

# Challenging Media Representations of the Veil: Contemporary Muslim Women's Re-veiling Movement

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## **Abstract**

The image of the Muslim woman's veil in the popular western media is that it is a symbol of oppression and violence in Islam. The forced covering of women in postrevolutionary Iran, or lately, under the Taliban in Afghanistan seems to confirm this image of the veil. But this singular image of the 'veil' is not the whole story of covering. Since the late 1970s scores of Muslim women, from Arabia to Asia to the West, have been voluntarily covering. The re-covering movement challenges the reductive image of the veil as a symbol of Muslim women's oppression. Due to the ubiquitous image of the veil as a symbol of oppression or violence, Muslim women living in the West who cover often suffer discrimination, harassment, even assault. Hence, it is important to understand the multiple meanings of the veil, and to challenge the media to improve their representation of its meanings.

The popular western media image of the 'veil' as a symbol of Muslim women's oppression is actually an old image in the West. Originating before colonialism, it gained full force during the colonial period as part of a discourse about the inferior status of women in Islam.<sup>1</sup> In contemporary times, the West's witnessing of forced covering in Iran after the 1979 revolution, or in Afghanistan under the Taliban's accession to power in 1997, that defines 'the' meaning of the 'veil' for all Muslim women. Westerners rightly find the violence and force that has accompanied covering in Iran and Afghanistan as frightening and tragic for the women involved. And the

conclusion that 'the veil' is a symbol of Muslim women's oppression seems a fairly logical one under those circumstances. But this interpretation of 'the veil' presented by popular media is not the whole story of the meaning of covering.

To challenge the reductive notion that 'the veil' is a symbol of Muslim women's oppression, I examine the contemporary Muslim women's re-veiling movement. The re-veiling movement describes a phenomenon that has been taking place across the Muslim world since about the 1970s, from Arabia to Asia to Muslims living in the West: women whose mothers did not cover, indeed, whose grandmothers and mothers may have fought to uncover, started, without coercion, to wear the *hijab* (headscarf) and the *niqab* (face veil).<sup>2</sup> Re-covering has caught many observers by surprise. By the late 1960s the face-veil and headscarf had all but disappeared in many Muslim countries (small villages or lower class women excluded.) This disappearance had been hailed by the West and by native élites committed to 'modernization' programs as a sign of progress. The reappearance of the head covers was a seemingly puzzling step backwards.

The media is an important determinant of western popular cultural views on the veil, but to date, the voluntary re-covering movement has been given little space. A smattering of newspaper articles has allowed some Muslim women to explain their positive views on covering,<sup>3</sup> but more often than not, the image of the veil remains, as in the colonial era, a negative one, associated with violence and oppression. Academic views on the veil often echo the media's simplistic view,<sup>4</sup> creating a western 'cultural consensus'<sup>5</sup> on its meaning. This cultural consensus that associates the veil with violence or oppression often makes for an uncomfortable, even hostile, environment for Muslim women living in the West who wear *hijab/niqab*. Muslim women who cover suffer daily indignities, from low level harassment (verbal abuse) to discrimination to assault.<sup>6</sup> It thus becomes crucial to challenge simplistic popular media (and academic) representations of the veil as an inherent symbol of Islam's violence or oppression of women. The best way to do this is to examine the sociological complexity underlying the contemporary re-covering movement and then to compare that with the popular media's representation of the Muslim women's veil. Doing so highlights the reductive nature of western popular media's discourse that associates the veil with oppression and violence. It also illustrates the continuities of this discourse with earlier colonial attacks on the veil and Islam.

In contesting the impoverished western mainstream media view on the veil, I rely on the feminist methodology of using women's experience as a foundation for knowledge.<sup>7</sup> I take, as the starting point for understanding the meaning of covering, testimonials from women participants in the re-covering movement who have voluntarily made the decision to cover. It is important to understand that my argument does not claim that covering is never oppressive, only that for some women it is not, and that in important ways these women find covering to be a positive experience, one that they have chosen after much reflection and deliberation. The point is to emphasize multiple meanings of *hijab* in order to counter the popular western cultural notion that the veil is necessarily a symbol of Muslim women's oppression.

In the section "Reasons for Covering," I examine four themes synthesized from the literature about re-covering to capture women's differing motivations for covering: political protest, religious, continued access to public sphere, and statement of personal identity.<sup>8</sup> Naturally, there is some intersection among the themes I have identified and more than one may apply to the same woman. For some reason, most of the studies have been conducted in Egypt, so there is now a good understanding across classes as to why women there have started covering, but there are too few studies on other countries. This is an area where more diverse research is needed. Section "Discussion of Themes" discusses these themes briefly. In section "The Meaning of *Hijab*—Western Media Viewpoint," I look at the meanings the contemporary western media commonly ascribe to *hijab*. This allows for telling demonstrations that the image of *hijab* in the West that is generated by the media is overwhelmingly negative, with little relevance to the women's perspective.

## Reasons for Covering

### Political Protest

Several studies of re-covering found that women put on *hijab* as a form of political protest against elite westernization programs and western neo-imperialism. By adopting the head covering, women signal that they are not happy with the current political situation, either with policies pursued by the State and/or with the commercial, technological, political, and social invasion of their countries by the West.<sup>9</sup> The 1967 Arab defeat at the hands of Israel was a shock to many Muslims. One can date the rise of the Egyptian Islamic movement and the replacement of Arab nationalism by

Islam as the ideology of dissent from this event.<sup>10</sup> Many people in Egypt felt betrayed when Sadat signed the Camp David Accord in 1973. There, the re-covering movement began in the late seventies among university students. At first, middle class and elite families were shocked and did not take the *muhajabat* seriously.<sup>11</sup> But by 1985, *hijab* had spread through most of the lower middle classes and to younger government employees.<sup>12</sup> It is important to understand that the type of outfit these women adopted differs greatly from that of their grandmothers, that of the peasant, and that of the *bint al-balad*, the traditional lower-class urban woman whose roots are in the rural village.<sup>13</sup> The new dress is called *al-zayy al-shar'i* (lawful dress) and signals an intent to conform to an interpretation of Islamic Law and an assumption that other forms of covering did not.

Williams's 1978 study of re-covering tries to explain why Egyptian women, whose grandmothers/mothers had led the Arab world in throwing aside the veil, and some of whom had continued to pray, fast, and otherwise think of themselves as pious Muslims, even while wearing western dress, were adopting *al-zayy al-shar'i*. After all, he writes, "Egyptian women, it has been shown, are no sheep. No one is likely to persuade them to exchange the cooler, more comfortable modern dresses for *zayy shar'i* unless they wish to do so."<sup>14</sup> He concludes that the women had multiple reasons, including the feeling that they were "solving problems,"<sup>15</sup> and in a modernizing Muslim country, making a personal statement that was "usually connected with [their] faith."<sup>16</sup>

But Williams finds that "[e]ven those who tended to defend their dress on fundamentalist grounds ('I am a Muslim woman; this is what my faith demands of me') responded somewhat differently when asked what had occasioned their response to a demand that, after all, Islam has appeared to have made for a long time, and which has not always been so clearly heard." The women advanced several reasons as to what had made them decide to cover now:

- "I did it to reject current behavior by young people and contemporary society."
- "Until 1967, I accepted the way our country was going. I thought Gamal Abd al-Nasser would lead us all to progress. Then the war showed that we had been lied to; nothing was the way it had been represented. I started to question everything we were told. I wanted to do something and to find my own way. I prayed more and more and I tried to see what was expected of me as a Muslim woman. Then I put on *shar'i* dress."

- “Once we thought that western society had all the answers for successful, fruitful living. If we followed the lead of the West, we would have progress. Now we see that this isn’t true. They (the West) are sick societies; even their material prosperity is breaking down. America is full of crime and promiscuity. Russia is worse. Who wants to be like that? We have to remember God. Look how God has blessed Saudi Arabia. That’s because they have tried to follow the Law. And America, with its loose society, is all problems.”<sup>17</sup>

The majority of the younger covered women Zuhur interviews in her 1988 study of Cairene (Egyptian) women see *hijab* as a symbol of change. “This change was not only a personal and moral decision, but represented a social sisterhood to them.”<sup>18</sup> Zuhur concludes that the covered women in her survey, *hijab* symbolizes a rejection of the “guiding principles of state policy regarding women over the last thirty-five years. Their rejection implies a relinquishment of the principles of secularism and western models and ideals in general.”<sup>19</sup>

Watson interviewed Fatima, a 70 year old widow who sells vegetables in Cairo, who had an interesting angle on the *zayy shar’i*:

Why have young girls started to cover themselves in this new type of veil and dress like old women? I think that it is just a trend, a fashion like any other. . . . I do not think that this new veiling is a religious duty. A woman’s modest conduct is more important than what she wears. The new veils are expensive. I could not afford to buy them for my daughters, they have to be satisfied with the peasant women’s scarves which just cover the hair. Does this endanger their modesty? “Rubbish,” I tell them when they raise the issue of the new veil, “*hijab* is not about any one type of dress, it’s about your behavior and what’s in your mind, so give that your greatest attention.”

