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***Contemporary Discourses on Muslim Women and Veiling:***

***A Critical Analysis***

***by***

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***A minor dissertation in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
award of the***

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Declaration

*This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or the works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited as*

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28/11-2005

## Abstract

I propose that dominant discourses on veiling objectify Muslim women and do not engage with Muslim women dialogically as subjects capable of agency and self-definition. In this thesis I explore this problem critically within two different contexts, namely in selected Muslim minority contexts of Europe and America, and in the particular Muslim majority context of Iran. I illustrate that these highly politicized discourses often instrumentalise representations of Muslim women for their respective ideological agendas. I then present an alternative mode of engagement with the issue of veiling by examining the varying, marginalized voices, subjectivities and agency of Muslim women in their understandings of this phenomenon.

It is imperative to question stereotypes and universalistic assumptions concerning Muslim women's bodies, modesty, dressing and agency in order to advocate a new gender consciousness which sees women as subjects. The various discourses of the veil reflect that Muslim women's choices and opinions are divided. As such, it is important to *listen* to Muslim women's voices to be able to create a discourse that is based on dialogue, authentic representations, mutual understanding and respect.

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## ***Introduction***

This thesis critically explores dominant discourses around the veiling of Muslim women, particularly in light of the distorted representations of Muslim women in contemporary debates pertaining to women's agency and women's rights. These discourses often assume, either implicitly or explicitly, that Muslim women are mute, victimized, without personal agency, and ultimately incapable of self-definition. I examine particular cases where both Western and Islamic political discourses construct and reinforce distortions of Muslim women. To the extent that both these dominant discourses deprive Muslim women of their agency and self-expression, I critically engage in the parallels between these hegemonic paradigms.

Nevertheless, subjected to various cultural, political and religious developments the veil has become a multi-faceted symbol. By looking at contemporary Muslim women's active participation in meaning-making, I will challenge these dominant narratives and misrepresentations. Through linking analyses of historical contexts and scripture to the contemporary debates, I deconstruct and ultimately undermine the distorted stereotypes that pertain to the lack of Muslim women's agency.

The first two chapters of this thesis will present various socio-political factors in terms of veiling embedded in a western context and in Iran respectively. Despite different political structures and contexts, both the west and Iran imposes laws and regulations that overwhelmingly deprive Muslim women of agency. Veiling discourses have become part of a larger tension between modernity and traditional religious identities. In dominant contemporary western discourses, the veil has come to symbolize Muslim women's "otherness" and represent broader irreconcilable differences between Islam and the west<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this thesis I will make use of the categories, Islam and the West. However, this terminology is not premised on homogenous assumptions or fixed entities. Rather, I use the categories as descriptive expressions of different cultural representations. For a more thorough analysis pertaining to these categories see Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 1978.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I present different cases that have received wide attention both in western countries and in the Muslim world. I also look at various western representations of Muslim women, which emphasize the notion of “otherness”. Through exploring these distortions I challenge the ideological biases embedded in dominant western cultural narratives that assume to speak authoritatively for people coming from other traditions.

The second chapter of this thesis deals with the multiple meanings of the veil in Iran, which is a majority Muslim context. Here I look at the varying ways in which women and their dressing became entwined in the ideological agendas and visions of successive political regimes. I examine both the pre- and post revolutionary political contexts. I also assess how the physical representation of women created ambivalences and resulted in the emergence of various feminist discourses.

In the third chapter of this thesis I contest the prevalent assumption that Muslim women are mute and deprived of agency. Through presenting various Muslim feminist contestations of traditional patriarchal understandings, pertaining to women’s bodies, modesty and dressing, I will challenge these distorted stereotypes. The diverse Muslim feminist voices presented are from within the Islamic tradition, and as such represents active agency and participation in self-definitions. Given the general neglect of Muslim women’s voices, in terms of a pervasive male dominant narrative, I am redressing a marginalized discourse with particular focus on the interpretations of various contemporary women scholars. While their methodologies and understandings differ, their engagement with Qur’anic interpretation and religious meaning is highly significant for contemporary discourses pertaining to women and the veil.

Before I move on to the chapters outlined above I will define and clarify some key concepts that I will make use of throughout this thesis. I feel that the definitions undertaken here are valid representations of the multiple views conveyed in this thesis.

### *A Working Definition of Feminism*

There is a whole emerging body of literature pertaining to the complexities around Islam and feminism that presently is being debated. Some Muslim women reject the label 'feminist' because of its association with Western feminism. The identification 'feminist' is thereby already assumed to connote a specific ideological framework that certain Muslim women feel uncomfortable with. Other Muslim women are content with this term in relation to how they apply various strategies to obtain their goals. At this point I will stay away from the debate concerning the relation between Islam and feminism<sup>2</sup>. In relation to the context of my paper I think that it is necessary to conceptualize feminism within a broader framework that reflects the various voices presented in this thesis. I will apply a working definition of feminism by drawing on both Sa'diyya Shaikh and Miriam Cooke's definitions.

According to Sa'diyya Shaikh the term feminism includes: "*a critical awareness of the structural marginalization of women in society and engaging in activities directed at transforming gender power relations in order to strive for a society that facilitates human wholeness for all based on principles of gender justice, human equality, and freedom from structures of oppression*" (2003:148).

Miriam Cooke asserts that feminism refers to "*women who think and do something about changing expectations for women's social roles and responsibilities*" (2001: ix).

Given that these are two of many ways in which feminism is being defined, I will search for these activities within Muslim women's discourse. Both definitions aim at promoting feminism as a tool to improve the position of women. To the extent that these kinds of projects are undertaken by Muslim women and given that their activities applies to the discourse of the veil, I will also contest the constructions that depicts Muslim women as other.

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<sup>2</sup> A discussion pertaining to this complexity will be conveyed in chapter two.

### *Defining Hijab – the Muslim veil*

'Hijab' and 'veil' are concepts that often have been used intertwined; however, these two words differ in relation to their content and meaning. The word 'veil', mostly used by Westerners in debates around Islamic female dress can include face-veil, head-scarf and dress/coat. What distorts this conception of veil is that it has no equivalent in Arabic language. When discussing female clothing the Arabic language have multiple terms that vary according to country of origin, historical era, class, status and age (El Guindi, 1995:108). The word 'hijab' was reinstated in relation to the feminist movement in Egypt in the 1970s; it had previously been used in early Islam in connection with the phrase '*Darb*' (adopting) *al-hijab*, referring to the Prophet's wives who donned the hijab. The word 'hijab' has been interpreted differently by various Islamic scholars. Its multiple meanings allude to seclusion, separation in space (domestic/public, men/women), protection and veiling (ibid: 109). Hijab does also allude to the concept of Islamic dress (*shar'i*) which entails a long robe or skirt and long-sleeved top, and a head-scarf (usually also covering the neck and shoulders). In certain areas or within certain Muslim organizations hijab also constitute a face veil, gloves, and sunglasses (Zuhur, 1995:385).

In this thesis I will make use of both the word hijab and the veil. I will also apply other terms to define specific articles of women's clothing. Since I am conveying contemporary Muslim scholars view on 'veiling' I will adapt to their vocabulary when debating around certain verses of the Qur'an and its historical relations. I will do my best to present a nuanced and differentiated image of veiling in connection with its contextual arguments.

## ***Chapter 1***

### ***Western Representations of Veiling and Muslim Women***

Towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the veil emerges as a highly politicized symbol, and often acts as a visible boundary marker between what characterizes the West and Islam. By focusing on what the veil communicates in a contemporary western context, I address various distorted representations of Muslim women and also examine some of the processes by which these discourses are produced. Here I examine how veiling is perceived in societies where Islam is a minority religion. This means situating Islam in a context where veiling is not the cultural norm or expected way of dress.

The contemporary political discussions concerning Muslim women and Islamic dress are often premised on Eurocentric assumptions relating to the relationship between religion and public life. These pre-conceived notions lead to emphasis on the importance of secularity and approach the issue of dress in terms of accommodation and assimilation. The first part of this chapter will address various contemporary cases where veiling occurs as *the* imperative symbol.

The western society at large has developed critical views pertaining to the veil. The assumption that veiling is strongly linked with the inferiority and suppression of women has been prevalent. This symbolic connection has extensively had a negative impact on understandings of Islam as a whole. The second part of this chapter deals with various western depictions of Muslim women and I look at different bodies of representations predominantly related to contemporary media.

## ***1.1 Contemporary Confrontations***

### ***1.1.1 Hijab in France***

The repercussions after September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 have implicitly influenced the western view on Muslim women. The Muslim veil is often seen as an explicit symbol of an assertive religious identity, thereby Muslim women have become the 'objects' of a western critical discourse. In France, the hijab (head-scarf) was prohibited in public schools by law on 10<sup>th</sup> February 2004. Along with other 'obvious' religious symbols such as the Jewish kippa and 'flashy' Christian crosses, the hijab was seen as a symbol that advocated a strong religious commitment (Plesner, 2004:153). Before the prohibition by law, each school could decide whether or not they wanted to ban the hijab. This led to various uprisings within the confines of the schools that prohibited the use. As a consequence, the French government implemented a law that concerned *all* public schools (Giddens, 2004:127). The prohibition unleashed intense and sometimes furious debates in Europe. There were massive protests from both Muslims living in France and throughout the world<sup>3</sup>. Some Muslim women, who were in favor of the veil, saw this prohibition as an attack on their identity as Muslims.

The reason for prohibition can be found in the French principle of *laïcité*<sup>4</sup>. This principle forms the foundation for France as a secular nation. *Laïcité* refers to the separation of church and state and thereby *laïcité* also represents a certain French national and secular identity. By supporting this principle, the people of France embrace a prerequisite for peace and national integration (Plesner, 2004:158-159). In this connection, the donning of 'obvious' religious symbols can be seen as an antagonism to *laïcité*. Because various religious visual symbols advocate an image of diversity and not sameness, the symbols can be seen as a hindrance to integration. However, these assumptions are built on pre-conceived notions concerning the relationship between religion and public life. Hence, in this view secularization implies the rejection of religion in the public sphere.

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<sup>3</sup> The Economist, February 7<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> 2004.

<sup>4</sup> *laïcisation n.f.* laicization, secularization. *laïciser v.t.* to laicize, to secularize. *laïcité n.f.* undenominational character (of schools etc.). In Cassell's New French-English, English-French Dictionary, 1965.

On the other hand, the French constitution clearly states that *laïcité* also refers to the individual's right to advocate religious commitment. The right to equal treatment despite religious conviction should therefore challenge the prohibition of religious symbols in public schools (Plesner, 2004:159-160). The wearing of hijab in France is strongly connected to the idea of a Muslim identity; this in turn is believed to increase the isolation of Muslims from integration into the French society (ibid: 171). Nonetheless, the politicians argued, in connection with the prohibition of religious symbols, that the principle of *laïcité* is threatened since Muslims distinguish themselves from the 'unified' majority (ibid: 164).

When surveying the political debates just prior to the prohibition, it was first and foremost the hijab, as opposed to religious symbols in general, that the government wanted to get rid of. As such, Islamic religiosity is portrayed as a menace to French nationalism. In the media it is the hijab that has emerged as the symbol that restricts women's agency and self-definitions. Christian crosses and Jewish kippas do not receive the same attention. Hence the debate is largely focused around how Muslim women in particular represent a sense of otherness and at the same time their inferiority under a misogynist religious ideology. Subsequently, the French government relates certain pre-conceived assumptions to render Muslim women as voiceless, victimized and lacking agency.

The hijab-prohibition pertains to two separate but related issues. Firstly, the French government assumed that a prohibition would improve the situation of veiled Muslim women. In essence by unveiling, women would no longer be suppressed. Secondly, as a consequence of the unveiling, Muslim women would now participate in the community (as 'free' women), something that would increase the social integration. All these positions were expounded by the French government without any real wide-ranging discussion and engagement with Muslim women. Muslim women's own agency is not acknowledged, and prejudices concerning veiled women continue to prevail.

Researchers predict that the prohibition will in fact lead to the formation of several Muslim private schools and thereby increase segregation (Plesner, 2004:168-169). Implicitly researchers are arguing that the coercive removal of the veil from public space (public schools) will increase Muslim isolation in France. Muslim women are being deprived of autonomy in terms of donning the veil out of their own choice. The government chooses *for them* what is correct according to the state's policy. As such I will argue that the French government alludes to a certain fundamentalism when it comes to creating particular identities of sameness that works in accordance with the dominant political ideology. In fact this development shows that there are direct discursive parallels related to coercive policies in terms of veiling or unveiling whether it is in France or in Iran<sup>5</sup>.

Coercive unveiling or veiling is often seen as an attack on identity and individuality and will therefore have serious consequences for self-representations. Coercive prohibition of hijab entails discrimination towards a religio-cultural expression that the French government justifies in terms of integration. In consequence, many Muslim women may react to this prohibition by re-veiling. However, it is impossible to predict the outcome of this newly implemented law and it will be interesting to follow the development in the years to come.

### ***1.1.2 Dahlab v. Switzerland***

The debate on hijab in public space also has implications for Muslim female teachers in Switzerland. The legal case of *Dahlab v. Switzerland* received wide attention. It involved a Muslim teacher who got fired from her position because of wearing the hijab while teaching. This is the only case that has been tried in the European Human Rights Commission pertaining to the hijab. The court found that her dismissal was an encroachment on her rights; however, the court advocated the importance of teachers being neutral (especially in terms of religious conviction), and consequently concurred

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<sup>5</sup> I will come back to these parallels when examining women's coerced identities in Iran in chapter two.

with the school's decision. As such, the Human Rights Court explicitly drew a parallel between the hijab and religious ideology (Høstmælingen, 2004:252-258)<sup>6</sup>.

There is controversy around teachers wearing religious symbols in terms of its pedagogical implications. How will this affect children? Or *will it* influence them, either positively or negatively? Will the wearing of religious symbols offend the pupil's liberties or freedom in any way? Muslim women's increased participation in public space is a fact. It is thereby crucial to analyze and evaluate the consequences pertaining to donning of the hijab. However, Muslim women have various reasons for wearing the veil, and it is thereby crucial to investigate the context for veiling and place women's agency at the centre of the debate.

### ***1.1.3 Intellectuality and Religious Commitment – The case of Turkey***

Turkey is another country where veiling has been widely debated. While the country has a majority Muslim population, it is built on a model of western secularization. This has various impositions on women. One consequence of this 'Western' model has resulted in denying veiled women to take their university exams. This caused furore and in effect, veiled Turkish women wore wigs over their hijab to be able to do their exams in 2002 (Roald, 2005:183). This shows that Muslim identity and the veil is highly intertwined. Activism regarding the issues pertaining to the veil illustrates Muslim women's agency in terms of criticizing secular Western norms. The example also shows that self-definitions are related to religious ideology and the possibility to represent a counterculture to western modernization.

There is an existing dichotomy in the west where education/urbanization and veiling reflects an oxymoronic relationship. This dichotomy also reflects the ambiguous relationship between modernization and Islam. Since veiled women are perceived as backward, medieval and suppressed, the existence of veiled intellectual university

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<sup>6</sup> For a more thorough analysis of this case see; European Court on Human Rights, Dahlab v. Switzerland, Judgement of 15 February 2001, Appl. Nr. 42393/98, available at [www://hudoc.echr.int](http://www://hudoc.echr.int).

students represents a paradox in a western context (Göle, 1996:97). In Turkey, this dichotomy is challenged by Islamic female students who convey the realization of both being educated and religiously involved. Turkey is a prime example in terms of veiled women's agency in a western context. Veiled educated women address the distorted representations the west previously and presently conveys (ibid: 97). The increased participation of veiled women in educational establishments as well as in public space indicates that veiled women actively partake in new identity constructions (by merging religious commitment with intellectual capacity), and at the same time undermines the dominant stereotypes.

