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Unveiling the Veil: Debunking the Stereotypes of Muslim Women

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Unveiling the Veil:
Debunking the Stereotypes of Muslim Women

*A Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Masters of Liberal Studies*

by
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Chapter I: Introduction

[...alarm clock sounding, displaying 7:00am...]

Laila turns over to switch off her alarm clock. Today is a new day and the first day of high school. She walks to her closet to find what outfit she will wear. For every teenage girl, this can be a challenge. However, for Laila, the decision is much more difficult.

She has lived her entire life in the United States, but was raised as a Muslim and values both her American culture, as well as her Islamic identity. Today she awoke thinking about this and has decided that if she will wear the hijab, today will be the day to start.

She thinks about God, Allah, and their relationship. It is strong, one that she is confident in, and she is proud to be Muslim. She thinks about the women in her family who have chosen to wear the hijab and those who have decided not to. She wonders if their decision to wear the hijab was as conflicting as it has been for her. She thinks about other women she knows that wear a veil, like Mrs. Goldberg, from down the street, who is always so careful to cover her hair in observance of *tzniut*, especially on her way to the synagogue. She also thinks about Mary, Mother of Jesus, and Mother Teresa and the countless images she has seen where they both covered their head. All of the women she knows who wear a veil of some sort do so in honor and with love for God.

Then Laila thinks about the city and country she lives in. She knows the decision to veil is solely hers and her parents have not tried to sway her to wear the hijab or not. She wonders if she will be able to keep her old friends or if she will be able to make new ones. She wonders what will be said about her and how people will treat her. She thinks about her public school and if the teachers will treat her differently or if she will be ignored all together. She has heard some stories from other girls that veil and the anxiety starts to grow within her.

What will Laila decide? For many Muslim girls, this struggle is very real and, for most, it does not stop once an initial decision is made. For many women, the decision to veil or not continues throughout the rest of their lives.

It is not unusual for people to express prejudices against others who look or act differently than the predominant culture. These differences, while they may be miniscule, become such a focus that they come to represent the "Other" emphatically, regardless how small the differences are. To break down some of these barriers, some background on Islam and its culture is necessary.

Islam is the second largest religion, after Christianity, and is the fastest growing religion in the world. Their prophet, Muhammad, is thought to be the last prophet of the Abrahamic religions, and Islam recognizes many of the prophets within Judaism and Christianity, including Jesus. There are five pillars that are required for Muslims to follow. The first is the *Shahadah*, which is the oath and declaration of faith believers pledge to the religion. Next is the daily prayer, *Salat*, which is performed five times a day to remind them of God. Third, *zakat*, which

asks that the believers share a portion of their annual income with the poor and is usually reserved for Muslims that are financially able to. The fourth pillar is fasting—*sawm*—which asks Muslims to not take any food or drink from sun up to sun down during the month of Ramadhan. The last pillar is the pilgrimage, or *hajj*, to Mecca. Muslims who are physically and financially able are asked to make this journey at least once in their lifetime. The term Muslim means “one who submits” and Islam itself means submission. Muslims look to the Qur’an and *hadiths* to provide guidance in their lives and follow their interpretation of what it means to be a devoted Muslim. While these few facts are by no means comprehensive, they represent a brief overview of the key points within Islam.

One of the outward observations of the Islamic religion is the hijab, a veil that covers the head, neck, and chest. Muslim women wear the hijab, or similar covering, most often by choice, and it reminds them of the modesty that Islam requires. This modesty is not only required in their attire, but also in their actions and it is not limited to women only. Yet, this symbol of modesty is often attacked and tainted, leaving many outsiders to question the women who wear them and their Islamic culture.

While many Westerners believe that Muslim women are forced to wear the hijab, this is not the case everywhere in the world, especially in the United States. The United States is a free nation and, as such, many Muslims come to the States and then decide to veil or not. However, societal opinion to not veil in the United States can pressure women to avoid wearing the hijab, resulting with some Muslim women feeling forced to abandon their cultural or religious beliefs.

So, where is the balance? Why are some Americans so fixated on the hijab and the women who wear them? Is it that Non-Muslim Americans are just fearful of the perceived Other? Why does Western culture force its notions of Western feminism upon a group that has its own feminist thought? In an attempt to answer these questions, I explored the topic in hopes of understanding how the Western world can better accept Muslim women and the religion of Islam. My research included interviews with women in Central Florida whose perspectives, as they struggle to interpret the religion for themselves while simultaneously dealing with prejudices, were enlightening. By examining the history of the veil and the Western misconceptions surrounding it, I contend that women wear (or do not wear) the hijab for complex reasons, underscored by the oppressiveness of Western culture.

The history of veiling—which historically has not meant the oppression of women—started much earlier than the religion of Islam and was first recorded in 1300BC. In fact, many women of ancient Western civilizations wore some sort of veil. To veil during this time represented prestige and honor, and was usually limited to the wealthy and powerful. As time went on, Muslim women began to wear the hijab and this became the cultural norm amongst women in the Middle East. While Muslim women today are among the last to wear a veil, the covering of women's hair is still controversial. Due to the Western cultural perspective of veiling and the pressure many Middle Eastern countries feel in order to be inclusive, many of the aforementioned countries have gone through periods of forced veiling and unveiling, leaving many women conflicted in regards to the

hijab. Yet, in the last few decades, many women and the countries in which Islam is the predominant religion have returned to the veil in an effort to show their rejection of the larger Western culture that has been integrated in the Middle East. Similarly, some women have started to veil or unveil to make a political statement. While many debate the reasons women veil, there are equally complex debates about feminism within the Middle East, with many scholars arguing over what feminism looks like and how to address the concerns of women within Islam. Currently, the arguments around veiling are multilayered and complex, with reasons ranging from political statements to accepting the veil as the traditional, cultural dress.

By looking at the history of the veil, there are some interesting, and often conflicting, reasons Muslims feel it is (or is not) required of women. Referencing the often-cited verses from the Qur'an and the *hadiths*, there are various verses commonly used to validate the wearing of the hijab. This however becomes complicated, as translators may interpret the same word differently and each word could support or discredit a verse. Furthermore, emphasis on one word or another alters the meaning of the verse in question. The Qur'an is noted as the most trustworthy source a Muslim can reference, yet there is much debate over whether a specific verse requests women to veil. This leads many to the *hadiths* where there are more detailed verses regarding veiling. However, there are many who argue the authenticity of what is found in the *hadiths*, as much of this work has been passed down and if there is not a clear link to the original source it is often thought to be false. By looking at the sources that many Muslims consult, I

gained a better idea of the arguments made, and discovered the core of the hijab's complexity.

As we move to the next segment, I looked at the common misconceptions that are consistently presented through Western media. Among the news stories, government officials' speeches, and the entertainment industry as a whole, Muslim women are consistently shown in one of two ways: the oppressed and helpless woman or the terrorist to be feared. Here we see how Islamophobic the Western world is and how the media has contributed to this, creating more fear and misunderstandings. Looking at the media and entertainment industries allows us to grasp just how much these industries influence Western thought and the oppressive nature of their stories. By calling attention to this issue, one cannot help but recognize that the culture from which these Muslim women come is not the oppressor, but rather the West that forces its ideals of freedom upon Islamic culture.

The final chapter of this thesis will reveal the findings from the discussions I was privileged to have with some of Central Florida's Muslim women, who varied in ages and ancestry, and who will all remain anonymous. In speaking with them, the diversity within the Muslim community became evident. However, all of the women I spoke with, whether they veiled or not, held similar beliefs regarding the difficulties one can have if they choose to veil. In one way or another, wearing the hijab is a daily struggle for a Muslim woman in a non-Islamic culture. These women agreed that the daily struggle seemed worth it at the end of the day. In completing these interviews, I gained a more realistic view of what the hijab

means to Muslim women in Central Florida, while also drawing a connection to the oppressive nature of Western culture both directly and indirectly.

In presenting this material, I argue that the reasons for veiling are complex and have become further complicated due to Western cultural mores. The misunderstandings and interactions with the oppressive Western culture force Muslim women, like young Laila at the beginning of this chapter, to question their cultural or religious traditions. As a typical young woman, Laila wants to fit in with other young women, while also just being herself. Yet she knows there is a likelihood she will be subjected to discrimination. Laila's decision about veiling is a difficult one and one that can be avoided when ignorance is replaced with knowledge. In writing this work, I will provide new information and awareness to the larger Western audience, leading to a deeper understanding, and more acceptance, of the Muslim community as a whole.

While this work is one that will need continuous revisions—especially in the ever-changing world we live in—I hope that the information I present will ignite a curiosity that propels readers to search for the truth and alter the way the West views veiling and the women of Islam.

Chapter II: Origins of the Veil

The veil has been seen throughout history and is still worn today to represent modesty. A traditional wedding would not be the same without the lifting of the veil to reveal a blushing bride. A nun without her habit would be nearly unrecognizable. Take for instance Mary, Mother of Jesus, or Mother Teresa—two of the most recognized women in the [Christian] world, especially in the West—who are always shown modestly covered. Historically, the veil was not seen as oppressive or degrading to women. Yet today, even the notion of wearing any sort of covering seems to limit the Western ideals of freedom, causing greater misunderstandings when one thinks of the complex reasons women veil.

Before we can discuss the veil or hijab of today, we need to know its history and the history of all veiling. Historical documentation is limited, something to be expected when one considers most recording was completed by males, and little focus was placed on women. Additionally, some of the research found contradicts other research, making it difficult to pinpoint when veiling started and who influenced the first Muslims to wear the hijab. Nevertheless, most historians agree that the first recorded instances of women wearing a veil was reserved for women of higher classes, allowing them to stay hidden inside, away from outside strangers. Nikki Keddie shares, “In the first known reference to veiling, an Assyrian legal text of the thirteenth century BC, it is restricted to respectable

women and prohibited by prostitutes. From the first, veiling was a sign of status.”¹

This is the first known instance where women veiled, which is long before the Islamic religion. Moreover, this shows that a woman’s veiling demonstrated one’s status.

