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The Creation of the Hyper-Masculine World: The White Man’s Modern State and the Sedimentation of Binaries

Aliah Yacoub¹

Abstract

This research identifies a specific constellation of historical and phenomenological factors that have contributed to the rise of the hypermasculine modern state and, by extension, the monolithic image of the oppressed Muslim woman. The goal of this project is to establish a causative link between the gender binaries used in the conception of the modern state—marking modern states and politics as exclusively masculine arenas—during the colonization era and the current stagnant image of the Muslim woman in the habituated visual field of Westerners. This is done through an exploration of the gendered undertones of the modern state, a recapitulation of colonial literature that highlights how the binaries were transported to Arab colonies, and an assessment of its effects on the over-determined image of Muslim women in our current context by employing case studies of French Algeria and France today to solidify and cement the argument. Instead of tracing the tangible genealogy of that construction or offering a trajectory that is historically grounded, as many post-colonial critiques have proposed, this research adopts a phenomenological lens with which we can see anew the repercussions of colonial epistemology on the Muslim woman today.

Keywords

Phenomenology; Modern State Masculinities; Post-colonialism; Arab World; Perceptual Habits

Introduction

The backward glance of a historian can arguably trace the construction of the hyper-masculine world back to the White man’s creation of the modern state and his subjugation of the third world (see Enloe, 1989; Hooper, 2001; Tickner, 2001; Zalewski and Parpart, 2008). The forceful imposition of the European model of the modern state onto the global South is marked by binaries of domination-subjugation, colonizer-colonized, masculinity-femininity, and evil-good that produced our material realities both at the colonizing moment in history and today. The colonizer’s project of categorizing the colonized to control them better was successful in that it Other-ed the “third world” nations by gendering and racializing them. It marked them as feminine and brown, and so ascribed to them a matching set of attributes that made control easy as well as morally and politically necessary. Through the continual usage of such categories, the gaze upon Arabs, particularly, stagnated; it became habitual and pre-conscious, producing an over-determined image of the Muslim woman. Thus, in this paper, I will utilize the works of Anne McClintock, John M. Hobson, Frantz Fanon, Alia Al-Saji, and others to explore the effect of said binaries on the creation of the masculine world which continues to inform our daily lives in the MENA region and reproduces our image to the West. Accordingly, the argument in this paper will be developed in three stages: stage (i) is a genealogy of the construction of the hyper-masculine world during the colonization era, stage (ii) explores the broad strokes of the ongoing effect of this construction on our social and political structures as well as our constitutive image to the West today by using the Muslim veil in French Algeria and France today as case studies, and stage (iii) offers final reflections and concluding remarks.

Before any proper examination of the subject at hand can commence, it is important to first tidy up terminology. The usage of the term “white,” for example, is used to denote the

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Western powers whose whiteness, epistemologically, was politically manifested. This automatically excludes the Balkans and Southern Europe. A closer term would be “White Anglo-Saxon Protestant;” however, for a bigger focus on power at the colonizing moment and the effects of racialization, the term white is still preferred. Other terms such as “Third World” and “Global South” are ridden with the weight of their often-condescending connotations but are used cautiously to only mark the regions previously colonized. Similarly, the term “Arab” requires some qualification, in order to avoid homogenization, but its specific meaning will be elucidated as the paper unfolds.

Construction of the Hyper-Masculine Modern State and the Gendered Colonies

“Nationalisms have typically sprung from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope.”

Cynthia Enloe (1989)

Though it seems to be axiomatic to the point of banality, there has been an appallingly—albeit expected—miniscule amount of literature dedicated to theorizing about the gendering of the European modern state and its colonized counterpart. In this part, I will attempt to show how gender was a formative dimension of the modern state and the colonized subjects. This will be done in two stages: the first establishes the conception of the modern state as masculine, and the second explores the ways in which this conception manifested itself in the imperialist project by gendering the colonized subject as feminine and hence necessitating rescue and domination.

