

## The Hijab and Memory

Dina Hendawi

*Johns Hopkins University*

Aunt Mira is the youngest of six sisters. Although now an adult with two children of her own, she exudes a youthful charm that positively charges a room. She moves with swiftness, a sense of hilarity, as she rattles on in Arabic the tasks of the day. Central to her every moment are her girls. She attends to her daughters' education with the sagaciousness of one who had so few choices growing up. Ranya is studying to be a doctor. She graduated top of her class, achieved a result within the highest percentile on the Thanaweya Amma—the national examination known to dash dreams—and obtained entry into the medical division of Cairo University. Janine is more of a stargazer, unsure of what to pursue, but nevertheless settles into her studies with the same relentlessness as her sister. Aunt Mira checks on them, seeing what they need and conversing with them over the content of their studies. Although she does not fully understand the principles and concepts and pages upon pages of text that her daughters must mine, she engages so that they may practice their understanding out loud. They know what she means to do. Although their mother has never been quite “book smart,” she has always been in tune with a woman's relegated place in the world—and she does all she can to defy those circumstances.

I am visiting Cairo from New York and have spent a few nights in her home. I had just graduated from university and thought of spending some time with family before disappearing into that next chapter of adulthood that I had been told would be altogether uncertain and terrifying. Aunt Mira leaves the girls' room, depositing two cups of black tea and two bowls of rice pudding on their desks. The three of them had just finished a

rousing exchange in which her presence was a welcome respite from the day's scholarly work. She sees me across the way, sitting on her bed, and makes a running start before hurling herself beside me. We laugh together; that is what she always hopes for with us. We know each other so little, living worlds apart—geographically and linguistically—and yet she expedites our relationship-building by skating past decorum and delving instead into free follicking fun.

She asks about my individual pursuits first. What will I do next? Where will I work? What is it like to live alone? She then asks about marriage. Will I find an American man? Will he be Muslim? I answer every question as best I can with my sparing Arabic. Since graduating, I am unfortunately used to questions about marriage from my parents' Egyptian friends, but with Aunt Mira, I answer easily. She does not ask from a space of traditional expectation but rather from a place of curiosity. I tell her that the plan is not to worry so much about marriage—and she agrees. She married much too young, before she could decide who she would become. “Kha-leek,” she says, telling me to wait, then wrapping her arms around me.

She hops off the bed and says she has decided to try something different for once. She is wearing a sheer, indigo scarf, fitted to perfection on her head and framing her spectacular green eyes. With the agility of an illusionist, she removes the many pins that hold the scarf in place and lifts the material above her head: she is blond. She whips her head round and round like those American shampoo commercials she finds so silly and asks what I think. I tell her it is surprising, unexpected, given Egyptians are so rarely blond. I ask what her husband thinks. She sticks her tongue out and says: “ho-wa ma-gaboosh.” He thinks her zaniness now has a color to match. Nevertheless, she loves it, relishing her own private secret. She leaves her home each day, bargaining over every Cairene domestic affair, while concealing her youthful expression of choice. She returns later to reunite with herself as she knows herself to be: a rebel.

\* \* \*

IT IS DIFFICULT TO BELIEVE that a fabric, often soft to the touch, exacts a multiplicity of hard meanings for the Muslim woman who wears it on her head. This headscarf, a mere item of fashion, foists upon her a narrative of submission and voicelessness. She is “buried alive behind the veil.” She is “ignorant and degraded.” She is

“prisoner and slave.”<sup>1</sup> Living in America, this tale of Islamic oppression entered my consciousness in disparate patterns of thought. I saw Muslim women as represented on many screens: forlorn, timid, without agency. I then saw the Muslim women in my memory—vibrant, nurturing, loud and boisterous. I did of course know some quieter, less vocal Muslim women, but their silence was not necessarily rooted in despair but rather in their simpler exchange with life and their faith.

