



Veiling Between Denigration and Glorification in Algeria

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Abstract

Veiling is a cultural practice that has created controversial debates since colonial intervention in Algeria. Such debates either condemn veils as “oppressive” or deify them as markers of cultural authenticity, and women are often seen either as “victims” of an “oppressive” culture or as “dignified” guardians of a “glorious” culture. Informed by postcolonial feminist scholarship exposing the political motivations of the debates associating women with culture, this paper outlines the history of the controversies about veiling in Algeria, where women’s bodies still serve as a battlefield in power-motivated struggles. The ongoing interpretation of Algerian women’s experiences within dichotomized discourses has harmful consequences on both women and their cultural practice. While veiling is getting mystified due to denigration and glorification, women’s lives are affected in different ways by the polemical debates. The most tangible effect is the violence endured by women because of the growing tensions between the two sides of the debates, which have intangible effects that are also detrimental. These debates are shaping and distorting the attitudes of so many women about veiling. Examined sources show that women’s opinion is divided between advocates and detractors of veiling, and arguments are repetitive of the same inconsistencies created throughout the long history of the power-motivated debates. Interpreting women’s attitudes in the light of dissonance theory shows that both women who advocate veiling and those who condemn it repeat inconsistencies often motivated by defensive purposes, which obscure vision and undermine scrutiny and inquiry in what would help settle the conflictual issues.

Keywords Veil · Algeria · Culture · Religion · Postcolonial feminism · Dissonance theory

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Introduction

Associating women with culture was an early “colonial discourse,”¹ based on the assumption of the inferiority of the colonized cultures, where women were often seen as “oppressed victims.” These assumptions, which were used to justify imperialism and to preserve Western hegemony as demonstrated by postcolonial theory (Said 1979; Bhabha 1994), were refuted by decolonization nationalists who created a counter discourse assuming the superiority of local cultures and requiring women to be the embodiment of cultural authenticity. Common debates about the inferiority/superiority of the colonized cultures discussed the practice of veiling. While veiling was seen by the colonizer as a demonstration of the inferiority of local cultures, it was idealized by decolonization nationalists as an expression of national and religious identity.

These debates have been perpetuated in different ways for a long time. They have been repeated by feminists who decried veiling as an instrument of religious oppression and obstacle to gender equality. They have equally been disseminated by Islamist movements that used religion to justify veiling as a requirement of faith, which elevates women. The same colonial discourse about the victimization of women in culture and the counter discourse defining women as guardians of culture have been reiterated in debates where women’s voices were often appropriated by those who want to “liberate” them from a “patriarchal” religion and an “oppressive” veil and those who require them to be the embodiment of a “glorious” culture. Recently, women’s voices are less marginalized, but many women keep reproducing the same arguments advocated on both sides of the debate.

This paper outlines the history of the debates about veiling in Algeria and shows their effects on women. The choice of Algeria is motivated by the fact that since colonial intervention with veiling, Algerian women’s bodies have often triggered controversies affecting women’s lives negatively. The paper uses written sources to reconstruct the history of the debates and their effects on women. It endeavors to demonstrate that the ongoing interpretation of Algerian women’s experiences within dichotomized discourses has harmful consequences on both women and veiling. It shows that while veiling is getting mystified and stripped of meaning under much manipulation through denigration or glorification, women’s lives are affected in different ways by the polemical debates. The most tangible effect is the violence endured by women because of the growing tensions between the two sides of the debate. The polemics have intangible effects, which are also detrimental. These polarized debates are shaping and distorting the attitudes of so many women regarding veiling.

Examined sources show that women’s attitudes are often shaped by the debates so that opinion is divided between advocates and detractors of veiling, and arguments

¹ ‘Colonial discourse’ is the equivalent of what Edward Said calls “orientalist discourse” which he used to describe how colonialism relied not only on military intervention and political rule to dominate the colonized, but also on a large variety of texts from different disciplines, which associated the will to know the Other with the will to maintain colonial domination (1979).

are repetitive of the same inconsistencies created throughout the long history of the power-motivated debates. Reading women's attitudes in the light of dissonance theory, this paper shows that repeating inconsistent assumptions, women fall prey to distress and discomfort, which motivate dissonance reduction processes accomplished through worldview defense reactions. It also shows that achieving cognitive consistency through defensive reactions obscures women's vision of other perspectives and undermines their ability to scrutinize the arguments they repeat.

My reading of the history of the debates has been informed by postcolonial feminist scholars who have challenged the discourses associating women with culture. Such scholars as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Chandra Mohanty, and Marnia Lazreg have disclosed the reasons behind the continuing reiteration of these discourses by many feminists and by decolonization nationalists. They have demonstrated that while colonial discourse associating women with culture repeated by feminists is aimed to justify imperialism, the counter discourse advocated by nationalists is power motivated too (Spivak 1994; Mohanty 1991, 2003; Lazreg 1988; 1994; 2009).

With focus on veil controversies in Algeria, Marnia Lazreg argues that women's bodies have been ruthlessly used in power-motivated struggles that can be traced in colonial intervention with veiling countered by decolonization nationalists and perpetuated by feminists and Islamist movements (Lazreg 1994). In *Questioning the Veil* (2009), Lazreg questions veiling and its recent resurgence in the Muslim world and in Europe and North America. She explains that the veil "has been so politicized that it threatens to shape and distort the identity of young women and girls throughout the Muslim world as well as in Europe and North America" (Lazreg 2009).

