

# Post-Colonial Identity and Gender in the Arab World: The Case of the Hijab

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## ABSTRACT

Using the hijab as a case-study, this article focuses on the political entailments for Arab women of the merging of gender, religion, and national identity in a post-colonial context. It critically engages two conflicting feminist approaches to the hijab, while relying on excerpts of interviews with veiled women.

## RÉSUMÉ

En se servant du hijab comme étude de cas, cet article se concentre sur les répercussions politiques pour les femmes arabes causées par le fusionnement des hommes et des femmes, de la religion, et de l'identité nationale dans un contexte post-colonial. Il engage de façon critique deux approches féministes contradictoires au sujet du hijab, tout en s'appuyant sur les extraits d'entrevues avec des femmes qui portent le voile.

This article focuses on the connection between a new form of veil wearing - the hijab<sup>1</sup> - which has emerged in the Arab world since the 1970s, and the concomitant rise of a nationalism stressing close ties between religion and ethnicity. That the hijab is an expression of the re-focusing, in post-colonial Muslim countries, of collective national identities on traditional Islamic values is an assumption shared by several authors (Ajami 1987; Donohue 1983, 1-23; Loomba 1998, 226). However, what seems to be a more controversial issue is whether the hijab (and the broader restructuring of gender identities according to this new politicized Islam) perpetuates gender-based power relationships detrimental to women. Such a question has generated heated debate in both the Western and the Muslim world. It has been especially addressed, in the most stimulating and diversified manner, by feminist authors who questioned the implications of the merging of religion and ethnicity for Arab, and other Muslim women. This paper seeks to address this question by looking primarily, but not exclusively, at the case of Egypt, which constitutes a paradigmatic example of the process by which veil wearing has been turned into a strong symbol of an Islam-based national identity in the Arab world. By engaging postcolonial theory while relying both on feminist analyses and on veiled women's narratives, I will discuss the political consequences of the hijab for

Arab women.

## THE POST-COLONIAL ERA AND THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY IN THE ARAB WORLD

For most Arab countries, as well as for most Third World countries, the post-independence era did not mark the end of the struggle against the West. After the departure of colonial powers, the pervasive influence of Western cultural models remained untouched, thus exacerbating an identity crisis that permeated Arab societies. One of the most important catalysts of this identity crisis was the disruptive impact of post-war modernization. The movement toward modernization initiated by ruling élites in order to emulate the West in achieving technological and economic development has been coupled with the importation of non-indigenous behavioural norms and values. This process of "cultural colonization" was particularly acute within limited circles of élite groups, who often indulged in the blind mimicry of Western modes of dress and social behaviours, considered by many to be contrary to traditional Arabo-Islamic values and practices. This situation resulted in a sharp gap between the rulers and the ruled, a gap exacerbated by pronounced class differences related to the unequal distribution of economic wealth, and by the generalized corruption prevailing in state

institutions (Dekmejian 1995; Farah 1987). Also, in the Arab world, as well as in several other Third World countries, the post-independence era opened the way to neo-colonial forms of domination based on alliances between local élites and rulers on the one hand, and First World governments, trans-national corporations and international economic institutions on the other (Shohat 1992, 105). As a result, the national self-narratives offered by post-colonial Third World regimes and élites following independence became unappealing to large segments of the increasingly pauperized and uneducated masses.

The only ideology which, from 1952 to the late seventies, almost succeeded in occupying a dominant position within the realm of discourses competing to provide a post-colonial Arab identity was Nasser's Pan-Arabism.<sup>2</sup> Secular and socialist, it was oriented toward the construction of a collective Arab identity resolutely independent from Western influences. According to several authors such as Wafik Raouf (1984), Fawzi Mellah (1985), and Fouad Ajami (1987), Nasser's personal charisma was the main pillar on which the popularity of Nasserism was based. This could explain in part why Nasserism has not been able to outlive its founding father, who died in 1970. There is also a consensus among scholars that the Arab military defeat of 1967 at the hands of Israel precipitated a sharp decline in Pan-Arabist sentiments. Experienced by Arab masses and intellectuals as a humiliating event, it largely discredited the ruling élites of the time - including Nasser himself - whose "political capital" was, at this point, seriously eroded (Ajami 1987; Farah 1987; Mellah 1985; Raouf 1984).

Pan-Arabism and Western-type liberalism's failure to provide the principles needed to shape a post-colonial identity triggered a search for new normative grounds giving meaning to the idea of "arabness." Within this ideological vacuum emerged a new Islamic nationalism asserting a collective identity freed from remnants of the former colonized identity imposed by the West. Islamist discourses and movements became increasingly politicized and militant, advocating the Islamization of social structures both in public and private domains. Furthermore, over the past three decades and despite certain national variations, this religious nationalism, stemming essentially from the

base, has led to the embodiment of orthodox Islam-based values in state institutions and in the family. Thus, one can safely contend that religion has tended to become inextricably interwoven with National selfhood in the post-1970s Arab world (Dekmejian 1995; Donohue 1983; Farah 1987; Mimouni 1992; Shukrallah 1994;).

