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“A Comparative Study of Hijab Discourse in the Islamic World:
Socio-Economic & Political Considerations”

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The recent emergence of popularity of the *hijab*¹ among Muslim women is a phenomenon that cannot be adequately attributed to an aggregate rise in religious awareness. The rhetoric of contemporary *hijab* discourse implies that several socio-cultural and political currents have contributed to the “rediscovery” of the scarf. This paper seeks to analyze the non-theological variables that affect a Muslim woman’s decision to cover or not. Attention shall be paid to the veil discourse in different regions of the Islamic world², examining the variations from one area to the other. In addition, attention shall be paid to how discourse on has been influenced by socio-economic forces, class structure and political necessities, such as colonial-era Algeria. This paper shall study the current use of *hijab* as a litmus test for authenticity vis-à-vis religious piety as well as its role as a copious indicator of Muslim identity. Finally, the phenomenon of “*hijab* revival” shall be analyzed as it pertains to the American experience, drawing parallels from other parts of the Muslim world as well as assessing the points of difference.

Introduction

One of Islam’s most physical manifestations concerns a Muslim’s physical appearance. For men, the beard is regarded as a sign of the believer’s level of religiosity, as it is usually undertaken to emulate the example of the Prophet Muhammad. In the case of Muslim women, the headscarf (veil) is similarly perceived as an indicator of personal piety and adherence to Islamic obligations of modesty. Yet, the discourse created around the veil transcends the theological; it has assumed narratives that permeate several dimensions. Political forces, socio-economic currents and the quest to define ones own identity are but a few of several dynamics that affect, influence and determine a woman’s decision to use, or not use, the veil.

Over the past two decades, there appears to be a resurgence of interest in the veil, by non-Muslims and Muslims alike. For those not of the faith, the veil represents an affirmation of commonly held perceptions of Islam being a misogynistic faith, where women are compelled either by their religion or by their male relatives to dress in a particular

¹ There is considerable debate over the exact definition of the word, *hijab*. For purposes of this paper, the terms *hijab* and “veil” shall be limited in their scope to refer to the headscarf.

² For purposes of this paper, the term, “Islamic world” shall not be limited to its conventional definition, but shall refer to those areas of the world where this is a measurable Muslim population.

manner. For Muslim women, the veil represents many things: commitment to their religion, liberation from social pressures, empowerment to dictate and define their own identity and an ability to establish their presence in the public sphere.

The discourse on the veil varies, sometimes dramatically, depending on temporal and spatial considerations. The rationale to use the veil may differ in one part of the Islamic world as opposed to a different region or a different period of a community's development. Despite unique and specific circumstances affecting the direction of veil discourse in a particular place, there are some factors that appear common to all aspects of the Muslim *Ummah*³: a desire by Muslim women to define their own identity and create space for themselves in the public arena.

The Veil in Southeast Asia

When one thinks of the "Muslim" world, Southeast Asia does not readily merge in one's consciousness; usually the Middle East- the so-called "traditional" epicenter of Islam- is considered. Despite the fact that Southeast Asia has a significant Muslim presence- it is home to the most populous Islamic state- there is relatively little attention paid to the region in the collective western consciousness, unlike the Middle East. In addition, it is also attenuated from the political and intellectual pulse of the Islamic world. Consequentially, the position of Muslim women in Southeast Asia vis-à-vis the veil does not play a prominent role in the overall discourse. Nonetheless, for these women, the veil debate mirrors similar discussion elsewhere, and brings to the overall narrative some unique features that may have parallels to the American experience.

Indonesia is the most populous Muslim country in the world with 90% of its 190 million citizens subscribing to the Islamic faith. The main island of Java is home to over half the total population (107 million).⁴ The country experienced a resurgence of Islam, beginning in the 1970's. The cultural climate of the nation oriented itself to accommodate and reflect the paradigm shift. Predictably, such a social transformation had an impact on Javanese women as well, most notably, the emergence of a critical mass who started wearing the veil.⁵

Historically, the veil has not been a very limited component of Javanese culture. A system of cultural mores that provide a syncretic form of Islam, blended with local, non-Muslim traditions has been the zeitgeist.⁶ As such, Indonesia's recent experience may be best described as a move to veiling, rather than being a case of "reveiling," as in other parts of the Islamic world. The decision by Javanese women to veil is influenced by both indigenous as well as global Islamic trends. In addition, the veil challenges not only local traditions, seen as having tainted authentic Islamic precepts, but also western models of modernity, as such models are often categorically accepted as normative. The result has been a process of self-transformation for Javanese women, a phenomenon that is bilateral

³ Ummah means community; it may have local, regional or even global connotations.

