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Decentering the Veil

Transforming the Discourse Surrounding Muslim Women

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Abstract

Western society's preoccupation with the veil and the women who don them continues to occupy political and public arenas, garnering widespread attention. In the west, the veiling practices of Muslim women are most commonly as either a symbol of oppression or resistance. This dichotomy of prevailing discourses fails to capture the complexities of navigating gender, religious and racial identities within western society, thus perpetuating reductive representations of Muslim women. This article examines Western perceptions of Muslim women who choose to veil. Prevailing discourses are problematized, and considerations to elevate nuanced narratives of Muslim women that transcend the veil are explored.



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Nationally and internationally, Western society's obsession with the veil and the women who don them continues to occupy political, public, academic, and media arenas, capturing the attention of many. The veil in its various forms and styles, have come to be understood most commonly as either a symbol of Muslim women's oppression or their resistance. Constructed as dichotomous perspectives, these prevailing discourses fail to capture the complexities of navigating gender, religious and racial identities within western society, thus perpetuating static, one dimensional representations of Muslim women. This examination begins by positioning this discussion within the western political context and how this continues to influence understandings of and experiences of Muslim women who choose to veil. Further, this paper seeks to examine competing discourses of oppression and resistance that tend to surround the practice of veiling and Muslim women, as well as considerations to elevate a more nuanced narratives of Muslim women that transcend the veil.

Political Context

As it is well known, Western discourse regarding Muslim women, both in local and global contexts, affect each other. Meaning, the manner in which Muslim women who wear the veil are being portrayed in the Middle Eastern context cannot be entirely separated from how Muslim women who wear the veil in Canada. They are, in effect, intertwined. Locally and globally, the political climate paints a problematic portrait painted with suspicion and Islamophobic sentiment, advancing anti-Muslim stereotypes and marking Muslim women who wear the veil as a symbol of religious fundamentalism and extremism (Zempi, 2016). This perspective appears to be heightened in the post-9/11 context, growing with the rise of attention on militant and terrorist groups that feed false notions that tend to associate Islam with terrorism. Constructed within the midst of global and political events, the western perspective of the veil as a symbol of gender oppression and fundamentalism has sparked a number of public debates and political responses used to justify sanctions to restrict Muslim women from wearing the veil in public and therefore obstructing their ability to participate fully in society (Mackie, 2003; Rootham, 2015; Zempi, 2016).

France being one of the first countries to introduce a ban on the niqab in 2011, led the charge on such enforcement with Belgium, Barcelona, some towns in Italy, as well as approximately 8 German states following suit (Bilge, 2010; Mackie, 2003; Zempi, 2016). Within the United Kingdom and Canada attempts to impose legislative restrictions on wearing the veil have been attempted with some success, where restrictions are upheld in particular contexts like the court of law or in educational settings, primarily targeting women in teaching professions (Zempi, 2016). While initially passed in Quebec, successful suspension of the ban has been undertaken, though it is unclear as to whether this will be continue to be upheld and to what extent women who adopt the veil are impacted and discriminated against regardless of legal restrictions. As it moves toward the courts, Quebec's secularism legislation, Bill 21, continues to be a cause for concern as its passing would certainly undermine the freedom and equality of many.

It is important to recognize that Muslims have long been racialized and through this process subjected to differential and unequal treatment, a lived reality conveniently ignored by those in academic and political spaces who veil their bias under the guise of ideology and universal human rights. Political arenas are filled with discussions or rather arguments over how

