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Review Article: Veil of Tradition, Veil of Resistance

Islamic Dress in Contemporary Egypt

Alisa Perkins

Ahmed, Leila
1992 Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate. New Haven: Yale University Press.

El Guindi, Fadwa
1999 Modesty, Privacy and Resistance. Oxford: Oxford International Publishers Ltd.

In two recent ethnographic studies of gender and Islam, Leila Ahmed and Fadwa El Guindi discuss a trend in dress found in contemporary Egypt referred to as Islamic dress or *al-ziyy al-Islami.* Egyptian women in the 1970s designed this style of dress to comply with Qur'anic injunctions against using clothing to enhance sexual attractiveness in public. Characterized by loosely flowing garments and minimal expo-

Fadwa El Guindi and Leila Ahmed agree that the veil is a multivocal symbol, and that its designation as an emblem of resistance to the West is among its most prominent meanings. Yet the two ethnographers disagree about the relative importance of resistance as a factor conditioning contemporary veiling practices in Egypt. El Guindi understands veiling as an empowering means of self-expression through which women intensify their relationship with their own culture and faith. In contrast, Ahmed critiques the return of the veil in Egypt as furthering a dialogue with the West, and traces the process by which engagement with the West as Other may normalize subordination of women in Islamic societies. Moreover, she challenges those who claim that contemporary veiling practices are based upon a culturally authentic Islamic code of dress. While El Guindi's vision of Islamic feminism centers around a return to a specific set of culturally authentic practices, Ahmed questions the viability and wisdom of this path.

sure of flesh, women and men alike wear this dress to express affiliation with the contemporary Islamic revival movement. Within their analyses, Ahmed and El-Guindi present contrasting ideas about the messages and meanings carried forth by *al-ziyy al-Islami*, especially as it relates to gender and authenticity.

While both authors refrain from overt judgment on how *al-ziyy al-Islami* ultimately influences gender dynamics in contemporary Egypt, a close reading of their texts reveals definite and contrasting stances on its significance. In *Veil: Modesty, Privacy and Resistance* (1999), El Guindi embraces *al-ziyy al-Islami* and celebrates its potential for empowering Islamic women. Alternatively, in *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (1992), Ahmed traces a more complex history of this trend. While El Guindi refers to women who wear the dress as self-empowered heroines, Ahmed questions not only the message these women convey through their dress, but also the extent to which they control the implications of this message.

El Guindi and Ahmed agree that the veil is a multivocal symbol, and that its designation as an emblem of resistance to the West is among its most prominent meanings. The two ethnographers differ, however, in the relative importance each attributes to this resistance as a factor conditioning contemporary veiling practices. Both writers draw upon a model of controlling processes such as the one put forth by Laura Nader (1989,1994) to illustrate the complex dynamics of this counter-influence and its rhetoric of positional superiority. The controlling processes model seeks to understand how societies deploy representations of other societies in their battles for cultural domination. These representations often involve the bodies of women at the expense of women, whose interests are subordinated to the "larger" battle over culture: "images of women in other societies [can be used to] reinforce norms of subordination of women in one's own society" (Nader 1989:347). Although El Guindi relies on this model of controlling processes in explaining the relationship between East and West, she neglects to employ this model in her analysis of gender relations. In contrast, Ahmed thoroughly explores and builds upon the interdependence between the rhetoric of positional superiority and the subordination of women in producing her analysis.

In this paper, I will show how the contrasting theoretical orientations of Ahmed and El Guindi structure and color various aspects

of their work. These orientations underlie differences between each writer's stated objectives and methodologies, interpretations of the imperatives behind contemporary veiling, approaches to historical analysis, and conflicting visions for the future of Islamic feminism.

Controlling Processes

Laura Nader's article on gender and culture, "Orientalism, Occidentalism and the Control of Women" (1989), provides a framework through which to read the works of Ahmed and El Guindi. The model that Nader introduces in this article "extends Said's observation that the Moslem world exists 'for' the West,to include the notion that the West also exists 'for' the Islamic world and serves as an important contrastive comparison which restricts and controls women's resistance…and explains gender construction as a result of interactions between two large world regions—the European West and the Arab East" (Nader 1989:325).[1] Nader's theory, which centers upon analyzing the effects of what she refers to as "multiple systems of female subordination in a single locale," proves instrumental in analyzing how women's participation in the Islamic revival ultimately affects gender dynamics. Her argument finds its basis in the observation that:

> the cumulative effect of the multiple systems of female subordination patterns results in a crisis in gender relations which is not the creation of particular men or particular women, but the result of the evolution of a set of ideas about gender relations that do not include the adaptive responses (or the resistance) of women which are linked to enduring structures. (Nader 1989:325)

