

Veiling in the Islamic world has been a topic of anthropological study in the subjects of sexuality, gender, and power. From early on, acting as not only a form of clothing necessary in the arid environment, but also as a symbol of respect, it is now one of the most debated articles of clothing that symbolizes a form of “oppression” to many. Anthropologists have argued, through both a holistic and cross-cultural analysis, that it can symbolize both, depending on the history and circumstances in which it is worn. My paper will evaluate the fieldwork conducted on the matter through the ethnographies of Lila Abu-Lughod (author of *Veiled Sentiments*), Shahram Khosravi (author of *Young and Defiant in Tehran*), and Sarah Tobin (author of *Everyday Piety*). Through the analyses of these ethnographies, it will evaluate the sentiments and meanings behind the veil in various regions of the Middle East, particularly in Egypt among the Bedouin people, Urban Iran, and Jordan.

Does the veil act as a way to connect to God or is it a symbol of the hegemony by the “male rule class?” Are there varying sentiments from culture to culture on the importance and significance of veiling? How much of the body is covered, and are women treated differently from men in the society? Are women active participants in their religious communities, and do they have any experience in reading the Quran in a scholarly manner? These are questions that have pondered the minds of anthropologists for decades and continue to be questions outside of the social sciences due to years of conflict between the Western world (developed nations of Europe and North America) and the Islamic World (the Middle East and northern Africa). Many of these answers vary depending on the region studied and which group of people was asked. For example, Khosravi’s studies revealed a sentiment of oppression against both women and the young adult population of Tehran, Iran. He revealed through his ethnography that the change in political structure brought more dependence on a more orthodox religious tradition than natural

science or Western philosophy, bringing about more restrictions against women who for many decades had lived without the need for veiling.

In turn, there are also varying sentiments about veiling and how it relates to the empowerment of women. There are changing views, especially across the Muslim world as to what the veil means to women who are “coming of age” and beginning to take on the veil. The research conducted in this field argues that the historical particularism and importance of religion within a culture determines the value of veiling within the society. In her ethnography, *Veiled Sentiments*, Lila Abu-Lughod presents a Bedouin family and how they construe the veil as a defense against “embarrassing” situations, a symbol of respect, and a tool to allow women to convey their own interpretations of religious scripture through poetry. In other societies, the veil is seen as a choice, especially in Sarah Tobin’s *Everyday Piety*, where she discusses how the revival of religion in a more modern and westernized society allowed the veil to become more of a choice among women. However, orthodox sentiments persist as to when women should begin veiling and the importance of continuing to wear it for the rest of their lives.

As seen, all three ethnographers bring arguments that contrast the range of societies in the Middle East. The western countries -Egypt, Jordan, and Syria- are predominantly of a population with a Sunni Muslim tradition and have valued their religious practices through veiling practices for many generations. Their change in perspective, whether women should veil and what it means to them, came about recently and has become a topic of debate among younger women. In contrast, the society in Khosravi’s *Young and Defiant in Tehran* had been a very liberal and western one up to the point of the Iranian Revolution of the 1970s. Women and younger people had begun to veil after a long period of liberal religious views. Under a hegemonic rule that dictates that they must veil, the younger generations of the early twenty-first century have begun to protrude the power of government and the orthodox Shiite order by acts of rebellion, as

Khosravi points out as “defiant” acts (drinking, partying, and wearing the veil in “improper” ways).

Power is an important factor as to who forces the women into wearing the veil and how the veil is interpreted as either a religious symbol or tool to either oppress or empower women. In Jordan, the government clearly stated that they would not force women to wear the hijab but societal pressures pushed women to wear it. It was always a question, Tobin argued, when women should begin to wear the veil. Were they ready enough to take on that next step in their lives? Tobin evaluates how a woman began to stop veiling, but to avoid scrutiny from family and neighbors, she began to wear a large hat near her home. Another situation arose where a family, particularly a brother, began to disown a woman because of the meaning behind taking the veil off. Was the woman committing sinful acts? Was she drinking or having extramarital affairs? The meanings society conjures up for veiling was the main force for women to wear the veil.

Conversely, the government and religious powers of Iran forced women to veil and cover their arms and legs in public places. Beginning in the 1970s, when the new “democratic” government developed after the downfall of the Shah, women were forced to wear veils in schools and public areas, and began to feel a strong separation between themselves and men. The defiance that arose would cause the government to act in oppressive ways, even publicly whipping or killing those who continued to challenge the rules. Khosravi opens his novel with a situation where a young woman who was in a telephone booth encountered an officer who, when demanding that she pull her veil forward, shot and killed her for refusing to obey the law.

Abu-Lughod analyses the cultural hegemony of the Awlad ‘Ali Bedouin tribe of the western desert in Egypt by conveying how they value honor and respect towards their elders and the patriarchs of their society. She begins by conveying how she lived for two years among their

community, speaking about the relationships they have with their extended family members in other communities and how the relationship between men and women has become more segregated due to the development of a sedentary life. Tobin explains how women were allowed to “escape” the cultural hegemony through poetry where they could interpret religious scripture and provide social commentary. They gained power through the respect they had from wearing the veil.

Veiling has a range of meanings that vary from region and historical context, as seen by these three ethnographies. Women can either be empowered by the respect they earn from the veil or oppressed by those who force them to wear the veil. It’s a struggle for power that goes beyond religion, becoming a social construct that relies upon historical and political circumstances of a group of people.