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Balancing agency, gender and race: how do Muslim female teenagers in Quebec negotiate the social meanings embedded in the hijab?

Paul Eid

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In the past decade, the hijab has increasingly come to be regarded in the West as an unambiguous symbol of female oppression. Such an orientalist framework rests upon a feminist rhetoric using gender equality as a vehicle for the racialization of Muslims. Correlatively, from the 1970s onwards, conservative Islamist movements have converted the hijab into a natural(ized) symbol of cultural resistance to Western imperialism. In this context, what room is left to Muslim women's agency in the production of the social meanings embedded in veil wearing? I explore this issue by presenting the findings of an interview-based research with veiled and non-veiled high school Muslim female teens in Montreal (Quebec). I show that, although these teenagers have much leeway to bypass and subvert the dominant framings of veil wearing, one should not overestimate their capacity to disrupt the dominant gendered religious framework through which this practice is socially construed.

Keywords: hijab; Muslim; youth; Quebec; gender; racialization

Introduction

Although not a historical novelty, in the past decade or so, Islam has increasingly come to be regarded in the West as an unambiguous symbol of female oppression. Such an orientalist framework rests upon a neo-colonial feminist rhetoric converting gender equality into a marker of Western cultural superiority over its Muslim Others. It has been referred to as a form of 'sexual nationalism' (Bilge 2012) whereby the figure of the emancipated Western woman resonates socially in opposition to that of the non-Western (read Muslim) woman, presumed to be this powerless victim of an all-encompassing culture bearing the imprint of patriarchy (Mohanty 1988; Yegenoglu 1998; Volpp 2001).

Furthermore, in the Bourdieu-ian idiom of Hage (2000), it could be said that gender equality now operates in the West as a prime form of 'national capital' that can be converted into 'national belonging'. And Muslim minorities' claim to national belonging risks being denied since their culture is presumed to be (naturally) incompatible with gender equality and feminism. In Quebec, the use of gender equality as a vehicle for the racialization of Muslim minorities has been observed during two widely publicized debates, first in 2006–2008 during the 'reasonable accommodation crisis'¹ (Bilge 2012), and then again in 2013–2014 about a bill

championed by the nationalist Parti Québécois that, had it passed, would have banned conspicuous religious symbols for public servants. The framing of Muslim minorities as culturally alien to feminism, and thus to the nation, has also been documented for Europe (Lentin and Titley 2011), and for France in particular (Delphy 2008; Laborde 2008).

Consistent with this line of thinking, the hijab is thought to be the epitome of Third World women's oppression at the hands of their inherently sexist culture. Of particular interest for this paper is the issue of agency that permeates the hijab debates in the West. Within the orientalist framework shaping Western representations of the hijab, there is no point in hearing out veiled women's points of view on that matter since they are assumed to be either coerced by their men into wearing it, or alienated by an overwhelming culture against which, to paraphrase Star Trek, 'resistance is futile' (Scott 2007; Bilge 2010, 17–19). From this perspective, agency becomes the prerogative of Western women, whose culture is defined by its dynamism and internal complexity. Conversely, Muslim women, especially veiled ones, are perceived as being overpowered by their culture, which, from this understanding, is paramount to an all-mighty matrix annihilating agency and crushing any efforts to resist it (Volpp 2001; Phillips 2007).

However, if race and gender cross-fertilize each other in Western-made images of the Orient (Yegenoglu 1998), the same can be said about gender and nation in anti-colonial and postcolonial nationalisms, which tend to essentialize those very traditions that were categorized as inferior by the colonizer, setting them up as natural(ized) symbols of cultural authenticity and resistance to Western imperialism. For nation-building purposes, forgotten traditions are (re)activated while others are (re)invented and, in the process, the liberties of women are restricted, their body and sexuality disciplined, and their behaviours closely scrutinized (Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989).

In Muslim societies, the emergence of the hijab in the 1970s has to be understood as a strong symbol of a religious nationalism setting up Islamic values as a protective screen against Western culture. The hijab expresses native populations' need to re-emphasize the value of their ancestral traditions and customs, which, under colonial domination, have been disparaged. In the postcolonial era, the new veil came to symbolize the restored dignity of native customs. Thus, the hijab is clearly one of these postcolonial gendered traditions that cannot be fully grasped unless the fact that it emerged out of a complex dialogue with the phantasmagorical image of this practice in Western colonial imagery is taken into account (El Guindi 1981; Ahmed 1992, 164; Hoodfar 1992).