Although I have this opinion about the new veil being a trend which is not an essential part of Islam, I am not against what it stands for if it means that society is becoming more concerned with morality and turning against some of the modern ways and western values which started to take hold. . . . It is important for the Arab people to rediscover their own traditions and take pride in themselves. Our ways of dressing can even be part of this. . . . It seems very important when you see how the world has changed for the worse. . . . We have become used to seeing western women almost naked in our streets, and if because of this, our women want to cover themselves in the new veil, then it is a welcome protest against indecency and our overwhelming past interest in all things foreign.

The women who adopt the new veil do so for a number of reasons, but it should not be a matter of law but one of personal choice. . . . For instance, now it is important to think about how you appear to strangers and to know why you have chosen to safeguard modesty by an extreme measure. I have made my own decision and my personal views may explain why I have started to wear the new style of veil, even though I am an old woman.<sup>20</sup>

Hessini observed a similar spreading of *hijab* when she visited Morocco in 1989. She became intrigued after she noticed that the *muhajjabat* are often the most outspoken/articulate in class, behavior that contradicts the western belief that Muslim women are subservient, so she decided to investigate further. Between 1989 and 1991 she interviewed educated and professional urban women living in Rabat and Casablanca. As in Egypt, the outfit these women adopted differed from the traditional Moroccan covering.<sup>21</sup> Her interviewees stress that they had not been taught 'true' Islam, and are part of a movement to try to change society so it better reflects true Islamic principles. These motivations, as in Egypt, signal a relinquishment of the secular path Morocco has been following for the past decades. The secular paradigm exists uneasily with the indigenous value system, and the women feel "they have no control over systems that are shaping their lives and that the influence of western values is pernicious."<sup>22</sup> The women told Hessini that "Only Islam can create a functional society. They asserted repeatedly that capitalism leads to chaos, communism is passé, and that secularism, as practised in Tunisia, is against divine will."<sup>23</sup> As one woman, Jamila, put it: "Practicing the true Islam is the only thing that can save us."<sup>24</sup> Their ideal is the society that existed during the time of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). Hadija said, "The *hijab* is a way for me to retreat from a world that has disappointed me. It's my own little sanctuary."<sup>25</sup> *Hijab* is their way of "project[ing] a Muslim identity and refut[ing] an imitation of the West."<sup>26</sup>

### Religious

Clearly part and parcel of the political protest against westernization and secularization is the conviction that Islam is an alternative political, social and economic system. This international movement, 'Islam is the solution/alternative,' includes calls for women and men to observe an Islamic dress code that requires women and men to wear long loose clothing that covers the body, with women being required also to cover their arms and heads, and the men to wear beards.<sup>27</sup> Many women have decided to cover

their heads based on these invitations to practice Islam 'better.' Williams notes, in his study of Egyptian women's unveiling, that those adopting *al-zayy al-shar'i* "claim that its wearing is a religious gesture; [and] that it conforms more to the religious law of Islam than any other available dress."<sup>28</sup>

Zuhur's study of Cairene women finds that *hijab* and *niqab* wearers see covering as a sign of religious identity, as do 40 percent of the uncovered women.<sup>29</sup> The covered women believed covering was an obligatory religious duty (*fard*) for Muslim women, and "[t]he young veiled women especially wanted to make sure that I understood the immutability of the Islamic message; that they did not approve of reform or amendment to particular historical circumstances."<sup>30</sup> The uncovered women disagreed that covering was obligatory,<sup>31</sup> though some indicated that they were thinking seriously about wearing it, and some said they would wear it after marriage.<sup>32</sup> Some younger uncovered women felt that the *hijab* required some moral preparation. One woman exclaimed, "To wear *hijab* [*hijab*] a woman must behave like an angel."<sup>33</sup>

Zuhur finds that age and social class have an important effect on receptivity to the new Islamic message. She finds an inverse correlation between covering and age, with the younger women more likely to cover than the older, and a direct correlation between covering and social class, the lower income groups being most likely to cover (i.e., *hijab* is a way to "escape social and economic limitations in a hierarchical society through a visible leveling process and the wearing of a uniform, and by verbally emphasizing social equality").<sup>34</sup> She notes, however, that existing theories that explain covering solely by referring to socioeconomic category are not adequate, since they cannot explain the appeal of *hijab* to upper-middle-class or elite women.<sup>35</sup>

In Morocco, Hessini's interviewees mentioned similar notions. The women she interviewed stressed their adoption of *hijab* as a religious choice, an expression of adhering to 'true' Islam. For example, two interviewees, Sou'al and Wafa, said the following:

Sou'al: "My mother has always worn the veil, but she knows nothing about Islam. She wore the veil out of tradition, whereas I wear it out of conviction."<sup>36</sup>

Wafa: "Women who wear *hijab* are 'true believers,' whereas women who wear another type of veil may do so out of habit."<sup>37</sup>

All her interviewees stated they had not been taught proper Islam either by their parents or their society, so there is a sense that these women feel

they are part of a new movement of people practicing true Islam, believing, like Jamila, that “practicing the true Islam is the only thing that can save us,” and hoping to be models for others to follow.<sup>38</sup> Another interviewee, Houria, said:

It is important that women who wear the *hijab* pursue advanced studies and obtain high positions [as doctors, lawyers, etc.]. If we do so, we will project a good image and set a good example for others. We will show others how to practise the real Islam. I would like to influence others into wearing the *hijab*.<sup>39</sup>

The appearance of the new *hijab* in the Middle East has surprised some observers, but its appearance in Indonesia is even more dramatic, because there is no tradition of covering there. (Only old women who may also have been on *hajj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca, tended to cover.)<sup>40</sup> In 1993 Brenner interviewed 13 urban, educated women in their twenties in Java to try to understand why they were adopting the new *hijab*. She found that the women were experiencing a ‘conversion’ process in which they came to believe that good Muslim women should be covering their hair. They believed that those opposed to the new *hijab* (devout Muslims included) were not properly aware of Qur’anic injunctions to cover. The new *hijab* is criticized by parents, husbands and friends for whom it “conjures up a picture of fundamentalist extremism that is as culturally dissonant for them as it is for many Westerners.”<sup>41</sup> Not being part of ancestral traditions, which are very important in Indonesia, the new *hijab* is seen as a foreign, Arab import, out of sync with local customs.

### *Make Society Better*

Along with rejecting westernization and secularization and adopting Islam as an alternative is the pervasive theme that women who don *hijab* feel they are being proactive about improving society. In this view, *hijab* ideally represents a leveling of the social classes, and Zuhur argues that in Egypt, the flexibility/adaptability of the Islamist message enables women of differing socioeconomic classes similarly to adopt a new ideology.<sup>42</sup> Williams finds that women feel they are wearing *hijab* as a way to remedy society, to stop it from falling apart, to stop *inhilal* (dissoluteness, disintegration):

There are so many problems in Egypt today that we don’t know how to solve. It seems that only God can solve them—we have problems of housing, budgets, schools, transportation, electricity, gas and water, and the telephone doesn’t work. When we put on *zayy shar’i*, we can

feel that at least here is one problem we can help solve for our family and society by ourselves. At least we've done something.<sup>43</sup>

The Moroccan women Hessini interviewed also saw *hijab* as a sign of an attempt to improve society, to make a more egalitarian, just society.<sup>44</sup> As in Egypt, the new *hijab* is not like the traditional Moroccan veils which used to show class distinctions. Now the *hijab* stands as a “unifying symbol shared by Muslim women.”<sup>45</sup> Nadia: “My religion saved me. In a world where there is no justice, I now believe in something that is just. I now have something I can count on.”<sup>46</sup>

Brenner argues that the young Indonesian women’s decision to cover is part of the broader Islamic movement in Indonesia that is putting Islam forward as an alternative to westernization and secularization. She finds the movement to be thoroughly modern, in that it represents a break with the past and is forward looking:

As a symbol of the modern Islamic movement, the veil represents for some Javanese Muslims both self-reconstruction and the reconstruction of society through individual and collective self-discipline. The notion of reconstruction here does not mean reviving the indigenous past, it means tearing down and building something new, distancing oneself from local history in order to create a more perfect future for oneself and other members of society. The goal is to affect religious and social change through the individual and collective actions of members of the Islamic community. In covering the sins of the past, so to speak, veiling here signifies a new historical consciousness and a new way of life, weighed down neither by Javanese tradition nor by centuries of colonial rule, defined neither by western capitalism and consumerism nor by the dictates of the Indonesian political economy. It stands for a new morality and a new discipline, whether personal, social, or political—in short, a new Islamic modernity.<sup>47</sup>

### *Continued Access to the Public Sphere*

Not all the women who have started to cover in recent years have done so out of religious conviction. Hoodfar notes that her (Egyptian) interviewees did not become more religious after covering; only one woman in her sample prayed, and she had prayed for four years before adopting *hijab*. The number of women in Macleod’s survey (of Egyptian women) who prayed regularly was a “tiny minority.”<sup>48</sup> And the number of women who discussed *hijab* as a religious form of dress was small.<sup>49</sup> These women have

found that *hijab* facilitates access and movement in the public sphere, seeking employment, gaining respect, and combating male harassment.