#### ***1.1.4 The challenge of Multiculturalism***

Can Islamic expressions coexist with Western values? An article in *Time* (Walt, 2005:30) asserts that anti-immigration parties in Europe are on the increase. These highly conservative parties are advocating assimilation as the main objective for a possible future coexistence. Angela Merkel, opposition leader in Germany, stated that "*the idea of a multicultural society cannot succeed. It is prone to failure from the start. Multiculturalism is not integration*". The identity crisis in Europe is a fact. Both second and now also third generation immigrants are still characterized as immigrants. This means that it does not really matter if you are born and raised in a European country, neither does it matter that you speak the country's language just as fluent as any 'Europeans'. It does not matter if you have been going through the 'European' education system, been employed in a 'European' company, participating in the community, or identify yourself as 'European'. People, real 'Europeans', will still see you as an immigrant (ibid: 31). What we encounter here is an enormous problem. On the one hand conservative parties want assimilation as a prerequisite for coexistence. 'They' need to be like 'us', or move out. On the other hand, immigrants will always be seen as immigrants, no matter how 'assimilated' they are. Veiled Muslim women adapt easily into this characterization. However, Muslims themselves claims that it is fully attainable that "*Islamic ideals can coexist with European values*" (ibid: 31).

### ***1.1.5 Comments***

These examples are a small selection of cases that have been highly debated in European media. What do these developments indicate? The emergence of veiling as a disputable symbol in various secular contexts is an issue that needs to be addressed. When countries like France advocate policies that elucidate integration as an important objective for national development, does this mean assimilation? The hijab-debate in France and Turkey is premised on certain secular assumptions from a particular historical trajectory. Secularization assumes a separation of state and religion. As such, both France and Turkey implicitly advocate a kind of normative appearance in public space. However, particularly in terms of Europe, the definition of religiousness has not previously been addressed in terms of dress. The dominant political culture assumes by the demarcation of religion and public space that the invisibility of religion is a self-implied consequence.

In terms of Islam, the historical developments clearly show that there is a connection between tradition and dress. Islamic dress often becomes a symbol of religious identity. As such the integration of Muslims in a French context becomes a contested area. By prohibiting the hijab in public schools the French government is undermining the importance of religious symbols as an intrinsic part of certain Muslim self representation. A Muslim woman donning the hijab in public space is automatically perceived as connoting a specific religious identity; it becomes a symbol of her religious life in public space. For some Muslim women hijab is an intrinsic part of religiosity and the binary positioning pertaining to separating religion and public life is an outside imposition. However, wearing the hijab is not automatically a public statement; in essence, the veil does not indicate opposition to the prevailing political ideology or modernization. Hijab is *how* some women dress; it could be a cultural expression rather than a public symbol of a religious conviction.

The prohibition advocated by the French government is clearly pertaining to the challenges of a large Muslim immigrant population, but also to the pre-conceived stereotypes that are reinforced by the wearing of the Islamic dress. By implementing the

prohibition of religious expressions, pertaining to Muslim women, France is implicitly legitimizing certain prejudices that allude to Muslim women's inferiority and lack of autonomy. If the debate concerned all religious expressions, it is fair to assume that the Jewish kippa would be prohibited long time ago; however, this is not the case. This indicates that the prohibition is based on certain understandings of what the hijab represents. As such one can argue that since Muslim women are donning the hijab they still represent the other, 'they' are not becoming like 'us'. Subsequently, an alternative to enforce integration into the dominant culture will be to implement laws and regulations that coercively force 'them' to become like 'us'.

I will now turn to some of the various western representations of veiled Muslim women to look at how some of the biases and prejudices have been constructed.

### ***1.2 Media Portrayals***

Muslim women have to a large extent been victimized by the western representation of her. Many feminists from a western background saw themselves as fighters for women's rights across the globe<sup>7</sup>. Their liberation agenda also included Muslim women. By connecting veiling with female suppression, western feminists saw it as their aim to liberate the mute victims of Islamic misogyny. However, the successful Iranian revolution linked to the Muslim women who supported this theocracy by voluntarily donning the veil, received such controversial attention that the Islamic dress became the preoccupation of not only Iranians, but also western researchers<sup>8</sup>.

El Guindi argues that western feminists, by connecting the veil to the inferiority of Muslim women, are advocating a simplified picture of the complex symbolisms embedded in the veil. When focusing on the single aspect of veiling as suppression, western feminists are representing a view that distorts reality (1999:3). However, this

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<sup>7</sup> I am not arguing that Western feminism is a homogenous group, however, there are certain pre-conceived assumptions of the West, which largely builds on orientalist scholarship that produce unitary images of, in this context, Muslim women.

<sup>8</sup> I will come back to the Iranian discourses pertaining to veiling in chapter two.

perspective is embedded within a larger theoretical framework. Chandra Mohanty is arguing that neo-colonial power is exercised when western feminists are contrasting their own self-representations with that of Third World women. By using similar strategies as some orientalist scholars, western feminists are rendering Third World women as mute and deprived of autonomy. This view pertains to how power-dynamics are exercised in order to universalize ethnocentrism (1991:53)<sup>9</sup>. Through positioning western realities as the standard for comparison, western feminists are exercising power that deprives Muslim women of self-representation. This view renders Muslim women as an objectified category that needs the active liberated western woman, who is situated in a position of superiority in terms of knowledge, to lead her towards emancipation.

These types of orientalist and neo-colonial Western representations have also often been conveyed through media and I will now look at a few examples where media promote highly racist representations. The polarization between 'us' and 'them' have been an imperative tool in media's image-making. By advocating a unilateral, often negative, representation of the 'other', namely, the veiled Muslim woman; media is influential and often being the only source of reference. Shirazi argues that the main problem is not that the representations are promoting negative images, but that these are the *only* representations presented by media. This means that Islam as a totality is being distorted by media's minimal or non-existent emphasis on positive or neutral images. In turn this leads to the impression that Islam encourages extremism, religious terrorism and suppression of women (Shirazi, 2001: xvii).

### ***1.2.1 "Liberation Afghani women"***

Unbalanced media representation could result in misconceptions and misunderstandings; this was seen in connection with the 'liberation' of Afghani women. Shirazi argues that an average American views the custom of veiling as oppressive towards women. In the aftermath of the 'successful' Afghani endeavor questions were posed in relation to the

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<sup>9</sup> However, the application of these methodologies apply to both western feminists and women from other geographical or cultural areas, in essence, the aim is to disclose the yardstick in which the 'other' is represented (Mohanty, 1991:55).

continuing compliance of veiling. “Now that the women in Afghanistan are liberated by Allied forces, why are these women still wearing the burqah?” Shirazi asserts that Americans have become so exposed and used to veiled women, and the connection between this symbol and the inferiority of women, that they missed the foundational aim of the ‘liberation’. The main objective (in relation to issue of gender) was to grant Afghani women expanded rights, such as the right to education and access to other previously denied forums in public space. This indicates that the veil itself, ‘the symbol of oppression’, does not need to *come off* to gain these rights. Shirazi argues that veiling of a female’s body and hair/face is not “*a veil over her mind*” (Shirazi, 2001: xviii).

### **1.2.2 Hustler and Religious Racism**

The development of stereotyping veiled Muslim women as supporting terrorist actions can be seen as one cause of the negative image-making of Muslim women. The American *Hustler* magazine has to a certain degree complied with this image when they published highly religiously racist cartoons in the 80s. One example is the depiction of an Arab man holding an Uzi, next to him is a heavily veiled Muslim woman. The woman is dressed in a T-shirt with the inscription “*Future Suicide Bomber*”. The woman in the cartoon is pregnant; the T-shirt further depicts an arrow pointing towards her belly (Hustler, Dec. 1986, in Shirazi, 2001:58). These references and visible connections to the link between veiled women and terrorism are truly distorted representations of reality. The only objective for the cartoon-maker is to elucidate the differences between ‘us’ and ‘them’ and as such increase the already existing polarization.

Another example, a cartoon also depicted in *Hustler* (Sept. 1988), shows a Muslim man registering at the ‘Arab High School’. The courses offered at this school is: “*Plane Hijacking, Hostage Murder, Rock Throwing, Embassy Bombing, Flag Burning...*”. A veiled female is also seen in the background (Shirazi, 2001:58). By employing these images, *Hustler* is participating in the image-making of the ‘others’. Both cartoons implicitly say that veiled women are connected to terrorism and support this behavior. Further, when investigating who the readers of *Hustler* are, Shirazi asserts that the

magazine is widely read by American troops. These cartoons in it self may have boosted certain attitudes among American soldiers (ibid: 59).

### ***1.2.3 Airport Literature***

Irene Donohoue Clyne has written an interesting chapter concerning airport literature and the depiction of Muslim women. She claims that this is another form of media representation which needs to be taken into consideration when evaluating how negative stereotypes are created and developed (Clyne, 2003:20). Both fictional books and autobiographies depict heavily veiled women on the cover, and contrary to the usual opinion that one should not judge a book by its cover; the cover should utterly be recognized and judged (Clyne, 2003: 20). The storyline follow similar patterns; some are 'escape stories', women from the West, married to Muslim men are brought to Muslim countries to visit his family, this visit result in entrapment<sup>10</sup>. The opposite is also possible; Muslim women are living under horrible and oppressive circumstances and escapes to the promising West. The various stories are all connected to one protruding visual image: the veil of subjugation (ibid: 22). The narratives portraying Muslim women, or western women in a Muslim contexts, implicitly depict a misogynist oppressive Islamic world and an egalitarian, emancipated West. As such, they contribute to the prevailing dominant western discourses around veiling and the suppression of women.

Through the 'veiled' airport literature, readers can develop a sense of fear of Islam. In Betty Mahmoody's book "Not Without My Daughter" (1989), an autobiography where she depicts her struggle for lost freedom, readers can indulge in sentences like: "[characterization if Iran] *the most openly hostile attitude towards Americans of any nation in the world*" and "[depicting her husbands family] *the smell of the greasy food, the stench of the people, the never-ending chatter of imponderable tongues*" (ibid: 28). As a consequence of the now popular airport literature, a reinforcement of stereotypes is

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<sup>10</sup> "Not Without My Daughter" by Betty Mahmoody (1989) and "Saudi" by Devine (1986) are both good examples.

excelled. Through the catching, albeit, disturbing content, readers develop minimal understanding of the lived reality of Muslim women. This one-dimensional representation of the oppressed woman must not be underestimated as an imperative influential factor in the development of Western negative attitudes (ibid: 35).

#### ***1.2.4 Rickets 'caused by' the Veil***

Another depiction of veiled Muslim women can be found in a Swedish newspaper article. This time media assert a relationship between veiled women and physical health. The headline advocated that wearing the veil was a life-threatening risk in countries where sunlight was minimal. Veiled (Muslim) women were thereby in the danger zone. By their minimal exposure to sunlight, veiling would result in lack of vitamin D and increased chances of being subjected to the rickets<sup>11</sup>. Most immigrant Muslim women come from countries where sunlight is more usual; by the wearing of veils in Scandinavian countries however, Muslim women will aggravate their physical health (Roald, 2005:209-210).

A converted Muslim of Swedish origin claimed that veiling is not an indication, or the reason why, Muslim women are subjected to rickets. Muslim women in Scandinavia are not *as much* outdoors as the average Scandinavian. This has to do with Islamic cultural customs where the ideal woman often is a 'housewife'. Muslim women think that it is Islamic to be at home. The lack of vitamin D is thereby related to being indoors, *not* by donning the veil. However, both veiling and a 'domesticity-ideal' are related to practices or customs, found within an Islamic discourse. Thereby, the actual problem is how western women perceive both veiling and domesticity as suppressive in terms of women's rights and roles in society. The article was seen, by Muslims, as a means to advocate the Muslim veil in a negative light. A Muslim woman, Khadija, responds to the article by saying that the veil probably *is* a danger to health, but this is because the attitudes in Western societies are destructive for veiled Muslim women. She claims that the pressure put on Muslim women, by continuously being subjected to negative

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<sup>11</sup> Rickets: Children's disease caused by lack of vitamin D, resulting in softening and deformity of the bones and enlargement of the liver and spleen (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 1989).

attitudes, will probably have consequences for their health. She closes her response by asserting that it is unfortunate that there are no supplements that can be taken by non-Muslims to influence their negative attitudes and treat Muslim women in a more civilized way (ibid: 209-211).

### ***1.2.5 Comments***

These depictions of Muslim women and veiling, in the context of secular Western culture, points to some of the difficulties faced by Muslim minorities living in the West. The polarization between 'us' and 'them' becomes apparent since the majority often understands *their* foundational values as immutable truths. This also indicates an understanding of these 'truths' as non-negotiable or immutable. In a western context where values such as democracy and equal rights between the sexes are being promoted, 'the others' are often depicted as belonging to an 'alien' framework who do not convey the same ideological values. Since western 'truths' are seen as 'correct' expressions, 'the others' are represented in a negative light. In a western context it is likely that the majority will define what 'Muslim' is, or what it means to be a Muslim woman etc. Albeit, this does not mean that the majority are representing authentic Muslim self-representations, but the majority are promoting their own perceptions of 'Muslimness'. This may lead to alienation and controversies among the Muslim population in western contexts. It is important that mutual authentic understandings and accommodation of religious beliefs in a western context emerge as the yardstick of image-making.

Western representations of Muslim women do not acknowledge Muslim women's own agency in constructing own identities and self-representations. While there may be restrictions concerning Muslim women's agency within their religious communities, one cannot automatically assume that this is a given without any level of discussion and engagement with Muslim women. The emphasis on linking the visual symbol of veiling to the oppression of Muslim women says something about western pre-conceived notions pertaining to dress.

The cases discussed in this section of the thesis illustrate representations of Muslim women in western media. It is easy to understand how various biases and prejudices are being constructed. If people are used to being met by front-pages depicting veiled Muslim women along with the news on the most recent suicide bombings, one can clearly understand where some of the negative attitude come from. These representations cannot be seen as isolated phenomena, but can be, and are being, connected to various political agendas. The images boosts the polarization between the 'civilized' and the 'savages'. The most recent depiction of this political polemic was advocated in connection with the London bombing July 7<sup>th</sup> 2005. US President Bush clearly states that this attack was an attack on the civilized world. This statement automatically renders Islam, or the Muslim's behind the terror, as savages.

Dominating western representations of Muslim women in the contemporary world have been informed by the broader political implications of the Iranian revolution. I will now examine how the various constellations within an Iranian context have constructed various female identities according to different political ideologies.

***Islamist Politics and The veil: The Case of Iran***

In this chapter I explore the varying ways in which the veil is politicized in the majority Muslim country of Iran. Within this context, discourses of veiling symbolize broader gender and national politics. In the modern era, coercive veiling and unveiling imposed by the state have informed the realities of Iranian women. Through problematizing these discourses of the veil, I look at how the donning of the veil, and the rejection of it, inform constructions of Iranian women's identity. I also examine the nature of women's agency within the confines of these political discourses of veiling.

Firstly, I analyze the Iranian political landscape during the Pahlavi era and how women's dressing became a significant marker of Westernization. Secondly, I focus on the Khomeini regime and how certain images of women were part of a political agenda where women's dressing became a symbolic code for the country's broader morality.

While veiling is currently coercively implemented by the state in Iran, multiple modes of feminist agency persist in the country. Thirdly, I examine these varying contemporary feminist responses to the politicised veiling discourses imposed on women in Iran.

***2.1 The Woman Question during the Pahlavi Era***

Reza Shah, the first Pahlavi, commenced his reign in 1925. His political agenda consisted of creating both a modern nation and a new economic structure (Poya, 1999:35). Against this background, the 'woman question' was addressed in ways that connected the Iranian woman with the new political direction of the Iranian nation. A new bourgeoisie, made up by those who supported the modernization of Iran, emerged. As a consequence, the traditional middle class who rejected the secular politics of the Shah, suffered losses in terms of decreased economic and political autonomy (ibid: 35-36).