If the hijab is politically instrumentalized, both in the West and in the Muslim world, what room is left to Muslim women in the production of the social meanings embedded in veil wearing? Even more interesting, how do young Muslim women raised in the West negotiate the veil's symbolism given that they are socially located at the crossroads of (at least) two interlocking systems of domination, gender and race (Collins 2000), and that they were exposed, throughout their lives, to cultural frameworks construed as mutually incompatible (the West vs Islam)?

In this paper, I explore this issue by presenting the findings of a qualitative research based on in-depth interviews with veiled and non-veiled Muslim high school teenagers in Montreal. I will first argue that the hijab needs to be grappled from a

postcolonial feminist perspective that is sensitive to both the constraining and enabling effects of power. After laying out the methodology, I will present my data with a focus on: (1) the ways in which my informants' agency is played out in their decision to wear the hijab or not; and (2) the meanings they impart to the hijab, with special attention paid to issues of gender equality. Finally, I discuss my findings with a view to reflect on the implications of these second-generationers' (re-)appropriations of religious norms and practices on the classical agency vs structure debate.

The hijab's symbolism and the dialectics of power and agency

For postcolonial theorists such as Homi Bhabha (1994) and Stuart Hall (1991, 55–57), identities need to be contextualized to render visible their quintessentially hybrid and unstable character. Thus, for Bhabha (1994), collective identities are never unitary in themselves, nor do they imply a binary opposition between the Self and the Other. Rather, they are constructed in an ambivalent space of enunciation in which the Self and the Other are forged relationally, caught up in a complex reciprocity. From this post-structuralist perspective much indebted to Foucault (2001), power relations are never fixed, opening up a wide space for contestation within which subaltern groups can negotiate the cracks of ideological and symbolic structures underlying all forms of domination, including colonialism, racism and patriarchy (Mohanty 1988; Bhabha 1994).

Building on these insights, postcolonial feminists relevantly argue that Islam-based nationalism does not hold a monopoly over the symbolism of the hijab. They shed light on the plurality of meanings that the hijab can take on, depending on the different motives invoked by those who wear it (Laborde 2008; Hoodfar 1992, 6; Scott 2007). Authors working under these assumptions read into the hijab a form of 'accommodating protest' (Macleod 1992) whereby patriarchy is being subverted from the inside. They argue that the hijab prevents women from being sexually objectified while operating as an 'off-limits sign' telling the public that, although a woman has left the house to study or work, she remains respectable and does not expect to be harassed. From this perspective, the hijab is a way for women, consciously or not, to legitimize their presence in the public domain by neutralizing the lewd or disapproving gazes they must often endure when venturing outside the house (Ahmed 1992, 144–169; Hoodfar 1992; Macleod 1992; Abu Odeh 1993).

However, one should not overestimate the power of Muslim women to subvert the dominant frames shaping the social significations conveyed by veil wearing today. Drawing on Bourdieu, it can be said that domination is maintained through 'symbolic violence', in the sense that social hierarchies appear as natural and de-historicized in the eyes of all subjects 'playing the game', including members of dominated groups (Bourdieu 1972, 18). Similarly, in her seminal essay, Spivak (1988) argued that the combined workings of colonialism and patriarchy make it extremely difficult for the (sexed) subaltern to articulate her own (autonomous) point of view outside the dominant frames shaping relations of power. The fact that Islamist movements have largely contributed to encode the dominant symbolism of the hijab constitutes a double-edged knife for both veiled and non-veiled women. If it is true that, by veiling herself, the hijab wearer makes a social compromise from which she can benefit in the short

term, such a strategy risks legitimizing the (Islamist) notion that a good Muslim woman must veil herself to harness, control and discipline her perverted sexual nature, from which men must be protected (MacLeod 1992, 556; Abu Odeh 1993, 35–36).

The possibility for Muslim women to disrupt the dominant ideology of the veil depends on a wide array of factors, one of which being the socio-historic context within which resistance is taking place. Thus, Muslim minority teenage girls raised and schooled in the West are generally more empowered to negotiate the hijab's meaning outside the realm of ideologically dominant frameworks.

Research showed that young Western-born Muslims from both genders are often disenchanting with their parents' more traditional brand of Islam while being deterred by rigid religious dogma. This is why they participate in religion increasingly less through formally organized rituals. Indeed, much like their Christian and Jewish peers, they tend to experience their religion outside of formal religious organizations, preferring instead to pick à la carte those religious norms and practices that best fit their spiritual and normative needs, even if it means revisiting some of them in the process (Cesari 2002; Frégosi 2008; Laborde 2008, 139; Haddad 2011). Research also suggests that it is not uncommon for religion to serve ethnic-identity-building purposes for second-generation Muslims. While most of them refuse to regard their Islamic and national identities as incompatible sources of allegiances, as shown for France (Venel 2004), Great Britain (Afshar, Aitken, and Franks 2005), the USA (Ajrouch 2007; Haddad 2011) and Canada (Eid 2007), a minority come to see them as mutually exclusive in reaction to perceived Islamophobia in a post-9/11 context.