This model applies particularly to Egyptian women, who have been exposed to a plethora of dogmas of female subordination originating from both East and West, some of which are disguised within imported versions of feminism, such as that promulgated by Cromer during the 19th century.[2] The questions debated by El Guindi and Ahmed regarding this issue can be phrased as follows: Does the Islamic revival movement, in its effort to isolate Islamic society from the West, help to muffle the voices of Western patriarchal systems, thereby reducing their influence? Or alternately, does the discourse of the movement amplify these foreign voices through preoccupation with and per-

petual allusion to them while simultaneously subjecting women to a new system of inequality introduced by the movement itself? If the latter formulation were the case, this new system would be particularly insidious by virtue of its promise to improve the lives of women and its requirement that women subordinate their identities as feminists to their Islamic identities, trusting that the rights and benefits gained for followers of Islam will "trickle down" and improve the situation of women.

Ahmed and El Guindi agree that by adopting *al-ziyy al-Islami*, some women express rejection of a Western lifestyle and a commitment to distancing and distinguishing themselves from Western women. This rejection finds its basis in a set of cultural comparisons between Islamic and European women in which European women are viewed as having made lifestyle choices fundamentally contradicting ideals set forth in the Qur'an. Although the life choices of Islamic and non-Islamic women may differ significantly, preoccupation with the image in the absence of any real engagement with the Other leads to an exaggeration of differences. Identities constructed in opposition to such distorted images will likewise be distorted and alienated from social and psychic reality. As stated by Mervat Hatem, "Misleading cultural comparisons support contentions of positional superiority which divert attention from the processes which are controlling women in both worlds" (quoted in Nader 1989:324). In her analysis of the rhetoric of the Islamic revival, Ahmed takes into account the repercussions that may arise from maintaining a stance of positional superiority over an imagined Other. In contrast, El Guindi focuses upon the potential of this stance to unify and strengthen Islamic women.

Comparing Objectives and Perspectives

El Guindi, who published her work six years after Ahmed, often alludes to Ahmed, at times to credit her historical research and acknowledge its value as a resource, but just as frequently to distinguish herself from Ahmed and other scholars with whom she associates Ahmed: those who study the veil from the perspective of gender. "My work differs from existing works in its goal to understand veiling, not gender, in the overall interpretation of historical and religious materials, and in the analysis" (El Guindi 1999:xiii). El Guindi characterizes the work on *al-ziyy al-Islami* that has been carried out from a gender perspective as flawed due to biases introduced by the preoccupation

with gender.

El Guindi attempts to correct these flaws by devoting attention to how veiling serves to express Islamic identity for both women and men, as well as the ways in which veiling has been employed throughout history to signify class difference and religious status. She describes her methodological approach as a diverse, including original fieldwork-based ethnography, linguistic and visual analysis, and the ethnographic analysis of historical materials, highlighting symbolic anthropology and the "paradigm of communication" developed within the study of the anthropology of dress as her most valued ethnographic tools (El Guindi 1999:xvii). Through this methodological diversity, El Guindi strives to capture the complex and multidimensional nature of veiling, for her a necessary step in combating the defamation of veiling that reached its height in 19th century "colonial feminism." El Guindi compares the discourse of this earlier movement, which imagined veiling as a sign of Eastern inferiority, with that of today's feminist scholars, whom she claims have narrowed their foci to accommodate only the aspects of veiling that they can construe as subordinating women.

In contrast, Ahmed identifies her principal objective as "identifying and exploring the key Islamic discourses on women and gender and exploring the key premises of the modern discourses on women in the Middle East"(Ahmed 1992:3). Ahmed explains that this technique of discourse analysis enables her to reveal the mechanisms by which discourses on women's bodies become buried within discourses on nation. In justifying her methodological approach, Ahmed introduces her readers to the complexities inherent in studying gender from a cross-cultural perspective, and explains how this complexity can best be captured through concentrating on representation rather than "fact."

Ahmed and El Guindi share the decision to focus on dress as a vehicle through which one can follow the contemporary resistance movement, and they both center their explorations in Egypt. El Guindi has been carrying out fieldwork among the *Islamiyyin*, or politically activist Muslims, in Egypt since the 1970s, and Ahmed also devotes a substantial portion of her analysis to discourses involving Egypt, noting that "developments within Egypt parallel, reflect, and sometimes anticipate developments in other Arab countries"(Ahmed 1992:6).

