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# **Cartographies of Cloth: Mapping the Veil in Contemporary Art**

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the  
degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## Abstract

Author: V. A. Behiery

Title: *Cartographies of Cloth: Mapping the Veil in Contemporary Art*

Department: Art History and Communication Studies, McGill University

Degree: Doctor of Philosophy

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The veil is a historically constructed site, 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 the thesis I set out to demonstrate that many of these visual texts also propose significant reinscriptions of the sign capable of displacing dominant discourse. However, because of the veil's metonymy in Euro-American mainstream culture and 'collective gaze,' the thesis 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 *subject-ive* 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.

## Résumé

Auteur: V. A. Behiery

Titre: *Cartographies of Cloth: Mapping the Veil in Contemporary Art*

Département: Art History and Communication Studies, McGill University

Diplôme: Docteur en philosophie

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Le voile est un site construit par l'histoire coloniale. Devenu un symbole omniprésent en occident, il trace sans équivoque une frontière entre l'orient et l'occident. Des disciplines récentes tel que les études postcolonialistes, le féminisme tiers- mondiste, ou les études en culture visuelle contestent la fixité du signe du voile, stipulant que sa signification est multiple et qu'elle varie selon l'individu, et le contexte social, historique et géographique. Les représentations du voile se sont également multipliées dans l'art contemporain au cours des deux dernières décennies. Cette thèse a pour but d'établir que la plupart de ces représentations visuelles réécrivent le voile en déconstruisant le discours dominant qui l'entoure. Montrant comment le voile est un site culturel euro-américain de réification mais cherchant également à rendre compte comment les pratiques artistiques contestent cette réification, la thèse dépeint d'abord l'histoire du voile et sa signification dans le discours et l'environnement médiatique. Elle établit comme prémisses de départ que l'enracinement du symbole et surtout ce qu'il évoque (la femme opprimée, le terrorisme, l'islam-autre, *etc.*) compliquent son utilisation par des artistes d'origine musulmane exposant dans les réseaux artistiques occidentaux. La thèse procède ensuite à délinéer trois discours alternatifs du voile présents dans l'art contemporain en identifiant les questions de genre, de politique, de représentation et de subjectivité qu'ils soulèvent. Je dois néanmoins admettre que la motivation principale qui sous-tend l'étude de ces trois trajectoires se situe dans ma conviction que l'image détient cette capacité unique à faciliter la compréhension et la communication transnationales. L'étude donc, se penche tout particulièrement sur la relation ou l'espace entre le lieu –géographique ou idéologique- du regard et l'image. Elle démontre que cette relation est fluctuante, plurielle et pleine d'espoir.

sur la relation ou l'espace entre le lieu –géographique ou idéologique- du regard et l'image. Elle démontre que cette relation est fluctuante, plurielle et pleine d'espoir.

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I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Christine Ross, my supervisor who not only guided me with her profound insight but who equally reconciled me with 'academia' confirming what I had once thought but which previous circumstances had lead me to doubt, namely that intellectual depth and curiosity cohabit with kindness and magnanimity and that teaching necessarily encompasses a human or intersubjective dimension. I could not have imagined a better advisor and I thank her for accepting to work with me. I would also like to thank the Art History department and its staff whose encouragement and presence I have much appreciated throughout this long process. Many other people at McGill should be thanked, most notably Dr. Donald P. Little from my former department whose support throughout the whole of my graduate studies has been invaluable and much appreciated, albeit silently in the last few years. I must also mention my friend and life partner Dr. Ayman Behiery who has helped me in ways that have no words and last but not least, the being who kept me the most company during the writing process, my cat, Yan-Soon, whose furry black and marmalade colour natural *hijab* I never cease to admire.

## Cartographies of Cloth: Mapping the Veil in Contemporary Art

### Introduction

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

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, ...<sup>2</sup>

Holly Edwards

The Muslim women's veil constitutes a common site in Euro-American<sup>3</sup> 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. If scholarly consensus now acknowledges the veil's polysemy and the fact that it is in essence an artificially contrived site, 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 thesis

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

<sup>2</sup> 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."

<sup>3</sup> 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.

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.”<sup>4</sup> 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 *subject-ive*-, 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, on 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,”<sup>5</sup> and, as the study will demonstrate, representations of the veil intimately participate/d in this silencing and speaking for her. The veil in fact exceeds its sartorial materiality, as it constitutes a historically embedded filter through which the Euro-American imaginary perceives the Muslim woman and which it projects onto her. That 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

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<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> 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.

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 obligé*. 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.""<sup>6</sup> 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 Hôpital Ephémère. 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."<sup>7</sup> 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."<sup>8</sup> The present 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

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<sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> F. Daftari. *Op. cit.* p. 175.

<sup>8</sup> Amer quoted in *Ibid.* p. 177.

Meyda Yeğenoğlu puts forth, “an overdetermined totality ... in the unconscious of the subject [of the gaze].”<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup> 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 raisonné* 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 thesis will facilitate the reading of and encourage research on their work.

The central hypothesis of the thesis 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

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<sup>9</sup> Meyda Yeğenoğlu. 1998. *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 48.

<sup>10</sup> In fact, none of the women artists discussed in the thesis veil with the exception of Emirati Nuha Asad discussed in Chapter 3.



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 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 biculturalism<sup>11</sup> 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"<sup>12</sup> 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."<sup>13</sup> 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.

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<sup>11</sup> 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.

<sup>12</sup> 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.

<sup>13</sup> F. Daftari. *Op. cit.* p. 175.

The alternative narratives of the veil the thesis 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,”<sup>14</sup> I submit that such a discursive dismantling can 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.<sup>15</sup> 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

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<sup>14</sup> 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.

<sup>15</sup> 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 là comme un vide, un intervalle silencieux entre le fait de la colonisation et celui de la décolonisation. Non point que ça et là ne s’éclatent ni ne s’élaborent des paroles subversives et responsables, mais quelque chose d’étranglé 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: Denoël, p. 48.

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 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 world<sup>16</sup> as well as a substantive growth in scholarship on and exhibits of contemporary art in the Muslim World,<sup>17</sup> there are to date only two books specifically devoted to visual

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<sup>16</sup> 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 Marín 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.

<sup>17</sup> Jocelyne Dakhli (ed.). 2006. *Créations artistiques en pays d’islam. Des arts en tension*. Paris: Éditions Kimé. Catherine David. 2003. Tamáss: *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<sup>e</sup>-21<sup>e</sup>)*. Würzburg: Ergonin Kommission. Jessica Winegar. 2006. *Creative Reckonings: The Politics of Art and Culture in Contemporary Egypt*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

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).<sup>18</sup> The seminal *Veil: Veiling, Representation 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.<sup>19</sup>

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."<sup>20</sup> 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

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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.

<sup>18</sup> Faegheh Shirazi. 2001. *The Veil Unveiled: The Hijab in Modern Culture*. Gainesville, Florida: University of Florida Press.

<sup>19</sup> David A. Bailey and Gilane Tawadros (eds.). 2003. *Veil: Veiling, Representation and Contemporary Art*. Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: The MIT Press; inIVA.

I might also add that continuing national debates surrounding the headscarf have lead 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" surmédiasé." *Migrations Société* 2(8):9-45.

<sup>20</sup> 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.

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.

The 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 common meanings of the veil that “transcend cultural, religious, and historical boundaries,” are those of eroticism and oppression.<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup> Shirazi's Mernissian-style perspective on Islam<sup>23</sup> 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*.'<sup>24</sup> While there can be no doubt

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* p. 176.

<sup>22</sup> 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.

<sup>23</sup> 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.'

<sup>24</sup> 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

that most Muslim majority societies remain patriarchal in nature, and that veiling sometimes constitutes an attempt “to channel, control, legalize and tame women’s sexuality,”<sup>25</sup> 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 to accompany the *Veil* show, proves to be much more than an exhibition catalogue as, besides reproducing many of the works in the show, it also includes essays by scholars, writers, and artists on the veil. Curators Bailey and Tawadros<sup>26</sup> 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.”<sup>27</sup> 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.<sup>28</sup>

While the exhibit largely meets its objectives, some comments must be proffered with regard to the publication.<sup>29</sup> Because the show’s aim was to

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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 Malti-Douglas takes care to point out (in Fedwa Malti-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 thesis 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.

<sup>25</sup> F. Shirazi. *Op. cit.* p. 29.

<sup>26</sup> *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.

<sup>27</sup> David A. Bailey and G. Tawadros. 2003. “Introduction.” In D. A. Bailey and G. Tawadros (eds.). *Op.cit.* p. 19.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* p. 19.

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

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.

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,"<sup>30</sup> 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 *representation* 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.<sup>31</sup> 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

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<sup>30</sup> 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.

<sup>31</sup> 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.

unequivocal alternatives to colonial and neocolonial constructions.<sup>32</sup> 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.”<sup>33</sup> 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 the thesis, 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 and their analysis to produce *or* deconstruct such totalities. Moreover, the very paucity of sources on the topic and their short investigation above suffice 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.

The veil possesses both a history/histories and a 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

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<sup>32</sup> For example Sabera Bham, Shekaiba Wakili (b. 1965) (fig. 47), 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.

<sup>33</sup> D. A. Bailey and G. Tawadros. *Op cit.* p.18.



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 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 *subject-ive* veil. These do not possess the pretence 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 centre 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 religion<sup>34</sup> 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

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<sup>34</sup> 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 Koraïchi (b. 1947) whose prolific work is completely rooted in the mystical sufi traditions of Islam.

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 11<sup>th</sup> 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 *subject-ive* 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, 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.'<sup>35</sup>

Helen Watson

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

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*.<sup>37</sup> In fact, there is no Arabic equivalent of the generic English term veil<sup>38</sup> 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 traveller than to a twenty-first

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<sup>35</sup> 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.

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

<sup>37</sup> 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 letter 'ain and the left facing one for the *alif*. For example the term *ḥijāb* will be written simply as *hijab*, or the writer Qāsim Amīn and his book *Tahrīr al-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 long ā 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 appropriate *chador* or *chadri* will also be used for the sake of communicability.

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

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.<sup>39</sup> The term used 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

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<sup>39</sup> 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: "*Hijāb*, from the root *hajaba* 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, *hijāb* 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. xli. 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 *Hijāb*. How a Curtain Became a 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: Eisenbrauns, pp. 87-104.

not the one covering her hair.<sup>40</sup> 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.<sup>41</sup> The 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.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> 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.

<sup>41</sup> 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 (1879-1924)*. 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 1860-1950*. London: Quartet Books, pp. 83, 231, 233.

<sup>42</sup> 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](http://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



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 title of their books, which are thankfully both dedicated to the topic.<sup>43</sup> To adduce as proof of the prioritization of profit over fact with regard to the veil, one need only mention the cover of El-Guindi’s *Veil: Modesty, Privacy and Resistance* that bears a blown-up *burqa*-clad face, a type of veiling practice completely unrelated to the Middle East, the area of focus of her work. The image has become synonymous with women’s very real terrible plight under the Taliban regime in Afghanistan (1997-2001) not discussed in her work and thus here serves as a general referent signalling female Muslim victimization and difference; and yet one of the main premises of the book concerns deconstructing such facile and often erroneous

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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.

<sup>43</sup> The authors each explain their acceptance of this request in different terms. See Fadwa El Guindi. *Op. cit.* p. xi-xii. And Faegheh Shirazi. *Op. cit.* p.6.

equations as that of the veil with abuse and oppression.<sup>44</sup> Perhaps this lack of intellectual propriety on the part of an academic publisher corroborates author Judy Mabro who puts forth that the veil “is such a powerful symbol that it can blind people into false generalizations.”<sup>45</sup> This tendency is as widespread textually as it is visually. One finds gross errors in content in many otherwise excellent works on the veil, a propensity that might often be best explained by a lack of knowledge in the rich and complex field of Islamic studies. For example, Daphne Grace, professor of postcolonial literature and feminist theory at Sussex University in England, has written a compelling and landmark book on the representation of the veil in contemporary Arab and South Asian literature that I use as a reference in the thesis, but unfortunately *The Woman in the Muslim Mask* presents several such type inaccuracies. Her statement that ‘awra, a term that in Islamic texts refers to what parts of the female and male body are appropriate to cover in public, literally means female genitalia and her confusing a *hadith*, an oral tradition of the Prophet Muhammad for a Qur’anic verse on the same page confirm her lack of grounding in the field.<sup>46</sup> Perhaps even more blatant and bordering on ridicule, although she has no doubt again based herself on a certain branch of Islamist or Arab feminist literature, is her statement, “From an Islamic point of view, it is entirely understandable, that a

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<sup>44</sup> The photograph is part of a photographic diptych conceived by El Guindi and found in *op. cit.* p. 102 in order to compare the scopical property of the face veil with that of a typical Islamic architectural feature the *mashrabiyya*, a decorative latticed window screen allowing women to look out onto the street while preserving their privacy. However, the *burqa* half has been decontextualized and blown up by the book designer with a total disregard for the content and perspective of the work. The *mashrabiyya* image figures on the back cover in the size of a postage stamp.

<sup>45</sup> Judy Mabro. 1991. *Veiled Half-Truths: Western Travellers’ Perceptions of Middle Eastern Women*. London: I. B. Tauris, p. 1.

<sup>46</sup> D. Grace. *Op. cit.* p.85. Many other authors single out this meaning of the term ‘awra (see footnote 23). See for example B. F. Stowasser. *Op. cit.* p.95. Arabic words often have multiple meanings and if one consults the most renowned but not necessarily the best Arabic to English dictionary the entry for the term reads: “defectiveness, faultiness, deficiency, imperfection; - (pl. āt) pudendum, genitals; weakness, weak spot.” *The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* [J. M. Cowan (ed.)] 1976. Ithaca, New York: Spoken Language Services, p. 656. If one looks to the mother text of the Arabic language, the Qur’an, ‘awra is used to refer to houses that are “bare and exposed” (33:13), or to improper times to bother someone (24:58) implying again vulnerability (*i.e.* they are in a state of undress), or to the vulnerable spots of a woman’s character or body (24:31). This last usage can have connotations of a sexual nature but does not necessarily mean genitalia. The Qur’anic term for genitalia is *farj* or plural *furuuj* (24:31, 23:5).

man seeing an unveiled women would be unable to restrain his own sexual desires.”<sup>47</sup> Still clinging to a centuries-old monolithic conception of Islam and Muslims, although striving not to, Grace is not alone in forgetting that there are in fact many *Islams* as legal and spiritual interpretations like veils vary not only according to time, place, legal school, or religious authority but also according to class, gender and even the individual. In other words, scholarship on Islam and Islam related issues must consider this heteroglossia and must without fail be well grounded in the Islamic legal and theological sciences without essentializing Islam and embracing it as the sole cause of all historical, social and economic developments in the Muslim World. This holds particularly true in the field of Women in Islam, which as the very set of terms indicate often attributes Muslim women’s roles and status in society ahistorically to religion alone, forgetting not only the socio-economic context but also how the various patterns of Islam are in fact defined in part by what Deniz Kandyoti terms “different systems of male dominance.”<sup>48</sup> These concerns with the study of Islam and of women in Islam may seem far from the domain of contemporary art and yet I contend, and trust that the artists discussed in the present study would agree, that the veil forms such a central and polemical site in and is

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<sup>47</sup> D. Grace. *Op. cit.* p. 113. It is crucial to note that I have not intentionally signalled out an author as errors due to a lack of knowledge in the field of Islamic Studies are practically inevitable unless one is a well-versed scholar in the field or has access to such scholars, especially in studies spanning several disciplines like Grace’s. These errors, as intimated above, are widespread. To cite just one more example, although not of the same calibre as Grace, Dawn Chatty in her article on a particular type of partial face veil shows similar confusion. Not only does she spell *Qur’an* two different ways within the text (Koran (p.128) and Quran (p.134)), she also demonstrates, although again probably due to conflicting sources, a lack of understanding of the term *hadith*. See Dawn Chatty. 1997. “The Burqa Face Cover: An Aspect of Dress in Southeastern Arabia.” In N. Lindisfarne-Tapper and B. Ingham (eds.). *Op. cit.* p. 128. Recognizing that I am not immune from the problem, I will make every attempt to avoid such errors in this study by consulting, when in doubt, the necessary specialists. Interpretation also evidently constitutes a major factor in such matters and as such there is no doubt that many will dispute my views on the term ‘*awra*’.

<sup>48</sup> Deniz Kandyoti. 1991. “Islam and Patriarchy.” In Nikki R. Keddie and Beth Baron (eds.) *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender*. New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 24. The author contends that: “...different systems of male dominance, and their internal variations according to class and ethnicity, exercise an influence that inflects and modifies the actual practice of Islam as well as the ideological constructions of what may be regarded as properly Islamic.”

mediated by these disciplines, both historically and presently, that there is no evading them when reading contemporary works that deploy its motif.

The range of methodological problems that proliferate in contemporary scholarship on women in Islam, regardless of the geographical origins of the authors, is due essentially to the discursive dominance of Euro-American culture, itself ensconced in colonialist thought. The isolated focus on women- as is the entire western discipline of Islamic studies- is itself rooted in European ideologies and interests, as Leila Ahmed professes in *Women and Gender in Islam*,

The study of Muslim women in the West....is heir to colonialism, to colonialism's discourses of domination, and to its cooptation of the ideas of feminism to further Western imperialism. Research on Middle Eastern women thus occurs in a field already marked with the designs and biases written into it by colonialism.<sup>49</sup>

The obsession with the Muslim women's veil forms an intrinsic part of this colonial heritage. The overemphasis assumes that all Muslim women wear a type of *hijab* and that covering one's head is restricted to women. After all, what most works on the veil, with the exception of El Guindi's cited above, fail to mention is that traditionally, in Muslim cultures, men also cover their head with a variety of means from the scarf and 'agal, to the turban, fez, or the colourful small caps of Central Asia, South Asia and western China.<sup>50</sup> The present study devoted to the image of the woman's veil in contemporary art, will hence be guilty of the same bias although one cannot deny that, in the hegemonic war of images, the power of the representation of the 'veiled' Muslim man pales in comparison to his female counterpart. Alternatively, it might be more accurate to bring forward that the stereotyped portrayals regarding Muslims are gendered; if the veiled women signals the oppression of her male relatives and her religion,<sup>51</sup> the traditionally attired Muslim man is usually represented to convey his violence as well as that of Islam. That the

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<sup>49</sup> Leila Ahmed. 1992. *Op. cit.* p. 245.

<sup>50</sup> What is also often ignored is the fact that traditional dress is often not as gendered in the Muslim world as compared to many other cultures, the gendering occurring largely through accessories, decoration or material. For example, Islamic jurisprudence reserves the wearing of both gold and silk for women.

<sup>51</sup> As shall be demonstrated in the following chapters, there has been a shift in media constructions of the veil, as it has come to signify not only oppression but also violence.

Euro-American fixation on the veil is a symptom and not a diagnosis can be successfully argued by putting forth that, although there exists a profound link between dress, identity and even ideology, no other female non-western item of clothing, be it the sari, the kimono or the Mayan embroidered blouse- continues to spill so much ink and remains an object of often vitriolic and disproportionate attack.<sup>52</sup>

It must however equally be brought forth that if the stereotype and fixed identity of the Muslim woman articulated in the colonial era persists and is oft reproduced, a number of scholars working on women in the Muslim world (including Grace), influenced by postcolonialism, cultural studies and the emergence of feminisms, have been contesting and unpacking the many assumptions and engaged in critiques of the alleged universality of often culturally specific terms and paradigms. This has produced the most interesting scholarship in the field and the present study hopes to add to this body of work/knowledge. Two examples will suffice to illustrate the point. In the western intellectual tradition, public and private are presented as dichotomous and this binary model used to frame and analyze women's history is often applied to a Muslim context and to the veil in particular without questioning its validity in a non-western context. Not only is the model construed as universal but also the presumed antithetical nature of the two concepts. Elizabeth Thompson's recent article, "Public and Private in Middle Eastern Women's History"<sup>53</sup> questions the applicability of the public/private binary to the Middle

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<sup>52</sup> For example, the association that is sometimes made between the *hijab* and the Third Reich. In Quebec, in 1995, several schoolgirls were sent home for wearing the veil which was compared to a swastika. See K. Bullock. *Op. cit.* p. xxxvii. The same tasteless metaphor has been frequently employed in France. Fawzia Zouari quotes French journalists who, in the 1989 November 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of *Le Nouvel Observateur*, wrote, "Autoriser le foulard c'est mimer la reculade des puissances occidentales démocratiques devant Hitler en 1938." F. Zouari. *Op cit.* p. 84. John Bowen proffers other examples of the linking of the headscarf with Nazism in his study on France and the veil. See John R. Bowen. 2007. *Why the French Don't Like Headscarves*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

<sup>53</sup> Elizabeth Thompson. 2003. "Public and Private in Middle Eastern Women's History." *Journal of Women's History*, 15 (1): pp. 52-70. Many other scholars have equally contested the applicability of the public/private dichotomy to Islamic societies. El Guindi recognizing that it is "commonly imposed on Arab and Islamic cultural space," cites a long list of authors who like herself argue that the "paradigm is more appropriate to describe European Mediterranean and Balkan cultures." F. El Guindi. *Op. cit.* p. 79. Recent scholarship on women in other non-

East by reviewing the difficulties of authors who have used the model, and by reminding the reader of Ahmed's thesis that "European colonizers promoted a public/private dichotomy that has stymied women's efforts to attain equality."<sup>54</sup> Nancy Hirschmann for her part attempts to redefine terms in cross-cultural fashion in order to avoid similar Eurocentric transpositions and mistranslations. Her article "Western Feminism, Eastern Veiling, and the Question of Free Agency" attempts to contextualize definitions of agency and hence of the subject.<sup>55</sup> Much akin to the field of cross-cultural psychology, Hirschmann posits that the concept of the Muslim female subject is "different from the dominant Western notion" and that it is "located in community and cultural membership" as opposed to being rooted in individualistic autonomy.<sup>56</sup> The above examples have been brought forth to point out that while I use the set of terms 'Euro-American feminism,' I am referring in fact to certain of its prevailing discourses still steeped in colonialist ideas. Some scholars to mark the distinction clearly speak of 'imperial feminism.' Euro-American feminism obviously forms, as does Muslim feminism, a heterogeneous site. Identifying some of the difficulties that arise in any study concerning Muslim women and their representation also provides the occasion for me to put forth that I am acutely aware of the caveats and sensitivities of undertaking an examination of such a non-neutral site as that of the Muslim woman's veil. To illustrate the predicament and to underscore the additional complexity of the adoption of Euro-American views by individuals, groups, classes or whole societies in the Muslim world, one need only cite contemporary Iranian author Farzaneh Milani,

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western contexts is also challenging the use of the private/public model as a framework of analysis.

<sup>54</sup> E. Thompson. *Op. cit.* p. 59.

<sup>55</sup> Nancy J. Hirschmann. 1998. "Western Feminism, Eastern Veiling, and the Question of Free Agency." *Constellations: An International Journal of Critical and Democratic Theory*, 5(3): 345-368. For a more in-depth probing of what agency means or how it is to be defined for religious or Islamist Muslim women in Egypt, see Saba Mahmood's masterful work, Saba Mahmood. 2005. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

<sup>56</sup> N. J. Hirschmann. *Op. cit.* p. 355.

The veil is such a pervasive cultural issue that veiled/unveiled could be added in the case of Iran (and Islamic Middle Eastern countries) to the rather universal dichotomization of masculine and feminine in terms of such polarities as culture/nature, reason/passion, self/other, subject/object, law/chaos, day/night, rational/irrational.<sup>57</sup>

Unlike Milani, I esteem this dichotomy -two worlds divided by a veil- to be an artificially created ideological construction.

## 1:2 History of the Veil

There exists no site more conflated with “the Muslim woman” than that of “the veil” and this is as true in Euro-American visual culture as it is in Islamist circles and discourse.<sup>58</sup> The phenomenon is not new and already possesses a certain history. Leila Ahmed traces the European fixation on the veil back to the colonial period where, oddly, renowned misogynists like Lord Cromer, then British consul general Evelyn Baring, posited that the veil and segregation were manifest signs of female oppression in Islam and thus responsible for the “backwardness” of Islamic societies.<sup>59</sup> Ahmed describes British colonial views on these issues,

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<sup>57</sup> Farzaneh Milani. 1992. *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers*. Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, p. xi.

<sup>58</sup> If the term veil is, as previously outlined, problematic, as it does not capture the diversity and complex meanings of veiling practices in the various cultures of the Muslim world, I have opted for its use with the purpose of intelligibility overriding other equally important factors. The same holds true for the terms Islamist and Islamism, also coined in the west and criticized by scholars as being as inappropriate as its predecessor fundamentalism. El Guindi perceives the distinction made between Islamic and Islamist as erroneous because it infers, she pertains, that Islam is extraneous in the case of the latter. F. El Guindi. *Op. cit.* p. xix. Despite the fact that I concur with the author that “revival movements in the Islamic world do not constitute a phenomenon external to Islam,” I accept the semantic distinction for reasons of communicability as the terms Islamism or Islamist have a specific temporal and socio-political dimension not found in the terms Islam and Islamic. There are movements generally accepted under the term Islamism that are no more than political organizations operating under a veneer of religious legitimization but this problem will have to be addressed elsewhere.

<sup>59</sup> L. Ahmed. *Op. cit.* p. 152. Ahmed like Kahf sees the centrality of the issue of Muslim women and hence the veil as not only a new development but as a consolidation of past negative European attitudes towards Islamic culture. She also aptly points out that Cromer, while making these claims seemingly concerned with women’s freedom, brought policies into effect that were harmful to Egyptian women. For example, he increased school tuition that the British had instituted (*Ibid.* p.153) and “discouraged the training of women doctors” (*Ibid.* p. 153). When questioned about the preference of Egyptian women for doctors of their own sex, he replied: “I am aware that in exceptional cases women like to be attended by female doctors, but I conceive that throughout the civilised world, attendance by medical men is still the rule.” From the Cromer Papers quoted in Judith Tucker. 1985. *Women in Nineteenth-Century Egypt*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.122. Ahmed also reminds the reader that if he championed the cause of women’s emancipation through unveiling, he countered it at home

Only if these practices intrinsic to Islam (and therefore Islam itself) were cast off could Muslim societies begin to move forward on the path of civilisation. Veiling- to Western eyes, the most visible marker of differentness and inferiority of Islamic societies- became the symbol now of both the oppression of women (or in the language of the day, Islam's degradation of women) and the backwardness of Islam, and it became the open target of colonial attack and the spearhead of the assault on Muslim societies.<sup>60</sup>

However, the grounds responsible for the emergence of anti-veil discourse in Europe are no doubt multifold. Mohja Kahf, who examines the representation of Muslim women in European literature from the medieval period up to the early modern era in *Representations of the Muslim Woman: From Tergamant to Odalisque*, traces the image of the oppressed Muslim woman centring on the veil and segregation back even earlier to the seventeenth century.<sup>61</sup> While she accepts that this view grew more entrenched in the early modern period with the advent of colonialism,<sup>62</sup> Kahf understands it more as the necessary negative backdrop against which the eighteenth century European notion of "middle-class female domesticity" was fashioned.<sup>63</sup> Mabro also posits that the perception of the "Oriental" involuntarily shackled up lascivious women was a European socially and ideologically driven necessity,

However, such attitudes were reinforced not only by perceptions of 'Oriental' women but also by the prevailing European ideas of women's role. The developing bourgeois ideology was based on an opposition of two spheres- the male, public sphere of alienated labour, the female private sphere of self-sacrificing, nurturing, non-alienated labour. *The whole structure depended on enforcing the ideals of monogamous marriage and women*

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being very the founding member and president of the *Men's League for Opposing Women's Suffrage* (op. cit. p.153).

<sup>60</sup> L. Ahmed. *Op. cit.* p.43.

<sup>61</sup> Mohja Kahf. 1999. *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman: From Tergamant to Odalisque*. Austin: Univesity of Texas Press. However, the author notes that when the Muslim women began to be presented as victim, the veil "still appears on European women and has not yet become a prop associated exclusively with Islam." *Ibid.* p.5. The veil and segregation were/are perceived as synonymous as the first was seen to be a public expression of the latter. These two concepts have remained associated up until today. In recent years, this view has been challenged by new veiling, a transnational phenomenon that I discuss later in the chapter, that has actually granted women in the Middle East more facility in penetrating and occupying public space whether in leisure, educational or work contexts. For an interesting discussion see Lama Abu Odeh. "Post-colonial Feminism and the Veil: Thinking the Difference." *Feminist Review* 43(1993): 26-37.

<sup>62</sup> Kahf, although refusing to cite colonialism as the main cause for the new negative representation of the Muslim woman, nonetheless admits a link between the two as she states that the narrative woven around Islam and the veil sought to "create the fiction of a Western, a not-Oriental, identity-and thus to prepare a supportive culture for colonialism as it began to gather momentum." *Op.cit.*p.6.

<sup>63</sup> M. Kahf. *Op. cit.* p.7.



*as passive sexual beings. To have depicted harem dwellers as ordinary women who cared for their children and looked after the home as did women in Europe would have undermined the whole basis of Western family life (emphasis added).*<sup>64</sup>

Both authors underscore the inconsistency between British social acceptance of the Victorian ideal of feminine behaviour and sexuality and the growing criticism of the hapless lot of Muslim women. The contradiction testifies to the incapacity of British society for self-criticism, as it failed to recognize the often similar shared fate of women east and west, and demonstrates as I address later how the modern European self constructed itself by differentiating itself from its negatively constructed other(s). It is in this sense that representations often divulge more about the viewer than the viewed leading Yeğenoğlu to describe the European perception of the Orient as “the cultural representation of the West to *itself* by way of detour through the other.”<sup>65</sup>

Kahf’s work is of particular interest as she begins her analysis of European representations of the Muslim woman back in the medieval period when Muslim civilization was deemed superior to that of Europe, culturally, militarily, and scientifically. Not only did popular literature not discuss the plight of the Muslim woman, it actually depicted the antithesis of today’s stereotype. In fact, the importance of Kahf’s work is to remind us that in medieval European literature the Muslim woman was depicted as “a queen or noblewoman wielding power of harm or succour over the hero, reflecting in this the earthly might of Islamic civilization.”<sup>66</sup> The powerful figure did not conform to the European idea of normative femininity especially as she was oft represented as a giant and/or endowed with a “wanton or intimidating sexuality.”<sup>67</sup> The perceived transgressive nature of the Muslim woman is

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<sup>64</sup> J. Mabro. 1991. *Op. cit.* p. 9.

<sup>65</sup> M. Yeğenoğlu. *Op. cit.* p.1.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.* p. 4. The author continues, “These figures are loquacious and transgress the bounds of traditional femininity, reflecting the failure of their parent religion to inculcate proper gender roles. The rhetorical move of many literary texts involving a Muslim woman is to subdue her, not liberate her.”

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* p. 5.

further revealed by the plot that generally has the Muslim *tergamant*<sup>68</sup> convert to Christianity and adopt “a more passive femininity.”<sup>69</sup> The European medieval representation of the Muslim woman attests to the fact that long before the colonial era there already existed a fusion of woman and culture with regard to the Middle East and a desire for Europe to conquer the latter employing as metaphor the making over of Muslim women in the image of its own women and norms of femininity. Homa Hoodfar in an article on the veil alludes to much later European authors who also contradict the now deeply entrenched stereotypes as she discusses travel accounts portraying Muslim women as “freely mobile,” as lacking in morality due to their revealing clothes or as power-wielding figures in the home.<sup>70</sup> All of this corroborates Kahf’s thesis that representations are neither absolute nor true but are rather constructions contingent upon time, place and culture.<sup>71</sup> The evolution of the Muslim woman from powerful woman to victim also underscores how representation of the other cannot be disentangled from issues of political and economic hegemony. When subjugation of the Muslim world moved from desire to reality, it transformed the powerful Muslim queen into a veiled damsel in distress needing to be saved thereby adding another element to the European argument of a *mission civilisatrice*. Many scholars such as Yeğenoğlu, have expounded on how the pervasive notion that Islam and Muslim men oppressed Muslim women formed a keystone of colonial discourse and representation,

In fact, one of the central elements in the ideological justification of colonial culture is the criticism of the cultural practices and religious customs of Oriental societies which are shown to be monstrosly oppressing women. Hence, the barbarity of the Orient is evidenced in the way cultural traditions shape the life of its women.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Kahf defines this term and explains her use of the term to signify the powerful Muslim woman in this manner: “*Tergamant* is the name given by the authors of medieval romances to one of the “Saracen” gods with a violent, overbearing character; sometime in the seventeenth century, it came to mean a quarrelsome, overbearing woman; a virago, vixen, or shrew. The development of the meaning of this word is, therefore, intriguingly linked to the meta-narrative of the Muslim woman.” *Ibid.* p.181, note 9.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.* p. 5.

<sup>70</sup> H. Hoodfar. 1997. *Op. cit.* pp. 254-5.

<sup>71</sup> M. Kahf. *Op. cit.* p. 2.

<sup>72</sup> M. Yeğenoğlu. *Op. cit.* p. 98.

Yeğenoğlu also explains how the veil is a major actor in this terrible game as it serves as visual ‘proof’ of women’s oppression hence visibly justifying such domination.

*The veil is taken as the sign of the inherently oppressive and unfree nature of the entire tradition of Islam and Oriental cultures and by extension it is used as a proof of oppression of women in these societies.* When the necessity to modernize these cultures was taken for granted, there was no hesitation in morally condemning the practice of veiling, for it was regarded as an impediment to modernization (emphasis added).<sup>73</sup>

For this reason while I concur with Kahf that late eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe’s obsession with the veil resulted from a variety of motives, it is impossible to deny that the colonial period and its corollary Orientalism indelibly mark a turning point in the history of the perception of the veil in both the east and the west. The veil took on enormous proportions signifying something much greater than the plight of women; it came to connote the unbridgeable divide between two worlds. The veil was forever reified as a loaded symbol visually signalling both cultural difference and inferiority. If veiling became synonymous with female oppression, Muslim male cruelty and civilizational backwardness, unveiling communicated modernity, progress and emancipation- or in short European culture.

This particular narrative of the veil holds true not only in the case of British but also of French colonialism. Julia Clancy-Smith in her article on French Algeria traces the evolution of how the French constructed their sense of superiority over the “natives.” In the first phase, it was based on their technological prowess and political institutions. After 1830, it was built by disparaging Islam, especially political Islam. Finally, once the country was totally controlled and civilian rule instated, the French turned to the plight of

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<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.* p. 99.

Muslim women.<sup>74</sup> The oppressed Muslim woman and her signature the veil also served to justify French occupation of Muslim countries.<sup>75</sup>

With the arrival of the twentieth-century, we witness the passage from colonial anti-veil discourse to colonial anti-veil action.<sup>76</sup> Authors such as the Martinique-born psychiatrist and founder of Third Worldism, Frantz Fanon (1925-1961), describe the incredible mobilization of resources and tactics employed to co-opt women into unveiling in French-occupied Algeria.<sup>77</sup> While the arguments used against the veil in twentieth-century Algeria resembled those enunciated above in the context of British-occupied nineteenth century Egypt, Fanon frames the French unveiling campaign as unconcerned with either the advancement of Algeria or its women. He observes that the French with whom he served in Algeria were cognizant of the fact that Algerians considered the veil as “the symbol of the status of the Algerian woman” as they also believed that Algerian society possessed a matriarchal essence beneath the manifest patriarchy.<sup>78</sup> Fanon insists that the occupiers’ emphasis on unveiling, rather than express a desire to modernize Algeria or liberate its women, constituted a “precise political doctrine” seeking to destroy any emblem of cultural and/or national identity.<sup>79</sup> The doctrine premised on the assumption that women represent the most interior and/or authentic core of a given culture and hence of resistance, again highlights how women and their bodies are often pawns in broader socio-political struggles. Fanon in fact puts forth the will to dominate as the true rationale for the French unveiling campaign, “Converting the woman, winning her over to the foreign values, wrenching her free from her

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<sup>74</sup> Julia Clancy-Smith. 1998. “Islam, Gender, and Identities in the Making of French Algeria, 1830-1962.” In Julia Clancy-Smith and Frances Gouda (eds.) *Domesticating the Empire: Race, Gender, and Family Life in French and Dutch Colonialism*. Charlottesville; London: University of Virginia Press, p.154.

<sup>75</sup> This colonialist argument used to justify military intervention and occupation is still redeployed as evinced by the important role the *burqa*-clad woman played in the arena of American politics, culture and media to justify the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001.

<sup>76</sup> Fanon describes -perhaps somewhat condescendingly- an unveiling ceremony in 1958 as “a theatrical performance involving only some intimidated prostitutes and maids.” Frantz Fanon. 1967. *A Dying Colonialism* (trans. Haakon Chevalier), New York: Grove Press, p. 59.

<sup>77</sup> Frantz Fanon. 2003. “Algeria Unveiled.” In D. A. Bailey and Gilane Tawadros (eds.). *Op. cit.* p. 74.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.* p. 74.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.* p. 75.

status, was at the same time achieving a real power over the men and attaining a practical means of deconstructing Algerian values.”<sup>80</sup> Fanon’s hypothesis of a “precise political doctrine” can be corroborated, as in the case of the British, by colonial texts and the statements made the French administrators themselves therein. One can already discern its contours more than a hundred years earlier in the 1840s when General Thomas-Robert Bugeaud, who conquered and then governed Algeria, remarked that “the Arabs elude us because they conceal the women from our gaze.”<sup>81</sup>

The Algerians responded to the unveiling campaign by veiling. Therefore, ironically, it was thus that the veil instigated by and serving as a reaction to the west was first attributed the meaning of political resistance. The veil was transformed into a visible site of resistance to western cultural hegemony and colonial policies as well as an affirmation of indigenous culture. Every unveiled woman came to symbolize the success of foreign domination, and every veiled one the tenacity of tradition and the refusal to yield to what Fanon calls the “rape of the colonizer.”<sup>82</sup> The veil visually demarcated the boundary of colonial power. The veil, a simple piece of cloth and part of traditional garb, came to configure the woman’s body, its visibility or concealment, as the site of competing cultures and of political struggle. In this particular context, the veil, a trope signifying the whole of the Middle Eastern or Muslim world, took on a new particular meaning. Fanon emphasises how the veil gained in importance in Algeria not only because of traditional views regarding gender but also and perhaps especially because “the occupier was bent on unveiling Algeria.”<sup>83</sup> He writes that the popularity of veiling not only demonstrated “that it was not true

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<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.* p. 75. See also M. Yeğenoğlu. *Op. cit.* p. 101.

<sup>81</sup> Quoted in J. Clancy-Smith. *Op. cit.* p.154.