The Modern, Masculine State

A mere cataloguing of the ways in which nationalism has been defined is enough to show that, from its inception, nationalism in the modern state is masculine: defined by men and for men. McClintock, in her article “No Longer a Future Heaven,” gives examples of all-too famous male viewpoints of nationalism that give credit to this argument. Gellner’s definition of nationalism, for instance, solely rests on the “male recognition of identity” for he says that “Men are of the same nation if and only if they recognize each other as being from the same nation” (McClintock, 1995; Gellner, 1993). Other examples include Balibar’s, whose recognition of nationalism lies in the “patrimony”—in the “transmission of male power and property” (McClintock, 1995).

Nationalism, relying heavily on the institutionalization of gender difference, thus sidelines women from definitions, from the public sphere, and it is only in relation to men that they are spoken of. As George Santayana says, “Our nationalism is like our relationship to women: too implicated in our moral nature to be changed honorably and too accidental to be worth changing.” Women, excluded from the public, political sphere and denied any national agency, are thus pushed into the private domains of life where they are symbols and signifiers of the nation. As McClintock (1995) adds, the purpose of women in the nation is identified by Yuval-Davis and Anthias in five ways. The first three are in regard to women’s biology: they are seen as reproducers of national members, of the nation’s boundaries through sexual restrictions, and hence as transmitters of the national culture. The last two identify women as symbolic signifiers of national difference and as participants in national struggles (McClintock, 1995).

Gendering the Colonies

We see, in retrospect, that the masculine view that permeated ideas of nationalism in the modern state was effortlessly utilized, amplified, and theoretically transported to the imperialist project. This is seen in the major theoretical frameworks that legitimized and facilitated the imperialist discourse and project: the Peter Pan theory and the theory of oriental

despotism (Hobson, 2004). The gender-binary categories that had already taken form in the modern state traveled with the colonizers, as it were, through tanks, bombs, guns, travel writings, and “orientalist art” (Said, 2004).

The Peter Pan theory envisioned the civilized first world as paternal, masculine, independent, forward-thrusting, and rational. In absolute contrast, it identified the third world as child-like, feminine, dependent, irrational, and indifferent. The dreamed-up binaries that were used to contrast the West from the East were complemented by a different set of binaries that the theory of oriental despotism also offered. It saw in the first world the existence of liberal democracy, freedom, individualism, and rationality, whereas the third world was seen as despotically ruled, collectivist, and irrational. These two theories, popularized by Marx and Weber’s Orientalist discourses, resulted in what Hobson aptly describes as an East that is “tainted with a Manichean divide between ‘an image of evil’ and a ‘romantic image of innocence’” (Hobson, 2004). They were two seemingly irreconcilable images of the East—dangerous yet childlike and feminine; a threat yet in need of saving—that Western intellectuals employed separately to produce one coherent imperial discourse. The discourse allowed the colonizing project to appear as a moral duty of an urgent nature, hence the infamous “White Man’s Burden” to civilize and protect (Hobson, 2004). Therefore, these two theories, with their blatantly gendered attributes and invented identities, allowed the West to legitimize their imperialist project.

The gendering of the colonized nations was not only used to give credibility to the imperialist project; its application onto the colonial subjects was also foundational to its success. The female colonial subject was viewed as a feminine, delicate, dependent object that required saving from the brown, despotic, and irrational male. This idea is clearly nostalgic of the two theories we had just discussed: here, the female colonial subject has the Peter Pan theory applied to her, and the male colonial subject has the theory of oriental despotism applied to him. The ingeniousness is better seen in how this very notion was used by the colonizer to effectively control the subjects. By following a classic “divide and conquer” strategy, they ruptured the relations between men and women in multiple ways—as I will later discuss in the case of French Algeria—and by so doing, conquered the whole community. This is most eloquently described by Fanon who says: “The Algerian woman is seen as the living flesh of the national body, unveiled and laid bare for the colonials’ lascivious grip, revealing “piece by piece, the flesh of Algeria laid bare” (Fanon, 1965). The female colonial subject was thus at once a symbol of the femininely-gendered nation as well as an instrumental tool to be exploited and abused by the colonizer to effectively gain control.

Patriarchal Colonial Structures Today

The colonial structure’s arguably most resilient effect on the MENA region is the result of the gendering process. The effect of it is thus twofold: the first is how, even so many years later, it is still institutionalized in our bureaucracies and political/social relations that exclude women from the public sphere, and the second, which I will give more weight to here, is how it produced an image of the Eastern woman that is overdetermined and unchanging as the oppressed other in spite of manifestations that may indicate otherwise.

