Hijab as commodity form: Veiling, unveiling, and misveiling in contemporary Iran

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Abstract
This article considers how state-mandated veiling and unveiling reinforce modern capitalism. State regulations regarding veiling incorporate the female body into the political economy of the commodity form. In addition to serving as an empty signifier to be filled with exchange value for the male observer, the veil operates as an ideological apparatus of the state. In showing through fieldwork conducted in Iran how the fault lines of political agency are inscribed into the veil, I argue that subverting its commodity function radically relativises its meaning. Because the veil is an empty signifier lacking intrinsic content, its meaning must be determined contingently. By combining a critique of secular discrimination against veiling with a critique of state-mandated veiling, I show how European and Iranian societies incorporate the veil into the capitalist world-system and use it to suppress women's agency.

Keywords
Body, capital, commodification, feminism, hijab, Iran, Islam, Marx

Value converts every product into a social hieroglyphic. (Marx, Capital)

Marx famously explicated the commodity form by point out that, notwithstanding its mundane appearance, it is ‘in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties’ (Marx, [1867] 1906: 81). For Marx, commodities acquire metaphysical objectivity through their social relations: ‘not an atom of matter enters into the objectivity of commodities as values’ (p. 55).

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When raw materials are crafted to suit human desires, then suddenly they are shot through with the miraculous. As Marx elaborated: ‘as soon as an object steps forth as a commodity, it becomes transcendent. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head’ (p. 82). The topsy-turviness of the commodity form is conditioned by its relationality, its capacity to satiate a metaphysical hankering through its materiality, and its dependency on the ontology of the human imagination. At once wholly incarnate and wholly transcendent, commodities are variations on religious revelations.

Because they are essentially grounded in fantasy, commodities can and usually do bear within themselves multiple mutually exclusive significations. Aside from any practical function they may serve, commodities are necessarily implicated in the production and satiation of human desire in ways raw materials are not. ‘We may twist and turn a single commodity as we wish’, writes Marx, ‘it remains impossible to grasp it as a thing possessing value’ (1906: 55). However, once commodities enter into relations with other commodities, their situation changes. The commodity’s pure materiality is usurped by its social function. With respect to its ability to manipulate souls and minds in modernity, the Islamic veil (hijab) fulfils the three basic criteria of the Marxian commodity: (1) it is traded on the market; (2) it fabricates and satisfies a human desire; (3) it stimulates a desire for the perpetuation of the immaterial relations it engenders.1

The literature on the hijab is arguably thicker and denser than that for any other issue in the Islamic public sphere. Out of proportion to the actual significance of this sartorial accoutrement in most women’s daily lives, this archival density attests to the extent to which ‘metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties’ have been conferred on the hijab as a mediator among cultures, genders, and civilisations. As Leila Ahmed perceptively points out, the veiling of women has come to constitute the central axis of difference between Muslim and non-Muslim societies in the modern imagination, and to emblematise the ‘civilizational tensions’ that extend from British-ruled Egypt to the 1979 Iranian revolution and its aftermath (Ahmed, 1992: 144–188; 2011: 195). Alongside those who denounce the veil on the basis of monologic stereotypes, there are those who argue forcefully that recent and seemingly more innovative attempts to pioneer a new politics of the veil by Saba Mahmood (2005) and others reveal a not-unproblematic desire ‘to be seen as questioning liberalism or secularism but from an ideologically and morally safe space with one foot still within modern liberal sensibilities’ (March, 2009: 549, n. 43).

It is not with the aim of contributing to the hysteria surrounding the veil or of exacerbating the tendency in the western media to confer disproportionate significance on a matter of dress that figures subtly and only sometimes significantly into women’s daily lives that this article is written. Rather, my aim is to pursue a line of inquiry that, in the vast literature on the veil in contemporary Islamic societies, remains marginalised. Aided by fieldwork conducted in the Islamic Republic of Iran during 2011 and 2012 and close readings of key texts in the history of Islamic and European discourses about women, I read popular discourses concerning
women’s rights against the grain of Muslim women’s experience in Iran, America, and elsewhere in the world.

While European legislation against the veil is often contrasted with Iranian and Saudi Arabian legislation making the veil legally obligatory, a less common strategy in addressing the politics of the Islamic veil is to consider how these states’ policies converge with respect to coercive dress codes. I argue here that contemporary secular legislation against the veil mirrors theocratic endeavours to make the veil mandatory. Both forms of coercive legislation concerning women’s bodies participate in the capitalist world-system. Equally, both policies deploy the veil as one of that system’s most richly signifying commodities. Veiling, unveiling, and misveiling (wearing the veil in a way that deliberately flouts state regulations) all propose different kinds of bargains with the state that regulates women’s dress codes. The pages that follow trace the terms of these varying bargains across the lines of gender, class, and nationality.

