A Short History of the (Muslim) Veil

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Abstract
The concept of implicit religion recognizes the many connections between the secular and the religious, unlike mainstream social narratives that continue to oppose them. Understanding that religious and non-religious worldviews both fulfil the human need for meaning and that they are equally capable of becoming intransigent ideologies, is ever more critical because of the instrumentalization of the religious-secular divide in present-day domestic and international politics. Modernity’s dualism possesses global ramifications; by conflating Western identity and progress with secularism, it painted the rest of the world—particularly the Orient—with the brush of religion and backwardness. The Muslim veil has constituted a symbol to denote Muslim religious fanaticism and misogyny, in contrast to Western freedom, feminism and democracy. Its constitutive role in producing modern Western self-identity, through contradistinction, explains the continued debates on Muslim veiling practices, as well as the tenacity of the veil sign. This article traces the history of the veil with the aim of simultaneously charting and unpacking its reification in Western contexts.

Keywords
veil, hijab, history of the veil, Muslim women, colonialism, Islamic feminism

Colonial beginnings of a sign
There exists no site more conflated with “the Muslim woman” than that of “the veil”, and this is as true in mainstream Western culture as it is in certain Muslim-majority communities and countries. The phenomenon is
not new and possesses a certain history. Ahmed traces the European fixation on the veil to the colonial period, when renowned misogynists like Lord Cromer (then, British-consul general Evelyn Baring) argued that the veil and segregation were manifest signs of female oppression in Islam and were responsible for the “backwardness” of Muslim societies (Ahmed 1992, 152). The only way for these societies “to move forward on the path of civilization” would be “if these practices intrinsic to Islam (and therefore Islam itself) were cast off” (Ahmed 1992, 43).

Kahf, however, suggests anti-veil discourse originated earlier. In her study of the representation of Muslim women in European literature from the medieval period to the early modern era, she traces the image of the oppressed Muslim woman centring on the veil and segregation back to the seventeenth century (Kahf 1999, 5). While admitting its consolidation under colonialism, she understands it more as the necessary negative backdrop against which the eighteenth century European notion of “middle-class female domesticity” was fashioned (Kahf 1999, 7). Mabro also relates the perception of the “Oriental woman” to European ideas on gender roles:

The developing bourgeois ideology was based on an opposition of two spheres—the male, public sphere of alienated labour, the female private sphere of self-sacrificing, nurturing, non-alienated labour. The whole structure depended on enforcing the ideals of monogamous marriage and women as passive sexual beings. To have depicted harem dwellers as ordinary women who cared for their children and looked after the home as did women in Europe would have undermined the whole basis of Western family life. (Mabro 1996, 9)

Both authors understand the discrepancy between British social acceptance of the Victorian ideal of femininity and criticism of Muslim women, as a demonstration of how the modern Western self was constructed through its distinction from cultural others. From this perspective, rep-

1. Ahmed also observes that if Lord Cromer championed the cause of Muslim women’s emancipation through unveiling, he countered it at home, being the founding member and president of the Men’s League for Opposing Women’s Suffrage (153).

2. Kahf (1995, 5) notes that when the Muslim women began to be presented as victims, the veil “still appears on European women and has not yet become a prop associated exclusively with Islam”.

3. Kahf (6), although refusing to cite colonialism as the main cause for negative representations of the Muslim woman, nonetheless admits that the narrative woven around Islam and the veil sought to “create the fiction of a Western, a not-Oriental, identity—and thus to prepare a supportive culture for colonialism”.

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resentations can be said to characterize their maker. Yeğenoğlu (1998, 1) effectively describes the European perception of the Orient as “the cultural representation of the West to itself by way of detour through the other”.

Western sources did not always portray the Muslim woman as a victim. In the medieval period, when the Muslim world was considered superior to Europe, culturally, militarily, and scientifically, popular literature actually depicted her as a powerful figure, “a queen or noblewoman wielding power of harm or succour over the hero” (Kahf 1999, 4) who, often endowed with a “wanton or intimidating sexuality” (5), did not conform to the European idea of normative femininity. The plot generally saw the Muslim woman convert to Christianity, and adopt “a more passive femininity” (5). Therefore, centuries before the colonial era, there already existed in Europe an association between woman and culture and a desire to conquer the Muslim world, employing as metaphor the making-over of Muslim women into the image of its own. Hoodfar cites later authors who, also contradicting today’s stereotypes, describe Muslim women either as “freely mobile”, lacking in morality due to their revealing clothes, or as power-wielding figures in the home (Hoodfar 1997, 254–255). The evolution of the Muslim woman from powerful woman to helpless victim demonstrates that representations are constructions, contingent upon time, place and culture, that cannot be disentangled from issues of political and economic hegemony. Thus the subjugation of the Muslim world transformed the Muslim woman into a damsel in distress, who nonetheless still needed to be saved. The veil, a major actor in this terrible game, constituted the necessary visual “proof” of “the inherently oppressive and unfree nature of the entire tradition of Islam and Oriental cultures” (Yeğenoğlu 1998, 99). And so, while Kahf is correct that late eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe’s obsession with the veil resulted from a variety of motives, the colonial period and its corollary of Orientalism mark a turning point in the history of the perception and representation of the veil in both East and West.

The veil came to signify something much greater than the plight of women: the unbridgeable divide between the two worlds. Veiling denoted cultural inferiority and unveiling, modernity, progress and emancipation or, in short, European culture, buttressing the notion of Europe’s “civilising mission”. This holds true not only in the context of British but also of French colonialism. Clancy-Smith (1998, 154), in her article on French Algeria, traces the evolution of the French construction of their sense of superiority over the “natives.” It was initially based on technological prowess and political institutions. After 1830, it was premised on disparaging
Islam, especially political Islam. Once the country was totally controlled and civilian rule instated, the French then used the figures of the Muslim woman and the veil to justify the occupation of Muslim countries.

The twentieth-century witnessed the passage from anti-veil discourse to anti-veil action. Fanon (1967, 59) notes the incredible mobilization of resources in French-occupied Algeria to co-opt women into unveiling, describing the campaign as being concerned with neither the advancement of Algeria nor of its women. Underlining that the French knew that Algerian society considered the veil to be as “the symbol of the status of the Algerian woman” that possessed a matriarchal essence beneath the manifest patriarchy (Fanon 2003, 74), he insists that the campaign formed a “precise political doctrine.” Premised on the idea that women represent the innermost core of a culture, it was a tool of domination: “Converting the woman, winning her over to the foreign values, wrenching her free from her status, was at the same time achieving a real power over the men and attaining a practical means of destructuring Algerian values” (75).

