

Cartographies of Cloth

Cartographies of Cloth:

Mapping the Veil in Culture and Contemporary Art

By

Valerie Behiery

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and Contemporary Art

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For all of humanity. It is very important to know, understand, and appreciate all cultures and religions. This is very vital regarding the Muslim hijab because there is sometimes Islamophobia in western countries, although the number of Muslims there are widely increasing. Some countries have even laws against the hijab. This book has been made to help understand and accept the hijab visually. It is dedicated to everyone because I believe that humans can all include positivity in their lives, which is a central part of being.

This is my hope, even prayer.

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ABSTRACT

The veil is, in addition to a Muslim reality, a historically constructed symbol in the west, a fixed sign used in Euro-America to conveniently and clearly dress the borders between east and west. Recent disciplines like visual and cultural studies, Third World feminism, and postcolonialism have challenged this assumption, positing instead the veil's polysemy and its different, sometimes multiple meanings according to the individual, and the historical and geographical context. Representations of the veil in contemporary art have appeared quite frequently in Euro-America in the last couple of decades, and in this book, I set out to demonstrate that many of these visual texts also propose significant reinscriptions of the sign capable of displacing racist, dominant discourse. However, because of the veil's metonymy in some Euro-American mainstream culture and collective gaze, the book first charts the topography of the trope in history, discourse and visual culture as its entrenchment obviously complicates any use of the sign by artists of Muslim origin exhibiting within the western art apparatus. It then traces three alternative narratives of the veil evident in contemporary practice underscoring their critical importance with regards to gender, politics, representation and the conception of self. I must however concede that the major impetus behind the analyses of the contextualized veil, the postcolonial veil, and the subjective veil is a belief in the radical power of visual texts to facilitate transnational literacy and translation. The study therefore focuses on the relationship between the location -territorial or ideological- of the gaze and the image. It demonstrates that this relationship or space is protean, plural and full of promise both individually and collectively.

INTRODUCTION

It thus remains a matter of political and cultural urgency to reconceptualize the economy of multiple gazes that filter through, slide off and remake the veil.¹

Reina Lewis

From one perspective in this story, the ideal was a cover girl; from another, the ideal was a covered girl. From yet another vantage point, the visibility and the agency of women are culturally limited in both cases, ...²

Holly Edwards

The Muslim women's veil constitutes a common site in Euro-American³ visual culture. The fact that it is equally a controversial one is due to historical and present-day geopolitics, as well as to issues of contemporary individual and collective self-identity/ies. Scholarship has begun to broach the topic of the veil specifically, examining its role in colonial, modernist, feminist, and Muslim discourses, probing its resurgence east and west, and analyzing its significance in media representations.³ If scholarly consensus

¹ Reina Lewis. 2003. "Preface." In David A. Bailey and Gilane Tawadros (eds.). *Veil: Veiling, Representation and Contemporary Art*. Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: MIT Press; in IV A, p. 14.

² Holly Edwards. 2007. "Cover to Cover: The Life Cycle of an Image in Contemporary Visual Culture." In Mark Reinhardt, Holly Edwards, and Erina Duganne (eds.). *Beautiful Suffering: Photography and the Traffic of Pain*. Chicago; Williamstown, Massachusetts: University of Chicago Press; Williams College of Art, p. 92. The author continues, "... for while Taliban atrocities were obviously a more egregious transgression of women's rights than the stifling values of fashion-conscious America, declaring that these attitudes are *categorically* different is specious."

³ As in much contemporary scholarship, I am using the term 'Euro-American' to mean -and instead of - 'western' in an attempt to avoid some of the pitfalls and/or historical entrenchment of the latter term. This usage of Euro-American now widespread should not be confused with contexts in which it is used to mean or specify an American of European as opposed to say African or native descent. For other examples of the use of the term as a replacement for western see Arif Dirlik. 1994. "The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in The Age of Global Capitalism." *Critical Inquiry* 20(2): 328-356. Or Amina Mama. 1984. "Black Women, the Economic Crisis and the British State." *Feminist Review* 17: 21-35.

now acknowledges the veil's polysemy and the fact that it is in essence an artificially contrived sign, popular perceptions and representations remain rooted in formulaic colonial and neo-colonial narratives. In the last two decades, images of the veil have frequently appeared on the global art scene and yet little scholarship has probed and analyzed the surprising phenomenon. Arguing in support of the veil's multivalence and seeking to rectify the dearth of studies on the topic, the book initiates a mapping of the veil in contemporary art, underscoring the alternative narratives to mainstream representations it proffers and exploring its myriad meanings and its link to the wider issues of gender, politics, and identity.

Paradoxically, the veil functions both as a predetermined reductive sign, and as Nancy Lindisfarne-Tapper and Bruce Tapper suggest, a social construction "held to indicate virtually anything informants and the analyst want."⁴ In order to navigate through this sartorial maze, I have opted to proceed like a cartographer first defining the discursive and visual terrain before charting three trajectories that explore and decode the veil's various meanings or geographies in contemporary artistic production. If the three paths, each identified by a particular epithet -contextualized, postcolonial, and subjective-, refer to major and specific inflections of the veil and veiling in representation, the nomenclature is not intended to re-embed the sign in fixities. As the very term and notion of trajectory imply, the emphasis is on the itinerary and the tentative mapping of heterogeneous terrain, rather than on a single nameable destination.

The Muslim woman, veiled or not, has historically "been reduced to silence, to the status of an object, or, worse, made into someone else's speech,"⁵ and, as the study will demonstrate, representations of the veil intimately participate in this silencing and speaking for her. The veil in fact exceeds its sartorial materiality, as it constitutes a historically embedded filter through

⁴ Nancy Lindisfarne-Tapper and Bruce Tapper, 1997. "Approaches to the Study of Dress in the Middle East." In Nancy Lindisfarne-Tapper and Bruce Ingham (eds.) *Languages of Dress in the Middle East*. Surrey: Curzon Press, p. 16.

