

# The symbol veil in muslim women religion essay



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This research paper aims to define the symbol veil in Muslim women. Aside from being a form of dress or hijab, it bears symbols of their oppression, social control, religious sanctions, invisibility and socio-political status, according to Watson. This has been an almost global concern for a sense of freedom.

In Saudi Arabia and some parts of Asia alone as well as North Africa, countries like Afghanistan, Iran, Egypt and Northern Cameroon practice Islam as a monotheistic religion with Qur’an as their religious text and Muslims as followers. Wherein, its women have been the part of a continuous discussion. Topics include the issue of the veil and how groups have been separated into account of maintaining its practice or not.

Some admits a total ignorance of their religion and culture, while there are “Islamic feminists” who have shown a passion to reclaiming the emancipatory message of the Qur’an on using veils as part of the earliest traditions in

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Muslim communities. Such a scenario has attracted angers and frustrations in retort to the deliberate racism afflicted on Muslims especially in US colonies.

Moreover, when Muslim women use veils showing a pictogram of ignorance and oppression, it has given fear to the younger population. Following patriarchy means having power over women's lives and in this lieu, these Muslim women wants to free themselves from its bonds. They want others to see themselves as an active part of the community vying for the same equal rights that allows them to be its members, workers as well as reformists. If the static colonial image of a Muslim woman wearing a veil does not improve in the future, they can deny their own culture and faith in religion.

## **Chapters**

### **What is a Veil?**

A veil is a piece of loose, opaque, non-distinctive clothing wrapped around the body in modest to be able to hide a wearers head, torso and ankles, but leaving the face, hands and feet exposed (Hoodfar, 1992.) In Muslim women, it is called (Woodlock, 2000) hijab, a simple headscarf. Why should they wear a veil? It is part of their identity.

On the other hand, Arab men are required to wear the keffiyeh, a traditional square cotton cloth that is use as a headdress. Other names are (ya)shmagh, ghutra, hattah or mashadah (Kaitlin, 2008.) Importantly, a veil is worn as a religious item in the Islam faith, because members show demonstrates honor to an object or space. In Qur'anic verse, it means that there is a definition of separation in the sacred from the mundane. In the entire practice of Islam

dress codes, its women members compete to gain a whole and complete image on being a pure and dedicated mother, sister, sister-in-law or daughter of their faith (Billaud, 2009.)

Before, all members were asks to wear a veil, but with the entry of westernization and colonization there was a separation of responsibilities to wear one (Hoodfar, 1992.) Among the Arab urban elite, men began to copy new ways to dressing from their traditional keffiyeh. Yet, there are also a small percentage of Muslim women following the same pattern (Hoodfar, 1992.)

The veil also underwent varied changes to fashions through out history. Some reasons entitle wearing a veil to show respect on conventional values or there are others who uses this to beautify their faces with make-up. Nevertheless, there have been other negative connotations to the symbol of a veil to which it can show a fundamentalist Islam in equal terms on extremism or terrorism (Van Santen, 2010.) Today, it bears a political meaning. Yet, Muslim women still continue to defend this choice.

## **Its Origins and Language**

The practice of wearing a veil in seclusion of women comes from a pre-Islamic and non-Arab Middle Eastern and Mediterranean society tradition. If we trace along the history line, the first instance to veiling dates back to the 13th century BC in an Assyrian legal text. During that time, only respectable women are permitted to wear veils, wherein prostitutes are not allowed wear a veil (Hoodfar, 1992.) It was a sign of status and a part of the elite ways in ancient Greco, Roman, pre-Islamic Iranian and Byzantine empires. After

then, Muslims was able to seclude a life from the conquered regions and followed traditions in wearing veils. Nowadays, both non-Muslims and Muslims recognize this way as an Islamic phenomenon. Even if in the Qur'an, there are no specific mentions of the veil.

Examples of descriptions, but not directly mentioning the use of veil, are Surah al - Nur verses 30 - 31. This requires women to cover their chests and jewelry, which also means to wrap their whole body in clothing. Adding to this is Surah al - Ahzab verse 59, that asks the Prophet wives to enveloped tightly their bodies, because they are should not be recognized, disturbed and molested outside. Though modern critics have rationalized that others also follow this form of dress, it was not until Safavids period of influence that the symbol status of veils was seen in the Muslim ruling class and urban elite. In 19th century, it was promoted as a major Muslim symbol, which members have fought for in the name of Islam and not for protecting culture practices.

## **Honor, Veiling and Etiquette in Afghanistan**

No Muslim woman can embody the face of Islam. Any insight to wearing a veil does not account for a completely understanding on the faith of Muslim women. The point of discussing its purposes and symbolism is to keep an open-mind and listen (Kaitlin, 2008.) The veiling practices widely differ from regions, ethnics or social groups. In Afganistan, a veil is corresponds to honor (Billaud, 2009.) In here, a woman shows a devotion to the honor system through doing a pardah<sup>5</sup> that can comprise of wrapping her head and hiding from unrelated men. When she does this, there is also a proud bearance to the honor of her male relatives or namus. Hence, in this region, a veil is

symbolizing of a male-female connection in terms of relationships and balance in natural inclinations or nafs. Furthermore, the multitude of veil chadari colors is also another thing to interpret.

On top this variations, a veil is also a way in the isolation of unrelated men and women in Afghanistan. Examples of these persons are the ones not affiliated with the same korwal or the inhabitants sharing a home. The society puts a difference between its private and public members, wherein a dakhili (the private sphere or home) is secluded and the biruni (outside world) is permitted to recognition. Moreover, the practice of namus allows a certain power from men that allow them to control women, which confine their manners when seen outside. If you are there, you can here men saying: 'Zan namus e ma's' ('The woman is our honour') (Billaud, 2009.) Similar to soldiers saying: 'Watan namus e ma's' ('The nation is our honour.') During the time that a woman steps outside of her home, she wears a veil and go with a mahram or a male relative to be able to defend her honor as part of the Afghanistan etiquette.

