Poststructuralist theory and women in the Middle East: going in circles?

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This article examines the effects of the uncritical use of the poststructuralist Foucauldian theoretical approach on studies of Middle Eastern women and gender. Focusing on the twin concepts of ‘empowerment’ and ‘resistance’ as they have been applied to account for the re-veiling trend among Muslim countries and communities, it explores the epistemic transformation of the explanation of this trend into its justification. It further provides an example of a historicized application of Michel Foucault’s conception of power.

Keywords: power; empowerment; resistance; explanation; justification; re-veiling

Background: knowledge and the Middle East

This paper explores the consequences, intended or unintended, of the application of the post-structuralist – especially Foucauldian – thought to the study of women in the Middle East, particularly with respect to the re-veiling trend. It intends to explain the transformation of the old discourse of Muslim women’s ‘oppression’ into a discourse of apology resting on a subversion of the twin concepts of ‘resistance’ and ‘empowerment’. It should be made clear from the outset that Michel Foucault’s theoretical and epistemological work is far more complex and fruitful than the selective use of some of his concepts currently applied to Middle Eastern institutions and practices.

The study of Middle Eastern societies was traditionally confined to area studies, a domain that was generally immune to methodological and theoretical developments that took place in mainstream social science. It was the preserve of experts whose objectives were to translate the specificity of the Middle East to their countries of origin. Their method of research was thus stable in so far as it was held to be largely unquestionable. The disciplines from which these experts originated, namely language, archaeology, history and anthropology, were also relatively less open to challenge than others such as sociology, political science or political economy. Referred to as ‘orientalists’, these experts created a body of knowledge that had its own boundaries, and that succeeded in functioning autonomously. The normalization of the knowledge they produced set the tone for native researchers writing in the European languages.

Two factors, operating in different directions, propelled the study of Middle Eastern societies outside of its intellectual ghetto: the publication of Edward Said’s Orientalism (1978) and the institutionalization of women’s studies programmes. Academic feminism signified the search for a new mode of theorizing that would account for ‘women’s experience’.¹ The universalistic claims of feminist theories of gender needed to be validated through the study of women in non-Western societies, especially Middle Eastern Muslim women whose religion presented feminists with a challenge. Said provided a

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concept, orientalism, and a critique couched in anti-imperial terms that could not be ignored, and that helped to articulate, for a younger generation of scholars who had felt uneasy with the knowledge yielded by area studies, its assumptions and socio-political implications. In becoming sensitized to signs or traces of orientalist assumptions or epistemology, students of the Middle East began to look for alternative theoretical approaches and systems just as they wrote to denounce orientalism as expressing relations of power and domination. By the same token, awareness of the pitfalls of orientalist epistemology spurred younger scholars to explore prevalent theoretical systems such as critical theory as formulated by Jürgen Habermas, and poststructuralist thought as formulated by Foucault. Oddly, while this search was going on in established disciplines, academic feminism, in its first phase, seized upon women in the Middle East as the embodiment of two related shortcomings: lack of agency and unmediated ‘oppression’ understood to be embedded in the religion of Islam. The two trends went their separate ways for a while, until the end of the Cold War when a quickened pace of cultural exchange with the Middle East was ushered in, and native female researchers emerged eager to explore concepts and theories such as those of poststructuralism that started to make inroads into feminist studies.

If deconstruction as exemplified by the work of Jacques Derrida held sway in literary criticism, Foucault’s conception of power and sexuality helped to redefine feminist theory, especially in the United States. An intellectual climate has emerged that frequently dispenses with the identification of a poststructuralist theorist as a source of inspiration so that a scholar may use the theoretical language of Foucault, for example, without a preliminary discussion of its meanings or applicability. The poststructuralist conceptual spillover in the study of Middle Eastern societies has served as either a cover or a legitimation for mounting critiques of existing governments, or exploring past historical events as representing multiple struggles for speaking to power. With respect to the study of women in the Middle East, the gradual introduction of a poststructuralist conception of power was adopted with little discussion of the theory or epistemology that ground it. It is thus important to examine what Foucault wrote about history and power before finding out whether there has been a break with previous conceptions of women.

