

From Fantasy To Fear: The Politics Of Veil During The Algerian War Of Independence

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Abstract

Women bodies have been the site of contestation and struggle in the colonial ventures. This research article aims to discuss the opaque veil erected as a barrier between the bodies of Algerian women and French colonizers' gaze. Rather than being an object to be seen and observed by French men, the veiled women 'See, without being seen'. Thus, the veil evaded power dynamics between colonized and colonizers. By doing a literature search of French colonial rule in Algeria (1830-1962), this paper explores the significance of the veil by comprehending the processes of veiling, unveiling and re-veiling of the Algerian women during the colonial rule in Algeria. Drawing the theoretical framework from the works of Malek Alloula and Timothy Mitchell, this essay also examines different paradoxes associated with the veil in Algeria. This essay analyses the drastic change in the French perception of the veiled Algerian women from the erotic towards a new emphasis on the veiled Algerian women as a symbol of political danger. This paper also explores how this new political role gave the veiled Algerian women agency to act during French colonial rule in Algeria and how veiling became a symbol of colonial resistance.

Keywords: French Veil, Colonial Rule, Algeria, Women, Politics.

I. Introduction

In most of the colonial discourse, the colonized lands are often perceived as feminized, passive, and deserted, waiting for virile colonial masters to inseminate and give it life. Gendered in French as feminine, Algeria is presented as a land to be ruled by French. The idleness and passivity of Algeria refers to the idleness and passivity of Algerian women in the harem. '... feminization of Algeria and masculinisation of France naturalized the colonial relationship' (Fletcher, 1998:209). Algeria, thus symbolized as a feminine entity to be penetrated and conquered by French colonizers since, in the colonial fantasy Algerian women is the pathway to conquer the Algerian land. Algerian women symbolize Algeria and veil is the barrier between Frenchmen and Algerian women. Stripping off Algerian women's veils equalize conquering Algeria. In that case Algerian women became the agency to conquer Algeria. 'Let us win over the veil and the rest will follow' (Fanon, 1980:37). Winning the Algerian women over to the foreign values aims to achieve power over the Algerian men and to deconstruct the Algerian culture. Thus, unveiling of Algerian women is seen as the first step to conquer Algeria. The veil is used as a medium by the French colonizers to intercept the mysteries of the orient and gain access to the cultural foundations of the other. This research article aims to discuss the opaque veil erected as a barrier between the bodies of Algerian women and French colonizers' gaze. Rather than

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being an object to be seen and observed by French men, the veiled women ‘See, without being seen’. Thus, the veil evaded power dynamics between colonized and colonizers. In this article, we will do an analysis of the layers of meanings associated with the veil by doing a literature review of the Algerian war of struggle during the colonial rule. Firstly, we will discuss the colonizers/Europeans’ frustrations around veil and what it stands for in the colonial context. Secondly, we discuss the politicization of the veil i.e., unveiling Muslim women and emancipating them and on the other hand Muslim women unveiled to take part in the struggle against the French colonial rule. Lastly, this article discusses how this new political role gave the veiled Algerian women agency to act during French colonial rule in Algeria and how veiling became a symbol of the colonial resistance.

II. World as Exhibition and the Veil Obstructing Colonial Fantasies

In *Colonising Egypt*, Mitchell proposes the idea of ‘world as exhibition’, which fits well with the colonized/colonizers dynamics in the Algerian context. Mitchell states that in today’s world people are oriented to the world from the outsides. ‘At a World Exhibition, just as in a theatre, the visitor is a spectator, detached from the object, the spectacle’. World Exhibition refers not to an exhibition of the world, but to the world conceived and grasped as though it were an exhibition (Mitchell, 1988:222). Mitchell demonstrates the idea of representing spectacle to the spectators and detached spectator observes the spectacle. Spectators in this colonial drama were the French, while the Algerians were displayed like spectacles. Applying this to Algeria, the colonized Algeria was set up like a theatre in front of the French colonizers. The colonizers wish to put everything under the glass and stare their fill. A significant aspect of the French colonial gaze is to visualize and be enthusiastic about the Orient and their culture (Mitchell, 1988:219). But one thing that perplexed the French is ‘the veil’.