This clash of imagery had a way of dislodging me from my heritage. I was more American than I was Egyptian in the sense that English was my first language and my traditions were of trick-or-treating, yams on Thanksgiving, and even Christmas trees. I visited my parents’ childhood homes in Cairo with a sense of my own difference. In Egypt, I was American through and through. I dressed in the commercialized Western style of Old Navy and Converse. I spoke a strained Arabic, simultaneously endearing and ludicrous to the Middle Eastern ear. And while my features were without question Egyptian—dark complexion, brows, and eyes—I unknowingly exuded my Americanness through the way I looked at the world. Egyptians can intuit a foreigner the same way New Yorkers can sniff out an out-of-towner.

In America, I was always Egyptian first. It was not because I said so, but merely because I appeared different. I was not Latinx, White, Black, or Asian—I always had to check “Other” on official applications. And despite not identifying with religion as a significant spiritual driver of my life, I always responded to people’s curiosities of my faith with “I am Muslim.” I knew I was not being asked so much about my religion as much as I was being asked if I considered myself like “them Muslims” on the television. It was important that I answered with love for my mother and aunts, my father and brothers, to all the Muslims in my life. I was not, and still am not, a practicing Muslim—not because I object to being one, but because being Muslim for me was something much more meaningful. It was a commitment to the beautiful culture that raised me—and not to the sprawling terror splayed across American screens.

\* \* \*

---

<sup>1</sup> Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 154.

SEPTEMBER 11, 2001 was the day Muslims in America became visible. Before they occupied some “other” space, one in which they hovered between two worlds, widely unseen. It was that anguished day, though, when they came into stark focus. The media portrayed it as an easy premise: *all* were terrorists and *all* were Muslim. This wretched journalistic sensibility of human character suddenly materialized into the air as *All Muslims Are Terrorists*.

My cousin Zahra was visiting me during her spring break from university. She opted not to tell me beforehand that she put on the headscarf. Perhaps she wanted to witness my reaction before hearing my words of support. Maybe she knew I would be just as surprised, and even disconcerted, with the plethora of problems she would inherit. Perhaps I even had my own hang-ups as well and she knew that.

She looked amused at my studied expression. I was taking in this new sight of her.

“It was just as much a surprise to me as it is now to you,” she said before hugging me tightly.

This was a characteristic of hers that I always found uniquely endearing: she was a firm hugger for family and close girlfriends. She was a firm hand shaker with everyone else.

“How do you mean?”

“Well, I could not say a week before putting it on that I knew I would one day do it.”

I was still curiously examining this new exchange between the headscarf and her face. Her thick, curly, obsidian hair was a force of its own and had a way of muting her fair features. But with her hair all tucked away, her compassionate honey eyes were suddenly present—and so were the happy creases at the edges.

“So what made you decide to wear it?”

“It is hard to describe—especially with *you*.”

“Me? Why me?”

“...because you will judge me.”

I was startled and slightly hurt. I knew what she was insinuating. I stopped attending the mosque. I stopped fasting during Ramadan. And I was engaged to a white American man. Deeply implied in her toying accusation was her own judgment of me.

“No, I won’t Zahra.”

She stalled a moment before speaking.

“I lost a good friend last year. I didn’t tell you because—well, I didn’t tell anyone about him. We went to Stuyvesant together and he...”

Zahra then stalled. I waited for her to say what she needed to say.

“...he wanted to get serious.”

This was the first time Zahra ever mentioned a person of romantic interest in her life. She always seemed too self-sufficient and focused for matters of the heart.

“I thought about it, but then we had the ‘faith talk.’ I think he didn’t mean it the way he said it, but it was clear what he really felt. He said that he didn’t want to raise his kids Muslim with the way the world is right now.”

She waited for my response, but then went on.

“I just couldn’t be with someone who didn’t accept that part of me.”

I understood her perfectly. A person did not need to be religious to feel this way. Being a Muslim was not just about the practice of faith; it was also about identity.

“He was probably just trying to be protective.”

“I know—but I also knew I couldn’t have a real future with him.”

“And what about your hijab?”

