

A DIALOGICAL MODEL OF PERSISTENT PATRIARCHALISM

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As women and men of the north shore of the Mediterranean Sea, what do we know about women on the south shore? From my Western feminist perspective, I would say we know *nothing*. Those women are invisible. This is a double metaphor pointing to double invisibility—an invisibility involving women on both shores. This invisibility is a texture, a piece of cloth woven into different kinds of veils. But if we pursue the matter at a deeper level, we can discover that the two different sorts of veils involve a common, and foundational, gender inequity—though the sort of inequity characteristic of each shore is different.

As a means to explore this deeper level, we can begin with the Western mass media. Which roles do the “developed” women of the West play? Which places do they occupy? Are there attractive male legs or beautiful bodies on television? Are there women in positions of power, at international summit meetings, leading the armies at war?

With respect to the southern shore, what Western mass media continually show are stereotyped images of Arab women, and these images are icons of colonialist, male-centered views and interests—as if that were the only reality. As one example, in magazines and journals and books—at least in Spain—Arab women never appear as politically active subjects. They are briefly mentioned in articles about motherhood and sexual issues, but where they proliferate, where they appear in almost every photograph, is in the iconography of the texts—and then almost nothing about them is revealed because they are always veiled. And the same pattern shows up in magazines and books published in France or Germany or Italy.

Fatima Mernissi (1992) has this to say: “Look, for example, at the covers of my books, even at the title pages. French and German publishers insist on including the word *harem* in the titles, or they put on the book jacket a

photograph of a veiled woman. And when I protest, they answer that that is what sells (even when the content of the work is intended to counter that image).”

And when we focus directly on the images, as a direct source of communication, as less mediated, what do we see? Or, more precisely, what do we not see? What we do in fact always see is veiled women, women who are covered up. And that is the message: in Arab countries, women are going back to wearing the veil—which, in this simplistic analysis, means that women are taking a step backward (from their perspective). Fundamentalism strikes again. The one point of view, the colonialist point of view, turns the question of wearing the veil or not into a highly political issue, and bleeds that issue for profit.

What I claim here is that the image of veiled women—joined together with other images of Islamic fundamentalism—is both comforting and useful for the West. “Us? We are okay, thank you; no problem.” Veiled women are turned into an image that reinforces Western modernity—an image that adds ever more veils to a complex issue. At the same time, I maintain that an unveiled look has the potential to open a fruitful (though never to be completed) path that might move us from one shore to the other, leading us to recognize ourselves within the images of one another.

If we pay close attention to differences among Arab countries, we will discover that the issue of readopting the veil has many nuances. To provide appropriate complexity for our analysis, we must take into account the interaction among features which are very different from one country to another; we must examine different histories, different colonial pasts (and post-colonial presents), different relationships with Iran, on one hand, and with Western countries on the other hand. Furthermore, related to all these factors, we must also come to know that the reasons for readopting the veil are different in each country.

The texts on which Islam is based are the Koran and the Hadith, with the latter being stories about what the Prophet said or did at different times. The Koran cannot be contested, but the Hadith can; they are subject to interpretation. One may offer a fundamentalist interpretation or one of a different kind—for example, one may say that the revelations of the Koran, as interpreted in the Hadith, were never intended to affirm patriarchy—indeed, that they were a denunciation of it. Is the return to the veil—or to other kinds of modest

clothing—a step backward or forward? Is this a religious duty? Must the emergent “discourse on the veil” reinforce a fundamentalist interpretation of texts of the Koran, or are other readings allowed?

MUSLIM WOMEN’S OPINIONS ON THE MATTER

The Moroccan journalist, Hinde Taarji, in her book, *Les voilées de l’Islam* (1991), provides a source of genuine information: namely, the voice of women (something difficult to discover in this tangle of veils). Situated somewhere between journalism and ethnomethodology, her book shows the variety of views women hold about the return to the veil. She reports great differences between Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Lebanon, and other Islamic countries. And there would be still more differences if Taarji’s interviews had focused on working women or the rural poor rather than on students or middle and higher class women. Certainly, the return to the veil affects those women more directly, since poor and rural women have never worn Western clothes. On the other hand, if one identifies the veil as a religious obligation, this raises a series of questions about the role that the Koran ascribes to women: praise for motherhood, seclusion, the segregation of women from men, the suitability of women’s participation in politics, in the labor market, and so on.