Lazreg shows that the new veiling trend relies on religious rationales to justify veiling; advocates of the veil define it "as religious, even when the religious texts lack clarity and determinacy in the matter;" and "female advocates of veiling wish to make the veil stand for religion and in so doing close the uncertainty and indeterminacy of the religious status of the veil." Lazreg has explored "the various angles of women's reasons and justifications for veiling," including "showing modesty in dress", "protection against sexual harassment" "pride in one's cultural identity", "conviction and piety." She has questioned these rationales in order to draw all the necessary conclusions. The most important conclusion she has reached is that "the veil is its purpose." It has no inherent meaning, but it has historically acquired various meanings, which "combine to obscure the purpose of the veil: the empowerment of a man over a woman in the intimacy of their sexual identity as borne by their bodies." This purpose has been reinforced by male advocates of veiling, who instrumentalized religion to justify veiling while being much interested in "the material visibility of Islam through the hijab [veil] at the expense of both women and their religion." Lazreg has eventually exhorted women to be aware of the complexities of the issue of veiling and to be vigilant about the misappropriation of their sex and their bodies to serve power-motivated struggles (Lazreg 2009).

While the history of the debates about veiling is read in the light of postcolonial feminist theory, women's attitudes to veiling as affected by the debates is read in the light of dissonance theory. Influenced by the debates, many women repeat those same inconsistent arguments which confuse veiling with religion and either denigrate or elevate veils. Holding inconsistent beliefs causes cognitive

dissonance, which motivates people to engage in dissonance reduction according to Leon Festinger and cognitive dissonance theory as recently re-examined (Festinger 1957; Harmon-Jones 2019).

Cognitive dissonance is often summarized as the psychological discomfort caused by the inconsistency between cognitions. Recent studies have demonstrated that “inconsistent cognitions, [...], are experienced as uncomfortable and can activate areas of the brain that process discrepancy-related distress” (McGregor 2019). Under the effect of discomfort, people are motivated to reduce dissonance either by changing dissonant cognitions or by the rationalization of beliefs or behavior in different ways as adding new cognitions consonant with earlier ‘inconsistent’ beliefs which increases the number of ‘consonant’ cognitions in the brain or reducing the importance of dissonant cognitions. Cognitive consistency is rarely achieved through attitude change, as cognitions are often resistant to change. Therefore, cognitive consistency is often reached through the rationalization of beliefs, which reduces the ‘dissonance ratio.’ Harmon-Jones and Mills explain ‘dissonance ratio’ in:

The magnitude of dissonance between one cognitive element and the remainder of the person’s cognitions depends on the number and importance of cognitions that are consonant and dissonant with the one in question. Formally speaking, the magnitude of dissonance equals the number of dissonant cognitions divided by the number of consonant cognitions plus the number of dissonant cognitions. This is referred to as the dissonance ratio (2019).

Cognitive dissonance has negative effects on the individual’s sense of action and sense of prediction as explained by Eddie Harmon-Jones and Cindy Harmon-Jones in their extension of Festinger’s original theory, “When knowledge about the environment, about oneself, or about one’s actions, beliefs, or attitudes is in a dissonant relation, the sense of being able to control and predict outcomes may be threatened, and ultimately, the need to act effectively would be undermined” (Harmon-Jones 2019).

Relevant to the purposes of this paper is research about conflict-related threats. According to Ian McGregor et al. threats often cause cognitive conflicts which motivate distress reduction processes. In face of conflict-related threats, cognitive consistency is accomplished via worldview defense reactions which “often take the form of amalgam defenses that wrap together compensatory convictions about opinions, values, goals, self-worth, and groups [...]. They involve heightened zeal for culturally mediated value systems that one identifies with and strives to morally exemplify.” McGregor et al. explain that “A powerful form of worldview defense is religious zeal. Various conflict-related threats, [...], cause people to amplify their religious zeal, for better or for worse” (McGregor 2019). McGregor et al. have demonstrated experimentally that reactive religious zeal is motivated by self-defensive reactions, not by submission to the will of God. Therefore, even if reactive religious zeal relieves distress, it “may also obscure one’s view of others’ perspectives [...] and facilitate ideological cruelty in the guise of noble cause” (McGregor 2010).

“Oppressed Victims”

As early as the beginning of colonialism, local cultures were decried as antonymic to human progress. Most of the time, arguments tried to prove that local cultures were patriarchal, and women in colonized societies were oppressed victims, who needed colonial intervention to liberate them. For instance, veiled women in Muslim colonized societies were seen as victims of religious oppression, which provided a good opportunity to interfere with the colonized life to change his ‘barbaric’ customs oppressive towards women. Western feminists, with some exceptions, repeated this discourse and called for the liberation of women from religious oppression represented in veils.

In colonial Algeria, the veiled, secluded woman in Algerian cities was the concrete evidence for the colonizer about the primitivism of Algerians and about their need to change. Thus, the French adopted the strategy of what Frantz Fanon called “unveiling” Algeria, that is, regulating families through instituting campaigns of medical assistance and education aimed at women to encourage them towards westernization. These campaigns were aimed to use women as a means of effective colonial domination, as neither health care conditions nor education was prosperous in colonial Algeria (Fanon 1965; Lazreg 1994; Abi-Mershed 2010; Woodhull 1993; Lalami 2008). Another evidence about the little concern of the French for women through the campaigns was the violence exercised against women, who were tortured and raped by the same army officers involved in “the ‘emancipation’ campaign” (Perego 2015; Lazreg 2016; Khanna 2008; Branche 2009).

