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**“Unveiled Muslim Identity in the West: A Muslim Male Perspective”
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Abstract:

This paper focuses on the meaning and promise of hijab in the transnational contexts, specifically in the Muslim diasporas. I argue for broadening the national imaginary of citizenry in the “Western” milieu to incorporate its “Other,” Islam, through reconsideration of the prevailing perception of hijab, which has long symbolized Islam’s oppression of women to the “Western” eyes. To this end, I set out to situate hijab at the crossroads of the deep issues of Orientalism, multiculturalism, feminism, and notions of citizenship informed by a wider meaning of politics. Inspired mostly by the emphasis of Katherine Bullock’s seminal work on the multiple meanings of hijab, my perspective proposes the revision of the dominant so-called liberatory feminist attitude that in effect sustains the oppression of women in both Muslim and “Western” settings. In offering this, however, I am closer to a cosmopolitan outlook than a multiculturalist one. I specially suggest avoiding assimilationary policies that would miss the real possibilities of empowerment and liberation of Muslim (and) women globally. The solution, instead, lies in the de-Westernizing of the West. In another vein, my “male” perspective will pose a challenge to certain commonplace convictions of some feminists that essentialize women’s experience over any other subjectivities that women and men share in other contexts and that might prove indispensable in working out the broader questions I will handle in this paper.

My veiled¹ activist friend was appalled at the reaction by feminists at an international conference she attended to raise international awareness about Turkey’s hijab ban. “They could not believe that a woman would struggle for her right to wear *hijab* in a secular Muslim country,” she related. So did most of the people here in the U.S. when I described how some of my friends were expelled from school, pressured by their parents, and even beaten up by the police or by their own family members since they insisted on covering themselves.² Accordingly, I could not

¹ Throughout the paper I will use the terms like “veiled”, “covered”, or “in hijab” interchangeably to mean the religiously mandated Islamic dress code that requires covering of the woman body except for hands, feet and face. The “veil”, on the other hand, will refer to the veil that covers the face, which is not part of the requirements of the Islamic dress code but practiced by some Muslim women. Although *hijab* in general includes the restrictions for the outfit of men, too, it is off the topic for the purposes of this paper; accordingly I will restrict this term to women.

² To see a detailed and vivid account of the state violence against Turkish hijabi’s, see *Fotoğraflarla Başörtüsü Yasağının Yakın Tarihi: ‘baş’üstüne: Near History of Scarf Ban by Photographs with pleasure*, (Istanbul:

realize that when we, male students, tried to help our friends for their cause, we were not taken on the same terms as the white abolitionists struggling against the slavery, as we wished, but as male fundamentalists brainwashing or even coercing the women to cover. It was an instructive experience that taught me to avoid being so engaged in women's affairs when doing so is doomed to be counterproductive.

In an academic world where "essentialism" has become the capital sin and where almost all binary oppositions are treated as ideological instruments, it is, surprisingly, not rare to find extensive use of the term "Western" to denote a monolithic entity that is constructed against its inferior "Other", which is authoritarian, misogynist, and backward. Does it make any sense to talk about a Judeo-Christian West when a West European state feels the need to ban a cultural practice that belongs to an "outsider" religion? Was not it the stressful existence of blacks amongst whites that made segregation an enforceable policy? Does not the hijab ban in France prove that the "other" is too visible to be neglected as outsider?

Hijab is at the crossroads of an amalgamation of theoretical issues. What does *hijab* mean in gender relations? Does this meaning hold across boundaries, or is there something complicated when we introduce the colonial/postcolonial relations into picture? Finally in a global world, what does multiculturalism, if it is such a great thing, require in the case of the Muslim minorities who insist on their women's wearing *hijab* in largely non-Muslim secular

Kırkambar Yayınları/Akder, 1999), esp. pp. 215, 51, 87 (picture of Canan Bezirgan who was injured by police action). Also, for exemplary news for this point, see "Polis, siyah çelenk taşıyan öğrencileri hastanelik etti" [The police beats up the students carrying black wreath] on the World Wide Web: <http://www.zaman.com.tr/2002/03/15/haberler/h12.htm> (Note that these were only high school students and no legal inquiry was conducted on this affair or similar affairs which took place numerous times). For pictures that depict the Turkish women's resistance against the hijab ban, see on the World Wide Web: <http://www.basortum.net/index.php?cid=33>. In fact, there has been a recent increase in the literature that covers first-hand experiences of the veiled Turkish women who have faced extreme pressure or violence by their very own families or the school or state officials. Unfortunately, they are all in Turkish. For instance, Nazife Şişman, *Başörtüsü Mağdurlarından Anlatılmamış Öyküler*, [Untold Stories by the Victims of Hijab Ban], (Istanbul: İz Yayıncılık, 2000); Cihan Aktaş, *Başörtülü Öğrencilerle Söyleşiler* [Interviews with Veiled Students], on the World Wide Web: <http://www.basortum.net/contents.php?cid=200>. Özdalga's book, which also covers this aspect of the hijab ban in Turkey is an exception: Elizabeth Özdalga *The Veiling Issue, Official Secularism and Popular Islam in Modern Turkey*. (Richmond Surrey: 1998, Curzon Press).

societies? My contention is that we will fail to answer any of these questions if we fail to address all of them together.

If what enabled the “Westerners” to construct their Western identity was the existence of Islam as the other, then ever-increasing populations of Muslim immigrants and converts at the heart of the West must be bad news. Having said that, is it really the case that France is aiming at liberating women from oppression, and instead not trying to save its own identity as a secular Western country? Is it just the veiled Muslim girl who was born and raised in the U.S. who is undergoing an identity crisis amongst national, ethnic, gender, and religious identities or is it the American citizenry itself that is in crisis?

