# Islam, Women and the Veil

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W omen of varying religious and cultural backgrounds have used veiling as a symbol in past and present feminist debates. Veiling has represented women's rights, versatility, freedom, female oppression, and backwardness—the meaning determined by and differing due to personal views and opinions. This paper will examine the different perspectives of Muslim and Western feminist groups in terms of veiling practices. It is, however, difficult to use the term "feminism" without noting the possibilities of ethnocentricism within the various feminist movements around the world. There is no single feminist authority or movement, and feminist ideals, rather than being homogeneous across cultures, differ greatly depending on the location and cultural ideals of particular social groups. For the purposes of this paper, feminism will be taken in a broader sense as the movement dedicated to expanding opportunities for women, and most topics will be addressed on a somewhat superficial level in order to offer the reader a broad understanding for future research. It is important to keep in mind that there is not a united feminist movement; therefore, perspectives, values, goals, and strategies vary greatly from one feminist group to another. Women from around the world have different priorities concerning aspects of their lives that need to change. This creates conflict between and among Muslim and Western feminists because they look at situations in different ways and disagree on the important problems. This is especially true when discussing veiling practices and equality issues between women and men.

Within the last thirty years or so, Muslim women have been struggling to define feminism in respect to their varying religious and cultural customs, and many groups have formed to address feminism and its relation to Islam. This article classifies Muslim feminists into two general groups (Traditionalists and Fundamentalists[1]) that are comprised of a number of smaller groups that have different ideologies and priorities in the struggle for female opportunities.[2] There is also friction among the many Western feminist groups about veiling practices, due to the variety of ethnic and cultural groups in the Western world.

The term feminism and its perceived ideological implications cause uneasiness throughout the world. Often, men perceive this new "f-word" as women rebelling against them, and in response women accuse men of fearing feminism because it threatens their oppressive attitudes (Göle 1996). Similarly, women fear the word feminism because of its perceived negative connotations. Feminism is not yet a united global fight against oppression; it is a cultural response to local situations (explaining the multitude of individual and separate feminist groups). Muslim feminist scholar Fadwa El Guindi argues, "Approaching Muslim women's rights through liberal feminist agendas cannot be effective because these agendas are based on the Western experience and derive from Western values hence they are irrelevant to most issues of concern to Muslim women" (El Guindi 1999, 182). There are different feminist groups forming within the Muslim community due to the variety of different cultural backgrounds encompassed by the term Muslim. Many western women have been somewhat hesitant to understand and/or accept the variety of Muslim feminist groups, which is similar to how they ignore the diversity of feminism within their own communities. Veiling, as an example, has uncovered the contrasting ideals of the female body, sacred verses, and the aesthetic.

Feminism in Islam

One may say that there was a nascent feminism in Islam as early as the time of the Prophet Muhammad (around 610 C.E.). ʿAʾisha (one of Muhammad's wives) was a great authority on Islamic law, and even led a rebellion against the fourth caliph ʿAli known as "The Battle of

the Camel" (Yamani and Allen 1996). Many of the Prophet's wives were considered authorities on his life, and they were often consulted when compiling the early Hadith[3] (Minai 1981). During Muhammad's lifetime, women negotiated rights by using the teachings of the Qur'ān. They spoke directly with the Prophet to clarify issues concerning women, and as a result enjoyed privileges (such as decision making power) unknown to non-Muslim Arabs in the area. Men attempted to oppose the rights for women because it meant giving up some of their own power, but the Prophet remained loyal to the words and wisdom of the Qur'ān and often sided with the women (Mernissi 1991). It was when Muhammad died that women's rights began to erode. What could have evolved into a full-fledged feminist movement took a backseat to other political power struggles.

The modern Muslim feminist/activist movement began in the 1970s with no formal organization or membership. To Muslim women, feminism needed to fit in a context of their religious beliefs, and, therefore, empowerment and liberation from restrictive religious norms were their main struggles (El Guindi 1999). Through studying the Qur'ān, women found ways to start breaking free from the laws and Hadith enforced by their fathers and husbands.