Veil of Tradition, Veil of Resistance

Ahmed and El Guindi devote much of their work to tracing how the European West has influenced the new trend in dress, characterizing *al-ziyy al-Islami* variously as an expression of resistance to the West, an inversion of Western value systems, and even as a partial acceptance of Western mores. To both, the impetus behind the new dress arises from two intersecting desires: one to re-establish connection with a culturally authentic past, and another to disengage from the West. Yet of these two factors, Ahmed places greater stress on the reaction to the West, while El Guindi concentrates her analysis on culturally authentic aspects of the trend. In her descriptions of *al-ziyy al-Islami*, El Guindi only secondarily addresses the significance of the veil as an expression of resistance. This formula is evident in the title of her book—first "modesty and privacy," then "resistance"—and throughout her analysis. For example, El Guindi argues that "veiling in contemporary Arab culture is largely about identity, largely about privacy—of space and the body…Veiling also symbolizes an element of power and autonomy and functions as a vehicle for resistance" (El Guindi 1999:xvi).

In contrast, Ahmed considers the new dress first and foremost as part of a conversation with the West and about a Western discourse of colonial domination that "in the first place determined the meaning of the veil in geopolitical discourse and thereby set the terms for its emergence as a symbol for resistance" (Ahmed 1992:235). She elaborates on the role of the West in shaping the particular features of the Islamic resistance: "the revitalized, re-imagined Islam is an Islam redefining itself against the assaults of the West but also an Islam revitalized and re-imagined as a result of its fertilization by and its appropriation of the languages and ideas given currency by the discourses of the West"(Ahmed 1992:236). The imagery that Ahmed chooses to employ here might disturb us; she genders the European West and Arab East as they have been conventionally gendered throughout colonialist discourses and having us imagine the (male) West copulating with the (female) East to produce a joint issue: the Islamic resistance. Yet we can assume that Ahmed does not naively employ these terms; rather, she uses this language to voice the irony inherent in her claim—the progeny of this union may ultimately serve the interests of the putative "father" West. By using this metaphor she illustrates that Islamic revi-

talization movements have complex, hybrid origins, and that the discourse of the resistance movement, with its most visible symbol, Islamic dress, works on multiple levels, some of which may contradict stated ideals.

While El Guindi sees 19th century colonial pressure to remove the veil as an effort to control Islamic women, she considers the new trend to take up the veil as positive by virtue of the fact that it originated from within the culture. "The early feminist lifting of the face-veil was about emancipation from exclusion: the voluntary wearing of the *hijab* [veil] since the mid-seventies is about liberation from imposed, imported identities, consumerist behaviors, and an increasingly materialist culture" (1999:184). To El Guindi, the movement back to the veil can be considered culturally authentic and a re-affirmation of traditional values and identities which, along with Qur'anic training and education in classical Arabic, constitute the only acceptable means of strengthening Islamic feminism.

El Guindi sees early feminists who removed the veil as too caught up in a dialectic with the West, in contrast to contemporary *Islamiyyin* women who bring this dialogue to an end through taking back the veil and studying religious texts. El Guindi considers these practices a viable means for Islamic women to effectively insulate themselves from Western influence by intensifying their relationship with their own culture and faith. For El Guindi, women who take up the veil are advocating a return to the way things were before the Western colonial intervention rather than furthering a stance of opposition to the West. In contrast, Ahmed understands the return of the veil to be as much a reaction to the West as the removal of the veil had been. "The notion of returning to or holding on to an 'original Islam' and an 'authentic' indigenous culture is itself a response to the discourses on colonialism and the attempt to undermine Islam and Arab culture and replace them with Western practices and beliefs" (Ahmed 1992:237). While El Guindi's representation of Islamic feminism centers around a return to a specific set of culturally authentic practices, Ahmed questions the possibility of seizing the culturally authentic in such a manner. Ahmed's criticism of the contemporary Islamic resistance movement and its uniform operates on two levels. She questions whether or not veiling can be considered a culturally authentic expression, a tenet upon which the practice rests, arguing that the acceptance of foreign technologies undermines and belies the claim of *Islamiyyin* cultural

purity. Her historical analysis of Islamic veiling suggests that there is no one truly Islamic veil, but rather a variety of veiling practices that have fluctuated widely over time. These fluctuations have relied not upon an incrementally more exacting understanding of the message of the Prophet, but are rather determined through "a process of seamless assimilation" of the patterns of dress of conquered people and other external societal patterns such as shifts in wealth and climate (Ahmed 1992:5). Further, she questions whether symbolic practices such as veiling can retain their original significance, pointing to evidence that such practices have signified markedly different ideologies in each epoch (Ahmed 1999:240).