<sup>82</sup> F. Fanon. *Op. cit.* p.76. Fanon may use the term rape due to his experience as Head of Psychiatry at Blida-Joinville Hospital in Algeria where he treated both French and Algerian patients. He discusses in his works, French patients who experienced fantasies of raping Algerian women often beginning with the tearing off of the veil.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.* p.85. He also writes on p. 79: “To the colonialist offensive against the veil, the colonized opposes the culture of the veil. What was an undifferentiated element in a homogeneous whole acquires a taboo character, and the attitude of a given Algerian woman with respect to the veil will be constantly related to her overall attitude with respect to foreign occupation.”

that woman liberated herself at the invitation of France and of General de Gaulle” but also possessed a practical political component as the large loose *haik* was ideal for concealing and transporting bombs and tracts during the resistance.<sup>84</sup> In the same vein, Ahmed claims that the notion of the veil as a “resistance narrative” is no less than an internalization of western preoccupations,

Standing in the relation of antithesis to thesis, the resistance narrative thus reversed-but thereby also accepted- the terms set in the first place by the colonizers. And therefore, ironically, it is Western discourse that in the first place determined the new meanings of the veil and gave rise to its emergence as a symbol of resistance.<sup>85</sup>

The veil as resistance was by no means restricted to Algeria, nor was it always restricted to defying a foreign-occupier. For example, the donning of the veil antedating and postdating the 1979 Iranian Revolution was directed against the Western style aspirations, concessions to the west, and despotism of the Iranian leader Reza Shah. After all, it was his predecessor who instituted the 1936 law banning the veil and calling for the arrest and beating of, and its forcible removal from women wearing it.<sup>86</sup> This narrative of the veil forms a leitmotif in historical and present-day representations of the veil and it therefore continues to impact both perceptions and policy in contemporary society as revealed by the banning of the veil in schools whether in France, Tunisia, or Turkey.

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<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 83-85. Unveiled women also played a role by carrying money or grenades on their persons. The role Algerian women played in the fight against French occupation has been well-documented. See Marie-Aimée Helie Lucas. 1999. “Women, Nationalism, and Religion in the Algerian Liberation Struggle.” In Nigel C. Gibson (ed.) *Rethinking Fanon*. Amherst, New York: Humanity Books, pp. 271-83. Cherifa Bouatta. 1994. “Feminine Militancy: *Moudjahidates* during and After the Algerian War.” In Valetine M. Moghadam (ed.) *Gender and National Identity: Women and Politics in Muslim Societies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 18-39. Djamila Amrane. 1994-2004. *Des femmes dans la guerre d’Algérie*. Algeria: EDIK.

<sup>85</sup> L. Ahmed. *Op. cit.* p.49. Fanon sees this as a natural phenomenon, “We here recognize that laws of the psychology of colonization. In an initial phase, it is the action, the plans of the occupier that determine the centers of resistance around which a people’s will to survive becomes organized.” F. Fanon. *Op. cit.* p. 79.

The driving impetus for resistance also needs evoking as in ‘French’ Algeria, the French ten percent of the population wielded the economic and political control, while the Algeria population at large was as El Guindi states, “forbidden by law to study their language,” and studied, when schooling was available, French language, history and geography. This is not to mention the well-documented instances of widespread rape and murder of women. See F. El Guindi. *Op. cit.* pp.169-170.

<sup>86</sup> For the negative consequences of this edict on Iranian woman see H. Hoodfar. *Op. cit.*

Although the veil acquired a new meaning when Algerian women continued to veil or re-veiled under the French occupation, the term resistance only fully describes the veil from the perspective of the colonizer. It does not suffice to explain the phenomenon from the more multi-faceted perspective of those wearing the veils. Yeğenoğlu in her masterful work *Colonial Fantasies* identifies the new inflection of veiling from the perspective of Algerian women as one of affirmation,

It is not surprising after all that women's agency emerged out of the *texture* of their own culture....However, this culture was no longer the same. In taking up the veil as a constituent symbolic element of their subjectivity, the Algerian women did not simply continue their traditional roles, because the veil had now become the *embodiment of their will to act, their agency*. It was thus re-inscribed and re-charged in the colonial situation and acquired a symbolic significance that directly affected the struggle.<sup>87</sup>

The shifting and polyvalent meaning attributed to the veil evoked here by one specific historical moment amongst others- from oppression to resistance and/or agency – is absent in arguments that still position the veil in a limiting binary-tradition versus modernity, oppressed versus liberated, or Islam versus the west-framework,<sup>88</sup> a reductionist approach still widespread in intellectual discourse, literature and visual and popular culture in both the west and the Muslim World. While it is clear that the veil has been- and sometimes remains- an instrument through which men dominate/d or oppress/ed women, it can also be transformed in a given context into a positive affirmation of political, cultural or subjective agency. It must also be stated that if the veil is construed as a patriarchal disciplining of the female body, this disciplining is equally present in other cultures and hence as Yeğenoğlu states, “the power exercised upon bodies by veiling is no more cruel or barbaric than the control, supervision, training, and constraining of bodies by other practices, such as bras, stiletto heels, corsets, cosmetics, and so on.”<sup>89</sup>

The charged perception of the veil and the concomitant issue of women in Islam became even more complex as they spread beyond the borders of

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<sup>87</sup> M. Yeğenoğlu. *Op. cit.* p. 64.

<sup>88</sup> H. Hoodfar. *Op. cit.* p. 250.

<sup>89</sup> M. Yeğenoğlu. *Op. cit.* p. 116.

colonialist discourse. With some exceptions, European female travellers to the Middle East embraced the colonialist view that the veil *cum* Islam was tantamount to female oppression. First and foremost were many of the missionaries who, as representatives of the Church, worked to convert women so that, as Annie van Sommer and Samuel M. Zwemer put forth, “the evils of Islam could be spelled out more directly.”<sup>90</sup> They deemed that the object of Islam was to “extinguish women altogether” and of course focused on the veil that “has had the most terrible and injurious effect upon the mental, moral and spiritual history of all the Mohammedan (*sic*) races.” In *Our Moslem Sisters: A Cry of Need from Lands of Darkness Interpreted by Those Who Heard It*, another work by van Sommer and Zwemer, the authors describe Islam as lewd because marriage was “not founded on love but sensuality” and because the Muslim wife was “buried alive behind the veil,” virtually a “prisoner and slave rather than...companion and helpmeet.”<sup>91</sup> Missionaries were not the only women to adopt the colonial narrative of the veil. As the travel diary was par for the course for both male and female travellers, many such type documents testify to the normativeness of such views. For example, a Mrs Albert Rogers, in her book *Winter in Algeria* narrating her stay in 1863-64, writes,

Met as usual troops of Arab women, when in the Jardin de Marengo. *These poor veiled creatures-veiled alike in mind and body- bound in shackles which none but their own sex can loose, how one mourns over them, and longs to be able to reach them!* But without a knowledge of Arabic, the hope is futile....I would we could employ an Arabic-speaking Bible-woman amongst them (emphasis added).<sup>92</sup>

Hoodfar observes that if these women writers rightly or wrongly criticised the lives of Muslim women, they failed to “draw parallels between the oppression of women in their own society and that of women in the Orient” and

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<sup>90</sup> Annie van Sommer and Samuel M. Zwemer (eds.). 1911. *Daylight in the Harem*. Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson and Ferrier, pp. 149-150. Quoted in L. Ahmed. *Op. cit.* p.154.

<sup>91</sup> Annie van Sommer and Samuel M. Zwemer (eds.). 1907. *Our Moslem Sisters: A Cry of Need from Lands of Darkness Interpreted by Those Who Heard It*. New York: F.H. Revell, pp.27-28. Quoted in L. Ahmed. *Op. cit.* p.154.

<sup>92</sup> G. Albert Rogers. 1865. *Winter in Algeria, 1863-4*. London: Sampson Low, Son, & Marston, p. 58. Quoted in J. Mabro. *Op. cit.* p. 183. It is the same Mrs. Rogers who, in another passage of the book (p.257), actually recommended the veil for ‘ugly’ women, “If only they would adopt the Moslem fashion, and hide their repulsive features, it would save one many a shock.” G. Albert Rogers. *Op. cit.* Quoted in J. Mabro. *Op. cit.* p. 257.



forgot that they had often fled their home countries themselves to escape domestic drudgery and debilitating definitions of womanhood.<sup>93</sup> The colonially-rooted discourse was also held by European women who saw themselves as concerned with women's emancipation, such as Eugénie Le Brun who mentored Egyptian feminist Huda Sha'rawi and who, urging her to unveil, lectured her on (the European negative assumptions about) the veil. Moreover, all accepted unconditionally that unveiling was tantamount to civilizational progress and female emancipation. This wholesale endorsement of what Ahmed terms "colonial feminism" is particularly puzzling as colonialism was largely a patriarchal institution and if it used feminism as a strategic manoeuvre abroad, it condemned it on the home front. Ahmed persuasively articulates the discrepancy,

That the Victorian colonial paternalistic establishment appropriated the language of feminism in the service of this assault on the religions and cultures of Other men and in particular on Islam, in order to give an aura of justification to that assault at the very same time as it combated feminism within its own society can easily be substantiated by reference to the conduct and rhetoric of the colonizers.<sup>94</sup>

In order to appreciate the reasons for and the implications of European women's acceptance of this oversimplified discourse on the veil and the oppression of women by Islam and Muslim men, it is necessary to first examine why the veil was/is such anathema to the western eye and psyche. As has already been suggested, European disdain of veiling may be attributed to ideological, military, and political causes but there also exists a further psychological dimensions. Authors such as Fanon, Yeğenoğlu, and Alloula have interpreted the disparagement of the veil by putting forth that the cloth simultaneously revealed and thwarted the colonizer's intent of possessing the colonized. The veiled woman, especially in Algeria where the *haik* an all-encompassing cloth covering everything but the eyes, sees but can not be

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<sup>93</sup> H. Hoodfar. *Op. cit.* p. 258. There are of course exceptions, for example two women who trusted their own perceptions and observations regardless of whether or not they confirmed or contradicted the stereotypes and dominant discourse of their own culture were Lady Mary Montagu who visited Ottoman Istanbul in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century and Lady Duff Gordon who lived in Egypt in the early part of the second half of the nineteenth century.

<sup>94</sup> L. Ahmed. *Op. cit.* p. 43.

possessed by the gaze of others.<sup>95</sup> The self-designated subject, in an unforeseen reversal of roles, remains the object of the other's gaze. The loss of control brought about by the woman who can see but can not be seen also evokes modernity's clear association of vision with knowledge or what Yeğenoğlu terms the "scopic regime of modernity."<sup>96</sup> Malek Alloula in his celebrated work on colonial postcards describes the frustration of the colonial gaze- and in this case the male photographer's- in terms of the negation and rejection of his desire,

The Algerian woman does not conceal herself, does not play at concealing herself. But the eye cannot catch hold of her. The opaque veil that covers her intimates clearly and simply to the photographer a refusal...draped in the veil that cloaks her to the ankles, the Algerian woman discourages the *scopic desire* (the voyeurism) of the photographer. She is the concrete negation of this desire and thus brings to the photographer confirmation of a triple rejection: the rejection of his desire, of the practice of his art," and of his place in a milieu that is not his own.<sup>97</sup>

The veil, although it constitutes a physical barrier to the onlooker's desire also acts as a site upon which desire may be inscribed. It is in the sense that Yeğenoğlu understands the veil as being structured through fantasy as a screen "around which western fantasies of penetration revolve."<sup>98</sup> Textual and visual artifacts portraying beguiling odalisques in bedrooms or Turkish baths attest to the veil as representing what is *imagined* hiding behind it. The erotic component of the veil brought about by its association with licentiousness and by extension, the harem has everything to do with contrasting viewpoints on sexuality and the body. El Guindi who posits that a puritanical Christian worldview could only imagine the harem, an all female space, as a homoerotic one and hence of sin or as a male phantasm of uninhibited sexual pleasure, clearly articulates how the conflation of "veil, harem, seclusion and unbridled sexual access"<sup>99</sup> is due to different cultural attitudes towards sex,

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<sup>95</sup> F. Fanon. *Op. cit.* p. 77.

<sup>96</sup> M. Yeğenoğlu. *Op. cit.* p. 43. On page 12, she describes it as the "desire to master, control and reshape the body of subjects by making them visible."

<sup>97</sup> Malek Alloula. 1987. *The Colonial Harem*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, p. 7.

<sup>98</sup> M. Yeğenoğlu. *Op. cit.* p. 47.

<sup>99</sup> F. El Guindi. *Op. cit.* p.23. The harem, a representation/stereotype as loaded as the veil and also signalling the civilizational inferiority and lasciviousness of the East to the West, has also been critically reassessed. See L. Ahmed. 1982. "Western Ethocentrism and Perceptions of the

Both Islam and Christianity provide moral systems to restrain improper and disorderly behavior that threatens the sociomoral order: Christianity chose the path of desexualizing the worldly environment; Islam of regulating the social order while accepting its sexualized environment.<sup>100</sup>

These divergent positions evident even in theological paradisiacal narratives explain in part historical attitudes of the Church towards Islam. El Guindi also ascribes the sexual fantasy of European men projected unto Muslim women by the introduction of very restrictive Victorian mores regarding sexuality especially that of women who, along with the new famous tight lacing and corsetry, were not encouraged to experience let alone express sexual pleasure.<sup>101</sup>

Yeğenoğlu, recognizing the veil as a construction of the (unveiled) subject relates the scopophilic frustration it arouses not only to sexual and ocularcentric desire, but also to the process of how the western self is produced, and by extension to the Enlightenment that shaped and defined this production. She suggests that the veil evoked the threat of non-being or a *mise en abîme* of the modern and colonial subject, perceiving these as being intimately related. Drawing upon the work of Gayatri Spivak amongst others, the author draws parallels between the projects/selves of colonialism and humanism as both are predicated on a self-proclaimed universal subject fashioned upon the exclusion of others,

In a different register, Gayatri Spivak commented on the affinity between the imperialist subject and the subject of humanism, *as both share the sovereign subject status of authorship, authority, and legitimacy*. Thus, to set up its boundaries as human, civilized, and universal, the Western subject inscribed the history of its others as backward and

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Harem." *Feminist Studies* 8 (3): 521-34. Haleh Afshar. 2000. "Age, Gender and Slavery in and out of the Persian Harem: A Different Story. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 23:905-16. Leslie Pierce. 1993. *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire*. New York: Oxford University Press. It has even been recently put forth that the harem or female quarters of the home at least in Egypt is where the impetus for Middle Eastern feminism emerged.

<sup>100</sup> F. El Guindi. *Op. cit.* p. 31.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.* p. 45. Michel Foucault discusses in *The History of Sexuality* the shift in the European attitudes towards sex between the relatively liberal seventeenth century when bodies and sexual discourse were relatively free and the nineteenth century when the Victorian era ensured that "sexuality was carefully confined." Michel Foucault. 1980. *The History of Sexuality*. New York: Vintage-Random House, p. 3. For an alternative view on tight-lacing and corsetry see David Kunzle. 1977. "Dress Reform as Antifeminism: A Response to Helene E. Roberts's "The Exquisite Slave: The Role of Clothes in the Making of the Victorian Woman."" *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 2(3): 570-9. Kunzle posits (p. 570) that the movement against these trends were themselves instigated by "autocratic males with a low opinion of the female sex and an attachment to the concept of the "natural woman," and were not concerned with liberating women.

traditional and thereby placed cultures of different kinds in a teleological and chronological ordering of history. It is this ordering which enabled the West to construe and affirm its difference from others as temporal distance. This temporalizing gesture, therefore, has enabled the West not only to invent itself as the universal subject of history, but also to assert its cultural domination and superiority by assuming one true story of human history (emphasis added).<sup>102</sup>

Humanism and colonialism both delineate who is included as a subject in history and who is not, as they equally postulate a temporal chasm between geographies, plotting the progressive modernity of the west against the backward tradition of the east, with a “Third World” always lagging behind, never able to catch up. The fact that both ideologies are premised upon racial, cultural, religious, and temporal differences does not imply that gender is not implicated in the process Spivak so appositely calls the “worlding of the world.” Yeğenoğlu reminds us that the assumed universal/imperial subject postulated by the Enlightenment was a European male because of the unquestioned patriarchal nature of the society that brought forth the notion and which was reflected in the purportedly masculine traits he exhibited. As the universal subject was masculine, making the *other/s* feminine regardless of gender,<sup>103</sup> the author perceives the modern self as produced through the other of sexual difference noting that, “the absolute otherness of the woman, therefore serves to secure for the man his own self-knowledge and truth.”<sup>104</sup> Patriarchal subjectivity was/is hence disturbed by the presence of veiled women as its own identity was/is foreclosed by the lack of vision/knowledge of the cultural other of sexual difference again elucidating further why the veiled women crystallized into a symbol of an impediment to modernity and modernization.

Yeğenoğlu examines and questions why women espoused what she calls the phallogentric nature of both selfhood and the other.<sup>105</sup> This investigation of how and why women performed and participated in the violence of Orientalist

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<sup>102</sup> M. Yeğenoğlu. *Op. cit.* p.95.

<sup>103</sup> The feminization or rather the emasculation of the other male is a recurrent theme in militaristic and colonial thinking. Edward Said believes that feminization of the orient is an inherent part of Orientalist theory. See Edward Said. 1978. *Orientalism*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

<sup>104</sup> M. Yeğenoğlu. *Op. cit.* p. 46.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.* p. 47.

discourse and acts forms a vital aspect of *Colonial Fantasies*. The author contends that if European women constituted the other to the universal male subject produced through difference, the female subject simulated this masculinist discourse by also producing her self through alterity against a *devalued* other but here one of purely cultural, as opposed to both sexual and cultural difference. This reproduction, Yeğenoğlu argues, was necessary to the construction of the modern female self and thus, it was, “in the East that Western woman was able to become a full individual.”<sup>106</sup> The veil developed into the central site or marker of difference against which the European female subject could come into being furthering and deepening the sign’s metonymy in Euro-American culture,

...the veil provided the benevolent Western woman with what she had desired: a clinching example that interlocks “women” and “tradition/Islam” so that it could be morally condemned in the name of emancipation.<sup>107</sup>

Yeğenoğlu rightly recognizes the drawbacks of such simulation as the European modern female subject by this acting out also positioned herself as exclusively universal, and accepted without question the notion of Islam and veiling as backward as well as the intellectual and ideological premises of Enlightenment-constructed disciplines of knowing oneself and others. Euro-American feminism internalized these attitudes to the degree that Ahmed asserts that not only anthropology but also feminism should be considered a “handmaid” of colonialism.<sup>108</sup> Yeğenoğlu emphasizes the urgency of admitting the participation of feminism in the propagation of both imperialism and patriarchy,

The acknowledgement of her complicity with this violent gesture is absolutely pivotal for a feminist criticism which seeks to develop what Spivak calls an alternative historical narrative of the “worlding of the world” which has been denied in the imperial narrativization. Such an alternative political/theoretical project is neither about “letting the Other speak” nor about trying to recover the lost authenticity of the Third World woman. But, as Spivak suggests, it is about “documenting and theorizing the itinerary of the consolidation of Europe as a sovereign subject, indeed sovereign and subject.”<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.* p. 107.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.* p. 99.

<sup>108</sup> L. Ahmed. *Op. cit.* p. 155.

<sup>109</sup> M. Yeğenoğlu. *Op. cit.* p. 94. The author is quoting from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. 1985. “Rani of Sirmur.” In Francis Baker *et al* (ed.) *Europe and its Others*. Colchester: University of Essex. Vol. 1, p. 128.

The relationship between the Enlightenment, colonialism and feminism is relevant to the discussion as all pivot on the notion of a western modernity itself conceived in part by its contrast to the perceived unchanging tradition of the Orient, and all shaped, accepted, and are even premised upon the still dominant perception of the veil and Islam. Feminism accepted the view of tradition as static, backward and other, and therefore also the impending necessity to unveil Middle Eastern women in order to “liberate” them, a view that “reflects the historical, cultural, psychical and political obsession of the culture that produced Western women”<sup>110</sup> more than the subjective experiences of the veiled women themselves. The veil has in fact been so prevalent in the constitution of the western male and female subject that it has according to Chandra Mohanty, come to signify not only the Muslim woman but the Third World woman - construed as powerless and oppressed- in general. In other words, the veil evidences the unequal power relations between the so-called developed and underdeveloped worlds again underscoring the political and economic subtexts of the sign. Bullock quotes Mohanty who puts forth regarding the Euro-American discursive representation of the powerless Third World woman that her “oppression...becomes a symbol of the difficulty all women once faced,”<sup>111</sup> and cogently points out that “the operative word here is “once,” with the implicit assumption that some women (Western women, ...) are no longer oppressed, but others (the veiled premedieval spectre) still are.”<sup>112</sup>

The issue of the veil and Muslim women’s dress and adornment more generally despite their connection to colonialism and sexism remain fetishized in Euro-American culture including its feminist component. In fact, a colonially constructed feminist discourse pertaining to women in Islam and the veil still permeates both popular and intellectual culture. Women professors of Middle Eastern origin teaching in western university contexts speak of their aggravation

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<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.* p. 12. The “urgency” to unveil is not limited to the colonial period as it continues today.

<sup>111</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty. 1984 (Spring and Fall). “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses.” *Boundary2* 12/13 (3/1), p. 338. Quoted in K. Bullock. *Op. cit.* p. 130.

<sup>112</sup> K. Bullock. *Op. cit.* p. 130.

of having to confront incessantly, and often to no avail, the conflation of Islam, veil and victimization in academic circles.<sup>113</sup> Global economic and thus discursive dominance again explain why the internalization of a patriarchal sense of superiority by Euro-American feminists has been late to slacken despite decades of articulation of other feminisms strongly criticizing and contesting the allegedly universal Euro-American definition of women's freedom, agency and appropriate dress. As late as the 1980s, authors continued to exhibit such feminist ethnocentrism positing the western female self as universal, superior and more advanced. For example, Juliette Minces writes,

Can the evolution of the condition of the women in the Arab world be evaluated by the same criteria as in the West? Is it not Eurocentric to put forward the lives of western women as the only democratic, just, and forward-looking model? I do not think so. The demands of Western feminists seem to me to represent the greatest advance towards the emancipation of women as people. Ideally, the criteria adopted, like those for human rights should be universal.<sup>114</sup>

As Euro-American feminism is not monolithic, I must reiterate that many feminist scholars with postcolonial sensitivities engage in critiques of Eurocentric or xenophobic elements in scholarship on women in Islam past and present. For example, on the enduring consensus that the veil continues to serve as "the barometer of social change in the Moslem World,"<sup>115</sup> Hirschmann observes,

Feminists as well as non-feminists often assume that veiling is in and of itself an inherently oppressive practice. Many view it like domestic violence; just as staying with the abuser seems beyond comprehension, so does "choosing" the veil. Women are seen as brainwashed or coerced, and the veil is seen as a key emblem of this oppression.<sup>116</sup>

Colonial attitudes towards the veil also penetrated the Muslim world creating internal societal divisions largely cutting along class lines. The equation of the veil with backwardness and oppression was first articulated in the Middle East

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<sup>113</sup> See H. Hoodfar. *Op. cit.*, M. Yeğenoğlu. *Op. cit.* p.121, and L. Ahmed who in *Op. cit.* p. 246 discusses how she is "disheartened by oppression against women used to justify hostility towards Arab and Muslims."

<sup>114</sup> Juliette Minces. 1980. *The House of Obedience*. London: Zed Press, p. 25. Quoted in M. Yeğenoğlu. *Op. cit.* p. 102.

<sup>115</sup> Ruth Frances Woodsmall. 1983 (1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1936). *Woman in the Changing Islamic System*. Delhi: BIMLA Publishing House, p.48. Quoted in M. Yeğenoğlu. *Op. cit.* p. 100.

<sup>116</sup> Nancy J. Hirschmann. *Op. cit.* p.349.

by early modernist male writers and then later adopted by Arab feminists.<sup>117</sup> The “battle of the veil” is deemed to have been inaugurated in Egypt with the publication of Qasim Amin’s *Tahrir al-mar’a* or *The Liberation of Women* in 1899 in which the author advocates primary school education for women, reforms of the polygamy and divorce laws, unveiling as well as the necessity of tremendous change in Muslim culture overall. This was a time in Egypt where several major male intellectual figures, such as Rifa‘ah Rafi‘al-Tahtawi (1801-1873), ‘Ali Mubarak (1824-1893) and the renowned reformer Muhammad ‘Abdu (1849-1905), were also examining the plight of women and calling for legal reforms and education to better their situation. If the works and ideas of the latter were well received, Amin’s *Tahrir al-mar’a* created “intense and furious debate”<sup>118</sup> in intellectual circles because of his harsh criticism of Egyptian culture and call for abolishing of the veil which as Ahmed observes he perceived akin to the colonialists as “the key to social “transformation.””<sup>119</sup> Reactions to Amin’s ideas saw the debate of the veil first enter the Arab press with three periodical defending the veil and two denouncing it.<sup>120</sup> The fact that Amin (1863-1908) was a prominent lawyer and had ties with the British help explain in part the adversity and, although his advocacy for change stemmed from an anti-British nationalist sentiment, he accepted the notion that European culture was more advanced technologically, economically, and culturally. Moreover, although he called for the adaptation of the veil rather than its abolition in this particular book, and that it was not so much the cloth but the social mores that accompanied it such as seclusion and segregation that he was condemning, references to Amin in both east and west concentrate on the veil.

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<sup>117</sup> Many contemporary Arab feminists have greatly modified their anti-veil stance in the last decades. See for example, Lama Abu Odeh. *Op. cit.* or Azza M Karam. 1998. *Women, Islamisms, and the State: Contemporary Feminisms in Egypt*. New York: St. Martin’s Press. Many scholars however from the Middle East continue to view it as intimately linked to patriarchy and oppressive practices towards women. See for example, H. Moghissi, *Op. cit.*

<sup>118</sup> L. Ahmed. *Op. cit.* p. 144.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.* p. 145. Amin’s argument against the veil is that it was accompanied by seclusion therefore forcing women to leave school, and who then, he proposed, promptly forgot everything they had learnt. *Ibid.* p. 160.

<sup>120</sup> Beth Baron. 1989. “Unveiling in Early Twentieth-Century Egypt: Practical and Symbolic Considerations.” *Middle Eastern Studies* 25(3), p.372.



This again underscores the metonymic nature of the veil and more importantly how this metonymy was itself set up by colonial discourse and then accepted by the colonized. It is also important to situate the veil in turn of the century Egypt as we tend to read the past through the eyes of the present. If we now generally view the veil as a specifically Muslim religious and political symbol, we should remember that it was also then worn by Jewish and Christian Egyptian women.<sup>121</sup> In fact, El Guindi esteems that full veiling was more related to class than religion as it “was an urban phenomenon associated mostly with the upper classes” adding yet another dimension to the veil.<sup>122</sup> The class or status aspect of the veil is often cited in the burgeoning field of Muslim women’s history as it is thought that historically full veiling (head, face and body) was the prerogative of urban women who did not have to work.<sup>123</sup> As the vast majority of Muslim women in the Middle East lived in rural contexts and participated in agricultural and herding work, one can infer that although some type of head covering was possible, the large headscarf let alone the face veil adorning the streets of metropolises both east and west may have been impracticable. The status aspect of the veil persists as in many Muslim majority countries today, the socio-economic standing of a (veiled) woman is made visible not only by dress but also by the type, size and style of veiling she adopts.

Up until quite recently, Qasim Amin’s *The Liberation of Women* was considered to mark the beginning of feminism in the Arab World. However, many scholars having reassessed the author’s ideas now believe that Amin, rather than being the “Father (*sic*) of Arab feminism” simply wanted to exchange a Middle Eastern patriarchal system for a European one. After all, he

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<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.* p. 379. Baron does mention however that Jewish and Christian Egyptian women discarded the face veil earlier than their Muslim counterparts.

<sup>122</sup> F. El Guindi. *Op. cit.* p. 178. This class or status aspect of the veil may be traced back to the earliest period of Islam but became especially salient when Islam was influenced by the imperial traditions of the Sassanids and the Byzantines.

<sup>123</sup> Contrary to thought, Muslim women were historically involved in many economic sectors. See Ahmad ‘Abd al-Raziq. 1973. *La femme au temps des Mamluks en Egypte*. Cairo: Collections textes arabes et études islamiques de l’IFAO, vol. 5. Maya Shatzmiller. 1988. “Some Aspects of Women’s Participation in the Economic Life of Later Medieval Islam: Occupations and Mentalities.” *Arabica* 35(1): 36-59. And Judith Tucker. 1993. “Gender and Islamic History.” In Michael Adas (ed.) *Islamic and European Expansion: The Forging of a Global Order*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, pp. 37-73.

only advocated primary education for women and this in order for her to be better able to fulfill her role as wife and mother. Ahmed perceives Amin's work as simply reflecting the penetration of Western colonial discourse into the Arab world. This is most apparent in his diatribe against Egyptian women describing them as dirty, unskilled, ignorant, trite, unattractive and as those who "do not know how to rouse desire in their husband, not how to retain his desire or to increase it...." <sup>124</sup> Timothy Mitchell links Amin's ideas on women to modernity and the particular form of social control it sought to enact. Abu-Lughod discussing Mitchell's thesis states that the author views Amin's ideas on gender as part of,

...a large-scale modernizing project intended to open up women's world to the same surveillance and individualized subjection as was imposed on the rest of the population and to organize the family into a house of discipline for producing a new Egyptian mentality.<sup>125</sup>

The negative consequences of the ideologies and institutions of modernity on the lives of Muslim women and women in general have thankfully begun to be addressed in scholarship.<sup>126</sup>

Amin's ideas on Muslim women and society as well as his belief in the superiority of European culture so echoed those of Lord Cromer's that they were only well-regarded by the British and the small Egyptian elite that profited from the British occupation of their country. The western view of the veil as a sign of backwardness and degradation was solely espoused by the upper middle and upper classes and refuted by 'the general population thereby fracturing society along the lines of economic and social privilege. This also framed the

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<sup>124</sup> L. Ahmed. *Op. cit.* p. 157. Quoting from Qasim Amin. 1976. *Tahrir al-mar'a*. In Muhammad 'Amara (ed.) *Al-a'mal al-kamila li Qassim Amin*. Beirut: Al-mu'assasa al-'arabiyya lil-dirasat wa'l-nashr, vol. 2, p. 29.

<sup>125</sup> L. Abu-Lughod. *Op. cit.* pp. 255-6. See Timothy Mitchell. 1988. *Colonising Egypt*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

<sup>126</sup> See for example, Afsaneh Najmabadi. 1993. "Veiled Discourse-Unveiled Bodies," *Feminist Studies* 19 (3): 487-518. Amira El Azhary Sonbol (ed.). 1996. *Women, Family and Divorce Laws in Islamic History*. Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press. In particular the essay by Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, "Women and Modernization: A Reevaluation, pp. 39-51. Margaret Meriwether. 1993. "Women and Economic Change in Nineteenth-Century Syria." In Judith Tucker (ed.) *Arab Women: Old Boundaries, New Frontiers*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 65-83. See also Dorothy L. Hodgson (ed.). 2001. *Gendered Modernities: Ethnographic Perspectives*. New York: Palgrave.

act of unveiling as solely 'western' thus precluding any possibility of subjective or indigenous choice in the matter. Thus, long before the unveiling ceremonies in Algeria, unveiling was interpreted to mean progress and acceptance of western ideologies whereas veiling meant tradition and a stance against western ways.

That Amin's book was long considered the foundational work of Arab feminism despite the fact that many of his fellow intellectuals held more progressive views on women proves how power and privilege are intimately linked to the production of knowledge. In other words, the facility of the dissemination of colonial discourse and its subsequent internalization by the colonized reveals what Ahmed terms the "global dominance of the Western World and the authority of its discourses."<sup>127</sup> In the Middle Eastern debate as in colonialist discourse, the negative view of the veil - and again it is important to remember that veil here means face veil- was first articulated by men and later appropriated by women. It is also imperative to note that in both contexts the major male proponents of unveiling were not necessarily concerned with the advancement of women as such, a criticism that may also be directed against many Muslim male proponents of veiling. The fact that the male instigated debate for and against the veil provoked by Amin was- and continues to be- fashioned as an anti-feminist versus feminist struggle again stresses the collusion of feminism with humanism, colonialism, and patriarchy. This perspective on the dispute is now deemed erroneous by many contemporary feminist scholars. El Guindi, for example, regards the debate not as feminist versus anti-feminist one but as a struggle,

...between two muddled versions of domesticity, a Western female domesticity versus an indigenous man's vision of female domesticity. Islam was not in any serious way the ideological basis for either position. Contradictions abound in both. In appropriating a women's issue, men polarized discourse surrounding the veil.<sup>128</sup>

This study is concerned with representation and the politics of representation surrounding the veil and it is hence important to stress that it is in no way implying that the veil was/is never oppressive, that women in Muslim societies

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<sup>127</sup> L. Ahmed. *Op. cit.* p.165.

<sup>128</sup> El Guindi. *Op. cit.* p.178-9.

were/are not oppressed, or that all Euro-American ideals about women's emancipation were/are essentially fallacious. While the sometimes oppressive quality of the veil, namely when it is forced upon women by male relatives or legally imposed with non-compliance leading to sometimes brutal punishment, or simply experienced as such, will be treated in the study, the other two issues remain beyond its scope.

Like Ahmed, a major reference for this section, I will consider Egypt as a "mirror" and a "precursor" of developments in the Middle East,<sup>129</sup> but in this case, it is to trace the discourse surrounding the veil in Arab feminism, which, like Euro-American feminism, came for the most part to indubitably accept the veil equals oppression thesis. The twentieth century was a time when European dress was being adopted by men and women at least by those of the upper middle and upper classes. The lives and role of women were changing not only through access to education but also to new fields of employment; for example, alongside the growing number of women's journals, there appeared the first women journalists in the mainstream press. Middle Eastern feminism emerged at the turn of the century and organized itself politically in the first three decades. Nascent Egyptian feminism is often considered both secular and multi-denominational.<sup>130</sup> However, Ahmed in *Women and Gender in Islam* affirms that if the branch of Arab feminism mimicking colonialist views remains the best known and was more prevalent during most of the twentieth-century, it was not the only one. To make her point she contrasts feminists Huda Sha'rawi (1879-1947) with Malak Hisni Nasif (1886-1918). Huda Sha'rawi, founder of the Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU) and of two women's magazines *L'Egyptienne* and *al-Misriyya*, supported the notion of a western more secular style state constructed along western ideological and institutional lines. If she considered the veil oppressive, we saw that while she discarded her face veil, she nonetheless, as did many in the EFU, often kept wearing a headscarf. In fact, Qasim Amin's wife and daughters never completely discarded the veil

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<sup>129</sup> L. Ahmed. *Op. cit.* pp. 6 and 175.

<sup>130</sup> Margot Badran. 1995. "Huda Sha'rawi." In John L. Esposito (ed.) *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, Vol. 4. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 45.

either. Sha'rawi's views on women were accepted by women like herself, from the upper middle, and upper classes. Ahmed laments the fact that her famous unveiling has overshadowed her political stance against British occupation while contemporary novelist Ahdaf Soueif articulates the incongruity of the coupling in Egypt of unveiling with anti-British sentiment,

That image of Hoda Sha'rawi unveiling in public was present in the schoolbooks of Nasser's Egypt, and to us – schoolchildren of the time- the contradiction in it was not immediately apparent. Sha'rawi was part of the struggle to break free from the grip of a European power, yet she publicly adopted the "revealed face" code of that same power. My parents' and grandparents' generations were able to live with this contradiction, because they thought (at least, the ones that thought about it) that politics and culture existed in two separate realms- that even though we needed to shake off the west's political yoke, the western was the more advanced culture and it was, therefore progressive to adopt it.<sup>131</sup>

The contradiction that Soueif refers can be adduced as proof for the thesis that nationalism in the Third World is also an offshoot of colonialism and not its presumed antidote, and that in both women have been subjected to male control.<sup>132</sup>

The second strand of feminism was distrustful of the suitability of western customs and mores for Muslim women and sought as Ahmed puts forth, "a way to articulate female subjectivity and affirmation within a native, vernacular, Islamic discourse."<sup>133</sup> If Malak Hisni Nasif was opposed to unveiling, it was interestingly not because she viewed it as a religious requirement because she did not. Rather, she thought that women needed the veil because men had not yet learned not to be abusive to unveiled women and because women had not yet gained sufficient experience of the outside world. She does suggest that after positive social change had been enacted, she would approve unveiling as a woman's choice "for those who want it" (as opposed to a male enforced and/or governmental decree).<sup>134</sup> More compelling is the fact that Nasif seems to have been alone in understanding that the issue of the veil was in essence a red herring and in perceiving "new varieties of male domination being enacted in

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<sup>131</sup> Ahdaf Soueif. 2003. "The Language of the Veil." In D. A. Bailey and G. Tawadros (eds.). *Op. cit.* p. 112.

<sup>132</sup> M. Yeğenoğlu. *Op. cit.* p. 12 and Chapter 12, "The Battle of the Veil: Women between Orientalism and Nationalism," pp. 121-44.

<sup>133</sup> L. Ahmed. *Op. cit.* p. 174.

<sup>134</sup> Quoted in El Guindi. *Op. cit.* p.180.

and through the contemporary male discourse of the veil.”<sup>135</sup> In a most perspicacious and singular manner, she also recognized as Soueif remarks that “the question of the veil was only central in the debate about woman’s place in society because the west (personified in Egypt then by Lord Cromer) had made it so.”<sup>136</sup> Nasif while calling for reforms in domains such as education and health, put forth as Ahmed states that the women who were unveiling were not doing so for the sake of “liberty” or the “pursuit of knowledge” but in order to preoccupy themselves with fashion and dress.<sup>137</sup> Despite her incisive insight and as Ahmed suggests, her untimely death, Nasif was in large part eclipsed by Sha’rawi and became important or rediscovered only at the end of the twentieth-century.<sup>138</sup> That the latter remains by far the better known of the two in the Euro-American world may be explained by the fact that the former refused the paradigmatic choice set up by colonialism, western discourse, and feminism also as I have shown “part of the colonialist effort to delegitimize Islam,” a choice aptly defined by Hirschmann, “either one embraces Islam and women’s oppression, or one throws it (and the veil) off and is free.”<sup>139</sup>

By the mid-twentieth century and mostly in the name of modernization, the veil including the headscarf had largely disappeared from the landscape of Egyptian cities (and other major Middle Eastern urban centres). Ahmed relates that Arab feminism from the 1950s to the 1980s began to discuss more subtle forms of patriarchy and to deal with issues not usually discussed in the open such as birth control, sexuality and clitoridectomy.<sup>140</sup> It was the many prolific feminists from this generation that adamantly refuted the veil *cum* headscarf as an un-Islamic and patriarchal social custom, understandably linking it with other forms of female oppression in their cultures. If I here, contrary to the case of

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<sup>135</sup> L. Ahmed. *Op. cit.* p. 174.

<sup>136</sup> A. Soueif. *Op. cit.* p. 113.

<sup>137</sup> L. Ahmed. *Op. cit.* p. 180.

<sup>138</sup> Nasif went further in her demands for women than Sha’rawi as she “demanded that all fields of higher education be opened to women” as well as “space in mosques for women to participate in public prayer.”

F. El Guindi. *Op. cit.* p.181. It must be stressed that Nasif nonetheless enjoyed enough prominence and respect in her day to earn the nickname “Researcher of the Desert.”