Past feminist struggles involved men as well as women. Qāsim Amīn's (1863–1908) work has traditionally been regarded as marking the beginning of feminism in Arab culture, especially in Egypt (Ahmed 1992). He lived and studied in Paris as well as throughout the Muslim world, becoming an advocate for the end of female oppression (2002). He denounced the keeping of women in a state of subjection, fought for the right of education, and spoke of the evils of the veil saying that it was "the vilest form of servitude." Amīn tied the veil into issues of class and culture by saying that "the widening cultural gulf between the different classes in society and the interconnected conflict between the culture of the colonizers and that of the colonized [was the veil]" (Amīn in Ahmed 1992, 145). As a jurist Amīn claimed that no Qur'ānic text justified the use of the veil in the ways that it was being practiced (as a complete physical barrier with seclusionary intentions) (Lewis et al. 1971). He believed that the emancipation of Muslim women did not require the reform or rejection of Islam itself, but

rather bringing practice in line with doctrine (Hussain 1984). Some scholars now question if Amīn was really a feminist or if he just desired the westernization of Muslim societies so that men could take on the male domination of the West (Ahmed 1992).

Removing the veil was never part of the Muslim feminist agenda. The term *raf' al-hijāb* means the lifting of the hijāb.[4] To Muslim women, this meant removing the symbolic curtain separating themselves from men (in terms of physical veils and seclusionary practices). Secular Western feminists have attempted to lift the face-veil, but have little understanding of the rest of the physical veil or the other implications of hijāb (El Guindi 1999). The term "unveiling" does not take into account the difference between unveiling the face and removing the whole headcover and/or outfit. Furthermore, the implications of seclusion and modesty are often overlooked even though they are the underlying meanings of the physical veil.

Many feminists within the Muslim world argue that the veil shows the high esteem in which they are held. They appreciate that men want to accompany them out of the house because it shows that men care enough about them to personally make sure that they are protected. Women attend parties and religious meetings out of their homes and they feel that they are on the moral high ground in a Western world obsessed with the display of wealth (Minai 1981). Many women owe their jobs, economic autonomy, and public persona to compulsory hijāb (i.e., universally required by law). Because they do not have to worry about their physical appearance or sexual harassment, they are able to strive in other ways (El Guindi 1999). Many Muslim women look at veiling as a way to make their attraction to their husbands strong in the house and to repulse men outside of the home. The veil allows women to be sexy and feminine around their husbands and just another mysterious woman when out on the street (Göle 1996). This is significant because work is separated from sexuality, allowing women to strive outside of stereotypical productive roles.

Traditionalism (Islam as Worship)
The cultural aspects of Islam give priority to faith, religion, and the empowerment of the individual (Göle 1996). Traditionalist Muslims

strongly adhere to the Qur'ān and the Hadith, as written centuries ago (the term Traditionalist refers to the adherence to the Hadith traditions). Among this group there is still sexual division, inconsistencies among women's education, and strong influences by the West. Traditionalist Muslim men claim that they are extroverted, active, and can conquer the outside world, and that women have an introverted nature and are dominated by emotions which leaves them best suited to stay in the home (Göle 1996). These sexist beliefs come directly from the texts compiled after the Prophet's death when women were stripped of the privileges given to them by Muhammad. Many of the Hadith (Traditions) have been questioned by scholars because of their apparent false origins, yet they are still practiced by Traditional men wanting to retain social control (Mohammed 2001; Rahman 1965). Veiling among Traditional women is becoming less common because their low status and incomplete education are not as much a threat to men. Some men believe that because the veil has been historically used to suppress female power and authority, when the threat disappears the veil is no longer necessary. Women enjoy more personal freedom, but still remain under forms of male domination. The physical veil may be disappearing for many Traditional women, but the seclusion and separation (physical and psychological) is still intact (Zuhur 1992).