All of these are issues that appear in the interviews carried out by Taarji in Arab emirates, in Algeria, Egypt, and Lebanon. I have selected from her book very different sorts of views on the veil question, on differing understandings of the Koran, and on the roles assigned to women. As will be seen, there is no clear agreement on the religious obligation of the *hijab*.

But we should return to the actual voices of the women. For Nadia Kilani, who is an editor of the Egyptian magazine, *Awa* [Eve], “The *hijab* is a sign par excellence of women’s evolution outside the home.” To the contrary, another Egyptian, Amina Said, is horrified. She is a leftist journalist who works for *El Mousawar* [The Independent], and she claims: “In the texts of the Koran, you will find no descriptions of clothing for Islamic females.” Maha, a professor of French Literature in Ain Chems University in Cairo, says she has adopted a more modest kind of clothing because of pressure from males staring at her on the streets; at home, she says, she wears jeans and miniskirts. Madiha, who teaches sociology at the American University in Cairo, sums up a number of reasons to

explain the return to the veil: (a) religion— “Most people believe it is the genuine Islamic style of clothing”; (b) family pressure (from not only fathers and brothers but also from sons); (c) the economy (“They do not have enough money to be fashionable”); and (d) society— “The *hijab* is more a national than an Islamic style; women wear it to be like everyone else.”

In Lebanon, Taarji found a strong connection between the return to the veil and the Lebanese fight against invading Israelites. That link is one psychological effect of the war, and the power of the Hezbollah party developed at the same time. One respondent, Fatima, gives expression to the combination of the fear of death and national identity: “When I put on the *hijab*, the fear of death disappeared in spite of bombs and bullets.” Another respondent, Nayfe, combines several of the arguments defended in Lebanon: the return to the veil as a way of escaping sexual attack and as a sign of opposition to the Israeli invader: “I started working at a newspaper, so I was able to mingle at every level of society...; [then] I became aware of how women are looked at...; I was able to observe how men perceive women...only in terms of their beauty, where only external appearance counts.”

We can link these reflections with others in the book voicing complaints against Western materialism. The view is overwhelming. Malkiya, an Algerian, began to pray at the urging of her son. She bought a copy of the Koran and went to Mecca. But she took her final step in Paris: “My recent readings had made me aware that the *hijab* is an obligation for Muslim women...; [in France] I was shocked by the materialism, the external appearances that guide human relationships. I set out dressing European but came back dressing Muslim.” Wearing the *hijab*, she says, she feels at peace; but she can also run because she wears trousers underneath.

Asma Ben Kadar, an Algerian theologian and mathematician, also returned to the veil, this time as a way to deal with the accepted asymmetry between attitudes toward men’s and women’s bodies: “In 1982, I started to raise questions about the relationship between men and women. I came to the conclusion that the *hijab* was the best way to gain my freedom. Given that men were unable to see anything in my person other than being female..., I decided to eliminate what wakens men’s desires. ...Gaining freedom from their stares, I affirm my freedom.” In spite of her being a theologian, she claims not to know

whether the veil is or is not a religious obligation, but she feels it has become a need as a result of social context. On the other hand, she does affirm that polygamy, special inheritance laws, and the male right to repudiate spouses are Islamic precepts.

In several countries, women said that wearing the veil makes them feel free. Fatima, for instance, says: “The *hijab* is like a wall built up against the instincts of males. It makes femaleness disappear, leaving room for the person.”

Family pressures are different in different countries: sometimes children make their mothers wear the veil; at other times, boyfriends forbid it or parents fear that wearing it will end their chances in life.