#### *Continued Access to Employment*

The Egyptian women in these studies who started wearing the new *hijab* in the mid-1980s are usually low-income first or second generation urban dwellers, possibly the first women in their family to be educated. They find themselves congregated in overstuffed government offices with promotion based on a system that does not take performance into account.<sup>50</sup> Egypt's economic crisis has hit these women and their families hard; their income has eroded with inflation, and the cost of employment has rendered holding a job not always a financial gain. Transport, childcare, and clothing costs take up much of a woman's salary. As Hoodfar notes, under these circumstances, low-income women have a "vested interest in reinforcing the existing sex roles and sexual division of labor, while at the same time trying to minimize the constraints that such ideology places on them," because they can then claim their Islamic right for the husband to maintain them, regardless of their own income.<sup>51</sup> Thus adopting *hijab* is a way these women solve the dilemma of keeping gains from modernization (working for wages), while at the same time keeping the benefits of their traditional Islamic rights as wife/mother.<sup>52</sup> Sommayya was having trouble with a fiancé and his family who did not want her to work after marriage. She solved the problem by wearing *hijab*:

If I have only two sets of clothes I can look smart at all times because nobody expects *muhajjabat* (the veiled ones) to wear new clothes every day. This will save me a lot of money. It will also prevent people from talking about me or questioning my honor or my husband's. In this way I have solved all the problems, and my husband's family are very happy that he is marrying a *muhajjabah*.<sup>53</sup>

Macleod's conclusions are in line with Hoodfar's reading of the situation for lower middle-class Cairene women, and her respondents voice similar things to the ones quoted here from Hoodfar's study. For Macleod, the new "veiling is a protest of [*sic*] an erosion of power women experience at the intersection of household and workplace, and an attempt to maintain the gains women have made with the opened political space of the employment experience."<sup>54</sup> She sees it as an attempt to recoup the lost dignity of the wife/mother role they "have somehow been cornered into abandoning" due to their economic need to work. *Hijab* solves the tension of the work ver-

sus household dilemma.<sup>55</sup> All the scholars find that “veiling is primarily women’s idea and women’s decision; the new movement is a voluntary movement initiated and perpetuated by women. Its popularity rests in this ability to resolve the question of whether women can work outside the home, yet resolve it in a way that satisfies the economic values of lower-middle-class families and pacifies disturbed gender beliefs.”<sup>56</sup> *Hijab* circumvents their cultural beliefs that a good Muslim woman should not work, because as a *muhajjabah* a woman is saying that she is a good Muslim woman, but forced to work in an effort to help her family, a socially laudable goal.<sup>57</sup> The section “The Meaning of *Hijab*—Western Media Viewpoint” will highlight the distance between this scholarly perspective and the western popular cultural notion that veiling is spreading via male fundamentalist coercion.

Moroccan women are also using the *hijab* as a guarantor of their continued access to the public realm, although the professional women of Hessini’s study are not facing the same economic dilemma as low-income Cairenes. For the Moroccan women, *hijab* is seen more as a way to facilitate women’s movement outside the home, rather than solving a work versus household crisis. Theirs represents a more radical challenge than that of the Egyptian women because it challenges the notion that a ‘good’ Muslim woman should not work. Remember, the women said they were practicing the ‘real’ Islam. As Nadia said, “Wearing the *hijab* shows that women have a role in the society. Of course I am for women who work outside the home. If not, I wouldn’t be for the *hijab*, because inside their households, women don’t wear the *hijab*!”<sup>58</sup>

### *Gain Respect*

The issue of female employment is still an area of hot debate in the Muslim world, with many holding the view that women should not work because being so much in the public realm compromises their modesty and honor. The ‘career’ woman, the dominant role model for the élite, the middle-class, and some members of the petit-bourgeoisie, also has not been an attractive image to other low-income groups. Sommayya’s dilemma (the Egyptian woman mentioned above) was that none of the women in her fiancé’s family had been educated or had worked, and they were worried she would not fulfil her wifely duties properly. *Hijab* signaled to them that she was a respectable woman who would care for and respect her husband and home, despite her unconventional economic behavior.<sup>59</sup> Muslim women’s decisions to adopt a certain dress in order to gain respect in a work environment

is akin to western women's adoption of a female version of the male suit in order to gain respect and be treated as an equal by men in the office and professional environment.<sup>60</sup>

### *Combating Male Harassment*

A common theme about the positive aspect of *hijab* as noted by those who wear it is the observation that women are treated for "their personality and their minds," not as sex objects, and not as bodies available to be judged by their physical appearance, dress, or jewellery.<sup>61</sup> The women argue that *hijab* takes away that sexual ambiguity/tension that exists between the sexes. As one Egyptian woman told Mohsen in her 1977 interview:

Before I wore the veil, I always worried what people might think when they saw me speak to a man in the cafeteria or outside the class. I even wondered what the man himself thought of me when I spoke with him. Since wearing the veil, I don't worry anymore. No one is going to accuse me of immorality or think that we were exchanging love vows. I feel much more comfortable now and do not hesitate, as I did before, to study with men in my class or even walk with them to the train station.<sup>62</sup>

Male harassment of women in the streets, on buses, in the workplace, etc., is a widespread behavior the world over. Some of the women I interviewed for *The Politics of the Veil* mentioned that a feature of *hijab* they enjoyed was the increased respect and good treatment they received from men, even non-Muslim men. Women in various countries also mentioned this aspect of wearing *hijab* as a positive feature that they enjoyed.<sup>63</sup> They find that the *hijab* succeeds in causing men to keep their distance because it creates a space cushion around a woman, even for a non-Muslim man who has no understanding of the reasoning behind *hijab*. In the Muslim context, "wearing a veil represents purity of intention and behavior. It is a symbol affirming that 'I'm clean' and 'I'm not available.'"<sup>64</sup> The effect of this personal space barrier gives women more freedom to travel through the public realm in peace, and in those Muslim countries that have an ideology of honor, husbands' jealousy and parents' concerns are vitiated by *hijab*, giving the women more freedom to move around.<sup>65</sup> As Hoodfar points out, this is a challenge to the traditional Islamic and western association of veiling with seclusion.<sup>66</sup> Women who adopt *zayy shar'i* are severing Islamic law from customary practice, and demonstrating they can participate in

public life, while maintaining an Islamic dress code that includes the covering of the head.

Wearing *hijab* can give a woman a sense of power and hence self-esteem. Zuhur noted that “denying men the ability to comment on their figures or silencing the “eyes of wolves” gave the younger respondents some satisfaction.”<sup>67</sup> Halah told Hoodfar that covering had helped her be more assertive in the office:

I used to dream of the day I would finish my studies and work to earn enough money to buy the nice clothes I never had because we were poor. When finally I had a good wardrobe and managed to look nice after years of waiting I had to take up the veil. I did it because in the office men teased us women and expected no answering back. If we answered they would start to think we were after an affair or something. That was difficult. All my life I always returned any remark a man made to me without being accused of immorality. In the office, whenever I would do that, my husband would get upset because he would hear what other men said amongst themselves [he was her colleague too]. But my veiled colleagues were always outspoken and joked with our male colleagues, and they were never taken wrong or treated disrespectfully. So I took up the veil. It has made my life easier and I feel freer to answer back, express my opinion, argue or even chit-chat with men. My husband is also much happier.<sup>68</sup>

Givechian, looking at post-revolutionary Iran, concludes similarly that many working women are pleased with wearing *hijab* because not only has it saved them from the expenses and hassles of trying to dress fashionably, wearing *hijab* can also “materialize their abilities and potential, without too much worry about their clothing or appearance:”

The unveiling of women . . . imprisoned women in their look and clothing thus exaggerating their ascribed status as women, [while] the veiling of women has given rise to expectation of achievement and work. It has freed women from fascination of men with their look and also has forced them to compete if they are to enjoy their rights as human beings. The aggressiveness and professionalities of many of the new veiled women generation are a pleasant welcome to the passive and patronized unveiled women of modernized generation.<sup>69</sup>

Western women often bridle at the suggestion that in order to counteract male harassment, women have to cover up. Certainly, it is unfair to have women cover while not tackling the issue of male harassment. Zuhur reports that leaders of the Islamic movement in Egypt, as well as many of

the young women she interviewed, are aware of the problem of male harassment and are working to eradicate it as well. They believe that men can be re-educated as "long as the family remains strong enough to inculcate a stronger sense of moral values in its sons."<sup>70</sup> The prevalence of sexual harassment in the workplace in the West suggests such re-education can be a long time coming. In the meantime, for many Muslims, covering is an acceptable strategy to counteract such male behavior.

