

# Article: Veiling Pulling as Orientalist and Colonial Violence: Contemporary Case Studies in Canada

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## Abstract

*The veil occupies a significant position within Western discourses as a symbol of Islam and a representation of Muslim women's perceived oppression. Rooted in historical and contemporary narratives, the veil's portrayal often intersects with colonial and post-colonial discourses. This paper explores the violent act of veil-pulling, a hate crime involving the forced removal of a Muslim woman's veil, as an extension of colonial ideologies and racialized oppression. Using the theoretical frameworks of Franz Fanon's analysis of French-colonized Algeria and Edward Said's Orientalism, this study investigates the enduring legacy of colonial attitudes toward the veil and their manifestation in modern contexts. The analysis highlights the nuanced connections between the historical practice of unveiling as a colonial tool and the contemporary targeting of veiled Muslim women. Drawing on case studies such as incidents at a Tennessee secondary school, the development of "Hijab Emergency Kits" at Dalhousie University, and occurrences at pro-Palestinian protests, this paper argues that veil-pulling is not merely a random act of aggression, but a deeply embedded act of violence rooted in colonial and racist intentions. This research underscores the need to recognize and address veil-pulling as a systemic issue requiring a critical and informed analysis.*

**Keywords:** Veil, Islam, Muslim women, colonialism, post-colonial theory, Orientalism, hate crimes, feminist critique

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## Introduction

The veil<sup>1</sup> holds a position within Western<sup>2</sup> discourses as a simulacrum of Islam as a religion and culture as well as contextually the oppression of Muslim women. The trope of an oppressed veiled woman existed long before Laura Bush decided that "We are Afghan Woman"<sup>3</sup>. The veil holds a pertinent position within both contemporary and historical contexts and is deliberated in detail by post-colonial theorists Franz Fanon and Edward Said. However, this article will not argue the validity of the common representations of the veil. By utilizing post-colonial theory so that one may conceptualize why veil-pulling is a common occurrence Muslim women are made to endure

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<sup>1</sup> This article uses the term "veil" rather than "hijab" as hijab speaks to a social and physical modesty and is applicable to men and women while veil refers to a physical head covering.

<sup>2</sup> This article uses Edward Said's (1995) concept of East vs. West as a binary rather than global south/north or minority/majority world dichotomy as it provides more context in the discourses applied to Muslim populations. This article uses the term European if specification is necessary/applicable.

<sup>3</sup> This is the name of Laura Bush's book published in 2016 about being the voice of Afghan women, reflecting on the time the United States spent in Afghanistan, fully titled *We are Afghan Women; Voices of Hope*. The title of her book builds on her infamous radio address from November 17, 2001 which called on "civilized people throughout the world" to liberate Afghan women as a pretext and justification for the US invasion of Afghanistan (White House Archives, 2001).

or be fearful of, this article looks to demonstrate how past understandings of the veil have continued into contemporary contexts, particularly through the prominent threat veiled Muslim women face of having their veils violently removed from their bodies. It is important to note that unveiling has likewise been used to metaphorically describe imperialist feminism's attempt to liberate Muslim women from their understanding of oppressive modes of dress. The veil-pulling described here is the hate-crime of forcefully removing the veil off a woman's head by the violation of her personal space, agency, and body. The connection between the association of unveiling and liberation in relation to veil-pulling is further explored in this article.

Having a veil ripped from one's head (and even the threat of it) is a violent action with roots deep in colonialism and needs to be recognized as such. Frantz Fanon describes the discourse around unveiling in French-colonized Algeria and although modern versions of veil-pulling are less systematic, their roots can be traced to comparable motives and understandings. This article begins with the post-colonial framework using Fanon's case study of Algeria and Edward Said's Orientalism to apply them to contemporary situations. This framework will provide the theoretical basis necessary to understand how the forced removal of a veil from a woman's head is not only a violent action, but is deeply rooted in racist, colonial intention. Contemporary occurrences such as the case at a Tennessee secondary school, the need for "Hijab Emergency Kits" at Dalhousie University, and the increasingly common occurrence of veils being pulled at Pro-Palestinian protests demonstrates that the action of having a veil pulled requires a nuanced analysis beyond simply being brushed off as an unintentional action or merely interpersonal harm.

