

Article

Unveiling in Arab Societies: Elite, Popular, and Social Media Discourses

Eman Alkhaja

Abstract

Unveiling as a trend began in Egypt in the early twentieth century following intense debates around modernity and tradition, at the centre of which was the position of women and their dress in society. It continued to gain momentum in the region in the following decades and became the norm before the veil's resurgence toward the end of the twentieth century. In the past decade, women have again started to cast their veils off, and the trend of unveiling has become visible once more. This article examines the media discourses surrounding the recent visible trend of women choosing to unveil in the Arab world. It applies a historical analysis of the origins of unveiling as a movement that reveals its occurrence within larger socio-cultural, political, and economic shifts in the Arab world. Additionally, it employs textual analysis to analyse various media texts surrounding unveiling between 2015 and 2021. Interviews of Egyptian and Arab Gulf celebrities who chose to unveil are also taken as case studies to examine the media narratives on unveiling. The analysis of the discourses surrounding unveiling indicates that its supporters rely on critiquing dominant ideological strands of thought that have created an environment of censure around removing it. In contrast, its opponents rely on religious rhetoric and other strategies to legitimize their positions. The analysis results also suggest that there is a critical consciousness that has allowed for the development of introspective subjectivities engaged in a process of redefining the religious, pious, and personal, foregrounding authenticity and autonomy as underpinning factors for leaving the veil.

Key words: Textual Analysis, unveiling, media discourses, piety, celebrities, Arab societies, authenticity

Unveiling in the Arab world is an area of research that is seldom investigated. The sensitive nature of the topic and the social opprobrium associated with unveiling in conservative contexts make it a delicate terrain to navigate. The specific Arabic term for women who do not wear the veil is '*sufūr*.' The transition from *sufūr* to veiled has different social connotations than the transition from veiled to unveiled. Unveiling, just like veiling, has existed as a historical trend across the Arab and Muslim worlds. This trend has gained attention and visibility in society and the media in various forms in the past decade. Though little research exists in the Arab world on this trend, Karin van Nieuwkerk (2021) is one of the few to write on women casting off their veils in Egypt. Her work demonstrates that in post-revolutionary Egypt, a new critical awareness of the religious and political establishments has led to other types of rebellions against the traditional, religious, and patriarchal. Women cast their veils off in a process of self-expression and 'uncovering and cultivating the self,' shedding the performances of the pious movement and the influence of the Islamic Revival period that began in the late 1970s and led to a rise in religious values, participation, and identification (Nieuwkerk, 2021, p. 5; Binzel, & Carvalho, 2017, p. 2556).

Unveiling as a trend in recent times has also become prominent and visible in non-Arab Muslim societies. In Malaysia, for example, the veil became a part of the conceptualisation of Malay Muslim femininities and an identity marker of religiosity 'for women in the shifting landscape of modernisation and Islamization' (Izharuddin, 2018, p. 161). According to Alicia Izharuddin (2018, p. 156), the 'personal and often difficult decision' of willful unveiling occurs due to multiple factors, such as new Muslim feminist discourses that allow for alternative meanings, a reaction to Islamization and the piety movement, and the emergence of different femininities (Izharuddin, 2018, p. 170; Izharuddin, 2021, p. 174). In the Indonesian context, Yulianingsih Riswan (2021) showed that some of the women who chose to unveil did so due to feelings of discomfort with the veil, emotions that originated in some cases from the dissonance the women had between their state of piety and conceptions of self and the socially and religiously expected state of piety for the veil, which is socio-culturally determined. The piety movement, previously mentioned, is a movement that occurred in the second half of the twentieth century and is connected to the construction of devout religious selves and the performance of piety through modifying or acquiring different modes of behaviour related to religious practice (Mahmood, 2005; Hirschkind, 2006).

In the Arab world, particularly Egypt and the Arab Gulf, unveiling as a trend is visible through the discourses surrounding it on social media and traditional media. Some of the most well-known news publications, such as *al Ahrām* Newspaper, founded in 1875, have reported on it. It has also become dramatically more visible due to a wave of

Arab celebrities who publicly unveiled, drawing extensive media attention. This article examines the discussions and the conversations that have emerged in the last decade regarding the trend of unveiling, maintaining that unveiling as a trend is occurring due to the role of larger socio-cultural shifts and technological influences as well as the development of introspective subjectivities engaged in a process of redefining the religious, the pious and the personal.

This article initially provides a historical analysis of secondary sources that explicate the position of the veil and the movement to unveil, utilizing material in both Arabic and English. It then applies textual analysis to identify recurrent definitions, patterns, and themes in various forms of media texts published between 2015 and 2021. Section 1 begins with a brief overview of the historical, sacred, and sociopolitical meanings embedded in the veil. Section 2 details the trend of unveiling in the Arab and Muslim worlds during the first half of the twentieth century, before the veil's resurgence in the region. Section 3 deconstructs the language used around unveiling in the media of the Arab world, particularly in Egypt. Newspaper articles, social media content, videos and interviews were examined for this article. All newspaper articles were accessed online, and the interviews were publicly available on YouTube and on-demand streaming websites. Section 4 analyses the unveiling trend among celebrities in Egypt and the Gulf. Celebrity interviews are taken as case studies to investigate how actresses, recently unveiled, constructed their decision to unveil, as their choice to unveil was a prominent subject in the press. The first is of Soheir Ramzi on *Al Sira (The Biography)*, a talk show that hosts celebrities to talk about their lives on the Egyptian channel DMC. The second is of Hala Shiha on the YouTube channel *CuttheCrap* (Lamaan & Arafa, 2019). The third is Sabrien's telephone appearance on the program *Al Hikaya* on MBC Egypt, posted on their YouTube channel, one of her first appearances to discuss her decision to leave the Turban (*Al Hikaya*, 2019). Lastly, the fourth is of Hanadi al Kindari on the talk show *Taw'am Rohi* on the beIN DRAMA channel as well as the program *8 Star* accessed on the YouTube channel Marina TV (Marina TV, 2016). Those interviews were selected because the actresses discussed their choice to unveil in them. Lack of resources and access prevented from analysing other media content in which the actresses may have spoken about their decision to unveil. The final section is the conclusion summarising the findings and detailing the contributions of this research.