Colonial attempts to manipulate women and to appropriate their voices were evident in the concrete forced unveiling of women in 1958. To describe this event, Fanon wrote, “French colonialism, on the occasion of May 13th, reenacted its old campaign of westernizing the Algerian woman. Servants under the threat of being fired, poor women dragged from their homes, prostitutes, were brought to the public square and symbolically unveiled to the cries of ‘Vive l’Algérie Française!’” (1965). The unveiling was celebrated as emancipatory by the French, who congratulated themselves through choreographed ceremonies throughout different Algerian cities, unveiling women and burning veils (McMaster 2012). The unveiling was, nonetheless, motivated by the need to achieve better control as explained by Lazreg, “the forced unveiling” of a “handful” of Algerian women was “organized by rebellious French generals in Algiers to show their determination to keep Algeria French” (1994). During a time where the veil started disappearing from Algerian cities among the young women who integrated French schools, the forced unveiling of Algerian women in 1958 had profoundly harmful effects on women’s lives particularly when nationalists used the event to develop their counter discourse, which I will develop below. The unveiling of Algerian women in 1958 demonstrated a colonial desire to control where women’s welfare was neither a concern nor a priority.

Many western feminist scholars repeated colonial discourse. They used colonial ethnographic literature to condemn what they considered the structures of

inequality embedded in indigenous traditions, which they described as responsible for the subjugation of women in non-western countries. For those feminists, the veil was an instrument of the oppression of women by religion and an evidence about the inferiority of Muslim culture. As early as the nineteenth century, M. E. Hume Griffiths described the veil as a living grave, "When Mohammed, acting under what he declared to be a revelation from Allah, introduced the use of the veil, he swept away forever all hope of happiness for Moslem women. By means of the veil, he immured them forever in a living grave" (1909).

In the twentieth century, the veil was associated with the oppression of women by religion for feminists as Simone De Beauvoir, Juliette Mincés, Kate Millett, Elisabeth Badinter, Patricia Jeffrey and Francine Pelletier among others, who engaged in debates aimed to liberate "Muslim women" from the yoke of religious oppression. For instance, Simone De Beauvoir, who emphasized the universal victimization of women, declared in *The Second Sex* that "The veiled and sequestered Moslem woman is still today in most social strata a kind of slave" (1956). Likewise, Juliette Mincés equated veiling with female genital operations, which she described as "two symbols of women's oppression" (1980). While claiming objectivity in the foreword of her book *La Femme dans le monde arabe*—translated into *The House of Obedience*, Mincés put the "Arab world" in one entity making easy generalizations and sometimes inaccurate portrayals of women's veils. For instance, describing the veil of women in some eastern regions in Algeria, Mincés description was inaccurate when she wrote, "Certain eastern regions in Algeria favor the black veil, a long cloak which covers the entire face and body except for one eye" (1980). Here, Mincés seems to mix between two styles of veiling, which were common in different regions in Algeria, and each region had its own style, which was functional with the climate, mores and manners and even historical circumstances of the region. Mincés's prejudice about veiling blinded her from seeing the variety of the styles of veils and of women's uses of their cultural instruments.

"Guardians of Tradition"

Associating women with culture was repeated, but with a difference. The same old colonial discourse, which fused women with culture and tradition, was adopted by Algerian nationalist leaders in their fight against colonialism. During anti-colonial struggles, nationalists advocated veiling as the embodiment of national and religious identity. In contemporary Algeria, the same arguments have been reproduced by Islamist movements, which emerged when the country moved to a multi-party parliamentary system. The latter put much more emphasis on the religious status of the veil.

In colonial Algeria, the history of veiling fluctuated between colonial and nationalist intervention. As already noted, colonial interference with women's lives was concretized with the unveiling of 1958. After this event, as witnessed by Frantz Fanon, the immediate response of many women "who had long since dropped the veil once again donned the *haik* [veil], thus affirming that it was not true that woman liberated herself at the invitation of France and of General de Gaulle" (1965). While women's

immediate response reflected a personal choice, the response of Algerian males to the event stripped women of choice. Nationalist leaders and most men in society advocated the need for veiling or re-veiling as a means of resistance to French rule, and unveiled women were soon demonized and “fiercely flung” into “the camp of evil and deprivation” as witnessed by Fanon (1965). Thus, this event, which stands as the most significant indicator of the colonial association between women and culture, is also significant to show the association between women and tradition by nationalists, who also misappropriated women’s voices and choices vis-à-vis veiling.

In postcolonial Algeria, the re-veiling trend which started as early as the 1970s in the Middle East has its effects on women. The veil was defended as a religious requirement by Islamist movements who found in veils the most esteemed practice which would make visible the change they aspired to achieve to save the *ummah*—nation—from degradation and disintegration. These movements insisted on the religious rationale for veiling, and the veil was given new significance, new criteria and even a new name, that distinguished it from the traditional veils. The new veil was called *hijab* and was advocated as *fardh*—a religious obligation, with various merits and requirements. The *hijab* replaced traditional veils, which until around 1990s continued to be worn by a few women, mostly non-working and unschooled women; who later shifted to the new style. Elevated to the rank of religious obligations as opposed to the traditional veil, which was consecrated by custom, *hijab* turned into the marker of a religious identity par excellence.