Similarly, veil wearing among Western-born females should be understood as a largely reinvented practice. A common pattern for veiled teenagers is to wear the hijab as a (strategic) way to reassure their parents about their allegiance to their native culture and community in spite of the liberal values and lifestyle that they adopt outside of the family (Gaspard and Khosrokhavar 1995; Hoodfar 2003). Another case scenario is the tendency of older teenagers to embrace the hijab as a result of an unmediated engagement with sacred texts, which then empowers them to challenge the gendered roles that their parents attempt to impose on them in the name of religion (Hoodfar 2003; Afshar 2008). Many of them also see in their veil a protective screen against the objectification of women in a Western context (Ruby 2006). Most express, through their hijab, a desire to display publicly their Muslim identity without this being interpreted as a lack of loyalty to the nation (Venel 1999; Afshar, Aitken, and Franks 2005). Yet, one can sometimes read into veil wearing a pattern of stigma reversal whereby, in the face of rampant racism, these young women choose to proudly endorse the category to which the majority's stigmatizing gaze is assigning them (Gaspard and Khosrokhavar 1995; Hoodfar 2003; Ruby 2006).

Methodology

The findings presented here are drawn from a research based on semi-structured interviews conducted in 2009 in Montreal with twenty Muslim female teenagers aged twelve to eighteen, of whom eleven were wearing the veil, and nine were not. Besides three participants who are Canadian-born, all others migrated to Canada between the age of one and twelve. Most participants have a North African (twelve) or Middle

Eastern background (five), while three of them are, respectively, of Pakistani, Chinese and Guinean origin (see endnotes for further information on participants²). The participants were recruited in two multi-ethnic public high schools located in neighbourhoods with high concentrations of foreign-born residents. For recruitment purposes, we reached every student in each school, as attendance to our information meetings was made compulsory for all students by the school administrations. We informed students that we were conducting a research probing the multiple meanings of veil wearing among veiled and non-veiled female Muslim teenagers in Montreal.

Certain cautionary remarks should be made regarding the representativeness of the sample and the generalizability of the findings. First, given that two subgroups are being compared, the sample size could have been larger. However, the recruitment of participants proved to be highly difficult given that the hijab issue is so politically sensitive in the West (especially in Quebec at the time of the interviews). Most Muslim schoolgirls were thus hesitant to participate in the study, even more so if they were wearing a headscarf. That being said, data saturation seemed to have been reached, especially among veiled participants, but a larger sample would have perhaps revealed new ideal-typical profiles and patterns of answers. Second, the objective of this research is not to measure the effect of ethnic origin on the way that participants construe and relate to the hijab. However, because ethnicity might somehow impact on such representations, I have attempted to ensure that my sample matches as closely as possible the ethnocultural make-up of foreign-born female Muslim teenagers in Montreal. When the distribution of source countries in the sample is contrasted with corresponding census data for Montreal,³ it appears that participants from the Maghrib are slightly over-represented (60% vs 54%), Middle Eastern origin participants are adequately represented (25% vs 26%), but those of South Asian origin remain, however, starkly under-represented (5% vs 20%). Finally, because they come from highly multi-ethnic schools hosting a sizeable Muslim student population, the Muslim teenagers in my sample are perhaps not representative of all Muslim teenagers in Greater Montreal. Different findings could be expected with a sample of Muslim teenagers recruited in more culturally homogeneous neighbourhoods and schools.

Various themes were covered by the interviews, but special attention is paid here to the rationales underlying the informants' decision to wear the hijab or not, the meaning they attach to veil wearing, and their personal views on gender roles and relations.