**Foucault on history, structure and the subject**

Foucault’s conception of power is unintelligible if it is not understood in its context, namely Foucault’s perspective on history, discursive formations and the role of the Subject in relation to knowledge. What is noteworthy about Foucault’s theoretical system is its non-reducibility to an anthropological or sociological interpretation of issues that are treated independently of the thick history in which they are embedded. In the *Order of Things* (1970), Foucault proposes to study the manner in which a given culture shapes language use, concepts, perceptions and social practices that coalesce to create ‘order’. This is the order that is found in classifications of nature, conceptions of human beings belonging to different cultures as well as the very understanding of knowledge. Historical and scientific knowledge does no more than provide *justifications* for the production of this order; they do not trace the conditions of its production. In the same book, Foucault argues that beginning in the eighteenth century Man became an object of knowledge and what constituted it like any other object. This ‘discovery’ of Man as an object of study also meant his undoing since he has now become an object to be classified (the sane and the mad, the criminal and the law-abiding), scrutinized in
medical terms (the pathological and the normal), confined (the dangerous), and excluded or repressed (the gay and the straight). The more knowledge of Man is sought and accumulated, the more he shrinks as an autonomous being, and the less he can escape from the conceptual schemes that entrap him like an intricate web.

Parallel to this, Foucault further argues that difference, otherness, is *produced* in a process that is not initiated by one person, since it is culturally embedded. However, some individuals did articulate key changes at significant moments in the history of knowledge. For example, René Descartes initiated a different way of thinking about truth and certainty by grounding these in the dismissal (exclusion) of factors that might undermine them. The Cartesian doubt was founded on the non-exploration of the relationship between reason and unreason, sanity and madness. Descartes subjected his radical doubt to the tests of sleep or dreams arguing that he could be just sleeping and dreaming that he was doubting, but concluded that he was not, as the evidence of his senses proved otherwise. However, he denied that his doubt could be caused by madness. Had he been mad, he would not have been able to think his madness. A mad man has no capacity to reason, and for Descartes to think of himself as a madman would be madness in its own right. Consequently, while sleep and dreams can be a source of error, they still retain a residue of truth. They are more accessible to the experience of the doubting subject than madness is. Foucault’s critique of the Cartesian doubt is momentous as it focuses on the role of otherness in theorizing. By excluding madness as a non-experiential condition that could not undermine the certainty of his doubt, Descartes elided the possibility of difference – *qua* – otherness in establishing certainty and truth. Indeed, he could have questioned the conventional understanding of madness and wondered whether positing the assertion ‘I think therefore I am’ was not an arbitrary act that would have easily been replaced with ‘I think therefore I am not who I think I am’. Descartes asserted the wholeness of his subjectivity at the expense of that of the mad other. Consequently, he produced an unmediated other whose subjectivity is dissolved because it cannot be penetrated (Foucault 1998, vol. 2, 393–417). In other words, the Subject was foundational of the kind of knowledge in the social sciences that also dissolves the subjectivity of others. Foucault’s critique of the flaw in the establishment of rationalist philosophy has relevance for the study of women in so far as it provides an epistemological critique of the neglect or exclusion of the role of women in social science theorizing prior to the advent of academic feminism. It also sheds light on Foucault’s conception of power and empowerment.

Foucault intended to outline a method of studying power that would not focus on government institutions as its source and cause, but shift attention instead to the multiple ways in which power is enacted, felt and responded to by people who have been constructed as others (such as the mad, prisoners, the hermaphrodite, etc.). However, this does not mean that any action that is undertaken by an individual is necessarily a source of power (or empowerment), or that it represents resistance. If some of Foucault’s texts may invite such a simplification, it is clear from his study of madness and other ‘limit experiences’ that the Subject is frequently constituted by power relations embedded in the language in which experience is framed. Furthermore, where Foucault clarifies his methodology, which he terms ‘historico-critical’, he points out three essential factors (Foucault 1997):

- Awareness of the ‘contemporary limits of the necessary’.
- ‘Permanent critique of ourselves.’
• ‘Forms of rationality’ that organize individuals as well as the ‘freedom’ with which they act.