Indeed, a hundred years earlier, in the 1840s, General Thomas-Robert Bugeaud, who conquered and then governed Algeria, remarked that “the Arabs elude us because they conceal the women from our gaze” (Clancy-Smith 1998, 154) further confirming how often women are pawns within larger political struggles.

Algerians responded to the unveiling campaign by veiling, which increased, because “the occupier was bent on unveiling Algeria” (Fanon 2003, 85). Therefore, ironically, it was in reaction to the West that the veil first became a symbol of political resistance, as well as a declaration of indigenous culture. Visually demarcating the boundary of colonial power, it came to configure the woman’s body (its visibility or concealment) as the site of competing cultures. Every unveiled woman demonstrated the success of foreign domination; every veiled one the tenacity of cultural identity and the refusal to yield to what Fanon calls the “rape of the colonizer” (Fanon 2003, 76).

Ahmed also traces the new meaning of the veil to

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4. Fanon (1967, 59) describes—perhaps somewhat condescendingly—an unveiling ceremony in 1958 as “a theatrical performance involving only some intimidated prostitutes and maids”.

5. Fanon can use the term rape due to his experience as Head of Psychiatry at the Blida-Joinville Hospital in Algeria, where he treated both French and Algerian patients. In his works he discusses French patients who experienced fantasies of raping Algerian women, often beginning with the tearing off of the veil.

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“the terms set in the first place by the colonizers” (Ahmed 1992, 49).\(^6\) The “veil as resistance” motif was not restricted to Algeria. It appears in other contexts in which the veil was discouraged or outlawed, and continues in the present day to shape not only perceptions of the veil but also policy as indicated by the banning of the veil in schools, whether in France, Tunisia, or Turkey. However, it only describes the garment from the perspective of the colonizer, and not of the women wearing the haïk. Yeğenoğlu (1998, 64) suggests that for Algerian women, veiling was emancipatory:

> It is not surprising after all that women’s agency emerged out of the texture of their own culture… However, this culture was no longer the same. In taking up the veil as a constituent symbolic element of their subjectivity, the Algerian women did not simply continue their traditional roles, because the veil had now become the embodiment of their will to act, their agency.

The examination of a single historical moment reveals the complexity of the veil: its changing and numerous meanings are usually absent from discussions about the garment, which remain couched in a limiting binary framework. The veil has been (and sometimes is) an instrument through which men have dominated or oppressed women, but it can also be, in a given context, a sign of religious or individual agency. In addition, if the veil is construed as a patriarchal disciplining of the female body, such disciplining takes other forms in other cultures, and hence “the power exercised upon bodies by veiling is no more cruel or barbaric than the control, supervision, training, and constraining of bodies by other practices, such as bras, stiletto heels, corsets, cosmetics, and so on” (Yeğenoğlu 1998, 116).

### Women, colonialism and the veil

With some exceptions, European female travellers to the Middle East embraced the colonialist view that the veil cum Islam was tantamount to female oppression. First and foremost were the missionaries who, as representatives of the Churches, worked to convert women, so that “the evils

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\(^6\) Fanon (79) sees this as a natural phenomenon, “We here recognize that laws of the psychology of colonization. In an initial phase, it is the action, the plans of the occupier that determine the centers of resistance around which a people’s will to survive becomes organized.”

The driving impetus for resistance also needs evoking, as in ‘French’ Algeria: the French ten percent of the population wielded the economic and political control, while native Algerians were “forbidden by law to study their [own] language,” and studied, when schooling was available, French language, history and geography (El Guindi 1999, 169–170). This is not to mention the well-documented instances of the widespread rape and murder of women.

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of Islam could be spelled out” (Sommer and Zwemer 1911, 149–150). Claiming that Islam set out to “extinguish women altogether,” Sommer and Zwemer focused on the veil which “has had the most terrible and injurious effect upon the mental, moral and spiritual history of all the Mohammedan races.” In Our Moslem Sisters: A Cry of Need from Lands of Darkness Interpreted by Those Who Heard It, they qualify Islam as lewd, because marriage was “not founded on love but sensuality,” and because the Muslim wife was “buried alive behind the veil,” virtually a “prisoner and slave rather than [...] companion and helpmeet” (van Sommer and Zwemer 1907, 27–28). Travel diaries of non-missionary female visitors also testify to the prevalence of such views. For example, Mrs Albert Rogers (1863, 58) describes Algerian women as “poor veiled creatures—veiled alike in mind and body—bound in shackles,” adding, “how one mourns over them, and longs to be able to reach them!” These women writers failed to “draw parallels between the oppression of women in their own society and that of women in the Orient,” forgetting that they themselves had often fled their home countries to escape domestic drudgery and debilitating definitions of womanhood (Hoodfar 1997, 258).

European women who saw themselves as concerned with women's emancipation also espoused these views. Thus Eugénie Le Brun, who mentored Egyptian feminist Huda Sha’rawi and, urging her to unveil, lectured her on (the European negative assumptions about) the veil. Indeed, all accepted unconditionally that unveiling was synonymous with progress and female emancipation. This wholesale endorsement of what Ahmed calls “colonial feminism” is puzzling, as colonialism was largely a patriarchal institution, which used feminism as a strategic manoeuvre abroad “in the service of this assault on the religions and cultures of Other men,” while it “combated feminism within its own society” (Ahmed 1992, 43).

To understand European women’s acceptance of colonial representations of Muslim women and the veil, it is necessary to fully appreciate European disdain of veiling, beyond any questions of military and political instrumentalization. The veil’s disparagement is due in part to the visual

7. Mrs. Rogers, in another passage of the book (257), actually recommended the veil for “ugly” women: “If only they would adopt the Moslem fashion, and hide their repulsive features, it would save one many a shock”.