⁴ Brenner, Suzanne. *Reconstructing Self and Society: Javanese Muslim Women and the "Veil."* *American Ethnologist*, 23:4 (1996), p. 676.

⁵ Ibid, p.674.

⁶ Ibid.

in nature. Such a change in women's perception of themselves affects Indonesian society and is, likewise, affected by that society.⁷ The most obvious effect is the dissociation from local, syncretic tradition while in the process, creating a new historical narrative and stream of consciousness.

The current movement toward the veil in Indonesian society has reasons that are not explicable within solely spiritual terms. There is significant evidence that the decision to veil is a response to dissatisfaction with society's current state. There is frustration, particularly in the middle and upper classes, with the legacy of economic development and state policies in that arena. In addition, there is also a pervasive perception among the same strata of the Indonesian population that the country suffers from moral decline and social disintegration.⁸

The younger generation, being most privy to the social transformations in their country, has been at the forefront of the veiling movement. Mostly urban based and well educated, these young women witness the palpable changes to society that are more pronounced and felt in the cities than they are in the rural areas.⁹ Besides serving as a rejection of a perceived inauthentic form of Islam, with its infusion of local traditions, young Javanese women see the veil as demonstrating the "New Islam," a more genuine version of the religion and one that is completely in step with modernity, yet on their own terms.¹⁰ This expression of Islam represents a reconstruction of the self and of society, attesting to individual and collective discipline.

The new orientation of Indonesian women toward the veil is by no means uniform or lacking vocal criticism. As the veil is not a traditional component of Javanese culture, "veil converts" have resorted to appropriating modalities that are, by definition, external to the community. The style of the veil incorporated by these women is very "Arab." Critics claim this demonstrates nothing more supplanting local custom and culture in favor of an alien, Arabized paradigm, not one that is necessarily steeped in Islamic precepts.¹¹ In addition to the cultural dissonance created by "imported" fashion, a second point of contention is the usefulness and appropriateness of the veil in Javanese society; for this issue, one must examine the existing public sphere. Indonesian society has not traditionally been the exclusive domain of men. Women have historically been integrated into all aspects of life outside the home, with minimal, if any, resultant social dystopia.¹² It is an open question whether the veil increases or decreases women's mobility in the public sphere, as social acceptance remains uncertain.

The ambiguity of society's receptivity and tolerance presents a palpable dilemma for those women who choose to veil, since those who do so are still deemed "different" in many circles; thus, the decision to employ the veil is not one undertaken without

⁷ Ibid, p.676.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid, p.677.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 674.

¹² Ibid, p.675.

tremendous thought. Yet, it exhibits a volitional, deliberative awareness- a key factor in veil discourse. Such action implies consciousness of global and local forces and how they impact society and the individual. Despite being viewed with suspicion, “veil converts” see themselves as trailblazers in society, affecting it perhaps more than they perceive it affects them. These Javanese women feel they have constructed a new historical consciousness and way of life that is unencumbered by local tradition or the colonial legacy. At the same time, they believe they are acting to resist Western cultural encroachment- socially and economically- as well as the effects of a malfunctioning Indonesian political economy. Yet, in this endeavor, Javanese women are susceptible to critiques that they are simply importing a foreign system to replace the indigenous status quo. Ostensibly, the selection of the Arabized form of veil implies a desire to incline toward a purportedly authentic version of Islamic identity; it remains to be seen, therefore, whether greater Arabization will be absorbed into Javanese society in the future.

The Veil in Transition: The Case of Jordan

Gender discourse in the Middle East is usually viewed through a single lens by the West, as if the condition for women is the same in every country where Arabic is the dominant language. Such conflation of perspective leads to imprecision when examining a particular country within the Arab world, as the variations from state to state can be quite dramatic. When one thinks of women and the Middle East, Saudi Arabia and Iran are the first, most obvious choices to enter the mind. Yet, theirs are not the only paradigm vis-à-vis gender issues in the region. Jordan, for example, has a narrative that is quite different than that of her theocratic neighbors.