Embracing the hijab freely: a religious obligation

Veil wearing constitutes a compulsory religious practice for most veiled (six out of eleven) and non-veiled (six out of nine) women in the sample. But interestingly, even those subjects who regard the hijab as a religious obligation consider that it is prescribed that women only start wearing it when they feel ready. Take participants V11 and NV7, for example:

Well I've started wearing it because I had to do it one day. That's important to keep in mind! It's written in the Koran that we must wear the veil, but it's not specified when

we're supposed to be ready Because in our religion, the hijab is compulsory, but only when you're ready! (V11)

Yes it's an obligation. However, nobody's forced to wear it in our religion. It's our choice in the end to make it a priority or not. It's really up to each girl to make that decision. People who force a girl to wear it are mentally sick! (NV7)

In other words, these informants consider that, although the hijab is a religious obligation, it has no value in the eyes of God if a woman was coerced into wearing it. This kind of stance, which is taken by a majority of both veiled and non-veiled informants, denotes these young girls' attempt to reconcile their staunch belief that the hijab is a divine commandment with their need to freely fashion their own religious normativity, that is, without being tied to binding rules imposed from above, even from God himself. However, two veiled informants (V4 and V10) consider that although the decision to embrace the veil is incumbent upon women, those who decide against wearing it will be accountable to God on Judgement Day. This excerpt is representative:

In our religion, veiling is compulsory, but only when you're ready. However, ... if you die without wearing the veil, what are you gonna say to God? You're gonna say: "Well I wasn't ready yet"? So that's why it's recommended to wear it as soon as possible. (V4)

The veiled informants

The veiled teenagers started wearing the hijab when they were aged between nine and thirteen. Although their mothers are generally veiled themselves, none of the veiled informants reported being coerced by their parents or relatives into wearing the hijab, except for one Pakistani-origin girl aged seventeen (V7), whose narrative strongly suggests that she started wearing it to please her parents. However, even if not coerced, these young girls were often influenced in their decision by their parents or a third party. Indeed, as mentioned, all veiled informants but two reported that their parents were expecting them to wear it one day, but only when they would feel ready:

I'm the one who chose to wear the veil. Like, it's not my parents who're forcing me to do it. No I just feel it's an obligation. The only thing our parents do is tell us what wearing the veil is all about. They teach us our religion and that's it. And we go: "OK, now I understand!", and then we wear it. (V9)

My father never tried to force me to wear the hijab. Parents always want us to wear it. But they're never forcing us. Because they know that a woman must understand why she wears it. So they explain it to us. Like they explained it to me, and I was like: "one day I'll wear it". And this day finally came. (V3)

Not only do these parents believe that their daughter ought to embrace the hijab willingly, but they also think she must fully understand what it implies to wear it. Participant V10, for instance, stated that when she first donned the hijab, she knew 'her mother would understand' if she ever changed her mind after a trial period, whereas participant V11 stated: 'If I tell my mother that I feel uncomfortable with my

veil, she'll go: "take it off if you want to". In short, most parents want their daughter to wear the veil, but only if it results from an informed and deliberate decision. However, although parental influence is the main external factor accounting for these young women's decision to wear the veil, it is not the only one. For example, one participant reports having donned the hijab at fourteen years old after she attended a conference about Islam. Because her parents did not provide her with a religious education at home, she had to turn to external sources:

My parents are really not practising Muslims. So since religion would not come to me, I had to go get it myself! So I guess you could say I'm a kind of convert [laughing]. Nobody taught me anything! I had to self-learn everything! (V5)

Another veiled informant, a twelve-year-old Canadian-born girl (V2), mentioned that she was mainly influenced by 'Arab television' and by the fact that, in her country of origin (Algeria), 'all the women are veiled'. Informants V1 and V10 both started wearing the hijab after a family trip to their country of origin. However, many veiled participants consider that the social pressures exerted in Montreal to incite them to wear the hijab are marginal compared to what they would have faced in their parents' country. Thus, according to one participant:

Q: Are you socially pressured to wear the veil?

A: In Lebanon or here? Cause in Lebanon, yes almost everyone is wearing it.

Q: What about here?

A: Here it's because of religion. (V1)

Informant V1 suggests that wearing the hijab in Lebanon results from social pressures, whereas in Montreal it is rather indicative of a woman's own spiritual quest. Another participant (V5) explains that her mother, as opposed to her, 'only started wearing it because everyone around her was wearing it, not because she was really eager to wear it'. Similarly, informant V6 pointed out that her mother's veil was imposed on her for 'cultural reasons', whereas she herself chose to wear it out of religious convictions. Thus, in a similar fashion to what Gaspard and Khosrokhavar (1995) observed in France, our data suggest that these veiled teenagers embraced the hijab out of a well thought-out decision-making process, as opposed to their mothers, whose veil is more a by-product of a socially hegemonic norm enforced through socialization than the outcome of a personal spiritual journey.