The adherents of the Pahlavi policies advocated how the 'new' country improved the position of women in terms of increased participation in public life. Women were encouraged to enrol in universities, and became more visible in the workforce as well as in the political domain (Najmabadi, 1991:49). However, the beneficiaries of these new reforms pertained to women from the new modern middle class based in urban areas, and as such only included a minority of the female population<sup>12</sup>. The position of women living in rural areas remained predominantly unaffected by the new political ideology (Poya, 1999:36).

In the beginning of the Pahlavi era, the development of various women's organisations and publications emerged<sup>13</sup>. The women behind these establishments encouraged Iranian women to partake in the struggle to improve the position of women, especially focussing on the conditions of working-class women (ibid: 38). However, soon after the new regime gained supremacy there were certain restrictive indications concerning women's independent establishments. Reza Shah launched Kanoone Banovan (Ladies' Centre), 1935, which led to the repression of existing women's organizations. The main objective in relation to this establishment was *not* to strengthen the position of women, but to have power and control over women's 'affairs' (Poya, 1999:38-39). The same year Reza Shah introduced the 'unveiling campaign'. The aim of this venture was to influence Iranian women to leave their veils at home. Reza Shah wanted an unveiled public space, an image he claimed worked in accordance with the principles of modernization. The celebration of Woman's Day 8<sup>th</sup> March was abandoned, and instead 7<sup>th</sup> January (1937) became the new Women's Day<sup>14</sup>. The Shah chose this date specifically because it was the day he introduced the act of unveiling two years earlier (ibid: 39).

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<sup>12</sup> In the 1920s and 30s 79% of the Iranian population were based in rural areas, this is an important factor to include in relation to the representation of women in the workforce predominantly situated in urban areas (Poya, 1999:36).

<sup>13</sup> The Patriotic Women's League is one organization which participated in the International Congress of Women in Paris, 1926. Other organizations and publications are: Alame Nesvan (Women's Universe), a magazine published in 1930, Anjoman Payke Saadat (The Messenger of Prosperity Organization) established a girls' school and published a magazine under the same name. This group was behind announcing 8th March as Women's Day in Iran (1927). Majme Enghelabe Zanan (Revolutionary Women's League) founded by Zandokhte Shirazi (1927), created the newspaper Dokhtarane Iran (Iranian Women), published in 1931-32 (Poya, 1999:38).

<sup>14</sup> See n13.

Women's clothing became a site that reflected a broader political agenda. By introducing the act of unveiling Reza Shah linked Iranian women's traditional dressing to the country's "backwardness". Veiled Iranian women were seen as the antithesis of modernization and progress, and therefore their way of dress had to be rejected. Islamic critics asserted that the Pahlavi regime indulged in power structures promoted by earlier colonial empires, and as such became a 'puppet government' controlled by Western imperial forces. The 'act of unveiling' which subsequently forced women to take off the veil before entering public space became a token of Western dominance and the submissive Iranian state (Najmabadi, 1991:50). Reza Shah asserted the following when he introduced the unveiling campaign:

"Women in this country [prior to this day of unveiling] could not demonstrate their aptitude and inherent qualities because they remained outside of society, they could not make their proper contribution to the country and make appropriate sacrifices and render their services. Now they can proceed and enjoy other advantages of society in addition to the remarkable task of motherhood...Now that you, my daughters and sisters, have entered the social arena...you must know that it is your duty to work for your country." (Najmabadi, 1991:54)

From this quote one can argue that Reza Shah perceive veiled women as victims that previously has been restricted from participating in the community. The fact that the veil now is prohibited and being removed from the public space grants women their 'God-given' freedom to actively participate in the public domain. Women have now been given the chance to show their qualities in a modern context where they appear *as* women. But the question that needs to be asked is whether it is really the covering of a woman's body that controls her presence and participation? Is it not possible that a woman could demonstrate her 'working and educational' skills when she wears the veil? The existence of a *woman* behind the veil seems to become of secondary importance to Reza Shah. What seems to be imperative is that the veil defines a suppressed woman. The solution to the woman question according to Reza Shah seems to be that in order to grant women their rights as 'equal' participants in the public space, the veil must come off.

However, the image of the unveiled woman works in accordance with Reza Shah's secular agenda. In fact the act of unveiling was *necessary* to symbolize his establishment of a new western secular nation. As such, the unveiling campaign was not essentially implemented to improve the position of Iranian women, but to render Iran as a western nation. The veil was in itself seen as a symbol of women's, and *also* Iran's, backwardness. Pre-conceived assumptions pertaining to veiled women as mute and victimized gained ground, and the Shah's politics of the veil resembles western generalizations and representations of Muslim women.

Reza Shah had to force women to unveil in order to situate himself as the leading authoritative executioner. This reflects broader power dynamics during the Pahlavi regime. Women were objectified. Their actions, behaviour and dress became instrumental in defining the national political agenda. In this process the political authorities did not recognize or allow for women's own agency and self-definitions. The Shah's political aim was modernization and as such the backward Iranian women had to change their dress to fit his agenda.

Reza Shah used coercive mechanisms to obtain his westernized goal and instructed the police that they were obliged to remove women's veil by force (Shirazi, 2001:90). This imposed unveiling received varying responses from Iranian women. Strong opposition vaguely existed. Nevertheless, the lack of resistance can be explained through the repressive political environment. Many women actually "*feared for their lives*", and women's organizations did not want to be closed down (Poya, 1999:39). The new reforms of modernization, education and social change, albeit limited, was subsequently welcomed by many women<sup>15</sup>. However, women's right to vote was still not addressed by the regime (ibid: 39-40).

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<sup>15</sup> The number of girls' schools increased from 41 (1910) to 870 (1933) (Poya, 1999:39).

### 2.1.1 Contradictions and Ambivalence

The politics of Reza Shah decreased the power of the Islamic clergy, however, ideologically, *ulama* remained influential in matters of women issues and family law (Poya, 1999:38). The act of unveiling and the increased participation of women in the public domain, subsequently led to ideological conflicts between the *ulama* and the politics of Reza Shah.

In 1941, after the abdication of Reza Shah, the establishment of women's magazines and organizations was again boosted, and women's participation in social and political spheres increased (ibid: 40)<sup>16</sup>. This development also led to the collective focus on granting women the right to vote. A petition was written by the National Council of Women (1952), but was rejected by Mossadegh (prime minister at the time). When the second Pahlavi, Mohammad Reza Shah, came to power (1953), women's organizations and publications were again repressed (ibid: 42). Mohammad Reza Shah stated that "*women's rights were to be royal grants*". The various women's organizations was subjugated under the control of Ashraf Pahlavi (the Shah's sister), and later transformed into WOI, Women's Organization of Iran (Najmabadi, 1991:60-61). Nevertheless, the women's organizations that continued to exist under strict supervision mainly aimed at granting women the right to vote (Poya, 1999:43)<sup>17</sup>.

WOI portrayed the Shah as a fighter for the advancement of women's rights, and this was the impression advocated internationally. Consequently the Pahlavi era represented different stands when it came to the debate concerning the 'woman question'. On the one hand, under the rule of Reza Shah, the position of women represented modernity in a

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<sup>16</sup> Examples are Zanane Pishraw (Progressive Women), Ghiayme Zanan (Women's Revolt), Hoghughe Zanan (Women's Rights), Azadi Zanan (The Emancipation of Women), Banu (The Lady), Banuye Iran (Iran's Lady) and Zanane Iran (Iran's Women). The organization with most members was Tashkilateh Zanane Iran (The Organisation of Iranian Women); the organization later became known as The Society of Democratic Women and published the monthly magazine Bidarie Ma (Our Awakening). The main issues advocated by the organizations were women's right to public participation (in political and social life), the rejection of child labour, and equal pay (Poya, 1999:40-41).

<sup>17</sup> Examples are Jamiyat Rah Now (The New Path League), The Association of Women Lawyers, Women Supporters of the Declaration of Human Rights, Federation of Women's Organisations (Poya, 1991:42).

male controlled ambit. The participation of women in the community symbolized the 'new' Iranian woman and simultaneously the new modern Iranian nation. During the second Shah, the elaboration of modernity turned towards the Shah himself. Mohammed Reza Shah viewed himself *as* the Iranian state, and as such *he* became the symbol of modernity. This concept was confirmed by his international image as a willing and progressive fighter for women's rights (Najmabadi, 1991:63).

Women's right to vote in Iran was first granted on 27<sup>th</sup> February 1963 (Poya, 1999:50). The relatively late development of women's suffrage in Pahlavian Iran is particularly ironic in light of the stated ideal of westernization. The effort to make Iranian women more western, especially in relation to dress, was a crucial factor in the implementation and realization of a secular agenda. It is thereby a salient paradox that women were deprived of the right to vote for almost 30 years after the act of unveiling. This indicates that although the Pahlavis wanted women to be more western, they did not want to grant women their autonomy in terms of taking individual choices that could promote female agency. Implicitly, giving women these grants could possibly affect or threaten their own political positions.

The politics of both Reza Shah and Mohammad Reza Shah depict women as instrumental in advocating their respective political agendas. Modernity and to a certain degree 'Westernization' are both seen as the ideal way of political evolution. Through presenting the image of the veiled Iranian woman as a hindrance to her own liberation, the Pahlavis contributed to the developing antagonism between the 'West' and the 'other'. Iranian women would now have to be *as* Western women to fit into the new political scheme.

Through modernization reforms the Pahlavis contributed to clear divisions among Iranian women. On the one hand there were the urban educated women. These women often belonged to the bourgeois of Iranian society and appeared as unveiled participants in public space. On the other hand, the visibility of veiled women in the urban cities was women who received religious education at home and followed the traditional Islamic way of life (Shirazi, 2001:91). By donning the Islamic dress, these women were caught in

the middle between traditional values and westernization. A solution for many was to dress traditionally at home, but unveiling and adopting a European dress style when entering public space (Poya, 1999:53-54). However, some women did also wear the veil in public space as a symbol of protest against the politics of the Shahs. As such they were also subjected to the consequences relating to this transgression. Thirdly, women living in the rural areas constituted the traditional ideal. These women were often illiterate and were kept in the dark of the current changes in the urban cities (Shirazi, 2001:91). These divisions must be seen in correlation with the policies that improved the position of certain groups of women. The women belonging to the bourgeois were the portrayed ideals. However, these were the women who predominantly had access to the new ideal. Their background, and family relations, granted them opportunities to become educated and participate as breadwinners for the community. Women from the lower strata of society did not have the same economic support, nor did they consequently have the same opportunities. The Pahlavis' politics can thereby be seen as a reformation that amplified differences amongst Iranian Muslim women.

Some women from the bourgeoisie engaged in the modernization process by imitating the Western woman. Through vague knowledge about Western women's liberation they started to show their rejection of traditional values by fighting against the *mahr* (bride price), which they claimed turned women into trade-objects, and secondly, debating issues pertaining to women's sexuality. They claimed that traditional values were entrenched with double-standards, especially focusing on men's control over women's sexuality, dressing and behaviour (Poya, 1999:54). In turn this led to participation in sexual relationships with men (either temporarily or permanent) without being married. This behaviour was despised both within the spheres of traditional Islam and by secular groupings. This shows that even though a secular nation was being built, there existed an all-encompassing cultural discourse pertaining to modesty. The development of the *gharbzadeh* woman, the embodiment of the corrupt Western woman, emerged as a consequence of this promiscuous behaviour (ibid: 54-55)<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> A broader discussion of the *gharbzadeh* woman will be emphasised from page 33.

## ***2.2 Towards a new era – The Islamic State***

The rise of the Islamic movements was first and foremost a reaction towards the secular corrupt legacy of the politics of the Shah (Najmabadi, 1991:64). Women's participation in the Iranian Revolution (1977-79), was essentially an expression of rejection of the Shah's politics. The opposition was not deriving essentially from the need to establish an Islamic state (Moghadam, 1993:88). This could also be seen in terms of the participation of secular unveiled women during the revolution. These women partook in the opposition, not because of their rejection of westernization, but because of the corrupt legacy of the Shah. His politics led to economical divisions and favourable conditions for the few, and was seen as a dictator who promoted a political agenda which did not involve the Iranian people (Tohidi, 1994:123). Thereby, women's rejection of the Shah's regime did not specifically focus on whether a new regime would improve the position of women, but a total opposition against the Shah himself. There were however also some Iranian women who expressed an opposition to the modernization ideal of the Shah by donning the hijab in public space.

### ***2.2.1 Gharbzadegi - Gharbzadeh***

*Gharbzadegi* alludes to the 'Westoxication' that took place during the reign of the Shahs<sup>19</sup>. The concept was used by Iranians to characterize the process of modernization, and advocated by both secularists and Islamists (Najmabadi, 1991:64). The term alludes to the alienation felt by many Iranians concerning the implementation of a Western discourse. It reflects the rejection of this type of administration and also the dissatisfaction with the reformation that had taken place during the Pahlavi era. The concept of *Gharbzadegi* also became a way to describe women influenced by Western degraded moral. The *gharbzadeh* woman encompassed all the evils the Western woman entailed: "*she was a super-consumer of imperialist/dependent-capitalist/foreign goods;*

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<sup>19</sup> *Gharbzadegi* was the title of a book written in 1964 by Jalal Al-e Ahmad, it reflected the anti-Western attitudes conveyed later by Ayatollah Khomeini (Tohidi, 1994:121).

*she was a propagator of the corrupt culture of the West; she was undermining the moral fabric of society; she was a parasite, beyond any type of redemption” (ibid: 65)<sup>20</sup>.*

In some contexts, for example the view of some Islamic militants, the *gharbzadeh* woman was any woman who was unveiled. For others, the *gharbzadeh* woman represented “*the painted dolls of the Pahlavi regime*” (ibid: 65). Nevertheless, *gharbzadeh* woman became the antithesis of the new Islamic woman, and Islamic modesty became the most desirable virtue. In contemporary debates concerning the position of Muslim women and female identity, the ambivalence reflected in the concepts of modern-yet-modest and the implementation of Islamic-thus-modest is pervasive (ibid: 65). These concepts represent a shift in the image of the ideal woman. During the reign of the Shahs, a modern woman, reflecting the Western images of woman in relation to dress, was the ideal. However, although adopting a western dress style, the ideal Iranian woman had to remain modest in relation to the modesty ideals advocated by *shari’a* law (not act promiscuous, following the rules relating to marriage, sexuality etc.). The new ideal however, Islamic-thus-modest, is a rejection of the western dress code, hence also a rejection of the modernization of the Iranian woman. Islamic-thus-modest implies that Iranian women must follow the dress codes established by the Islamic state and also, obviously, follow the rules regarding female modesty. Once again women are used as voiceless agents, this time to depict a Western discarded image. The construction of this image is rendered by the advocates of the new Islamic state (where the majority are men). This situates the Iranian woman, once again, as a mute victim of her own participation in image making.

### **2.2.2 The Woman Question according to Shari’ati and Motahhari**

Two Iranian prominent scholars ‘emerged’, Dr ‘Ali Shari’ati and Ayatollah Mortaza Motahhari. Both were instrumental in developing theories concerning the position of women in an Islamic society, and the fact that both scholars were dead shaped the notion

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<sup>20</sup> *Gharbzadeh* woman was further illustrated as: “*a woman who wore ‘too much’ make-up, ‘too short’ a skirt, ‘too tight’ a pair of pants, ‘too low cut’ a shirt, who was ‘too loose’ in her relations with men, who laughed ‘too loudly’, who smoked in public...*” (Najmabadi, 1991:65)

of a certain enduring value concerning their texts (Mir-Hosseini, 1996a:287). Their writings influenced the way the new Islamic state understood the 'woman question' and their texts were used as part of the new framework. Subsequently, the texts were taken out of their earlier contexts and applied to a later discourse. This development indicates a gap between the previous context, which was situated within the confines of the late Pahlavi era and the debates concerning gender in that context, and the later situation where an Islamic state was introduced (ibid: 287). Both Shari'ati and Motahhari were opposed to the 'new' modern women as represented in the West.