In Jordan, class structure occupies a prominent place in the nation’s collective narrative. By operation, such an orientation affects gender discourse as well. There is a correlation between the intensity of veil discourse in Jordan and the level of integration of women from the lower and middle classes into Jordan’s public arena, especially in the spheres of education and employment. Whereas the upper classes had a more secular outlook and liberal views vis-à-vis the veil, the female members of the mid-to-lower echelons of Jordanian society were entering the public sphere equipped with certain devices to cope with the new found challenges to modesty.¹³ This had not been as grave an issue for previous generations in Jordan because entry into the public sphere for certain classes is a relatively new development, at least in the numbers concerned. One may infer that veiling was not necessarily a new innovation for Jordanian society; rather it may be best characterized as a latent phenomenon that had emerged in the public domain due to new socio-economic realities.

Another impetus for Jordan’s lower and middle class women to veil may be the desire to distinguish themselves from the country’s upper classes, whose women purportedly epitomize the western behavior scorned by a more traditional-minded population.¹⁴ The

¹³ Taraki, Lisa. *Islam is the Solution: Jordanian Islamists and the Dilemma of the ‘Modern Woman.’* *British Journal of Sociology*, 46:4 (Dec. 1995), p. 649.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

veil allows its wearer to exercise “voluntary otherness.”¹⁵ In the case of the veil, the lower to middle class women declare their disdain and rejection of the “modern Arab woman,” who is at least partially responsible for society’s current direction. Such a vector is regarded as being Islamically inauthentic and socially unproductive. The veil also serves to repel the influence and imposition of upper class social mores onto the lower classes; instead, the veil is seen as the catalyst for demographic inversion- the lower classes influencing the upper classes, in a sense, compelling the veil to be considered as normative rather than the secular orientation of the privileged segments of Jordanian society. The appropriation of the veil by members of the latter would serve as a sign of success for such a reversal of impact. Finally, the inescapable identity that the veil provides for women makes her “visible” in Jordanian society. The “visible woman” forces society to take notice of the new reality borne of significant social transformation.¹⁶

The Veil in a War Zone: The Case of the Palestinian Territories

Perceptions of the veil in society differ greatly when one crosses the Jordan River. The Palestinian territories have little in common with Jordan politically. They still lack the classification of being a recognized sovereign entity, and their history over the last 37 years has been rife with turmoil and violence. As would be expected, such tumult has pervaded every segment of Palestinian society, including the condition of women. As the ongoing conflict with Israel and ensuing quest for independence has politicized all aspects of Palestinian life, even the veil has met with this fate.

The Palestinian Uprising (*Intifada*) of the 1980’s marked a turning point in Palestinian expressions of self determination. The impact on social and economic realities was significant, but the loss of human life, especially the deaths of hundreds of Palestinian men, propelled women into roles that were neither expected nor requested. Palestinian women became politicized by the *Intifada*, the outward manifestation of which was especially salient with Muslim women and their use of the veil.

Palestinian women, as is the case with their brethren in the Middle East, had a history of variation vis-à-vis the veil. The style and decision to veil were factors usually determined by class, ethnic identity and age, along with level of religiosity.¹⁷ Social transformation, especially during the 1950’s, recalibrated class structure, secularized society through a new focus on Arab nationalism and looked to western modalities of modernization, causing many women to eschew the veil altogether.¹⁸ This trend, however, reversed itself in the late 1970’s as the Palestinian movement acquired a significant Islamicized orientation. Groups such as Hamas defined themselves as an “Islamic Resistance Movement.” With the Palestinian conflict being viewed through the prism of religious identity, social modalities were consequently framed in Islamic terms

¹⁵ “Voluntary otherness” is the process by which an individual makes the conscious choice to conduct him/herself in a way that separates him/her from the dominant ideological or cultural paradigm.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 648.

¹⁷ Hammami, Rema. Women, the Hijab and the Intifada, *Middle East Report*, (May-Aug 1990), p. 24-28.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 25.

as well.¹⁹ New meanings and symbolism were ascribed to aspects of Palestinian action and life; the veil was conferred with religio-political value. It reflected its intrinsic religious significance as well as a specific political identification, similar to the *kaffiyya* worn by Palestinian men as a sign of resistance.