### Expression of Personal Identity

Another reason for wearing *hijab*, especially for Muslim women in the West, is to make a statement of personal identity. This is what Cayer finds in her interviews of first and second-generation Indo-Pakistani Muslim women living in Toronto. Many of the second-generation women had chosen to wear *hijab* against the will of their families (some first generation women started covering in Canada against the will of their husbands), and against the prevalent view of the West that their *hijab* was a sign of oppression. They were also protesting the Indo-Pakistani culture of their parents, which the second generation women viewed as more or less un-Islamic,<sup>71</sup> most particularly the practice of arranged marriages, and the focus on the beauty of the wife as an important feature of her 'marriageability.'<sup>72</sup> "By wearing *hijab* second generation women are stating that they are no longer accountable to the first generation for their status and position, but rather, only to Allah . . . *hijab* is their resistance to first generation control over them and their identity."<sup>73</sup> So for them, *hijab* was an antiracist and anti-anti-Islam statement, as well as a statement of faith.

The sense of needing to assert one's Islamic identity in a non-Muslim environment holds true in Britain and France as well, as the experiences of Nadia and Maryam, respectively, exemplify. Nadia is a second-generation British Asian woman who started covering when she was sixteen:

My cultural background and my family's roots are in another part of the world. These things are very important to me and make me feel special. It is important to me not to lose these parts of my life. My decision to wear the veil also ties into my feeling of coming from this different kind of background. We are a British family but because of Islam and our links with Pakistan we have different values and traditions from the families of my non-Muslim friends . . . I would feel completely exposed without my veil. It is liberating to have the freedom of movement and to be able to communicate with people without being on show. It's what you say that is important not what you look like. My non-Muslim friends are curious about what it feels like

to wear the veil. They ask what it's like to be invisible. But in my experience it can be just the opposite if you are the only person in a room full of students wearing western dress. The point is that it's what wearing a veil feels like for the girl that is important, not what kind of veil it is, or what she looks like. For me it's important to have a kind of uniform appearance which means that I don't draw attention to myself or my figure. At the same time wearing the veil makes me feel special, it's a kind of badge of identity and a sign that my religion is important to me.<sup>74</sup>

Maryam's story reflects several of the themes already mentioned about why women choose to cover, but since she is an Algerian immigrant living in France, it is personal identity in a non-Muslim environment which overshadows the other reasons she likes *hijab*. Maryam works in a textile factory:

I did not think to wear the veil as a younger woman at home in Algiers, it was not important then. At that time my mother, my aunts and sisters wore a western style of clothes and did not cover their hair or face. Most women did not think about *hijab* twenty years ago. Times have changed a lot of things in my life, and all Muslim women have had to face numerous changes, especially women like me who end up living in a western country. They were blind and deaf, not realizing how dangerous the world was becoming, how politicians and the wealthy classes were becoming greedy for money, corrupt and westernized . . . Immorality and corruption had a serious impact on poorer families like my own and on the health of the whole society. But thankfully we woke up after we saw what happened in Egypt and experienced the aftermath of the war with Israel and other conflicts with the West. . . . These things all had the result of making me more aware of the importance of Islam and my conduct and duty as a mother and wife for the future of the next generation. . . .

When my husband and I came to France we faced a lot of hardship. When money was short because things did not turn out as we had expected I had to find employment . . . there was no question that I would not wear a veil . . . it is difficult enough to live in a big foreign city without having the extra burden of being molested in the street because you are a woman. It is important to me to keep my appearance private and not to be stared at by strange men and foreigners. My husband was happy with my decision to take the veil. Once I am dressed in this way it makes it easier for him. He doesn't have to worry about my journey to and from work and being outside without him.

There is nothing for him to be concerned about when I am veiled and it allows me more freedom and shows that I am a woman concerned about her modesty.

The experience of being in a foreign place is unpleasant and difficult, and wearing the veil eases some of the problems. It is not frightening to walk through the streets for one thing. Being in *hijab* also makes it clear that the person is Muslim and that is also important to me. We cannot forget that we have a different way of life, one which has different concerns and priorities with regard to morality from those of the French people. Sometimes wearing the veil means that you attract the attention of the French people who hate Islam, but experiences like this make me more proud of being an Arab and a Muslim . . . you also feel safe when wearing the veil in any kind of situation—it is a protection as well as a sign of love of Islam.<sup>75</sup>

Like the Muslim women in the West who cover as an expression of personal identity, many Saudi women wear *niqab* (face-veil) for the same reason, as AlMunajjed in her interviews with Saudi women found:

A 35-year-old teacher, married with two children and holding a BA in education from the United States, said, “Yes, I wear the veil out of conviction.” “On what do you base your conviction?” I asked. “I am attached to my traditions. Wearing a veil is part of one’s identity of being a Saudi woman. It is a definite proof of one’s identification with the norms and values of the Saudi culture . . . and I will teach my daughter also to wear it.”<sup>76</sup>

For one 29-year-old single woman who has spent most of her life in Europe, gaining an MA in social sciences in London, the veil is not a sign of oppression, “I think that it is very wrong to believe that the veil for the woman of Saudi Arabia is a sign of oppression or retardation or subjugation as the West believes . . . and it does not mean at all that we hold a secondary status as all the Westerners want to believe. These are all false assumptions built against us.” She added, “I wear the veil because for me it is a sign of personal and religious choice. It is because I lived in the West and I saw all the corruption and immorality in their, as they call it, ‘liberated society’ of illicit sex and drug abuse that now I am more convinced of our local traditions and I am more attached to them. I want to preserve my Arab-Islamic identity, and for me, this is a way to show it.”

### *Social Status*

Personal identity is asserted in another way: as a way to declare one's position in the social hierarchy. This is how covering has traditionally been used, with different social classes using different styles, patterns, and materials. The new covering initially was a rupture in this kind of social meaning since it was a sort of uniform, stressing the egalitarian aims of the Islamic movement. Perhaps it is inevitable that as covering becomes more widespread people will use it as a way to distinguish themselves from others.<sup>77</sup> Macleod suggests that in Egypt the new *hijab* is partly an expression of the lower-middle-classes' attempt to differentiate themselves from the lower classes in the hopes of being middle-class. As one woman told her, "This dress is not the same as those *baladi* women wear! You see the way the scarf comes over my head, and the pin I use to hold it on. And also the soft colors and material. This *higab* is not the same at all; this is the dress that women of the middle-level, the middle-class, wear."<sup>78</sup> Or, as Hoda told Hoodfar:

It is terrible that we had to move to this area [a cheap neighborhood on the outskirts of the city] because we couldn't afford to stay in a better area. After all these years of studying I had to move to an even worse area with all these *falaheen* and illiterate women. . . . It is much better that I am veiled because if I wore European clothes to work, they would accuse me of being loose. . . . Even in the neighborhood I would never go out looking the way they do. Wearing the veil makes them respect me and accept that I am not one of them.<sup>79</sup>

Wearing the new *hijab* as a mark of middle-class status represents a dramatic change from earlier decades. Then, middle-class status was achieved by wearing western dress, i.e., skirt, blouse, two-piece suits, knit dresses, stockings, high-heeled shoes, and purse; for men, shirts, pants, suits, socks, and shoes.<sup>80</sup>

Macleod's 1983 study of lower middle-class Cairene women suggests another aspect of covering. Macleod points out that the spreading of *hijab* amongst the lower middle class has given covering different motivations from the initial impetus, even as some women cover for similar reasons as their predecessors.<sup>81</sup> Over half the women in her study associated covering with being fashionable. *Hijab* has become stylish. Said one woman: "I don't know why fashions change in this way, no one knows why; one day everyone wears dresses and even pants. I even wore a bathing suit when I went to the beach at Alexandria one time. Then, suddenly we are all wearing this

on our hair!" Another: "I don't know why everyone wore modern dress before and now we do not, but this is the situation."<sup>82</sup>

## Discussion of Themes

Based on her 1980-84 survey of women in Egypt, Jordan, Oman, Kuwait, and the United States, Haddad elaborated the following reasons women in the Middle East were re-covering. My summary of themes for covering are obviously consistent with Haddad's:

*Religious*—an act of obedience to the will of God as a consequence of a profound religious experience which several women referred to as being "born again";

*Psychological*—an affirmation of authenticity, a return to the roots and a rejection of western norms (one woman talked about the "end of turmoil" and a "sense of peace");

*Political*—a sign of disenchantment with the prevailing political order;

*Revolutionary*—an identification with the Islamic revolutionary forces that affirm the necessity of the Islamization of society as the only means of its salvation;

*Economic*—a sign of affluence, of being a lady of leisure;

*Cultural*—a public affirmation of allegiance to chastity and modesty, of not being a sex object (especially among unmarried urban working women);

*Demographic*—a sign of being urbanized;

*Practical*—a means of reducing the amount to be spent on clothing (some respondents claimed that others were receiving money from Libya and Saudi Arabia for the purpose);

*Domestic*—a way to keep the peace, since the males of the family insist on it. [Haddad ought to have mentioned the role that mothers and mothers-in-law play in insisting on *hijab* too.]<sup>83</sup>

Interestingly, the unveiled women in Zuhur's study accept El Guindi's interpretation of *hijab* as a psychological response to crowded urban space and as an economic tactic in times of hardship, and Rugh's interpretation that some wear *hijab* as a fashion item. But Zuhur, while finding her conclusions in line with Haddad's study too, is not happy with Haddad's 'economic' category:

The veiled respondents simply did not offer that sort of explanation for their orientation, and they clearly were not ladies of leisure. Even though I feel strongly that economic factors contributed to the growth of *hijab* wearing, they ought to be corroborated in a tangible manner

by the women directly involved. Unveiled women would agree that there is an economic explanation for veiling, because they believed veiled women seek to hide their lower-class origins. They combine that category with the motivations in Haddad's "practical" category . . . but socioeconomic and political insecurities as an explanation cannot be proven because this analysis must be based on the verbal evidence presented by the respondents. Most declared piety and a new realization of the meaning of Islam.<sup>84</sup>

Rugh noticed this also: "[F]rom my conversations with those wearing even the modified forms of fundamentalist dress, I would be reluctant to underestimate the strength of piety that underlies its use."<sup>85</sup> The veiled women in Zuhur's study completely disagree with these scholars' conclusions and older women especially disagree with Rugh's interpretation. The veiled women said:

*Higab* did not make travelling through public spaces easier for them personally, although they acknowledged that such an assumption was reasonable at a superficial level. It was difficult to understand why they would hedge on this point. I decided that it was because they wished me, as an observer and recorder, to interpret their decision to veil as one based upon piety and self-control rather than on practicality and pressure from other men and women.<sup>86</sup>

There is clearly a class dynamic involved in the wearing of, and pronouncements upon, *hijab*. In Zuhur's study most of the upper and upper-middle classes are opposed to veiling, or are unhappy with it. Pursuing the secular model of the 'modern woman,' a model promoted by the State, many unveiled women consider the *muhajjabat* as threats.<sup>87</sup> Others worry that the new *hijab* is the result of Saudi influence.<sup>88</sup> In lower-middle-class households, covering can be objected to for not being modern. Aida's fiancé was not impressed when he heard his future wife declare her intention to wear *hijab* after their marriage. He exclaimed, "Why wear these clothes? They are ugly and not necessary. These are modern times!"<sup>89</sup> Many uncovered women think covered women are seeking to conceal their class origins.<sup>90</sup>

Popular western culture and some feminists often take the increased numbers of women covering as evidence for a global threat of a growing Islamic movement.<sup>91</sup> Watson concludes that while each of her interviewees has differing personal reasons for covering, what they have in common "is that they are making an active politicized response to forces of change,

modernity, and cross-cultural communication." She concludes that their political act is "an Islamic example of the global trend of reaction against change experienced as chaotic or challenging, which takes the form of a renewed interest in fundamental principles of social and moral order."<sup>92</sup> Haddad characterizes the women in her study as part of an Islamist movement which "becomes a kind of moral rearmament in which women are spearheading the construction of a new social order and playing active roles in the anticipated vindication of the Muslim people."<sup>93</sup> But Macleod cautions against making such generalizations. The lower-middle-class women in her study were

quite negative about the beliefs or actions of Islamic groups and called the followers "bad Muslims" or even "criminals." They saw such groups as political, not religious, organizations and as inappropriate areas or activities for women in general. . . . Rather than participating in an overtly religious revivalism, these women express a general sense that people in their culture are turning back to a more authentic and culturally true way of life, and they perceive the veil as part of this cultural reformation.<sup>94</sup>

Macleod emphasizes that for the women in her study "the idea of being Muslim has more to do with their role as wife and mother in the family, than with expressions of nationalism or antiwestern feeling."<sup>95</sup> Rugh would concur. At the time of her study, *zayy shar'i* was largely a middle-class phenomenon. Lower-middle-class women wore a folk dress similar to middle-class dress, but their "motives are more related to community norms than to pretensions of piety. Lower-class women may be conscious of a certain kind of dress appropriate for Muslims, but vague about Koranic verses and specific requirements."<sup>96</sup> And Zuhur notes that while the modern Islamic ideal is a reaction to the model of the uncovered secular woman, upper-class covered women still have more in common with uncovered women in their own class than they do with the *balady*.<sup>97</sup>

Rugh suggests that lower-class *zayy shar'i* when compared to middle-class *zayy shar'i* shows an "inattention to the stricter interpretations of Islamic dress requirements that ask for more sober colors, opaque materials, and a complete concealment of the hair. The middle class usually claim that the lower classes are ignorant of religious meanings and implications even though they may comply with some of the formal requirements of Islam."<sup>98</sup> Rugh found that there is a great range of outfits in Egypt, and what one village considers immodest another may not. She views the new

*hijab* either as a generational rebellion against the liberal, prowestern, middle-class values of parents, or for socially mobile children of lower-class parents who still maintain more traditional values, the new *hijab* is a transitional outfit, less startling than other middle-class styles (i.e., western dress), but still signaling the acquisition of educated status for the young woman.<sup>99</sup>

Clearly the *hijab* has become a mine of meanings, and we should proceed very carefully if making summarizing or generalizing statements about what *hijab* means. As Brenner's study of Javanese women shows, conclusions relevant to the Middle Eastern context of re-covering are not relevant for Java. Javanese culture has no tradition of male/female segregation and no problem with women working outside the home, so covering for economic reasons, or to secure respect in order to work, such as the Egyptian studies revealed, have no resonance with the Javanese women's decision to cover.<sup>100</sup> At the very least, the presence of so many differing motivations for covering should forever expel the simplistic notion prevalent in the West that the veil means a woman is oppressed. The veil obviously means many different things, depending upon the context and, to some extent, upon the individual. In the 1970s in Egypt it could mean one was antiwesternization; in the 1990s in Egypt it can mean one is recognizing (an interpretation of) the law of one's faith, or seeking an acceptable solution to the problems of work and family; in the 1990s in Indonesia, Britain, France, and Canada it can mean an assertion of one's religion and unique cultural identity.

### The Meaning of *Hijab*—Western Media Viewpoint

It is fairly easy to demonstrate the differences between the sociological complexity of the motivations for and meanings of covering and the standard western media image of the motivations for and meanings of covering. For the western media, *hijab*, by and large, stands for oppression, and as shorthand for all the horrors of Islam (now called Islamic fundamentalism): terrorism, violence, barbarity, and backwardness. These days, Islam has replaced the 'Red Menace' of the Soviet Union, to become the 'Green Menace,' threatening western civilization and all that is good in the world.<sup>101</sup> The Green Menace, Islamic fundamentalism, is seen to be "fighting to keep a half-billion Muslim women in legal bondage to men,"<sup>102</sup> or is "determined to remove every small gain women had made and plunge them back into the Dark Ages."<sup>103</sup> "Saudi Arabia's grim reality," writes Brooks, "is the kind of sterile, segregated world that Hamas in Israel, most muja-

hedin factions in Afghanistan, many radicals in Egypt and the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria are calling for, right now, for their countries and for the entire Islamic world. . . . [They want] Saudi-style, theocratically enforced repression of women, cloaked in vapid clichés about a woman's place being the paradise of her home."<sup>104</sup>

Just as in colonial times, where the veil was the metaphor of the backwardness and barbarity of the entire Orient, in the 1990s the word 'veil' is shorthand for all these horrors of Islamic fundamentalism.<sup>105</sup> Headlines proclaim: "The Veiled Threat of Islam";<sup>106</sup> "Women of the Veil: Islamic Militants Pushing Women Back to an Age of Official Servitude";<sup>107</sup> "Foulard. Le Complot: Comment les Islamistes Nous Infiltrent" (The Veil. The Plot: How do the Islamists Infiltrate Us?);<sup>108</sup> "Islam's Veiled Threat";<sup>109</sup> "An Act of Faith or a Veiled Threat to Society?";<sup>110</sup> "Muslim Veil Threat to Harmony in French Schools, Minister Says";<sup>111</sup> "The New Law: Wear the Veil and Stay Alive";<sup>111</sup> and "Women Trapped Behind Veils."<sup>113</sup> Even those who are not focusing on *hijab* in their reports use the word 'veil' in their titles: Scroggins's article is called "Women of the Veil," and Goodwin's subtitle is "Muslim Women Lift the Veil of Silence on the Islamic World."