<sup>139</sup> N. J. Hirschmann. *Op. cit.* pp. 349-50.

<sup>140</sup> L. Ahmed. *Op. cit.* p. 214.

colonialists and Euro-American women, use the epithet understandable to allude to this conflation it is because the views of Arab feminists emerged from, regardless of any western influence, reflections on their own lives and problems. Perhaps seeking indigenous roots or lineage, this generation reinscribed Sha'rawi's baring of the face as a historical discarding of the veil, confirming how history is often more narrative than fact. As a comprehensive history of Arab feminism has yet to be written, and as my purpose is to provide an outline of the complexity of the veil sign, it will have to suffice here to mention the two most renowned feminiss and their respective views on the veil to reflect the mainstream Arab feminist view of the period on the matter.<sup>141</sup> Egyptian doctor and psychiatrist Nawal El Saadawi (b. 1931) is an extremely productive feminist author whose work is imbued with an egalitarian socialist outlook.<sup>142</sup> Once exiled from her country due to charges of apostasy and a number of death threats, she is obdurate in her opposition to the veil claiming that it leads to a "veiling of the mind."<sup>143</sup> El Saadawi puts forth that Arab women are torn between two divergent social messages about women, on the one hand the globalized and advertised canon of female beauty, and on the other the "Islamic notion of femininity 'protected' by men and hidden behind the veil."<sup>144</sup> The author condemns both believing that in the two cases women are "bodies without a mind" devoid of agency as these bodies "should be covered or uncovered in order to suit national or international capitalist interests."<sup>145</sup> Nonetheless, if El Saadawi unequivocally condemns the veil and links it with Islamism, she recognizes that there are greater problems, "The veiling of women is one of the most visible aspects of fanatic fundamentalist movements, but there are many other symptoms that are less visible but more dangerous."<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> There are many other important figures from both the first and second phases of Arab feminism, that have to unfortunately here be overlooked for reasons of succinctness. See Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke (eds.). 1990. *Opening the Gates A Century of Arab Feminist Writing*. London: Virago. Mai Yamani (ed.). 1996. *Feminism and Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives*. New York: New York University Press.

<sup>142</sup> See Nawal El Saadawi. 1980. *The Hidden Face of Eve*. London: Zed Books, p.180.

<sup>143</sup> Quoted in A. S. Roald. *Op. cit.* p.12.

<sup>144</sup> H. Moghissi. *Op. cit.* p.146.

<sup>145</sup> Nawal El Saadawi. 1997. *The Nawal El Saadawi Reader*. London: Zed Books, p. 140.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.* p. 95.

The Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi (b. 1940) is no doubt the best known Arab feminist in the west and she has discoursed extensively about the veil in several of her works. In her essay "Virginity and Patriarchy," Mernissi writes,

...the veil can be interpreted as a symbol revealing a collective fantasy of the Muslim community; to make women disappear, to eliminate them from communal life, to relegate them to an easily controllable terrain, the home, to prevent them from moving about, and to highlight their illegal position on male territory by means of a mask.<sup>147</sup>

The difficulty with the author's discourse is that, seeming to so closely parallel colonial views, one wonders if like Nasif, Mernissi clearly deconstructed the collusion between feminism and colonialism before positioning herself. Simultaneously, it again testifies to how the polarization brought about by the colonial narrative can occlude the colonized's own voice as perhaps Mernissi arrived at the same conclusion based not on the grounds of an internalized colonialism but on that of her own subjective experience. This in itself would evidently not be problematic, what is however, is that the author equates her experience of Moroccan practices and ideas, reproducing colonial thought, with a static ahistorical Islam.

The groundbreaking work of this generation was in fact the return to Islamic sources and exegesis to buttress their arguments allowing them to dispute on the grounds of their foes, and in fact in this sense Arab feminism cannot be compared to other feminisms whose discourses could circumvent religious discourse and are purely secular in nature, which is why many of these authors are sometimes referred to as Muslim feminists. Unfortunately, with regards to the veil at least, and regardless of whether one considers the veil as a practice textually embedded in Islam or not, many authors of this generation are inclined as Anne Sophie Roald observes, "to select those texts that are suitable to their purposes, precisely the same thing they have accused male scholars of doing

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<sup>147</sup> Fatima Mernissi. 1982. "Virginity and Patriarchy." *Women's Studies International Forum* 5 (special issue Azizah al-Hibri (ed.) *Women and Islam*), p. 189. Her definition of veil is unclear and seems to intimate the face veil. See also F. Mernissi. 1991. *The Veil and the Male Elite*. Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley. F. Mernissi. 1987. *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in a Modern Muslim Society*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.



historically and in contemporary times.”<sup>148</sup> The general view of this phase of Arab feminism is that the veil’s veritable *raison d’être* is to seclude and erase women from public space and to protect men from women’s powerful sexuality;<sup>149</sup> disposing of it therefore suggests a view akin to Euro-American feminism that women should not be held responsible for the lust of men. Although this generation sometimes held positions similar to that of western feminism, they also critiqued the latter either for speaking in their place or for failing to criticize the patriarchy operative in their own societies. If I discuss Arab or Euro-American feminisms as categories, it is for the sake of communicability. Both categories are of course multivocal with inner debates and divisions. For example, El Saadawi has been amply criticized by fellow Arab feminists because her writings seem to too willingly confirm Euro-American stereotypes of Arab *cum* Muslim women as perpetual victims.

The important point is that if society -at least major urban centres- now largely viewed the veil as traditional, old-fashioned, and a symbol of the popular classes, a new discourse that of Arab feminists was articulated in which veiling- including head veiling this time- was perceived as un-Islamic and oppressive, a point of view that resembles that of both colonialism and Euro-American feminism but diverges from it as it is rooted in subjective experience. It should be noted that the movement and ideas of Arab feminism were limited in effectiveness as they remained confined to the economically privileged classes. While I do not espouse any monolithic outlook on the veil, including its immutable equation with oppression (except when legally enforced or subjectively experienced as such), I think that texts need to be contextualized within their contemporary societies to be understood, and when one grasps the

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<sup>148</sup> A. S. Roald. *Op. cit.* p. 3. For a good critique of Mernissi, see Kathy Bullock. *Op. cit.* Chapter 4, “Mernissi and the Discourse on the Veil,” pp. 136-82 or more recently L. Ben Youssef Zayzafoon. *Op. cit.* Chapter 1, “A Semiotic Reading of Feminism: Hybridity, Authority, and the Strategic Reinvention of the “Muslim Woman” in Fatima Mernissi” pp. 15-30. In the thesis, to distinguish from the set of terms Muslim feminist and Muslim feminism, I reserve that of ‘Islamic feminist,’ for those feminists that operate completely within an Islamic paradigm. Interestingly, Miriam Cooke places both Mernissi and El Saadawi -and apparently with the latter’s blessing- in the category of Islamic feminism. See Miriam Cooke. 2001. *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature*. London: Routledge, p. xxvi.

<sup>149</sup> N. El Saadawi. *The Hidden.... Op. cit.* p. 84.

patriarchal nature of Arab –like most- societies, the oppression thesis becomes understandable even if methodological problems surrounding it exist. As examples, I can point to Mernissi's chronicle of growing up in a male guarded harem where her mother resented the lack of access to public space <sup>150</sup> and El Saadawi's account of her brutal circumcision when she was only six years old, <sup>151</sup> a custom that as she points out has no basis in Islam. <sup>152</sup> Both Mernissi and El Saadawi have exposed and combated many abusive customs towards women in their societies but in doing so, have sometimes confused social practices, customs and ideas and legal rulings on gender with "Islam."

If Ahmed considers that Sha'rawi has her progeny in the later figures of Arab feminism who embraced the term and chiefly aspired to western style democracies and attitudes to gender roles and equality, she also perceives a strong and singular woman, Zeinab al-Ghazali (b. 1917-2005), as having emerged out of Nasif's more subjective and indigenous approach to issues of gender. <sup>153</sup> Al-Ghazali may be considered the precursor <sup>154</sup> of what would only many decades later be called Islamic feminism, although she and many other Islamist and Muslim women do not often recognize the validity of the actual

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<sup>150</sup> F. Mernissi. 1994. *Dreams of Trespass: Memories of Harem Girlhood*. Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley.

<sup>151</sup> N. El Saadawi. *The Hidden ... Op. cit.* pp. 7-9.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.* p. 39. The author redresses the misunderstanding surrounding female circumcision or female genital mutilation (FGM),

Many people think that female circumcision only started with the advent of Islam. But as a matter of fact it was well known and widespread in some areas of the world before the Islamic era, including the in the Arab peninsula. Mahomet the Prophet tried to oppose this custom since he considered it harmful to the sexual health of the woman. In one of his sayings the advice reported as having been given to him by Om Attiah, a woman who did tattooings and circumcision, runs as follows, "If you circumcise, take only a small part and refrain from cutting most of the clitoris off...The woman will have a bright and happy face, and is more welcome to her husband, if her pleasure is complete."

The *hadith* is quoted from 'Abdel Rahman El Barkouky. 1945. *Dawlat El Nissa'a*. Cairo: Renaissance Bookshop.

<sup>153</sup> Ahmed compares al-Ghazali to her more secular contemporary counterpart, feminist Doria Shafik (1908-75). The two do indeed in many ways serve as a comparable pair to Nasif and Sha'rawi, even if I will not do the same here.

<sup>154</sup> I must note that there were earlier groups that developed an Islamically-based approach to women's rights such as a group that formed in 1908 to defend the veil. See B. Baron. *Op. cit.* p. 380.

term “feminism.”<sup>155</sup> While Nasif and al-Ghazali share some similarities, I view the latter as representing a third approach to gender because as a Muslim activist, she based herself entirely upon the Islamic theological tradition and thus her views on gender are not extraneous to her overall religious thought and discourse. Al-Ghazali was, directly or indirectly, related to the early Egyptian Islamist movement *ikhwan al-muslimin* or Muslim Brotherhood established in 1928 by Hassan al-Banna (1906-49) and whose paramilitary wing came to, in the 1940s, condone violence in confrontations with the state.<sup>156</sup> The emergence of the group advocating an Islamic reform of society through personal moral reform as that of Islamism in general is complex and suffice it to say for now that it was obviously at least partially a reaction to western encroachment as well as to the perceived or real corruption of their own government(s). I do not

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<sup>155</sup> Some Muslim women, especially those with Islamist or very orthodox Muslim leanings do not accept the term feminism or feminist as they consider it a western ideology not applicable to their culture. For example, Heba Ra'uf Ezzat, lecturer at Cairo University frames questions of women's rights, agency and equality solely within “the liberating potential of Islam,” and therefore Islamic methodology stating that terms other than feminist “can –and sometimes should- be used”. See Heba Ra'uf Ezzat. 1999. “Women and the Interpretation of Islamic Sources.” *Women Issues*, Islamic Research International. [www.irfi.org/articles\\_451\\_500/women\\_and\\_the\\_interpretation\\_of.htm](http://www.irfi.org/articles_451_500/women_and_the_interpretation_of.htm).

<sup>156</sup> L. Ahmed explains al-Ghazali's belief in “the legitimacy of using violence in the cause of Islam” by putting forth that she was trained in the tradition of “men's Islam,” her father being an al-Azhar University graduate. Ahmed is applying a distinction that emerged out of the social sciences that distinguishes between textual and oral Islam, or high and folk Islam, the first being more literal and the second closer to the spirit of the text and/or the actual practices of the people whether legally sanctioned or not. This distinction has been applied to gender, as does Ahmed, to examine the differences between male and female Islam, the latter often involving trances, maraboutism or other syncretic practices often stemming from the fact that –apart from serving as social and psychological outlets for women– a majority of women were illiterate and thus did not have access to religious texts. L. Ahmed. 1999. *A Border Passage: From Cairo to America*. New York: Penguin, p. 123. Regarding Muslim female devotional practice, see amongst other works, Robert A. Fernea and Elizabeth W. Fernea. 1972. “Variations in Religious Observance among Islamic Women.” In Nikki R. Keddie (ed.) *Scholars, Saints and Sufis: Muslim Religious Institutions in the Middle East since the 1500*. Berkeley: UCLA Press, pp. 385-401. Zahra Kamalkhani. 1998. *Women's Islam: Religious Practice among Women in Today's Iran*. London: Paul Kegan. Although the fact that the practice of Islam is gendered can be successfully proven, my own view to explain the particular political ideologization of Islam that occurred in the twentieth century does not view patriarchal interpretations of Islamic texts as the sole cause for sanctioning violence. I remain convinced that beyond, as in the case of al-Banna, the experience of imprisonment and torture, a much overlooked and understudied factor is the strong influence of Marxism, and Third Worldist revolutionary thought in particular, on the development of Islamism, which explains why unlike El Guindi, I differentiate between Islamist and Islamic, see note 57. For example, the rhetoric of the Iranian Islamic Revolution was very much steeped in and overtly indebted to Fanonism, especially salient in the work of Iranian intellectuals like Ali Shariati (1933-77).

adhere to the notion that is often brought forward, namely that Islamism constitutes the antithesis of modernity; quite to the contrary I submit that its Manichaeic tendencies are in fact very modern mirroring those of other twentieth century political ideologies. Islamism developed a broad popular base in Egypt and throughout the Middle East as Islamist groups like the *ikhwan* were and remain very active and well-organized in the area of charitable works from feeding and clothing the poor to providing free medical care.

Despite the fact that the Muslim Brotherhood's views on women were more 'liberal' than those of the traditional religious scholars or '*ulama*', it attracted few if any women into its fold which is why al-Banna sought out al-Ghazali's help. Although the *ikhwan al-muslimin* put forth that women's main role was motherhood, they nonetheless proposed that women could also contribute to society by having access to education in all fields and working in a professional field of their choice. This said the Muslim Brotherhood as most politically influential and/or governing Islamist groups and governments have more often than not endorsed misogynistic laws, policies and interpretations of Islam and have often been maleficent for women. The Brotherhood's main complaint about the adoption of the "western" <sup>157</sup> model of modern woman was that her sexuality was exploited by capitalist society, the same argument espoused by El Saadawi whom they condemned. That Islamism integrated or islamized several aspects of Marxist-based revolutionary thought from the advocacy of armed struggle for the marginalized to critiques of capitalism cannot be

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<sup>157</sup> Anti-Orientalist or postcolonial scholarship has now become subjected to academic scrutiny and has been criticized for perpetuating binary east-west essentialism and/or for blaming all the Muslim World's ills on colonialism. Although some of the points raised by those who refute anti-Orientalist discourse are important, I remain convinced that colonialism with the vast technology and scale of its operation continues to shape the Middle Easterner's view of the world. As no culture develops *ex nihilo*, historically Islamic culture willingly absorbed many elements from other cultures, whereas in its colonial and postcolonial phase, the Muslim world responded to its loss of identity, to its conquering by foreign powers by a reactive hardening and often exaggeration of attitudes towards Euro-American culture(s) and foreign influence. Bullock gives a perfect example. While all four (Sunni) schools of law permit family planning or in plain terms methods of contraception, the influential conservative Indian scholar Abul A'la Mawdūdī "decided family planning efforts as Western attempts to undermine Islam by reducing the number of Muslims." K. Bullock. *Op. cit.* p. xxxvii. In other terms, while historically both the western and the Muslim self were no doubt produced through difference vis-à-vis each other, colonialism heightened and magnified the polarization exponentially.

obviated and yet it is rarely, if ever, discussed. It must also be said that this again male-defined version of the Muslim woman self produced through its differentiation from the western other is not without parallel to Yeğenoğlu's description of the production of the western modern self, intimating as I have already proposed, that Islamism is in fact a modernist movement. The fledgling organization, echoing the secularists and colonialists, focused on dress and hence on the proper Islamic attire for women including the veil (usually not including the face veil) that was deemed a religious requirement. It is however important to note that Muslim male dress was equally important in Islamist discourse and the importance of the beard, the long tunics, and various male head coverings is rarely if ever broached in scholarship.<sup>158</sup>

After working with Sha'rawi with whose ideas she came to disagree, al-Ghazali left and at age eighteen, founded the Muslim Women's Association whose work involved offering classes on Islam to women, running an orphanage, helping the poor and aiding the unemployed to find work.<sup>159</sup> Her association survived throughout the 1940s, when state repression of the Muslim Brotherhood and the arrest of its members were rife, until the mid-sixties when al-Ghazali was also jailed for six years on charges of dissent and tortured. Al-Ghazali's revisionist views on gender still summarize the basic premise of the contemporary movement called Islamic feminism. As all Islamists, she perceived the cure to the "backwardness" of Muslim societies not to be in the emulation of the west but rather as a return to an authentic Islam devoid of local and foreign accretions, a notion that some would argue is itself a modernist purist idea derived from the modern/traditional postulate of colonialism. Al-Ghazali applied the same method onto issues of gender; she deemed Islam granted women with as Valerie Hoffman notes, "everything-freedom, economic rights, political rights, social rights, public and private rights," although these had generally been stripped away in Muslim societies.<sup>160</sup> Miriam Cooke

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<sup>158</sup> F. El Guindi. *Op. cit.*

<sup>159</sup> L. Ahmed. "Women..." *Op. cit.* p.197.

<sup>160</sup> Valerie J. Hoffman. 1985. "An Islamic Activist: Zeinab al-Ghazali." In Elizabeth W. Fernea (ed.) *Women and Family in the Middle East*. Austin: University of Texas Press, p. 235.

perceives in al-Ghazali's life contradictions<sup>161</sup> similar- I propose- to those held against American women on the Christian right who advocate family life but who in order to do so work full time.<sup>162</sup> While it is true to a certain extent that a discrepancy exists between Ghazali's active public and political life and her strong preaching on the importance of the role the Muslim woman plays in the home, the difference lies in the fact that al-Ghazali had legal religious sanction for her work and that she propounded that she never neglected her family, managing always to fulfill her responsibilities as a Muslim wife. Nevertheless, one must acknowledge with Cooke that the woman Islamist is unique and unorthodox in the fact that she divorced her first husband because he kept her from "her mission" while her second husband not only stipulated in the marriage contract that he would not interfere with her work but that "he would help me and be my assistant."<sup>163</sup> Al-Ghazali's views and life, contradictory or not, may prove to be in the long term more helpful than Arab feminism in the sense that they are able to effect change beneficial to women from within helping to shift attitudes of conservative 'ulama, Islamists and the general population as well as to empower women in the language of their own tradition. Interviews and studies of contemporary Islamist or strictly orthodox women contesting historically defined female normative behaviour, whether in Egypt, Turkey, Sudan or Scandinavia, tend to confirm this view.

Al- Ghazali was a *muhajjabat* and strongly believed, unlike Nasif, that the headscarf was a religious obligation. What is important to note is that the veil resurfaces as not only an emblem of political resistance but fully repositioned in religious discourse, uniting the political, the revolutionary and the religious realms. This particular configuration of the veil linking Islam with political opposition and sometimes violence may best describe and explain its most prevalent representation in Euro-American and even some Middle Eastern media or still yet in the imagery of Islamist revolutionary movements,

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<sup>161</sup> M. Cooke. *Op. cit.* pp. 83-106.

<sup>162</sup> This is a central point in the popular former bestseller, Susan Faludi. 1991. *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*. New York: Crown.

<sup>163</sup> V. J. Hoffman. *Op. cit.* p. 237.

substantiating Ahmed's idea of how western and Islamist constructions mirror each other. Colonial definitions of the contested cloth are being reproduced irrespectively of whether or not the Islamist or Islamic view on the *hijab* is an authentic indigenous view or a counter discourse to colonialism formulated in the latter's terms. I have purposely elaborated upon key Egyptian figures and history to underscore how the veil even in a majority-Muslim country forms an unstable and multivalent site and to adduce the interrelatedness of power, discourse and representation as unveiling or (re)veiling often remain related to - whether reproducing or contesting- colonial discourse.

The binary positioning of the veil, with its "with us or against us" approach, still permeates not only the field of discourse but also, as the next chapter testifies, that of visual culture and, as has the present chapter establishes, no analysis of imagery containing references to the veil can be undertaken without cognizance of its loaded history. This simplistic dualism, when one is not discussing a context in which the veil is legally enforced or is due exclusively to social pressure and coercion, reveals many flaws. For one, concentrating on dress fails to address the much more serious social, religious and economic issues that women often face in Muslim majority countries. It also fails to address dress as a serious and multifaceted discipline, the study of which would reveal that an item of apparel worn in different contexts for different reasons cannot be feasibly reduced to a one-dimensional symbol of an abject or inferior culture or denomination. Third, it overlooks the reality of contexts such as many of the countries in the Persian Gulf where the veil has never been much of an issue, internally or externally; there were no colonial rulers to reify it, instead one generally finds western allies applying cultural relativism in light of their vested interests. Fourth and more importantly, it leaves no room for those women, who unconcerned with the ideological and representational struggle over the veil, chose to veil or not to veil for multifarious subjective reasons. In other words, the persistence of situating the veil in a polarized discourse as a visible symbol of the incommensurable incompatibility of two world cultures silences the voices of and precludes any notion of agency to the Muslim

woman, veiled or not, an idea or rather reality that constitutes the central premise of the next chapter.

What has dealt the biggest blow to over-politicized and binary conceptions of the veil is “new veiling,” referring to the phenomenon that in Muslim majority countries where the majority of women no longer wore the headscarf, women suddenly began redonning the veil in the 1970s and 1980s. This movement, not limited to the Middle East, has led to a surge of studies<sup>164</sup> and has often driven the discussion, as scholars attempt to comprehend the transnational trend, beyond the Orientalist model.

New veiling or reveiling as a movement began with university students in urban Egyptian centres before spreading to other Arab and western capitals. The “new” refers to the fact that veiling had virtually disappeared from Arab city streets and that the tendency characterized by a long loose gown and a large headscarf or *hijab* was in fact an innovation, an invented tradition. Ahmed puts forth that if the new attire combines elements of Egyptian traditional, and types of Arab and western dress, there remains nonetheless an element of social reproduction as many of the new *muhajjabat* had older family members who also veiled. In this sense Ahmed judges the attire as a “modern” version of the conventions of dress.”<sup>165</sup> Several other studies, however, maintain that many women covered unlike and contrary to the wishes of their family- parents, siblings or spouses- or governments. Valentine Moghadam asserts,

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<sup>164</sup> Suzanne Brenner. 1996. “Reconstructing Self and Society: Javanese Muslim Women and the Veil.” *American Ethnologist*, 23(4): 673-91. Elizabeth Fernea. 1993. “The Veiled Revolution.” In Donna Lee Bowen and Evelyn A. Early (eds.) *Everyday Life in the Middle East*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 119-22. F. El Guindi. *Op. cit.* F. El Guindi. 1981. “Veiling Infitah with Muslim Ethic: Egypt’s Contemporary Islamic Movement.” *Social Problems* 28 (4): 465-85. Leila Hessini. 1994. “Wearing the Hijab in Contemporary Morocco: Choice and Identity.” In Fatma Müge Göçek and Shiva Balaghi (eds.) *Reconstructing Gender in the Middle East: Tradition, Identity and Power*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp 40-56. H. Hoodfar. *Op. cit.* H. Hoodfar. 1991. “Return to the Veil: Personal Strategy and Public Participation in Egypt.” In Nanneke Redclift and M. Thea Sinclair (eds.). *Working Women: International Perspectives on Labour and Gender Relations*. London: Routledge, pp. 104-24. Arlene Elowe Macleod. 1991. *Accommodating Protest: Working Women, the New Veiling and Change in Cairo*. New York: Columbia University Press. Sherifa Zuhur. 1992. *Revealing Reveiling: Islamist Gender Ideology in Contemporary Egypt*. New York: SUNY Press. J. A. Williams. *Op. cit.* This list of academic studies on the reveiling movement is not exhaustive but indicates how it has provoked much study.

<sup>165</sup> L. Ahmed. *Op. cit.* p. 222.



There is also some evidence that voluntary veiling is not necessarily an expression of affiliation with or support for an Islamist political movement, but rather that it paradoxically represents rejection of parental and even patriarchal authority among rebellious young women. This especially may be the case for young women from non-traditional families-...- who by donning hijab aspire to personal autonomy and more serious mien, especially at coeducational colleges.<sup>166</sup>

Although the set of terms new veiling implies a unitary phenomenon, El Guindi detects several phases. In the beginning, “new veiling” consisted of a large headscarf often covering the hair, neck and sometimes whole upper body often accompanied by a long loose gown (*jilbab* or *jalabiyya*) in only a few sober colours, a sobriety clearly linking it to the general religious revival of the period. In this phase, the new outfit often indicated a clear political statement of opposing the government and affirming belief in the establishment of an Islamist-defined Islamic state. In Egypt, a country that had effectively stifled all left-wing opposition, the return to Islam represented, by the 1980s the “major oppositional force.”<sup>167</sup> El Guindi puts forth that the new dress signalled a movement in which the “*hijab* became the object and the symbol for the new consciousness and a new activism.”<sup>168</sup> Decades after the Algerian Revolution, the veil is again at the forefront of resistance standing for “a relinquishment of the principles of secularism and Western models and ideals in general.”<sup>169</sup> At this stage, the Manichean polarity constructed around the veil as is its use as synecdoche is again being re-enacted.

Politics alone however cannot explain the increase in veiling that was triggered on and by Egyptian university campuses and that spread from Islamists to the general population at large.<sup>170</sup> If the dress sometimes announced

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<sup>166</sup> Valentine M. Moghadam. 1993. “Islamist Movements and Women’s Responses.” In Valentine M. Moghadam *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East*. Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, p. 149. S. Brenner in *op. cit.* p. 674 discusses the problems that newly veiled Javanese women have with their families.

<sup>167</sup> F. El Guindi. *Op. cit.* p.143.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.* p. 134.

<sup>169</sup> S. Zuhur. *Op. cit.* p. 109.

<sup>170</sup> It is common currency to put forth that Islam does not distinguish between the sacred and the secular- and hence is always political, and while this is true from a theoretical perspective, it would be an acceptance of Orientalist methodology to view Islamic history from such an ahistorical perspective. In other words, the political and religious have not been intrinsically linked throughout Islamic history although the latter has often been used to legitimize regimes.

a political position, it was/is also involved in the subjective politics of identity. In other words, one cannot simply ignore its purely religious aspect, as the intent of the new attire was to fulfill a religious requirement of modesty. Egyptians call the phenomenon not new veiling but *al-ziyy al-islami* or *al-ziyy al-sha'ri* meaning Islamic or legal dress, a distinction that reconfirms how the term veil is problematic and categorises according to culturally specific perceptions and emphases. Related to the religious aspect of reveiling is the frequent reference of how a return to Islam often accompanied by a change in dress was accompanied with feelings of peace and "inner ease."<sup>171</sup> I must however add that studies on new veiling equally reveal that not all women who veil are fully practicing Muslims, a fact that again underscores veiling as a multivalent social practice and again highlights how the veil, a sign constructed and imposed from without, is fraught with difficulty.

The religious revival<sup>172</sup> that is at the origin of the dress has been traced back to specific political events, such as Egypt's defeat in the 1967 Six-day War with Israel<sup>173</sup> or on the contrary to Egypt's victory over the latter in 1973.<sup>174</sup> Although I have difficulty ascribing specific historical events as the cause of what I see as a historical pattern or a phenomenon based in a complex set of interrelated factors, I am contradicted by many personal testimonies of the *muhajjabat* themselves. Williams, in an early article examining new veiling, cites an Egyptian woman who attributes her adoption of the veil to the 1967 crushing defeat,

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This is especially true from a *shi'i* perspective whereby the first Islamic state set up in 622 C.E. lost its religious legitimacy early on with the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 C.E.

<sup>171</sup> L. Ahmed. *Op. cit.* p. 223.

<sup>172</sup> The Religious Revival is a general term that encompasses various modern (and modernist) Islamic reform movements including Islamist ones but it is not synonymous nor to be confused with Islamism. Both emerged from the feeling of needing an alternative path of economic and political governance as well as of individual and collective identity. A movement or individual that may be construed as being part of the former will not necessarily hold the same views on gender, legal matters or the state as the latter.

<sup>173</sup> L. Ahmed. *Op. cit.* p.216. The author states that scholars generally attribute the rise of Islamism to this event. See also S. Zuhur. *Op. cit.* pp. 51, 55. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad. 1984. "Islam, Women and Revolution in Twentieth Century Arab Thought." *The Muslim World*, 74 34, p. 40, or K. Bullock. *Op. cit.* p. 91.

<sup>174</sup> F. El Guindi. *Op. cit.* p.134.

Until 1967, I accepted the way our country was going. I thought Gamal Abd al-Nasser would lead us all to progress. Then the war showed that we had all been lied to; nothing was the way it had been represented. I started to question everything we were told. I wanted to do something and to find my own way. I prayed more and more and I tried to see what was expected of me as a Muslim woman. Then I put on *shar'i* dress...<sup>175</sup>

The return to Islam and the veil are put down to many concrete historical and political motives, the disillusionment with Nasserist socialism, the cultural and financial influence of the Gulf States especially Saudi Arabia, the effects of the Iranian Revolution signalling the success of "Islam as a political idiom," and the bleak economic condition of most Egyptians whether under Nasser's socialism or the open door policies of Sadat.<sup>176</sup>

Early sociological studies explain the reveiling movement in an oversimplified manner. They ascribe the new dress to the sense of malaise and uprootedness experienced by young people arriving in big metropolises. Social scientists also attributed the new dress to economic factors as *al-ziyy al-islami* was embraced by women of the popular classes, they maintain, to erase class origins and because these female students could not economically compete with the sophisticated and expensive urban fashion of their colleagues. Although Ahmed presents these elucidations, El Guindi fittingly refutes these arguments by positing that they are not founded in substantive research.<sup>177</sup> As does Zuhur even if her own research reveals that women of the lower classes are more likely to veil,<sup>178</sup>

Even though I feel strongly that economic factors contributed to the growth of *hijāb* wearing, they ought to be corroborated by the women directly involved. Unveiled women would agree that there is an economic explanation for veiling, because they believed veiled women seek to hide their lower-class origins....Most declared piety and a new realisation of the meaning of Islam.<sup>179</sup>

Katherine Bullock in *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil* declares that the economic explanation for veiling pertains more to the old class warfare -the

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<sup>175</sup> J. A. Williams. *Op. cit.* p. 54.

<sup>176</sup> L. Ahmed. *Op. cit.* pp. 218-19. You will see these particular events/motives repeated in studies on the reveiling movement.

<sup>177</sup> F. El Guindi. *Op. cit.* p.162.

<sup>178</sup> K. Bullock. *Op. cit.* p. 96 referring to S. Zuhur. *Op. cit.* p. 61.

<sup>179</sup> S. Zuhur. *Op. cit.* pp. 104-5.

view of the upper classes on veiled women-, than to the experiences and realities of the *muhajjabat* themselves.

New veiling can be understood as an unambiguous marker of Islamic identity, but the meta-narrative of the veil has once again shifted. The veil, forever associated with the domesticity of Muslim women and their relegation to the home now on the contrary affirms the presence of Muslim women students and employees as El Guindi put forth “in public social space in which not only is her gender accepted, but also her sexual identity.”<sup>180</sup> This new meaning of the veil is perhaps what most troubles secular regimes as it not only destabilizes the public/private binary but the now well-entrenched view of the oppressed Muslim woman and the master narrative defining Islam as a threat for which it covertly stands. The headscarf ban in Turkey rests on the differentiation between the traditional scarf of the elderly often illiterate grandmother and the *hijab* of the young educated Muslim woman seeking to assert her religious identity and demand her rights in society; it is the latter that is seen as an assault on Kemalist republican values.<sup>181</sup> The same holds true in the case of Euro-America. In her article on the “headscarf affair” in France, Sonia Dayan-Herzbrun notes, “A sign of foreignness and exoticism, the French were not disturbed whilst the headscarves covered *silent and discreet* heads (emphasis added).”<sup>182</sup> It is thus the agency and voice of these veiled Muslim women that is experienced as an attack or threat. Hoodfar quotes a Montreal university professor commenting on a veiled student who seems to have

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<sup>180</sup> F. El Guindi. *Op. cit.* p. 144. Ahmed points out that this fact proves that this movement “cannot be seen as a retreat from the affirmation of female autonomy and subjectivity made by the generation of women who immediately preceded them.” L. Ahmed. *Op. cit.* p. 224. This view is not unanimously accepted and is countered by many Euro-American and Arab feminists who see Islamic dress as negating a women’s sexual identity and as a concession to patriarchal norms in exchange for access to public space. See for example A. Macleod. *Op. cit.*, and the works on the veil by F. Mernissi.

<sup>181</sup> See Barış Kılıçbay and Mutlu Binark. 2002. “Consumer Lifestyle, Islam and the Politics of Lifestyle: Fashion for Veiling in Contemporary Turkey.” *European Journal of Communication* 17(4): p. 496. There is even a semantic distinction, the “traditional” headscarf of the “peasants” and “migrants” is called *başörtüsü* whereas the headscarf of the Turkish headscarf affair in the 1980s came to be called *türban*. John Norton. 1997. “Faith and Fashion in Turkey.” In Nancy Lindisfarne-Tapper and Bruce Ingham (eds.). *Op. cit.* p.167.

<sup>182</sup> Sonia Dayan-Herzbrun. 2000. “The Issue of the Islamic Headscarf.” In Jane Freedman and Carrie Tarr (eds.) *Women, Immigration and Identities in France*. Oxford: Berg, p. 69.

forgotten, she observes, that the young woman courageously came to Canada alone, learned English, and pursued university studies,

She is a bundle of contradictions. She first came to see me with her scarf tightly wrapped around her head...and appeared to me so lost that I wondered whether or not she would be capable of tackling the heavy course she had taken with me...She, with her feminist ideas and critical views on Orientalism, and love of learning, never failed to amaze me every time she expressed her views. *She does not at all act like a veiled woman* (emphasis added).<sup>183</sup>

Therefore, the rhetoric about freeing the Muslim woman might be construed in one of two ways. It for one intimates or confirms that, contrary to being concerned with her self-defined notion of empowerment and mirroring so many centuries later the medieval tales analyzed by Kahf, “liberation” simply entails the remaking of the Muslim woman in the image of the west. Pointing out how such an idea, although prevalent, is untenable Ahmed remonstrates,

As the history of Western women makes clear, there is no validity to the notion that progress for women can only be achieved by abandoning the ways of a native andocentric culture in favour of those of another culture... This idea seems absurd, and yet this is routinely how the matter of improving the status of women is posed with respect to women in Arab and other non-Western societies.<sup>184</sup>

And yet, research demonstrates how Muslim and/or Arab women feel discrimination whether or not they adopt Euro-American styles or lifestyles. Soueif quotes a well-known Egyptian journalist, Safinaz Kazem, who explains in the film *Four Women of Egypt* why she has adopted Islamic dress, “For years we ran around in short skirts and bare arms saying to them, ‘Look, see, we’re just like you.’ Enough. It got us nowhere. We’re not like them, and they shouldn’t matter. We have to find a way to be ourselves.”<sup>185</sup> Similar allusions to authenticity and the willingness to visibly ‘own’ one’s particular cultural identity are two other reasons commonly alluded to by Muslim women for veiling.

And second, the rhetoric’s presumed and willed invisibility of the veiled other also returns us to Yeğenoğlu’s articulation of how the modern western self

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<sup>183</sup> H. Hoodfar. *Op. cit.* p. 269.

<sup>184</sup> L. Ahmed. *Op. cit.* p. 244.

<sup>185</sup> A. Soueif. *Op. cit.* pp. 112-3. The quotation is from documentary film entitled *Four Women of Egypt*, made by Tahani Rached and Eric Michel for the Canadian National Film Board (NFB) in 1997.

in order to come into being and experience continuity structures itself in opposition to its other. From this perspective, the self-assertion of the visible female Muslim other can therefore not be tolerated as once no longer oppressed, she, the other is de-otherized, “They should remain different, because I should remain the same: they are/should not be a possibility within my own world, which will thus be different.”<sup>186</sup> The difficulty as Yeğenoğlu explains is that the attitude is not a case of “simple” xenophobia that can be resolved through education or simple change of outlook,

It is not a question of liking or disliking the Orientals, their women and their culture. The hostility expressed here is the force of negation which constitutes the subject *as* sovereign, that stern force which drives the machine of his self-production in the dialectical, restricted economy of the production of the self as same.<sup>187</sup>

Moreover, it is this sovereign subject position that endlessly re-inscribes the negative narratives woven around the veil as it *must*, explaining why these narratives, despite scholarly and popular contestation, remain fixed and incessantly repeated and reproduced.

The new representations/meanings of the veil brought about by new veiling also refute modernity’s cleaving of the modern and the traditional. Ahmed remarks that the widespread renewed appeal of Islam testifies to a democratization of Egyptian culture as it has “led to the rise and gradual predominance of a vocabulary of dress and social being defined from below, by the emergent middle classes.”<sup>188</sup> She maintains that this shift to a “sociocultural vernacular” has allowed the access of the “newly urban, newly educated middle classes to modernity and to a sexually integrated social reality.”<sup>189</sup> The important point here is that the author associates the new attire with the modern, “Islamic dress is the uniform of arrival, signalling entrance into, and determination to move forward in, modernity.” Suzanne Brenner espouses a similar view in her study on veiling in contemporary Indonesia,

...veiling here signifies a new historical consciousness and a new way of life, weighed down neither by Javanese tradition nor by centuries of colonial rule, defined neither by

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<sup>186</sup> M. Yeğenoğlu. *Op. cit.* p. 57.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>188</sup> L. Ahmed. *Op. cit.* p. 225.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*

Western capitalism and consumerism nor by the dictates of the Indonesian political economy. It stands for a new morality and a new discipline, whether personal, social, or political- in short, a new Islamic modernity.<sup>190</sup>

Although scholars are articulating the existence of alternative and non-western modernities, much like in the case of feminisms, mainstream western and Eurocentric discourse is slow and loathe to share its authority in the “worlding of the world.”

As stated earlier the reveiling movement possesses several phases; when veiling spread from the university context to work contexts and from the student population to the professional and upper classes and to society at large, the dress was altered. The veil and *al-ziyy al-islami* were transformed from sober attire into much more hybrid, fashionable and attractive clothes and outfits. The establishment of very successful companies of Islamic dress for women as well as an increased academic interest in dress as social practice and identity marker have led to a number of scholarly investigations into Islamic fashion.<sup>191</sup> This development, that some see as a cooptation of Islamic norms by big business or by a new Muslim bourgeoisie, again demonstrates how the new veiling movement and hence the veil are neither fixed nor stable but rather remain open to permutation. In fact the discussion on new veiling unequivocally adduces the multifaceted nature of veiling as inquiries attribute the practice to religious, political, spiritual, economic, psychological (“inner ease”) and pragmatic (access to public space and work, protection from male harassment,) causes. There is also a sociological or moral dimension that I have not yet mentioned as the testimonies of many women explain their choice as a way to protect their reputation, take a stance against perceived prevailing social disintegration or rampant consumerism, and/or to contest the commodification of women.

One of the positive consequences of the studies undertaken on new veiling is that they finally permit the voices of veiled Muslim women to be heard, voices

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<sup>190</sup> S. Brenner. *Op. cit.* p. 690.

