Feminism on Religion: The Veiling of Muslim Women.

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Abstract

This paper focuses on feminism and the veiling phenomenon of Muslim women. A distinct contribution of the paper to the current literature is the focus on the micro level analysis to explain why Muslim women wear the veil. After a careful and critical examination of the cultural, religious, feminist and individual dimensions of veiling of the Muslim women, the following conclusion is drawn: Although the individual level explanation is closely tied to the cultural and religious explanations, the micro level must, at least be given credit for its ability to provide an alternative explanation which recognizes human beings, such as Muslim women, as critical, reflective thinkers capable of making decisions and choices, such as wearing the veil, based on the deliberate use of their intellect.

Introduction

The veiling phenomenon within the Muslim religion has received vigorous attacks from many individuals and organizations in Western societies. One of these attacks comes from feminist organizations, including those within academia. Some of these attacks seem to approach the issue from a totally Western cultural perspective, disregarding Muslim cultural, traditional and religious perspectives and most importantly, the individual perspective. These attacks generally seem to suggest that the veil is a sign or symbol of oppression and subjugation of Muslim women by its male-dominated society. Research suggests that the conception Westerners have of the veil and the women who wear them may, in fact, be overly simplified largely as a result of Western ethnocentrism. There is a tendency for Western scholars to view Islamic culture through the lens of Western culture, with the belief, however misguided, that Western culture is in some way superior. The reasons Muslim women give for wearing the veil are diverse in nature. There are some converging points in their rationalization for adhering to this practice, but as research suggests, the practice of veiling is more complex and multifaceted than many are led to believe.

Western ethnocentrism aside, why, exactly, do Muslim women wear the veil? Although veiling is a practice that can be found throughout history, within many different cultures, each with its own motivations for veiling, this paper focuses on the veiling of Muslim women with the main objective of providing a theoretical explanation and understanding of this phenomenon at both the micro and macro levels. Theoretically and sociologically, it appears that a better understanding of the veiling of Muslim women requires a careful and critical examination of: 1) its cultural dimension; 2) its religious dimension; 3) its feminist dimension; and then 4) its individual dimension.

Cultural Dimension/Explanation

The behaviors and actions of individuals in any human society cannot be understood and explained without taking into consideration that society's culture. Individual behavior or action sometimes stems from the individual's attempt to simply conform to cultural norms and in some cases it stems from the individual's conscious rejection of those cultural norms. Contrary to popular belief, the veiling of women is not relegated to the Islamic religion. Historically, veiling is thought to have originated in Indo-European cultures, such as the Hittites, Greeks, Romans, and Persians (Dashu 2006). Unlike the way it is commonly practiced today, veiling, among members of these early cultures, was primarily a means of conveying gender and class differences. Traditionally and historically, women who wore the veil were members of the upper class. Veiling was a way for them to display their class status while deterring would-be harassers from inflicting any harm onto them.

The veil, therefore, was a symbol of luxury and protection to which only a few had access. According to Brayer (2013), the veil of the Jewish woman was not always considered a sign of modesty. Sometimes, the veil symbolized a state of distinction and luxury rather than modesty. The veil personified the dignity and superiority of noble women. It also represented a woman's inaccessibility as a sanctified possession of her husband (Brayer 2013). The veil signified a woman's self-respect and social status. Women of lower classes would often wear the veil to give the impression of a higher standing. The fact that the veil was the sign of nobility was the reason why prostitutes were not permitted to cover their hair in the old Jewish society. However, prostitutes often wore a special headscarf in order to look respectable (Brayer 2013).

In some cultures, the wearing of the veil by upper class women was compulsory, while it was made illegal for lower class women. If lower class women were seen wearing the veil, in some cases, they were subject to punishment (Dashu 2006). In addition to not originating within Islamic culture, veiling has been a common practice in many religions and cultures around the world. Cultures around the world endorse the wearing of the veil for varying reasons and not all of those reasons have religious connotations. The most obvious and close-to-home example of veil-wearing can be found within the Christian religion. A nun wears a veil that is draped over the head and lies over the back of the robe. A separate article of clothing, called a wimple, covers the neck and surrounds the face. Obviously, the veiling of women has a cultural dimension and can be explained culturally.