8. There are of course exceptions: for example, two women who trusted their own observations were Lady Mary Montagu, who visited Ottoman Istanbul in the early eighteenth century, and Lady Duff Gordon, who lived in Egypt in the early part of the second half of the nineteenth century.
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economy it produces. The veiled woman, especially one wearing the all-
encompassing Algerian *haïk* covering everything but the eyes, sees but
cannot be seen. In a reversal of roles, she thwarts the “scopic regime of
modernity” and its “desire to master, control and reshape the body of sub-
jects by making them visible” (Yeğenoğlu 1998, 12).9 Because modernity
associates vision and knowledge, the figure of the veiled woman challenges
the epistemological role granted to sight (Behiery 2013). If the veil is con-
strued as a barrier to the onlooker’s desire, it also constitutes a site upon
which desire may be inscribed. Yeğenoğlu (1998, 47) locates the veil in the
imaginary, and describes it as a screen “around which western fantasies of
penetration revolve.” Textual and visual representations of beguiling odalis-
ques in bedrooms or Turkish baths, attest to the fact that the veil as sign
includes what is imagined hiding behind it. The erotic component of the
veil is reinforced by its association with sexuality.10 El Guindi (1999, 23)
explains the conflation of the “veil, harem, seclusion and unbridled sexual
access,” by contrasting viewpoints on sexuality and the body: “Christianity
chose the path of desexualizing the worldly environment; Islam of reg-
ulating the social order while accepting its sexualized environment” (El
Guindi 1999, 31). These divergent positions, evident even in descriptions
of paradise, further illuminate the historical attitudes of the Churches
towards Islam. The sexual fantasies that Europeans projected onto Muslim
women are also undoubtedly related to the very restrictive Victorian atti-
dudes regarding sexuality, especially that of women, who, along with the
new and famous tight-lacing and corsetry, were not encouraged to experi-
ence, let alone express, sexual pleasure (El Guindi 1999, 45).11

The veil forms a *mise en abîme* of both the modern and the colonial sub-
ject, because the projects of colonialism and modernity are intertwined. As
Yeğenoğlu observes, the two define the Western subject as “human, civilized,
and universal” (1998, 95), thus claiming “cultural domination and superior-

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9. Alloula (1987, 7) describes how the veiled Algerian woman is for the colonial
photographer “a triple rejection: the rejection of his desire, of the practice of his art,
and of his place in a milieu that is not his own.”

10. The harem is as loaded a sign as the veil and is used also to illustrate Muslim inferiority
and oversexualization. Like the veil it has also been critically reassessed. See Ahmed

11. Foucault (1980, 3) discusses the shift in the European attitudes towards sex, from
the relatively liberal seventeenth century, when bodies and sexual discourse were
free, to the nineteenth, when the Victorian era ensured that “sexuality was carefully
confined.”

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ity by assuming one true story of human history” (95), whilst simultaneously deciding who is included as a subject in history and who is not, marking the difference between the West and the rest of the world in temporal terms: the West as modern, contrasted with a “Third World” that is always lagging behind and never able to catch up. If colonialism and modernity are premised upon racial, cultural, religious, and temporal difference, gender is also involved. The universal subject was male, making the other’s feminine regardless of gender, and intimating that the modern self is also produced through the other of sexual difference: “the absolute otherness of the woman, therefore serves to secure for the man his own self-knowledge and truth” (Yeğenoğlu 1998, 46).12 Male modern self-identity would therefore be doubly disrupted by the presence of the veiled woman, foreclosed by the lack of vision/knowledge of the cultural “other” of sexual difference.

If European women constituted the other to the universal male subject produced through difference, the female subject simulated this masculinist discourse by also producing her self through alterity against a devalued other, but here one of only cultural, as opposed to sexual and cultural difference (Yeğenoğlu 1998, 107). This reproduction was necessary in light of modern self-identity produced through alterity. It was therefore, as Yeğenoğlu argues, “in the East that Western woman was able to become a full individual” (107). The veil became the central marker of difference, against which the European female subject could come into being; it “provided the benevolent Western woman with what she had desired: a clinching example that interlocks “women” and “tradition/Islam,” so it could be morally condemned in the name of emancipation” (99). Western feminism internalized the notion of universality and superiority, to the degree that Ahmed asserts that not only anthropology but also feminism should be considered a “handmaid” of colonialism (Ahmed 1992, 155). Deconstructing the complex sign of the veil requires both admitting mainstream feminism’s participation in the propagation and violence of imperialism and patriarchy (Yeğenoğlu 1998, 94) and understanding the veil as “the historical, cultural, psychical and political obsession of the culture that produced Western women” (12). The veil has in fact been so central to the constitution of the Western modern subject that it has come to signify not only the Muslim woman but the Third World woman more generally, construed as powerless and oppressed (Mohanty 1984, 338).

12. The emasculation of the other male is a recurrent theme in colonial thinking. Said (1978) believes that the feminization of the Orient is inherent to Orientalism.

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Colonial feminist attitudes towards Muslim women and the veil continue to inform popular and intellectual culture. Female Middle Eastern professors teaching in Europe and North America, speak of their aggravation at having to incessantly confront an amalgamation of Islam, veiling and victimization (Hoodfar 1997; Yeşenoglu 1998, 121; Ahmed 1992, 246) that has been slow to lessen, despite the articulation of global feminism(s), criticising the assumed universality of Western definitions of women’s freedom, agency and appropriate dress. The ethnocentrism that Minces exhibited in 1980 continues still: “Is it not Eurocentric to put forward the lives of western women as the only democratic, just, and forward-looking model? I do not think so... Ideally, the criteria adopted, like those for human rights should be universal” (25). The point is that the veil is not just a garment but a symbolic field and an object tied to the very heart of Western self-identity (Behiery 2013).

Veiling in the modern Middle East

Colonial feminist attitudes towards the veil also penetrated the Muslim world, creating internal societal divisions, largely cut along class lines. The equation of the veil with backwardness and oppression was first articulated by male early modernist writers, but was later adopted by Arab feminists. The “battle of the veil” is deemed to have begun in Egypt with the publication of Tahrir al-mar’a (The Liberation of Women) in 1899, in which Qasim Amin advocates unveiling, along with primary school education for women, changes in the polygamy and divorce laws, and a general need for tremendous change in Muslim culture overall. This was at a time in Egypt when several major male intellectual figures, including Rifa’ah Rafi’ al-Tahtawi, ‘Ali Mubarak and the renowned reformer Muhammad ‘Abdu, were also examining the plight of women and calling for legal reforms

13. Feminist scholars with postcolonial sensitivities engage in critiques of Eurocentric or xenophobic elements in scholarship on women in Islam past and present. For example, Hirschmann (1998, 349) observes: Feminists as well as non-feminists often assume that veiling is in and of itself an inherently oppressive practice. Many view it like domestic violence; just as staying with the abuser seems beyond comprehension, so does “choosing” the veil. Women are seen as brainwashed or coerced, and the veil is seen as a key emblem of this oppression.

14. Many contemporary Arab feminists have greatly modified their anti-veil stance in the last decades. See for example, Abu Odeh (1993) or Karam (1998). However, many scholars from the Middle East, like Moghissi (1999), continue to view it as intimately linked to patriarchy and oppressive practices towards women.
and education to better their situation. If ‘Abdu’s ideas were well received, Amin’s Tahrir al-mar’a created “intense and furious debate” in intellectual circles because of his harsh criticism of Egyptian culture, and his claim (akin to the colonialists) that the removal of the veil was “the key to social ‘transformation’” (Ahmed 1992, 144–145).

