

The Dynamism of the Veil: Veiling and Unveiling as a Means of Creating Identity in Algeria and France

By Peter Racco

In contemporary political discourse, particularly in the United States, Muslim women who don the veil are often considered agentless members of an oppressive patriarchal religion, subjects in need of rescue.¹ This idea of the *white* male rescuing *brown* women from *brown* men is perpetuated throughout colonial history and discourse,² including within the Middle East, Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Yet the reality of the matter is that women have a variety of reasons for veiling and that, while the idea of being forced to do so vis-à-vis a subordinate position in society cannot be necessarily discounted, often times wearing a veil is used as a method of improving or challenging one's devalued position or of asserting power beyond physicality.

Similarly, the act of unveiling cannot be simply read as way of moving towards modernization, feminism, equality, et cetera but rather as a complex method for navigating tensions in a social context or contexts. As Natalya Vince, an historian of modern France and Algeria, warns, we should take care not to suggest that the veil, whether worn or unworn, always indicates "colonial influence over the local population or a Fanonian cultural resistance," as both can be done for "socioeconomic or familial reasons" as well.³ It is my intention to argue that the veil is used as a method of creating or maintaining a multitude of identities – some real, some constructed – in order to better suit one's political, societal, economical, and/or familial needs. To do so, I will compare the use of the veil as a form of resistance during the Algerian War for Independence and the use of the veil as an identity-creating tool in 1980s-90s France (during the headscarf controversy).

During the Algerian War for Independence, the veil, or absence thereof, allowed women to become highly effective guerilla fighters. This, however, was merely one part of the larger trend of the Algerian War, wherein identities and senses of belonging were challenged, contested, and redefined.⁴ Frantz Fanon – a psychiatrist whose work relating to post-colonial studies and particularly the Algerian War for Independence is well known – argues that, initially, wearing the veil in colonial Algeria was a form of cultural resistance against French efforts to unveil Algerian women (thus, in their view, bringing them over to the side of modernity and liberalism) – it "was worn because tradition demanded a rigid separation of the sexes, but also because the occupier *was bent on unveiling Algeria*."⁵ Then, "[w]hat is in fact the assertion of a distinct identity, concern with keeping intact a few shreds of national existence, is attributed to religious, magical, fanatical behaviour."⁶ This constitutes a clear misinterpretation on the part of the French of the actions of women who refused to unveil.

The prominence of French colonial strategy placed on Algerian women as a method of destructuring Algerian society necessarily gave rise to "reactionary forms of behaviour on the part of the colonized."⁷ As immortalized in the film *The Battle of Algiers*, Algerian women could become highly effective guerilla fighters by shedding the veil and adopting

a Westernized physical appearance.⁸ This allowed them to freely pass through French-Algerian society, even through French checkpoints, without garnering suspicion. As Fanon eloquently describes:

Carrying revolvers, grenades, hundreds of false identity cards or bombs, the unveiled Algerian woman moves like a fish in the Western waters. The soldiers, the French patrols, smile to her as she passes, compliments on her looks are heard here and there, but no one suspects that her suitcases contain the automatic pistol which will presently mow down four or five members of one of the patrols.⁹

This usage of the veil, even in its absence, is notable because “it functions efficiently only by *misrecognition*.”¹⁰ It was virtually impossible for the French to conceptualize a “Westernized” woman who nonetheless harbored anti-colonial feelings. Vince provides an example: “At no point was it proposed that Hammadi,” an *évoluée* who chose to join the National Liberation Army (ALN), “who spoke excellent French and dressed ‘à la française,’ might have harbored anything more than a fleeting and circumstantial resentment toward the colonial system.” To the French these women “did not conform to type;” their behavior was not predictable, and it was therefore dangerous.¹¹

The Algerian woman who discards her veil to wage guerilla warfare not only manipulates a false identity but also creates a new, legitimate one. In order to combat a feeling of awkwardness, nakedness, and incompleteness, “[s]he quickly has to invent new dimensions for her body, new means of muscular control. She has to create for herself an attitude of unveiled-woman-outside.... [She] relearns her body, re-establishes it in a totally revolutionary fashion.”¹² The transformation is physical as well as mental; it involves kinetics, the way her body moves, in addition to the way she must think and conceive of herself.