The Taliban regime in Afghanistan is an example of a Traditional group taken to the extreme. In this case, men used women to bolster their status, and took sexist and oppressive interpretations of the Qur'ān and Hadith to a new level (Dowd 2001). Women in this regime were forced to cook and take care of their families, and were not given the opportunity to attend school or hold a job (Waldman 2001). Windows were painted so that women could not be seen from the street, and complete veils were forced on women leaving their home (U.S. Department of State - Coordinator for International Women's Issues 2001). Veiling in this instance was the choice of a small group of men, in order to seclude women from every aspect of public life. It was a punishment to be a woman under the Taliban leadership, which claimed the Hadith as their authority. By selecting only those Traditions and laws that suited them, the Taliban distorted the goals of Traditional Islam. In an attempt to follow the words of the Qur'ān,

they were dominating politically, economically, and sexually. I use the Taliban as an example of Traditional Islam only because of their adherence to their interpretation of the Hadith, not because I am comparing them to the majority of Muslims that fall under this category. As many Muslims have declared, neither Islam nor its Prophet can be held responsible for the un-Islamic behaviour of people who call themselves "Muslims" (Asad 1987). Afghan women now free from the control of the Taliban are slowly starting to unveil because they are returning to their lives before the Taliban occupation. They had not chosen to veil, and are now returning to their own beliefs and ways of life. Their unveiling cannot be used as an example of all Muslim women wanting to unveil.

Fundamentalism (Islam as Politics)
Political aspects of Islam are turning against Western imperialist forces to defend Islamic identity and independence. What is being called the Islamic or Fundamentalist Feminist Movement (not to be confused with political or religious fundamentalism) is a group of women and men trying to bring the utopia of the Golden Age (the time of Muhammad) into today's society (Göle 1996). The term fundamentalism has caused Western feminists to question the movement from the start, but it is used in a radically different way than expected. In this case, fundamentalism is the political and collective power of religion turning against Traditional Islam and influences from the West (Göle 1996). The name Al-jama'at al-islamiyya, "the Islamic groups," conveys overtones of popularism, solidarity and political oppositionism within the feminist movement. They claim that they have rejuvenated the meanings of womanhood and femininity by creating a tangible, charismatic image that is respected by the community (Zuhur 1992).

During the Golden Age there was some degree of sexual equality; many Traditions have been written and misinterpreted since then. Those in the Islamic feminist movement are trying to throw out the corrupted and misunderstood Traditions (those questioned and interpreted differently throughout the Muslim world, especially among scholars) in order to get back to what they see as the happiness that surrounded the Prophet (Göle 1996). The radical Islamic movement

(being discussed in this section) has enabled women as collective social actors, and allows them to realize their desires to free themselves from their monotonous lives. Veiling allows women to try to detach themselves from conventional patterns of life because once veiled they are able to move through society with more freedom and ease (due to their lack of individuality). Veiling also fights the urge to accept the Westernization of Islam (Göle 1996).

Women in early Islam were valued and enjoyed many similar rights as men. It is possible that these rights may have decreased due to Arab communities (polytheistic and/or Christian or Jewish) coming in contact with Islam. Influences from other cultures have been shown to play some role in the formation of new Islamic practices, since Islam was expanding in an area rich in religious and cultural traditions (Hussain 1984). According to Göle, female veiling was a mark of honour, modesty, and respectability for free women—not a punishment. Contemporary women are trying to create a new profile for Muslim women that allows for strong religious belief and an education and career outside the home (if that is what individual women desire). Since creating the equality of the Golden Age will force women into arenas with Western influences, they want to hold on to their Muslim identity while also proving their intellectuality. Education is the fastest way to transmit Islamic faith (*tebliğ*) to the next generation, and it benefits the next generation for their mothers to be educated (Göle 1996). It also allows women to find their own personal identities. It is not forbidden in the Qur'ān for women to learn and work. As long as they can be good mothers, it is acceptable for them to enter the public sphere (Göle 1996).

Case Studies

There is no nation that falls completely under either Traditional or Fundamentalist Islam on a political or social level, and most countries have conflicting feminist groups that believe in different ideologies. These groups all strive for equality and respect, but through different means. Often, they do not even agree on the definitions of equality and respect. These examples from Iran, Turkey, and Egypt trace femi-

nism starting before the modern activist movements, and through many stages of development. The governmental stance on feminism often differs greatly from the visible feminist groups within each country.