### **Gendered Islamophobia and the Homogenization of Muslims**

Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) writes about the importance and necessity of intersectionality as a lens in the context of domestic violence, illustrating that women of colour walk the world from a perspective unique from simply combining the experience of white women and men of colour. This consideration paved the way to understanding different lenses and vulnerabilities. Understanding the experience of veiled Muslim women requires a similar nuance. The term gendered Islamophobia calls into question the differences between the way men and women endure Islamophobia differently (Zine 2006). Jasmin Zine outlines a definition for gendered Islamophobia in the following passage:

This can be understood as specific forms of ethno-religious and racialized discrimination leveled at Muslim women that proceed from historically contextualized negative stereotypes that inform individual and systemic forms of oppression. Various forms of oppression, for example, racism, sexism, and classism, are rooted within specific ideological/discursive processes and supported through both individual and systemic actions. In the case of gendered Islamophobia, the discursive roots are historically entrenched within Orientalist representations that cast colonial Muslim women as backward, oppressed victims of misogynist societies (2006, 24).

Gendered Islamophobia offers the notion that the experience of a Muslim woman is in itself a unique phenomenon, and this is made particularly salient when the woman is veiled.

As members of one of the fastest growing religions in the world, Muslims cannot be considered a homogenous group even if they often are. Orientalist discourse contributes to painting all Muslims as Arabs despite fewer than 15% of all Muslims being Arab. Even within the context of Arab countries, the cultures vary greatly and cannot be considered synonymous; the differences between countries like Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine diverge greatly on the basis of factors such as wealth, international war, civil war, modern colonialism, historical colonialism, tradition, majority sect, politics and religious practice to say the least. These factors influence the way the veil is represented, observed, and responded to as part of a fashion ensemble and as an instrument for achieving religious modesty. By taking an intersectional approach, one is forced to uncover further intersections that would change and diversify the image of how Islamophobia is experienced. An example is the anti-Blackness faced by Black Muslims both within Muslim communities and broadly. Immigration, education, or class status would also impact how one experiences Islamophobia uniquely. Being a minority within a minority group is a factor that an intersectional analysis would need to take into consideration (Karim 2006). In her conversation with three Muslim women, Jamillah Karim describes “overlapping sites of injustice” in relation to African-American Muslim women who wear the veil (231) experiencing gendered Islamophobia and anti-Blackness. However as both Karim and Crenshaw suggest, walking the world as a Black Muslim woman cannot be considered as simply adding the way non-Muslim Black people and non-Black Muslim people are treated by the general public; the experience is its own. Taking into consideration that these intersections increase vulnerability on individual and systematic levels the way Crenshaw (1991) describes, the violence of veil-pulling can vary greatly as far as aggression and motive before and during attacks, and the support received post-attack.

### **The Veil in Colonial Contexts**

Franz Fanon (1970) illustrates the struggle between French colonial forces and Algerians resistance over the independence of the country. He dedicates a chapter to describing the discourse around the veil in this time period and the role it played in resistance efforts. He notes the veil served as a marker of Arab/Muslim society and is consequently representative of the negative characteristics attributed to said society (38). The distribution of these characteristics is defined well by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s understanding of modern sovereignty: “the world of modern sovereignty is a Manichaeon world, divided by a series of binary oppositions that define Self and Other, white and black, inside and outside, ruler and ruled” (2000, 139). Their concept is adopted from Fanon (1963) who describes this as a colonial logic. Within the context of Algeria, the veil symbolized barbarism of the Algerian men and the unveiling of the Algerian woman was a sign of liberation and acceptance of French colonial rule.



*French Colonial Anti-Veil Poster - Source: Perego 2015, translation: Aren't you pretty? Reveal yourself!*

In Algeria, the revolutionary struggle is not illustrated through a story of an individual snatching a veil off the head of a Muslim woman. The removal of the veil was purposeful and meant to diminish the woman's agency and identity as an Algerian Muslim woman. The colonial context therefore provides the undeniable intention of this action as colonial, systematic violence. Fanon discusses this as part of the dream of the European in relation to the Algerian woman:

Thus, the rape of the Algerian woman in the dream of a European is always preceded by a rending of the veil. We here witness a double deflowering. Likewise, the woman's conduct is never one of consent or acceptance, but of abject humility (45).

The lack of consent is an essential element in the colonial context, even when considering the removal of the veil as part of "liberating" the women from patriarchal modes of dress. Therefore the "liberation" of the Muslim woman does not occur with persuasion but rather a forced removal of her veil which leads to her embracing European liberation as a whole. The characters attributed to European women become the Muslim women's for the taking. Another point to consider as colonial motive is how the veil was symbolic of the Arabness of Algeria and the most recognisable method to confirm Muslimness (35). Fanon argues that the colonial agenda assumed control of the veil that in order to conquer the nation, hinging on the presumption that one would need to conquer the women as they are the creators and maintainers of culture, and this could not be done while they were veiled (38). To the colonizer, the veil was a barrier to colonizing Algeria as the veil prevented reciprocal seeing –the unyielding inability to be seen became a source of loss and frustration for the colonizer (43).