The veil continued to function through misrecognition even after the French came to suspect “European” women. “The discovery by the French authorities of the participation of Europeans in the liberation struggle,” Fanon argues, “marks a turning point in the Algerian Revolution. From that day, the French patrols challenged every person. Europeans and Algerians were equally suspect.” In these cases, “a new technique had to be learned” – how to smuggle equipment under a veil. A woman resistance fighter’s body “had to be squashed, made shapeless and even ridiculous,” so as to hide a bomb or machine-gun clips. These would be attached to her body directly so as to allow free movement of her hands – “the sign that disarms the enemy soldier.”¹³ “In doing so,” Vince argues, “the [Front de Liberation Nationale] was exploiting the French stereotype of the ‘traditional’ Muslim woman: a passive and submissive woman who should under no circumstances be touched.”¹⁴

The veil became an enabler of guerilla warfare, allowing women to “appear” and “disappear,” to sow paranoia, to give the impression that an attack could come at anytime, from anywhere, orchestrated by anyone. As Decker states, “[t]he Algerian woman’s veil generates the desired effects of terrorism... [it] simultaneously produces in the ‘look’ of the Algerian woman the ideological effect of in- and within-significance—that is, lack and power.”¹⁵ The results are almost paradoxical: a woman is powerful because she is perceived powerless; the veil is useful because it is “read” incorrectly.

Female nationalists struggled with – and against – both colonialism *and* sexism.¹⁶ Though women were just as strongly nationalist as men were, “It was often against some

nationalist leader's will that women joined the armed struggle. Indeed, the nationalists' perception of women as 'passive' and in need of protection was out of step with women's own conceptions of their capabilities... In many ways, by joining the movement women acted as contestants of men's monopoly over nationalist militancy."¹⁷ In this way, they were able to carve out a new identity within Algeria, to force the reconsideration of women's issues—though this reconsideration would have to wait until after the Revolution for official policy. Even then, some policies – like the Algerian Family Code of 1984 – served to affirm rather than disassemble patriarchy.¹⁸

Regardless of whether or not official policy after the Revolution reflected the change in women's status, during the Revolution female resistance fighters were able to exercise a degree of influential, or soft, power. Fanon argues that the resolve of a female FLN/ALN member could serve to diffuse "[t]he old fear of dishonour" and that "[b]ehind the girl, the whole family – even the Algerian father, the authority for all things, the founder of every value, following in her footsteps, becomes committed to the new Algeria."¹⁹ Women not only carved out new identities for themselves, but created familial recognition and tacit acceptance of their newly fashioned identities.

More than thirty years later, women still alternatively veiled or unveiled themselves for similar purposes in France – not for terrorism, but to establish new identities and navigate difficult social settings. Political scientist Catherine Wihtol de Wenden writes that young, elite, female Muslim immigrants in France,

though not necessarily representative of all or even most Muslim women, functioned as mediators between tradition and modernity (*femmes relais*), seeking to form a bridge between the traditional culture of the homeland and the modern, Western one of the receiving country. Far from resisting these mediation attempts, most young women...increasingly welcomed a loosening of the traditional bonds that tended to keep women in a subordinate position.²⁰

When Algerian women in France shed the veil, it was often for pragmatic reasons. Caitlin Killian, a gender and immigration sociologist, states that "men face more racism than women, being viewed immediately as Arabs or foreigners. Women, on the other hand, are seen as women first, and their ethnicity or immigrant status becomes secondary—at least for those women who meet certain requirements, notably the ability to speak French and dress like the French."²¹ Wearing the veil makes apparent an "otherness," causing those who wear it to be viewed, not as women, but as foreigners.²² Thus, pragmatism: by unveiling themselves, Algerian women in France could attain a better opportunity "to work, to be hired, to fit in."²³

This calls to mind the "Teflon construction" of Islam.²⁴ In essence, cultural artifacts, as well as practices that are "restraining, unfair, or unwise," can be safely ignored without affecting one's religiosity. "Bad things slide off the 'true Islam,'" Williams summarizes, "as if it were coated with Teflon."²⁵ This is not to suggest the existence of an objective, "true" Islam, but rather an internalized version that is true to one's own piety. Though Williams writes of the Muslim experience in America, this concept seems equally applicable to France in the late 1980s-early 1990s, or colonial Algeria during the War for Independence. In all cases, a level of pragmatism influenced Islam on multiple levels, not simply in regards to veiling.²⁶