Religious Dimension/Explanation

Some Christian denominations, such as the Amish and the Mennonites for example, keep their women veiled to the present day. The reason for the veil, as offered by their Church leaders, is that *"The head covering is a symbol of woman's subjection to the man and to God"*, which is the same logic introduced by St. Paul in the New Testament (Brayer 2013).

In a small-scale research study published in *Gender and Society*, a pair of researchers interviewed a group of Muslim women in Austin, Texas in order to discover the varying meanings the veil had for the women in the group (Read and Bartkowski 2000). Half of the women in the group chose to veil, while the other half chose not to veil. The veil-wearing women featured in the study indicated a strong religious connection with regards to wearing the veil. One of the most prominent reasons for wearing the veil cited by the women in the interviews pertained to religion. One woman, for example, stated: "The veil represents submission to God" (Read and Bartkowski 2000:403). The other women in the study are reported to have stated that they wear the veil because the Qur'an tells them it is better, it makes them feel special because it symbolizes their commitment to Islam, and that the veil is a symbol of worship (Read and Bartkowski 2000:403). Other interviews with veil-wearing women have yielded similar responses. Whatever religiously-derived reasons they gave for wearing the veil, they all agreed that it is a practice that is required of women according to the Qur'an. To be a proper woman and a true Muslim means one must follow the Qur'an, which they believe instructs women to wear the veil. These women choose to wear the veil because it symbolizes their commitment to their faith and it provides them with a sense of religious pride. It is a way for them to display, or even wear, their faith and to assert themselves as devout Muslims. It is not simply imposed upon them by their male-dominated society. It is obvious that the veiling of women has a religious dimension and can be explained religiously.

Feminist Dimension/Explanation

After the fall of the Twin Towers resulting from the September 11th, 2001 terrorist attack, the United States became convinced the solution was to fight terrorism and bring democracy to radical, Islamic nations of the Middle East considered to be responsible for state-sponsored terrorism. The so much attention directed toward the events of September 11th, 2001 and the issuing war in the Middle East led to a critical review of the Islamic religion by many Westerners. The Fear of another terrorist attack resulted in anti-Islamic views in Western nations and anyone associated with Islam was very quickly branded a terrorist. This spurred a negative, critical view and attack of Islam. One aspect of this critique focused on the role of women in the Middle East. Feminists from around the world openly addressed the roles of women in these societies and how religion shaped those roles. They critiqued the roles of women, claiming that they were victims of male domination that was largely influenced and justified by religious doctrine (Ngwainmbi, 2011).

In this critical review of Islam, some feminists argued that the wearing of the veil is not only an oppressive practice, but also a symbol of female inferiority and male dominance in general. The veil, they argued, represents women's exclusion from society which basically translates into the view that women should neither be seen nor heard.

They argue women are made invisible by the veil, a veil that diminishes their individuality, making them indistinguishable from one another. These women, they argue, lack so much autonomy that they cannot even exercise any decision-making power, not even with regards to their own attire. In fact, this argument is consistent with that of Marianne Weber (2000: 317) who argued that the interaction among individuals, especially between males and females produces male domination through the interaction of patriarchy and capitalism, law and culture, resulting in autonomy and freedom in self-definition for males and domination and alienation for females.

Some feminists argue that these women wear the veil because they are coerced and forced to do so. These women submit to the unfair pressures that are placed upon them and wear the veil because they fear being ostracized, stigmatized, or punished. Some women feminists within the Muslim religion have become outspoken advocates of women's rights within the Muslim faith, specifically battling for rights within the mosque, and in women's choice of a marriage partner (Nomani 2015). According to Nomani (2015), the atrocities of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) are ideologically motivated and driven, with religiously justified basis in the Koran/Quran. It is obvious that the Feminist Movement provides one explanation for the veiling of Muslim women.