Looking at ancient literature, Faegheh Shirazi points out that in *Metamorphoses*, Ovid uses the veil to tell the love story of Phyramus and Thisbe:

Phyramus and Thisbe fall in love, but their parents disapprove of their relationship. The lovers agree to meet in secrecy... Thisbe, who arrives early, sees a lioness and flees into a cave leaving her veil behind. The lioness, whose muzzle is dripping with the blood of a fresh kill, rips Thisbe’s veil. When Phyramus finds the torn and bloodstained veil, he concludes that the lioness has killed Thisbe and commits suicide with his sword. When Thisbe finds Phyramus’s dead body, she throws herself on his blade.²

In Ovid’s love story, the veil represents the woman Phyramus loves and by her veil falling off, this subsequently resulted in his death. This leads me to conclude that the notion of unveiling outside of the private sector during this time would only mean that she had died, as a woman would not allow her veil to be removed and, therefore, she would not allow herself to be vulnerable in the public sphere.

Veiling was seen as power and prestige; only those who were privileged were able to wear a veil. Thinking in these terms, no women would allow her veil to be removed. Kiddie explains,

Respectable Athenian women were often secluded, and veiling was known in the Greco-Roman world. Veiling and seclusion existed in pre-Islamic Iran and

¹ *Women in Middle Eastern History*. Ed. Nikki Keddie and Beth Baron. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991. Print. 3.

² Shirazi, Faegheh. *The Veil Unveiled: The Hijab in Modern Culture*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2001. Print. 3-4.

the Byzantine Empire, the two areas conquered by the first Muslims, though we do not know how widespread they were.³

The ability to isolate women, by way of seclusion or veiling, showed others the wealth of the family. These women had no need to go outside or do any sort of labor, a lifestyle that exhibited the respectability of the family.

Throughout the ages, the veil has also been used to ensure the modesty of women for various reasons. “Women in medieval Europe dressed more like women in the Muslim world than is generally realized. It was customary, especially married women, for them to cover their hair with various kinds of headdresses.”⁴ This was also displayed in much of the art from this period and led to the traditional dress for women entering a convent to become a nun, which “represents the most conservative style of female dress in the Christian world. It drew on the traditional head-veil of patrician Roman women, though the wimple may have Hunnic roots.”⁵ Somewhat similar to other notions of veiling,

The same codes are reflected in Christian scriptures calling for veiling as a symbol of male lordship over women. Tertullian referred to it as “the discipline of the veil,” and denounced Christian women who protested its enforcement. He wrote that most Greek churches, and some North African ones, “keep their virgins covered.” [*On the Veiling of Virgins*, III] Perhaps more to the point for the Arabian context are rabbinical sayings treating a woman’s uncovered hair as ‘nudity.’⁶

Even within the Christian faith, veiling was and still is observed by some women.

Although most of these women are nuns, the reason for veiling is due to the

³ *Women in Middle Eastern History*. 3.

⁴ Dashu, Max. “Some Thoughts on the Veil.” *Suppressed Histories Archives*. 2006. Web.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

requirement of the religion, much like many Muslims who argue the same for the women of Islam.

While the Prophet Muhammad was alive, generally speaking, women did not wear a veil. It was only his wives who were separated by a veil of some sort to protect them. During this time, Muhammad had many visitors who came in and out of his home, as it was the community mosque, and by having the women separated by a veil they were left undisturbed.

[B]y 627 CE, when he had become the supremely powerful leader of an increasingly expanding community, some kind of segregation had to be enforced to maintain the inviolability of his wives. Thus, the tradition, borrowed from the upper classes of Iranian and Syrian women, of veiling and secluding the most important women in society from the peering eyes of everyone else.⁷

In this instance, veiling again represented prestige, protecting these women from the gazing eyes of outsiders. This may have been one of the influences for what is found today in sacred Islamic texts.

During the days of the Prophet Muhammad, dress was of little concern and there were few restrictions about wearing certain items of clothing.

When the niece of Aishah Bint Abu Bakr (the Prophet's wife), Aisha bint Talha was asked by her husband Musab to veil her face, she answered, "Since the Almighty hath put on me the stamp of beauty, it is my wish that the public should view the beauty and thereby recognized His grace unto them. On no account, therefore, will I veil myself."⁸

⁷ "Islam: The Origin of Hijab." *Never Mind*. N.p., n.d. Web.

⁸ "Historical Perspectives on Islamic Dress." *Women in the Muslim World: Personalities and Perspectives from the Past*. Women in World History, n.d. Web.

In her cited response, Aisha declined the request to veil, sharing that it was her way of showing Allah's blessing upon her. This reveals that veiling was not commonly practiced during Muhammad's lifetime. Aisha most likely dressed in modest attire and it is possible that she still covered her hair, however she was not required to veil for religious reasons during that time.

While wearing the hijab was not initially a requirement within Islam, as the religion spread into new lands with different cultures, women began to ascribe to the notion of veiling.

As Islam reached other lands, regional practices, including the covering of women, were adopted by the early Muslims. Yet it was only in the second Islamic century that the veil became common... The Qur'anic prescription to "draw their veils over their bosoms" became interpreted by some as an injunction to veil one's hair, neck and ears.⁹

Later we will see what verses in the Qur'an, as well as some *hadiths*, reference veiling as a requirement.

While there are many contradictions as to when veiling became the expectation of Muslim women, it is generally thought it was sometime between the tenth and twelfth century. "[T]he veil had been imposed on women in the Muslim world to exclude them from public life, Shirazi says. 'A sign of distinction had been transformed into a sign of exclusion,' she writes in her book."¹⁰ However, this does not represent all of the women of Islam.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Blake, John. "Muslim Women Uncover Myths About the Hijab." *CNN*. 2009. Web.

Although veiling was becoming popular, not every Islamic state had its women veil. As Anatolia (present day Turkey) was conquered by Muslim Turks in the fourteenth century, Ibn Batutta expressed his fascination upon observing unveiled women, “Not only royal ladies but also wives of merchants and common people...”¹¹ At that time, present day Turkey was still a predominantly Christian state. It was “not until the reign of the Safavids in the Ottoman Empire, an area that extends through the Middle East and North Africa, in the 16th century that the veil emerged as a symbol of social status among Muslims.”¹² This revival of the veil among the upper classes led to another cycle of popularity for veiling.

As time went on, veiling vacillated between periods of popularity and near abolishment. Through the centuries, some argue wearing the hijab became more of a cultural practice rather than a religious one. As a result, the veil, along with other traditional clothing, was looked down upon.

By the second half of the nineteenth century, intellectuals, reformers, and liberals began to denounce the idea of women’s protective clothing. This group was sensitive about the advances western nations had made, and wanted to push their countries toward a more western-style society. One way of achieving this, they felt, was to change the status of women. To them this meant abandoning traditional customs, including protective covering and the veil which they saw as a symbol of the exclusion of women from public life and education.¹³

This started to lead toward progress for Muslim women. Women were given opportunities they were not given before. This may have had something to do

¹¹ Nasser, Jolaina. “The History & Evolution of the Hijab in Iran.” *Academia.edu*. N.p., n.d. Web.

¹² “History of the Hijab.” *Arabs in America*. N.p., n.d. Web.

¹³ “Historical Perspectives on Islamic Dress”

with the work of Qasim Amin, who wrote *The Emancipation of Women* in 1899. His work was extremely controversial, as it called for renewed interpretations of the Qur'an and mainly focused on veiling, polygamy, and divorce.¹⁴ Amin "argued that such practices had nothing to do with Islam, but were a result of customs of peoples who had become Muslims."¹⁵ It is worth mentioning that Amin was from an aristocratic family where, after law school, he lived in France for several years, ultimately shaping his worldview to a more Western one.

With the published work of Amin and the movement to liberate women, some Islamic states used this to demonstrate the readiness for independence from colonial rule. As the campaign for independence went on, "Women were encouraged to be symbols of the new state. Those who resisted these ideas of social progress were taunted. Turkish elites, for example, mocked women covered in black, calling them 'beetles.'"¹⁶ It was about this time that the Modern Father of Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, rose to power. "[I]n 1923, [he] denounced the veil, calling it demeaning and a hindrance to civilized nation. But he did not outlaw it."¹⁷ Around the same time Ataturk also criticized traditional dress, including the fez hat, and encouraged the people of Turkey to wear more western style clothing in an effort to modernize the country.

Concurrently, other Islamic states began to move toward the modernization of their countries. "The most dramatic public unveiling was undertaken by Huda

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Shaarawi in Egypt in 1923. Following suit were Ibtihaj Kaddura in Lebanon, Adila Abd al-Qudir as-Jazairi in Syria, and much later, Habibah Manshari in Tunis.”¹⁸ Around the 1930s, Reza Shah Pahlevi issued “a proclamation banning the veil outright. For many women, this decree in its suddenness was not liberating but frightening. Some refused to leave home for fear of having their veil torn from their face by the police.”¹⁹ The forced unveilings continued in Iran until the Iranian Revolution, when there was a radical reversal and the veil was revived.

The real surge toward donning hijab came with Iran’s revolution. Women were seen as key elements in achieving changes in public morality and private behavior. Unveiled women were mocked, called unchaste “painted dolls,” and were punished if they appeared in public without proper covering. In countries beyond Iran in the 1970s, demonstrations and sit-ins appeared over opposition to the required western style dress code for university students and civil servants.²⁰

During this time “Iran moved from being a pro-western, autocratic monarchy to an autonomous, secular republic.”²¹ As the Islamic Revolution—the second part to the Iranian Revolution—unfolded, a more Islamic party headed by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini took control of Iran, which lead to “an increase in patriotism...[and] found itself becoming more and more alienated from the rest of the world.”²² However, once Khomeini passed away, President Hashemi Rafsanjani began to repair Iran’s relationship with the West.