Throughout the article, the word 'unveiling' is used in reference to the willful decision of women who were veiled to remove the veil. Other phrases such as lifting the veil, removing the veil, leaving the veil, or casting off the veil are also used to mean the same thing.

1. The Historical, Sacred, and Sociopolitical Veils and their Significations

The site of the modern veil in Islam is imbued with meaning, whether worn, discarded or lifted. The origins of the veil in the Arab peninsula and the wider geographical region predate Islam. In fact, in ancient Mesopotamia, around 3000 BCE, the veil existed as a piece of fabric that covered women's heads and bodies and was a marker of class and social status in different civilisations (Ahmed, 1992, p. 55; Al-Wahabi, 1988; Goto, 2004, p. 278). It became inscribed with religious meaning and became a visible element of gendered religious practice, particularly in monotheistic religions (Ahmed, 1992; Al Wahabi, 1988). The word for the veil, *ḥijāb*, requires some elucidation before historically contextualizing it. In Arabic, the word *ḥijāb* originates from the root verb *ḥajab*, which means to hide, cover, or seclude. It is also a thing that separates: a screen, a partition, or a curtain. Veiling as an Islamic practice to which women adhere can be attributed to its prescription in the Qur'an. The writing surrounding it in the prophetic traditions, the hadith, is also important. The word *ḥijāb* is mentioned in the Qur'an seven times, in verses 7:46, 17:45, 19:17, 33:53, 38:32, 41:5, and 42:51, with various meanings. Only two of those seven instances reference women. One is about a partition used by the mother of Jesus Christ, Maryam (in verse 19:17). The other is in verse 33:53, which is of significance because the descent of the veil can be traced to it in the fifth year of Hijra (AD 627), and it is commonly regarded as having been directed towards the wives of the Prophet (Mernissi, 1991; Ahmed, 1992; Stowasser, 1994). In addition, two other verses receive strong emphasis in the discourses of the veil, verses 33:59 and 24:31. Verse 33:59 addresses the moral decay in the city of Medina and the harassment of women, regardless of their status as free or enslaved. To prevent the problem, women were advised to don the jilbab (a large piece of clothing) so that they might be recognised as free and spared the harassment. According to Mernissi, this revealed the vulnerability of women and their essentiality in Medina's political, economic, and social reality (1991, p. 180). The issue of slavery is mentioned elsewhere in the Qur'an (Mernissi, p. 181). Verse 24:31 specifically addresses covering beauty. This verse and a lot of the traditions surrounding it are essential as they came to prescribe what parts of a woman were considered *'awra* and *fitna*. Here, *'awra*, literally 'nudity' or 'private parts,' is commonly used to refer to which parts of a woman can be seen by a man who is not designated as a *maḥram*, a relative to whom she cannot be married. It also indicates private parts that cannot be shown to anyone. *Fitna*, on the other hand, has multiple meanings such as 'temptation,' 'attraction,' 'discord,' 'dissension,' and 'trial,' and it is associated with women's beauty and anything being the instigator of men being driven away from piety to corruption (Goto, 2004). Many of the discourses surrounding the veil reference the verses mentioned above and the hadith to support their

positions as either proponents of the veil or opponents of it (Bint Abdullah, 1995; Cronin, 2016; Arat, 2010; Mernissi, 1991; Read & Bartkowski, 2000).

The veil is also a cultural symbol that needs to be contextualized historically and politically. Divergent interpretations of the veil at particular historical moments have produced specific narratives of the veil not just as a gendered religious practice but also as a contested artifact within cultural, political, and social transformations. For instance, the veil became the emblem of colonial and post-colonial resistance. As a symbol of resistance to the hegemony of colonial powers that sought to dominate it as a cultural sign, the veil (or the absence of it) underwent a process of resignification in the Arab region (Fanon, 2003). There are parallels in the work of Fanon's (2003) *Algeria Unveiled* and Ahmed's (1991) *The Discourses of the Veil* of the efforts of the French and British colonial projects, respectively, at unveiling women and 'civilising' the nation through that process, the former being more intense in their relentless, aggressive campaigns and the latter utilising traditional elites in its project, marking the traditional and religious practices of both Algeria and Egypt as inferior and in need of discarding. The consciousness of resistance in the societies of colonial subjects led to varied political and class-based stances. That is apparent in the collision of positions in the discourses of modernity and tradition taking place in multiple Middle Eastern countries at the time, in which heated discussions regarding the future of the nation, between secularism and tradition, made central the issue of women, their clothing, and their veils. Throughout the twentieth-century anti-veiling campaigns in Iran, Turkey, the Balkans, and Central Asian countries became symbolic of the ideal secular woman and modernity, which followed the European model. In contrast, veiling laws became emblematic of Islamization and discourses based on Islamic tenants, opposing Western modernity and viewing unveiling as a loss of cultural integrity and religious identity (Cronin, 2016; Göle, 1997; Najmabadi, 2000). Such tensions complicated building alliances, spaces for cooperation, or identifying sites of transformation within tradition. It is also why the veil in Muslim majority or non-Muslim contexts is still loaded with meaning as it is caught in shifting sociopolitical currents outside the control of those who don it or leave it.