Secondly, Ahmed calls into question the movement's rhetoric of purity, pointing out the contradiction in allowing a reliance upon Western technologies while at the same time advocating the abandonment of all foreign and imported cultural expressions. While it may be argued that foreign technologies cannot pragmatically be repudiated at this point, and furthermore, that they can be set into the service of maintaining an Islamic identity, Ahmed critiques this logic, asserting that Western technology cannot be totally divorced from other aspects of Western culture. As expressed by Nader, "when the East borrows Western technology, a lifestyle accompanies these new forms and Western gender relations travel with the technology" (1989:328). Nader provides examples of how specific material items have the power to articulate and perpetuate messages about culture and society:

> Developers export technologies that carry gender ideas, as with farm machinery that was to be run by men because of the assumptions that the farmers were always male, or with the export of female technologies such as "the pill" which carries with it the idea that women are to be responsible for population control…or with Western cosmetics which are often the first step in socializing women to a certain conception of beauty that implicitly carries a command for women to complete the rest of the fashion picture…and to acquire the behavior that accompanies the dress. (Nader 1989:345)

Ahmed draws attention to technology as a carrier of cultural implications and directives not to suggest that the Islamic resistance adopt a policy of tighter restrictions against such imports. Rather, she

does so to support the claim that the contemporary Islamic resistance movement would benefit by shedding its impossible ideal of recapturing an authentic indigenous culture, and instead adopting a more pragmatic rhetoric to match its pragmatic strategy. Ahmed advocates the acceptance of ideas, technologies, and practices "based on their merit, not their tribe of origin" (Ahmed 1992:237).

Practical Advantages of the Islamic Dress

Both Ahmed and El Guindi demonstrate that alliances with Islamic resistance groups and the adoption of *al-ziyy al-Islami* have brought significant and tangible benefits to women. Yet while El Guindi rests her analysis on this note, Ahmed stresses the more ambiguous aspects of this alliance, demonstrating that these benefits rest on ideologically shaky ground. In their discussions of the benefits brought to women by veiling, both authors employ ethnographic and sociological data to clarify who is veiling, how veiling has affected women's lives, and the reported reasons for adopting the veil.

Both rely extensively on Zeinab Radwan's 1982 survey studies that attempt to trace the socioeconomic conditions that predict an individual's likelihood to adopt the new Islamic dress. According to Radwan's analysis, these factors include membership in the new middle class, migration to urban centers, and higher education by women with parents who are less educated. Ahmed draws upon this data to sketch a psychosocial profile of a typical individual affiliated with the Islamic revival movement:

> Socially they are educationally and professionally upwardly mobile, although society threatens to frustrate their aspirations—and are confronting bewildering, anonymous, cosmopolitan city life for the first time, a city life in which vivid inequalities, consumerism and materialism, foreign mores, and unscrupulous business practices linked to the foreign presence, whether Western or Arab, are glaringly apparent. (Ahmed 1992:222)

Ahmed and El Guindi each enumerate a similar list of distinct, practical advantages that might attract such an individual to adopt *al-ziyy al-Islami* in contemporary Egypt. Both emphasize the fact that many of these women are confronting sexual integration for the first

time. In light of this, the adoption of the Islamic dress can be seen as "practical coping strategy" (Ahmed 1992:223) since women who adopt *al-ziyy al-Islami* report a decrease in the amount of male harassment directed at them in public places. The veil also affords wearers a relatively greater sense of freedom in associating with male co-workers, as their visual proclamation of adherence to the Islamic sexual code may exempt them from constant scrutiny by elders and peers at the workplace. This decreased vigilance sometimes leads to the facilitation of romantic relationships and thus allows women to seek out marriage partners independently (Ahmed 1992:223). This is an important consideration given that the waning popularity of arranged marriages has left some women suddenly responsible for finding their own husbands. In addition, adoption of the Islamic dress might make the wearer appear more modest and thus more attractive as a potential wife.

Both El Guindi and Ahmed recognize that the adoption of this dress has led to the facilitation of great gains for *Islamiyyin* women. Ahmed points out that since the emergence of this trend, women's numbers in the universities and other public spaces have increased greatly, and that more women have successfully entered professional occupations. Thus, this change "cannot be viewed as regressive, however apparently conservative the uniform they wear to accomplish these moves successfully (Ahmed 1992:224). Ahmed articulates two contrasting evaluations of these "practical advantages." As El Guindi phrases it, by adopting the Islamic dress, women are "carving out a legitimate public space for themselves, and public space is redefined to accommodate women" (Ahmed 1992:224). Indeed, this strategy of dress has afforded some women a satisfactory means of adapting to hostile, unfamiliar, traditionally masculine territory. Yet strategies of adaptation potentially involve two levels: an alteration of one's appearance, as in camouflage through clothing, and secondly, an attempt to directly reform the environment. Veiling involves only one of these levels. In carving out a legitimate public space for themselves, veiled women might also be inadvertently legitimating the harassment of unveiled women while contributing to the limitation of their own sphere of movement should they choose not to veil at some future point. Although the adoption of the veil in Egypt is a voluntary move on the part of women, meaning that no institution or law forces the veil upon them, if we look at the benefits that are granted to the women who adopt the veil set against the advantages that are reportedly withheld from unveiled

women, we may well consider veiling as somewhat socially mandated rather than a purely voluntary practice.