Before the 1979 Revolution...the hijab was a way of differentiating oneself from the West or Europeans, a reaction against the States’ push towards a more Western Iran...

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Jolaina Nasseri

²² Ibid.

It did not however imply an acceptance of Islam as a totality. This form of dressing allowed an increased sense of homogeneity among women while eliminating any tensions that may arise from class differences. Psychologically, it provided women with a more serious and asexual political front.

However, after the Revolution these hijab-wearing demonstrators suddenly found themselves being identified only by their sex. The question of women and the concept of the hijab had become so politicized that women who did not adhere to Khomeini's imposition of strict (supposedly) Islamic forms of dress were labelled as Westoxicated, a product of the cultural imperialism of the West. As a result, by the 1980's, it became mandatory in all government and public offices for women to wear the hijab.²³

What started as a cultural or religious article of clothing slowly turned into a political agenda, and wearing of the veil became a more complex decision for the women who did and did not wear it. With the revival of Islamic ideals, "both male and female dress went through a sort of de-westernisation. So much so that any attempt to curb the embracing of any particular Islamic form of dress was met with sometimes violent resistance."²⁴ This was demonstrated in what would later be known as *the* symbol of women resistors of the West: when Europeans tried to prohibit the Algerian *haik* and the Algerian women were faced with brutality.

In other regions of the world, there were women who did not oppose the traditional Islamic clothing, especially those in the more rural areas. Furthermore,

In areas where Islam was resisted and believers felt threatened, like Indonesia and the Philippines, Muslim women began to dress more conservatively as a way to assert who they were. During militant struggles for independence, such as that against the French in Algeria or the British in Egypt, some women purposely kept the veil in defiance of western styles.²⁵

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ "Historical Perspectives on Islamic Dress"

The hijab increasingly became a tool to demonstrate Islamic pride and reassert power over what many believed to be their cultural heritage.

Today, women in most Islamic states have the right to choose whether or not to veil. By veiling today, Fadwa El Guindi explains there is “a new public appearance and demeanor that reaffirms Islamic identity and morality and rejects Western materialism, consumerism, commercialism, and values... [creating] a contemporary movement about contemporary issues.”²⁶ In participating in this type of activism, these women are standing for what they believe in and are key demonstrators in which “they symbolize a renewal of traditional cultural identity.”²⁷ Margot Badran has commonly cited this way of thought as being “gender activism.”²⁸

In 1994 [Badran] identifies “a kind of feminism or public activist mode without a name.” It is represented by Muslim women who decide for themselves how to conduct their lives in society. Because the women who do this work resist the term feminism, which has largely “Western associations,” she adopts the term, “gender activism.” She shows that pro-feminist women avoid the feminist label for pragmatic reasons, the term is confining and potentially misleading. Further, Islamist women reject feminism as “superfluous or heretical,” and therefore also preclude the possibility of an “Islamic feminism.” Despite these proscriptions upon feminism, Badran explains that this gender activism is a new and “unencumbered, analytic construct,” and its protagonists (among them feminists, pro-feminists and Islamists) represent a convergence that “transcends ideological boundaries of politically articulated feminism and Islamism.”²⁹

²⁶ El Guindi, Fadwa. *Veil: Modesty, Privacy and Resistance*. Oxford: Berg, 2000. Print. 145.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 145.

²⁸ Seedat, Fatima. “When Islam and Feminism Converge.” *The Muslim World* 103:3 (2013): 404-420. Web.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

This rejection of the term feminism is because it is “associated with a betrayal of Islam and an uncritical embrace of Western values.”³⁰ However, Badran later revisits the notion of Islamic feminism stating, “she is convinced that Islamic feminism has emerged and that it is more radical than secular feminism.”³¹ Because the term feminism is often associated with Western thought, the term is often debated amongst Muslims who live in the Middle East and the West.

Haideh Moghissi argues,

Feminism now includes many brands, both conservative and radical, religious and atheist, heterosexual and nonheterosexual, white and nonwhite, issue-oriented and holistic, individualistic and community-oriented, North and South. So it certainly has room for yet another brand of feminism that is self-identified or identified by others as “Islamic feminism.”³²

Moghissi goes on to discuss yet another form of feminism, which seems most appropriate in terms of how Muslim women view the hijab, and identifies women “as *Muslim feminists*. That is, they are Muslim women who, while embracing Islamic ideology as liberating, are genuinely trying to promote women’s rights within the confines of Islamic Shari’a by proposing a more moderate and more female-centered interpretation of the [Qur’an].”³³ The Muslim feminist, therefore, looks for a common ground between a patriarchal Islam and a solely Western feminist view.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Moghissi, Haideh. “Islamic Feminism Revisited.” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 31.1 (2011): 76-84. Web.

³³ Ibid.

Over the last several decades, as discussed, the hijab has become more popular. Today, some Islamic states, including Iran, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia, require proper veiling to go out in public. However, most women who veil do so on their own accord, contrary to the belief that they do so because of androcentrism. As Muslim feminists work to provide more rights to women within Middle Eastern countries, there are many reasons why women choose to veil in countries outside of those previously mentioned. As we will see, wearing the hijab or any sort of veil is extremely complex, usually having a multilayered meaning for accepting the modest covering.

Chapter III: Religious Justifications

Within many religions, there are always disputed claims as to what a person should or should not do. We see these within Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, among other religious traditions. Like any book, holy or not, what is written thousands of years ago will most likely be taken out of context. Translators will mistranslate words; readers will misinterpret phrases; and, teachers, religious or not, will teach something other than the intent of the original author or storyteller. This is an inevitable fact that everyone must come to terms with. That said, anyone who is certain about anything observed from the past—with very few exceptions where something is blatantly spelled out—is likely mistaken.

The Qur'an is no exception. The Qur'an

...was revealed piecemeal throughout a period of about 23 years. According to narration, The Prophet Mohamed received the first revelation in 610 CE and newer revelations kept on being sent like small messages whenever the circumstances of the newly born Muslim society in the Arab peninsula needed divine guidance.³⁴

In addition to the delivery of the Qur'anic verses, it is likely there were verses wrongly interpreted and passed down in ways different than what was originally intended. This has led to very different readings of the Qur'an and the *hadiths*—‘traditions’ or sayings of Muhammad. Because of this, many Muslims turn to the holy books to support or persuade one argument or another, as interpretations

³⁴ Ezzat, Ashraf. “Hijab: The Politics and History behind the Veil.” *Dissident Voice* 30 October 2010. Web.

vary. One fact rarely brought to our attention is that most Muslim women agree that the decision to veil or not is solely between herself and God. However, the women who do veil usually insist emphatically that it is “required” by Islam, implying that they are correct while others are not in compliance.

Many veiled women and supporters of the veil cite a few verses from the Qur’an that they believe requires the hijab. To emphasize this, many others quote common *hadiths* to support their claim. To start, allow me to note that the term hijab in translation can mean to shield or cover and does not solely refer to the covering of a woman’s hair.

The first commonly quoted verse refers to the wives of the Prophet and is found in the Qur’an, Sura 33:53.

O you who believe, do not enter the house of the Prophet for a meal without awaiting the proper time, unless asked, and enter when you are invited, and depart when you have eaten, and do not stay on talking. This puts the Prophet to inconvenience, and he feels embarrassed in (saying) the truth. And when you ask his wife for some thing of utility, ask for it behind the screen. This is for the purity of your heart and theirs.³⁵

While the above quote does not explicitly state the wearing of the hijab is required, some argue that if the Prophet’s wives veiled or were hidden away from the view of others, Muslim women should be veiled in a similar manner. The way in which the word “hijab” is used in this verse—which here is translated to the word “screen”—has multiple meanings, including curtain. This is often used to show the importance of modesty and to keep both men and women from unholy

³⁵ Amer, Sahar. “Uncovering the Meaning of the Veil in Islam.” *The Veil*. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, n.d. Web.

desires. Because there were so many visitors at the Prophet Muhammad's house, which had become the community mosque, there was a greater concern for the protection of his wives, as mentioned in the previous chapter. It is noted that during the lifetime of the Prophet, only his wives observed the hijab. In this manner, wearing the veil often meant that the woman wearing it was one of the wives of the Prophet. Thinking of this, "Muslim women probably began wearing the veil as a way to emulate the Prophet's wives, who were revered as 'the Mothers of the Ummah.'"³⁶ Conversely, others argue that this verse is not an indication as to how women should dress. Sahar Amer, Professor of Asian Studies at University of North Carolina, believes this quote is unrelated to the way a woman is to dress. She shares,

...nowhere, including in Sura 33:53 is *hijab* used to describe, let alone to prescribe, the necessity for Muslim women to wear a headscarf or any of the other pieces of clothing often seen covering women in Islamic countries today.³⁷

Looking at this one verse and its interpretation, one could argue that the true meaning in this verse is that women are to be respected and should not be subjected to the prying eyes of others. As previously mentioned, this quote seems to be hinting more generally about modesty of women and their protection from unwelcome attention.

Another commonly quoted verse from the Qur'an (Sura 33:59) directly calls for the faithful women to cover themselves:

O Prophet! Tell thy wives and daughters, and the believing women, that they should cast their outer garments over their persons (when abroad): that is

³⁶ "Islam: The Origin of Hijab."