### **2.2.3 *Fatima is Fatima***

'Ali Shari'ati was an outspoken critic of the Pahlavi regime and his scholarship was partly the foundation for the Shiite opposition towards Western modernization. "Fatima is Fatima" (a lecture delivered in 1971), was a treatise which dealt with the position of women and the Iranian society in the early 1970s. Shari'ati engaged in defining the 'woman question' and the ambivalence felt by Muslim women in terms of the application of the 'modern-yet-modest' towards the 'Islamic-thus-modest' ideal (Mir-Hosseini, 1996a:287-288). By blaming the West *and* Muslim men (the adherents of the Shah and Islamic clergy) for this ambivalence he advocated a new position within the Islamic discourse (Mir-Hosseini, 1996a: 288).

The solution to the confusion between Islamic, modern and modest was to be found in Fatima, the Prophet's daughter, mother of Hassan and Hussein and wife of Ali. Fatima's life and experiences illustrates the ideal Muslim woman and Shari'ati argues that Iranian women must strive to imitate this ideal (Ferdows, 1986:129-130). Fatima illustrated the female ideal through her domestic responsibilities as wife and mother. However, she also came to symbolize martyrdom and women's sacrifices in war. This reflects the incidents that led to the schism between Sunni and Shi'i Islam (the Battle of Siffin and the Battle of Karbala) where conflicts pertaining to who was the rightful caliph gained currency. From these characteristics of the ideal woman Zahra Rahnavard, an outspoken Muslim feminist and writer on women's issues, argued:

“Motherhood and wifedom is the road to freedom and liberation. A woman has the revolutionary responsibility of showing the right path and prohibiting the wrong deed, decrying the false and teaching the right. It is women who teach the future generations and it is women who must endorse or reject any political agenda.” (Poya, 1999:65)

As understood from the quote above, the ideal of Fatima gained ground in Islamic Iran also among women. However, Rahnavard also argues that women are imperative agents in embracing or rejecting a political agenda. I will argue that this view pertains to the realization of the Islamic state and the rejection of the politics of the Shahs, which Rahnavard suggests is destructive for the family unit. Nevertheless, in times of economical deprivation, women must also contribute to the survival of the family (Poya, 1999:79)<sup>21</sup>.

In 1980 the Islamic Republic introduced May 6<sup>th</sup>, as the new Woman’s Day since this was the birthday of Fatima. As such Fatima represented the values and characteristics advocated by the Islamic state, and the importance of Iranian women’s struggle to become ‘like Fatima’ (Poya, 1999:67). In relation with Shari’ati’s presentation of Fatima it is worth noticing that Fatima only gains significance through her relationship with men. Fatima’s characteristics, as an ideal mother and wife exemplify this notion. Fatima is exclusively dependent on the men in her life, and her own agency is defined in relation to how well she handles her domestic or sacrificial responsibilities (Ferdows, 1986:140). It was through the emergence of a new power structure that the ideal of Fatima was established. This indicates that the regime needed a new female ideal in order to facilitate and realize their political agenda. This also shows that the Islamic Republic established a

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<sup>21</sup> Rahnavard argues: “Women under the previous system entered employment for a number of reasons; the hatred of family life; to be independent; to help the family’s budget as the man’s earnings were not enough; a few because of specialization, but generally insecurity in relation to the family, The Shah’s objective was therefore to disrupt family life, to increase bureaucracy, to create sexual chaos, and generally to create pro-western family life...Only under certain circumstances could women go out to work: if their domestic duties are not neglected and if this work is to promote Islamic values. Under present economic difficulties, where women are forced to go out to work, the government must promote men’s employment enabling them to maintain their families. Women’s hours of work must be reduced to allow them to perform their domestic duties satisfactory. Women who have specialization and are financially secure must give up part of their earnings to help the economic problems of the country” (Poya, 1999:79-80).

new ideal as a direct reactive against the Pahlavi discourse on women. The search for a correct Muslim female identity was an ongoing struggle where the ideal image changed according to political context. This shows that throughout the history of the Pahlavi Shahs as well as in the Khomeini era, women were used to signify a broader political and ideological agenda, which gained supremacy to the ruling elite. What is lacking in this construction is the Iranian woman's own participation in the creation of a new ideal. Who did Iranian women themselves identify with? And what characteristics would be elucidated? Did their understanding of a female ideal work in accordance with the regimes' ideal? And did Iranian women themselves relate to the image of the ideal woman in connection to their dependency on men? These are valid questions to ask in relation to image-making and will continue to be important in contemporary constructs of the female self.

#### **2.2.4 Mortaza Motahhari's text**

"The System of Women's Rights in Islam" (1974) was a collection of articles written by Mortaza Motahhari, a leading Iranian cleric and Islamist thinker. The articles deal with the status and position of women, and Motahhari argues that the Western concept of equality is contradicting the Islamic world-view. This view descends from the notion of a distinction between men and women according to biology where women are naturally inferior to men. Hence, Motahhari justifies the inequality between the sexes from a 'natural' legacy of *Shari'a* law (Mir-Hosseini, 1996a:290).

Motahhari brings women's sexuality into focus, arguing that the re-veiling of Muslim women can be seen as protecting men from engaging in unlawful desires. In this sense, Muslim women became the protectors of society's moral through a specific dress-code. Hence, veiling also led to a gendered public space for the sake of men's uncontrollable lusts (Ferdows, 1986:131, Moghadam, 1993:89). Motahhari argues that the veil visibly symbolized the boundary between the sexes. Women and men will by accepting the

practice of veiling, participate in the denunciation of *fitna* (Shirazi, 2001:92)<sup>22</sup>. The female dress-code (coercively) re-adapted into the Iranian society both symbolically and politically represented the re-establishment of the country's forgotten moral code and also the realization of the Islamic state. 'The painted dolls of the Shah' was a stage left behind, and only reflected an intrusive eclipse in the history of the Iranian society.

The implementation of the Islamic state had severe consequences for Muslim women in the public space. Laws and regulations concerning education and professions were carried out and restricted women's participation in the community (Afshar, 1996b:125). These tendencies reflect a gender ideology that prioritizes women's roles in the domestic sphere and as such encouraged women to abandon their "*civil rights*". This development reflects a certain disempowerment and restricted the liberties of Muslim women (Afshar, 1998:117)

### **2.2.5 Opposition and Accommodation**

Two specific events alarmed feminists who fought for women's rights in the early stages of the revolution. Firstly, the new regime abolished the Family Protection Act (FPA) that had regulated the widespread of polygamy and facilitated the access to obtain divorce for Muslim women. FPA had also improved the conditions for women in terms of negotiating marriage-contracts and women's right to child custody<sup>23</sup>. Secondly, they were concerned about the compulsory veiling imposed by the new Islamic government (Mir

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<sup>22</sup> *Fitna* – moral or social disorder, chaos. Men's control over women is justified through this principle (Rippenburg, 1998:154).

<sup>23</sup> The Family Protection Act was implemented in 1967. Its objective was to reform family law. Among other rules and regulation it stated that "*a man could marry a second wife only with the permission of the court*". Additional amendments were added in 1975; "[a husband must have] *the consent of the first wife* [to able to marry a second wife]...*unless she* [his first wife] *was unable to have sexual relations...or unable to bear children*". However, the first wife also had the right to seek divorce if "*her husband was unable to have sexual relations with her, was unable to provide for her, ill-treated her, suffered from contagious disease, abandoned her or was insane*". In 1977 abortion was legalized, however married women had to have a written consent from her husband to perform this procedure (Poya, 1999:51).

Hosseini, 1996a:287)<sup>24</sup>. Ayatollah Khomeini had this to say concerning the dismantling of FPA:

“the ‘Family law’ (FPL), which has as its purpose the destruction of the Muslim family unit, is contrary to the ordinances of Islam. Those who have imposed [this law] and those who have voted [for it] are criminals from the stand-point of the *Shari’a* and the law. The divorce of women divorced by court order is invalid; they are still married women, and if they marry again they become adulteresses...” (Mir-Hosseini, 1996b:147)<sup>25</sup>

Ayatollah Khomeini despised the women who protested against the adoption of the Islamic dress. He claimed that they had been brainwashed by the Shah’s ‘Westoxication’ and as such internalized the immorality advocated by the Western world. The women who supported the new regime were seen marching, shouting: “*Death to foreign dolls*” (Ferdows, 1986:132). The traditional Iranian woman became “*the public face of the revolution*”, and the established dress code became a symbol of the first successful implementation of an Islamic state (Afshar, 1998:117-118)<sup>26</sup>. In this connection, Islam became promoted as a religion that was globally strong and the Western media started to represent Islam, in general, as hostile and suppressive towards women (Cooke, 2001: xi).

Zahra Rahnavard had this to say about the Muslim veil: “*The veil frees women from the shackles of fashion, and enables them to become human beings in their own right*”<sup>27</sup>. However, it is worth noticing that Rahnavard herself wore miniskirts in the 60s

<sup>24</sup> In July, 1980, the compulsory implementation of Islamic dress was a fact. Every part of a woman’s body was to be covered, except for her hands and face (Poya, 1999:73).

<sup>25</sup> It is worth commenting that none of the divorces issued by FPL was annulled, neither was anyone charged with adultery (Mir-Hosseini, 1996b:147).

<sup>26</sup> In *Zan-e Ruz*, a women’s magazine published in Teheran, this editorial was published in April 1984. It deals with the concerns of the Islamic society: “...*Islamic belief and culture provides people of these societies [Islamic societies] with faith and ideals...Woman in these societies [are] armed with a shield that protects her against the conspiracies aimed at her humanity, honour and chastity. The shield is verily her veil. For this reason...the most immediate and urgent task was seen to be unveiling...Then she became the target of poisonous arrows of corruption, prostitution, nakedness...After this, she was used to disfigure the Islamic culture of the society...and drag society in her wake toward corruption, decay and degradation...Today the Muslim woman has well understood...that the only way for her social presence to be healthy and constructive is to use Islamic veil and clothes...*” (Najmabadi, 1991:68)

<sup>27</sup> Zahra Rahnavard is earlier quoted on page 35.

(Goodwin, 1994:112-113). Maybe this could be an indication of how strongly the veil was being connected to the traditional Islamic image of modesty. The ideal of the domesticated Fatima now symbolized the liberation of Iranian women from western corruption. However, many Iranian women had difficulties in adopting the new dress code and as a consequence; many were sacked from their jobs<sup>28</sup>. Female TV presenters who refused the new dress code got replaced by women who un-problematically donned the hijab (Poya, 1999:73). Subsequently, the rejection of adopting Islamic dress automatically kept women away from the public space<sup>29</sup>.

Another development that effectively forced women to don the hijab in public space was the emergence of new security units<sup>30</sup>. Their objective was to look after public moral; this means that their main task was to ensure that women who appeared in public space were dressed according to Islamic rules. The results of these security stake-outs were that no women dared to enter public space without the proper dress (Poya, 1999:73). In this connection traditionalist Islamic women, who were recruited to join these security units, got to promote co-option through the coercive veiling of Iranian women and as such became empowered in terms of participating in the realization of a political ideology. Thereby, these women were in some sense asserting a certain amount of power. However, by partaking in this power structure, they also became representatives of patriarchy. By representing the antithesis of the western woman, Muslim women became the veiled protectors of the social moral, and undertook the responsibility of participation in a 'just' society. The veil thereby represented a protecting device for the women wearing it. The security units were known to be violent, their methods included amongst

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<sup>28</sup> "As Islamisation spread and was consolidated, things became more and more difficult. One could be dismissed for 'unIslamic' behaviour that is for talking to male colleagues or wearing make-up. Finally, when wearing Islamic clothes became compulsory, a large number of women were sacked for being bad *hejabi* (not complying with Islamic dress)." (Poya, 1999:66)

<sup>29</sup> However, their resistance to the dress decreased after some women experienced "reduced degree of sexism": "I do not like to wear the *hejabe eslami*. It is ugly and I feel that women have to cover their body because men cannot help themselves to be sexist, sexually harass women and look at women as a sex object. But I have no choice than to accept that this is an unfortunate reality of our society. Exactly for this reason now that I am covered head to toe at work my expertise is appreciated much more than under the previous system. Now they look at me as a scientist while before they looked at me as a sex object." (Poya, 1999:74)

<sup>30</sup> Examples are: Sarollah (the Blood of God), Ershad Eslami (Islamic Guidance), Komiteh (local Islamic councils) and Pasdaran (the Revolutionary Guards) (Poya, 1999:73).

other strategies, to pour acid over unveiled women (ibid: 73). This indicates that veiling was not only coerced, but also violently and aggressively imposed. One can argue that this shows that the political authority once again used women as agents to promote specific agendas. On the other hand; the traditional women's engagement with the issues pertaining to women's proper dress was driven by their own religious persuasions at the time (ibid: 75).

Some argued that veiling helped to uproot the corrupting beauty-myth of the West. Nonetheless, the dominant discourses of women's veiling in Iran at the time also assume that women were responsible for men's moral behaviour. If they were treated as sex symbols (by men), it was their own fault because they did not comply with the Islamic rules of modesty<sup>31</sup>. At the same time, the communal wearing of the Islamic dress espoused a certain form of a shared, albeit, coerced national identity. The new Islamic dress code mainly affected the modern women in urban cities. Women living in rural areas, who always had dressed traditionally (even under the Pahlavis whose policy did not reach or affect the rural community at large) continued to do so. The same happened with the traditional middle class in urban areas. These women had predominantly rejected the politics of the Shah, and were more than likely to identify with the female ideal promoted by the new regime (ibid: 74)<sup>32</sup>.

#### **2.2.6 Towards a New Discourse**

A new feminist discourse emerged in the aftermath of the Islamic revolution. This development elucidated on the equality between men and women. However, even though men and women were perceived as equal, they did not necessarily have to be treated the same way with regards to the rights granted them (Ferdows, 1986:132). This view reflects an understanding of gender that assumes complementarity instead of equality. I

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<sup>31</sup> Note that modesty in this context becomes strongly connected to the idea of a modest dress, i.e. the Islamic dress. Modesty equals Islamic dress.

<sup>32</sup> One woman asserted the following: "*I like to wear the hejabe eslami. I feel that this is respecting the views of people like me. Under the previous regime, I could not get a job as a nurse because I was wearing the chador.*" (Poya, 1999:74-75)

will argue that this development pertained to the female ideal of Fatima already established in the Iranian context. Women needed an explanation that could clarify the reasons for isolating them from various spheres of public space. Since Fatima was the ideal woman, feminists could use her as an example in terms of explaining their complimentary role. Iranian feminists claimed that because men and women were different biologically (the view promoted by Motahhari), they embedded distinct qualities and characteristics which positioned them in diverse roles within the Islamic society. The biological difference promoted domesticity and procreation for women, and participation in public life to support the family for men. The focus reflected that equality did not literally mean sameness, but rather an equal balance (ibid: 133).

Adherents of the Islamic regime asserted that the struggle for equality in Western terms was in fact an attempt to gain similar rights, which they claimed was contradictory to divine logic. The struggle for sameness shows immoral tendencies and as such fit the description of the *gharbzadeh* woman (Najmabadi, 1991:50). Equality between the sexes was not on the political agenda in the post-revolutionary era. On the contrary, equality represents injustice. This development reflects the urge to get rid of the previous contested political discourse and show Muslim women that they can contribute to society in ways which are not degrading within the confines of the Islamic framework (Najmabadi, 1991:50).