Numerous feminist authors have argued that, in a great many Third World nations, anti-colonial as well as post-colonial nationalisms were not only articulated along religious and traditional lines, but were also, and still are, powerfully gendered (Loomba 1998, 217-20; McClintock 1997, 89-90; Nagel 1998, 252-53; Yula-Davis and Anthias 1989). In the case of Arab and other Muslim countries, the emphasis given to the issue of women in this context of cultural resistance was particularly strong. This close connection between gender and nationalism in newly independent Arab countries was represented by Lama Abu Odeh (1993) through the telling image of the woman's body as "a battlefield where the cultural struggles of Post-Colonial societies were waged" (27). Hala Shukrallah (1994, 16) is even more explicit: "women, as a category, are central to the process of the re-creation of the [Arabo-Islamic] community due to their role as 'symbolic cultural bearers' of national traditions" (Abu Odeh 1993; Ahmed 1992).

The emergence and rapid spread of the hijab has to be understood as one of the chief manifestations of the Islamist discourse's emphasis on the necessity of re-drawing gender roles in order to forge an Arab identity along the lines of religious principles. In this sense, the hijab is more than a simple item of clothing prescribed by religion; it is a strong symbol of the rise of a religious nationalism setting up Islamic values and behaviours as a protective screen against the "depraved" and "imperialistic" Western culture (Ahmed 1992; El Guindi 1981; 164; Hoodfar 1992). As Homa Hoodfar rightly pointed out, the hijab also expresses native population's need to re-emphasize the value of their own ancestral traditions and customs which, under colonial domination, had been systematically disparaged (1992). Thus, in the post-colonial Arab social imagery, the new veil (hijab) came to symbolize the recovered dignity of native customs (Ahmed 1992, 164; Geadah 1996; Hoodfar 1992; Loomba 1998, 218).

After having sketched out a brief socio-historical account of the hijab, I will discuss two conflicting feminist perspectives on the topic. I will then discuss these two "analytical lenses" by critically engaging postcolonial theories. My argument will be buttressed by secondary data, namely excerpts of interviews with veiled women conducted by various authors.

### **BRIEF SOCIO-HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF THE HIJAB IN THE ARAB WORLD: THE EGYPTIAN EXAMPLE**

Veil wearing in Arab countries is not a new practice. It has existed since the beginning of Islam (7th century BC), and even before, in Byzantine imperial social circles. Before the emergence of the new Islamic revival in the post-1970s era, the dominant symbolism attached to veil wearing was, to a large extent, removed from religious connotations. Authors such as Nawal El Saadawi (1980), and John Esposito (1995, 108) convincingly demonstrate how an adequate understanding of the pre-1970s veil in the Arab world should, primarily, take class differences into account. The case of Egypt, in this respect, is particularly well documented, given its high paradigmatic value as an illustration of a cross-national Arab phenomenon. Thus, El Saadawi (1980) explains that in Egypt, prior to independence, veil wearing had always been the symbol of a high social status, and only a minority of upper-class urban women wore it. These veiled women often experienced seclusion, which operated as a class marker differentiating them and the majority of poor rural and urban women whose work was an economic necessity for their family's survival. In other words, veiling and seclusion - generally interwoven - were spread almost exclusively within a certain urban aristocracy which was able to afford the "luxury" of excluding women from the labor market. It is in this context that, in 1923, the Egyptian feminist Huda Shaarawi, on her return from a women's conference in Rome, publicly removed her veil in front of journalists and photographers in a symbolic gesture of protest. This act is considered by many to have heralded the women's liberation movement in the Arab world. The feminist movement which ensued after Shaarawi's gesture drew its ideological references

from the largely Occidentalized upper-class sub-culture. However, as Nawal El Saadawi pointed out, "the issue of abolishing the veil was unlikely to evoke much enthusiasm amongst poor women, since in any case the working women in factories and fields had never known what it was to wear a veil" (1980, 7). Upper class women, on the other hand, were quite receptive to Shaarawi's discourse as they massively started to adopt Western-type clothes while lower class women continued to wear various traditional outfits, which generally included long colorful dresses and gauzy headscarves (Ahmed 1992; El Guindi 1981; MacLeod 1992). This example, although pertaining to Egypt, illustrates how the dynamics of the pre-20th century veil is structured along strict class lines throughout the Arab world in general (Ahmed 1992; El Saadawi 1980; Esposito 1995).

Since the end of the 1970s, a new form of veiling has emerged in the Arab world, and in a great many other Muslim countries: "What the Islamic revival has introduced is the Islamic headdress, the hijab, which covers the hair and neck like a wimple. It is worn with a long loose gown" (Hijab 1988, 52). The new veiled woman tends to belong mainly to urban lower and middle classes (Abuh Odeh 1993, 27). The hijab stands in contrast to the traditional scarf, a "folkloric" garment that many Arab women always used to wrap loosely around their head in such a way that unruly locks are visible (Geadah 1996, 84-85; Hijab 1988). But the difference between the traditional scarf and the Islamic veil is not only one of form; it is also one of content. The hijab is considered as a religious prescription by its wearers and its proponents in general. According to this new discourse, based on a re-reading of the Koran, the practice of veil wearing is prescribed by two Suras (verses) of the sacred book. This has led to an important theological debate within the Muslim world. However, from a sociological point of view, even more relevant than analyzing the theological controversy over the hijab is to examine the realm of socio-cultural significations in which it is embedded. Feminist sociologists put forward different interpretations of the hijab as a social phenomenon, and of its impacts on gender relationships. As mentioned, the various analyses can be schematically divided into two groups: 1) the post-marxist perspective, which primarily

emphasizes the power dynamics structuring the discursive as well as the socio-institutional underpinnings of the hijab, and 2) the post-structuralist approach, which often associates the former camp with a form of neo-colonial feminism and focused on the potentialities for veiled women to subvert the dominant symbolism attached to the hijab.