In many of these popular articles/mass-market books the *hijab* is not the central focus, but serves as a symbol of a range of oppressions women are alleged to suffer under Islam. Thus *hijab* is linked to claims about women's inferiority within Islam. The veil is assumed to be a "blatant badge of female oppression,"<sup>114</sup> forced on unwilling women by various methods—bribery,<sup>115</sup> or threats of and actual violence.<sup>116</sup> Goodwin emphasises how uncomfortable *hijab* is in the heat, and that wearing it can bring diseases from lack of sunlight.<sup>117</sup> When Brook's colleague adopts *hijab*, Brooks writes:

The Islamic dress—*hijab*—that Sahar had opted to wear in Egypt's tormenting heat signified her acceptance of a legal code that valued her testimony at half the worth of a man's, an inheritance system that allotted her half the legacy of her brother, a future domestic life in which her husband could beat her if she disobeyed him, make her share his attentions with three more wives, divorce her at whim and get absolute custody of her children.<sup>118</sup>

(Compare with Hoodfar: "Whatever might be said for or against veiling, the veil is nonetheless a socially sanctioned style of clothing, and most

veiled women feel that the advantages it offers outweigh any inconveniences it may present.”<sup>119</sup>)

But as we saw above, many women in Muslim countries wear *hijab* willingly and with conviction. In Scroggins, Goodwin’s, and Brook’s hands, these women come across at best as silly, duped, or bizarre, and at worst, as Islamist ideologues equally as responsible and culpable as men for supporting an antiwoman ideology:<sup>120</sup>

The rise of fundamentalism in Islamic countries marks dramatic and detrimental changes in the lives of women. It is recognized, of course, that women do join the radical movements voluntarily, as happened in Iran at the beginning of Khomeini’s revolution. Such women frequently become fundamentalists because they were among the disenfranchised who gained access to power for the first time, or because they are genuine believers in the ideology. Others felt that under fundamentalism, and if they are completely veiled, they will receive more respect and be less harassed by men. But in the *vast majority of cases*, women are forced to adhere to fundamentalism either because the men in their families require them to or because of threats of violence from Islamists in their communities. (My emphasis)<sup>121</sup>

The youth, who featured prominently in the academic studies of covering discussed above, in Goodwin’s study are presented as easily attracted to “extremism” due to their age and their socioeconomic conditions.<sup>122</sup> Her “vast majority” obviously escaped being interviewed by those scholars cited above. In Brook’s hands they are presented as the herald of a bleak future leading their country backward in time, proclaiming an Islam that is “the warped interpretation promoted by the wealth of the Saudis. I hated to think of a generation squandering its talent in the service of that repressive creed.”<sup>123</sup> None of the caveats/nuances of the scholarly studies exist, such as Macleod’s observation that the new veiling in lower-class Cairo is not directly linked to the Islamic movement in Egypt, or Zuhur’s and Rugh’s emphasis on piety, not socioeconomic conditions, or Brenner’s perception of Javanese women as forward-looking, rational and modern women seeking to rediscipline themselves and improve their society.

When covering is a central focus of an article, the image is not much better. Two representative, if scurrilous, examples are Michele Lemon’s piece in the *Globe and Mail*, and Katherine Govier’s in the *Toronto Star*.<sup>124</sup> Lemon, who has an MA in Islamic Studies from McGill University, discusses her reaction to seeing a woman in *niqab* while she is waiting for a

bus: "I feel I've been punched in the stomach." Lemon concludes that headscarves should be allowed in Canada, but not *niqab*. Her reasoning is based on the well-worn notion that women in *niqab* are oppressed:

I see a premedieval spectre before my eyes . . . her oppression, for oppression it is, becomes a symbol of the difficulty all women once faced and a startling reminder that the struggle for equality has not ended. I understand all too well why she wears this hideous costume, but I despise it nonetheless. How could anyone defend the outfit as preserving anything but the low regard and true unimportance of women, all protestations to the contrary? This woman is a walking billboard that proclaims public space is reserved for men.

When the others at the bus stop tsk tsk and laugh to each other, Lemon writes, "I want to tell them that this is no laughing matter, that under that forbidding costume there lurks a defaced human being. . . . I arrive home feeling shell-shocked. I say that people who want to promenade in this country as slaves should not be allowed to do so. It is an affront to the rest of us, to human dignity and respect."<sup>125</sup>

What I want to highlight here is Lemon's confident assumption that the woman wearing *niqab* is oppressed, indeed her insistence on this ("for oppression it is") just in case anyone might beg to differ. Lemon proclaims these judgements without even talking to the *niqab*-wearing woman herself and without knowing anything about her: "I understand all too well why she wears this hideous costume, but I despise it nonetheless."<sup>126</sup> Chandra Mohanty critiqued approaches like Lemon's a full fifteen years ago for their colonizing nature. This approach constitutes women as a group outside any contextual social/political/economic relations in which they live, and then universalizes *the* oppression of women to apply to all women. All that is needed is to find a group of powerless women to "prove the general point that women as a group are powerless."<sup>127</sup> And the veiled woman is taken by this approach to be the example *par excellence* of the powerless woman: "Her oppression . . . becomes a symbol of the difficulty all women once faced." Further, the operative word here is "once," with the implicit assumption that some women (western women, Lemon) are no longer oppressed, but others (the veiled premedieval spectre) still are.

Katherine Govier discusses her reaction to seeing women in *niqab* representing Yemen at the Beijing conference on Women: "What are these figures? Bank robbers? Egyptian mummies in full drag? Escapees from the executioner's chamber?" She articulates the conventional western view that

women in *niqab* are oppressed. A woman in *niqab*, she writes is “masquerading—as a nonperson”:

To present this walking black pyramid, a negation of a human figure, as a delegate, is gallows humor. . . . When I first saw the photo [Yemeni woman’s identity card photo] I was choked with anger. Who enforces this walking jail on women? Or how do they get away with it? This is not to denigrate the individuals inside that cloth. . . . But what a tragedy that they are forced to represent their fellow Yemeni women in this dehumanizing way.

Govier evidently did not sit down and discuss with the Yemeni women what they perceive as their most pressing social problems: Makhlof’s study with Sana’ women (the capital of Yemen) found that women were most concerned about “early marriage, high fertility, illiteracy, and lack of any activity outside housework and *tafrita*.”<sup>128</sup> Govier says of these women:

Some women report to like the veil. We read all about that, several decades ago, when the veil first came into question by feminists. It’s liberating, wrote some eastern women, because you don’t have to feel vulnerable all the time as men stare at your body. That is tantamount to arguing that a 7 p.m. curfew would be liberating for women because you wouldn’t have to worry about men attacking you after dark. . . . It’s a life I guess. But not much of a life.

Here we have the western woman questioning the ability of the native to understand her own practices. “Some women report to like the veil” implies “if only they could understand its true oppressive nature.” Govier wonders why nations tolerate this dress.

Do we mistake this cloaking and negating of the essence of women for worship? But it is a social dictate, enforced by men who regard women as chattels; it is for nothing but the protection of property, and to prevent women’s participation in all but the most private spheres of life . . . and why does this pass unremarked? Where are those among us who will stand up and cry enough to the practice of extinguishing women with black cloth?

Scroggins, Goodwin, Brooks, Lemon, and Govier all share the following problematic assumptions:

- that western women are better off [Scroggins: “Wherever we went, Jean and I always wished Islamic women would ask us the questions

we imagined they had about American women. For example, we were eager to discuss why we were free to travel without our own male guardians."<sup>129</sup>];

- that they understand the meaning of the practice of covering better than do the women themselves [Lemon: "It is not the woman I despise, but her compliance in a charade."]; and,
- that they ought to come to the aid (albeit unasked) of Muslim women [Govier: "Where are those among us who will stand up and cry enough to the practice of extinguishing women with black cloth?"]

These assumptions are no different from the colonial women's view of the veil. Compare the above quotations with some from Hume-Griffith's *Behind the Veil in Persia and Turkish Arabia* (notice the use of the word "veil" in the title of her book):

When Mohammed, acting under what he declared to be a revelation from Allah, introduced the use of the veil, he swept away for ever all hope of happiness for Moslem women. By means of the veil he immured them for ever in a living grave. . . . Ought not the cries of distress and agony from the poor women of Persia so to rouse us, their sisters in England, that we shall determine to do all that lies in our power to lighten their burdens and to bring some rays of light into the dark lives of our Eastern sisters? . . . Poor, blind, misguided Moslem women of Mosul and other Mohammedan lands! How my heart aches for them! Will no one heed the cry of anguish and despair which goes up from their midst? As we think of their lives our cry can only be, "How long, O Lord, how long will these things be?"<sup>130</sup>

## Conclusion

Over the last few years several high profile newspapers have published more positive articles about covering from covered Muslim women's perspectives: "Their Canada Includes *Hijab*";<sup>131</sup> "Not a Fashion Fad, But a Way of Life";<sup>132</sup> "Don't Let the Scarf Fool You";<sup>133</sup> "My *Hijab* is an Act of Worship—and None of Your Business";<sup>134</sup> "The Power Behind the Veil";<sup>135</sup> "Muslim Women Try to Debunk Myths About Women";<sup>136</sup> "My Body Is My Own Business";<sup>137</sup> and "Islamic Sisterhood Challenges Stereotypes."<sup>138</sup> But the full weight of the mainstream view is as yet untouched. Just as in colonial times, the word 'veil' is a synonym, or shorthand, for Muslim women's oppression. The word 'veil' stands for the entire culture of the Muslim world, and encompasses everything done to women.

For the popular media, *hijab* is foreign, alien, a sign of 'other,' of violent, backward, and inferior foreigners trying to drag the civilized world down. This image of *hijab* serves journalists well—it is sensational, controversial, jingoistic, and exciting reading. And *hijab* is also something visible, a tangible symbol on which to hang these meanings, something that 'pictures' well. It should be obvious how different that journalistic image is from the sociological studies examined above.