These principles call for a constant critical stance before what appears inevitable or compelling. The last one clearly indicates that Foucault was aware that the ‘freedom’ with which individuals act may be a structuring form of rationality. He did not and could not imply that such ‘freedom’ was absolutely free, or that it was acceptable. Although Foucault objected to a number of characteristics of the Enlightenment worldview, he also retained, albeit begrudgingly and selectively, its emancipatory impulse. He borrowed Immanuel Kant’s definition of the Enlightenment as ushering in the passage from a state of ‘immaturity’ to one of ‘adulthood’ (Foucault 1997). He called for ‘a historical investigation into the events that have led to constitute ourselves and recognize ourselves as subjects of what is, what we are doing …’ (Foucault 1997, 315). The state of maturity Kant had defined as the hallmark of modernity when combined with Foucault’s emphasis on understanding the constitution of our subject-hood necessarily implies a next step, that of involvement in some concrete action to bring about change for ourselves. Although he consistently refrained from providing specific guidelines for change for others to follow, Foucault engaged in selective acts of protest as a ‘specific intellectual’. It must be recalled that by being selective about which cause to support, Foucault wished to distinguish himself from Jean-Paul Sartre who espoused all progressive movements’ causes. For instance, Foucault participated in protests against the treatment of prisoners in French jails, or in solidarity with Poland’s opposition to Communist rule. These and other specific acts do not naturally flow directly from his theorizing. Rather, they represent Foucault’s embeddedness in a society in which expressing one’s opinion about local and world events in accordance with some fundamental principles of human-ness is a value. In this sense, Foucault’s critique of humanism, which grounds his methodological approach, namely archaeology and genealogy, is at odds with his occasional political engagement, itself a by-product of the Enlightenment. Foucault’s analysis of the Iranian Revolution in 1978–1979 is the best example of the paradox of rejecting humanism, on the one hand, and acting according to its values, on the other. An assessment of his analysis is beyond the scope of this article, but he left no doubt about the source of the power against which the Iranians protested. However, having hailed the Revolution as a singular event aimed at bringing about a new order drawing its force and inspiration from religion – Shi’ism – Foucault ultimately resorted to an interpretation in historical materialist terms after he realized that events in the aftermath of Khomeini’s ascent to power took a turn he had not anticipated.3

It must be remembered that Foucault was writing about Western historical formations with a view to questioning their traditional self-representation as being impelled by a progressive movement forward. He focused on discontinuities rather than on continuities, contingent events and ‘limit experiences’. Therefore, the application of some of his concepts, shorn of the epistemological context in which they are embedded, to explain past or current events in the Middle East may result in an outcome that is the opposite of the theoretical import of Foucault’s thought. The point is not that Foucault’s theories should not be used when studying Middle Eastern societies. Nor is this an argument in favour of a theoretical ghettoization of studies of Middle Eastern societies. Rather, this is an invitation to reflect on the transformation of theoretical interpretation into justification. It is an exploration of the process by which the study of issues that are central to Middle Eastern Muslim
women’s history and roles in society turns into a study of the glorification of the contingent and the maintenance of the status quo. Put differently, this is a reflection on the process by which social science (as represented by ascendant academic feminist practices) relinquishes its demystifying function to become an apologetic discourse for reasons external to the subject under investigation. The study of the re-veiling movement that has swept across Muslim societies in the past two decades is a case in point.

**Knowing or justifying (re-)veiling?**

To reiterate, at the beginning of second wave feminism in the United States, the discourse on the veil privileged ‘oppression’ as an explanation of Muslim women’s condition. Islam was perceived as unchanging and unchangeable. Women appeared as passive bearers of religious categories, having no will of their own. The veil was interpreted as a tangible symbol of ‘oppression’ as well as an integral part of women’s persona. When an occasional ‘Muslim’ woman objected to her representation in the feminist discourse, she was dismissed as a mouthpiece for men’s patriarchal ideology. Parenthetically, this interpretation of women and their relation to Islam constituted a feminization of the then-prevailing (and male-centred) academic discourse on Middle Eastern societies. In what became a second phase, starting around the 1990s, researchers began to reverse this trend and three main approaches emerged. One is a class analysis that represents veiling as a tool that a poor or working-class woman uses to work outside the home without incurring the wrath of her husband, or to neutralize rumour-mongering in her community. Another approach adopts a narrative of the veil as signalling the failure of ‘modernizing’ policies undertaken by Middle Eastern states in the aftermath of the decolonization movements. From this perspective, women turn to the veil in protest. Presumably, protest is also a cause of women’s donning the veil as a means of securing legitimacy when they wish to challenge interpretations of the *shari’a*. Consequently, putting on a veil is interpreted as an exercise in female agency either in the form of resistance or empowerment (among others, see, for example, Hessini 1994; MacLeod 1991; and Zuhur 1992). A third approach involves variations on the first two approaches and turns the veil into a mere *dress* that is culturally shaped, a sort of costume (El Guindi 1999), or (and primarily among converts and women members of faith-based associations) a religious obligation for a woman, a sort of sixth pillar of Islam (Bullock 2003).