<sup>191</sup> See See B. Kılıçbay and M. Binark. *Op. cit.* Alec H. Balasescu. 2003. “Tehran Chic: Islamic Headscarves, Fashion Designers and New Geographies of Modernity.” *Fashion Theory* 7(1): 39-55. Mona Abaza. 2007. “Shifting Landscapes of Fashion in Contemporary Egypt.” *Fashion Theory* 11(2-3): 281-97. Carla Jones. 2007. “Fashion and Faith in Urban Indonesia.” *Fashion Theory* 11(2-3): 211-31.

that have the potential of finally fracturing, or at least destabilizing, Cromer's colonial construct. The studies also carry the debate beyond the confines of politics and ideology allowing for discussions of "individual attributions of meaning or individual choice."<sup>192</sup> Nancy Lindisfarne-Tapper and Bruce Ingham are unmistakably clear and fair on the issue of choice positing that every individual woman's choice to wear a head cover or not along with the reason's she offers for such a choice "must be treated with the utmost respect and as separable from the apparent conformity and communal allegiances such a choice may also convey."<sup>193</sup> However, even this element of subjective choice when discussing veiling is often contested even if the majority of women in societies where it is not legislated have adopted the *hijab* out of personal choice. Compare Lindisfarne-Tapper and Ingham's stance with that of Grace who questions if a Muslim woman is ever free to chose,

To what extent can it be argued that the veiled woman acts within a sphere of agency? Is she free to initiate action, or is her action determined by the way her identity has been framed within the discourse of the veil, whether by Islamic (*sic*) men or western women?  
<sup>194</sup>

If Grace's question is in itself valid because society and social forces are inevitably coercive in every culture, the assumptions on which it rests are not. She accepts the heritage of colonial disciplines established to scrutinize others but not her own Euro-American self. After all, Grace's own style of dress and adornment –however it may be– is also embedded in a complex set of relations instituted by social narratives, cultural norms of femininity and appropriateness, (male) desire, class, and individual choice and yet she does not seem to question her own agency, nor to surmise that European norms of dress can also be understood as submitting to patriarchal or other internalized external demands.

All the socially constructed representations of the veil that I have traced so far cannot be disentangled from the ideologies and discourses animating them.

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<sup>192</sup> N. Lindisfarne-Tapper and B. Ingham. *Op. cit.* p. 14.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.* p. 18. Other scholars like El Guindi, Bullock, Roald, Hirschmann, even Ahmed, acknowledge that veiling in a context where it is not enforced, can be a subjective female choice that can be experienced as liberating.

<sup>194</sup> D. Grace. *Op. cit.* p. 23.



The new veiling movement is no exception and has its discursive counterpart in Islamic feminism<sup>195</sup> that reinterprets Islamic sources from a gender sensitive perspective advocating a reinterpretation of Islamic law or at least its disinvestment from the many misogynistic accretions that are now enshrined within the *shari'a*.<sup>196</sup> If Arab feminism was split down the middle early on, bifurcated between secular/elite and religious/popular points of view, and remains so to a certain extent, the articulation and study of Islamic feminism by Muslim women both veiled and unveiled, as well as by non-Muslim women has helped to bridge the gap because it has reshaped discourse and feminism in such a manner that as Afsaneh Najmabadi puts forth, “women of different outlooks can have a common stake.”<sup>197</sup> Najmabadi maintains that the movement she qualifies as radical is blurring old boundaries and hence antagonisms to the degree that the “comforting categories of Islamic and secular (and are making) West and East speak in a new combined tongue in dialogue with rather than as negating of each other.”<sup>198</sup> Works by Azza Karam, Margot Badran, Rifat Hassan, and many others attest to the fact that some women are willing to work together despite divergent ideological positions and sometimes different religions and confirm as Karam concluded that any “feminism that does not justify itself within Islam is bound to be rejected by the rest of society, and is

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<sup>195</sup> See for example, Amina Wadud-Muhsin. 1992. *Qur'an and Women*. Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Fajar Bakti Sdn Bhd. Riffat Hassan. 2001. “Challenging the Stereotypes of Fundamentalism: An Islamic Feminist Perspective.” *The Muslim World*, 91:55-69. Hibba Abugideiri. 2001. “The Renewed Woman of American Islam: Shifting Lenses Toward ‘Gender Jihad.’” *The Muslim World* 91(1-2): 1-18. Gisela Webb (ed.). 2000. *Windows of Faith: Muslim Women Scholar Activists in North America*. Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press. One can equally cite Huda al-Khattab, Asma Barlas, Azizah al-Hibri, and Margot Badran, etc.

<sup>196</sup> A concrete example would be that in most Islamic codes of law, a woman cannot divorce; she can only have her marriage annulled in extraordinary circumstances. Islamic feminism will point out how this is unfounded as in the days of the Prophet Muhammad, a woman could divorce on several grounds such as not loving her husband (‘finding him ugly’) or even lack of sexual satisfaction. Another astounding finding relevant to many women’s lives is that a Muslim woman/wife is not legally mandated to do housework. She can require help or payment. Bullock writes, “Three of the four schools of Sunni Islamic jurisprudence consider that housework is not part of a wife’s marital obligations.” K. Bullock. *Op. cit.* p. 59, n. 28. The author is relying on Hammuda Abd al-Ati. 1979. *The Family Structure in Islam*. Plainfield, Indiana: American Trust Publications.

<sup>197</sup> Afsaneh Najmabadi. 1998. “Feminism in an Islamic Republic: Years of Hardship, Years of Growth,” In John Esposito and Yvonne Haddad (eds.) *Islam, Gender and Social Change*. London: Oxford University Press, pp. 59-84. Quoted in M. Cooke. *Op. cit.* p. xiii.

<sup>198</sup> A. Najmabadi. *Op. cit.*

therefore self-defeating.”<sup>199</sup> The point of view of Islamic feminism on the veil is that the veil when freely chosen is a symbol of Islam’s egalitarian nature demanding that women be judged on their spiritual and intellectual merit alone and to have, if they so choose, their bodies free from the scrutiny of others. It also accepts its polysemy. For example, the South African Islamic feminist Sa’diyya Shaikh while recognizing that veiling when obligatory is coercive and often linked to misogynistic discourse on women, insists on the multiple meanings of the veil,

*Hijab* within Muslim societies does not constitute a singular symbolic field. It has come to represent varying meanings within multivalent realities. On the one hand there are large numbers of women who believe it is a religious requirement exemplifying the Islamic requirement of modesty and they choose to wear it to be obedient to God. Other women have stated explicitly feminist anti-capitalist motivation for their veiling. They argue that the veiling detracts from patriarchal prioritization of women’s physical and sexual attractiveness. Moreover it provides resistance to a perceived Western consumerism in which money and energy are constantly spent in keeping up with changing fashions that in reality keep women hostage to their appearance and to the market. Finally, it is to be remembered that norms for dress are socially and culturally specific and there is no reason that Muslim women’s clothing needs to be measured against Western specific norms of dress.<sup>200</sup>

It must be said that Islamic feminism has many detractors from both within and without the Muslim world who remain sceptical doubting that religion -and particularly Islam- can help women much if at all, and believe that reveiling is a step in the wrong direction and Islamic feminism an oxymoron.<sup>201</sup>

The chapter has retraced from several positions how the narratives surrounding the veil have been constructed in over the last hundred years. In pre-modern times, the veil did not form for the west an object of attention intrinsically linked to the Muslim woman. Rather the Euro-American negative narrative of the veil emerged with the advent of modernity and colonialism. If the thesis of the veil’s synonymy with backwardness and oppression was equilly espoused by missionaries, Euro-American feminists and the colonized,

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<sup>199</sup> Azza Karam. *Op. cit.* p. 11.

<sup>200</sup> Sa’diyya Shaikh. 2003. “Transforming Feminism: Islam, Women and Gender Justice.” In Omid Safi (ed.) *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender and Pluralism*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, pp. 152-3.

<sup>201</sup> See for example H. Moghissi. *Op. cit.* Or Shahrzad Mojab. 2001. “Theorizing the Politics of ‘Islamic Feminism.’” *Feminist Review* 69:124-46.

alternative meanings of the veil nonetheless transpired from tracing its history. It demonstrated how the veil could/can also signify, from the perspective of the cultures in which it was/is worn, agency, resistance, status, and/or adherence to religious beliefs. Nonetheless the endurance of colonially rooted perceptions of the veil witness how the body/visibility of the Muslim woman was and often remains the site around which geopolitical and ideological struggles are configured revealing how modern secular ideologies are not gender-neutral as they so often assume. The woman's body constitutes in fact a privileged locus of modernity's inscription. The tenacity of modernist secularism also underlines how it imbricates with complex notions regarding self-identity and the other and testifies to how power shapes global discourse and the production of knowledge.

New veiling has given rise to new narratives of the veil, both more realistic and more nuanced as the veil is understood as polysemous and moves beyond the colonialist model. The fact that scholars and veiled women, scholars or not, proffer so many motivations for the adoption of the *hijab* cautions the reader, regardless of his or her position, against monolithic analyses as well as leads him/her to again question *veil* as a concept/category which could not feasibly withstand scrutiny if it were not for the Euro-American fixation upon it. Lindisfarne-Tapper and Ingham in their article "Approaches to the Study of Dress in the Middle East," deliberate on these questions,

In short, 'veiling' may be held to indicate virtually anything informants and the analyst want. The problem is that there is no single garment, nor any single woman or man (...), who dresses as he or she does for any single reason: generalization about the veil and a category of women or men partake of the absurd. Rather, wearing a head-covering must be understood as a complex act which may generate a myriad of nuanced interpretations. As Eickelman succinctly notes, singling out a single attribute of local custom, such as the practice of veiling (...), often turns out to be relatively unimportant in comparison to overall patterns of sexual ideology and practice.<sup>202</sup>

The alternative visions of the veil brought forward by the examination of its history and in particular the present-day new veiling trend, have not yet succeeded in disengaging the veil from entrenched stereotypical representations. If the multiple meanings possess the possibility of dismantling the binary view

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<sup>202</sup> N. Lindisfarne-Tapper and B. Ingham. *Op. cit.* p. 16.

of the veil and the interests it defends, the old representations rooted in colonialism persist. Probing why leads us, as we have seen, to more complex issues little related to gender. As Grace observes, “the figure of the veiled woman is in danger of becoming a palimpsest written over with the desires and meanings of others.”<sup>203</sup> Any rendering of the veil in contemporary art- at least as long as the standards, models, and premises of the global art world remain, consciously or unconsciously, Euro-American ones- takes place within, is mediated by, and cannot escape the complex history of the contested cloth fleshed out in this chapter. As the actual act of veiling is distinct from its visual translation(s) to be addressed in the next chapters, it is essential to conclude by remembering how the politics of representation demand that “we ... know how, in each particular setting, images of women’s dress are understood to have originated, how they are used, in what contexts, to persuade which audiences of what political advantages, and why?”<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> D. Grace. *Op. cit.* p. 23.

<sup>204</sup> N. Lindisfarne-Tapper and B. Ingham. *Op. cit.* p.16.

## **Chapter 2: Envisioning the Veil Through the Euro-American Cultural Screen**

Whether cradling her baby, carrying an assault rifle, or walking ten feet behind her oppressor husband, the stereotypical images of a usually fully veiled Muslim woman are burned deep into Western consciousness.<sup>205</sup>

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More importantly, what does the need for such a law say about French values and French “identity” in the first place? If a veil can derail them maybe it is time for a change.<sup>206</sup>

Trica Danielle Keaton

The first chapter traced the history of the formation of mainstream Euro-American perceptions of the veil. It demonstrated the imbrications of factors that lead to the veil becoming a condensed site indicating erasure, misogyny, violence, and cultural backwardness. The fact that the veil continues to be mediated in Euro-America through this colonially-rooted lens and that mediation is rightly recognized as the matrix of both the production and reception of images adduces the necessity of considering the entrenched perceptions of the sign in any study devoted to its visual representation(s). To further identify this cultural collective mediation, I employ Kaja Silverman’s image/idea of the “cultural screen” that she describes as “the culturally generated image or repertoire of images through which subjects are not only constituted, but differentiated in relation to class, race, sexuality, age and nationality.”<sup>207</sup> As the history of the sign’s construction attests, the veil forms an intrinsic part of the Euro-American cultural screen as a privileged if not constitutive site of alterity, of the Euro-American Muslim ‘other.’ Silverman’s notion also consolidates Yeğenoğlu’s idea brought forth in the last chapter positing the link between the site of the veil and its essential role in the production of the Euro-American self.

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<sup>205</sup> Yvonne Haddad, Jane I. Smith, and Kathleen Moore. 2006. *Muslim Women in America: The Challenge of Islamic Identity Today*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 40.

<sup>206</sup> Trica Danielle Keaton. *Op. cit.* p. 193.

<sup>207</sup> Kaja Silverman. 1992. *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*. New York: Routledge, p. 135. Quoted in Begüm Özden Firat. 2006. “Writing Over the Body, Writing With the Body: On Shirin Neshat’s Women of Allah Series.” In Sonja Neef, José van Dijck and Eric Ketelaar (eds.). 2006. *Sign Here!: Handwritten in the Age of New Media*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, p. 218, n. 3.

Chapter 2 postulates that the veil when employed as a symbol of critique in artistic representation is always, regardless of the artist's subjective intent, re-appropriated by and translated through the Euro-American mainstream perception of the veil or cultural screen. Stated differently, when artists depict the veil as a metonymic sign to contest and criticize Islamic norms, Muslim-majority polities and/or gender issues therein, and this whether the sign is reproducing its metonymy in Euro-American discourse or commenting on that in Islamist counter discourse,<sup>208</sup> it only serves to reinforce Euro-American definitions of the sign. It thus, through the decontextualization and generalization inherent to stereotypes, engulfs and erases the subjective and specific aspects of the artists' propositions thereby perpetuating the strategic victimization of Muslim women and the notion that the modern self and agency are built on the exclusion of the visibly Muslim female other and by extension Islam. I must however note that I consider the postulate to be geographically circumscribed concerning only art viewed and discussed in Euro-America and/or Muslim majority countries, or classes therein, that have espoused and/or internalized the colonial perception of the veil and its set of assumptions. Physical location thus still affects the production and reception of images and remains in varying degrees linked to collective perception despite the increasing deterritorialization of identities,<sup>209</sup> and the hegemonic nature of Euro-American modernity.

The chapter will proceed in two stages and therefore possesses a twofold structure. The first section will dissect colonial and neocolonial representations of the veil drawn from popular visual culture, emphasizing the cultural, political, and psychological narratives founding this iconography. As such, there can be no doubt that the preceding chapter broaching the veil from the perspectives of history and discourse greatly informs the examination of the

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<sup>208</sup> As suggested in the first chapter, the centrality of the veil in Islamist discourse is often seen as a reactive counter-discourse to colonialism's fixation upon the cloth. The counter-discourse perpetuates its reification.

<sup>209</sup> I must add that geography also affects this study. As a Euro-American (although straddling several cultural, linguistic, national and spiritual traditions) living in North America, my own choice of artists was limited by the preselectivity of the Euro-American cultural apparatus.

visual translations of the veil.<sup>210</sup> Both chapters in effect confirm the premise that Euro-American culture actually produced the western trope of the veil and reified it into an impenetrable border between the west and Islam.

The inclusion of mainstream images of the veil - colonial postcards, media and advertising images- and their subtexts is crucial, as these adduce in visual terms the cultural screen through which artistic representations of the veil are received and sometimes produced. Demonstrating the pervasiveness and power of shared collective mediation in the visual realm, the analysis will testify to both the difficulty and necessity of proffering alternative visual narratives of the veil and help identify visual and artistic strategies capable of displacing mainstream views. The images themselves also constitute essential visual templates by which to measure and compare the representations of the veil in contemporary art both in the second section of the chapter and in the study as a whole. If I investigate mainstream iconography at some length, it is equally because I recognize the tremendous power of images in shaping public perception as well as their very real capacity to do violence. As Michael Harris, author of *Colored Pictures* appositely states, “harmful images imposed from power are more difficult to subvert than language.”<sup>211</sup> At the heart of this inquiry, as the ensuing chapters will evince, lies the desire to understand how to diffuse this violence without either perpetuating division or dissolving difference.

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<sup>210</sup> This also means that a large part of the chapter will again engage in deconstructing the predominant Euro-American rhetoric surrounding the veil thereby perpetuating the east/west divide for which not only Orientalist but also anti-orientalist or postcolonial scholarship is now much criticized. The aim of the present study, which will become evident as the present and subsequent trajectories unfold, is not to further perpetuate these convenient constructs. Rather, it is to unpack them, sometimes in the starkest terms, in order to allow alternative narratives transcending these codes to emerge. If my analysis here essentially targets Euro-America, it is because therein lies the origin of the trope of the veil and simply because it is the geographical and discursive sphere in which I live and work. I am certainly not suggesting that the discourses, practices, and cultures of Muslim majority countries should not be scrutinized and subject to similar examination and critique (In fact, in the original draft of the present study, there was a section devoted to the role of the veil in Iranian revolutionary art which was omitted only for reasons of length). However, this lies beyond the scope of the present study.

<sup>211</sup> Michael Harris. 2003. *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, p. 15.

In the second section of the chapter, I discuss works by Parastou Forouhar, Fariba Samsami, and Shekaiba Wakili that foreground the veil. The three artists depict the veil to oppose the politics of, or gender politics in Iran or Afghanistan including the legal enforcement of the veil and its reification in what are called Islamic politics and polities, a reification, which as the last chapter put forth, may be understood as a defensive reaction to colonial views. Despite the specific and diverse targets of the artists' critiques, the veil in their work, because of its metonymic function, ensures its encompassment by and consolidation of the Euro-American cultural screen. This holds true regardless of whether the veil is expressing internalized colonialism, subjective denunciations of the veil, contestation of state policies, and/or sincere concern for the challenges facing women in particular Muslim-majority countries. I do however recognize that visual representations of the veil can effectively engage in critique *and* circumvent the binarism inherent to the west's cultural screen but only on condition that they visibly acknowledge and deconstruct the latter's coded construction of the sign. In other words, integrating the issue of cross-cultural (mis)translation right into the work can obviate hegemonic re-appropriation. The only instances I have come across are works that reproduce stereotypes of the veil in order to target both eastern and western societies and confining definitions of women. However, this will be discussed not here but in the fourth chapter tracing the trajectory of the postcolonial veil.

## **2:1 The Colonial and Neocolonial Veil: Visual Translations of the Cultural Screen**

Read through the western cultural screen the veil constitutes an insignia to convey the message of the Muslim's woman's victimization; she is a prisoner of the violence of patriarchy, Islam, "eastern backwardness," and even history and hence a passive body/object devoid of agency and *not a speaking and thinking subject*. As chapter 1 clearly demonstrated, this viewpoint, deeply entrenched in geopolitical history, is by far the most dominant and the most enduring and hence constitutes the basic "structure of reference" to use Said's terminology. Although seemingly straightforward, it is skewed by a series of uncongenial



subtexts. Military logic served as its impetus and rendered the veil into a *visible* justification for war, colonization, and occupation. Its ethnocentric implications assume the superiority of Euro-American norms of gender and culture. More significantly, mainstream perceptions remain uninformed by the field of Third World feminism(s), Subaltern studies<sup>212</sup> and/or the recent developments in the history of Muslim women, thereby eclipsing the heterogeneity of the lives and experiences of Muslim women and silencing them by confining them, veiled or not, to the role of victim. The imposition of silence constitutes the hidden underlying violence of this representation and is still much manifest today. John R. Bowen, in possibly the best study to date on the French headscarf ban, proffers an example. He explains why France 2's television Sunday morning half hour series *Vivre Islam* (Living Islam) is prohibited from showing *muhajjabat*,<sup>213</sup>

In 1999, the then interior minister, Jean-Pierre Chevènement, had seen a program that featured a *young woman in a headscarf speaking very well about issues of sexuality and death*. "You might have thought he would have welcomed these images because they showed that Islam was very open-minded ....But he took it as encouraging young women to wear headscarves. He called the director of the program and suggested they not do that." As a result, Islam appears on *Vivre Islam* as a faith, but people do not "look Muslim" unless they are shot in other countries. There women "look Muslim," but not here in France (emphasis added).<sup>214</sup>

Clearly revealing the inner workings of Islamophobia, the minister does not perceive the young woman as an individual but rather as a selfless object or instrument of a proselytizing Islam. The above, and the too numerous examples like it, confirm that the Euro-American construction of the veil, externally decrying Islam's misogyny- the veil is disparaged in France principally on the basis of being an oppressive practice- in reality unveils the Euro-American willed erasure of the female Muslim visible other/self and by extension Islam itself. Corroborating Dayan-Herzbrun's claim that "the French were not

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<sup>212</sup> For a brief look at the local concerns but global implications of the Subaltern Studies historians consisting chiefly of Bengali Marxist scholars, see Robert J. C. Young. 2001. *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 352-59.

<sup>213</sup> J. R. Bowen. 2007. *Op. cit.* p. 206. The author quotes the producer of the series, Didier Bourg, who exclaims: "We are the only program that deals with Islam that is forbidden to show women in foulards!"

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.* p. 206 Bowen is again here quoting the producer of *Vivre Islam*.

disturbed whilst the headscarves covered silent and discreet heads,”<sup>215</sup> the veil, when it ‘transgresses’ the restrictive definitions externally imposed upon it, as in the case of the articulate woman above, is simply censored, silenced and kept from public view.

The veil used as a referent for the Muslim woman as victim forms not only an intrinsic part of colonialist and neocolonialist orientalist discourse but also of its concomitant vast system of visual representation. Historically, the pictorial methods employed to express the subjugation of veiled Muslim women were many. One effective tactic was to emphasize their confinement and thus lack of physical mobility by photographing women behind iron lattice-like window grilles. The generic seemingly factual titles of the images, such as *Women at Home*, gloss over the fact that the windows are in reality simply elements of vernacular architecture, and that the women photographed are not ‘real’ women in the sense of being who they are portrayed to be but generally poor women from the margins, often displaced by the colonial system, posing for money.<sup>216</sup> It was this staged artifice of colonial representation that, as many authors from Edward Said on have put forward, was passed off for and accepted as knowledge and a realistic objective depiction of the “Orient.” Alloula reproduces several examples of the imprisoned other, in the chapter of *The Colonial Harem* appropriately and ironically entitled “Women’s Prisons.”<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> S. Dayan-Herzbrun. *Op. cit.* p. 69.

<sup>216</sup> Although the window bars meant to keep burglars out seem prison-like because of their structure and material, the photographer may have also been attempting to bring to mind the *mashrabiyya/moucharabieh*, the lace-like wooden windows adorning the women’s quarters of upper class urban homes in many Muslim centers and that were built for women to see but not be seen. Scholars like Fadwa El Guindi contest the simplistic equation of women’s confinement with the *mashrabiyya*, putting forward that they “serve to guard families’ and women’s right to privacy ... and are not about seclusion or invisibility.” F. El Guindi. *Op. cit.* p. 94. I put forth that the *mashrabiyya* must be socially and historically contextualized. While the structures were built to keep a certain class of women from public sight while at home, scholarship on Muslim women’s history shows that these same upper class women not only left the home for picnics, visits, and public baths, but also often wielded despite a certain segregation, considerable political, cultural and economic power. These structures, commonplace in orientalist painting, have been taken up by contemporary women artists most notably by Franco-Algerian Samta Benyahia (b. 1950) discussed in the following chapter and German-Egyptian Susan Hefuna (b. 1962), to comment on gender and cross-cultural translation.

<sup>217</sup> Malek Alloula. 1986. *The Colonial Harem* (trans. Myrna Godzich). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 17-26.

The postcard bearing the caption *Mauresque chez elle* (fig. 1) portrays a young veiled girl, perhaps twelve or thirteen, sitting on the inner window ledge of a house. Looking weak and carrying a glum expression, she not only stares into the camera through the window grilles, but holds unto the latter thereby making a vernacular architectural element evocative of prison and clearly communicating the idea of the girl's alleged physical and hence psychological incarceration. Other postcards insinuate not only the Muslim woman's entrapment but also her sexual deprivation. Here the women are not only posing behind bars but are also naked from the waist up testifying to the European conflation of the veil with the harem and rendering as Alloula suggests "the imprisonment of women... the *equivalent of sexual frustration*."<sup>218</sup> This is most blatant in the photograph depicting an Arab male suitor traditionally dressed in *jilbab* and *fez*, bearing a look of what the viewer is supposed to construe as agonizing intensity and discussing through the window grilles with the semi-naked but head-covered woman inside.<sup>219</sup> Interestingly, and contrary to most of the images intended to evoke the prison-like condition of women's lives, the camera has framed the shot, not from the point of view of the outsider looking in, but from inside the house looking out. That the viewer is beckoned to observe the scene from the woman's perspective obscures the voyeuristic gaze and the erotic nuances that undergird the image. The spectator is supposed to identify with and feel compassion for the woman's staged frustrated desire, and thereby fallaciously construe the veiled Muslim woman, and not the French photographer, as responsible for her state of undress clearly unmasking for whom and why the veil is considered repressive. Another colonial postcard actually admits this subtext of the veil and unveiling (fig. 2). The lithographed image depicts a woman in full *haïk* who is writing on the inner wall of a North African home overlooking the city. The text reads, "If you want to lift up my dress you will be able to see the see the colonial arts" (*Si ti veux lever ma robe ti pourras voir les Arts Coloniaux*). This time the image clearly imputes to the

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<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.* p. 25.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.* p. 24.

Muslim woman the responsibility of summoning the onlooker to look beneath her *haik* and not to the French male *colon* who conceived both the image and its caption.<sup>220</sup> If the woman exerts some agency by the act and knowledge of writing, the fact that the text bears a grammatical mistake (*ti* instead of *tu*) testifies verbally to the dynamics of colonial power motivating/authorizing the undressing of colonized women as well as to the narrow patriarchy of allegedly universal conceptions of art. That veiling, particularly full veiling, prevented in effect colonial access to Muslim women's bodies explains the plethora of colonial images produced in which Arab women were paid to undress.

When the veil constitutes a barrier to the onlooker's desire, it is deemed a sign of subjugation. When it becomes a screen onto which desire is projected, it is transformed into the exotic veil.<sup>221</sup> When the desire is rendered into images portraying veiled or unveiled Muslim odalisques, one may speak of the erotic veil.<sup>222</sup> So while the exotic/erotic veil(s) may appear to be the antithesis of

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<sup>220</sup> There was another way that colonial image-makers were able to 'blame the victim.' They consciously set out to prove the 'barbarity' of sexuality in the Islamic world not because Islam, contrary to the west, does not believe in the notion of original sin nor hold a negative attitude towards the body and sensual life, but because they treated tales like *A Thousand and One Nights* as fact hence substantiating their sense of cultural and moral superiority. This is most evident in photographs colonial powers staged and produced to serve as proof of what they perceived as sexual depravity like those implying bigamy or female homosexuality.

<sup>221</sup> The exotic veil encompasses the veil used as a representation of 'picturesque' or anthropological otherness and/or its eroticisation. The objectification of otherness that begot the disciplines of anthropology and ethnology replicate the same dynamics of power as colonialism. The fact that these disciplines were never meant to be applied to the cultures of peoples of European descent evinces how the taxonomy of knowledge itself is flawed by its bases in notions of racial and cultural superiority and how the site of Euro-American modernity sought to appropriate and control the gaze and by extension the master narratives shaping the production of knowledge.

<sup>222</sup> Julia Clancy-Smith puts forth that there is an observable progression from the exotic to the erotic in colonial iconography depicting Muslim Arab women. She dates this shift in representation (in both photography and painting) to the 1890s, "Lurid photographs and oil canvases of Arab prostitutes in seductive poses supplanted the older, folkloric representation of women....The ideal spectator was the European male in Algeria or France, who was denied any contact with respectable Muslim women." She also explains why photography won out over other media, "Yet by 1900, photography, for all its proclaimed documentary precision, nurtured the sexual commodification of Arab women. In the gradual transformations of visual representations, a prostitutionalization of the Muslim female can be discerned." J. Clancy-Smith in *Op. cit.*, p. 157.

A number of interrelated factors account for the shift from the exotic to the erotic (or pornographic) further adding to the veil's complexity as a sign. The fact that the female nude has long constituted a privileged subject of art in Europe, establishing the male as subject and possessor of the gaze and the women as its/his object, confirms the ascription of motives of

western fixed perceptions of the veil, they are intrinsically linked through the nexus of power, vision, and sex, a nexus that seeks to remain largely concealed in representation. In all cases, Muslim women are, to use Jananne al-Ani's words, a "territory to be conquered, subdued, and controlled."<sup>223</sup> The veils adorning women in colonial photographs, even the most seemingly benign, always betray the political, economic, technological and discursive domination of the colonizers.<sup>224</sup>

Shirazi, in her analysis of the veil in American advertising, observes another interesting relationship between the misogynistic and erotic veils, one that corroborates the link between imperialism, patriarchy, and feminism put forward in the first chapter. The author submits that they are called upon according to the gender of the targeted consumer group. If for women, the Muslim woman is portrayed as oppressed, as "the submissive woman, forced to hide behind the veil," for men she is represented as the inaccessible object of desire, "the mysterious woman hiding behind her veil, waiting to be conquered by an American man."<sup>225</sup> In her discussion on the significance of the veil in the explicitly sexual photographs found in pornographic magazines, the author perceives the dimension of power inscribed in the images to be even stronger. She concludes that here the Middle Eastern/Muslim woman marked by her veil denotes the "the wanton woman who finds pleasure in her subjugation" and the "willingness to partake in male fantasies."<sup>226</sup> This seems to confirm the hypothesis that the veil as a sign of oppression indeed covertly signifies the Euro-

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(patriarchal) power to the gradual undressing of the Muslim woman. The vicarious conquering of the Muslim women's body was also a reaction to the fear provoked by the doubly othered subject and, as the example above manifestly reveals, a response to the frustrated ocularcentric gaze. In addition, it may be considered as a form of warfare. Alloula describes the "exotic postcard" as "the vulgar expression of colonial euphoria just as much as Orientalist painting was, in its beginnings, the Romantic expression of the same euphoria." M. Alloula. *Op. cit.* p. 29.

<sup>223</sup> Jananne Al-Ani. "Acting Out." In D. A. Bailey and G. Tawadros. *Op. cit.* p. 100.

<sup>224</sup> A photograph published in Sarah Graham-Brown, exemplifying the exotic/erotic veil, depicts a standing young nubile woman naked except for her *hijab*. Neither the classical elegant pose, nor the studio aesthetic, nor the naïve title of *Peasant Girl, Naked (Fellahmädchen, nackt)* (1908), suffice to erase the coded connotations of what Said calls the imperial "will to sexualise." As the model is nude, the veil constitutes the sole emblem of the girl's geographical origin and religious identity. Sarah Graham-Brown. *Op. cit.*

<sup>225</sup> F. Shirazi. *Op. cit.* p. 20.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 44 and 46.

American male's lack of access to the sexuality he imagines behind the veil. The eroticization of the veil therefore forms, as proposed above, an aspect of the metonymic veil, equally involved in the strategic victimization and domination of the Muslim woman.

Many other visual tactics are employed to express women's dehumanized role in Muslim cultures. Alloula for example notes how fully veiled women in colonial images are generally portrayed in groups.<sup>227</sup> For the viewer, the women appear as interchangeable non-autonomous objects and not as individualized subjects. The tendency to portray colonized peoples in groups –when alone they become anthropological specimens or exoticized/eroticized objects- provides a means to transmit the implicit temporal aspect of east-west power relations contrasting a pre-modern *cum* “primitive” notion of a community-based identity with modernity's notion of the individual ego separate from his/her interpersonal relationships. As Dorothy Hodgson rightly claims, the ““freeing” of individuals from the supposedly stifling bonds of family and community” constituted a “central component of the ideology of Modernity.”<sup>228</sup> The image *Mauresques se rendant au Cimetière* (fig. 3) offers a good example of this visual cliché while also again evoking the fantasy of the harem by the overwhelmingly outnumbering of women to men. The postcard shows against a backdrop of trees, a large group of women walking, their bodies and faces swathed in their seemingly identical *haïks*. The only two men in the photograph have tables set up to sell goods to the women out to accomplish mourning rituals. If the image in and of itself is apparently harmless, it must be positioned within the context of foreign occupation. The depersonalization of Muslim

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<sup>227</sup> M. Alloula. *Op. cit.* p. 11.

<sup>228</sup> D. L. Hodgson. *Op. cit.* p. 3. This conception of self has now been contested by many postcolonial authors, Euro-American feminists, feminist and cross-cultural psychologists, and others. However, it is not only the definition of self that does not necessarily translate cross-culturally, but also that of the family. Alloula includes a chapter of postcards portraying couples. In the text he puts forth how this privileging of “twoness” is also an externally imposed notion denoting “civilization,” “The very idea of the couple is an imported one which is applied to a society that operates on the basis of formations that are greater than simple twoness, such as the extended family, the clan, or the tribe. The couple, in the Western sense, is an aberration, a historical error, an unthinkable possibility in Algerian society.” M. Alloula. *Op. cit.* p. 38. Abu Lughod criticizes the colonial introduction of the couple and the emphasis on romantic love from a Marxist perspective. See also L. Abu Lughod, *Op. cit.*

women through 'mass portraits' has persisted up until the present day and forms a recurrent motif of news coverage of the Muslim world. Commenting on western reporting of the Lebanese War in the 1980s, artist Mona Hatoum notes how Arabs were shown in swarms "with mostly hysterical females crying over dead bodies," adding, "We rarely heard about the personal feelings of those who lost their relatives."<sup>229</sup> Hatoum's observations reveal how the strategies of the mass and victimization converge to heighten the erasure/lack of individuation of Muslim women and to obfuscate, in this case, the women's very real victimization.

That the traditional Algerian veil hides the contours of the body and most of the face underlines the cultural differences regarding vision and its relationship to subjective embodiment and facilitates the colonial conflation of the absence/lack of self with the female veiled other. Alloula articulates this idea by focusing on the *haïk*'s colour, "Whiteness is the absence of a photo, a veiled photograph, a whiteout, in technical terms."<sup>230</sup> This "whiteout" is equally applicable to all forms and colours of veiling. Eluding being seen and captured on film and the frustration it triggers once again draws attention to the primacy of vision in the Euro-American modernist paradigm. However, vision in Euro-America has not only been considered synonymous with empirical and existential knowledge; it has also been linked to modern forms of external and internal control. The great western continued emphasis on unveiling Muslim women can therefore be understood as modern society's tendency to open up all citizens to its surveillance and modes of discipline. Individual subjects in turn internalize the notion of self-control and a certain disciplining of the body. The body, having become part of public space, finds identity in its spectacle and is controlled and kept in check by its public view.<sup>231</sup> This conception diverges starkly with a body seemingly out of the public eye, differently disciplined, and

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<sup>229</sup> Michael Archer *et al* (eds.) 1997. *Mona Hatoum*. London: Phaidon Press, pp. 139-40.

<sup>230</sup> M. Alloula. *Op. cit.* p. 7.

<sup>231</sup> One can also here invoke Foucault's theories of the policing of the body/subject by the modern (European) state in which "national policy is interwoven with sexual and bodily conduct." Banu Gökırsel and Katharyne Mitchell. 2005. "Veiling, Secularism, and the Neoliberal Subject: National Narratives and Supranational Desires in Turkey and France." *Global Networks* 5 (2), p. 150.

based on a different sense of self/body/embodiment; a distinction that was well captured within Muslim-majority modern societies by the late Algerian-born French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002). The *Photograph of Algiers* (1958-61) (fig. 4), taken on the eve of Algerian independence (1962), shows a crowded street scene. The signs on the shop in the background are in French, not Arabic, and all of the bustling crowd of shoppers are in European dress except for two women crossing the street and walking towards the camera who are wearing traditional dress. They are fully veiled with only their eyes and foreheads visible. Looking out of place in their own, albeit colonially-controlled, country, the image renders in almost palpable fashion how the veil was construed as a tool of resistance and how western modernity, a corollary of colonialism, was often imposed from without and divided societies internally along the lines of vision. Rana El Nemr's (b. 1974) photograph from the series *The 'Metro' Women* (2004) shot in the Cairene metro (fig. 5) focuses on the continuity of the internal polarization of many Muslim-majority countries positing, through the western barometer of a women's body and its visibility, modernity's incompatibility with 'Islam' and not their accepted contemporary diversity (fig. 6). The fundamental ocularcentrism structuring Euro-American modernity and its various political and philosophical implications explain why veiling, continues to be perceived as tantamount to the total effacement/erasure of the self.<sup>232</sup> Karin Gwinn Wilkins substantiates the fact that this view, even with regard to the *hijab*, persists as part of the collective consensus of Euro-American culture in her study of *New York Times*' photographs of Middle Eastern women,

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<sup>232</sup> If some strains of feminism and particular feminists have accepted the primacy of vision over the other senses, ocularcentrism has also been seriously challenged and dismissed as phallogocentric in certain quarters of Euro-American feminist scholarship most notably by French philosopher, Luce Irigaray. The significance of vision and the ascribed role of women as revealed object of the gaze obviously impacts perceptions of and opinions on the veil. Similarly, Laura Marks criticizes feminism's confusion of the body's visibility with embodiment, "many feminist critiques fail to move beyond the body. Hence the outrage at cultural practices whose impact is felt directly on the body, such as the resurgence of *hijab* or veiling across the Muslim world,..." Laura U. Marks. 2003. "What Is that *and* between Arab Women and Video? The Case of Beirut." *Camera Obscura* 54 18(3), p. 51.



Almost two-thirds (63 percent) of the women shown in the photographs of the Middle East are wearing a veil. *Apparently, the veil shields the hair as well as the articulated identity of the wearer* (emphasis added). Veiled women were much less likely to be identified by name ( $r=.50$ ,  $p <.0005$ ) or position ( $r=.62$ ,  $p <.0005$ ) than nonveiled women; rather, veiled women were identified through their religious affiliation ( $r=.39$ ,  $p <.0005$ ).<sup>233</sup>

The erasure and victimization aspects inherent to the veil trope serve equally to maintain the modernist narrative of Euro-American self-identity constructed through differentiation from and negation of its other(s).<sup>234</sup> The first chapter established that the veil plays the role of a privileged symbol of this alterity in discourse. The present one puts forward that the complex politics of the veil are as prevalent, if not more so, visually as they are discursively because the sign, essentially based on issues of vision and visibility, lends itself so readily to pictorial representation. A 1989 advertisement for Virginia Slims cigarettes reproduces an old black and white South Asian photograph depicting a seated man in a tuxedo topped with a turban surrounded by three veiled sari-clad women. The caption reads, “The Sultan of Bundi had nothing against women. He thought everyone should own two or three,” (fig. 7) followed by the trademark Virginia Slims slogan, “You’ve come a long way baby.”<sup>235</sup> The man’s corpulence, his prominent position in the image, and his high contrast black and white attire all serve to effectively communicate the idea of a *pater familias* surrounded by the women over whom he rules. The viewer construes, because the women seem of equal age and especially because the caption identifies the man as Muslim and polygamous, that the women are his wives. The image presented as a document of a Muslim family is in fact pure fiction. Not only is it decontextualized by the backdrop having been cut out, but especially by the fact that the man, as Shirazi notes, is not Muslim as he is wearing a Sikh turban. Furthermore as a Sikh from Bundi, India, she observes,

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<sup>233</sup> Karin Gwinn Wilkins. *Op. cit.* p. 58. I must add that the *hijab* remains for journalists the compass by which to measure the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. See, just to name one instance, Montreal newspaper article, Agnès Gruda. 2006. “Les femmes perplexes devant le Hamas.” *La Presse* (mercredi 22 mars), p. A30.