First, the imposition of the European model of the modern state, disguised as a civilizing mission and a moral duty to liberate brown women, produced colonial governments and institutions that, ironically, displaced the more traditional institutions that were in place that allowed working class and *fellaheen* women into the public sphere. An example of this is colonial Egypt’s incorporation into the European Economy with its capitalist modes of production. As Hatem explains in her chapter “Modernization, the State, and the Family in Middle East Women’s Studies,” Egyptians from all classes were “affected by the outcomes of social and economic development” (Hatem, 1999). In the 19th century, it was said that progress

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for women in Egypt was imported from the West. Refuting that, Hatem argues that Egypt's incorporation into the European capitalist system was in fact disruptive to the family structure and denigrated the status of women and their job opportunities. Egypt's integration into the European economy weakened the "guilds, especially those dealing with textiles, another area in which urban working-class women were active" and by privatizing health and education, it "offered women only limited access to both services and slowed down the development of alternative social institutions that served their needs" (Hatem, 1999). Remnants of the working-class women's expulsion from the public sphere can still be seen today, where the working-class woman is constrained within the domestic domain.

Since the tangible effects of the forceful, colonial imposition of the masculine, European model of the state is traceable—and saturated in the literature—in this part I shift to an effect that is far less examined: a phenomenological analysis of how the image of the Muslim woman stagnated as a result of the aforementioned Western hypermasculine state.

The Muslim Veil: The Production of Habitus

In this section, I use the Muslim veil as an example of the how the gendering-colonizing project has led to a sedimentation of binaries and a habituation of vision that continues to inform an overdetermined image of the Muslim female. I will draw from the works of Al-Saji and Merleau-Ponty to elaborate on the habituation of the vision, and will employ Fanon's phenomenological-historical analysis to show how the image imagined by the West at the colonizing moment of the female Muslim subject still exists today and continues to play a constitutive role in the formation of the Western identity. I will do this by first using the unveiling project in French Algeria, at the beginning of the colonial project, then move on to the ban of the veil in France, over a century later in 2004, as case studies that bring to light the sedimentation of the colonial binaries that led to a habitus in vision.

The Habituation of Vision Owing to Sedimentation of Social and Cultural Structures: French Algeria

"We learn to see," Merleau-Ponty states in his magnum opus *Phenomenology of Perception*. Vision is not a mere neutral recording of the visible; we see differently according to sedimented habits of seeing (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Vision, like the other modes of perception and the body, learns tacit ways in which it moves around and sees the world. Like driving, which becomes a sort of brainless activity after some time, vision too allows certain aspects of the world to be pushed to the foreground. As Alcoff adds to Merleau-Ponty, these habits of seeing are a result of social, cultural, and historical structures (Alcoff, 2006).

The colonizer has learned to see the female colonial subject in a certain way. The Muslim woman became the focus of the colonizer's gaze: she was the feminine symbol of the nation, an instrumental tool to exploit if you were to conquer, but, more importantly, she was hyper-visible. In the Arab world, the visibility of her veil in the colonial context influenced the course of history for Muslim women. As Fanon elucidates to us in "Algeria Unveiled," "In the Arab world, for example, the veil worn by women is at once noticed by the tourist ... for the tourist and foreigner, the veil demarcates Algerian society and its feminine component" (Fanon, 1965). Invisible and normalized from the gaze of the Algerian man, the veil was not in his field of vision. Yet, hyper-visible to the colonizer, the French colonial perception of the Muslim veil in French Algeria became the marker for cultural difference and a tool for Othering—already influenced by a colonial visual field which functions by means of representations that overdetermine perceptions of the colonized.

Being the most easily perceptible marker for cultural difference and a symbol of Algerian women, the colonial project to unveil Algerian women was thus established to destroy the culture as well as to rupture social relations and so control it. The latter is a method

previously mentioned in this paper: to effectively dominate the colonized, the French project of unveiling Algerian women was a way to grant them “agency” over themselves thereby weakening their patriarchal culture, disrupting the social order, and dominating the men. This project, as explained by Fanon, was thus coextensive with the colonial project to destroy its culture (Al-Saji, 2010).