Reality poses constant challenges to the constructs in our minds, yet we lag far behind in adapting our categories to it. What *hijab*, which is itself a borrowed term, means in a Western context will guide me through this paper as the key to discuss the boundaries of citizenship in the Western countries, in particular the U.S. I will embark upon my endeavor by delving into colonial-Orientalist construction of the West and Islam as inimical terms, and explore what it means today in understanding the prevalent perceptions of *hijab*. Thereafter, as I call the dominant perceptions of *hijab* into question I will propose alternative ways of perceiving *hijab*. Debates on multiculturalism will direct the course of my discussion in that section. Subsequently, I will seek to develop alternative strategies for putting hijab into action as a positive force to shape the future meaning of the citizenry, speaking from the position of an “alien” student of politics experiencing being a Muslim male in the U.S. I will conclude my reflections by pointing to some possible pitfalls involved in this hard task. As usual, it requires women to carry the burden to change the society, but in a world where most of the injustice and oppression have been inflicted on this segment of the humanity, and when history does not provide sufficient instances of oppressors giving up oppression on their own, this should come as no surprise.

***Hijab* as the Symbol of Islam's Oppression of Women?: Deconstructing A**

Colonial Representation

It might seem irrelevant at first glance to see the *hijab* through the debates on colonial/postcolonial situation. Yet, tracing a perception back to its roots can help us in that genealogy always carries the potential to reveal the definitive moment when and how a certain power constellation created the discourse for its legitimation which in turn serves to legitimize subsequent forms of similar relations of power. Who would otherwise think that “the brutal domination of slave women’s procreation laid the foundation for centuries of reproductive regulation that continues today” in the form of welfare system, which is usually understood in benevolent terms?³ This argument on power and discourse is certainly reminiscent of Foucault, who developed a powerful argument linking all forms of the will to knowledge and all modes of cultural representation of the ‘Other’, or marginal constituencies, more or less explicitly, to the exercise of power. Secondly, he understood ‘discourse’-the medium which constitutes power and through which it is exercised- ‘constructs’ the objects of its knowledge; that is to say, in his view discourse produces reality, it produces domains of objects, and rituals of truth.⁴

Having thus said that it is through discourse that power is exercised, *hijab* is situated in a context where the majority of people in the “West” define themselves as liberated, emancipated and in this sense superior to the non-Western people who have come under their direct control or influence for a considerable time. For those people, *hijab* really represents something irrelevant and foreign to their world, as when veiled converts would always tell you how somebody on the street or at the mall asked them where they were from, or yelled at them to go

³ Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Rape, Reproduction and the Meaning of Liberty*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1999):23. Roberts aptly shows the persistence of the relationship between the white man and the black woman since the slavery times, which is often disguised under different forms but essentially the same domination.

⁴ Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics* (London: Verso, 1997):36.

back to their own country.⁵ Why is this so? Following Connolly, I maintain that “identity requires difference in order to be, and it converts difference into otherness in order to secure its own self-certainty,”⁶ and,

...in order to secure itself as intrinsically good, coherent, complete or rational and in order to protect itself from the other that would unravel its self-certainty and capacity for collective mobilization if it established its legitimacy. This constellation of constructed others now becomes both essential to the truth of the powerful identity and a threat to it. The threat is posed not merely *by actions* the other might take to injure or defeat the true identity but by the very visibility of its mode of *being* as other⁷ (Connolly, 65-66).

I cannot provide here a detailed account of why Islam emerged as this inimical other, but suffice it to say that it could be sought in the historical relations of power between these two universes, namely, Orient and the West. It is beyond the purposes of this paper to determine when Westerners invented “the West,” but it is without a doubt that as Edward Said points out in his seminal work, *Orientalism*, Orientalism, as a style of thought, was based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between “the Orient” and (most of the time) “the Occident.”⁸ In saying so, Said adapted the theories of Foucault and Gramsci to the colonial literature to show how the regime of disciplinary power inscribed in Orientalism transforms the ‘real’ East into a discursive ‘Orient’, or rather substitutes the one for the other.⁹ Speaking from today, it is odd to say that there is an authentic East; so Said might be said to make a reverse essentialism; but the important point here is his emphasis on this relationship between power and knowledge. Hence,

⁵ Bullock provides numerous examples of such real life stories in *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil: Challenging Historical & Modern Stereotypes*, (Herndon: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2002):73-76. See also Russell Cobb, “Behind the Veil” *Identify (News and Analysis)*, June, 7 2004, On the World Wide Web: <http://inthe fray.com/html/article.php?sid=482&mode=thread&order=0>: “I’ve had people scream, ‘Go back to Morocco,’ at me from their cars. I’m from France and my parents are from Benin.”

⁶ William Connolly, *Identity/Difference*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991): 64.

⁷ *ibid*, 65-66.

⁸ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), p. 2.

⁹ Gilbert: 36-37.