much accommodation of cultural difference should be tolerated, suggesting multiculturalism is beneficial until the state decides it is not. Bilge (2010) argues failures of multiculturalism are evident in the West as the debate to tolerate or outlaw Muslim women who veil, dichotomizes women's rights and ethnic/religious minority rights. To claim that accommodating veiling for Muslim women is a threat to gender equality, sexual freedom and secularism, highlights the problematic nature of these political discussions. By reducing this issue to an either or predicament, the discussion perpetuates an essentialized understanding of women and fails to account for the intersectionality of identities that are at play. When scrutinized further these debates unearth some questionable attitudes about inclusion, citizenship, and appropriate expressions of gender and culture. The western response to limit freedoms and intervene in the lives of Muslim women reeks of colonialism, attempting to equate women's devotion to Islam as backward, a threat to westerner's "modernity" that has come to be associated with secularism and a certain form of feminist expression. Bilge (2010) describes this as an occurrence of governance feminism, whereby feminist agendas are advanced by governments in a gender-first manner, but fail to critically assess how agendas might create or enforce exclusions or hierarchies. It is critical that the influence of governance feminism on Muslim women who choose to veil be recognized and addressed, as western agendas that emphasize emancipatory rhetoric continue to be co-opted to reinforce anti-immigration and anti-Muslim political agendas and policies (Bilge, 2010).

Zine (2006) offers a critical insight asserting that whether the veil is mandated or outlawed, its effect is the same. By attempting to govern women's bodies and religious practices, state sanctioned impositions of authority attempt to constrain Muslim women's spiritual, political, and social autonomy. While in the west we are most often exposed to the oppression discourse associated with the veil, interpretations of the veil vary not only across space and time, but also according to the meanings ascribed to it by those who regulate it, fear it, and more importantly the women who wear it. Notably absent from the political, public, and academic debates is the perspectives of the women themselves who have chosen to wear the veil. Contemporary discourse surrounding Muslim women who veil continues to be *about* them as opposed to *from* them.

However, there appears to be growing attempt within the scholarly realm to better understand the experiences of women who wear the veil in its various forms and their reasons for doing so. Such studies have been conducted with Muslim women who veil in a number of multicultural nations including Canada (Saba, 2013; Zine, 2006), France (Rootham, 2015), the United States (Droogsma, 2007; Sarroub, 2010), and the United Kingdom (Zempi, 2016). Across these studies, motivations are both similar and distinct in a number of ways as these women share the ways in which they reconcile their experiences and expressions of various identities and faith practices. It is uncertain as to whether the authentic experiences and truths of these women will penetrate the public discourse, and if so it may unearth questions of representation and whether it is even possible to accurately portray the experiences and perspectives of a very diverse group of women.

Prominent Discourses of the Veil and the Woman Behind

The Oppression Narrative

The practice of veiling is known to predate its association with Islam, however, over time the veil has come to be known as a symbol of the Muslim world in the minds of westerners (MacDonald, 2006). It is of interest to note that the veiling practices common to other traditions are rarely, if ever discussed, nor are they contested in the way that Muslim women have experienced. Has one ever questioned why the same preoccupation does not exist with signifiers from other faiths? For those of other orthodox faiths where veiling is common practice, the veil is associated with modesty and spiritual practice, however, the devotional and spiritual practices of Muslim women are overshadowed by the west's obsession with unveiling them. The oppression narrative often associated with Muslim women, especially Muslim women who veil, has its roots in orientalist representations that represent Muslim women as oppressed victims, submissive and backward (Abu-Lughod, 1985; Bilge, 2010; Droogsma, 2007; Khan, 2014; Rootham, 2015; Zine, 2006). Further reinforcing the oppression narrative, are the stereotypical dichotomous representations of "good" vs. "bad" Muslims, which is increasingly problematic when intertwined with false notions of Muslim women needing to be rescued from "bad" Muslim men. These representations have and continue to serve imperialist and contemporary political agendas that seek to rationalize sanctions and restrictions in the name of emancipation (Zine, 2006). Within this discourse Muslim women who veil occupy a puzzling paradox of passive and oppressed, but also as a seemingly active threat to the value of western society (Bilge, 2010; MacDonald, 2006; Zempi, 2016). It seems that over time the western narratives surrounding this particular group of women have not necessarily changed, but rather taken on additional contradictory associations resulting in an accumulation of distorted understandings.