The Algerian women, who wears the veil, obstructs the colonizers’ gaze. A European visiting Algeria remarked about Algerian men that they are guilty of hiding the mysterious beauties of the Algerian women by covering them in the veil (Fanon, 1980:43). He further suggests that the Algerian men should exhibit these strange beauties to the world by unveiling them and if the Algerian men deny exhibiting the unveil the Algerian women, they should be forced to do so. These words of a European visitor, as narrated by Fanon, clearly demonstrate the curiosity of European men. The beauty of Algerian women should be displayed because in the colonial field all the objects should be exhibited to fill the colonizers’ stare and nothing should be kept hidden or inaccessible from the colonial gaze. If something is kept hidden it should be exposed or colonized people should be forced to expose it. Other than being a spectacle to the colonial gaze the veiled Algerian women tend to disrupt all the essential features of the world-as-exhibition, since they were unavailable to be observed but they were observing others around them. They were exotic beings who denied to present themselves to the European visitors to be observed (Bullock, 2002:6). The veiled Algerian women deny accessibility and visibility to the visual desire of French colonizers. Algerian women refused to be presented as an object to be seen. The veiled Algerian women do not offer themselves as spectacle to be exhibited and how to control some creature that could not be grasped, could not be seen?

According to Michael Foucault’s concept of knowledge is power. The veiled women have the knowledge as they can see the things, being unseen at the same time. The veiled women have the knowledge as well as power, they can watch the colonizers while the colonizers neither can see the veiled women nor they have the knowledge what is behind the veil. Foucault describes power as a form of hegemonic domination which tends to control everything and spare no space for autonomy. The visible invisibility of the veiled Algerian women challenges the power of colonizers as the veiled women were in front of the Frenchmen yet they were unseen and inaccessible. The invisible presence of the veiled Algerian women gives them freedom and contravenes the ‘power’ of colonizers. The colonizers lack of control on the Algerian women makes them feel powerless.

The veiled Algerian women not only limit the colonial gaze and control on them but they dodged the power dynamics between themselves and European men as they can see without being seen. ‘This woman who sees without being seen frustrates the colonizer’. (Fanon, 1980:44). It is frustrating that the veiled Algerian women do not present themselves or offer themselves like a spectacle to be observed and studied by the colonizers. The colonizers were mindful of the fact that they were being observed by the veiled women, who were themselves inaccessible and unseen. This gives Algerian women some superiority and power over the colonizers and this is turnaround of the anticipated dynamics between colonizers and colonized. So, in this situation object becomes subject, spectacle becomes spectator. The veiled Algerian women were assumed to hide some mystery or information that is kept hidden in the layers of their veil. The eagerness of the French colonizers to unveil the Algerian women has assumed not only a political but an erotic form.

III. Colonial Frustrations and its Symbolic Revenge

Malek Alloula collects and tries to reframe the postcards during the colonial time presenting Algerian women. The veiled Algerian women discourage the scopic desire of the photographer. ‘The whiteness of the veil becomes the symbolic equivalent of blindness: a leukoma, a white speck on the eye of the photographer and on his viewfinder. Whiteness is the absence of a photo, a veiled photograph, a whiteout, in technical terms’ (Alloula, 1986:7). The veil serves as an obstacle between the eye of camera and the object i.e., Algerian women. The veil, thus, not only serves as an embarrassing enigma to the photographer but also mocks his endeavour to approach the unapproachable, to present the hidden and mysterious. Besides this, there is an outright attack upon the photographer. The photographer feels himself photographed by the female gaze of Algerian women, like the eye of camera which impressions at everything. The perplexed situation of the photographer who takes photos of the veiled Algerian women is such that he feels himself become an object of observation by the Algerian women since, he loses initiative: he is dispossessed of his own gaze ... Algerian society, particularly the feminine world with it, threatens him in his being and prevents him from accomplishing himself as gazing gaze’ (Alloula, 1986:14, original emphasis). This restriction on the artistic ability of the photographer led him to shoot and There is no reciprocity. She does not yield herself, does not give herself, does not offer herself to unveil the veiled Algerian women and give symbolic representation to the unseen and forbidden. So, as a symbolic revenge, the photographer hired poor women and prostitutes as substitute models of the real Algerian women. The Photographic images of the hired poor women were engineered to provide visually erotic access to the inaccessible’ (Clancy-Smith, 1998:157).

