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***Narratives of Power and Subjection: Representations of
the Veil in Selected Works by Muslim Women Novelists***

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“All praise is due to Allah alone, the One with whose blessings and grace all good deeds can be completed”

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Preface

The veil was known in many nations before Islam. . It is as old as the Assyrian laws which dictate that daughters, wives and widows have to wear a veil on their faces and that prostitutes have to be punished if seen wearing a veil (Driver, G.R. et al). Veiling was common in Jewish as well as Christian traditions. For instance, in the Old Testament, the book of genesis reports that when Rebecca saw Isaac she veiled herself "And she said to the servant, "Who is that man walking in the field towards us?" And the servant said, "He is my master." And she took the veil and covered herself." Genesis 24:65. In Christian scriptures also, there are many references to veiling. For instance, in Corinthians 11:5 we read "And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered, dishonors her head, for it is just as if her head were shaved". It is also widely perceived that in all her representations the Virgin Mary wears a veil.

Before Islam, the veil was known as *mandīl/mindīl*, *qinā*, *lithām*, *burqu'* and *naṣīf*, in early Islamic period it was referred to as *Khimar*, *idnaa'*. In modern ages across many Arab countries, the face veil was referred to as *milāya* and *burqu'* in Egypt, a *sifsāri* in Tunisia and Lybia, *ḥāyik*, *milhafa*, *fūṭa*, *izār*, and *takhlila* in Morocco and Algeria, and *yashmak* in Turkey. The face veil was then abandoned with varying degrees in different Arab countries for the sake of a Western dress code which was common among upper class women who replaced their veils with hats or *hijāb/tarha*, then dropped their veils off altogether. As a reaction to secular oppressive regimes, Islamic political parties began to appear, and the headscarf started to be common again among middle class educated women. Throughout the dissertation the word "veiling," rather than the word "*hijāb*," is used to refer to different kinds of veiling because I think it is more comprehensive than the word "*hijāb*" which refers to a specific kind of

head covering. This choice is also meant to write back to the colonial use of the word "*hijāb*" often associated to backwardness and oppression.

The present dissertation aims at investigating the relationship between Islamic veiling on the one hand, and power or subjection on the other through a detailed analysis of seven novels written by prominent Muslim female writers. The novels under investigation are written in three different languages; Arabic, English and French. Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006) and Ahdaf Soueif's *The Map of Love* (1999) are written in English. Assia Djebar's *Ombre Sultane* (A Sister to Scheherazade) (1987) and Emna Belhaj Yahia's *Jeux de Rubans* (Games of Ribbons) (2011) are written in French. And finally, Hadya Said's *Hijāb Kashif* (2008), Maysalun Hadi's *Zainab, Mary and Yasmeen* (2012) and Maya Al Haj's *Burkini: I'tirāfāt Muḥajjaba* (2014) are written in Arabic. Since I believe that language and culture are two sides of the same coin, I

assumed that studying the veil in three different languages/cultures will provide a panoramic view of the relationship between veiling and power. These novels are specifically chosen because they offer fresh representations of the veiling phenomenon. The majority of previous fictional literature about the veil confines it to the contours of a stereotypical vision. However, these novels, offer new horizons of portrayal that allow for seeing the veil from a new complex perspective.

It is also important to note that this dissertation does not aim at designating the different writers' personal stances towards the veil. Instead, it attempts at reaching conclusions through textual analysis which takes into consideration the perspectives of the women in the novels under study. Character analysis as well as plot development are key elements in discovering and delineating the relationship between veiling/unveiling and power/subjection.

In order to arrive at conclusions on whether the veiled women in each novel are powerful or subjugated, chapter one offers a set of parameters, which I call power parameters. For the sake of focus and clarity, the analysis in each chapter will depend on the power parameter(s) which is most relevant to the novels dealt with in this specific chapter. This is meant to highlight different facets of power/subjection in the seven selected texts in which veiling constitutes a dilemma.

Before introducing the topic, the chapterization, and the approach to analyze each novel, it is important to clarify some ideas about word choice, use of Arabic words or acronyms, translations and transliteration. Arabic/French words/acronyms will always appear in italics, and if an explanation of their meanings is needed it will be provided as an endnote. The reference to Qur'anic verses mention the number of the surah followed by a colon then the number of the verse itself. References to prophetic sayings do not

quote the whole *ḥadīth*, rather they are using the most important words which are relevant to the topic of discussion. An appendix of whole Qur'anic verses and ḥadīth is also provided at the back of the dissertation. Another appendix including a chart of the phonemic symbols used in transliteration will also be available. Translations of the meanings of the Qur'anic verses are all Yusuf Ali's, while the English version of all Prophetic sayings is taken from <http://sunnah.com>. All the translations/transliteration used in this dissertation are mine unless specified otherwise. Following the eighth edition of MLA, this dissertation uses the original language of any quotation followed by its translation.

Moreover, the dissertation will focus on the veil as a concept rather than on the veil as a religious obligation. Therefore, the analysis does not include the various interpretations of the Qur'anic verses or the Prophetic sayings (henceforth ḥadīth) which speak about the veil as a

religious obligation. Addressed as a phenomenon, the veiling practice is not present in a vacuum. It exists along with, affects and is being affected by social, political, economic and cultural factors. This will be highlighted in the fictional works studied in this dissertation.

The study begins with an overview of the notion of the female body in different feminist waves and a view of its immanent/transcendent status, a presentation of the Islamic Feminist point of view on veiling, as well as an overview of the widespread feminist stereotype that sees the veil as the emblem of women's oppression in Islam. Being linked to patriarchal oppression, sexual objectification, lack of agency and backwardness, the veil is examined as a narrative of power/powerlessness in this dissertation.

A detailed explanation of these stereotypes is presented along with a presentation of the possible reasons behind stereotyping the veil. The first of these is the

creation of a western discourse about veiled Muslim women. Using Foucault's definition of discourse gives room to find a correlation between the veil and power, which necessitates forging a special kind of discourse for representing Muslim women in general and veiled women in particular. Such discourse leads to normalizing the image of veiled women and thus, objectifying them and impelling them to act in accordance with western values. This can be read as a step towards western hegemony and control. Judging veiled women according to western values alone is a denial of these women's cultural diversity, their authenticity and their subjecthood. This tendency towards conformity could be viewed as another cause for the false representations of veiled women. Western humanist liberals call for wiping out any signal of peculiarity and difference, while ironically monopolizing the true essence of humanity. However, this same tendency appears to endorse practices of authenticity against those of liberal freedom:

External pressures to normalize modern subjects, in this case veiled women, are not the only forces that shape their authentic identities, which are viewed as an amalgam of innate personal characteristics as well as cultural norms, which results in creating unique authentic beings.

Chapter one presents two major lines of thought to prove that veiling is a power inducing practice. The first point of view offers religious evidence while the second presents a rational one. Through a detailed analysis of Qur'anic as well as sayings by Prophet Muhammed Peace be Upon Him (henceforth PBUH) which include conceptual references to the word veil, hijāb has been linked to notions of power in the first section.

Divided into five power parameters, the second section uses western theories to shed light on different aspects of power related to veiling. The five power parameters discuss ideas of subject constitution, subjective well-being, market power, anti-hegemony and anti-