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Feminism and the Cultural and Racial Other

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In some respects, the essay by Al-Saji on the politics of veiling in France is not new. It concludes by invoking many of the key thinkers in post-colonial theory. The article is indeed part of a larger set of writings on orientalism—the idea that the West produced/produces the East as "the other" in order to enable a clearer view of the West of itself. (Said 1978) Malek Alloula has wonderfully analyzed the sexual politics of the veil to French imaginations in his analysis of French postcards from Algeria in *The Colonial Harem*. In this article, Al-Saji joins that conversation in arguing that the laws and discourses about the veil which have taken place in French public culture since the 1990s, have very little to do actually with women who wear veils. Rather, Al-Saji argues that this fixation on the veil and by extension on Islam in France and elsewhere is a site where French intellectuals and politicians and feminists develop their understandings of normative French culture.

For Al-Saji the fetishization of the veil confirms for the people invested in that fetish, that France is a place of gender equality where patriarchy no longer has sway, and where men and women, have freedom of choice. This discourse depends on a representation of veiled Muslim women, understood in some respects as ALL Muslim women, as a homogenous group, with no agency, no diversity, and no reflections of their own to offer to the conversation. In this respect the paper also echoes the work of Chandra Mohanty who argued in "Under Western Eyes," that some Western feminist writings "discursively colonize the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world, thereby producing/re-presenting a composite, singular "Third World Woman." (Mohanty 1991, 334) Mohanty argues that images of "the third world woman" (the veiled woman, chaste virgin, etc.)… are predicated upon (and hence obviously bring into sharper focus) assumptions about Western women as secular, liberated, and having control over their own lives." (Mohanty 1991, 353).

It is in this wider and enduring context of postcolonial and feminist theory and practice that I engage with Al-Saji's essay. The article innovatively theorizes the implications of a truly intersectional analysis for understanding the multiple meanings of the debate over the veil in France. In this regard she develops further Joan Scott's attention to race in Scott's *The Politics of the Veil* (2007). Scott locates the laws banning veiling within French imperial ideology, which emphasized assimilation to French cultural norms and rejected the very idea of compatible difference. Scott argues, thus, that France does not see French of Muslim and/or North African background as being assimilable so long as they practice Islam or engage in cultural practices supposedly antithetical to French culture. Al-Saji expands on the significance of race by showing how the politics of exclusion and racism can function almost silently in a politics of supposed neo-liberal feminism. Al-Saji thus, in a sense, calls the bluff on both the French state, French public culture, and particular feminists who want to insist that the politics of the veil is about a defense of women's rights.

Indeed Al-Saji's complex interpretation of the multiple and sometimes countervailing forces at work and in play in this discussion distinguishes this essay. Rather than having one choose between race or gender, or culture or politics, norm or other, Al-Saji shows how the laws and discourses on veiling in France are all of the above. The author also reminds us that there are multiple debates

taking place about veiling-presumably within households where women wear veils, within communities, among various publics. However, hegemonic discourses on veiling suggest that there is only one debate possible and that is in the mainstream French public sphere. The very discourse on veiling implicitly claims that veiled women and their communities cannot engage in debate on this issue, since veiled women are intrinsically without agency, and that Muslim communities are homogenous and cannot engage in debate since Islam supposedly is an oppressive religion.

Al-Saji argues that such moves place "the burden of sexism on a particular othered and racialized group, in this case French Muslims." (Al-Saji 2010, 881) The rest of the essay elaborates on the historical (Fanon and Algeria) and epistemological (Alcoff) contexts, which help constitute and naturalize this particular racialized gaze. This returns us via a different route to the works with which I started the essay, namely post-colonial theory. Al-Saji's analysis moves, I think, beyond her debt to post-colonial theory in her insistence that the "projection of gender oppression" onto Muslim communities, by way of particular understandings and representations of the veil, is a racialized move. She argues that in the discussion of the veil gender analysis and gender subjectivities have already been raced. "Western and white, heterosexual gender relations are naturalized by means of the contrast instituted with other forms of gendering...Thus while Islam is taken to repress and deform feminine subjectivity and sexuality, it is assumed that western systems of gender allow femininity free (and natural) expression." (Al-Saji 2010, 899) She argues that this is "cultural racism." (Al-Saji 2010, 899) She develops this argument with regard to how clothing becomes a marker of race, so that "veiing is seen as a kind of material prison—perceptually limiting and immobilizing, but also affectively, psychically and physically disabling." (Al-Saji 2010, 891)

This argument has great import for the contemporary moment in which feminists in the tradition of the Second Wave have become so influential in the discourses of women's international human rights. Since Beijing 1995, we have witnessed a flourishing of UN Security Council Resolutions on women, war, and peace. UN Women is now established in the UN with various groups involved in supporting and promoting women's rights around the world. This all seems to the good. However, Al Saji's work reminds one that contemporary international feminist discourses about the need to empower women

in the Global South, carry with them the danger of the kinds of framings that her article explicates.

Indeed, intervention upon and regulation of African women's bodies as form of modernizing project, was a staple of colonial interventions in Africa. (Scully 2011) As Sally Engle Merry has argued, many of the bodies in the UN concerned with the status of women tend to view culture as static, backward, and belonging primarily to the Global South. (Merry 2006) In these contexts of UN governance, culture is often seen as an obstacle to liberation. One recognizes the positing of the West as a zone of women's equality, versus the problematic gender relations supposedly present in the Global South in some of the calls for women's liberation in Afghanistan, or the need to end gender based violence in Liberia, for example. One could argue that Western media practices and campaigns that focus on topics such as "honor killings" or "female genital cutting" or "forced marriage" employ implicitly the kind of "cultural racism" identified by Al-Saji.

Again, this is not to say that such practices cannot be or are not bad for women. It is to say, that who speaks, and who does not, and how such practices get read, are already constituted by habits of meaning and seeing, as elaborated by Alcoff. Al-Saji's essay reminds us that history matters, and that colonial and imperial histories continue to matter today in the supposedly post post-colonial world.

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