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Marnia Lazreg: Questioning the Veil

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Introduction

IN MY PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED WORK, I have consistently objected to the manner in which Muslim women have been portrayed in books as well as the media. On the one hand, they have been represented as oppressed by their religion, typically understood as being fundamentally inimical to women's social progress. From this perspective, the veil has traditionally been discussed as the most tangible sign of women's "oppression." On the other hand, Muslim women have been described as the weakest link in Muslim societies, which should be targeted for political propaganda aimed at killing two birds with one stone: showing that Islam is a backward and misogynous religion, and underscoring the callousness or cruelty of the men who use Islam for political aims. Such a view made it acceptable to hail the war launched against Afghanistan in 2001 as a war of "liberation" of women. Subsequently, the American-sponsored constitutions of both Afghanistan and Iraq were lauded as protecting the "rights" of women in spite of evidence to the contrary.¹ In this context, any Muslim woman who takes

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cheap shots at Islam and crudely indicts Muslim cultures is perceived as speaking the truth and is elevated to stardom.

I do not wish to enter the fray on one side or the other of the ideological struggle for or against Islam. I have no animus against Islam. I was born to a Muslim family in a predominantly Muslim country, and I am proud of my heritage. I have decided to write these letters to women whose religion is Islam and who either have taken up the veil or are thinking of wearing it. However, writing about women necessarily means writing about men. To many in the Muslim world, well-meaning individuals beleaguered by geopolitical events, these letters may seem pointless. But perhaps such individuals need to resolve the apparently unimportant issue of veiling before they can defend themselves more effectively. These letters are also relevant to all people, women and men, seeking to understand the human experience. I have reached a point in my life when I can no longer keep quiet about an issue, the veil, that has in recent years been so politicized that it threatens to shape and distort the identity of young women and girls throughout the Muslim world as well as in Europe and North America.

A revealing trend that emerged in the past two decades in a number of countries has recently gathered momentum. This trend is sustained by a socially conservative mood that spread over the Muslim world, the dissemination of faith-based literature extolling the home-making vocation of women, as well as a renewed or intensified involvement of men in matters pertaining to women's dress and deportment. I have walked into stores in Algiers where owners played CDs of speeches from self-styled religious leaders exhorting women to cover their bodies and attend to their wifely duties. I have seen prepubescent girls wearing a tightly wrapped scarf around their head atop a long skirt,

holding hands with their similarly attired mothers. I do not have a daughter, but the sight of these young girls stirs feelings in me that disturb me as a woman and an intellectual. I cannot be a spectator before a trend that I strongly believe is misguided and limits women's capacity for self-determination in their bodies as part of their *human* development. I address the veil, not from its overwrought and contrived exegetic religious angle, but as an essential part of a trend that is largely *organized* and thus detrimental to women's advancement.

These young girls remind me of an experience I had when I was about seven years old while I was playing with friends outside of my home. A boy, the son of neighbors, had pulled my braids from the back while making lewd movements with his body. Alerted by my cries for help, my mother opened the door of our house and took in the scene. Since time was of the essence, she could not go back inside and put on her white veil. Instead, she pulled one of her clogs off her foot and threw it at the boy, missing him. The clog landed on my forehead, making a bloody gash. I had a half-inch scar for many years to remember the incident by. Had my mother not been thoroughly socialized in the culture of the veil, she would have simply walked the twenty feet or so that separated her from my attacker. Thirty years later, she discarded her veil. In retrospect, I wonder whether that incident had somehow worked through her unconscious mind and prepared her psychologically for the removal of her veil. The street we lived on was in a residential area, and there were few men around during working hours. My mother could have crossed it with no one noticing her. But she could not and did not. As I grew older and reflected on the incident, I wondered what would have happened had the boy been older and carried a weapon. Would the

veil have prevented my mother from saving my life? Probably not, but the power of socialization on the mind cannot be easily dismissed. The veil was part and parcel of her persona; she could not be outdoors without it. She had felt utterly paralyzed before throwing her clog at the boy. Since then, many women have been able to disentangle their sense of self from the veil. But today organized efforts are made to resocialize women into the culture of the veil with the help of a whole array of frequently contradictory arguments as well as the apparent consent of some women.

To those of us who have pondered the issue, the veil inevitably makes us uneasy about its fundamental unfairness to women. The Algerian writer Kateb Yacine remembered telling his mother, who was walking him to the Turkish bath, to draw her veil over her head when she let it slip off (most likely her face and head) to breathe freely. Mother and son were on a deserted road, yet the son peremptorily ordered his mother to “put back your veil!” He wondered, years later, how he could have insisted that his mother keep her veil in place when she was out of reach of men’s gaze, and whether he had not “somehow contributed to the seclusion of women.”² He acted as her censor, oblivious to her desire for freedom in her body—freedom that he enjoyed as a matter of fact. This thought haunted him. Yacine was one among many men who made sure that their women relatives remained in the folds of their veils.