⁵ Susan J. Brison is speaking about the difficulty of survivors of trauma in "regaining ... voice." Lamia Ben Youssef Zayzafoon draws a useful parallel with the situation of Muslim women. Susan J. Brison. 1999. "Trauma Narratives and the Remaking of the Self" In Mieke Bal, Jonathon Crew and Leo Spitzer (eds.) *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*. Hanover, New Hampshire: Dartmouth College; University Press of New England, p. 47. Quoted in Lamia Ben Youssef Zayzafoon. 2005. *The Production of the Muslim Woman: Negotiating Text, History, and Ideology*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, p. 82.

which the Euro-American imaginary perceives the Muslim woman and which it projects onto her. Those issues of cultural identity, gender, and the production of otherness converge in the image of the veil explain why the sign, most often coupled with a postcolonial consciousness, has become a motif of predilection for many women artists of Muslim origin. For those living in Euro-America, the stereotyped projections of the 'host' society, and of which the veil forms an inextricable part and/or remains the most potent symbol, make recourse to the veil almost a *passage oblige*. Pakistani painter, Shahzia Sikander (b.1969), after studying miniature painting in Lahore left for the United States to undertake a M.F.A. at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) (1993-95), where, as Fereshteh Daftari notes, "she was confronted for the first time with a perception of herself that confined her within a framework: the 'Muslim woman.'"⁶ The frustration resulting from being reduced to and misconstrued by the invisible veil of the Euro-American cultural screen led the artist to temporarily don the veil as a performance piece at RISD in order to observe the reactions it aroused. The same type of ethnology 'in reverse' and heightened awareness of the metonymy of the veil and the difficulties of cultural translation instigated Ghada Amer's (b.1963) *I Love Paris* (1992) exhibited in Paris at the Hospital Ephemere. The series of photographs portray Amer and her friend, Ladan Naderi, both wearing the veil in different social and public circumstances from art openings to posing "in front of iconic monuments such as the Eiffel Tower."⁷ Despite the alternative venue, the humorous irony of the work was lost on viewers who, in the vast majority, left pejorative comments in the guest book, leading the artist to conclude, and actually confirming the premise underwriting *I Love Paris*, that, "Muslim women were not the subject of the message[s], the perception of them was."⁸ The 1998 study equally posits that the interrelated tropes of the veil and the Muslim woman generally relate more to the individual and/or collective viewer than to the viewed and constitute as Meyda Yegenoglu

⁶ Fereshteh Daftari. 2003. "Beyond Islamic Roots- Beyond Modernism." *RES* 43, p. 181. Sikander relates the same event in an interview with Homi Bhabha from which we can infer it was a *burqa*, "I actually wore a veil for a brief period of time for the purpose of recording people's reactions. I would go to the grocery store and to the bar, and people would get confused and intimidated. Obviously for me, it was just the opposite. Nobody could see my body language or facial expression. That gave me more control, security, and articulation." Homi Bhabha. 1999. "Chillava Klatch: Shahzia Sikander Interviewed by Homi Bhabha." In Shahzia Sikander *Shahzia Sikander, The Renaissance Society, March 8- April 19, 1998*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 20.

⁷ F. Daftari. *Op. cit.* p. 175.

⁸ Amer quoted in *ibid.* p. 177.

puts forth, "an over-determined totality ... in the unconscious of the subject [of the gaze]." ⁹

The veil persists as an overarching symbol of the difference, often plotted as irreconcilable, between the west and "Islam," modernity and tradition, and freedom and oppression. Its fixed assumptions continue to impact the lives of women of Muslim descent living in Euro-America and elsewhere to the point that women artists who have never worn a veil like Amer and Sikander cited above, often re-appropriate the motif in order to speak back. ¹⁰ The gendered associations and effects of the sign, the fact that it is mostly women artists who depict the veil and the pressing question of how Muslim women are able to reclaim their voices and counter the still largely predominant stereotyped representations of themselves, explain why the present study focuses almost exclusively on women artists of Muslim background. However, works produced by male artists will be brought forth when necessary, for the sake of fully tracing the constellation of a particular trajectory because after all the magnitude of the veil sign, often a visual shorthand for the problematic nature and misogyny of 'Islam,' equally impinges upon the lives of Muslim men. I must here also put forward that although the study has in a sense adopted the form of a contemporary catalogue because it affords the greatest scope and necessary breadth, simple considerations of length explain why many noteworthy artists (*i.e.* Ghazel (b. 1966), Faisal Abdu' Allah (b. 1969), *etc.*) who reference the veil have unfortunately been excluded. To these I apologize hoping that the book will facilitate the reading of and encourage research on their work.

The central hypothesis of the book is stark in its simplicity is no less radical. I postulate that the representations of the veil introduced in the three trajectories displace Euro-American dominant discourse and propose alternative narratives to colonial and neocolonial circumscriptions of the sign, revealing instead its plural and multifaceted character. The visual texts examined therefore challenge the veil's reification and by extension its use as a classificatory trope. More significantly, they unpack the cultural mistranslation the sign denotes instead pointing to and/or uncovering the spaces of possible cross-cultural communication thereby confirming an important subtext of the study positing the transformative potential of the image. In addition, I submit that a subjective location affording double

⁹ Meyda Yegenoglu. 1998. *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 48.

¹⁰ In fact, none of the women artists are discussed in the book veil with the exception of Emirati Nuha Asad discussed in Chapter 3.

vision allows an artist to reconfigure the image of the veil in order to become self rather than other in all three trajectories. I am not implying that an artist of Muslim origin should inevitably and solely be a cultural interpreter as is often expected and assumed, as I argue that the simultaneity of a subject's social inclusion and exclusion stems not only from biculturalism¹¹ but also from gender. In this sense, the analysis of many of the works corroborate Teresa de Lauretis' idea that "the subject of feminism speaks from a doubled position that is both inside/outside ideology"¹² or dominant discourses. Daftari articulates the same idea but speaks specifically to Muslim female bicultural subjectivity when she puts forth that, "gender... creates a space of observation equally unsparing to those Islamic cultures with a narrow vision of women, as to the myopic Western perception of the veil."¹³ If the claim on the agency of biculturalism and gender proves to be correct, I nonetheless also concurrently contend that representations of the veil cannot, again as many of the art works herein adduce, be entirely decontextualized from their site(s) of both production and reception, intimating that geographical location, despite the increasing deterritorialization of subjective and collective identities, still matters.

