American Media and Veiling: Popular Perceptions of Women in Islam

The common view from the perspective of western society is that Muslim women who veil are ignorant and subjugated by Islam. The film *Not Without My Daughter*, as well as the season 4 campaign for the television show *Homeland* reinforce a long history of the west misinterpreting Islamic societies. However, when one examines the larger historical and social context that Islam was formed in, what the Quran says about veiling, and how Muslim women feel about covering, one can see that western media does not portray Muslim women or Islam accurately and is plagued with stereotypes.

How the west views Muslim women has evolved since the west began to colonize eastern societies in the 19th century. In the early 19th century Muslim women were often looked at as sexual objects. This was due to the fact that spaces in the Arab world were gendered. Men of the western world then fantasized female spaces as a place where women let loose and do anything that would please them. Women were often drawn dancing for men in revealing clothing or posing in a flirtatious way (“From Orientalist Sexual Object to Burkini Terrorist Threat”, 2). This idea however was far from the truth, yet it remained the prominent portrayal of Muslim women in the western world. This continued into the 20th century when photographers began to photograph models who they would say were average Muslim women. These models would then expose themselves in front of the camera and the photos would then be placed on postcards, which would be sent back to the west by soldiers and travelers to friends and family. (6-7). These
paintings and photographs created an image that Muslim women were promiscuous, as well as, subservient to men. This narrative eventually shifted as more people began to travel to the Middle East. Through the writings of Annie Jane Harvey, Muslim women began to be viewed as ignorant. Her writings asserted the superiority of western civilization and education over what she observed in the Ottoman Empire and that she was a steward for Muslim women’s rights. An example of this is when she wrote about the coverings women wore in the outside, which she called them “savage” (9-11). When her writings were published the west began to believe that “Muslim women were ignorant, lacking, uneducated, and lazy” (11). The misrepresentation of Muslim women has existed for a long period of time and can be seen in western film and television.

The film Not Without My Daughter is a prime example of a western media perpetuating the stereotype that covered Muslim women are ignorant and oppressed. The film is based off of the true story of Betty Mahmoody her daughter, Mahtob, and her Iranian husband, Sayyed. The story is that Betty must escape back to the United States with her daughter after a visit to Iran goes awry, because her husband’s behavior suddenly changes and he begins holding both of them hostage (Mazur, 245). While the film does tell a harrowing story of a mother and daughter, it perpetuates the idea of ignorance and oppression of Muslim women as well as the superiority of the west. One of the first examples of this is in a scene when Betty call the country of Iran “primitive” because of the fact that women veil. While her husband does tell Betty to look at the culture from another perspective, the film ignores this point as it continues (00:24:20-00:24:54). At another point in the film Betty is assaulted by her husband at their daughters school. The women who are around just stand there and stare as she is beaten and taken away by him (01:15:00-01:16:26). This scene presents women as passive to domestic violence, thus indicating
that women’s oppression is okay in Islamic societies. Not Without My Daughter constantly shows Muslim women as passive object and juxtaposes that with Betty who is a strong and independent western woman. Thus furthering the stereotype against Muslim women and the veil. Finally another problematic element in the film is that the Iranians that help Betty and her daughter escape have been exposed to the west (Emami, “The Not Without My Daughter Problem: How a Sally Field Movie Became an Iranian-American Headache.”). This furthers the idea of east versus west and asserts the dominance of the west’s culture. Not Without My Daughter is a film that paints the Islamic society as a backwards society that forces women to cover themselves. The women in these societies are passive and do not defend themselves because they do not know any better. The audience is supposed to be taking pity on these women who are forced to cover by their assumedly abusive husbands. This film takes extreme examples of covering and Islamic society and presents them as the norm. Essentially the film is saying that the east is bad and the west is good, when in reality it obviously much more nuanced than this binary. Another modern example of how western media perpetuates these stereotypes is the television show Homeland, specifically the season four campaign for the show. One of the biggest problems with the campaign was its poster that depicted its main character wearing a red headscarf and looking back while surrounded by women in burqas. However, the burqas are black instead of traditional blue which is the color of burqas in Afghanistan, which is where the show takes place (Karim, “Framing Muslim Women: The Problem with Homeland's Season 4 Campaign.”). Right from the start the campaign has inaccurately portrayed Muslim women and shown cultural insensitivity. This as well as the trailer limited Muslim women to just their covered appearance and emphasized passivity. This furthers the idea of the primitive ways of Islamic society and how it is the west’s job to liberate women from the oppression of Islam.
(Karim, “Framing Muslim Women: The Problem with Homeland's Season 4 Campaign.”). The ad campaign for *Homeland* and *Not Without My Daughter* both perpetuated the idea of an veiled Muslim women who is ignorant and cannot defend herself against an oppressive Islamic society. However when one looks at the historical context of Islam one can see that patriarchal societies influenced Islam.