When I was growing up, my uncle would take me, along with my aunt and my mother (both of whom were veiled from head to foot), for refreshments in the middle of the summer to a French ice-cream parlor by the shore that catered mostly to French customers. The peak moment for me was to observe my aunt and mother strenuously maneuver the tall glasses filled with cold juice and the long

straw under their white veils, bending their heads over while drawing the top of their veils in such a way that they could free the right hand that secured the veil over the face according to the style that left an opening for one eye only. It was a delicate maneuver that took a few seconds, during which I expected the glass to fall and break, causing all the customers to turn around and look at us. My uncle was a highly knowledgeable man in matters of religion. He wore a red *shesh* with a black tassel that bounced in the air as he walked, and traditional pleated pants (*sarawal*) topped by a shirt, tie, and jacket à la française. He fancied himself a modernist but never said to my aunt or my mother that they could uncover their faces and enjoy their drinks, that the Quran did not enjoin a woman to conceal her face. Nor did he tell them that religion is not supposed to cause unnecessary hardship—another Quranic principle. Yet he used to lecture others about their misconceptions of their religion. His modernism was limited to taking his veiled wife and sister-in-law to an all-French spot where French women and men sipped refreshments side by side.

The normalization of the veil, its power over men's (as well as women's) minds, can be so blinding as to be deadly. In March 2002 Saudi media reported that fifteen girls died in a fire that erupted in their school in Mecca because the vice police (*mutawwa*) prevented firefighters from approaching the screaming girls on the grounds that the girls were not wearing the proper dress (a scarf over the long black *abaya*), and contact with them would be sinful. A father was quoted as saying that "the school watchman even refused to open the gates to let the girls out."³ Firefighters had to confront the police in order to save lives. I am not reporting this incident for its sensationalism, but to indicate that it stands at the other end of the veil culture continuum: at one

end, my mother's inability to get out of the house and help me without anyone preventing her from doing so except her oversocialized self; at the other end, the special police squads enforcing the virtue of the veil at the risk of bringing death to women. In between there are as many variations of attitudes as there are styles of veiling. Such is the power of the veil that it captures the imagination, frustrates, coerces, inspires, and disempowers.

The reveiling trend coincides with an approach espoused by academic feminists that seeks to correct the notion that the veil is a sign of "oppression" but in reality makes oppression more intellectually acceptable. Although acknowledging that veiling may reinforce gender inequality, this approach uncritically and apologetically foregrounds lower-middle-class women's stated reasons for taking up veiling. Its proponents engage in various degrees of sophisticated theoretical hair-splitting in order to excavate the operative agency assumed to be lurking behind the veil, subverting its use, and turning it into a tool of empowerment. The implication is that the "oppressed" are not so oppressed after all; they have power. Faced with this newly discovered power frontier, the researcher does no more than study its manifestations.⁴ She finds power in a woman's decision to veil herself, and the veil is hailed as securing a woman's ability to work outside her home, or protecting her husband from experiencing jealousy. In bending over backward to "give women a voice," adherents to this approach find it necessary to dismiss the reality of the women who object to veiling. These are routinely disposed of as being "elite," "upper class," and "Westernized." Implicitly, apologists for veiling seek to disempower local women who have a different understanding of veiling from theirs and to delegitimize these women's views while at the same time validating their

own as those of dispassionate outsiders, intent upon discovering the truth of veiling or reveiling against the “Westernized” native. In this way, the outside expert shifts the charge of bias onto the “elite” native woman-qua-“Westernized.” One woman elevates herself as a social-class avenger and decipherer of the hieroglyphics of the subject behind the veil; the other is banished from the realm of personhood altogether as she is deemed to only mimic the “Western” woman. It is tempting to interpret this approach as a form of intellectual masochism on the part of the researcher who dismisses the native woman as “Westernized” because she wishes nothing more than to not have to contend with the veil thing, just as the researcher does not. It represents, in fact, a new form of prejudice.⁵

My intent is not to defend the upper classes of the Middle East. Rather, I wish to draw attention to the continued and problematic academic investment in an area of Muslim women’s lives in either a prejudicial or an apologetic mode. The hidden premise of the apologetic approach is that the veil is unquestionable because its wearers purportedly assume it to be so, and as long as they “choose” it, our task as researchers is to reveal its benefits for *them*. The veil, once again, emerges as a field of struggle, not only between men and women, as it has been historically, but also between native women (opposed to it) and women from non-Muslim cultures, or those hailing from Muslim cultures who support veiling in one way or another. Furthermore, the academic sanctioning of the veil turns it into a fixture of the Muslim landscape instead of an evolving phenomenon.⁶