Veiling and colonial interpellation

At the turn of the nineteenth century, the Egyptian lawyer and social reformer Qāsim Amīn famously asked his mostly male readers:

Is a woman considered so much stronger than a man that men have been allowed to show their faces to the eyes of women, regardless of how handsome or attractive they are, while women are forbidden to show their faces to men, from the fear that men’s desires may escape the control of their minds, and they may be tempted by any woman they see? (Amīn, 1995: 42)

Amīn pointed out that justification of the hijab on the grounds of women’s presumed capacity to rein in their sexual desires better than men assumes that women’s disposition is superior to that of men. Such an assumption entails a second question: ‘Why should women always be placed under men’s protection?’ (Amīn, 1995: 42). Amīn deployed such rhetoric not of course to argue for women’s superiority or even for their autonomy. Rather, he aimed to expose the logical inconsistency of the current practices surrounding the hijab, which at the time of his writing referred to a full facial covering rather than to the partial head covering it signifies in modern times. His effort earned him the reputation of being Egypt’s first feminist.²

While Amīn helped to bring the question of the veil into the public sphere, the terms of his call for women’s ‘liberation’ have been criticised by contemporary feminists as imperial and patriarchal in equal measures. In her critique of the discourse of the veil in early twentieth-century Egypt, Leila Ahmed argued that Amīn ‘conducted an attack that in its fundamentals reproduced the colonizer’s attack on native culture and society...under the guise of a plea for a “liberation” of woman’ (Ahmed, 1992: 161). Even closer in time to Amīn, the Egyptian feminist Malak Hīfīnī Nāṣīf (1886–1918), writing under the pen name ‘Seeker in the Desert’
(Bāḥithat al-Bādiyyah), warned against male intellectuals who were ‘as despotic about liberating us’ as they had been ‘about our enslavement’ (Nāṣif, 1925: vol. 2, pp. 8–9). Contesting the reduction of public discussions concerning women’s liberation to the veil, Nāṣif argued that instead of policing women’s bodies by debating the merits and demerits of veiling, men should ‘give women a true education’ and then leave it to women to choose ‘what is most advantageous to her and to the nation’ (Nāṣif, 1925: vol 2, pp. 25, 28). Given the choice between unveiling and veiling, Nāṣif was unpersuaded that the former automatically accorded more deeply with women’s interests than the latter. Obliquely indicting Amin, she wrote:

The majority of us women continue to be oppressed by the injustice of man, who in his despotism commands and forbids us so that now we can have no opinion even about ourselves... If he orders us to veil, we veil, and if he now demands that we unveil, we unveil, and if he wishes us to be educated, we are educated. We are weary of his despotism. (Nāṣif, 1925: vol. 2, p. 8)

In addition to his paternalistic attitudes towards women, Amin’s doublespeak was shaped by a racialist hierarchy that was in evidence when he discussed the Anglo-Saxon race as superior to the Egyptians and other Muslim peoples. ‘The activities of this race’, Amin elaborated, ‘their boldness and intelligence... attest to their superiority’ (1995: 71). Although the controversy Amin’s text stimulated helped to raise the profile of the Egyptian women’s movement, the racist essentialism that underwrote his civilisational hierarchy is intimately implicated in his call for female liberation. Indeed, contesting the conventional view of Amin as a pioneer of women’s rights, Ahmed maintains that ‘Far from being the father of Arab feminism... Amin might more aptly be described as the son of Cromer and colonialism’ (1992: 163).

No less striking than the racism that led Amin to favour the Anglo-Saxon nation above Islamic peoples is the elitism that is entailed in his call for the unveiling of upper-class Egyptian women. Amin is concerned that upper-class women compelled to veil their faces and pass their lives in seclusion with the lower classes may initiate conversations with the lower classes, particularly with itinerant salesmen. He warns that veiled upper-class women are more prone than unveiled women to mix with women who are ‘ignorant of their roots, their background, or their condition’ (Amin, 1995: 55). Amin’s programme for imitating colonial norms together with the imperative to minimise contact between the upper and lower classes further substantiates the Cromerian genealogy attributed to him by Ahmed.

**Hijab and class hierarchies**

From the perspective of the history of capital, it is of interest that Amin’s emphasis on the veil’s class character assumes its ancient political function as a tool for
naturalising sexual difference even as it inverts the veil’s form. While Amîn calls for the unveiling of upper-class women in order to prevent their association with the lower classes, ancient Assyrian law forbade peasant women, slaves, and prostitutes from wearing the veil, and punished violators of this interdiction (El-Guindi, 1999: 11). Whereas the Assyrian, Byzantine, and Persian Sassanian empires reserved veiling for women of the upper class, under the modernist dispensation, class distinctions are preserved when the upper classes choose not to veil. In both scenarios, the female body is made to serve as a marker of class difference. Both scenarios demonstrate that women’s oppression traverses fault lines of class as well as of race and geography. But even more to the point, both usages treat the veil as an empty signifier, the meaning of which is realised when it sharpens distinctions among social classes. As a discriminator among differences of gender and class, the veil fabricates equivalences that facilitate its circulation in the marketplace of desire. The exchange ratios that animate commodity forms, Marx notes, appear ‘accidental and purely relative’ (1906: 43). Hence, the veil’s relative value is conditioned by inequities of class and gender.

Although the veil is frequently considered by its contemporary proponents to represent the core of Islamic teachings, the Qur’ân is notoriously ambiguous on the question of veiling. Historical research has demonstrated that early Muslims adopted veiling from conquered peoples, including Christian societies, whose women followed dress codes now associated exclusively with Islam (de Vaux, 1935). As in the Arabic and Persian traditions generally, hijab signifies in the Qur’ân in many different, and mutually conflicting, ways, only one of which corresponds to the head covering (while hijab refers to both the face veil and the veil that covers only the hair and neck, in the Qur’ân, and most pre-twentieth-century writings, the former is the operative meaning). One of the basic proof texts for contemporary injunctions on veiling is from sûra al-Ahzâb (‘The Confederates’) (33: 59), addressed to the prophet Muhammad and his family:

O Prophet! Tell Thy wives and daughter and the believing women
That they should cast their outer garments over
Their persons [when abroad]: That is most convenient,
That they should be known [as such] and not molested.

