

RETHINKING MUSLIM WOMEN AND THE VEIL

Challenging Historical
& Modern Stereotypes



Katherine Bullock

THE INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ISLAMIC THOUGHT

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CONTENTS

	<i>page</i>
<i>Foreword</i>	vii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
<i>Preface</i>	xi
INTRODUCTION	xiii
The Veil and Feminist Approaches	xv
Islam and Methodology	xviii
The Veil, Islam and the West	xxxiii
Muslims in the West	xxxvii
Method and Argument	xxxviii
Terminology – The Veil	xl
1. <i>ḤIJĀB</i> IN THE COLONIAL ERA	1
Metaphysics of Modernity	3
The Harem and Colonial Control	18
The Meaning of <i>Ḥijāb</i> for Modernizing Elites	26
Conclusion	29
2. PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF WEARING <i>ḤIJĀB</i> IN TORONTO	35
Feminist Methodology and <i>Ḥijāb</i>	37
The Interviews	40
Perceptions of <i>Ḥijāb</i>	41
Wearing <i>Ḥijāb</i> in the West – Everyday Experiences	73
Conclusion	84
3. MULTIPLE MEANINGS OF <i>ḤIJĀB</i>	85
Reasons for Covering	87
Discussion of Themes	118
The Meaning of <i>Ḥijāb</i> – Western Media Viewpoint	122
Conclusion	133

4. MERNISSI AND THE DISCOURSE ON THE VEIL	136
Mernissi and Methodology	137
Women in <i>Beyond the Veil</i> and <i>The Veil and the Male Elite</i>	141
Discussion of Themes	151
Conclusion	177
5. AN ALTERNATIVE THEORY OF THE VEIL	183
<i>Hijāb</i> and Liberation	183
<i>Hijāb</i> and the Male Gaze	186
<i>Hijāb</i> and Femininity	192
<i>Hijāb</i> , Sexuality and Essentialism	200
<i>Hijāb</i> and Choice	214
<i>Hijāb</i> and Religiosity	216
Conclusion	219
6. CONCLUSION	220
APPENDIX 1 <i>The Interviewees</i>	230
APPENDIX 2 <i>Qur'anic Verses and Hadiths on Covering: Interviewees' References</i>	232
APPENDIX 3 <i>How do the Interviewees Want Others to See Them?</i>	233
APPENDIX 4 <i>Interview Questions</i>	236
<i>Bibliography</i>	241
<i>Index</i>	258

FOREWORD



Of knowledge, we have none, save what
You have taught us. (The Qur'an 2:32)

The International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) has great pleasure in presenting this treatise on Muslim women and the veil. The author, Dr. Katherine Bullock, embraced Islam during her Ph.D. candidacy and, interestingly, it was the experience of people's reaction to her conversion that led her to change the original topic of her doctoral thesis and choose instead the study of the veil as the subject of her Ph.D. Through careful and meticulous study into an area fraught with historical and cultural misconceptions the author has sought to challenge some of the subjective and negative fundamentals which have come to dominate much of the discourse into this important issue today.

This detailed and significant study is a powerful critique of the popular western notion that the veil is a symbol of Muslim women's oppression. In postulating a positive theory of the *hijāb*, the author challenges with great sophistication both the popular culture view of Muslim women as being utterly subjugated by men, as well as the more complex arguments put forward by liberal feminists such as Mernissi, Macleod, and others who have sought to criticize women's choices to cover as ultimately 'un-liberating.' Examining and questioning the validity and accuracy of some of the latter's assumptions, the author puts forward the case that the judgment of the veil as being an oppressive feature of Islam is based on liberal understandings of 'equality' and 'liberty' that preclude other ways of thinking about 'equality' and 'liberty' which would offer a more positive approach for contemplating the wearing of the veil. The author argues that in a consumer

capitalist culture, the *ḥijāb* can be experienced as liberation from the tyranny of the beauty myth and the thin 'ideal' woman.

The IIIT, established in 1981, has served as a major center to facilitate sincere and serious scholarly efforts based on Islamic vision, values and principles. Its programs of research, seminars and conferences during the last twenty years have resulted in the publication of more than two hundred and sixty titles in English and Arabic, many of which have been translated into several other languages.

In conformity with the IIIT in-house style sheet, words and proper names of Arabic origin or written in a script derived from Arabic have been transliterated throughout the work except when mentioned in quoted text. In such cases they have been cited as they appear without application of our transliteration system.

We would like to express our thanks and gratitude to Dr. Katherine Bullock, who, throughout the various stages of the book's production, cooperated closely with the editorial group at the IIIT London Office.

We would also like to thank the editorial and production team at the London Office and those who were directly involved in the completion of this book: Sylvia Hunt (who made an important contribution by reducing the length of chapter one of the original manuscript which now appears as chapter two), Shiraz Khan, Sohail Nakhoda and Dr. Maryam Mahmood, all of whom worked tirelessly in preparing the book for publication. May God reward them and the author for all their efforts.

Şafar 1423
May 2002

ANAS AL-SHAIKH-ALI
Academic Advisor
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*All praise is due to God, the Creator
and Sustainer of the Universe.*

This book is based on my Ph.D. thesis, ‘The Politics of the Veil.’ It has seen different versions since then, but I remain indebted to the members of my thesis committee, Joseph Carens, Melissa Williams and Janice Boddy for their encouragement, support and critical feedback on the initial text. *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil* would not be here today if it were not for their support during my Ph.D. years. My thanks again go to the women I interviewed for the thesis, who gave so generously of their time and thinking: about Islam, the *hijāb* and their personal lives. Their words are the heart of my thesis, and of this book.

Chapter One appeared as a shorter article ‘The Gaze and Colonial Plans for the Unveiling of Muslim Women’, in *Studies in Contemporary Islam* (2, 2, Fall 2000); Chapter Three, as a shorter article ‘Challenging Media Representations of the Veil: Contemporary Muslim Women’s Reveiling Movement’, in the *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* (17, 3, Fall 2000); Chapter Four as a book review of Fatima Mernissi’s *Beyond the Veil*, in the *Journal of Law and Religion* (xv, 1 and 2, 2000–2001). I am grateful to the publishers for permission to reprint these materials.

At the IIIT office, my thanks go to Dr. Louay Safi, and Dr. Anas Al-Shaikh-Ali for their backing of my project, and to Sylvia Hunt for her expert copyediting of the manuscript.

To all my friends and family, I wish to express my appreciation for their continuous support and encouragement for my project: for long conversations about issues the *hijāb* brings up; and for reading different versions of the text and giving critical feedback. Here also are

my apologies for often being too busy writing to take time out to reply properly to e-mails or letters.

Many long hours have gone into this book; I hope it is successful in helping dispel some myths about Muslim women and *hijāb*. If the book helps ease the lives of Muslim women in the West, I will feel I have done my job. May God assist us, and guide us to a path that is straight.

KATHERINE BULLOCK
California, 2001

PREFACE

Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil was being copy-edited for publication when the tragic attack on the World Trade Center in New York occurred. President Bush's response included an emphatic message to the American people not to attack Muslims in America in revenge. At his visit to a Washington DC mosque on September 17, 2001, Bush made a speech praising Islam and arguing that Muslim women in America who wear *ḥijāb* must feel comfortable to do so and not to feel intimidated going outside. President Bush's speech was published in *The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* (November 2001, xx, 8, pp.78–79). This public endorsement of the *ḥijāb* by the highest political leader in the US is unprecedented. It renders obsolete that part of my argument where I suggest that the negative stereotype of the *ḥijāb* in the popular western perception is essential to US foreign policy. On the other hand, the week after the atrocities, I received in the mail a free-trial offer from *The Economist*, whose cover was a picture of a woman in *niqāb* and the heading "Can Islam and Democracy Mix?" This was an extremely insensitive and shameless attempt on the part of *The Economist* to capitalize on anti-Islamic sentiment that had been aroused in the US by the September 11th attack. It remains to be seen whether Bush's speech marks the advent of a new era of public discourse about *ḥijāb* in the West, or if *The Economist's* cover article indicates that it will be business as usual.