Despite this pragmatism, however, many female immigrants in France – especially second or third generation Muslims of adolescent or young adult age – choose to continue veiling themselves, or even to take up the practice for the first time. This decision is what led to the “Headscarf Incidents” in France, a controversy over whether students had the right to wear headscarves to school in a secular nation. Though the reasons students might have for doing this are manifold, many of them relate to issues we have previously discussed – those of identity, cultural navigation, and misrecognition.

One reason for veiling is due to familial or societal pressures within the Muslim immigrant community. Body-Gendrot notes that some Muslim women “admit that they wear a headscarf when they leave their neighborhood, so as not to be bothered, but a larger group resents the domination exerted upon them, domination that they claim has intensified in the last ten years.”²⁷ Wihtol de Wenden argues that it is less about social pressure and more about a desire for adolescent agency. Wearing a headscarf,

rarely is meant to indicate a return to the traditionalism of their mothers (who did not put much emphasis on it anyway), but rather may be adopted as a means of soothing parental anxieties, demonstrating to them that their daughter is a good Muslim who knows the traditional way and how to follow it. So when they leave home wearing a traditional dress or scarf, they often gain more freedom while simultaneously giving satisfaction and reassurance to their parents.²⁸

In this case, veiling again functions through misrecognition. Despite being a symbol of Islamic traditionalism, wearing a headscarf here is not meant to serve as a visual declaration of one’s own traditionalism. Rather, it is used to assuage parental concerns while acquiring a greater freedom of movement. It bears resemblance to the way female FLN/ALN members could utilize the veil (or lack thereof) to move more freely through checkpoints without invoking French suspicion – though, obviously, that case is militaristic while this case is not.

Still more women use the veil as a means, not of satisfying parents, but of creating their own identity. Killian argues that wearing a veil is an example of maintaining a positive self-image by rejecting comparison with a majority group. “This,” she argues, “is a predicted strategy for devalued groups who have little access to social, political, and economic resources that might change their status in society.”²⁹ Sebastian Poulter adds that wearing a *hijab* provides a wealth of personal benefits, including the creation of a private space, an increased sense of dignity, and shielding from sexual harassment; that it serves as an assertion of one’s right to an identity of both French *and* Muslim; that it is, in short, “a liberating and empowering device.” In addition, Poulter implies that such a decision is highly individualistic, made by “modern, well-educated *individuals*,” aimed at creating a “*distinctive* place,” and part of a search for “*personal* dignity” (emphasis mine).³⁰

At the heart of the matter seems to be the issue of what it means then to be both French *and* Muslim. Killian argues that “the veil is a way to negotiate between the community of their parents and the French society in which they are immersed... These girls reject what they view as a devaluation of their parents’ culture and an emphasis on assimilation. They accept integration through schooling and employment, however, and wish to be recognized as both Muslim and French.”³¹ Williams adds, “[*h*]ijab carves out a cultural

space for young Muslim women to live lives that their mothers could barely have imagined... and still to be publicly Muslim.”³² Beyond simply allowing for this – and in contrast to the use of the veil during the Algerian War – Williams argues that “[w]omen in hijab instantly signal who they are and what group they identify with, making clear their religious and community connections.”³³ The veil should therefore be recognized as *both* a disguise and as identification, or rather, as identification that can become a disguise when that identification is falsified to play on misrecognition.

It is worth noting that, as in the Algerian War for Independence, the practice by Muslim immigrants in France who veil seemed to begin with children and then moved upward. Discarding the veil during the Algerian War was used by the FLN/ALN as a recruiting tool: it demonstrated a woman’s resolve and thereby caused her family to support her. Williams quotes one young Muslim woman and notes that “[b]y her account, her mother began covering about the same time she did—but she presents this as a trend that is going from the second generation to their parents’ generation, rather than vice versa.”³⁴ This is not however to suggest that this trend remains true in all regions and time periods in which women contested or redefined the veil.³⁵

Despite numerous similarities, these cases should not be conflated. Though both dealt with identity politics, in the case of female FLN/ALN members, the goal was terrorism and the defeat of the French, while Muslim immigrants in France most often were responding to familial pressures or attempting to synthesize Muslim and French identities. Nevertheless, in both cases, these women veiled or unveiled themselves in pursuit of a new identity or societal space. This is the “historic dynamism of the veil”³⁶ of which Fanon wrote – the ability of the veil become a tool for different purposes both in being worn and in not being worn, and it is no less true in 1990s France than 1950s Algeria.