From my perspective, veiling is not reducible to its rationalizations, be they theoretical, social-psychological, economic, or political. By the same token, veiling is not about the “right” of a woman to wear or not wear one kind of veil

or another. Rights are political matters, as has been shown in the headscarf controversy that has engulfed France since 1989 and, more recently, Turkey. In France, the state passed a law (referred to as *laïcité*) on March 17, 2004, denying young French Muslim women the right to attend public schools if they wear headscarves. In Turkey, the state availed itself of the French law of *laïcité* to reinforce a long-standing prohibition against veiling in public educational institutions and compel faculty members to report and expel from their classes female students wearing headscarves.⁷ The Erdogan government's attempt to remove the ban on headscarves in the spring of 2008 threw Turkey into turmoil similar to France's. The attempt was overturned by the Turkish high court as unconstitutional.⁸ These controversies are part of the background of many women's decision to take up the veil. However, it is noteworthy that in both countries the veil has been made to represent something other than itself: proselytism as well as the incursion of religion—deemed backward—politics, and thus an affront to secularism. French opponents of the scarf equated it with “sexual apartheid,”⁹ and the former president of France, Jacques Chirac, called it flatly an act of “aggression” against French values.¹⁰ In both instances, the decision that a woman makes to dress the way she pleases for whatever reason is denied. The politicization of the veil—its forced removal or its legal enforcement (as in Iran and Saudi Arabia)—impairs women's capacity to make a decision freely, just as it also compels them to abide by an intrusive law at the expense of their own conscience and judgment. More important, it contributes to confounding the veil question by defining it *unambiguously* as religious, even when the religious texts lack clarity and determinacy in the matter. In this sense, the intrusion of the state in women's lives in support for or

against the veil stacks the deck against women and makes them vulnerable to giving undue credence to arguments provided by one side or the other.

I do not approach veiling from the perspective of the struggle between “tradition” and “modernity,” which purportedly women resolve by opting for the veil, as a number of studies have claimed.¹¹ New styles of veiling are less confining to a woman’s ability to move about than the old ones, and a number of veiled women throughout the Muslim world have been carrying out their professional activities side by side with men in their workplaces. Nor do I consider wearing a veil at work as ushering in a new form of “modernity.” Furthermore, I do not intend to characterize veiling as representing women’s “alienation,” “enslavement,” or “subjugation” to cultural norms. Such characterizations are unhelpful as they can easily be applied to our postmodern condition, marked as it is by a retreat from a meaningfully shared human experience and the flaunting of privatized forms of consciousness, which result in conceptions of women that are as detrimental to women’s integrity as the veil might be. I instead approach veiling from an existential-philosophical standpoint that peels away the justifications that women who wear it or intend to wear it usually invoke. This is a delicate endeavor as the risk is great that a woman’s rationale for wearing a veil might be discounted as a form of false consciousness, and her agency dismissed as illusory. As a social scientist, I cannot deny women’s agency or substitute mine for theirs on grounds that I am more equipped to make sense of their motivations than they are. By the same token, mystifying rationalizations are not necessarily expressions of false consciousness or “agency.” However, agency is not a free-floating capacity independent of the social framework within which it expresses itself; neither

is it above questioning. At the same time, veiling involves *me* as a woman who grew up with relatives, neighbors, and friends who wore, or still wear, a veil. Veiling is existentially familiar to me; it has been part of my life even though I do not and will not wear a veil. Because in the popular imagination, in the Muslim world as well as in the “West,” veiling has come to represent the essence of Islam, little space has been made in which this practice could be examined outside the framework of religion, or for its potentially deleterious psychological effects.

There has been a change in women’s perceptions of the veil in the Middle East and North Africa. The generation of women that came of age in the 1950s and 1960s when a number of countries recovered their political sovereignty seldom took up the veil in urban centers. Coinciding with the emergence of the Islamist movement, the 1970s and 1980s witnessed a trend toward the use of veiling. Women explained their turn to the veil as the result of a heightened consciousness of the place and meaning of religion in their lives; a way of showing modesty in their dress; a protection against sexual harassment or undesirable looks from men; and a political statement, especially among women relatives of men who joined the Islamist movement. In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, the veil acquired a new meaning in Western countries as a demand for acceptance by non-Muslims and, by the same token, a manner of fighting prejudice by flaunting difference. In the context of the headscarf controversies in France, the veil has also been hailed as a tool of “liberation” for women from imposed “assimilation” into the majority culture and, for some, from their parents’ strict control of their movements. The most difficult argument to unravel is that of faith and conviction. I respect the woman who, after studying religious texts,

