

Discrimination, Exclusion and Erasure

—Islamic Dress in Lebanon under Coloniality—

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Coloniality, the darker side of western Modernity, works through a process of marking and erasure in the pursuit of a uni-versal world (Mignolo 2010, 2012). In this sense, it works through the establishment of a colonial difference, the construction of social forms of difference, where difference from the imagined European produces a hierarchy in humanity; a racialization (Grosfoguel 2008, 2013, 2016). In a small multi-confessional ex-colony on the shores of the Mediterranean grave, where neo-liberal economics and liberal politics have long taken their toll, coloniality runs rampant.

Coloniality has many victims in Lebanon. Amongst them, and amongst its most brutalized one I will claim, are those read by mainstream Lebanese society as ‘Muslims’. Scholarship have shown that around half of the Lebanese population thinks that women should not wear the hijab in public (Moaddel 2013). Yet the hijab, which has an ‘almost insignificant tradition’, is resurging in the twenty-first century with ‘the resurgence of Islam’ (Thomas 2012: 10). In a country where westernization, from culture to economics, has taken its toll the dress’s position, as the west’s racializing Other, raises concerns and intrigue as it promises insights on forms of racism and the produced hierarchy of the human in our modern globalized world. This project will hence investigate the Islamic dress and explore its relationship to Coloniality. What do those women wearing it experience? What are the terms through which they understand these experiences and how can they be theorized? How do their experiences demonstrate the entanglement of various markers of inferiority such as gender, class, nationality and geographic background? Indeed, what does a decolonial practice of listening in Lebanon tell us about the coloniality of daily life in the small nation?

Research Questions;

1. Does the Islamic Hijab figure in the production of a hierarchy in Lebanese society?
2. If it does, what is the structuring force behind the marking and exclusion of Hijabi women in Lebanon and who are its agents?
3. What is the result of this attempted erasure on the Hijabi woman's experience and how does this entangle with other markers of inferiority (class, gender, national origin...)?

Rationale

In a time of increasing racism, discrimination and social exclusion, a call to re-theorize the definition of race from a non-Eurocentric standpoint has emerged in the academy (Mignolo 2005, 2009, 2011; Grosfoguel 2016, Grosfoguel et al. 2015). Understanding race as a 'global hierarchy of superiority and inferiority along the line of the human' produced by institutions of Modernity/Coloniality 'politically, culturally and economically' (Grosfoguel 2016: 10), an exploration of various racial markers (beyond skin pigmentation and biological features) becomes an urgent need.

Lebanon, a place where the nation-state project has failed, is home to eighteen official sects. Lebanon is a country where neo-liberalism and neo-imperialism run rampant to produce a state of coloniality where Western Otherness entangles with class, gender, nationality and geography to produce social inequality. It is also a place where 'political Islam' is on the rise and where a highly modernized/westernized culture is the hegemonic norm. In Lebanon, the Islamic hijab is a potent symbol of multiple affiliations, identities and belongings: from piety to sect and from class to national origin. Clearly, it is a symbol of a public nature, an artefact which marks and brands the wearer. As a religious symbol, and with French colonial baggage, is the dress is the object of exclusion, discrimination and condescension.

Most of the work done on the Islamic dress has focused on one of two geographic settings: western nations or Islamic ones (at least demographically/culturally). Within these two settings researchers have sought out to understand a telling phenomenon. As valuable as it is, the literature remains western-centric: from the theories used to the locales investigated. Revolving around questions of agency, identity and piety this scholarship has shed much light on the working of the hijab but has often failed to analyse the object in its global interconnectedness to a hierarchy of humanity and its nature as a tool for the production of social inequality, to analyse the micro-dynamics of what happens as a result of this interconnectedness and to think outside of the categories of Eurocentrism.

In Lebanon, I would argue, there is a production of the Hijabi as a subject-position at the bottom of the social hierarchy, entangling with gender and class. Coloniality, hence, uses the dress as a marker in the production of social inequality in its pursuit to erase and establish its colonized modernity. The results are experiences of exclusion, discrimination and marginalisation which ultimately transforms both the hijab and the woman wearing it.

Methodology

As a case study, this work will focus on Lebanon: a small Arab Mediterranean ex-colony. For an optimal understanding and sound analysis, a triangulation of research techniques was applied through focus groups and interviews with photo-elicitation techniques (in both). Throughout, anonymity, optional participation as well as all other rights of research participants were given due care. Importantly, methods fed into the same broad questions; the techniques were used concurrently and in parallel. The value of having more than one method is two-fold: on the one hand it allowed me to access more participants, more efficiently, including those who would not agree to participate in a certain method but would do so with another. On the other hand, it allowed a deeper and more robust analysis and an integration of data coming through different techniques to increase confidence in the narrative of the dissertation. Both methods were tailored to answer the research questions, trying to understand women's experiences and accounts. These covered background, underlying forces and structuring factors behind the heterogeneous scene in current Lebanese society as well as narratives related to more personal experiences. The interview guidelines were semi-structured as much of what is sought after cannot be reduced to categories and multiple-choice questions. Finally, and especially through focus-groups, these methods allowed me to draw out patterns and see how women negotiate and discuss the relationship between the various markers at play.