The alternative narratives of the veil the book delineates explore uncharted territory in that they test and unpack certain basic premises and tenets of Euro- American modernity and discourse. Michel Foucault perhaps correctly ascertained that new epistemologies emerging from such a voyage "beyond familiar territory" would completely debilitate the west's "grounds of thinking." However, rather than fearing that such an event is necessarily cataclysmic leaving "for analysis a blank, indifferent space, lacking in both interiority and promise,"¹⁴ I submit that such a discursive dismantling can

¹¹ Biculturalism can refer not only to the experiences of Muslim diasporas living in Euro- America but also to the populations of postcolonial societies in the Muslim World where the culture, signs, and concepts of western modernity were introduced under the aegis, first of colonialism, then of imperialism, 'development,' and later transnational capitalism.

¹² L. Ben Youssef Zayzafoon. *Op. cit.* p. 65. The author is referencing de Lauretis who described the feminist subject as being "inside *and* outside the ideology of gender, and conscious of being so, conscious of that twofold pull, of that division, that doubled vision." See Teresa de Lauretis. 1987. *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. 10.

¹³ F. Daftari. *Op. cit.* p. 175.

¹⁴ Michel Foucault. 1972. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. New York: Pantheon Books, p. 37. Quoted in Patricia Yaeger. 1996. "Introduction: Narrating Space." In Patricia Yaeger (ed.) *The Geography of Identity*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, p. 3.

move beyond trepidations of nostalgia and defeat and rise to the challenge of rescripting historical and cultural texts including rethinking the taxonomy of knowledge. The 'imagined communities' of both Euro-America and the Muslim World can, although I address only the former as it is the site I inhabit, contrary to much prevailing sentiment, successfully be re-imagined.¹⁵ In other words, I am proposing that the proximity of difference -cultural, ethnic, and religious- brought about in the west by the very tangible realities of postcolonialism and globalization, affords a shift from being defined by, to being transformed by alterity.

While the veil became early on a heavily charged trope set up as a 'cloth' curtain between east and west, its discussion in colonial texts and even in postcolonial critiques examining the construction of Orientalist representations of the Muslim woman has generally been limited to a small section of the work. In fact, it is only in the last few decades that the veil has become an acceptable object of study in and of itself. This phenomenon may be attributed to the writing of alternative global histories, the transnational trend of new veiling, as well as the continued controversy and passion Muslim presence and the veil continue to arouse in Euro-America. After all, the veil, often defined and fetishized by cultures in which it was/is not worn, only constitutes a tenable site of analysis because of the historical and ongoing fixation upon it. As the first chapter will establish, much of the new scholarship specifically devoted to the veil is sociological in nature, such as that on new veiling, postcolonial, such as studies examining its role in colonialist discourse, socio-political as the number of publications that have emerged from the French "*affaire du foulard*," or finally religious as that addressed to a devout Muslim readership.

Little scholarship has however broached the topic of the veil in visual representation, rendering an important objective of the study the attenuation

¹⁵ The destabilization, fragmentation and void that Foucault fears would issue from the deconstruction of the Enlightenment-based system of knowledge and master narratives is echoed by Middle Eastern subjects questioning the possibilities of transcending the effects of (internalized) colonization. For example, Abdelkebir Khatibi writes, "Oui, nous ne sommes pas arrivés à cette décolonisation de pensée qui serait, au-delà d'un renversement de ce pouvoir, l'affirmation d'une différence, une subversion absolue et libre de l'esprit. Il y a la comme un vide, un intervalle silencieux entre le fait de la colonisation et celui de la décolonisation. Non point que (;,a et la ne s'éclatent ni ne s'élaborent des paroles subversives et responsables, mais quelque chose d'étrangle et de presque perdu n'arrive pas à la parole parlante, à se donner ce pouvoir et ce risque. Abdelkebir Khatibi. 1983. "Double critique." In Abdelkebir Khatibi *Maghreb pluriel*. Paris: Denoel, p. 48.

of the gap between alternative images of the veil in contemporary art and deeply entrenched dominant perceptions and depictions of the veil, with the important subtext of assessing why the latter remain so resistant to postcolonial dismantling. While there exists a small burgeoning of texts on the representation of women in historical and contemporary arts from the Islamic world¹⁶ as well as a substantive growth in scholarship on and exhibits of contemporary art in the Muslim World,¹⁷ there are to date only two books specifically devoted to visual articulations of the veil. Faegheh Shirazi's *The Veil Unveiled: The Hijab in Modern Culture* analyzing the veil in both eastern and western visual culture, is relevant to the study, not only because of the proximity of popular culture to art, but because of, as mentioned earlier, the inseparability of the veil from culturally constructed discourse(s) and narrative(s).¹⁸ The seminal *Veil: Veiling, Representation*

¹⁶ Walter Denny. 1985. "Women and Islamic Art." In Yvonne Haddad (ed.) *Women, Religion and Social Change*. New York: SUNY Press, pp. 147-180. Afsaneh Najmabadi. 1998. "Reading for Gender through Qajar Painting." In Layla S. Diba and Maryam Ekhtiar (eds.) *Royal Persian Paintings: The Qajar Epoch, 1785-1925*. Brooklyn, New York: Brooklyn Museum of Art and I.B. Tauris, pp. 76-90. Layla S. Diba. 2003. "Lifting the Veil from the Face of Depiction: The Representation of Women in Persian Painting." In Guity Nashat and Lois Beck (eds.) *Women in Iran: From the Rise of Islam to 1800*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, pp. 206-36. Silvia Naef. 2002. "Between Symbol and Reality: The Image of Women in Twentieth-Century Arab Art." In Manuela Marfn and Randi Deghilhem (eds.) *Writing the Feminine: Women in Arab Sources*. London: I.B. Tauris, pp. 221-35. Beth Baron. 2005. *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender and Politics*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