## **Veiled Performance and Politics**

In modern times, the Islamic feminists have shown great efforts to reclaiming the emancipatory message of their Qur'an. They also want to gain back the rights that were bestowed upon them in the earliest Muslim communities (Falah & Nagel, 2005.) Islamic regions have shared their own stories for this matter. Here are some of them:

Politics in Afghanistan - the new Islamic Republic has allowed its clothing and veiling practices to be under political category, which are mandatory to

women to reach out to the public. Now, there are similarities between the image of parliamentary women and female university students that are Muslims in Afghanistan and whom displays a modern yet Muslim persona. The latter renounce the women's issues just to protect the practice of wearing their veils. Hence, Afghanistan women are divided into 2 categories: the conservative or nationalist and liberal women (Billaud, 2009.)

2. Iran's De-veiling Law - this was promulgated during the taking place of a rapid social change from a mayhem on its national economy; results of negative impact on the public, social, and leisure activities of its urban women; going to weekly ablutions in an offending feeling of nakedness; and a social implication bestowed on young women students when not wearing a scarf in public wherein parents hindered entry to schools (Hoodfar, 1992.)

3. Struggles in Northern Cameroon - this shows an account to an image seen on Muslim women that they are a homogeneous category. To which, in public schools, wearing of a headgear is asked to be taken off inside the premises as required by the laic prescriptions of Cameroon's constitution. Though there is no buzz on this matter. In this lieu, men choose to enter schools where veiling is allowed, while women opt for education (van Santen, 2010.)

## **Women's Rights Activists Situations**

The Revolutionary Association of the Women in Afghanistan

In the manner, a lot of women's rights activists, while opposing the need in veiling of women under chadari, used the practice to enjoy freedom of movement while carrying out tasks. The chadari was a symbol of women's  
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oppression, but now in cultural norms, they were able to be active citizens fighting for a change in the community. The said hadari was a guarantee of women's protection in Afghanistan, wherein they need the veil during travelling to remote areas where security was often tight.

In this lieu, the Revolutionary Association of the Women in Afghanistan is a very good example of a group with an instrumental nature of the chadari in inline with the goals of being politically engaged women (Billaud, 2009.) For certain their records are part of history under the human and women's rights. The Taliban realizes this under the chadari. When working in rural areas, this was worn for security reasons, during times that people tended to be suspicious on persons from the outside world. This was a strategy used by Rahela6, who is a member of the Afghan Women's Network, when she taught mullahs on women's rights in rural areas. She said, " At first, it was difficult for us, women, to approach mullahs. They were reluctant to talk to us. But they gradually got used to us. By wearing chadari, we eventually gained their respect."

### Egyptian Feminist Movement in the 1920s

Disobedience of the patriarchy can be seen in the de - veiling act started by the Egyptian feminist movement during the 1920s and to the same situation resistance happening for a call to compulsory veiling in Iran. In here, we can see that aside from being a part of culture and religion, the veil can also be a form and symbol of resistance, for example in the case of the anti - Shah movement that took place in Iran.



In the same context, there were a number of Islam feminists Muslim women in Canada who have used the veil and reference to Islam during their stay in the country, because they wanted to resist some of the cultural practices that their forefathers have believed, like arranged marriages or far away educations from home without secluding from their parents and communities.

Though, in Egypt, a lot veiled Muslim women use it as an instrument of mediation significantly seen from Muslim minority cultures and those of host cultures. Strangely enough, Western colonies reactions to Muslim women, as seen through the eyes of an Orientalist and colonialist frame, sets barricades on the customs and traditions of Muslim women to be difficult and opposite to their usual way of lives (Hoodfar, 1992.)

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the veil is not so significant, after all, but it is who wears it that lies in importance. When in public, a Muslim woman shows people who see her in the outside world a marginal status that is of respect and honor. Not for culture and religion causes or even fashion. The series of incidents mentioned this paper have made me apprehend why a lot of young Muslim women today are so angry and have decided to fight for their rights together with other believers of Islam. This research paper aims define the symbol veil in Muslim women. According Watson in 1994, " OR NON-MUSLIM WRITERS, THE VEIL IS VARIOUSLY DESCRIBED AS A TANGIBLE SYMBOL OF WOMEN'S OPPRESSION, A CONSTRAINING AND CONSTRICTING FORM OF DRESS, AND A FORM OF SOCIAL CONTROL, RELIGIOUSLY SANCTIONING WOMEN'S INVISIBILITY AND SUBORDINATE SOCILA-POLITICAL STATUS."

I did not want to diminish or question the religious beliefs of the Muslim women in Islamic communities, but rather to underline and put emphasis on the possibilities that can be resulting through the reiteration of these feminine ceremonials. Since, it would be like a forever burden or mistake if the veil is lessened in reputation and disrespected in symbolism, which are its instrumental functions to the women, especially the young students in schools. Though, talking about the topic of veil, it was enough to see in it a pure religious expression. Reverence and dissimulation for it were indeed political gestures in my side that place defense on it as the necessary social make-up for women to be seen and heard through the public scenario. Moreover, if the Western colonies will only have a deeper analysis of Muslim women's motives and actions in their practicing their beliefs, efforts by these women can be recognized as strategies and adaption in relationship with them, displaying different roles in the foreign community that should be basing on to the different Western citizen they wished to address themselves.