³⁷ Sahar Amer

most convenient, that they should be known (as such) and not molested. And Allah is Oft- Forgiving, Most Merciful.³⁸

In this translation, this verse is calling for women to cover to protect themselves. It is said that “[a]n alternate translation is ‘they should lengthen their garments.’”³⁹ However, I do not read this translation as one indicating the need for longer garments, but a need to cover oneself completely. “The verse also indicates that the purpose of dressing this way is that women are recognized as Muslims and not harassed. It was not very safe for women to go out during this time when they could be mistaken for prostitutes or assaulted.”⁴⁰ Yet another translation asks that women “...should let down upon themselves their *jalabib*.”⁴¹ The term *jalabib* is the plural form of *jilbab* and “means a loose outer garment.”⁴² Using this description, this translation makes it seem as though modest loose coverings were required as way of protection. This verse is also referenced as the Verse of Al-Hijab which supports one of the *hadiths* that I will call attention to later in this chapter.⁴³ This same verse has been translated in many ways; another translation is read as though it calls for women to cover in order to distinguish their status. “O Prophet, tell your wives and daughters, and the women of the faithful, to draw their wraps a little over them. They will thus be recognized and no harm will come to them. God is forgiving and kind.”⁴⁴ Sahar Amer shares that

³⁸ “Hijab.” *BBC*. 2009. Web.

³⁹ *Ibid*.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*.

⁴¹ “The Qur’an and Hijab.” *Al-Islam.org*. N.p., n.d. Web.

⁴² *Ibid*.

⁴³ Larocque, Gary. “Anas bin Malik, Witness to the Verse of Al-Hijab, The Veil.” *Sahaba.net* 24 November 2010. Web.

⁴⁴ Sahar Amer

the verse's aim is not to require women to cover, but instead "it is meant to distinguish between the clothing of free aristocratic women from that worn by female slaves. The dress code here is a social marker, and has nothing to do with a gender dress code."⁴⁵ These translations are slightly different, leaving them open for interpretation (much like any ancient text), or for guidance.

The final quote in the Qur'an (Sura 24:30-31) that I will share with you, is the most commonly cited verse and has the most compelling lines as to why not only women should wear the hijab, but also the men.

Tell the believing men to lower their eyes and guard their private parts. There is for them goodness in this. God is aware of what they do. / Tell the believing women to lower their eyes, guard their private parts, and not display their charms except what is apparent outwardly, and cover their bosoms with their veils and not to show their finery except to their husbands or their fathers or father-in-laws, their sons or step-sons, brothers, or brothers' and sisters' sons, or their women attendants or captives, or male attendants who do not have need (for women), or boys not yet aware of sex. They should not walk stamping their feet lest they make known what they hide of their ornaments. O believers, turn to God, every one of you, so that you may be successful.⁴⁶

In this verse, there is a call for both men and women to dress and act in a modest way to prevent impure thoughts. In this verse which calls to the "believing women," the word "charms" is commonly referred to as "beauty" which leads many people to assume that a women should not display anything that would be described as physically beautiful. It is further argued that a woman's hair is what is most physically attractive and must be covered to conform to these notion of modesty, just as one would cover the rest of their body. In an alternate

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

translation, this verse is read as a prescribed dress code for women. "...[A]nd not display their beauty except what is apparent, and they should place their *khumur* over their bosoms..."⁴⁷ The term *khumur* is translated as the plural form of *khimar* which "means a piece of cloth that covers the head."⁴⁸ In the second part of the sentence, it is asked that women use the cloth that covers their head to also cover their chests.

According to the commentators of the Qur'an, the women of Medina in the pre-Islamic era used to put their *khumur* over the head with the two ends tucked behind and tied at the back of the neck, in the process exposing their ears and neck. By saying that, "place the *khumur* over the bosoms," Almighty Allah ordered the women to let the two ends of their headgear extend onto their bosoms so that they conceal their ears, the neck, and the upper part of the bosom also.⁴⁹

This suggests that the reason women are not directly asked to cover their hair is in part because women were already covering their hair. Therefore, this added direction was to ensure women were being as modest as possible. Amer points out that the language used is the same for the men as it is for the women, yet "throughout the Islamic world and in the West, one never hears anything said about the way men must dress or conduct themselves in public. The focus has always been and continues to be on women."⁵⁰ This may be due to the dress that women have accepted, such as wearing the hijab, or similar covering, whereas the focus for men is placed in his actions and behaviors. This verse is more than just a prescription for dress, it hints at something further—a code of ethics for

⁴⁷ "The Qur'an and Hijab."

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Sahar Amer

behaviors and thoughts, and wearing the veil serves as a physical reminder to the woman who wears a veil and the external world to respect her.

In addition to the Qur'anic verses that are commonly cited, there are several *hadiths* that are commonly referenced that prescribe the necessity of wearing the hijab. *Hadiths* are the recorded sayings and deeds of the Prophet and are generally used as additional guidance for Muslims when the Qur'an has not clearly explained how they are to live their lives. The first *hadith* that is arguably the most accepted is from Abu Dawud, Book 2, Number 0641: "Narrated Aisha, Ummul Mu'minin: The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: Allah does not accept the prayer of a woman who has reached puberty unless she wears a veil."⁵¹ This is generally accepted by many that while praying women must cover all except her face and hands, as several other religions, such as Judaism, have similar requirements that include cover one's hair. "It is [however] forbidden to cover the face while praying."⁵² This *hadith* aims to ensure that women are modest while in prayer.

One *hadith* that seems to be more specific in terms of addressing the need to wear the hijab is in Abu-Dawud, Book 32, Number 4092:

Narrated Aisha, Ummul Mu'minin:

Asma, daughter of AbuBakr, entered upon the Apostle of Allah (peace be upon him) wearing thin clothes. The Apostle of Allah (peace be upon him) turned his attention from her. He said: O Asma', when a woman reaches the

⁵¹ Hasan, Ahmed. *Center for Muslim-Jewish Engagement*. University of Southern California, n.d. Web.

⁵² "Hijab"

age of menstruation, it does not suit her that she displays her parts of her body except this and this, and he pointed to her face and her hands.⁵³

This *hadith* seems much clearer in terms of what was expected for a woman to cover. However, many believe that this *hadith* is unreliable.⁵⁴ *Hadiths* are usually judged based on the people who pass them down and are considered untrustworthy if there is a missing link in the chain of narrators.⁵⁵ In this case, because Abu-Dawud died in 888 CE, there are concerns that he was not alive when the previous narrator was, thus creating a break in the line of reliable narrators. The main compiler of *hadiths* was Sahih al-Bukhari, and his compilations are generally accepted by most Muslims due to his strict guidelines regarding which *hadiths* were acceptable.

The final *hadith* that I will call your attention to has the most direct prescription for veiling. “According to this *hadith*, one man (Umar ibn al-Khattab, later the second caliph) was able to bring about the commandment for the Prophet’s wives to veil their faces.”⁵⁶ In Sahih al-Bukhari, Volume 1, Book 4, Number 148, it is written:

Narrated ‘Aisha:

The wives of the Prophet used to go to Al-Manasi, a vast open place (near Baqia at Medina) to answer the call of nature at night. ‘Umar used to say to the Prophet “Let your wives be veiled,” but Allah’s Apostle did not do so. One night Sauda bint Zam’a the wife of the Prophet went out at ‘Isha’ time and she was a tall lady. ‘Umar addressed her and said, “I have recognized you, O Sauda.” He said so, as he desired eagerly that the verses of Al-Hijab (the

⁵³ Ahmed Hasan

⁵⁴ “Hijab”

⁵⁵ Rahim, Abdullah. “How Can I Know if a Hadith is Authentic (Sahih) or Not?” *Exploring Islam* May 2013. Web.

⁵⁶ “Hijab”

observing of veils by the Muslim women) may be revealed. So Allah revealed the verses of “Al-Hijab” (A complete body cover excluding the eyes).⁵⁷

In this *hadith* there is reason to believe that such a covering is required. The Al-Hijab verse that is referenced is the Qur’anic verse I previously mentioned, Sura 33:59. As we previously saw, there are many interpretations of the aforementioned verse and it is still unclear as to what the requirements for veiling are.

The Qur’anic verses and *hadiths* are subject to various interpretations and translations. Like many ancient texts, especially the Holy Books, there are disagreements regarding the way they have been translated as well as how they are interpreted and accepted by the believers. It is difficult to say whether any Holy Book lists instructions of what to do and not do. However, it is ultimately up to the decision of the believer to adopt what he/she thinks the true message is and what is best for him/her. For those women who veil, it is their choice to follow their interpretations of the text.

Today, there is much debate as to whether women are to veil or not. Some argue that it is a requirement of the religion, most commonly citing the above quote which calls women to “cover their bosoms,” while others deny that this is actually a prescribed dress code. Sahar Amer argues, “...it seems that the *hijab* is a construction created shortly after the Prophet’s time and maintained till today by patriarchal society in order to keep women in a subordinate position.”⁵⁸ While

⁵⁷ Ahmed Hasan

⁵⁸ Sahar Amer

this may in part be true, the women who veil in the West and are given more freedoms to veil on their own accord, do so because of their belief that it is necessary to live a modest lifestyle, both internally and externally. Taking this into consideration, the veil is worn for various complex reasons, making the hijab that much more difficult for the Western world to understand and accept.

Chapter IV: Misconceptions of Muslim Women

Today we live in a world that is powered by technology. While technology propels us into the future, it increasingly holds us back from certain truths and keeps us from questioning the misconceptions that are forced upon us every day. The most frightening part about this is that a majority of the general population accepts information as being factual without completing their own research and uses these inaccurate depictions to shape their world views. This in turn creates a narrow-minded world and leads to suspicion when the truth finally presents itself.

One such representation can be seen in the events that took place on Tuesday morning, September 11, 2001. On that day, nineteen people, who happened to be Muslim, changed America and the world. The actions of these men led to wide-spread panic and instant suspicion of anything that the Western mind considered the Other. Over the following few months, arguably few years, men and women who fit the description of a Middle-Easterner or were identified as being Muslim were targeted, accused of being “terrorists,” and were threatened or abused (verbally and/or physically). Meanwhile, many Muslims were equally, if not more, upset that such events took place, as Islam is a religion of peace.