FROM THE INVISIBILITY OF WOMEN TO THE INVISIBILITY OF PATRIARCHY

There is an analytical approach to these issues that males, from both shores, fail to take into account. For the moment, let us consider our societies under the rubric of a hypercomplex system shaped by differing kinds of arrangements or subsystems—the social, economic, religious, cultural, colonial, to mention a few. Up to the present, there has been one factor that analyses typically ignore, hierarchial arrangements rooted in patriarchy. But this factor is peculiar: it is a horizontal system, a subsystem that cuts across all other subsystems. In that respect, the two shores of the Mediterranean, north and south, historically share the same patriarchal arrangement (each with its own peculiarities, of course).

To understand the complexity of the interactions between a patriarchal society, religion and popular beliefs, and political-economic conditions, we could use the dialogical model proposed by Edgar Morin. It allows us to look at antagonistic, complementary, and congruent relationships all at the same time as emerging from the interactions of these same features. Then, when we examine the status of women on the two shores, the dialogical model can help us to see what arises from patriarchy and what corresponds to geo-social-political situations. We can also avoid the linearity of analyses which do not take into account the complex historical evolution of the features in question. The result is an analysis that allows us to see in each place the particular interaction of those

features that give rise to a unique situation—the real situation, which is always unique in spite of apparent similarities.

Patriarchy is a persistent feature of both sorts of society. Western feminists have identified our dominant paradigm as that of white, Western, middle class men. They have also realized that the global dominance of the West over the rest of the world might prevent us from seeing certain differences that affect women elsewhere. The point is this: Does paying attention to other cultures' veils prevent us from recognizing sexist veils that we continue to wear or suffer from—youth, slenderness, positive attitudes toward motherhood, and so on?

Which are the real similarities that Western women share with the women of Arab countries? If we concentrate on the different sorts of alienation in the societies of the north and south shores—young men alienated by war; colonial countries alienated by labor relations from their raw materials; the special alienation of women (on both shores) based on their bodies—and this in the double sense of sexuality and motherhood. In both cases, women's bodies (except in a few situations which are unimportant for now in our analytical construction of the two sorts of society) are considered to be the ultimate object of desire. From this viewpoint, the women of both shores bear a very close similarity. This is because (as we already know on other grounds) to change sexual and parental roles in any profound way is too profound a step to take. Do we believe that sexual asymmetry is not at work in our north-shore societies? The main point is to notice amidst a great deal of variability the fitness-to-survive of patriarchy as a subsystem—its ability to adapt even to contradictory forms. Women's bodies in the South are hidden; in the North, they are on display to an excessive degree. But the result is the same in both cases: asymmetry.

That women on the south shore accept the veil may shock us, but it is also shocking to them to see all the veils that Western women accept. Years ago—from the 1920s on—Egyptian and Turkish feminist women fought against the veil, believing that it was a symbol of seclusion. Now, at least some women think that wearing it makes them feel more at ease. Taarji believes that the return to the veil is sometimes a strategy for winning in the public sphere. Given the deep and uncritically-accepted belief that women's bodies provoke desire—and given the aggressive-repressed sexuality in which males in these societies have been reared—women have returned, in various ways, to traditional roles in order to

gain a place in the public sphere. Doing so, they think it is easier for men to accept the unstoppable eruption of women in every sphere of political and economic life.

The patriarchal system thus works in many different ways. At times it wakes as from a sleep to be used to reinforce political movements; this is the case with the Algerian fundamentalists. Why do such groups consider the control of women to be one of their major goals? Why do they want to return to a policy of seclusion, of segregation, of forcing women into an allegedly holy, full-time devotion to home and children? How are women classified by these fundamentalists—as journalists or activist militants? Almost never. They are classified merely as women, as bodies. That is one way it turns out that our bodies are politics.

Trying to keep women at home goes against the facts; women must work to survive—and, of course, they have always worked. In Arab countries, feminist theorists are well aware of these issues. Fatima Mernissi makes it very clear: “In Morocco, for a woman to earn her own living is the essential concern.” And Naoual el Saadaoui claims, in *The Hidden Face of Eve* (1980), that the patriarchal system is not a political, economic, or cultural system; rather, it permeates all aspects of society, adopting various forms—sometimes different, sometimes similar. These theorists attempt to separate the aspects that come from Islam from those that come from the patriarchal system. And they insist on the liberating potential of an Islam correctly interpreted: “Arabia’s people struggle for freedom and social equality, and they base this on the Koran and Mohammed’s teachings...which have always been used to justify opposite tendencies—both those defending feudalism and those fighting for freedom.” Both Mernissi and al Saadaoui seek a women’s liberation that includes an Arab identity (though at the same time they oppose the veil and the isolation of women).

