



Examining the Politics of Piety: From Unveiling to Hyper-Veiling and the Specularity of the Indian Muslim Woman's Veil

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Abstract : *In the opening of his essay “Algeria Unveiled,” Frantz Fanon asserts that women’s attire is often a measure by which a society’s ‘civility’ or potential for ‘civilization’ is assessed. However, what occurs when this very symbol of recognition and decency is transformed into an instrument of oppression and shame? The disruption of normative aesthetic conventions in the public sphere—particularly when instigated by a marginalized minority—is often perceived as a threat to the smooth functioning of institutional norms. Unless Muslims assimilate into racially unmarked spaces, the practices and politics that emerge from such disruptions are viewed as violations of moral, cultural, and religious commitments. These disruptions, while ostensibly considered threats to secularism and liberalism within a democracy, are in fact challenges to an entrenched communal dichotomy that has taken deep root in countries like India. Such actions, though widely condemned, signify the disciplining of Muslim women through administrative and procedural regimes, meticulously crafted under the guise of culturally secular and neutral norms. These occurrences are intertwined with a longstanding capitalist economy embedded in political and legal liberalism, which demands compliance through judicial procedures and the appearance of neutrality. The ‘Muslim question,’ as symbolized by the veil, extends beyond religion; it encapsulates issues of race and belonging. The veil, therefore, becomes a metaphor for the regulation of women’s bodies.*

Key words: Veil, Non-normative, Secularism, Diaspora, Hegemony

Introduction

The disruption of dominant aesthetic norms regarding attire and food, particularly when enacted by marginalized minority groups, is often perceived as a threat that must be controlled and contained. The discourses and practices that emerge from the dominance of racially unmarked groups serve as mechanisms of social and cultural repression, through which the Western world has intensified its challenge to the moral, cultural, and religious allegiances of Muslims. This challenge is often framed as a necessary political defense against the perceived norms of political Islam. In her article titled “Who Takes Exception to the Veil?” published on *The Wire*, G. Arunima discusses how disruptions to hegemonic sartorial practices, while overtly considered threats to security, secularism, and democracy, actually represent deeper challenges. Arunima states, “...these are challenges to the long-standing, unchallenged authority of imperialism and colonialism, which are closely intertwined with the capitalist economy and embedded in political and legal liberalism, demanding obedience through the machinery of legal procedures and the appearance of neutrality” (Arunima). The ‘Muslim question,’ as symbolized by the veil, is about something much deeper and more existential; it is not merely a matter of religion. It also involves the unspoken disciplining of Muslim women’s bodies through juridical and procedural regimes disguised as cultural, secular, and neutral norms.

Veils have consistently occupied a significant place in the historical discourse surrounding women. Women, whether veiled or unveiled, have been compelled to bear the “civilizational burden” in various forms. As Arunima notes,

“The history of the veil has shown that both veiling and unveiling are complex signifiers that have changed meanings” (Arunima). The concept of piety is often driven by ideas of religious and cultural devotion. However, this notion of ‘enforced devotion’ is not solely rooted in religious adherence but is also influenced by the underlying critical threads present in any philosophical tradition. In India, the practice of veiling women transcends religious boundaries and is not confined to Muslim women alone. Arunima highlights instances such as the *purdah* observed by Hindu women across many castes in North India and the *marakkuda* used by Namboodiri women in erstwhile Kerala to veil their faces in public as examples of such veiling practices. This illustrates that the veil is not inherently an Islamic symbol of enforced modesty.

The origins of the Muslim veil have a long and complex history. Muslim women have historically covered their heads in various ways, reflecting the diversity of their physical and geographical contexts. The meanings associated with the veil have also varied across different cultures and historical periods. Islamic studies scholars, including Lila Abu-Lughod, Amina Wadud, Fatema Mernissi, and Saba Mahmood, have explored why educated and skilled Muslim women from diverse ethno-cultural backgrounds began adopting the veil in the late 20th century. The modern use of the veil among educated Muslim women emerged as a political act against power hierarchies in the Arab world during the late 1970s.

