

WOMEN'S LIVES IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO THE HIJAB

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The oppression of women is a thread that has woven together cultures and religions from across the world. Though many women have begun to sever that tie; this bond still holds strong within the Middle East. While this could be for a multitude of reasons, a couple of questions stand at the forefront: How do women in the Middle East view their daily lives? Do they want or need change? Do our internal biases as Americans affect our perception of these women? By analyzing these questions, while including literary and media analysis, I hope to better understand the lives of women in the Middle East and how American views are imposing on their lives. Specifically, I'm interested in the role of the hijab in women's religion and activism across the Middle East, as well as the lack of coverage of their strides and victories in Western media.

Literary Analysis

These question that I have asked about the women in the Middle east are similar to questions that have been asked about women within our own society in the United States. One of the main reflective pieces of our time is the *Feminine Mystique* by Betty

Freidan. When the first wave of feminism had receded after white women gained the right to vote, white women outwardly shared their newfound comfort in their roles as housewives. What Freidan found however, was an underlining yearning for more than roles within the house. Her section on "The Problem with No Name" addresses the way women in the United States felt in the 1950's without the ability to pinpoint the cause of their despair (Freidan, 1963). This despair is not solely confined to the United States, but is applicable to women all over the world, which can lead to a feminist revolution anywhere. For some women in the Middle East these fights have already begun. For example, Leila Ahmed's *A Quiet Revolution: The Veil's Resurgence, from the Middle East to America* discusses not only the current revolution against the hijab but also the hijab's history. Ahmed examines the diversity and complexity of feelings surrounding the headdress. To understand how these women's lives are structured, it is important to know where the traditions and cultures are rooted. *Women in the Middle East: Past and Present* by Nikki Keddie (2007) delves deeply into the history

of these women's pasts. Fully understanding how these women operate daily and how this is affected by their culture can help outside advocates understand what they need help with and even if they need help at all. It can also further our understanding of their relationship to the hijab and its standing in their culture.

To have well rounded research that examines this topic through different lenses, I made sure to find sources that reflect various ideologies and viewpoints using a different cultural perspective. "Women's Oppression or Choice? One American's View on Wearing the Hijab" by Lacey Sloan (2011) does a great job of weighing both sides of the argument, maintaining a liberatory feminist perspective often followed in America while still holding the ideologies and understandings of women's lives in the Middle East. This allows the American reader to better comprehend the cultural and societal aspects of their lives while using a theoretical lens that they are accustomed to.

While getting the information from these women directly would be the best way to understand their lives, the current war climate restricted my ability to get firsthand stories from individuals. Instead, I found two sources with first-hand accounts of acts of oppression towards these women: *Personal Experiences of Oppression of Women Stereotypes in the Middle East: Both East and West are Guilty* by Dina Abdelzaher and Amanda Bullough (2013), and "Palestinian Working Women in Israel: National Oppression and Social Restraints" by Suheir Abu Oksa Daoud (2012). These

works fill in the gaps of their own narratives to further build the framework of their relationship to the hijab, and their social and cultural relationships.

Finally, the last point of textual analysis I would like to discuss is media coverage. While there are dozens of articles based on media coverage or lack thereof, two stuck out to me. Both "The First Ladies and the Arab Spring: A textual analysis of the media coverage of the female counterparts of authoritarian oppression in the Middle East" by Elza Ibroscheva (2013), and *Muslim Women in War and Crisis Representation and Reality* by Faegheh Shirazi (2010) do a fantastic job of making sure there is attention brought to the media coverage that is allowed of these groups while prying the doors open further so that we can better understand the conditions these women are subject to.

While the aforementioned works are not as thoroughly analyzed and presented here, I wanted to show that there is already thorough coverage on many aspects of this topic. However, my question remains. If there is a multitude of scholarship on many areas of this topics, as well as several different approaches, why do so many unanswered questions remain?