<sup>234</sup> What is problematic is not the notion or experience of identity founded on alterity, but rather the nature of the relationship with the other.

<sup>235</sup> F. Shirazi. *Op. cit.* p. 16.

he would not have practiced polygamy.<sup>236</sup> Nonetheless, the advertising agency both read and reproduced the image through the ‘harem’ and ‘oppressed Muslim woman’ lens. Although the storyline is in part sustained by the presence of the women’s veils even if these are of general South Asian type, the message hinges more principally on the stereotype of the abusive Muslim male, another trope directly associated with *the* veil and the Euro-American cultural screen more generally. The other fiction imbuing the image is of course equating smoking with female emancipation thereby masking the economic enticement and purpose of the photomontage.

Although the advertisement immediately recalls the colonial period if only by the hybrid male dress and the photographic medium itself, it is re-inscribed, not to reflect upon the violent history of colonialism in the region, but rather to reinstate the colonial, in this case imperial feminist, narrative. While successfully expressing the message that Muslim women are “chattel” and dispossessed creatures, the advertisement concurrently affirms that western women are now free modern subjects having shed the historical shackles of oppressive gender roles and sexual interchangeability. If the advertisement visually confirms Yeğenoğlu’s thesis on the necessity and role of otherness in the formation of the Euro-American modern female self, Shirazi does so textually when she proffers that, “the strategy behind this ad is to reassure the consumer that she is nothing like the women in this ad and that by purchasing Virginia Slims *she will never be like them*” (emphasis added).<sup>237</sup>

If the Virginia Slims image employs a number of signifiers to demarcate the progressive western woman from Islam’s cultural backwardness and treatment of women, a 1992 Bijan perfume advertisement in *Vogue* magazine relies exclusively on the veil sign as a synecdoche of Muslim alterity through/against which the Euro-American female self is constructed. The image is composed of two portraits of women from the shoulders up. The photograph on the left depicts a woman’s face in a black *chador*. The shot is frontal, and the woman

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<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.* p. 16.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.* p. 16.

with wide-open eyes and a closed sulky mouth appears motionless, the caption describing her as “obedient, grateful, modest, respectful, submissive, and very, very, serious.” The image on the right shows a women’s face from the side. She is wearing a baseball cap, her head is thrown a bit back, and she is laughing, all in an attempt to convey movement, freedom, and the west as a small American flag adorns the picture. This time the caption informs the reader that the woman portrayed is “bright, wild, flirty, fun, eccentric, tough, bold, and very, very, Bijan.”<sup>238</sup> The use of the veil as synecdoche is evident. The piece of cloth dresses the border between the west and Islam and evinces in the starkest terms the Euro-American general vision of the veil as synonymous with the Muslim female other, Islam and misogyny. The spectator is to infer, not only the superiority of western norms with regard to gender, but also that of Judeo-Christian society and political systems.

Specific events continue to shape the production of the image of the Muslim other. If in the aftermath of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the *chador* was the preferred tactical site of alterity, in the post-September 11<sup>th</sup> era, the focus turned to that of the *burqa* as a symbol of totalitarian Islam, and of its female victim(s). In the build-up for the war against Afghanistan, the fetishization of the *burqa* reached such heights that it was impossible to avoid the excess of newspaper, book and television images peddling the image of the repressive Afghan veil. A paroxysm of the hysteria was attained with the U.S. Feminist Majority Foundation actually selling ‘authentic’ *burqa* pieces replete with mesh online for five dollars so that American women might commiserate with their Afghan sisters.<sup>239</sup> The point is not to defend the *burqa* (or the Taliban) or its enforcement by the state or male relatives, but to highlight how it has been exploited for causes unrelated to those wearing it, and to expose how

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<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.* p. 18.

<sup>239</sup> Lamia Ben Youssef Zayzafoon discusses the role the plight of Afghan women played in swaying American public opinion in favour of the war. See L. Ben Youssef Zayzafoon. *Op. cit.* pp. 177-84. For more on the role of the U. S. Feminist Majority Foundation in war propaganda, see Charles Hirschkind and Saba Mahmood. 2002. “Feminism, the Taliban, and Politics of Counter-Insurgency.” *Anthropology Quarterly* 75(2): 339-54.

its deployment in visual culture constitutes, like the *chador* or the veil more generally, a signifier that by far transcends the contentious cloth.

The *burqa*, like its Iranian counterpart, has even been called upon in marketing strategies. A 2003 advertisement produced part of a joint campaign between Benetton and the World Food Program (WFP) articulates by means of the garment western benevolence, underwritten by both a sense of cultural superiority and desire for hegemony. The photograph depicts the same Afghan woman twice against a white backdrop,<sup>240</sup> on the left her upper body and face are covered by an embroidered sky blue *burqa*, while on the right, her face is revealed, her *burqa* lifted up but still framing her face and upper body (fig. 8). The text tells us that “Basima, 16, is supported with food aid in Afghanistan,” and that she “now hopes to find work as an embroiderer in Kabul.” The message is scripted for the viewer iconographically by the veil/*burqa* that marks Basima as Holly Edwards puts forth, “the victim of a cultural system that veils (sequesters/abuses) women, leaving them without adequate food or gainful employment.”<sup>241</sup> Chandra Mohanty has expatiated at length on the tendency of western feminist scholarship to actively construct an “average third-world woman,” grounded in both, as this study also demonstrates, the economies of power and self-representation, maintained fixedly in place by the representation of Third World women as “implicit *victims* of particular cultural and socio-economic systems.”<sup>242</sup> Recognizing the reification of the veil into a privileged symbol of victimization, Mohanty insists that, “the analytic leap from the practice of veiling to an assertion of its general significance in controlling women ... must be questioned.”<sup>243</sup>

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<sup>240</sup> The fact that the woman is portrayed alone outside of her environment accentuates how the veil functions as a “negative signifier,” suggesting “that the only thing these women need to be free is to remove the veil.” L. Ben Youssef Zayzafoon. *Op. cit.* p. 178. It also glosses over the fact that the garment is still considered either an accepted traditional norm or a necessary accoutrement for women’s safety, showing how little has changed since the ousting of the Taliban.

<sup>241</sup> H. Edwards. *Op. cit.* p. 84.

<sup>242</sup> C. Mohanty. *Op. cit.* p.65 and p. 66 respectively.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.* p.75. The author adds,

To assume that the mere practice of veiling women in a number of Muslim countries indicates the universal oppression of women through sexual segregation is not only

The unveiling as liberation metaphor of the Benetton image adopts the dichotomous before (Islam) and after (west) narrative evidently more pregnant with political meaning than a cosmetic makeover. However, Edwards, in her poignant article drawing parallels between the patriarchy of the “covered girl” and the “cover girl,” pointedly observes how the image, part of a campaign inciting donors to give money, “capitalizes on the striking appearance of the girl.”<sup>244</sup> In other terms, the designer(s) assumes viewers to be culturally blind to the fact that Benetton and the WFP are visually ‘freeing’ Basima by simply replacing one phallogentric code of women’s representation with another<sup>245</sup> in which her face is no longer proscribed from public view but exposed for economic gain. In both frames of reference, Taliban/Islamic patriarchy and western ‘feminist’ capitalism, the woman is not representing herself, free from externally imposed codes and constraints.<sup>246</sup> There exists an economic dimension to the ‘*jihad* to McWorld’ makeover in its conflation of freedom, gender equity, and western economic systems.<sup>247</sup> Testifying to how ideologies

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analytically reductive, but also proves quite useless when it comes to the elaboration of oppositional political strategy.

<sup>244</sup> H. Edwards. *Op. cit.* p. 92.

<sup>245</sup> Annabelle Sreberny makes the same observations in an article on the topic, “The representations in Western media during Spring 2002 of the burqa in Afghanistan seem to exemplify a struggle between two competing male determinations of women: that of the Taliban inside Afghanistan and that of Western politicians and journalists outside.” Annabelle Sreberny. 2004. “Unsuitable Coverage: The Media, the Veil, and Regimes of Representation.” In Tasha G. Oren and Patrice Petra (eds.) *Global Currents: Media and Technology Now*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, p. 172.

<sup>246</sup> The notion that freedom remains defined for the Muslim woman as becoming other than herself equally undergirds the unveiling metaphor.

<sup>247</sup> In many other examples, cosmetics form a recurrent premise in much second-rate but popular feminist media discussion on post-Taliban Afghan women. I do not believe that cosmetics and feminism are antithetical but I do object to images of nail polish being sold on markets or the opening of beauty salons being exploited as metaphors of emancipation and touted as visible proof of the military intervention’s success in liberating and empowering Afghan women. Anne Taylor Fleming in her television essay “Faces of Women” shown on American station PBS on November 21<sup>st</sup> 2002 as part of *The MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour* declares how the differences between the lives of Afghan and American women diminish when “you hear about a dab of makeup, a flick of lipstick beneath a *burqa*.” She also muses about the transition “from *burqas* to botox in the blink of an eye,” stating, “It’s sort of distasteful and sort of wonderful at the same time, because it means freedom of choice for women- no more, no less.” Fleming unashamably puts forth that “vanity” is simply part of the “package” of western women’s freedom coeval to education, security, etc. See [www.pbs.org/newshour/essays/july-dec02/fleming\\_11-21.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/essays/july-dec02/fleming_11-21.html). *Op. cit.* pp. 2-3. Transferring the confusion between lipstick and botox with safety, respect and empowerment unto a poor war torn post-Taliban Afghanistan is at the very least inexcusable ignorance. It also

of resistance like female empowerment can be easily and ‘economically’ co-opted, this phenomenon seems to prove Slavoj Žižek’s postulate of a more generalized, albeit still covert, link between victimization and capitalism.<sup>248</sup>

The problem with the advertisement is that the cultural screen that produced the image has recourse to the trope of the veil as a signifier of disempowerment, the Taliban, Islam, and poverty blaming these rather than the war for the women’s plight. That the neocolonialist image, postdating the war against Afghanistan, fails to make reference to the war exposes how the strategy of victimization depoliticizes conflicts and reframes them, often dangerously as “moral” and not “political” battles.<sup>249</sup> The fact that the former obscures the latter in the whole history of the Euro-American construction of the veil helps elucidate the veil’s unrelenting potency as a sign allowing Benetton to simply recycle the popular premise of the oppressed veiled woman. The theme of the beautiful Muslim woman to be saved from Muslim men by Euro-American men and/or society that Khaf traces back to the seventeenth-century has thus persisted intact into the modern and contemporary eras where it continues to permeate bestseller literature, media culture and Hollywood plots. Benetton and WFP presume, perhaps rightly, that viewers’ perceptions, despite all the talk of globalization, have not shifted; the spectator willingly participates in the freeing of “a captive woman” from “evil Arabs,”<sup>250</sup> or in this case other evil Muslims, the Taliban. The story line of western self-professed superiority disguised as benevolence has been aptly and famously described by Spivak as, “brown women saved by white men from brown men,”<sup>251</sup> a narrative underlying the

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corroborates the discussion in Chapter 1 regarding the relationship between imperialism, patriarchy, and Euro-American feminism.

Edwards cites an article revealing how other commodities, in this case from the entertainment industry, are positioned against the veil *cum* Islam, See David Rohde. 2001 (Nov. 18<sup>th</sup>). “In Kabul, DVD’s and TV’s Fill the Shopping Bags; Burqas Sit on the Shelves.” *The New York Times*, section IB, p. 3.

<sup>248</sup> Slavoj Žižek. 2000. *The Fragile Absolute*. London: Verso, p. 60.

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.* p. 57.

<sup>250</sup> N. Macmaster and T. Lewis. *Op. cit.* p. 127. The authors are referring to the 1965 Elvis Presley film *Harum Scarum*.

<sup>251</sup> Barbara Harlow. 1986. “Introduction.” In M. Alloula. *Op. cit.* p. xviii. The author is quoting from the Gayatri Spivak lectures she attended at Wesleyan University, Center for the Humanities, in 1983-84.

WFP campaign and, as the section has demonstrated, the representation of the veil more generally (fig. 9). If the *burqa* has recently constituted the preferred symbol to enact this discourse, mounting Canadian frustration with the war in Afghanistan has led to some refreshing critiques of the one-sided mainstream disavowal of the garment, such as the political cartoon from a Québécois newspaper drawing a metaphor between a woman hiding behind a *burqa* and a female Canadian minister hiding behind a tank (fig. 10).

One final undertone of the veil as a sign of oppression and victimization, although mentioned briefly at the beginning of the present section, must be acknowledged in order to complete the portrait of the sign and its connotations in popular visual culture. The chapter has thus far largely explored the hidden tyranny of victimization arguing that it actually constitutes a willed strategy of erasure. This premise is substantiated by the fact that an *alleged victim who accedes to or is granted subject status, is transformed into a threat*. Žižek articulates the idea in a discussion, which although pertaining to western military intervention in Kosovo, is equally applicable to the representation of the veil and the Muslim female visible other in general,

What we encounter here is again the paradox of victimization: the Other to be protected is good in so far as it remains victim (which is why we are bombarded with pictures of helpless Kosovo mothers, children and old people...); the moment it no longer behaves like a victim, but wants to strike back on its own, it magically turns all of a sudden into a terrorist/fundamentalist/drug-trafficking Other...<sup>252</sup>

The phenomenon explains the upsurge of images in recent years in which the veil is framed as threat. In the last two years, the debate over the veil has resurfaced in Quebec. In one instance a Muslim teenager from outside of Quebec, was forbidden to play soccer in a tournament in Montreal and was publicly evicted because of her *hijab*. The event made headlines and divergent views were expressed. However, the way the cartoonist of the city's English language newspaper, *The Gazette*, portrayed the incident is telling. The depiction of a "*Burka Soccer*" team<sup>253</sup> resorts to the unrelated *burqa* as a form

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<sup>252</sup> S. Žižek. *Op. cit.* p. 60.

<sup>253</sup> Mentioned in Jalaluddin S. Hussain. 2007 (April 15-30). "Reflections from Montreal." *Canadian Asian News*, p. 9. He is referring to the editorial cartoon of the March 19<sup>th</sup> 2007 issue of *The Montreal Gazette*.

of strategic exaggeration sometimes termed “hyperveiling”<sup>254</sup> to communicate the underlying peril the veil and Muslims pose to the western way of life even in the guise of an energetic young soccer player. The Muslim girl, who assumes her identity/ies, exerts her agency, and is obviously well integrated into North American society, can no longer form the *other* constitutive of the Euro-American self. As put forth in the previous chapter, the self-assertion of the visible female Muslim other cannot be tolerated as it unravels the narrative of the modern western self described by Yeğenoğlu, “They should remain different, because I should remain the same: they are/should not be a possibility within my own world, which will thus be different.”<sup>255</sup> From this perspective, the “hostility” that transformed the Turkish-Canadian girl by means of her *hijab* into a symbol implying that her presence was equivalent to the talibanization of soccer *cum* western society must thus be understood as a dogged, albeit hateful, attempt to preserve the paradigm upon which Euro-American self-identity is founded. Until a shift to a new paradigm more compatible with global reality/ties occurs, the master/victim binary will be endlessly re-inscribed through the sign of the veil, the master losing identity when the victim no longer plays by the/his rules.

I have mapped some of the multitude uses and meanings of mainstream representations of the veil showing that if the Euro-American cultural screen translates the veil into a fixed signifier, it nonetheless possesses multiple connotations and strategies of representation. Themes of imprisonment, mass portraits and victimization, the stratagems of decontextualization and passing fiction off as fact, are all employed to reinforce the definition of the veil as a site of patriarchy, cruelty, erasure, tradition, and violence. However, I sought to essentially unpack the complex subtexts of the sign demonstrating how power has been particularly salient in its construction resorting most often to the strategy of victimization to foreclose any possibility of acknowledging Muslim female subjectivity and agency, and by extension Islam. The analysis of

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<sup>254</sup> N. Macmaster and T. Lewis. *Op. cit.*

<sup>255</sup> M. Yeğenoğlu. *Op. cit.* p. 57.



representations of the veil confirmed the idea put forth in Chapter 1 that the veil's entrenchment is due to the fact that it is so enmeshed, politically, culturally, and psychologically, in the production of Euro-American modern identity. Silverman maintains that images play a privileged even constitutive role in the formation of collective and individual memory and self. The veil (or veiled woman) is one of the socially determined images and part of the repertoire of images defining Euro-American identity. The historical continuity and rootedness of the cultural lens through which the sign is consciously or unconsciously mediated demonstrates the necessity of its consideration in both the production and reception of images of the veil in Euro-America. They also intimate how it is essential that artists who integrate the veil into their work be sufficiently cognizant of the veil's metonymy and the predetermined reception and implications of the sign.

## **2:2 The Cultural Screen and the (Im)Possibilities of the Veil as an Artistic Strategy of Critique**

The first part of the chapter drew up a portrait of how the Euro-American cultural screen produces the veil and sets up its metonymy. More importantly for the purposes of this study, it clearly determined the role of culture in/as mediation explicating why a chapter essentially devoted to artistic representations of the veil began with an assessment of the nexus between the veil sign and collective perception. The present section examines works by three artists, Parastou Forouhar, Fariba Samsami, and Shekaiba Wakili, who employ the veil as a condensed signifier to oppose the policies and politics of either Iran or Afghanistan. Whether their use of the sign is responding to its metonymy in what are called Islamic polities or endorsing its use as synecdoche in the west is irrelevant as I argue that the repetition of the trope in a Euro-American context is problematic as it simply reinforces mainstream perceptions and their troubling subtexts. I submit that the analysis of the works will evince the difficulties of reproducing the veil without clear contextualization and without taking the reality of cross-cultural (mis)translation into account. Stated differently, the problem lies not in disliking and opposing the veil but in

seemingly reproducing its colonial reification and hence the mediative filter through which it is produced and perceived.

The three artists are contesting politics where the veil was/is legally enforced. Anger provoked by such laws in essence more patriarchal than Islamic, by the politicization of the veil, by its persistent role as synecdoche within Islamist politics and polities, or simply by conservative understandings of the veil and women have served as a strong impetus for several artists.<sup>256</sup> This is important as one can argue that artists condemning imposed dress codes most understandably have recourse to the image of the veil and provide an instance where the veil should theoretically form an appropriate aesthetic strategy of critique. However employing the veil to critique the veil, particular governments, or issues of gender requires reproducing its reification and therefore mimics the Euro-American construction of the veil. The specific historical and political contexts are lost in translation because of the fixedness of the veil trope. The latter equally overpowers and appropriates the artists' subjectivities and intents; as shall be articulated below the three artists' representations of the veil were triggered by different reasons. Forouhar is motivated by her anger towards the Iranian state that she blames for the murder of her dissident parents, Samsami is denouncing the social and legal discrimination against Iranian women in Iran, while Wakili is expressing both her deprecation of the Taliban and her ambivalence towards the war against Afghanistan.

The work of Iranian artist, Parastou Forouhar (b. 1962), now residing in Germany, is driven almost *in toto* by her irate oppositional stance *vis-à-vis* the structures, practices, and ideology of the Iranian government coloured by personal tragic events. However, her experience in Germany as one of the west's others also informs her work confirming her awareness of the cultural

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<sup>256</sup> The veil's reification in Islamist politics cannot unfortunately be treated here. Suffice it to say, that the veil and its visual representation play an important role therein, for example in the prolific output of art linked to the Iranian Revolution. The veil and therefore women's dress/body thus equally form linchpins of modern Islamic identity confirming Ahmed's idea that it mirrors, although antithetically, the discourse of Euro-American modernity.

lens through which she is viewed.<sup>257</sup> Several of her photographic series are based on the sign of the veil, in this case evidently the *chador*.

As part of the Berlin Biennial of 2001, Forouhar exhibited a series of outdoor colour photographic billboards. The images were blow-ups of the *Blindspot* series (2001) (fig. 11) showing a middle-aged man wearing a black *chador* backwards shot in different poses, the baldish back of the head recalling a mannequin dummy and confronting the viewer in lieu of the face as Phyllis Kiehl explains,

A black patterned chador is draped fluidly around the figure, who appears to be kneeling in prayer, and whose position alters slightly from image to image. Another motif, smaller this time, shows the same figure, from the chest upwards, again in slightly different positions. The figure in the chador is a man. He has no face. Instead, the viewer is confronted with the back of a shaven head, a smooth, skin-coloured protuberance that has no identity. Only a band of grey stubble betrays the gender of this human figure that has been reduced to mere form.<sup>258</sup>

The genderless faceless figure is further decontextualized: cut out as a silhouette he sits, floats in an all-white space, the absence of floor and background adding to the sense of unreality that Kiehl describes as a “black-and-white non-space” in which “harsh silhouettes of the bodies appear as absurd manifestations of a sterile world.”<sup>259</sup> The critic however maintains that the images are attempting to displace western stereotypes putting forth that “the figure effortlessly foils our prejudices and casts them back at us, “Who is speaking? With what right? In which language?” stressing that “no hastily interpretative approach should influence the dialogue to be conducted.”<sup>260</sup> I contend that if this was the artist’s intent –and there exists a possibility that Forouhar was attempting to criticize both the east and the west by means of the veil sign-<sup>261</sup> it is obscured in the *Blindspot* series.

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<sup>257</sup> The anger animating Forouhar’s work is also apparently aimed at Euro-America. This is most evident in her works that by transforming Islamic ornamentation into nightmarish patterns, seek to expose the orientalizing gaze of the western other.

<sup>258</sup> Phyllis Kiehl. n.d. *Blindspot* (trans. by Ishbel Flat).  
[www.parastouforouhar.de/english/Works/blindspot](http://www.parastouforouhar.de/english/Works/blindspot)

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>261</sup> The title could confirm this thesis as ‘blindspot’ can refer to what the viewer does not or cannot see as it can equally apply to the non-seeing veiled figure.

For a viewer to be able to identify that the faceless/selfless Muslim woman is presented as a stereotyped projection of the western psyche, the veil sign needs to be somehow displaced or contested within the work. However, *Blindspot* repeats, even exaggerates, the strategies and associations of Euro-American representations of the veil. Replicating Orientalist methods and ascriptions to the veil, *Blindspot* depends upon the decontextualization, depersonalization and victimization of the Muslim woman. The grotesque and literal facelessness of the figure imparts a particular violence or more precisely reveals the violence inherent to the notions of victimization and erasure discussed previously, as does the reference to Muslim prayer accomplished by the puppet-like figure. The veiled Muslim woman is depicted as not only a victim (she is not seen) but also as a passive accomplice (she does not see) manipulated by state repression, patriarchal religious codes and 'backward' traditions. As in colonial and neo-colonial narratives, she needs saving but because she is also devoid of personality and agency, she forms but an easily manipulated site in the cross-cultural contest for power and authority. If the *chador* localizes the image and specifies the geographical context, I submit that this specificity will nonetheless be subsumed by the trope of *the* veil that is not limited by historical and geographical borders except for its main role of parsing east and west. Like Euro-American mainstream culture, *Blindspot* conflates Iran with Islam and the veil with totalitarianism and misogyny. As such, the photographs simply reinforce the sign of the veil as a geopolitical boundary and the gross generalizations such a simplistic order entails.

*Blindspot* obviously seeks to violate the *chador*'s religious, national and/or political sanctity within Iran where the figure of the veiled woman constitutes an important ideological and religious symbol at the level of the state and its supporters. As a symbol of state ideology, Islam and female modesty and as a perceived counter-symbol to the image of the modern Euro-American woman it considers the west seeks to universalize, the *muhajjabat* plays a privileged role

in the vast corpus of Iranian modern religious discourse and revolutionary art.<sup>262</sup> However, if Forouhar set out to deflate the trope of the veiled woman in Iran and her role as a political pawn, it is lost in translation by her own synecdochic representation of the garment in line with Euro-American visual culture. For the sake of comparison and to stress the criticalness of contextualization, the study will briefly allude to a work that will be fully treated under the rubric of the postcolonial veil. Well-known London-based Iranian artist, Mitra Tabrizian's much earlier piece, *Surveillance* (1988-89) (fig. 12), manages to simultaneously reproduce the trope and critique the metonymy of the veil in Iranian politics. The huge staged panoramic photograph with its central figure of a veiled woman on a pedestal succeeds in portraying how she has formed in Stuart Hall's words, "part of the spectacle of power"<sup>263</sup> in Iran by showing in incontrovertible terms, how this "spectacle" is itself linked to wider, albeit precise, historical and political events. The image clearly places the veiled icon within its broader frame of reference by referencing real historical events and figures that engendered the Revolution, in particular the embroilment of America in Iranian politics including its link to a coup d'état ousting a democratically-elected government to bring in a west-friendly monarchy whose reviled totalitarianism is deemed as the central cause for the events of 1979. Unlike Forouhar, Tabrizian obviates the analytical errors involved in taking a particular veil that emerged out of specific historical conditions and interpretations of Islam as a signifier to connote and condemn all veils, all Muslim women, and Islam.

The viewer approaching the images of the *Blindspot* series realizes that the generic Muslim woman is in fact a man. The cross-dressing inserts an additional element of travesty although its meaning remains ambiguous. The gender substitution, because it intensifies the artist's violent deconstruction of the veil and the veiled woman, can be read, but only to a certain degree as in some

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<sup>262</sup> For the most comprehensive work on the visual culture of revolutionary and post-revolutionary Iran, see Peter Chelkowski and Hamid Dabashi. 2000. *Staging a Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran*. London: Booth-Clibborn Editions.

<sup>263</sup> Stuart Hall. 2004 "The Way We Live Now." In Mitra Tabrizian *Beyond the Limits*, Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, p. 7.

women-centred work purposely having recourse to excess and the grotesque in order to unpack regimes of gender representation or to expose femininity, perhaps even gender, as categories of discourse and representation and not of nature. Alexandra Karentzos puts forth that Forouhar's work reflects on the interplay of binaries including "categories such as male and female,"<sup>264</sup> an idea that might confirm the thesis. However, it is important to remember again that the artist is targeting a specific time and place, the hybrid images endeavouring to collapse official gendered religious and social narratives in present day Iran. Because the veil's metonymy allows for and reproduces the Euro-American translation of the veil and the work eclipses all frames of reference except for that of the monolithic veil, I argue that the obfuscation of genders will be interpreted –or was indeed intended– as a strategy for satirizing the sign and all that it connotes. From this perspective, the satire, perhaps borne out of the artist's anger, only serves to confirm the Muslim woman *cum* Islam as the abject other. I must add that the artistic stratagem of parody associated with both postcolonial and postmodernist art forms a double-edged sword and its slippage from postcolonial empowerment to postmodern self-deprecation is particularly significant for those subjects marginalized by Euro-America historically, politically, and discursively. The *chador* may here be in fact construed as an element of postmodern derision lampooning all master narratives, a lampooning that, as much recent scholarship has convincingly argued, ends up perpetuating Euro-American hegemony by forcing the other to abdicate his/her traditions and history,<sup>265</sup> thereby fully embodying the Gramscian definition of hegemony as "domination by consent."<sup>266</sup> Because the veil functions as the site of competing ideologies, Forouhar, consciously or not is participating in the colonial and neocolonial "worlding of the world" in which Islam, Muslims and non-westerners more generally have no place unless they

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<sup>264</sup> Alexandra Karentzos. 2005. "The Location of Art: Parastou Forouhar's Displacements." In Jewish Museum of Australia (ed.) *Intersections: Reading the Space: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam*. Australia: Jewish Museum of Australia, p. 55.

<sup>265</sup> See in particular Ziauddin Sardar. 1998. *Postmodernism and the Other: The New Imperialism of Western Culture*. London: Pluto Press.

<sup>266</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. 2000. *Post-colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. London; New York: Routledge, p. 116.

conform and submit to Euro-American power, conceptions of self, and modernity.

Forouhar often includes as part of her exhibits, documentation on the murder of her dissident parents along with a photocopier for interested spectators. The articles and clippings offer insight into the artist's motivations and experience and one might suppose they contextualize the work. However, rather than provide an objective framework assisting the reading of the images, the information further consolidates the binary psychological and political subtexts of the veil trope plotting east against west. The artist's pain and the murder of her parents further confirm the barbarism of the east and the moral and political superiority of the west. The exhibitions of *Blindspot* in Germany and elsewhere in the west raise the important issue of the politics of culture. The art apparatus forms part of Euro-American culture and is therefore involved, as are other areas of culture, in the negotiation of Euro-American identity. Although often presented as an inclusive site of liberalism and the avant-garde, the western art industry has equally been perceived by many intellectual and artists to be on the contrary conforming all too comfortably to Euro-American power. If Forouhar's criticism of Iran and the exhibiting of work that is censored in Iran<sup>267</sup> will be put forth as exemplifying the openness of Euro-American culture, the work often serves to confirm stereotypes of Iran and Islam and the increasingly dangerous strategic undertones underwriting them.

The problems of having recourse to the veil as a visual strategy of critique are also evident in Forouhar's series *Behnam* (2000) built around the same theme of a decontextualized generic crossed-dressed *chador*. They are equally manifest in *Freitag (Friday)* (2003) although the piece is both conceptually and aesthetically very different. The quadriptych is composed of four immense photographic panels mounted on cloth three of which are pure monochromes made up of enlarged details of black on black floral traditional veil material.

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<sup>267</sup> The Golestan Gallery in Teheran attempted to show *Blindspot* in 2002 but the exhibit was shut down by authorities. See Maura Reilly. 2007. "Introduction: Towards Transnational Feminisms." In Maura Reilly and Linda Nochlin (eds.) *Global Feminisms*. New York: Merrell Publishers, p. 41.

The images are beautiful and far from the anti-aesthetic of *Blindspot*. The fourth image is also a 'veil' monochrome except that an index and thumb appear from beneath the cloth to hold it. Britta Schmitz writing about *Freitag* clearly seizes its objective, "In a culture of concealment, the significance of the visible is heightened. The fragments of the body that can be shown symbolically represent all that cannot be shown and cannot be said. This makes them eloquent and multivalent."<sup>268</sup> The appearance of the hand thus refers to the eroticization of the woman's body that can occur from it being less, rather than more exposed, a theme that been addressed in western scholarship, by Roland Barthes amongst others. However, the Irano-Islamic context is quite different. Historical and sometimes present-day (essentially male) interpretations of Islam have been so exclusive of women and the female body that there exists a history of exaggerated -often to the point of absurdity- rulings on women. *Freitag* is addressing these often culturally entrenched attitudes towards women, in which the woman's body is considered socially and sexually disruptive. That the opening of the *chador* and the part of hand that emerges have been consciously shaped to evoke a vulva (had the image left the hand to appear naturally it would have been more evocative) reiterates the veil's synonymy with the regulation of a woman's sexuality and confirms the artist's rebellion against such attitudes and Islam more generally as Friday is the day of Muslim congregational prayer. *Freitag* substantiates the impossibility of having recourse to the veil as a symbol of critique without cognizance of cultural translation. The emphasis on the veil, and the equally colonial allusion to the sex beneath it, will be interpreted through the western cultural screen ensuring both the marginalization and erasure of Muslim women while upholding the authority of Euro-American discourse and foreign policy. In the photographic quadriptych, as in western mainstream perceptions, the veiled Muslim woman remains a depersonalized ideological projection, and because she is a fiction, she is to be acted upon, even violently. I am reminded of philosopher Charles Taylor who in

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<sup>268</sup> Britta Schmitz. n.d. Excerpts from "Tausend und ein Macht" (trans. By Ishbel Flat). [www.parastou-forouhar.de/englis/Works/freitag](http://www.parastou-forouhar.de/englis/Works/freitag).



*The Malaise of Modernity* warns us that once those “that surround us lose their significance that accrued to their place in the chain of beings, they are open to being treated as raw materials for our projects.”<sup>269</sup> The analysis of *Blindspot* and *Freitag* clearly demonstrates the conundrum of reifying the veil and the necessity of complicating the sign. Not only does the sign’s metonymy exclude and do violence to women who self-identify as Muslim, it also erases and victimizes the culturally Muslim subjectivities of those artists using the sign to engage in socio-political critiques.

If political anti-Iranian discourse is inherent to Forouhar’s art, exhibitions, and general visibility, in the case of Iranian-Canadian artist Fariba Samsami (b. 1957), it is the question of women’s oppression in Iran again symbolized by the veil. The reaffirmation of this oppression is presented by the artist and the cultural apparatus (press releases, reviews, *etc*) as the lens through which to read the work, whether the victimization of Iranian women is visually evident in the actual pieces or not. Up until very recently, actual veils and veil material constituted the core material and metaphor of her installations. The textile diptych, *Entangled Knots* (2002), consists of dark-coloured *chadors* and *mantos* having belonged to friends and family members in Tehran knotted onto gridded metal frames. The surrounding discourse on women’s subservience to and effacement by the dictates of the state structures the work conceptually but I propose that a viewer unaware of the fact that the textiles are Iranian veils could and would not interpret the diptych in this way. This also applies to the poetic dimension introduced by the act of producing art with textiles that are infused with sensory and non-sensory memories,<sup>270</sup> which while denouncing the oppressive quality of the legally enforced dress and women’s restrictions more generally, simultaneously evokes, if not the women’s agency, at least their

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<sup>269</sup> Charles Taylor. 2003. *The Malaise of Modernity*. Toronto: House of Anansi Press, p.5.

<sup>270</sup> Other artists have employed used clothes as a medium. For example, Christian Boltanski’s (b.1944) use of piles of second-hand clothes to evoke the horrors of the Holocaust. Here the clothes serve as a signifier of the horrific anonymity of selves lost to genocidal history, whereas in Samsami’s work, the clothes refer to a state-imposed standardization and while also a form of anonymity it is inflected with a subjective charge of selves still presently alive. It thereby could be interpreted to suggest that the women’s subjectivities are stronger than the law/veil the artist perceives as identity negating.

subjectivities and therefore their resistance. If in many of Samsami's textile-based pieces, the poetic often equally reveals itself at the aesthetic level, I submit that the discourse on women surrounding Samsami's production overshadows, limits, and/or is superfluous to the poeticality that alone might better provoke thought on Iranian women and bear witness to the artist's experience of having lived in Iran and of having being forced to wear a veil.

The installation, *Closet* (fig. 13) (2003), consists of a row of vertical rectangular metallic structures covered in *chador* material reminiscent, as the title attests, of portable closets. The title sets the stage for a particular interpretation of the piece: veiled women are 'in the closet' both literally and figuratively, their bodies/selves hidden away under sheaths of dark cloth. The piece reiterates a common analogy often drawn between the full veil and the tent equating the veil with erasure and social exclusion as Pamela Karimi describes,

Despite being allowed in public, *women are secluded from the outside world as their bodies are wrapped in the chador*. The chador works like a space for seclusion of the bodily appearance in the eyes of others. The chador, thus, functions first as a portable habitat (reflecting the true meaning of chador, 'tent'), reduced in size to the bulk of a woman's body. It also works as a stage set for the audience (indicating a secondary meaning of chador, 'screen')(emphasis added).<sup>271</sup>

While the analogy is etymologically sound, Karimi assumes a neat cleavage between the public and private domains, and confuses presence with visibility, two ideas the study has already established as Eurocentric and not necessarily transferable to other cultures. It must be noted that *Closet* like all of the artist's textile-based production, is structured upon on what is perceived as a most austere form of veiling, and one associated with *shi'i* Islam and Iran in particular, the black *chador*. Reducing the imposed veil in Iran to the monolithic black overgarment partakes in the same stereotypical and reductive processes articulated in the first section of the chapter. However, the veil and veil material, dark in colour yet displaying a subtle variety of textures, tone on tone

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<sup>271</sup> Z. Pamela Karimi. 2003 (Dec.). "Chador, the Portable Habitat." *ISIM Newsletter* 13, p. 15.

Franco-Iranian artist Ghazel (b. 1966) has also played with the comparison between tent and *chador* in her humorous video self-portraits, but the effective use of parody causes the viewer to identify with her *chador*-clad protagonist who shifts the trope by conveying her agency.

patterns, and shades equally imbue the work with a sober minimalist aesthetic characteristic of Samsami's practice overall. It is the incongruity between the discourse surrounding the work and the aesthetic experience the work provides that renders the installation interesting, and elucidates why despite the conceptual drawbacks and reiteration of the veil's metonymy, *Closet* works aesthetically.

The strength of the work resides in the simultaneous tension and marriage of geographies and genders that appear when *Closet* is carefully analyzed. The material and the shape of the structures associated perhaps erroneously with western modernism (modernism was/is not exclusive to Euro-America) and thereby implicitly with a male-determined aesthetic and the west conjugate with black bicultural cloth evoking both minimalism and Iranian women's *chadors*. Samsami has injected into the strict aesthetic of masculinist minimalism, both the metaphor of the home and cloth, two elements often associated with feminist art as a way of feminizing the artistic canon. She has done so using *chador* material, an intimate object of daily life for Iranian women.

*Closet* consists of a series of veiled structures. To contest forced veiling, the artist has actually engaged in the aesthetics of veiling and as such, presages the next chapter that contextualizes the veil by putting forth how the metaphor of veiling permeates Muslim-based societies and transcends by far the veiling of women. In addition, despite her anti-veil rhetoric, and contrary to Forouhar's anti-aesthetic parodying of the cloth, Samsami's veiled structures do not mask or erase the beauty of the veil material but rather, the study contends, places these at the service of the aesthetics of *Closet* and of her own subjectivity. The artist has taken the imposed veil and rewritten it from a symbol of closure into that of her own artistic agency. This possesses two implications in light of the present study. First, it indicates that subjectivity, despite the debates over the term or its existence in contemporary theory, is capable of fracturing hegemony. That the artist's discourse is often superfluous to the work demonstrates that, despite the artist's rhetoric and replication of colonial discourse on the veil, Samsami has not fully accepted the self-annihilation the latter tacitly demands

of her, obliging her to choose liberalism over the veil, the west over Islam, or the other over herself. However, it also proves the thesis that representations of the metonymic veil only bolster the Euro-American cultural screen and if they fulfill the criteria of the western art apparatus, nonetheless reinscribe their producer as other. If this were not the case, Samsami's work would not always be framed in terms of women's victimization in Iran but rather on its own terms confirming how being on the 'us' side of 'us and them' nonetheless perpetuates binary thinking and continues to define the non-western artist as other. If Samsami's practice positively hints at how subjective inscription constitutes an effective form of resistance, it has nonetheless thus far not chosen to move beyond the comforting certainty of anti-veil rhetoric and the victimization of Muslim women it infers. In other words, Samsami has yet to carve out a niche for herself beyond the Euro-American cultural expectations of her to confirm her otherness and to conform with its binary vision of the world. The symbol of the veil used to contest the subordination of Iranian women has in fact ended up silencing the artist herself and blinding the viewer to the sensitive aesthetics permeating her work.