An even more comprehensive Qur’ânic discussion of veiling occurs in sûra al-Nûr, which enjoins believing men (al-mû‘menîn) to ‘lower their gaze and guard their modesty’ (24: 30). I was exposed to an interesting perspective on this Qur’ânic injunction during a leisurely walk near the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art with Fatima, an Iranian friend whom I met at a conference on Islamic values sponsored by al-Mustafa University. Fatima chose to wear the chador. She explained her relationship to this proof text when I solicited her opinion about veiling regulations. Fatima pointed out that only after male Muslims are instructed to guard (yahfâzû) their modesty does the text turn its attention to the appropriate behaviour for believing women (al-mû‘menat). In the sentence that
follows and duplicates the injunction delivered to men, believing women are told to ‘lower their gaze and guard their modesty’ (24: 31). The only difference between the two injunctions lies in their grammatical agreement with the male and female gendered nouns. In all other respects, the terms for lowering the gaze and preserving one’s modesty are identical. Fatima pointed to this nuance by way of demonstrating that the injunction to modesty delivered in the Qur’ān is made without discrimination along the lines of gender.

Although this Qur’ānic parallelism suggests an initial equivalence between the veiling requirements imposed on men and women, the emphasis in recent times has only been on mandating the veiling of women, while the Qur’ānic injunction for men to lower their eyes and guard their modesty has been relegated to the realm of individual choice. Scholarship on the rapid adaptation of European styles of dress by male Muslims during the colonial period suggests that the Qur’ānic injunction for men and women to veil may have been applied more equitably before colonial modernity, when men and women tended to dress conservatively to equal degrees (Hoodfar, 1997: 253). Alongside dress codes, wealth was managed more evenly across gender lines in Islamic societies before colonialism.

According to Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, centralised governmental institutions in British-occupied Egypt were ‘sustained by foreign ideas of the frivolous nature of women’ and caused women to be ‘peripheralized in the nineteenth century’ (al-Sayyid Marsot, 1996: 47). Economically marginalised Egyptian women ‘only recovered some of the economic activities they had had in the eighteenth century in the twentieth century’ (al-Sayyid Marsot, 1996: 47). In Egypt and elsewhere throughout the Islamic world, the veil facilitated women’s autonomy when it accompanied their forays into the public sphere. While retaining many of these earlier significations, the colonial encounter inscribed the Islamic veil with a new set of meanings and implications. In societies that legislate mandatory veiling, a double standard with respect to dressing – a standard that has no Qur’ānic precedent – prevails in contemporary Muslim-majority societies, including Iran.

Drawing attention to this double standard, Ziba Mir-Hosseini asks whether the hijab can be discussed ‘in terms of an ethical and personal choice for women’ in the same way that it is treated in practice with respect to men (Mir-Hosseini, 1999: 94). Relatively, the clearly metaphorical usage of terms for veiling has led Homa Hoodfar to conclude that, contrary to the prevalent assumption that the Qur’ān sanctions veiling, this practice is ‘nowhere specifically recommended or even discussed in the Qur’ān’ (Hoodfar, 1997: 251). Without denying that an argument for veiling can be deduced from the Qur’ān, it is evident that the Iranian state has failed to apply the Qur’ānic precepts regarding appropriate dress equitably across the gender divide. Until the Qur’ānic injunction to lower the gaze is equalised across genders, Barlas’ complaint that the compulsory hijab displaces the ‘sexual misconduct of Jāḥili men [on]to believing female bodies’ will resonate with accuracy (Barlas, 2002: 56).

As troubling as the compulsory status of the veil in contemporary Iranian society are the ways in which the task of maintaining the ‘hijab regime’ is allocated to
fathers, brothers, boyfriends, and male acquaintances while it is only indirectly imposed on women. One secular Iranian friend named Ahmad detailed the challenges he faced while merely speaking in public spaces with his long-term girlfriend. He told of a particular incident when he pulled his car over in order to discuss with his girlfriend where to spend their day together. Suddenly, a police car parked next to him. The policeman got out and ordered Ahmad to follow him to the police station. Luckily, in this instance he was able to evade a trip to the station by paying a bribe.

On a second occasion Ahmad was not so lucky, perhaps because his girlfriend’s hijab happened to be less than adequate that day. When a policeman saw his girlfriend’s face reflected in a mirror, he told Ahmad to pull over. The policeman insisted that he surrender all documents testifying to his ownership of his car, and would not accept a bribe in exchange. He then asked for his driver’s licence. Ahmad had no choice but to hand his licence over. He expected that his documents would be immediately returned. Instead, the officer informed him that he would only be able to retrieve them if, in two months’ time, he visited an office on the outskirts of Tehran and signed a contract promising that he would never again allow a misveiled woman to travel in his company. The most interesting aspect of this incident is that the officer never confronted the misveiled girl with her ‘crime’. She was expected to remain silent during the duration of Ahmad’s interrogation. When I asked Ahmad whether it was common to punish men for associating with misveiled women, he estimated that eighty per cent of the time when a misveiled woman was caught by the morality police in a man’s company her male companion was reprimanded, while the woman was ignored.11

In contemporary Iran, as in other societies that legislate mandatory veiling, the circulation of male authority is reinforced through the compulsory hijab. Rather than critiquing this somewhat familiar manifestation of patriarchy, which is more of a constant than an anomaly, my aim is to understand how a practice that has been commodified by capitalism can be reclaimed as a site of women’s agency. Before that possibility is assayed, however, we need to explore more thoroughly the intersection of male authority and the authority of the nation-state.