“I wear it because it reflects how I feel on the inside—if that makes any sense.”

“Say no more. I get it. I am happy for you.”

I gave her a crushing hug—a dose of her own medicine—and she shoved me away with a laugh.

“And your mom—what does she say?”

“She hates it. She thinks it will ruin my chances for marriage.”

\* \* \*

THE HIJAB HAS BECOME a contentious subject in America. I remind my friends that in the way a Muslim woman wears the head covering, devout Christian nuns wear their habits. I also explain that in many cases it is *not* so similar in that the hijab does not necessarily denote piety—although I have known many Muslim women who have transcended the angst of daily life by way of their private relationship with God. A Muslim woman may decide to wear the headscarf because it is the fashion. Stores are stocked with vivid colors and patterns, and many Muslim women find it exciting to express their individuality through such novelties—just like perhaps some American women don their tattoos and Prada bags. However,

there are also Muslim women who feel oppressed *not* by the hijab but instead by the confining standards of Western fashion; they take back their femininity by wearing this much-disparaged fabric. There are also Muslim feminists—a loaded and problematic term that implies unity with a European feminist framework—who perhaps identify better as the reimagined diverse *Muslimwoman*. The hijab is a reclaimed symbol, one in which the woman who wears it rejects the colonizer’s patriarchal discourse of a Muslim woman’s dress and thus wields her right to wear and define the hijab as she sees fit. And finally, I also humorously inject stories of aunts of mine who wear the headscarf because they are tired of going to the salon. Egyptian hair has a way of being unruly—and after fifty or so years of toiling with it, the hijab has become a convenient, much easier choice.

It is not so simple to pigeonhole Muslim women, and yet they are pitted in this invisible contest over narrative so as to subordinate them deeper within the politics of men. My memory narrates a different story. The hijab is the fabric of love and subtlety. It is the re-envisioned cloth of yesterday and tomorrow. There is empowerment in a Muslim woman’s hijab as she has chosen to decide its meaning for *herself*.

\* \* \*

I ARRIVE IN GERMANY with the distinct sense that I am a stranger. No one makes me feel this way, but there is something in the air of stiff civility. I am of a New Yorkan disposition—keep to myself, avert eye contact, watch where I step—but also a Middle Eastern sentiment—engage warmly, smile at onlookers, and make nice. I acknowledge the barrier of language: many Germans do not adapt for outsiders. I remain in the periphery of German everyday society unless I speak German. I actually admire this condition. In every country I lived in before, there were so many accommodations made for English speakers. And I admittedly navigated each foreign place with such ease, but also discomfort in myself knowing that I would rather have it easy than try harder to immerse myself in the local ways and culture.

I live in a spa village only fifteen miles away from downtown Frankfurt. I registered for German lessons in the *Badehaus*, the town historical center with its library, its gallery, and its regulation office on garbage pick-up and property maintenance. I arrived at my first class in good spirits, happy to take the step toward fitting in. We are nine months into the coronavirus pandemic, and so the

waiting room is filled with adult students like myself, eyes darting, all of us wearing sweaty fabric masks. When the teacher arrives, a German woman in her fifties, she bears a weighty combination of totes, shopping bags, and a knapsack. She is disheveled and panting after climbing three flights of steps while wearing a mask. Several students approach her to help. She drops all bags to the floor and bends down to find the classroom key. She then leaves all the bags behind, assuming they will follow. It takes her twenty minutes to settle in. At first we all understand—and then with frequent shared eye contact and checks of the watches, we do not understand.

She speaks in German first: “*Wie heißen Sie? Woher kommen Sie?*”

I am delighted by the diversity in the class. I hear Brazil, Korea, Finland, Colombia, China, Lebanon, México, and Italy. I had not realized before that this small town was so international. The teacher peers at each student after each introduction. She then points to the woman from México and says: “You don’t look like you’re from Mexico.”

Her name is Olivia. She is patient as she replies: “Yes, I am from Mexico.”