Reactions to Amin saw the debate over the veil first enter the Arab press, with three periodicals defending the veil and two denouncing it (Baron 1989, 372). Although his advocacy for change stemmed from anti-British nationalist sentiment, Amin (a prominent lawyer with ties to the British) considered European culture more advanced than Egypt technologically, economically, and culturally. If he called for the adaptation of the veil rather than its elimination, and if it was not so much the cloth but the social attitudes such as seclusion and segregation accompanying it, that he was condemning, references to Amin in both East and West concentrate on the veil. This is all the more interesting because, in turn-of-the-century Egypt, urban Jewish and Christian Egyptian women also wore the veil, albeit they discarded the face-veil earlier than their Muslim counterparts (Baron 1989, 379). That facial veiling was “an urban phenomenon,” more related to class than to religion, adds yet another dimension to the veil (El Guindi 1999, 178). The vast majority of Muslim women in the Middle East lived in rural contexts and participated in agricultural and herding work, and, while some type of head covering was possible, the large headscarf, let alone the face veil adorning the streets of metropolizes, may have been impracticable. The status aspect of the veil persisted long past the medieval period, whether in colonial Algeria or present-day Oman (Wikan 1982).

Until quite recently, The Liberation of Women was seen as marking the beginning of feminism in the Arab World. However, recent reassessments challenge the idea that Amin, who only advocated primary education for women (and this in order to make them better wives and mothers), was the

15. Contrary to general thought, Muslim women were historically involved in many economic sectors. See ‘Abd al-Raziq (1973); Shatzmiller (1988); and Tucker (1993). A concrete example would be that in most Islamic codes of law, a woman cannot divorce; she can only have her marriage annulled in extraordinary circumstances. Islamic feminism will point out how this is unfounded, as in the days of the Prophet Muhammad a woman could divorce on several grounds such as not loving her husband (“finding him ugly”) or even lack of sexual satisfaction. Another astounding finding, relevant to many women’s lives, is that a Muslim woman/wife is not legally mandated to do housework. She can require help or payment. Bullock, relying on Abd al-Ati (1979), writes, “Three of the four schools of Sunni Islamic jurisprudence consider that housework is not part of a wife’s marital obligations.” (Bullock 2002, 59, n. 28).

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“Father (sic) of Arab feminism.” His ideas are now more aptly viewed as the penetration of Western colonial thought into the Arab world. This is most apparent in his diatribe against Egyptian women, whom he describes as dirty, unskilled, ignorant, unattractive, and knowing neither “how to rouse desire in their husband, nor how to retain his desire or to increase it” (Ahmed 1992, 157). Mitchell (1988) links Amin’s ideas on women to social control and the politics of vision, or, in Abu-Lughod’s words, to “a large-scale modernizing project intended to open up women’s worlds to the same surveillance and individualized subjection as was imposed on the rest of the population and to organize the family into a house of discipline for producing a new Egyptian mentality” (1986, 255–256). Amin, whose opinions mirrored those of Lord Cromer, was well-regarded only by the British and the small Egyptian élite that profited from the British occupation, thereby fracturing Egyptian society along the lines of economic and social privilege. Framing unveiling as modern and therefore “Western” precluded any possibility of subjective or indigenous choice in the act. Long before the unveiling ceremonies in Algeria, unveiling signified progress and acceptance of Western ideologies, whereas veiling meant tradition and a stance against them.

That ṭahrīr al-maʿrāʾ was long considered the foundational work of Arab feminism, despite the fact that many of Amin’s contemporaries held more progressive views on women, demonstrates how power shapes the production of knowledge: the facility of the dissemination of colonial thought, and its subsequent internalization, reveal the “global dominance of the Western World and the authority of its discourses” (Ahmed 1992, 165). In the Middle Eastern debate, as in colonialist discourse, the negative view of the veil—here usually the face veil—was first articulated by men and later adopted by women. In both contexts the major male proponents of unveiling were not necessarily concerned with the advancement of women as such, a criticism that may also be directed against many Muslim male proponents of veiling. That the debate for and against the veil provoked by Amin was—and continues to be—framed as a struggle between anti-feminists and feminists, highlights the collusion of feminism with modern humanism, colonialism, and patriarchy. This framing endures, despite contemporary feminist scholars who forcefully argue that the dispute is one “between two muddled versions of domesticity” (El Guindi 1999, 178–179).

The veil and Arab feminism

Like Ahmed in being a major reference for this section, I will consider Egypt as a “mirror” and a “precursor” of developments in the Middle East
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(Ahmed 1992, 6, 175), but here it is to trace the perception of the veil in Arab feminism, which, like Western feminism, accepted the synonymy of the veil and oppression. In the twentieth century, Egyptian men and women, at least those of the upper and upper middle classes, were adopting European dress. The lives and role of women were changing not only through access to education but also to new fields of employment. For example, alongside the growing number of women’s journals, there appeared the first women journalists in the mainstream press. Feminism emerged at the turn of the century and organized itself in the first three decades. Early Egyptian feminism is often considered both secular and multi-denomina-
national (Badran 1995, vol. 4, 45). However, Ahmed affirms that if the school of Arab feminism, mimicking colonialist views, remains the best known and most prevalent during most of the twentieth-century, it was not the only one, contrasting Huda Sha’rawi with Malak Hisni Nasif to make her point. Sha’rawi, founder of the Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU) and its two women’s magazines (L’Egyptienne and al-Misriyya), supported the notion of a Western and more secular-style state. If she considered the veil oppressive and discarded her face veil, as many did in the EFU (and Amin’s own wife and daughters), she nonetheless never completely abandoned the headscarf. Ahmed laments the fact that Sha’rawi’s famous public unveiling in 1923, upon her return from an international women’s conference in Rome, has overshadowed her political stance against British occupation, while contemporary novelist Soueif (2003, 112) observes the incongruity of the coupling in Egypt of unveiling and of anti-British sentiment:

That image of Hoda Sha’rawi unveiling in public was present in the schoolbooks of Nasser’s Egypt, and to us—schoolchildren of the time—the contradiction in it was not immediately apparent. Sha’rawi was part of the struggle to break free from the grip of a European power, yet she publicly adopted the ‘revealed face’ code of that same power. My parents’ and grandparents’ generations were able to live with this contradiction, because they thought (at least, the ones that thought about it) that politics and culture existed in two separate realms—that even though we needed to shake off the west’s political yoke, the western was the more advanced culture and it was, therefore progressive to adopt it.