In post-revolutionary Iran, the veil had up until now been used to distinguish the Muslim woman from the “*Western doll*”. However, during the Iran-Iraq war the veil acquired yet another layer of meaning. The veiled Iranian woman was now represented as being more pious than the Iraqi woman (Shirazi, 2001:94). Posters depicting veiled Iranian women as mothers, sisters, wives and daughters who supported their sons, brothers, husbands and fathers in the war could be seen everywhere. In this sense the women portrayed on the posters could be seen as representing the ideal woman Fatima (ibid: 96). At the same time, the ideal of Fatima was, as already mentioned, depicted *in relation* to her male consorts. This once again shows that women were used deliberately in the Iran-Iraq war as instruments to promote a political and military agenda.

The political symbolism entailed in the veil became further enhanced by equating the veil and *jihad*. Yet other posters were made that depicted veiled Iranian women holding guns. The aim was to signal that these women supported the war and at the same time fought for their religious right. In essence, Iran embodied true Islam, Iraq did not. Martyrdom became a religious ideal (an ideal unconditionally reserved men), but Iranian women embodied this ideal by representing Fatima. However, the militant image of the Iranian women was solely an image. There were no women that legally could participate in the war. Thereby, Iranian women could not obtain the martyr-ideal by promoting personal agency (ibid: 101).

In addition, the Islamic Republic continues to represent veiled Iranian women as repositories of modesty, Islamic values and morality throughout the world. As such, state discourses of morality are simplified in terms of relating morality almost exclusively to women's sexual modesty, behaviour and dress. By linking morality and Islamic values to women's physical appearance, the Islamic Republic represents a discourse that results in narrow and limited understanding of this concept. Morality is a broad category that relates to a number of human relationships. One could argue that a more comprehensive engagement with the notion of morality would demand a critical inquiry into coercive gender relationships including state-imposed dress codes for women.

From these developments it is clear that Muslim women's dress has occupied a central symbolic space in the politics of the Pahlavis and of the Islamic state. The veil has constantly been defined and redefined in the changing political climate and women are used instrumentally by successive political regimes. Iranian women themselves have had limited autonomy and power in relation to the dominant constructions of female ideals. Patriarchal political authorities have constructed and regulated these images according to their varying political ideologies. It is not an exaggeration to say that Iranian women have been exploited and that their realities and identities have been manipulated to coincide with the realization of various political agendas.

Iranian women, in general have recognized the difference in treatment pertaining to men and women under the new Iranian state. Secular feminists, who represented the minority, voiced their opinions more strongly, specifically in terms of the coercive Islamic dress. As a result they often suffer great consequences for their resistance. As mentioned earlier, women who refused to comply with the Islamic dress code, most definitely would get sacked from their jobs, others experienced difficulties when performing daily errands, in that they were refused to buy goods and groceries. However, the worst punishments for unveiled or not properly veiled women pertained to the physical abuse performed by security units (Poya, 1999:73). Some Muslim secular women chose to burn themselves in protest against the androcentric regime. The 21st of February 1994, Professor Homa Darabi Tehrani set herself on fire. The reason for this unfortunate event was her resistance towards the Islamic rule, which she claimed disempowered and suppressed women (Afshar, 1996b:138). The fact that women choose to take their own lives to support their principles should be an alarming sign which strongly reflect the notion of dissatisfaction with the present situation for women in the Iranian society (ibid:138).

As a consequence of the strict gender politics, many secular women saw it as their only option to unite powers with the traditional Islamist women. Poya claims that also traditional women were starting to question the legacy of the Islamic state in relation to women's position. However, many secular Muslim feminists decided to live in exile because they felt that the emancipation of women could not be achieved within the confines of the Islamic Republic of Iran (Poya, 1999:135).

### ***2.3 Contemporary Debates***

Two feminist trends developed as a result of the gender politics advocated by the Islamic state, secular feminism and Islamic feminism. The discourse developed by Islamic women elucidates on the 'woman question' from within the Islamic perspective (Moghadam, 2002:1142)<sup>33</sup>. Najmabadi argues that the views on issues pertaining to

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<sup>33</sup> Adherents of this view are Iranian women like Afsaneh Najmabadi, Nayereh Tohidi and Ziba Mir-Hosseini (Moghadam, 2002:1142).

women's sexuality have changed. From believing that women were biologically different and that this in turn justified the differential treatment of men and women, Islamic feminists now argued that the discrimination of women pertained to social circumstances. This meant that Islamic women in Iran no longer believed in the divine basis of gender discrimination (ibid: 1144). In the midst of this new feminist discourse is the re-interpretation (*ijtihad* – independent reasoning) of the Qur'an and *Shari'a*. The active participation of women within this discourse has created valuable contributions to the Islamic scholarship in Iran. The 1992 Divorce Amendments is a result of this engagement and gives women the right to “*domestic wages for the work they have done during marriage*” (Mir-Hosseini, 1996a:286).

Secondly, the women's magazine *Zanan* (launched in February 1992), has emerged as a strong site for raising gender consciousness at a popular level. *Zanan* advocates new *Shari'a* interpretations, and suggests new understandings which elucidate equality *within* the confines of Islam (ibid: 286). *Zanan* has paved the way for a new discourse which promotes the advancement of women's choices by encompassing Islamist feminist voices and perspectives. Interpretations include both laws and regulations pertaining to the domestic sphere as well as to the public domain (Mir-Hosseini, 1996a:293).

Despite the strict dress code, Iranian women have access to public space. They are consciously increasing their influence in the community through the *use* of the veil. This means that the veil could represent an empowering aspect; it gives Iranian women legalized access to public space. Nafiseh Faizbakhsh argues that:

“Islamic Iran has the most advanced pro-woman laws and we have no need whatsoever to resort to the West, its laws and its shortcomings which have resulted in uncertainty, injustice, problems and sufferings. We are at the forefront of the best and most forward looking laws for women. Our only hope is that our legal study centres and universities will be able to pull out these laws from the text of Islamic teachings and codes which, God willing and with the help of Majlis, they will do so very soon.” (Zan-e Ruz, May 1994, in Afshar, 1996a:212)

Maryam Behruzi, another Muslim feminist supporting the current Islamic state, describes the position and role of women in the following manner:

“Under the Shah women’s participation in the public sphere could only occur if the women adopted the loose and shameful dependent character of Western women...Our revolution has allocated a major part to women and has removed the barrier of Westernization which viewed the veil as an impediment to participation in the public sphere...We are the very cornerstone of the future civilization which will be rooted in Islam...” (Zan-e Ruz, May 1994, in Afshar, 1996a:212)

Faizbakhsh promotes a new discourse where an engagement in *ijtihad* must take place. The laws that are pro-women are to be found in the sacred scriptures of Islam and her objective is that universities and other legal institutions must partake in their realization. Since the pro-women laws are already found within the confines of the Islamic framework, women do not need to look for answers within the Western discourse. This development reflects the theories of other Muslim feminists who advocate the advancement of female agency through revival and re-interpretation<sup>34</sup>. Behruzi elucidates the position of women in relation to a broader political scheme, as such she engages in broader geo-politics. She argues that Muslim women will play an important part in future civilizations. This renders the Muslim woman a crucial agent in the forming of a discourse embedded in Islam.

Cooke, a scholar of Islam and Muslim societies, establishes the principle of ‘multiple critique’ in relation to the development of Islamic feminism. She argues that Muslim women participating in promoting gender justice within the Islamic framework are “*creating a transnational sense of belonging, resistance, and steadfastness through their behaviour but also through the hermeneutical and historical texts they are producing*” (2001:109). The Islamic feminists are, through this active participation in re-

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<sup>34</sup> See for instance Kecia Ali. 2003. “Progressive Muslims and Islamic Jurisprudence: The Necessity for Critical Engagement with Marriage and Divorce Laws”. In *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender and Pluralism*, Omid Safi, Ed. Oxford: Oneworld. Pp. 163-189. Or, Asma Barlas. 2002. “*Believing Women*” in *Islam, Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’an*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

interpretation of Islamic teachings, contradicting the representations (of them) advocated by Western critics. By simultaneously contesting the neo-colonial discourse they design their own maps towards liberation. At the same time, they engage in critical assessments of various establishments within the confines of Islam (e.g. institutions and structures), that they feel are limiting their rightful agency as women. However, through 'multiple critique', they still preserve their opposition within the Islamic ideology (ibid: 109).

The second discourse that emerged, the secular Muslim feminists, elucidates on the suppressive nature of Islamic ideology, subsequently they claim that liberation within this discourse is unattainable (Moghadam, 2002:1151). Mahnaz Afkhami, a Muslim feminist writing from exile in Washington D.C., asserts "*I call myself a Muslim and a feminist. I'm not an Islamic feminist – that's a contradiction in terms*" (ibid: 1152). Afkhami's position reflects the secular feminist stand which pertains to the belief that a fusion between Islamism and feminism is an oxymoronic perception. Moghadam questions the one-dimensional view of women's liberation within the Islamic ideology. She claims that by engaging in theological arguments, as opposed to questioning cultural and political establishments, Islamist women will not achieve results that actually contribute to drastically change their position in society. Further, she asserts that this form of gender consciousness (solely re-interpreting Islamic scriptures), could lead to the reinforcement of the patriarchal structures embedded within Islamic ideology (Moghadam, 2002:1158).

From these two different approaches, however, both pertaining to improve the position of women, another controversy has emerged. I mentioned earlier that many secular Muslim feminists chose to live in exile, and it is this development that has become a contested issue. Secular Muslim feminists who still live in Iran claim that their counterparts chose an easy way out; as such they could be seen as the 'Quislings' of Muslim feminism. They argue that these women are sitting on their high horse criticizing everything that is wrong with the Islamic state in relation to gender issues without partaking in the actual struggle within the country (Najmabadi, 1998:73). On the other hand, secular Muslim feminists in exile claims that the women presently residing in Iran, calling themselves either Islamic or secular feminists, need their help. They enforce this argument on three probable

accounts. Firstly, women residing in Iran are implicitly supporting the present patriarchal regime. Secondly, by supporting the politics of the Iranian state they have compromised themselves and what they believe in, in order to actively participate in the community (for instance by donning the veil). And thirdly, their agency is taken away from them by complying with the rules of the regime and they can thereby be seen as mute victims in need of “*a voice outside*” (ibid: 73). However, an increased dialogue between these various feminist groups is emerging. One of the places where such a dialogue can be found is in *Zanan* who has embraced the various positions through equally representing their different and often opposing arguments (ibid: 73)<sup>35</sup>. Through these debates concerning contemporary feminist establishments, it becomes clear that it is important to acknowledge the multiplicity of feminist Iranian voices. Iranian women are not a homogenous group, as seen throughout this chapter, and as such it becomes salient to acknowledge the varying discourses that speak to the notions of female agency on multiple levels.

## **2.4 Reflections**

Throughout this chapter I have explored multiple factors that have influenced the representations of women and veiling within the confines of the Iranian state. By analyzing the emergence of different political movements I have found that the veil is a strong symbol that carries political significance. The veil became an indicator of both belonging to and supporting the ideologies carried out by the Iranian state, as well as the opposition to these political agendas. With that having been said, the various discourses of the veil also connote a lack of women’s agency in terms of participating in the construction of ideal images and self. Women have both been subjected to coercive unveiling and veiling. Women’s own agency have been suppressed and regulated in terms of rules pertaining to the existence of women’s organizations, and the deprivation of women’s right to vote (for almost 30 years after the act of unveiling).

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<sup>35</sup> For a more thorough discussion on these issues that pertains to increased dialogue read Najmabadi, 1998:73-77. In *Islam, Gender, and Social Change*, Yvonne Y. Haddad and John L. Esposito, Eds. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.

The various political ideologies show that the regimes had pre-conceived notions pertaining to women's position and agency. The position of women was always negotiated within a male controlled ambit. The power-dynamics shows that women were treated as objects that had to be controlled in order to represent the supremacy of the nation. Dressing and women's bodies became imperative symbols of political agendas. As such, women played a minor (if not a non-existing) part in decision making. This indicates that in both ideologies there was an explicit element of political coercion. However, the existence of various positions, in terms of either rejecting or welcoming a new ideology, was pervasive. This reflects that opinions were placed along a continuum of varying positions.

Through dressing, women became represented as the protectors of the various political agendas. Three dates can be seen as descriptive for the various political developments. Firstly, in 1927 a woman's organization called The Messenger of Prosperity established Woman's Day on 8<sup>th</sup> March to celebrate the Iranian women without relating her to any pre-conceived female ideal. However, in 1937 this day was changed under the first Pahlavi to 7<sup>th</sup> January since the latter date marked the implementation of his campaign to unveil Iranian women and strive towards the ideal unveiled western woman. Thirdly, in 1980 Khomeini changed Women's Day to 6<sup>th</sup> May, the birth of Fatima, the new Iranian ideal presented by the Islamic Republic. These three dates, ironically, reflects the pervading changes in the political domain due to varying political agendas.

The social, religious and cultural contexts define the semantics of the veil. Paradoxically, some women have appropriated the political purposes of the veil to their own advantage. The Islamic dress in Iran is presently being used as a means of gaining access to public space. This shows that various feminist positions are taken in terms of fighting for women's rights. Subsequently, it becomes important to listen to the multiple voices advocated within the Islamic feminist discourse. Women are not simply victims of androcentrism, but as the new Islamic feminism shows, active participants in for example re-interpretations of the Islamic sources to promote female agency and improve the position of women from within the confines of Islam. However, there are other feminist

positions taken that claims that women's position can only be altered and improved *outside* the confines of an Islamic ideology. Against this background one must understand that Iranian feminism is a heterogeneous entity where each woman has her own subjective experience of what it means to be a woman, religiously committed or not. These experiences are however always rooted in a cultural and political context. Thereby, women's lived experiences will influence the direction the feminist discourse takes.

The 'woman question' has been debated along the lines of liberation and limitation. The continuing redefinition of this concept is still maintained and will continue to exist in the ever-changing realms of public and political discourses. Today the veil is often seen in relation to identity-building. This new symbolism of the veil (in terms of donning the veil to indicate a religious position) has been especially dominant in countries where Islam is a minority. Wearing the veil out of choice and as a symbol of identity in an un-Islamic context characterizes the Muslim woman as an individual who shows her independence through participating in her own identity construction. By making subjective choices, the Muslim woman can extensively be seen as a modern individual who reflects the 'modern' characteristic of self-determination. The Islamic dress-code can be seen as a powerful metaphor, which is capable of representing many shades of meaning and performing many functions. The veil reflects that women's opinions are divided and western generalizations of Muslim women must be contemplated. Some women will see the veil as a tool that liberates and empowers instead of imprisons. However, as outlined in this chapter, veiling in Iran came to signify broader gender politics. This means that the veil, regardless of traditional function, has been transformed and instrumentalized due to various political agendas.

The polarization between Islam and the West has become central in the politics of the time. Muslim women's identities are as such encapsulated within a particular political climate, and convey perceptions that *could* lead to the reinforcement of this polarization. The schism between Islam and the West, developed through European colonial history and in the political encounter between Christianity and Islam, has partly resulted in contemporary western portrayals of Islam. Another development that has influenced the

recent representations is the terrorist actions, performed by extreme fundamentalist groups. There has been a tendency to characterize Islam negatively in light of these terrorist actions which unfortunately have been carried out in the name of Islam. Especially in the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, religious racism and prejudice have particularly affected Muslim women because of their religious visibility. However, the contemporary debates, pertaining to coerced unveiling in France, Switzerland and Turkey (however embedded within various contexts), shows that there exist direct discursive parallels between Iranian patriarchal implementations of various political agendas and western authoritative decisions and regulations concerning the Muslim veil.

So where are the voices of Muslim women outside of the coercive political discourses imposed on them by either Western or Islamist governments? The previous chapters show limitations of Muslim women's agency in relation to the authoritatively imposed rules pertaining to identity constructions, dressing and 'sameness'. These representations or coerced discourses shows that women are mostly perceived as objects that can be controlled through various laws and regulations.