After the events of September 11, there was a significant rise in hate crimes, “going up by 1,600 percent.”⁵⁹ Many people were targeted for just looking like the perceived Other. Leila Ahmed shared what was found in a *Post* article shortly after the events,

Two men had been killed, one a Muslim Pakistani store owner who had been shot in Dallas on September 15, and the other the Sikh owner of a gas station in Mesa, Arizona, shot on the same day. Sikhs (the paper explained) are not Muslims, but because they wear beards and turbans the killer took the man for a Muslim. The FBI, the article also stated, had initiated 40 hate crime investigations involving reported attacks on Arab American citizens and institutions.” CAIR [Council on American-Islamic Relations] had also received reports “of more than 350 attacks against Arab Americans around the country, ranging from verbal abuse to physical assault. It also received reports of dozens of mosques being firebombed or vandalized.” Among the reports the police were investigating was a case of “two Muslim girls” who were beaten at Moraine Valley College, in Palos Hills, Illinois.⁶⁰

Attacks like these continued to go on and affected many who were and were not Muslim.

How upsetting and sad to have the events of September 11 occur and then for Westerners to turn around and blame a group of people in its entirety—or even people who were assumed to be part of the targeted group—wishing them the same harm that happened to those who lost their life in the aforementioned events. I have often reflected on this and questioned how this could be. Do humans naturally accuse the perceived Other out of fear and misunderstanding? Why does the average person generalize and make blanket statements that are inaccurate? The only answer that seems to make sense is the way in which the

⁵⁹ Ahmed, Leila. *A Quiet Revolution: The Veil's Resurgence, from the Middle East to America*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011. Print. 200.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 199.

majority of the general population perceives certain information to be true and where they are learning these “truths.”

With technology at our fingertips, a flip of the switch to turn on a television or a quick search on the Internet gives people access to all sorts of information imaginable. While this is incredibly empowering, a majority of people do not question the authenticity of the information provided. Many websites are maintained by people who may have not completed adequate research themselves and pass along inaccurate data and/or extremely biased views. Simultaneously, the media, and arguably other types of entertainment, distort facts or only present a glimpse of a much larger picture. Considering this, how can one willingly accept any information that is so readily available?

Since the events of September 11, the United States has become increasingly obsessed with the Middle East. With every image that is shown, the media and entertainment industries have taken two positions: one of the “terrorist” and the other as the “oppressed.” Oppressive actions and judgments made against the Muslim community by the West are still seen in the news today. Some of the stories range from public attempts to degrade the Islamic community and culture to blatant acts of discrimination and violence.

This past year, in 2013, there were stories of Qur’anic burnings and anti-Islamic rallies. One such rally in Venice, Florida, was initially to be a memorial for the events of September 11, but quickly turned to the condemnation of Islam.⁶¹

⁶¹ Webb, Shelby. “Venice Speakers Denounce Islam at 9/11 Ceremony.” *Herald-Tribune* 11 September 2013. Web.

Within the last few years, there has also been controversy regarding the education of basic religious information on Islam. In 2012, Hillsborough County (FL) School Board held a meeting where arguments were made that would allow an Imam to lecture to students about Islam; however the argument received resistance from some of the parents.⁶² There were also many stories of discrimination toward women who wear the hijab. In Tennessee, a woman wearing a hijab and wanting to donate blood was asked to leave a blood bank after refusing to remove her veil.⁶³ Other stories of discrimination include several women who wear the hijab who were discriminated against at their workplace, leading to legal proceedings. One of the women, who was fired back in 2010 from Abercrombie and Fitch, recently won her case for the discriminatory acts of the company.⁶⁴ However, the woman who was discriminated against at Disneyland for wearing her hijab and refusing to cover it with a large hat is still in legal proceedings with Disney.⁶⁵ This incident is similar to the separate 2004 case at Disney World, where a woman wearing the hijab was offered relocation to an area that would keep her from directly working with the public. Back in 2003, a Central Florida woman who wears a *niqab*—a veil that covers her body and only shows her eyes—sued the State of Florida after it was requested that she retake her driver’s license photo to show her face; the request to have the retaken photo came just a few months after the events of September 11. The

⁶² Davison, Laurie. “Hills. School Board Meeting Gets Heated Over CAIR Controversy.” *News 13* 28 February 2012. Web.

⁶³ “Blood Donor Turned Away Over Hijab.” *WESH Orlando* 8 November 2013. Web.

⁶⁴ Sacirbey, Omar. “Muslim Clerk Wins Hijab Fight Against Abercrombie and Fitch.” *Religion News Service* 9 September 2013. Web.

⁶⁵ Patten, Dominic. “Muslim Woman Sues Disney Over Right to Wear Hijab.” *Deadline Hollywood* 13 August 2012. Web.

State ultimately did not rule in her favor and the woman was requested to wear a less conservative veil, such as the hijab, to obtain a new license.⁶⁶ Most recently in Central Florida, a Muslim woman was run off the road, which she describes as a hate crime after the man who was in the other vehicle mocked her hijab.⁶⁷ These news stories are just a few that exemplify the oppressive nature of the West and the intentional exclusion from Western society.

Beyond local news, the media and entertainment industries consistently attempt to show the Muslim community as the perceived Other. In one way to further attack the Middle East or Muslim communities and show its “backwardness,” these industries have questioned the rights and freedoms of Muslim women, often depicting them as imprisoned by their beliefs and forced to veil. Accordingly, the West has taken the symbol of the veil as being one of the predominant “issues” within Islam and has more or less attacked this emblem suggesting the wearer as someone oppressed and in need of “saving” or, conversely, as a “terrorist” and someone to fear, which is exemplified in the abovementioned stories.

The lens through which the Western world views Muslim women is over generalized and misrepresentative of the culture as a whole, leaving any true issues unresolved. While there are some rights that are limited for women in the Middle East, historically the hijab has not meant oppression and has not been a main concern for the women who cover. However, once the West came in

⁶⁶ “Muslim Woman Cannot Wear Veil In License Photo.” *WFTV* 6 June 2003. Web.

⁶⁷ “Florida Woman Says Man Tried to Run Her Off Road Because of Headscarf.” *WFTV* 30 October 2013. Web.

contact with cultures where women veil, the meaning of veiling became more loaded. Having women unveil is not the answer to what perceived inequalities the West sees. It seems that the Western understanding of the hijab is extremely flawed and it is the Western culture that is oppressive when looking at the perceived Other.

It is important to describe how Middle Eastern women are depicted in the West, as this has led to further misunderstandings and adds to the complexity of the veil. While there may have been many misrepresented images of women prior to the events of September 11, they became more evident in daily American life post September 11.

The events of September 11 undoubtedly changed America forever. One of the most apparent occurrences was the amount of imagery that followed in the years after this event and that are still evident today. Because so little was, and arguably still is, understood about the Middle East, fear has continued to rise in Americans, leading to more misunderstandings and false imagery. The media has fixated on the veiling of women and the US government seems to play in to this as well, swaying Western public opinion. Md. Mahmudul Hasan explains that these misunderstandings that construct Western perspective become what he considers gendered Islamophobia. He states,

In the wake of the 9/11 attacks on New York in 2001 and in the context of the West's subsequent war and invasion of Afghanistan, the most prominent representation of the country and its people (especially in Western media) was the inferior condition of its women. In this regards, Rawi (2004) argues: "When the US began bombing Afghanistan on October 7, 2001, the oppression of Afghan women was used as a justification for overthrowing the

Taliban regime.” The American government also seems to have justified its imperialistic war on Afghanistan on the plea of women’s status in the country. As America’s the then first lady stated triumphantly: “Because of our recent military gains in much of Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned... The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women” (as cited in Rawi, 2004).⁶⁸

Undoubtedly the US government was using the notion of oppressed women in the Middle East as a way to gain American supporters. Lila Abu-Lughod shares that within Laura Bush’s address:

...there was the blurring of the very separate causes in Afghanistan of women’s continuing malnutrition, poverty, and ill health, and their more recent exclusion under the Taliban from employment, schooling, and the joys of wearing nail polish...her speech reinforced chasmic divides, primarily between the “civilized people throughout the world” whose heart breaks for the women and children of Afghanistan and the Taliban-and-the-terrorists, the cultural monsters who want to, as she put it, “impose their world on the rest of us.”⁶⁹

As Abu-Lughod points out, the issues that Laura Bush points out tend to cross between the true issues, such as health and adequate food, with the less important perceived issues, such as the rights Western women enjoy. The *burka*, which is the commonly used covering in Afghanistan and covers the entire body allowing a screen over the woman’s eyes, has been described as being “portable seclusion” which allows women greater freedoms.⁷⁰ To women who veil, this freedom is due to the common perception that the public sphere is for men, while the private sector is for women. By wearing a covering of some sort, women can

⁶⁸ Hasan, Md. Mahmudul. “Feminism as Islamophobia: A review of misogyny charges against Islam.” *Intellectual Discourse* 20.1 (2012): 58. Web.

⁶⁹ Abu-Lughod, Lila. “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others.” *American Anthropologist* 104.3 (2002): 784. Print.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 785.

travel outside of the home without interference from unrelated men. Abu-Lughod goes on to question the notion of saving women:

It is deeply problematic to construct the Afghan woman as someone in need of saving. When you save someone, you imply that you are saving her from something. You are also saving her *to* something. What violences are entailed in this transformation, and what presumptions are being made about the superiority of that to which you are saving her?⁷¹

The way that Western culture perceives these women as being helpless shows that the West is oppressing them, assuming they do not have the freedom that veiling offers them. Using these terms to depict how the West views Muslim women is arguably tainted and uses the misrepresented images of these women to further oppress them. It can be assumed that the imagery given to the American people over the last few decades have fed into the distorted images of helpless woman, validating the retaliation on the culture as a whole. Leila Ahmed shares,

First, it is evident that the connection between the issues of culture and women, and more precisely between the cultures of Other men and the oppression of women, was created by Western discourse. The idea (which still often informs discussions about women in Arab and Muslim cultures and other non-Western world cultures) that improving the status of women entails abandoning native customs was the product of a particular historical moment and was constructed by an androcentric colonial establishment committed by male dominance in the service of particular political ends.⁷²

The lens that the West has used to view these women has led to more confusion and has created more questions, but ultimately focuses on the veil, not really

⁷¹ Ibid., 788-789.