Foucault's impact is more related with the way power as an impersonal force makes its subjects objects of power through knowledge and Orientalist 'discourse', producing the Orient as not only essentially distinct but also inferior, which in turn reinforces its image of itself as a superior civilization.¹⁰

Following the footsteps of Said, both Leila Ahmed¹¹ and Katherine Bullock¹² convincingly show how the modern discourse on hijab in the West can be traced back to a colonial moment when the colonial powers found *hijab* instrumental for its metaphorical value to portray Islam's backwardness and inferiority. Ahmed, for instance, argues for the Egyptian case that the British colonial presence and discursive input constituted critical components in the situation that witnessed the emergence of the new discourse of the veil.¹³ Hijab thus appeared as the metaphor of the entire 'Orient.'¹⁴ One may think that notwithstanding its economically exploitative aspects, colonization might have helped women in fighting against their oppression in the Muslim countries. In this view, just like the humanitarian campaigns in China against footbinding (1874-1911), or the campaign against female circumcision in Kenya (1923-1931),¹⁵ colonizers might have pursued elimination of veiling practice as a humanitarian cause. But given that Cromer, who embraced the cause of disseminating negative views on hijab and enforcing unveiling in Egypt, carried out contradictory policies such as restriction on girls' education that were blatantly detrimental to Egyptian women¹⁶ leaves no doubt that he was not a feminist man. It is interesting to note that this same champion of the unveiling of Egyptian women was, in

¹⁰ *ibid.* p 39

¹¹ *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ Ahmed, p. 145

¹⁴ Bullock, 126. She provides an exhaustive account of this point with innumerable examples from both journalistic writing of the past and today's media. For a more detailed information, see her chapter 2 on "Hijab in the Colonial Era." pp. 1-33.

¹⁵ For a detailed account of these campaigns, see Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

¹⁶ Ahmed, 153.

England, founding member and sometime the president of the Men's League for Opposing Women's Suffrage.¹⁷ This supports the point that

The idea (which still often informs discussions about women in Arab and Muslim cultures and other non-Western world cultures) that improving the status of women entails abandoning native customs was the product of a particular historical moment and was constructed by an androcentric colonial establishment committed to male dominance in the service of particular political ends¹⁸.

I will come back to this point when elaborating on the multiculturalist debate on *hijab*, since I think many of the arguments in that debate rely on these inaccurate perceptions formed during colonial times by the misogynist men. Leaving that aside, what emerges from my concern with the colonial roots of the commonplace perceptions of *hijab* is the fact that, as in many other instances, women's plight was put into service by the white male colonizer to legitimize and perpetuate the colonial domination. This makes the judgments on *hijab* as symbol of women's oppression a suspect category. Many women in the West today unwillingly serve the perpetuation of the oppression of women in the Third World or pursuance of other interests by white male elites disguised under the emancipation discourse, the most recent example of which was the media coverage on *burqa* during the Afghanistan war.¹⁹

Who is speaking for whom?

¹⁷ *ibid*, 153. Gallagher also quotes this fact from Nicole Gaouette's news article in support of the argument: "European nations often used Muslim women to justify their intrusions into Islamic countries." Examples include French authorities' insistence of unveiling of women for emergency relief in several occasions. Nancy Gallagher "Liberating Afghan Women" *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 21, no. 3 (2004): 80.

¹⁸ *ibid*, 165.

¹⁹ Since my primary concern is the *hijab* experience in the West, I will not deal with that matter further. Yet, it should be noted that the media today still covers the Orient in more or less the same way as the colonial literature did before postcolonization. I elaborated on this point in my other article: "Muslims and the Media after 9/11: A Muslim Discourse in the American Media?" *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 21, no. 3 (2004): 39-69. Gallagher, *ibid*, makes the same argument based on several textual evidences from the mainstream media. Finally, Said in *Covering Islam: How the Media and Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), and Bullock in her section on "The Meaning of *Hijab*-Western media viewpoint" also make parallel arguments for other occasions.

If once we leave aside the fact that the current meaning of hijab in the West was formed during by the colonial elite on behalf of colonial interests, to what extent is this picture accurate? In order to answer this question, we need to question the legitimating sources of knowledge claims made to this end. We are no longer living in an academic environment where “objectivity” of the scholar is the utmost criterion for the validity of her truth claims. For better or worse, it is not illegitimate when one reveals his positions and dispositions when making his arguments. Quite the opposite, in a poststructuralist, anti-foundationalist world, “objectivity” claims are scrutinized in search for the subject positions hidden under this guise at the service of the reproduction of certain relations of power. Moreover, material experiences of life have gained a renewed value as the bedrock of knowledge in the Second wave feminism (1970s). The idea here is that no one can speak for the other. As Dorothy Smith puts it, “women’s standpoint...discredits sociology’s claim to constitute an objective knowledge independent of the sociologist’s situation” and “sociology’s conceptual procedures, methods and relevances organize its subject matter from a determinate position in society.”²⁰ I agree with this argument insofar as it does not in turn essentialize the women’s experience. It does not make the women in the U.S. closer than me to the experience of women in Turkey just because they share the same experience of womanhood. Holding, in a sense, the colonizer position vis-à-vis the subalternity of the women of the Third World might impede one’s engagement with the reality of her sisters.

So, where there are multiple sites of domination, and where people in subaltern positions are under multiple burdens, sharing one aspect of the subjugation does not make one a legitimate spokesperson of the group in question. Bullock refers to a group of historian and anthropologist feminists who seek to understand the meaning of a social practice from the inside and who raise the question as to whether Western feminists’s issues are universally applicable.²¹ I believe that in

²⁰ Dorothy Smith, “The Disjuncture Between Sociology and Women’s Experience,” p. 326.

²¹ Bullock, xvii. In fact the same problem resides even within a certain country, as Dorothy Roberts shows in the context of birth control-abortion campaigns of white women which meant a completely different thing to black women. *ibid.*

approaching the problems of non-Western women, many liberal Western feminists fall into this trap.