2. Unveiling in the Past in Arab Societies

There was a time in the Middle East when the movement to unveil became widespread, and not veiling was not an indicator necessarily of secularism or lack of religious devoutness. In the words of Ahmed (2011, p. 48), 'If the era of the 1900s to the 1920s was the Age of Unveiling, the 1920s to the 1960s was the era when going bareheaded and unveiled became the norm.' The change in veiling practices can be attributed to the overarching

transformations in the traditional Islamic dress system, which began due to contact with the West. In the early nineteenth century, changes to traditional dress, which included abandoning loose-flowing garments in favour of tailored Western clothes, occurred on a smaller scale and were exclusive to the Muslim elite and the affluent non-Muslim communities (Stillman, 2003). In the 1830s, European influences on clothing, for example, were evident in Turkey, particularly in Istanbul (Scarce, 1987, pp. 66-85; Micklewright, 1986). Western ideas would become potent in the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries, especially in matters of the veil (Stillman, 2003; Ahmed, 2011).

In the view of the colonizing West, the veil was 'a sign of the inferiority of Islam and Muslim societies and peoples, as well as of Islam's 'degradation' of women.' (Ahmed, 2011, p. 44). The battleground of the veil would lead to fierce debates about the place of the West in the traditions of the East. A new burgeoning class of European-educated intellectuals contributed to that by bringing back to their native lands Western sartorial practices and ideas of modernity (Ahmed, 1992). French-educated Qasim Amin, one of the most prominent intellectuals of Egypt in the late nineteenth century, was a crucial figure in the debates that surrounded unveiling and the end of seclusion of women in Egypt through his books *Tahrīr al-Mar'a* (Woman's Liberation) (1899) and *al-Mar'ah al-Jadīdah* (The New Woman). Amin is often criticized for denigrating Egyptian culture and positioning the East as the epitome of backwardness and the West as the bastion of enlightenment (Ahmed, 1992). The debates around unveiling continued among women as well through women's magazines such as *al-'Afa'* (1910) and *al-Sufūr* (1915) (Baron, 1989). By the early twentieth century, many women began to view the veil as less of a religious obligation and more as a social custom and a cultural norm (Baron, 1989, p. 379). They took to expressing themselves in new ways, through dress and fashion, determining for themselves the meaning encapsulated in the veil. Additionally, the substantial changes taking place culturally, economically, and socially in Egypt and later in the wider Arab region contributed to the movement to unveil. Women were being educated abroad and locally, more women ventured outside of their home environment to places such as newly opened department stores, markets, and schools, and the diffusion of European cultural elements and languages in the upper classes and the upper middle classes was widely visible (Ahmed, 2011, Baron, 1989, Badran, 1995). This alarmed the *'ulama* – the class of religious scholars – who, in 1914, published a recommendation that the government should impose a prison sentence or a fine on women who did not veil (Baron, 1989). There were also strong voices of women opposing this trend and urging men to act and keep the women in their families veiled (Baron, 1989, p. 380). In 1923, Egyptian feminists led by Huda al Sh'araawy, founder of the Egyptian Feminist Union, would unveil their

faces before showing their hair over time, solidifying the unveiling trend, which would trickle gradually at first, but would soon suffuse large portions of society across many classes (Al-Sharaawi, 1987, Stillman, 2003). Unveiling at that time in Egypt signalled larger transformations in women's lives, and as Beth Baron (1989, p. 382) explains, 'Whether through force of argument or the impact of social, economic and cultural change, Egyptians supported unveiling in growing numbers.' She further adds regarding the veil, 'Fewer women wore the veil; if they did, they put it on later in life, took it off when they travelled abroad, and chose a lighter veil as the practice literally faded.' This trend continued to spread in other major areas of the Arab world, such as Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq.

In the Arab Peninsula, the unveiling movement would gain traction in the 1950s in some countries and regional pockets. Similar to Egypt, it would first spread through the elite and the well-to-do classes. Those classes had the means and connections to send their children to acquire their education abroad in a region rife with new ideas and nationalist consciousness (Al-Mughni & Tétreault, 2004). In Kuwait in the 1940s, print media, which was predominantly controlled by the liberal merchant class, was utilised to spread new ideas, particularly in regard to gender (Rumayhi, 1986, p. 99; Al-Mughni & Tétreault, 2004, p. 126). In the early days, many magazines, for example, had a 'Women's Corner,' a place for women to voice their thoughts and affect change in society surrounding traditions and gender relations. Many of those magazines had Western women on their covers, a model of femininity symbolising modernity, and discussed contentious topics such as lifting the veil, the practice of women's seclusion, work, education, and the changing role of women in society (Al-Mughni & Tétreault, 2004, p. 127). In 1956 the first group of Kuwaiti female students was sent to study abroad in Cairo (Al-Khalid Family, 2022). Fatima Hussein, one of those students, became notoriously known locally as the 'Huda al Sh'araawy of Kuwait' as she was one of the first women to call for unveiling in what came to be called the 'Khimar Revolution'. When she was around fifteen years of age, she and a group of her friends burnt their *boshiyya* (full-face veils) in school. She declared that face veils had no place in religion and were dictated by customs and tradition only. She made the decision to unveil boldly in Kuwait and stop wearing the *'abāya* (a loose robe-like cloak) after spending two years in Cairo, along with other students (Tétreault, 1999, p. 240; Al-Madani, 2014; Aubry, 2017; Al Ali, 2017, 2:54). In Kuwait, according to Haya Al-Mughni and Mary Ann Tétreault (2004, p. 130), 'Before the Iranian Revolution and continuing through the early 1980s, the proportion of female students at Kuwait University who wore the hijab was lower than the proportion of women dressed in Western clothes.' The influence of the various intellectual and migratory movements in the Arab world also contributed to this shift in perceptions. Many of the educators in Kuwait in the 1950s and 1960s were Palestinian, Lebanese, and Egyptians who brought