### **THE POST-MARXIST APPROACH TO THE HIJAB**

According to this approach, the sudden spread of the hijab has to be regarded as the manifestation of the social and political influence of fundamentalist groups. Authors such as Hinde Taarji (1990, 258-78), Sophie Bessis and Souhayr Belhassen (1992), Rachid Mimouni (1992), Hala Shukrallah (1994), R. Hrair Dekmejian (1995), Khalida Messaoudi (1995), Yolande Geadah (1996), and many others, argued that these groups have largely oriented the production of the new religion-based Arab identity in the post-1970s era. According to this reading, fundamentalist groups "convinced a large part of the population that veil wearing is, if not a compulsory Islamic obligation, at least the expression of an identity assertion necessary to check harmful Westernization" (Geadah 1996, 105. my translation). The post-marxist approach to the hijab has shown how, in most Arab countries, extremely well organized Islamist movements have capitalized efficiently on the State's loss of credibility in the eyes of a frustrated and increasingly pauperized urban population deeply affected by unprecedented unemployment. Many authors have also argued that the current pervasive influence of the fundamentalist ideology in Arab countries is the direct consequence of the numerous political concessions made by Arab regimes, in the 1970s and the 1980s, to the most radical factions within the Islamist movements. For instance, in the Maghreb (except perhaps Tunisia) and in the Middle-East, all post-independence governments have enacted Personal Status Codes - or Family law - drawn from the Sharia (Islamic law). These Family laws have legalized some practices deemed discriminatory against women by a majority of Arab feminists (Loomba 1998, 226; Nagel 1998, 253-54). Politicized Islamist discourses have also

become increasingly influential in schools in general, and on University campuses in particular. Finally, since the end of the 1970s, mosques have become important centres of recruitment for fundamentalists, who frequently call for strict sexual segregation, compulsory veiling, women's submission to their husbands, and so on (Geadah 1996). However, ideological mobilization was perhaps best achieved by radical Islamist groups through their efficient and well organized community networks, which provide pauperized lower classes with a wide range of social services - whose quality often surpasses that of the state infrastructure (Geadah 1996; Mimouni 1992; Shukrallah 1994).

Most post-marxist feminists consider the hijab as part of a coherent rhetoric directly derived from the fundamentalist ideology. According to this discourse, veil wearing is aimed at hiding the woman's body in order to limit its excessive sexual power, associated with females' "perverted nature" which, if not controlled, will lead to "social chaos" (*fitna*) (Bessis and Belhassen 1992; Geadah 1996, 92). Interestingly, for Yolande Geadah, such an argument marks a significant but yet subtle shift in meaning when compared to the original spirit of the Suras invoked by fundamentalists to justify veil wearing. As the author puts it, "the contemporary veil is not meant anymore to protect women's dignity and security against men's sexual harassment. It is now meant to protect men and the whole society against the 'perversity' of women whose sexual power, from this perspective, ought to be, if not suppressed, at least confiscated" (Geadah 1996, 86 - my translation). This latter quote reflects the post-marxist feminist concern with bringing to light the socially constructed and highly politicized character of the current fundamentalist reading of Islam.

### **THE POST-STRUCTURALIST APPROACH TO THE HIJAB**

Generally speaking, both post-structuralist and post-marxist approaches acknowledge that the hijab is closely connected to Third-World anti-(neo)colonialist nationalisms. However, what perhaps best differentiates these two perspectives is the claim made by the former that religion-based nationalism does not hold a monopoly over the

symbolism of the veil. Post-structuralist authors tend to stress the plurality of meanings that the hijab can take on, depending on the different motives invoked by its wearer (Hoodfar 1992, 6; MacLeod 1992). Others, such as Leila Ahmed (1992), do not even establish any link between the spread of the hijab and the rise of fundamentalist groups, stressing that many women choose freely to wear the veil. Finally, a minority among post-structuralist feminists consider the hijab wearer as a key actor within the Islamist movement, which is presented as "a creative alternative (from within and from below) to institutional channels, be they political, legal, social, or religious" (El Guindi 1981, 466).

Several authors embracing such an analytical framework came to the conclusion that the hijab could even be considered as empowering for women. They argue that the veil has freed women from the image of sexual object that society imposes on them, and has conferred upon women a social dignity which has facilitated their integration into the public sphere. According to this approach, the hijab - which should be worn only in the presence of non-kin adults - operates as an "off-limits sign (Hijab, 1988)" which tells the public, and particularly the male public, that although a woman has left the house to study or work, she is respectable and does not expect to be harassed. This has led Lama Abu Odeh (1993), and Fadwa El Guindi (1981) to argue that the hijab re-empowers its wearer insofar as it legitimates her presence outside the house while neutralizing the tendency of men to associate the "public woman" with the image of a shameful sexual being. Thus, say Lama Abu Odeh in a telling passage:

Public sexual harassment seems to reinforce the non-veiled women's ambivalence about her body making her powerless in the face of unwelcome intrusions. The problem does not seem to exist for veiled women, since adopting the veil was meant among other things to shield them from such sexual approaches, so that, when they are actually made, they are looked upon as being simply outrageous, both by the veiled women and the public. (1993, 29-30)

In the same connection, Nadia Hijab

(1988) considers the hijab as a "useful mechanism for societies in transition" (52), while Fadwa El Guindi (1981) regards it as an "innovative movement [through which] two oppositional forces are synthesized: *asryya* (modernity) and *asala* (authenticity)." She adds that, through such a symbol, "public sphere is redefined to accommodate women, and society is restructured" (482).

