

# Western feminists veil race, gender oppression

by Afra Jalabi

MONTREAL (CUP)—Four years ago I came to Canada from the Middle East to attend McGill. I moved in with a Canadian woman who called herself a strong feminist. I also identify with feminism, and I was happy to live with a woman who was concerned about such issues.

But things did not go too well. Although we got along, she was offended by my way of dressing. In particular, she objected to the scarf I wear over my hair. She wanted me to comply to Western standards of dressing. For her the problem was clear: I was afraid to show my body.

This argument shocked me because all my life I had considered veiling the harder choice. When veiled, a woman cannot use her body as an advantage. I also learned that as women we should resist the sexualization of our bodies and instead develop our intellectual capacities. I learned to be seen through my intellectual personal capacities and not my looks.

She did not consider my arguments valid because they came from a Muslim woman. She replied that if Muslim men dressed like Muslim women she could accept it. My answer to that was that if her fellow men wore lipstick, high heels, and mini skirts then I too could accept the difference. Later, she decided that she did not want me there any longer, because I was a threat to her image as a feminist.

I wondered why the differences between Western men and women were acceptable to her, but not those between Muslim men and women. She seemed to have the idea that Western women had gone through some kind of enlightenment, and it was now their business to help Muslim women become "liberated".

It is sad that many women in the West do not realize that their status is not better than that of other women, and that their superior position only comes from the domination of the Western patriarchy over other patriarchies.

When I started looking for another apartment, I asked if my veil was offensive. Here, in a supposedly "liberal" society I was in the position of having to gain approval on my style of clothing.

But the issue ran deeper. I had been oppressed by a Western "feminist" whose main purpose was to remove oppression from women's lives. She felt no solidarity with me or with women like me. She could not identify with our struggle.

**Western stereotypes of Muslim women**

From my own experience and the experience of other Muslim women, I realized how rigid and stereotypical Western ideas about Muslim women are.

We are differentiated from Western women, and considered inferior. Many Western women believe they have the most liberated status in the world as women. Such women equate Westernization with modernity and liberation.

Non-Western peoples' cultural practices, no matter how symbolic and harmless, are seen as oppressive elements which must be replaced with Western alternatives.

Veiling is one of the most obvious problematic and symbolic practices that is politicized by the West. Many people draw spurious causal links between veiling and oppression. If a woman is veiled, she is certainly naive, dependent and oppressed. The fact that a woman is working or getting her education in a foreign country is overlooked—if she is veiled, she is "oppressed."

Ironically, many Muslim women have the same belief that Muslim women enjoy the best status in the world. As women, they are not exploited sexually, they are not used as advertisement ploys, they have had marriage and divorce rights for centuries, and they do not lose their names when they marry.

Moreover, women in Islam have the right to refuse their mother role and household tasks for which they either will be paid or receive hired help. In addition, women in Islam have had the right to pre-condition their marriage on any aspects they choose.

The themes most frequently discussed to represent Muslim women are total veiling and clitoridectomy (female circumcision), sensitive and horrifying issues not only to Western viewers but also to Muslim women themselves.

Unfortunately, the practices selected to represent "insightful" accounts into the lives of Muslim women are also spurious and unrepresentative of the lives and concerns of women in Islamic countries. The main emphasis placed on these exotic and very limited practices divert the attention of many women from their common struggle and their common goals. It keeps women in different societies from recognizing the potential in the diversity of approaches for resisting the constraints on their lives.

By becoming preoccupied with minor symbolic issues, looking only at the surface of society and its symbolic expression, we are blinded to many

common issues.

**Limits in all societies**

When Muslim women choose to veil, they have the right to do so, and it has to be respected as an option chosen to neutralize their sexuality. This option is just as valid as other women's choice to expose their sexuality. Both cases are expressions of female identity.

Both approaches can be symbolic of freedom and independence, as well as of oppression. Both these options can be oppressive if they are enforced on women formally. For example, veiling is not intrinsically oppressive. It is a contextual symbol and has been used for variety of reasons at different times.

Likewise, Western standards of dressing are not intrinsically liberating and emancipating. Some Islamic countries enforced legal unveiling as a measure of modernizing their "traditional" societies. This shows how unveiling is perceived to be intrinsically liberating even when it is done coercively by the state.

The Western media did not give any attention on compulsory unveiling as they did with compulsory veiling, because for them Western standards are essentially liberating.

The point here to be considered is women's choices and freedom to select the ways in which they want to represent themselves. The similarities present in both contexts are usually overlooked. It is culturally determined values and judgements that took the lead in representing and portraying what was happening to women.

Many Western women will argue that even when the state is not involved, veiling is oppressive because women fall under the dominant values of society. But these women forget that any society has codes of modesty and dressing. Western women can't go around topless, for example.

We must keep in mind that all societies have limits, and all people who live in them are free to the extent of being able to use the available choices.

Of course, we always break the lines but also have to know the benefits and costs. Is it really worth breaking some symbolic practices rather than reworking the roles and meaning behind them? That is what modern Muslim women are doing when they re-veil. Their struggle should be seen more in the economic, political and legal spheres, rather than in light of culturally specific practices and symbolic institutions.

The problems facing Western and Muslim women are similar, no matter how different they appear on the surface. But cultural hegemony

continued on page 12...