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DISCOURSES OF VEILING AND THE PRECARIETY OF CHOICE

Representations in the post-9/11 US

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Introduction

Hello, Sunshine: A young woman in Kabul takes advantage of the sudden opportunity to move about unveiled. The Taliban, which was particularly brutal to women, required them to wear the head-to-toe burka. Now those who stuck with the traditional costume did so by choice.

(Behakis 26 November 2001)

The full-length Time magazine article from which this quote is drawn is accompanied by exotic pictures of Afghan women, both veiled and unveiled. The excerpt and the pictures are powerful. The sunshine bursts with life, energy, joy; the caption Hello, Sunshine expresses the new confidence that Afghan women (ostensibly) achieved immediately following the United States' invasion of Afghanistan in September 2001. As the young woman who ‘takes advantage of the sudden opportunity’ still covers her hair loosely, while others remain in head-to-toe burqas, the photograph presents a contrast between women who are relatively free and those who are constrained. Yet the traditional costume is now one choice among others, the author suggests, for the invasion has granted women a certain agency. Such a characterization of the burqa dehistoricizes the veiling practice, of course, but also offers a rationale for the United States’ invasion of the country.

While fixation on the veil is not new in Western discourses (Ahmed 1992; Kahf 1999; Andrea 2007), in post-9/11 America certain nuances require critical examination. To that end, this depiction is only one example of how the bodies of Muslim women who veil (the headscarf, abaya, niqab, burqa, and so forth – I refer to these together as ‘veiling’, because the problematic of representation that I address in this chapter does not essentially differentiate among types or cuts of cloth) were made a contested terrain in the post-9/11 era. Veiling practice is frequently interpreted as proof of women’s subjugation, despite a growing body of literature which challenges such representations. Yet either interpretation often hinges on an opposition between freedom and coercion (is the veil imposed on women? or do they choose to wear it?). This discursive contour is problematic at a number of registers. In particular, and disregarding social and historical context, it presumes that a liberal conception of choice will adequately determine
whether or not the practice is voluntarily embraced. As Saba Mahmood (2005, 11–2) critically notes, freedom in liberalism is constituted as the ability to autonomously ‘choose one’s desires’ and that an individual’s actions must be established to be the consequence of her ‘own will’, rather than of custom, tradition, or social coercion. Similarly, Carol Hay (2013, 12) observes that liberals agree that individuals should be free ‘from the unwanted interferences of others’, should ‘live the life of one’s choosing’, and should choose ‘one’s own conception of the good’. Joan Scott (2007) also underscores the problematics of such liberalism. This liberal perspective passes over how a subject’s social and cultural upbringing shapes their interests and desires; how presumably free choices are attained within power relations and asymmetries; and how the hegemony of certain representations already constitutes certain practices as signifying one thing or another.

Keeping in mind these aspects of the liberal conception of free will, this chapter first examines burqa representations against the backdrop of the ‘war on terror’ in US news media, and then analyses the notion of ‘choice’. I chart the manner in which the practice of veiling points to problematic liberal assumptions and their fraught relationships to female Muslim emancipation – since the ostensible liberation is already punctuated within colonial and imperial discourses. I then discuss how some Muslim women themselves understand veiling. For not only does the mainstream mediatized landscape render Muslim women through the vocabulary of choice, but also the discursive logics of self-representation re-inscribe this vocabulary in the name of reclaiming agency. To underscore problematic aspects of agency, I also draw attention to US women’s bodily patriarchal practices. In the final section, I discuss the discrimination Muslim women often face in the United States while conducting their daily business, because of their clothing. Such intolerance points to a fragmentation as well as an ethnocentrism regarding veiling. To present these arguments, I begin with former First Lady Laura Bush’s radio address, and then draw upon articles that appeared in *Time* magazine and the *Washington Post*, widely read news media in the US.