¹⁷ Jocelyne Dakhli (ed.). 2006. *Créations artistiques en pays d'islam. Des arts en tension*. Paris: Editions Kime. Catherine David. 2003. *Tamass: Arab Contemporary Representations*. Rotterdam: Witte de With Center for Contemporary Arts. Haus des Kulturen der Welt. 2003. *DisORIENTations. Contemporary Arab Artists from the Middle East*. Berlin: Haus des Kulturen der Welt. Venetia Porter. 2006. *Word into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East*. London: The British Museum. Silvia Naef and Bernard Heyberger (eds.). 2003. *la multiplication des images en pays d'islam: de l'estampe à la télévision (17'-21')*. Wurzburg: Ergonin Kommission. Jessica Winegar. 2006. *Creative Reckonings: The Politics of Art and Culture in Contemporary Egypt*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press. There are now recent periodicals devoted to Middle Eastern contemporary art. *Al Jadid Magazine* and *Bidoun* cover the Arab World, *Tawoos* the Iranian world. The section of the Germany based excellent online publication *Universes-in-Universe* devoted to contemporary art from the Islamic World offers a wide geographical spectrum treating not only the Middle East and North Africa but also Central Asia, South Asia and Southeast Asia.

¹⁸ Faegheh Shirazi. 2001. *The Veil Unveiled: The Hijab in Modern Culture*.

and Contemporary Art edited by David A. Bailey, co-director of the African and Asian Visual Artists Archive (AAVAA), and Gilane Tawadros, former director of the Institute of International Visual Arts (inIVA), forms the sole work to date assembling and addressing, as the title indicates, the varied inflections of the veil in contemporary artistic practice.¹⁹

Shirazi's book dissects the representation of the veil in a variety of spheres of popular visual culture -American and Saudi Arabian advertising, American pornographic magazines, Iranian and Indo-Muslim cinema, depictions of Middle Eastern armies, and also, if somewhat unrelated, Islamic mystical poetry. Drawing upon such a wide spectrum of media and cultural contexts permits the author to prove her thesis of the veil's ubiquity, polysemy, and unfixedness observing that the "different visual, political, and literary representations of the veil demonstrate that its symbolic significance is being constantly defined and redefined, often to the point of ambiguity."²⁰ The analyses of a number of different sites also confirm the author's idea that an understanding of the specific local and global contexts informing the veil's representation is imperative in accessing its various meanings. There obviously exists a marked difference in how the veil will be both presented and perceived in *Playboy* as opposed to an advertisement in a Saudi women's magazine. *The Veil Unveiled* in fact dresses a portrait of how images of the veil -and hence of Muslim women- are constructed by a set of criteria defined by cultural norms, stereotypes, religious discourse, and/or state ideology.

That book constitutes a landmark within scholarship on the veil. The scope of the study is large, and each chapter provides ample historical background and discussion to contextualize each topic for the reader, even those not versed in the particular field of women in Islam or Middle Eastern history. The Iranian- born author in her final analysis concludes that the two most

Gainesville, Florida: University of Florida Press.

¹⁹ David A. Bailey and Gilane Tawadros (eds.). 2003. *Veil: Veiling, Representation and Contemporary Art*. Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: The MIT Press; in IVA. I might also add that continuing national debates surrounding the headscarf have led to recent studies on media representations of the veil. See amongst others, Neil Macmaster and Toni Lewis. 1998. "Orientalism: From Unveiling to Hyperveiling." *Journal of European Studies* 28(1): 121-35. Or Antonio Perrotti. 1990. "Immigration et médias. Le "Foulard" surmédialise." *Migrations Sociétés* 2(8):9-45.

²⁰ F. Shirazi. *Op. cit.* p. 7. This echoes Ingham and Tapper who also posit the manipulability of the veil sign, a tendency they attribute to its artificiality as a site of analysis. See N. Lindisfarne- Tapper and B. Ingham. *Op. cit.* p. 16.

common meanings of the veil that "transcend cultural, religious, and historical boundaries," are those of eroticism and oppression.²¹ I, however, submit that Shirazi does not always sufficiently analyze the various inflections of the veil apparent in the images she brings forth, and maintain that her own views on the veil restricted her emphasis to these two aspects even when other meanings transpire from many of the examples in the book but remain uninvestigated.²² Shirazi's Mernissian-style perspective on Islam²³ limits the scope of veils identified and led her as well to make a few factual and interpretative errors, for example with regard to menstruation and the concept of '*awra*'.²⁴ While there can be no doubt that most Muslim majority societies remain patriarchal in nature, and that veiling sometimes

²¹ *Ibid.* p. 176.

²² For example, the *hijabs* of the women in advertisements for menstrual products or toothpaste, or those of the U.A.E. female army recruits do not fit into these categories, except in so far as one may construe them as oppressive because like all images, they shape and define the normative.

²³ Shirazi belongs to the Mernissian school of thought whereby Islam views women as defective, impure and the source of all social chaos. She quotes Mernissi's famous thesis that "the entire Muslim social structure can be seen as an attack on, and a defense against, the disruptive power of female sexuality." F. Shirazi. *Op. cit.* p. 29. Quoting from Fatima Mernissi. 1987. *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in a Modern Muslim Society*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. 45. In all fairness, I must admit that my disagreement with these views is situated on a theoretical and thus ideal level. If such views sometimes exist at the level of local practice(s), I am disputing that they are to be equated with a monolithic 'Islam.'