Arab Modernity

Although adoption of *al-ziyy al-Islami* may bring with it certain material advantages, El Guindi emphasizes yearning for a stronger religious and cultural identity as the main factor underlying this trend. For El Guindi, this dress expresses a feminist reinterpretation of ideals of gender relations that incorporates both traditional and modern aspects. She sees the veil as a hybrid form, combining elements from different eras and cultures, which has been designed above all to accord with Islamic prescriptions on dress. "Women's Islamic dress is an innovative construction first worn in the mid 1970's by activists. It does not represent a return to any traditional dress form and has no tangible precedent " (El Guindi 1999:133). What is at stake in this debate over the origin of the Islamic dress hinges upon the struggle to separate "Western" from "modern," concepts that have been consistently conflated throughout the history of colonialism. Against this conflation, the *Islamiyyin* insist that the Qur'an dictates not a regression to tradition, but rather the aesthetics and practices of a distinctly Arab modernity.

Ahmed agrees that the new dress is both hybrid and innovative, pointing out that, "although referred to as 'the Islamic dress,' the term means that it fulfills the Islamic requirement of modesty, not that it is derived, as a style of clothing, from an Islamic society of the past" (1992: 220). Ahmed describes the dress as combining elements of the traditional dress of Egypt, other parts of the Arab world, and the West. Perhaps unwittingly echoing scholarship that conflates "Western" with "modern," Ahmed goes so far as to characterize Islamic dress as "Western dress, with modifications to make it acceptable to the wearer's notions of propriety" (1992:225). Ahmed's rationale for describing the dress as "Western" lies in its capacity to facilitate integration of the sexes and erase class distinctions, as opposed to relaying messages about societal stratification, as did traditional Islamic veiling practices. Ahmed continues, "from this perspective, Islamic dress can be seen as a uniform, not of reaction, but of transition. Far from indicating that the wearer remains fixed in a world of tradition and the past, then, Islamic dress is a uniform of arrival, signaling entrance into, and deter-

mination to move forward in, modernity" (Ahmed 1992:225). Ahmed's analysis is problematic, however, because it relies upon opposing the East against the fanciful notion of a purely egalitarian West.

Establishment Islam and Ethical Islam

One major way that the analyses of Ahmed and El Guindi differ is that Ahmed proposes a distinction between two Islams: "establishment" Islam and "ethical" Islam, while El Guindi entertains no such divisions. In Ahmed's conception, these two Islams have individual histories, objectives, and avenues of expression. Ahmed contends that women involved in the resistance movement consciously support "ethical" but not necessarily "establishment" Islam. For Ahmed, "ethical" Islam is the Islam found in the Qur'an, which preaches the moral and spiritual equality of all human beings, while establishment Islam is "authoritarian, implacably androcentric, hostile to women, has been and continues to be the established version of Islam, the Islam of the politically powerful" (Ahmed 1992:225). According to Ahmed, throughout history institutionalized Islam has imposed a hierarchical structure on the relationship between men and women, but "even as it instituted a sexual hierarchy, it also laid the ground, in its ethical voice, for the subversion of that hierarchy" (Ahmed 1992:238). Through an analysis of her original ethnographic findings and those of other researchers, Ahmed concludes that women who adopt the Islamic dress are in effect:

> declaring their allegiance to ethical Islam…Yet, without their particularly intending to, their affiliation with cultural and ethical Islam lends support and strength to Islamic political forces, which, if successful in realizing their objectives, would institute authoritarian theocratic states that would undoubtedly have a devastatingly negative impact on women. (Ahmed 1992:230)

Ahmed's interpretation of Radwan's 1982 data leads her to conclude that the *Islamiyyin* feminists who adopt *al-ziyy al-Islami* are ideologically opposed to the policies and laws instituted by Islamic resistance groups that are currently in power. From a survey of veiled students at the University of Cairo, Radwan concludes that a majority

of women who attire themselves in *al-ziyy al-Islami* support equal rights and duties in public life between men and women and believe that women should have the right to occupy the highest professional and governmental positions. Thirty-eight percent of these women also believe in equality between the sexes in marriage. Ahmed draws attention to how radically these women's descriptions of their vision of an Islamic justice contrast with the policies that have been instituted under *shari'a* law in contemporary societies. Although the majority of Egyptian women in Islamic dress have described a point of view that contrasts dramatically with the policies of contemporary *shari'a* law, sixty-seven percent of these women report that they would approve of the institution of *shari'a* law in Egypt. Ahmed negotiates this contradiction by questioning if these women are conscious of the technicalities of the *shari'a* law that they represent themselves as supporting. Her interpretation of the words of veiled and unveiled women who claim that they would support the institution of *shari'a* law in Egypt leads her to conclude, "it is surely extremely doubtful that either group has any idea of the extremes of control, exclusion, injustice, and indeed brutality that can be, in the present order of things, legitimately meted out to women in the name of Islam" (1992:234).

