

## Conceptions of the Veil

The veil has become a defining feature seen by the West of Muslim women, and of Islam itself. We recognize two main opinions that the West has formed of the veil: it is first seen as oppressive to women, and it is secondly seen as a symbol of the backwardness of the “Orient,” its reluctance to embrace modernity. I will argue that the image of the veil’s oppression of women is only sometimes historically constructed; I also contend that the backwardness symbolized by the veil, throughout the entirety of history until now does not necessarily have a historical construction.

Throughout history, oppression has been only one of many uses for the veil; hence the veil being seen as oppressive is only sometimes historically constructed. Indeed, the veil has sometimes been a “mechanism in the service of patriarchy” (Hoodfar 5), and oppression of women in general stems from “never-reformed legal provisions” (Lamrabet 3). For example, we know that in Iran, the veil was mandated by the government after the Iranian Revolution in 1980 (Hoodfar 12), certainly against the wishes of some women – many left their jobs or the country (Hoodfar 12). If the veil is equated with oppression with such instances in mind, then the image of oppression is certainly historically constructed. Yet at the same time, the veil had varied uses, and was not always oppressive. The veil could “beautify the wearer ... to demonstrate conventional values, or to hide the wearer’s identity” (Hoodfar 7). In the earliest instances of the veil, it was a sign of a woman’s nobility. Ultimately, the “veil’s functions and social significance have varied tremendously ... during times of rapid social change” (Hoodfar 5) making the veil incredibly multifaceted in purpose. In fact, some women view it now as a “fulfillment of their spirituality” (Bullock & Jafri 31), highlighting not only another key purpose, but also a reason for why women may have willingly embraced the veil. In terms of these realities, the West

broadly labelling the veil as oppressive could not be farther from historical truth. Ultimately, we must recognize that the veil has been used and interpreted differently – and “oppressive” is a valid label for only a very limited part of the veil’s image.

The other major image of the veil is one of backwardness, of the Islamic world, the Orient, in its decadent orthodoxy, reluctant to change. This image became prevalent as Western colonialism took hold of the Islamic world in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the Europeans contrasted their own technology and social progressiveness with what they saw – the veil on Muslim women in the colonies: Africa, the Middle East, India. The conception that the veil symbolizes backwardness is historically flawed for two reasons. The first reason is that backwardness in Islamic society was not because of cultural customs like the veil – rather, it was due to a combination of poor government, technology, and foreign affairs. For example, the Ottoman Empire – perhaps the last Muslim polity with significant political and military strength comparable to that of the West – fell behind and ultimately collapsed due to internal strife caused by the First World War and its polyglot of peoples vying for independence. It is difficult to see how customary veils on women or such cultural factors contributed to their fall. Secondly, the veil is not a backwards concept at all – it is used not just in the Islamic world, but also in many (modern) Western nations by religious figures, or (to a lesser extent) by women in general. While it was true that much of the Islamic world was technologically and socially backwards compared to Western nations (by Western standards), this backwardness has nothing to do with the veil, which only happens to be an accompanying cultural symbol, causally unrelated to backwardness. Therefore, while it may make sense to superficially associate the veil with Islam which was backwards in some respects, it is historically incorrect to associate the veil with backwardness itself. After all, the veil was prevalent in Islamic regions well before they became

“backward” – would Middle Ages Europe have regarded the massively wealthier and technologically more advanced Caliphate as “backwards” because of their veils?

In conclusion, I have argued the validity of two major conceptions of the veil that the West holds. The image of oppression is only partly true, but the image of backwardness is unrelated to the veil and does not historically make sense. The veil is nuanced and complex; it is unsurprising that many broad opinions that the West holds of it are not well-constructed historically.

Works Cited

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