**Representations of burqas**

In her radio address of 17 November 2001, former First Lady Laura Bush contended that as a result of the United States invasion, much of the Taliban regime had retreated, ‘and the people of Afghanistan – especially women – are rejoicing’. These two events, according to her, are directly related, because ‘the brutal oppression of women is a central goal of the terrorists’ and ‘the Taliban and its terrorist allies were making the lives of children and women in Afghanistan miserable’. This misery is profound: ‘Seventy percent of the Afghan people are malnourished. One in every four children won’t live past the age of five because health care is not available. Women have been denied access to doctors . . . Women cannot work outside the home, or even leave their homes by themselves.’ This description blurs suffering of women and children as a result of poverty (Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries of the world), three years of severe drought, inadequate healthcare resources, and the restrictions imposed by the Taliban regime during the five years of rule – all into a single frame of immiseration. Yet one distinction does emerge: that between the civilized and the uncivilized. For not only do the civilizeds ‘hearts break for the women and children in Afghanistan, but also . . . we see the world the terrorists would like to impose on the rest of us’. The invasion of Afghanistan thus has world-historical significance beyond addressing the stated suffering of Afghan children and women. It is about saving the world: ‘All of us have an obligation to speak out.’ And this ‘speech’ yields results: ‘because of our recent military gains . . . women are no longer imprisoned in their homes. They can listen to music’.
Some crucial historical information is missing here, of course. While the former First Lady proudly declares the United States’ military gains, she neglects to note how ‘over the course of just one month, the US dropped over half a million tons of bombs – approximately 20 kilograms of high explosive for every man, woman, and child in the country’ (Khattak 2002, 19). Women may not be imprisoned in their homes, but many may have simply died or been injured and disabled because of the bombing. Indeed, many of them may have been ‘put at greater risk of starvation because US bombing severely restricted the delivery of food aid’ (Hirschkind and Mahmood 2002, 341). The celebratory radio address also omits the well-documented history of how the CIA and various Western countries, to weaken the Soviet Union, supported the Taliban in the 343 refugee camps that were established across the North West Frontier Province and Baluchistan in Pakistan (Khattak 2002, 19). Shahnaz Khan (2006, 120) writes that in 1998, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Secretary of State under President Jimmy Carter, admitted that he and CIA director Bill Casey ‘had helped create the conditions for the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan’. They believed that ‘the resistance in camps in Pakistan would hasten the fall of the Soviet empire’. In the aftermath of 9/11, when Brzezinski was asked about ‘the wisdom of supporting radical Islamists in Afghanistan’, he remarked: ‘What is more important to the history of the world? The Taliban or the collapse of the Soviet empire?’ (For further information on the United States’ role in these events, see Hirschkind and Mahmood 2002). This admission puts Laura Bush’s contrast between civilized and uncivilized in a different light. The people whose ‘hearts break’ for Afghan suffering actually bear clear responsibility for their suffering. This does not allow for benevolent intervention.

Wrapping the generic sufferings of Afghan women around the brutality of the Taliban is frequent in American news media – often as bolstered by Afghan women themselves, though no less problematic for it. A common pattern has an Afghan woman who left Afghanistan long ago identify the practice of veiling as alien, recalling the freedom women enjoyed prior to Taliban rule. One article reports that an Afghan women’s rights activist, Fahima Vorgetts, who fled Afghanistan in 1979 and now lives in the United States, showed despair upon her return to Afghanistan. Before leaving, she wore mini-skirts; now women had to wear burqas to feel safe (Hernandez 2002). Another article features an Afghan woman who returns to Kabul after 23 years living in the United States. She is shocked to see women ‘shrouded in burqas’, because ‘in the Kabul of her childhood, no one wore the enveloping shrouds’ (Sheridan 2002). Although such nostalgic, selective autobiographical accounts identify the burqa as a Taliban-imposed practice, they ignore the long-standing veiling tradition in Afghanistan and inadequately address why women did not feel safe leading up to the fall of the Taliban regime. My intention here is certainly not to minimize women’s sufferings caused by the Taliban, but to underscore the problematic framing that obscures (rather than clarifies) the stakes and context of the veiling practice.

