

Week 5: Graduate Reading Summary

“The Veil in Their Minds and on Our Heads: The Persistence of Colonial Images of Muslim  
Women”

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Hoodfar's article discusses the origins of veiling and its interpretations by society today. She notes that wearing a veil originated before Islam even came into existence and reflected a high status in society. Its adoption by Muslim cultures was greatly impacted by foreign expectation: "it is only since the nineteenth century, after the veil was promoted by the colonials as a prominent symbol of Muslim societies, that Muslims have justified it in the name of Islam, and not by reference to cultural practices."<sup>1</sup> Hoodfar distinguishes between veiling and *purdah*, the seclusion that often presents Muslim women from pursuing careers and/or involvement in spheres outside the home, "reproducing and occasionally intensifying the gap already existing between men's and women's economic opportunities."<sup>2</sup>

Hoodfar says that the Qur'an does not advocate veiling.<sup>3</sup> I feel it is worth noting that this is not a universal interpretation by Muslim women. Nora Nashawaty, a former student of mine, wears a veil and pointed to a verse in the Qur'an (33:59) directing that women who are believers should cover themselves with a cloak, outer covering, or, in some interpretations, a veil. Hoodfar addresses this same verse through only the "cloak" interpretation. Additionally, Hoodfar says that this directive is to the Prophet's wives, but translations that I have read refer to his "wives, daughters, and women of believers."<sup>4</sup> I am not a Muslim scholar, and Hoodfar cites researchers who share her conclusions (Mernissi, Bedawi), but it seems complicated rather than objective.

Veiling comes in many shapes and sizes, and that full covering that is often depicted by Westerners would "prevent women's mobility. Throughout history, though, apart from the elite, women's labour was necessary to the functioning of the household and the economy and so women

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<sup>1</sup> Hoodfar, Homa, "The Veil in Their Minds and on Our Heads: The Persistence of Colonial Images of Muslim Women." *RFR/DFR* 22, no 3/4 (1993): 6.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>4</sup> "Surah Al-Ahzab [33:59]." Qur'an. 2016. Accessed June 21, 2018. <https://quran.com/33/59>.

wore clothing that would not hamper their movement.”<sup>5</sup> Is full coverage, then, associated with the upper classes in the same way that foot binding was in China? A Chinese woman’s inability to move with ease meant that her household was run largely by servants; if a Muslim woman’s mobility was restricted, then, one wonders if there was a socio-economic statement that was also being made. Hoodfar discusses other social statements that are made through veiling. Women can insult or challenge men with their use of the veil. For example, women might remove the veil in the presence of lower-class men, indicating that they are not seen as a threat; they might remove their veil to indicate that their opponent is not really a man, evidence strongly by women in the Tobacco Movement who challenged their men by threatening to drop their veils and fight themselves if the men were too timid to fight.<sup>6</sup>

Both veiling and *purdah* certainly had their counterparts in Victorian Europe. Women, especially those in the upper class, were largely contained to the household and to show an ankle would scandalize a 19<sup>th</sup>-century European audience. Mistresses were common in Europe even as men pointed fingers at polygamous practices eastward, perhaps chastising its public nature rather than the practice itself. This is reinforced by modern stories that Hoodfar shares about wearing a scarf, about a veiled student who surprised her professors with her independence and tenacity.<sup>7</sup> Though it is slowly changing, America often denies the differences between genders or of religion in professional settings; it does not publish salaries highlighting the wage gap, it creates “no fault” divorces to avoid discussions of fidelity, even a WWJD bracelet might raise eyebrows in a professional workplace. Perhaps then, Western dismissal of veiled women is as much a dismissal of the public profession of religion as it is about the religion or woman who professes it, and Westerners see that openness as an invitation to comment or make assumptions without education, understanding, or respect.

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<sup>5</sup> Hoodfar, Homa, “The Veil in Their Minds and on Our Heads: The Persistence of Colonial Images of Muslim Women.” *RFR/DFR* 22, no 3/4 (1993): 7.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 14-15.