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The image of Veil in Leila Ahamd's Women and Gender in Islam

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Abstract

Mostly suppressed and disempowered throughout man's history, the gender of women has undergone a dissipating process where an overpowering oscillation between the two genders has occurred. In spite of this fact that this basis creates a generalization, the position of the womanhood, wasn't always under subjugation. This Paper intends to throw a light upon women's past, present and future by relying on mainly Leila Ahmad's flagship works and by drawing a map showing how the veil plays a critical role in the representation of women. As we march towards the new millennium, men should strive for the discontinuation of harassing and torturing veiled women.

Keywords: Image, Gender, Women, Subjugation, veiled etc

Introduction

Leila Ahmad's Women and Gender in Islam concentrates on the progression of women gender from the ancient Sumerian history to nowadays. Ahmad enables her readers to have a short journey from ancient times to the present. Woman is perspective to give a general look on the issue of woman and her position. Ahmad disembarks her discourse from the Pre- Islamic Mesopotamia. The ancient mores and traditions can be traced back to their origins where they coalesce into ancient societies. Furthermore, Ahmad puts forward her theory regarding how misogynist Patriarchal society

came to be granted that Mesopotamia was first inhabited by Sumerians, then invaded by Alexander the great and then Persians and then Sabians; there was such an amalgamation of culture boasted by the ancient Sumerian law and being mainly shaped by Hammurabi in 1752 B.C.E. Most of these confiscations that were initially designed by Hammurabi put women into an inferior position against men. To give an example, men had the full rights to divorce their wives if she was incapable of fulfilling her marital responsibilities, such as providing fully satisfaction as a sex object or giving male 'heirs' to their husbands, meanwhile there were also some advantageous laws that protected women as well; they could divorce their men too if the man cheated her with another woman – but not a mistress, mistresses were not counted and she could immediately divorce him and turn back to her father's home.

Considering the veil as an important discourse from the academic point of view, it is not a mere coincidence to realize that veiling is commonly studied in both feminist and post-colonial theories. As a controversial topic, it has symbolic meanings relevant to some other issues, such as resistance, oppression, identity, colonialism and patriarchy rather than being just an object. Although it is disputed by the social studies in terms of its cultural value as well as the increasing inclination towards veiling in the west that leads Islamophobia, it is accepted as a symbol of oppression in a patriarchal society by western feminists. The veil is considered

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as emblematic of the abuse and pressure of the oppressed 'oriental' women in a male dominated community or due to the influence of neo-imperialists and colonizing western powers.

Veil was a significant symbol for women even in the ancient history. For example, in Sumerian civilization veiling was a symbol of women who were under the protection of men, in other words, it was class status for the women who were married. Ahmad indicates "wives and daughters of seigniors" were obliged to veil; accompanying their mistress had to veil. Former sacred prostitutes, now married had to veil, but harlots and slaves were forbidden to veil. (Ahmad women and Gender in Islam). The veil as an image is aimed to mark the upper class and mostly to make difference between respectable women and others. However when several invasions occurred in Mesopotamia, the very social status of women stated to decline as a result of Persian and sasanian cultural impacts over the Mesopotamian people, owing to the fact that Persians and sasanians tended to see the female gender more of a commodity. The male gender did not hesitate to use their wives as rental sex labors.

Coming to the fifth and sixth centuries, in the Mediterranean Middle East, Byzantine society was the dominant imperial power in which women were always expected to veil that symbolized the honest women in the byzantine society. In the early Christian era, the practice of infanticide, especially girls was quite normal. Fathers were choosing all their sons and just one girl to grow up, due to the fact that the church affirmed abortion, female body become the symbol of shamefulness and had to be concealed. Men began to escape from women since they saw the women as a danger; because of this the veil gained meaning as a concealing cloth. Including pagan rituals, veiling was not only a symbol of demarcating upper class, pure women and

concubines. As a result, too long ago before Islam entered the Mesopotamian area, veiling tendency began to show a higher status or decency.

Going back to the time when Islam was raising first in Arabia and the regions around it, veiling was already common that Prophet Mohammad (S.A.W) did not introduce it into Arabia. It was worn in some groups but mostly in the countries which were in connection with Syria and Palestine, until the period Greek, Romans, Jews and Assyrians had veiled partially. As Ahmad states "it is nowhere explicitly prescribed in the Quran; the only versus dealing with women's clothing instruct Women to guard their private parts and throw a scarf over their bosoms". During Mohammad's prophet hood, veiling was practiced by their wives more explicitly. As a discourse 'she took the veil' meant that she becomes the prophet's wife. However how the veil spread throughout the Muslim regions is obscure. Ahmad makes an assumption that Mohammad's wives were taken as modals in the following years. As a matter of fact, since veiling was especially commemorated and pronounced to denote Mohammad's wives, veiling was a necessary denotation to display purity. Naturally, the tendency towards hijab becomes synonyms with purity and decency.

