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The Veil in Kuwait An Empirical Study

Palgrave Pivot 2014

In April 2013 we conducted a survey on Islamic veiling at the Gulf University for Science and Technology (GUST) in Kuwait. The purpose of the survey was to establish reasons for veiling within the complex society of Kuwait and, in particular, to view the veil through the prism of recent international developments that have transformed veiling, at least partially, into a fashion phenomenon. International research has shown that in many Muslim and non-Muslim countries the veil is no longer necessarily a traditional item but is influenced by fashion and other contemporary phenomena. Such research has been undertaken since the late 1990s in several countries such as Egypt, Iran, the USA, the Netherlands, France, and Turkey (Gökarıksel and Anna Secor 2012; Hoodfar, Homa. 2001; Karim 2006; Killian 2003; Laborde 2006; MacLeod 1993; Mir-Hosseini 2007; Nieuwerk 2008; Sandıkcı and Ger 2010; Williams and Vashi 2007; Zuhur, Sherifa. 1992; Williams 1979). In North America, Williams and Vashi observed how “girls and young women talk about hijab with each other as if they were talking about their clothes from the mall. Further, the ways in which it is wrapped about the head and draped down over the shoulders, is subject to fashion, innovation, and trend” (2007: 285).

How could this phenomenon develop in the relatively conservative society of Kuwait? So far, not much research has been done on modern aspects of veiling in the Gulf region. The study is unique in that there is no other similar data to date. The only existing study is the one conducted by Sobh et al. (2011). This is surprising because the Gulf States are an interesting territory for such a research: on the one hand, a distinct ethos of traditional dress for both men and women does still exist and on the other hand, Kuwait is a country tolerant enough to permit the coexistence of veiling and non-veiling practices. The editor of the Kuwait-based Pan-Arab fashion magazine *Alef* explains: “We only tend to see the negative thing, over-hyped Dubai [or] conflict zones.... But we don’t really see the subtleties of Kuwaiti society that is (...) traditional and modern and semi-democratic, but also very conservative at the same time” (Lewis 2010: 73). Kuwaiti clothing culture is intriguing because it contains in itself two extremes: religious traditions that are more conservative than in many other Middle Eastern countries are combined with features of a frenetic Western-style consumer culture fed by oil-money. The present study tries to spell out the internal logic sustaining the coexistence of those opposed elements. Is Kuwait the country of hijab-wearing fashion victims or do religion/tradition and modernity communicate along reasonable lines? From this

follow further questions: Does the present reveiling wave express frustration and resentment in the face of unkept promises of modernity? Is there a real desire to return to the values of the past? How do those forces function within a reality influenced by mass media, mass communication and globalization in which unilinear scenarios of identities and worldviews become increasingly impossible?

In summary, the study focuses on the following aspects of the veiling phenomenon:

To what extent do local woman strive to emphasize their authenticity and ethnic affiliation through the wearing of ethnic dress?

How do consumption styles such as extravagant and conspicuous fashion interfere with this ambition?

How important is religion in the decision to veil?

Are young Kuwaiti women aware that the adoption of new clothing styles and adornment practices can potentially conflict with traditional values requiring modesty in the public domain?

Is veiling a matter of identity search and due to a rejection of Western values? If it is an authentic form of a stable cultural or religious essence, how is this essence experienced within social interaction including traditional, modern, as well as fractured values?

Is the veil merely perceived as a symbol enhancing traditional values or can decisions to veil also be supported by feminist justifications?

Is the act of veiling voluntary or dependent on parental/social/religious influence?

How do men relate to the veiling of women within the above contexts?

The strong point of our study is that we did not only ask covered students why they veil but also uncovered students what they believe to be their classmates' reasons for veiling. Naturally, such a comparative approach invites critical reflections on the veiled students' statements. By considering responses from subjects who are not immediately concerned (who do not wear the hijab), we realized that not all of the veiled students' answers can be taken for granted but must be submitted to a critical reading.

Chapter 1.

Chapter one provides context to the study. It details the importance of the research given that veiling has been of multidisciplinary interest to researchers globally. This chapter explores the contentions between the hijab as a fashion item on the one hand, and a religious/conservative demonstration of identity in a consumer culture that is Kuwait (distinctions between the hijab, niqab and abaaya are all discussed in this chapter). This chapter summarises the underlying questions proposed by the study in terms of the extent to which religion dominates the reasons behind veiling as well as whether or not the practice of veiling is more a search for identity as well as a rejection of Western values. It also explores the extent to which veiling is embraced voluntarily or if it is dependent on parental/social/religious influences. The way in which men relate to veiling is also key to understanding the phenomenon of veiling. This chapter contextualizes the study in relation to previous research in the field and demonstrates how the present study is unique given that Kuwaiti Society in itself is unique. It is the 5th richest country in the world per capita and has all the features of a modern consumer society like lavish malls, luxury cars etc. It has one of the highest literacy rates in the Arab World (93.3%). This chapter also details the Methodology employed, providing a solid rationale for how the data was collected, with due consideration to validity of findings and the ethics of exploring the social experiences of human subjects.

Chapter 2.

Chapter two outlines the focus of the survey conducted, demonstrating the overall participation rate of 1662 individuals. Family backgrounds of the participants are discussed in this section, as are the sensitivities of conducting research on the Hijab in a Muslim society. The difficulties of conducting sensitive research in a conservative society as Kuwait, are compounded by the post-colonial context in which the survey is perceived to sit, according to some. This may be otherwise described as the 'East-West' problem where the research is regarded with suspicion and objections to Western Orientalism manifest themselves through the respondents.

Chapter 3.

Chapter three presents the main findings of the study, addressing the central question 'Why do you veil?' The complete data is presented in table format followed by selected data analysis of the main findings. This analysis is supported by verbatim comments from respondents in order to keep the data rich in context. The research findings are presented from the 3 groups of respondents, namely veiled women, unveiled women, and men. Feminist analysis as well as religious context are provided in this section. The Social interactions between those who veil, and those who do not, are explored, as are mutual perceptions within this society. Concepts such as culture, religion, self-perception, respect and virtue, western clothing and veiling fashion, and beauty are all discussed in relation to the findings from the study.

Chapter 4.

Chapter four provides a detailed analysis of self-image in relation to the guilt/shame paradigm associated with 'veiling fashion'. Additionally, notions of modesty and the concept of 'Fitna' are explored in this chapter, supporting feminist notions of 'blaming females'. Here the discussion focuses on female shame as a motivator for normative action in Arab and Muslim societies, a classical sociological topic.

Chapter 5.

Chapter five draws conclusions based on the findings of the study. This chapter illustrates clearly the uniqueness of the findings in Kuwaiti society in which 'veiling fashion' combines an almost exalted form of religious devotion with a strong interest in modern fashion. The discussion draws its overall conclusions in the context of the research project.