The Overdetermined Image in the West Today

The French homogenous perception of the veil as one of cultural difference and oppression gives rise to and foreshadows perceptions of the veil in the current context. This is due to the fact that the vision of the West had become habituated, meaning that the structures of the visual field in the colonial moment of the veiled female subject made the overdetermination of how Muslim women are seen and represented today possible (Al-Saji, 2010; Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

In the colonial moment, the veil was a symbol of the oppression of female subjects that are in need of saving from the brown man. Decades later, this representation has become sedimented and habituated in the Western field of vision, so much so that it had stagnated. The image of the veiled Muslim woman now still holds the very same connotations: she is feminine and dependent, she has no subjectivity, there’s no need for an account of her lived experience, her veil means she is oppressed by the brown male—she needs saving by the white man. If one recalls the propaganda leading up to the U.S. war on Afghanistan in 2001, one automatically sees the image of the Afghani woman in burqa. Nostalgic of the colonial moment, the image functioned to legitimize the war and give it credibility on account of it being a moral duty to save her from oppression. This was, of course, a result of the homogenous Western perception of the veil. In this perception there was no room for variations of the veil, for women’s freedom to cover up or down or hold any different religious beliefs, nor for women’s agency of any kind, despite significant empirical data suggesting otherwise. As Al-Saji explains, “This representation conflated various historical factors that had contributed to women’s situation in Afghanistan, attributing that situation to a unitary source, an ‘Islamic fundamentalism’ immediately identifiable with the burqa” (Al-Saji, 2010).

Similarly, the French gaze stagnated. The law on the headscarf in March 2004 in France solidified the argument of the overdetermination of Muslim women’s representation in the West. Al-Saji recounts the debates and cases preceding the ban of the veil and argues that the central argument leading up to the passage of law was regarding gender oppression. The habituated representational schema dominated the discourse on the veil in the West and is one where “gender oppression was naturalized onto the Muslim veil”; it is in that sense that any image of a veiled woman was overdetermined in advance (Al-Saji, 2010). The image enters into a framework where its Western reception is known in advance. It cannot possibly be said that this gaze was wholly deliberate, historically engineered by some actors or government, for although many states have exploited this habitus to their advantage—as with the Afghanistan woman—its power and resilience is rooted in the fact that visual habituation is sedimented: it is culturally cemented in a temporal sense in which seeing the Muslim woman that way, over and over again, since the colonial project, turned it into habit. This habit, although originally engineered during the colonization era through binary-fueled ideology, ceases to be that intentional and becomes just that: habit. Attempts to change this image over the years have been outweighed by the strength of the invisible structures of the Western visual field.

The lack of awareness of the colonial visual field is key here. As philosopher Linda Martín Alcoff argues, the visual field is structured and habituated in a way that allows it to motivate rather than fully determine the objects of perception to produce the “meaning-making schemata” (Alcoff, 2006). This structure of vision owing to habituation and sedimentation means that the perceived object is seen, yet the habits owing to seeing in that way are tacit and

thus invisible. It occurs on a pre-conscious stage that makes its erasure seemingly impossible. As Alcoff asserts, “Our experience of habitual perceptions is so attenuated as to skip the stage of conscious interpretation and intent” (Alcoff, 1999).

Final Reflections and Concluding Remarks

The stagnant Western representations of veiled women in our current context—about which wars were fought and policies were passed—fail to take into account said women’s lived experiences or any subjectivity and agency. However, this phenomenon did not spontaneously materialize in the 21st century in the West; rather, it has its roots in the colonial project which gendered the colonized subjects and thereby sedimented their image in the visual field of Westerners. The author of this phenomenon is the hyper-masculine state which travelled from a mere conception of the modern state in the minds of male British imperialists to the third world and thus ushered in an era of racist, gendered vision of the East—especially the Eastern woman—that still haunts us today. Although a historical trajectory that pinpoints the landmarks of this phenomenon is required, it is well beyond the scope of this paper which had, as its ultimate goal, the aim of using phenomenology to shed light on the white, hypermasculine state’s effect—be it structural or one of visual habituation—on the MENA region today.

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