⁷² Ahmed, Leila. "The Discourse of the Veil." *Veil: Veiling, Representation and Contemporary Art*. Ed. David A. Bailey and Gilane Tawadros. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2003. Print. 51.

addressing or accepting the possibility of extremists within the Islamic faith. Inevitably, it is Western views that make the veil oppressive and not the culture from which it is accepted.

As the media built upon the themes that the US government started to push on Americans and, as previously mentioned, became somewhat obsessed with the Muslim community and its veiled women, much of the imagery involved women in the Middle East. This imagery has attempted and continues to support the claim of the supposed oppression these women face due to the veil they wore or continue to wear. Susan Muaddi Darraj shares,

...images of Islam were strategically—almost artistically—painted with glimpses of what Islam did to its own women: it turned them into mute shadows, thus flying in the face of the gender equality and democracy that American feminism claimed as its foundation.⁷³

This has led to much controversy and has created a feeling of need by many Western women to address these perceived issues. The images that flooded Western media quickly turned to those that showed these women as indoctrinated terrorists or as the helpless oppressed, in need of saving, as mentioned above. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad states, “increasingly the American public has identified ‘the veil,’ whether a *hijab* (a cover of the hair) or *burqa* (a covering of the head including the face), with Islamic militancy, extremism, jihadism, and oppression of women.”⁷⁴ Yazbeck Haddad goes on to say that the

⁷³ Muaddi Darraj, Susan. “Understanding the Other Sister: The Case of Arab Feminism.” *Monthly Review* 53.10 (2002): 16. Web.

⁷⁴ Yazbeck Haddad, Yvonne. “The Post-9/11 *Hijab* as Icon.” *Sociology of Religion* 68.3 (2007): 255. Web.

media's fixation with the hijab became most apparent after the liberation of Kabul and they did not understand why Middle Eastern women did not unveil in celebration. Wolfgang Wagner (et al.) shares,

The veil has become one of the most contested and symbolic motifs in Western imagery of the East and of Islam. Despite this, not much has been done to decode it and veiling is often depicted as almost ahistoric and static; a symbol of archaic, gender-oppressive practices within Muslim societies.⁷⁵

The lack of understanding of the issues and the misinterpretation of the meaning behind the veil has led to further judgments about the Muslim community, creating a larger divide between veiling cultures and the oppressive West. Zineb Sedira states,

The Muslim woman's body is central to Orientalist imagery as a voyeuristic site of Otherness and difference. The veil functions as a personal, cultural, religious and political emblem - an ideological objects shrouded in fantasy and mystery. It has come to symbolise class, culture and the related conflict between colonised and coloniser - a site of contestation. The unveiled woman is seen as an individual and uncivilised subject, a far cry from the over-represented and culturally constructed veiled woman, who is considered anonymous, passive and exotic. The construction of gender in the Islamic world has already been mapped by the Western mind.⁷⁶

While there are many reasons for veiling, the shortest answer I have been told is that it is a very personal and complex choice. However, people from the West seem skeptical that this is really the case and argue that the pressure from family and the threat of violence forces these women to veil. W. Shadid and P. S. Van Koningsveld state,

⁷⁵ Wagner, Wolfgang, et al. "The veil and Muslim women's identity: Cultural pressures and resistance to stereotyping." *Culture & Psychology* 8.4 (2012): 522. Web.

⁷⁶ Sedira, Zineb. "Mapping the Illusive." *Veil: Veiling, Representation and Contemporary Art*. Ed. David A. Bailey and Gilane Tawadros. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2003. Print. 70.

“The Islamic headscarf was represented as a symbol of submission and religious fervour or indoctrination and manipulation.” This idea is shared throughout many EU countries, not necessarily because it is seen as a threat to secularism, but because fundamentalism is strongly associated with intolerance and terrorism.⁷⁷

This added misconception has led most Westerners to believe that all women who veil are persuaded to do so and forced to remain silent. However, in reality, this is not how many Middle Eastern women view veiling.

The seclusion of women, which to Western eyes is a source of oppression, is seen by many Muslim women as a source of pride. The traditional women interviewed all perceived seclusion as prestigious. In rural Morocco seclusion is considered the privilege of women married to rich men.⁷⁸

In many Middle Eastern countries, veiling is still seen as an indication of status, as veiling once was perceived as such.

The Western perspective of Muslim veiled women has long been skewed by the agenda of Western media, entertainment, and government. The imagery and misconstrued stories of the treatment of women has led the West to target the veil, rather than focus on any of the true issues that Muslim women may be faced with.

Part of the ethos of the day regarding the adoption of hijab was, Macleod reported, that taking on the hijab should come about not out of compulsion but rather as the result of a women’s personal choice. This is an ethos that is clearly a product of the late twentieth century and one that unmistakably postdates the cycle of history of the 1900s to the 1970s and from unveiling to veiling. Before the era of unveiling, covering was just normal dress for all

⁷⁷ Shadid, W. and P. S. Van Koningsveld. “Muslim Dress in Europe: Debates on the Headscarf.” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 16.1 (2005): 45. Web.

⁷⁸ Mernissi, Fatima. *Beyond the Veil*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987. Print. 142.

women in Muslim majority societies, and choosing not to cover was not an option.⁷⁹

Because the veil is also acknowledged as a cultural norm in which veiling was part of the traditional dress, having these women remove their veils will not create the rights that these women are perceived of lacking, nor will it solve the issues that they may face. It is the Western perspective that is in need of shifting to create a positive change for the women who are in true need of help by focusing on real issues and not the misunderstood emblem of the veil.

There is controversy over what can be perceived as truthful when discussing the hijab. In my attempt to provide some of the perspectives of previously researched and interviewed Muslim women, this information has been used to help clarify and bring some understanding to the concept of veiling. Even in this task to provide understanding, it may be difficult to obtain answers that are truthful. Many argue that a Middle Eastern Muslim woman who now lives in the West may be swayed to a more Western perspective and, conversely, that a Middle Eastern Muslim woman who has remained in the region is still seen as “suspicious” and influenced by her society. Taking this in to consideration, feminist views (e.g., secular, Islamic, or Muslim) that focus on the hijab can have a similar disposition. Haideh Moghissi adds to the complexity, sharing that

...given that doubting and questioning of Islamic legal practices are life-threatening activities in almost all Islamic societies, and the critical individual can be persecuted for blasphemy (*kofr*), the responsibility for opening a dialogue on these issues falls on the shoulders of the Middle Eastern

⁷⁹ Leila Ahmed, *A Quiet Revolution*, 125.

scholars, inside and outside the academy, who live in the West, free of such threats.⁸⁰

Because this is the case, research completed by women who live in the Middle East are guarded and less critical of the patriarchal customs seen within Islam.

Let it be understood that the issue to veil or not to veil has created a lot of tension not only in the West, but also within the Muslim community itself. Originally, "... [the *burqa* was] developed as a convention for symbolizing women's modesty or respectability."⁸¹ To many Westerners, the notion of covering oneself seems contrary to the Western ideology that exposure is true freedom, which one could further argue is how Western culture oppresses Western women. However, to women of the Middle East, "...the veil became an important symbol of resistance and the rejection of alien values."⁸² Wagner, et al., seem to support this view, in their assertion that "displaying the *hijab* is seen as a political choice that has to do with identity and bonding to their in-group; that should have nothing to do with their societal worth, particularly post-9/11."⁸³ Muslim women who veil are making a statement using their appearance, displaying their freedom in their decision to do so. These women aim to exercise their right to express their personality and beliefs, without the influence of any other party. In this light, the Western perspective that women who veil are

⁸⁰ Moghissi, Haideh. "Islamic Feminism Revisited." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 31.1 (2011): 76-84. Web.

⁸¹ Lila Abu-Lughod, 785.

⁸² Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, 257-58.

⁸³ Wolfgang Wagner, et al., 535.

oppressed or have limited freedoms is false, as it is a statement that they chose to make.

Looking at the opposing view of the hijab from Muslim women who do not veil is equally important and adds to the complexity of this perceived issue. Again, many Muslim women state the choice to veil, or in this case not to veil, as one that is personal and not necessarily influenced by others.

The justification for not wearing the veil is linked to stressing individualist values where true religion is above *hijab*, physical existence and prejudice...It is worth noting that the veil was rejected in its ostensive form – an overt symbol, which made you stand out as displaying religious identity.⁸⁴

To the women who do not veil, the question of religiosity is not one that correlates with the hijab. However, for those women who have decided not to veil, the goal may be to blend in, and may be especially true of those women now living in the West. The decision to not veil is just as complex as the one to veil, with exception to the additional external pressures from Western perspective and judgment.

Ultimately, the choice to veil is one that every young Muslim woman must make. Yazbeck Haddad shares,

... [the *hijab*] is a matter of choice. Some [continue] to insist that wearing a *hijab* is a witness to the faith, even in times of stress. By this interpretation, wearing the *hijab* can be seen as a personal struggle, a *jihad*, as the wearer is tested daily in the public square. Other women chose to wear the *hijab* to witness that they are proud Muslims and are not afraid to say so.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Ibid., 536.

⁸⁵ Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, 263.

Taking this understanding of the veil into consideration, the veil can be seen as not only being a religious statement, but as a political one as well. What this emblem represents to many Middle Eastern Muslim women should be left to interpretation by those within the community—more specifically the individual—and not judged by Western misperceptions of oppression and limitation. While the symbol of the veil is still extremely complex and difficult for the West to understand, the veil should not be the sole focus for misguided judgments.