The Hijab

The hijab is a topic that holds a lot of controversy not only in America but in many communities that require specific dressings, either modest or cultural. The hijab is also commonly referred to as the veil, which is a term that is often used interchangeably within these cultures and religions. For non-hijab wearing Americans,

they often label it as an oppressive tool used by “The Man” (or the patriarchy) to revoke women’s bodily autonomy. However, to others, and especially those who do decide to wear the hijab, it is a sign of devotion to their religion and their God. Making sure to include voices that are a part of the veiling community, Sahar Amer says “...for some Muslim women, veiling is a practice that sits squarely at the crossroads of religious, political, feminist, economic, and sociocultural traditions” (2014, 131). There is not only one lens to view the hijab, but rather a point at the intersections of several different frameworks that you can fully understand its meaning. However, many strongly believe that any form of religious dress, in this case the hijab, should be a personal choice that is respected by others, especially those from other cultures and faiths.

The mandated use of the veil in some Middle East countries is something that has faded in and out of use through time. However, whether mandated or not, many women continue to veil themselves. As a non-religious American, I have always been curious as to why they chose to participate in veiling. The short film *I Wasn’t Always Dressed This Way* (Martins, 2013) addresses this question and gives us the ins and outs of veiling as a sign of acceptance, especially when converting to Islam. As the film moves through separate subsections, a key point of this film titled “Empowerment through the Veil” is something that carries weight through the film. A recent conversation with a colleague helped me to understand the message given in this section. He said “when you go

to a bar or to the beach and you can tell you have eyes on you how do you feel? Does it make you want to cover up or get out of view? Consider that for these women, it could create a sense of security and allow them to live their lives more freely”. This perspective creates a real-life connection for non-hijab wearing individuals. Often for women in America there is a sense of comfort in leaving the house in baggy sweatpants and an oversized shirt, for hijabi women, the veil is their comfort.

On the other hand, many American women would not agree and impose their views onto these women who veil. We have since taken a completely different approach to gain our sense of safety and freedom. Instead of covering up to protect from prying eyes, we wear as little as we see fit and take a stance against the sexualization of our bodies, no matter what we are wearing. Why is one way viewed as inferior to the other? Ethnocentrism, or “the evaluation of other cultures according to preconceptions originating in the standards and customs of one’s own culture” (Oxford Languages, n.d), bias, racism, and nationalism, which are often implicit, could be the cause. Unfortunately, these teachings are deeply rooted in many countries around the world, which only exacerbate engrained thoughts and hatred towards others. I firmly believe that there is simply a lack of empathy and understanding of other cultures that would allow us to empower each other. After the horrific terrorist attack in New York City on September 11, 2001, and the fall of the twin towers, many have used this as a reason to make islamophobia more acceptable. However, this isn’t just one-off individuals--

news and even government propaganda can often perpetuate these ethnocentric ideologies. During the early 2000s the ideas of the hijab as a tool for oppression was used as a coercion technique to persuade the American people to support the war in Iraq. "It is only since then that Muslim veiling has been associated with the oppression of the woman and the backwardness of Islam" (Amer, 2014, p. 198).

Media Coverage

While the choice of veiling is something that should be empowering, the enforcement of wearing the hijab is something that was being fought against in Iran. However, media coverage shown in the States didn't do this fight justice. As the Veil was required by the government and heavily enforced by the morality police, tension grew among the women of Iran. Just over a year ago Mahsa Amini was murdered in Tehran as she refused to comply with strict hijab standards. As the Woman, Life, Freedom movement sparked against these stringent rules, Mahsa quickly became the martyr. Even though this is still a relatively recent event, the media coverage died off almost as fast as it came about. When you google "Hijab riot Iran" or "Hijab riot Iran today" the most recent article is dated November 4, 2023, and entitled "Freed Researcher Says Anti-Hijab Protests Changed Iran, Its Prisons" (France-Presse). This article discusses the ways Fariba Adelkhah, French Iranian anthropologist and scholar, saw how the Iranian government was cracking down on the mandatory veil use, even inside the prison. She continues to explain how the protest even continued inside, by those

who were arrested simply for being women. While the media had focused on the streets outside, Adelkhah argues that these women's work was more pronounced in the prisons, and inside activism eventually led to the awarding of the Nobel Peace prize to Narges Mohammadi. Most importantly, she ends the article on an uplifting point of

Today, like-minded Iranian women greet each other when they go out without their headscarves. Before it was "unthinkable," said the researcher [Adelkhah]. Now they tell each other: "You are so beautiful!" (as cited in France-Presse, 2023).