The veil discourse in the Palestinian territories differs significantly from Jordan. The relative stability of Jordanian society- a sovereign state with only two leaders in the past 50 years- is a key distinction between the two communities. Although Jordan has endured two wars with Israel, as well as a substantial influx of refugees, in that timeframe, the political climate in that monarchy cannot be compared to a stateless Palestinian reality replete with disorder and uncertainty. For Jordanian women, class stratification has been the primary variable in defining social space and the use of the veil. In contrast, Palestinian women were not preoccupied with class as being a major factor of identification, as it was subsumed to the graver reality of an entire society being under siege. The veil became a potent sign of political expression, one that recently has attained a supplemental religious connotation as well.

Yet, the primary distinction between Jordan and Palestine vis-à-vis the veil may revolve around the voluntariness of using the veil. The Islamic resistance movements that had taken charge of the *Intifada* imposed the veil upon Palestinian women. Since the Palestinian struggle was now framed in religio-political terms, it was essential for the veil to be regarded as embracing both facets. The veil was defined as a sign of commitment to the *Intifada*- a form of political membership. In addition, the veil also was perceived to be a sign of respect for those killed during the *Intifada*, who were conferred with the status of martyr (*shaheed*) by the Islamists.²⁰ The need for the veil to be seen in this capacity was driven by the importance of maintaining the religious character of martyrdom and of the resistance movement, in toto, while providing inspiration and motivation to future recruits and giving relevance and meaning to the lives of the dead. The veil also signified women's active and visible participation in the resistance movement, acting as an analogue to the *kaffiyya* donned by Palestinian men during the *Intifada*.

When the State Imposes the Veil: The Cases of Saudi Arabia and Iran

The "institutionalized" imposition of the veil in Palestinian society mirrors similar efforts in other parts of the Middle East. Theocratic states such as Saudi Arabia and Iran have codified an agenda of social conservatism with an Islamic imprimatur, having a considerable impact on the gender narrative. The health and well-being of society are measured by the role and position occupied by women in that realm. For such states, national identity is, in fact, defined by "the ideal woman" and her acknowledgement and fulfillment of a series of tasks in that pursuit as established by the state.²¹

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Doumato, Eleanor A. *Gender, Monarchy and National Identity in Saudi Arabia*, *British Journal of Middle East Studies*, 19:1 (1992), p. 31-47.

²¹ Ibid.

In Saudi Arabia, the segregation of genders is a significant part of state policy. Moreover, it is validated by the kingdom's *Wahhabi* form of Islam and duly enforced by the country's religious police- the *Mutawwin*. Among its various responsibilities, the *Mutawwin* patrols the public space checking to ensure that women are properly "covered."²² Such strict control of women in public is justified by the kingdom as necessary to define the nation as well as to facilitate the "ideal woman" paradigm, which attests that the ideal woman is defined by her place in the private, not public, domain. The measure of a Saudi woman is a function of her efficacy as a wife and mother; her presence outside the home is relevant only when measuring her adherence to the strictures of imposed regulations. As such, the veil is a sine qua non to expected public engagement for women. In a sense, the rigid requirements of conduct serve as a discouragement to enter the public sphere unless necessary, thereby creating *de facto*, as well as *de jure*, gender segregation.

Like Saudi Arabia, the Islamic Republic of Iran is a theocratic state with similar attitudes toward women in the public space, albeit with a much different historical legacy. The House of Saud has ruled the kingdom since its inception in the 1930's. A succession of sons followed the country's founder, Saud ibn Abdulaziz to the throne, whose *Wahhabi* religious orientation had been well established through tribal links dating back to the middle of the 18th century. In contrast, the current Iranian regime has been in existence for a quarter of a century, borne of the Islamic revolution of 1979 that deposed the country's last Shah.

Iranian women took on the veil as a political symbol in the 1970's to express their dissatisfaction with society and the Shah's policies. Notwithstanding his oppressive measures and despotic rule, the Shah had also created a social climate that was very secular and inimical to the sensitivities of most of Iran's citizenry. To protest the "Westoxification" of Iranian society and its accompanying attack on indigenous culture, women used the veil to demonstrate their anti-bourgeois stance.²³ The veil was employed by secular and Islamically oriented women alike, as the opposition to the Shah's regime encompassed varied ideological segments of the population. The Islamic opposition, whose influence eventually dominated the movement, fully supported the use of a religious device in a political effort, and upon seizing control of the government, made the wearing of the veil mandatory. Such legislative action was not seen as being pernicious by even secular women, who believed such a measure to be ephemeral. This was not to be the case; the veil became an obligation that was enforced by the Islamist regime- a reality that is still in effect.²⁴

The Iranian Islamic revolution of 1979 promoted the wearing of the veil as an antidote to western and imperialist objectification of women that was perceived to be so prevalent during the Shah's tenure. Several Iranian women willingly accepted this narrative and chose to appropriate the veil as a political emblem in stark opposition to the social

²² Ibid.