concludes that it is incumbent upon her to veil herself, or that without a veil she would be living in a state of sin. I would, however, doubt her commitment to the veil if she has simply followed the opinion of others—men or sometimes women of religion—about the religious meaning of the veil. Faith is a personal matter even if religious practices involve the community of believers. Nevertheless, considering that the woman question in Middle Eastern cultures has traditionally been a thorny one, it is crucial that any woman who decides to wear any type of veil examine her conscience and determine whether the veil is the *only* manner for her to fulfill her spiritual needs. Because of both its role in the history of women's exclusion from social life outside the home and its resilience, the veil is overlaid with meanings that cannot be simply brushed away because a woman says so. Whenever a woman wears a veil, her act involves other women, including the girl child.

Veiling is both a discourse—a manner of thinking and talking about it, perceiving it as well as taking it for granted—and a practice. As a discourse it lies at the interface of political ideology, culture, and agency. As a practice, veiling cannot be detached from history. And it is as history—the history of women in relation to men—that it is lived and experienced by women in various parts of the world. Conflating discourse and practice “naturalizes” veiling by making it appear normative and immutable. The veil as history informs the veil as discourse, sheds light on its modalities, and helps to make out its future evolution.

The open letters that follow are offered as an invitation for greater reflection on the reasons for which women are reclaiming the veil as a constitutive part of their identity, defending it, and describing it as a means of “liberation.” Over the past fifteen years, I have spoken with and interviewed

numerous women, old and young, in the Middle East, North Africa, France, and the United States who have worn one type of veil or another; women who took off their veil for a while but felt they had to put it back on; and women who have been thinking of wearing one. I take these women's arguments seriously but wish to subject them to scrutiny as I am convinced that only rational reflection can advance women's understanding of themselves, particularly in times of political turmoil. For what is at stake is how women think of themselves when they are discussing religious matters, implementing what they might think is God's will, substituting religious norms for political action, or (more important) retreating into custom as a means of political protest. I explore the various angles of women's reasons and justifications for veiling, question them, and draw all the necessary conclusions, including those that might be disturbing, be unsettling, or go against the grain.

Given the history of misunderstanding of Islam as a religion and culture, there is no language in which to speak about the veil meaningfully without conveying to the reader that one is either denigrating or apologizing for a very rich culture with its inspiring ideals as well as less elevating customs. Hence I use terms that need clarifying. The expression "Muslim women," for example, does not mean that all women living in countries where Islam is the main religion are necessarily devout or in agreement with the veiling custom. Rather, it refers to the women who have taken up the veil as a way for them to display their religious affiliation. The best but cumbersome way to refer to these women would be "women-who-wear the veil-because-they think-it-is-a religious-obligation-in Islam." There is no generic "Muslim woman," just as there is no generic "Christian woman"☒ only concrete women engaged in concrete

actions. To avoid the label “Muslim men,” I use the expression “male advocates of veiling.” These can be theologians or self-styled promoters of a conservative interpretation of Islam. I also identify opposition movements that have used religion as a platform of social mobilization as Islamists or neofundamentalists, although these are imperfect labels.

The vocabulary of the veil lends itself to some confusion. The English concept of “veil” is rendered in Arabic by a number of terms that have different meanings in different countries and regions within countries. Besides, Quranic words referring to women’s proper attire have been interpreted and translated in various ways that add to the instability of meaning. Nevertheless, at present, four words are commonly used to refer to major styles of veiling: *hijab*, *jilbab*, *niqab*, and *khimar*. The *hijab* has emerged as the standardized form of veiling across the Muslim world, coexisting with local styles.¹² It comprises a headscarf wrapped in more or less intricate ways covering the neck but not the face, atop a long skirt, long baggy pants, or a combination of both. Often the hijab is reduced to a headscarf draped around head and neck, worn over any modern style of dress. The *jilbab* consists of a long garment covering the body, a headscarf, thick socks worn with flat shoes (usually sandals), and gloves.¹³ Frequently, a black face cover (*niqab*)¹⁴ is added to the jilbab, primarily by women affiliated with a specific Islamist movement such as the Salafi (or adherents to a conservative interpretation of Islam). *Khimar* today refers to a specific way of executing a head cover that usually hugs the head tightly and cascades over neck and shoulders in a capelike fashion.¹⁵

To avoid linguistic confusion, I will use the concept “veil” (or veiling) to mean hijab, the most common style of veiling, and will use the two concepts interchangeably unless otherwise indicated.

In the following letters, I have changed the names of the women I interviewed, to protect their identity. Each of the first four letters considers one of the main arguments made by women and advocates of veiling or reveiling. The fifth letter discusses the reasons why women should not wear the veil.