INTRODUCTION

In 1991 I saw a news report on the television that showed Turkish women who were returning to the veil. I felt shocked and saddened for them. “Poor things,” I thought, “they are being brainwashed by their culture.” Like many Westerners, I believed that Islam oppressed women and that the veil was a symbol of their oppression. Imagine my surprise then, four years later, at seeing my own reflection in a store window, dressed exactly like those oppressed women. I had embarked on a spiritual journey during my Master’s degree that culminated four years later in my conversion to Islam. The journey included moving from hatred of Islam, to respect, to interest, to acceptance. Naturally, being a woman, the issue of the veil was central. Despite my attraction to the theological foundations of Islam, I was deeply troubled by what I believed to be practices oppressive to women. I felt that the veil was a cultural tradition that Muslim women could surely work to eliminate. I was shown the verses in the Qur’an that many Muslims believe enjoin covering on men and women, and it seemed quite clear to me then that, indeed, the verses did impose covering. I wandered home, feeling quite depressed and sorry for Muslim women. If the verses were clear, they had no recourse: covering would be required for a believing Muslim woman. I had to put these issues aside in order to decide whether or not to accept Islam. What counted, in the final analysis, was the fundamental theological message of the religion – that there is a single God, and that Muhammad (ṢAAS)* was His Last Servant and Messenger. After several years of study I had no doubt about that ... if only it were not for the issue of women and Islam.

* (ṢAAS) – *Ṣallā Allāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam*. ‘May the peace and blessings of God be upon him.’ Said whenever the name of the Prophet Muhammad is mentioned.

When I finally made my decision to convert, now one and a half years into my doctorate (July 1994), I decided that whether I liked it or not, I should cover. It was a commandment, and I would obey. I warned some people in my department that I had become a Muslim, and that the next time they saw me I would be covered. Needless to say, people were quite shocked, and as word spread (and as people saw me in my new dress), I found myself subject to some hostile treatment. How could I have embraced an oppressive practice, especially when I was known as a strong and committed feminist? How could I embrace Islam? Had I not heard what Hamas had just done? Had I not heard what some Muslim man had just done to a woman? I was not quite prepared for this hostility, nor was I prepared for the different way I was being treated by secretaries, bureaucrats, medical personnel, or general strangers on the subway. I felt the same, but I was often being treated with contempt. I was not treated as I had been as a white, middle-class woman. It was my first personal experience of discrimination and racism, and made me see my previous privileged position in a way that I had never before properly understood.

My new Muslim women friends (including many converts) comforted me as I negotiated my way through my new religion and the reactions that I was experiencing from the broader community. How did my friends manage this situation, I wondered? Did they experience wearing *hijāb* (headscarf) in Toronto the same way I did, or was I just being overly sensitive? Did people really stare on the subway, or were they looking at something else? Why was I being treated with pity and/or contempt? During this difficult time I was deciding on a topic for my Ph.D. dissertation, and although I tried to avoid it for a while, it became obvious that the reaction to the headscarf was a topic worthy of exploration. Why was the ‘veil’ seen as a symbol of oppression in the West? Why did the West seem to malign Islam? How could I and my friends feel committed to something that we felt was liberating, and yet be in so much conflict with the non-Muslim society around us? Why did people not know our version of Islam and the scarf?

After I finished my doctoral thesis on *The Politics of the Veil*, and after the positive feedback that I received from those who read the

dissertation, I felt it was important to share my research with a wider audience. The foremost aim of this book is to challenge the popular Western stereotype that the veil is oppressive. My main argument is that the popular Western notion that the veil is a symbol of Muslim women's oppression is a constructed image that does not represent the experience of all those who wear it. That construction had always served Western political ends, and it continued to do so even in the late twentieth century. In addition, I argue that the judgment that the veil is oppressive is based on liberal understandings of 'equality' and 'liberty' that preclude other ways of thinking about 'equality' and 'liberty' that offer a more positive approach for contemplating the wearing of the veil.

A. THE VEIL AND FEMINIST APPROACHES

The perception that the veil is a symbol of Islam's oppression of women has different adherents who embody different assumptions and different levels of sophistication. On the one hand there is the mainstream, pop culture view: Muslim women are completely and utterly subjugated by men, and the veil is a symbol of that. This version is the most simplistic and unsophisticated view of the veil. It is underpinned by an unconscious adherence to liberalism and modernization theory, compounded by an ignorance of any actual details about Muslim women's lives. The pop culture view is found in the mainstream media and mass market 'women and Islam' books. It is the view that I encounter: when my dentist suggests that my grinding problem is caused by my scarf, and why don't I experiment by taking it off for a while?; when bureaucrats, upon seeing my Australian passport and my husband's Middle Eastern passport, whisper conspiratorally and worriedly to me, "You married a Muslim, didn't you? What's it like?;" when strangers, upon discovering that I married a Muslim, ask me worriedly, "Are you happy?;" and when I am told that I do not belong at an International Women's Day fair because I represent the oppression of women. It is the view on which Western politicians rely and which they manipulate when they need to assert their interests in the Muslim world.

A more sophisticated view is that of one school of feminists,

both Muslim and non-Muslim. They argue that Islam, like any patriarchal religion, subordinates women. They are committed to women's rights and believe that Islam does not allow women liberation. Unlike the pop culture version, these feminists are often very knowledgeable about Islamic history and practice. Though some of them do not listen attentively to the voices of covered women,¹ others do make an attempt to understand and present the Other's voice.² However, these writers do not ultimately find Muslim women's arguments for the meaning of covering persuasive. They remain convinced that a satisfying life in the veil is still an oppressed life. Like the mainstream view, their assumptions are also ultimately grounded in liberalism. The concepts most at play are liberal concepts of individualism, equality, liberty, and oppression. For this reason, I shall call this school of feminists 'liberal feminists'.

There is another school of feminists, both Muslim and non-Muslim, that also listens to the voices of covered women, but reaches

¹ Azar Tabari, 'Islam and the Struggle for Emancipation of Iranian Women', in Azar Tabari and Nahid Yeganeh (eds.), *In the Shadow of Islam: The Women's Movement in Iran* (London: Zed Press, 1982); Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society*, revd. edn. (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1987), and *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1991); Marie-Aimée Hélie-Lucas, 'Women, Nationalism and Religion in the Algerian Struggle', in Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke (eds.), *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1990); 'Women's Struggles and Strategies in the Rise of Fundamentalism in the Muslim World: From Entryism to Internationalism', in Haleh Afshar (ed.), *Women in the Middle East: Perceptions, Realities and Struggles for Liberation* (London: Macmillan, 1993), and 'The Preferential Symbol for Islamic Identity: Women in Muslim Personal Laws', in Valentine Moghadam (ed.), *Identity Politics and Women: Cultural Reassertions and Feminisms in International Perspective* (Boulder, Co.: Westview Press, 1994).

² Haleh Afshar, 'Islam and Feminism: An Analysis of Political Strategies', in Mai Yamani (ed.), *Feminism and Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives*, (Reading, Berks, (UK): Garnet, 1996); Arlene Elowe Macleod, *Accommodating Protest: Working Women and the New Veiling in Cairo* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); Leila Hessini, 'Wearing the Hijab in Contemporary Morocco: Choice and Identity', in Fatma Müge Göçek and Shiva Balaghi (eds.), *Reconstructing Gender in the Middle East: Tradition, Identity, and Power* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); Carla Makhlouf, *Changing Veils: Women and Modernisation in North Yemen* (London: Croom Helm, 1979); Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); Nikki Keddie, 'Introduction: Deciphering Middle Eastern Women's History', in Nikki Keddie and Beth Baron (eds.), *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1991).

different conclusions about covering from those of the liberal feminists. Often anthropologists and historians, this group of feminists has been concerned to understand the meaning of a social practice from the inside. These feminists may also be grounded in liberalism to some extent, but their methodological approach leads them away from using mainstream Western liberal categories to judge the Other's voice. Many of these feminists raise the question as to whether Western feminists' issues are universally applicable.³ Naming this group of scholars is somewhat problematic, because unlike the liberal approach described above, there is not an 'ism' that captures this orientation. For want of a better term, I shall call this approach the 'contextual approach'.

Writing as a practicing Muslim woman, I fall into this school of feminism.⁴ I present the interviews of Muslim women who live and work in Toronto, Canada, as a way of better understanding the practice of covering, and as a way of puncturing the popular image of Muslim women as subjugated (Chapter Two). My argument is thus directed at two different levels. In addition to challenging the pop culture view of veiling, I also seek to challenge liberal feminists' understanding of the oppressive nature of veiling.

³ Uni Wikan, *Behind the Veil in Arabia: Women in Oman* (Baltimore, Md.: John Hopkins University Press, 1982); Lila Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1986); Judith E. Tucker, 'Problems in the Historiography of Women in the Middle East: The Case of Nineteenth Century Egypt', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 15 (1983), pp.321-336, and 'Introduction', in J. Tucker (ed.), *Arab Women: Old Boundaries, New Frontiers*, (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1993); Janice Boddy, *Women, Men, and the Zar Cult in Northern Sudan* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989); Mai Yamani, 'Introduction', in Mai Yamani (ed.), *Feminism and Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives* (Reading, Berks, UK: Garnet, 1996); Elizabeth Fernea, *Guests of the Sheikh: An Ethnography of an Iraqi Village*, 2nd edn. (New York: Anchor Books, 1989); 'The Veiled Revolution', in D. Bowen and E. Early (eds.), *Everyday Life in the Muslim Middle East* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1993), and 'Foreword', in Amira El Azhary (ed.), *Women, The Family, and Divorce Laws in Islamic History* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996); Elizabeth Fernea and Bassima Bezirgan (eds.), *Middle Eastern Muslim Women Speak* (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1977).