In the early 20th century, many Indian Muslim women joined the National Movement, renouncing the veil as a symbolic gesture to reshape both their personal futures and that of their country. However, in recent times, amid a

growing atmosphere of Islamophobia in India and beyond, many Muslim women have embraced the hijab, niqab, and, in some cases, the burqa. The motivations for this shift are varied, but at its core lies a desire for communal solidarity, cultural visibility, and political assertion. Additionally, it reflects a need for safety within their own community in the face of prejudice and Islamophobia. Notably, many young women have chosen to wear the veil of their own volition.

The allegiance of Muslim women is not solely expressed through the veil. As with women from all castes and creeds, there is significant internal diversity among them, whether in terms of political affiliations, forms of expression, or self-conceptions. Under ordinary circumstances, there might be no need to address this sensitive issue. However, given the current context in India, it becomes necessary to emphasize this point. While Islamophobic and progressive feminist ideologies in the West have often framed Muslim women as persecuted and subservient figures in need of ‘protection,’ the impulses in India’s present scenario differ.

Recent debates and discussions surrounding gender dynamics within Islamic communities have generated a range of arguments about the complex relationship Muslim women have with the veil. Like any cultural symbol, the veil acquires new meanings as cultural and political contexts shift, even as it continues to bear the legacy of Eurocentric interpretations that view it as a tool of repression. In India, some non-Muslim progressives dismiss the veil as a non-issue, while Hindutva politics portrays it as an Islamist refusal to conform to the norms of the political majority and the nation. Since the early 20th century, some Muslim feminist scholars have challenged such orientalist and liberal conceptions of the veil.

Contemporary feminist research examines the evolving meanings of the veil, exploring how educated and employed Muslim women adopt it to assert moral authority, political autonomy, and sovereignty.

In contrast to post-independence Muslim women who rejected the veil in public spaces out of fear of being marginalized and “othered,” educated Muslim women in contemporary India appear to harbor no such apprehensions. These veiled women demonstrate a political consciousness that seeks to challenge traditional practices by integrating secular and egalitarian principles with their personal and sartorial choices. Bolstered by transformative changes in socio-political spheres, the growing engagement of educated Muslim women with debates surrounding the veil in culturally and racially contested spaces globally has empowered them to position themselves as agents of social change. However, their preferences can only be fully understood within the context of the significant shifts in India’s political and social landscape over the past few years. This period has witnessed a dramatic transformation in various interrelated domains. The emphasis on a specific sartorial practice cannot be separated from the new political and social dynamics that have emerged from this profound shift. Gradually, the veil has evolved into a symbol of solidarity and sisterhood, representing a shared resistance to a dominant cultural supremacy that has, through duplicity, marginalized them from the country’s rapidly shrinking public spaces.

This raises the question: why has the veil become a contentious issue now, especially when one perspective does not inherently challenge the other? In the current context, an

increasing number of Muslim women in India are adopting the veil, sometimes as an act of resistance against their unaccommodating parents, who were part of a more lenient political past, and at other times as a way of publicly affirming their solidarity with their religion. For these veiled women, devout reverence to God, commitment to a secular Constitution, autonomous expression of dissent, and the reclaiming of public spaces have all become assertions of their identity as both Muslims and Indians. This draws attention to a broader issue of how majoritarian nationalism perceives minority choices in matters of food and dress. Globally, there are intense campaigns to ban the veil, reflecting the insidious foundations of ethnic nationalisms in contexts where religious minorities are pressured to conform to the social and cultural norms of the political and cultural majority. Such campaigns seek to undermine the bodies and spaces of cultural minorities. The visibility of educated women with their own sartorial choices and body signifiers in public spaces challenges the rigid ideologies of radical vigilantes in India, who struggle to comprehend anything beyond the conventional and prejudiced norms of conformity and compliance, particularly concerning women, regardless of their religion.