I will now challenge this notion of women as objects by presenting active Muslim voices in terms of their own engagement with Qur'anic interpretations and contestations of patriarchal narratives in relation to veiling.

### *Chapter 3*

#### *Muslim Women's Voices*

In this chapter, I examine Muslim women's conceptual, theological and scriptural understandings of veiling and also broader gender dynamics within Islam. Here I explore Muslim women's voices from within the tradition and thereby challenge the objectified representations presented in the previous chapters. These voices all address the dominant narratives of veiling, albeit, in diverse ways.

What does the Qur'an say about women's dressing? What were the social grounds informing and shaping the emergence of the Islamic dress? What did the veil represent in the early Muslim context? What were the justifications for the use of the veil? And *why* was it important? I focus on how different Muslim women answer these central questions around the meaning of veiling, modesty, and women's dressing. By applying different methodologies, including historical and scriptural analysis, present-day Muslim scholars have developed diverse and even competing modes of understanding this phenomenon.

I begin this chapter by examining views that propose veiling as a pre-Islamic phenomenon. I then present the relevant Qur'anic revelations on the issue of dressing and physical modesty. Next, with the purpose of understanding diverse Muslim applications of these verses, I explore a conservative discourse on gender and veiling. Here, given that I am committed to focus on the lives and voices of Muslim women, I examine the case of Zaynab al-Ghazali. I explore some of the ambiguities pertaining to her position on gender more broadly and how they relate to questions of veiling. Finally, I consider in more detail Muslim feminist Qur'anic exegesis on veiling as reflected in the works of Fatima Mernissi and Asma Barlas, respectively.

### 3.1 The veil – A pre-Islamic Phenomenon

Nawal El Saadawi, an Egyptian doctor and a feminist, claims that the inferiority of women was already present both before, and at the time when Islam emerged. She argues that the suppression executed and idealized by representatives from both Judaism and Christianity was worse than the ideology represented by early Islam. The veil was a pre-existing phenomenon before the rise of Islam; El Saadawi argues that it was a result of Judaism. Her reason for taking this position is that when Jewish women were praying to God, then according to the Old Testament, they had to cover their heads (El Saadawi, 1980:5).

Fadwa El Guindi argues that the custom of veiling already existed in Hellenistic-Byzantine societies. Also in Mesopotamian societies the veil was used to distinguish respectable women from lower-class women. As such, it represented a class phenomenon and often had brutal consequences for women and men belonging to lower classes<sup>36</sup>. By transgressing the rules pertaining to way of dress an individual could be ruthlessly punished (El Guindi, 1995:108)<sup>37</sup>.

Leila Ahmed, an Egyptian-American historian, explores the historical roots of Islam and how this history has influenced and shaped the contemporary discourses on gender. She also argues that veiling was a pre-Islamic phenomenon, and through expansion and assimilation, it became an Islamic practice. Ahmed claims that *only* the wives of the Prophet were required to veil during his lifetime. By making a contextual argument Ahmed argues that only after the Prophet's death did the veil become apparent among other women, especially amongst upper-class women who saw it as a symbol of piety, and as such a symbol of status. Since veiling and seclusion of women was already adopted as a means of segregation between the sexes in pre-Islamic times, veiling cannot conclusively be seen as a symbol of Muslim culture (Ahmed, 1992:5). From this

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<sup>36</sup> According to El Guindi, ethnographic research has documented the use of veil also for men in pre-Islamic times (El Guindi, 1999:4).

<sup>37</sup> Laws concerning way of dress, and who were allowed to wear what, were contained in Assyrian law (El Guindi, 1995:108).

perspective it is possible to argue that Ahmed's view places the custom of veiling both outside the Islamic religious sphere, *and* the Islamic cultural sphere.

El Guindi's position is that the *institutionalization* of veiling was not apparent in pre-Islamic times, but with the rise of Islam (El Guindi, 1999:11). This view conveys that when a religion becomes institutionalized, practices and customs evident in the current society could possibly be incorporated or assimilated (as Ahmed argues) into the emerging religion.

In my view the controversy concerning veiling *only* for the wives of the Prophet or Muslim women in general, needs to be looked at from a point of view that considers inter-human relationships. It is likely that the wives of the Prophet were seen as representing an ideal for *all* Muslim women; after all they were the ones who received a special status in the light of their position. If this is a fact, why would not all Muslim women also choose to wear the veil in order to become more 'similar' to the wives of the Prophet?

El Sadaawi, El Guindi and Ahmed interpret veiling in relation to various pre-Islamic contexts. More specifically, the veil occurred as a pre-existing phenomenon; hence, it was not introduced by Islam. Nawal El Sadaawi renders the veil as a religious custom since she links it to both Judaism and Christianity. El Guindi places emphasis on veiling as a way to distinguish the respectable woman from the slave, as such the veil is seen in relation to social status or a marker of socio-economic class. Ahmed advocates a theory of veiling where veiling is seen as a process of assimilation. The veil is characterized as an already existing cultural norm, hence, neither an Islamic cultural practice nor an Islamic religious custom.

So how did the veil become known as a purely Islamic phenomenon, according to the traditionalists, sanctioned by the Qur'an? To address this issue it is necessary to examine the relevant Qur'anic verses.

### 3.2 Female dress in the Qur'an

The first ayah that introduces the 'descent of the *hijab*' is Q33:53<sup>38</sup>:

“O ye who believe! Enter not the dwellings of the Prophet for a meal without waiting for the proper time, unless permission be granted you. But if ye are invited, enter, and, when your meal is ended, then disperse. Linger not for conversation. Lo! that would cause annoyance to the Prophet, and he would be shy of (asking) you (to go); but Allah is not shy of the truth. And when ye ask of them (the wives of the Prophet) anything, ask it of them from behind a curtain. That is purer for your hearts and for their hearts. And it is not for you to cause annoyance to the messenger of Allah, nor that ye should ever marry his wives after him. Lo! that in Allah's sight would be an enormity” (Pickthall, 1977:448)

The next revelation that relates to veiling is found in Q33:59<sup>39</sup>:

“O Prophet! Tell Thy wives and thy daughters and the women of the believers to draw their cloaks close round them (when they go abroad). That will be better, so that they may be recognised and not annoyed. Allah is ever Forgiving, Merciful.” (Pickthall, 1977:449)

And thirdly Q24:30-31 reads:

“<sup>30</sup>Tell the believing men to lower their gaze and be modest. That is purer for them. Lo! Allah is aware of what they do. <sup>31</sup> And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and be modest, and to display of their adornment only that which is apparent, and to draw their veils over their bosoms, and not to reveal their adornment save to their own husbands or fathers or husbands' fathers, or their sons or their husbands' sons, or their brothers or their brothers' sons or sisters'

<sup>38</sup> Ayah (sing.), ayat (pl.), sign; used for verses of the Qur'an (Barlas, 2002:235).

<sup>39</sup> I will use this expression when dealing with the various ayat, Q stands for the Qur'an, followed by numbers indicating surah, then ayah.

sons, or their women, or their slaves, or male attendants who lack vigour, or children who know naught of women's nakedness. And let them not stamp their feet so as to reveal what they hide of their adornment. And turn unto Allah together, O believers, in order that ye may succeed." (Pickthall, 1977:362-363)

Historically, these few Qur'anic ayat that deal with the issue of veiling did not restrict the enormous impact the various interpretations have had in connection with the position of women, specifically in relation to their physical appearance in public spaces. During the classical era, the establishment of various Islamic law-schools advocated different views on veiling. Scholars adhering to the Shafi'i and Hanbali law schools assumed that women's entire bodies were *awra* and thereby women had to cover completely (this included hands, face and below the ankles)<sup>40</sup>. The followers of Maliki and Hanafi law schools, on the other hand, discarded hands and faces as *awra* based on "a number of authenticated traditions that the Prophet himself instructed" (Stowasser, 1994:93). al-Tabari (d. 923 C.E.) argued that "both women and men could show those parts of the body that were not pudendal", but interpreted *awra* to exclude both hands and face<sup>41</sup>. al-Baydawi, another classical scholar (d. 1285 C.E.), claimed that every part of a free woman's body was a symbol of temptation and "the gaze itself being a messenger of fornication" (Barlas, 2002:55). Drawing on these classical exegeses I will now examine a contemporary conservative view on gender and veiling as exemplified by Zaynab al-Ghazali.

### **3.3 Zaynab al-Ghazali: A Conservative Feminist**

Zaynab al-Ghazali joined the Egyptian Feminist Union (founded by Huda Shaarawi in the 1920s) in 1935<sup>42</sup>. However, she was dissatisfied with the values and the direction of this movement. According to al-Ghazali, the Egyptian Feminist Union was trying to modernize Egyptian women after Western standards. Rejecting this biased position al-

<sup>40</sup> *Awra*: Literally meaning 'genital' or 'pudendum' (Stowasser, 1994:92)

<sup>41</sup> Ironically belonging to Shafi'i, but later established his own law school (Stowasser, 1994:93).

<sup>42</sup> Huda Shaarawi was against the custom of veiling the face which she saw as "the greatest obstacle to women's participation in public life" (Badran, 1995:93).

Ghazali established her own organization, the Muslim Women's Association (1936), focusing on the 'pious' Muslim woman. Al-Ghazali elucidated on the development of the community in terms of implementing educational projects that advocated Islamic values (Cooke, 2001:86, Duval, 1998:54). In terms of the increased access and participation of Egyptian women in universities, al-Ghazali contested the idea of co-education. She used religion as an important device to support her anti-gender-mixing agenda (Badran, 1995:163).

In 1965 she was arrested, accused of participating in the suspected conspiracy concerning the assassination of Egypt's president, Gamal Abd al-Nassir (Nasser). She spent six years in prison and was subjected to severe torture (Duval, 1998:54). Enduring these torturous years, al-Ghazali authored the biography *Days from my Life* (1986), a collection of prison memoirs, where she presents herself as an ideal Muslim woman. Her exemplary will and consistency in prison indicates her persistent commitment to Islam. However, although al-Ghazali's life is characterized by political activism, rejecting the Westernizing agenda, she maintains the belief that a Muslim woman's duty first and foremost is to be a mother and wife (Cooke, 2001:84).

Nevertheless, al-Ghazali encourages *all* women to partake in *jihad*, a political struggle that aims at rejecting the imperialist and modernist tendencies of the Egyptian government<sup>43</sup>. It is only by establishing an Islamic state that women rightfully can participate as active agents in the public sphere (Cooke, 2001:90-91). She reminisces her own participation in *jihad*, where she often appears (according to her biography) as spiritually stronger than men. During her imprisonment, she claims that many men collapsed under the strains of torture, whilst al-Ghazali herself endured this pain (ibid: 84-85). This renders al-Ghazali as a powerful and enlightened woman, implicitly depicting men as lacking spiritual knowledge and strength. On the other hand, one can interpret the role of Muslim women, whose first duty is domesticity, as working in

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<sup>43</sup> *Jihad* carry various connotations; it may describe an internal struggle (a struggle within the individual) to erase all evil tendencies, or as an external struggle where restoring the moral order for the sake of Islam is the ultimate goal (Peters, 1995:369-373). Zaynab al-Ghazali refers to the external *jihad* and states that by partaking in this struggle, men and women will equally engage in the fulfilment of religious duties.

accordance with the principles of Islamization. Although these women will not partake in an external physical *jihad*, they will support the ideal of Islamization by fulfilling their roles as 'housewives'. However, al-Ghazali argues that "*The true believer will not be confused, [as to which ideal she will follow] nothing is more important than building the Islamic state*" (ibid: 88).

The participation of women in educational projects were crucial, al-Ghazali argues that "*We want to be educated for the sake of our sons, the next generation of men, and not so as to become equal with our husbands. We are not like European women, whose goal is the destruction of their family*" (ibid: 87). This indicates a pre-conceived notion of different gender roles in society. Women are not supposed to be like men, but are equal to them by fulfilling specific duties. However, al-Ghazali's position also assumes a clash between European and Egyptian women which reflects the broader political context of colonization.

Throughout her participation in political life, al-Ghazali supports the female modesty-ideal as outlined by the classical exegetes. She states in an interview with Sherifa Zuhur (1992:90) that a veil which covers the face was mandatory for the wives of the Prophet. This *fard* is however optional for all other Muslim women<sup>44</sup>. Today's Muslim women thereby have a right to choose whether to veil their face or not. On the other hand, the wives of the Prophet must be seen as ideals of their time, thereby indicating that pursuing their ways is looked upon as virtuous. The immoral woman is the one who does not make an effort to 'be like the Prophet's wives', hence modesty of dress (al-Ghazali argues that at least a head-scarf must be worn) is strongly related to the religious framework.

Further al-Ghazali argues that if a woman is beautiful, she should cover her face unquestionably. The reason for this is that "*such a woman was [is] more likely to encounter male harassment, and she would inadvertently tempt men more strongly*". This argumentation results in the compulsory face-veiling of beautiful women. As such it indicates an absence of choice for women who are beautiful (Zuhur, 1992:90-91). An

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<sup>44</sup> *Fard*: Translated to mean 'obligation' (Zuhur, 1992:90).

implication of this claim is the question concerning who is selecting the women that are beautiful. What are the measurements of beauty? On the other hand, it is also a functional description of veiling. If beautiful women are walking the streets unveiled, they will receive so much attention that their agendas are less likely to be realized. Another consequence might be that these women are not taken *as* seriously as veiled women, who are seen as following the examples set by the wives of the Prophet. However, at the level of gender ideology, like some of the Iranian ideologies discussed previously, al-Ghazali's position places the responsibility for the sexual morality of a society primarily with women. Such an argument is extremely problematic for feminists since it absolves men from taking responsibility for their own sexuality. More especially it prejudices women, in this case particularly beautiful women, as representing the enticing sexual principle which needs to be controlled to maintain gender harmony in society.

It appears that al-Ghazali agrees with the conservative interpretation of female dress. By describing the female body as *awra*, the classical exegetes justify the reason for female covering, or modest dress<sup>45</sup>. However, al-Ghazali claims that the reason for women to cover themselves lies within the confines of imitating the wives of the Prophet, who were role-models in Medinan time. al-Ghazali's positioning when it comes to the covering of Muslim women must be seen in relation to the realization of an Islamic state. Nevertheless, by asserting that beautiful women must veil she implicitly agrees with the conservative argument that women's bodies are *awra*. Her positive attitude towards veiling can also be seen in connection with her rejection of Westernization. Veiling can as such be seen as a way of distinguishing the Muslim woman from the Western 'other'.

Zaynab al-Ghazali appears as a paradoxical figure, in terms of her ambiguous goals for Muslim women. Her own life bears witness of the ideal woman in connection with political activism. Thereby she elucidates on her own independent struggle for freedom and the importance of participating in the establishment of the Islamic state. This is the ultimate goal; it is then questionable whether the ideal 'housewife'-role only can be attained after the Islamic state is achieved. Nevertheless, al-Ghazali is an individual that

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<sup>45</sup> Modesty is however a contested term and I will come back to this discussion later in this chapter.

promotes women's agency within the confines of Islam. Through imprisonment and torture she defied all gender roles and emerges as a 'super-woman', a role-model, for other Muslim women. Her belief in the superiority of Islamic culture is imperative for the understanding of her political agenda.

### ***3.4 The Meaning of the Veil – Fatima Mernissi***

After exploring a conservative feminist position pertaining to Islamic dress, I now examine the work of Fatima Mernissi, a Moroccan Muslim feminist who will largely contests conservative views on veiling. She is a key contemporary figure in influencing researchers on Islam, especially on women's issues. Mernissi studies sacred texts by thoroughly analysing the related contextualities. Through applying various modes of feminist hermeneutics, she derives new understandings of scriptural texts that promote a new, less patriarchal light on gender relations within Islam. In this way she challenges the traditional interpretations of the Islamic texts and advocates a more egalitarian view. Mernissi's methodology is based on the notion that all interpretation must be understood in relation to context. Her engagement with Q33:53 and Q33:59 will elaborate this perspective. Mernissi argues, through the interpretation of these ayat, that there is no immutable theological evidence for the implementation of a particular form of Islamic dress.