In closing, I have attempted to examine the complexities surrounding the veil worn by Muslim women in the Middle East. I have suggested the many false impressions the West has made, predominantly due to the US government and the Western media and entertainment industries, and strived to bring some clarity on this complex issue by sharing what my research showed on how the veil is regarded among Muslim women. Through my research, not only did I discover how much more complex this issue truly is, but I also realized just how damaging the Western perception and misinterpretation can be. While there may be issues of gender equality in the Middle East, the true issue is not the hijab, which is what is primarily targeted. Ultimately, the best course of action to be taken by Westerners, as Lila Abu-Lughod suggests in her article *Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?*, is to work with women's groups to address the true concerns of illiteracy, poverty, and safety that are affecting these women, rather than focusing on what the West perceives as the issues.

Chapter V: Muslim Women of Central Florida

Central Florida – the home of Walt Disney World. The place where dreams come true. The place where magic comes to life. The place where people from all over the world come to cohesively celebrate innocence. The one place where one would think difference would be celebrated and encouraged. However, the truth is we live in a Post-9/11 world, and that world is fearful of the perceived Other.

Prior to living in Central Florida, I had very fond memories of my visits. But this is easy for me to say, considering I appear to be a Caucasian female from a working-middle class family. As I grew older though, I realized that my fortune was not shared with some of my friends from different cultures. After conversing with several Muslim women who live in Central Florida (please note, all of the women's names were changed to protect their identity and respect their privacy), I came to realize that their memories were not as young-spirited as mine. In fact, many of the stories I heard were somewhat terrifying and unimaginable for many Westerners.

To start, please allow me to introduce the six women I had the privilege of interviewing. The first woman I spoke with—Zeynab, who does not veil—grew up in the Great Lakes region and has lived in Florida for the last several years. Her parents are from Yemen and they wanted to ensure that their children held on to their cultural identity. The next woman I spoke with, Rajiya who wears the hijab,

was roughly half way through her undergraduate degree. Rajiya was born in New York, but raised half of her life in Zimbabwe and moved to the States roughly a decade ago, where she has lived in Central Florida. Her father was originally from Pakistan and she described her mother as being of Persian decent. I then spoke to Fikriyya, who is in her early thirties, wears the veil, and was born in Egypt. She moved between Egypt and the States from the ages of 4 and 14, until she settled a bit more in Egypt and lived there for 10 years. Prior to September 11, she moved to Washington, D.C. and settled in her new home in the States after getting married. The fourth woman I spoke to was Najwa, who does not wear a head covering. Najwa has lived in Central Florida for three years and is originally from a city in Saudi Arabia that is close to Jordan. Sanem was the woman I spoke with after Najwa. Sanem is a young woman of about 20, born in Cairo, wears the veil, and was influenced by her Egyptian community and her Turkish mother. The last conversation I had was with Zuleika, who does not veil. Zuleika is originally from Michigan and has lived in Central Florida for the last three years. Her father is Cuban, with some Japanese heritage, her mother is Nicaraguan, and was raised as a Seventh Day Adventist. Zuleika was first introduced to Islam when she met her ex-husband, converted in 2004, and has reaffirmed her belief in the last eight months. In meeting these women, I was able to gather a more comprehensive understanding of how Muslim women view the hijab.

The stories these women told have a common theme of misunderstandings and misconceptions of what Islam and the hijab truly means. The lack of

understanding or knowledge of the religion has led to the poor treatment of these women by the Western world and, ultimately, to their struggle with the decision about wearing the hijab.

Many of the women I spoke with had at least one story of blunt discrimination. Shortly after the events of September 11, Zeynab felt she was viewed as an outsider in the country she grew up in. In 2001, Zeynab was in college and had a constant feeling of fear for friends and family. She told me about an incident when she was in one of her college classes that caused her to be self-conscious of her cultural identity. Although she was unsure of the journey that led her fellow female classmate to say what she did, the student shared that she thought “*they* need to leave.” This was the first time she heard such painful words directed to her and her cultural group and felt as though this may have been a thought shared by others, which added to her fears. Similarly, Najwa was treated as an outsider as soon as she disclosed her identity. While she did not grow up in the States, she did grow up visiting fairly often. She recalled prior to the events of September 11, most people she came in contact with were very friendly, and sadly after that, many people were not as welcoming as she had previously encountered. Najwa recollected that on one occasion while she was visiting Las Vegas, there was a gentleman that was quite friendly while standing in line for an attraction that they happen to both be seeing. However, upon learning that she was from Saudi Arabia, his disposition completely changed and for a time he refused to speak to her. After spending the majority of time silent, he spoke to her and she shared with me that she did her best to educate him and disprove

his misconceptions. While she may have been able to alter this gentleman's perception of Islamic culture, his reaction was an example of Western Islamophobic attitudes that leave these women feeling as outsiders. One can argue that these two instances of discrimination can be attributed to the media's misrepresentation of Muslim culture, creating misunderstandings between these women and the Western oppressors.

Rajiya, one of the younger interviewees, shared how moving to the States post-September 11 shaped her life. Upon arriving, she shared that her family was interviewed by those she believed were FBI agents, who held their belongings for several weeks. She mentioned that they must have gone through every item they owned and questioned them on items that had only sentimental or professional purposes. Since then, she has lived her life as though someone is always listening and watching. Sanem, another one of the younger interviewees, was equally affected by the events of September 11 and has accordingly shaped her world-view. Sanem has lived most of her life in the States and has many memories of the events of September 11 and the subsequent years. She was in 3rd grade when the events occurred and did not know something was going on until she got home and saw her mother speaking to her friend's mother. She shared that it was a "devastating feeling to see people devastated, unjustly." She remembered going to her community mosque for a town hall meeting, where a law enforcement agency offered tips on how to stay safe during the days afterward. She stressed that a "tragedy is a tragedy" and empathized with the nation she calls home. Yet several years later, due to the misconceptions that

people held, she was teased and ridiculed by some Westerners, which led her to hold a strong conviction to change the way non-Muslims see Islam. Both of these women grew up with added societal pressures due to their Islamic beliefs, constantly trying to escape the stereotypes that were placed on them as they matured.

The last two interviewees seemed less affected by their instances of discrimination and/or ostracization. This may be due to the additional life experience these women had, as they were roughly ten to fifteen years older than my youngest interviewees. Zuleika, being a convert, experienced some hardships upon converting, mostly from family members who feared people would mistreat her. She described occasional instances when she received comments and/or questions about whether she would commit terrorist acts, sporadically making her feel like an outcast. However, while she admits this can at times be hurtful, ultimately she has come to realize that the people who act in this manner are in need of educating themselves on the religion of Islam. Fikriyya was confident in saying that she did not feel any biases from Westerners post-September 11, and went on to disclose that she actually has felt more discriminated against in her own country of Egypt than in the United States. Western ideologies have influenced the view that many Egyptians hold—that the veil is worn by women of a lower class. This is because religion has become “more cultural than theological” and many prefer Western culture and all that it implies—advancement/modernity/intellect. Fikriyya shared that she was not affected very much by how people treated her, but it was in the questioning of

her husband who was a convert and how the events of September 11 caused many Muslims to question humanity and then question Islam. These women, while questioned and discriminated against, have held strong to their faith and worked to increase the understanding of Islam, despite the barrage of misconceptions they are consistently subjected to.

I then spoke to the women about their struggle to wear the hijab or to not veil. Each woman had a unique story and experience. Ultimately, they all shared that it was their decision to veil or not to veil, contrary to what many Westerners think as one forced upon them.

Fikriyya and Sanem were the two women who felt strongest about veiling and they agreed they would not remove them. Fikriyya was raised Muslim, but stressed that you still have the choice whether to follow Islam or not. She first started to veil when she was nineteen and was in her second year of college where there was a revolution. It was during this religious movement in the late 1990's when she started to study Islam more in-depth. She wore the hijab in high school for Ramadan, but admitted to being mildly obsessed with her hair and it was a difficult step for her to take. But as she grew spiritually and learned from others who were well-traveled and educated, it became easier for her to veil. The more she learned and grew in her faith, the more she was willing to give up the fixation with her hair and veiling became comfortable. She still struggles with fashion and uses hair products, like many women, but she covers her hair for God. Fikriyya went on to share that she has never felt threatened and that it helps with the "grey areas," as well as protects women by telling an unwelcome

eye to “back off.” This reminded me of the Qur’anic verse that calls for women to cover to prevent harassment, or rather molestation. When asked why women remove the hijab, she believed that for most women it was the concern of wanting to feel pretty, too materialistic, which causes one to lose faith and unveil. Fikriyya shared, oftentimes, women are susceptible to vulnerability and can be influenced by others’ opinions. This has led her to be careful in the manner she presents herself: always careful not to show too much emotion in case someone were to view her actions as how Muslim women in general are treated or behave. Similarly, Sanem shared how she is careful in the way she presents herself. She always knew she would veil, but her parents never pressured her to start. Then, right before she entered the 8th grade, her childhood friend called her, excited, and shared she would start veiling and asked if she would join her. Sanem agreed, and the first year became the most impactful. Because of her schedule, she spent a lot of time alone, which she says “created a stir” allowing her to feel a deeper connection to her religion. But it was still difficult. Some of her classmates would try to pull off her hijab and would tease her. She started to recognize the many misconceptions that her fellow classmates held, which presumably came from a lack of understanding Islamic culture. As she got older, she realized how the media magnified this and started to become more aware of how her interactions could combat the false impressions that have been spread by the media. This, as you can imagine, became a constant burden and led to an almost paranoid feeling that made her question if she was presenting the “correct” image for Muslim women as a whole. Ultimately, she says that once she

started to wear the hijab, she became much more confident in herself and felt empowered. I thought it was quite interesting that both Fikriyya and Sanem took it upon themselves to ensure they were presenting themselves as proper Muslim women at all times. This has led me to believe that the action of closely guarding how they presented themselves was a result of the misconceptions Western media popularized, consequently becoming a defense mechanism to combat incorrect images that are so widely accepted in the West.