The photographer’s studio became a miniature of the harem which eventually satiated the French photographer’s voyeurism and desire to penetrate the harem, no matter even if it was virtually created. ‘The reflection of a reflection, the exotic (and/or colonial) postcard is above all an art of simulacrum, in both the theatrical and the compensatory sense of the term’ (Alloula, 1986:64, original emphasis). These postcards of Algerian women with their exposed breasts depict the photographer’s frustration to surmount what is hidden, concealed, inaccessible and unapproachable. The Algerian women veiled or in harem were inaccessible to the European gaze. In these postcards the Algerian women were not only shown unveiled but naked with their breasts exposed. Photographer has photographed what is hidden, forbidden, unseen and what will address to the taste of buyers. These postcards were circulated in Europe and it catered to the colonized men who were unable to see the unveiled European women.

The postcards present the entire theme of colonial desire and longing for the Algerian women. It represents the meek, docile, oppressed and submissive young Algerian women with a lower gaze standing by the side of a window. ‘On the other side of the wall, a man (with European outlook) is desperately clutching the bars that keep him from the object of his unequivocal yearning’ (Alloula, 1986:25). The setting brings back to reader’s mind the

oppressed Algerian women imprisoned behind the walls of harem waiting for a European savoir, to save her from the clutches of cruel, barbarous Oriental master.

Alloula's work presents the symbolic revenge of the French photographer in response to the veiled women who hide themselves from the male gaze. By veiling themselves, the veiled Algerian women are rejecting to be the object of male voyeurism. The Europeans who visit the colonized Algeria are perplexed by the veil of the Algerian women and the barrier it creates between them and the object of their fantasy, which has now become a frustration and obsession. The veiled woman is an enigma for the Europeans. This frustration is obvious in the postcards collected by Malek Alloula, as the photographer not only unveiled the Algerian women but photographed them half-naked. Thus, presenting to the world what was unseen, hidden and veiled. The will to unveil the veiled Algerian women is presented by giving the analogy of liberating oppressed Muslim women from the oppression of Algerian men. By removing the veil, the French colonizers believe that they are emancipating the poor, oppressed and helpless Algerian women. Whereas, the will to unveil the Algerian women means a disruption in the cultural denominations of Algeria. This change was strongly discouraged and detested by the Algerian and a resistance was shown by the Algerian against the so-called emancipatory act of liberating them by the colonizers.

Veil as a Symbol of Resistance

The movement of resistance in Algeria is condensed in the veil which limits the European male voyeurism and frustrates them. A whole set of paradoxical meanings are associated with veil and veiled women in Algeria during the colonial period. The veil was used as a symbol of resistance against the colonial male gaze and symbolically against the French invasion of Algeria. For the French, the veil acted as a fantasy that hid a beauty and lifting the veil would reveal the eroticized Algerian women. Symbolically, this referred to conquer Algeria by tearing that veil. According to the French colonizers, in order to destabilize the structure of Algerian society and their capability to resist they must first conquer the Algerian women, who are kept hidden from the colonizers by the Algerian men. It was upon the outbreak of the struggle for freedom that the attitude of Algerian women towards the veil underwent modifications.

Before the revolutionary struggle started the veil was predominantly worn by the elite and urban Algerian women. It is during the revolutionary time period that some of the urban Algerian women decided to take off their veils to contribute in the war against the French colonial rule (Alloula, 1986:95). Yegenoglu argues that the act of unveiling symbolizes the will of the Algerian to take part in the struggle on their own (cited in Moore, 2007:341). The Algerian women were unveiled to be a part of the revolutionary project. The Algerian women, unveiled, dressed like western women used to courageously pass secret message and carry explosive material. The bare legs of the Algerian women, which are not more in the confines of the veil and her free body movement cannot give a clue of their hidden intentions to colonizers (Fanon, 1980:36). Towards the end of the revolution, when women who adorned western clothing style became a symbol of suspicion, the Algerian women again veiled themselves with the intention of hiding explosive material and took part in the movement to fight against the French colonizers. It was partly due to the revolution that the Algerian women used to hide explosive in the veil and partly it was an act of resistance against the colonial rule. On 13th May, 1958, a demonstration was held in which servants, poor Algerian women and prostitutes were publicly unveiled, under the threat of being fired, as an act of westernizing Algeria. In reaction to this, the Algerian women started to wear the veil again. This process of veiling, unveiling and re-veiling of the Algerian women has transformed the symbolic value attached to the veil from fantasy to fear and manipulation during the war of struggle. The veiled women, who were once the object of European fantasy now transformed into an object of political danger (Fanon, 1986:61).