**The hijab and male authority**

Nāsif’s critique of Qāsim Amīn’s programme for women’s unveiling as just another iteration of paternalistic despotism eloquently testifies that unveiling campaigns can be as oppressive with respect to women as can veiling campaigns. As if in imitation of Cromerian-style coercion, the Iranian government perpetuates the paternalistic legacy of prescribing female dress codes by consolidating male authority within the public sphere through the mandatory hijab. This section considers how the veil consolidates male authority while also constituting it as a commodity in the marketplace of male desire. While it can be argued with respect to regimes that do not legislate the hijab that ‘Islamic commodification’ strengthens ‘an individualised form of Islam’ that makes ‘established institutions . . . less influential
than they once were’, the status of the commodity form is radically different in a society, such as the Islamic Republic of Iran, where the hijab is legally required (Fealy, 2008: 16). While the veil has historically been one of the most important and varied elements of women’s wardrobe, and as conducive to freedom as to constriction, the hijab-as-commodity is a fundamentally modern object that stimulates heterosexual desire in the act of rendering it as forbidden. This tactic of enforcing the hijab regime through male authority that elicited Ahmad’s complaints is paralleled by Algerian veiling practices. Anne-Emmanuelle Berger asks whether it is merely a paradox that women wearing the hijab become ‘undifferentiated among themselves… in order to secure their difference from men’ (Berger, 1998: 108). She illustrates how, in both the Islamic and European public spheres, differences among women are erased and suppressed even as their genetically feminine status is accentuated. On Berger’s account, engendering through veiling homogenises the female body in such a way that it renders women visible to men in what is seen as the only appropriately ‘Islamic’ fashion.

Within the legal and discursive space of regimes that mandate women’s veiling, women can only be represented as collective antitheses to the lower classes, to non-believers, and to men. Individualising representations of women are seen as a threat to homogeneous gender segregation. Within the space of this gendering process, women who hide ‘their lack or excess behind the hijab’ (Berger, 1998: 108) make themselves visible – homogeneously – by covering themselves. Rather than erasing women from the field of the male gaze, the male-authorised hijab assigns women a permanent place in the male specular hierarchy. From this perspective, the only major difference between capitalist commodification and compulsory veiling is that in the first instance women are interpellated into the patriarchal regime through male desire while in the second instance they are interpellated through male authority.

Drawing on Antonio Gramsci’s scattered reflections concerning the ambiguities of the state’s hegemony, Louis Althusser famously distinguished between repressive state apparatuses such as prisons and police, which function through violence, and ideological state apparatuses, which rely predominantly on persuasion to achieve their hegemonic ends (Althusser, 1970: 3–38). The hijab-as-commodity fulfils both roles. The interpellating process that constitutes citizens as subjects takes place in Althusser’s account primarily through ideological state apparatuses such as the church, the school, the family, the law, political parties, trade unions, and the media. Because Althusser’s schema was formulated to elucidate a bourgeois social order that naturalises the dichotomy between public and private (prive) (1970: 13), the distinction between repressive and ideological state apparatuses must be adapted to the distinctive shape of the political in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Of the seven institutions Althusser identifies as ideological state apparatuses in bourgeois European democracies, only the law for Althusser does double duty as an ideological state apparatus and as a repressive state apparatus tied to governmentality (le droit, 1970: 13, n. 9). In the Islamic Republic of Iran, however, where secular law is subordinate to and an extension of shari’a, religion does
double duty as an ideological as well as a repressive state apparatus. While, here as elsewhere, ‘the individual is interpellated as a (free) subject’ (Althusser, 1970: 36), the individual’s freedom is also interpellated by the state through the material conditions of social coexistence. Thus, in the Islamic Republic of Iran, the official state religion interpellates individuals as subjects of the state through the imposition of compulsory veiling. Practices regarded in other contexts as matters of purely personal piety are thereby placed squarely within the force field of the nation-state’s sovereignty.

As commodities, the hijab and its variants (chador, niqāb, burqa) equalise differences both in the way women relate to their bodies and in the way in which they are objectified. This homogenisation is reflected also in the way the hijab is made to authorise and stimulate male heteroerosexual desire. Iranian feminist Afsaneh Najmabadi rejects what could provisionally be called the ‘suppressive’ thesis of justification for the veil. The suppressive school, which is most in evidence among society’s legislators and least in evidence among women activists who choose to veil, holds that the hijab purifies relations between men and women, and erases any taint of sexual tension in cross-gender encounters. The suppressive thesis assumes that the veil’s primary purpose is to control male heteroerosexual desire, thereby promulgating a “natural, inborn” heterosexuality – something that classical Islamic thought did not assume’ (Najmabadi, 2005a). Concurrently with Najmabadi, Khaled El-Rouayheb (2005) and Joseph Massad (2007: 51–98) have documented the fluidity of the boundaries between homosexuality and heterosexuality in Islamic societies before colonial modernity. This new generation of scholarship collectively suggests that the suppressive thesis represents a modern reading of the hijab, more indebted to Victorian sexual norms than of Islamic law. Along similar lines, the Moroccan intellectual Abdelkebir Khatibi has argued that sexual difference is at most a secondary matter from the Qur’ānic point of view, and that its significance pales in comparison to the distinction between believer and non-believer (Khatibi, 1983: 170).