their lived experiences with them to the Gulf. Bahrain followed a similar trajectory. With the discovery of oil, the country was developing rapidly. Girls were being sent to acquire higher education abroad from 1956 (Mahmood et al., 2019, p. 36). Like Kuwait, Bahrain also had many educators from the Levant region and North Africa (Mahmood et al., 2019, p. 36). Bahraini women also followed in the steps of their Kuwaiti counterparts, and in the 1970s and 1980s, the veil was donned mostly by the highly conservative or in villages. In the cities, the norm was being unveiled or only donning the *daffa*, a loose open black robe that did not connect in the front and could be worn to cover the head partially.

In 1955, Albert Hourani, the Oxford historian and author of *The History of the Arabs*, would comment on how veiling as a practice was on the verge of becoming obsolete in an essay in the *Courier* titled 'The Vanishing Veil: A Challenge to the Old Order' (Hourani, 1955, p. 35-37). Hourani was incorrect in his prediction and could not have foreseen the deep political symbolism the veil would come to embody through various ideological and political movements in the years that followed. Rather than seeing it vanish, the decades that followed would mark the veil's resurgence and its embedding in multiple political currents. The 1967 Arab-Israeli War, the Iranian revolution in 1978-79, the seizure of the Grand Mosque in 1979, the 1990-91 Gulf War, would all play a role in heightening a specific religious mood and language (Ahmed, 2011). At the end of the twentieth century, the movement of veiling gained steam due to, not only women's own personal choices and agency, but also a newfound religious awakening, the movement of religious piety, differing notions of authenticity and cultural values, resistance to ideas of Western hegemony, the Islamist movement's influence and a new lucrative capitalistic market for religiosity via various forms of media preaching (Wickham, 2002; Dekmejian, 2003; Talhami, 1996; Macleod, 1991; El Guindi, 1981, Mahmood, 2001, Zuhur, 1992; Zuhur, 2011). Unveiling would emerge again slowly in Arab and Muslim societies by the 2010s.

3. Unveiling as a Returning Visible Trend in Arab Societies

While research on the phenomenon is scarce, unveiling in the Arab world has once again recently become an emerging and noticeable trend. It has also sparked fierce debates in the public sphere among nationalists, secularists, and religious conservatives in the past decade. These debates expanded fast and wide across multiple mediums. They became fervent due to the influence of social media, which led to reorientations and reconfigurations that have drastically altered many aspects of communications and gender relations. Social media was central in debating the issues surrounding unveiling. A campaign dubbed by the media as the "million to take off the veil" in February of 2015 took place on Facebook. It attracted wide media attention in the Arab world, and Egypt specifically,

the birthplace of the campaign (Arabic CNN, 2015; Qarni, 2015). At the heart of this call to gather and unveil was the Egyptian *al Ahram* newspaper journalist, writer, thinker and intellectual, Cherif Choubachy, who called women to officially liberate themselves from the veil in a Facebook post on April 2, 2015:

Is there a brave girl or woman who is ready to repeat what Huda Sh'araawy did in 1923 and remove her veil in the heart of Tahrir Square? She will be surrounded by men to protect her from religious merchants and fools... I will be the first to stand next to her... I ask friends to think seriously about this and suggest the possibility of implementing it to deal a new painful blow to political Islam. (Choubachy, 2015d)

On April 6, 2015, Choubachy followed up urgently on his previous post by giving more specific details and instructions for this symbolic event, referencing Huda Sh'araawy once again and urging women to communicate quickly. Though the event never took place, the symbolism here is clear as Tahrir Square, literally translated to "Freedom" Square, is the site of the January 25th revolution in Egypt and Huda Sh'araawy, the head of the Egyptian Feminist Union, was a revolutionary feminist that advocated tirelessly for women's liberation and rights and who also unveiled as described in the previous section. Prior to that, Choubachy expressed strong views about the veil in an article published on June 6th, 2006, in the *al Ahram* newspaper titled 'The Position of the Veil' as reported in *al Arab* Newspaper (Al Naabi, 2015, p. 9). In it, he wrote:

If we agree that wearing the veil is a personal freedom, the practices surrounding this issue have come to negate the character of freedom, and the character of the personal together. There is an atmosphere that dominates the streets, universities, and workplaces that links the wearing of the veil with virtue, meaning that those who do not wear the veil can have their morals and behaviours questioned.