Individual Dimension/Explanation

Micro Level Explanation: Symbolic Interactionist Perspective

It is very reasonable to view individual behavior or action as a product of culture and tradition as illustrated and highlighted by the Feminist approach to veiling of women in Islamic societies. However, is it also reasonable to explain the veiling of women in Islamic societies from the perspective of the individual women who make the free choice and decision to wear the veil very consciously, based on their meaningful interactions with other members of their societies? Before we attempt to answer this question from the Symbolic Interactionist Perspective, we want to first of all examine the perspective very critically and carefully in order to gain a better understanding of it.

The focus on the individual Muslim women is derived from critical humanism and social psychology (Larsen and Wright 1986). This theoretical perspective interprets the process of interaction itself and claims that facts are based on and directed by symbols. Understanding these symbols is important in understanding human behavior. According to this theoretical perspective, individuals live both in the natural and symbolic environment (Aksan and Kisac 2009). Meaning evolves from their interactions in their environment and with people. The Symbolic Interactionist Perspective focuses on the way individuals learn to interpret and give meaning to the world through their interactions with others.

George Herbert Mead, a pragmatist and anti-dualist philosopher, argues symbols develop the mind and are used as a means of communication and thinking (Aksan and Kisac 2009). As human beings, we have the unique ability to name things. When children interact with friends, family, and other individuals, they pick up on the language and learn the social meanings attached to certain words. Humans differ from animals in that humans have the ability to think of things instead of simply reacting to them. This process involves a reflective pause through which we modify our interpretation of symbols (Stryker 1987). This illustrates the view that the veiling of Muslim women is explained by their reflective pause and their careful interpretation of what the veil symbolizes since symbolic meanings might be formed differently for anyone involved in this interaction process (Aksan and Kisac 2009). In order to get a deeper understanding of this perspective and its usefulness in understanding the veiling of Muslim women, it is important to examine the following seven assumptions of the Symbolic Interaction Perspective according to Aksan and Kisac (2009):

1) People become distinctively human through their interaction with others;
2) Human society consists of people engaging in symbolic interaction;
3) People are unique, exceptional creatures because of their ability to use symbols;
4) The social act should be the fundamental unit of social psychological analysis;
5) People are purposeful individuals who act in and toward situations;
6) To understand people's social acts, we need to use methods that enable us to discern the meanings they attribute to these acts; and
7) People are conscious and self-reflective beings who actively shape their own behavior.

Focusing on the individual explanation of this veiling phenomenon among Muslim women, the Symbolic Interactionist Perspective, unlike the Feminist approach which views the veil as a sign or symbol of oppression, tends to focus on individual Muslim women and their personal explanations, which are derived from their social interaction with others, their interpretations of those interactions and ultimately the meanings they assign to those interactions.

This approach accommodates, validates and provides meaning to the views of some Muslim women who feel that wearing the veil is "liberating" (Merali 2006: 175). According to Merali (2006), the stereotypical view of Muslim women in the Western world is that they are oppressed by their male-dominated society and religion. But "Muslim women state that they believe the veil to be liberating and Islam to be the only avenue of liberation for women" (Merali 2006:175). This view and belief are shaped by these women's social interaction with others, their interpretations of the interaction associated with the veil as a symbol, the meanings they assign to it which, most importantly, then contribute to their identity formation. This veiling practice and the symbols associated with it are certainly reinforced by social interaction within the Muslim community.

In a small-scale research study published in *Gender and Society*, a pair of researchers interviewed a group of Muslim women in Austin, Texas in order to discover the varying meanings the veil had for the women in the group (Read and Bartkowski 2000). Half of the women in the group chose to veil, while the other half chose not to veil. Of particular interest to the topic being discussed in this paper were the responses given by the women who chose to veil. The veil-wearing women featured in the study listed many reasons or justifications for choosing to wear the veil. First and foremost, their responses indicate that there is a strong religious connection with regards to wearing the veil. Second, their decision to wear the veil appears to have been strongly influenced by the people with whom they interact and the community in general. Third, and possibly the most interesting, is how their responses reveal the ways in which their conceptions of self are shaped by wearing the veil and how others react in response (Read and Bartkowski 2000). This study clearly points out that while the veil symbolizes religious devotion for the women who wear the veil, there are also other influences that operate to encourage this practice, which, interestingly, result in the reinforcement of religious values. In the study, the women also cite their peers as important influences in their decision to wear the veil. One woman featured in the study states that she made the decision to wear the veil when she was in high school because it helped her to fit in with her peers and allowed her to more easily form meaningful friendships (Read and Bartkowski 2000:403). Again, a meaningful decision made based on individual reflection and interpretation of their interaction with others, not simply imposed by her male-dominated society. These women's accounts reveal how the veil extends beyond a religious symbol and becomes a source of identity and relationship formation. Many women who wear the veil are undoubtedly influenced, to some degree, by their peers. The people these women interact with exert an influence that results in them deciding to take the veil. It is a way for them to fit in with others, allowing them to form meaningful relationships with others.