THE ECONOMIC DOMINATION OF THE WEST

Finally, we come to another fundamental factor in analyzing the return to the veil. The economic domination of the West involves an ideological domination, and this too damages women’s cultural identity. Consider Algeria as an example: after a hundred and thirty years of French domination, a

fundamental assumption among the nationalist forces searching for an Algerian identity has been to affirm the need to return to Muslim traditions. A Spanish Arabist, Gema Martín Muñoz, has analyzed the split that occurred in Algeria, dividing it into factions favoring political and economic modernization following the industrial model and others wishing to preserve everyday Muslim lifestyles. The modernization of culture is interpreted as a denial of Muslim culture. This amounts to the same thing as saying that, in Algeria, a truly modern culture never took root. In the opinion of Martín Muñoz, the Law of the Family (restored in 1984) demonstrates the chasm separating official rhetoric from social reality in Algeria—where women are kept under tight control. The Algerians have a double reference system—and the emergence of the Islamic Salvation Front is just what the doctor ordered. The double system was a prerequisite of the confusion, of the crisis of identity, that was needed to encourage the growth of Hezbollah. That growth feeds on a lack of social and economic alternatives, not only in Algeria but in other Arab countries as well. With no other alternative spaces, the mosques have become the preferred platform for pan-Arabism—and the mosques are even more important communicational spaces for women. Here again we find the interplay of contradictions: using high-technology antennas, Arab peoples can receive Western broadcasts, but within the mosques they get nothing but the most conservative interpretations of their culture.

This twofold reference system—modernization coming from the West and an everyday lifestyle coming from Arab culture—when added to the questions discussed earlier (including a close interrelationship between the state and religion) gives shape to a complex framework. And Arab women must live within it. Mernissi contrasts the separation of church and state in the West with the lack of such a separation in Arab countries: “The modern Muslim state has never presented itself as secular. Muslim nationalist forces, trapped by a militant and colonialist West unable to share or export its humanism, were driven to build up a rampart, to entrench themselves within the past.”

Muslim feminists cannot remain apart from their tradition. They need and want to seek the liberating elements of the Koran—elements that have been hidden by a biased, and in particular a patriarchal, interpretation. Islam and patriarchy feed on one another; otherwise, the return to Islam as a source of identity would not have meant regression in terms of women’s liberation. However, strategies for fighting against patriarchy must be situational. One

strategy followed in the West has been deconstruction—especially of Big Discourses: religious, philosophical, scientific. In contrast, feminists in Arab countries have to fight an inside battle, both because they have the roots of their identity in the Koran and because any criticism of Islam and its ways runs the risk of being interpreted as identifying with the West.

When, using a materialist framework, we reflect on the fact that religions (as well as poetry, science, etc.) are in fact systems of thought (in the current jargon, “discourses”) that emerge out of interactions among the social, economic, and structural conditions of particular societies, the conclusion should be obvious that they will necessarily be male-centered. All large-scale religious systems have always been and still are fundamentalist (recall the recent writings of Pope Paul II). So the point is not to ask whether or not Islam is sexist—which it is, as are the other two major religions of the Book—but to ask (a) why, historically speaking, Arab countries have adopted the most sexist interpretation of the Koran; and (b) why their political problems, economic situation, problems of cultural identity, and their anti-colonialism struggles have served as other reasons for certain groups to adopt extremely reactionary interpretations of the Koran as their legitimating discourse. In this respect, they remind us of another international trend, the feminization of poverty. Everywhere, women are kept out of the labor market in times of scarcity; they are sent back to their homes under the burden of the “sanctity” of motherhood.

I started with a look at the complexities of the return to the veil in Arab countries. I end with an unveiled look at our culture as well: fundamentalism-endorsed patriarchy is a problem everywhere.

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