Secular feminist responses failed to challenge this prevailing narrative and instead supported the construction of the veil as a symbol of oppression and inequality, reducing both the veil and the women behind them to an essentialized caricature of the west's imagination (Bilge, 2010; Zempi, 2016; Zine, 2006). Within feminist scholarship some have argued that Muslim women are coerced into veiling and if Muslim women claim to want to veil it is attributed to the development of a false consciousness (Bilge, 2010). Proponents of these assertions portray these women as devoid of agency, regarding their voices irrelevant and denying their legitimacy to construct and express personal meanings and value that they attribute to veiling practices. It is interesting to note that within these political debates, particularly in France, when Muslim women were involved in the discussion, it was often the views of Muslim women who opposed the veil that were privileged over those who wore it (Bilge, 2010). This is clearly demonstrative of a problematic pattern, where voices aligned with the views of dominant society gain legitimacy, while others are rejected.

While feminist writings supporting this narrative point the finger at patriarchy for the oppression of Muslim women, they are equally responsible for the discrimination and oppression felt by Muslim women who veil. By spreading these one-dimensional representations of Muslim women, constructing narratives *for* Muslim women, and denying space for the voices and narratives of women who veil, they too are complicit. From this discussion it is clear that the value orientation and priorities of western feminist discourses tend to serve certain groups over others, resulting in fragmentation and marginalization within and across groups of women.

The Resistance Narrative

The depiction of the woman behind the veil as a subjugated being of limited agency, has been met with disapproval by some within the feminist discourse (Bilge, 2010). Most often the resistance perspective equates or perhaps reduce veiling practices to function, specifically how the veil offers benefits to its wearer which are then associated with certain motivations and outcomes (Bilge, 2010). Cited most often to be associated with resisting western commodification of the female body, materialism, and imperialism, as well as a marker of religiosity, modesty, solidarity and identity (Bilge, 2010; MacDonald, 2006; Mackie, 2003).

Resistance discourses emphasize the emancipatory function of the veil, asserting its strategic use among Muslim women to gain access to opportunities in the public sphere, and liberation from oppressive beauty expectations of the west and unwanted male attention (Bilge, 2010; Droogsma, 2007; MacDonald, 2006; Mackie, 2003; Rootham, 2015; Saba, 2013; Zempi, 2016; Zine, 2006). Thematic analysis of qualitative interviews with women who choose to veil in the west highlight a number of functions of the veil that include: Muslim identity, mechanism to align behaviour with religious values, resist and protection from objectification, affords respect, preservation of intimate relations, challenges stereotypes, fashion accessory and/or statement, source of freedom, and power over one's body (Droogsma, 2007; Michalove, 2014; Rootham, 2015; Saba, 2013; Sarroub, 2010; Zempi, 2016; Zine, 2006).

The resistance narrative also carries with it problematic assumptions that tend to reduce the agency of these women to resistance, whilst resistance may be a form of exercising agency it is credited with holding much more explanatory power than it actually does. This explanation fails to capture the complexity underlying the choices and actions made by Muslim women in their decisions to veil or not. Feminist scholars and activists alike are eager to 'give voice' (as if it is one's to give) and seek out resistance in the places they expect and hope to find it. It is these romanticized notions that continue to push the resistance narrative, yet in doing so such notions also advance a particular interpretation of agency and autonomy backed by limited understandings of how power, identity, agency, and faith interact across time and space.

This exploration does not deny that the legitimacy of the aforementioned motivations and outcomes, rather this critique emphasizes that such a narrow understanding of women's agency that primarily focuses on the veil as a strategic tool of resistance, obscures the varied and complex motivations, identities, contexts, faith and cultural practices of an extremely diverse population of women. What is often left unattended to is a deeper understanding of the religious or spiritual desires of these women, their sense of self, and the process of reconciling the expressions of their identities, experiences and faith. To understand secular and Islamic feminism, one must consider the history and context of their emergence, as well as, their evolution. Where secular feminism pulls from various discourses such as, humanitarian/human rights, democratic and secular nationalist; Islamic feminism is grounded in a religious discourse where the Qur'an is central (Badran, 2005). However, the relationship between religious devotion and women in both the western and Islamic feminism discourse is often a site of contention (Bilge, 2010; Kynsilehto, 2008; Moghadam, 2002; Mojab, 2001), that is beyond the scope of this exploration.