⁴ A practicing Muslim is one who abides by the five pillars of Islam (testament of faith, prayer five times daily, fasting during the month of Ramadan, annual charity and pilgrimage once in a lifetime). Many Muslims no longer practice their faith, just as many Christians no longer go to church and many Jews no longer attend the synagogue or observe kosher. Nonpractice does not imply nonbelief.

B. ISLAM AND METHODOLOGY

As many commentators have observed, the study of Muslim women, indeed, Islam in general, has suffered from methodological problems not found in other areas. Until recently, the predominant methodological approach to the study of Muslim women has been Orientalist, or neo-Orientalist. Orientalism, masterfully analysed by Edward Said, has viewed Muslims through the prism of religion. 'Islam' has been seen as a static, monolithic, backward doctrine that both explains and determines Muslim behavior. Colonialists, missionaries, and secular feminists have subscribed to this view. After World War II, Orientalism was transformed into modernization theory (neo-Orientalism). This approach analyzed the non-Western world with the assumption that 'progress' required the world to evolve into Western style institutions.⁵ The mainstream Western media and mass-market books still rely on a belief in the inherent superiority of Western ways to make the case against Islam. In colonial times, Muslim élites accepted the Western version of the meaning of the veil, and they also saw its disappearance as essential to the 'modernization' of their countries. A Lebanese woman, Nazira Zain al-Din, the "first Arab woman to publish a lengthy treatise" on the topic of veiling, wrote:

I have noticed that the nations that have given up the veil are the nations that have advanced in intellectual and material life. The unveiled nations are the ones that have discovered through research and study the secrets of nature and have brought the physical elements under their control as you see and know. But the veiled nations have not unearthed any secret and have not put any of the physical elements under their control but only sing the songs of a glorious past and ancient tradition.⁶

⁵ Cynthia Nelson, 'Old Wine, New Bottles: Reflections and Projections Concerning Research on Women in Middle Eastern Studies', in Earl L. Sullivan and Jacqueline S. Ismael (eds.), *The Contemporary Study of the Arab World* (Edmonton, Alta., Canada: University of Alberta Press, 1991), p.131; Donna Robinson Divine, 'Unveiling the Mysteries of Islam: The Art of Studying Muslim Women', *J. of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, VII, 2 (Winter 1983), pp.5-10; Fernea, 'Foreword', p.xi; Amira El Azhary Sonbol (ed.), *Women, the Family, and Divorce Laws in Islamic History* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996), p.4.

⁶ Nazira Zain al-Din, 'Unveiling and Veiling: On the Liberation of the Woman and Social Renewal in the Islamic World', [Beirut, 1928] in M. Badran and M. Cooke (eds.), *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1990), p.272.

Historians, and anthropologists in particular, have challenged Orientalism and modernization theory in relation to Muslim women by urging a focus on the specificity of Muslim women in order to understand them better.⁷ They have challenged viewing Muslim women only through the eyes of a deterministic religion, and demonstrate in their work that other institutions in society make an impact on women's lives: local customs, and political and economic forces. Marsot argues that economic and political exigencies are what count, and religion/ideology is used only to legitimate whatever has been required. She observes that in wartime, women are encouraged to work outside the home, but after the war, domesticity is urged. She believes this is a universal phenomenon, and mentions Rosie the Riveter in the United States.⁸

Indeed, it is useful to point out that women's rights frequently deteriorated under European intervention in the Muslim world, challenging the linkage of modernization and Westernization with liberation for Muslim women.⁹ Seclusion increased in the Ottoman Empire during European penetration.¹⁰ Meriwether documents the adverse impact that European economic penetration had on Aleppo, Syria, especially on urban working-class women, who lost their

⁷ Tucker, 'Problems in the Historiography of Women', p.327; Marnia Lazreg, *The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in Question* (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp.14-15; Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, 'Women and Modernization: A Reevaluation', in Amira El Azhary Sonbol (ed.), *Women, the Family, and Divorce Laws in Islamic History* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996), p.50; Sonbol, *Women, The Family, and Divorce Laws*, p.20; Camillia Fawzi El-Solh, and Judy Mabro (eds.), *Muslim Women's Choices: Religious Belief and Social Reality* (Oxford, UK: Berg Publishers, 1994), p.2; Deniz Kandiyoti, 'Contemporary Feminist Scholarship and Middle East Studies', in Deniz Kandiyoti (ed.), *Gendering the Middle East: Emerging Perspectives*, (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996), p.9.

⁸ Marsot, 'Women and Modernization', p.51.

⁹ Margaret L. Meriwether, 'Women and Economic Change in Nineteenth-Century Syria: The Case of Aleppo', in J. Tucker (ed.), *Arab Women: Old Boundaries, New Frontiers* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1993); Tucker, 'Problems', and 'Introduction'; Sonbol, *Women, the Family, and Divorce Laws*.

¹⁰ Divine, 'Unveiling the Mysteries', p.8. Wikan's study of Omani women is a masterful examination of women who live in seclusion. She looks at their lives through their own eyes and categories. I know that not all women experience seclusion as oppressive, and I am aware that I may be showing the same negative attitude as those who judge the veil oppressive when I write against seclusion. My aim is not to assert that these women are unhappy, or deluded by false consciousness. However, their way of life is not a vision to which I aspire, nor do I think it in accordance with Islam. See Wikan, *Behind the Veil*.

important place in the cotton industry owing to imported European twists and dyes.¹¹ Muslim women have had the right under Islamic law to own and control their own property, theoretically without the husband's involvement. In Aleppo, upper-class women were "property owners of some importance in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries... In 1770, 59 percent of all property sales involved women as either buyers or sellers; in 1800, 67 percent; and in 1840, 53 percent."¹² Women in Egypt were not so lucky. Muhammad Ali's (1805–1848) centralization program deprived them of economic independence. In Mamluk Egypt (1254–1811) upper- and middle-class women had actively participated in the economy. Elite women were significant property owners and tax farmers. They engaged in trade and commerce. Centralization excluded them, as Marsot documents, because the ruler gave away land at his discretion to women's detriment. In addition, the

new centralized system also introduced new institutions derived from Europe that militated against women. Banks, stock exchanges, insurance companies, et cetera, in Europe did not recognize the legal existence of women; and so they followed the same strategies in Egypt. Women were not allowed to open bank accounts in their own names or to play the stock market or to indulge in other activities in their own right.¹³

Marsot argues that it is only in the twentieth century that women have "recovered some of the economic activities they had had in the eighteenth century" (p.47). So, if modernization improved health and education and, after colonialism, ended seclusion, in other areas women's "social maneuverability" deteriorated.¹⁴

Hence historical study of specific women in specific places is revealing that Westernization and modernization did not always equal advancement for Muslim women. That should not actually come as a surprise to any feminist. Which of them in their analysis of their own societies ever believed that modernity was liberating for

¹¹ Meriwether, 'Women and Economic Change', p.75.

¹² Ibid., p.70.

¹³ Marsot, 'Women and Modernization', pp.45–46.

¹⁴ Sonbol, *Women, the Family, and Divorce Laws*, p.7. See also Tucker, 'Problems', p.332, and 'Introduction', pp.xi–xii.

women? On the contrary, feminists attack modernity for enshrining ‘male–female,’ ‘reason–nature,’ ‘superior–inferior’ dichotomies that suppress women.¹⁵

My study also attempts to challenge the tradition–modernity dichotomy. The veil is seen as quintessentially traditional. Colonialists, missionaries, Orientalists and secular feminists attacked veiling as a backward tradition, but it is now known that veiling became more widespread in the Middle East after Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in 1798, and increased during European occupation of the Middle East (1830–1956). Cole writes:

In an Orientalist corollary to Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle, the intrusive presence of Westerners appears to have helped produce the phenomenon [widespread veiling] that they observed. In short, the notion of tradition as a stable foil for the dynamism of modernity has been demolished, as the diversity and volatility of premodern extra-European societies has come to be better appreciated.¹⁶

So ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ are unstable categories. My book aims to break the equation: ‘modernity equals unveil’.