The veil came to be associated with specific meanings for Choubachy, meanings that transcended women's choices and became matters of the political and religious apparatuses' means of social and gender control (Choubachy, 2015b). Though Choubachy maintained that the veil is a personal choice and should not be forced, clarifying that his position on the matter was political, he also stated that the veil was appropriated by specific patriarchal religious interpretations of sacred texts to serve in political and ideological currents. He criticized it as a marker for piety and morals and questioned it as a

religious obligation, pointing out the lack of its explicit mention in the Qur'an, referencing religious scholars who supported his point of view (Choubachy, 2015a). Additionally, he questioned the vehement opposition to his calls in contradiction to the encouragement and support preachers who call for the veil generally receive. He had posted repeatedly on the 'beautiful time' of the past, the 1950s and 1960s, when it was the norm for women to be unveiled, longing for the morality and ethics of an era long gone (Choubachy, 2015c). *Millioniyya Khale' al-Hijab*, "the million to take off the veil" hashtag on Twitter, became the most trending in Egypt according to different news sources (Arabic CNN, 2015; Qarni, 2015) and came under severe criticism with a counter hashtag *Millyoniyya T'iyyeed al-Hijab*, "the million with the veil" (Abdultawab, 2015; Abood, 2015). Other social media pages also sprang up in defence of the veil, such as the Facebook page 'Against the Campaign to Remove the Veil', created on April 16, 2015, with 8642 followers.

This issue crossed the virtual realm into the traditional media sphere, receiving attention in many news outlets, notably the prestigious *al Ahram* newspaper. It was also a recurrent issue on debate and talk shows such as '90 Minutes' on Al Mehwar, 'Al Bayt Baytak' on Ten TV, and '10 PM' on Dream TV channels. Many articles in the news media reacted by calling this gathering an invitation for *fitna*, provocation, and immorality (Khalil, 2019; CNN Arabic, 2015; BBC Arabic, 2015). It was also considered an attack on the Egyptian cultural and Islamic identity and the right for women to choose, with some even questioning why a man was responsible for such a calling (Qarni, 2015; Abdulmunem, 2015; Al Naabi, 2015; BBC, 2015; CNN Arabic, 2015). Al Azhar, the country's premier religious institution, weighed in in 2015 with Dr. Abbas Shoman, the Secretary-General of the Council of Senior Scholars, stating that the veil is a religious obligation and that the campaign to unveil is a blatant attack on the freedom and dignity of Muslim women, warning against those who would question the legitimacy of religion by masking it in calls for freedom (Abdulhamid, 2015). The Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, the most influential Muslim religious authority figure in the country, Sheikh Abdulaziz al Sheikh, also commented on the matter. He described the gathering as 'Satanic' and stated that 'Muslims should fear God and know that the veil is an honour and glory for the Islamic nation.' (CNN Arabic, 2015; Al Ahram, 2015), also adding that 'The call to leave the veil is a corruption of religion, morals and virtues' and that women should 'adhere to the veil as an honour and protection for them' noting that the veil 'was common in Islamic countries throughout the past centuries until the colonizer came and took advantage of the opportunity to corrupt morals and values by calling for abandoning the veil' (Sheikh Abdulaziz Abdulla Al Sheikh, n.d.).

There were also strong voices of women who supported Choubachy's calls for unveiling as a symbol of resistance to Islamist patriarchal hegemony. Huda Badran, for

example, the president of the Egyptian Women's Union, positively responded to Choubachy's call to unveil by saying that it was 'a political awakening for Egyptian women and a slap in the face of the Muslim Brotherhood', stressing that it was a post-revolution reaction and a course correction to return to the true Egyptian identity adding that women have also been unveiling due to new conceptualisations of their selves, that a woman is a 'human and not a body' to be covered (Abdulhafith, 2015). Some criticized the position of religious clerics and the media on the matter and the characterisation of the calls as *fitna*, such as journalist Rula Khirsa (2015), who stated, 'It is as if we as a people are unable to think, and that anyone who comes out against us with a different opinion will cause sedition,' adding that 'therefore we have to close our minds and just listen to what is dictated to us without discussion.'

As the symbol of religious devotion and the Islamic movement, its politics, and its rhetoric, the veil continues to be a site of struggle, a symbol of not only a woman's piety but the piety of the nation as a whole. Voluntarily unveiling is caught in the dichotomous narratives of modernism and tradition, secularism and religiosity, the West and the East, which elite religious scholars employ to defend their position on the veil not only as an obligation, citing the Qur'an and traditions, but also as a mode of resistance to the influence of the West. Both religious legitimacy and historical legitimacy are utilized for their assertions. They also claim that it is protection for women. That would be a protection from *fitna* (temptation) or it would protect them, their *zīna* (ornaments) by covering them (Goto, 2004, p. 288-290), reinforcing the narrative that men are creatures of their instinct and it is best for women to protect themselves from that by donning the veil, seldom addressing why the onus is on the women to modify their behaviour and not on the men. The opposing view is that the veil is not a religious obligation. Taking it off or donning it is a personal choice and calling for voluntary unveiling is not a violation of people's freedoms. The last point has received much attention due to the rising awareness that the veil is not always a personal choice but could result from social and religious pressure, cultural and environmental influences, or even, unfortunately, coercion, following some cases in the media about girls being coerced to wear the veil in schools in Egypt and adult women sharing their experiences online on social media, such as the Facebook community named 'I am veiled against my will _ post it if you are like me' which has over 9449 followers and was created on April 27, 2012 (Abdulhameed, 2015; Morocco World News, 2015; Al Anba, 2015; BBC News, 2012; The Guardian, 2012; Facebook, 2012; Abd Alhadi, 2015; Sherif, 2015).