According to Fanon (1980) and Yegenoglu (1998), the unveiling and re-veiling gave Algerian women a new identity and a sense of self-affirmation. Yegenoglu argues that the act of re-veiling is not just going back to tradition; instead, it reconstructs the veil as the personification of the women's willingness to take part in the movement of freedom, their agency, a parodic repetition which for sometimes contravenes the binary logic of Orientalism. But my argument follows that, the veiling and re-veiling of the Algerian women did not give them agency, rather they were used like auxiliary objects during the revolution by the Algerian men. The Algerian women did not decide themselves to take part in the revolution but they have been incorporated by the Algerian men. This identity was not self-attained by the Algerian women but it was bestowed on them by the Algerian men. During the revolution, the Algerian men agreed to unveil the Algerian women and let them participate in the revolution. The Algerian women did not create their identity at their own. Algerian men made Algerian women part of struggle and used them during that time for placing bombs, carrying explosive materials etc. Juliette Minces (1978) contends that the Algerian women who were employed in the war, although, consciously, as adjuncts and auxiliaries. She contends that a relatively small number of women participated in the war of liberation on their free will. Overall, the acts of veiling, unveiling and re-veiling of the Algerian women have been shaped by the male patriarchs. This comment resonates with the view the politics entrenched in veiling, unveiling or revealing of women give an example of the strife for power between colonial (neo-colonial) nationalist and Islamist (or anti-colonial/patriarchal) forces (Khan, 1995:146).

IV. Conclusion

The veiled Algerian women, besides, being objects of the European voyeurism, were used as objects by native and Frenchmen. According to some of the scholars like Khan (1995) and Minces (1978), the decision to take part in the war of struggle was not a conscious decision made by the women themselves rather it was imposed on them by the male patriarchs. First of all, the Europeans associated women with Algeria and winning over the native women equalizes conquering Algeria. By unveiling the Algerian women, the French colonizers projected that they were 'emancipating the oppressed Muslim women and protecting them from the patriarchal order which restricted their freedom' (Tahir et al., 2021). However, the move to unveil the Algerian women was based to challenge the Algerian value system and destructing Algerian culture (Fanon: 1980:17). Secondly, the veiled Algerian women have been eroticized by the Europeans visitors and French colonizers as an object of fantasy, concealed and inapproachable. The veil of the Algerian women became a symbol of Algeria and the colonizers assumed that by removing the veil they will win over the Algeria. Thirdly, the veiled Algerian women have been used in the revolutionary project as auxiliaries. The decision to contribute in the struggle for freedom was not taken by women but the patriarchs of Algeria took this decision for Algerian women, which Algerian women obeyed without any question. The veiling, unveiling and re-veiling of the Algerian women was directed by the Europeans. The enigmatic character of the veil during the colonial rule in Algeria is best described by Edmondo De Amicis who says that it becomes difficult to comprehend that what the Algerian women plan to do with veil ... to display, to conceal, to promise, to propose a problem or to betray some little marvel unexpectedly (cited in Yegenoglu 1998:44).

The Algerian women veiled because the occupiers wanted to unveil them. During revolution, the Algerian women unveiled themselves to look like western women so that they could take part in the struggle for freedom. However, when the Europeans started to suspect the unveiled figures, the Algerian women again veiled themselves. Some scholars argue that nowhere have we seen any struggle on the part of Algerian women. The Algerian woman has not been voiced in the colonial discourses and she has been presented by the dominant colonial male discourse. She, who was much discussed in the French colonial discourse, was not given voice. As Patricia Jeffery states about the veiled Algerian women:

‘anonymous, a non-person, unapproachable, just a silent being skulking along, looking neither left nor right’ (cited in Lazreg, 2018). However, I contend that despite the invisibility of Algerian women in the discourse on the war of struggle one cannot deny their agency to act and their willingness to take off their veils to be part of struggle to liberate their land from the rule of oppressors. The Algerian women of all classes joined the liberation movement and irrespective of their cultural and social background they stood by the Algerian men and this brave act cannot be undermined. The participation of the Algerian women in liberation movement has evaded the politics of veil and gave it a distinct character.

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