Before Islam came to be in the Middle East women were worshiped as goddesses. There is archaeological evidence to support the idea that women were actually in the dominant position of society in ancient times. However this began to shift once women began to be kidnapped due to the increase in demand for labor. This caused women to become property and lead to the creation of warrior cultures, which asserted men's power over women. In ancient tribal societies power was concentrated to fathers and husbands (Ahmed, 11-13). Male oppression did not begin with Islam, it has a long history that goes back over a millennium. Another important idea that must be recognized is how women were treated differently in geographical spaces. In places like Greece women were confined to private spaces while men were allowed to freely roam in public. Women were expected to be quiet and submissive. In Aristotle's writings women were “inferior” and “defective” compared to men (28-29). However in places like Egypt, women were held in higher esteem. Women in Egypt had the right to sell, own, and buy property. Marriage was meant to be monogamous and had the right to divorce their husbands. Although women were treated relatively equally it is important to note that Egypt was still a male dominated society where women held few positions of power (31-32). Women were treated differently based on where they lived. Despite this difference the common theme everywhere was that men are dominant over females. This is important to take into account when Islam begins. Islam began when the Prophet Muhammad received his first revelation from the angel Gabriel in 610 C.E. in
Mecca. He received these revelations for over twenty years until his death in 632. What is important to note about these revelations is that the first one to believe them was Muhammad’s wife Khadija (Esposito, 8). The first believer in Islam was a woman. During and after the life of the Prophet Muhammad Islamic rule spread vastly over the world. Under Islamic rule cities could follow their own affairs (40). Islamic rule did not call for a mass conversion of conquered lands and allowed for people to carry on as they would before they came under Islamic rule. This made Islam a minority religion for quite some time, which made it subject to influence from other cultures. As Islam began to interact with other cultures and societies it began to adopt more misogynist ideas. These ideas then affected how Islamic law was interpreted (Ahmed, 67). Islam came to be in a larger cultural context that had a long history of oppressing women. That culture then influenced Islam’s treatment of women. Islam did not invent misogyny, misogyny had existed for thousands of years before and made its way into the Islamic community. What is also worth noting is that veil was not created by Islam it had existed for a long time in Syria, Greece, and Rome. It was also practiced in Jewish communities as well (55). This by no means justifies some of oppression women face under Islam, but it is important to realize that this oppression is not the result of the Islam itself, it is the result larger patriarchal forces. While historical context surrounding Islam is important, what the Quran says about veiling must be taken into account as well.

Verse 31 in Sura 24 is where veiling results from, the Quran says “And tell the believing women to reduce [some] of their vision and guard their private parts and not expose their adornment except that which [necessarily] appears thereof and to wrap [a portion of] their head covers over their chests and not expose their adornment”. Essentially this verse calls for women to cover themselves, specifically to men whom they are not related to through blood or marriage.
There is some debate among the Islamic schools of law about how much women should cover. However, all schools support women covering their body, extremities, and hair. Veiling of the face is not common but can still be found in some communities (“Coverings”, 1). It is also important to take into account the context around the verse as well. The verse was revealed on the night Muhammad married Zaynab. During this time guests stayed speaking to Zaynab for a long time and did not have the awareness of when to leave. Thus the hijab verse was revealed to instore etiquette in a “boorish” society (Mernissi, 92). Muhammad did not want to establish the veil but needed to because he was too soft spoken. He wanted a society that would allow women to be free but this was not the historical reality. The veil was then transformed as a system of control under the Caliph Umar and that has remained common thought and interpretation within Islam (187). The verse and the historical context surrounding it shows that practicing veiling was meant to protect rather than oppress women. The verse has been largely misconstrued due to the influence of patriarchy and the fact that male scholars have been responsible for reading and interpreting the Quran (Wadud, 3). Despite there being this evidence the west ignores it and tells Muslim women that they are oppressed by the veil and Islam, but how do Muslim women really feel?

Muslim women have various emotions and thoughts around veiling and why they do or not veil. However, the fact that they have put thought into veiling and whether or they want to or not shows that they are not ignorant. One major factor in why Muslim women choose to veil is because of religious obligation. However there can be choice within this. For example a woman said that she started to veil because she had read the Quran and interpreted veiling as part of what it means to be Muslim (Darnell and Ahmadi, 54). Rather than being forced to wear a hijab by her family, she decided that it was the best for her based on what she believed. Another reason why
Women decide to veil because it is a useful tool for recognition. Covering can be used for Muslim women to identify other Muslim women and establish a Muslim identity. This identity can be used as a form of social advocacy in places where veiling is frowned upon, like France or Turkey (56). In this example, the veil is a tool of liberation and can build morale as well. It is also important to take into account why Muslim women do not veil as well. The main reason is because of the misconceptions and stereotypes surrounding women who veil. Many Muslim women especially when they live or visit the United States feel uncomfortable because of how others perceive them. Women have reported being laughed at when walking into a room or certain people will talk to them differently because they think someone who is wearing a veil is uptight (58-59). Muslim women have the potential of being alienated because of their choice to wear a veil and will choose not to wear it in these cases. Another reason that women have cited not wearing a hijab in America is because if they wear one they will not be able to get a job (61).

As one can see, the reason why many women take off the are the result of Western influence. Now it is true that many Muslim women choose to not veil because they feel it is unnecessary or that it does represent a form of oppression. Also that some Muslim women veil because they fear being judged by others who are Islamic. However, the fact that many Muslim women have the choice to veil shows that they are not ignorant and that Islam does oppress them. The real oppression comes from the west and how American media portrays Muslim women. Media reinforces social attitudes and those can be socially toxic. This can be seen experiences of Muslim women in America they feel uncomfortable in expressing their religion for fear of being alienated or discriminated against. Rather than helping Muslim women Americans are making them feel more oppressed and subjugated. The perspective that Islam and the veil oppress women is hypocritical when it makes Muslim women feel subjugated. In order to stop this
assumption American media outlets should try to create more accurate portrayals of Muslim women and subvert stereotypes. What is more important is that one should stop assuming that America know what is best for Muslim women, one should examine the larger social and cultural contexts around Islam and actually hear the thoughts of Muslim women.

The assumption that Islam and the veil are tools that are used to oppress and subjugate women is hypocritical. This idea is reinforced by American media, which portrays Muslim women as ignorant and lazy. Examples of this are the film *Not Without My Daughter* and the television show *Homeland*. When one examines the larger historical and social context of Islam, what the Quran says about covering, and how Muslim women actually feel about covering, the assumption of the western way is better begins to fall apart. There is much more nuance and layers behind the relationship between the veil, Islam, and women and the view that Islam and the veil oppress women, ignores that.
Works Cited


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