An alternative consciousness is emerging regarding the language surrounding the veil itself. Presently there is a growing critical movement to redefine piety. Specific forms of devout practice are criticized in that piety should not have a specific exterior marker,

like the veil or the associated performances attached to the veil, to indicate goodness, religiosity, or spirituality. Karin van Nieuwkerk (2021, p. 2) found that unveiling is a process of 'uncovering the self', of women understanding not only who they are but also who they want to be, of redefining piety and their own space in society and redrawing the boundaries of the social, political and the feminine and resisting normative religious discourses. For the religious elite, unveiling or discussing its religious validity threatens to destabilise specific ideological currents, which some have vested interests in maintaining. Put in the context of the political revolution of the Arab world, the voices and the discussions surrounding unveiling gained significant attention because of the disillusionment of young people with the state of political affairs and the power play in Egypt after the 2011 revolution. The revolution has allowed for a rebellion against and liberation from many of the effects of the Islamic revival age, religious discourses, religious preachers and the piety movement which created 'pious and disciplined bodies' and gave space to the younger generation after 2011 to create 'liberated bodies' that were highly critical of 'not only the political establishment but also religious and patriarchal authorities.' (Van Nieuwkerk, 2021, p. 2; Izharuddin, 2021, p. 174). The discourses of unveiling are also taking place on the level of not only religious identity, but also national identity wrapped in the nostalgia of an older time when women did not veil, and their morality and religious devotion were not in question.

4. Unveiling Among Celebrities

The debate surrounding unveiling gathered further attention in the Egyptian and Arab media following the decisions of high profile and well-known Egyptian and Arab celebrities to unveil, such as the Egyptian actresses Sabrien, Hala Shiha, Soheir Ramzi, Shahira, Sawsan Bader, Abeer Sabri, Shahinaz, Afaf Shuaib, and from the Arab Gulf, the Kuwaiti actress Hanadi al Kindari (Abu Hameela, 2019; Alraydy, 2018). Some of the Egyptian celebrities who had chosen to don the veil did so as a part of a larger decision to repent, renounce the materialistic life of art and step down from acting (Nieuwkerk, 2007). Some did so due to the influence of religious teachings and preachers, such as Shaykh Mitwaly al-Sharaawy and Amr Khalid, in the 1990s and early 2000s. Whether to don the veil or to uncover, as key public figures and opinion leaders the actions and decisions of these celebrities mattered. According to Karin van Nieuwkerk (2007, p. 55) 'if celebrities choose to veil and to leave the spotlights for the mosque it has an enormous impact on millions. They are trendsetters whether in fashion or veiling, in trendy lifestyles or in Islamic ways of lives.' Their choice to unveil and to speak about it publicly also has an 'enormous impact on millions', especially in a hyper-connected media age. Scholars in various

disciplines have demonstrated the influence that celebrities have on the mass public, whether in product branding, consumer behaviour or public opinion on varied issues such as health and politics (Yeshin, 2006; Noar et al., 2015; Amos et al., 2008). In this section, the analysis of how these celebrities constructed their decision to leave the veil contributes to understanding the narratives that surround the formation of such a choice in the media.

There are parallels between Soheir Ramzi and Hala Shiha in that they both donned the veil at the height of their fame and success. Soheir Ramzi, one of the most acclaimed Egyptian actresses, known for her cinematic work throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and Hala Shiha, also a successful series and film actress in the late 1990s early 2000s, were both reported on in the media extensively for taking off the veil after wearing it for a long period of time; in the case of Ramzi it was after 26 years, and for Shiha it was 12 years (Ahmed, 2019; Alraydy, 2018). Al Kindari, who worked as a TV presenter, was veiled before becoming an actress, taking off her veil as she entered the acting field in 2012. Sabrien donned the veil after her highly successful show *Um Kolthom*, which was based on the renowned singer, and decided to leave acting in 1999, only to return to it gradually toward the mid-2000s. She also started wearing a wig for her roles at that time instead of the veil, though it was controversially received. She took off her veil, or more specifically the turban, in 2019 to severe media criticism (Alraydy, 2019). In discussing their decisions to unveil, the actresses revealed a process of introspective subjectivity in matters related to religion, modesty, and personal change and awareness, echoing the work of Riswan (2021), Izharuddin (2018), and Nieuwkerk (2021).

In discussing the religious domain, the act of religious introspection was one of the primary motivators for some of the actresses to think about the veil differently. In a discussion centring on what it means to veil, Sherine Arafa, one of the hosts of the podcast/YouTube show, on which Hala Shiha was a guest, shared her experience on the dichotomy of veiling as an act of devotion and the language of punishment that surrounds being unveiled that she experienced from others when she was thinking of veiling. Hala interjected, sharing her own view of spirituality and redefining religiosity and the position of the veil for herself, saying:

That is exactly what we grew up learning - that you have to be a specific way and wear the veil a specific way because that is what God likes. Ok, fine, there are things that God likes, but that (the veil) is not fundamental. Do not plant fear in children when they are young and plant specific things in them that they will have in them later on when they grow up. Let their relationship with God be based more on love. That (the veil) is

not fundamental. It is not because it was not mentioned in the first verse of the Qur'an in Surat al Bakara. It was in the middle. (Lamaan & Arafa, Part One,16:58)