In this paper, although I present my perspective as a Muslim male (an oppressor category), I still believe that having seen the real-life examples of the plight of many women at my former universities who were stigmatized, discriminated against and oppressed before my eyes, I am in a better position than my female office-mate in Texas who once asked me “But, isn’t the veil oppressive?” This even holds true for those woman scholars in Turkey who never go out of their upper-class environment to see how people outside their class live and feel yet behave like the spokespeople of all the women in Turkey regardless of their class, status, or worldview. I am aware that I cannot still speak for them about what *hijab* means to them, but in the same way a woman who is oppressed by the Iranian regime or a member of RAWA (Revolutionary Association of Women in Afghanistan) cannot give a universally accurate meaning of *hijab* based on their own experiences. Thus, Fatima Mernissi²², who supposedly gives an insider’s perspective as a Moroccan Muslim sociologist, cannot speak for the Muslim women better than Katherine Bullock, an Australian-American Muslim convert who herself wears hijab in a Western context and theorized on her very own experience, who in turn cannot speak for women in Morocco.

Nevertheless, I do not believe that this point could support a categorically relativist standpoint that allows no room for negotiation, mutual dialogue and general theorizing. As a Muslim male, I can well be attached to the emancipation project of women at some point. A deep commitment to justice might lead me to a deep empathy with all of the other subaltern groups as I feel myself belonging to one of them. With these thoughts in mind, I will proceed to reflect on what hijab might mean in multiple contexts, in particular in the Western context.

Multiple Meanings of Hijab

²² Fatima Mernissi, *Behind the Veil; The Veil and the Male Elite*.

The heading is revealing, *hijab* can gain its meaning only in its particular context, that is, its meaning is contextual. This point should be so obvious to students of non-Western people, though for the reasons I elaborated in the section on postcoloniality, its meaning as symbol of oppression prevails in “Western” minds. In a sense, the question is empirical. An extensive survey all over the Muslim countries might bring to light why people wear *hijab* in several different contexts. It should be admitted that what complicates the situation is the argument about individual autonomy in a liberal sense *vs.* false consciousness. Many liberal feminists would feel infuriated if somebody would label them as being brainwashed by some modern ideas to exhibit their bodies, thus turning them into sexual objects in complete dependence on approval by the male gaze. However, they do not hesitate to label Muslim women’s voluntary covering as being brainwashed by their culture or religion, if they ever accept that they have no male pressure on them. I do not challenge the view that some systems of domination might sustain their legitimacy through articulation of a belief system that would keep the subjugated unaware of their subjugation. In fact this idea has been very well articulated in the Marxist tradition, beginning with Marx’s idea of false consciousness, later developed especially in Althusser’s and Gramsci’s thought.²³ But in a situation where the knowledge production on the “other” has been mediated by power relations, and where the self is in constant need of representing its “other” as inferior and backward in order to keep her identity secure, the burden of proof lies with the holders of such ideas that they are not speaking from a colonizing position with an interest in representing Islam in negative terms. This stance is truly called by Leila Ahmed as “colonial feminism.”²⁴ Actually, it is colonial feminism that rendered the consequent feminist movements in the Muslim world as an “ally of colonial interests.”²⁵ In any case, it is counterproductive to “teach” the

²³ It is very well known that what led Gramsci to develop his theory of hegemony is the submissive stance of working class towards the capitalist parties in complete defiance of their “class interests.” When I mentioned Althusser, I referred to his idea of ideological state apparatus.

²⁴ *ibid*, 151. In her definition, “colonial feminism, or feminism as used against other cultures in the service of colonialism.

□ *ibid*, 167.

women of another world what their true interests are, or how they can get rid of or reform their religion.²⁶

One other thing that complicates the situation is the ease that colonial feminists find allies who share their convictions in the Muslim world. Along with many other examples in his time, Qasim Amin, who stood up to unveil women in Egypt as the beginning of the social reform assumed and declared the inherent superiority of Western civilization and the inherent backwardness of the Muslim societies.²⁷ They were really co-opted, no different than Fanon, who himself fought sincerely for French interests during World War II, only to realize later that they were never “citizens” of the metropolitan country.²⁸ Whose power structure is reproduced through these attitudes does not need any further explanation. If Western women really want to help their sisters in the Muslim world, they need to focus on real issues like honor killings, sexual harassment in everyday life, domestic violence, education of women, etc, which are beyond any dispute accepted worldwide as the necessary steps to full equality of women.²⁹

²⁶ As Heba Attieh puts it, “It’s not for women in the US say Afghan women are oppressed and should take off the veil. If an Afghan woman is upset about her situation, she should change it, not you.” Gallagher: 81. Yet, I do not rule out an authentic cooperation based on mutual dialogue and not paternalism.

²⁷ *ibid*, 155. Almost all of the internal colonization movements, beginning with Kemalism of Turkey, drew on similar premises about their way to progress. It is interesting to note that 40% of the women in France are said to be supportive of the newly legislated hijab ban. “French MPs back headscarf ban,” *BBC News*, February 10, 2004. On the Web: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3474673.stm>. Also, the journalists who wrote on this ban seemed to have found no difficulty in finding staunch opponents of hijab. For instance, Fadela Amara, founder of Ni Putes ni Soumises (Neither Whores nor Doormats), a movement that represents women from the immigrant suburbs of Paris was among the signers of the open letter in *Elle*, titled “The Islamic veil sends us all — Muslims and non-Muslims — back to a discrimination against women that is intolerable.” Elaine Sciolino “Ban Religious Attire in School, French Panel Says,” *New York Times*, December 12, 2003. On the Web: <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/12/12/international/europe/12FRAN.html?th=&pagewanted=all&position=> .