One terrain for the working out of conceptions of gender difference within the Islamic Republic of Iran is the state’s handling of its transgendered citizens. While the high rates of sex-change operations in Iran can be read as ‘an indicator that Iran promotes heterosexuality and will go to any length to do so’, Imam Khomeini’s famous fatwa (legal ruling) legitimating such operations yields multiple meanings (Khumainī, [1387] 1967: vol. 2, pp. 735–755). That the Iranian state subsidises the second highest number of sex changes per capita in the world minimally implies a recognition that Islam permits a contravention of the ‘natural’ order. This in turn casts doubt on the suppressive thesis as an explanation for the necessity of wearing the hijab, since, even if it is ‘natural’ for male sexual desire to interrupt the social order, this does not mean that the natural order should be allowed to dominate. A licence for turning against nature is already written into the Iranian state’s policies with respect to transgender, even when the natural order is contradictorily invoked to justify the hijab.
To elucidate the engendering of women that attends these forms of acculturation, Berger invokes Luce Irigaray’s hypothesis that women’s alienation stems ‘not so much from their social reduction to some biologically determined function but from their enrollment in a monological and prescriptive symbolic order’ which reproduces itself through ‘their erasure or self-effacing complicity’ (Berger, 1998: 105). It is less the reduction of women to their bodies that sustains women’s oppression as the prescriptive homogenisation imposed on their bodies. Such impositions categorically exclude a space for sexual difference within female sexuality. Sexual duality is monologically projected on to the male/female binary while it is denied to women individually. While men are also homogenised by this system, the non-compulsory nature of male sartorial modesty means that the state’s interpellation of the body is less coercive for men than it is for women.

In contrast to veiling in contemporary Syria, Egypt, and Turkey, veiling in Iranian society applies to all women regardless of their religious beliefs, their Islamic identity or lack thereof, and their status as citizens or foreigners. One reason for this differential application of veiling regulations across the Islamic world is that, until 2011, Egypt, Syria, and Turkey were ruled by regimes wherein coercive secularism clashed with and frequently trumped the broader population’s religious values.

As elsewhere in the Islamic world, twentieth-century Egypt’s coercive secularism with respect to the veil was the effort of many factions, including the state and its liberal institutions. During the same years that the secular Egyptian government came to regard Islamic dress ‘as an overt display of politics, and even a threat’ to its existence, the American University of Cairo (AUC) issued a telling, and, in its own way, coercive, prohibition on wearing the hijab to all of its students and faculty (Herrera, 2001: 17). Issued by the AUC administration almost exactly a decade before the 2011 revolution, the email read like an ultimatum: ‘A liberal arts education requires dialogue and intellectual interaction with colleagues and with other members of the University community. Face veiling inhibits this interaction. Students who choose to cover the face should seek another type of education.’

In light of such dictates from the state and its liberal apparatuses, the era of Cromer and Amin seemed to have come full circle: in 1900, as in 2001, women were denied the right to choose how they dress. The circle that long appeared closed has now been opened by the Arab Spring. Given that it is now possible for Egyptian women to wear the veil without fear of negative repercussions from the state, it will be interesting to see how the politics of veiling is itself changed. Will new possibilities arise for the veil to function as a material means for women to express their agency from within the midst of capitalism, or will the hijab-as-commodity dominate all forms of public expression?

Many Muslim women who chose to veil would likely agree with the Muslim-American Haida Mubarak, former president of the largest student association of Muslims in the United States. ‘It is ultimately each woman’s prerogative to decide whether or not she will cover her hair’, Mubarak declares, ‘No one – not a father, husband, or brother – can ever force a woman to cover against her will. For that in
fact violates the Quranic spirit of “let there be no compulsion in religion” (Qur’an 2: 256) (Mubarak, 2007). Mubarak’s citation from the Qur’an signals a new direction in the exegesis of 2: 256 (lā ikrāh fī al-dīn), a verse more commonly read within the framework of confessional difference to say that ‘all citizens in the Islamic state constitute one political ummah, although they may belong to a plurality of religious affiliations’ (Abu-Rabi, 2004: 214). While Mubarak’s reading of the Qur’anic injunction against coercion (ikrāh can be translated as compulsion or coercion) to contest the mandatory veil marks a relatively new moment in the history of Qur’anic hermeneutics, it is not inconsistent with Islamic teachings. This new interpretation of a much-studied phrase appears to be gaining traction, particularly among Arab-American women.

Veiling as commodity form

The difference made by veiling in capitalist modernity, as contrasted with earlier circulations of commodities, is that it has been interpellated, along with women’s bodies, into the capitalist world-system. This commodification of the female body pertains as much to misveiling and unveiling as to veiling. These practices structurally converge in the commodity form, whereby ‘Muslims selectively consume “Islamic” products from an expanding spiritual marketplace’ (Fealy, 2008: 16). Under the leadership of Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989–1997), the Islamic Republic of Iran’s fourth president, capitalism transformed contemporary Iranian society, prompting one observer to note that, aside from the ubiquitous veiling of women’s faces and bodies, ‘Iran seems less Islamic than it used to’ under the Shah (Sadeghi, 2008: 251). The policies of later Iranian leaders have similarly contributed to the capitalist commodification of the female body in the name of Islam.