²³ Moghadam, Valentine M. Gender and Revolutionary Transformation: Iran 1979 and East Central Europe 1989, *Gender and Society*, 9:3 (June 1995), p. 328-358.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 341.

malaise of the time. Any illusions of the temporary utility and lifespan of the veil were soon dashed as the Islamic government fortified its authority.²⁵ In fact, the result was a form of state objectification, with the government delineating the veil as an issue and removing the element of choice from the equation, thereby forcing the antithesis to the Shah's imposed secularism upon women.

The reaction to the state imposed requirement of the veil in the West has been understandable, as limitations on freedom of expression are generally alien to contemporary social narratives. Yet, the actions of the Saudi and Iranian regimes were not regarded as being as significant among the Gulf States, where conservative, authoritarian governments are commonplace. Their denizens considered Saudi Arabia's perspective to be normative, while they saw Iran as an emerging representative government with traditional values; such a regime was not only more progressive than some of its neighbors- especially Saudi Arabia- but it also was enacting "modesty laws" in full accordance with a legitimate political system.²⁶ Iran was not a dictatorship or rigid monarchy, per se; therefore, its legislative actions were seen to be within acceptable norms of governance and, arguably, reflective of the will of the people.

The Veil in Africa: The Cases of Nigeria and Algeria

Some Muslim countries have a history of Islamic laws and social customs being institutionally enforced. Yet, just as some areas are experiencing the "veiling" phenomenon, rather than the "reveiling" trend, similarly some regions are being newly indoctrinated to an Islamicized system of governance. An example of this reality is occurring in some of the northern provinces of Nigeria. As these predominantly Muslim areas elect to implement and enforce Islamic law (*Sharia*), the impact on gender dynamics is appearing with profound impact.

The Hausa women of northern Nigeria have found themselves subject to *Sharia* regulation. This move toward religious-based legal systems is consequential of a social awakening to a religious identity and its corresponding mode of governance.²⁷ There are certainly some significant effects on the gender dynamics of Hausa society, but interestingly, the veil has not been regarded as a particularly polarizing or polemical issue. In order to understand the relatively low impact of the veil discourse in this part of the Muslim world, one must examine Hausa society, in toto, vis-à-vis women's place in the public sphere. There exists a deep level of gender segregation in Hausa culture that predates the entry of *Sharia* into the calculus.²⁸ For cultural as well as religious reasons, the presence of women in the public sphere has been limited at best. As the public realm is almost exclusively the province of men, the issue of the veil is superfluous, as Hausa women rarely venture outside the home. Most practice strict seclusion (*pardah*); 95% of married women maintain such an arrangement.²⁹ If women are not present outside the

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid, p. 342.

²⁷ Callaway, Barbara J. Ambiguous Consequences of the Socialisation and Seclusion of Hausa Women, *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 22:3 (1984), p. 429-450.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 432.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 431.

private sphere, the need for the veil is diminished, especially when the occasional visit to the public arena implies a very conservative form of clothing, where the entire face is concealed, let alone the woman's hair.³⁰ Again, the differing social norms that exist in Hausa society explain the perception of the veil, which is rendered fairly irrelevant given the needs and the mores of the community. Women's space in the public realm is once more a function of cultural and social modalities that have predated the advent of an Islamic paradigm, which has merely codified the status quo ante.