In the following passage Fanon narrates the satisfaction in unveiling women for the colonialists:

After each success, the authorities were strengthened in their conviction that the Algerian woman would support Western penetration into the native society. Every rejected veil disclosed to the eyes of the colonialist's horizons until then forbidden, and revealed to them, piece by piece, the flesh of Algeria laid bare. The occupier's aggressiveness, and hence his hopes, multiplied ten-fold each time a new face was uncovered. (42)

The language, particularly phrases like "piece by piece, the flesh of Algeria laid bare" and "horizons until then forbidden," underscores a forceful, sexualized imposition in the removal of the veil. Fanon's analysis in Algeria supports the idea that this act was not about liberating Muslim women but was, rather, a further colonizing tactic aimed at violating and controlling their bodies, symbolizing a deeper intrusion into their culture and identity.

### **The Veil as a Symbol of the Orient**

When discussing Muslim-centered issues it is nearly impossible to overlook the use of Edward Said's concept of Orientalism (1978). Influenced by Michel Foucault, Said refers to Orientalism as a discourse in which the Orient (North Africa, the Middle East and South Asia) is understood, from a European perspective. This discourse establishes a cultural and political dominance on the basis of flawed expertise:

A text purporting to contain knowledge about something actual and arising out of circumstances similar to the ones I have just described, is not easily dismissed. Expertise is attributed to it. The authority of academics, institutions, and governments can accrue to it, surrounding it with still greater prestige than its practical successes warrant. Most important, such texts can create not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe. In time such knowledge and reality produce a tradition, or what Michel Foucault calls a discourse, whose material presence or weight, not the originality of a given author, is really responsible for the texts produced out of it. (94)

Orientalism is thereby produced through a European perception of limited interactions with the Orient and is applied across the multitudes of diverse geographies and populations. This Manichaean process works by allocating positive attributes to Europe while attributing the opposite negative characteristics to the Orient. These discourses purvey a narrative of the Orient being a backward society void of any civilization. Forming this binary establishes European identity as the superior society, what Hardt and Negri speak to as a process of creating said identity:

Colonialism and racial subordination function as a temporary solution to the crisis of European modernity, not only in economic and political terms, but also in terms of identity and culture. Colonialism constructs figures of alterity and manages their flows in what unfolds as a complex dialectical structure. The negative construction of non-European others is finally what founds and sustains European identity itself. (2000, 124)

Orientalism is a colonial construct that produces figures of alterity and continues to do so as empire and neo-imperialism take the place of direct colonialism. Hardt and Negri discuss that no nation will have the power that European colonial rule once had, including the powerhouse that is the United States of America; however, they do state that the USA hold a privileged position in facilitating empire (xiv). They indicate that this is due to the similarities between the present-day USA and European colonialists; these similarities carry into the way said power-states utilize Orientalist discourse to maintain and promote their own identity through empire (xiv).

Since the veil is a very visible symbol of Islam, Orientalist notions are applied to the people within the East and "Orientals" living in the West as a product of Empire. The relationship the West has

with Islam is a complex one to say the least. Whatever the contents of the actual relationship, the European perceptions and discourses about them are what have formed regimes of truth about Islam in the Western imagination. Said (1978) discusses trauma that Europe has in relation to Islam since the Middle-Ages:

At the end of the seventeenth century the “Ottoman peril” lurked alongside Europe to represent for the whole of Christian civilization a constant danger, and in time European civilization incorporated that peril and its lore, its great events, figures, virtues, and vices, as something woven into the fabric of life (59-60).

The use of this representation remains persistent as violence caused by Muslims is always categorized as terrorism and the language in media coverage reiterates similar verbiage such as “devastation caused by barbarians”. This discourse fuels revenge hate-crimes after terror-attacks which contributes to veiled women increasingly fearing their veil being pulled off.