## Iran
Iran has had a history wavering between extremes, especially in terms of veiling. From the 1940s-70s veiling was stigmatized and it prevented women from moving up the social ladder. For years after the 1979 revolution, being unveiled was deemed an offence, and by 1994 the government required all women to be completely veiled in public (El Guindi 1999). The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran safeguards the rights of women in all respects. It offers a favourable environment for the growth of women's personalities and the restoration of her rights tangible and intangible. The laws are enforced in the manner they were meant to, but they do exist. Currently, women in Iran are struggling with the implications of feminism and Islam, especially because of the inconsistencies between law and reality (Hussain 1984).

Ayatollah (literally meaning "sign of God")[5] Nuri claimed that women were inferior to men because of biological differences. He said that women's rights are suited to their biological natures and, therefore, women cannot be equal with men. In his opinion, Islam has lifted women's status from pre-Islamic times because it recognizes their biological nature (Hussain 1984). Ayatollah Motahhari preaches that it is necessary for women to cover themselves lest the temptations lead men to adultery, premarital sex, rape, or prostitution. He also cites the natural differences between sexes (Hussain 1984). Feminist groups must struggle with these religious interpretations of gender stereotypes and their own desire for change.

Iran is an example of a country struggling with the use of the veil and its implications on the whole community. As the laws changed between the 1940s and today, women's veiling practices also changed. Some of the leading politicians and Islamic scholars in Iran saw the need for complete veils in order to remain an Islamic nation as opposed to a nation that merely practices Islam. This is a very Tradi-

tional society because they are extremely reliant on Hadith and religious traditions. The Ayatollahs and other men in power have determined the laws surrounding veiling, and they tend to uphold the need for male domination. Women are not given the choice to veil or not, limiting their choices and participation in society. Feminism is restricted here because women are not free to speak out, make individual choices, and defend their own rights.

## Turkey

In Turkey, men were the first to call for reforms regarding women. The year 1826 was the beginning of this period of reform called Tanzimat. Midwives were the first to be educated, and schools for girls began opening by the end of the 19th century. Newspapers discussed a wide range of political and social reforms, and by 1895 the first Turkish women's weekly was started in order to discuss such issues as being a good mother, wife, and Muslim. By the early 1900s women could attend college, and some fought in the war that overthrew the sultan and established Turkey as a republic. Leading feminists credit Islamic progress to literacy and the emancipation of women; both were set in motion thanks to men (Hussain 1984).

Mustafa Kemal, better known as Ataturk, gave women equal rights when he established the Republic of Turkey in 1923. Turkey became the first Muslim nation to raise feminism onto the national political level. Ataturk said that it was not Islam, but distorting customs originating in corrupt places, that were responsible for the oppression of women. He did not ban veiling because he tried not to violate men and their imagined sense of honour and control that veiling created. Instead he proclaimed that women in civilized nations would not cover their faces and turn their backs to men. He did not want Turkish women to be inferior to other Europeans, and therefore women were encouraged to work, get an education, and speak in public. By 1930 family code was replaced by civil code and women gained legal and civil status (Hussain 1984, Minai 1981). *Purdah*[6] was officially abolished in Turkey in the 1930s (Hekmat 1997).

Modern Turkey recognizes two forms of feminism: the struggle for secularization on one hand and for fundamentalist ideals on the other.

The basic Islamic outlook of the average Turk could be classified as Traditional, albeit with certain peculiarities. While dominant understanding of Islam is based on the classical interpretations of the Qur'ān and Hadith, the West significantly influences both the government and the people of Turkey. The veil has been officially banned as a result (Göle 1996). The growing Islamic (Fundamentalist) Movement is taking hold in Turkey, especially among women studying at the university. Most of these young women came from Anatolian families practicing a more Traditional form of Islam. For young women who came from Traditional families and small provinces, the act of veiling is an urban phenomenon and relates to their experiences in the educational process. They believe that women hold a stronger voice in public if they extend the limits of religion from personal worship to a collective political movement. These students use veiling as a form of protest against the government and Traditional Muslims. The differences in veiling styles shows indicates distinctions between the Traditional and Fundamentalist feminists in Turkey (Göle 1996).