²⁴ In short, Shirazi claims that both the Qur'an and Islamic jurisprudence consider menstrual periods an evil, that popular Muslim culture regards menstrual blood as repugnant and that women are in essence impure. While there are some Muslims and strains of thought within Islam(s) that abide by such misogynous views, it is far from any mainstream Islamic perspectives and in fact Shirazi has misquoted her sources. Mary Hossein, from Queen's University, Belfast, observes that the author buttresses her views on the topic by incorrectly and only partially translating her sources. By jumping from a particular definition of '*awra*' (not the standard one given by Boudhiba) to the conclusion that the entire female body is impure, she neglects what her source Fedwa Mahi-Douglas takes care to point out (in Fedwa Mahi-Douglas. 1991. *Woman's Body, Woman's Word: Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 122): that what we are discussing here is the conceptualization of a radical feminist novel, not the official positions of the society. Mary Hossein. 2002. Review of *The Veil Unveiled: The Hijab in Modern Culture*. *Journal of Islamic Studies* 13(3), p. 363. The point of the above is only seemingly irrelevant to the topic. I posit that the book will clearly establish how the veil sign is in fact imbricated with all the surrounding discourse regarding women in Islam of which Mernissi, as the most widely read Muslim feminist intellectual in the west, is an integral part.

constitutes an attempt "to channel, control, legalize and tame women's sexuality,"²⁵ Shirazi's excellent study would have been more comprehensive and even more pioneering had the author probed further the representations of the veil that are neither erotic nor misogynous.

The British *Veil: Veiling, Representation and Contemporary Art*, published in 2003 to accompany the *Veil* show, proves to be much more than an exhibition catalogue because, besides reproducing many of the works in the show, it also includes essays by scholars, writers, and artists on the veil. Curators Bailey and Tawadros²⁶ describe in their introduction the groundbreaking nature of *Veil* when they specify that an exhibit for "the first time in the history of curatorial and exhibition practice ... extends the possible interpretations of the veil and explores the ambiguities articulated in recent and contemporary practice."²⁷ They also view as a milestone the show's visual enactment of the mutation of the veil's representation from the field of ethnology (and colonial leisure) - the exhibit includes much colonial imagery- to that of contemporary art.²⁸

While the exhibit largely meets its objectives, some comments must be proffered with regard to the publication.²⁹ Because the show's aim was to highlight the veil's polysemy and because many of the artists, despite having exhibited extensively, are not yet internationally renowned, readers (and viewers) would have greatly benefited from a more extensive and precise discussion of the various articulations of the veil present in the work. In other words, the admirable introduction, which briefly discusses the artists and their work, should have formed the major text, shifting the emphasis from history and discourse to that of actual practice. Recognizing that the purpose of the curators was to establish a reference work and provide adequate material to properly frame the topic, and that a decision of fleshing out the introduction to become the main critical text would have required greater financial investment, I nonetheless maintain that it would have greatly increased the book's critical and art historical usefulness.

²⁵ F. Shirazi. *Op. cit.* p. 29.

²⁶ *Veil* was a collaborative project. Initiated by artist Zineb Sedira, another three curators came on board artist Jananne al-Ani, and London-based curators, David A. Bailey and Gilane Tawadros.

²⁷ David A. Bailey and G. Tawadros. 2003. "Introduction." In D. A. Bailey and G. Tawadros (eds.). *Op.cit.* p. 19.

²⁸ *Ibid.* p. 19.

²⁹ I can only base myself on the book, as I unfortunately did not see the exhibit.

More crucially, I maintain that *Veil* would have succeeded more fully in fracturing, as Bailey and Tawadros assert "the simplistic binaries that are repeatedly invoked about the liberal West and censorious East,"³⁰ by integrating an even wider range of perspectives on the veil. Many of the artists disrupt resistant stereotypes and open up spaces beyond them through humour and/or ambiguity, and therefore the contemporary veils in *Veil*, I contend, largely -and understandably- address the *represent-tation* of the veil commenting on geopolitics, history/modernity and identity politics. However, in the process, actual veiled women remain marginalized. Nowhere is the veiled female other a producer, despite many of the up-and-coming women artists- some of whom are veiled- from the Gulf region and elsewhere.³¹ More pertinently, nowhere is she represented as a contemporary subject east or west, despite the fact that artists and photographers have produced such type of representations in order to offer unequivocal alternatives to colonial and neocolonial constructions.³² Including a broader spectrum of representations of the veil in particular those simply disregarding its metonymic function that put forth more neutral and hence in this particular case more subversive aspects of the veil and/or veiled Muslim women would have greatly contributed to presenting "the veil from plural and complex viewpoints ... against the grain of written histories."³³ The criticism is not intended to detract from the importance and quality of *Veil*, an innovative and serious publication to which, akin to *The Veil Unveiled*, the present study is certainly indebted.

A few main points may be deduced from the survey of the two sources above. Both works acknowledge the veil's particular entrenchment in Euro-America as a sign shaped by colonial and neocolonial geopolitical interests. They equally however, foreground and posit, as does my book, the veil's polysemy, the inextricability of the sign from the subjective and culturally constituted mediation(s) of the viewing subject, and the capacity of images

³⁰ D. A. Bailey and G. Tawadros. *Op. cit.*, p. 34. Although here they are specifically referring to the works of Elin Strand (b. 1970), Ghada Amer (b. 1963), Majida Khattari (b. 1966) and Emily Jacir (b.1970), the statement sums up their general view on the exhibit as a whole.

³¹ Such as Emiratis Nuha Asad (b.1983) (fig. 21) or Karima Al Shomaly (b. 1965), Bahreini Waheeda Malullah (b.1976), or Egyptian Sabah Na'im (b. 1967) whose photo-based world is presently enjoying much European and Egyptian success.

³² For example Sabera Bham, Shekaiba Wakili (b. 1965) (seen below), Zohra Bensemra (b.1968) (fig. 48), Reem Al Faisal (b. 1968) amongst many others. Contemporary representations of the veiled Muslim woman as subject will be treated in Chapter 5.

³³ D. A. Bailey and G. Tawadros. *Op cit.* p.18.

and their analysis to produce or deconstruct such totalities. Moreover, the very paucity of sources on the topic and their short investigation above suffices as proof that the veil in visual culture, more particularly art, has not been sufficiently studied. The present enquiry constitutes an attempt to begin remedying this lacuna.



Shekaiba Wakili, "Muslim Women in London," 1998, black and white photograph.