### A CRITICAL READING OF THE TWO PERSPECTIVES IN RELATION TO POSTCOLONIAL THEORY

In this section, I will discuss both the post-marxist and the post-structuralist approaches to the hijab by critically engaging postcolonial theory while at the same time resorting to secondary qualitative data to support my argument. But first, we need to clarify briefly the notion of the "postcolonial," for it refers to a field of studies which provides, to a large extent, the theoretical backdrop of both post-marxist and post-structuralist analyses of the hijab. If the adjective "post-colonial" can constitute a mere temporal reference to what comes literally after the period of colonialism, it takes on a different meaning when qualifying a theory or an analysis. In this latter case, the hyphen in "post-colonial" is generally dropped, and, most importantly, the notion is then understood as the discourses, be they academic, militant, or both, informed by a "contestation of colonial domination and the legacies of colonialism" (Loomba 1998, 12). However, as Ella Shohat (1992, 101) pointed out, the "postcolonial" implies both going beyond (neo)colonialist as well as anti-(neo)colonialist rhetoric. In this respect, prominent postcolonial theorists such as Stuart Hall (1991, 55-57), Homi K. Bhabha (1995, 206), and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1997), rightly take issue with these two discourses' tendency to fix the figures of the Colonizer and the Colonized into essentialized, monolithic, and largely phantasmagoric representations, derived themselves from Master Narratives "written in homogeneous, serial time (Bhabha 1995, 208)." Hence, according to these authors, postcolonial identities, be they individual or collective, need to be analytically contextualized in order to render visible their quintessentially hybrid and unstable character.

The notion of hybridity is central to most

postcolonial re-articulations of the notion of identity. It is Homi Bhabha's use of the concept which has been most influential within recent postcolonial studies (Loomba 1998, 176). For Bhabha (1995, 207), national as well as social identities are never unitary in themselves, nor do they imply a binary opposition between the Self and the Other. Rather, they are constructed in a contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation, where the Self and the Other are forged relationally, caught up in a complex reciprocity. From this perspective, the (neo)colonized and the (neo)colonizers' identities are unstable, agonized and in constant two-way flux (Bhabha 1995, 208; Loomba 1998, 232). Furthermore, one could say that Homi Bhabha's thought has fueled a certain strain of postcolonial theory positing that the extreme fluidity and hybridity of identities opens up a wide space for contestation, within which subaltern and marginalized agencies can negotiate the cracks of dominant discourses, including colonialism, neo-colonialism, as well as anti-colonial nationalism (Bhabha 1994, 177; Loomba 1998, 232; Rutherford 1990). It should be clear, by now, that Bhabha's theoretical framework can be associated with post-structuralist feminist accounts of the hijab, such as those discussed above.

Post-structuralist analyses of the hijab are, in my view, sociologically relevant in some respects, for they highlight how veiled women can re-appropriate the dominant social significations attached to the veil. They are informed by the notion that actors are not bound to follow to the letter a pre-written "social script," but can improvise around it, thanks to the "arbitrariness of the sign" (Bhabha 1994, 176). Actors are indeed continuously engaged in a dialogue with the prescriptions attached to the social roles they are called to play. Such an approach emphasizes the social interstices through which the individual can pass, in order to turn to his or her advantage the dominant discourse's frame of norms. From this perspective, subjects are considered as having full control over their consciousness, and hence, as being hardly capable of making any decision contrary to their interests. Post-structuralist feminists generally resort to these theoretical assumptions to de-victimize and re-empower women. Thus, as we have seen, these authors make the case that the veil

can be used as an empowering means of resistance because it enables its wearer to access a male-dominated environment - the public domain - traditionally hostile to the presence of females. This argument seems to be confirmed by the statements of several veiled women interviewed by various authors. For instance, one university-educated veiled woman from Egypt declared: "Before [I started to wear the veil], it was awful: the cars were always stopping, men bothering me... Now I am really in peace (quoted in Taarji 1990, 34 - my translation)." Another veiled woman from Tunis explains her decision this way: "No one can insult a woman wearing the hijab. No man can undress her with his eyes. They don't dare flirt with her. They respect her" (quoted in Bessis and Belhassen 1992, 226 - my translation). Similarly, an Algerian woman remarked:

I came to the conclusion that the hijab was for me the best way to gain my freedom. Since men are unable to see in me something other than a sexual being, nor to talk to me in a natural and respectful manner, I decided to eliminate what could arouse their sexual desires. By covering my body, I present myself to them in such a way that they will have no choice but being interested in my spirit, my behavior. In short [by veiling myself], I force him to consider me as a human being.

(quoted in Taarji 1990, 277 - my translation)

However, the post-structuralist argument of the liberating effects of the veil, although relevant, tends to overlook the frame of power relationships from which the hijab's dominant social significations originate. For this reason, it might be useful to turn our attention to authors who, within postcolonial studies, question the subaltern's capabilities of producing counter-narratives susceptible of resisting and eventually subverting dominant discourses. In a seminal and much influential essay entitled "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) casts serious doubts on the intellectual's capacity to recover the voice of the oppressed, arguing that the combined workings of colonialism and patriarchy make it extremely difficult for the (sexed) subaltern

to articulate her point of view. Spivak's warning reminds us that veiled women's capacities to voice their concerns outside of the dominant (patriarchal) institutional and ideological channels are rather limited. Hence, veiled women's narratives should not be uncritically taken as a token of an autonomous and subversive self-consciousness.