Mainstream audiences and critics often fail to create a space for authentic Muslim representations. If religion is indeed the repressed element of critical practice in Eastern countries, then cultural identity serves as the intermediary of Muslim representation in Western contexts. One might then ask what these dispersed Muslim women seek when they assert not just the right to be seen but the desire to represent themselves. In her book *The Political Psychology of the Veil: The Impossible Body* (2020), Sarah Ghumkhor explores the

notion of culturally identifying Muslim women as producers of “antipatriarchal aesthetics,” thereby creating a minority identity that is not prominently marked in the public sphere. Muslim women are frequently represented through “the veil,” which becomes their defining signifier in non-Muslim majority contexts. According to Ghumkhor, this master signifier traps Muslim women within a “Lacanian imaginary,” regardless of whether they wear burqas, niqabs, or other veils associated with Islam (Ghumkhor 79). The dynamics of “veiled-veiling-unveiling-unveiled” function as a symbol of violence that must constantly occupy these sites of conflict. In Ghumkhor’s analysis, Muslim women enter the symbolic order only through compliance. By renouncing the religious body as different, women secure the purported “secular” unified body as natural, self-evident, and universal, without acknowledging the inherent lack at the core of subject formation. Even the “hypervisibility” of contemporary young women in veils in social and digital media contributes to this notion. Ghumkhor states, “I do not focus on veiling practices or their histories. Furthermore, the question of the secular body as an identity distinct from a modern or liberal, capitalist, or Western institutional formulation of bodies remains very open” (105). However, she does highlight the imaginary of the secular body as unified and natural. The dichotomy between religious and secular is more illuminating than fully descriptive, especially for women who identify as Muslim but whose relationship to belief and practice varies. She explains how Muslim women in the West have entered mainstream media productions in relation to the master signifier of the veil as an image, even as cloth, fabric, fashion, and covering are used in many of these representations.

In the Indian political imagination, the veil has often functioned as a symbol that obscures individuality, depth, movement, and specific detail, reducing the Muslim woman to a faceless entity. Attempts to reclaim Muslim women's self-representations from this symbolic stain risk falling back into the very binaries they seek to transcend. These representations do not necessarily advance a specific religious doctrine or political agenda, although some do. Nor do they uniformly challenge the neoliberal construction of the individual woman; rather, they may at times restore the notion of "white femininity." These representations engage with neoliberal, "secular" Muslim female identities and critique sex/gender norms by drawing on Islamic knowledge, reminiscent of the Qur'anic principles of *tafsir* and *ijtihad*. *Tafsir*, which means "explanation," "interpretation," or "exegesis," and *ijtihad*, or "independent reasoning," are central to critiques of patriarchy and androcentrism within Islamic contexts. These critiques, while echoing Qur'anic imperatives for social and gender justice, also incorporate theological concepts such as *tawhid*—the unity of God's creation—and draw parallels with women's *da'wa* or devotional movements, though these parallels are not always welcomed.

These and other intellectual currents laid the foundation for feminist and gender justice advocacy within Islam during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Among the pioneering Islamic feminist scholars were Amina Wadud, Riffat Hassan, Asma Barlas, and Kecia Ali, who worked within a global context, often as part of the diaspora. For example, Asma Barlas argues that while patriarchal interpretations (*tafsir*) have historically dominated Islamic exegesis, they lack a solid basis in the Qur'an. Barlas advocates for a holistic reading of

the Qur'an, emphasizing its "best meaning" and contextual translations of key terms. Her democratic approach to tafsir leads her to assert that the Qur'an promotes equality and cautions against gender-based oppression, without denying biological differences. Since its message transcends the specific constraints of seventh-century Arabia, the Qur'an anticipates future injustices as well. Barlas calls upon the Islamic tradition of exegesis and reasoning, using concepts such as *tafsir*, *ijtihad*, and *siyaq* (context) to argue against gender injustice.