The veil possesses both history/histories and geography/geographies. Knowledge of both is indispensable to any understanding of the veil and its various meanings in a contemporary context and although both are ideologically encrypted, the relationship of the former to the latter can be compared to that of discourse to the image. That history informs geography, or that chronological mediations define space, makes apparent the necessity of charting a history of the veil before proceeding to an exploration of its representations. Chapter 1 establishes such a historical account tracing the cultural and political narratives woven around the veil from the perspectives of both Euro-America and the Muslim world (although here Egypt largely serves as its referent) from the colonial period up until the present day. The chapter outlines the events, ideas and actors that shaped these narratives and the veil's use in often-conflicting political positions. While the sign habitually operates as a signifier informed by, whether reproducing or

contesting, the historical and ideological perspectives sketched out in the chapter, the latter's main focus lies in examining the overt and latent reasons for mainstream Euro-American perceptions of the veil. It thus concentrates on how the garment was reified into a barrier denoting the inferiority of the Muslim world and the lack of agency of the Muslim woman. The polemical nature of the veil sign renders it a complex site of analysis also obliging one, if one is to properly grasp its parameters and significance, to explore a whole host of other related sites and disciplines. The initial chapter will touch upon a number of these thereby further enabling a proper contextualization of the veil's representation in contemporary art.

Chapter 2 examines how the constructed trope of the veil functions as a signifier in both contemporary visual culture and art. Investigating how Euro- American mainstream perceptions of the veil translate visually and affect the reception -and perhaps the production of- of works by contemporary artists who use the veil as an artistic strategy of critique, its structure is thus twofold. The initial section considers representations of the veil in colonial iconography and modern advertising. The second section constituting the chapter's core addresses works of three contemporary artists, Parastou Forouhar, Fariba Samsami, and Shekaiba Wakili, relying on the veil motif to condemn polities where the garment is enforced namely in present-day Iran and Taliban-ruled Afghanistan -and in some cases Islam more generally. I posit that whenever the veil is used as synecdoche *in a western context*, it only serves to bolster Euro- American colonial and neocolonial constructions of the sign. Whether the artists are seeking to justifiably denounce the legal imposition of the veil, or its metonymy in Islamist politics, or whether they are manifesting internalized colonialism or conformity to the expectations of the western art apparatus is here unimportant. I am arguing that the metonymic veil regardless of intent, because it buttresses stereotypical Euro-American perceptions, invariably if paradoxically erases the artists' subjectivities. I conclude that in order to address problems facing Muslim women or political and social issues in Muslim- majority countries effectively, it is best to avoid the sign altogether and thereby its automatic translation into *the* veil. Some artists avoid the pitfall by reproducing the trope but only to subvert it and use it as a method of critique aimed at both eastern and western confining definitions of Muslim women. The trajectory of the postcolonial veil explores this strategy.

If the first two chapters essentially plot the discursive and visual articulations of western mainstream perceptions of the veil and define its numerous undertones, the next three chapters turn to an examination of

contemporary art produced by artists of Muslim background that submit different discourses on and views of the garment. I have identified three principal ways in which representations of the veil offer up new readings of the sign: by a contextualization of the veil, by a deconstruction or subversion of colonial and neocolonial narratives of the garment, and by the production and increased access to images that refuse or bypass the veil as an overarching signifier by presenting Muslim women as subjects. Subsequently, the trajectories mapped will be termed accordingly, as mentioned earlier, the contextualized veil, the postcolonial veil, and the *subjective* veil. These do not possess the pretense of comprehensiveness and are neither strictly circumscribed nor mutually exclusive. Many works that deploy the image of the veil may simultaneously be mapped as part of more than one trajectory. In addition, the works of a single artist also evince heterogeneity and hence the veil may possess different connotations from work to work. The objective of the trajectories is simply to offer new points of entry into (re)reading a sign that we often 'think we know.'

Chapters 1 and 2 establish that singling out an item of female dress as an all-encompassing site of Muslim alterity is theoretically untenable, and elucidate how the veil is in fact an artificial site constructed by its decontextualization and its transformation into a fixed yet externally malleable sign. Chapter 3 or the first alternative narrative puts forth that (re)positioning the veil within its cultural environment(s) by shifting the discourse from *the* veil to the broader notion of veiling demonstrates how from the perspective of a cultural filter shaped by Islam, both possess a different set of evocations. The chapter considers veiling in its widest sense including the literal material and aesthetic act of veiling as well as the visual veils of calligraphy and infinite pattern that figuratively drape artefacts and buildings. The chapter's first section describes not only how veiling forms an integral part of the aesthetics and art of Islam-based societies, but also how, because intertwined with a metaphysical worldview and a unique understanding of vision and representation, it actually constitutes the central metaphor informing artistic idioms. That the veiling metaphor privileges the unrepresentable and the unrepresented and clearly delineates the interstitial and intersubjective space(s) between image and viewer as the locus of both the reception and production of art makes it relevant not only to representations of the veil in contemporary art, but also to the theoretical concerns of contemporary art more generally. The chapter's following two sections devoted to examining contemporary works through the lens of the different dimensions of veiling in fact center in particular on the meanings that emerge from a focus on the gaps of vision implicit to veiling and reveal how these can be inflected to broach issues of spiritual, existential, cross-

cultural, and/ or feminist concern. The six artists brought forth call upon the visual metaphor in varying degrees and for different purposes and thus the chapter's objective is not to engage in discussions of authenticity, history, and religion³⁴ but to demonstrate how contemporary artists appropriate and essentially reinvent the culturally specific aesthetic metaphor.

Chapter 4 examines works that have deliberately set out to deconstruct stereotypical representations of the veil and Muslim women and in fact, the trajectory of the postcolonial veil characterizes the greatest number of representations of the veil on view in the western art circuit. If many ways of making sense of the plethora of postcolonial representations of the veil were feasible, I opted to organize the chapter according to four particularly salient methods of displacing the trope. These strategies more conceptual than visual correspond to key ideas put forth by Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha, therefore explaining the chapter's division into three sections. The first associated with Said's notion of contrapuntal reading scrutinizes work purposely exposing the hidden subtexts at work in colonial and neocolonial cultural texts. The second rooted in Spivak's articulation of resistant mimicry examines work that alters master narratives from within and that equally involves a reclaiming of Muslim female agency and voice challenging both eastern and western definitions of 'the Muslim woman.' The third and final section probes how two ideas central to Bhabha, namely the produced as opposed to the innate subject and hybridity, reinscribe the veil sign. While the different means adopted to challenge western cultural and discursive hegemony and the externally imposed definitions of the Muslim female self-compete at the theoretical level and claim precedence over each other, I maintain in light of the present-day post-September 11th situation, that a number of deconstructive strategies are not only beneficial but also necessary.