Ahmed calls upon the examples of Iran and Pakistan to illustrate what might be in store for Egyptian women should an Islamic resistance group seize control of the government. She describes laws instituted in these countries in the wake of Islamic revolution as a tremendous setback for women, which led to a wholesale diminution or eradication of their rights in many aspects of life including the personal, educational, and legal realms.

In this analysis, Ahmed asserts that women who adopt the Islamic dress do not control the meanings of the symbol, but instead the symbol of Islamic dress accesses meanings already established by patriarchal societies. In contrast, El Guindi argues that these women have the agency to assign meanings to the symbol they have chosen, and that they can and will gain the authority to designate the meaning of the modern Islamic dress, basing it on a feminist interpretation of the Qur'an. El Guindi asserts that the only viable avenue through which Islamic feminists should seek to maintain and increase their rights is through gaining access to Islamic knowledge, and advocates learning Arabic as the key to changing Islamic society from the inside out. El Guindi envisions Islamic dress as a mantle of authority bestowing upon

its wearer legitimacy to interpret the Qur'an, while Ahmed sees the veil as a marker of marginalization.

Pre-Islamic Veiling

Based on the premise that the symbology of the veil in earlier societies will cast light on the meaning of *al-ziyy al-Islami* in contemporary Egypt, El Guindi and Ahmed both carry out explorations of veiling in the pre-Islamic Greek, Byzantine, Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Arabian cultural and regional areas. According to El Guindi, the consensus among scholars in Middle Eastern studies over the past few decades traces veiling to Mesopotamian and Persian roots and seclusionary practices to Hellenic and Byzantine roots. El Guindi attempts to problematize these geographically centered divisions, and calls attention to the innovative nature of her thematic approach to the roots of veiling which attempts to trace historical trends across the map. She emphasizes the ways her approach diverges from mainstream scholarship, specifically contrasting her thematic approach to Ahmed's geographic approach.

Although El Guindi asserts that her thematic approach to the history of veiling illuminates aspects of the practice that transcend its relationship to gender, she nonetheless devotes a great deal of her analysis to gender concerns. She structures her analysis upon an identification of five cultural traditions that undergird *al-ziyy al-Islami*, labeling each with a descriptive term that encapsulates the function and meaning of veiling in that area: Sumerian gender complementarity; Assyrian/Persian class exclusivity; Hellenic gender hierarchy; Egyptian gender equality; and Byzantine seclusion. Contrary to her stated intentions, in all but one of these sub-headings the word "gender" is either directly stated or implied as the central designation for the veil. In this chapter, El Guindi attempts to show how the veil has carried a multiplicity of meanings, asserting this multiplicity against the colonialist notion that the veil has always signified women's subordination to men. By emphasizing that the veil often signified an elevated status within gender and across gender, El Guindi seeks to demonstrate that contemporary women's Islamic dress has the potential to enhance women's status by echoing this history.

In the Sumerian section, El Guindi provides us with a brief account of an ancient Sumerian gender ideology in which women

functioned as the heads of households. She ties this account to an illustration from today's Bahrain, situated in the ancient Sumerian region, where women traditionally carry the house key in their braid or headcloth, a theme that for El Guindi connects the veil to women's empowerment in this region in both ancient and modern times. In the section on Assyrian and Persian class exclusivity, El Guindi focuses on how the veil signifies social stratification. In these societies, women of the nobility were required by law to veil, while the law forbade lower class women to veil: "out of veiling laws a pattern emerges revealing a highly stratified social system based on class, moral and marital status, and respectability" (1999:15). El Guindi refers to Ahmed in this section in order to highlight the differences between their approaches: "Ahmed adds that the emphasis must be put on the differentiation between respectable women and those who were publicly available…but I see the primary feature reflected in Assyrian society to be the class divide" (1999:16). Here, a woman's legal "right" to veil was based on the status of her father or husband, and any shift in her status was contingent upon a shift in her relationship to a man. Although by achieving the high status signified by the veil the woman gained legal rights and privileges as well as power over both men and women of lower rank, her access to the veil was always determined by her relationship to a man.

In her section on ancient Assyria, El Guindi focuses on how the veil, once achieved, signified the power of the woman wearing it; Ahmed chooses to stress the veil's functions as a means by which men communicate with other men about the availability of women, understanding the rights and privileges enjoyed by women via their affiliation with men of status to be a provisional extension of the man's rights. In El Guindi's analysis, the ancient Assyrian veil functions as a mark of agency, while in Ahmed's analysis, it was part of a system of female objectification.