It is well documented that forms of veiling for women in the subcontinent of Central Asia are long-standing. Pashtun women, one of several ethnic groups in Afghanistan, traditionally wore a burqa when they went out (Abu-Lughod 2013, 35). The practice symbolizes women’s modesty and respectability, and separates men’s and women’s spheres, including making a distinction between mahram (close relatives with whom marriage is not permissible) and non-mahram (individuals with whom marriage is permissible). It also allows women to move into the public sphere without jeopardizing religious and cultural expectations of moral and sexual behaviour. The burqa thus performs multiple symbolic and physical functions. But if it has been part of the social fabric of Afghanistan, ‘Why would women suddenly want to give up the burqa in 2001? Why would they throw off the markers of their respectability?’ (Abu-Lughod 2013, 35). In other words, while Afghan women no longer live under the Taliban-imposed rulings on the burqa, the Taliban did not invent it in the first place. Whilst they imposed a
particular style of veiling ‘on everyone as “religiously” appropriate’ (Abu-Lughod 2013, 37), it is unreasonable to expect a renouncing of traditional clothing in the wake of American invasion of the region.

In fact, although the burqa discourse often makes media headlines, it may not be among the greatest worries of Afghan women. One article even states that ‘the burka is the least of their concerns’ (Lacayo 2001). The same article interviews Dr Rahima Zafar Staniczia, the head of the Rabia Balhi hospital for women, who says: ‘What women wear is a secondary issue . . . first we need peace. Then we need central government. Then we need education. After all that, we will be in a position to make a decision on the burka’ (36–7). This account counters the popular depiction of the burqa. In fact, as Dr Staniczia states, it is only conditions of sustained law and order that will enable women to decide about the burqa. From this perspective, if one is genuinely concerned about women’s rights in Afghanistan, she needs to sincerely explore ‘the history of the development of repressive regimes in the region and the United States’ role in this history’ (Abu-Lughod 2013, 31). One also needs to ask if US tax dollars put toward the war in Afghanistan will bring peace, security, and education closer to women or rip them further away. The role of the burqa is not amplified in this discussion.

In the aftermath of the ‘war on terror’, issues related to security and women’s covering are greatly intertwined in both Afghanistan and Iraq (after the US invasion in 2003). Several news reports indicate women are reluctant to take off their veils in both countries, for safety reasons. Several Iraqi women, mostly university students, tell an interviewer that more and more women wear the hijab ‘simply out of fear’ (Spinner 2004). An Iraqi woman remarks, ‘I put on the scarf because I wanted to walk in the street without fearing someone will kill me or kidnap me . . . I heard rumors about killing women without a scarf. Why should I risk my life?’ The article continues:

This is the new reality for many women in Iraq . . . As the months have passed since the U.S.-led attack, fewer women are daring to venture out without wearing a . . . head scarf . . . In Baghdad, moderate Muslim women used to feel they had a choice whether to wear the scarf, even as religious oppression under Saddam Hussein grew over the past decade. Now, in many neighborhoods, it is hard to find a woman outdoors without a head scarf.

Thus Iraqi women (subjected to the violence engendered by the war and beyond) have to wear the hijab for safety reasons after the American invasion. That Iraqis increasingly withdraw to their cultural, ethnic, and religious affiliations, and commit sectarian violence, must be understood in relation to the American invasion which ended an entire regime of social life. More directly, this whole discourse (increased veiling, what this is taken to signify, etc.) must be critically situated in relation to the ‘war on terror’ that created such conditions, rather than simply recoursing to the popular rhetoric of Islamists imposing rigid and conservative clothing on women.

Other news articles report on how the war hinders Iraqi women’s daily life and robs them of opportunities they had previously enjoyed: ‘Iraqi women had been earning university degrees since the 1920s . . . and became physicians, engineers and lawyers’ (Trejos 2006). It continues: ‘as a college student in 1974, Nouri showed off her long black hair . . . wore short skirts . . . walked around campus with friends who happened to be boys . . . [Women] took walks around their neighborhood . . . wearing whatever they wanted.’ However, after the United States’ invasion, all of this was changed. ‘The younger women say they fear being snatched on their way to school and wonder whether their college degrees will mean anything in the new Iraq.
Older women, proud of their education and careers, are watching their independence slip away. “We’re suffering right now . . . The war took all our rights.” Once again, these women’s lived experiences call for a critical assessment of the popular discourse that suggests that Muslim women live constrained and secluded lives, either voluntarily or otherwise, and wear the hijab because of the influence of radical Islamists.