Other scholars, such as Margot Badran and Sa'diyya Shaikh, have also championed the concept of Islamic feminism. Badran contends that Islamic feminism is not merely derived from Islamic discourses but also draws on other texts, making it a universal rather than a Western or Eastern construct. She views it as a necessary and rational framework for critiquing patriarchy, employing a conventional dialect that transcends spatial and temporal limitations in religion. Kecia Ali discusses the practice and resonance of Islam in contexts where its legal structures are not enforced, leading to new formations of Islamic feminism and Muslim female identity. These scholars reject the notion of Muslim women as mere inert bodies or as "bodiless robes."

In India, as global and domestic politics increasingly focus on national security, particularly in response to "Islamic terrorism," the presence of veiled Muslim women remains largely unregulated by the state, despite the potential for such symbols to be perceived as threatening or subversive to secular liberalism. However, this does not mean that the veil is free from social control. Muslim women in India who wear the veil are subject to various forms of regulation and

discipline, both within their social context and by the state, in ways that are more explicit than those experienced by their Western counterparts, who often find the veil disturbing, if not outright offensive, to their dominant “secular” liberal culture. In India, veiled Muslim women are controlled through a range of legal, economic, and juridical measures.

This control reflects a broader discourse that rejects Muslims unless they are seen to integrate into the racially unmarked dominant culture. Such discourse, along with the policies that stem from it, represents practices of cultural, social, and legal repression. These practices, which originated in the West, have sparked a widespread challenge to Muslims’ moral, cultural, and religious commitments. This challenge, however, is often framed as a necessary resistance to “political Islam” or “Islamic terrorism.” These projects are intertwined with a longstanding capitalist economy rooted in political and legal liberalism, which demands compliance through legal procedures and a façade of neutrality.

Frantz Fanon, in his essay “Algeria Unveiled,” famously asserts that “it is by their apparel that societies first become known” (Fanon 35). In this context, women’s attire often serves as a measure of civilization, where a society’s civility is frequently evaluated. The bodies and clothing of women, particularly those who are dark-skinned, foreign, or marginalized, are subject to interpretation against a backdrop of colonialism and imperialism. In this light, the aesthetic of dress that reflects India’s cultural hegemony contrasts sharply with that of “Other” cultures, in this case, the dress of Muslim women.

The veil has been marked as a perpetual racial shadow on the female body, signaling difference. Non-compliance with

imposed sartorial rules has often resulted in violence, sometimes disguised as misfortunes attributed to “cultural practices,” including forced veiling, honor killings, bodily mutilation, and female genital mutilation. These are portrayed as symptoms of the constraints that produce “The Good Muslim Woman.” The “veil of violence,” both real and metaphorical, nurtures the illusion of an “unveiling freedom.” In Western countries, the veiled woman is repeatedly cast as a symbol of danger and a threat to national integrity. Numerous incidents have been reported where veiled women, as visible markers of allegiance to “terror-inducing” Muslims, have been confronted and mobbed by the public. The veil, when worn, is perceived as a vehicle for “dangerous ideas” and the wearer is often branded a “passive terrorist.” The intensifying frenzy surrounding the perceived radicalism of Muslim women is directly proportional to the thickness of their veil: from the veil, to the niqab, to the burqa. The practice of veiling the body is often considered more potent than merely veiling the face. The debates surrounding women who wear the veil and other significant sartorial markers are often rooted in discourses of self-assurance, cultural persecution, and the need to maintain cultural integrity and local peace.

Amidst the current global rise in phobias, resulting in travel bans, immigration restrictions, and other prohibitions, the banning of the veil could be seen as an obsessive step that warrants a closer examination of its underlying motivations. The veil, symbolic of the burqa, niqab, and sometimes even the hijab, is portrayed as a cultural threat to national security in the West, despite evidence to the contrary.