The contradiction appears to buttress the idea that nationalism in the Third World also constituted an offshoot of colonialism, rather than its presumed antidote (Yeğenoğlu 1998, 121–144).

A second strand of feminism disclaimed the suitability of Western customs and attitudes for Muslim women and sought “a way to articulate

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female subjectivity and affirmation within a native, vernacular, Islamic discourse” (Ahmed 1992, 174). Nasif was opposed to unveiling, but not because she viewed it as a religious requirement, because she did not. Rather, she thought that women needed the veil because men had yet to learn not to be abusive to unveiled women, and because women had not yet gained sufficient experience of the outside world. In the case of such positive social change, she states her approval of unveiling “for those who want it” (as opposed to a male-enforced and/or governmental decree) (El Guindi, 180). More compelling is the fact that Nasif seems to have been alone in understanding that the issue of the veil was in essence a red herring, revealing “new varieties of male domination being enacted in and through the contemporary male discourse of the veil” (Ahmed 1992, 174). She also recognized that “the question of the veil was only central in the debate about woman’s place in society because the west (personified in Egypt then by Lord Cromer) had made it so” (Soueif 2003, 113). Calling for reforms in domains such as education and health, Nasif bitingly suggests that women were unfortunately unveiling, for the sake neither of “liberty” nor the “pursuit of knowledge,” but in order to preoccupy themselves with fashion (Ahmed 1992, 180). Despite her incisive insight and untimely death, Nasif, who went further in her demands for women than Sha’rawi, was in large part eclipsed by her, and only rediscovered at the end of the twentieth century. That Sha’rawi remains by far the better known of the two in the West may be explained by the fact that Nasif refused the binarism established by colonialism, Western modernity, and feminism: “either one embraces Islam and women’s oppression, or one throws it (and the veil) off and is free” (Hirschmann 1998, 349–350).

By the mid-twentieth century, mostly in the name of modernization, the veil, including the hijab, had largely disappeared from Egyptian (and other major Middle Eastern) cities. Arab feminism from the 1950s to the 1980s began to discuss more subtle forms of patriarchy and issues not usually discussed in the open, such as birth control, sexuality and clitorectomy (Ahmed 1992, 214). It was the many feminists from this generation who condemned the veil as an un-Islamic and patriarchal social custom. The linking of the veil with other forms of female oppression is partly understandable here because, contrary to the case of colonialists and Western feminists, the views of Arab feminists emerged from reflections on their own lives and problems, regardless of Western influence. Because the purpose here is to simply outline the complexity of the veil sign, only the two most renowned Arab feminists will be discussed, to convey the mainstream Arab feminist
view on the veil: Egyptian doctor and psychiatrist Nawal El Saadawi, and Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi.16 El Saadawi is an extremely productive feminist author whose work is imbued with an egalitarian socialist outlook. Once exiled from her country due to charges of apostasy and a number of death threats, she is obdurate in her opposition to the veil, claiming that it leads to a “veiling of the mind” (Roald 2001, 12). Describing Arab women as torn between two divergent social messages about women—on the one hand the canon of female beauty of global advertising, and on the other the “Islamic notion of femininity ‘protected’ by men and hidden behind the veil” (Moghissi 1999, 146)—El Saadawi refuses both, because in each case women are “bodies without a mind” and devoid of agency, which “should be covered or uncovered in order to suit national or international capitalist interests” (1997, 140). While the author disparages the veil and links it with Islamism, she recognizes that there are greater problems: “The veiling of women is one of the most visible aspects of fanatic fundamentalist movements, but there are many other symptoms that are less visible but more dangerous” (95).

Mernissi is well known for her opposition to the veil, which she considers a form of willed erasure:

...the veil can be interpreted as a symbol revealing a collective fantasy of the Muslim community; to make women disappear, to eliminate them from communal life, to relegate them to an easily controllable terrain, the home, to prevent them from moving about, and to highlight their illegal position on male territory by means of a mask. (1982, 189)

So closely paralleling colonial views herself, one wonders if, like Nasif, Mernissi understood the colonialism underwriting feminism before positioning herself. Simultaneously, it demonstrates how the polarization caused by colonial narrative can occlude the colonized’s own voice(s), as perhaps Mernissi arrived at the same conclusion based not on the grounds of an internalized colonialism but on those of her own subjective experience. This in itself would evidently not be problematic. What is, however, is that the author, reproducing Western stereotypes, equates her experience of Moroccan practices and ideas, with an ahistorical “Islam.”

The groundbreaking consequence of this generation was in fact the feminists’ re-examination of Islamic sources and exegesis in order to dispute the very grounds of their foes. Because Arab feminists could not circumvent religion, authors such as Mernissi and El Saadawi are often referred to

16. There are many other important figures, from both the first and second phases of Arab feminism, that are here overlooked, for reasons of length and argument. See Badran and Cooke, eds. (1990).
as Muslim feminists. With regards to the veil at least, and regardless of whether one considers it to be or not to be a practice textually embedded in Islam, many are inclined to “to select those texts that are suitable to their purposes, precisely the same thing they have accused male scholars of doing historically and in contemporary times” (Roald 2001, 3). Although twentieth-century Arab feminists adopted positions similar to those of Western feminists (for example that women should not be held responsible for male lust), they also criticized the latter for speaking in their place, and for failing to criticize the patriarchy underpinning their own societies.17

Arab feminism’s view on veiling as the censorship of women from public space and the protection of men from women’s powerful sexuality (El Saadawi 1980, 84), resembles that of both colonialism and Western feminism, but diverges from it because it is rooted in subjective experience. Texts need to be contextualized to be understood, and when one grasps the patriarchal nature of Arab (like most other) societies, the veil-as-oppression thesis becomes comprehensible, even if methodologically problematic. As examples, I point to Mernissi’s chronicle of growing up in a male-guarded harem, where her mother resented the lack of access to public space (1994), and El Saadawi’s account of her brutal circumcision, when she was six years old (1980, 7–9)—a custom that, as she points out, has no basis in Islam (39). Both authors have exposed and combated many abusive customs towards women in their respective societies; but in doing so, they have sometimes confused social practices, customs and ideas, and legal rulings on gender, with “Islam.”