During the 1980s and 1990s, Islamist movements started socializing women with the new style of veiling or *hijab*. The *hijab* had to respect specific conditions that were the subject of books and recorded lectures in the form of audio cassettes and CDs available everywhere. With the spread of television satellites, *hijab* lectures were easily available at home. The lectures explained to women the criteria of the Islamic or *shari’ah*—legal—*hijab*, including the parts of the body that should be covered and the conditions of the dress, which should not be transparent, attractive or reveal the figure and should not resemble the clothes of men or those of unbelievers. The *hijab* was represented as the exclusive sign of virtue. Women were taught that the *hijab* was the only condition to gain God’s blessings and to save their souls, as without their veils, they will be cursed and none of their other virtues would help them against God’s wrath in this life and the hereafter.

Hijabs were glorified not only as a condition to save women’s souls but the *ummah’s* salvation too. Women were, therefore, taught that their veils were armors against the westernization of society. Parents were counselled to socialize their daughters in the veiling tradition before they got tempted by western clothing styles. Unveiled women were stigmatized *moutabarijates*—women who reveal their beauty—a word pregnant with negative connotations. They were blamed for refraining progress and the salvation of the *ummah*.²

In the 1990s, veiling was used as an important tool to achieve political influence by the opposition party Front Islamique du Salut (FIS).³ FIS used proselytizing to

² The literature advocating veiling as a religious requirement is now available through multiple websites, and it is still influencing women’s attitudes to veiling.

³ A popular Islamist political party which won success in the 1990s but was dismantled later.

influence women wear the *hijab*, presented as God's undisputable commandment necessary for salvation and the achievement of required change. Through political action, FIS wanted to invest in the 'education' of women about the merits of veiling, as explained by one its leaders, for whom women who "do not like to wear the veil" are "victims" of the state and western media:

Our line of conduct is aimed at education. We have a very clear program which we want to achieve through education and persuasion. Algerian women are Muslims, yet they do not like to wear the veil, because they are victims of the government and the influence exerted by the European media, which instill a fear of the Islamic system in their hearts (qtd. in MEW 1992).

Veil controversies were particularly boiling during the 1990s, which was also a period of civil unrest characterized by ravaging violence. During this period known in the Algerian history as the "Black Decade," women paid the heavy penalties of this violence instigated by a race for political power as violence started after the annulment of the first democratic elections won by FIS. In *Guerre Invisible*, French historian Benjamin Stora reports, "L'Algérie des années 1992–1999 présente la 'particularité' d'être ce pays où la violence à l'égard des femmes est des plus atroces. Ainsi, le gouvernement annonce, le 22 décembre 1994, que 211 femmes ont été assassinées depuis décembre 1993, avec viols, mutilations, décapitations" (Stora 2001) "Algeria of the years 1992–1999 has the 'peculiarity' of being a country where violence against women is the most atrocious. Thus, the government announces, on December 22, 1994, that 211 women have been killed since December 1993, with rapes, mutilations, decapitations."⁴ In 1994 in Algiers, the veil controversy reached its highest when armed groups who were speaking in the name of Islam killed young unveiled women for the refusal to don the veil, and another opponent group killed veiled women to retaliate⁵ (Lazreg 1994; Roberts 1917).

All in all, it has always been in the name of change that women were compelled, sometimes coercively and at times through proselytizing to manifest change through their bodies. Just like the ex-colonizer who needed a tangible evidence about the success of the "civilizing mission" through forced unveiling, male leaderships in both decolonization and the Islamist opposition parties needed to see "the material visibility" of the success of their political projects at the expense of women.

⁴ The translations from French are my own throughout the paper.

⁵ The literature about the perpetrators of violence in the 1990s is highly controversial. Many sources repeat the thesis of the Algerian authorities accusing the dismantled party FIS for all the atrocities against civilians and especially against unveiled women (Djerbal 2003; Salhi 2010; Ghanem 2019). Yet other sources emphasize the responsibility of the Algerian state and the military for much of the violence endured by women and all Algerians. Relying on the testimonies of the survivors of violence and officers deserting the army, this second thesis argues that the state and the military are largely responsible for that violence (Pennell 2019; Roberts 1917; Bedjaoui 1999; Ladewig 2014). Whoever the perpetrators were, it seems that once again, women's bodies and their lives were enlisted as a battlefield for political struggles.

Veiling and God's Veiled Truth

Veiling, a local custom, has become a discourse following colonial intervention as shown in the previous section. Halting veils as a symbol of oppression by religion and denigrating Islam as a religion oppressive to women has been faced by the counter discourse about Islam as a religion which exalts women through veils, elevated to the rank of religious obligations. In their attempt to defend veiling against western denigration, the Muslim *faqih*—jurists, who defended veiling as a religious obligation, have also discouraged attempts to re-examine the Quranic texts and hadiths—prophet's sayings—about veiling. Therefore, the argument defending veiling as *fardh* has long been adapted in Islamic jurisprudence—*fikh*—as a ruling closed to further inquiry (Abou El Fadl 2014). For instance, following recent controversies about veiling, Al-Azhar Fatwa Global Center⁶ issued a statement, which warns against the reinterpretation of Quranic texts about veiling, broadcasted via the Facebook page of the Center. The statement says, “The veil is an obligation proven obligatory by Quranic texts [...] closed to *ijtihad*,⁷ and no one has the right to contradict established rulings; additionally, it is not permissible for the public or non-specialists—whatever their intellectual ability—to delve into them.”⁸