Similarly, Stuart Hall's Marxist Culturalist perspective helps us to place the hijab within a framework of power, institutions, and systems of politics and economics. Hall (1981) convincingly argues that actors negotiate meaning embedded in language uses, depending on their social and cultural location within society. Furthermore, the control over societal institutions (school, family) is generally a prerequisite for the dominant group's ability to "inject" its world representations into the socially legitimate cultural models. Hence, stresses Hall, culture must be seen as inextricably interwoven with power relationships, which leads to a continuous struggle between groups and classes over social significations. At stake in this struggle over cultural encoding is the power for a group to socially legitimize its own ideological discourse, which is then seen by actors as the quasi ontological expression of the people's culture (Hall 1981). Hall's theory reminds us that the supposed "arbitrariness of the sign," over which Homi Bhabha gloss, becomes a fiction once the signified embedded in social discourses is understood as being shaped in relation with hegemonic ideological, and institutional frameworks, themselves interlocked with questions of gender, class, ethnicity, and so on (Hall 1991, 57-67; Loomba 1998, 179-81; Shohat 1992).

The post-marxist feminists who critically examined the hijab echo to a large extent Spivak and Hall's approaches to culture. In particular, they have shown how, since the 1960s-70s, the emergence of the hijab took place under the influence of the fundamentalist movements, which have gradually radicalized the dominant interpretation of veil wearing. The fact that the dominant meaning attached to the hijab is today largely defined/encoded by fundamentalist movements constitutes a double edged knife, both for veiled and non-veiled women. If it is true that, by veiling herself, the hijab wearer makes a "social compromise" from which she will benefit in the short term, it must also be kept in mind that such a

strategy reinforces and legitimizes the fundamentalist representation of women as perverted sexual beings who, if not veiled, will disrupt the social order. Even though some women see (rightly) in the veil a symbol of liberation and emancipation, the public acknowledgement of such a claim implies a continuous and unequal struggle against the overwhelming influence of the fundamentalist interpretation of the veil.

Post-structuralist feminists rightly point out that veiled women's narratives often denote a "demand for a renewed dignity" (MacLeod 1992, 552). It is also true that the hijab can indeed be used, as Fadwa El Guindi (1981) argued, as an indirect way for women to force men to release some of the "control which they once jealously held" (483) over them. However, this "renewed dignity" entails the tacit acceptance, both by the veil wearer and the public, that a woman who leaves the house - especially when neither her husband nor any male relative accompany her - is of questionable virtue. This social discourse delineates a sharp frontier between two representations of women, the mother and wife on the one hand, and the "public woman" on the other. According to the dominant symbolism of the veil, if the mother and wife is highly respectable, the public woman attracts *a priori* suspicion. Thus, it seems that the dignity and respectability which the hijab provides to its wearers rests on a representation of the female body portrayed as a permanent threat to society.

My review of second-hand qualitative data has revealed that veiled women tend to *indirectly* legitimize this (fundamentalist) "demonized" representation of women's nature rather than overtly embrace it. For instance, one Egyptian working mother of three small children justifies her decision to wear the veil by saying: "(...)Before we dressed differently, I don't know why. But this dress is better. When I wear these clothes (the hijab), I feel secure, I know I am a good mother and a good wife. And men know not to flirt with me. So it is not a problem to go out to work, or to shop, or anything" (quoted in MacLeod 1992, 543). Another woman from Egypt declared: "Before, people were looking at me as if I was any other girl. Now, [that I wear the hijab] it's almost as if I was reflecting the image of Islam" (quoted in Taarji 1990, 34 - my translation). This Lebanese woman says that wearing the veil will "protect her from the suffering

endured in hell" (quoted in Taarji 1990, 194 - my translation). Finally, this Egyptian mother argued that "this dress says to everyone that I am a Muslim woman, and that I am here working because my family needs me to. Not for myself! I am here because I love my family" (quoted in MacLeod 1992, 549-50).

Although such examples reveal that one's decision to wear the veil can rest on diverse motives, they disclose one common denominator. They denote a tendency to set up the hijab as a precondition to attain the status of "good wife and mother," or that of "good Muslim." And the implicit corollary of such assumptions is that unveiled women do not deserve these epithets. In other words, these veiled women, by upholding such opinions, implicitly reinforce the belief that unveiled women - especially the working ones - are "bad mothers," "bad wives," do not "love their family," "will go to hell," or are "bad Muslims," etc. Such attitudes contribute to bring non-veiled women into "social disrepute." One Egyptian and non-veiled woman expressed well how the dominant symbolism of the veil always obliges her to prove to the public that, even if non-veiled, she is still worthy of respect: "The veiled woman covers herself and is guaranteed to be perceived as morally good. This creates a problem for me, because I have to prove that I am not a bad girl, that I don't go around with men, and that I can be interested in serious things" (quoted in Davis 1992, 140).