**Situating choice**

As discussed above, in the US news media, veiling is often portrayed as a practice imposed on women. In particular, it is frequently juxtaposed with Western-style clothing, signifying the former as a symbol of conformity and the latter as a symbol of autonomy. One article states: ‘The burka is still universal . . . even in Kabul, where Western-style skirts were not uncommon before the Taliban’ (Lacayo 2001, 36). Another article reports that a tailor in Kabul is now busy making women’s pants that were banned under the Taliban. The article also states that ‘skirts cut just below the knee are particularly popular for indoor wear’ (Baker 2001). Likewise, another journalist remarks: ‘Although Iraq is predominantly Muslim, for many decades its capital was a trendy, modern city. In the 1960s, women wore short skirts and blouses with low necklines. But their daughters say they do not have such freedom today. They blame a post-war insurgency bolstered by conservative hard-liners’ (Spinner 2004). While the Taliban and the conservative hardliners are here blamed for restricting women from wearing pants, skirts, and low necklines, women seem to have only two options: Western-style attire, modernity, autonomy – or ‘traditional’ clothes, conservatism, confinement. Such casual oppositions are neither remarkable nor recent, for such representations of Muslim women and their veiling practices are embedded in classical Orientalist discourses. As Edward Said’s (1978, 7) landmark work demonstrated, Europe produced the Orient as its contrasting image to assert its own superiority. Further, as Uma Narayan (1997, 45) states, ‘[a] colonial representation is one that replicates problematic aspects of Western representations of Third-World nations and communities’, and it can be ‘produced’ by those outside the ‘West’, too, including ‘Third-World’ subjects. Viewed from this perspective, the veil stands between tradition and modernity, East and West, suppression and autonomy. This formulation constructs Islam as an oppressive religion and proposes that Muslim women must be liberated from the veil.

When such accounts emphasize that women cannot wear Western-style outfits because of conservative hardliners, they imply that Western women choose their clothing freely. This implicit assumption appears similar to the category of the ‘average Third World woman’, in contrast to the self-representation of the ‘Western’ woman that Chandra Mohanty (2003, 22) has examined. That is, while the former supposedly leads an essentially truncated, sexually constrained, and tradition-bound life, the latter presumably has control over her body and sexuality. This portrayal is built upon a racial and geographical hierarchy, and uncritically situates ‘Western’ women as agents of their own destiny. Of course, a serious look at the massive Western fashion, advertising and cosmetic industries, which incessantly proclaim the ‘imperfections’ of women’s bodies, declaring what they must wear to get a perfect man or job, swiftly collapses the mirage of freedom on offer.

Indeed, seeking to intelligently understand the practice of veiling also requires situating Western women’s choices in social context. Consider the banal examples of high-heeled shoes and plastic surgery. Many women continue to wear high-heeled shoes despite the fact that they cause health problems, for ‘high heels have a long history of social status, sexuality, and power. It is not really surprising, by the time girls are four years old they know that Disney’s high-heeled glass slipper does not fit the ugly women’ (Head of Oxfordshire Podiatry Services, cited in Chambers
A steady increase of cosmetic surgeries in the US also demonstrates the internalization of certain beauty standards and gendered behaviours. The American Society of Plastic Surgeons (2013) reported performing 290,224 breast augmentations in 2013, a 37 per cent increase since 2000. It can be argued, as Clare Chambers (2008) has remarked, that a woman may want breast implants because she herself likes the way they look, and not to please a man or to submit to patriarchal norms. However, ‘it would be impossible to say that a woman’s desire for breast implants were independent of patriarchal norms unless she lived in a nonpatriarchal society . . . Why on earth would anyone want to have surgery to insert heavy and dangerous alien objects into her body if there were no social meaning to, or social payoff from, the practice?’ (39–40)

In other words, rather than problematically assuming Western women have control over their bodies and sexualities, one must consider that ‘all choices take place in a cultural context, and depend in large part on that context for their meaning’ (40). These body modifications and others are embedded in a social script that devalues women’s natural bodies and represents them as objects for the male gaze.