Remarkably, though claimed to be a fatwa—legal ruling, the text of the statement has been changed within a few days. The phrase “closed to *ijtihad*,” which exists in the original text published on 21/11/ 2020, has been removed a few days later—on 28/11/2019.⁹ While the restrictions against rereading the text are not removed from the broadcasted statement, the removal of the phrase “closed to *ijtihad*” which adds emphasis and gives a legal status to the statement, casts doubt on the fatwa. Are the “specialized” jurists not certain about their fatwa? Do they doubt the mandatory nature of the “established ruling”? What is the purpose of discouraging further inquiry and scrutiny? If the “specialized” jurists are so certain that the text tolerates only one meaning, why defend its re-examination through further scrutiny? Wouldn't re-examining the text help approve and confirm the “established ruling” and, consequently, God's intent to a global believer who might not be satisfied with believing without scrutinizing and understanding the justifications and reasons of a command? How can their statement with such hesitation help women gain a clear and consistent understanding about the command, defended as communicating God's intent addressed to a global Muslim audience?

Such an approach, which imposes only one and single interpretation of the Quranic text about veiling, has harmful effects on both text and women. According

⁶ “Al-Azhar” is a prestigious university for Islamic studies in Egypt, “*Fatwa*” is the Arabic word for legal ruling. Al-Azhar Fatwa Global Center is an electronic religious center in charge of interpreting Islamic legal rules to Muslims around the world.

⁷ *Ijtihad* in “Islamic law is the independent or original interpretation of problems not precisely covered by the Quran, Hadith (traditions concerning the Prophet Muhammad's life and utterances), and *ijma'* (scholarly consensus)” (Britannica 2018).

⁸ The excerpt is translated from Arabic by the author.

⁹ The changes can be tracked in the history of modification on the Facebook page where the statement is published.

to Khaled About El Fadl, “closing the text” to interpretation results in “usurping the Divine Will and marginalizing the text” and eventually, veiling God’s intent (About El Fadl 2014). To impose on the Quranic text a single reading, closing it to further scrutiny, is a transgression against a religious heritage that many women in Algeria and in the diaspora hold dear to their hearts and souls. Those women feel so proud to belong to and stand ready to bend to the requirements of this heritage, sometimes unquestionably, trustful and in deference to the expertise of the “specialized” authority. The latter are, however, much interested in “the material visibility of Islam through the *hijab* at the expense of both women and their religion” as Marnia Lazreg puts it (2009). Due to the overemphasis on the importance of the female body and how it should appear, the physical ended up having a clear supremacy over all other attributes in defining this heritage and in shaping women’s attitudes to veiling.

Veiling and Women’s Dissonance

Throughout those controversies, and through denigration and glorification, veiling, which is now increasingly common worldwide, has acquired multiple meanings that are fraught with ambiguity, inconsistency and contradictions. It has been a symbol of oppression, an obstacle to equality and women’s freedom, an expression of national and or religious identity, a symbol of protection and a sign of virtue and cultural pride among others. In Algeria, the controversial debates are shaping the attitudes of many women about veiling. Multiple sources representing women’s attitudes to veiling show that while some women repeat colonial discourse and decry veils as an expression of religious oppression, others reproduce the counter discourse while defending the merits of veiling with emphasis on the religious rationales. I will examine women’s attitudes in the light of dissonance theory.

Veiling: A Religious Curse

The veil is considered by some Algerian women as a symbol of religious oppression. This attitude is commonly held among feminists influenced by French feminism as represented by Simone de Beauvoir decrying the universal victimization of women and by radical orientations in feminist criticism which emphasize the need to challenge the patriarchal roots of gender inequality through focus on culture change defended by such feminists as Mary Daly and Kate Millet.

For instance, Algerian feminist, Wassila Tamazali, finds in the veil all the evils decryed by early Western feminists and much more. She claims that the veil is more than a symbol of oppression; it is a catalyst of gendered violence and sexual harassment recommended by religion. Interviewed by Monique Durand, a Canadian independent journalist, in *Gazette des Femmes*, September 23, 2014, Tamzali condemns Islam as a religion of inequality, where the veil not only stands as a symbol of inequality, but it also accelerates sexual deviance and exposes women to gendered violence in the Arab and Muslim societies. She claims, “Il n’y a pas d’égalité dans le Coran,” “There is no equality in the Qur’an,” where

the veil has been established to curb the desire of men, who turn violent against women because of thwarted sexuality. She reports that the Arab streets are getting erotized “Les rues arabes s’erotisent” as sexual repression causes serious pathological deviances that result in the most barbaric acts against women.

The Canadian journalist interviewing Tamzali has been a happy listener while attending to the overstated claims of the Algerian feminist who makes easy generalizations about the causes of a supposedly gendered violence ravaging all the Arab streets. She has required no evidence from her interviewee, yet to make her exaggerated tone and groundless claims seem accurate, she adds that the Algerian feminist lives in Algiers and knows the whole Maghreb squeezing “the Arab streets” that the Algerian feminist claims to know in “Algiers and the Maghreb.”

Additionally, Tamzali describes Muslim women as unconscious victims, whose apparent social success occupying different jobs in society does not reflect an improvement in their status. Despite their achievements, women are still victims; their apparent success shifts them to become the victims of political systems that deny them, insists Tamzali. Tamzali even criticizes postmodern feminists and their arguments in support of cultural relativism. She accuses them of amnesia as they have forgotten their fight against patriarchy and the universal victimization of women.

