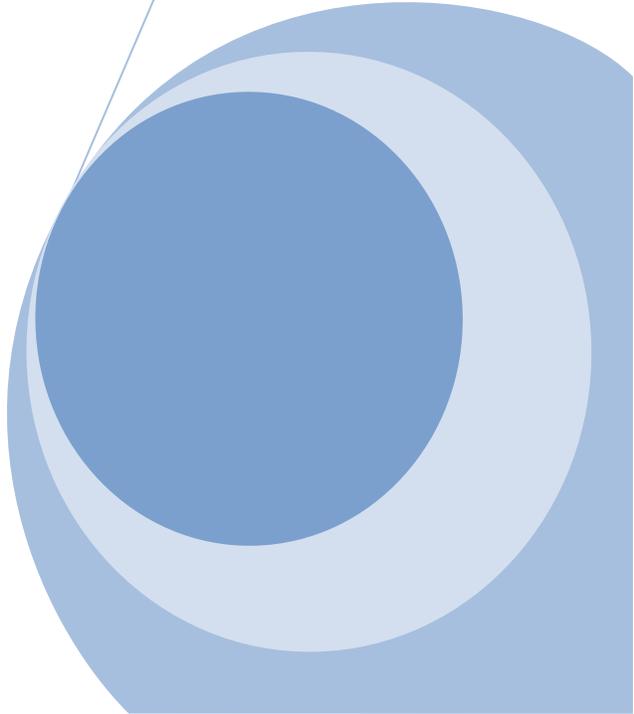


*Veiled Heads: A Middle Eastern
Feminist Perspective*

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“Hardcore Feminist” I called my mother in front of my skeptical and surprised classmates, as I was presenting my family’s three generational genogram many years ago. I felt that there was no other word to describe my stereotype shattering maternal half. My classmates were astounded that these two simple words could be used to describe the mother of me, the veiled Iranian Muslim woman standing before them. The question that even today still rings in my distant memories is: “Don’t you think being Muslim and feminist are kind of mutually exclusive?”

At the time, my defenses were triggered and I adamantly persisted that if my mother believes in the equality of men and women, if she advocates for women’s rights and if she challenges the oppressive ways of men world wide, then regardless of her culture or religion she can be a feminist to the very definition. Even today, as I stand before society in my power inducing and symbolic veil, I have no choice but to constantly insist that this outer shield that I feel is the very essence of my feminist strength is truly not oppressive and that there is no man with a stick waiting for me to come home and make sure that my hair is still neatly pleated beneath the simple fabric. The irony is in the fact that this very symbolic piece of material has been interpreted today as a contradiction to being emancipated, modern and open minded.

Interestingly enough First and second wave Western feminists and even secular feminists from the Middle East (Moghissi, 1999; Mernissi, 1987; Haeri, 1995) also claim that Islam and feminism are mutually exclusive. They argue that under Islamic fundamentalism (a term whose root was grown in Western colonial tradition), veiled women experience a life of oppression and that the true symbolism of the veil is that of vile inequality.

This discourse about the equivalency of being veiled and oppressed and about the urgency of emancipating the claustrophobic heads of Muslim women from their burdening fabric, continue to be part of a major debate among Western colonizers, Western feminists and even many secular Middle Eastern feminists. According to Ahmed (1992):

“...because male domination and injustice to women have existed throughout the West’s recorded history, the only resource for Western women is to abandon Western culture and find themselves some other culture. The idea seems absurd, and yet this is routinely how the matter of improving the status of women is posed with respect to women in Arab and other non-Western societies... to this day, the struggle against the veil and toward westernization and the abandoning of backward and oppressive Arab Muslim ways is still commonly the framestory within which Western-based studies of Arab women, including feminist studies, are presented.” (Page 244)

To counter this problem, third wave feminists use postmodernism framed by a poststructuralist perspective (De Reus, et. all, 2003) to allow us to reinterpret, re-store, and reinscribe our veiled lives quite differently given the fact that both colonial powers’ and fundamentalists’ interpretation of Islam and lives of women are quite the same. According to Moghissi (1999), it is amazingly ironic that Islamic fundamentalists, by embracing the female body as the symbolic representation of communal dignity, and by drawing only on the Qur’an and orthodox texts to explain, as divine, the historically developed subjugation of women in Islamic societies, recycle the totalizing colonial conception of Islam and women’s right as a static, unchanging and unchangeable order. As with other forms of extremism, the two opposing poles end up on the same side on certain important issues. By manipulating the female body as a playing card in oppositional politics, fundamentalists embrace, however unsought and uncomfortable, the views of the Western colonizer. However, the new wave of feminists are challenging both the fundamentalist’s and the Western colonial interpretations of women’s lives by using an epistemology that redefines, reinterprets, reclaims, and restores lived

experiences. According to Najmabadi (1998) by inventing new visions and revisions of Islam, and simultaneously constituting themselves as the “greening hands” of secular feminism, veiled Islamic feminists have audaciously messed up our comforting categories of Islamic and secular.

Now knowing that the success of forward-thinking feminism praxis is the ability to embrace contradictions (De Reus, et. all, 2003), veiled Islamic feminists are challenging the fundamentalists’ interpretation of Islam on many grounds. For example, Iranian feminists are proposing several changes including making women’s contribution more visible, forming women’s organizations, encouraging women’s skepticism of the existing condition of women, changing women’s and men’s perception of women, the ending of inequalities not only at the level of laws but in actual social practice through provision of equal opportunities for women, and finally and most importantly cultural transformation of concepts about men and women (Najmabadi, 1998). Taking into consideration such a recipe to the perfect blend of feminism at its best, I still cannot perceive labeling my mother anything other than a “hardcore feminist.”

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