To further appreciate the limits of agency, assumed for American women, is also to consider how women in other parts of the globe view their autonomy. Courtney Smith (2011) conducted research in which she compared practices of female genital cutting and breast implantation. Although in her study, the American interviewees emphasized that ‘in the U.S. women are free to make whatever choice they want regarding their bodies’, her African participants articulated a very different response to breast implantation. One interviewee remarked, ‘I have never heard of this practice and never in my life do I want to know about it. Women who do it aren’t really women. It must be caused by a sickness.’ Commenting on the statement, Smith writes that her participant is clear that ‘not everybody believes American women are, in fact, free’ and that their ‘bodily integrity clashed directly with Western notions of liberty and rights’ (34, 37).

Smith’s study illustrates the limitations of freedom afforded to American women, given the perspective of those who have not internalized similar social meanings. American women’s choices and autonomy are indeed shaped and curtailed by patriarchal culture.

And women elsewhere are critical of Western values and hegemony. One article (Mcgirk 2002) discusses the ways some elite Pakistani female students who study in very modern and expensive American-style schools, and who have been to the US, express concerns regarding the American invasion of Afghanistan. One student remarks, ‘[a]nd what’s so great about these American values that they’re trying to impose on us? . . . Is it really liberty? I watched Oprah the other day. She was talking to pregnant 13-year-old girls who were unmarried. I’m glad I don’t have those complications in my life.’ Following her lead, another student states: ‘That’s right . . . Americans talk about protecting women’s rights. But have you seen that George Michael video where he has these women on leashes like dogs? Give me a burqa any day [instead].’ These students are attentive to American supremacy and do not seem inspired by presumed liberal American values. Their observations regarding mainstream media demeaning women resonates with critical scholarship. As many scholars argue, media images suggest ‘how women in general, specific women and groups of women in particular, are seen, treated and received. [They construct] their status as unequal and their reputation as inferior’ (MacKinnon 2011, 14). Since the objectification of women’s bodies in the media points to a certain violence that women in the US are subjected to, the student cited above juxtaposes it with the burqa and considers the latter, sarcastically, a better disparity.

Even so, people often do not reflect on diverse forms of social inequalities that women face in the US. They seem to have internalized the liberal notion of choice and draw on it to assert a certain autonomy. A newspaper editorial, ‘Veils as a Matter of Choice’, is a case in point. ‘To mandate . . . that I must or must not wear a veil, robs a woman of her inherent
freedom . . . I may choose to wear a habit, a veil, a chador, a niqab. I have that freedom, as well as the freedom to respect another person’s choice’ (Ugolini 2006). Similarly, a Muslim woman argues elsewhere that although she would never herself wear a burqa, she ‘must agree with Afghanistan’s new minister for women’s affairs, who told the New York Times Magazine recently that it was not about the burqa but about choice’. The author continues:

I have met women who choose to cover their entire body, including their face. We must support that choice . . . Isn’t that what it’s about for women all over the world, be it the choice to vote, have an abortion, drive a car, wear a miniskirt or wear a scarf? When it becomes about what women wear rather than what they choose to wear then we infantilize women as much as the Taliban did. (Eltahawy 2002)

These accounts are critical of the popular representations of veiling, and argue that women must be free to choose their dress. Denying women that right is seen equal to the Taliban-imposed restrictions. Everything – the salvation of the world, as in Laura Bush’s idiom above – seems to hinge on this right. However, these descriptions, too, disregard the social context in which women make their decisions. For ‘if we accept the fundamental premise that humans are social beings, raised in certain social and historical contexts and belonging to particular communities that shape their desires and understandings of the world’ (Abu-Lughod 2013, 40), then one has to consider the significance of cultural practices to individual choices.