²⁸ This attitude of mine seems to have fallen prey to the same paternalism mistake in that I seem to teach the postcolonial people that their true interest lies in an anti-imperialist attitude or values of one’s own culture should be preserved at all costs. Yet, what I want to challenge is just the essentialism they accepted without any critical interrogation. Muslim supporters of the hijab ban might be doing it out of their sincere convictions about their idealized status of Muslim women. Their sincerity is out of question here, but I want to point out that their struggle ultimately does not serve to the interests of those women they are try to “liberate,” but the colonial enterprise.

²⁹ I admit that in some contexts like the Iranian one, more energy should be spent for removal of the restrictions of women’s right to uncover. But this equally requires the same sensitivity for the struggle of women in Turkey, Tunisia, Singapore, and now France for their right to wear *hijab*. In both cases, yet, it is a must to pursue a holistic approach. Otherwise, too much emphasis on hijab while people are being killed on a daily basis for the honor of their family is only a distraction.

Bullock specifies seven reasons for covering among Muslims worldwide: revolutionary protest, political protest, religious reasons, continued access to public sphere (basically economic reason, seeking employment, but also gaining respect and combating male harassment), expression of personal identity, custom, and state law requirement.³⁰ This list is in no way an exhaustive one, a woman can cover just because she feels herself more beautiful when she wears *hijab*, or because in her country men prefer to marry women in *hijab* since for them it is a symbol of modesty. Bullock herself does not intend to capture the totality of meanings. The idea here is the multiplicity of the meanings³¹, whereas the problem in the dominant discourse is obsession with the last one. It is always overlooked that the exact opposite ban was enforced by the Shah in Iran during 1936-43, when some women choose not to leave home for the whole seven years at the risk of their outer garments to be taken off by the police.³² Yet, this explicit oppression and even sexual harassment³³ of women still seemed as a clear mark of progress to Ruth Frances Woodsmall, who provided firsthand information on the subject as she wrote these lines during those days: "...as no veiled women were permitted in sight along the city avenues at this time. This function is probably the most significant milestone in the advance of Iranian women and hence the modernization of Iran."³⁴

My purpose in this section has been debunking the myth that *hijab* merely means oppression of women (either by the male members of their families, by the state, or by their religion). It is only against the colonial background that this meaning resonates with the people in

³⁰ Bullock, 85-118.

³¹ This multiplicity is now increasingly being acknowledged, though not to a sufficient extent, as Russell Cobb points to it: "But while my mostly white, middle-class students attacked the veil and supported the government, others on campus have a quite different take. After I asked professors and minority students about the issue, I found that everyone on campus had become hyperconscious about headwear and its symbolic power, but no one could agree on what the Islamic headscarf actually represented. Oppression by a fundamentalist patriarchy? An Islamic expression of feminism? The latest fashion in teen rebellion?" *ibid*.

□ Bullock: 223.

³³ As in other sexual harassment cases, we can take the stand that what matters is what women feel about the male behavior. If asked those women, many of them without a doubt would say that it was an infringement of their honor and sexuality.

³⁴ Ruth, Frances Woodsmall, *Moslem Women Enter a New World*, (New York: Round Table Press, Reprint of the 1936 ed.), pp. 43-44.

the West, and secures the integrity of their own identity. Thus, I contend that in order that Westerners maintain their Western identity, they are in constant need of deeming and portraying *hijab* as the symbol of Islam's oppressive nature, and thus inferiority, in turn the superiority of their own identity. One of the most significant population movements since the last quarter of the last century posed the biggest threat to the essentiality of the Western identity: formation of the Muslim "diasporas" in the West through large scale immigration from the Muslim countries. So, in the next section I will focus on the effects of this new phenomenon to my larger discussion on *hijab* and the boundaries of Westernness.

Hijab in the Diaspora: Is Multiculturalism Really Bad For Women?

We are now living in a Western world where the Muslim population has exceeded the number of Jews in many countries, and Islam has become the second biggest religion, including U.K. and France, and perhaps in the U.S. I believe that the integrity of the American identity has never suffered such a threat after the (not-fully-achieved) black inclusion. Irish, South and East European, and even Jewish immigrations were painful, but not at the extent of a crisis. Racism, by far the biggest oppression in the U.S. history, has been part of the political debate for so long. Internal colonization was maintained through the black population in the U.S.

But if the Western identity is formed and has been maintained only with reference to its inferior other, Islam, how can this identity be maintained any longer when Muslims have reached a significant number as citizens? Continental Europe has had more of this problem. Their memories of the Ottomans and Moors as intrusive or invading "others" had been fresher compared to the distant America. But 9/11 attacks have been a turning point for the American identity to deal with its Muslim other.

Since then, the U.S. media, as the new terrain of colonial discourse, have been facing a critical problem. On the one hand, they had been portraying Muslims as the "other" and as

monolithic for so long.³⁵ On the other hand, they were appealing to an audience in the U.S. which comprises a significant number of Muslims although they are still a minority. Under these circumstances, a clash between moderate Muslims as opposed to fundamentalists started to characterize American media coverage of Muslims.³⁶ The fundamentalist category from this point on would be essentialized and universalized. All the inner differences of “fundamentalists” were lumped together under this single entity, and it was represented as manifesting itself through separate instances all over the Muslim world: Al-Qaida, Taliban, Palestinian *intifadah*, Iranian government, and even Saddam’s secularist-Baathist regime.

Under these circumstances, while “American Muslims” were tolerated, there have been constant reminders that among American Muslims there are some extremists-fundamentalists and several mosques have been serving as recruitment centers.³⁷ The underlying message is that Muslim is a suspect category and any Muslim, under some circumstances can be labeled as fundamentalist depending on his association with certain symbols or behaviors. Since fundamentalist is never defined, and its meaning is always instilled through images, this strategy gave a free hand to the media to turn any Islamic image into the symbol of fundamentalism at their own disposal.