These veiled women's narratives can be considered as by-products of the fundamentalist discourse insofar as they contribute to consolidate the (fundamentalist-rooted) "demonized" image of the female's body and nature. Nonetheless, post-structuralist feminists are right to view the hijab as a gesture of "accommodating protest" (MacLeod 1992), as it keeps in check the hassle and disapprobation that women frequently face when venturing outside the house. However, as the above statements showed, it appears that several veiled women do not adopt the veil only in order to benefit from this gesture. Most of the time, indeed, they adopt not only the veil itself, but also the dominant rhetoric that comes with it. As Yolande Geadah puts it, "a Muslim woman who adopts voluntarily the veil today is not necessarily a fundamentalist, but she probably has internalized a certain number of beliefs and values derived from the fundamentalist

movement" (Geadah 1996, 87 - my translation). Finally, the "social bluffers" whose conversion to veil wearing was purely strategic can hardly, by their mere willpower, drag the hijab from the frame of social significations in which it is now inextricably embedded. Thus, based on the qualitative data reviewed here, it seems that the power of veiled women to disrupt the hegemonic interpretive framework through which the hijab is socially encoded and decoded is significantly curtailed.

Also, because they celebrate unconditionally the return of the Subject, post-structuralist feminists, such as Leila Ahmed (1992), enthusiastically emphasize the "free choice" of a woman's decision to wear the hijab. This argument should also be questioned, as it is now a well established fact that fundamentalist groups, in certain Muslim countries, frequently resort to, if not violence, at least strong intimidation to force "recalcitrants" to wear the veil. For now, this phenomenon is mainly confined to countries such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Algeria, where the expansion of fundamentalist movements is well under way (Bessis and Belhassen 1992; Messaoudi 1995; Mimouni 1992). But far more generalized than violence and intimidation are the social pressures aimed at convincing Arab women to adopt the hijab. These pressures originate not only from fundamentalist groups, but *first and foremost* from the primary web of social relations (family, work place, circles of friends, etc.) in which each woman is enmeshed. This aspect of the propagation of the hijab is largely overlooked by post-structuralist analyses, which often ignore the influence of the subtle but yet omnipresent social pressures exerted on Arab women.

The following narratives illustrate well some of the various forms that these social pressures can take. Explaining how she came to wear the veil, a Lebanese woman declared:

[When I was 18 years old], my mother (...) pushed me to attend some religious meetings held in our village. (...) The Sheik was telling us about God's revelations in the Koran, about hell's suffering, and about the hijab. His speech gradually penetrated my mind. My husband had to leave home for a long period of time.

When he came back, I was wearing the hijab.

(quoted in Taarji 1990, 201-02 - my translation)

Samia, another Lebanese woman, explained that her mother warned her: "If your husband wants you to put it on [the hijab], you'll put it on." She then added: "That's what happened" (quoted in Taarji 1990, 204 - my translation). A Tunisian named Hrairia declared the following:

Here, [in my neighbourhood], it became impossible not to wear it [the hijab]. It became almost indecent to go bareheaded to the store or to your neighbour's place. Everybody would gossip about it. Maybe I would have never worn it if I was still living in the heart of Tunis. But here, people's eyes are everywhere.

(quoted in Bessis and Belhassen 1992, 225 - my translation)

A 36 year old cleaning lady from Algeria expressed similar feelings: "I wear the hijab because in my city (...), everybody is wearing it" (quoted in Bessis and Belhassen 1992, 225 - my translation). Raja, a 24 year old woman from Casablanca who began wearing the hijab after joining the "feminine circle" of the neighbourhood's mosque, explained how she was taught that "women cause *fitna* (social chaos). In order not to provoke disturbances in the society, women have to wear the veil until death" (quoted in Bessis and Belhassen 1992, 230 - my translation). Finally, the case of Nora, 22 years old, is particularly interesting. The woman from Lebanon explained how she started wearing the veil after having had repeated nightmares in the course of which a "spirit" was tormenting and threatening her. The spirit was enjoining Nora to wear the veil. After one month of resistance, when Nora yielded to pressures and adopted the hijab, the spirit finally stopped haunting her. According to the interviewer, it seemed quite likely that this spirit was directly related to Nora's sister-in-laws, who all wore the chador. As a matter of fact, Nora later confessed: "It's been a long time now since my sister-in-laws have been urging my husband to force me to wear the chador" (quoted in Taarji 1990, 197-98 - my translation). The above cited narratives are quite

revealing, for they disclose the influence of a woman's social environment on her decision to wear the hijab.

Post-structuralist feminists frequently report, as a proof that veil wearing is based on free choice, cases of young girls who decided to wear the hijab despite the strong opposition of their parents. In fact, such examples are not surprising, given that, since the eighties, the new Islamist discourse found in public schools and universities a fertile ground for its large scale diffusion, thus chiefly reaching youngsters. Hence, it is not uncommon to encounter inter-generational clashes where the children's religious attitude is much more orthodox and conservative than that of their parents. Thus, for instance, one elderly Moroccan woman declared that she did not understand her 19 year old veiled grand-daughter, who became an active Islamist militant defending polygamy, repudiation, strict sexual segregation, and so on. Commenting on her grand-daughter's austere religious attitude, the grandmother said: "I don't understand this religion which has nothing to do with Islam. My grand-daughter must be crazy or sick. (...) As far as I am concerned, my head will only be wrapped the day I die, not before that. I wear my jellaba, and a scarf like everyone else. What is this religion (...) where you eat the strict minimum and where fun and cakes are forbidden? Religion is not a punishment!" (quoted in Bessis and Belhassen 1992, 232 - my translation). This latter remark illustrates the significant radicalization undergone by the dominant religious discourse within less than two or three decades. It also points to the fact that the hijab is not a "deeply rooted" or "ancestral" tradition," but rather a recently invented one, which fundamentalists have set up as an essential component of an Arabo-Muslim identity to serve their political and ideological agenda (Gedah 1996; for an excellent analysis on invented traditions, see Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983).