Committed Muslims are often criticized for discussing the status of women in ‘Islam’ in terms similar to the Orientalists: they assume religion to be the determinate force in people’s lives, and they discuss an ahistorical ‘Islam’ that liberates women. For instance, they argue that “in Islam women have the right to own property,” when in actual practice women may not have been able to own property. Lazreg notes how that approach mirrors the Orientalist: it ignores the very real oppressions that Muslim women have faced, or currently face.¹⁷ Orientalists ignore specificity to claim Muslim backwardness; these Muslims ignore specificity to claim progressiveness. As I emphasize throughout this book, religious text does not determine in any causal way how people live. There are factors of interpretation of text,

¹⁵ Christine Kulke, ‘Equality and Difference: Approaches to Feminist Theory and Politics’, in Joanna de Groot and Mary Maynard (eds.), *Women’s Studies in the 1990’s: Doing Things Differently?* (London: Macmillan, 1993), pp.134–135.

¹⁶ Juan R.I. Cole, ‘Gender, Tradition, and History’, in Fatma Müge Coçek and Shiva Balaghi (eds.), *Reconstructing Gender in the Middle East: Tradition, Identity, and Power* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p.24; Keddie, ‘Introduction’, p.13.

¹⁷ Lazreg, *The Eloquence of Silence*, p.13.

prevailing discourse, local customs, and political, economic and social considerations. Any study that purports to discuss Muslim women as they are must account for all those forces.¹⁸

Lazreg argues that unlike black women in the United States, 'Eastern' feminists frequently adopted Western feminist categories without interrogating their relevance first.¹⁹ Tabari's account confirms this, as she mentions second wave feminism in the West as a guide and inspiration to Iranian feminists in the late 1970s/early 1980s.²⁰ That entailed an acceptance of modernization theory, and the view that liberal secularism was the only path for women's liberation. There are still feminists with those views. However, the 1990s has seen the emergence of two separate, but probably related, phenomena that signal a change from this: the rise of indigenous (that is, non-Western) academics who accept a feminist goal, but who seek to fashion an indigenous model that does not hold the West as its ideal model; and the increased numbers of Muslim women worldwide who have started covering. These two groups may have overlaps, although there may be some in the first who do not wish to cover, and some in the second who do not identify with feminism. The first category often includes historians and anthropologists who emphasize studying the specificity of Muslim women. Even if they are secularists, Muslim/Arab feminist scholars are insisting on a feminism that is indigenous. Yamani's collection of essays about Muslim women by Muslim and Arab women is a call for an indigenous feminism.²¹

The second category of women, which comprises mostly non-academic women, are those in the 're-veiling' movement that started in the late 1970s. This trend, where many young, educated women started covering even though some of their mothers and grandmothers had fought against the veil, has caught many feminist scholars off

¹⁸ Nelson, 'Old Wine, New Bottles', p.141; Tucker, 'Problems', p.325.

¹⁹ Marnia Lazreg, 'Feminism and Difference: The Perils of Writing as a Woman on Women in Algeria', *Feminist Studies*, 14, 1 (1988), p.82.

²⁰ Azar Tabari, 'The Women's Movement in Iran; A Hopeful Prognosis', *Feminist Studies*, 12, 2 (Summer 1986), p.353.

²¹ Yamani, 'Introduction', p.24. See also, Tucker, 'Introduction', p.xi; Azza M. Karam, *Women, Islamisms and the State: Contemporary Feminisms in Egypt* (London: Macmillan, 1998); Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992).

guard. Why embrace a symbol of oppression? Afshar, who admits to not understanding why women embrace the veil,²² writes:

The twentieth century marked the apex of Muslim women's intellectual engagement with their religion, first to denounce it and to disengage from its gender-specific prescriptions, and then to return to the texts and reclaim their Islamic rights. Faced with this unexpected *volte face* researchers have tended to take embattled positions to attack or defend the faith, and have all too often failed to engage with the realities and the situations in which women have found themselves.²³

By and large, it seems that many feminists have trouble knowing how to deal with the veil, Islam, and the women who embrace it. Afshar points to the "embattled positions" that researchers take, and Keddie observes that the women and Islam field is ideologically charged and tense:

One group denies that Muslim women ... are any more oppressed than non-Muslim women or argue that in key respects they have been less oppressed. A second says that oppression is real but extrinsic to Islam; the Qur'an, they say, intended gender equality, but this was undermined by Arabian patriarchy and foreign importations. An opposing group blames Islam for being irrevocably gender inequalitarian. There are also those who adopt intermediate positions, as well as those who tend to avoid these controversies by sticking to monographic or limited studies that do not confront such issues. Some scholars favour shifting emphasis away from Islam to economic and social forces.²⁴

²² Haleh Afshar, 'Fundamentalism and its Female Apologists', in Renee Prendergast and H. W. Singer (eds.), *Development Perspectives for the 1990s* (London: Macmillan, 1991), p.315.

²³ Haleh Afshar, 'Development Studies and Women in the Middle East: The Dilemmas of Research and Development', in Haleh Afshar (ed.), *Women in the Middle East: Perceptions, Realities and Struggles for Liberation* (London: Macmillan, 1993), pp.8-9.

²⁴ Keddie, 'Introduction', pp.1-2. Keddie notes that a debate amongst feminists is whether to try to reform Islam from within, or to embrace secularism wholeheartedly (p.19). That conclusion is shared by many Muslim intellectuals, for whom secularism has great appeal. With regard to Turkey, see Yesim Arat, 'Women's Movement of the 1980s in Turkey: Radical Outcome of Liberal Kemalism?' in Fatma Müge Coçek and Shiva Balaghi (eds.), *Reconstructing Gender in the Middle East: Tradition, Identity, and Power* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994). With regard to Egypt, see Karam, *Women, Islamisms and the State*.

It is my belief that there is no doubt that Muslim women are often unduly restricted and denied their rights to attain their full potential as human beings, but I maintain that we must be very cautious about where we lay the blame for this situation. Sometimes Islamic jurists have extrapolated too much from certain verses of the Qur'an to formulate laws that restrict and discriminate against women (for example, restrictions on involvement in public life stemming from a particular understanding of verses from the Qur'an such as 4:34, that is often taken to proclaim general male guardianship over women).²⁵ Often, however, restrictions on women are based on a local community's way of 'being Muslim,' that has little reference to the Qur'an, the Sunnah, or juristic teachings, or result from women's own understanding of their role, which they then impose on others. We should always attend to how much actual practice is based upon explicit juristic rulings, and how much is based upon other factors. As I explain in more detail in Chapter Four, we should be very careful in equating 'Islam' with 'Islamic law', and indeed, especially careful in suggesting a deterministic relationship between restrictive interpretations of a particular Qur'anic verse, or juristic rulings on women in general and the resulting practices of Muslims in all centuries and all countries. Local custom and predilections are relevant, perhaps most important for an understanding of women's actual role and involvement in society.

Obviously conceptual views of women's position and role in society do count for something, and one of the burning questions of the contemporary Muslim scene is to what extent early juristic prescriptions and prescriptions for women's status and role ought to be the guiding norm for Muslims today. Several camps exist (amongst those seeking to debate these issues from inside the fold of Islam):

1. Traditionalists who argue that Islamic law is already complete and ought to be relied upon as authoritative.

²⁵ Qur'an, 4:34: "Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because God has given the one more [strength] than the other, and because they support them from their means." 'Abdullāh Yūsuf 'Alī, *The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary*, new revd. edn. (Brentwood, Md: Amana Corporation 1989). Unless otherwise noted, all Qur'anic translations are from 'A. Yūsuf 'Alī; Abdullahi An-Na'im, *Toward an Islamic Reformation: Civil Liberties, Human Rights, and International Law* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1990), pp.54-55.

2. Modernists of various types (including some feminists) who in differing ways aim to build on, extrapolate from, or sometimes negate, classical Islamic law, and reinterpret it for modern times (many of whom attempt to overcome the classical law's restrictions on women by reinterpreting Qur'anic verses in the light of the Qur'an's unmistakable commitment to male and female spiritual equality).
3. 'Salafis' calling for the end of adherence to traditional schools of law, who rely on the same early scholars as do the others, but who do not rely on the historical precedents of the total body of classical Islamic law, instead formulating new rulings on some matters, and who, in varying degrees, do and do not promote equality of the sexes (often referred to as fundamentalists or Islamists, which is confusing, since some in the modernist camp concur on the point of ending Muslims' total adherence to a particular traditional school of law).

There are also those feminists whose benchmark is liberal secular liberalism, who seek to remove all aspects of Islamic law that do not conform to a secular liberal feminist standard of equality and liberation for women.