The formation of identity and the influence exerted by the people with whom one interacts as well as the community as a whole is another contribution of symbolic interactionist perspective to our understanding of why Muslim women wear the veil. An important concept used by symbolic interactionists is the self. The self refers to the human capacity to see oneself from an external, objective point of view. According to George Herbert Mead, the self is developed through social activity and social relationships and in this respect, the self is a social process (Ritzer and Goodman 2004:396). Social interaction alone does not dictate this process; a critical component of the development of the self is the "ability to put ourselves unconsciously into others' place and to act as they act" (Ritzer and Goodman 2004:396). In essence, the formation of one's identity can be viewed as a product of one's social experiences.

In order to more thoroughly explain the process through which the self is developed, Mead introduced the terms significant other and generalized other to refer to the groups individuals use to evaluate themselves. With reference to peers and the community of which the individual is a part, the term generalized other is used. The generalized other encompasses all of the norms, values, and expectations that dictate social interaction within the community and among peers (Henslin 2005:68). The significant other denotes the people with whom the individual shares a closer, more intimate relationship. This includes people within the family, such as parents, siblings, husbands, and wives, all of whom the individual has more continuous, direct interaction with. As a consequence of this more intimate relationship, the significant other is believed to exert a significant influence on the individual. However, the influences of the significant other do not negate those of the generalized other.

Mead is quoted as saying the following with regards to the generalized other: "Only in so far as he takes the attitudes of the organized social group to which he belongs toward the organized, co-operative social activity or set of such activities in which that group is engaged, does he develop a complete self" (Ritzer and Goodman 2004:398).

The significant other and the generalized other each exerts an influence on the individual that facilitates the development of self. These two groups, or reference groups, as they could also be referred to, not only provide a mode through which the self is developed, but they also act as a way for one to evaluate one's behavior. The family is a critical agent of socialization that influences the values, beliefs, and even behaviors of the individual. However, the generalized other is just as critical a component because it is through the family that the individual is first introduced to the norms, values, and expectations of the entire community. The goal is to facilitate the individual's assimilation to society. Therefore, the attitudes of the community of which an individual is a part facilitate the development of the self, with the goal of group harmony and cooperation based on the group's sharing of common values, beliefs, and goals.

If the formation of one's identity can be viewed as a product of one's social experiences, and if the actions and practices of the individual are influenced by the identity that is socially-derived, then the aforementioned principles can be applied to Muslim women who wear the veil. Living in a society in which religious fervor is strong and large numbers of women are choosing to wear the veil, the Muslim woman is influenced in her decision regarding whether or not to wear the veil. Muslim women choose to wear the veil because their peers wear the veil, and within the groups with which they interact, wearing the veil influences how they perceive and define themselves. Through interaction with others—peers, family members, the community, etc—they gauge how others react to them, how others define them, and they model themselves after others, which influences how they identify themselves. Other veil-wearing Muslim women, may, for example, treat them with respect, perceiving them as proper, dignified women who are religiously devoted. This, in turn, may create feelings of mutual understanding and respect among the group. They share the same values and beliefs, which not only reinforces them within the individual, but also aids in the development and maintenance of self-conception because the women see and evaluate themselves through the eyes of their peers. The identities of veil-wearing women are therefore developed and shaped by social activity and social relationships, which also influence the behaviors and practices in which they participate.