The question of the relationship between the hijab and power issues has been addressed in various ways by post-structuralist feminists. Certain authors completely ignore the entanglement of the veil's symbolism with power relationships. Thus, for Leila Ahmed (1992, 166), the hijab constitutes a harmless and apolitical item of clothing. It should be clear, from the above discussion, that such a claim hardly stands up to analysis. However, other

authors such as Arlene Elowe MacLeod (1992, 556) and Lama Abuh Odeh (1993) are very well aware of the potential dangers related to the current spread of the hijab. Thus, for example, Abuh Odeh made the following remark in the conclusion of her article:

(...) In my construction so far, I have largely ignored the question of power. (...) A woman who decides to wear the veil is usually subjected to a certain ideological indoctrination (by a fundamentalist preacher) about how every Muslim woman needs to cover her body so as not to seduce men. (...) This will have the effect of disabling the veiled women from seeing the subversions and variations that exist to disrupt the ideology of the veil [sic].

(Abuh Odeh 1993, 35-36).

But in general, post-structuralist feminists, even those for whom the hijab's symbolism is subjected to power relationships, are nonetheless convinced that the dominant rhetoric of the veil can be subverted "from within" (Abu Odeh 1993; Ahmed 1992; Hoodfar 1992; MacLeod 1992). Furthermore, they generally deem inappropriate the opposite approach advocating the suppression of the veil in the name of a Western-rooted feminism. As MacLeod (1992) argues pertinently, the image of the "liberated" Western woman does not fit in the social imagery of the typical *Mouhajjaba* (veiled women). Also, she adds, "In a post-colonial context, any images derived from the West are politically and culturally suspect" (555). This point was also made by Lama Abuh Odeh (1993), who argues that feminists denouncing the oppressive character of the veil offer veiled women a discourse which, in a post-colonial context, "will make them socially conspicuous, questionable, and suspect" (32). As she puts it, to embrace such a discourse would be "socially suicidal" for most veiled women.

These remarks are particularly relevant, for they remind us of the strong tendency of Western feminism to consider non-Western models of gender relationships as sexist and backward. It is true that Western feminism has often been used to discredit non-Western cultures, and, conversely, implicitly assert Western cultural superiority. Such attitudes have largely complicated non-Western feminists' attempts to fight sexism in their own

country. Indeed, non-Western feminists who challenge the dominant rhetoric of the hijab continually risk being accused of endorsing this Western ethno-centrist ideology while betraying their own native cultural background. Homa Hoodfar (1992) expressed very well the dilemma in which non-Western feminists are placed: "Western feminists' failure to interrogate critically colonial racist, and androcentric constructs of women of non-Western cultures forces Muslim women to choose between fighting sexism or racism" (6).

For this reason, several post-structuralist feminists prefer opposing Western-centrist neo-colonial representations of Third World women by revealing indigenous histories, re-activating pre-colonial symbols and mythologies, and echoing, where possible, the voices of native women themselves. As Ania Loomba reminds us, "since colonialism often eroded certain women-friendly traditions, images, and institutions, such moves to recover aspects of the pre-colonial past can certainly be extremely useful for feminists" (Loomba 1998, 229). However, as exemplified by the case of the hijab, such an approach runs the risk of glossing over the patriarchal and sexist aspects of some of these re-invented traditions, especially as they are re-cycled into symbols of anti-colonial or post-colonial resistance by either Third World States, or fundamentalist groups within it. In this respect, critics such as Spivak (1988), or Appiah (1991), are right to warn postcolonial advocates and thinkers against idealizing the pre-colonial past and romanticizing native cultures.

One wonders if there is a way out of this dilemma. Is it possible for a feminist to challenge the sexist significations attached to certain non-Western "cultural traditions" without embracing gender relationships mechanically modeled on Western ones? Inversely, is it possible to fight neo-colonial forms of feminism while remaining critical of the sexist cultural norms which are socially legitimized in the name of this same native culture to be defended and fostered?

I will attempt to address this question as it applies to the present topic of discussion. First, it is urgent that feminists overcome the religious nationalist maneuver of equating veil wearing with pre-colonial cultural authenticity on the one hand, and feminist criticisms of the hijab with a Western-rooted form of neo-colonialism on the

other.<sup>3</sup> To this end, feminists, be they non-Western or Western, need to continue challenging the sexist character of the fundamentalist interpretation of the hijab, with the view, to put it in Spivak's terms, of making visible the marginalized position of the sexed subalterns. However, and this is crucial, these reforms should also be pursued in a "native idiom," rather than by resorting exclusively to a rhetoric perceived as Western-made, and thus socially suspicious. For instance, the critical deconstruction of the hijab as a sacred obligation would have much more appeal to Arab and other Muslim populations if it was not only buttressed by post-marxist feminist arguments, but also if it would authorize itself with religious arguments as well. More specifically, Arab feminists need to re-invest the terrain of Islam, from which they have been expelled by religious nationalists as treacherous pro-Western and anti-Islamic elements. Given the tremendous social legitimacy that Islam has gained in Arab civil societies as an essential component of a post-colonial national selfhood, any attempt to fight fundamentalism is doomed to failure as long as its ideological foundations remain unchallenged on religious grounds. Thus, it would be appropriate to set against the fundamentalist reading of the Koran and other sacred texts (Sunna, Chaaria, and Hadith), a more liberal one fostering egalitarian gender relationships. That is exactly what Muslim feminist and sociologist Fatima Mernissi undertook, among others, in her book *The Veil and the Male Élite* (1991). In this ambitious study, Mernissi analyzed thousands of pages of Hadits, that is, all the remarks attributed to the Prophet after his death. She searched the origin of each Hadit which fundamentalists usually invoke to justify sexist "religious prescriptions," and concluded that there are more fraudulent than authentic ones. Ironically, Fatima Mernissi has thus attempted to desacralize the hijab - and the sexist symbolism attached to it - by resorting to sacred texts. Her approach offers a twofold advantage. First, it presents Arab feminism as an anti-fundamentalist, yet Islam-friendly, discourse. Second, and most importantly, it refutes the belief that the hijab is the embodiment of Islam, a belief which has gained wide acceptance in the Arab world over the past decades, even in countries such as Egypt, Morocco, and Algeria, where Islamist movements are actively repressed and silenced by governments. In this context, feminist