Ahmad claims that Egypt is the most appropriate place to obscure the changes in the Islamic world though the end of the 19th century especially in Egypt, there was imitation of the west especially in the upper class. The veil began to disappear slowly because of the Europeanization; there were changes in the way of dressing among women. They veiled when they were in Egypt, otherwise they used to be unveiled while travelling to Europe. The veil seemed to be more transparent, a kind of fashion that belonged to Istanbul in Turkey. Women in Egypt were wearing in different styles,

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veiled or unveiled joining a lot of professional activities.

Qasim Amin's the liberation of the women written in 1899 includes radical proposals for women. As a symbolic reform he offers the abolition of the veil, he emphasizes the urgency of a comprehensive cultural and traditional innovation in the country. To provide the desired transformation, abolishing the key process for the widely change (Ahmad 145). Leila Ahmad indicates "the thesis of the new colonial discourse of Islam centered on women. Islam was oppressive to women that the veil was the comprehensive backwardness of Islamic society" (152) veiling was apparently the most striking signal of divergence and inferiority of Muslim countries from the view of the west.

Amin and Lord corner's attack on veiling caused a counter attack and emergence of an Arabic narration depending on the resistance narrative. Fanon indicates "in the Algerian affirmed the veil because the tradition demanded the rigid separation of sexes and because the occupier was bent on unveiling Algeria" (Studies in Dying colonialism 64). In his enduring and dynamic text the wretched of the earth Fanon became a spokesperson of colonized people and his struggle inspired the masses to regain their own identity. The veiled women turned out to be the symbol of resistance in Algeria that fuelled the sense of identity and independence. It is because women took an important role in the independence war between Algeria and France. The Algeria war lasting from 1954 to 1962 resulted in Algeria's victory over the French military forces and Algeria gained independence. To emphasize however vital it is to make women join the resistance, Fanon reflects the colonial point of view and their theory, "if we want to destroy the structure of Algeria, its capacity for resistance, we must first conquer the women.

In the 50s, and 60s of the twentieth century head covering or veiling vanished in the urban areas, however in small towns and rural areas the veil kept on being common among the women as a norm. In 1970 after Egypt was defeated by Israel, Egyptians thought that it was a God's punishment and God had abandoned them. From then on Islamic groups became wide spread. Saudi Arabia and Libya used their wealth for the adaption of Islamic dress. They even made a proposal for every woman to wear a veil. It was also an important issue in education, especially among university students. The veil first appeared in urban areas in certain centers like Cairo, Alexandria and Assiut. It gained popularity among young students and professionals.

It wasn't actually until the 20th century that veiling underwent tremendous changes and implications, especially after the 2nd world war and decolonization period, veiling become a symbol of resistance. This resistance could be observed in Algeria and could be noted in Pakistan after 9/11 attacks in America. As Ahmad states in her Book, A Quiet Revolution, Muslim women in hijab were exposed to the attacks or harassments by the people in America. In such a case, a group on Non-Muslim women organized 'head scarf days' to the support the women in hijab that gained its meaning as resistance against oppression, (Ahmad, A Quiet Revolution 2011). The Muslim in the USA experiences such discrimination because the western world tends to see Muslims as oil suppliers, as terrorists and more recently as bloodthirsty mobs.

Even today, being influenced both by the Islamphobia and traditionalism, the veil has gained a symbolic meaning that represents tradition and religious identity in Britain. As Grace indicates, the veil is central to the discourse of west versus East.

Objectives:

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- 1.To investigate victimization of women in Islamic world under the name of religion.
- 2.To handle the issue of veil as an image within a sophisticated historical knowledge which includes the issue of today on gender studies.
- 3.To give a general look on the issue of women and her position in Islam.
- 4.To explore the significant contribution of women in all respects of life under legitimacy given by Islam.

Conclusion

In conclusion as it is stated above there are religious, political and gender obligations that are influential in creating the emblems of veiling. Ahmad states the customs of veiling and the position of women in Muslim countries become the proof of the inferiority of Islam to undermine Muslim religion and society.

Women even though veiled, definitely have a purpose, vision and a message to spread. Men need to accept the grace and abilities of veiled women, so that veil does not wither her identity. Let men do not live blindly in ignorance but help women to how her individuality even in veils.

I am a humanitarian and firmly hold the opinion that men should be free from pride and boastfulness, “woman is, by habit or nature, queen of the household. She is not designed to organize on large scale.”

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