
A Feminist View on the History and Current Reality of Veiling

Monica Burney

Originally from Dix, Illinois, Monica Burney earned her BA cum laude with a major in history and a minor in anthropology in spring 2016. In fall 2016 she will begin work on a Master's Degree in history at Eastern Illinois University.

As one of the major symbols tied to Islam, veiling has been a controversial topic for almost as long as the practice has been around. Everyone seems to have their own opinions on the topic, with some condemning the practice as being sexist and archaic and others stressing the importance of wearing the garment as an ultimately personal decision. Throughout history the veil has stood for a number of different things for each person who has worn it throughout history. Despite the common misconceptions, as well as the occasionally repressive history of the practice, veiling today can very much be considered a feminist practice in many places in the world.

Historically the tradition of veiling has pre-dated Islam by a good deal of time. One of the first known mentions of veiling is found in Assyrian texts by the thirteenth century BCE. In the early days of the practice veils were used as a way to denote social status, with married women wearing veils to distinguish themselves from prostitutes and people of lower classes. In Persia veils were often worn by royalty and those of the upper classes, the same is the case with ancient Mesopotamia. Additionally, early Jews and Christians tended to have their own versions of the practice despite the idea typically being tied to Islam in modern society. In all of these societies the common thread was a patriarchal society in which the idea of women's sexual and spiritual purity tended to be valued.³¹

Today the term veil can actually apply to a number of different styles. In common western ideals there are three main styles that people tend to know. The Hijab, which tends to cover the person's hair and neck. Further coverage is given by the Niqab, which tends to leave only the women's eyes uncovered. Possibly the most conservative of the styles is the Burka where every part of a woman's body is covered including her eyes with a screen in place to enable her to see out.³² To understand the importance of veiling in Islam one must first understand its origins in the religion. In the Qur'an there is no specific mention of veiling in terms of women's clothing. Most of the support for the idea of veiling being required comes from one specific quote in general;³³

O believers, enter not the houses of the Prophet, except leave is given you for a meal, without watching for its hour. But when you are invited, then enter; and when you have had the meal, disperse, neither lingering for idle talk; that is hurtful to the Prophet, and he is ashamed before you; but God is not ashamed before the truth. And when you ask wives for any object, ask them from behind a curtain (hijab); that is cleaner for your hearts and theirs³⁴

As is evident in the quote this idea of having a women being veiled referred primarily to the Prophet Muhammad's wives, to protect his wives from unnecessary gossip. It is unclear if this was supposed

³¹ Sahar Amer, *What is Veiling?* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014) 5-9.

³² n.a, "In Graphics: Muslim Veils" *BBC News* (accessed December 13, 2015)
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/spl/hi/pop_ups/05/europe_muslim_veils/html/1.stm.

³³ Sahar Amer, *What is Veiling?*, 23-25.

³⁴ Quran, "33:53" in *What is Veiling?*, ed. Sahar Amer (Chapel Hill the University of North Carolina Press, 2014) 24.

to be applied to women in general or if only the Prophet's wives needed to be screened. At first, many women did not immediately take to the practice. Some still did, however, with the belief that the visual representation of being a Muslim could help to protect them and Muslim men would recognize them as one of their own. Additionally, the veil eventually came to stand for women's piety as well as the modesty that the Qur'an tended to stress for both men and women. Unlike previous uses of the practice it appears that veiling at this time was used voluntarily by the choice of the women.³⁵

There is also one Hadith that is also cited as support for the idea that veiling is a required part of Islam. In this Hadith it is said that Muhammad at one point gestured to dictate what parts of a women's body should be left uncovered, which was reported to be the hands and face. With that being said this Hadith is not universally recognized as sound, leaving to question if the events it described did indeed occur.³⁶ Once again the vagueness of the evidence has caused the necessity of veiling up for a great deal of debate.

As time went on veiling slowly became a much more common practice. As with many cultures of the time a women's sexual purity was considered to be of paramount importance to everyone around. It was even to the point that brothers were socially allowed to kill their sisters if they believed some sort of sexual misconduct had taken place. In fact, a family's social status was often determined by the perceived purity of the women in the family. As such, men would often insist that their wives and daughters wore veils, effectively changing the practice from a voluntarily decision back into more of a necessity if the men in the family demanded it (once again taking away the women's ability to make decisions about her own life). This also began to denote social status, with upper class women wearing veils as a way to show that they were wealthy enough to not have to work.³⁷

At the same time that veiling increased, segregation between men and women was on the rise. To preserve the purity of the female members of the family, women were often forced to stay in the house unless leaving was deemed necessary. This could possibly be when the Burka and Niqab became part of the Islamic culture, as women were veiled virtually as much as possible when leaving the house in order to avoid the male gaze and head off any rumors that a woman may be promiscuous.³⁸ While women during this period could have preferred to wear veils, the virtual necessity for women to wear the veil is often what westerners associate with veiling and Islam. This is where the mindset comes from, which certainly is not always accurate, that women in Islam are repressed as a part of the very foundation of the religion.

Rules and laws that are directed at enforcing certain aspects of women's appearance can be very specific. Depending on the situation women are expected to wear a number of different styles. In front of men who are not of blood relation, as well as occasionally with non-Muslim women, it is expected that only the face and hands are left bare. To close male relatives and fellow Muslim females it is acceptable for women to show everything except the area between the navel and knee. Women are also advised against wearing full face veils when going on the Hajj. For men, however, the rules are much more lax with everything between the navel and the knee being covered at all times. Once again it appears that more attention is given to female appearances.³⁹ Even though veiling is often tied with Islam today, the practice did take a sharp decline between the 1940's through the 1970's as people began to embrace European ideals and styles of dress, often

³⁵ Sahar Amer, *What is Veiling?* 23-27, 32-33, 56.