Tamzali, therefore, writes a book entitled *Une femme en colère. Lettre d’Alger aux Européens disabusées* (2009), where she blames European feminists who show reluctance to support women in the Arab and Muslim societies in their fight against patriarchy. She claims that this fight could be achieved through desacralizing Islam, which imposes dress codes and controls women’s sexuality. She argues that women in Europe got liberated from such control thanks to desacralizing Christianity, and women in ‘Muslim’ societies need the support of all European feminists to gain their battle against Islam (2009).

Similar attitudes are held by another Algerian feminist, Khalida Messaoudi, who also hurried to gain the support of western feminists and western media to help the Algerian women “victims” of Islamic fundamentalism in her book *Une Algérienne debout* translated into English as *Unbowed: An Algerian Woman Confronts Islamic Fundamentalism* (1998). “The title of the book in French simply means an Algerian (woman) Standing or An Algerian (woman) Stands up rather than the sensationalist English title which plays up the ‘War on Terror’ and fear of Islamic fundamentalism” comments Teresa Camacho Abes, skeptical about the overtones of victimization and heroism of the Algerian feminist (Abes 2011).

Through a series of interviews with the French journalist Elisabeth Schemla, Messaoudi reflects about her experiences fighting for women’s rights under the threat of “Islamic fundamentalism,” with many flashbacks to women’s lives in colonial Algeria. The book reinforces orientalist prejudice about the restricted existence of women in colonial Algeria, where seclusion and veiling stand as indicators of women’s oppression for Messaoudi. She returns to those themes through dramatizing the seclusion and veiling of her mother, who, however, possesses an exceptional sense of freedom and wisdom that other women lack since the latter “keep quiet or only echo their husbands’ wishes,” claims Messaoudi (1998).

In her zeal to reinforce colonial prejudice, Algerian feminist refutes her own arguments about the “luckier fate” of the unveiled non-secluded women in Kabyle villages when she writes answering her interviewer who reminds her about her earlier claims, “The fact that these women don’t wear a veil does not at all mean that they enjoy equality. [...] In our mountain villages, these women work, and they lead a hard life. They can’t wear a long robe that impedes their movement,” she contends. Then wanting too much to please, Messaoudi has gone too far in mystifying the condition of those women saying “If they have jewelry on their ankles, it isn’t to be pretty but to protect that naked part of their bodies from the gaze of men” (1998). With such a reductive representation where even jewels serve as veils, the Algerian feminist has surpassed even colonial literature in orientalizing Algerian women’s lives.

Paradoxically, after years of activism ‘standing up’ for women’s rights, and after all her efforts to convince the “West” about the need to intervene in order to save Algerian womanhood from the shackles of the “patriarchal” culture she has represented in her book, Messaoudi did nothing to help improve women’s condition when she was given the chance to do it after her appointment as a Minister of Communication and Culture. She, however, used her position to silence criticism against the corruption and despotism of the Bouteflika government, recently dethroned after a popular uprising (Cazeaux 2013).

While they have little concern for the fate of women and little knowledge about the culture they denigrate and describe as oppressive, Algerian feminists who repeat colonial discourse seem haunted by the rhetoric of women’s victimization. They, therefore, see oppression everywhere, in women’s veils, in their jewels, and even in their achievements. Sometimes through exaggerated overtones of victimization and others through a celebration of their heroism to challenge oppression, those feminists seem obsessively concerned to fit with the requirements of a “feminism,” which seems to deny them despite their efforts.

Reading feminists’ conflictual claims in the light of dissonance theory reveals a state of distress caused by threat. Feminists’ exaggerated claims about the victimization of women in the Algerian society seem to be motivated by palliative defensive purposes. Women’s desire to be accepted in the fellowship of “western” feminism as equal advocates of a feminist ideology decrying the universal victimization of women reciprocated by threats of rejection highlight a situation of “simultaneously accessible discrepancies.” According to Ian McGregor et al., holding simultaneous inconsistent cognitions, which often occur in conflict-related threats, causes people “to react with exaggerated conviction about their social-issue opinions, identity commitments, and in-group biases” (2019). Algerian feminists’ conflict-related threat—desire for inclusion and threat of rejection—causes them to react with exaggerated conviction about their opinions regarding the issue of veiling and that of women’s position in the Algerian society. They, therefore, can reduce distress in a way that neither helps clarify women’s lived reality nor settle the biases.

Holding exaggerated claims of victimization is a reactive attitude which undermines effective action. Notably, instead of scrutinizing Algerian women’s challenges whether against a past “patriarchal” order or a present day “gender inequality,” “gendered violence,” “sexual harassment,” or “political denial,” these feminists who

claim to speak for Algerian womanhood have reinforced biases risking the effacement of women's lived reality. To inscribe Algerian women's past struggles and challenges within the reductive rhetoric of victimization creates new myths about Algerian women—who use jewelry “to protect that naked part of their bodies from the gaze of men.” Equally, to inscribe women's present-day challenges or achievements within the reductive conception of the “unconscious victim” risks the mystification of Algerian women's present-day experiences.

Veiling, a Religious Blessing

Conversely, influenced by the counter argument emphasizing the religious rationales for veiling, many women defend veiling as a requirement of faith with multiple merits. For instance, in contemporary Algeria where veiling is increasingly common, most veiled women claim that their motivations for veiling are religious and argue that veiling is a religious duty. However, recent studies show that neither women's religious knowledge about veiling nor their new veiling styles, which follow fashion and modernity, reflect religiosity.