Mernissi claims that Q33:53 transpires from the need to mark a threshold between communal space (and the community's indiscretion), and the Prophet's private sphere. The ayah was revealed as a consequence of violating the latter. The Prophet had just married Zaynab and he wanted some privacy with his new bride. A companion and guest in the wedding, Anas Ibn Malik, 'lingered around for conversation', and as such transgressed the Prophet's intimate boundaries. The 'hijab-verse' literally 'came down' since the Prophet physically drew a curtain in front of his nuptial chamber to keep Anas Ibn Malik from entering. Secondly, the 'hijab-verse' also descended metaphorically as a revelation from God. The revelation can be seen as God's concern for the threatened privacy of the Prophet's wives, who possessed a unique position in society at the time. A

separation in space, as well as protecting the wives of the Prophet, was thereby the result of the transgression which led to the revelation of Q33:53 (Mernissi, 1991:85-87).

The Qur'an entails revelations which often occur to the Prophet in a given situation, this seems to correlate with the revelation presented above. What is questionable argues Mernissi, is the momentary character of the revelation. The Prophet was well known for his patience, and usually the revelation took place after a "*period of gestation...a time of waiting*". The idiosyncrasy of the descent of the hijab was that it took place immediately (Mernissi, 1991:87-88). The irregularity in the revelation process becomes a focal point of Mernissi's investigation. Why did the revelation take place immediately? Q33:53 must be interpreted in relation to its historical context. Year 5 of the Hejira is characterized by Fatima Mernissi as the "*Prophet's most disastrous year as military leader of a monotheistic sect that was trying to assert itself in an Arabia that was polytheistic and happy to be so*" (ibid: 89). This analysis is based on implications concerning a complex religious landscape characterized by military crisis. There is also implicitly a vague existence of moral decay, as commented on by Mernissi in relation to the 'hijab-verse' (ibid: 92). The tense political climate could be one explanation for the rapidity of the revelation. To be able to grapple with the subsequent immorality one must investigate extra-contextual circumstances.

Similarly, Q33:59, the second ayah outlined earlier, reflect the political landscape in year 5 of the Hejira and places an emphasis on protectionism. It explicitly encourages the 'women of the believers' to cover themselves before entering the public space. Two distinct features developed at this time; opposition against the Prophet and his companions increased, and insecurity became an evident fact. Medina was at the threshold of a civil war and the position of women was highly threatened. The tormenting atmosphere influenced *all* women; sexual harassment had become a public nuisance. Implementation of the veiling of Muslim women could be seen as a consequence of the uncertainty of the political milieu (ibid: 168-170). The veil became a protecting fabric, separating the Mothers of the Believers and other free women, from the slaves. This implicitly indicates that the unveiled slaves were 'allowed' to be harassed. The streets

became a public space where Hypocrites were free to practice *zina* (fornication), and the visual cloak (word used in Q33:59) acted as the marker of separation and protection (ibid: 183). In this context the veil might be seen as a symbol of defeat. The policy concerning freedom for all people, including slaves, was abandoned in favour of securing the protection of *only* free people. The accommodation of the veil not only represented a division or a separation, it also introduced the principle of *inequality*. One layer of society was protected at the expense of another (Mernissi, 1991:179). The veil symbolically represented the victory of the Hypocrites and divided women into two distinct categories, free women and female slaves (ibid: 187).

Mernissi argues that the Hypocrites 'defended' their harassment through applying a theory of recognition; they claimed that they only harassed women they believed were slaves. This development advocated a new meaning for the use of the veil. It was now used for both protection *and* recognition; as such the veil became a new symbol of identity. The Mothers of the Believers along with other free women now adopted the veil in order *not* to be harassed; this was their sole agent of protection and advocated a sense of security and condition for safeguarding their Muslim faith (ibid: 180).

In relation to Q33:53 Mernissi argues that the hijab (curtain) descended as a means of separation and to provide domestic privacy. This verse must be seen as applying to the wives of the Prophet who occupied a unique position and status in the society. Q33:53 is a context-specific verse and should not be understood in terms of a coercive implementation of a certain dress-code for Muslim women in general. Q33:59 on the other hand, elucidates a general notion of female dress and indicates that at the time of the revelation there was an urgent need for the protection of all free women. The revelation of Q33:59 advocates a concern for the physical appearance of all believing women. The veil can subsequently be seen as a historical necessity due to a tense socio-political environment. Neither of the ayat can according to Mernissi be seen as a Qur'anic injunction for the implementation of the veil, nor can they be seen as verses that justify the seclusion of women in public space. Both Q33:53 and Q33:59 can be seen as only

applicable in history, meaning, they do not have an eternal value. These revelations can be understood to give answers and guidelines to a past historical time.

I will now turn to Asma Barlas, another contemporary scholar, who also engages in a feminist interpretation of these specific verses, albeit from a different position.

### ***3.5 The Qur'an – a Source of Ethical 'Sameness'***

By engaging in a particular interpretive methodology, Asma Barlas advocates that the Qur'an is premised on a notion that promotes gender equality. Based on this perspective she challenges the classical exegetes and the conservative approach. She claims that a reading which justifies the subordination of women is rooted in serious misconceptions and misinterpretations. By contesting the patriarchal interpretations, Barlas calls for a liberatory reading, legitimized by the Qur'an, which aims at promoting an ethical awareness required by both men and women (2002:2-3).

Through systematic analysis of sexuality and gender morality in the Qur'an Barlas argues that there is a difference between "*what God says and what we understand God to be saying*" (ibid: 19). This indicates that all understanding is interpreted understanding. Since an interpreter always will be situated in a specific context, it is inescapable that new methodologies and views will be developed (ibid: 25). The controversy of interpretation is complex, but it should be legitimate to prefer one interpretation over another. This view is grounded on the basis that not all understandings of the Qur'an are invalid if they do not correspond with the Qur'anic principles of coherence and relation to context (ibid: 19). By arguing against the de-historicizing or ahistorical perceptions of the Qur'an, Barlas' methodology represents a countervoice to many of the existing androcentric discourses. Her methodology also opens up for the possibility of multiple modes of reading. Further, Barlas claims that one must read the Qur'an ethically; this is a conscious choice which corresponds with the Qur'anic hermeneutics (ibid: 207). This means that within the Qur'an there exists a broader ethical framework, which Barlas understand as being intrinsic to the text. This ethical narrative must be the focal point

when reading and understanding the embedded meanings in the Qur'an. Barlas textual reading is based on the notion of reading the Qur'an to "*discover what God may have intended. This means that I [she] ascribe intention/ality to the text...[and] also read to uncover what I [she] believe already is there in the Qur'an;...anyone can retrieve them if they employ the right method and ask the right questions*" (ibid: 21).

I will now outline Barlas' textual analysis relating to Q33:59 and Q24:30-31. In analyzing Q33:59, she states that it presents a specific model of veiling in terms who needs to veil and why i.e. free Muslim women were to be protected from the *jahili*-men (not the Muslim men) whose behavior included sexual abuse and harassment<sup>46</sup>. This indicates that the *jilbab* was implemented to distinguish the believing women from the slaves, who were subjected to 'legitimate' abuse<sup>47</sup>. By adopting the *jilbab*, Muslim women were physically visible, not invisible. The historical context needed a resolution and the *jilbab* was as such used to make the Muslim women recognizable in the eyes of the hypocrites. Barlas elucidates on the importance of understanding this ayah in its historical context (Barlas, 2002:55-56). I will argue, according to this interpretation of female covering, that there is no indication of adopting the *jilbab* in terms of concealing women's bodies. The dress code for Muslim women in *jahili*-society has a functional explanation. As such her argument contests the conservative understanding that uses these ayat to justify a universal mode of veiling by depicting women's bodies as *awra* or as a source of *fitna*<sup>48</sup>.

Barlas posits that by justifying veiling as a form of protecting Muslim men from women's sexual bodies, conservatives distort the meaning of Q33:59. Barlas claim that there is an inconsistency between this interpretation and the Qur'anic intent. Firstly, the conservative interpretation fails to acknowledge the apparent contextual connection between the *jilbab* and *jahili*-society (ibid: 57). Secondly, the Qur'anic depiction of

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<sup>46</sup> *Jahiliya*: Pre-Islamic time/time of ignorance (Roald, 2001:318).

<sup>47</sup> *Jilbab*: The word used to describe clothing in Q33:59 often translated in English to mean cloak. In Q24:30-31, *khumur* is used, commonly referred to in English as a shawl. Traditionally both *jilbab* and *khumur* are used to cover bosom and neck. There is however no Qur'anic verses that refers to the covering of face, head, hands or feet (Barlas, 2002:55).

<sup>48</sup> In this context *fitna* means that women's bodies are sources of temptation

sexuality renders both men and women equally 'sexualized'. This means that women are not depicted as more sexual in nature than men, but the notion of "*sexual sameness*" is emphasised (ibid: 152). As such, sexuality in the Qur'an is an ontological category, undermining the notion of a socially constructed sexuality and the hierarchical division of men's sexuality as superior to women's, or women's sexuality as more 'dangerous' than men's. However, she states "*the Qur'an recognized sexual difference* [understood as sexual specificity], *but it does not adhere to a view of sexual differentiation*" (Barlas, 2002:165).

As such, the conservative justification of veiling as a protection of women's chastity is also challenged by the Qur'anic definition of this concept. According to Barlas the Qur'an describes chastity as alluding to a "*sexual praxis that remains within the moral limits prescribed by God*" (ibid: 153). By elucidating the Qur'anic sexual ethos, Barlas contests and rejects the conservative understanding which proclaims women's bodies as both *awra* and sources of *fitna*. The equal sexual nature of men and women is clearly prescribed in the Qur'an, and can as such not be used as means to restrict the physical appearance of women in public space. Nor is such an appearance threatening the community's moral agency since the Qur'an also outlines moral limits in terms of modesty for both sexes. The modesty ideal will be further elucidated in the textual analysis of Q24:30-31.

Barlas interprets Q24:30-31 as representing a "*general model*" of veiling, by this she means a universal sexual praxis equally applicable to both men and women. This ethical framework is applicable at all times, depicting the revelation as not contextually bound. Within this ayah, Q24:30-31, there is an existence of two different notions relating to the veil. Firstly, Barlas comment on the notion of eyes/gaze. Classical exegete's justification for veiling and segregation of women is based on an understanding where the gaze is interpreted as a threat, and also a "*messenger of fornication*". Barlas argues that this view is misrepresenting the Qur'anic intent (ibid: 158). First of all, the injunction given by Q24:30-31, to 'lower their gaze' applies *equally* to both men and women. Secondly, the revelation implicitly indicates that both men and women *are* free to 'eye' each other in

public. However, the Qur'an encourages a more modest behavior from both men and women when interacting in the public sphere (ibid: 158).

The second notion relating to the veil is body/dress. Q24:30-31 clearly states that both men and women must appear modest. However, the conservative's elucidation on 'adornments' relates to their perception of women's bodies as fundamentally impure and polluting (Barlas, 2002:158)<sup>49</sup>. According to Barlas, the Qur'an's description of bodily modesty is founded on the understanding of the body itself as a "*sexed body*". This view encapsulate both women's and men's bodies. Deriving from this notion, the Qur'an is also indicates that the body in general is a symbol of eroticism. Barlas argues that this principle refers to *both* the female and the male body. Subsequently, the implementation of modesty (understood in this context as both dress and behaviour) as an ideal 'presence' does not mean that the Qur'an "*de-eroticizes or de-sexualizes the body*" (ibid: 159). Rather, the Qur'an introduces the principle of modesty to regulate sexual desires, hence establishing a mode of correct behaviour. From this analysis the Qur'an does not measure the body in relation to pure/impure dualities, but in terms of decency and dignified behaviour (ibid: 159).

The idea of the body as being as 'sexed body' can be explained through the concept of *sukun*<sup>50</sup>. By establishing that relationships between men and women must be understood according to an idea of mutuality, the Qur'an advocates that both men and women have sexual desires. Secondly, men and women have an equal right to realize or carry out these desires. The Qur'an thereby encourages sexual activity, not only as a means of procreation, but as a pleasant and enjoyable encounter between men and women. These Qur'anic principles, pertaining to sexual praxis, are necessary to realize the concept of *sukun* (ibid: 153). Subsequently, the Qur'an itself challenges the conservative interpretations, limiting women's bodies to *awra* and sources of temptation, by stating

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<sup>49</sup> When interpreting Q24:31 the conservatives focus on the word 'ornaments'. According to their understanding, ornaments justify the veiling of not just bosom, but also face and hair (Barlas, 2002:158).

<sup>50</sup> *Sukun*: "*implies a deeper intimacy ensuing from sexual gratification and mental peace*" (Barlas, 2002:153)

that women and men have similar sexual natures. The sexual nature of men and women is an essential feature in the Qur'an's description of human nature (ibid: 154).

The Qur'an asserts that impurity is not applied exclusively to women. The idea of sexual sameness also connotes a preconceived notion of *both* men and women as human beings, capable of engaging in immodest behaviour. This means that both men's and women's bodies have a potential to become impure according to moral behaviour (Barlas, 2002:154). Q24:26 reads:

“Corrupt women are for corrupt men, and corrupt men are for corrupt women; good women are for good men and good men are for good women. The good are innocent of what has been said against them; they will have forgiveness and a generous reward.” (Haleem, 2004:222)

Barlas notes that Q24:26 contests the conservative understanding of women as exclusively sexually corrupt. It also renders purity/impurity as a result of a general moral behaviour. This means that purity/impurity is a function of conduct, not fundamentally connected to human nature, or “*sexual identity*” (2002:154). In other words, if men and women are leading a life which is based on sexual morality and modesty, a result of this behaviour will render them ‘pure’, this purity however, is not intrinsic to their human nature.

Through looking at how gender is articulated in the Qur'an, Barlas is contesting the conservative view on issues pertaining to women's bodies, the practice of veiling, as well as the sexual nature of women and men. Barlas is advocating a sexual praxis, outlined in the Qur'an, which renders women's and men's bodies as equally ‘sexed’. Q33:59 deals with a specific notion of veiling, veiling as a protection from *jahili*-men. This indicates that veiling is context specific and historically contingent. In relation to Q24:30-31, Barlas is arguing that the Qur'anic intent was to implement a moral code that promoted modesty for *both* sexes. This means that the ayah advocate a general idea of ‘veiling’ in terms of developing rules of conduct for all Muslims.

### *3.5.1 Synthesis of Mernissi and Barlas*

From the analysis outlined by both Mernissi and Barlas, it is justifiable to argue that the conservative interpretations of women's gaze and bodies can be seen as distorted representations of the Qur'anic intent that curtail female agency.

By challenging the existing patriarchal interpretations of Qur'anic verses, Fatima Mernissi represents a counterbalance to ideological and political Islam reflected in the discourse of conservative Muslims. Through the re-interpretation of religious texts, by examining Qur'anic verses in the light of their contexts, she rejects the religious justification for imposing veiling on women. Her context-related methodology is premised on the assumption that the custom of veiling transpired from a certain socio-political background. Veiling was a praxis prescribed at the time of the Prophet. Thereby she uses the Hypocrites' harassment of women as the main cause for the implementation of the veil.