³⁶ Sahar Amer, *What is Veiling?* 32-37.

³⁷ Nikki R. Keddie, "The Past and Present of Women in the Muslim World" *Journal of World History* 1, no. 1 (1990) JSTOR (accessed December 13, 2015) 84-88.

³⁸ Nikki R. Keddie, "The Past and Present of Women in the Muslim World" 84-90.

³⁹ n.a., "Hijab" *BBC News* (accessed December 6, 2015) http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/beliefs/hijab_1.shtml.

while shunning some of the more traditional practices tied with the region.⁴⁰ This movement away from the practice can be said to have started primarily in the late 1800's. One man in particular, Qassim Amin, wrote passionately about how the veil should be banned. It can be said that these ideals were at least somewhat influenced by English colonizers in Egypt. These views tended to be that the veil was a visual manifestation of gender inequality in Islam which they used to pointedly condemn the practice while ignoring the gender issues present in western cultures.⁴¹ Though protection of women was often touted as being of the utmost importance, men involved in the movement to ban the veil seemed impervious to the irony of forcing women to take off an item of clothing that they may prefer to wear. One female author stated as such, arguing that women should choose to remove the veils for personal reasons.⁴²

As with many issues public opinion began to move back in favor of wearing the veils. Many professional and college aged women began to wear the veils again. This was due in part to a rise in religious piety as well as a rebellious nature that spread through the area, since veils were also seen as a way to show one's dislike for the Egyptian government (which was not fond of veiling at the time). Many women cited a feeling of freedom and comfort that came with wearing veils as it was believed that those who wore the veil were more pure and trustworthy than women who did not.⁴³ Once again it appears that women were being valued by typical patriarchal ideals such as the need for women to be virginal. With that being said the fact that women took it upon themselves to veil is of massive importance, giving women a sense of agency that previous periods did not possess. In today's world the topic of veiling is as controversial as ever, especially in the west. Several major countries have placed bans on various forms of veiling, especially the Niqabs. Most notably is France which, despite being home to a large Muslim population, easily passed their ban on the style with a monetary fine placed as a punishment for those who disobey the ban. Many, especially Muslim women, have made a point to speak against the veil. While some women have ceased wearing the Niqab, others seem to have adopted it as a way to align themselves with their religion (showing that women can be French and Muslim at once).⁴⁴ Canada also had laws that prevented women from wearing the Niqab during citizenship ceremonies, a ruling which has since been overturned after being challenged by Muslim women.⁴⁵ Other countries that have placed some sort of restriction on veiling include Switzerland, Russia and China. Transversely there are several countries that require the ban, namely Saudi Arabia and Iran.⁴⁶ Once again it is shown that western ideals of what a woman should look like and wear is given precedence over the opinions of the women themselves.

Despite the backlash that often comes with wearing any type of veil, women each have their own unique reasons for going against western social convictions (many declaring it to be a feminist choice). Among the reasons stated is the freedom from the social idea that women should wear as little as possible. The ability for a woman to choose to, or not to, wear a veil is feminist in itself

⁴⁰ Nikki R. Keddie, "The Past and Present of Women in the Muslim World" 143.

⁴¹ Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1992) 144-145,152-153.

⁴² Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, 180-181.

⁴³ Sahar Amer, *What is Veiling?* 142-146.

⁴⁴ Tom Heneghan, "Anniversary of France's Niqab Ban Passes Almost Unnoticed" *The Washington Post* (accessed December 10, 2015) https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/religion/anniversary-of-frances-niqab-ban-passes-almost-unnoticed/2015/10/20/ff51a85a-7752-11e5-a5e2-40d6b2ad18dd_story.html.

⁴⁵ Susana Mas and Alston Crawford, "Justin Trudeau's Government Drops Controversial Niqab Appeal" *CBC News* (accessed December 8, 2015) <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/niqab-appeal-appeal-citizenship-ceremonies-canada-jody-wilson-raybould-1.3321264>.

⁴⁶ Adam Taylor, "Map: The Places Where Islamic Face Veils Are Banned" *The Washington Post* (accessed December 1, 2015) <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/01/16/map-the-places-where-islamic-face-veils-are-banned/>.

because it is granting women agency over their own body and appearance.⁴⁷ Other reasons that are often given can range from religious piety to the comfort of covering one's body. Ultimately the choice to wear hijabs, in most western societies, is a very independent and personal decision.⁴⁸

The history of veiling in Islam is majorly fluid, with various government and countries requiring women to wear or not to wear veils. From its onset veils were meant to show something about the women that wore it, whether it be a sign of social status, purity, or piety. Throughout its history the decision of participating in veiling has shifted back and forth with women and men making the decision for themselves and others. Though the practice was born out of highly patriarchal societies, which always tend to relate a women's appearance to her worth, the ability of women to choose if they wish to wear it or not makes the practice of veiling very empowering to women that choose to take part in it.

⁴⁷ "My Hijab Is Nothing to Do With Oppression. It's a Feminist Statement – Hanna Yusuf | Comment If Free" Youtube video, 3:10, posted by "The Guardian" June 24, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t1x5Zu18f7U>.

⁴⁸ "[1/10] HIJABIFY ME: Why do muslim women wear hijab/headscarves?" YouTube video, 9:27, posted by "thehijabstylist" October 2, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tyXXuaJYnZY>.