Elsewhere in Africa, gender dynamics have assumed a much more political incarnation; the reason being, the historical experience of the society as a whole. Algeria had to cope with an independence movement that was particularly turbulent. As French occupiers in the 1950's were loath to cede any control to the indigenous population, an anti-colonial movement gained strength. In order to enervate Algerian society, the French targeted the most vulnerable, and pivotal, segment of the community- the women.³¹ As the honor of the woman was central to a perceived healthy society, the French sought to undermine the Algerian morale by systematically ordering the removal of the veil. By bringing the veil into the colonial struggle, Algerian women became politicized and active participants in the anti-colonial movement. Achieving parity with their male comrades in the struggle, several women manipulated the veil to their advantage. Consciously electing to remove the veil, these women were able to maneuver through the public sphere unnoticed by the French occupiers, as they were believed to be modern, pro-French members of the community. Yet, the belief that these individuals were a benign presence was misguided. Unveiled women were as involved in the independence struggle as the men, but were able to move through the public space with greater stealth. They served as spies and smugglers for information and weapons, respectively.³² It is clear that Algerian women played a decisive role in the independence struggle. A key revelation of this episode of Algerian, and even Islamic, history is the absence of theology in determining whether to remove the veil. Its religious nature and obligation were subsumed to the political realities at the time and the need for a certain quantum of pragmatism in negotiating a tumultuous situation affecting the population.

The ongoing political vicissitudes of Algeria have affected the perception of the veil by Algerian women. In the early 1990's the Islamic Salvation Front's (FIS) electoral victory was nullified and the country descended into civil war, with considerable loss of life.³³ The resurgence of Islamic identity in recent Algerian society has seen a "reveiling" in Algerian life. The veiled woman is perceived to be capable of legitimately occupying public space and sharing it with her male counterparts. This quest for space is manifested through a religious narrative and identity that is borne of the country's experience with Islamist currents. The veil is now being embraced as a necessary device to ensure women are allowed to engage in the public realm, unfettered by articulations that

³⁰ The concept of *pardah* is also quite pervasive in South Asian culture, among both Muslims and Hindus of India and Pakistan. For an analysis of this phenomenon, please read Papanek, Hanna, *Purdah: Separate Worlds and Symbolic Shelter*, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 15 (June 1973), p. 289-325.

³¹ For a detailed narrative of the French colonial experience in Algeria and the ensuing independence movement, please read Fanon, Franz. *A Dying Colonialism*, New York: Grove Press (1965).

³² Fanon, p. 35-67.

³³ Slyomovics, Susan. "Hassan Ben Bouali, If You Could See Our Algeria": Women and Public Space in Algeria, *Middle East Report* (Jan-Feb 1995), p. 8-13.

indiscriminate mixing of the genders can occur.³⁴ Although this rejuvenated religio-political identity does not overtly discriminate against unveiled women, there is an implicit rejection of the alternate narrative of the veil now. Absence of the veil is seen as an accommodation of the oppressive secular-leaning government and a threat to the ability of women to belong to public space with legitimacy. As a result, the use of the veil in present day Algeria discounts the significant contribution made by those women in the 1950's who consciously removed their veils in order to effectuate an independent state. Ironically, it is the contribution of unveiled women fifty years ago- creating a viable public space in Algeria with the expulsion of colonial forces- that many women today are reluctant to recognize and appreciate for its importance.

The Case of Europe: Veil Discourse outside the “Islamic World”

Islam is the second largest religion in a number of European countries. A combination of the colonial legacy and an influx of immigration have contributed to sizable Muslim populations in France, Britain, Germany and the Scandinavian nations. Given the longevity of Islam in Europe and the diversity of the Muslim population therein, the sheer spectrum of Islamic ideological thought on the continent is considerable wide. Due attention must be paid to three important factors when examining European Muslim attitudes on the veil: (1) the background of immigrant Muslims vis-à-vis veil discourse and gender dynamics in their native countries and the political and socio-economic forces in their experience; (2) the level of integration and assimilation of these Muslims into European public space and (3) the response of European society to a religiously oriented identity in light of institutionalized secularist policy and culture. The first factor is part of an internal narrative within the Muslim community; the third factor is external to the Muslim population, as it concerns the non-Muslim perception of this suspect group. The second issue factor is a point of nexus, where Muslim and non-Muslim European perceptions intersect and sometimes clash.

The French experience is currently the most salient of Europe's encounters with veil discourse.³⁵ Official state policy banning the veil from public school has created a firestorm of protest and debate regarding France's recognition of its second-largest religious community and whether French public life has space for Muslims, especially women who adhere to a copiously Islamic identity. As young French Muslims, most of North African descent, are prohibited from going to public school adorned in the veil, the Islamic community in France is feeling under siege. Many were reminded of the tribulations at the hands of the French in Algeria four decades earlier, where the veil played a prominent and pivotal role in the independence movement. Now, in the name of preservation of the country's secular orientation, France has imposed laws banning the overt display of certain religious symbols, including the veil. The response has been a resurgence of Islamic identity manifested by the wearing of the veil. This new consciousness is caused by the realization that a secular state is not necessarily one that accommodates differing viewpoints or creates sufficient space for them in the public

³⁴ Ibid, p. 10.