In Samsami's more recent installation, *Reframing* (2005) (figs. 14 and 15), technology has replaced textiles. Still treating the theme of the veil in her words as a site of "control and power exerted upon female sexuality,"<sup>272</sup> the installation presents a video of a large contingent of Iranian women in an undated pro-Khomeini demonstration, where wearing black *chadors* and carrying holy books is *de rigueur*. A sign asks the viewer to sit down on the one chair installed. As he or she does so a hidden photo booth type of apparatus takes and produces a small photograph of the viewer's face donning a black *chador*. While the installation is innovative and funny, *Reframing* also raises problematic questions. The image used to signify even essentialize the post-revolutionary Iranian or Islamist woman, references the black *chador* and the masses to convey the selflessness and fanaticism of Muslim women and their

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<sup>272</sup> These are part of Samsami's statements on the piece. See her website page, [www.faribasamsami.com/Multimedia\\_Installations\\_by\\_Fariba\\_Samsami](http://www.faribasamsami.com/Multimedia_Installations_by_Fariba_Samsami)

passive subservience to and victimization by a totalitarian patriarchal leader and religion. Also replicating colonial and neocolonial strategies of representing Muslim women, the image is decontextualized, and the authority imparted by photography purportedly testifies to its validity as a document on Iranian women. Had Samsami used images splintering and not reinforcing stereotypes, it would have profoundly altered the viewers' experience altogether. For example, the photographs of contemporary Tehran shown in the large Paris exhibit, *Musulmanes, musulmans* (2004) - young women in jogging suits and small headscarves playing soccer in the street (fig. 16), mixed groups of teenagers in cafés, or a demonstration of Iranian female university students clad in black *chadors* protesting the lack of freedom of expression (fig. 17) - would have diffused the convenient binaries upon which Samsami's work rests and in fact revealed its fatal flaw. I must add that the proposed 'knowledge' of Iran glosses over the fact that the dark coloured *chador* central to Samsami's sculptures/installations is no longer obligatory and that Iranian Islamic dress has edged much closer, for those who wish, and akin to Egypt or the Gulf States, to more colourful and diverse fashionable attire, enough to be dubbed by one author as "Tehran Chic."<sup>273</sup>

Samsami has stated that the objective of *Reframing* is for viewers to "experience the shock of their new constructed identity,"<sup>274</sup> by visually and subjectively experiencing the imposition of the veil. The humour of the piece is exclusive of women with Muslim (veiled) self-identities and is obviously aimed at an audience for whom veiling remains foreign. However, I propose that akin to the textile-based pieces above, *Reframing* can be interpreted over and beyond the binary politics of the veil. I argue in fact that *Reframing* might actually open up other possibilities of meaning, for unveiled women viewers at least. The laughter provoked by seeing themselves veiled, rather than reaffirm the female viewers' rejection of the veiled other(s) might on the contrary trigger a more subversive reaction. As Jo Anna Isaak describing the role of humour in art so

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<sup>273</sup> See Alec H. Balasescu. "Tehran Chic..."*Op. cit.*

<sup>274</sup> F. Samsami website. *Op. cit.*

pointedly notes, “The viewer must want, at least briefly, to emancipate himself [herself] from “normal” representation; in order to laugh, he [she] must recognize that he [or she] shares the same repressions.”<sup>275</sup> In this sense, *Reframing*’s female public might engage in a process Lucy Lippard called “the expanding self,” whereby a subject who has identified the element of sameness in difference, without annulling the latter, comes to view the other both as a subject and as a virtual possibility of self. Nonetheless, the clever installation partakes in a particular parsing of the world reinforcing, perhaps even more so than the textile-based pieces, Euro-American mainstream perceptions and geopolitics of the veil.

The legally enforced *burqa* also figures in works produced by many artists of Muslim origin. Young Afghan-American photographer Shekaiba Wakili (b. 1965) exhibited in New York, a series of closely cropped portraits of Afghan women both with the *burqa* on and with the *burqa* lifted up over their forehead. Wakili describes the intent of *Unveiled* (2002) begun “right after the U.S. starting bombing Afghanistan,”<sup>276</sup> as “lifting up the burqa to show your true self.”<sup>277</sup> The photographer also sought to reveal the diversity of Afghan women by choosing women from different professions and age groups as well as from each of the four main ethnic groups in Afghanistan, Pashtun, Tajik, Hazaras and Uzbek. For example, the woman posing in the green *burqa* is Pashtun and left Kabul just after the Taliban had taken control of the city (fig. 18). While *Unveiled* makes an unequivocal comment on the Taliban’s imposition of the veil<sup>278</sup> clearly condemning the *burqa*’s concealment of Muslim women (perhaps both as a legal obligation and as a confining stereotype). However, the veil is here not based on simplistic sensationalism or on corporate interests, rather it is used to recreate private re-enactments of the women’s often-painful memories.

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<sup>275</sup> J. A. Isaak. 1996. *Feminism and Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women’s Laughter*. London; New York: Routledge, p. 5.

<sup>276</sup> Warren Lehrer and Judith Sloan. 2003. *Crossing the Blvd*. New York: Norton & Company, p. 166.

<sup>277</sup> Wakili quoted in Dilshad D. Ali. 2002. “No Holds Barred: The Photos of Shekaiba Wakili.” *Islam Online*, [islamonline.net/English/artculture/2002-03/article11.shtml](http://islamonline.net/English/artculture/2002-03/article11.shtml).

<sup>278</sup> That the Taliban also imposed a male dress code is often forgotten.

If Wakili, who grew up in the United States, did not live under Taliban rule those photographed had and for these the photo shoot proved difficult. One of the sitter's, although she does not veil in the U.S. let alone cover her face, changed her mind in the midst of the session and refused to be photographed unveiled still fearing Taliban reprisal. However, as in the case of Forouhar and Samsami, the contextually specific (Taliban) and subjective implications (women's experiences and memories) of the visual narrative were/are often lost in cultural translation and applied to buttress the Euro-American mainstream discourse on the veil. The reviewer for *Women's Enews* described the exhibit as "a dramatic demonstration of the humanity the veil covers and the loss of identity that the act of veiling extracts."<sup>279</sup> The veil –once again the difficulty of the term appears as it does not distinguish between *hijab* and *burqa*- is again equated with the effacement of the female self. If the criticism may be appropriate in this case (except for those Afghan women who might chose the *burqa* once security concerns no longer make it necessary), the writer failed to note that Wakili is criticizing not the veil itself but its legal enforcement. Despite her perception of the *burqa* as oppressive,<sup>280</sup> Wakili recognizes that it forms part of her cultural heritage having emerged long before the Taliban, mandated more by tradition than by Islam, "When women had a choice whether to wear the borqa they would develop a sense of style in their color and embroidery on their borqas and shawls. But that changed when it became law, when they were forced."<sup>281</sup> The latter observations imply an unacknowledged heterogeneity to the monolithic and overused sign of the *burqa* and imply that the garment, like the headscarf, can be individualized.

Wakili's series constitutes yet another example evincing the difficulties embedded in depending on the veil as the visual sign of gender oppression, even when treating a historically specific veil which will inevitably be read as *the* veil, confirming yet again how the personal and the specific are often

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<sup>279</sup> D. Ali. *Op. cit.*

<sup>280</sup> The photographer submits not only that the veil, although here I infer she means the headscarf, is not repressive when it is a personal choice, but that it can even be liberating.

<sup>281</sup> Maya Dollarhide. 2003 (Dec. 7). "Exhibit Reveals the Humanity Hidden by the Veil."

*Womens Enews*. [www.womensenews.org/article.cfm?aid=794](http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm?aid=794).

overshadowed by the veil's metonymy in Euro-America. That Wakili is not consciously aligning herself with the latter is corroborated by the artist's cognizance of the fact that unveiling does not constitute a panacea for Afghan women<sup>282</sup> and that the sign of the veil constitutes a Euro-American fetish reproduced to essentialize the Muslim woman and her oppression. In a profile of her life, she writes, "Once people know I'm Afghan, the first question is, "Are you Muslim?" The second question is, "Where is your veil?"<sup>283</sup> She continues on to say that she is then asked about why Islam mistreats women. The three small questions tersely sum up the simplistic nature of what Mohanty calls the "analytic leap from the practice of veiling to an assertion of its general significance in controlling women."<sup>284</sup> They in fact reveal the step-by-step process of the Euro-American cultural screen through which the Muslim woman, Islam and the veil are mediated and demonstrate how the veil forms a site particularly resistant to cultural translation.

A large part of Wakili's production broaches the theme of Muslim women and her representation. Growing up with a secular, although patriarchal father, in New Jersey, the artist did not really self-identify as Muslim. As is the case of many bicultural artists, it was the unfolding awareness that her society defined her as Muslim and other that prompted her to explore the subject of Muslim women, identity and representation. If one series of photographs addresses 'the veil' imposed upon her by Euro-American collective perception, *Unveiling*, however does not address the issue of cultural translation. The series of double portraits, I suggest, issued out of the artist's process of negotiating her bicultural identity. The adoption of the unveiling as liberation metaphor, over and beyond its condemnation of the Taliban and concern for the women's subjectivities and diversity betrays the complex relationship of the Afghan-American artist towards her dual heritage and more significantly the post-September 11<sup>th</sup> war

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<sup>282</sup> She correctly states in response to the post-war litany of "Well, now that the Taliban are gone, women can go without the burqa," "But I don't think it's true. There's still a lot of other social issues that need to be taken care before women can really walk around freely." *Ibid.* p. 166.

<sup>283</sup> W. Lehrer and J. Sloan. *Op. cit.* p. 165.

<sup>284</sup> C. Mohanty. *Op. cit.* p. 75.



against Afghanistan. Co-existing with the hope for the fall of the Taliban signified by the gendered sign of the veil, is the grief engendered by the consciousness of the bombing of one's home country, and often relatives. From this perspective, the women's faces, presented without artifice or exoticism, can be seen as contradictorily serving to dispute not only Taliban laws but also American foreign policy. The pressing concern is whether viewers contextualize the various veils they see and interpret them in light of the socio-political and existential circumstances of their production. In other words, will the public distinguish between the corporate Benetton veil and the subjective veil of Wakili's photographs as both seemingly duplicate the same message and 'before and after' narrative? It might through the art gallery context and/or through repetition as Wakili presents Afghan women, and not *the* Afghan or exotic Muslim woman.<sup>285</sup> However, in light of the terrible tenacity of mainstream narratives of the veil, I put forth that the images will be translated through the lens of *the* veil especially as they seemingly reproduce the hegemonic temporal and racist logic of Eurocentric modernist discourse and its conflation of subjectivity and visibility. For example, Helen A. Harrison, in a review for *The New York Times*, while acknowledging the "personal" nature of the work, simply reiterates Euro-American 'knowledge' of the veil,

A series of photographs by Shekhaiba Wakili is a pointed commentary on the status of women in her native Afghanistan, but the effect is more personal than political. Pairs of images show female faces covered by burqas then exposed, revealing makeup, jewelry and the individuality that is masked by traditional dress.<sup>286</sup>

*Unveiled* reveals how an image should not be interpreted separately from the specific conditions in which it emerged; the series must be read inflected by the intent of its production, Wakili's sincere concern for Afghan female selves, her subjective feminist condemnation of the Taliban, and her ambiguous sentiment towards the war. Wakili's work, as does Forouhar's and Samsami's, substantiate Lindisfarne-Tapper and Ingham's claim that "we need to know how, in each

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<sup>285</sup> Although the Benetton/WFP woman is named for the viewer and seemingly presented as the real individual that she is, the medium of advertising by its very nature fictionalizes the 'real.'

<sup>286</sup> Helen A. Harrison. 2003 (April 13). "Art Reviews; 'East From Here.'" *The New York Times*. [http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/h/winslow\\_homer/index.html](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/h/winslow_homer/index.html).

particular setting, images of women's dress are understood to have originated, how they are used, in what contexts, to persuade which audiences of what political advantages, and why?"<sup>287</sup> More germane to the objective of the present study is the clear conclusion that the veil cannot form an efficient artistic strategy of critique because of its historically and ideologically ensconcement in Euro-America.

The chapter established the problems inherent to the metonymic veil delineating the strategies and subtexts of this metonymy in western visual culture. It then demonstrated how these were in fact reinforced by artistic representations that employ the veil sign to engage in a critique of politics or norms generally associated with Islam and that reproduce the notion of an agency built on the exclusion of the Muslim veiled other. The examination of the works by Forouhar, Samsami, and Wakili, further adduced the problems of the veil trope as it ascertained that it consistently masked the specific conditions -historical, geographical, and subjective- of the veils being represented. Two conclusions may be drawn from the evidence that the veil as symbol of critique will inevitably be translated through the Euro-American cultural screen. First, artists desiring to address gender and political issues within Muslim politics or communities would do so most efficaciously by avoiding the loaded sign of the veil altogether. Second, it confirms the necessity for artists to integrate into their production an awareness of the issue of cross-cultural translation.

The expatiation on the veil's reification exposed the binary politics underlying the sign as well as that of the art apparatus. Museums and galleries that chose to exhibit the work discussed are also making political claims and statements. This is particularly true in the cases of Forouhar and Samsami where a political discourse reconfirming the political order traced by the veil is presented as an integral part of the work. In the case of Wakili, the politics are implicit to the political context in which *Unveiled* was produced, made at the onset of the war against Afghanistan, at a time when the *burqa* was branded as one of its justifications. The premise that institutional aesthetic choices are

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<sup>287</sup> N. Lindisfarne-Tapper and B. Ingham. *Op. cit.* p.16.

political, consciously or not, and are mediated through the cultural screen can be corroborated by the fact that Forouhar's work critical of Islam and Iran were chosen as representative of Islam for an interfaith show at an Australian museum. The geopolitical or hegemonic underpinnings of the art apparatus are equally evident in the pressure to conform to the rules of what Olu Oguibe calls the "culture game." Artists seemingly reproducing Euro-American discourse on the veil will find it easier to receive funding for and exposure of their work. Laura Marks articulates the idea in an article devoted to Arab women's video but her remarks framed in terms of economics are equally pertinent to other media and Muslim women artists in general,

Notions that oppressed Arab women must be saved from orientalist patriarchy in general and Islamic patriarchy in particular inform the funding priorities, content, titles, and marketing strategies of productions. Arab women media makers may package work for export in an act of preemptive self-Orientalism intended to meet the interests of an outside audience.<sup>288</sup>

If I have emphasized the tenacity of the veil trope as a mediative filter, I nonetheless recognize not only the urgency, but also the possibility of displacing the discourse woven around the sign. As stated in the introduction, I posit the polysemy of the veil and put forth that an analysis of the representations of the veil in contemporary art will uncover alternative narratives capable of dissolving dominant discourse and avoiding the trap of "preemptive self-Orientalism." Now that the present chapter has made the stakes clear, the next three chapters will map three of these alternative narratives.

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<sup>288</sup> Laura U. Marks. *Op. cit.* p. 52. Jessica Winegar corroborates Marks' statements with regard to Middle Eastern visual artists trying to achieve visibility in the west, when she observes "...artists whose work critiques patriarchy or religious oppression in majority-Muslim societies, or which is at least interpreted to do so, tend to garner the most significant attention." J. Winegar. 2002. "In Many Worlds: A Discussion with Egyptian Artist Sabah Naeem." *Meridians* 2 (2): 146-62. [vnweb.hwwilsonweb.com/hww/results/results\\_single\\_ftPES.jhtml](http://vnweb.hwwilsonweb.com/hww/results/results_single_ftPES.jhtml).

### **Chapter 3: Contextualizing the Veil: Veiling as Metaphor**

Spaceless, it constitutes an exile; timeless, it is composed of multiple presents, of a series of inceptions. This zero point has one quality: it is a hiatus.<sup>289</sup>

Doris von Drathen

... the empty signifier of the universal is something without which concrete emancipations cannot take place, but also something that can never be fully exhausted or embodied....<sup>290</sup>

Jacob Torfing

I have mapped thus far the history and the predominant visual geography of the veil in Euro-America cultural texts. From here on, I proceed to an analysis of contemporary art produced for the most part by women artists of Muslim background that offers up new readings of the sign. The first trajectory or alternative narrative I plot demonstrates how contextualization can unpack entrenched visions of the veil. It argues that the veil must be (re)positioned within its socio-cultural environment, because, as has been clearly determined, the veil sign has been constructed by artificially divorcing the garment from Muslim tradition(s) as a whole.<sup>291</sup> The chapter seeks to establish the veil's link to its wider cultural framework by shifting the discourse from *the* veil to the wider notion of veiling in its examination of works drawn from contemporary art. These will demonstrate how veiling transcends both questions of gender and dress, and more significantly for the purposes of the study, how it constitutes a culturally central metaphor determining notions of representation, vision, and art. If veiling as metaphor finds its origins in Islamic history and culture, my purpose here is not to reclaim a theology of art or to defend a discourse of tradition and authenticity. Rather, almost as a counterpart to the preceding chapter, it is to dress a portrait of veiling mediated through a lens or cultural screen shaped entirely or in part by the culture(s) that emerged out of Islam. The

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<sup>289</sup> Doris von Drathen. 2004. *Vortex of Silence: Proposition for an Art Criticism Beyond Aesthetic Categories*. Milan: Charta, p. 18.

<sup>290</sup> Jacob Torfing. 1999. *New Theories of Discourse: Laclau, Mouffe and Žižek*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, p. 282. Torfing is referring to the ideas of Ernesto Laclau.

<sup>291</sup> One cannot for example imagine singling out the blue jean or some other garment associated with Euro-America, and transforming it into a homogenizing yet nonetheless all encompassing ideological sign.

objective is to provide sufficient cross-cultural literacy to contextualize the veil and veiling in contemporary artistic praxis.

I posit that the intrinsic relationship between veiling and representation in Islam-based cultures continues to open up possibilities of reading contemporary art, elucidating why the first section is devoted exclusively to an articulation and discussion of the concept of veiling in Islamic art and aesthetics. With the image of the veiled *Ka'ba* as starting point, it will concisely define three dimensions of the veiling metaphor I have identified in both historical Islamic art and contemporary practice. The first aspect is the most literal, and concerns the unique prominence of and references to textiles and veiling in Islamic art and culture. The second, rooted in Islamic thought and metaphysics, explores how veiling in representation, rather than denoting concealment and marking the end of vision, forms in nexus with the void an aesthetic strategy to signify the unrepresentable. The third dimension related to the first two –all are in fact interrelated– broadens the notion of veiling to include the two main visual languages associated with Islamic art. Infinite pattern and calligraphy indeed drape, albeit in figurative fashion, artefacts and buildings and equally possess as their object of reference that which eludes vision. The initial section on Islamic aesthetics couched in references to history, religion, and metaphysics may at first appear tangential to the topic of the *hijab*, yet I cannot overemphasize enough that veiling, as a dress practice, cannot be fully understood if one disregards its relationship to the tremendous and non-gendered significance of veiling in Islamic culture as a whole. It may also seem peripheral to contemporary production by artists of Muslim origin but again this proves not to be the case as the works examined in the chapter will indubitably attest. I must also stress that it was the study of contemporary practice that lead to and made necessary the inclusion of this initial discussion and not vice versa.<sup>292</sup>

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<sup>292</sup> I believe that modernity's claimed *tabula rasa* is somewhat of a myth. While acknowledging the paradigmatic shift that occurred with the advent of modernity ensuing from philosophical, economic, political, and technological developments, I put forth that a complete rupture –and therefore still a reaction to– with the past is impossible to achieve. Contemporary Euro-American educational, legal and philosophical systems, institutions, *etc.* derive their basis from historically developed and rooted western notions. In addition, I affirm that a reactive break

The second and third sections of the chapter will treat contemporary art and reveal how artists have recourse to the aesthetics of veiling and the visual processes of Islamic art, often consciously, to address contemporary concerns such as class, memory, gender, self, and/or cultural mediation. Stated differently, they will map how veiling has been translated through the lens of contemporaneity. The second section addresses the first and second dimensions of veiling noted above and discusses works in which veiling constitutes the central visual metaphor. Nuha Asad's recent works confirm how vision is itself a cultural construction. In her photographs, veiling, contrary to mainstream perceptions, works to symbolize human unity and to articulate individual identity. Zineb Sedira's photographic mosaic exhibits the continuity of the textile aesthetic associated with the art and taste of Muslim-based cultures and pertinently connects the veil, contrary to Euro-American views, to the universe and visual field of women and not men. In Alidousti's photographic self-portraits, an actual veil, the black *chador*, although perhaps meant to criticize the Iranian regime, becomes a representational device. Functioning as an empty field that accentuates the recognizable elements of the images, it visually signals the gaps in vision, image and self. If all the works unmistakably corroborate the veil's links to a culturally inflected gaze, they equally testify to the polysemy and relevance of the veiling metaphor in the context of contemporary practice.

The third section considers contemporary art in which script and pattern enact the veiling metaphor. The two main idioms of the Islamic system of representation emerged from the Islamic worldview and equally allude to the void, and privilege the interstitial space between the signifier and (un)signified. However, the medial space opened up by the veiling of text or pattern in the contemporary works brought forward, while drawing upon the historical methods of Islamic art, takes on new dimensions. The contemporary nature of the works and hence their readability make evident how the medial space offers the possibility of intersubjective and/or transcultural communication. Although

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with the past is not necessarily a sought or necessary precept of all (non-western) modernities, implying that references to the past are not always experienced as 'backward', 'unchanging,' and 'traditional.'

the choice of work based on Islamic pattern and calligraphy is vast, I limit the discussion, for reasons simply of length, to three, albeit diverse, artists. The initial discussion on text as veil will revolve around works produced by Shirin Neshat and Shirazeh Houshiary. The subsequent one, on the veiling aspect of pattern will examine works again by Shirazeh Houshiary and by Samta Benyahia.

The text inscribed on Neshat's *Guardians of the Revolution* sets up four levels of veiling. It veils the image, it veils the woman's body, it veils the meaning of the text, and it sets up a separate field of vision engendering a veiling and void paradigm outside of and beyond the image. While the numerous studies devoted to the *Women of Allah* series have addressed the relationship of the text to the photographic image, the question of gender, and/or the content of the Persian poetry inscribed, none has considered it through the lens of the veiling metaphor as a veil signalling an elsewhere to both image and text. I will discuss the layers of veiling operated by the text before articulating how the new reading locates and mediates the interstitial space produced by the calligraphy. Shirazeh Houshiary's *Unknowing*, part of the artist's text-based graphic work while reclaiming the perennial spiritual values and intentions of Islamic calligraphy, largely conceals its script. The obsessive repetition of text, generally a sacred word or formula builds up the actual image of the painting and functions as a spiritual, aesthetic, and embodied veil, yet remains little evident in the final seemingly monochrome white image which can equally be construed as a metaphorical veil. The artist has extracted and imaged the void implicit to the veiling of text, purposefully privileging it over the culturally identifiable text for the sake of communicability. The artist's use of pattern in *Loom* also avoids too visible and immediately identifiable characteristics associated with Islam and Islamic culture. The sculpture nonetheless constitutes a cogent example of how pattern through number and geometry can confer upon a seemingly solid structure the sensation of continuous movement and expansion leading the mind away from matter to a subtle presence it seems to evoke. *Loom* proposes materiality as a veil. Finally and conversely,

recognizably Islamic geometric infinite pattern serving as a symbol of the *mashrabiyya* constitutes the leitmotif of Samta Benyahia's production. In the pieces in which the artist transforms gallery or museum spaces by installing arabesque all over patterning on doors and/or windows, the screen of pattern draws attention to the space opened up by looking, between the subject and object of the gaze. The void made partially visible by the architectural elements' transparency provokes in tandem with the tessellations reflection on the gaze and cultural mediation. In the installations in which Benyahia enacts the *mashrabiyya* three-dimensionally, the interstice denoting the possibility of cross-cultural interaction becomes an actual physical space. However, before further discoursing on contemporary art, I must first delineate the concept of veiling as metaphor in Islamic aesthetics and art.

### **3:1 Veiling as Metaphor in Islamic Art and Aesthetics**

There evidently exist several manners of contextualizing the veil in order to challenge monolithic views of the garment. El Guindi, in a book whose intent is to redress the Euro-American view of the veil offers up a whole array. The anthropologist proposes framing it within the larger context of the study of dress, a discipline still relatively unexplored from an anthropological perspective. Dress then, and in this particular case the veil, is understood as a code of communication marking "individual and group identity, social status, economic position, political power, gender, and religious role."<sup>293</sup> Additionally, the scholar situates the veil in its wider environment by devoting a section of *Veil* to male 'veiling' and the various Muslim male head covering practices. El Guindi equally positions the veil within the specificity of Arabo-Islamic culture that she identifies as a culturally unique fluidity and interweaving of the private and the public realms, as well as of secular and sacred space and time.<sup>294</sup> From this standpoint, the veil can be seen as the private and the spiritual's penetration

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<sup>293</sup> F. El Guindi. *Op. cit.* p. 66. On p. 58, the author notes, "how dress survives destabilized geography and borders to communicate messages about identity and to serve as an embodiment of a group's memory."

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid.* p. 78.



of, or rather intermingling with, the public secular arena,<sup>295</sup> even if ideally, the Islamic worldview does not distinguish between the secular and the sacred. More germane to our discussion is the parallel El Guindi draws between the women's veil and the embroidered cloth covering of the *Ka'ba*, the *kiswa*, a term derived from an Arabic root meaning to "cover."<sup>296</sup>

It is this image of the *Ka'ba* and *kiswa* that here serves as the premise from which to explore veiling because it evinces the three aspects of veiling as metaphor present in Islamic art and aesthetics that I want to address. There is a historical case to be made claiming that veiling as a key foundation of visual expression in the Muslim world can be traced right back to the *Ka'ba*, as the admission of an affinity between a worldview and the artefacts it generates stems from common sense. However, although I am professing a parallel between artistic artefacts and ideas epochs apart, the method here is phenomenological rather than historical. Phenomenology, concerned with, as Valérie Gonzalez notes, "the essence of being of an object as it *appears* to the sight,"<sup>297</sup> provides a methodological approach capable of resolving historical discrepancies by focusing on aesthetic experience or in Gonzales words, on "the direct observation of artistic forms as meaningful things and the experience they induce."<sup>298</sup> With this in mind, let us therefore turn to a description of the *Ka'ba*.

Indicating the direction of prayer to Muslims worldwide, and forming the central site of the Muslim pilgrimage, the *Ka'ba* (fig. 19) constitutes the sole

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<sup>295</sup> The author defines her view of the Islamic worldview in order to unpack what she deems as an ethnocentric association of the veil with the "seclusion- shame- modesty" paradigm that she replaces with "sanctity-reserve-respect." In so doing, she reinstates the notion of women as sacred but contests those who reduce this sacredness and the veil to issues of sexuality and chastity. *Ibid.* p. 83.

<sup>296</sup> *Ibid.* p. 95. El Guindi also informs the reader that the word *kiswa* is also used to refer to the new clothes men and women don on religious holidays or brides on their wedding further confirming the "textile metaphor" put forth in the chapter and the latter's analogical method.

<sup>297</sup> Valérie Gonzalez. 2001. *Beauty and Islam: Aesthetics in Islamic Art and Architecture*. London: I. B. Tauris, p. 3. That the study is arguing for an approach based on vision while it is so forcefully focused on how culture mediates the gaze may seem contradictory. It is therefore important to state that it recognizes the distinction articulated by Kaja Silverman between the "gaze" indeed constructed by cultural discourse and the "look" that can "see otherwise," and resist "the discourses which seek to master and regulate it." Kaja Silverman. 1995. *The Threshold of the Visible World*. London; New York: Routledge, p. 156.

<sup>298</sup> V. Gonzalez *Op. cit.* p. 3. Here Gonzalez is speaking of what she calls "applied aesthetics," a concept related to "aesthetic phenomenology" which informs her book.

structure necessary to the cult of Islam. Muslims regard it as the holiest site of Islam and the sole axis where Heaven and earth meet. The *Ka'ba* is a large cubic structure, now made of brick and empty except for an ancient black meteorite housed in one of its walls. A decorated black *kiswa* fashioned yearly drapes the materially and aesthetically humble monument.<sup>299</sup> The full significance of the veil is apparent by its sheer material reality and scale described by Patricia Baker: “the finished gold-and silver- thread embroidered drapes” measure “some 2,500 feet (762 metres)” and weigh “around 5,000 lb (2,270 kilograms).”<sup>300</sup> The inside of the *Ka'ba* is equally ‘veiled’ as it is “covered with red silk with silver embroidery.”<sup>301</sup> The fact that veiling is enshrined in the holiest symbolic structure would mean little for the present study if it did not portend and share the nature and characteristics of Islamic art. However, the richly embroidered *kiswa* clearly foretells the primacy of both textiles and the aesthetics of veiling, that tendency to beautify, to bestow meaning upon, and to signify the sanctity of essentially humble structures and material by draping them literally or figuratively in cloth. These two features ensuing from the image of the *Ka'ba* constitute the first and most tangible dimension of the veiling metaphor.

Many Islamic art historians acknowledge this distinctive intersection of textiles, veiling, and art. Dominique Clévenot, for example, entitled her introductory work on Islamic art, *Une Esthétique du voile*.<sup>302</sup> Robert Hillenbrand has suggested as a method of discerning meaning in Islamic art, an art form without an art historical discursive tradition, looking at the way in which many textile-related terms were employed in both art and architecture.<sup>303</sup> It is however Lisa Golombek who comes closest to echoing what I call the first aspect of veiling as metaphor in her reformulation of a notion dating back to the

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<sup>299</sup> Although the *Ka'ba* was veiled from the days of early Islam, perhaps earlier even, the present tradition of the black embroidered *kiswa* dates back to the ‘Abbasid dynasty (750-1258 C.E.).

<sup>300</sup> Patricia L. Baker. 2004. *Islam and the Religious Arts*. London: Continuum, p. 145.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.* p. 145.

<sup>302</sup> Dominique Clévenot. 1994. *Une Esthétique du voile: Essai sur l’art arabo-islamique*. Paris: L’Harmattan.

<sup>303</sup> Robert Hillenbrand. 1994. *Islamic Architecture: Form, Function and Meaning*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 405.

European ‘discovery’ of Islamic art. The University of Toronto professor suggests that Islamic society’s “obsession with textiles” or its “textile mentality” shaped “certain characteristic idioms of Islamic art.”<sup>304</sup> As a stylistic descriptor of the latter, she speaks of a “textile metaphor.” Like the study’s veiling metaphor, Golombek’s “textile metaphor” is both literal and figurative, referring to both the pre-eminence of textiles in Muslim-based cultures, and to the emergence, out of this pre-eminence, of veiling as a significant artistic metaphor and/or visual strategy.

If one can consider veiling at the most material level, further observation of the *Ka’ba* reveals more abstract significations. The *Ka’ba*, as mentioned above, is considered the holiest site of Islam, Muslims believing in fact that it marks a unique site where Divine Presence manifests itself. The simple cubic structure made of brick cannot be said to denote the latter, nor can the meteorite lodged in one of its corners. However, the structure is empty, allowing the viewer to infer that it is this emptiness or void that signals the invisible presence, itself considered unrepresentable or beyond representation. Space obviously does not possess a visible form -at least by itself- bringing us back to the veil, veiling and the *kiswa*. The veil always constitutes an ambiguous symbol as it both reveals and conceals. It tells the viewer something is there without necessary naming what that something is. In the case of the monumental veil, the *kiswa*, it signals – or both dissimulates and alludes to- the presence of the unrepresentable. In an article addressing the metaphysical aspects of the Muslim veil, Tim Winter articulates the symbolic relationship between the *Ka’ba* and the *kiswa*, although again it is obvious that the British scholar when speaking of the former is not referring to the actual structure but rather to the space therein,

The *Ka’ba*’s status as a veiled structure has frequently been remarked upon;...The *Ka’ba*, symbol of antiquity, of a time out of mind, becomes the symbol of the pre-existence of

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<sup>304</sup> Lisa Golombek. 1988. “The Draped Universe of Islam.” In Priscilla Soucek (ed.) *Content and Context of the Visual Arts in the Islamic World*. Pennsylvania: Penn State University Park, pp. 25 and 36. She explains, on p. 34, “I would like to carry this idea further by suggesting that a “textile mentality” was responsible for the development of certain characteristic idioms in Islamic art. In other words, if textiles penetrated so deeply into all aspects of life, can they not be expected to have had some impact on the formation of aesthetics as well.”

God, and the *kiswa*, the black veil which always shrouds it, is the veil we must lift if we are to come to *al-haqq*, the Real.<sup>305</sup>

One can draw two main conclusions from the above discussion. One, that the image of the veil is correlated, in the relationship of signifier to (un)signified, to that of the void.<sup>306</sup> The latter as revealed by the anatomy of the *Ka'ba*, serves as a metaphor designating that which lies beyond the grasp of the human imagination and intellect. However, the void is not limited to a theoretical abstraction. Like the veil, it equally permeates and constitutes a principal element of Islamic art forming in fact a formal artistic element fully integrated into the various media of the Islamic arts by calligraphers, artisans and builders. Comparing the conception of space in European and Islamic historical architectural traditions, Seyyed Hossein Nasr notes how in the latter, it is considered a starting point for, rather than a product of, a built environment,

The positive significance of the void is also to be seen in the role space plays in Islamic architecture and city-planning. In Western architecture of either the classical, medieval, or modern periods, space is defined by a positive form such as a building or a statue. It is the object that determines the space around it and gives the space its meaning and determination. In Islamic architecture space possesses a negative sense. Space is not determined by a positive object but is defined by the absence of corporeality. It is once again an aspect of the void and is what, for want of a better term, one could call 'negative space.'<sup>307</sup>

The second inference, also of particular importance for the present study, is the fact that if the void signifies the blindspot(s) of representation, it does not, as in cultures based on the "triumph" of the eye, denote the end of vision, representation and knowledge. Rather, as in the case of the *Ka'ba*, it carries a content, and one that inevitably, because imprecise, acknowledges subjective

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<sup>305</sup> Tim Winter. 2004 (March). "The Chador of God on Earth: The Metaphysics of the Muslim Veil." *New Blackfriars* 85 (1996): 144 -157. [blackwell-synergy.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2004.00003.x](http://blackwell-synergy.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2004.00003.x).

<sup>306</sup> Although the colour of the *kiswa* has varied over the course of Muslim history, the fact that black has remained its colour of predilection since the medieval period, seems to bear out its symbolic appropriateness. This is the case even if the choice of black originally possessed political connotations and signified the coming to power of the Abbasid dynasty (750-1258 C.E.) whose dynastic colour was black.

<sup>307</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr. 1987. *Islamic Art and Spirituality*. Albany: State University of New York Press, pp. 188-9. The most visible examples of the aesthetic role of space in the conception of artefacts are the prolific screens of all types of materials and types found in Islamic architecture. Equally, one might add the abundant use of counterchange patterns where symmetrical positive and negative forms constitute the overall pattern.

mediation and elucidates the origin of the veil sign. The idea that vision and visual expression are structured by and are metaphors for the unrepresentable is rooted in the Islamic worldview that views as Malise Ruthven writes, “the phenomena of the natural world, not as things-in-themselves but as ‘signs’ or symbols (*ayas*),”<sup>308</sup> suggesting that “the realm of appearance (*al-shahada*)” hints at “an unseen world (*al-ghaib*) whose ultimate reality is unknowable.”<sup>309</sup> From this viewpoint, the phenomenal world equally constitutes a veil, especially as Islam intimates that it is mediated differently according to the state of mind or spiritual depth of the viewer.<sup>310</sup> That the world is viewed as both metaphor and multiple, and hence unstable because never fully knowable, explains not only why veiling emerged as a dominant artistic metaphor but also more fundamentally why Islamic art is an art based on metaphor and analogy and not on the concept of *mimesis*.<sup>311</sup>

The third dimension of veiling as metaphor encompasses neither the material, nor the act or meaning of veiling but rather the means. In other words, it seeks to identify how a viewer can recognize that a building or artefact is *figuratively* veiled. The *kiswa* is a sartorial and not a metaphorical veil and yet its aesthetic, although sober, nonetheless provides clues. The veil, although monochrome black in colour, bears embroidered elaborate Qur’anic calligraphy

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<sup>308</sup> Malise Ruthven. 2000. *Islam in the World*. London: Penguin Books, p. 103. Ruthven is an Islamicist and not an Islamic art historian. For the most profound and insightful studies on Islamic art, see the works of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Frithjof Schuon and Titus Burckhardt, although the three are themselves also not Islamic art historians per se, but scholars of Islam and Islamic mysticism.

<sup>309</sup> As it is often put forth that Islamic art is purely aniconic, it must be noted that the ornamentation is restricted, with a few exceptions, to the non-figurative only in religious settings. Luxury artefacts are replete with figurative imagery from astrological imagery, to the princely cycle, to zoomorphic tribal emblems. The legalistic argument usually provided for the religious preference for the abstract is not sufficient to explain the aesthetic choices made by Muslim artisans nor is its orientalist explanation, the alleged *horor vacui* of the Arabs.

<sup>310</sup> Winter states, “...the veil is, nothing but the world, *dunya*, which is bewailed when it veils us from God, but cannot be condemned, because, like the tresses [of the Beloved], it is of God. Again, it is membrane. It obstructs the gaze, and hence is part of the divine rigour, but we can project upon it our images of what lies beyond, and it is hence merciful.” T. Winter. *Op. cit.*

<sup>311</sup> This relates once again to how notions of the gaze and hence of experiencing, defining, and classifying the nature of the physical world are culturally constructed and not universal. Euro-American culture in its post-Renaissance formulations is built upon a neo-Hellenistic notion of the reality and solidity of the physical world that stands in stark opposition with its transience from an Islamic viewpoint, a viewpoint that bears much similarity with other spiritual traditions including western pre-modern ones.

and some abstract ornamentation, the two visual languages the most closely associated with Islamic art. The latter can often be said to refer in effect less to actual objects than to a process of adorning surfaces and matter by draping them in ornamental script and pattern (fig. 20), <sup>312</sup> recalling Golombek's "textile metaphor." Gonzalez, for her part, uses a similar metaphor when discussing the famous Nasrid (1232/38-1492 C.E.) palace, the Alhambra. She speaks however not of a veil of ornament but rather of the building's 'skin' when describing the veiling aesthetic's implicit separateness or gap between structure and ornament,

*This sense of the Alhambra's highly elaborated mathematical configuration thus comes not from its anatomy, i.e. from the primary constitutive level of its architecture, but from its decorative dressing or 'skin', composed by the sum of the elements that transform its architectural morphological schemes into diversified geometrical spaces and surfaces. That is to say, the applied ornamentation and architectonic layout: the stucco and ceramic elements, the reticulation, the colonnades, windows and arches, and the crowning features- domes, hanging vaults and roofs which are not, as we said, intrinsically linked to the walls.* <sup>313</sup>

Text and pattern by their relationship to ground and the similarity of their visual expression with that of textiles render the act of 'figurative' veiling apparent. They also re-enact the double configuration (veil/void) of vision and representation encompassed by the veiling metaphor; their signs and often their profusion, by dematerializing the surface(s) they embellish, somewhat surprisingly reference the void, once again placing the structuring unity of vision and the intellect at the level of the noumenal and not the phenomenal. Two essential points are especially relevant for the subsequent analyses of contemporary works. One is that veiling as an artistic strategy implies that the concept of representation includes both the optically visible and that which escapes it and two that these gaps marked by veiling denote the un-representable, and, because the latter remains unsignified, equally incorporates the reality of subjective mediation into the very notion of art. The preference of

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<sup>312</sup> Islamic art history generally confines itself to the central lands of the Muslim world and to the productions of the middle and upper social classes. I am in a sense doing the same here by limiting Islamic art to the above. The vernacular expressions, as well as those from the non-central regions (Southeast Asia, China, Sub-Saharan Africa) while being accented forms of Islamic art, nonetheless also share, in varying degrees, essential similarities such as the importance of textiles, calligraphy, and pattern.