“But Mexicans don’t look like you.”

Olivia pauses to process the implication in her statement.

“Mexicans can look different.”

“But you look white—you look like an American.”

I am sitting beside Olivia. I can sense her discomfort as she firmly ends the dialogue with “but I am *not* American. I am Mexican.”

The teacher loses interest in Olivia and proceeds to probe other students. She asks the man from China if he just arrived from Wuhan. She asks the man from Italy if he is lazy. She asks me—the only American—if I voted for Trump. She poses her questions as jokes, but nearly every student is silenced by her staunch bigotry. When she lands on the single hijabi woman, she abruptly asks: “Are you a refugee?”

I hear a few gasps. I hold my breath beneath the mask.

The woman carries herself with purpose. She is wearing a blazer with a button-down shirt and black free-fitting pants. Her headscarf is simple, sheer and black. Her nails are a subtle pink and her makeup appears modest and understated, even with her mask on.

“I am from Lebanon—my name is Salma,” the woman says in English, perfectly.

“Yes, but are you a refugee?”

I perceive Salma’s jaw tightening beneath the mask.

“No. I live here with my family.”

“Do you have a German ID?”

The room is tense. People are fidgeting.

“I do.”

“Can I see it?”

Salma loses the will to speak. The silence is unbearable.

“Is it required for you to check our ID’s?” I interject.

The German teacher dismisses me, still waiting for Salma’s answer. She had not quite figured out yet that I did not fit her American model of whiteness. She could not detect my ethnicity beneath my mask. As for Salma, the veil was all she could see.

Salma regains herself and says: “No. It is not possible for you to see my ID.”

“Well then,” the teacher retorts. She then moves onto writing the date on the board.

Olivia leans in and says to me, “What is wrong with this woman?”

I can only look over at Salma. I want to move and sit beside her, but I know she will not appreciate it.

With the teacher’s back turned to the class, we all exchanged expressions of outrage and disbelief. Everyone is finding it difficult, however, to look at Salma. She may have sensed this. She resisted the piteous glances and the rest of the lesson by looking down at her phone.

When it is time to leave the class I know I will never return to, I pass by Salma on the way out.

“*Ab-lan wa sab-lan Sell-ma*,” I greet, conscious of pronouncing her name the Arabic way.

She smiles kindly and nods her head.

I try to effect a mutual slowing down of pace, but she is determined to get out. I can tell that she is on the cusp of unraveling but is trying to be polite with me.

“I am not strong enough to spare the ignorant. How about you?”

She thinks a moment before laughing slightly. She then looks at me with gentle eyes.

“Nice to meet you. I hope we meet again.”

She walks ahead.



I had only been in Germany for a few weeks. I learned later that this incident was not common; the teacher was an anomaly of sorts. And yet she bluntly and discourteously represented the underlying nativistic sentiment in Germany. In 2015, Syrian refugees were given asylum in Germany and this humanistic decision by former Chancellor Angela Merkel wedged a rift in German society. There were many Germans who welcomed the refugees and even applauded their presence as many arrived in Munich's Central Station. There were others, however, who radically opposed this open-door policy, and some committed hate crimes in effect. Many refugees have since been integrated into society by learning the language and finding work.

It is the perceived markers of "Arabness" or "Muslimness" that prompt the loaded question: "Where are you *really* from?"

And in the question lies the buried statement: "You do not belong here."

\* \* \*

THE WORD "VEIL" BEARS a heavy connotation. It implies the action of concealing, hiding away, refusing a part of oneself. It is a colonizer's word. It is a supremacist's word. It means to diminish Muslim women, to make them miniscule and muted in the world. It is a word tinged with misinformation and pretense. The Muslim woman who chooses to wear the hijab does not *veil* herself; rather, she presents herself fully to the world—just as she is.

I had always spoken the word "veil" before without sensing its implication. I know now to rely on my memory, to count on it, and to always challenge the false truths that push into my consciousness like a worm burrowing to make its long-lasting home.

*Confluence*