The last chapter addresses a third and, in this context, final alternative narrative of the veil that I have termed the *subjective* veil. It treats representations of the veil that displace Euro-American mainstream perceptions by portraying veiled Muslim women as subjects. If the veil sign is generally synonymous with erasure and serves to erase veiled Muslim subjectivity, I postulate, and this constitutes the chapter's central premise,

³⁴ The study does not refute the existence of several art worlds and categories, including that of contemporary Islamic art. However, this is not the subject of this study. Some artists have managed to be within the context of the Euro-American art world both contemporary and 'Islamic' artists like Rachid KoraYchi (b. 1947) whose prolific work is completely rooted in the mystical Sufi traditions of Islam.

that representations of subjects, because they afford a subject-to-subject relationship with the viewer and hence provoke viewer identification with a marginalized figure, possess the capacity to dislocate dominant discourse on the veil. The chapter investigates three case scenarios that seem to account for the representation of female veiled subjectivity, location, autobiography and finally documentary intent. The first section discusses works evincing that the veil simply forms part of the artists' environment. It thus involves images presenting the veil as a part of dress for some women and therefore as one type of dress amongst others in a globalized world. In the second section, the veil and the veiled woman subject form part of autobiographical works that confirm how personal narrative can remediate the veil sign. Finally, the photographs analyzed in the third section, produced with the specific intent of documenting modern Muslim veiled subjects, provide new readings of the sign and of modernity by 'deworlding' or 'reworlding' the 'worlding of the world.'

CHAPTER 1

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE VEIL

The image of a veiled Muslim woman seems to be one of the most popular Western ways of representing the 'problems of Islam'.³⁵

Helen Watson

The word 'veil' stands for the entire culture of the Muslim world, and encompasses everything done to women.³⁶

Katherine Bullock

1:1 Terms, Methods, and Caveats

It is essential to locate the present study by addressing some of the important considerations facing any study involving the contentious topic of the veil specifically, and the equally ideologically laden field of "Women in Islam" more generally. The first imperative is to define the somewhat ubiquitous term "veil" that has come to include several items of clothing and degrees of "covering" from the face veil *niqab*, to the simple headscarf now known as *hijab*, to various total body coverings like the (in)famous *burqa*³⁷⁷ In fact,

³⁵ Helen Watson. 1994. "Women and the Veil: Personal Responses to Global Process." In Akbar Ahmed and Hastings Donnan (eds.) *Islam, Globalization and Postmodernity*, p. 153.

³⁶ Katherine Bullock. 2002. *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil: Challenging Historical and Modern Stereotypes*. Herndon, Virginia: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, p. 133.

³⁷ As this study is not solely addressed to Middle Eastern and Islamic studies specialists, I have chosen the simplest method of transliteration simply putting foreign terms into italics without diacritics with the exception of the right facing apostrophe to signal the Jetter 'ain and the left facing one for the *alif*. For example the term veil will be written simply as *hijab*, or the writer Qasim Ami'n and his book *Tatrir a/-mar'a* will become Qasim Amin's *Tahrir al-mar'a*. The only inconvenience I can foresee by this is the lack of distinction between female singular and female plural nouns as the Jong a of the latter will not be visible. Context will have to suffice to differentiate, for example, between one veiled woman and several, both here written as *muhajjabat*. Terms like *burqa* as opposed to the more

there is no Arabic equivalent of the generic English term veil³⁸ demonstrating how the term precludes the diversity of both the practice and of its motivating factors and meanings. The fact that the all-encompassing term has been- and is still- used to refer to a variety of veiling practices in different historical periods and geographical contexts remains the source of much confusion in both general public and academic publications. Historical factors play a role in the term's lack of specificity because "veil" would have often signified something quite different to a European eighteenth century traveler than to a twenty-first century one. Geographical and linguistic factors also partially account for the befuddlement. The Muslim world is a multi-ethnic reality including over fifty countries hence obviously possessing a variety of types of local dress and veiling practices with equally as many terms to be subsumed under the term veil. Because the Muslim world is also multi-linguistic, similar types of veils will bear different appellations according to country or language group. For example, to name a type of full-body veil that is drawn over the body and in some cases the face, one would speak of the black *chador* in Iran, the black *'abaya* in the Gulf states and the white *haik* in a specifically Algerian context. Another difficulty in any scholarship on veiling lies in the discrepancy between contemporary (and/or local) and Qur'anic terminology. In contemporary usage and here in this study, the headscarf that covers the hair and sometimes the shoulders and/or chest is called *hijab* while in the Qur'anic text (33:53), the noun is used to describe a curtain that prevented onlookers from gazing at the Prophet Muhammad's wives.³⁹ The term used

appropriate *chador* or *chadri* will also be used for the sake of communicability.

³⁸ Fadwa El Guindi. 1999. *Veil: Modesty, Privacy and Resistance*. Oxford: Berg, p.xi.