<sup>313</sup> V. Gonzalez. *Op. cit.* p. 73.

Islamic art for aniconism or abstraction, and more pointedly metaphor, further underscores this point. Gonzalez, in her book on beauty in Islamic art and aesthetics, draws a relevant distinction between “representation” that “designates and denotes its object and fixes its rules of designation and denotation” and metaphor that “suggests its object” is “essentially variational,” and leaves “an active part to the individual subjectivity.”<sup>314</sup> The above discussion establishes how Islamic art recognized and integrated fluidities and gaps into its conception of both self and image, and explains why these strategies, often paralleling contemporary ideas and concerns, offer much to present day artists.

As text is central to two of the artists discussed in the chapter, Neshat and Houshiary, it is essential to forcefully highlight the primacy and historical embedment of text in Muslim societies. It is impossible to overstate and exaggerate the textuality of all Muslim-based cultures both historically and contemporaneously. Calligraphy, because of its association with revelation and the Qur'an, has occupied a unique and privileged role within Islamic culture.<sup>315</sup> Calligraphy, the most valued art form, played a primordial role in the Islamic

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<sup>314</sup> V. Gonzalez. *Op. cit.* pp. 78-79. Even the best-known scholar of Islamic art, Oleg Grabar, who has struggled for decades with the issue of meaning in Islamic art (*i.e.* implying there is none) agrees at least that the emphasis on metaphor and aniconism also allows for freedom of individual interpretation. Writing that Islamic ornamentation might be seen as “a search for ways to separate forms from meanings,” he nonetheless concedes that the tension created “bequeaths the interpretation and pleasure of the artistic experience to the viewer and leaves him free to make his own choices and judgments. Therein lays its greatest achievements, even if we cannot quite explain as yet why it is so.” Oleg Grabar. 2006. “What Makes Islamic Art Islamic?” In. Oleg Grabar. *Islamic Art and Beyond. Constructing the Study of Islamic Art*, Vol. 3. Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, p. 251.

<sup>315</sup> Calligraphers were traditionally more revered than any other artists/artisans. Their names unlike the latter's were recorded in biographical dictionaries, essential sources for Middle Eastern history and art. Biographical dictionaries have also played an important role in the burgeoning field of Muslim women's history and have come to be accessible for publics not literate in one of the several main languages spoken in the Muslim world. If all scholars broaching Muslim women's history depend on such sources, some focus specifically on the invaluable texts themselves. See for example, Fierro Bello, María Isabel. 1983. “Mujeres hispano-árabes en tres repertorios biográficos. Yadwa, Sila y Bugya, S. X-XII.” In *Actas de las segundas jornadas de investigación interdisciplinaria. Las mujeres medievales y su ámbito jurídico*. Madrid: Universidad Autonoma de Madrid Press, pp. 177-182. Maleeka Rahmatullah. 1952. *The Women of Baghdad in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries as Revealed in the History of Baghdad of al-Hatib*. Baghdad: Times Press. Ruth Roded. 1994. *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections. From Ibn Sa'd to Who's Who*. Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

arts from the beginning, apparent already in what is considered the first monument of Islamic art or at least the earliest one still extant, the famous Dome of the Rock (691-2 C.E.) in Jerusalem.<sup>316</sup> Although calligraphy involves intelligible meaning, its role in the Islamic arts blurs the boundaries between word and image and must be considered in some senses iconic. Serving as a way of inflecting buildings/space or objects, legibility was/is not always the first concern as many of the inscriptions are so decorative or are placed so high that the viewer cannot decipher them. Important to highlight is that religious inscriptions are signifiers but that their signified are not necessarily limited to the actual words and ideas depicted, but serve, again metaphorically, as “the visual body of the divine revelation,”<sup>317</sup> revealing how even text functions as a mediative veil. It is from this perspective that one must understand Gonzelez when she observes that, “it is primarily the entire aesthetic configuration of the inscriptions that activates their signifying potential.”<sup>318</sup> That the same applies to pattern is only logical.

While the primacy of script emanated from the *Qur'an* and its foundational role in Islamic theology and spirituality, all types of text and writing occupy, by analogy and because of the centrality of revelation, an equally honoured role in Islamic culture from *belles-lettres* through scholarship to secular inscriptions on architecture and *objets d'art*. The unspoken connection existing between the various modes of text again highlights the idea of layering and veiling that permeates the Islamic worldview and aesthetics. Regarding this relationship, scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr writes,

Although calligraphy has developed in numerous forms and has embraced functions and domains not directly related to the text of the Quran, something of this principal wedding

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<sup>316</sup> We know from literary sources that earlier mosques existed. The sites have either not been excavated or in the case of the most important one, the Prophet Muhammad's house/mosque in Medina (622. C.E.), it was completely rebuilt during the Umayyad period (661-750 C.E.) and has since been radically transformed and rebuilt.

<sup>317</sup> Nader Ardalan and Laleh Bakhtiar. 1973. *The Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, p. 45. The authors push the comparison even further, “Calligraphy is thus the visual body of the divine revelation, sacred in both form and content. Corresponding to the iconographic image of Christ in Christianity, this calligraphy embodies the Word and its very presence obviates the use of imagery.”

<sup>318</sup> V. Gonzalez. *Op. cit.* p. 99.



between calligraphy, which began in a purely Quranic context, and the spiritual substance of the Quran has survived within all aspects of traditional Islamic calligraphy.<sup>319</sup>

Gonzalez expresses the same idea when discussing a particular type of urban medieval pottery, Samanid (819/874-999 C.E.) white ware bearing aphorisms in sober elegant script,

Thus, as a site of reactivation of the primordial signification of the act of writing and the presence of writing itself, the Samanid artefact *a fortiori* conceals or emanates, like distant echoes, sacred or spiritual reminiscences....Indeed, it is quite impossible to pass over the fact that this artefact was conceived in an Islamic civilisational context in which, after spoken language, the graphic symbol is fundamentally the universal and visible location of an uncreated and revealed truth, the religious truth.<sup>320</sup>

The above citations serve to emphatically demonstrate the unique conception and power of the word in Islamic culture(s), a power that has endured to this day today. Calligraphy, like geometrical ornament, possesses the ability to transform an object and visually inscribe it within the spiritual and aesthetic meta-narrative of Islam. Both further probe and reveal the extensive connotations of veiling.

If the concept of veiling in Islamic art emerged out of metaphysics and historical spiritual and artistic practices, I argue that veiling and the veil metaphor came to form a central part of Islamic urbane culture shaping all cultural productions (poetry, dress, architecture, *etc.*). Furthermore, I put forth that these became and remain part of Islam-based cultures' cultural screen, continuing to inflect, in varying degrees, present-day experiences and definitions of vision, materiality, representation, and even beauty. A comparable proposition would be that the human-centred narrative central to historical Christianity elucidates in some measure the emergence of the privileged role granted to the notion of the individual in western culture and legal theory. It allowed for a linkage with Hellenistic ideas further strengthening the idea, and provided an essential philosophical underpinning for the precepts of Euro-American modernity and therefore secularism. In other words, I am concerned with how culturally-entrenched notions and ideals are translated through the lens of contemporaneity. The objective of this first section has been to enable

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<sup>319</sup> S. H. Nasr. *Op. cit.* p. 19.

<sup>320</sup> V. Gonzalez. *Op. cit.* p. 104.

sufficient cross-cultural literacy to induce analyses of contemporary examples of the veiling metaphor that move beyond deconstruction of Euro-American attitudes and to adduce how the rich metaphor possesses the potentiality to address contemporary concerns.

### **3:2: The Veil/Veiling Metaphor in Contemporary Practice**

The above discussion established the dominance of veiling in Islam-based artistic culture. Basing itself on the anatomy of the *Ka'ba*, it identified three dimensions of veiling in historical Islamic art but equally maintained that these remain relevant to contemporary praxis, opening up for the public new readings of actual works as well as of the veil and veiling more generally. The present section will engage in an examination of a small selection of works in light of the first and second dimensions of the veiling metaphor, namely the predilection of textiles and veiling as a central aesthetic strategy.

Veiling is central to Nuha Asad's (b.1983) recent photographs and performances. The young upcoming artist from the United Arab Emirates has exhibited twice at the Sharjah Biennale, both times from a series of photographs entitled *Faces with One Feature* (2004-05) (fig. 21). The large-scale colour images display groups of seated people whose torsos and faces are covered with a single long red satin cloth. Viewers, in their attempts to make sense of the image and 'see' the figures without having access to their faces, are obliged to observe the indicia that are apparent, hands, clothes and feet and to draw conclusions from their shape, colour, state, *etc.* The photograph reproduced here shows four people seated on mundane functional chairs in what can be construed as a neutral gallery space. The second person on the left is easily identified as a woman by her black *jilbab*, typical of and common in the Gulf region. The clothing and hands of the other three sitters reveal they are men. The one wearing a beige *jilbab* and sandals would seem to indicate that he, like the woman is of Emirati, background. The two remaining men are wearing shirts, pants and scuff or mud-marked shoes. The casualness of their clothes, the state of their shoes, and the colour of their skin intimate that they are workers. Anyone who knows the demographic reality of the U.A.E. whereby the majority

of the population are migrants workers or their progeny realizes that the artist has used the veil as a device to raise the issues of class, race and social diversity, still somewhat taboo topics in the U.A.E..<sup>321</sup> If the veil serves to highlight the differences between and the identities of the sitters, it concurrently acts to mark their basic human similarity as it covers the four bodies, uniting them in their difference. About *Faces with One Feature*, Asad states,

Essentially the people are equal, although they might differ regarding their origins, culture, economic situation, or social status. My work is about the humanity in us all, even though I don't aspire to erase the differences between us. Difference is a basic attribute of nature, and something that I accept while focusing on the thin line which separates our common humanity from our own cultural and social differences.<sup>322</sup>

Proving how location, here both cultural and territorial, shapes perception, the artist's view and use of veiling as that which reveals and unifies, is a complete reversal of the common Euro-American critique of the veil as a garment that both divides (people) and conceals (individuality). Even the title demonstrates the cultural differences with regard to vision and veiling as Asad refers to the sitters' faces *as if* they were visible corroborating the idea that from an Islam-based cultural screen, vision is relative because always mediated and because as Gonzalez states, "appearances are not realities, ... only part of them."<sup>323</sup> Veiling in *Faces with One Feature* carries a revelatory function as described in the previous section. Creating a disjuncture in the image, the red 'void' sharpens the reality and definition of the discernible in its attempt to reveal the image's subtext to the viewer. The visible and the *in*-visible are coterminous but here comment on social rather than metaphysical realities.

The fact that veiling in *Faces with One Feature* is meant to accentuate the diverse identities of the sitters while also covering their faces, possesses further implications. It connotes that the body is as invested a site of personal expression and identity as the face. This cross-cultural difference is also evident

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<sup>321</sup> As Haider writes, "Today, local Arabs only make up twenty percent of Dubai's 1.1 million residents. The remaining eighty percent are expatriates and migrant workers from [a] hundred and twenty countries." Deeba Haider. 2006. "The Transformation of Dubai: Turning Culture into a Theme Park." In J. Dakhli (ed.) *Créations artistiques contemporaines en pays d'islam. Des arts en tension*. Paris: Éditions Kimé, p.653.

<sup>322</sup> Quoted in Mahita El Bacha Urieta. 2005. "Nuha Asad: *Faces with One Feature*." *Universes-in-universe.de/islam/eng/2005/11/asad/index-print.html*.

<sup>323</sup> V. Gonzalez. *Op. cit.* p. 41.

in the early figurative work of Sabah Na'im (b.1967), an Egyptian artist increasingly visible in Europe. In a series of collages made from postcards and newspapers each as Marilu Knode describes "delicately worked with gold leaf to highlight gestural differences between people in crowded scenes," the artist covers the faces in order to point out the expressiveness of bodily gestures and "to direct our attention to reading other signs of emotion."<sup>324</sup> Jessica Winegar, discussing this particular series, reiterates the geographical differences with regard to veiling put forth in the present chapter, "Whereas in other contexts covering signifies negation, Naeem draws on a whole cultural complex (including veiling) in which covering illuminates important aspects of personhood while reserving privacy and respect for other aspects."<sup>325</sup>

If *Faces with One Feature* definitely hinges on the veil trope, Asad who like Na'im, wears a veil is adamant about the fact that the work is unrelated to the plethora of contemporary work now broaching the *hijab* testifying to how the notion of veiling is much larger than the question of women and Islam. If it is tempting to frame the work within the discourses on the women's veil, art critic Mahita El Bacha Urieta cautions the viewer against it,

Considering the context in which Nuha Asad lives, one is prone to compare her works with those of other women artists from Arabic countries or the Middle East, devoted to the theme of covering, veiling, and concealing women's faces and bodies. Only Nuha Asad is neither explicitly concerned with that, nor with the traditional black garments worn by women in this part of the world, but rather with general aspects of human existence. Hassan Sharif, the renowned artist and art theorist from Dubai, puts it this way: "...her work deals with an undercurrent, an invisible aspect of modern life: the often cruel and negative reaction to diversity. She criticizes this racism, ethnicism, and all the other 'isms' that describe prejudice and hatred based on race, color, class or any other morphological, cultural, social, political or economic differences."<sup>326</sup>

Jocelyne Dakhli, for her part, pointedly puts forward that, because the images include both men and women beneath the red cloth, Asad is able to move beyond the veil as a gendered referent or, in the author's words, "le seul plaidoyer pour la condition féminine."<sup>327</sup>

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<sup>324</sup> Marilu Knode. 2000 (July-Aug.). "Egypt in the Twenty-first Century C.E." *New Art Examiner*. [www.vnweb.wilsonweb.com/hww/results/results\\_single\\_fulltext.jhtml](http://www.vnweb.wilsonweb.com/hww/results/results_single_fulltext.jhtml).

<sup>325</sup> J. Winegar. *Op. cit.*

<sup>326</sup> Mahita El Bacha Urieta. *Op. cit.*

<sup>327</sup> J. Dakhli. *Op. cit.* p. 50.

Franco-Algerian artist Zineb Sedira (b.1963), now settled in Britain, produced *La maison de ma mère, Algérie* (2002) (fig. 22) for the City of Leicester Gallery's exhibit, *Fold* while in Algeria with her family. The twelve piece photographic portrait of her mother's house inscribes itself in a whole body of the artist's work both autobiographical and revolving around the theme of the veil. If the premise of the exhibit was "folds in draperies and cloth,"<sup>328</sup> Sedira has broached these through the adjacent concept of veiling. It is effectively the veiling, in tones of white, and central to each image that imparts visual and conceptual cohesiveness to the piece.

*La maison de ma mère* is a grid of square colour photographs with small spaces between them arranged into three rows of four images. Each row possesses a particular subject. The bottom one focuses on curtains. The images frame in diverse manners the curtains veiling different doors and windows and showing an array of designs and textures. Parted drapes open up onto the French doors' seemingly black window panes, a translucent lace curtain with all over patterning hangs in front of a dark window, a zoom-in of a slightly parted drape is seen through a small window pane from outside, and the folds of an embroidered curtain are overlaid with a repetitive pattern of shadow. All the images play with the optical dimension of veiling as a screen between the seeing in and the seeing out. Interestingly, in all four photographs, veiling, even when translucent, never allows the seeing through, and when, as in two of the photographs, the veil is lifted; the viewer is faced with a 'void' in the form of windows darkened either by night or by daytime reflection.

The photographs of the middle row all depict the artist's mother. The images, again isolated fragments, show glimpses of the mother's body - a shaded profile, a wrist, neck, or cheek- emerging from beneath her headscarf and semi-transparent white lace housedress, the veiling simultaneously dematerializing the body and intensifying the awareness of its materiality and presence. It is apparent in two of the photographs that the woman is standing, and in the other

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<sup>328</sup> Joseph McGonagle. 2006. "Translating Differences: An Interview with Zineb Sedira." *Signs* 31(3), p. 623.

two that she is lying down and yet the work Sedira describes as “a kind of kaleidoscope”<sup>329</sup> is not a narrative. The sequence of images and their multiple perspectives do not connote movements in time like a film. Rather, they aim at transcribing the complexity of reality. Veiling weaves the disparate fragments together into a type of portrait but one in which, because the permutations and limitations of representation are acknowledged, fixity of image and perspective are avoided. Subject matter and meanings are intimated and not stated because they cannot be; they lie outside of the image.

Close-ups of different facets -perhaps different rooms- of the house’s interior compose the top row. The lower half of a glass vase sits on a lace doily itself layered over a patterned cloth. A decorated polychrome china serving dish rests on a shelf draped in white lace. Flower-patterned bed sheets, witness to sleep, sit crumpled, and a set of colourful embroidered and fringed cushions are neatly piled up one on top of the other. They speak of ‘woman’s work,’ of the role of textiles in transforming a house into a home, and of a particular silence and pale light imbuing the home and many women’s lives. The images are more diverse and veiling is less pronounced than in the other rows.

Sedira, in *La maison de ma mère*, in order to eschew the limiting approximations of the image, claims the strategies of veiling, multiple perspectives, and partial views, as the aptest means to map the psychologically and emotionally charged subject of the mother and her home. If the portrait is therefore purposely composite and not optically rational and linear, a process of unveiling, a movement from the external to the internal, is nonetheless apparent when reading the image from bottom to top. The bottom photographs provide the frame and setting. They enunciate the liminality of the house, stating its boundary position between inside and outside. The central photographs announce and depict the core subject, the artist’s mother. While these are actual portraits of the mother, the upper images allude to her presence indirectly by witnessing and capturing her gestures. There is little to see in these visual traces of Sedira’s mother except for what is most crucial to the piece, the sensitivity of

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<sup>329</sup> J. McGonagle. *Op. cit.* p. 623.

the artist's gaze upon her. Again and enacting the veiling aesthetic, it is the trajectory from form to absence of form and the subtle evocations of images of seemingly 'nothing,' that best reveal the heart of an image's intent.

On the most literal level, *La maison de ma mère* recalls Golombek's notions of "textile mentality" and "textile metaphor." Traditionally in many Muslim homes, textiles provided not only the décor but actually constituted the sole 'furniture' in the form of rugs, carpets, cushions, and various other textile artefacts and they continue to predominate in furnished settings such as in Sedira's mother's house. More importantly as intimated above, veiling imparts unity to the photographic mosaic. That it naturally links the images of the artist's mother to those of the home bears out in the clearest, because visual, terms how the veil relates to veiling and to an overall aesthetic, in this case, the largely female aesthetic of the home -as opposed to the patriarchal structures of society- raising important questions regarding gender and aesthetics. Islamic art in its most urbane and sophisticated expressions never severed itself from what are called the minor or decorative arts, explaining why, despite the fact that Muslim women historically did not have access to all artistic media, it was never as gendered as Euro-American art and thus women-made artefacts co-existed harmoniously with those made by men. That a split in the arts into 'fine' and 'applied' never occurred equally clarifies why Islamic art never viewed the image or art object as the outcome of an encounter between a subject and defined object of its gaze thus avoiding the patriarchal appropriation and definition of visual expression that occurred in post-Renaissance European art. This substantiates the opinion put forth in the first chapter that those who view the veiled woman as inevitably oppressed –and those who impose the veil on women- are simply reproducing patriarchal models assuming the gaze to be male and its object female.

*La maison de ma mère* consists of a series of fragments visually unified by veiling. This conception of portraiture, consciously or not, relates to Islam-based notions of representation that envisage the static rational image as too fixed and incomplete, and that mark the veil *cum* void as signifier for what

cannot be represented within its confining boundaries. Something always escapes physiological vision, and it is these blindspots that are thought to confer fuller meaning. Sedira renders the depiction of her mother and her mother's home obliquely; the total image does not, in this case, equal the sum of its parts. The fragments demand assembly but not *into* a single-point perspectival image but *by* the subjective references and meanings their interstices provoke. Gonzalez's distinction between art that rests on the concept of "reference" as opposed to "subject [matter]" is here useful in its definition of the former as constituting a "*potentiality*."<sup>330</sup> This potentiality, multiple by definition and signalled by the gaps inherent to the veiling paradigm, considers translation and therefore locates itself outside of the image in the realm of the experiential, the subjective, and the mnemonic. It also designates intersubjectivity as space rather than image but one in which both the image and subject are produced. In *La maison de ma mère*, intersubjectivity concerns not only the relationship between the viewer and the artist and the viewer and the theme of the work but also between the artist and her mother. Sedira's art is rooted in autobiography, and from this perspective, the piece addresses and embraces her matrilineal and cultural lineage, both historically marginalized in Euro-American art. The artistic strategy of veiling (and voiding) has provided the artist with a cogent means of communicating the abstract dynamics and emotions animating the 'filial' relationship between mother and daughter. In this sense, Sedira's contemporary translation of veiling possesses a feminist inflection.

Iranian photographer Shokoufeh Alidousti (b. 1976), who resides and works in Iran, created a series of self-portraits (2003) (fig. 23) that is part of a well-curated travelling exhibit of contemporary Iranian photography, *Persian Visions* (2005-2009). The series of black and white images as Robert Silberman describes in the catalogue, "presents the artist veiled, seen largely as the intense black form of her chador with only a bit of her face showing in a corner (with

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<sup>330</sup> V. Gonzalez. *Op. cit.* p. 37.



lipstick, and therefore modern [*sic*]).”<sup>331</sup> The partial shots of the artist’s face are either frontal or side views. On the *chador*, the artist has attached one or more family snapshots. The viewer easily decodes these, identifying the artist, her children, her mother, her husband or the picture of the artist as a child. Their personal content, quotidian aesthetic and age sharply contrast with the rest of the hieratic images. The veil in the portraits, taking up most of the image, composes a visually abstract black field, in which veil and void are one. Intensifying the visibility of the visually legible, it underscores the contrast and aesthetic distance between the artist’s face and the family snapshots. Veiling here thus asserts the existence of different modalities of perception, representation, and reality. If it marks two levels of figurative representation, it does not explicitly declare their signification. Acting as interface, it also constitutes a third field of vision. In so far as it symbolizes the undeclared or un-signified tension set up between the different modes, it constitutes the cipher of the image, the decoding of which requires a preliminary and clear delineation of the two representational poles.

That the meaning of Alidousti’s self-portraits remains elusive is often attributed to the political control of art in Iran. Art critics generally interpret the images as veiled critiques of Iranian restrictions on women and representation, which may have been the artist’s intent, or at least in part. Silberman, posits the artist is concerned with “the issue of what can and cannot be shown,” because, unlike the *chador*-clad Alidousti, “the family snapshots are exposed to view and include images of her in less formal [unveiled], less partial views.”<sup>332</sup> William Ganis deduces that the representational tension “mark[s] the distinctive

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<sup>331</sup> Robert Silberman. 2005. “Essay.” In Hamid Severi and Gary Hallman (eds.) *Persian Visions: Contemporary Photography from Iran*. Washington, D.C.: International Arts and Artists, p. 22. The preceding chapter noted the confusion and conflation of feminism and cosmetics. Evidently cosmetics have been worn by women (and men) all over the world for eons, including in the Middle East. The point, I believe, the author was trying to make is that the use of cosmetics frowned upon and indeed forbidden by clerics of the Revolution signals that these particular images of a woman in a *chador* are not to be read as part of the enormous revolutionary visual lexicon. Both constructions of ‘woman’ are however modern. In fact, the Iranian Revolution is unthinkable without its main precursor, the revolutionary politics of the 1960s, in particular Third Worldism.

<sup>332</sup> *Ibid.* p. 22.

differences between the public and the private presentations of the feminine self.”<sup>333</sup> Roger Green equally views Alidousti’s family photographs as “testifying to her fuller identity” and relates the image of the veil to censorship, “Many pictures include bold areas of saturated or nearly saturated black....In these and other works, areas of black hover ambiguously between representation and abstraction, eluding the culture police.”<sup>334</sup>

I however argue that the visual ambiguity noted above, simultaneously proffers, even when one considers the political context of the images’ production, alternative readings. Furthermore, I propose that certain elements, the metaphorical power of veiling/voiding amongst them, prevent such an unequivocally unambiguous or monolithic reading. Silberman ends the catalogue essay by underlining the omnipresence and recurrence of the veil in the exhibit. It is here that he finally recognizes the polyvalence of the sign and its important pictorial and aesthetic functions. His conclusion –proving how exposure to alternative narratives of the veil can shift those of the Euro-American cultural screen- is helpful for deciphering Alidousti’s elusive self-portraits beyond the question of censorship,

The photographers in *Persian Visions* include some who in effect indicate a wish to remove the veil, to see behind the veil by using the camera as an instrument of exposure and revelation. All the same, the veil has its uses as a source of pictorial mystery and ambiguity, with layering and concealment not indicative of social or religious customs but elements of art. The presence of the veil then becomes a sign that the photograph is neither mirror nor window, neither a reflection of the photographer’s (or viewer’s) own position and preoccupations nor an unmediated, wholly transparent opening onto the world. The images that feature the veil acknowledge the complexity of representation....<sup>335</sup>

The author’s observations substantiate the central idea of the present chapter, that the veil and veiling in visual expression are intrinsically linked to a cultural conception of representation, one that recognizes its relative nature, the power of the unsigned, and the role of mediation. Silberman did not position

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<sup>333</sup> William V. Ganis. 2007 (May-June). “On Others’ Outlook: Persian Visions: Contemporary Photography from Iran.” *Afterimage*.  
[www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m2479/is\\_6\\_34/ai\\_n27276489](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2479/is_6_34/ai_n27276489).

<sup>334</sup> Roger Green. 2007 (Oct.). “Prints of Persia: Nuanced Visions of Life from Iranian Artists.” *The Metro Times Detroit*. [www.metrotimes.com/editorial/story.asp?id=11883](http://www.metrotimes.com/editorial/story.asp?id=11883).

<sup>335</sup> R. Silberman *Op. cit.* p. 49.

Alidousti's self-portraits in these terms, as he circumscribed their 'unsigned' to censorship and the veil. I however consider Alidousti's photographs through the lens of veiling, of "the complexity of representation," and in existential rather than political terms. I do not read the cropped face and the imposing veil as signs of the Iranian Revolution and its nefarious psychological and physical effects, nor do I perceive the family photographs as testimonies of the lives figuratively lost to or impeded by them. Worded differently, I view the photographs as self-portraits and not as statements of the latter's impossibility. In order to elucidate, I will deconstruct –but not deny– the censorship reading, before proposing an alternative. It must however be emphasized that regardless of how viewers interpret the self-portraits, veiling possesses the same function. Fracturing the integrity of the image, and denoting its multilayeredness, it equally, because here functioning simultaneously as void, inscribes the multivalent space of signification and mediation right into the image. It is this open potentiality of the veil that allows for multiple readings.

*Self-portrait #4* reproduced here is almost a black monochrome. In the triangle left uncovered in the top left hand corner, half of the artist's mouth, and a hint of her cheek and jaw line appear from beneath the *chador*. In the bottom right hand corner, the artist's hand sits atop the cloth and clutches a small photo booth type portrait of a young man in a suit whom the viewer infers to be an important man in Alidousti's life. In order to critique the veil, the ideal of the veiled woman, or government imposed restrictions on representation while still working within Iranian guidelines of representation, there has to be an element of incongruity, a visible twist, or a shade of irony, something that will call into question and subtly criticize the image of the veiled Muslim woman. Yet none of these subtexts is here present or blatantly obvious. The fact that the face hidden by the veil, but mostly by the boundaries of the photograph, is partial and that the veil is so vast may not necessarily be construed as meaning a woman's psychological confinement by the imposed veil. I propose that the image does not translate into a clear condemnation of the veil because of its aesthetic configuration. The image of the veiled woman is best described as

enigmatic, and therefore the viewer, although cognizant of the fact that it is Alidousti, asks him/herself who the woman is and what she means. Criticism restricts and defines an image rather than opens it up to interpretation.

The woman and her veil form a graphically beautiful image. The high contrast graphics, reminiscent of American early black and white fashion photography, and the richness of the black surface possess too much elegance to communicate criticism of the veil and its connotations in the Iranian context, especially as the image is meant to pale in front of the images taken from the family album. If beauty and mystery can sometimes constitute strategies of rebellion and resistance, the study contends that it is here not the case. The aesthetic sophistication of the photograph also thwarts another possible reading of the image as a coded critique. The theme of a woman in a black veil grasping onto the portrait of a male loved one recalls many images of the Iraq-Iran war or even those of conflicts elsewhere in the Muslim world with women brandishing usually worn and dated portraits of the war deceased and/or the disappeared. Yet here the face emerging from the *chador* does not evoke a mother's, sister's, or wife's suffering, rather, as stated above, it is inscrutable, and the self-portrait with its sense of conscious *mise en scène* does not possess the unbound emotion and rawness of the latter as in the photograph of an Afghan mother holding an image of her lost son (fig. 24). Nonetheless, the visual parallel raises the possibility that the family snapshots in the series, like those of the mourners, evoke memory. They portray the artist in different stages of life and the protagonists of her life, and like memory, they are discontinuous, a series of multiple fragments in which scenes and faces become condensed and powerful signifiers. Conversely, the veiled woman constitutes the constant element in all of the images. The motif of unity and diversity recalls Islamic art, premised on a conception of the world as multiple signs of an underlying unknowable unity. Alidousti's photographs structured on this schema have transposed it, the study maintains, onto the self in an attempt to answer the perennial existential question of 'Who am I?'

The images are self-portraits and both registers of the image therefore refer to different dimensions of the artist's self. From this perspective, the veiled woman represents the arcane or unknowable part of the self, and the difficulty or impossibility of understanding and naming its cohesiveness. Despite the fact that one often experiences the self as inchoate, contradictory, and evolving, the self is because it cannot be another. The snapshots projected onto the black screen formed by the veil, accept the impossibility of answering the question fully and unequivocally. Interestingly, most of the familial images are not of her, but of other family members, positioning self-identity and knowledge not in the realm of a separate ego, but in that of intersubjectivity. They tentatively assert the self's revelation to itself brought about by its interaction and intertwinement with others through love. Examined through veiling rather than through the veil, the self-portraits broach issues that are transcultural like autobiography, memory, time and generation. Because the woman's veil that so often signifies the impossibility of cultural translation is here steeped in a wider frame than sexual politics, it should in no way, and despite the rhetoric of reviewers, obscure the access of non-Iranian publics to the images. However, the various translations of Alidousti's photographs underscore the tenacity of the veil trope and the culturally different constructions of the gaze. If the artist has rendered the veil through veiling, readings are shaped by whether the viewer considers the veiled woman or the void of veiling, that is *the* veil or veiling, as the locus of the image, and by the nature of the viewer's associations with the veil and Iran.

The above analysis of specific works has demonstrated how the metaphor of the veil and veiling remains relevant to the context of contemporary artistic production and broader than issues of the *hijab* or gender more generally. In the works brought forward, veiling constitutes an artistic strategy capable of pushing the boundaries of the stable single-point perspectival image to signal the complexities and multiplicity of vision and experience. In association with the void, it provides meaningful visual and conceptual blindspots that obliquely situate the inner intent of the image outside of its boundaries in the realm of

mediation. Contextualizing the veil however, means not only widening the discussion to comprise the act or metaphor of veiling, but also, as will be discussed below, encompassing the metaphorical veils of text and pattern at the heart of Islam-based visual expression.

### **3:3 Text and Pattern as Veiling in Contemporary Practice**

Veiling as an aesthetic strategy implies a protean notion of both vision and representation. Its ultimate object of reference is that which escapes both. This holds true not only for the act of draping but also for the figurative veils of pattern and script, the two visual vocabularies engendered by the Islamic worldview that have come to be almost synonymous with Islamic art and its system of representation. Artistic enactments of the veiling metaphor, they posit a gap between surface and ground and privilege the space between the signifier and signified because the visible can never give full form to the unrepresentable or (its) subjective mediations. Calligraphy because of its intimate association with the Qur'anic text functions more obviously as a veil, as Muslims consider the latter a means of communication or a hermeneutic interface between the phenomenal and the noumenal. Geometric-based all-over pattern however also possesses veiling qualities beyond the fact that it visually drapes artefacts and buildings. Often profuse, it constitutes a mechanism creating a sense of dematerialization leading the viewer to a vision of the world as a set of fluctuating signs of a causal order. The fact that tessellating pattern by suggesting its continuation beyond the boundaries of the artefact or image, symbolically expresses the interconnectedness of things and beings (including the viewer/s) further consolidates the aesthetic experience of the world as a veil manifesting a reality that eludes physiological vision.

The present section will analyze a series of contemporary works having recourse to these two languages of visual expression intimately associated with Islam. It will articulate their veiling function emphasizing how the matrix of meaning and intersubjectivity is here as above situated in the interface(s) implicit to the veiling paradigm. As mentioned in the introduction, the discussion revolves around works by Shirin Neshat, Shirazeh Houshiary, and

Samta Benyahia and focuses on the new inflections they bring to the veiling metaphor. Before proceeding, it must be stated that if these two visual languages became for myriad reasons integrated in the first half of the twentieth century into the modern art idioms of the Muslim world, the artists discussed here are not considered as a continuation of this tradition. They are not preoccupied with rewriting the cleavage brought about by modernity into a historical continuity; nor are they centered on a discourse of cultural authenticity. All were born in Muslim-majority countries but presently live and work in western capitals. The process of negotiating biculturalism imparts to their work a particular prescient awareness of the politics of representation. Drawing upon both western and Islamic traditions, their practice will further confirm Daftari's claim regarding the role of contemporary women artists of Muslim origin in "developing new narratives that reconfigure and subvert the original idioms."<sup>336</sup> Interestingly in all the works broached, the hiatus engendered by veiling provides a space of transcultural communication, reflecting the original broad spiritual premise of Islamic art, which, because not based on religious narrative, is not denominational in the traditional sense, explaining why the many church or synagogue artefacts produced in Islamic lands in the style associated with these are very much part of the category of 'Islamic art.'<sup>337</sup>

Neshat's *Guardians of the Revolution* (1994), like most of the *Women of Allah* series, exhibits perfectly how script acts contemporaneously as a veil because, if its intent differs, it nonetheless relies on, in fact replicates, the same aesthetic system of signification as Islamic historical and/or religious calligraphy. As mentioned in the chapter's introduction, the artist's act of textual inscription overtop the photographic image creates four levels of veiling. It veils the image, it veils the meaning of the text for her mostly non-Persian speaking public, it veils the woman's body, and it veils (or delineates), I submit,

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<sup>336</sup> F. Daftari. *Op. cit.* p. 175.

<sup>337</sup> This internationalism of Islamic art reflects the spiritual premise of Islam that is in essence a method. The ultimate objective of the Muslim is to reconnect with or re-access the primordial spiritual religion (*fitra*) and spiritual state experienced naturally by un(self)conscious and/or non-human beings but for and towards which humans must consciously struggle.

a referent lying outside of the image. Recognizing that Neshat's work is wilfully polyvalent, the following discussion first articulates, citing from other sources, a number of ways of reading the work through the lens of text before putting forward a new interpretation that adds to rather than negates other interpretations.

*Guardians of the Revolution* (fig. 25) shows a woman's hands held together in the position of Muslim personal prayer, beautiful penmanship covers her palms. The text appears to be written on the woman's hands that take up most of the picture plane, but it is in fact inscribed onto the photograph by the artist herself. Above aimed at the woman and the viewer who stands in her place is the round cold hole of the barrel of a gun. Judging from the swath of black cloth/veil draping around it, a woman is wielding the weapon. The Arabic-looking text immediately identifies the scene as 'Islamic.' The photograph, upon the first reading, thus seems to confirm the double stereotype of the Muslim woman, both a victim and a perpetrator of religiously sanctioned violence. The women in the *Women of Allah* series as a whole bear all the necessary accoutrements, black veils, kohl and weapons, to exhibit violence and victimization simultaneously. Neshat generally portrays this contradictory co-existence in a single subject, whereas *Guardians of the Revolution* renders it in two, depicting a woman as the victim of another women's violence. That the image points to 'Islam' or its instrumentalization of woman as its cause exposes the problematic aspects of Neshat's work that have been discussed at length elsewhere. If many critics and publics have limited themselves to interpretations consolidating neo-Orientalist positions and perceptions, I maintain in line with many others and in spite of the work's essentialism, that further analysis reveals that the multiple layering operated by the text aspires in fact to deconstruct Orientalist readings.

The text handwritten in ink atop *Guardians of the Revolution* clearly marks two different modes and media of representation and sets up a tension between them. By confronting the viewer with untranslated or untranslatable calligraphy,



it prevents a simple reading of the photograph.<sup>338</sup> The space of the text, like a veil, impedes the gaze and fractures the image visually and conceptually signalling to the viewer its unreadability and hence his/her lack of access to the image.<sup>339</sup> In this vein, Lindsey Moore interprets the text as a critique of Euro-American ocularcentrism, handmaiden of colonialism in her eyes, describing its effect as “cancelling [Euro-American] connections between visibility, presence and knowledge,” and obstructing “the violence of that perspective.”<sup>340</sup> The tension between image and text, between legibility and cultural untranslatability, is thus deconstructive, aiming at subtly displacing stereotypical readings by destabilizing “the Western viewer’s already constructed viewing position.”<sup>341</sup> Both however represent not only specific modes, but also specific cultures of representation. Firat, while acknowledging that simultaneous modalities of representation within the same field of vision is a characteristic of Islamic art, aptly, in the case of *Women of Allah*, ascribes cultural identities to them, the perspectival image and looking to the west, and textuality and reading to the Islamic world. *Guardians of the Revolution* is bifocal and bicultural, and the veiling of text opens up a space between the two modes and cultures of representation challenging the truth with which we invest images and commenting upon how perception itself constitutes a veil because codified by collective cultural discourses, subjective temperament, and ideological location.

The calligraphy proffers yet another layer of meaning to the images’ biculturalism or double vision, as it confers different readings for different publics. Neshat’s viewing public is essentially western, critics arguing that the

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<sup>338</sup> Neshat’s essentially western but also global public does not generally read Farsi. It must be put forth that the tension between visual and cultural modes of representation is more salient in one of the most frequently reproduced images of the series, *I Am its Secret* (1993). The present chapter seeking to prioritize veiling over the veil and the veiling function of text purposely chose an image in which the *chador* or the exotic Muslim woman is not present.