Rajiya and Najwa seemed to be much more lenient regarding the rules of veiling. Both reported times they would veil and times they would not. Rajiya has been veiling since 2012, but has worn it on and off from the time she was younger. She tends to be freer with veiling, as that is what she is most familiar with and shared that it was not as strict as to whether someone veils every day or not. Rajiya went on to say that when she went to school she would veil, but still wore shorts and tank tops on other days. I thought that this is most likely common among young girls, considering the Qur'anic verse that requires women to veil during prayer, thus limiting when young girls are to veil. It was not until she went back to Africa to do some charity work that she felt the hijab's importance. Although she lost some friends from high school, she chose to start veiling more consistently to focus on things that were important to her. To Rajiya, veiling has given her a way to stay dedicated to the path she has chosen while still being able to partake in Western culture.

Interestingly, I found that Najwa was also freer with veiling. Najwa, who was raised Muslim, veiled from about 14 until 19, when she moved to the United

States. Because she lived in Saudi Arabia, she shared that it was frowned upon if a woman did not veil. A woman who does not veil in Saudi Arabia is often subject to judgment and is thought to bring shame to her father for not dressing modestly. However, she admitted that it was easier to not veil if you were in a group with other women who also did not veil. She did not have to wear the hijab all of the time, and often wore it outdoors and would remove it upon entering her destination, such as a restaurant. This notion of only veiling while in the public sphere, reminded me of Lila Abu-Lughod's article that I previously referenced in an earlier chapter, and how by veiling women have greater freedom to move about. This also brings up questions of the public sphere versus the private sector. In this case, it would seem that the public sphere would require veiling, as this belongs to the men, whereas it would be appropriate to remove the veil once in a more isolated location, i.e., the private sector. Once she moved to the United States, she could decide to continue to veil or remove it. She ultimately decided not to veil since she felt it was not necessary. However, she did say that she now feels empowered to decide whether to veil or not, no longer interested in how others will judge her and has a chance to think about the meaning and importance of wearing the hijab.

Zeynab and Zuleika were two of the three women I interviewed who do not veil. However, both had veiled at one point in their lives and shared that one day they both would return to wearing the hijab. Zeynab wore the hijab for the first time when she was in 7th grade, but was fearful of being teased and removed it after one day. However, the following school year, in 8th grade, she started to veil

and continued to do so until the 10th grade. Because she went to a predominantly Caucasian school, she constantly felt pressure to remove the veil. Because of the added pressure from the Western culture within her school, she questioned whether she should continue to wear the veil. Eventually, she removed her hijab and has chosen not to veil, but shared that someday she may wear it again. Zuleika had a similar experience with veiling as Zeynab did. Zuleika was first introduced to the hijab by her then mother-in-law, who was her main influence, and who asked her one day if she wanted to try it on. She shared that she felt more secure, more at peace, and that she felt as though people respected her. She grew up in a modest home, so wearing the hijab was not that much of a stretch. She seemed comfortable with wearing the veil, but her family was concerned for her safety when she wore the hijab and she received derogatory comments when she veiled. In the end, she expressed that it is really about your relationship with and knowing God that matters, not necessarily the veil. In these two instances, one can surmise that Western societal pressures contributed to the removal of these women's hijabs.

Lastly, I spoke to the women about how they view the veil and what they wished people would learn or know about the Muslim community. Many of them expressed their hope that someday people will become more educated and question commonly accepted discriminating views of the perceived Other.

Rajiya and Sanem, two of the younger interviewees, shared that the hijab holds so much more meaning than what an outsider may see. Rajiya states that wearing the hijab, she feels liberated in many ways. She has more self-respect

now that she veils and that she became much more aware of her actions.

Wearing the veil “grounds you” and makes you more humble. She wanted people to know that Islam is a lifestyle that is intended to serve God. It is her hope that people become more educated and stressed the point that she feels many are missing: the purpose of religion/faith is to help believers become good people. Sanem had a similar disposition toward the hijab. For Sanem, wearing the veil was more than wearing a piece of fabric that covers your hair. It is an attitude of modesty. It is, as she put it, the “physical manifestation of the internal struggle of modesty and humility.” She has not thought to remove her veil and says that it is something of value, something worth keeping. Growing up in a world that is so concerned with appearance, wearing the veil gave her the ability to recognize her own beauty. Her hijab does not cover her beauty, but rather it highlights a different aspect of it. Islam is about modesty in general and is not limited to women. She went on to share that Islam does not oppress women and that the misconceptions of women in Islam are far more offensive, as I have argued—it is Western culture that is oppressive in regards to the Muslim woman and the hijab. The way people view Muslim women makes it seem as though they are belittling women’s intelligence and taking away their dignity, which Sanem vehemently stated the religion does not do. In the end, Sanem shared that she just wanted others to stop judging Muslim women for veiling and recognize that the Islamic religion raises women up; “Why else would so many women flock to the religion?” In this view, after speaking with Sanem I was able to understand why

so many women who veil see the hijab as a symbol of power, prestige, and modesty, just as it has been represented throughout history.

While Fikriyya held similar views of the veil as Rajiya and Sanem, she was more adamant than the other women in that it was a necessity and that a woman should not unveil, regardless of the challenges one may face. To her, she feels much more comfortable wearing her veil. By wearing the veil, one is perceived as being modest and reserved, and her actions follow suit. The focus is moved solely to who the woman is and leads to the woman valuing herself. When I asked her if she thought wearing the hijab was required by Islam, she replied that while it is disputed, there is a verse in the Qur'an that asks for women to cover all except her face and hands. She went on to say that some people think it is optional, but she disagrees and that all women know it is a requirement but choose not to veil because they have trouble with it. Although at times it is a personal *jihad*, "internal battle," she feels that it is between her and God and that she is only accountable to Him.

Although Zeynab and Zuleika do not wear the hijab regularly, they both shared their highest regard for the veil and respected the women who choose to veil. Zeynab feels that by veiling, it allows others to focus solely on the person and offers her beauty only to her husband and God. She shared with me that Islam is very peaceful and that it holds women in high regard. Zeynab explained that in a *hadith*, there is a story of a man who asks who is to be "worthy of [his] companionship." The Prophet goes on to tell him, "Your mother...your mother...your mother...then your father." In sharing this *hadith*, Zeynab pointed

out how women are held in the highest regard, contrary to the misconceptions some Westerners may have. She went on to say that there are many similarities between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and recalls every picture she has ever seen of Mother Mary, wearing a veil, as I have previously pointed out. She then raised the question of whether or not women in other cultures or religions enforce various requirements that may be perceived as different, yet it is the hijab that calls so much negative attention to Islam. Zuleika had similar questions and focused on the woman's relationship with God. She shared that beyond the veil, the importance should be placed on the oneness with God and that one should strive for any connection to make one feel closer to God. To her, modesty is part of Islam and by being humble, you will become one with God. She pointed out that there are good and bad people in the world and her wish is for people to recognize that just because one Muslim does something bad, it does not make the majority of Muslims bad. She closed our interview by saying that in the end, we are all family and [the Muslim community] will feed, clothe, and help those in need. Reflecting on these two interviews, I cannot help but think of how misunderstood the Muslim community is and how the veil (of all things) has led to so many misconceptions within Western society.

Najwa had a very different experience of veiling than the other women did. Because she grew up in Saudi Arabia, the option to never veil was not given to her. However, she recognized the value of the hijab. She shared that veiling doesn't necessarily equate to someone who is religious. Many women who veil do not pray, and the veil is really just a way to stay modest. In this view, veiling is

more of a cultural norm, which is more predominant in the Middle East, such as in Saudi Arabia. By veiling, it forces people to get to know someone based on personality rather than their external appearance. Like several of the other women, she ended by saying that the decision to veil or not veil is between her and God and feels that Islam supports the “what’s best for you” philosophy. Najwa’s interview helped show how complex the hijab can be and all the reasons for wearing it. Because she grew up in the Middle East, like Fikriyya, Najwa supports the claim that the veil in some parts of the world are more cultural rather than religious—or at least viewed in this way by some women.

Regardless of whether the women veiled or not, every woman I spoke with respected the symbol of the veil, and all it represents. They all touched on some common themes, pointing out that the hijab forces people to get to know the personality of the woman, rather than judging someone by their external appearance. As each woman praised and celebrated the hijab, I was reminded of how Western culture has taken this symbol and tainted it with judgments, creating an oppressive Western view and contributing to the misunderstandings of the veil.

In interviewing these women, I continuously reflected on the surrounding Western culture and our need to feel “free.” However, with that *need*, I question whether we truly are free considering the ads that are forced upon us daily—all of which *tell* us that we must wear as little clothing as possible, that we must be unhealthily thin, and that the only thing that matters is our external appearance, because after all, that is what seems to be rewarded in Western society—the

subjectification of women. Considering this seems to be the case, are we (the Western culture) not oppressed as well? Are we not losing the freedom we have, just to oblige those who prescribe what beauty is? Perhaps the Western world has lost its ability to think for itself or question what is deemed as “popular.” This leads me to believe that the religion of Islam is much more supportive of the women who practice and support the notion of modesty.

All the women I interviewed tried to find the common ground between the Western culture they live in and their Muslim identity, while facing internal and external struggles of some sort. It appeared that these women all believed that the hijab was to ensure the modesty of the woman who wears it, much like the Qur’anic verses support. However, not all women felt it was a requirement, instead about half of them felt that the decision is left to the woman to decide and thought Islam supports that decision. This reminded me of the very different interpretations of the Qur’anic verses and *hadiths*, making what would seem the true reading more convoluted. Furthermore, several women pointed to veiling as a cultural practice that has historical roots in many countries where Islam is the predominant religion. In the end, it seemed that each of these women had their own complex reason for veiling or not veiling, which may have been affected by Western misconceptions and societal pressures. To conclude, I believe that the judgments that are geared toward Muslim women are unjustified. With every criticism that is aimed at describing the oppression of Muslim women, or possibly worse, describing them as terrorists, Westerners are adding to the misconceptions and oppressive nature that has already been created.

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