In 2008, the governor of Tehran Province organised a series of fashion shows that included models parading ‘like their European counterparts in high-heeled shoes and colorfully patterned dresses’. Reflecting on this paradoxical commercialisation of the female body within an Islamic republic, Haideh Moghissi asks ‘for whom’ such alluring dresses are displayed, when veiled women ‘are constantly harassed in the streets by morality police and have to oversee self-created modesty standards’ (Moghissi, 2009: 67). Even as it violates women’s autonomy and consolidates male authority, compulsory veiling assimilates female modesty into capitalism’s political economy. When it takes the form of commodification, resistance to the veil within this system is as much a product of women’s subjugation as is submission to the hijab regime.

The ‘retreat of ideology and the commodification of many aspects of life’ (Sadeghi, 2008: 253) that commentators have observed in contemporary Iran has generated disenchantment with collective goals, especially among the younger generation. With the space for political action already neutralised by capitalism, mis-veiling is frequently driven less by resistance to state coercion than by a woman’s desire to co-opt her body into a capitalist system that, in rendering her as a
commodity, thereby ensures her desirability to male spectators. This tendency of capital to co-opt misveiling for the purpose of commodifying women’s bodies undermines the contention of the suppressive thesis that veiling erases sexual tension between men and women. It also challenges the view that the figure of the bad-hijabi (misveiled woman) demonstrates the incompleteness of the Islamic Republic’s subjugation of women. Whereas some feminists argue that the middle-class misveiled woman who draws attention to her body by ‘draping a roosari [scarf] around her head in creative ways, teasing out a lock of dyed blonde hair, wearing various shades of lipstick and sporting fashionably tailored manteaus’ enacts resistance to the state, the bad-hijabi woman, like the hijabi woman, is a site for the female body’s commodification (Naghibi, 1999: 569). She demonstrates in the flesh how the Islamic Republic of Iran has managed to co-opt even the idiom of resistance by assimilating it into the capitalist world-system. Far from being liberated, the fashionably dressed, misveiled woman is as much a product of patriarchy as are her more modestly veiled sisters.

The problem is not then with veiling as such but rather with the coercive capitalism within which veiling is embedded. Within the capitalist system, as Marx perceived, exchange value acquires priority over use value, such that things that are not needed become as desirable as those that serve demonstrable needs. In the process of being incorporated into the capitalist system, the veil finds ways to stimulate sexual desire, as can be seen from the Egyptian women interviewed by Arlene Elowe Macleod in the late 1980s. The turn to the veil, these interviewees suggested, represented a fashion trend more than a resurgence of piety. One woman to whom the question of Egyptian women’s turn to the veil was posed explained: ‘I don’t know why fashions change in this way... one day everyone wears dresses and even pants. I even wore a bathing suit when I went to the beach...then suddenly we are all wearing this on our hair!’ (Macleod, 1991: 112–113; also see Herrera, 2001). Although they no doubt only tell the side of the story that a secular western observer was most likely to hear, such responses expose the veil as a commodity suffused by exchange value more than use value: purely relational in meaning and conditioned by political and historical circumstances.

Whereas use values correspond to needs unmediated by economies of exchange, exchange values are generated by the market. The exchange value dimension to the commodity form crucially structures the hijab-as-commodity. The hijab-as-commodity transposes use values into exchange values, rendering these values exclusively in terms of their relations to other objects. The homogeneity of the state-mandated veil, together with its equalising effect, is an important aspect of the positive impact its proponents claim that the hijab regime has on the representation of women generally. Indeed, one of the points most frequently adduced in favour of the hijab by Islamists such as Sayyid Abul A’la Maududi is that it equalises differences among women and helps them concentrate on their primary function of bearing children (Maududi, n.d.: 209).

Within the capitalist system, the veil functions analogously to a sexy bathing suit: both articles of clothing render the woman’s body up for consumption,
smoothing out differences into simulacra of sameness. As Marx documented in meticulous detail, commodities are always in flux because their value is always relational. Inasmuch as the very substance of commodities is constituted by consumption, neither their substance nor their meanings can be stabilised. Reading the hijab-as-commodity as a fashion statement shows how it is permeated by capitalist norms that instead of relating to commodities as values in themselves read them in relation to their ability to gratify ephemeral desires. From this perspective, state-mandated veiling and capitalist commodification of the female body belong to the same patriarchal project of co-opting women’s agency, marking out female difference publicly and ineradicably, and reinforcing male authority.

According to at least one study, Iranian girls who vigilantly practise state-mandated veiling – labelled *chadori* regardless of whether they wear the chador or another kind of body covering – are more prepared to defend their freedom than are misveiled girls who engage in premarital sexual relations. In subjecting young girls to male sexual prerogatives, the latter deny female agency even more effectively than the hijab regime. As one chador-wearing girl stated when asked what she would do if made to choose between hijab and personal progress, ‘In that case, I would choose my progress, not veiling’ (Sadeghi, 2008: 257).

Notwithstanding their vigilance in veiling in Iranian society, when asked whether they would continue to wear the chador in societies that did not value or mandate veiling, many chador-wearing girls said that they would discard their chadors and switch to the less burdensome hijab. These historical and cultural nuances demonstrate that the veil’s significance is utterly contingent, the combined result of a complex constellation of legal norms, social expectations, and personal beliefs. Even for specific women, its meaning varies according to specific social contexts. While misveiling is not evidently or necessarily rooted in a rebellion against religion or even against the state, wearing the chador can be an assertion of autonomy as well as of piety. Indeed, it might be argued that within a hijab regime that participates in the capitalist system, wearing the veil does more to further a woman’s freedom than rebelling against it.