By understanding veiling as context-related, Mernissi employs a historicist interpretation. I will criticise this approach in terms of its focus on justifying the veil through pragmatics and functional explanations. Subsequently, less importance is given to the divine origin of the revelations and the verses applicability and relevance today. As such she contests the notion of veiling as a theological pre-ordained praxis. This view implicitly contests the immutability of Qur'anic revelation. The context is crucial to understand the significance of Qur'anic revelation; on the other hand, this view subsequently challenges, and could also be seen as undermining, the divine status of the Qur'an. By implicitly questioning the integrity of the revelations, in terms of emphasising the strong connection between social context and revelation, Mernissi engage in pragmatics which renders veiling as a functional tool for the seclusion of the Prophet's wives and the protection of Muslim women.

From a conservative point of view, her arguments could be condemned as sacrilegious. By partly neglecting, the importance of the divinity of the Qur'an and its revelations,

Mernissi's analysis can be seen as simplistic and limited. In terms of contesting the conservative understanding of women's dressing by solely focusing on explaining *away* the custom of veiling, Mernissi is marginalizing the position of veiling today. By understanding veiling as a custom which is essentially suppressive towards women and restrictive for women's agency, she fails to acknowledge (or refuse to) how various contemporary and socio-historical contexts influence broader understandings and meanings in terms of veiling. Her analysis pertains to render the veil as a device for controlling women's presence and mobility. Within a broader framework, veiling implicitly represents the society's lack of democratic values. I will argue with regards to the arguments outlined above, that Mernissi's examination of the custom of veiling is analytically reductive and tends to be selective in terms of the ways women can achieve agency. Veiling is not a custom which conclusively limits women's choices and opportunities. By buying into this argumentation, Mernissi conveys a position that resembles a Western feminist position, seeing veiled Muslim women as deprived of autonomy and restricted self-definitions. The context around different veiling discourses in contemporary societies show that both contexts and the varying meanings embedded in the veil are not static, but constantly changing. In relation to this assertion it is imperative to note that women's understandings of the veil, its symbolisms and meanings are also dynamic and changing. Nevertheless, by making contextual related arguments, Mernissi pinpoints that the influence of context is relevant for Qur'anic revelation. By engaging in a re-interpretation of the Qur'an where the promotion of female agency is the objective, she addresses a marginalized discourse which has been subjected to severe misrepresentations.

Asma Barlas is contesting the conservative view on veiling through questioning their understanding of women's sexual bodies. By engaging in textual arguments, which she claims works in accordance with the Qur'anic intent; she establishes a broader ethical framework, the Qur'anic ethos. Barlas claims that the Qur'an is premised on gender equality and through looking at the moral-social principles in the Qur'an she advocates a view where the sexual sameness of men and women is established. This view also promotes a notion of sexual modesty and morality, relating to both dress and behaviour,

as equally applicable to both men and women. From her textual analysis it is possible to trace three levels of understanding. In relation to Q33:59, Barlas establishes a specific mode of veiling. Veiling is incorporated into *jahili*-society as a functional resolution for the protection of believing women from *jahili*-men. Veiling is thereby specifically related to a relation between men and women, but premised and encapsulated within a historical context. Secondly, veiling in *jahili*-society says something about the sexual ethos at the time. Women were often harassed and sexually abused, and it was in relation to this turbulent status quo that the believing women needed something that could shield them from being subjected to this immoral behaviour.

The second level of understanding and textual analysis deals with sexuality in the Qur'an. Since the classical exegetes often used the specific mode of veiling, outlined in Q33:59, to justify a universal praxis of veiling all Muslim women, and as such interpreting the Qur'an as ahistorical, Barlas explores the Qur'an's view concerning the sexual nature of men and women. By asserting that the idea of sexual sameness is intrinsic to the Qur'an's understanding, she undermines the conservative's distorted assumptions. Thirdly, Barlas explores the broader moral ethics in the Qur'an. In relation to Q24:30-31, Barlas views the issue of dress as a secondary mandate. The focus of this ayah lies within the confines of promoting a sexual moral and modest praxis equally applicable to both men and women. The function of veiling can thereby be understood as justifiable in terms of immodest or immoral behaviour, not as a means of concealing a woman's body because of the nature of her sexuality. On the other hand, veiling would not be necessary if both men and women act in accordance with the ethical principles of the Qur'an. As such the ayah can be seen as implementing an ethical code for the whole Islamic community. The moral agency, connected to the ideal of modest behaviour, is seen as disconnected from both context and time; hence it is an ideal that has an eternal value. Thereby Barlas disputes the concept of veiling both by arguing that Q33:59 is premised on a historical contingency, and that Q24:30-31 is primarily revealed to advocate the ethical code of the Qur'an. By elucidating on the integrity of the text, Barlas is conveying a thorough and holistic analysis which is true to the Qur'anic revelations in terms of its gender dynamics and egalitarian ethos. Barlas makes explicit connections between different verses and

Qur'anic ethics by conveying meaning-systems that are embodied within the Qur'anic text itself.

The main difference between Mernissi and Barlas, from the analysis outlined above, is their methodological approach to the Qur'anic material. Mernissi predominantly makes contextual related arguments to explain and often reject the coercive veiling of women. Barlas, on the other hand, is employing a method where textual arguments (in line with the Qur'anic intent) are used to undermine the conservative view on veiling, the female body and sexual nature. As such Barlas convey a methodology which is both encapsulating and contesting broader gender assumptions in interpretations of the Qur'an. Hence, her analysis is not based on pragmatics or functional explanations to diminish the custom of veiling, but rather to capture the integrity of the text to support her analysis. I will thereby argue that Barlas gives a more holistic examination of the broader gender relations embedded in the Qur'an. Her thorough exploration of the Qur'anic scripture renders her analysis more trustworthy, all-encompassing and boundless.

### ***3.6 Reflections***

Throughout this chapter I have engaged in various interpretations that deal with the custom of veiling. Nawal El Saadawi, Fadwa El Guindi and Leila Ahmed all explain the custom of veiling through situating the custom in pre-Islamic times. As such they all make the claim that the custom of veiling is not new to Islam (not stemming from a divine Qur'anic origin), but rather a praxis that was culturally assimilated. Subsequently, they open up a debate pertaining to the notion that veiling was not a custom that derived its significance through a theologically constructed framework. However, the contemporary use of the veil, where many women explain the donning of the hijab with reference to a preordained Qur'anic revelation, must be taken into account.

The three Qur'anic ayat outlined earlier forms the foundation for both justifying the veil as a religious custom prescribed by the Qur'an, as well as a means of refuting the same theological argument. The conservative position is founded on the assumption that

women's bodies are a source of temptation and consequently must be concealed by veiling. Embedded within a broader conservative framework, Zaynab al-Ghazali supports the conservative perspective by promoting the veiling of women as a means of pursuing the female ideal, exemplified by the wives of the Prophet. This view must be seen in connection with al-Ghazali's objective, which is to establish an Islamic state. The veiling of women is thereby necessary because the practice relates to the religious framework of Islam, hence she renders veiling in terms its theological status in the Qur'an. However, her strong ideological persuasion also reflects ambiguities in terms of gender roles. By advocating domesticity as an ideal female activity, her own life, as an active participant in the political life, is strongly contradicting this Islamic female ideal. As such she can be seen as challenging the stereotypical patriarchy in terms of refusing to play the part as a mute victim of Islamic ideology.

Mernissi and Barlas are both contesting the traditional patriarchal understandings of veiling. Their analysis shows the existence of women's agency within the confines of interpreting Qur'anic scripture. However, whereas Mernissi strongly reject the custom of veiling by giving pragmatic expedient responses that does not reflect the broader ethos of the Qur'an, Barlas advocates a position that is not necessarily for or against the praxis of veiling. Nevertheless, both scholars reject the veil as a Qur'anic imperative and thereby undermine the *coercive* element of veiling. Drawing on this notion Barlas advocates that we must explore the issue of veiling in terms of Qur'anic ethics. The distorted understanding that women must veil because they have to take care of men's sexuality must be contested. This view is not based on a correct understanding of morality. By examining the modesty ideal pertaining to both men and women and as such, placing the custom of veiling within broader gender politics in the Qur'an, Barlas argues that men and women are alike in terms of sexual modesty pertaining to both modest dress and behaviour.

All Muslim feminist scholars represented in this chapter are using Islam as a parameter in terms of their theoretical works. The debates that come out of the framework of Islam and

religious scripture are discussions within the tradition. As such they all represent a marginalized narrative; Muslim women's voices.

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***Conclusion***

Throughout this thesis I have problematized and analyzed various contemporary discourses of the veil. The prevailing images of Muslim women, in terms of bodies, modesty, dressing and agency, have generated heated debates both in western and Muslim societies. However, the dominating political and politicised narratives represent discourses that often marginalize Muslim women's voices.

In my first chapter, I examined varying representations of Muslim women in the political debates pertaining to particular western contexts. Moving from the governmental and legislative state issues regarding veiling, I explored the more popular representations and debates around Muslim women in western media. In the second chapter I analyzed the different political ideologies relating to veiling in the Muslim majority context of Iran, and how women became symbolic in representing various state agendas. The case of Iran can also be seen as representative for a particular type of Islamic discourse primarily defined by ruling male elites.

Given that western and Islamic discourses are constructed by fundamentally different ideologies, I found that in both discourses there exist similar power-structures of gender dynamics when relating to issues of Muslim women's agency. Both hegemonic discourses tend to treat Muslim women as objects to be utilized within broader ideological debates that ultimately disregard Muslim women's voices and agency. Men are the ones who authoritatively construct and impose certain female ideals. However, dominant Western feminist discourses have previously also imposed their own constructions on Muslim women. It is noteworthy that the Iranian revolution was a turning point in how the West came to view contemporary Islam more broadly and Muslim women in particular. Nevertheless, both western and Islamic narratives, reflects a parallel line of discourse in terms of not genuinely engaging with Muslim women themselves. Ironically, these two discourses that seem to be so opposed to one another are

structurally dealing with Muslim women in similar ways. Subsequently, both western and Islamic discourses have clear ideological parallels in terms of gender ideology.

The similar constellations in western and Islamic discourses show that despite all the rhetoric of equality and freedom from oppression (especially in western discourses), the narratives impose coercive justifications for veiling or unveiling. Western discourses often claim to be the antithesis of Islamic ideology, however, by not involving Muslim women, certain Western discourses reflects similar authoritarian processes. The Muslim women who directly are affected by these various decisions or regulations are spoken for instead of actually being engaged in a dialogical relationship.

In my third chapter I explored a marginalized discourse: Muslim women's voices. I found that Muslim women are actively participating in critically analyzing and challenging dominant discourses around women's bodies, modesty and dressing. This chapter shows that Muslim women are contesting the dominant, often distorted, representations found in chapter one and two. By examining varying Muslim women's voices, I hope to add another, more representative, image of Muslim women's agency.

The need to question old assumptions concerning the 'women question' is important to be able to advocate a new gender consciousness which sees women as subjects. Muslim female interpreters and Muslim women, who wear the veil out of *choice*, promote this subjective individualistic tendency. In an un-Islamic context, the active choice taken by Muslim women donning the veil could represent the veil as a symbol of a personal identity. This development characterizes the Muslim woman as an individual who advocate her own independence through participating in her own identity shaping. By making this individual choice, albeit in a specific context, this choice can be seen as a result of an authentic subjective self-determination. Muslim women are consequently individuals who reflect the 'modern' characteristic of female participation through self-determination. At the same time, there are religiously engaged as well as secular Muslim women that contest the notion that veiling of women is necessarily required by Islam. Yet others challenge the coercive *imposition* of veiling based on sexist gender ideologies. On

the contrary, one also finds cases where some Muslim women become part of a political apparatus that imposes either veiling or unveiling on their peers. Thus discourses of the veil among Muslims certainly reflect that women's opinions and choices are divided. Western stereotyping and universalistic assumptions needs to be interrogated in order to properly address the contemporary debates concerning prohibitions and abolishment. The Muslim veil is without a doubt a powerful symbol which is capable of representing many shades of meaning and performing many functions. Against this background one can reach a deeper understanding *and* be able to resolve present conflicts of interest.

Western societies needs to consider what values are important to promote and at the same time representative for the present context. A positive attitude towards an increasing pluralism and multiculturalism creates a foundation for dialogue. The use of hijab in itself is not a symbol that advocates lack of integration. It is people's attitudes that promote this view and the imagined link between donning the hijab and isolation.

From the analysis undertaken one can ask what veiling symbolizes, both politically and religiously. Clearly in some cases, such as Iran, the Islamic dress becomes a fundamental part, however coercively, of who you are and what you stand for politically. I have also argued that certain western discourses pertain to this pre-conceived assumption. After all, if some western societies did not connect the veil with a particular ideology there would not be necessary to prohibit this symbol. Debates pertaining to religious visibility and identity also relate to another discussion. Who decides what it means to be a Muslim? And who decided that the wearing of religious symbols in public space connoted a certain public statement in relation to a specific religious identity, hence threatening the secular ideology and values such as equality, democracy? In western contexts it is clear that political expressions are based on values pertaining to secularization and modernization. Thereby, the norm is set by a certain authoritarian pre-conceived notion of sameness. Muslim women who don the veil will not reflect this 'accepted' norm since their physical expression conveys difference. Hence, the encounter between Islam and the West is dominated by certain problematic restrictions in terms of visual expressions in public life.

There is a belief that the donning of the veil could lead to identity differentiation and gender stigmatization. However, if the veil is banned will this necessarily improve the position of Muslim women in a western context? The search for Muslim women's participation in these debates is imperative when implementing laws that specifically affect the visible expressions and identities of Muslim women. By not engaging in dialogue, western discourses reflect a colonial narrative that gives no voice or agency to Muslim women. Controversial issues pertaining to superior cultures, where cultural values are imposed on 'the other' are assumptions that need to be contested in a Western context. As such Muslim women's identities in western contexts have emerged as various articulations pertaining to problematic hybridizations of self and other. Nevertheless, in western contexts, the elucidation on the veil as the 'new' Islamic or Muslim icon has been imperative for many Muslim women's self-representations. However, whether the veil is worn or rejected, its position as an active agent embedded with complex symbolisms is a reality.

So what are the possibilities for a future discourse? Multiculturalism and coexistence have become contested concepts that allude to politics of identity in relation to integration versus assimilation. However, the existing contemporary distortions concerning Muslim women must be critically examined since they predominantly are developed without examining Islam itself. In a Western context, it is important to create possibilities for a discourse that is based on authenticity, mutual understanding and respect, and to be aware of the challenges pertaining to such an endeavor.

The exposition of veiling or un-veiling in various contexts advocates the need for an increased knowledge and understanding of Muslim women's self-representations. Muslim women are striving for authentic self-representations which *will* result in various expressions of identities. The *existence* of choice, in terms of advocating various identities, is what is crucial for the evolving female agency. For some it is imperative for their self-understanding to maintain a clear Muslim identity. This identity can be advocated in terms of donning the hijab, go to mosques, or learn Arabic. The crucial

factor is that these identity-shaping instruments must be available and engaged with respectfully in a Western society.

I hope by the analysis undertaken to enhance the perceptions of Muslim women and contribute to a future dialogue between Muslims and non-Muslims. The contradictions and challenges experienced by many Muslim women in western contexts are pervasive. From embracing values such as equality, religious freedom and individual rights to still be seen as 'other' is both difficult and destructive for self-representations. It is crucial to start looking at Muslim women as a heterogeneous group with multiple identities and various expressions and manifestations of these identities. We must start to *listen* to Muslim women's voices to be able to develop authentic understandings. A re-examination of contemporary assumptions needs to take place; this includes both the veil as a Muslim symbol with all its encompassing meanings, and the implications for the women that rejects or dons it. Both scenarios are valid for the individual. One-dimensional representations are not longer viable or justifiable and must be contested as misrepresentative, ignorant and distorted representations of reality.

I advocate for the possibility of a future positive coexistence, where *all* voices must be taken into consideration and participate in the construction of a new discourse. A future based on dialogue, mutual understanding and respect might contest and deconstruct the contemporary myths and illusions created by both mainstream society and minority communities.

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