The non-veiled informants

Surprisingly, out of the nine non-veiled teenagers we interviewed for this study, only one (NV2) is firmly opposed to wearing the hijab. As for the eight others, they all hope to wear it one day (although only four of them have a veiled mother), but do not consider themselves ready yet at this point in time. Their rationales all boil down to the same thing: wearing the hijab is not only about concealing one's hair; it also implies living by a strict and demanding code of conduct. The perceived obligations that such a rigorous behavioural ethics entail all revolve around sexuality and boys:

Personally I'm not ready yet to wear it because there's more to it than just wrapping it around your head. You can't show your cleavage, you must be buttoned up, if ya know what I mean. When I see this, I tell my friends: "guys, how am I gonna do this?" (NV1)

I do wanna wear it but I'm not ready yet because there's a lot of things that come with it. Like, I couldn't go to the pool anymore. I'd also have to restrain myself with boys. When I'm not veiled, I feel I have more freedom to do these things. If I'm veiled, I feel I need to be much more respectful of my religion. (NV8)

Other participants, such as NV6 and NV9, are consciously putting off wearing the veil in order to be able to keep experimenting with things that would be considered inappropriate for a veiled woman:

'Right now, I like to try new things, I constantly change hair colour, I like to try all kinds of things. But in the end, I'll surely feel I've done what I wanted to do, and then I'll tell myself: Ok I've done this and that, and now it's over' (NV6).

Like their veiled religious peers, non-veiled teenagers all insisted that their parents are not trying to force them to wear the hijab, although they do attempt to steer them in this direction. For example, when asked whether it is important for her mother that she wears the hijab, participant NV3 gave this answer: 'Yes and no. If I wear it and she sees I'm miserable, she's gonna be unhappy.' Nevertheless, her mother sends her subtle messages to incite her to wear it: 'For example, if we see a four-year-old wearing a veil, my mom's gonna go: "you see, she's younger than you and she's already wearing it!"' But in general, parents are believed to realize that compelling their daughter to wear the hijab would have no value from a religious standpoint, and that it would be useless anyway since she would take it off as soon as she was out of their sight. For example, informant NV4 reports: 'My parents don't try to force me to wear it since they know that if they do, I'll take it off.' Informant NV6, previously quoted, stated that her veiled mother always reminds her that 'before putting a veil on your head, you've gotta really have it in your head'.

The symbolism of the veil

The hijab: a conspicuous sign of moral purity

A majority among both veiled and non-veiled participants considers that one of the main purposes of the hijab is to shield women from men's sexual desire. This informant's narrative provides a good illustration of this:

The veil is required so that girls won't be considered as sexual objects by men. You know how guys are! Sex is always on their mind! So it's all about seduction, about how the girl looks, and about her hair. (NV7)

But beyond providing women with a physical protection, the hijab provides them first and foremost with a 'moral' one. Indeed, it is considered a symbol of modesty, signalling that the woman wearing it is virtuous and not sexually promiscuous. Veiled women owe this image of purity to the fact that the hijab is perceived as a pledge of

chastity and moral decency. For example, informant V3 considers ‘that a Muslim man will respect more a veiled woman’, whereas for NV1, ‘when a girl wears the veil, she let boys know that she is off-limits, and this way she’s more respected by them’. For many of them, concealing their hair or any other physical feature that is likely to spark men’s desire can even have liberating effects since it forces men to show interest in them as human beings, not as objects:

The word hijab means protection. As I was saying, men treat women like objects and I don’t want that. When I’ll meet someone, he’ll be interested in what’s inside me, not just in my appearance. (V3)

However, if the hijab imparts respect to its wearers, what happens then to a woman whose head is uncovered? Because the hijab is recognized as a symbol of moral purity, it then becomes more difficult for unveiled women to make the claim that they are worthy of the same respect as their veiled peers. When asked whether Muslim boys behave differently with unveiled girls, one non-veiled informant (NV8) answered:

‘If the girl is veiled, boys are gonna go: “We shouldn’t get too close to her because she’s veiled”, whereas when you’re not veiled like me, they feel they can touch you. They think: “OK she’s not veiled, so she must be more open” [pause] It’s not because I’m not veiled that they can get away with everything!’ (NV8)

Participant NV5 expressed a similar sentiment:

Even though a Muslim woman is not veiled, it doesn’t give men the right to stare at her, you know? Yes wearing the veil is a religious obligation, but if you don’t wear it, that doesn’t make you a sinner! Many unveiled girls are good practising Muslims! (NV5)

Interestingly, two veiled informants (V10 and V5) stood up for their non-veiled religious peers in order to underscore their moral integrity. For example:

But I have Muslim friends who don’t wear the veil and they’re respected. Why? Because they behave well, they’re not promiscuous and they’re not the type of girls who’s gonna have too much skin exposed. (V10)