**Unveiling as coercion**

The alignment between veiling and coercion is certainly not restricted to movements that have supported the mandatory veiling of women. Anti-veiling and veiling campaigns converge in terms of their violence against women’s bodies. Many scholars have observed the similarities between Reza Shah Pahlavi’s anti-veiling measures and the parallel counter-moves mandated by the Islamic Republic in the 1980s. Historians of the Iranian women’s movement have noted that the brutality of Reza Shah’s anti-veiling campaign contributed to the ‘Islamist backlash of the 1940s and eventually the Islamic Revolution of 1979’ which made veiling compulsory (Najmabadi, 2000: 36). The colonial underpinnings of the Shah’s
anti-veiling campaigns are reflected in the language of a mandate issued in the 1930s by the Pahlavi monarchy, enjoining women to clothe themselves in the *libas-i tajaddud-i nisvan* (clothes of women’s modernity) and the *libas-i tamaddun* (clothes of civilisation) (Ja‘farī, Ismā‘īl’zādah and Farrashchī, [1371] 1992–3: 105, 148). Among its many detrimental effects, the 1936 ban on the chador opened up ‘an unbridgeable chasm’ among women who favoured veiling and women who were opposed to it (Najmabadi, 2000: 39). As of old, the veil consolidated class divides as well as gender difference. Girls who refused to unveil or whose guardians refused to allow them to do so were withdrawn from schools and educated at home. Working class women for whom unveiling was the equivalent of public nudity were compelled to leave their jobs and spend the rest of their lives confined to domestic spaces.23

Notwithstanding secular democracy’s presumed neutrality towards religion and support of female autonomy, the impulse to manage women’s bodies through the veil ramifies far beyond the Islamic world. The same Tehran-based conference that introduced me to Fatima and her feminist reading of the Qur’ān introduced me to the discrimination women who choose to wear the hijab face in the secular United Kingdom. One of the most active conference participants was a British convert to Islam who had worn the hijab since her conversion thirteen years earlier. For eleven out of thirteen of those years, although she had a PhD from a leading UK university, she had been teaching at an Islamic college in London, in part because this visible expression of her religious faith made it difficult for her to find an academic position elsewhere. She told of how, when she was on the staff of an academic journal dedicated to the study of Islam, she had been forced out of her position by two of the journal’s female secular editors who were opposed to working with converts, and particularly with female converts who wore the hijab. The only women who could wear the hijab legitimately in the opinion of the editors of this Islamic studies journal were ‘native’ Muslims, whose veiling practices could be rationalised as the extension of a cultural custom. While women born into Islam who wore the hijab could be conveniently marginalised as other, non-native hijab wearers were regarded as a threat from within, either to be treated with polite disdain, or to be actively opposed.24

One of the paradoxical effects generated by the ideological state apparatus is its introduction of a false consciousness that promotes the illusion of objectivity. ‘Those who are in ideology’, Althusser postulates, ‘believe themselves by definition outside ideology’ (1970: 32). Ideology is characterised by its ability to induce its adherents to mask their beliefs in the form of objective claims about their external worlds. This results in a condition wherein ‘ideology has no outside for itself’, while at the same time, and in seeming contradiction to the first premise, ‘it is nothing but outside’ (Althusser, 1970: 32). The ideology that claims to reject that which is outside itself while being entirely subsumed within finds a parallel in non-Muslim-majority societies such as France, the United Kingdom, and the United States, where legislators and media commentators condemn the veil as incompatible with gender equality and then surreptitiously discriminate against women who
wear it. Many who support legislation and other forms of discrimination against the veil claim to speak from ideologically neutral positions, including a secular liberalism that fetishises tolerance as the basis of its social order. That these commentators are themselves implicated in a capitalist system that has already licensed the commodification of women’s bodies belies the putative neutrality of their critiques.

This analysis has shown that the veil has functioned historically as an empty signifier, and has been deployed equally for the ends of women’s liberation as for their oppression. The crucial question is not whether or not a woman chooses to veil, but whether the choice to veil is forced on her by the state. Additionally, it has shown how state-mandated veiling partakes of the capitalist world-system, and how the female body is commodified when veiling is resisted just as it is commodified when veiling is mandated. Whereas the Islamic Republic of Iran consolidates male authority by making the hijab compulsory, secular democracies that discriminate against women who choose to veil draw on similar logics of power to extend the patriarchal mandate. Both forms of coercion subjugate women’s freedom to male desire. In the first instance, the suppression of this desire is made a condition for women’s purity. In the second instance, its arousal is made a condition for woman’s self-esteem. From the early modernity to the contemporary moment, the intersections of state power, capitalism, and agency have varied according to the power of the veil to realign these relations.

The foregoing critiques of veiling and unveiling have yet to consider in any detail how the hijab might signify in a political space where its deployment is subject neither to state regulation nor to the coercive male gaze. Although the invocation of such a political space is necessarily utopian, there are locations where veiling is actively being realised as a means for asserting women’s freedom, even today. I conclude by surveying some of the new political configurations enabled by the hijab when it is situated outside and against the state.