Notes

¹ The author, being also an editor, recused himself from the editing process regarding this article. It received no special treatment and was required to conform to all standard requirements.

² Lila Abu-Lughod, “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism,” *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (2005): 784

³ Natalya Vince, “Transgressing Boundaries: Gender, Race, Religion, and ‘Françaises Musulmanes’ during the Algerian War of Independence,” *French Historical Studies* 33, no. 3 (2010): 459.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 448.

⁵ Frantz Fanon, “Algeria Unveiled,” in *Decolonization: Perspectives from Now and Then*, ed. Prasenjit Duara (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 55.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁸ *The Battle of Algiers*, directed by Gillo Pontecorvo (1966; Algeria: Rizzoli, Rialto Pictures).

⁹ Fanon, “Algeria Unveiled,” 52.

¹⁰ Jeffrey Louis Decker, "Terrorism (Un) Veiled: Frantz Fanon and the Women of Algiers," *Cultural Critique*, no. 17 (1990-1991): 185.

¹¹ Vince, "Transgressing Boundaries," 453.

¹² Fanon, "Algeria Unveiled," 52.

¹³ Ibid., 53-54.

¹⁴ Vince, "Transgressing Boundaries," 454.

¹⁵ Decker, "Terrorism (Un) Veiled," 193.

¹⁶ Ibid., 184.

¹⁷ Marnia Lazreg, "Gender and Politics in Algeria: Unraveling the Religious Paradigm," *Signs* 15, no. 4 (1990): 767

¹⁸ Ibid., 755-56.

¹⁹ Fanon, "Algeria Unveiled," 53.

²⁰ Catherine Wihtol de Wenden, "Young Muslim Women in France: Cultural and Psychological Adjustments," *Political Psychology* 19, no. 1 (1998): 135.

²¹ Caitlin Killian, "The Other Side of the Veil: North African Women in France Respond to the Headscarf Affair," *Gender and Society* 17, no. 4 (2003): 587.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 584.

²⁴ R. Stephen Warner, Elise Martel, and Rhonda E. Dugan, "Catholicism is to Islam as Velcro is to Teflon: Religion and Ethnic Culture Among Second Generation Latina and Muslim Women College Students" (paper presented to the Midwest Sociological Society, St. Louis, 2001).

²⁵ Rhys H. Williams and Gira Vashi, "'Hijab' and American Muslim Women: Creating the Space for Autonomous Selves," *Sociology of Religion* 68, no. 3 (2007): 280.

²⁶ Though Algeria, taken broadly, is perhaps not the best example of Islam's "Teflon construction," during the War for Independence many social mores and taboos seemed to be suspended. For one example, see: Vince, "Transgressing Boundaries," 461.

²⁷ Sophie Body-Gendrot, "France Upside down over a Headscarf?" *Sociology of Religion* 68, no. 3 (2007): 294.

²⁸ Wihtol de Wenden, "Young Muslim Women in France," 141-42.

²⁹ Killian, "The Other Side of the Veil," 579.

³⁰ Sebastian Poulter, "Muslim Headscarves in School: Contrasting Legal Approaches in England and France," *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 17, no. 1 (1997): 71.

³¹ Killian, "The Other Side of the Veil," 572.

³² Williams and Vashi, "'Hijab' and American Muslim Women," 283.

³³ Ibid., 282.

³⁴ Ibid., 284.

³⁵ Ashraf Zahedi, "Contested Meaning of the Veil and Political Ideologies of Iranian Regimes," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 3, no. 3 (2007): 75-98. Zahedi's article contains a discussion of a contrasting example during the Iranian Revolution of 1979.

³⁶ Fanon, "Algeria Unveiled," 55.