With regard to Hellenic gender hierarchy, El Guindi references Ahmed's analysis in her discussion of how Aristotle influenced Greek ideology of gender:

> Aristotle's theories conceptualized women not merely as subordinate by social necessity but also as innately and biologically inferior in both mental and physical capacities–and thus as intended for their subservient position by 'nature' with their defective bodies which render them 'impo-

> tent males' whose contribution to conception is that of matter and not the soul, and hence inferior. (Ahmed 1992:17)

El Guindi and Ahmed agree that in Hellenic society the veil functioned as a marker of the inferior status of women. Through rendering them less clearly identifiable as individuals, the veil assisted women in achieving a social ideal of silence and submissiveness.

El Guindi includes ancient Egypt in her survey of the veil and veiling behavior "for perspective and because it seems, as noted by many scholars, to be the only Mediterranean/Middle Eastern society on record in which women show no evidence of head or face covering" (1996:13). Both Ahmed and El Guindi cite the same quote by Jean Vercoutter to describe Egyptian women's status in ancient Egypt: "the absolute equality before the law of the man and the woman appears clearly. Doubtless this equality is at the source of the general belief in the privileged position of women, in comparison with the feminine condition in other civilizations of Antiquity, and this deserves to be examined more closely" (quoted in El Guindi 1992:18).[3] It appears through this description that the Egyptian society is the only one among the five societies discussed by El Guindi in which women had power and control over their lives. Given this, it is noteworthy that ancient Egypt was also the only one of these five societies in which veiling was absent.

In the section on Byzantine seclusion, El Guindi describes how veiling and sexual segregation were prescribed for Byzantine women as a means of controlling the level of disruption they incited in the lives of men. In her work on the Byzantine, Ahmed expands on the implications of the fact that although the ideal of chastity and single-minded devotion to Christ were operative for both men and women in this society, the women were the ones required to veil because their bodies embodied sin in a way male bodies did not. According to El Guindi, the Byzantine conception of women's bodies as corrupt "is important in this study because of the historical encounter and contact between the Byzantines and Persians in the region that is now the Middle East, establishing traditions that flowed into what became the Islamic civilization" (1999:19).

Although El Guindi calls attention to the importance of disaggregating the study of the veil from the study of gender, she meets this aim least successfully here, relying heavily on Ahmed's material and

sometimes the same citations along with excerpts of Ahmed's gender-focused analysis of these segments. Rather than convincing the reader that the veil in pre-Islamic societies carried a multiplicity of meanings over and above gender, this weakness draws our attention instead to the prominence of gender in veiling practices. When she attempts to diverge from this model and assert that the veil primarily signifies the power and autonomy of the woman behind it, she provides neither solid evidence nor convincing analysis.

In her exploration of the ancient roots of veiling in the pre-Islamic Middle East, Ahmed's discussion of Zoroastrian law leads her to note that women were often described as property, or "things" rather than as people. "While *thingness* versus the personhood of slaves has received scholarly attention," Ahmed notes, "there is no comparable exploration of the ambiguities in the statuses of women"(1992:21). Throughout her discussion, Ahmed explores the extent to which women were viewed as things: less than men, and ultimately less than human. In Mesopotamian society, Ahmed writes, "veiling and the confinement of women spread throughout the region and became ordinary social practice, as did the attitudes towards women and to the human body such as a sense of shamefulness of the body and of human sexuality that accompanied such practices"(Ahmed 1992:18). El Guindi devotes several chapters of her study to combating this notion that the veil encourages a sense of bodily shame in Islamic society. Instead, through an historical-semantic approach to themes of veiling and seclusion, El Guindi concludes that an etymological analysis of Arabic words such as *hijab* (veiling) suggests that the veil functions to reify the sacred rather than to obscure the profane.

Male and Female Veiling

El Guindi's stated objective of analyzing the contemporary veil outside of the context of gender is difficult to meet as the veil has always carried messages about gender along with cultural and class designations. El Guindi calls attention to the fact that men veiled their heads and faces in the Middle East throughout history, pointing to reports that "the Prophet Muhammad himself face-veiled on certain occasions" (El Guindi 1999:117). For, El Guindi, male veiling served to communicate messages about the class, ethnic origin and spiritual status of the wearer, and is itself further evidence that veiling by women

carries a multiplicity of meanings beyond subordination. Put simply, when men wore the veil it did not signify their subordination.

In her analysis of contemporary veiling, El Guindi compares male and female Islamic dress in a way that highlights their similarities while eliding their striking differences. She characterizes the new tradition of adopting *al-ziyy al-Islami* as one that will facilitate the restitution of gender relations according to Islamic feminist ideals. These ideals include allowing women to regain a position of prominence in all aspects of religious and professional life and more importantly, to regain authority to interpret Islamic scripture. In an evaluation of the potential of *al-ziyy al-Islami* to serve as a dress of Islamic feminism, we must take into consideration differences between the Western feminist ideal of equality between the sexes and the ideal of complementarity between the sexes found in Islamic feminism (cf. Nader 1994: 90).