Discussion and Conclusions

It is very clear from the literature and our examination of the veiling of Muslim women that the veiling of Muslim women has cultural, religious, feminist and individual explanations. The main focus of our analysis has been on the individual explanation and the thesis of this paper is that a better understanding of this phenomenon is provided by the focus on the individual dimension. However, it must be pointed out that the individual explanation is closely tied to the cultural and religious explanations. It can be argued that although Muslim women have the ability to interpret the meaning of symbols such as the veil, this ability is shaped by the culture in which they are raised and more importantly by the process of social interaction with members of their culture and cultures other than theirs. It is therefore difficult to eliminate cultural and religious influences completely.

In *The Sacred Canopy*, Berger argues that "religious symbols and systems offer explanations and rationales for the maintenance of the cultural order" and that "people are congenially compelled to impose a meaningful order upon reality" (Baer 2012). Religion, along with all its components, in essence, serves the individual by enabling him or her to legitimize the social order by attributing it to an external, higher power. In the case of the Islamic religion, women individually, for example, might accept the roles that have been subscribed to them as originating from a higher power, thereby justifying their position in society and all the expectations that go along with such a position. With regards to wearing the veil, women can rationalize this practice by referencing the Qur'an, proclaiming that it instructs them to wear the veil if they are to be loyal adherents to Islam. Veil-wearing women who have been featured in a plethora of studies surrounding this issue claim that one of their motivations for wearing the veil is that the Qur'an instructs women to do so. The veil-wearing women in the Read and Bartkowski Study (Read and Bartkowski 2000) all agreed that the Qur'an says that women should wear the veil. They not only believe they are following the word of the Qur'an, but they also believe that by following this perceived instruction that they are better Muslims and better women.

There is also a political dimension to the veiling of Muslim women. Aside from the veil being a symbol of religious devotion and a vehicle through which women are able to solidify relationships and develop their identities, another reason for veil-wearing proposed by the literature is that it is a statement, or protest, against Western colonialism. An Algerian member of Hamas, Abderazak, for example, describes the Islamic veil as a "cultural awakening" and a form of "cultural revenge against colonialism" (Berger 1998:94).

Many people within the Islamic community feel threatened by the West and its constant attacks on Islamic religion and culture. They feel that the West, motivated by its ethnocentrism, in all its arrogance, is endeavoring to transform their society into one that mirrors that of the West. Therefore, in their minds, veiling is believed to be a way they can showcase their ethnic, cultural, and religious pride as well as their resistance to Western cultural ideals and practices.

By resisting Western influence, they are endeavoring to preserve their religious and cultural heritage, to protect their values and beliefs, and to maintain their own concepts of self that are shaped largely by the beliefs and customs to which they adhere. In fact, one could argue that opposition to the West has become an inclusive component of Islamic ideology. In countries that are predominantly Muslim, where religious and political lines can become so blurred that the two sometimes seem to be inseparable, the veil is representative of national identity and wearing it is a way for people to distinguish themselves from outsiders. As Berger points out in his article, "It sees itself in the eyes of an understandably antagonized other and makes itself seen by it" (Berger 1998:102).

The portrait of the veil-wearing Muslim woman painted by interviews portrays her not as one who is oppressed, but one who is a willing participant. Veil-wearers cite a number of reasons for taking the veil, and many claim that it provides them with feelings of empowerment and liberation. This picture does not even closely resemble the one that is depicted by Westerners and other critics of veil-wearing and Muslim women in general. If women are oppressed and coerced into unwillingly wearing the veil, then how could these women make such claims? How could they justify wearing the veil? What about their roles in society? If these women are victims of oppression that is perpetuated by a male-dominated society in which they are deemed inferior, a society with strict gender role expectations that limit their individual autonomy, then why are they not speaking out against the patriarchal structure that, as some argue, severely limits their ability to not only become active participants in all social spheres, but also to reach their fullest human potential? Is this a form of false consciousness as suggested by the works of Karl Marx (Wallace and Wolf 2006)?

In conclusion, we argue that although the individual level explanation is closely tied to the cultural and religious explanations, the micro level must, at least be given credit for its ability to provide an alternative explanation which recognizes human beings, such as Muslim women, as critical, reflective thinkers capable of making decisions and choices, such as wearing the veil, based on the deliberate use of their intellect.

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