## Egypt

Egypt is recognized as both having several feminist movements and working towards gender equality on a variety of levels. Women in Egypt have been treated more equally by the law, are allowed to associate with men, and are not forced into seclusion (El Guindi 1999). In 1925 the Egyptian feminist movement was born (Lewis et al. 1971). Similar to Turkey, the first advocates of feminist notions were men, who had were sent to study in Western nations where they were influenced by Western thought and values. Even before the official feminist movement began, Qāsim Amīn (1865-1908) wrote two seminal works on feminism in the Arab world (Hussain 1984). The problem was that no government, party, or male individual with access to power adopted feminism as a central issue. Compounded with this lack of attention, social institutions like education were lacking compared to Turkey; only some girls were privately educated (Hussain 1984).

Egypt's first feminists were divided between those that were Westward-looking and those that were not (El Guindi 1999). Although

such a demarcation of Egyptian feminists clearly carries an ethnocentric perspective, it effectively notes the wide usage of such a demarcation in discussions of women's rights in Egypt. The more Traditional Muslims were led by Hudā Sha'rāwī (1879-1947), who formed the Egyptian Feminist Union in 1922. She led a delegation to an international women's conference, and unveiled ceremonially in a public political act in 1923 (Ahmed 1992, El Guindi 1999, Hussain 1984): "Private life, family life, inner feelings and thought were sacrosanct. They were as veiled by convention as women's faces had been. Writing about her life during the harem years was a final unveiling. It can be seen as Hudā Sha'rāwī's final feminist act." She was a dual symbol, fighting for both political rights on behalf of all citizens and precipitous female entry into public life (Zuhur 1992). Zaynab al-Ghazali followed in the leadership of the Egyptian feminists. She founded Jama'at al-Sayyidat al-Muslimat, or the Muslim Women's Association, which existed between 1936 and 1964. She is known for her public activism and leadership in Islamic issues (El Guindi 1999).

It was stigmatizing for women in Egypt to work for wages, due to the cultural interpretations that, if women worked, their male relations were seen as either unable or unwilling to support their women and failed to meet their social obligations. After the 1952 revolution, the stigma lessened and work was seen as more of a national duty for women; it was no longer a last resort. But there are statistics showing that in the less wealthy Arab countries women worked, whereas in the more wealthy countries they do not (El Guindi 1999). The need continues for women to fight for the right to work if they choose. Similar to the stigma of female employment, veiling has been associated with a variety of stigmas. In the mid-1980s there was reluctance in Egypt to wear the newly introduced al-khimar (headcover that covers the hair and extends to the forehead, comes under the chin to conceal the neck, and falls over chest and back). In opposition, many women began to wear a turban-like headcover. They switched to this Turkish style because it was less constrictive and more chic (El Guindi 1999).

The Islamic movement in Egypt began in 1973 with the Ramadan War, but the ideas were planted years before by Malak Hifni Nasif (pen name Bahithat al-Badiya) (El Guindi 1999). She had a ten-point

plan to improve the status of Egyptian women, which did not include unveiling; she was actually adamantly opposed to the idea (Hussain 1984). Nasif did not believe that the religion directly commented on the matter of veiling or that a veil determined modesty. It came down to the fact that women were accustomed to veiling and should not be abruptly ordered to unveil (Ahmed 1992). Nasif believed that those in Egypt who did unveil were upper-class women preoccupied with fashion, not always thinking of the reasons or consequences of their actions. She was one of the first advocates for higher education and for creating space in mosques so that women could participate in public prayer (El Guindi 1999). Malak Hifni Nasif, and others like Doria Shafik, did not separate feminism from religion. They remained loyal to their culture while finding ways to make changes to improve the rights of women (Hussain 1984).