Often the findings of many studies represent knowledge about and from Muslim women as a constant and static truth, however, apparent in the interviews conducted by Droogsma (2007) is the way in which functions of the veil change over time for some women, at times

influenced by age, spiritual understanding, and/or socio-political context. Thus simultaneously the veil becomes subject to the meanings ascribed to it by insiders, outsiders, Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Rootham (2015) underscores that the meaning of the veil is fluid and evolves with the understandings of those who attribute meaning to it, as well as according to the context in which it is worn. The choice to adopt the veil can be subject to change just as any other choice is. Depending on one's religious trajectory, spiritual understanding, contextual factors, personal decisions, and many other factors unknown to anyone but the wearer herself, some women may choose to remove the veil. Just as we must be cautious to attribute certain meanings to the practice of veiling, we must be cautious of not interpreting the practice of 'unveiling' as a signifier of assimilation into society, rejection of Islam, or any other understanding that feeds the prevailing polarizing narratives.

Nuancing the Narrative

Through exploring the political context and predominant narratives surrounding the veiling practices of Muslim woman, a number of issues have surfaced that highlight the troubling nature of how these woman have come to be understood and impacted by the western societies in which they reside. Muslim women who choose to veil must then navigate the traps and trip wires set by essentialist and reductive archetypes, in order to represent themselves in a manner that is self-determined, self-defined and self-narrated. This paper offers two separate but interconnected approaches that seek to nuance, enrich and disrupt the current narratives.

Authentic voices. Often critiqued in the literature by those who advance the resistance discourse is the reality that academics and researchers alike, rarely consult women who choose to veil about the meaning of choices and experience. Rather what is typically produced in these works are the interpreted meanings scholars ascribe to the veil with particular attention to its functions (Droogsma, 2007). Currently only a handful of studies exist that seek out the voices of these women, suggesting there is significant work that is yet to be undertaken. As discussed, veiling practices do not have universal meanings, therefore purposeful and respectful inquiry is necessary to gain insight into the influences and complex meanings associated with this practice in a manner that is true to the experiences of the women represented. Authentic and accurate representation of these diverse voices should be strived for if we truly seek to dismantle and disrupt the prevailing narratives.

It has been four years since Zunera Ishaq found herself in the midst of Canadian political debates surrounding her choice to don a veil at her public citizenship ceremony. Since then the debates have continued and yet few other Muslim women have gained access to public platforms to express their views to a wider audience. Despite the attempts of Ishaq and others to foster mutual understanding and respect for the choices of Muslim women, the debates continue to be polarizing, restricting one to choose between anti-racism or anti-sexism (Bilge, 2010). Although intersectional approaches have and continues to be advanced in other areas of scholarship, it is rarely proposed as a lens to critically assess the issues faced by Muslim women who adopt the veil. Bilge (2010) and Rootham (2015) call for intersectionality scholarship to move into these uncharted and under-theorized spaces. Dimensions of religion/faith remain to be integrated into our understandings of other social dimensions such as gender, race and class. We cannot begin to undertake this venture without the women themselves.

For those in professions and positions seeking to uphold justice, who consider advocacy, allyship and activism as central to their roles, must first examine their current practice. Has their work contributed to the maintenance of polarizing narratives and inclusion of some at the expense of the exclusion of others? Have attempts to seek understanding and knowledge from Muslim women who veil resulted in authentic representation and efforts to transform the discourse? For the women at the centre of this debate, many choose to disbelieve the flawed conceptualizations of their existence, to refute these distortions by inscribing and presenting their own truths to personal veiling practices (Droogsma, 2007). If we as insiders, outsiders, Muslims and non-Muslims, have any role in supporting this transformation, it begins by choosing to disbelieve *with* them.

Decentering the veil. When it comes to discussions of Muslim women in the both the east and west, the western obsession with the veil follows closely, occupying politics, media, and academic scholarship. The result is the image of a meek woman in a shroud of black imprinted into the psyche of many in society. The symbol of the veil has become a site for ascribing constructed and reconstructed meanings, with little consideration for the woman behind and/or under it. This exploration is too at fault for its primary focus on the veil, however it is my hope that the ends justify the means. To transform the essentialist definitions placed upon Muslim women, it is imperative that we move beyond our preoccupation with the veil to know and understand the women we have hidden or rather chosen not to see.