### **Imperialist Feminism**

There is even more of a perceived victory in the removal of such an explicit symbol of Islam as the veil: it is seen as a form of restoring modernity to the West. Between the East and West there is a binary of modernity that is used as a tool to justify imperialism as seen in the case Fanon provides of Algeria and the way Laura Bush discusses Afghanistan. This is not a phenomenon unique to Muslim women; the idea of women in non-Western countries needing saving or being oppressed by their cultural contexts has been applied to women in various countries like India and Japan (Hardman 2004). Further, this discourse has been utilized to justify imperial impositions on Muslim-majority countries. Gayatri Spivak notes this phenomenon as ‘white men saving brown women from brown men’ (1988). Examples of this trope can be found in the invasion of Iraq too; while not the primary cause of invasion, it was nonetheless used to justify continuous military action in Iraq (Bashawieh 2015, 1).

In a highly Islamophobic discourse, the veil is often described as an emblem of backwardness and the male subjugation of females. Since Orientalism functions as a discourse of opposition, Europe/the West is then seen as the pinnacle of modernity and women’s liberation. Hardt and Negri attest to this as producing alterity within those placed in said opposition of the dominant discourse (123). Discourses that create such a binary are used to justify colonial violence and in the case of veil-pulling operates similarly. The removal of the veil is visualized as a restoration of modernity, whether it be individual or systematic. Apart from the forceful removal of the veil from individuals by individuals, government policies have played a hand in a similar violence. Niqab and Burqa bans in France and Quebec exemplify this systematic removal of the veil in an Orientalist discourse disguised as promoting a secular society. The systematic removal of the veil further enables individual acts of violence against veiled-Muslim woman as attackers are seen as operating within jurisdiction of the law.

### **Contemporary Veil Pulling**

The year 2017 showed a climax of hate-crimes against Muslims in Canada, with the general statistical synopsis indicating a 5% increase in hate crimes since the year prior with hate crimes

against Muslims increasing by 61% and accounting for 12% of all hate crimes (Stats Can 2017). Although this number already seems steep, one must consider that it does not account for victims who are attacked on the basis of their proximity to Muslimness. Examples include non-Muslim Arabs and Sikhs who are both commonly mistaken for Muslims. In addition, 53% of victims of hate crimes are female, the 13% increase from the year prior is directly attributed to Jewish and Muslim women; explained by their visibility as minorities. These statistics only intensify within the United Kingdom and United States contexts as the prominent discourse is not as diversity-driven. This does not suggest that Canada is free of hate but rather fosters an environment less tolerant of explicit prejudice as it holds itself to a stereotype of celebrated multiculturalism, even when multiculturalism leaves less a lot to be desired. Similarly, a study carried out by The Council on American-Islamic Relations (2015) indicated that 29% of veil-wearing Muslim girls experienced offensive pulling of their veil within academic spaces in California – one of the most “tolerant” states. These hate crimes unfailingly increase post-terror attacks as seen in a 505% increase in hate crimes against Muslims in Manchester following the bombing in the Manchester Arena in May 2017 (Halliday 2017). Increases are also prominent when public officials are tolerant of prejudicial speech; the Trump administration being a prime illustration of unequivocal hate speech. Women invariably end up being targets as they are often more visible due to the veil and end up facing a form of “revenge” in the face of terror attacks. However, as the colonial contexts show, the pulling off the veil is not an unintentional part of the general hate-crimes described. The contemporary contexts demonstrate that veil-pulling, functions as an extension of colonial violence to the present day.

#### *Secondary-School in Nashville, Tennessee*

A case at a secondary school in Nashville, Tennessee exemplifies veil-pulling with “no malicious intent” (Associated Press 2017) that speaks to imperialist feminist ideals. The video, posted on popular social media app Snapchat, was taken by the teacher who recorded herself removing the hijab of one of her students as the student hides her face and becomes obviously distraught as her classmates all begin touching her hair. The caption to the videos were “pretty hair” and “lol all that hair cover up”<sup>4</sup>. These captions underlie a tone of imperialist feminism particularly in conjunction with the school administration emphasizing good intentions. Rather than a frustration with the religion and seeking “revenge” through hate crimes, this unveiling follows a different trope as more commonly seen held by women. The notion of saving Muslim women, as exhibited by feminist groups like FEMEN<sup>5</sup> and celebrities/public figures like Laura Bush, typically are non-consensual and silencing in nature, as was the teacher removing the veil of her student.