Islamic dress was introduced in Egypt by college women returning to the roots of Islam; not by lawmakers imposing laws (El Guindi 1999). After the mid 1970s Islamic dress, al-ziyy al-Islami, replaced modern secular clothes as part of a grass-roots activist movement. This Islamic or "lawful" dress (*ziy shar'i*) was not the same as the traditional forms of the veil worn by lower-class urban women or those earlier in Egyptian history (Zuhur 1992). The state tried to prevent women from wearing a complete veil, but met with harsh resistance, partially due to the fact that Egyptian women were more actively involved in the fight for rights than their counterparts in Turkey (El Guindi 1999, Hussain 1984). This new Egyptian woman was a young urban college student completely veiled including her face and hands (the movement was not limited to women, but this paper is mainly focusing on veiling issues). It was the highest achievers who wanted the return to the utopia of the Golden Age, and were willing to veil in order to remind Muslims of the "true meaning of being Muslim" over against a Western model. These women believed that veiling allowed women to work and still claim traditional respect; it gave them the best of both possible worlds while still basing their lives around religion (El Guindi 1999).

Western Feminism in Respect to the Veil

Christianity has played a large role in the formation of the Western world and, in particular, the rise of feminist theory. It was missionary influences that led Christian women to stop veiling in Arabia and parts of Europe, and it is missionaries who believed that the degradation of women in Islam legitimized the change of native culture (i.e. as part of the process of colonialism) (Ahmed 1992, El Guindi 1999). Colonial powers tend to impose their beliefs onto other cultures, partly through the work of missionaries and utilization of propaganda. In order to prove cultural superiority, both to their own culture and that of the "other" culture, biological and anthropological arguments have been drawn upon due to their persuasive power. Western powers have always believed that veiling and segregation epitomizes oppression and has led to the "backwardness" of Muslim societies (Ahmed 1992). The inequalities "exposed" through missionary work and Christian moral codes led to the creation of many revolutionary groups, feminism being one example.

Modern feminism has become a Western narrative regardless of the geographical location within which this narrative is played out. It often ignores the diversity of feminists/feminisms around the world while claiming to represent a united front. Within such a narrative, the veil has come to signify oppression; those that want to end the practice are considered feminists and those that want it to continue are antifeminists (Ahmed 1992). Western feminist thought believes that veiling will not liberate Muslim women; veiling being seen as dangerous and double-edged (i.e., using veiling to protest Traditional values will only create more inequality between women). In other words, equality will only come to women who are not veiled (El Guindi 1999).

Western women back up claims and accusations of unjust behaviour with laws and examples from their own lives. In the United States, human rights laws give every person the right to freedom of expression, association and assembly, the right to work, the right to education, freedom of movement, and the right to health care. It is believed that because Muslim communities may not conform to these in the same

way, women do not have the freedom that they have in the West (U.S. Department of State - Bureau of Democracy 2001). Many Westerners believe that since girls are usually veiled between twelve and fourteen that the veil is hindering their adolescent development. This is because this age is crucial for the development of talents and intellect, and the veil gets in the way of young girls accomplishing these important milestones (Ahmed 1992).

Feminists in the West also look at the phenomena of the *second shift* and they believe that Muslim women respond to this by veiling. *Second shift* is a Western feminist theory that addresses the jobs women do outside (first shift) and inside (second shift) the home. This was a groundbreaking theory in the early 1990s because it valued unpaid labour performed by women as much as paid formal labour outside of the home (Hochschild and Machung 1990). In the Muslim context, women are expected to do the majority of reproductive roles in the home, leaving little time to work outside of the home. It is believed by some Western feminists that if seclusionary veiling practices ended, then women would have more opportunities to work outside of the home and, such opportunities, would require respect for the unpaid work that they do within the home (El Guindi 1999).

Since the pillars of Islam are time-bound, that is rooted to the particular period of the Prophet, it has been assumed by many in the West that they are not necessarily positive for the future. Western nations adapt to laws and edicts from the past realizing that the times and situations have changed. On the other hand they think that Muslims are stuck in a time with few similarities to today: "Role expectations within a Muslim family are derived from the norms prescribed by Islam. But, in order to have eternal validity they must be applicable in any context and at any time period. Unfortunately this has not happened, because Muslim civilizations have been corrupted and corroded through time and history and women have been one of the greatest casualties of this process" (Hussain 1984, 3). Many Western feminist groups are attempting to help facilitate a move into modernity for Islam, because of their belief that it is a culture rooted in the past.