An assumption of this book is that 'Islam' does not oppress women, and that where 'Islam' finds its expression in law, that law should not oppress or discriminate against women; and that where such burdens are to be found in law, they should be amended or removed, and that the Qur'an and Sunnah provide the legitimacy and wherewithal so to do. However, to elaborate how that could be done would be the subject of another book, not that of this book which is dedicated to challenging the notion that the veil oppresses women. My contention is that if and where veiling is linked to oppressive practices against women, such as under the Taliban's regime in Afghanistan of the 1990s, where women have been denied education, confined to the home, and barred from any role in public life, veiling may be seen as a symbol of women's oppression in that community. Nevertheless, suppression ought not to be generalized either

to 'Islam', or to 'the' meaning of the veil. The main task of this work is to disconnect such assumptions, and demonstrate multiple meanings of the veil. The focus is on the Western discourse of the veil, rather than debates inside the Muslim world.

Hence I differ from Sonbol, who argues that an important methodological problem in the field is with those scholars who accept the Qur'an, Hadith, and Sunnah as "representing the *actual* as opposed to the normative condition of women."²⁶ Her assumption is that the normative position of women can be said to be oppressive, but that actual women's lives may not have been, that actual women's lives may not have conformed to the description of a constricting 'official' doctrine: "If anything, social discourse seems to point to a position quite opposite to what the 'formal' discourse presents us. This means that the actual lives women led caused reactionary clergymen to interpret laws more conservatively. The 'looser' the women, the stricter the interpretation" (p.5). Across Islamic history, this is sometimes true. Huda Lutfi's analysis of fourteenth-century Ibn al-Hajj's prescriptive treatise is an example. Ibn al-Hajj was denouncing Cairene women's habits in no uncertain terms, arguing forcefully that they should be made to stay in their homes. Cairene women ignored such injunctions to stay home, and carried on business in the marketplace and so on as usual. Lutfi uses these women's daily lives to challenge the stereotype of Muslim women as submissive.²⁷ However, like Sonbol, her argument is that Muslim ideals found in theological literatures are restrictive and oppressive to women, and not an ideal.

Sonbol's and Lutfi's points are an important corrective to the Orientalist/religion paradigm that would have Muslim women oppressed owing to one or two verses in the Qur'an that do not seem to accord women equality and dignity. Nevertheless, I would qualify their corrective. I agree that there are interpretations of the Qur'an that normatively point to an 'ideal' that is anti-woman. However,

²⁶ Sonbol, *Women, the Family, and Divorce Laws*, p.5.

²⁷ Huda Lutfi, 'Manners and Customs of Fourteenth-Century Cairene Women: Female Anarchy versus Male Shar'i Order in Muslim Prescriptive Treatises', in Nikki Keddie and Beth Baron (eds.), *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender*, (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1991), p.118.

there are other interpretations that do not. It depends on which verse one is quoting and to which scholar one is referring. In addition, it depends on which definition of freedom or equality one is drawing upon. Hence I disagree with Lutfi's extrapolation from Ibn al-Ḥajj's text to all Islamic theology. She analyzes his text to show that "formal Islamic discourse," whether medieval or modern, seeks a patriarchal ideal order that inherently oppresses women.²⁸ My conclusion is that some Islamic discourses may result in an oppressively patriarchal order, but other Islamic discourses do not.

Berkday, a Turkish feminist, criticizes the contextual approach described above, which seeks to understand Muslim women from their own perspective, for its cultural relativism. She argues, following Tabari, "cultural relativism becomes a banner under which oppression may be made to appear tolerable."²⁹ Berkday refers to veiling as an example of the problems of cultural relativism:

This benevolent cultural relativism on the part of Western feminists sometimes goes so far as to extend a rationalisation of the segregation of women to accepting and condoning even veiling for the Middle Eastern 'sisters': 'Although universally perceived in the West as an oppressive custom, it [veiling] is not experienced as such by women who habitually wear it', writes Leila Ahmed.³⁰ Leaving aside the strength of the argument about the social construction of experience and feelings, and about how misleading it therefore is to claim a special 'authenticity' for (only some among) them, one wonders whether Western feminists, who know perfectly well that these practices spring from a theology of the maintenance of so-called female purity, would ever accept 'veiling' for themselves – and not as an 'alternative' way of life, but as something compulsory, from which there is no possibility of opting out.³¹

Berkday believes there is a difference between avoiding Eurocentrism, and avoiding criticism of oppressive practices in 'Other'

²⁸ Ibid., pp.100, 118–119.

²⁹ Fatmagül Berkday, 'Looking from the "Other" Side: Is Cultural Relativism a Way Out?' in Joanna de Groot and Mary Maynard (eds.), *Women's Studies in the 1990's: Doing Things Differently?* (London: Macmillan, 1993), p.120; Tabari, 'The Women's Movement in Iran', p.356.

³⁰ Leila Ahmed, 'Western Ethnocentrism and Perceptions of the Harem', *Feminist Studies*, 8, 3 (Fall 1982), p.523.

³¹ Berkday, 'Looking from the "Other" Side', p.123.

cultures. But as the quotation above illustrates, it would be difficult to agree on what counts as ‘oppressive practices’. She obviously finds veiling oppressive, whereas I do not. And I reject the assumption that I hold my position unreflectingly. Our different judgments about veiling have to do with differences in our worldviews and in ideological and political commitments and contexts. However, I understand Berktaý’s emphasis on seeking what is common between women of different cultures. As Moors argues, difference should not be essentialized: there are universal human values that can unite us.³² What this means, though, is that it should be indigenous women themselves who define what counts as an oppressive practice for them. As this chapter shows, even amongst themselves they will not agree. What needs to be done, then, is to accept disagreement and work together on issues that coincide. There will be issues on which all women can cooperate: education, spousal abuse, humane treatment for women and so on.

Berktaý is one of the few feminists openly to challenge feminist attempts to understand the meaning of veiling from within as cultural relativism gone wrong, although I would argue that her view is the prevailing norm in most feminist studies of Muslim women (even if left unstated). Hélie-Lucas argues that feminist attempts to find liberation from within Islam will eventually reveal the limits of Islam,³³ and Keddie and Berktaý conclude that the ‘different-but-equal’ notion often used by Muslims to contend for the equality of women in Islam, is not equal, but inferior.³⁴ Keddie holds that even if Muslim women are treated with dignity and respect in covering, veiling is part “of a system where males are dominant and females are to be controlled.”³⁵ Hessini argues that women who choose to cover are ultimately acquiescing in male dominance by not challenging the male–female relations at their core:

³² Annelies Moors, ‘Women and the Orient: A Note on Difference’, in Lorraine Nencel and Peter Pels (eds.), *Constructing Knowledge Authority and Critique in Social Science*, (London: Sage, 1991), pp.121–122.

³³ Hélie-Lucas, ‘Women’s Struggles and Strategies’, p.219.

³⁴ Keddie, ‘Introduction’, p.18; Berktaý, ‘Looking from the “Other” Side’, p.123.

³⁵ Keddie, ‘Introduction’, p.12. She adds, “It is true that the overall system is more important than veiling as such.” This is exactly my point: veiling can be part of a system of male dominance, but that need not be the case (ideally) and veiling is neither a cause nor a sign of male domination.

When women wear the *hijab*, they obtain respect and freedom. In this sense, the *hijab*, which is often perceived by Westerners as a tool of male domination, may ultimately be a liberating force for some Moroccan women. However, this choice is made within a patriarchal framework. It is a conditioned reaction and can exist only within prescribed norms established by men for women.³⁶

Leila Ahmed concludes that the contemporary re-veiling movement is an “alarming trend”³⁷ because of her fear that it will be the forces holding restrictive interpretations of women’s role in society that will win over all other currents and streams of Islamic movements. We can hope that she is wrong, and be active in working for another goal. Nevertheless, we must be very careful about how elisions are made from ‘this particular Islamic movement holds suppressive views on women’ to ‘the veil is the sign of what this movement defines as women’s roles and only theirs is the meaning of Islam’.

Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil, then, is entering these debates over covering at two levels. First, I rely on interviews with Muslim women living in Toronto, Canada, to discover their understanding of the meaning of *ḥijāb*. I stress that I do not generalize from my small sample of interviewees to all Muslim women, though some of the sentiments expressed by some of my interviewees are in tune with views recorded by other scholars studying the ‘re-veiling’ movement. I do not claim that all Muslim women do, or should, hold opinions like those of my interviewees. The aim here is simply to listen to the voices of some Muslim women about their understandings of, and experiences with, the veil. A second level is to add a perspective that has hitherto been marginalized, namely the point of view of the believer. Because almost all my interviewees are religiously oriented, indeed, because I am religiously oriented, the book as a whole has a spiritual orientation.³⁸ This allows for a different reading of women, Islam and the veil.