Fortunately, *hijab* has not been targeted by the authorities in the U.S. context, and it has been generally tolerated, though there have been some individual incidents here and there most of which were solved through legal means.³⁸ However, hate crimes are pretty much part of daily life in the U.S. as well as Western Europe, and veiled women have been easy targets for the fanatics. It is interesting to note that in one instance in London, U.K., the religious fanatic who

³⁵ Said’s *Covering Islam* illustrates many examples of how Islam was portrayed always in a monolithic way and as the Other.

³⁶ This was the main argument of my paper (ibid).

³⁷ Speculations abound as to what percent of mosque attendants are extremists.

³⁸ It can be recalled that Alabama’s attempted hijab ban for driving licenses has been solved through a collective community action by Muslims and Sikhs.

abducted and terrorized a teenager schoolgirl said he took her because she “wore a headscarf and all Muslim girls are oppressed”.³⁹ This shows how colonial discourse on hijab has been pervasive.

All in all, *hijab* is often freely practiced in the U.S. It is not surprising to see it that way in this country where religious freedom has been one of the central tenets of this country’s foundation. But this does not mean that it is any more than tolerated.⁴⁰ Despite the positive articles in some publications,⁴¹ the widespread belief is still the one that is constituted by the colonial discourse. More importantly, at any time, it might be turned into the symbol of fundamentalism, as in France and Germany.⁴² It can be claimed that the U.S. has always been different from them in terms of religious freedom⁴³, but this never guarantees that in this particular instance it will not tend to predominate its “Western” identity vis-à-vis the inimical other, currently the Islamic fundamentalism.

Having located the current debate on *hijab* in terms of both its historical precursors and contemporary, postcolonial implications, I would like to look at *hijab* as part of multiculturalism debate. Especially in Kymlicka’s framework, culture has found its place in the liberal thought as

³⁹ “UK: Muslim Schoolgirl, 17, Kidnapped and Terrorised,” *Ilford Recorder*, March, 26, 2004.

⁴⁰ as opposed to respected and regarded as just another choice of dress. More often than not, many people render mixed feelings towards hijabis: pity for being oppressed by their men and religion, resentment for following a false religion. What is not granted, though, is that the veiled women can do it out of her free will, and this is an equally respectable decision as her own decision to choose her dress.

⁴¹ Muslim women are increasingly given chance to express her reasons and motivations for covering. An increasing activism among hijabis in this sense is observable. See, for instance, Sukaina Jaffer, “Free to pursue my ambitions without the leers of men,” *The Guardian*, July, 13 2004; Aisha Khan, “The veil in my handbag,” *The Guardian*, June 18, 2002; *La Tonya Floyd*, “No Mystery Behind the Veil,” *Dallas News*, February 21, 2004. On the World Wide Web: <http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/news/city/irving/opinion/stories/022204dnirvfloyd.9dfa.html>

⁴² It is interesting to note that, in these two countries oppression discourse and symbol of fundamentalism (political protest in Bullock’s categories) go hand in hand. In Turkey, on the other hand, emphasis has always been on hijab as a political symbol, that is, symbol of rebellion against the secularist regime despite the high level of depoliticization of veiled girls. For France’s perception of hijab as both symbol of male oppression and fundamentalism, see, Patrick Weil (who is a member of Stasi Commission), “A nation in diversity: France, Muslims and the headscarf”, *OpenDemocracy.net*, March, 25, 2004. On the World Wide Web: <http://www.opendemocracy.net/debates/article-5-57-1811.jsp>. For German perceptions, see, “First German State Outlaws Headscarves For Muslim Teachers” *Agence France Presse*, April, 1, 2004. On the World Wide Web: <http://iafrica.com/news/worldnews/313608.htm>.

⁴³ This too, has been criticized by many in French public. Interestingly enough, Russell Cobb’s student, whom she quotes in the article encapsulates the French perception of American religiosity this way: “If you allow religion into the public sphere, France could become like the United States, where the president declares war while in church.” *ibid*.

the context of choice which makes the pursuance of individual life plans possible. Kymlicka's main goal is to make up for the failure of the liberal theory to capture the importance of culture, and thereby minority rights, in realization of the individual autonomy.⁴⁴ This grants minority cultures, in a sense, immunity from the judgments by the ethnocentric standards of the dominant culture, since the minority culture makes full enfranchisement of the minorities into the citizenship possible. There are also psychological effects of preserving one's culture in that one feels at home and her self-esteem is honored. Even though multiculturalism seemed as an advancement of democratic theory, it was faced with backlash by the liberal universalists. It has been mostly criticized for being too compromising towards authoritarian practices of the minority cultures. Although I tend to agree with the multiculturalism insofar as it does not disregard how cultural perceptions are inherent in one's perception and exercise of autonomy, insofar as it makes issue with the nation-state model that is based on a false monocultural assumption.⁴⁵ However, this does not lead me to condone an absolutely relativist perspective. I am closer to the cosmopolitan perspective of Wendy Brown in calling the inner relations of power into question.⁴⁶ To me, an uncritical recognition of all minority practices as cultural differences is dis-empowering for the individuals, whose individual interests are disregarded for the good of the group. This conception is also deficient since it stands for an antiquarian view of politics where state is the ultimate site of power among power-free groups. In other words, it is implied that the state is just an arbitrator where politics takes place among different cultural groups who operate without the involvement of power relations. As having subscribed to a view of power that immerses all over the life world, I contend that true empowerment will come about when the power relations in all kinds of human associations are unearthed.

⁴⁴ Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship, Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995): 194-95.