Muslim Criticisms of Western Feminism

Feminists in the Muslim world often see women's rights in a different way than women in the West. The phenomenon of modernization can be seen as a unilateral path of evolution to transition into modern society; which is very different than the Muslim belief system. Muslim women question who determines this modern society, and who is to say that every society wants to be modern (Göle 1996). In Islam, the people consider societal rights to cater to the needs of all, but they believe that in Western societies women are struggling for equal rights. Muslims believe that Western women cannot comment on others' oppression when they are still oppressed on every level (Hussain 1984). An example of this is how Western women bring division and weakness to their families because they are stretching between two jobs: inside and outside of the home (*second shift*). Muslim priorities put the family first, and women can work if it does not put their family in a disadvantaged position. This is similar to the fact that many Muslim women believe that family should be more important than money and proving oneself in the workplace (Göle 1996). As Zuhur puts the matter: "The idealization of a family woman, a non-working wife, is a phenomenon to be more attributed to the development of customary law, and non-Arab influences, than to Islamic discourse on women" (1992, 12-13). Just because many Muslim women do stay at home does not mean the practice should be associated with religious beliefs.

Muslim feminists believe that Western feminists have been led off track with their fascination of the human body. In the West, it is believed that the human body is under aesthetic and hygienic command of willpower; women have accepted the submission of their bodies to the spheres of science and secularization. In Islam, one's body is connected with the inner world and, therefore, taking care of the body is more religious than vain (Göle 1996). It is often believed that Western women want to prove their own identities, pushing forward an individualistic or egotistic agenda rather than helping women collectively. This is not the kind of feminism Islam needs or wants (Göle 1996).

## Conclusion

There is no unified feminist approach dealing with veiling practices, similar to the fact that there is not one type of feminism. Because the term "veil" refers to head cover, face-cover, and body-cover it is important to clarify what we mean by unveiling. In the Muslim context, unveiling usually refers to taking off the face-veil, wearing some type of head cover and dressing modestly. To Western feminists, unveiling means taking off the entire headpiece and any confining modest clothing.

For early Muslim feminists, the lifting of the face-veil was to signify emancipation from exclusion from Muslim societies. The voluntary wearing of the complete veil since the 1970s is about liberation from imposed, imported identities, consumerist behaviours, and an increasingly materialistic culture for Muslim women that chose to re-veil (El Guindi 1999). The veil has turned into a focal point for political struggles for rights, both from within a community and from outside observers. In different situations, it takes on different meanings, all encompassing more than just the physical veil.

It is also necessary to remember that the meaning of Islam and what it means to be Muslim vary greatly throughout the various Muslim countries as well as, more generally, the world. This article has used generalizations, and in so doing has not done adequate justice to the complexities of Islam. However, in this study, generalizations were useful in order to understand the veiling debate as it is seen by a variety of feminist perspectives.

Feminism needs to address the discrepancies between choosing to veil and being forced to veil. In some instances the veil is used as a form of oppression, but in others it is desired and representative of women free from sexual pressures and obstacles. By increasing the awareness between all feminists, veiling can be analyzed in specific cultural situations and time periods. Only then will we be able to completely understand the complexities of Muslim veiling practices.

## Notes

[1] Feminist fundamentalists should not be confused with Islamic fundamentalists who condone violence as a way to deliver religious messages.

[2] These are not the only Muslim feminist groups, but are the only two that this paper will focus on.

[3] Hadith are a collection of traditions from the time of Muhammad that have been recorded and adapted as a source of guidance for Muslims throughout time. They are also referred to as Traditions, hence the need to capitalize the 'T' in Traditions or Traditionalists (see El Guindi 1999).

[4] Hijāb encompasses the concept of veiling and is made up of four dimensions: material, physical and special divides, symbolic (invisibility), and religious (El Guindi 1999, Mernissi 1991).

[5] Ayatollah also means the highest level of scholarship within the *Shii* hierarchy. In the Iranian context, he is considered the representative of the lost Imam (Denny 1994).

[6] *Purdah* is a Persian term, meaning curtain or veil as well as privacy and seclusion (Hekmat 1997).

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