Because they are not automatically presumed to be worthy of respect, unveiled girls must avoid engaging in practices that could denote a desire to seduce, whether real or imagined. In their case, earning men’s respect entails being distant and demure with them, as well as dressing modestly:

Even though I’m not veiled, I’m not gonna wear mini-skirts and things like that. Why would I wanna draw attention? If a person’s gonna choose me, whether as a friend, at work or even if I wanna go out with a guy, he’s gonna choose me for who I am. He’s not gonna choose me because I have bigger breasts or because I show off my ass. (NV1)

In other words, both veiled and non-veiled teenagers have internalized the notion that they are expected to project a self-image that is asexual. However, non-veiled girls

must exercise extra caution so as not to bring a (bad) reputation of 'seductress' upon themselves, whereas, by contrast, veiled girls are assumed to be morally irreproachable until proved otherwise. This explains why many non-veiled teenagers judged quite harshly those veiled girls who reap the symbolic benefits associated with wearing the veil (respect), while being unwilling to comply with the strict behavioural ethics that such a choice entails:

It's really unpleasant when you see a veiled girl who's wearing tight clothes. It's so illogical! If you put on a veil, it's to put boundaries. Like, you can't wear a veil and two seconds later you're flirting with a guy. It's non-sense! (NV6)

I find there's something wrong when I see a veiled girl who's dressed like me! The whole point is to prevent people from seeing the shapes of your body. You can't just wear a scarf and then wear tight jeans and a revealing sweater! (NV9)

These non-veiled informants are not challenging the dominant symbolism of the hijab, but criticize the 'impoture' of those veiled girls who behave in a way that makes them unworthy of this religious sign, which is perceived to be the embodiment of exemplary piety.

Gender equality

I will now look into the narratives of my informants to probe what gender equality means and implies for them. Whether they wear the veil or aspire to wear it, these Muslim teenagers generally subscribe to the principle of gender equality in all areas of life. They think that men and women are entitled to the same rights in the family, the labour market and in the public domain. In fact, both groups tend to clearly distance themselves from their parents' more traditional views on these matters. However, five informants, who are all veiled but one, expect as future mothers to be in charge of their children's education since, in their view, men do not have the required aptitudes to perform this type of work. Interestingly, veiled participants were more likely to recoil at the fact that their parents impose more freedom-restricting rules on them than they do on their brothers. For example:

My mom, whatever country she's in, she thinks we should always behave as if we were in Algeria. She goes: "At your age, you should start cleaning the toilets and cooking meals and all that!". And then my brother goes: "But mom, then how come last time we were in Algeria, all my [female] cousins were doing was watching TV?" (V2)

However, other veiled teenagers accept with more ease this kind of strict parental control. For example, one informant explains that when her friends invite her to go clubbing, she turns them down in order not to disrespect her parents who are opposed to it. And when asked why she refuses to party, she offers this answer:

My parents trust me, so I don't wanna betray their trust, because you never know what can happen. If I drink and do something stupid, it's not only gonna affect me, it's gonna affect my parents too. And if I ever lose their trust, it's really hard to gain it back. (V8)

Equally noteworthy is a tendency among both veiled and non-veiled participants to cast a critical eye on patterns of gender relations that they associate with Quebec culture. Indeed, many blame Quebec culture for majority women's objectification and dissolute conduct, as well as for high divorce rates and broken families. For example, informant NV5 believes that Quebecois women have their first sexual experience much too early in life, while informant NV6 considers Quebecois women to be excessively promiscuous, which in her view constitutes a culturally differentiating factor between 'Us' (her community) and 'Them' (the Quebecois). Thus according to NV6: 'Here the first thing on teenagers' mind is: "am I gonna sleep with him or not?", whereas we don't have this mindset! You think about your studies, your work, your family.' A commonly expressed view is that Quebec women are treated as sexual commodities commercialized by and for men:

I find that Québec women are like [sex] symbols. They're used to sell stuff: toilet paper, cell phones, etc. In school, girls want to impress boys. To get men's attention, they're gonna dress sexy. There's no end to it. It's a form of submissiveness! (V4)

Interestingly, for this participant, it is majority women who are 'submissive', not veiled women, since she considers the former to be enslaved by men's sexual desire. This type of reasoning was particularly put forward by veiled teenagers, as if the value of modesty that they traditionally use as grounds for wearing the hijab was suddenly turned into a distinctively Muslim symbol of resistance to women's sexual exploitation. Many informants stressed not only that Islam is consistent with gender equality, but that it is integral to it. Take, for example, this veiled participant:

People think that Muslim women are dominated. Well, I can't blame them for thinking this way since plenty of them are! But it's written nowhere in the Koran that men should beat women! It's not written that men should work and that women should stay home. It's something that's primarily cultural, or perhaps peculiar to certain individuals. And they [people] mix everything up: culture and religion! And that's just really damaging! (V5)

This informant points out that although unequal patterns of gender relations do exist in her community, they are grounded in 'culture', not religion. The notion that there is a sharp distinction to be made between culture and religion was often stressed by these teenagers in a clear attempt to dissociate Islam from those social norms and practices clashing too abruptly with their more liberal and egalitarian values. From this perspective, 'cultural' traditions are thought to account for all norms and practices deemed sexist (forced marriage, female genital mutilation, honour killings, etc.), whereas Islam, when it is not distorted by 'cultural' archaism, necessarily translates in effect into gender equality. For this non-veiled informant, rehabilitating her religion, and thus reversing the stigma attached to it in Quebec, is facilitated by contrasting women's status before and after the advent of Islam:

A lot of people forget that before Islam, men were deciding everything and were beating women. I explain to them: "Listen, before Islam, women weren't allowed to this and

that. Before, men had the right to beat women". Then Islam came and said: "No! Women are not objects!" (NV8)

This participant characterizes pre-Islamic times as a period of brutal patriarchy in order to contrast it with the post-Islamization period, which, in her view, marked the beginning of a new era bringing equality and freedom to women.

Discussion

In the West, the hijab is often perceived as carrying a unique and invariable signification: the oppression of women by their culture. Not only do my findings make evident the shortcomings of such reductive categorizations, but, most importantly, they call attention to the necessity of approaching power relations outside of the classical sets of binary oppositions such as agency vs structure, or resistance vs domination. First, all but one veiled teenager report having chosen willingly to wear the hijab because they see it as a religious obligation. Furthermore, all but one non-veiled informant aspire to wear the hijab one day, but only when they feel ready for it. Interestingly, girls from both groups attempt to reconcile their need to exercise free will with what they perceive to be a God-mandated obligation. The solution? Emphasizing that the hijab can only be validated by God if it has been freely chosen by the veil wearer. Such a 'manoeuvre' is not fortuitous since, typically, the parents – or other significant family members – of these young women have attempted to persuade them to start wearing the hijab.

These data confirm the importance of shunning the misconceived notion that racialized minorities are solely motivated by culture whereas free choice is confined to Western people. This kind of one-sided cultural essentialism masks the fact that Muslim minority women also have the power to engage reflexively with the dominant gender roles into which they were socialized. Conversely, it prevents us from seeing how gendered cultural models also colour majority women's life choices, often in a way that reinforces sexist patterns of social relations. For example, the decision of a woman to wear G-strings, make-up or crop tops is as much shaped by personal agency as it is by culturally proper models of femininity 'requiring' women to present a sexualized image of themselves in public. In short, the de-essentialization of culture is a prerequisite for fully grasping how personal agency and power structures both co-produce and mutually constrain each other in the making of social relations.

A larger epistemological claim to be made here is that the interlocking systems of domination (race-gender-class) in which agents are located both open up and foreclose spaces for resistance depending on time- and context-specific power configurations (Bilge 2010). These young Muslim girls raised in Montreal cannot be portrayed as purely passive victims of omnipotent cultural forces imposing on them patriarchal models of gender relations. Not that these forces do not exist, but their influence is mediated and mitigated by these teenagers' ability to 'bargain' with the dominant gendered frameworks in which the hijab's symbolism is entangled.

Thus, on the one hand, both veiled and non-veiled informants do not see the hijab as a symbol of male domination. Most endorse gender equality in all spheres of life, and many even draw on religious normativity to justify their belief that men and women are

equal. Such a stance runs counter to both the stigma of patriarchy attached to Islam in Western social imagery, and the patriarchal interpretations of Islam fostered by Islamist movements (Narayan 2000). Unquestionably, the fact that these Muslim teenagers attend highly multi-ethnic schools in Montreal gives them considerable leeway to dispose of religious norms and practices encroaching too heavily on their personal values. This is facilitated by the fact that, as second generationers, they tend to develop a strong ethnic and religious self-concept, but without being embedded in tightly knitted (ethnic or religious) communities impelling them to conform to dominant cultural models through strict social control (Waters 1990). This gives them more freedom to assert a syncretic religious identity bearing the imprint of the liberal values that they tend to embrace.