re-interpretations of the sacred text are salutary, for they demonstrate that the hijab, far from being a symbol of Islam, is rather a symbol of radical politicized Islamist discourses. Once again, such a strategy should not act as a substitute for, but rather as a necessary complement to, a more "conventional" feminist critique of the structural and patriarchal gender-based power effects related to the fundamentalist interpretation of the hijab.

## CONCLUSION

Beyond the issue of the hijab proper, this paper has addressed the question of the relationship between agency and structure. Postcolonial theory in general is largely informed by the postmodern call for the acknowledgement, both scientifically and politically, of marginalized groups whose voices have been historically silenced by dominant actors (e.g., Western, Middle-class, Men) perceiving and studying the "Other" through their own (sub)cultural lenses. We have seen that some postcolonial feminists, namely those committed to a radical "Bhabha-ian" post-structuralist agenda, tend to put a strong emphasis on Third World women's abilities to bypass and escape the multifaceted power structures to which they are subjected. From this perspective, researchers, rather than throwing light on structural mechanisms of domination, prefer stressing the counter-powers and counter-strategies deployed by native women. Such a research agenda raises an important theoretical question: can these silenced voices, echoed by post-structuralist feminists, be regarded as an expression of a critical and subversive counter-discourse of resistance? Or are they simply by-products of the dominant discourse, the mere duplicate of an external ideology from which they are derived? On the one hand, it would be simplistic to contend that the discourses emerging from the margins are a mere function of the symbolic order defined by the center. The process by which a dominated group's self-concept takes form constitutes a dialogue with the dominant group's ideology, a dialogue which often leads to creative re-appropriations of the symbolic material drawn from the hegemonic culture. However, although highly relevant to Women Studies and to the feminist movement, this post-structuralist insight can become sociologically deficient and politically

counter-productive when it goes as far as to neglect, and often negate, the power effects which contribute to reproduce and reinforce unequal gender relationships. Furthermore, the Marxian concept of alienation should remind us that the dominated group's world view, as well as the self-consciousness of minority group actors, are often coloured by the dominant discourse and its "cultural models," which are socially construed as universal. Hence, if used improperly, the post-structuralist assumptions underlying the work of certain postcolonial feminists could be turned into a powerful instrument of legitimization of the

ideological and political structures perpetuating gender-based inequalities. In any case, the complexity of this question calls for a nuanced answer.

## ENDNOTES

1. The *hijab* is a large headscarf which only covers the hair and neck like a wimple. It is, by far, the most common and least radical form of Islamic veiling today. Its main purpose is to cover the hair, considered by Islamists to be a highly sexual feature of the female body. Other forms of veiling are pushing this logic further. Thus, the *chador* (think of Iran) is a large piece of black material used to cover the entire body except the face and hands. Finally, the *burka* (think of Afghanistan), is a top-to-toe gown which not only covers the entire body, but also the face, leaving only holes or a tight screen to allow seeing, breathing, and talking.

2. It must be said that, before Nasser, the Turkish leader Mustapha Kemal offered, from 1918 to 1938, a charismatic and nationalist discourse which advocated for the radical secularization of his country's social and institutional structures. Also, Atatürk was perhaps the first Muslim political leader of the 20th century who managed to accumulate a great political capital for having successfully preserved his country's autonomy from Western colonial imperialism. However, Kemalism's impact in the region has been largely confined to Turkey, which, at the time, was still conceived of by Arabs as a former colonial empire of its own, whose grip over most of the Middle East had just recently come to an end.

3. Even more so given that this simplistic and erroneous equation risks finding a fertile ground for its wide-scale propagation, in a context where anti-Arab and anti-Muslim sentiments have mushroomed throughout the Western world since the September 11th terrorist attacks on US soil. Furthermore, in Muslim countries, the US military intervention in Afghanistan is generally perceived as yet another American imperialistic aggression against Islam and Muslim peoples. This has put radical Islamist movements in a perfect position to capitalize efficiently on this generalized anti-American resentment, in order to set up their patriarchal and retrograde socio-political agenda as an anti-colonial discourse of cultural resistance. As a corollary, Arab and Muslim feminists' critiques of Islamist discourses are now even more at risk of being socially discredited as treacherous pro-Western views. In this respect, this form of silencing is really not different from the "manufacturing of consent" observed in Western media since the September 11th events; George W. Bush's now infamous "you are either with us or against us" sums up very well this sort of chilling Manichean nationalist discourse, whereby internal criticisms of the hegemonic normative framework are systematically equated with a withdrawal of one's support for the nation, as an anti-patriotic stance to be suppressed.

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