In Lacanian terms, the “veiled” woman becomes the prime signifier—a substitute for the “Good Muslim Woman.”

She stands as a representation to be observed and analyzed, and she is always seen as a dilemma to be resolved. Assimilating both the discursive ground and the concealed space that simultaneously allows and prohibits discussion of the Muslim woman, the veiled woman ultimately becomes a representative figure. The dialectics of the veiled and unveiled body reflect the Western desire to comprehend the unseen—what does the veil hide? Imagining her “unveiled” realizes the illusion of what Lacan calls the “knowing subject,” a concept that asserts epistemological dominance by claiming bodily autonomy and universal truth. The “invisible subject,” the veiled Muslim woman, becomes an object of anxiety, a sign of obedience, and an indicator of intolerance. The return to the veil, then, is a return to a scene of seduction that establishes the dynamics of veiling and unveiling, where the body rediscovers itself.

Muslim women’s bodies are ensnared in a civilizational illusion that reflects modernity’s obsession with clarity. This article discusses this illusion through the marking of the “natural” veiled body in the pursuit of the “universal” veiled body. Autonomy, as a cultural exercise of the liberated body, is recognized in the Western illusion as performances of unveiling—the oft-unveiled body—which marks the convergence of modernity’s desire for lucidity, its obsession with the exposure of the flesh, and its quest to reveal the Truth. Expertise in this pursuit is thought to be achieved only through the shedding of irrational principles, the severing of ties with institutions, and a commitment to self-exploration. The temporal transcription that triggers the illusion of unveiling is not limited to the unveiling of Muslim women’s bodies; it is an unveiling of all bodies.

Within the historical discourse surrounding the unveiling of the Muslim woman's body, there is an underlying portrayal of unveiling as a process that simultaneously uncovers the history and symbolism of the veil itself. The progressive impulse, often associated with the pursuit of ultimate truth, is closely tied to the act of unveiling. This reconstitution of the unveiled body is achieved through the biopolitics of Truth and Liberty, which disciplines and shapes the body according to the norms of the "politically correct" body. The restrictions imposed on Muslim women by fundamentalist systems are continuously influenced by ideologies that equate desire with 'unveiling' and abstinence with 'veiling'. Bodies become comprehensible only when the veil is removed, conforming to visible and aesthetic standards of pleasure. Society tends to accept only those bodies that passively perform their roles, adhering to all norms and exercising rights often linked to a materialistic autonomy that enables consumption and interaction free from sartorial constraints.

Conclusion

This article seeks to affirm the connection between the illusion of the "perfect Other" as an elevated entity and the association with the unveiled body, a totality made visible through the body itself. The disappearance of these performing and subservient forms beneath the veil provokes an instinct to unveil, to liberate the body from its perceived bonds. In this context, veiling is regarded as a suppression of natural desire, restricting the body from experiencing and engaging with the sensual pleasures of the world. The process of unveiling thus becomes a biopolitical tool for disciplining and controlling modern subjects, molding them into the

universal human ideal that constitutes the norms of the “perfect body.”

In conclusion, the visible body is integral to the representation of the self-empowered, temporally progressive subject. Autonomy is envisioned and “fixed” through the potential of the unveiled body. The portrayal of veiled bodies as “incomplete” generates a desire for realization that is fulfilled by discovering the body beneath the veil. The veiled body holds the promise of completeness in opposition to the imperative of unveiling. As the veil acquires multiple meanings, knowledgeable Muslim women, who assert their own agency, establish a legitimate and independent space for themselves within the constraints of the Constitution, without apologizing for their cultural and ethnic identities. The veil thus becomes a metaphor for the simultaneous management of women’s bodies and their freedom. It transcends fashion-specific contexts and challenges the shared assumptions of liberal ethnic and cultural values. The veil assumes an independent identity, challenging not only the aesthetics and politics of a sexually liberated society but also the culturally specific and ostensibly neutral norms articulated through judicial and bureaucratic practices.

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