³⁶ Hessini, ‘Wearing the Hijab in Contemporary Morocco’, p.54.

³⁷ Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, p.230.

³⁸ I define religiosity very broadly as believing in the existence of God, and for Muslims, the belief that the Holy Qur’an is the actual Word of God revealed to Prophet Muhammad. Differences among believers in the interpretation of the text is not a part of my understanding of what it means to be religious, although I suggest that religiosity must entail some level of practice of the faith. Because most of my interviewees and I are Sunni, the book also has a Sunni Muslim orientation. I do not speak for other Muslims.

Not surprisingly, religious belief is marginalized in Western academic circles, which have a secular orientation. Even less surprising is traditional feminist disdain for religious belief, given historic associations between religion and misogyny.³⁹ Nevertheless, feminist scholars are revising their total rejection of religious belief and practice for women. Young's introduction to Sharma's *Women in World Religions* finds that the feminist assumption that religion is irredeemably patriarchal is now seen as simplistic.⁴⁰ Carmody's *Women and World Religions* assumes that in spite of women's suffering under organized religion, many women have drawn strength from their religion, and that the world's religions offer women and men "great sources for forgiveness and renewal:"

Without denying [the] feminist critique, I would add that, nonetheless, the bottom line in virtually all the developed religious traditions is a holiness equally available to women and men. Women have suffered many disabilities in the organisational dimension of religion, but when it comes to intimacy with God and helpfulness toward other people, they do at least as well as men ... If one's self was honest, loving, and wise, one was what God or the Way wanted. So the depths of the world's religions offer an instruction as important as it is consoling. Indeed, the instruction is important precisely because it is consoling: any person may become holy and wise.⁴¹

Warne speaks of the "unacknowledged Quarantine" that has existed between feminists and religious studies, and suggests it is time to break down the barriers:

Unfortunately, there is a tendency to consider only [women's] negative experiences [with religion] as accurate, and all positive ones, by definition, as a kind of patriarchally induced false consciousness. Judgements such as these pose serious problems for scholars interested in both women and religion, because work that attempts to be more nuanced is sometimes read as betrayal, or as patriarchal co-optation.⁴²

³⁹ Denise Lardner Carmody, *Women and World Religions*, 2nd edn. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1989 [1979]), p.3 and passim.

⁴⁰ Katherine Young, 'Introduction', in Arvind Sharma (ed.), *Women in World Religions* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1987), p.3.

⁴¹ Carmody, *Women and World Religions*, p.9. Also J. O'Conner, 'Rereading, Reconciling and Reconstructing Tradition: Feminist Research in Religion', *Women's Studies*, 17, 1 (1989), pp.101-123.

⁴² Randi Warne, 'Further Reflections in the 'Unacknowledged Quarantine': Feminism and Religious Studies', in *Changing Methods: Feminists Transforming Practice*, (eds.), Sandra Burt & Lorraine Code (Peterborough, Canada: Broadview Press, 1995), pp.97-98.

These are welcome voices. However, as Lazreg has pointed out, their force has been observed only for Judaism and Christianity. While many would still view these religions as oppressive to women, there is an acceptance of those feminist (even non-feminist) women, who seek to identify as Jewish or Christian, while simultaneously claiming liberation and working for women's equality. Muslim women have not yet been accorded such respect:

The evolutionary bias that suffuses most thinking about women in the Middle East and North Africa is expressed in a definite prejudice against Islam as a religion. Although U.S. feminists have attempted to accommodate Christianity and feminism and Judaism and feminism, Islam is inevitably presented as antifeminist. What is at work here is not merely a plausible rationalist bias against religion as an impediment to the progress and freedom of the mind but an acceptance of the idea that there is a hierarchy of religions, with some being more susceptible to change than others. Like tradition, religion must be abandoned if Middle Eastern women are to be like Western women. As the logic of the argument requires, there can be no change without reference to an external standard deemed to be perfect.⁴³

My task, then, is to introduce respectability to the believing Muslim woman's voice, to claim liberation and women's equality inside Islam. I believe that this is an indispensable part of unsettling both the Western popular cultural view that the veil is a symbol of Muslim women's oppression, and those feminist conclusions that concur with pop culture.⁴⁴ I seek to challenge the assumptions Hessini, Macleod and others use to criticize women's choices to cover as ultimately un-liberating.

Differences in judgment over *hijāb* finally turn on a few key points. The following is a list of six themes that I have garnered from my reading in the women and Islam field. Those who criticize the veil rely on secular liberal assumptions about society and human nature. Thus veiling is supposed to be oppressive because it:

⁴³ Lazreg, 'Feminism and Difference', p.85.

⁴⁴ For a contemporary feminist view that is in tune with the popular cultural view, see Amy Gutmann, 'Challenges of Multiculturalism in Democratic Education', in *Public Education in a Multicultural Society: Policy, Theory, Critique*, (ed.), Robert K. Fullinwider (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

1. covers up (hides), in the sense of smothering, femininity;
2. is apparently linked to essentialized male–female difference (which is taken to mean that by nature, male is superior, female is inferior);
3. is linked to a particular view of woman’s place (subjugated in the home);
4. is linked to an oppressive (patriarchal) notion of morality and female purity (because of Islam’s emphasis on chastity, marriage, and condemnation of pre- and extra-marital sexual relations);
5. can be imposed; and
6. is linked to a package of oppressions women in Islam face, such as seclusion, polygyny, easy male divorce, unequal inheritance rights, and so on.

I address these assumptions over the course of the book. I shall argue (not in this order) that covering:

1. does not smother femininity;
2. brings to mind the ‘different-but-equal’ school of thought, but does not posit essentialized male–female difference;
3. is linked to a view that does not limit women to the home, but neither does it consider the role of stay-at-home-mother and homemaker oppressive;
4. is linked to a view of morality that is oppressive only if one considers the prohibition of sexual relations outside marriage wrong;
5. is part of Islamic law, though a law that ought to be implemented in a very wise and women-friendly manner, and
6. can and should be treated separately from other issues of women’s rights in Islam.

It will become clear that I do not necessarily dispute some of the feminist criticisms as false. However, my own world-view leads me to view those things differently (for example, male–female differences).

Critics of the Western discourse of the veil point out that the Western focus on the veil has been obsessive.⁴⁵ Many of those Muslim women who do not cover feel annoyed that Muslim women are reduced to their headcovers, as if there is nothing else about their identity worthy of mention. Many of those who do cover are disappointed that their own positive experience of covering is denied; and, like those who do not cover, annoyed that other aspects of their identity are ignored. In some ways by writing a book on *ḥijāb*, I am keeping alive the Western tradition of discussing Muslim women only in relation to their headcovering. My justification is that despite the Western focus on the veil, the prevalent view is that of the ‘oppressive’ nature of veiling and Islam. This is in spite of the ethnographic and historical accounts of particular Muslim women in specific times and places that challenge the stereotype of Muslim women as oppressed. There are still very few fora that provide an empathetic space for the voices of those who cover, or for a positive theory of veiling.

C. THE VEIL, ISLAM AND THE WEST

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the topic of Islam, fundamentalism, terrorism, extremism and women’s position in Islam is on many people’s minds, from the local bus driver to the specialist scholar. The discourse in the popular mind is one of the backwardness, violence and barbarity of Islam, Arabs and Muslims. The oppression of women is a given. This makes challenging the popular Western stereotype that the veil is a symbol of Muslim women’s oppression an uphill battle, all the more so in light of certain late twentieth-century events in the Muslim world: Iran’s imposition of the *chador* after Khomeini’s revolution in 1979; the Taliban’s imposition of the *burqa*⁶ after their accession to power in 1997; and the violence perpetrated by radical groups in the name of Islam in Egypt, Israel, Algeria and the like. Does not all this merely confirm that Islam is violent, intolerant and anti-women? My book is not an

⁴⁵ Lazreg, ‘Feminism and Difference’, p.85.

attempt to discuss all the socio-political problems in the Muslim world. Nonetheless, the turmoil in the Muslim world complicates my task because of the Orientalist legacy in the West (a legacy combined with wide-spread and profound ignorance of Islam). The Orientalist vision of Islam is precisely that Islam is barbaric, violent, medieval and backward. Yet when was the last time the media tarnished all Catholics with the actions of the IRA, or all Protestants with the actions of the Loyalists? The media should not thus tarnish all Catholics and Protestants: the point is that Muslims are not accorded the same degree of care and precision, there is no recognition of special, localized circumstances that intervene between 'Islam' and enactment.