The popular media's presentation of *hijab* as foreign is especially problematic for Muslim women living in the West, who are challenged to prove that wearing *hijab* does not violate western values. The fear created by these images and arguments is palpable, both in the authors writing, and in western audiences reading. And terrorist attacks on western tourists in the Muslim world, or the actions of the Taliban's violence against women for not 'properly' covering, only confirm for the average western reader that Islam is antiwomen, fanatical, violent. But instead of understanding and presenting the social/political/economic context of the Taliban, or the actions of other extremist groups, the mainstream media present their actions about covering as a sign of 'real' Islamic behavior. It is not, "the Taliban are oppressing women by forcing them to cover, but in Egypt many women are choosing freely to cover." It is "the veil oppresses women, look at the Taliban for example." Discrimination, harassment, and assault of Muslims living in the West are the results of these ways of thinking.

## Notes

1. Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

2. That's why it is not accurate to label it a 're-veiling' movement, because the women mainly concerned are covering for the first time, and they are mostly adopting *hijab*, not *niqab*. *Hijab*, an Arabic term from the root *hajaba* meaning to 'cover,' 'conceal,' 'hide,' is a complex notion encompassing action and apparel. It is also the name given to the headscarf, or any kind of covering for the body. It also denotes a general attitude of modesty. It applies to men as well. *Niqab* is the name of the face veil. In this paper, I use *hijab* to mean headscarf. The western use of the word 'veil' effaces the diversity involved in covering; I put the word 'veil' in scare quotes to signal my distance from the western discourse on 'the veil.' I use 're-covering' instead of 're-veiling' so as to avoid the loaded nature of the word 'veil.'

3. For example, "Their Canada Includes Hijab," *Globe and Mail* (Toronto, Canada), August 22, 1994, A1.

4. For example, Amy Gutmann, "Challenges of Multiculturalism in Democratic Education," in *Public Education in a Multicultural Society: Policy, Theory, Critique*, ed. Robert K Fullinwider (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Susan Okin, "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?" in *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?*, eds. Joshua Cohen and Matthew Howard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

5. Edward Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 48.

6. See CAIR (Council on American Islamic Relations), *A Rush to Judgement: A Special Report on Anti-Muslim Stereotyping, Harassment and Hate Crimes Following the Bombing of Oklahoma City's Murrah Federal Building, April 19, 1995* (Washington: CAIR, 1995), and *The Price of Ignorance: The Status of Muslim Civil Rights in the United States* (Washington, DC: American-Muslim Research Center, 1996). CAIR has intervened in hundreds of cases in the US where Muslim women were fired for wearing *hijab*. See <http://www.cair.com>, Winter Newsletter, 1998, and others.

7. Personal Narratives Group, *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 4; Lorraine Code, "How Do We Know? Questions of Method in Feminist Practice," in *Changing Methods: Feminists Transforming Practice*, eds. S. Burt and L. Code (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 1995), 26.

8. This paper is part of a broader study about the multiple meanings of *hijab*. For additional themes about covering see chapter three of my *The Politics of the Veil* (Ph.D. diss., Department of Political Science, University of Toronto, Canada, 1999).

9. Sherifa Zuhur, *Revealing Reveiling: Islamist Gender Ideology in Contemporary Egypt* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), 108.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 51, 55; Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, "Islam, Women and Revolution in Twentieth Century Arab Thought," *The Muslim World* 74, no. 34, (July/October 1984): 140; Andrea B Rugh, *Reveal and Conceal: Dress in Contemporary Egypt* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 95–6.

11. *Muhajabat*: the veiled ones, head cover; *munaqqabat*: the veiled ones, wearing *niqab*. Zuhur, *Revealing Reveiling*, 53.

12. F. El-Guindi, "Veiling Infatih with Muslim Ethic: Egypt's Contemporary Islamic Movement," *Social Problems* 28, no. 4 (1981); Homa Hoodfar, "Return to the Veil: Personal Strategy and Public Participation in Egypt," in *Working Women: International Perspectives on Labour and Gender Relations*, eds. Nanette Redclift and M. Thea Sinclair (London: Routledge, 1991), 112.

13. *Bint al balad*, in Egypt, meaning 'daughter of the country' can also include Coptic women (Christian), they dress alike. They have rarely worn the face-veil but they have mostly maintained traditional dress, throughout the era of secularized uncovering, and now in the era of re-covering. They wear a recognizable form of dress: often a *jalabiyya* (a long, coat-like dress) covered by a black outer dress, and a modesty wrap known as the *malayya laff*. Some have replaced that with a long, conservative western-style dress, and, sometimes, a shawl. They wear a kerchief (*mandil*) over their hair. See Zuhur, *Revealing Reveiling*, 8–9. The *balady* are religious, but attend shrines rather than mosques, and have not increased their religiosity, nor become involved in the current Islamists' political opposition to the State, as have many of those adopting the new *hijab*. See Zuhur, *Revealing Reveiling*, 121.

14. John A. Williams, "A Return to the Veil in Egypt," *Middle East Review* 11, no. 3 (1979): 53. Scholars differ over their assessment of the comfort of *zayy shar'i*. Rugh in *Reveal and Conceal* argues that western dress are more restricting and stifling than traditional folk *jalabiyyas*, which are loose enough to allow for air convection to cool the body. Moreover, rather than being made of cotton, western dress tends to be made of hotter synthetic nylons and knits (*Ibid.*, 119). Arlene Elowe Macleod, *Accommodating Protest: Working Women and the New Veiling in Cairo* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991) argues the same about the new veiling, arguing they are hot because they are made of polyester fabrics favored by the middle-class (*Ibid.*, 138). This is changing with more cotton *jalabiyyas* now appearing.

15. *Ibid.*, 53.

16. *Ibid.*, 51.

17. *Ibid.*, 53–4.

18. Zuhur, *Revealing Reveiling*, 76.

19. *Ibid.*, 109.

20. 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), 150–1.

21. Leila Hessini, "Wearing the Hijab in Contemporary Morocco: Choice and Identity," in *Reconstructing Gender in the Middle East: Tradition, Identity, and Power*, eds. Fatma Müge Göçek and Shiva Balaghi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 42.

22. *Ibid.*, 51.

23. *Ibid.*, 49.

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Ibid.*, 50.

26. *Ibid.*, 51.

27. El Guindi, "Veiling Infitah," 474.

28. Williams, "A Return to the Veil," 50. See also Zuhur, *Revealing Reveiling*, 59. Although she saw some young women wearing the headscarf, but also tight jeans and make-up.

29. Zuhur, *Revealing Reveiling*, 74. This contrasts with Macleod, *Accommodating Protest*, 114, and Hoodfar, "Return to the Veil," 119, who finds only a minority seeing *hijab* as a sign of religiosity.

30. Zuhur, *Revealing Reveiling*, p. 75.

31. *Ibid.*, 77.

32. *Ibid.*, 59.

33. *Ibid.*, 77. Egyptians pronounce the Arabic 'j' as 'g'.

34. *Ibid.*, 13.

35. *Ibid.*, 61.

36. Hessini, "Wearing the Hijab in Contemporary Morocco," p. 42.

37. *Ibid.*, 42.

38. *Ibid.*, 49.

39. *Ibid.*, 47.

40. S. Brenner, "Reconstructing Self and Society: Javanese Muslim Women and the Veil," *American Ethnologist* 23, no. 4 (1996): 674.

41. *Ibid.*

42. Zuhur, *Revealing Reveiling*, 2. Zuhur found this ideal contradicted by the Yves St. Laurent line of headscarves available for purchase. See also Hessini, "Wearing the Hijab in Contemporary Morocco," 50.

43. Williams, "A Return to the Veil," 54.

44. Hessini, "Wearing the Hijab in Contemporary Morocco," 50.

45. *Ibid.*, 41–2.

46. *Ibid.*, 51.

47. Brenner, "Reconstructing Self and Society," 690.

48. Hoodfar, "Return to the Veil," 119; Macleod, *Accommodating Protest*, 110.

49. Macleod, *Accommodating Protest*, 114.

50. Hoodfar, "Return to the Veil," 119.

51. *Ibid.*, 110.

52. *Ibid.*, 111; Macleod, *Accommodating Protest*, 121.

53. Hoodfar, "Return to the Veil," 114.

54. Macleod, *Accommodating Protest*, 136–7.

55. *Ibid.*, 121, 132, 136.

56. *Ibid.*, 121.

57. *Ibid.*; Williams, "A Return to the Veil," 54; El Guindi, "Veiling Infitah," 481.

58. Hessini, "Wearing the Hijab in Contemporary Morocco," 47.

59. See also Rugh, *Reveal and Conceal*, 122–3 and Sawsan El-Messiri, "Self-Images of Traditional Urban Women in Cairo," in *Women in the Muslim World*, eds. N. Keddie and L. Beck (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 532: The *bint al balad* "considers

the government employee conceited, superficial and neglectful of her wifely duties. This explains why she spends her salary only on selfish and superficial pleasures."