It is noteworthy that the academic discourse on re-veiling reinforces, and to a large extent mirrors, the conception upheld by faith-based movements on this issue (Lazreg 1988, 81–107). The twin concepts of ‘resistance’ and ‘empowerment’ grounded in a poststructuralist theoretical domain cannot in and of themselves explain the (re-)veiling trend. Generally, resistance to power and domination usually implies the search for a greater good, such as freedom, which requires finding and using tools (e.g. empowering oneself) with which to resist. Admittedly, under special circumstances individuals resist their subjugation through acts that undermine their domination by others. For example, a worker experiencing exploitation may manage surreptitiously to sabotage the machine on which he works, malingering on the job, etc. Resistance as an object of social science enquiry, however, is a highly complex question as it brings into play intricate relationships between the powerless and the powerful as well as the socio-cultural, political and economic contexts within which these relationships take place. Anthropologists have questioned the ease with which researchers have frequently turned conscious acts of behaviour aimed at taking a position,
upholding a custom or value, or taking a step toward change, for example, as unmitigated acts of resistance. The ambiguity of the concept of resistance is such that it lends itself to a romanticized view of observed behaviour when the ethnographer is eager to foreground her subjects’ purposive action, which subsequently appears sanitized of ‘politics’ (Ortner 1995, 176–177). More important, the uncritical use of the concept of resistance dispenses with an examination of the minute and insidious ways in which power operates in relationships between women and men. In the study of re-veiling, the use of the twin concepts of ‘resistance–empowerment’ obscures the actual relationship between women and men; leaves unaddressed the nature and purpose of ‘empowerment’; and makes it impossible to determine the conditions under which acquiescing to veiling may be a form of cultural complicity. These twin concepts are embedded in a form of cultural relativism that stresses the functionality of veiling by systematically excluding an examination of its dysfunctions, or at best explaining them away. For example, such studies summarily dismiss as ‘westernized’ women who argue that re-veiling is a trend that re-inscribes women in an old pattern of gender inequality and thus does not constitute a rupture with the past. This interpretative dismissal is indicative of two biases. First the researcher (when she is a non-Muslim) claims professional ‘objectivity’ by pointing out that the critic of the veil is but a pale copy of herself – a ‘westernized’ rather than a genuinely ‘western’ woman, not the real thing. Consequently, the veil, once reviled by early academic feminists as a marker of ‘oppression’, is rehabilitated at the expense of the native woman critic who is made to appear as biased ostensibly because of her social class affiliation which informs her presumed westernization. In this the interpretative circle is closed: native women are set against one another with the good Muslim woman who ‘empowers’ herself with the veil elevated to a state of cultural heroism, and the Muslim woman who questions the veil relegated to an inauthentic, prejudiced ‘West’ which she implicitly fails to resist. Second, the researcher reveals a dogmatic a-historicism by implicitly claiming that veiling is a condition of being Muslim, that no woman should aspire to being different because that difference has already been claimed. In other words, freedom from the veil is a privilege that only some women can claim by being born in the ‘West’. In this context, it is not surprising that justifications for re-veiling would be taken seriously as expressions of cultural difference. Veiling is normatively imbued with a number of unexamined functions, including the preservation of modesty, protection from sexual harassment, assertion of cultural identity as well as female piety.