While US administrations and other Western powers do not have anything against Islam as a religion in general, or against Muslims in general, I am convinced that the public rhetoric demonizing Islam is part of the Western maintenance of its global hegemony. The discourse of the veil in the West is tied to Western national interests. US policy in the Middle East is to protect its access to Middle Eastern oil fields and give unconditional support to Israel.⁴⁶ Because Islam is perceived as anti-West, the contemporary Islamist movements to install Shari'ah law are feared. It is thought that Muslim governments committed to implementing Islamic law will interfere with Western interests and may threaten Israel. Hence pro-Western, secular governments in the Muslim world are supported, even if they repress their own populace. The veil's association with the Islamist movements is thus the link between Western power politics and an anti-veil discourse in the West. The media and Western scholars have a stake in maintaining Western hegemony, so some Western scholars provide the intellectual justifications for this anti-Islamic diatribe.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Yvonne Haddad, 'Islamist Perceptions of U.S. Policy in the Middle East', in *The Middle East and the United States*, (ed.), David W. Lesch (Boulder, Co.: Westview University Press, 1996), p.419; Ralph Braibanti, *The Nature and Structure of the Islamic World*, (Chicago, Ill.: Int. Strategy and Policy Institute, 1995), p.5; William Quandt, 'New U.S. Policies for a New Middle East?' in *The Middle East and the United States*, (ed.), David Lesch, pp. 413-414; Edward Said, *Covering Islam* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), p.143.

⁴⁷ For instance, S. Huntington, 'The Clash of Civilizations', *Foreign Affairs*, 72, 3 (Summer 1993), pp.22-49; Benjamin Barber, 'Jihad Vs McWorld', *The Atlantic Monthly* (March 1992), pp.53-65.

The mainstream media carry the discourse into the popular culture.⁴⁸ Journalist Hoagland argues that with respect to US foreign policy, Washington DC sets the media agenda:

With international affairs it is pretty much a Washington business; it's a company town. And it is very difficult to sustain interest in a foreign policy issue if the White House and the State Department and the Executive Branch and even Congress are not interested, or are trying to downplay that particular issue... but without that kind of follow-through by some part of the government, the press itself is very weak in trying to set or sustain an agenda. You can do it for a day, or maybe for 3 days, but at the end of the 3rd or 4th day, if there's no echo, there is very little you can do to create that issue.⁴⁹

However, US and Western national interests have dictated foreign policies that are interpreted by most of the Muslim and Arab populace as hypocritical and harmful to their own interests and needs: Israel is not bombed for its covert nuclear weapons programme; the West remains silent over violations of Muslims' human rights (repression and torture of Muslims in Turkey, Tunisia, and Israel); and the West supports corrupt governments over democratic movements.⁵⁰ All these things fuel extremist groups in the Muslim world. Nevertheless, the actions of terrorists in the Muslim world, especially against Western tourists, leave the Western populace convinced that Islam and Arabs are barbaric and anti-Western and in need of strong treatment and punishment from the West. So, Westerners are afraid of Islamic parties being elected to power and act against that, and Muslims, convinced that the West is against them, are driven to more extremes. The vicious cycle continues to this day.

Hence US and Western national interests have allowed the demonization of Islam in the public mind to flourish. And ideas about Islam's oppression of women and the role of the veil in that oppression are part of this discourse. When the Western populace is predisposed to disliking Muslims and Arabs, asserting US/Western foreign policy needs is easier, because the public supports rather than criticizes the foreign policy (for example, by not condemning Israel's extra-

⁴⁸ Said, *Covering Islam*, pp.48 and 144.

⁴⁹ Jim Hoagland, in *Split Vision: The Portrayal of Arabs in the American Media*, (ed.), Edmund Ghareeb (Washington, DC: American-Arab Affairs Council, 1983), p.226.

⁵⁰ Said, *Covering Islam*, pp.xvi and 164.

judicial assassinations of Palestinians, or the suffering of innocent Iraqi citizens owing to sanctions.) People who consume mainstream news as their only source of information about Islam cannot know anything but the negative perspective on the veil.

The mainstream Western discourse against Islam has also made it harder for Muslim reformers to improve the status of Muslim women, because betterment has often been linked with colonization and/or Westernization.⁵¹ Tucker observes that Arab feminism has had to chart a difficult course between ‘tradition’, that may be oppressive but is seen as ‘authentic’, and reform, that may be seen as Westernization and ‘inauthentic’.⁵² Indeed, calls to protect ‘tradition’ and ‘authenticity’ have even hampered improvements that would bring women more in line with the earlier rights that women exercised under Islamic law over a deteriorated ‘tradition’. For instance, in the mid/late twentieth century, Mawdūdī, an Islamic scholar from the Indian subcontinent, decried family planning efforts as Western attempts to undermine Islam by reducing the number of Muslims, even though family planning was condoned by all four Islamic *madhāhib* (schools of law) and widely practiced in the pre-colonial era.⁵³

Another legacy of Orientalism that complicates my task of undermining the stereotype that the veil is oppressive is the West/East dichotomy that it enshrines. It is too simplistic to label that stereotype a ‘Western’ stereotype (though easier for sake of exposition), because there are plenty of Muslims in the world who also view the veil as oppressive. Dividing the world into ‘West’ and ‘East’ is an Orientalist assumption that has worked to ensure ‘Western’ superiority and ‘Eastern’ inferiority. The duality simplifies global politics, and most importantly, erases areas of similarity between ‘West’ and ‘East’. Muslim states in the Middle East and Asia have been secularizing/‘modernizing’ for the past one hundred years. Numerous Muslims

⁵¹ Tucker, ‘Introduction’, pp.x–xi.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p.xi.

⁵³ Abdel Rahim Omran, *Family Planning in the Legacy of Islam* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp.206–208; See also, Basim Musallam, *Sex and Society in Islam: Birth Control before the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983). Egypt hosted the International Conference on Population and Development in 1994 amidst “antagonisms and suspicions that the ICPD as a whole was a Western conspiracy to rid the Muslim world of its Islamic values by legalizing abortion, calling for women’s equality and destroying family values.” Karam, *Women, Islamisms and the State*, p.172. Many Roman Catholics had similar fears.

are not practicing Muslims, just as a significant number of Westerners are no longer practicing Christians or Jews. (Indeed the West/East dichotomy glosses over Christians and Jews living in ‘Muslim’ countries, and Muslims living in the West.) Many Muslims are as anti-Islam as many Westerners are, convinced it is oppressive, backward, violent and so on. The legacy of Orientalism in mainstream Western media and scholarship, by leaving out these dynamics, works to reinforce the negative stereotype of Islam in the West. It fortifies the negative stereotype because the uncomplicated West/East division enables simplistic equations to be made: West equals progressive, East equals underdeveloped; Western women are liberated, Eastern women subjugated; and so on. And yet it is also widely acknowledged that these days the world is a ‘global village’. In recognizing globalization, it is possible to become a more sophisticated observer of the world. The truism the ‘veil is oppressive’ is not tenable in the face of a refined understanding of the dynamics and currents in a global village in which some Muslim women embrace the veil willingly, but others do not.

D. MUSLIMS IN THE WEST

The need to challenge the negative stereotype of the veil as oppressive is urgent for those Muslims who live in the West.⁵⁴ Anecdotal evidence demonstrates that Muslims (male and female) are hurt by the negative image of the veil and Islam. Several examples will suffice to highlight this. In 1995 some Muslim schoolgirls were expelled from school in Quebec, Canada, for refusing to remove their scarves. The schools ruled that the scarves were an ‘ostentatious symbol’ akin to a swastika. A teenage girl in Quebec who wore *hijāb* to high school was mortified to see her teacher on television proclaiming, “Islam degrades women.” “I started to cry. I couldn’t understand why someone would say something like that,” she told [Kelly]. “She knows me. She knows what I am like, and that I am not like that. How can she say that?”⁵⁵

⁵⁴ I refer to the ‘West’ in this book because it is a recognizable shorthand for a certain part of the world and its culture, that is, the Anglo-European world and its ex-colonies (the United States, Australia, Canada, etc.). I advocate the discontinuation of the terminology even while I use it, for so far there is no agreed alternative.

⁵⁵ Patricia Kelly, ‘Integrating Islam: A Muslim School in Montreal’, unpublished Master’s thesis (Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University, Canada: 1997), p.103.