According to El Guindi and Ahmed, several salient features distinguish male and female Islamic dress. Islam calls for voluntary masking of the face by females but not males. Additionally, while there is only one prototype for male Islamic dress—loose fitting clothing—female Islamic dress exists in degrees of severity that communicate the level of adherence to Islam and thus the woman's potential for leadership. Since the object of Islamic dress is to present oneself in a way that is not sexually enticing, the fact that females and not males are encouraged to veil suggests that the female head is seen as either eroticized or sacred in a way that the male head is not

That gradations within the Islamic dress of women result in more respect for the wearer suggests that men have only to make the decision to adopt the dress to be considered fully observant while women must strive continually to adopt more and more austere levels of dress in order to attain higher levels of respectability. Therefore, an Islamic woman who wears the minimum amount of cover will be accorded less respect than another who is wearing the full uniform, even as all men who wear the dress in any form tend automatically to be granted the same measure of respect, all other factors being equal. This gradtion makes dress more of a preoccupation and encumbrance for women than it is for men, pointing to the gendered nature of Islamic dress.

In the Shadow of Colonial Feminism

While El Guindi eschews the "gender perspective" and de-

scribes its scholarship as biased by an overly exclusionary focus, she fails to explore the possibility that her wholesale dismissal of this perspective may be a factor that weakens her argument (1999:xvi). By turning away from the possibility that women and men have conflicting interests due to the different societal and cultural challenges confronting them, El Guindi introduces a *scotoma* into her vision of Islamic society blocking her vision of how aspects of the Islamic revival, in its present incarnation, may restrict the progress of Muslim women. Ahmed, in her commitment to considering the interests of women and men separately, is able to trace how the Islamic revival's rhetoric of positional superiority, with its exaggeratedly contrastive comparison, ultimately contributes to the normalization of patriarchy in both Islamic and Western society. Yet Ahmed, in emphasizing the fixity and pervasiveness of the veil's already established symbolism, may be seen as underestimating the potential agency of contemporary women to reappropriate the veil and invest it with a new set of meanings.

Although El Guindi and Ahmed agree that a specifically Islamic feminism is a viable and necessary end, their visions for achieving this end differ significantly. El Guindi wholeheartedly approves of the path veiled women have forged in wearing a culturally authentic Islamic dress, insulating themselves from Western influence as far as possible, and turning their attention to the study of Islam. She is optimistic that through their scholarship these Islamic feminists will eventually be able to change institutionalized Islam in such a way that it will elevate the position of women.

In contrast, however, Ahmed expresses reserve regarding the affiliation of Islamic feminist movements with Islamic revival movements. She is concerned that instead of forging a new establishment Islam that incorporates ethical Islam, veiled women may find themselves perpetuating a contemporary establishment Islam that subordinates them. Although the veil as an article of dress is above reproach, at this point in history the veil carries with it an already established and loaded set of meanings and expresses affiliation with a particular version of institutionalized Islam. Ahmed focuses on the way *al-ziyy al-Islami* extends rather than ends the conversation with the West, tracing the processes by which this enmeshment with the "West as Other" may normalize the subordination of women in the Arab world. In order that this positional superiority does not become set into a rhetoric that strengthens the patriarchal control of women, she urges the adoption of affiliations and customs based on their intrinsic merit rather than on

their culture of origin.

In contrast to El Guindi's ideal for Islamic feminism as a separatist and purist movement, Ahmed looks toward the possibility of transcultural feminism. While agreeing that Arab and Muslim feminist movements have suffered and continue to suffer from Western domination, Ahmed finds the reaction posed by the Islamic resistance movement as leading Arab women into continued submission and marginalization. While she does not espouse an embrace of Western ideologies, she criticizes the rhetoric of the Islamic resistance and outlines suggestions for how Islamic feminists can best move on from their current situation. Although sharing with El Guindi the basic premise that the Western contact has had negative repercussions on the East, she advocates a stance that is thoughtfully responsive rather than defensively reactive. Nevertheless, Ahmed's aim in critiquing the discourse of the Islamic revival is the same as El Guindi's paean in support of it—to theorize the strengthening of Muslim women in their struggle for autonomy as followers of Islam and as women.

ENDNOTES

1. Cf. Edward Said *Orientalism* New York: Vintage Books, 1978.

2. Lord Cromer, Evelyn Baring, the British consul general of Egypt from 1883 to 1907. Colonial era gender ideology encouraged Egyptian women to abandon the veil and emulate the figure of the Victorian woman. See Ahmed *Women and Gender in Islam* (1992:144–168).

3. Jean Vercoutter, "La Femme en Egypte ancienne," in *Historie Mondiale de la Femme*, ed. Grimal, 1:119.

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