⁴⁵ Kymlicka puts it this way: "Most organized political communities throughout recorded have been multiethnic, a testament to the ubiquity of both conquest and long-distance trade in human affairs. Yet most Western political theorists have operated within an idealized model of polis in which fellow citizens share a common descent, language, and culture." Ibid, 2.

⁴⁶ Brown, Wendy *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (1995)

Nevertheless, multiculturalism represents a further point than the universalism which is either not aware of its ethnocentrism or which has political interest in hiding its point of view under the disguise of universalism. Only when one becomes aware of his past ethnocentrism, he can move on to discuss the inner authoritarian relations within the cultural groups which have been elevated to an equal status, and pursue cosmopolitanism as his identity. Even more important than that, in a context where a dominant perspective once constituted the power configuration to its own interest, and then defined all other subject positions, its authoritative position can always be called into question by those subjugated ones. Accordingly, interrogation of the cultural practices of the minority culture by the dominant Western one will always be under suspicion as another instance of colonialism. Rather than enabling critical dialogue, this conversation of unequal subjects can easily turn into affirmation of the mostly criticized practice. Even during the colonial times campaign against female circumcision was doomed to fail mainly because of this reason. This is why the responsibility lies with the former colonialist to prove that there is no domination involved in the interrogation of the minority cultural practice.

Is that the case with *hijab* debates? Unless the Westerners open their eyes to the oppression of veiled women in secularist countries, there is little hope that Muslims will start interrogating their cultures. The debate on *hijab* in France was immensely shaped by the idea of a model citizenship that is based on secularism as well as assimilation of the minority cultures to this civic religion.⁴⁷ Kristeva, for example, a self-declared cosmopolitan, considers abstract advantages of a French universalism (that emanates from French nationalism) as a “transitional object” and sees Muslim scarf as an obstacle for integration of the Muslim community to the French society.⁴⁸ Susan Okin, on the other hand, is right to point out that “when liberal

⁴⁷ For hijab and citizenship debate, see, Johannes Willms, “France unveiled: making Muslims into citizens?” *OpenDemocracy.net*, February, 26, 2004. On the World Wide Web: <http://www.opendemocracy.net/debates/article-5-57-1753.jsp#>; Patrick Weil, *ibid*; Amr Elchoubaki, “French moves to ban the veil in schools is not an attack on Islam, but rather a crisis of secularism” *Al-Ahram*, On the World Wide Web: <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2004/673/op41.htm>.

⁴⁸ Bonnie Honig “Ruth, the Model Emigree: Mourning and the Symbolic Politics of Immigration,” *Political Theory*, 25/1 (1997): 123, 125.

arguments are made for the rights of groups, then, special care must be taken to look at within-group inequalities;”⁴⁹ but when the same author says that “any suspicion that official concern over headscarves was motivated by an impulse toward gender equality is belied by the easy adoption of a permissive policy on polygamy,” one is no longer convinced that the author has a complete vision on the complexity of headscarf issue. Patrick Weil, who served in Strasi commission that proposed the unfamous *hijab* ban, acknowledges that *hijab* might have different meanings in different circumstances. He also makes no secret of the French custom of keeping religion as a private matter, but ensures that the ban proposal was not based on this custom, but a hard choice between sacrificing one of two freedoms: freedoms to veil vs. freedom to unveil. But there is no clear explanation why the ultimate choice was made in line with the secularist custom, which was supposedly not behind the ban. If there were any reference that number of girls whose freedom not to wear would exceed that of those whose freedom to wear, then a flawed but more objective argument could be made.

Under these circumstances, multiculturalism seems a much more democratic way than the universalist integrationist model of citizenship. Yet, one step further would require us to call the in-group oppressions into question. I want to sum up my reflections on multiculturalism and *hijab* with some general arguments. First, because of the predominance of the historically conditioned meaning of *hijab* in the Western context imbued with double standard, the burden of proof that the concern with *hijab* does not stem from colonial feminism lies with the “Western” feminists. Second, interrogation of the inner world of the culture does not seem possible unless this first step is taken and a holistic approach towards the problems of Muslim women is developed. This also requires abandonment of paternalistic tendencies of the Western feminists. Only Muslim women themselves can engage in a critical dialogue with the historical formulation of Islam permeated by the local customs. Then what should women themselves do?

⁴⁹ Susan Moller Okin, “Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?” <http://bostonreview.mit.edu> [October/November 1997])

What is to be done?

This section does not presume that as a Muslim male,⁵⁰ I can give further advice to Muslim women on their proper conduct. The veil is an unveiling practice in the sense that veiled Muslim women unveil their Muslim identity as opposed to Muslim men who can easily escape attention in a Western or secularist context. In this section I will attempt to cast light on the multiple fronts where Muslim women wage their war towards making Muslims full citizens of the Western countries.

Obsession of the (misogynist) colonialist white male elite and their native co-opted elite with the veil of the Muslim women proved the Muslim women more subjugated in many ways. First, their freedom to choose what to wear, that is, their control over their body was taken away. Making the body of the Muslim woman the site of struggle for modernization rendered it a target of countermodernization strategies of some Islamist movements. In this regard, the full meaning of Iranian enforcement of hijab can only be grasped in the light of the forced-unveiling projects of the Shah Period. In either case, autonomy of Muslim women was made a target for social engineering projects. Fortunately many other Islamist movements have realized the negative effects of the forced veiling practice of Iranian government, not only on the overall project, but also on *hijab* itself.