³⁹ This relatively new meaning of *hijab* for headscarf is common in the context of Muslim minorities in the west and in certain Middle Eastern countries like Egypt or Algeria. Although more rooted in Islamic culture, it must be noted that the term can prove as elusive and polysemous as the English term veil. Both historically and in the present, *hijab* can refer to the general concept of female covering and appropriate behaviour, as it can to different degrees or types of veiling. Katherine Bullock points out that it is not gender specific as a general concept: "*/hijab*, from the root *l.;ajaba* meaning to cover, conceal, hide, is a complex notion encompassing action and apparel. It can include covering the face, or not. It includes lowering the gaze with the opposite sex, and applies to men as well, who must lower their gaze and cover from navel to knee. These days, */:hijab* is also the name used for the headscarf that women wear over their heads and tie or pin at the neck, with their faces showing." Katherine Bullock. *Op. cit.* p. xii. For a discussion on how the Qur'anic term historically associated with domestic seclusion in theological exegesis came to signify a particular head garment, see Barbara Freyer Stowasser. 1997. 'The */hijab*.

for the head veil in the Qur'an is *khimar* (24:31). However, over and beyond history, geography and semantics, ideological considerations also contribute to the term's ambiguity. For instance, many scholars describing the famous event of 1923 when Huda Sha'rawi returned to Egypt from an international women's conference in Rome and threw off her "veil" fail to specify that she only discarded her face veil or *niqab* and not the one covering her hair.⁴⁰ In the history of such a contested cloth, the distinction is significant and one can only explain the omission by the desire to construct or favour a certain history of Islam, Arab feminism and the veil. This is especially true as the Egyptian feminist pioneer mentions in her autobiography being complimented by some of her contemporaries for having kept on the *hijab shar'i* or the legally sanctioned headscarf.⁴¹ The

How a Curtain Became an Institution and a Cultural Symbol." In Asma Afsaruddin and A. H. Mathias Zahniser (eds.) *Humanism, Culture and Language in the Near East: Studies in the Honor of Georg Krotkoff*. Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbraus, pp. 87-104.

⁴⁰ Examples of the omission abound. See Leila Ahmed. 1982. "Feminism and Feminist Movements in the Middle East, a Preliminary Exploration: Turkey, Egypt, Algeria, People's Democratic Republic of Yemen." *Women's Studies International Forum* 5(2): p. 160. Leila Ahmed. 1992. *Women and Gender in Islam*. New Haven: Yale University Press. In the latter on

p.164 Ahmed states that Sha 'rawi called for unveiling and on p.176 she declares, "It was upon their return from this trip (to Rome) that Sha'rawi and Nabawiya removed their veils, presumably in a symbolic act of emancipation, as they stepped off the train from Cairo." She does however in one section of the book unlike in the article specify that it was the face veil. The aim here is not to criticize particular scholars but to point out the caveats inherent to the term 'veil.' See also, Homa Hoodfar. 1997. "The Veil in Their Minds and on Our Heads: Veiling Practices and Muslim Women." In Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd (eds.) *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital*. Durham; London: Duke University Press, p.258. Daphne Grace. 2004. *The Woman in the Muslim Mask: Veiling and Identity in Postcolonial Literature*. London: Pluto Press, p. 72. Or Haideh Moghissi. 1999. *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism: The Limits of a Postmodern Analysis*. London: Zed Books, p. 129.

⁴¹ Fadwa El Guindi. *Op. cit.* p.179. Although El Guindi mentions this important point, it would be interesting to know why most of the photos illustrating her autobiography translated by Margot Badran show her mostly without a head cover. Is it due to the selectivity of the editor/translator? Is it because Sha 'rawi adopted the *hijab* on certain occasions or at a certain stage in her life or is it that photography was not considered a public space? See Margot Badran (ed.). 1986. *Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist (1879-/924)*. London: Virago. In contrast, two of three photographs of Sha'rawi in Graham-Brown's work, show her in *hijab*. See Sarah Graham-Brown. 1988. *Images of Women: The Portrayal of Women in Photography of the Middle East 1860-/950*. London: Quartet Books, pp. 83,231,233.

same selectivity is also present in much contemporary - and no doubt also historical- discussion on whether or not veiling for women is mentioned or recommended in the Qur'an but this whole other equally sensitive and polemical debate remains beyond the scope of this study.⁴²

While I generally use the term veil, as do many other contemporary authors to signify the headscarf or *hijab*, I have here been obliged to use "veil" in its generic and hence more perplexing sense because the works to be here examined evince a variety of veil types possessing different names. I will however introduce, if necessary and/or appropriate, terminology that is more precise. Nonetheless, it will soon be made apparent that the veritable challenge posed by the term is not in specifying the physical forms of head and body covers it connotes, but rather in understanding *veil* as a much less tangible signifier related in Euro-America to questions of alterity, gender, political interests and even the processes implied in the production of self and knowledge.

The veil has come to serve as a convenient visual shorthand of the Orient in general and the oppressed Muslim woman in particular thereby surpassing by far its purely sartorial reality. The commodification of the veil sign adds to the mystification, the term remains of highly marketable value no doubt due to its role as synecdoche mentioned above. Publishing companies utilize it in full cognizance in titles of books that are too often unrelated to the topic. At least two scholars, Fadwa El Guindi and Faegheh Shirazi admit that their respective publishers insisted upon having the term appear in the

⁴² Scholars like L. Ahmed, F. El Guindi, H. Hoodfar and Fatima Mernissi amongst many others, view the veil as an inherited custom from both the Sassanid and Byzantine empires and/or as a recommendation concerning only the wives of the Prophet Muhammad. While there is no doubt that non-Islamic imperial traditions reinforced veiling, and especially female seclusion and the institution of the harem, these authors much like their orthodox Muslim counterparts, have been blamed for selectivity in their exegetically based arguments, for example by basing their interpretation on the *hijab* verse (33:53), a term which does not, as we mentioned mean veil in the Qur'anic text. See Anne Sofie Roald. 2004. "The Feminist Debate Over Hijab." 2004. *The Message International* (messageonline.org/2004feb/march/cover2). February-March, pp. 12-14. The arguments over textual interpretation are complex and suffice it to say here that one can convincingly argue for or against the veil from an Islamic perspective. Over and beyond exegetical disputes, pre-Islamic styles of both male and female head coverings prevalent in Arabia are thought to have continued after the birth of Islam in the seventh century C. E. For a description of pre-Islamic Arabian female attire including a form of head veil, see Fawzia Zouari. 2002. *Le voile islamique: Histoire et actualité, du Coran à l'affaire du foulard*. Lausanne: Editions Favre, pp. 17-19.