³⁵ For a compelling contemporary study of the encounter of Islam and France, please read Cesari, Jocylene. *When Islam and Democracy Meet: Muslims in Europe and in the United States*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan (2004).

sphere. Despite overtures of being a paragon of tolerance, enlightenment and civilized society, France is perceived to be, in the eyes of its Muslim citizens as well as Muslims the world over, intolerant of religion in general, and especially Islam. For France, the veil represents a dual threat: assertion of religious identity over state secularism and the rejection of culturally normative French society. It is, ironically, a phenomenon with parallels in Turkey as well, despite its self-proclaimed standing as a democratic Islamic state with a secular orientation.

Muslim immigrants living in Europe tend to reflect the lifestyle of their native countries. Although some undergo a process of assimilation that is quick and deep, many newcomers adhere to their respective cultural mores in an effort to maintain connectivity to their “home country.” Yet, European society since September, 11, 2001 has reexamined its Muslim population with suspicion and concern as to whether it constitutes a “fifth column” and internal threat. In ability and unwillingness to assimilate in to European culture to a satisfactory level has brought Muslim communities in several European Union countries to be subject to a new and heightened scrutiny. In addition to the religious perspective, Muslim Europeans are often the target of derision due to their economic status. Many are migrant workers from North Africa and Turkey and are made to feel unwelcome where their stay was expected to be quite temporary. The consequence of such a negative perception- and accompanying social and institutional treatment- has led many Muslims to reevaluate their position in European public space. With their commitment to their domicile questioned and challenged, many Muslims have sought to reestablish their connection to their Islamic heritage. For women, this is often, if not most easily, accomplished through the appropriation of the veil. In the effort to control and shape one’s own identity in a “foreign land,” Muslim women are influenced by the veil discourse in their native countries, yielding either conformity or rejection of the antecedent perspective.³⁶ An unintended consequence of resorting to the veil is the widening of the cultural and ideological chasm as perceived by the majority European population, who see the veil as antithetical to secular, western, progressive and enlightened civilization. Again, although some may regard the action of European Muslim women to be another example of “voluntary otherness,” these women may respond by asserting their decision is a reaction to the social and spatial barriers that have been imposed by a majority culture with limited tolerance for the “Other.”³⁷

The Veil and the New Frontier: The Case of America

The level of research on veil dynamics in the United States has been relatively minimal, when compared to other parts of the world. Nonetheless, there have been attempts made to ascertain what forces are driving the seemingly recent phenomenon of veil revival in America.³⁸ In the process, veil discourse in the United State appears to be a conflation of

³⁶ Roald, Ann Sofie. *Women in Islam*. London: Routledge, 2001. Official Turkish policy limiting the use of the veil may cause European Turkish women to be emboldened to wear the veil, while women from countries where the veil has been imposed by state fiat (e.g. Iran and Saudi Arabia) may feel liberated from the institutional obligation.

³⁷ For further discussion of contending with the dual identities of being European and Muslim, please read Ramadan, Tariq. *To be a European Muslim*, Leicester: The Islamic Foundation (1999).

³⁸ Due to the lack of research measuring the veil resurgence in America, much of the affirmation of this phenomenon has been observational, rather than the result of scientific analysis.

the myriad discourses that are present throughout the Islamic world. The United States has arguably the most diverse Muslim population on the planet, with broad spectra of ideological, ethnic, linguistic and socio-economic diversity being visible. The legacy of colonialism, a key factor that has affected not only much of the Muslim world, but specifically gender dynamics therein, is absent from the American narrative. Unlike European countries- many of whom are former colonial occupiers that are now confronting influxes of Muslim immigrants from former controlled territories- the United States is unencumbered with the issues borne of that four centuries-old “relationship” vis-à-vis Muslims. Nonetheless, many Muslim immigrants in America have arrived from areas previously under colonial rule, where gender narratives and social mores continue to bear the effects of social transformation from that era.