Secondly, Muslim women were disempowered through the colonial construction of the meaning of hijab when *hijab* became a metaphor for the inferiority of Islam in its historical construction, or the symbol of fundamentalism in the contemporary sense. Their decision to cover or uncover is not comparable to the decision to perform or skip their daily prayers anymore. Its meaning is imposed from outside. The colonial elite, by creating this metaphor, made the Muslim women as opposed to men incumbent to struggle with the identity crisis of the

⁵⁰ Though I believe that I am more feminist than most of the veiled Muslim women in Turkey. I must mention one incident when a veiled Muslim middle-age educated woman mentioned me over-socialization of veiled girls outside their homes as the chief reason for hijab ban. She believed that God has sent it as a punishment to these girls to remind them of their true place, which is their home.

West, through reversing the meaning of *hijab*, thereby negating the oppressive view of Islam. It is obvious that Muslim males are not in a position to defend Islam through *hijab* because their defense will only reinforce the views of the Westerners that it is these men who brainwash their women to believe this nonsense and perpetuate their domination over them.

Third, this colonial construction deprived the women of the chance to deal with the male elite in the Muslim societies. Defense of *hijab* has been prioritized over all other issues because of the ongoing assault. Many Muslim women are simply too busy with counterbalancing the Western discourse to struggle against the domination of the male elite on interpretation of religion for the whole Muslim community.

In another sense, the colonial construction of *hijab* jeopardizes the overall cause of the women in the West. If identity provides a sense of security to the self in portraying the other as inferior, then representing *hijab* as the metaphor for an oppressive worldview will serve to the self-righteousness of the Western worldview as if it has achieved full emancipation of women. This, in turn, will cover-up most of the ongoing oppression of women in many spheres of life. It should come as no surprise that even in 19th century some Western women would feel themselves lucky that they were not Muslims. This was an era when they did not have right to vote, or even right to inherit in many parts of the Western world. In the atmosphere where *burqa* became the dominant symbol of women's oppression in Afghanistan, it was not extraordinary to witness that many Western women were talking about how emancipated they were in the West.

The veiled Muslim women have developed a number of arguments in defense of their *hijab*. They deem it as an act of liberation, in complete contrast to its Western meaning. To them, it is liberation from being regarded primarily as a sex object. This is very much in line with the critique of advertisements that commodify women's body. They reverse the meaning of false consciousness and argue that dominant culture force the women to believe that they have to show their body to be free, but in fact they are making their sexuality an object of public

consumption. This perspective cannot be easily dismissed. After all, in the West, too, critique of pornography is based on similar convictions. Bullock also develops her positive theory of hijab along these lines. This has a potential to open up a critical scrutiny of the self-definition of women in the West as emancipated women.

In any case, Muslim women have a harder task to make their authoritative voice heard within the scholarly Islamic discourse. This is not something unique to Islam, but it is an ongoing attempt in the West, in many fields of science and humanities. It is not so strange to have a male-dominant society when most of the Muslim scholars after Aisha, the wife of the Prophet and one of the greatest early scholars of Islam, have been men. Although no direct reflection between the social practice of religion and its scholarly interpretation can easily be drawn, there are still significant parallels. Secularist women who despise the veil and think like Orientalists are no help in this matter. Their arguments, no matter how persuasive, are not made within an Islamic discourse. This includes Fatima Mernissi, who used a traditional Islamic methodology in her *Veil and the Male Elite*. Aside from the fact that she is arguably not a scholar of Islam, her general commitments and her first book that already made her statement against *hijab* based on Western methodology are known by everybody. A truly woman contribution to the formulation of Islam is only possible when there is a large body of female Muslim scholars.

So, under these circumstances, where all veiled Muslim women are burdened with struggling with the dominant perceptions on their religion, most veiled women have a more difficult task: legal sanctions against veiling are ever increasing in the Western countries after the secularist regimes of the Middle East. Following Phelan,⁵¹ I do not see the legal achievements fundamental in this matter, though they are a necessary part of the struggle. In the U.S. there is no significant threat in this matter, but the task for the veiled women still remains the same. The boundaries of the national imaginary are still defined by means of othering Islam and Muslims

⁵¹ : Shane Phelan, *Sexual Strangers: Gays, Lesbians, and Dilemmas of Citizenship*, (Temple University Press, 2001).

where *hijab* represents the inferiority of Islam. The real target should be opening up these boundaries of the national imaginary. Most Western women still think of themselves as full citizens while there is a lot to do to achieve this broader aim. This broader aim should certainly leave space for the Muslim women whose struggle will also bring about inclusion of Muslimness (male or female) within the boundaries of citizenry. Assimilation, as some Muslim women choose, might be considered as another option. In this case, Muslim women simply unveil to conform to the norms of women in the Western society, which amounts to leaving the field. This does not include those Muslim women in the West who are too afraid to present themselves as “Other” and take part in this fight in their everyday lives. Muslim women, by their very act of veiling, are offering new perspectives to the gender relations that have been entrenched for quite a while in the Western societies. There are always possibilities to bring new interpretations in Islam, which is quite flexible in this manner. Accordingly, Muslim women might change the dominant view of *hijab* in Islamic scholarship with their own authoritative voices. But this should not pose itself as an escape from this ongoing struggle. The problem is with the status of the male Muslims. Some people might suggest that Muslim women are over-burdened with the task of changing the entire course of history while men can easily escape attention and struggle. This is a fact, but in my opinion, this fact stems more from contingent historical constructs that colonial feminism created than from an essential problem of Islam with women. I believe the change that will rupture the essentiality of the West and the Orient will start (maybe not in a time sequence but in a logical sequence) from *hijab* spread to the whole body of Islam and the West until we, people, who have fallen apart with these historical contingencies, will come to a better understanding of each other to create the future of humanity together.