Zeinab al-Ghazali

If Ahmed considers that Sha’rawi has her progeny in the later figures of Arab feminism who embraced Western notions of gender equality, she perceives Zeinab al-Ghazali as having emerged out of Nasif’s more subjective and indigenous approach to women’s issues. While the two share similarities, al-Ghazali represents a third approach because, as a Muslim activist, she based herself entirely upon the Islamic theological tradition. Al-Ghazali, whose views on gender are not extraneous to her religious practice and thought, may be considered the precursor of what would only many decades later be called Islamic feminism, although she and many

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17. Discussing Arab and Western feminisms as categories, is for the sake of communicability. Both are multivocal with inner debates and divisions. For example, El Saadawi has been amply criticized by fellow Arab feminists because her writings seem to too willingly confirm Western stereotypes of Arab Muslim women.

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other Islamist and Muslim women do not always self-identify as feminists. She was also, directly or indirectly, related to the Egyptian Islamist movement *ikhwan al-muslimin* or Muslim Brotherhood, established by Hassan al-Banna in 1928, whose paramilitary wing in the 1940s came to condone violence in confrontations with the state. The emergence of Islamist groups advocating an Islamic restructuring of society through personal moral reform, was in part a reaction to Western encroachment as well as to the perceived or real corruption of governments. Generally considered to have grown out of a fear of modernity, I submit instead that Islamism’s binary worldview is modern, and mirrors that of other twentieth-century political ideologies. For example, Islamism integrated or Islamicized several aspects of Marxist-based revolutionary thought, from the advocacy of armed struggle to counter injustice to critiques of capitalism.

Islamism developed a broad popular base in Egypt and throughout the Middle East, as groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood were and remain very active and well-organized in the area of charitable works, from feeding and clothing the poor to providing free medical care. Despite the fact that the *ikhwan al-muslimin’s* views on women were more ‘liberal’ than those of the traditional religious scholars or ‘ulama, it attracted few if any women into its fold, explaining why al-Banna sought out al-Ghazali’s help. Citing motherhood as women’s main role, the organization also believed that women could contribute to society by having access to education in all fields, and working in a profession of their choice. In practice however, Islamist groups, including the Brotherhood and governments, have often, once in power, endorsed misogynistic laws, policies and interpretations of Islam, detrimental to women. The *ikhwan al-muslimin* condemned the ‘Western’ model of the modern woman on the basis (like El Saadawi, whom they condemned) that her sexuality was exploited by capitalist society. The male-defined version of the Muslim woman (self-produced, through its difference from the Western other) is not without parallel to Yeğenoğlu’s description of the production of the Western modern self, again intimating that Islamism is effectively a modernist movement. The Muslim Brotherhood, like the secularists and colonialists, focused on dress and Islamic attire for women, including the *hijab*, which it considered a religious requirement. However, Islamism’s preoccupation with Muslim male dress, premised on the notion that the beard, the long tunics, and various male head coverings were religiously mandated, is rarely discussed (El Guindi, 1999).

At first, Al-Ghazali worked with Sha’rawi, but then came to disagree with her ideas. At the age of eighteen, she founded the Muslim Women’s
Association, which offered classes on Islam to women, ran an orphanage, and helped the poor and the unemployed find work (Ahmed 1992, 197). It survived throughout the 1940s, when state repression of the Muslim Brotherhood was rife, until the mid-sixties, when al-Ghazali herself was jailed for six years on charges of dissent, and tortured. As all Islamists, she perceived the cure to the “backwardness” of Muslim societies to be, not the emulation of the West, but a return to an authentic Islam, devoid of local and foreign accruements. Al-Ghazali deemed Islam granted women “everything—freedom, economic rights, political rights, social rights, public and private rights,” although these had been stripped away in Muslim societies (Hoffman 1985, 235). Cooke (2001, 83–106) sees contradictions in al-Ghazali’s life similar to those of American women on the Christian right, who work full-time in order to advocate a domesticated family life. While al-Ghazali’s active public and political life contrasts somewhat with her unrelenting emphasis on the important role the Muslim woman plays in the home, the difference lies in the fact that al-Ghazali could use religious texts to validate her work, beyond that devoted to her immediate family. Nevertheless, one must acknowledge, with Cooke, that the activist was unorthodox, in that she divorced her first husband because he kept her from “her mission”, while her second husband’s marriage contract stipulated he was to help her and not interfere with her work (Hoffman 1985, 237). Al-Ghazali’s ideas may prove to be more helpful than those of Arab feminism because they are able to effect beneficial change for women and shift the conservative attitudes of ‘ulama, Islamists and the general population from within, by using theologically-grounded, non-Western arguments. Studies of contemporary Islamist and orthodox Muslim women contesting historically-defined female normative behaviour, whether in Egypt, Turkey, Sudan or Scandinavia, confirm this view.

Al-Ghazali was a *muhajjabat* who unlike Nasif believed, that the headscarf was a religious obligation. The veil resurfaces, not only repositioned in religious discourse, but transformed into an emblem of resistance, because of the conflict between the Brotherhood and the Egyptian government. As in the Algerian Revolution, the veil here symbolizes “a relinquishment of the principles of secularism and Western models and ideals in general” (Zuhur 1992, 109). This configuration of the veil, uniting the political, the revolutionary and the religious and linking Islam with political opposition and sometimes violence, may best describe and explain its representation in mainstream Western and some Middle Eastern media. Corroborating how Western and Islamist narratives parallel each other, this equating
of the veil with Islamism is reproduced, irrespective of whether or not it reflects the views of most *muhajjabat*.

Examining the discussions around the veil in modern Egyptian history demonstrates that even in a majority-Muslim country the veil forms a multifaceted sign. Relating it only to Western colonialism—as either reproducing or contesting its precepts—obscures the plurality of its meanings, especially in contexts in which it is not legally enforced or worn, due to social pressure and coercion. In the Persian Gulf, the veil has never been much of a domestic or global issue. Instead, one finds Western allies applying cultural relativism in light of their vested interests. No colonial rulers needed to instrumentalize it in order to maintain their dominance, highlighting the relationship between power and media representations of the sign.