On April 19th, 2024, an article titled "The Islamic Republic of Iran Uses Global Distractions to Further Crack Down on Women" informed the reader that their fight may not be over yet (Team MTHS). Under the guise of tension and war in the surrounding Western world, the Islamic Republic of Iran is further oppressing their women. Even as Israel has begun to set their eyes on Iran, the article reports that the morality police still focus their fight on the women and girls. Nahid Naghshabandi, Iran researcher at Human Rights Watch, reported to the More to Her Story Team (MTHS) that "Iranian authorities have prioritized their brutal repression of women, including reported arrests under Iran's draconian compulsory dress laws" (para. 14). Not only has the morality police increased their pressure, but they've also increased their numbers: "I saw 30 police in one street trying to arrest women. Usually, it's three or four," Nelly Bagheri told MTHS. The increased presence and force is something that is all too familiar for many

revolutions across the world, however their voices have yet to be silenced.

Supporters of these women and their fight for freedom are spreading the news through social media outlets. According to MTHS, @AlinejadMasih posted on X, "If the world does not unite with us, the women of Iran, to fight against one of the most dangerous regimes, believe me, this virus will spread to infect the rest of the world" (2024). For women in the US, many may feel that virus has already spread with the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. With the current political climate around the world, many minorities and more specifically non-white, non-heterosexual, or non-male human beings are feeling unprotected and targeted to revert back to "the good old days".

In similar fashion, "Letter from Afghanistan: A Slow Death" is a first-hand account of an Afghan girl from prison after she led a protest against the Taliban. She openly discusses how she felt after the Taliban's initial entry into Afghanistan: "... after the Taliban entered Afghanistan, girls fell silent and watched. Everyone waited, expecting resistance and defiance, but no one took initiative" (Habibzadeh, 2024). As she goes on to discuss the way she took charge of the situation and rounded up her fellow classmates to ensure their right to education, she explains that these actions would be met with significant pushback from the Taliban. In spite of threats and intimidation, she and her friends persevered to fight for their rights and equality. Although she knew the Taliban's threats held weight and acknowledged that the final destination of her protest would end in prison, she fought to help end the

inequalities and oppression of women and girls under the Taliban. In her words that ring so loud and clearly "... the Taliban actively impeded women's progress and systematically organized in such a way to neutralize the resistance efforts of people like me" (as cited in Habibzadeh, 2024).

With such courageous women, why is there little to no media coverage on these subjects? Is it that Americans don't want to see these people as self-sufficient and able to fight for themselves so that when and if needed the United States government can prey on our savior complexes and promote the need for our military presence? Or is it the Taliban's way of withholding information to make it look like everyone is complacent in the laws they are enacting?

Conclusion

Although the three guiding questions for this work haven't been answered, the search for answers led to the finding of holes in available scholarship and media coverage. These women deserve the same chances, freedoms, and liberties of women in any other free country. In reflecting on this work, how is American freedom supposedly different from Middle Eastern oppression? While Americans don't have a mandated religion with rules, there are several areas of legislation where freedoms are being stripped away or are threatened. Lured into a false sense of security by the patriarchy, women and minorities across the world are all living in similar situations; however, we each have our own sense of nationalism and bias to allow ourselves to believe we are better off than others. Finally, while the ability of these women to fight for their own

freedoms is boundless, it has been eye opening to more issues and questions not only of the Middle East, but how women of any minority group are being treated.

Personal Statement

As a non-religious white, middle class, cis-woman, I understand that my view can come from a place of privilege. I want to

make it clear that I also come from an Armenian background, and I have a genuine curiosity for the countries, cultures and religions surrounding Armenia. While my interpretations of the first-hand accounts and scholarship may not be perfect, it does not come from a place of malice. In my attempt to educate others, I am also educating myself, and I hope that I have done these women justice.

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