What would a Foucauldian analysis of re-veiling be like? It would first of all identify the historical formation within which the veil emerged and became entrenched. It would delineate four periods: the pre-colonial (writ large), colonial, the post-independence period and the current period. This would help to determine the rise and fall of the veil as an object of historical enquiry.

Second, it would delineate the language – religious, juridical, political and cultural – in which the veil has been enunciated in the various historical periods, as well as trace its variations from and continuities with the classical period of Islamic law. The veil as discourse is analytically distinct from the veil as history, yet it cannot be separated from it.

Thirdly, it would trace the disturbances, modifications, corrections – material, social, political and juridical – that took place as a result of the enforced ‘intimacy’ effectuated by the imperial West. Of special interest is the encounter with ‘Western’ feminism. In the current historical conjuncture, the westing of the West (the flipside of the easting of the East or orientalism) has resulted in presenting women in the
Middle East as the ‘redeemers’ by proxy of women in Western countries for their perceived bodily sins. Wearing the veil, ‘covering’, is hailed as the antidote to the sexual objectification of women in the ‘West’, the recovery of a quintessential sexual morality — the famed ‘modesty’. By the same token, young women are urged to cast doubt on the philosophy of women’s liberation on the grounds that they are already free, have all the rights that they could hope to get given their fundamental biological difference from men. More important, the veil is upheld as a new form of ‘modernity’ for women (Ramadan 2004, esp. ch. 6). Furthermore, a woman’s identity is objectified, reduced to the veil. There is circularity in the justification of the veil: Muslim women wear it; women who wish to identify themselves as Muslims should wear the veil; there is no alternative to being a Muslim woman in a veil.

The fourth element in a Foucauldian analysis of re-veiling would be to unearth the various methods through which the discourse of veiling constitutes women as subjects at different epochs, the conditions under which such methods become inoperative, and the configurations of events that enable them to be intensified. Parallel to this, this perspective would address the ways in which women’s awareness of the discourse of the veil as a discourse of power played to their advantage as well as disadvantage. In the aftermath of decolonization struggles, a generation of women ceased to think of veiling as determining their Islamicity or womanhood. In the present historical conjuncture, these women’s achievement is elided in favour of a view that flaunts a seamless history of the veil as a condition of female Islamicity.

Finally, the fifth and last element would be to bring out the dual nature of the veil discourse as also constitutive of men’s masculinity. How does a change in the veiling discourse affect a man’s identity? Under what socio-political and economic conjuncture do men (especially the younger among them) perceive the absence of a veil as producing sexual vulnerability for them? How do these men avail themselves of a greater range of expression of a softer (more feminine) identity made available globally (in the media), but insist on a more rigidly defined masculinity by demanding that a fiancée or a wife wear a veil?

In conclusion, this article has argued for a critical awareness of facile interpretations that reconcile women to practices and events that are limiting to them by normalizing the contingent as being necessary and inevitable. In Foucault’s words:

The critical ontology of ourselves is not a theory, a doctrine, a permanent body of knowledge; it must be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits imposed on us, and experiment with the possibility of going beyond.

(Foucault 1977, 313)

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Notes

1. For an assessment of the role played by ‘experience’ in feminist epistemology, see Lazreg (1994).
2. For an example of the use of Habermas’s theory, see Lynch (1999); for examples of the use of Foucault’s theorizing, see Mitchell (1991); and Fahmy (2002). It must be noted that Fahmy uses Mitchell’s adaptation of Foucault’s political thought.
3. For an analysis of Foucault’s reports on the Iranian Revolution, see Afary and Anderson (2005).
4. The characteristics of the academic feminist discourse on women in the Middle East have been addressed by Lazreg (1988, esp. 81–89).
5. Although not an advocate of veiling, Amina Wadud explains that she wears a veil strategically such as when she speaks to a male audience about religious matters (Wadud 2006, 223, also 177, 221). Veiling goes unquestionably hand in hand with the Cairo ‘piety movement’ as studied by Mahmood (2004).
7. In this regard, the re-veiling discourse signals a regressive step in relation to what Ortner (1995) called the ‘refusal of ethnography’ to identify the failings of the ethnography of ‘resistance’.
8. For a discussion of these justifications, see Lazreg (2009).

References