The “new veiling” phenomenon

“New veiling” refers to the phenomenon whereby in Muslim-majority countries, where the majority of women no longer wore the headscarf, numerous women suddenly began (re)adopting it in the 1970s and 1980s. The trend has dealt the biggest blow to over-politicized, divisive conceptions of the veil. Not limited to the Middle East, new veiling has led to a surge of studies, often driving the discussion, as scholars attempt to comprehend the transnational movement, beyond the Orientalist model.¹⁸

New veiling began with university students in Egyptian cities before spreading to other Arab and Western capitals. Characterized by a long loose gown or *jilbab* and large headscarf, the new attire can be seen as a “modern version of the conventions of dress” (Ahmed 1992, 222). Combining elements of traditional Egyptian, Arab and Western dress, Ahmed argues that it also involves social reproduction, because many of the new *muhajjabat* had older family members who also veiled. Other studies demonstrate that many women covered, but unlike, and contrary to, the wishes of their family—parents, siblings or spouses—or governments:

There is also some evidence that voluntary veiling is not necessarily an expression of affiliation with or support for an Islamist political movement, but rather that it paradoxically represents rejection of parental and even patriarchal authority among rebellious young women. This especially may be the case for young women from non-traditional families...who by donning hijab aspire to personal autonomy and more serious mien, especially at coeducational colleges. (Moghadam 1993, 149)


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Although new veiling implies a unitary phenomenon, El Guindi detects several phases. In the beginning, it consisted of a *hijab* covering the hair, neck and sometimes whole upper body, and an accompanying *jilbab* in only a few sober colours. Linked to the Religious Revival of the period, the new outfit could indicate a political stance against the government and for the establishment of an Islamist-defined Islamic state. In Egypt, a country that had effectively stifled all left-wing opposition, the return to Islam represented, by the 1980s, the “major oppositional force” (El Guindi 1999, 143). However, politics alone do not suffice to explain the increased veiling of students that spread to the general population at large. It must also be related to the personal politics of identity and to religion, because the attire’s intent was to fulfill a religious requirement of modesty. Egyptians call the dress, not new veiling, but *al-ziyy al-islami* or *al-ziyy al-sha’ri*, meaning Islamic or legal dress, a distinction pointing to the difficulties inherent in the generic term veil. The frequent reference to women claiming that a return to Islam, often accompanied by a change in dress, produced feelings of peace and “inner ease,” confirms the spiritual, subjective aspect of reveiling (Ahmed 1992, 223), whereas the studies revealing that not all women who veil are fully practicing Muslims only underline the garment’s many meanings, and argue against the validity of the veil’s being a site of analysis (Behiery 2012).

The Religious Revival, frequently cited as the impetus for new veiling, is often traced back to Egypt’s 1967 defeat in the Six-day War with Israel (Ahmed 1992, 216; Zuhur 1992, 51, 55; Haddad 1984, 40; Bullock 2002, 91), or, contrariwise, to Egypt’s victory over Israel in 1973 (El Guindi 1999, 134; Haddad 1984, 140). Although I have difficulty attributing (what I consider to be) a phenomenon based in a complex set of interrelated factors to such precise historical events, I am contradicted by many personal testimonies. Williams (1980, 54) quotes an Egyptian woman who attributes her adoption of the veil to the 1967 crushing defeat:

> Until 1967, I accepted the way our country was going. I thought Gamal Abd al-Nasser would lead us all to progress. Then the war showed that we had all been lied to; nothing was the way it had been represented. I started to question everything we were told. I wanted to do something and to find my own way. I prayed more and more and I tried to see what was expected of me as a Muslim woman. Then I put on *shar’i* dress…

The return to Islam and the veil are also ascribed to such other factors as the disillusionment with Nasserist socialism, the bleak economic condition of most Egyptians under Nasser’s socialism or the open-door policies of Sadat.

Early sociological studies also explained new veiling by the sense of malaise and uprootedness experienced by young students living in big cities for the first time, and by economic factors, maintaining that women of the popular classes embraced the veil to erase class origins and because they could not afford the expensive urban fashion of their colleagues. El Guindi (1999, 162) argues that these ideas are not founded in substantive research. Zuhur (1992, 104–105) believes economic considerations were a factor, even if her own research reveals that most participants described their choice to veil in terms of “piety and a new realization of the meaning of Islam”. Bullock (2002, 61) considers the economic explanation for veiling as pertaining more to the old class warfare—the view of the upper classes regarding veiled women—than to the experiences and realities of the _mubajjabat_ themselves.

While new veiling constitutes an unambiguous marker of Islamic identity, the meta-narrative of the veil has once again shifted. Forever associated with the domesticity of Muslim women and their relegation to the home, the veil now affirms the presence of Muslim women students and employees in the public arena.19 This new meaning is perhaps what most troubles secular regimes, as it destabilizes the entrenched view of the Muslim woman as oppressed and Islam as a threat. The headscarf ban in Turkey rests on the differentiation between the traditional scarf of the elderly and often illiterate grandmother, and the _hijab_ of the young educated Muslim woman seeking to assert her religious identity and demand her rights in society; it is the latter that is seen as an assault on Kemalist republican values (Kılıçbay and Binark 2002, 496).20 As Dayan-Herzbrun (2000, 69) aptly observes, the same holds true in Western contexts such as France: “A sign of foreignness and exoticism, the French were not disturbed whilst the headscarves covered silent and discreet heads”. Similarly, Hoodfar (1997, 269) quotes a Canadian university professor commenting

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19. Ahmed (1992, 224) argues that this movement “cannot be seen as a retreat from the affirmation of female autonomy and subjectivity made by the generation of women who immediately preceded them”. This view is not unanimously accepted and is countered by those feminists who see Islamic dress as a negation of a woman’s sexual identity and a concession to patriarchal norms, in exchange for access to public space (Macleod 1991).

20. There is even a semantic distinction: the “traditional” headscarf of the “peasants” and “migrants” is called _başörtüsü_, whereas the headscarf of the Turkish headscarf affair in the 1980s came to be called _turban_ (Norton 1997, 167).
on a veiled student, having forgotten, she observes, that the young woman courageously came to Canada alone and learned English in order to pursue higher education:

She is a bundle of contradictions. She first came to see me with her scarf tightly wrapped around her head...and appeared to me so lost that I wondered whether or not she would be capable of tackling the heavy course she had taken with me... She, with her feminist ideas and critical views on Orientalism, and love of learning, never failed to amaze me every time she expressed her views. She does not at all act like a veiled woman.

Can one deduce that what is experienced as unacceptable is the simple agency of veiled Muslim women? The rhetoric about liberating Muslim women might therefore really mean, following the plotline of medieval literature, the remaking of the Muslim woman in the image of the West, premised on the absurd belief that “progress for women can only be achieved by abandoning the ways of a native andocentric culture in favour of those of another culture” (Ahmed 1992, 244). Research demonstrates, however, that Muslim women experience discrimination, whether or not they adopt Western styles or lifestyles. Egyptian journalist Safinaz Kazem explains in Four Women of Egypt her own adoption of Islamic dress: “For years we ran around in short skirts and bare arms saying to them, ‘Look, see, we’re just like you.’ Enough. It got us nowhere. We’re not like them, and they shouldn’t matter. We have to find a way to be ourselves” (Soueif 2003, 112).