The veil, as discussed in the first section, is viewed as a religious obligation, and here Hala does not question that. What she questions is its importance relative to other core religious obligations. In the conversation, the hosts Lamaan and Sherine discussed with Hala how women have different interpretations regarding veiling and how they veil for different reasons. Hala also commented on how the veil was more of a spiritual matter and that being in the middle and being moderate was essential for her, that she did not need to have a veiled look anymore (Lamaan & Arafa, 2019, Part One, 28:32), asserting that the veil is a personal matter. Similarly, Soheir Ramzi asserted that unveiling was a personal matter and that she was unconcerned and unafraid of the perceptions of others. She also started questioning the meaning and the position of the veil religiously. For her, being genuinely modest meant the veil within, the one in her heart and mind, elevating internal piety over external manifestations of piety. She says (Kailany, 2021):

I sometimes just sit and think would God ignore everything good in us? If we do good things and are convinced, we are doing something good, will he focus on this (referring to the veil)? No, God is the God of hearts and the God of intention and the God of thinking, and the God of the way things are done and the God of morals and the God of many things... How could I go to heaven just because I have the veil on, but I lie, and I am a hypocrite and steal and I speak ill of people and defame? It is not possible. And the veil does nothing. But what is important is the internal veil. It's very important. Besides that, the external veil is a beautiful respectable Islamic look. (1:20:55)

Sabrien echoed similar thoughts on how the veil was a personal matter and only God could judge her for her decision. Al Kindari as well affirmed that her decision was hers alone, and it was a personal matter, conveying her incredulity at the media attacks she faced. Despite her unveiling a long time ago, people still attacked her on social media through her veiled pictures (Marina TV, 2016, 11:33). She stated that she had her own principles and that people had different mentalities regarding removing the veil (Nishan, 2019, 14:50), refraining from explicating more about the motivations behind that decision. That suggests an environmental awareness and sensitivity to talking about the decision to unveil. As she is a Kuwaiti actress and is from the Gulf, there is limited space for

discussing divergent views on such sensitive matters. On '8 Nojoom', she defended a statement she had made about people needing to respect that she was veiled in the past to severe criticism from the host, Ali Najem, who said: 'I oppose what you are saying right now. How can you say people should respect that when we are a conservative Arab society that will not accept a woman throwing her veil' (Marina TV, 2016, 12:53). Al Kindari never criticized the veil as a symbol. On the contrary, she framed herself as being 'unworthy' of it. She also admitted regretting her decision and talked about how the 'right' veil was a beautiful thing and how she was truly convinced, even wanting to go to the Ka'ba in Mecca, the holiest site for Muslims, and return with the veil on, but despite her conviction, she hesitated (Nishan, 2019, 16:08). Al Kindari explained how she was not wearing the veil 'right', saying:

I was wearing it wrong. With the veil, either you wear it right, or you do not wear it because your relationship with God is not just with the veil. I used to wear a turban, my neck was out. Makeup. My clothes were the clothes of an unveiled woman. Not the clothes of the veiled. Let us not kid ourselves. Either I wear it right, or I do not wear it. (Nishan, 2019, 14:57)

For al Kindari, even though she practised veiling in differing modern ways, or what Linda Herrera described as 'downveiling' (2001), which is concerned with dressing in a way that is less concealing and less conservative, it did not feel right to her, and true veiling meant not only proper veiling and proper attire, it also meant proper veiling conduct. Riswan (2021, p. 160) discusses 'an ideal state, a level of piety that is either set by religion and/or society,' that women feel they must attain, and not embodying that state brings feelings of discomfort and it is by unveiling that some women articulate their feelings of comfort once more. This does not necessarily connote a rejection of the veil or the faith. Rather, it is a mode of self-expression and assertion of autonomy. Riswan also states that the idea of discomfort with the veil has different variations, such as not being ready at heart, feelings of shame for not being worthy, or the inability to fulfill the expectations of the veil socially (2021, p. 160). Riswan's (2021) elucidation of the feelings of discomfort associated with the veil helps explain al Kindari's position on being convinced of the veil but simultaneously not being ready to wear it.

Furthermore, al Kindari also speaks of the 'right' veil, which is the veil prescribed by dominant interpretations of religious scholars. That veil is a part of a system of covering *zīna* (ornaments), like her makeup, and *'awra*, like her neck, or anything which is meant to enhance her beauty and attract attention (Goto, 2004, p. 288-292). She took the veil off to extensive social media scrutiny and at a high personal cost. According to the