Veiling encounters intolerance

The notion of freedom also needs to be understood against the power relations which shape it and which it sustains. In the US, the practice of veiling is not seen as a sign of cultural and religious aspiration but a practice belonging to the Other. Within this context, many Muslim women experienced discrimination at different venues in the post-9/11 era. One article reports that in Atlanta, police arrested a Muslim woman because she refused to remove her head scarf before attending a hearing (Washington Post 2008). Thereafter, a judge ordered her to serve ten days in jail for contempt of court. Though she was released in less than a day, the incident sparked a protest, ending up requiring court workers to undergo sensitivity training. However, as Council on American-Islamic Relations spokesman Ibrahim Hooper argues, training does not address the problem behind the behaviour. Elsewhere, a journalist reports that ‘[a] Muslim woman was asked to leave her place in line at a credit union in Southern Maryland and be served in a back room because the head scarf she wore for religious reasons violated the institution’s “no hats, hoods or sunglasses” policy’ (Zapotosky 2009). Commenting on the event in the article, Hooper reiterates that ‘[t]his may be the tip of the iceberg . . . There’s got to be a way to work it out so that this security concern does not lead to violations of constitutional rights’. Indeed, such discrimination remains part of the social fabric of the society.

Other articles report on discrimination regarding employment opportunities faced by head scarf-wearing women. The Supreme Court was to hear the case of whether Abercrombie & Fitch ‘violated anti-discrimination laws when it denied a job to a Muslim applicant because her head scarf conflicted with the company’s dress code’ (Barnes 2015). When the applicant was interviewed, ‘she scored high enough on the company’s ratings to qualify for a job’. Another Muslim woman describes her experience: ‘When I walk into interviews, I find that literally interviewers’ jaws drop. They are excited on the phone, but in person they lose the energy’. This woman sent a post-interview email, explaining that ‘she hopes no one was taken aback
by her manner of dress and that her faith has nothing to do with how well she works or what level of commitment she brings to a job'. The journalist reports that the woman is ‘born and raised in this country (not that this should matter) and is well educated, with a master’s degree in public policy. She has had a solid six years of work in international development.’ The woman’s friends also had similar discriminatory experiences (Joyce 2005). Overall, religion-based discriminations have increased in the post-9/11 America. According to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, ‘the number of charges filed by Muslims alleging discrimination doubled from the four years before the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks to the four years after’ (Joyce 2005). These incidents expose prejudice that Muslim women face in the United States, despite the fact that Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits workplace discrimination based on religion, national origin, race or gender. Muslim women’s choice to wear or to not wear a veil, thus, must be situated within this broader social context, this wider terrain of prejudice. The discourse of choice regarding veiling is clearly insufficient: whether concerning women in the West or elsewhere, whether framed in the language of choice or not, it cannot be understood without understanding the social context and relevant power relations.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed post-9/11 representations of the veil in the US. While the practice of veiling continues to be freighted with negative connotations, it needs to be situated within socio-historical context. I have discussed how the ‘War on Terror’, and related rhetoric, has subjected Muslim women to new violence and restrictions, while veiling has been framed by a problematic liberal notion of choice. After all, ‘ideology and beliefs limit and shape what are perceived as available and viable options for all individuals in a society’ (Fineman 2004, 41). Since the practice of veiling already has a negative trajectory in the US, any discussion regarding it cannot be consigned outside such discourse: it must speak to (if not from) this discursive formation. When the media represent the veil as an imposed (rather than freely chosen) practice, this rhetorical and discursive move epitomizes Muslim women as docile, powerless, and vulnerable victims. This has a distributed effect, ‘because the Western definition of what makes one human depends on the notion of agency and the ability to make rational choice’ (Volpp 2001, 1192). To throw Muslim women into a world where their dress codes are determined by conservative hardliners, as such interpretations do, erases the long and variegated history of the veil, reducing it to a foil for the freedoms signified by Western clothing. Furthermore, one cannot ignore discriminations Muslim women continue to face because of their clothing in the US. To that end, one has to account for US ethnocentrism in order to comprehend Muslims’ veiling discourse. This notion of choice, after all, does not carry some innate, objective reality; it remains precarious.

References


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