**Veiling, agency, freedom**

The arguments adduced thus far linking veiling and coercion do not apply to veiling in all societies, Islamic or otherwise, nor do they apply to all women in any given society. Focussing on contemporary Iran, I have concentrated largely on the negative consequences of coercive veiling and on the interface between state-mandated veiling and capitalist commodification. But it would be false to suggest that Islamic modernity accommodates only one reading of the veil. Indeed, as Hoodfar notes, even when the veil functioned as a tool of patriarchy, ‘women have used the same social institution to free themselves from the bonds of patriarchy’ (1997: 249). They have reinscribed the veil’s meanings by using it to give themselves greater, rather than less, visibility, and by politicising its significations. Such reinscriptions illustrate how the meanings of the hijab are as variable and variegated as is the cloth from which it is woven.
Ahmed in particular has shown how, among Muslim women who choose to veil in American society, the hijab functions as a way of expressing political solidarity with Muslims around the world suffering from American imperialism, and as a language for defining women’s autonomy against the postcolonial state. Ahmed notes that the meanings she adduces for the Islamic veil in America ‘are meanings that the hijab can come to have only in societies that declare themselves committed to gender equality and equality for minorities. They are not meanings that the hijab could possibly have in Cairo or Karachi or Riyadh or Tehran’ (Ahmed, 2011: 214).

At the same time, even in nominally liberal societies, Muslim women who seek to inscribe progressive meanings on to the veil face considerable resistance from imperialistic assumptions, pervasive throughout the United States and Europe, concerning the lack of women’s agency in Islamic states and societies.

Although the changing political landscape of the Middle East may mean that Cairo can become a site for a veiling practice that Ahmed would be willing to align with women’s agency, her distinctions compel, particularly given the way group ideologies and statist discourses impinge on personal freedom. The veil can be liberating for individual women in Karachi or Riyadh, but it cannot be liberating for women collectively so long as they are coerced to veil by the state. In a similar vein, Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad reports on Muslim-American activists who describe wearing the hijab as a way to waken American consciousness about the Islamic world, and therefore as a political act. ‘If they do not wear the hijab’, one Muslim-American leader asked, ‘how will Americans recognize that there are American Muslims?’ (Haddad, 2007: 254). Meanwhile, in Canadian society, ‘many Muslim women have taken up the veil . . . to assert the identity and existence of a confident Muslim community and to demand fuller social and political recognition’ (Hoodfar, 1997: 271). In the instances cited by Ahmed and Haddad, women’s liberation is intertwined with a cross-gendered commitment to the broader community. Without denying the feminist implications of wearing the veil in these non-Muslim-majority contexts, such practices derive their meaning in part from a political project that reaches beyond gender.

The Muslim-American Haida Mubarak, who, as seen above, invoked the Qur‘ānic axiom that there is no compulsion in religion to contest compulsory veiling, has also critiqued Saudi Arabia’s mandatory niqāb on the grounds that it strips ‘women of their agency to decide what to wear and how to wear it’ (Mubarak, 2009). Speaking out against France’s similarly coercive legislation against the burqa, Mubarak asserts: ‘Whether French women wear spaghetti-strap tank tops and shorts or long dresses and headscarves is none of the state’s business. What women wear in public should be left to their discretion – not the discretion of the President or the Parliament or any other man’. Like Malak Hifni Nāsif’s critique of Qāsim Amin’s patriarchal reformism with which this article began, Mubarak’s polemic suggests how veiling can advance the cause of women’s liberation. At present, however, some of the most substantial impediments to the achievement of freedom and autonomy for women are posed by the legal regulations currently in place in secular democracies and Islamic republics
alike, whereby men are authorised to determine how women should dress and to punish those who have the courage to disobey.

Notes
1. I take this tripartite definition of the commodity’s function from Harvey (2010: 16).
2. For this moniker, see inter alia Pollard (2005: 153).
3. For state-sponsored veiling practices in antiquity, see Shirazi (2001: 3).
4. On this point, Nikki Keddie states: ‘Although Islamic traditions say veiling and seclusion for all Muslim women are in the Quran, this is a tendentious reading’ (1991: 4).
5. For Qur’anic citations, I use ‘Alī (1899).
6. With the exception of public figures and authors, all names of my Iranian interlocutors have been altered.
7. Although she herself chose to wear the chador, Fatima stated that she was opposed to the compulsory hijab. She noted that men who fail to uphold the Qur’anic injunction to lower their gaze and preserve their shame are sinning against Islam to the same extent as are women who fail to uphold these injunctions.
8. The sequence of these clauses has been altered in my citation.
9. For approaches to the hijab that diverge from the suppressive school, see the final section of this article. I devote the bulk of my attention to the suppressive thesis because it is most frequently used to justify coercive veiling in contemporary Iran.
10. For a more detailed account of how ‘gender as a binary has since become a template for categories of modern sexuality’ in Iranian modernity, see Najmabadi (2005b: 3).
11. For coercive secularism in Turkey, see Yavuz (2011: 158).
20. For some ethnographically grounded examples, see Cainkar (2009: 250–251).
22. Sadeghi’s conclusion that chadori women are not in any evident way less committed to their own self-advancement than are misveiled women correlates with the findings of Imache and Nour for Islamic women in Algeria who choose to dress conservatively (Imache and Nour, 1994: 81).
24. Hoodfar, however, reports the exact opposite reception in contemporary Canada. In her fieldwork, native-born women were more likely to be targeted for wearing the veil than were foreign converts (1997: 270).

References