actress, her father did not speak to her for two years as he did not want her to enter his home unveiled (Nishan, 2019, 17:07). Sabrien, on the other hand, had the support of her whole family, her husband and children, but similar to al Kindari she received an incredible amount of scrutiny for her decision, which she announced through her Instagram account on November 18, 2019 (Sabrien [sabrienofficial], 2019). Sabrien could be described as having practiced what Izharuddin (2021) calls sartorial-embodied tactics when she decided to wear a wig in her roles and also decided to wear the turban to cover instead of the veil. Women who veil, veil in a multitude of ways across the Middle East and the Islamic world. Some don a veil that covers their hair fully, some partially. The turban is a type of head covering that wraps around the head and exposes the neck (though not always). Different styles of veiling signify how women define for themselves the meaning of modesty as they don the veil. According to Izharuddin (2021, p. 176), 'The practice of unveiling in stages, from taking off the hijab to wearing other forms of head covering, necessitates the deployment of tactics.' Some of those tactics involve different forms of downveiling or hair accessories and clothing articles that hide the hair partially in that in-between state of being veiled and being unveiled, such as beanies, hats or hoodies (Izharuddin, 2021). Not only Sabrien, but Soheir Ramzie also practiced unveiling in stages, gradually showing more of her hair. A new use of language accompanied that transition. Both actresses stopped referring to themselves as *mohajjaba*, veiled. Sabrien stated that she took off the veil when she decided to wear the wig, and Ramzi stopped saying she was *mohajjaba*, veiled. With time, the actresses started to refer to themselves as *mohtashama* (modest) and not *mohajjaba* (veiled). Therefore, these actresses excluded themselves from the practices and language that accompany specific forms of veiling and their implications for dress and conduct. Being modest, *mohtashama*, connotes abiding by the rules of piety, but without the veil. The inner state of piety is elevated instead of an external state of piety.

Another facet of the introspective subjectivity process, in accordance with the work of Nieuwkerk, Riswan and Izharuddin, was the deep awareness of feelings of inauthenticity, feelings of 'contradiction' and a desire for changing the self. Sabrien, for example, stated that the decision to unveil was not about work when she asked if it was a motivating factor stating 'It was about me. About me. The contradiction was too much.' (Al Hikaya, 2019, 5:11). She also stated: 'I sat struggling with myself and said I was divided into two parts, and I looked in the mirror saying who is this and is what I am doing right or wrong? I sat very, very often, asking myself which step to take.' (Al Hikaya, 2019, 1:29). For Hala Shiha it was about change and authenticity. It meant liberation from fear and making a choice, especially at a point in her life where she understood that change was a natural process of being. The process of internal and personal change that contributed to

her decision to remove the veil, including the face veil she had at the time, was due to life experiences, trying different things, and learning. Admitting that simply changing how you feel about something and being true to yourself was allowed as decisions made in youth were not the same as decisions made when one was older and more mature, which is something that Ramzi also stated. Unveiling for Shiha was related to a process of renewed self-discovery, diving into the self, and free exploration. She states, 'so I came back (to Egypt) and I took the decision to be free from everything again. So, I can again create something new inside of myself with my experiences through the years.' (Lamaan & Arafa, Part Two, 15:14).

For Hala Shiha, Sabrien and Soheri Ramzi, unveiling involved a process of redefining their relationship with the veil and elevating the internal over the external, the private over the public. For Hanadi al Kindari, it was a symbol of failure and discomfort on her part, for not being ready to subscribe to the veil and all the symbolic meanings that she understood it to have. Unveiling, thus, is not simply the act of removing an article of clothing. The willful act of leaving the veil is complex, and women come to it differently. The themes the actresses discussed concerning their own experiences suggest that introspection was a critical part of it. Even though the choice to unveil is not embedded in the same economy of meanings as donning the veil is, on the contrary, leaving the veil connotes subversion and transgression, women still make that choice as a process of reimagining and rediscovering the self.

5. Conclusion

The veil is a complex symbol and the process of leaving the veil or even donning the veil is one that highlights transition, agency, and autonomy. According to Riswan (2021, p. 168), 'Muslim women are (re)claiming their bodies, either by embracing or leaving hijab, or constantly moving between the two boundaries.' Therefore, critical analysis of unveiling in the media and women's choices to unveil in Muslim-majority contexts needs to be articulated without falling into 'orientalist assumptions that the veil represents cultural backwardness and inhibits the progress of womankind'; it also needs to be juxtaposed against the politicization of Muslim women veiling in non-Muslim majority contexts, where it becomes an act of political and cultural resistance to assimilation and oppression (Izharuddin, 2018, p. 172; Moors & Salih, 2009).

By textually analyzing the media discourses surrounding the unveiling campaign that started on Facebook and analyzing the interviews with some of the most prominent actresses in Egypt and the Gulf regarding their choice to unveil, this article contributes to the complex discourses of unveiling in the Arab world on which there is a dearth of

research. An examination of the media discourses surrounding unveiling for this article revealed themes pertaining to the presence of religious rhetoric that is invested in maintaining specific interpretations of veiled gendered practices. The rhetoric of the religious elite illustrates that women who unveil destabilise the constellation of gendered meanings that are deeply interlinked with the veil. Women and their bodies symbolically belong to the nation and must be covered to signify their chastity, modesty, and piety. Proponents of unveiling, on the other hand, elevate the development of critical introspection, autonomy, and freedom of expression through partial nostalgia for a bygone era. In examining the celebrity women of the Arab world who chose to unveil, a deeper understanding of the choice to unveil in a hyper-visible media context gives an understanding of how these mediated narratives can inform such a socially contentious decision in a public forum.

The technological and political transformations of the past decade have emboldened men and women to address topics that were deemed taboo and of the utmost sensitivity in the region. The unveiling trend that the Arab and Muslim region is witnessing right now is occurring due to wider socio-cultural shifts that are connected to the weakening grip of the religious influence socially and culturally (Izharuddin, 2021) and as an effect of a growing critical social consciousness, that is present in the social media and the traditional media spheres. Women who unveil undergo a process of introspective subjectivity, a process of understanding the self to find alternative meanings in matters of spirituality, piety, and identity. They also resist the gendered hegemonic norms that exist regarding the meanings associated with the veil in the Arab context, not as liberal bodies per se, but as autonomous agentic bodies.

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