign of Islam, there is no wonder why Westerners are prone to prejudice against Muslim women. Unquestionably, ignorance and assumptions incorporate into the development of the unfavorable Western attitude towards veils, yet the ill-considered generalizations are what harm the true image of the veil and of veiled Muslim women.

As a final point to tie in the relationship between islamophobia and the veil, exposing the social conditions of veiled Muslim women in North America and in France reveals that generalization has a direct correlation to discrimination and intimidation. As mentioned, the post-9/11 years intensified islamophobia amongst the North American and even European populations. A survey has shown islamophobic sentiments toward Muslims:

“Survey respondents were asked, ‘When you hear the word Muslim, what comes to mind?’ [and] 32% used negative terms, many of which alluded to images of war, guns and violence. In addition, a stunning quarter of the respondents believed that Muslims teach their children how to hate.”²⁴

Because of the buildup of islamophobia throughout history, many Muslim women feared being attacked for having an Islamic identity and/or sought to diminish the suspicious looks of others and, therefore, faced the predicament of de-veiling. Sometimes, the decision was irrelevant as public places banned the veil. An American Muslim schoolgirl described her experience as “a battle between being obedient to God by wearing [her] *hijab* to be modest in Islam versus school

²¹ Dr. Jack Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*, documentary, directed by Sut Jhally, (2008; Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation).

²² Valerie Behiery, “Bans on Muslim facial veiling in Europe and Canada: a cultural history of vision perspective”, *Social Identities* 19, no. 6, (2013), 777.

²³ Salman Sayyid, *Thinking through Islamophobia: Global Perspectives*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 1.

²⁴ Barbara Perry, “Gendered Islamophobia: hate crime against Muslim women”, *Social Identities* 20, no. 1, (2014), 77.

dress code policy”.²⁵ For those that veil for individual reasons, exposing themselves immodestly is uncomfortable, not to mention that their human right to freedom of expression has been violated. Just as some females face discrimination in the academic sphere, some Muslim women are fired for refusing to remove their *hijab* at work. In another study, women discussed the negative impact racism and violence had on their “freedom of movement and sense of safety; sense of belonging and participation in society; and sense of control and agency over their lives”.²⁶ Taking a deeper analysis, Americans have continuously criticized veiling because of its ‘oppressive nature’. Contradictorily, by forcing the unveiling in some public spaces in the United States, veiled women are experiencing oppression through the constant intimidation and discrimination towards their own practices.

In France, the government went as far as to implement an anti-veil law in 2004. Their main claims for instituting this law circled around global security and saving women from oppressive patriarchy. The law “‘banned all ostentatious religious signs’ from French public schools”²⁷; Muslim girls challenged it and some were expelled, but none of the girls’ voices were considered in court.²⁸ This relates back to the Western definition of oppression, which in that particular discourse means “without voices”. Ironically, France promotes equality and freedom of expression. In the case of the schoolgirls, where is the presence of these principles? In 2009, President Sarkozy publicly stated that the *burqa* “is not welcome on the territory of the French Republic [since it] debased women” therefore “cutting [them] off from all social life, deprived of identity”.²⁹ It is hypocritical that a non-Muslim male politician can decide what is beneficial for a female Muslim woman. Without a doubt, both individuals share little in common regarding religious attributes; thus, it would be unreasonable for the politician to determine a Muslim woman’s way of life. In the end, the anti-veil law is actually an insinuated anti-Muslim law as it denounces a people. It is clear that the West misunderstands the veil and that the generalizations created over Muslim women negatively influence the West’s manner of dealing with the veil, thus damaging the true image of the veil and ignoring the human rights of a people.

By looking through varying definitions of oppression and freedom, exploring the unstable relationship between the West and East, and understanding Muslim women’s different views and disapproving Western views on the veil, I conclude that islamophobia is present and a reason for which the “progressive” and “liberal” West deems the veil as oppressive. It is known that the United States and France have always been proud of their liberal and democratic values. Ironically, after all the work over the centuries to escape religious oppression, these countries are now oppressing a people based on biased generalizations of Islam. An interesting point that one interviewee brought up is that people do not go to Christian nuns and ask them to unveil, so why should Muslim women be targeted and taunted for their religious practice?³⁰ Clearly, the veil is misunderstood in the West, and because of this uncertainty, many Westerners are scared. This is why they unconsciously oppress women, believing it solves their “Islam problem” and that of the veiled women. To diminish the discrimination and the tension of the controversy of the veil, it is

²⁵ Sahar Amer, *What is Veiling?*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 186.

²⁶ Barbara Perry, “Gendered Islamophobia: hate crime against Muslim women”, *Social Identities* 20, no. 1, (2014), 85.

²⁷ Sahar Amer, *What is Veiling?*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 152.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid, 168-169.

³⁰ *(Un)veiled: Muslim women talk about hijab*, documentary, directed by Ines Hofmann Kanna, (2008; Watertown, MA: Documentary Educational Resources).

possible that learning about the veil from a first-hand perspective can be influential and beneficial to the larger non-Muslim population and thus create a more understanding and accepting environment.

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