An Islamic advocacy group in the United States and Canada, the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR) documents harassment and discrimination against Muslims. In 1998 they reported incidents of women losing their jobs or not being hired for refusing to uncover at: Dunkin' Donuts (Boston); US Airways; Boston Market Restaurant (Sacramento, California); Taco Bell (Arlington, Virginia); Domino's Pizza (Colorado); KMART (New Jersey); and the Sheraton Hotel (Washington). In all cases the women were reinstated after CAIR intervention. Some women received apologies and compensation. Muslim men suffer from the negative discourse on the veil too. CAIR reported in November 1997 that a 13-year-old boy was hospitalized after being beaten by two or more teenagers who called him a "rag head" and "f---ing sand n-gger." Apparently the attack occurred after the father of one of the attackers called the father of the victim a "rag head" and "rag head lover."⁵⁶ My book, in seeking to undermine the stereotype, thus aspires to improve the lives of Muslims living in the West.

E. METHOD AND ARGUMENT

Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil straddles many academic disciplines: political theory, feminism, anthropology, sociology, history, and Middle East and Islamic studies. My method in undermining the stereotype of the veil is eclectic: there are five chapters, each using a different methodology (drawn from one or more of the disciplines mentioned above) to take a different tack in challenging the stereotype. The thread that holds the different chapters together is the tradition of political theory, the 'home' discipline of my book. Political theory, broadly conceived, aims to study the nature of power in political communities – between citizens and the State, or between citizens and other citizens – and to inquire into just and unjust, equal and unequal patterns and relations of power. In *Rethinking Muslim Women*, I mean to focus on the popular Western cultural view that the veil is oppressive for Muslim women and to highlight the underlying patterns of power behind this constructed image of the veil. In addition, I formulate a positive theory of the veil.

⁵⁶ Council on American Islamic Relations, *Newsletter* (Winter 1998). The incident between the boys allegedly began as a school bus dispute over spilled paint.

Chapter One traces the origins of the ‘veil is oppressive’ discourse in the West. I argue that attacking the veil was an essential part of the colonial project, necessary to break down barriers between colonial power and hidden women. The point is to stress the constructed nature of the antiveil discourse, and to highlight its link to Western political interests. I also show how the move to independence in colonized Muslim countries included a focus on the veil, as nationalist élites accepted the West’s version of the meaning of *ḥijāb* and strove to ‘liberate’ their country from backward Islamic practices. Chapter Two presents interviews with some Toronto Muslim women. Between May and July 1996, I interviewed fifteen Sunni Muslim women and one Ismaili woman to ask them about their understanding of *ḥijāb*, and for those who cover, their experiences of wearing *ḥijāb* in Toronto. The chapter draws on feminist methods of using women’s experience as a foundation of knowledge. Chapter Three is a survey of the contemporary ‘re-veiling’ movement in the Muslim world. Here I draw on contemporary anthropological, sociological and historical literatures that discuss the ‘re-veiling’ phenomenon. These surveys demonstrate that women cover for many different reasons, be they religious, social or political. Empirical reality alone challenges the Western stereotype that all Muslim women are forced to cover and that covering is oppressive. With a critique of Moroccan feminist Fatima Mernissi’s perspective on the veil, Chapter Four moves the book into theoretical grounds. Here I show that Mernissi’s analysis of the veil is based on an idiosyncratic reading of Islam. Her interpretations are based on her own negative personal experiences with veiling, but she argues that all Muslim women suffer because of veiling. I disagree with that conclusion and attempt to show why an alternative reading is possible within Islam. Chapter Five is an effort toward formulating a positive theory of the veil. I draw on two testimonials by Muslim women in newspaper articles about their positive experience of covering. The women’s arguments derive from feminist critiques of the exploitation of the female body in capitalist society to contend that covering can be a form of liberation. I end the chapter by highlighting the aspect of religious belief that is all too often left out. I shall reiterate as I proceed through the book that I am not attempting to argue that the veil is never oppressive for Muslim

women. Clearly some women experience covering as oppressive. My point is that the ‘veil is oppressive’ notion has become a paradigm in which the ‘meaning’ of the veil as oppressive assumes the status of a truth claim. I am saying that I disagree with that interpretation. In this book, I present an alternative perspective.

It is important to understand that this study is a debate at the level of ideas. I include interviews not as part of an ethnography of Muslim women who live in Toronto, but as a jumping off point for theorizing about the veil. My underlying assumption that Islam as a political theory (a theory of political community) does not oppress women guides my critiques and formulation of a positive theory of the veil. I understand that real Muslim communities may not reflect the positive normative outline that I describe. However, just as liberalism remains an ongoing aspiration for the creation of a good society that has not yet been achieved in reality⁵⁷ – a society free of racism, poverty, sexism and so on – so I hold to a theory of Islam that is an ongoing aspiration for the creation of a good society. Though we struggle and reform and fight as we go, we are aiming at a higher good.

F. TERMINOLOGY – THE VEIL

A final note on the word ‘veil’. I sought to avoid the word ‘veil’ in my writing, because the word is so laden with the negative stereotype. Part of the whole problem of the West’s focus on the ‘veil,’ as many scholars have mentioned, is precisely the simplification that the phrase ‘the veil’ entails: as if there is only one kind of ‘veil’ that Muslim women have ever worn.⁵⁸ This is a travesty that augments the problem of the negative stereotype. In the English language a ‘veil’ is normally “a piece of usually more or less transparent fabric attached to a woman’s hat, etc., to conceal the face or protect against the sun”

⁵⁷ Gutmann, ‘Challenges of Multiculturalism in Democratic Education’, pp.160–161.

⁵⁸ Helen Watson, ‘Women and the Veil: Personal Responses to Global Process’, in *Islam, Globalization and Postmodernity*, (eds.), Akbar S. Ahmed and Hastings Donnan (London: Routledge, 1994), p.141; El-Sohl and Mabro, *Muslim Women’s Choices*, p.9; F. El-Guindi, ‘Veiling Infitah with Muslim Ethic: Egypt’s Contemporary Islamic Movement’, *Social Problems*, 28, 4 (1981), p.374; Dawn Chatty, ‘Changing Sex Roles in Bedouin Society in Syria and Lebanon’, in *Women in the Muslim World*, (eds.), Nikki Keddie and Lois Beck (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), p.403.

[OED].⁵⁹ This word corresponds to the Arabic *niqāb*, the veil with which women cover their faces. As a word to convey the Islamic notion of *ḥijāb* it is totally inadequate. *Ḥijāb*, from the root *ḥajaba* meaning to cover, conceal, hide, is a complex notion encompassing action and apparel. It can include covering the face, or not. It includes lowering the gaze with the opposite sex, and applies to men as well, who must lower their gaze and cover from navel to knee. These days, *ḥijāb* is also the name used for the headscarf that women wear over their heads and tie or pin at the neck, with their faces showing. Over the centuries, and in different places, how a woman covers has varied enormously – what parts are covered, with what kind of material, texture, pattern etc. The terminology has varied also, region to region, of course. In this book, I use the word *ḥijāb* to refer to the concept of covering. The word headscarf will designate women who cover all but hands and face, and in keeping with common Muslim usage, headscarf will be interchangeable with *ḥijāb*; the word *niqāb* will refer to the face veil that some women attach to their headscarves.

⁵⁹ *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*. Definitions (2) and (3) are interesting, but not widely known: (2) 'a piece of linen etc. as part of a nun's head-dress'; (3) 'a curtain esp. that separating the sanctuary in the Jewish Temple'. According to the OED, 'To take the veil' means becoming a nun. Given the respect accorded to nuns in the West, it is a pity 'taking the veil' has not had the same positive connotations for Muslim women who 'take the veil'.

This detailed and significant study is a powerful critique of the popular western notion that the veil is a symbol of Muslim women's oppression. In postulating a positive theory of the *hijāb* the author challenges with great sophistication both the pop culture view of Muslim women as being utterly subjugated by men, as well as the more complex arguments put forward by liberal feminists such as Mernissi, Macleod and others who have sought to criticize women's choices to cover as ultimately unliberating. Examining and questioning the validity and accuracy of some of the latter's assumptions, the author puts forward the case that the judgment of the veil as being an oppressive feature of Islam is based on liberal understandings of 'equality' and 'liberty' that preclude other ways of thinking about 'equality' and 'liberty' that offer a positive approach for contemplating the wearing of the veil. The author argues that in a consumer capitalist culture, the *hijāb* can be experienced as liberation from the tyranny of the beauty myth and the thin 'ideal' woman.

Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil straddles many academic disciplines: political theory, feminism, anthropology, sociology, history and the Middle East and Islamic Studies. The author's research is wide-ranging — from the historical background of the western stereotype of the veil and the influence of the colonial era, to modern veiling trends in Muslim and non-Muslim countries. Her analysis includes interviews with a group of Muslim women from various backgrounds in Toronto, Canada. Ultimately, in dispelling some widely held myths about Muslim women and the *hijāb*, the author introduces respectability to the believing Muslim women's voice, claiming liberation and the equality of women as fundamental to Islam itself.

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