According to Algerian sociologist Zoubir Arous, the *hijab* in contemporary Algeria has lost the religious connotations associated with it in the 1980s and 1990s. The *hijab* is no longer a sign of piety, modesty, or religiosity. It is becoming a social practice that takes into consideration fashion and the spirit of the times, confirms Arous as reported in *Radio voix de femmes* on July 20, 2015. Veiling is motivated by social norms, and it reflects social changes rather than religious convictions demonstrates a recent study about the widespread rise in veiling—*hijab*—in Algeria (Bouchareb 2017). The study is based on a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the phenomenon of veiling, where a sample of 200 veiled women have been interviewed. 82.02% argue that *hijab* is *fardh*—religious obligation. The study shows that though the sample of the study is vigilantly chosen among academics, the respondents could not hold a coherent argument about veiling; their perception of veiling stems from a concern for social considerations rather than religious convictions, even if they claim that their motivations for veiling are religious.

The study shows that though 82.02% emphasize that veiling is *fardh*, which justifies their choice to wear *hijab*, the respondents have a remarkably weak knowledge about the Quranic texts or the prophet's Sunnah referring to veiling. The significance they attribute to *hijab* could not go beyond what is common in society about veils as *sutra* (protection). They, in addition, completely ignore the uses and nuances of meaning of the veil terminology—*hijab*, *khimar*, and *jilbab*—as used in the Quran. Despite their ignorance, some respondents could add that all other women's virtues are worthless if unveiled, and some repeat that an unveiled woman is cursed by angels (Bouchareb 2017).

Besides the inconsistency of beliefs about veiling, the study also shows that the respondents' behavior contradicts their beliefs as reflected in their veiling styles. Caught between the need to manage their bodies freely but also the need to respect the requirements of what is believed as a ‘religious’ duty, many women in Algeria take up new styles of *hijab*. Irrespective of the restrictions of the

shari'ah—legal—*hijab*, which imposes the concealment of the female body, the new *hijab* styles follow fashion and allow women to reveal rather than conceal their beauty. Their new fashionable *hijab*, therefore, neither denies religious restrictions nor recognizes them. In Bouchareb's study, many respondents, who claim that their motivations for veiling are religious, fail to respect the criteria of *shari'ah hijab*. Statistically, 52.80% of the respondents in the study claim that their veils do not respect *shari'ah* criteria for veiling, and about 70.95% justify their behaviour by the need to follow fashion. Paradoxically, even if the fashion *hijab*, which reveals more than conceals the body, goes against an adamant justification for mandating *hijab*—concealment of the female body—women still argue that their veils reflect their obedience to a religious obligation.

Holding conflicting beliefs and behaving in ways that contradict beliefs often result in cognitive dissonance, which is ultimately reduced through attitude change or the rationalization of beliefs or behavior in different ways according to dissonance theory. The inconsistency in women's beliefs about veiling and their contradictory behavior as reflected in fashion *hijabs* shows that the cognitive dissonance experienced has not been reduced by changing or removing dissonant cognitions. On the contrary, dissonance reduction is achieved through the less rational ways such as adding new cognitions consonant with what they already know and reducing the importance of the dissonant cognitions, which obscures women's vision and undermines "their need to act effectively."

Holding dissonant beliefs mostly defined by the controversial counter arguments about veiling, not only do most respondents in the study obey "the command" exhorting veiling as a religious obligation without scrutinizing the justifications, but some recklessly defend arguments that they have unquestionably accepted. To overcome the discomfort caused by holding inconsistent beliefs—defending veiling as a religious obligation while ignorant about religious texts justifying claims—the respondents resort to "adding new consonant cognitions" in alignment with their attitude as when they repeat that women's worthiness is determined by veiling and an unveiled woman is cursed.

Likewise, the women who adhere to fashion while justifying their veils as religious seem to be motivated to overcome the dissonance resulting from the inconsistency between belief and actions by decreasing the importance of the inconsistent cognitions rather than changing dissonant behavior or belief. These women reduce dissonance by ignoring the inconsistent behavior while insisting that their fashion *hijab* is religious despite appearances. Eventually, though the dissonance might be reduced, women fall prey to self-delusion.

The social media controversies about the issue of veiling provide for many examples about the cognitive inconsistency of Algerian women wearing their 'religion' instead of living by its morals and values. The hashtag "veiled and proud" is significant to our context. This hashtag was launched by two young veiled journalists, using social media—Facebook and Instagram—in reaction to the declarations of another journalist claiming that the *hijab* in Algeria has lost its religious significance, and it becomes a social phenomenon. The hashtag was supported by many followers who, as did the journalists, shared photos of veiled women in fashion style *hijabs*. Despite evidence as reflected in fashion veils, which contradict the *shari'ah*

criteria for veiling, these women reject the information stating that women's veiling in Algeria obeys social rather than religious considerations, a fact that has also been demonstrated by scientific research.

Following the theory of cognitive dissonance, being exposed to belief-discrepant information often arouses dissonance that people would seek to overcome either by changing beliefs or engaging in the rationalization of beliefs to reduce dissonance. Harmon-Jones and Mills explain that "Dissonance is aroused when people are exposed to information that is inconsistent with their beliefs. If the dissonance is not reduced by changing one's belief, the dissonance can lead to misperception or misinterpretation of the information, rejection or refutation of the information, seeking support from those who agree with one's belief, and attempting to persuade others to accept one's belief" (2019).