On the other hand, if a post-structuralist feminist framework rightly emphasizes minority women's abilities to bypass, and at times subvert, the multifaceted power structures to which they are subjected, minority voices should not automatically be taken as a token of unfettered counter-discourses of resistance (Bilge 2010). As Hall (1977) rightly stressed, agents negotiate meaning embedded in language depending on their social and cultural locations within society, but this sort of brokering does not occur in a political vacuum. As previously pointed out, the emergence of the hijab in the 1970s as a postcolonial symbol of resistance to Western imperialism took place mainly under the influence of religiously conservative movements. Thus, it is not coincidental that both veiled and non-veiled women in my study have largely internalized the notion (consistent with a typically Islamist framing) that the hijab's main purpose is to signal, especially to men, that the conducts and intentions of a woman remain chaste and virtuous, and thus worthy of respect, despite the fact that she interacts with non-kin males in public. Although one can read into this a form of 'accommodating protest' (MacLeod 1992) – as the hijab keeps in check the sexual hassle that women may face in public places – the political downside to this interpretation is that it risks legitimizing the notion that women who enter the public domain do not deserve respect unless they are veiled.

Furthermore, within this framing, the tremendous power of seduction attributed to women, as well as the moral corruption that this power, if unbridled, is presumed to unleash among men, is not seen as resulting from a (patriarchal) process of sexualization, but rather as a natural feature inherent in the female body. The containment of this sexual power, which entails concealing one's hair, is thus an obligation incumbent upon women only. Therefore, the dignity and respectability provided by the hijab is predicated to a large extent on a representation of the female body portrayed as a permanent threat to society, and to men in particular. Correlatively, as exemplified by our data, within such framing, non-veiled women must constantly prove to men that, even if non-veiled, they remain worthy of respect. Thus, although it is important to acknowledge the abilities of these young women to bypass gendered power structures, one should not overestimate their capacity to subvert politically the dominant religious framework through which the meaning of the hijab is socially construed.

To conclude, in the past decade, many Western states have attempted to pass legislations meant to ban the hijab from public institutions. Such decisions are often informed by neocolonial assumptions regarding Muslim women's capacities to exert

their agency and resist cultural domination: first, that *only* Muslim women's autonomy can be hampered by their gendered culture; and second, that veiled women's resistance to sexism is impossible within (because incompatible with) the religious framework that they regard as their own. Not only are such assumptions misguided, but from an intersectional perspective (Collins 2000), this fixation on gender as the sole locus of oppression for Muslim minority women ignores the fact that, in the West, these teenagers are prejudiced and discriminated against, not only as women, but also as Muslims and Arabs. What is more, the failure of Western states to see how gender and race intersect in shaping Muslim women's experience of oppression, coupled with the labelling of Islam as being essentially backward and patriarchal, could lead these young girls to close ranks around the disparaged norms, practices and identity, while deterring them from self-identifying as members of their respective national and political communities.

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Notes

1. In Canada, the term 'reasonable accommodation' refers to the legal obligation of organizations to modify, without undue hardship, any norms or practices that fail to take into account the special needs of minority groups protected against discrimination under the law. In Quebec, starting in 2006, an inaccurate perception amply fuelled by the media came to prevail that Quebec's social cohesion and core values were under siege because of a deluge of unreasonable requests for religious accommodations made by Muslims and other religious minorities.

2. *Veiled informants* (age, origin, age at arrival in Canada)

- V1: sixteen, Lebanese, three
- V2: twelve, Algerian, Canadian-born
- V3: thirteen, Algerian, nine
- V4: fifteen, Moroccan, Canadian-born
- V5: seventeen, Moroccan, under one
- V6: seventeen, Egyptian, seven
- V7: seventeen, Pakistani, under one
- V8: seventeen, Chinese, eight
- V9: fourteen, Tunisian, nine
- V10: seventeen, Moroccan, one
- V11: fourteen, Algerian, eleven

Non-veiled informants (age, origin, age at arrival in Canada)

- NV1: fifteen, Algerian, eight
- NV2: eighteen, Guinean, eleven
- NV3: thirteen, Algerian, four

- NV4: seventeen, Algerian, ten
- NV5: sixteen, Lebanese, Canadian-born
- NV6: seventeen, Lebanese, twelve
- NV7: eighteen, Qatari, ten
- NV8: seventeen, Algerian, twelve
- NV9: seventeen, Moroccan, twelve

3. We compared our sample data with the closest proxy available in the census, that is, female Muslim Montrealers aged fifteen to twenty-four who were born in the Maghrib, South Asia and the Middle East, broken down by region of origin (Statistics Canada 2011).

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