In addition to the origins of Muslim immigrants, the continuous flow of people with America as their destination has played a major role in how Muslims interact with each other in this country. The impact on shaping an American Muslim identity is quite profound. Immigrant Muslims differ ideologically based on their respective countries of origin. Furthermore, there is often a fissure between the perspectives of immigrant Muslims and indigenous Muslims.³⁹ Such a lack of monolithic Islam has permeated to areas of Muslim life beyond the mere theological. Differences in the approach to gender issues occur due to mosaic of past and present life experience, yet the mergence of a triggering event may evoke a more uniform reaction that affects American Muslims across experiential lines. Although adequate research has yet to be undertaken on the subject, such a triggering event might be the paradigm shift in perception of Islam and Muslims precipitated by September 11, 2001.

The uncertainty of acceptance and tolerance serves as a powerful impetus for a reevaluation of identity. The recent resurgence of the veil in American Muslim life has certainly been affected by September 11 as Muslim women decide whether they should enter the public sphere with such a copious symbol of their religious identity, even if their motivation for wearing the veil is not necessarily spiritually based.⁴⁰ Through observational analysis, it appears as if the veil transcends socio-economic, ideological, ethnic and cultural lines for American Muslim women. The decision to veil, unveil or reveal has been influenced by public reaction and levels of individual comfort. Interestingly, the attitudes of the majority society may supersede forces from within the Muslim community for a woman to determine if the veil is an appropriate and prudent choice in the current cultural and political climate.

American Muslim women do not have to contend with institutionally imposed edicts on the veil, whether it is the obligation to wear, e.g. Saudi Arabia and Iran, or the demand to remove, e.g. Turkey and France. In addition, the United States does not have a legacy as

³⁹ Indigenous Muslims include African-American, Euro-American Muslim and Latino converts as well as non-first generation Muslims.

⁴⁰ Even prior to September 11, 2001, the veil has been the subject of civil rights litigation, as some American Muslim women have experienced discrimination, ostensibly because of their choice to wear the veil. For further reading on this subject, please see, Moore, Kathleen. *The Hijab and Religious Liberty: Anti-Discrimination Law and Muslim Women in the United States*, in Haddad, Yvonne and Esposito, John L., Eds. *Muslims on the Americanization Path?* New York: Oxford University Press (2000), p. 105-128.

in Algeria, where the veil became a political symbol in an independence struggle. Yet, perhaps the primary common denominator that American Muslim women may have with their brethren worldwide is that the veil serves as a response to a perceived dissatisfaction with the majority society. In the pursuit of voluntary otherness, the veil makes a statement of affirming and maintaining space in the public sphere, while preserving a distinct, unique identity separate from the dominant socio-cultural paradigm.

Conclusion

The complexities of veil discourse for Muslim women ensure a fluid, dynamic debate to continue in the conventional Islamic world as well as those regions where Muslims are establishing themselves in significant numbers. Several factors play into the equation used by women in their decision to veil or not; many are not necessarily based within a theological model. Socio-economic currents, the level of affinity with one's native country, reactions to the dominant ideology or cultural zeitgeist and political vicissitudes all contribute to the decision to veil. Yet, a significant factor affecting women and the veil is not an external force. It is women's own ruminations over defining their identity and negotiating how and to what extent that identity has a place in the public sphere that plays the largest role in the three choices available to Muslim women: veiling, unveiling or revealing. The current resurgence of attention to the veil reflects a global phenomenon of introspection, where Muslim women have begun to assess their condition and have decided that it is their right to determine the parameters of their identity, gauging what place they may have in society as a function of how society perceives them. Such issues are emerging on the American landscape, where Muslim women are privy to an experience that is different in the aggregate to what is endured by Muslim women elsewhere. Yet, the composition of the Muslim population in the United States, a *mélange* of people and ideologies spanning the rest of the Islamic world, also brings with it the diversity of thought and opinion *vis-à-vis* the veil. Muslim women in America are uniquely situated to absorb all of the various perspectives and to carve out a distinctly American interpretation of the veil discourse for their particular purposes. The caveat to be heeded is that women must be judicious in discerning which factors have influenced certain veil narratives in other parts of the world and whether the presence or absence of such factors here has an impact on their experience in this country. The danger of appropriating particular modalities of the veil, even though they may not be germane to American life, is a possibility that requires caution to avoid. The realization that a new narrative is capable of being constructed domestically, however, is in itself a significant step in the formation of identity.