60. Macleod, *Accommodating Protest*, 181.
61. Hessini, "Wearing the Hijab in Contemporary Morocco," 50–1.
62. Safia K. Mohsen, "New Images, Old Reflections: Working Middle-Class Women in Egypt," in *Women and the Family in the Middle East: New Voices of Change*, ed. Elizabeth Warnock Fernea (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985), 69.
63. Hoodfar, "Return to the Veil," 116; Hessini, "Wearing the Hijab in Contemporary Morocco," 53; Williams, "A Return to the Veil," 53.
64. Hessini, "Wearing the Hijab in Contemporary Morocco," 53.
65. *Ibid.*, 54; Fatemeh Givechian, "Cultural Changes in Male-Female Relations," *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs* 3, no. 3 (1991): 528, 530.
66. Hoodfar, "Return to the Veil," 121.
67. Zuhur, *Revealing Reveiling*, 102.
68. Hoodfar, "Return to the Veil," 117. See also Mohsen, "New Images, Old Reflections," 69.
69. Givechian, "Cultural Changes in Male-Female Relations," 530.
70. Zuhur, *Revealing Reveiling*, 130.
71. Carmen G. Cayer, *Hijab, Narrative, and the Production of Gender among Second Generation, Indo-Pakistani, Muslim Women in Greater Toronto* (master's thesis, Social Anthropology, York University, 1996), 77, 113.
72. *Ibid.*, 184.
73. *Ibid.*, 169.
74. Watson, "Women and the Veil," 148. Nadia is the first woman in the family to have a post-secondary education. She is now studying medicine.
75. *Ibid.*, pp. 149–50.
76. Mona AlMunajjed, *Women in Saudi Arabia Today* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1997), 47.
77. Evidence for this aspect came from the Egyptian studies, so there is no way of knowing how it applies to other countries. Certainly this use of hijab contravenes the Moroccan women's statements as well as the earlier egalitarian stress of the new veiling in Egypt. See El Guindi, "Veiling Infatih," 476.
78. Macleod, *Accommodating Protest*, 134.
79. Hoodfar, "Return to the Veil," 120.
80. Rugh, *Reveal and Conceal*, 118.
81. Macleod, *Accommodating Protest*, 115.
82. *Ibid.*, 112–3.
83. Haddad, "Islam, Women and Revolution," 158.
84. Zuhur, *Revealing Reveiling*, 104–5, 83. In her comments on my thesis manuscript, Haddad pointed out that the quotations in my "Continued Access to Employment" category contain references to wearing *hijab* for economic reasons, i.e., wearing *hijab* saves money on clothes.
85. Rugh, *Reveal and Conceal*, 156.
86. Zuhur, *Revealing Reveiling*, 78.
87. *Ibid.*, 133.
88. Williams, "A Return to the Veil," 53. Bahraini women who mostly wore western dress worried to Ramazani about "retrogressive ideas from Saudi Arabia" entering Bahrain. Nesta Ramazani, "The Veil—Piety or Protest?" *Journal of South-Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 7, no. 2 (Winter 1983): 29.
89. Macleod, *Accommodating Protest*, 2.
90. Zuhur, *Revealing Reveiling*, 78.
91. An idea, as we shall see in the next section of this article, caricatured by the media as women's coercion by fundamentalist men.
92. Watson, "Women and the Veil," 156; Macleod, *Accommodating Protest*, 116.

93. Haddad, "Islam, Women and Revolution," 159.
94. Macleod, *Accommodating Protest*, 110–1. Macleod is sceptical about the women's use of *hijab*, because she says while the women may not choose to remember the negative aspects long associated with veiling, others will, and the veil's prevalence will make it easier for them to invoke other traditions of the past, such as seclusion (152). The women thus reinscribe their own subordinate status (153–4).
95. *Ibid.*, 115.
96. Rugh, *Reveal and Conceal*, 155.
97. Zuhur, *Revealing Reveiling*, 15. In Egypt, *balady* carries the sense of 'hick' and 'red-neck.'
98. Rugh, *Reveal and Conceal*, 148.
99. *Ibid.*, 154.
100. Brenner, "Reconstructing Self and Society," 674.
101. See S. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations," *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (Summer 1993): 22–49; Benjamin Barber, "Jihad vs. McWorld," *The Atlantic Monthly* (March 1992): 53–65.
102. Deborah Scroggins, "Women of the Veil: Islamic Militants Pushing Women Back to an Age of Official Servitude," *The Atlanta Journal/The Atlanta Constitution*, Sunday, 28 June, 1992, P1.
103. Jan Goodwin, *Price of Honor: Muslim Women Lift the Veil of Silence on the Islamic World* (New York: Plume, 1994), 144.
104. Geraldine Brooks, *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 177.
105. The veil was also a symbol of exoticised femininity, sensuality and sexuality, but whose sensuality merely confirmed the backwardness of the area (ie, primitive unbridled sexuality as distinct from civilized and controlled sexuality), an image still evoked on occasion, as in the 1987 Brooke Shields movie, *Harem*, the story of a New York woman kidnapped by an Arab sheik and taken back to his harem in the Arabian desert; or, the June 1997 cover of the Canadian Automobile Association's magazine *Leisureways* that depicts a woman in a face veil, her lovely eyes beckoning. The caption reads: "Yemen: Lifting the Veil on a Colorful Nation."
106. *New Statesman*, 27 March 1992, cover page.
107. *The Atlanta Journal/The Atlanta Constitution*, 28 June 1992, Section P.
108. *L'Express*, (Québec), 17 November 1994, cover page.
109. *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 28 September 1994.
110. *Toronto Star*, 14 May 1996, F5.
111. *Vancouver Sun*, 15 September 1994, A18.
112. *Montreal Gazette*, 11 April 1994, B3.
113. *Toronto Star*, 15 December 1996, F4.
114. Scroggins, "Women of the Veil," P3.
115. Goodwin, *Price of Honor*, 262.
116. *Ibid.*, 55, 78–9, 81, 98, 101, 107–9, 293, 300; Scroggins, "Women of the Veil," P3.
117. Goodwin, *Price of Honor*, 56. Note the double standard: 'we' western women are advised to cover-up in the sun.
118. Brooks, *Nine Parts of Desire*, 8.
119. Hoodfar, "Return to the Veil," 116.
120. Goodwin, *Price of Honor*, 112, 161, 186–7, 217, 247, 342. Goodwin presents some women who cover as not fundamentalists and fearing fundamentalism, 85; Scroggins, "Women of the Veil," P2.
121. Goodwin, *Price of Honor*, 15.
122. *Ibid.*, 137, 175.
123. Brooks, *Nine Parts of Desire*, 165; see also 152, 166.

124. M. Lemon, "Understanding Does Not Always Lead to Tolerance," Facts and Arguments, *Globe and Mail*, Tuesday, 31 January 1995; K Govier, "Shrouded in Black," Opinion, *Toronto Star*, Monday, 25 September 1995, A19.
125. Janice Boddy suggested to me that the concept of 'face' in western culture also plays a role in attacks on *niqab*, viz, Lemon's 'defaced human being': with make-up 'one puts on one's face'; one 'faces' the world, hardship, the future . . . and so on. Without a 'face,' (i.e., veiled) one is lost.
126. See Rahat Kurd's reply in the *Globe and Mail* ("Facts and Arguments," Wednesday, 15 February 1995): "Whenever I read, watch or personally experience criticism of Islamic dress, I'm always struck by how little relevance it has to my life, or the lives of friends like Shehzadi [who covers her face], who would take less than kindly, you understand, to being called a 'slave' in a 'straitjacket.' . . . [Lemon's] failure simply to try communicating with the woman whose face veil she objected to so strenuously is not encouraging. Think what might have happened if our distraught MA had actually talked to the pre-Medieval spectre. Nothing intense, just a smile or casual comment about the Blue Jays [a baseball team] or the going rate per metre of black cloth at Fabricland. Anything the pre-Medieval spectre might have said would be illuminating. Maybe she was on her way to a Quantum Physics class or an aerobic workout with her pre-Medieval spectre friends."
127. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *Boundary 2*, XII, 3, and XIII, 1, Spring and Fall, (1984), 338.
128. Carla Makhoul, *Changing Veils: Women and Modernisation in North Yemen* (London: Croom Helm, 1979), 36.
129. *Ibid.*, 12.
130. Hume-Griffith lived in Persia and Arabia for several years while her husband was employed as a doctor for a Christian Medical Mission. M.E. Hume-Griffith, *Behind the Veil in Persia and Turkish Arabia: An Account of an Englishwoman's Eight Years' Residence Amongst the Women of the East* (London: Seeley, 1909), 103, 222–3, 235.
131. *Globe and Mail*, 22 August 1994, A1.
132. *Globe and Mail*, 27 August 1994, D7.
133. *West Australian*, 16 November 1994, You: 5.
134. *Globe and Mail*, February 15, 1995, Facts and Arguments.
135. *The Weekend Review* (Australian), 22–23 July 1996, Features: 3.
136. *Toronto Star*, 30 July 1996, E3.
137. *Toronto Star*, 17 February 1998, C5.
138. *The Seattle Times*, 24 January 1999.