To decentre the veil is to know the woman behind it. Frequently expressed in the literature is the desire to be free of the definitions and labels that have become associated with the veiling practices of Muslim women. From Droogsma's (2007) study, Sadiyyah articulates this sentiment in saying 'I'd hope that somehow [hijab] fosters tolerance, you know, tells people that Muslim women are people just like you...we laugh, we cry, wearing [hijab] is just our expression of faith' (313). Similarly, Mona adds 'I guess what I hope they do think is that, I mean, I want people to value me for my thoughts and my opinions and my emotions and my feelings, and not...the way I look' (Droogsma, 2007, 313). As a Muslim woman living in and navigating the way of the west, this is a hope I hold and share in common with other Muslim women who not only seek but demand to be seen as more than the sum of the pervasive narratives that seek to define us.

The inclination to move beyond the veil is echoed by MacDonald (2006) and Zine (2006) asserting that there are more important things to attend to such as women's rights to access education, employment and participate in society without infringing on her rights to freely practice her faith. As a society we have too long focused on and made issue of the choices Muslim women make. The political and social policing of the veil has both obscured and distorted our understanding of and ability to relate to Muslim women, fragmenting Muslim women from western feminist discourse which has cost us in missed opportunities. We have missed opportunities to advance intersectional approaches that seek to disrupt and transform dominant structures, institutions and policies to increase inclusion and participation of Muslim women in society. Time and efforts that could be spent on transforming our understanding of Muslim women, continue to be squandered on the western fascination of the veil. Once we move to supporting Muslim women's freedom of choice and expression, we free ourselves from being confined to these primitive and dichotomous narratives that are in desperate need of transformation.

It is important to acknowledge that such work is already underway as we begin to move beyond the veil. ‘The Muslimah who Fell to Earth: Personal Stories by Canadian Muslim Women’ (Hussain, 2016) is a shining example of such work. This collection of stories from these diverse women successfully weaves together lived experiences of what it means to be a Muslim woman in Canada. The result is an insightful patchwork of the diverse journeys, experiences, thoughts, and hopes of 22 women who seek to elevate a more nuanced narrative that counters prevailing stereotypes and static representations of Muslim woman. In documenting their personal journeys to reconcile the expressions of various identities, experiences and faith, these women explicitly and eloquently defy normative assumptions on a number of dimensions including gender, sexuality, ability, ethnicity, culture, mental health and spirituality. While contemporary discourse surrounding Muslim women continues to be *about* us as opposed to *from* us, the existence of a work that rightfully centers the stories and voices of Muslim women, defies the colonial and patriarchal perspectives that attempt to diminish our complexity to a singular representation. This book is just one of the many possibilities and opportunities that exist to challenge existing conceptualizations of Muslim women.

With this in mind, it is critical that we move forward to pursue innovative opportunities to challenge the ways in which Muslim women have come to be constructed. While it is Muslim women that hold the key to this, as we ourselves are the sources of knowledge and sites of transformation, there are countless opportunities to support this process both personally and professionally. We can commit to this process in our everyday interactions, as well as in professional practice if efforts are made to simply see, understand, and value Muslim women for who we are in all of our complexity.

Conclusion

This exploration has offered insight into various influences and perspectives surrounding the veil as worn by Muslim women in western societies. In examining the socio-political context and dominant narratives that have attempted to construct the veil as either a symbol of oppression or subversive resistance, this paper highlights the ways in which these perspectives, have failed to attend to the complex and dynamic experiences of these women as they navigate the intersections of gender, religion and race within western society. In attempt to evade the pitfalls of these reductive and essentialized representations of Muslim women, this paper proposes two approaches to nuance and disrupt current narratives. These approaches converge in their intention to privilege authentic and diverse voices, to ensure Muslim women are represented as central sources of knowledge and transformation as we move to decentre the veil and come to know and understand the women themselves.

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