This new veiling challenges the notion of the modern and the traditional, or the public and the private, as dichotomous, and points to the existence of alternative modernities. Testifying to a democratization of Egyptian culture by “the rise and gradual predominance of a vocabulary of dress and social being defined from below, by the emergent middle classes,” it announces the “entrance into, and determination to move forward in, modernity”, of the “newly urban, newly educated middle classes” (Ahmed 1992, 225). Brenner (1996, 690), in her study on veiling in contemporary Indonesia, also links new veiling with modernity:

veiling here signifies a new historical consciousness and a new way of life, weighed down neither by Javanese tradition nor by centuries of colonial rule, defined neither by Western capitalism and consumerism nor by the dictates of the Indonesian political economy. It stands for a new morality and a new discipline, whether personal, social, or political—in short, a new Islamic modernity.

21. The documentary film was made by Tahani Rached and Eric Michel for the National Film Board in 1997–1999.

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When new veiling spread from the university to the office and from students to the upper classes and to society at large, the dress was altered. Islamic dress was transformed from sober attire into much more hybrid, fashionable and attractive clothes and outfits. The establishment of very successful Islamic clothing companies, coupled with an increased academic interest in dress as a social practice, has given rise to significant scholarship on Islamic fashion (Kılıçbay and Binark 2003; Balasescu 2003; Abaza 2007; Jones 2007; Lewis 2013). The latter, which some see as a co-optation of Islamic norms by big business or a new Muslim bourgeoisie, nonetheless demonstrates how the veil and veiling are open to permutation.

A positive consequence of studies on new veiling is that it has permitted veiled Muslim women's voices to be heard, and moved the debate beyond politics to questions of “individual attributions of meaning or individual choice” (Lindisfarne-Tapper and Ingham 1997, 14). Lindisfarne-Tapper and Ingham, for example, insist that every individual woman's choice whether to wear a headscarf or not, along with the reasons she offers for such a choice, “must be treated with the utmost respect and as separable from the apparent conformity and communal allegiances such a choice may also convey” (18). Compare this, however, with Grace (2004, 23) who questions if a Muslim woman is ever free to choose:

To what extent can it be argued that the veiled woman acts within a sphere of agency? Is she free to initiate action, or is her action determined by the way her identity has been framed within the discourse of the veil, whether by Islamic men or western women?

If Grace's question is valid, in that society and social forces possess a coercive aspect, the assumptions upon which it rests are not: the Western self is normative and universal and scrutinizes others but not itself. After all, Grace's own style of dress and adornment—whatever it may be—is also embedded in a complex set of relations influenced by social attitudes, cultural notions of femininity, (male) desire, class, and individual choice. Yet she neither questions the existence of her own agency, nor admits that Western dress codes can also be understood as submitting to patriarchal or other internalized external demands.

The various representations of the veil that have been traced, cannot be separated from the ideologies and narratives underwriting them. New veiling's veil has its counterpart in an Islamic feminism that advocates the reinterpre-

22. El Guindi, Bullock, Roald, Hirschmann, even Ahmed, among others, also acknowledge that veiling, in a context where it is not enforced, can be a subjective female choice that can be experienced as liberating.
tation of Islamic law, or at least its disinvestment from the many misogynistic accretions now enshrined within the *shari’a*. If Arab feminism perpetuated divisions between both secular and religious, and elite and popular, points of view, Islamic feminism as a movement encompasses veiled and unveiled Muslim women, as well as non-Muslim women, reshaping feminism, so that the “West and East speak in a new combined tongue in dialogue with rather than as negating of each other” (Najmabadi 1998, 55). It confirms that women can work together despite divergent politics, positions and sometimes religions, and that any “feminism that does not justify itself within Islam is bound to be rejected by the rest of society, and is therefore self-defeating” (Karam 1998, 11). Islamic feminists recognize dress as culturally-specific. There is therefore “no reason that Muslim women’s clothing needs to be measured against Western specific norms of dress” (Shaikh 2003, 153). They propose that, when freely chosen, the *hijab* can form a symbol of Islam’s egalitarian nature, demanding that women be judged on their spiritual and intellectual merit alone, and, if they so choose, have their bodies free from the scrutiny of others, while equally admitting the multiple meanings the veil can hold for its wearers. Islamic feminism has detractors inside and outside of the Muslim world, who doubt that religion—and particularly Islam—can help women much, if at all, and consider the expression an oxymoron.

**Conclusion**

The study has retraced the construction of the veil sign over the last century or so. Negative perceptions of the garment emerged with the advent of modernity and colonialism and were espoused by missionaries, and Western and Arab feminists, as well as by European and Arab public figures and intellectuals. Alternative meanings of the veil nonetheless transpired, demonstrating that veils could/can also signify, from the perspective of the women who wear them, agency, mobility, spiritual and religious commitment, and cultural identity. New veiling has given rise to new, both more realistic and more nuanced, new narratives of the veil. The numerous motivations listed by women to explain the decision to wear the *hijab* caution the reader, regardless of his or her position, against one-dimensional analyses. They also suggest that the veil as a concept/category could not feasibly withstand scrutiny, if it were not for the Western fixation upon it, especially as “singling out a single attribute of local custom, such as the

practice of veiling...often turns out to be relatively unimportant in comparison to overall patterns of sexual ideology and practice” (Lindisfarne-Tapper and Ingham 1997, 16).

Alternative visions of the veil have not, however, yet succeeded in dissipating commonplace stereotypes. Perceptions of the veil are mediated by, and cannot escape, the complex history of the contested cloth. Understanding the politics of representation demands that “we [...] know how, in each particular setting, images of women’s dress are understood to have originated, how they are used, in what contexts, to persuade which audiences of what political advantages, and why?” (Lindisfarne-Tapper and Ingham 1997, 16). More significantly, the endurance of the presumed and willed invisibility of the veiled other unravels the untenability of the modern Western self’s need to structure itself in opposition to its other(s) in order to experience continuity. From this perspective, the self-assertion of visibly Muslim women cannot be tolerated because, no longer oppressed, the other is de–othered: “They should remain different, because I should remain the same: they are/should not be a possibility within my own world, which will thus be different” (Yeğenoğlu 1998, 57). The difficulty is that the veil’s role at the heart of Western identity is not a case of “simple” xenophobia, easily resolved through education or a simple change of outlook. As Yeğenoğlu claims, the “hostility expressed here is the force of negation which constitutes the subject as sovereign, that stern force which drives the machine of his self-production in the dialectical, restricted economy of the production of the self as same” (57). The modern subject endlessly repeats and reproduces the negative narratives woven around the veil, as it must, in order to exist. The history of the veil would then also reveal the deep and vital need of rethinking both the production of self and the relationship with others.

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