#### *Weaponizing Veil-Pulling at Pro-Palestinian protests*

Since the events of October 7, 2023, in Israel and Gaza, anti-Muslim hate crime in Western countries has seen an exponential increase, with many more cases being reported than at the same time in previous years. The militarized treatment of Pro-Palestinian protestors on university

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<sup>4</sup> The video has been posted to numerous YouTube channels and was shown in news reports as well. One example of the video posting can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NzFrbsAzngM>

<sup>5</sup> FEMEN is a quasi-feminist organization notorious for its stance in opposition of Muslim woman wearing hijab as exemplified with their “Topless Jihad Protests” and published articles on the following topics: “Hijab is Sexism, Not Anti-Racism”(FEMEN Staff, 2016) and “Hijab Day: There's No Such Thing As a Feminist Who Supports” (Shevchenko, 2016).

campuses by university security and city police demonstrates parallels the colonial violence previously described. Despite the arrest of protesting Muslim women not necessitating the removal of their hijabs, pro-Palestinian protestors have documented the forced removal of the hijabs of protestors by police. These incidents have been documented in Ohio State University (Gallion 2024) and Arizona State University (CAIR-AZ April 2024), among others. Similar to the way the veil was marked as a form of resistance to colonial forces in Algeria, the targeting of the hijab is meant to stifle the resistance of pro-Palestinian protestors. The colonial legacies find their parallels in the dual resistances of colonization in Algeria and Palestine.

Similarly, as protests in Canada also demonstrate increased tensions, the trope of targeting a woman's hijab amidst physical altercations made national headlines as a Muslim woman had her hijab pulled off by an opposing protestor (CBC News, May 2024). In a protest in Ottawa, Hayfa Abdelkhaleq had her hijab ripped off in a targeted attack by a passerby, with no prior altercation. The Ottawa police investigated the incident as a hate crime with little findings, despite the incident being recorded and taking place in a heavily invigilated space. The intentional removal of the hijab, with no prior altercation, demonstrates the offense taken at the very sight of the veil. The charges against the perpetrator were dropped by Crown prosecutors stating that the chant "'From the River to the Sea Palestine will be Free," incited a call for genocide against Jewish people. While the intent behind the phrase has recently been heavily debated in discourses surrounding the geopolitical issues of Palestine-Israel, the decision sets a dangerous precedent. Allowing for the violent removal of a veil in response to a newly controversial protest chant opens the doors for future attacks on veiled Muslim women. This incident also paints the veil as an acceptable target for attack in response to political disagreement.

### *Dalhousie University's Emergency Hijab Kits*

Additionally suggestive of the prominence of veil-pulling is the establishment of an "Emergency Hijab Kit" in light of the amount of violence now prominent on the Dalhousie University campus. The point of the emergency kits is said to be twofold: a precaution in light of on-campus violence and to spread awareness as to just how pervasive such violence is. Other articles condition these points using the university claims these kits will go unused but will encourage people who face such hate crimes to come forward in reporting them (Canadian Press, 2017). This statement requires some analysis as the university both asserts that the veil-pulling is not a frequent occurrence but admits to a lack of reporting, bringing into question if the attacks are actually not occurring or are simply unreported. Based on the fact that hate crimes and hate incidents tend to go vastly underreported, especially by communities which may become distrustful of law enforcement or have little hope in the justice system, the latter is more likely the case.

## **Conclusion**

A commonly proposed solution to the issue of veil-pulling is the establishment of martial-arts programs for Muslim girls. Considering that self-defense is an important and useful skill, centering Muslim women in this type of program remains essential as most gyms are co-ed and can be uncomfortable for women to practice in. Centering Muslim women also allows programs to cater to attacks specific to them, such as instinctively reacting to a veil tug in a way that would not further compromise the person being attacked. Although this initiative is excellent regarding skill-



building, confidence, general health and socialization, it does place the onus on the victim to avoid attack. This solution does little to prevent this form of hate-crime and challenge the dominant discourse that allows it to take place. To remedy this, one needs to focus on challenging the discourse and develop research on veil-pulling specifically, including with those who pull veils.

This specific hate-crime is deserving of its own research as indicative by the limits in the reports issued through Statistics Canada. Further development would include specifying anti-Muslim hate by gender and race and contextualizing the crime by intent if possible. Intent is an important element as it depicts the dominant discourse that rendered the hate-crime necessary in the eyes of perpetrators. These adjustments will create space for transformative processes that contest violent and harmful Orientalist discourses in action.

This article has navigated the context in which veil-pulling occurs, as an act of forcefully 'liberating' Muslim women from their veil or an act of vengeance towards Islam as a religion. Both reasons are deeply steeped in Orientalist and Islamophobic discourse. The potential for further development requires in-depth research that centers the experiences of a diverse group of veiled-Muslim women and allows space for unreported anecdotal evidence while utilizing an intersectional method. These factors are essential to efficiently research this topic in a manner that is sensitive to experienced trauma and effective to transformative processes.

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