Under the influence of veil controversies, where veils are glorified through religious justification, changing beliefs and accepting the recent information put at risk the glorification frame of women's practices. Therefore, to reduce the discomfort caused by the recent information inconsistent with their beliefs, the women, who insisted on the religiosity of their veils, went for the refutation of the discrepant information, and they used the hashtag to seek the support of the community.

Such an attitude can also be interpreted as reactive religious zeal motivated by self-defence rather than by submission to the will of God. In face of the threatening recent information, women's reaction is motivated by the need to achieve cognitive consistency. Probably, the women who reacted defensively through the hashtag and those who supported them would feel comfort, especially after having their beliefs supported and validated by the community.

Refuting recent information through worldview defense reactions obscures women's view of others' perspectives and undermines self-scrutiny and effective action. Although refuting discrepant information allows reducing dissonance by increasing the ratio of cognitions consistent with earlier beliefs, the women's sense of acting effectively seems seriously undermined. Instead of scrutinizing the recent information and questioning their beliefs and actions, those women hurried to a defensive reaction, taking part in the polemical debate through glorifying veiling and adding cognitions consonant with their beliefs as the celebration of *hijab* as a sign of cultural pride. Importantly, not only is women's sense of acting effectively undermined, but their sense of cultural pride seems reductive. By stretching the meanings and the merits of veiling to include also cultural pride, the women seem to reduce a "complex Islamic culture to a contested custom" that "embeds women's 'choice' in a narrative of advocacy for the veil that transcends the goal of achieving cultural pride" as Marnia Lazreg has persuasively argued in refuting the argument suggesting that veils are a sign of pride in one's culture (2009).

Adding a new meaning to the long list of religious rationales used to justify veiling increases the list of (in)consistent cognitions created in the process of dissonance reduction, relying on increasing the ratio of cognitions consistent with earlier beliefs. Those beliefs rely on a text closed to questioning and re-interpretation by the "specialized" authority, which discourages women from engaging in attitude change whenever their beliefs are challenged. Therefore, whenever the earlier beliefs are questioned, leading to cognitive dissonance and discomfort, consistency is achieved

through worldview defense reactions which often result in adding new (in)consistent cognitions equal to the earlier beliefs. Additionally, even when women fail to align beliefs and behavior—as with fashion *hijab*—the dissonance reduction process is achieved through decreasing the importance of the inconsistent behavior rather than attitude change, which requires questioning the text closed to interpretation. Adding (in)consistent cognitions equal to earlier beliefs, which have been proved inconsistent, or decreasing the importance of inconsistent cognitions are self-justifying, self-defensive strategies, which undermine self-scrutiny and change.

Overall, in a society where women's bodies have been a battlefield of power motivated controversies for a long time, women's attitudes to veiling are often shaped by the same arguments that have ever been repeated in both sides of the polemical debates. The women who repeat colonial discourse often hold exaggerated claims about women's victimization deploring veils as a symbol of oppression and gender inequality. They are motivated by defensive purposes against the threat of being denied as equal advocates of a feminist ideology decrying the universal victimization of women. Likewise, the women who glorify veils and insist on the religious rationales for veiling fall prey to distress, which motivates dissonance reduction processes relying on the rationalization of their beliefs instead of rising to the challenge of questioning and scrutinizing beliefs. They often react with religious zeal when their beliefs are challenged.

Women's exaggerated conviction about their opinions or their rationalization of beliefs are defensive reactions that women turn to in order to reduce the distress caused by holding inconsistent beliefs. These defenses reduce distress but obscure women's view of others' perspectives and undermine scrutiny and effective questioning of conflictual issues.

Conclusion

To conclude, using colonial binary opposition between superior and inferior cultures to interpret women's experiences created a long-lasting heated debate between those repeating arguments about the victimization of women in culture and those inverting the equation by creating a counter discourse glorifying culture and the role of women within. Such debates, which proved power motivated, have little interest if any in cultural practices and less in women's wellbeing. They, on the contrary, have caused harmful consequences on both cultures and women. A good example are the debates about veiling in Algeria, where since colonial intervention with this custom, women's bodies have been used as a battlefield of a power-motivated discourse affecting women's lives and the veiling tradition in different ways. While veiling has been much manipulated to become mystified and stripped of meaning, the polemical debates have also detrimental effects on women.

The controversies about veiling in Algeria show that this cultural practice has been manipulated while getting denigrated or glorified at both sides of the heating debate. Decried as an expression of religious oppression, a catalyst for sexual deviance and gendered violence or glorified as a requirement of faith and defended as an expression of national and religious identity, a means of protection, and a sign

of virtue and pride in one's cultural heritage, the veil grows far unintelligible. The history of the debates also shows that many women have paid the highest price of the growing tension between the debaters, who mostly respond to power-motivated political agendas regardless of cultural authenticity and less of women's wellbeing.

The debates have detrimental effects on women, especially those who reproduce the same arguments produced throughout this long history of veil controversies. Examples of the effects of veil controversies on women show that when women have acquired a voice in the debate, their voices are often repetitive of either the biased arguments denigrating veiling and religion or the defensive counterarguments glorifying veils as a religious requirement. Repeating those arguments, women fall prey to various kinds of inconsistencies which undermine their sense of action and inhibit scrutiny and inquiry in what would help settle the conflictual issues risking the mystification of Algerian women's experiences.

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