Sociology of Veil in Saudi Arabia: Dress Code, Individual Choices and Questions on Women Empowerment

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Veil is one of the most contentious issues in discourses on condition and status of women in Muslim societies. In fact, it generates debate in Western societies with sizeable Muslim population such as France, Germany, UK and the US. Some such as France outlawed veiling in public on the basis that it violates women’s rights. Not unique because many Muslim countries such as Turkey had banned use of veil, and some Central Asian countries continue to ban its use to check rising tide of Islamism. While states act to satisfy their political capital, the debate on veil and its relationship with formation of female gender is an interesting reflection on a society and pertains to questions about individual choices. For some, particularly in Muslim societies it constitutes an ancient practice that shackles their freedom and prevents participation in public life. On the contrary many women, especially in the West, have asserted their right to use veil as part of their faith, identity, or a tool to protect male gaze.

When it comes to Saudi Arabia the issue is understood as largely settled in favor of veil, the kingdom being a ‘traditional’ society and a ‘conservative’ state. Given the strict dress code imposed on both local and expatriate women it largely remains a debate about to what extent the veil is enforced in public. Suggestions that its imposition became less strict during King Abdullah’s reign because of his reformatory measures gave solace to many outside. Indeed, as one visits marketplaces and upscale malls in the cities of Riyadh, Jeddah or Dammam it is not unusual to see many women without the otherwise usual *naqab* (veil). Though following the strict dress code of *abaya* (black gown) with *hijab* (head scarf), many particularly the young can be seen without veil. It might be surprising as well to see many young women travelling alone or in groups in train between Riyadh, Dammam and Hasa not following the dress code; that is, they wear the *abaya* and *hijab* but may not always cover their faces. These sights leave one wondering about questions regarding imposition of veil and individual choices.

It is not only difficult but extremely subjective to come to a definitive answer to this question because it can perhaps depend largely on individual choice based on socialization, idea of gender and feminity and familial and social considerations. Thus, it is difficult to argue if the state lifts the dress code on women, many Saudi women would discard the veil. Even if the society, in a hypothetical situation, for example, becomes more amenable to individual choices, will one see a lot of Saudi women in traditional attire with a veil or many would discard them as a symbol of oppression? It is a complex question but a peep into the women empowerment (*tamkin al-mara’t*) discourses inside
Saudi Arabia gives an impression that a substantial number across regions would discard veil but an equally substantial number would prefer to veil without compromising on their rights to have a public role, financial independence and the freedom to earn a livelihood.

This brings us to the larger question of the improvement in conditions of women in Saudi Arabia. Studies such as Soraya Altorki (1986), Salwa al-Khateeb (2007), Mona AlMunajjed (2009) and Madawi al-Rasheed (2013) give some idea about the conditions of women within the family, female healthcare facilities and economic participation. Literature on the practice of veil among Saudi women are limited, and largely it is either taken as a predominantly accepted social norm or as an imposed practice, thus, putting the entire issue in the binary of a choice made by women themselves or something that is imposed and would be completely discarded given a chance. Based on personal observation and discussion with a few Saudi women, this paper proposes that veil remains an important issue for them and even if it is not imposed by the state and left to their own choice many would prefer it as protective attire, while others would discard it as something that limits their freedom. It would largely depend on a number of other variables such as family, education, and economic independence. The paper also gives a sneak peek into the condition of women and the current debate around *tamkin al-mara’t* (women empowerment) in Saudi Arabia.

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