<sup>339</sup> B. Ö. Firat. *Op. cit.* p. 209. As Firat states, “Shirin Neshat tries to give a voice, an image, and a date to the Oriental woman by writing over the cross-cultural tensions. Yet, this time, the viewer remains silent because she cannot give a voice to the unreadable handwriting,” p. 217

<sup>340</sup> Lindsey Moore. 2002. “Frayed Connections, Fraught Projections: The Troubling Work of Shirin Neshat.” *Women: A Cultural Review* 13(1), p. 3.

<sup>341</sup> B. Ö. Firat. *Op. cit.* p.209.

artist “not only produces in the West but also *for* the West,”<sup>342</sup> and the texts are rarely translated for the public who inevitably see them simply as ‘Islamic.’ The photographs therefore *translate* differently for viewers who read Persian or who are cognizant of the fact that the texts are not religious but poetic. The verses inscribed on *Guardians of the Revolution*, composed by a pro-revolutionary woman poet, Tahereh Saffarzadeh (b.1959), in fact praise the Iranian Revolution. The text in this case then posits woman’s authorship, agency and even role in the events of 1979, while the image concurrently tenders a severe comment on the post-revolutionary backlash against women, conferring an additional and feminist dimension to the unhappy marriage between the violence of the image and the traditional Islamic aesthetic experience offered by the calligraphy. Most of the images in *Women of Allah* however, bear texts written by pre-revolutionary poets, such as Forugh Farrokhzad (1935-1967) whose clearly feminist verse claiming both female emotion and desire, delineates more intensely the gap between the woman-authored text and the patriarchal image. From this perspective, the image recalls not only western representations of Muslim women but also those of the vast lexicon of Iranian revolutionary art; and thus in this reading, for the textually literate viewer, *Guardians of the Revolution* asserts how the Muslim and/or Iranian woman is misunderstood and stigmatized by her own as well as by Euro-American culture and its stereotypes. This double vision or critique afforded by a bicultural feminist position will be addressed more thoroughly in the next chapter.

The text however, does not only demarcate tension with and challenge the image, as they equally possess a space or point of contact. Firat aptly situates “the possibility of cross-cultural viewing positions at the intersections of the visual and the verbal, of looking and reading, of translation and unreadability.”<sup>343</sup> The scholar, in a discussion largely informed by Gonzales, recognizes that the Farsi calligraphy is here, as in Islamic art, essentially iconographic and that it proposes an alternative image or space that “opens up a

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<sup>342</sup> *Ibid.* p. 218, note 1.

<sup>343</sup> *Ibid.* p. 210.

scriptural space on the visual surface.”<sup>344</sup> The author, however, while recognizing the iconic function of text and the individual and collective evocations triggered by calligraphy for Muslim viewers, submits that it invokes, for the Euro-American public, mainstream perceptions of the Qur’an and Islam and thus acts as “a generic visual sign, much like the veil, and the gun.”<sup>345</sup> This proposition then considers that the space of the text in fact confirms a neo-Orientalist reading annulling rather than elaborating on her idea that Neshat’s inscriptions “encourage a diverse mode of signification.”<sup>346</sup> In simple terms, for Firat, text and image function for a western audience as projections of its stereotypical perceptions, but the interface between them opens up a space of possible if unsignified translation.

In contrast, I argue that the calligraphy because of its aesthetic autonomy from the image engendered by the veiling metaphor transcends stereotypical evocations even for a western public. It posits a medial space not only between text and image or ground (this tension is much more pronounced in other works such as the often reproduced *I Am its Secret* (1993)), but equally one delineated by the veiling effect intrinsic to the text. Calligraphy, I maintain, sets up a separate field of vision proposing an alternative image or space, but one, which directs the viewer, through metaphorical power, beyond its boundaries. Paralleling Islamic aesthetics, it draws the viewer, regardless of his or her cultural memory and who temporarily forgets the photographic image, into the visual realm of beautiful text, and more significantly into the interface or void between the sign and the unsignified it connotes. As previously noted, this space because unrepresented, constitutes the locus of self-reflective mediation and hence of meaning. The text both image and veil obviates the more usual relationships between signifier and signified, opening up a hiatus, and always locating –but not defining– the latter in an undefined elsewhere of the image or sign. Because the interstice provided by the veiling aesthetic is simultaneously

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<sup>344</sup> *Ibid.* p. 211.

<sup>345</sup> *Ibid.* p. 212. The author is basing herself on the fact that there is a contradiction between the choice of text, its aesthetic and the content of the image as shall be discussed below.

<sup>346</sup> *Ibid.* p. 211.

indeterminate but modulated by subjectivity, it provides a realm of possible intersubjectivity and thus transculturality. Stated differently, I put forward that the virtuality of the unsignified encompassing both the subjective and the collective provides the possibility of cross-cultural communication. The two functions of text accentuated above, or the two levels of interstice it designates –between image and text and between text and its implicit unsignified– substantiate the polysemous potentiality of the medial space; it here provides glimpses of both cultural intranslatability and translatability and suspends the viewer between the two.

Artist Shirazeh Houshiary (b. 1955) fully develops the transcultural potentiality of the veiling/void metaphor permeating Islamic art. Her work solidly anchored in both Islamic practices and artistic idioms renders them little evident, often barely visible, in her work, preferring instead to emphasize the uncircumscribed spaces or voids they open up. The progression from the specific to the general, sometimes visibly inscribed into the actual work, is a conscious act on the part of the artist. Inspired by Islamic mysticism or sufism (*tasawwuf*), and its quest of transcending binary categories and the contingencies of sexual, cultural, national and even religious identity, Houshiary's work aims at conveying the intangibility of the self "that is part of every one of us."<sup>347</sup> She describes the latter in terms that concurrently articulate with concision the double configuration of veiling, "We are the veil, but we are also the essence. This contradiction exists simultaneously: the warp and weft represent something that doesn't allow you to see beyond them; but at the same time, they allow you to see the beyond."<sup>348</sup> This notion of self equally relates to the artist's conception of art as a visual witness or witnessing of the unrepresentable conceived of in spiritual terms; she describes in effect the artist as "someone who is capable of unveiling the invisible, not a producer of art

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<sup>347</sup> S. Houshiary speaking with A. B. Morgan. In Anne Barclay Morgan. 2000 (Jul/Aug). "From Form to Formlessness: A Conversation with Shirazeh Houshiary." *Sculpture* (Washington, D.C.) 19 (6): 24-9. [http://vnweb.hwwilsonweb.com/hww/shared/shared\\_main.jhtml?requestid=8257](http://vnweb.hwwilsonweb.com/hww/shared/shared_main.jhtml?requestid=8257).

<sup>348</sup> *Ibid.*

objects.”<sup>349</sup> The above corroborates how veiling as a defining concept for both art and self is enmeshed with a conception of the world and a paradoxical relationship between the sign and the signified informed by Islam and Islamic metaphysics.

Houshiary is best known for her sculpture as the Anglo-Iranian artist gained acclaim as part of Britain’s New Sculpture movement in the 1980s. However, I will first turn to the graphic work and painting produced in the 1990s, and rooted in writing to continue and conclude the discussion on the veiling metaphor operated by text. This body of work exhibits a highly minimalist aesthetic blurring the boundaries not only of text and image but also of visibility and invisibility. Here it is text that actually constructs form and image only to be dissolved in/by them as it is consciously left semi-visible, illegible or is even sometimes erased. However, script here functions not only as artistic mark and method. The writing, consisting of the obsessive repetition of letters, spiritual words or prayers, is performative, repetitive, even ritualistic and has its origin in an Islamic spiritual practice, particularly emphasized in sufism. *Dhikr* is the repeated recitation of and concentration on particular formulas drawn from the *Qur’an* and the *sunnah* (tradition of the Prophet Muhammad) thought to purify the heart and elevate the soul in order to remove the veils separating the ego from consciousness of the Divine. Houshiary’s process of ‘embodied’ invocation, while claiming the image’s rootedness in text, acknowledges the former’s mediative instability therefore recognizing vision and its objects as sites of multiple fluctuation or progressive revelation rather than of subjective mastery and empirical certainty. Reviewer Tony Godfrey articulates how the artist conveys through a two-dimensional medium, the notion of vision, equally here related to knowledge, as a process of unveiling, when he describes a series of seemingly black on black drawings that, refusing the limitations of the bound and static image, reveal themselves in three stages or layers of visual apprehension,

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<sup>349</sup> [www.sculpture.org.uk/biography/ShirazehHoushiary](http://www.sculpture.org.uk/biography/ShirazehHoushiary)

At first glance these seemed to be black monochromes but as one got used to the low light level, there appeared on each a shimmering geometrical pattern or mandala like a cobweb or a ghostly Naum Gabo. Closer inspection revealed that each swirl was composed entirely of a single Persian letterform repeated thousands of times and that the ghostly effect was *the* sheen of the graphite.<sup>350</sup>

The logical outcome of the artist's disciplined, laborious, and perhaps trance-like process is the set of paintings done in the early 2000s exhibiting such subtlety that they are impossible or at least extremely difficult to reproduce. The large painting, *Unknowing* (2002), an almost two metre square canvas, appears *prima facie* a white monochrome. It is only with time and proximity that the various layers of the painting reveal themselves. The seemingly monochrome image becomes a breathing or pulsating light that appears to stabilize when a semblance of landscape emerges; the faintest horizon line appears created by a subtle pink hue above, and a subtle green below.<sup>351</sup> Upon further inspection, the viewer realizes that the image is in fact made up of thousands of Arabic letters that meticulously mark the finely sanded gesso surface in graphite. Houshiary, discussing another text-based piece, describes the method and intent of building an image from text and of re-enacting the creative act through *dhikr* in which the word dissolves to become image or presence,

To set out, I simply use graphite to write text. The text becomes the breath or the vibration I was trying to say with the word. So the meaning of the word disappears, all that is left is vibration or energy. I asked myself, what was it about creation that is so mysterious and so majestic? It is the word that creates the universe, there is no hand involved.<sup>352</sup>

Text, although almost imperceptible, here functions as a performative, sonant, and visual interface marking the isthmus between the phenomenal and the noumenal. However, the artist has opted to visually emphasize the void aspect of the veiling metaphor. As one curator observes, the artist in this body of work "moves from form to formlessness, from the word to the unutterable, from

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<sup>350</sup> Tony Godfrey. 1993. "Exhibitions of Contemporary British Sculpture. Birmingham, Dublin, Glasgow." *The Burlington Magazine*, p. 841. The exhibit in question was at London's Camden's Art Centre but was then travelling to Dublin.

<sup>351</sup> See Anthony Bond and Wayne Tunnicliffe (eds.). 2006. *Contemporary: Art Gallery of New South Wales Contemporary Collection*. Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, pp. 36-7.

<sup>352</sup> A. B. Morgan. *Op. cit.*

legibility to invisibility, from text to abstraction.”<sup>353</sup> Houshiary is confident that, through a process of detachment from its form, the intent of the text, of *dhikr*, transfers its power and meaning onto the visual plane and continues to activate the signifying potential of the painting. In its slippage from text to abstract image, the script attempts to image its unsignified. However, its visual translation equally constitutes but a metaphor of the medial space opened up by ‘*Unknowing*.’ The “formlessness” of the image is a symbolic partial visual transcription of the void produced by the veiling quality of text, the artist deliberately and visually accentuating the generic over the specific, the aim over the means. Consciously seeking, as she has often attested, not to divide the sense of spiritual oneness she hopes to convey and that she esteems above relative identifications including those of religious affiliation, Houshiary privileges the aspects of the veil devoid of identity markers. Because the text, and hence its cultural and religious identity, is largely masked, the artist articulates and underscores the transcultural nature of the ellipsis implicit to veiling. The same *modus operandi* is present in much of her sculpture, which I will now address to begin an examination of the metaphorical veil of pattern.

I will explore a piece in which, as in *Unknowing* examined above, Islamic references are present in only the most subtle of manners. When Houshiary’s sculptures moved from the curvilinear abstract shapes of the 1980s, to geometry in the 1990s, a number of her works made direct references to geometric patterns immediately associated with Islamic art. *Loom* (2000) (fig. 26) however originates in a much less known type of architectural ornament prevalent in the Muslim world that emerged in ninth-century Iran and Central Asia.<sup>354</sup> *Hazarbaf* or ‘thousand ropes’ refers to a technique of building or adorning structures with

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<sup>353</sup> F. Daftari. *Op. cit.* p. 185 Daftari appositely describes the dynamics of these works triggered by the relationship of the multiple markings with the white ground in terms that also capture the essence of the Islamic worldview describing how “the signs both emerging from nothingness and simultaneously melting back into it.”

<sup>354</sup> The title, *Loom*, most likely alluding to the spiritual metaphor of weaving, prominent in the Muslim world as in many other cultures, equally returns us to the veiling metaphor and its link with both creation and representation.

all over decorative brick work (fig. 27).<sup>355</sup> The sculpture that Houshiary erected right in the gallery space is an imposing, structurally complex, but visually simple 17-foot column of glazed brick whose twisted ribbed pattern seems to set the column in motion creating the effect of its endlessness. Daftari, because Houshiary's practice references both western and eastern artistic traditions, compares *Loom* to Brancusi's *Endless Column* (1937-1938).<sup>356</sup> However, the study situates the icon of Euro-American modernism, although a powerful work, more in the realm of ideas whereas *Loom* provides the viewer with the actual aesthetic experience of an infinite double movement continuing above and below (and outward and inward) the segment of column visible, thereby manifesting in more physical terms Brancusi's ambitious concept.

That the mathematics and boundlessness of pattern confer upon the column a very real sensation of movement recalls the earlier description of the role of pattern in Islamic aesthetics. *Loom* proffers a masterful example of how, by means of geometrically-based pattern, the static can become dynamic, the weight of matter be dissolved and form refer to the void. The large structure rather than evoke mass seems to have space as its core and to merge with the empty space surrounding it. The subject and meaning of the work lie in the viewer's mediation of this space or presence the sculpture denotes without naming, confirming yet again, how veiling as an aesthetic strategy and metaphor obviates the confines of visual representation by acknowledging both its limitations and its translation.

Anne Barclay Morgan rightly puts forth that Houshiary "seeks to embody spiritual processes in order to manifest... the dematerialization of form."<sup>357</sup> As in Islamic art, this does not denote a negation or condemnation of form/matter; rather the artist has succeeded in depolarizing binaries to reveal how they are in fact interdependent, form seemingly weightless and space seemingly palpable. The notion of the co-existence of opposites applies equally to the self and being,

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<sup>355</sup> F. Daftari links it, erroneously except for perhaps the spiral motif, with the Malwiya (848/49-852 C. E.) tower of the Great Mosque of al-Mutawakkil in Samarra. F. Daftari. *Op. cit.* p. 184.

<sup>356</sup> *Ibid.* p. 184.

<sup>357</sup> Houshiary quoted in A. B. Morgan. *Op. cit.*



the nub of Houshiary's essentially solipsistic work. Islamic mystical doctrine advocates harmoniously integrating within the self existentially experienced dualities. Even the visual parallels with scientific structures born out of Houshiary's interest in the nature of matter –Daftari compares the “movement in ... *Loom*” with “ the double helix, the twinned spirals of genetic material encapsulated in DNA” <sup>358</sup> - are subsumed or explained by the artist's incessant inquiry into the nature of being,

I understand why physicists become so obsessed. The journey to find out the nature of matter takes you to amazing places, because it is about going deep within your own being and trying to know what you are composed of. I'm not trying to understand who I am in relation to name, culture, and all that. Those things I can describe and understand and finish with, but I cannot understand the magic, the mystery of existence. I can feel it. The nature of being, of existence, is more powerful than anything I know. <sup>359</sup>

Houshiary's work is rooted in the spiritual and artistic vision of Islam. Faithful to the spiritual intent of Islamic art, she adopts its visual and procedural strategies but trims them down to their barest core features by privileging the void aspect of the veil paradigm, thereby avoiding that her work be confined or defined by culture and religion. The approach produces work that integrates well into the context of the Euro-American art world demonstrating how contemporary art is not restricted to or solely rooted in Euro-American preoccupations, concepts, and idioms. Houshiary's work, without confrontation and circumventing artistic ethnic ghettos, counters the assumed geography of modernity and its consignment of “the rest of humanity to antiquity and atrophy.”<sup>360</sup> The metaphor of veiling lies at the basis of Houshiary's practice as she conceives of art, the self, matter, and vision through its lens. Substantiating the contemporaneity of a perennial spiritual tradition, it witnesses how veiling can remain significant as a metaphor and strategy of representation imbued with metaphysical content.<sup>361</sup>

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<sup>358</sup> F. Daftari. *Op. cit.* p. 184.

<sup>359</sup> The artist quoted in A. B. Morgan. *Op. cit.*

<sup>360</sup> Olu Oguibe. 2004. “In “The Heart of Darkness”.” In *The Culture Game*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 4. Oguibe continues, “...so as to cast the West in the light of progress and civilization.”

<sup>361</sup> Houshiary's work has been the object of many reviews and publications and has been shown alongside such diverse artists as Sol Lewitt (b.1928), Annette Messager (b.1943), or Anish Kapoor (b. 1954). The sufi mystical inspiration of her work is openly acknowledged in the

Islamic geometric patterning or arabesque is clearly overt in the work of Samta Benyahia (b. 1950) and its prominence renders its cultural affiliation unmistakable. The Algerian born French artist generally employs fields of geometric tessellation printed on acetate to denote the *mashrabiyya*, the historical wooden lattice-like window screens of middle and upper class Middle Eastern and North African urban homes allowing women to see out without being seen. These form the central reference of her work further underlining the veil's general ubiquity in Islamic culture, as these constitute in effect 'architectural' veils. A *mashrabiyya* is in essence an ornamental screen; space or the void thus forms an integral part of its design. However, it designates like every veil a hidden space that here refers to the women's quarters of the home and hence equally to their presence. If the *mashrabiyya* constitutes a physical and practical translation of the veiling metaphor, one must note that it equally emerged out of the scopic economy not only of Islamic norms, but also of Islamic aesthetics. Benyahia who describes the symbol of the *mashrabiyya* in terms of "a way to meet, converse, to exchange,"<sup>362</sup> adopts it, as shall be evinced below, to comment on cross-culturality and gender.

The reference to the *mashrabiyya*<sup>363</sup> and to the notion of pattern as veiling is most salient in site-specific interventions in which the artist affixes all over patterning to transparent architectural elements (Fig. 28). For *Paris pour escale*, a group show mounted at the Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris, Benyahia installed a digital blue geometric tessellation on a window and an audio tape of text and sound alongside (fig. 29). The field of pattern of *Nuit du destin* (2000) transforms the space or more precisely the gaze. The fact that it

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artist's interviews and catalogues. However, as little, if any, scholarship has been devoted to the topic of contemporary artists inspired by Islamic mysticism and/or sufism, Houshiary's work has yet to be contextualized within this frame. If it must be recognized that Houshiary's and her work's affiliation to the Islamic tradition did not prevent her from gaining prominence, it must equally be remarked that sufism, although an intrinsic part of Islam, has never suffered from the same negative perceptions as does Islam more generally.

<sup>362</sup> Olivia Qusaibaty. 2007 (March). "Samta Benyahia: Architecture of the Veil."

[http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/isamic\\_world/articles/2007/samta\\_benyahia.](http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/isamic_world/articles/2007/samta_benyahia.)

<sup>363</sup> Although Benyahia cites the *mashrabiyya* as the reference, the type of geometrical tessellation she employs is less commonly found on the window screens than in architectural decoration proper.

veils a window as opposed to another surface is crucial as the viewer looks through rather than at the work, his or her view of the 16th *arrondissement* panorama inexorably filtered by the screen of pattern. One can conjecture that the window represents the eye (or the 'I') and the pattern its inevitable mediation; the window, like the gaze, is no longer transparent but admittedly culturally codified. Bailey and Tawadros equally interpret the work as provoking a reflection on the gaze and cultural screen,

Laid across glass windows and doors, Benyahia's vinyl abstract designs create a contemporary *mashrabiyya* inserted into the fabric of the interior space of the building. Falling like a physical veil across the viewer's line of vision, Benyahia's installations designate different spatial zones, demarcating new public and private spaces within the gallery. With Benyahia's abstract patterns in place, it is impossible to see the space unmediated. A veil has been drawn by the artist that makes us acutely conscious of the precise delineations of spaces. It also makes us profoundly aware of the process of seeing and its myriad mediations. It is possible, asks Benyahia, to see the world without the screen of social and cultural assumptions?<sup>364</sup>

Usually a border demarcating the public from the private sphere, the *mashrabiyya* here, by symbolizing the culturally constructed gaze that partitions space and discourse, traces a cultural geography within the physical space of the gallery. The artist has taken a symbol of the segregation of the sexes, the *mashrabiyya* and transformed it into one marking cultural difference and the cognizance thereof. Paralleling a strategy already encountered in Neshat and that will be specifically mapped in the next trajectory, Benyahia, by re-appropriating a sign of the Islamic world returns the gaze inciting the Euro-American viewer to become aware of his/her own cultural screen while also acknowledging her own. If veiling comprises a strategy to reveal the reality of individual and collective translation, it is in this case not only deconstructive because as I argue below it here comprises no tension or polarization. However, before proceeding it is important to stress that location obviously enables and/or inflects the piece, which would function or translate differently in a gallery space in Dubai, Karachi, or Shanghai.

Benyahia has brought into the Euro-American gallery space, a symbol of the 'Muslim' gaze, the implications of which become even more trenchant when

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<sup>364</sup> D. A. Bailey and G. Tawadros. *Op. cit.* p. 26.

one considers the colonial historical relationship between France and Algeria. The artist has introduced the excluded other gracefully by the simple gesture of tessellating pattern. If some critics like Jocelyne Dakhliia have reproached the reference to or re-appropriation of Islamic pattern as a “repli de la culture islamique,” or a “tropisme de l’essence culturelle,”<sup>365</sup> I contend that modernity’s dictate of precluding the past is at the very least problematic and that Benyahia’s use of the starry polygon motif, while unequivocally mnemonic, is nonetheless novel. If one considers it essentialist, it must be deemed an example of what Spivak calls “strategic essentialism.” The metaphorical nature of geometric pattern (pattern as veiling) and the double vision motivating her work look forward rather than back or rather dissolve the alleged polarity. The lens of pattern shrouding the museum window creates a new hybrid gaze as ‘eastern’ perception meshes with a ‘western’ object of perception. The new vision, neither eastern nor western, dissipates cultural borders, anticipating the next chapter’s discussion on hybridity as a postcolonial strategy. As the viewer looks through the screen of pattern at the Parisian panorama, he or she forgets the politics of geography and art and simply appreciates the new gaze constituted by the merging of the beauty of stellar pattern with that of Haussmannian architecture. The fusion emerging out of a productive tension also hints at common cultural roots. The patterned window equally reminiscent of the European tradition of stained glass, points to the often-ignored shared heritage of Europe and the Middle East. The veiling effect of pattern engenders a signifying interstice and hence also points to the possibilities of cross-cultural translation. Brought to the fore by the window’s transparency, it interrupts the

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<sup>365</sup> J. Dakhliia. *Op. cit.* p. 42. Dakhliia judges the use of Islamic geometrical pattern severely, On est en droit d’estimer que cette lecture par le motif (métonymique, omnisignifiant) consacre une forme de circularité; et donc de repli de la culture islamique, et qu’elle la fige, fût-ce pour l’interpréter, mais elle figure une tendance forte des productions contemporaines.

The scholar’s viewpoint once again underscores the cultural cleavage caused by colonialism and Orientalism. That the latter articulated the idea that calligraphy and the arabesque were the defining signs of Islamic art and that they were intrinsically spiritual in nature renders any similar notions expressed by Muslims to be viewed as mimicry of this discourse and/or as backward rather than modern. And so while Dakhliia’s comments may be pertinent to some facile work, I cannot accept it as a general rule.

process of vision opening up a space between looking and its object, the void referring to, as suggested earlier and similarly to Firat's analysis of Neshat's *Women of Allah*, the possible shared spaces of subjective and cultural mediation rather than to metaphysical realities. If the medial space is here, as in the works discussed thus far, more conceptual than physical, it takes on full three-dimensionality thereby making its function more explicit in installations where Behyahia physically enacts the *mashrabiyya* structure in the gallery.<sup>366</sup> In either case, the interstice comprises, as Ramón Tío Bellido puts forth, the space, in which the encounter with the other can occur,

...indicating that in order to pass from one self to the other, to make that journey, we must cross a no man's land, a courtyard or other antechamber, which is revealed as the true point of transition between the internal and external worlds. It constitutes a transitory space, in which we may establish relationships, meetings, dialogue or contact.<sup>367</sup>

The unmediated virtual referent of the veiling/void paradigm provides Benyahia, like the other artists discussed in the chapter, with a signifier signaling the lieu and possibility of transcultural communication. Knowledge of the narratives undergirding Benyahia's recourse to the one specific pattern running through her work confirms and enriches the cross-cultural relevance and reading of her work.

Benyahia's choice of motif, the "starry polygon," possesses several subtexts. French scholar Jacques Berque (1910-1995) considered the geometrical tessellating figure the quintessence of the Islamic arts and of Islamic culture as a whole.<sup>368</sup> Novelist Kateb Yacine (1929-1989), expands on the idea and in a

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<sup>366</sup> *Inside Memory* (1998) consists of a patterned tiled floor laid out in the gallery creating the sense of a room, at one end of which, on the wall hangs a life-size photograph of her mother in Algerian Berber (Amazigh) dress (unveiled) and at the other, stands a carved vertical wooden structure simulating a *mashrabiyya*. The piece is clearly making a statement about, and asking the viewer to experience the gendering of space and thus of the gaze. However, by giving the viewer access to both sides of the border, the spectator, able to look in and to look out, is more likely to perceive the woman as not only an object, but also as a subject, of the gaze. The study submits that *Inside Memory* also solicits the viewer to "re-examine and reassess" his or her assumptions and elicits through the medial space delineated by veiling a possible space of cross-cultural interaction.

<sup>367</sup> Ramón Tío Bellido. 2003. "Through the *Mashrabiyya* and Other Jalousies." In Gilane Tawadros and Sarah Campbell (eds.) *Fault Lines: Contemporary Art and Shifting Landscapes*. London: inIVA with the Forum for African Arts and the Prince Claus Fund, p. 123.

<sup>368</sup> J. Dakhli. *Op. cit.* p. 42. Dakhli writes that Berque, "y voyait le propre de la culture islamique, et de l'art de la brodeuse à celui du dinandier, en passant par l'art du tapis, un même

book actually entitled *Le polygone étoilé*, the motif constitutes as Gilane Tawadros contends, “a metaphor for a utopian political and social space in which ideological and cultural polarities are negated.”<sup>369</sup> Benyahia’s audio tapes accompanying her installations often consist of readings of the Algerian author’s work and at least one of her works makes a direct reference to the ideas found in Yacine’s text cited above. *Le polygone et le dédale*, a freestanding wooden polygonal structure dedicated to the writer and exhibited at the 2003 Venice Biennale,<sup>370</sup> employs the motif to delineate the limitations of cultural mediation proposing, as in *Le polygone étoilé*, a space beyond geographical categories in which “a multiplicity of viewpoints become possible at one and the same time.”<sup>371</sup> Yacine chose the figure as an emblem of universality because the “structure without a defined beginning or end” relates to the “vortex.” If he did not consider how the conception of the sign as unfixed and its signified as utopian unity was itself rooted in Islam-based culture, his idea that the void, the other side of veiling, offers a transcultural space forms the theoretical crux of the present chapter.

The omnipresent use of the starry polygon has a personal, although largely veiled feminist significance for Benyahia. Called Fatima, a woman’s name, in North Africa, the artist started employing it in 1992, “during Algeria’s ‘black years.’” Because women were the target of much of the violence, the artist felt compelled according to Olivia Qusaibaty, “to integrate a female presence in the installations.”<sup>372</sup> Knowing that the artist’s screens of pattern refer to the

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motif, celui du « polygone étoilé », lui apparaissant comme l’émanation essentielle de la culture islamique, jusqu’au roman moderne, jusqu’à Kateb Yacine. »

<sup>369</sup> Gilane Tawadros. 2003. “The Revolution Stripped Bare.” In Gilane Tawadros and Sarah Campbell (eds.) *Fault Lines: Contemporary Art and Shifting Landscapes*. London: inIVA in coll. with the Forum for African Arts and the Prince Claus Fund, p. 021.

<sup>370</sup> The geometrical figure determined the architecture, the motif of the stained glass windows, and the shape of the central basin. If the structure demonstrates a certain recognizable métissage, for example the windows whose Cistercian forms bear Islamic patterning, the sense of peacefulness imbuing it, created by the geometry, pattern, colour, light and sound, can certainly not be confined to a particular culture. In this particular work, Benyahia has privileged the content over the form of Islamic art although cultural affiliation remains more visible than in the case of Houshiary.

<sup>371</sup> *Ibid.* p. 021.

<sup>372</sup> Olivia Qusaibaty. 2007 (March). “Samta Benyahia: Architecture of the Veil.” [http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/isamic\\_world/articles/2007/samta\\_benyahia](http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/isamic_world/articles/2007/samta_benyahia).

*mashrabiyya* adds another gendered dimension. Veiling a museum window symbolically transforms the viewers into ‘Muslim women’ or at least acknowledges their presence. Benyahia has metaphorically brought into the museum those marginalized by Euro-American art and art institutions, and, as she contends, from Islamic art and society. In the pieces where Benyahia integrates huge black and white photographs of Algerian women, the return of the gaze, unpacking stereotypes and refuting the unremitting victimization of Muslim, is no longer only figurative.<sup>373</sup>

The above analysis further confirms Benyahia’s cognizance and perception of the transcultural nature of ‘Islamic’ pattern (after all it is just pattern), and more specifically of the unmarked wide-open mediative space it implies and produces. The veiling function of pattern coupled with its non-denominational nature offers the artist a potent strategy to address both the limitations of culture and the possibilities of cross-cultural consciousness, ever more pressing in the current geopolitical context. The artist, while claiming her own agency, reinscribes tradition to call into question essentialist views of both the east and the west and to take her place within the cultural legacies of both.

By shifting the focus from the veil to veiling in its analysis of contemporary art, the present trajectory has offered a first alternative narrative of the veil and demonstrated how veiling examined through a cultural screen rooted in Islam-based culture(s) displaces Euro-American mainstream stereotypes and reveals the rich potentiality of veiling as a conception of vision and representation.

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Benyahia is of course referring to the terrible bloodshed and strife that plagued Algeria after the democratically elected Islamist party (Front Islamique du Salut) was overthrown by the army most plausibly with the help of western powers. Although living in France from 1988 onward the artist, a former professor at the École des Beaux-Arts in Algiers, was well aware of the strife in which thousands of civilians including leading intellectuals, artists, and women were assassinated.

<sup>373</sup> The artist also weaves gender into her work by integrating various materials often associated with artistic forms practised by women. *La vie en paillettes* (2003), exhibited at the Musée d’Art Roger Quillot in Clermont-Ferrand introduced both sequins and tulle. It also presented a series of Fatima embroidered by Algerian women, revealing another means by which Benyahia is consciously rewriting women into Islamic culture and art. The use of textiles and embroidery is commonly found in the practice of many other and quite diverse artists of Muslim heritage, female like Ghada Amer (b. 1963), Emily Jacir (b. 1970), or Fatma Charfi (b. 1955) or male, the best known being Rachid Koraïchi (b.1947) and should be considered another subtext of the “textile metaphor” and trajectory of the contextualized veil.

What emerges from delineating the veiling metaphor intrinsic to Islamic art is the particular conceptual importance of the interstice or void integral to it, which, paralleling much contemporary artistic theory and praxis, considers mediation, reception, and the gaps in the processes of representation.<sup>374</sup> Interrupting and pointing to a signifier beyond the parameters of the aesthetic object and vision, veiling draws attention to the relative nature of both, therefore emphasizing neither the subject nor object of the gaze, but rather the process and fluctuating spaces in-between. These medial spaces, generally more metaphorical or ontological than visual, provide the possibility of a transcultural space capable of moving beyond binary colonial, neocolonial and even postcolonial models. All the works mapped as part of the trajectory of the contextualized veil, despite their tremendous differences, indeed call upon the potentiality of the interstice to convey the space of possible communication and negotiation. The works examined in the chapter do not all consciously address cultural mediation, yet all provoke through veiling an enabling rethinking of cultural assumptions, uncovering the limitation of one's cultural screen, whether eastern or western. The next trajectory that of the postcolonial veil, returns to the veil and maps work that directly contests, rewrites, and unravels colonial and neocolonial representations of the veil and/or Muslim women.

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<sup>374</sup> It is important to note that postcolonial theory like Islamic aesthetics, as shall be evinced shortly, equally puts forth the medial space as a possible space of cross-cultural communication.



#### **Chapter 4: Deconstructing Metonymy: The Postcolonial Veil**

Even for me such things as the veil, which I use a lot in my work, remains exotic. It is a charged and provocative stereotype. The first time I put it in a work, everyone reacted strongly. Why? It is not a question of what kind of meaning the image is transmitting but what kind of image the viewer is projecting.<sup>375</sup>

Shahzia Sikander

In that sense, when the work is “transported” to Europe (...), a double effort must be made: it is no surprise to anyone that the “West” already has a “system of reception”, a web of ideas about what the “East” is about, what it should be, and what it is expected to say, that is a direct descendant of the old Orientalist discourse that doesn’t seem to subside.<sup>376</sup>

Tony Chakkar

The second alternative narrative of the veil I have identified in contemporary art is referred to as the postcolonial veil, and I first tersely establish the parameters of this appellation before analyzing diverse works in which the trope of the veil is deconstructed and often even constitutes the deconstructive mechanism. While the chapter recognizes and emphasizes the particular role of feminist positioning in affording a critical distance capable of critiquing both eastern and western norms and representations, it is structured according to diverse postcolonial essentially deconstructive strategies operating in the work, all of which can carry a feminist inflection. Because the strategies reflect specific ideas articulated by Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha, each section will revolve around one of the three main protagonists of postcolonial criticism in Euro-America. The objective is obviously not to illustrate theory but to make sense of, and provide possible paths of entry into the plethora of representations of the postcolonial veil outnumbering by far all other types of images of the veil in contemporary art. It should also be reiterated that while the study’s focus is on women artists, it includes, as stated in the introduction, works produced by male artists when necessary for the sake of argument and exposition. This is the case for both this chapter and the next.

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<sup>375</sup> Shahzia Sikander quoted in Homi Bhabha. 1999. “Chillava Klatch: Shazia Sikander Interviewed by Homi Bhabha.” In Shahzia Sikander *Shahzia Sikander, The Renaissance Society, March 8- April 19, 1998*. Chicago: The Renaissance Society, The University of Chicago, p. 20.

<sup>376</sup> Tony Chakkar. 2003. “Critical Thoughts” [universes-universe.org/eng/content/view/print/402](http://universes-universe.org/eng/content/view/print/402).

Defining postcolonialism, which straddles multiple disciplines, geographies, and positions, has been at the center of myriad theoretical debates and arguments.<sup>377</sup> For the purposes of the present chapter, the term refers to, as Bill Ashcroft puts forth, the “struggle over representation” (and self-representation), and the strategies artists have devised to contest “the representation of the dominated by the dominant.”<sup>378</sup> Acknowledging the tremendous power of racist colonial and neo-colonial iconography on both the self-perception and perception of the postcolonial subject, the central interrogations of the chapter parallel those of postcolonial theory succinctly summarized again by Ashcroft, “How does the colonized subject ‘go beyond’ that representation? Is it by rejecting the dominant discourse or by appropriating it that the ‘cycle of freedom’ may be initiated?”<sup>379</sup> The trajectory of the postcolonial veil will examine these questions and attempt to elucidate some answers. While much of the work examined in the preceding or succeeding chapters equally qualifies as postcolonial, the present trajectory will limit itself to works that deconstruct, in a direct and visible fashion, the trope of the veil and of the Muslim woman, and with one exception, reproduce it to serve as the very device of deconstruction.

Recognizing the heterogeneity of methods of postcolonial critique and of postcolonial representations of the veil, the trajectory will map three different strategies allowing the artist/subject to challenge *visually* Eurocentric discourse

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<sup>377</sup> Young highlights the problem involved in its definition, “Postcolonial theory involves multiple activities with a range of different priorities and positions; there would be a particular irony in assuming that it possesses a uniform theoretical framework given that it is in part characterized by a refusal of totalizing forms.” Robert J. C. Young. 2001. *Postcolonialism: A Historical Introduction*. London: Blackwell Publishers, p. 64. Nonetheless some scholars have come up with simple and apt descriptions of the field in the Euro-American context, such as Gen Doy who writes,

Postcolonial criticism seeks to overturn the Eurocentric emphasis of colonial views of history which marginalized colonized countries and peoples, views which constructed them as the other half of binary oppositions, for example white/black, civilized/native, here/there. What was once marginalized has now been brought to the very centre of European academic discourse, as the postcolonial critic decenters the master narratives of Enlightenment thought which previously held sway over intellectuals, creative writers and academics.

Gen Doy. 2000. *Black Visual Culture: Modernity and Postmodernity*. London: I. B. Tauris, p. 205.

<sup>378</sup> Bill Ashcroft. 2001. *Post-colonial Transformations*. London: Routledge, p. 5 and p.40 respectively.

<sup>379</sup> *Ibid.* p. 40.

and its construction of the Muslim woman. Each articulation will analyze works from the perspective of one concept – in the case of Bhabha two – central to Said, Spivak and Bhabha,<sup>380</sup> namely contrapuntal reading, mimicry, the produced subject and hybridity. The objective of these admittedly overly schematic configurations is to provide a cartography of the postcolonial veil in contemporary art and not of the complexity of the postcolonial critics' thought especially a Said's, Spivak's, and Bhabha's positions and ideas shift, evolve, and despite their divergence, sometimes overlap. For example, if the second section links the strategy of mimicry to Spivak, it is nonetheless also important for Bhabha. Additionally, many of the works addressed in a given section often present aspects related to another.

The three deconstructionist positions manage differently a theoretical tension situated at the heart of postcolonial theory created by its rootedness in modern political ideas of individual and collective resistance and counter hegemony and its intellectual indebtedness to poststructuralist deconstructive notions of both the nature of the subject and of power. If the latter opened up new ways to think about the marginalized, it created a conundrum that equally affected the articulation of feminism,<sup>381</sup> namely how to envisage individual agency for a self/subject now considered a site shaped and produced by discourse and ideology rather than an effective agent, or to use Ashcroft's set of terms, "a 'centre' or presence' ... that made things happen."<sup>382</sup> Poststructuralism considers ideology/ies although productive of subjects, equally as fragmentary thereby problematizing a monolithic and binary understanding of the colonizer/colonized relationship, stressing instead their mutuality and

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<sup>380</sup> If all three are tied by their roots to specific postcolonial or colonial geographies, they are equally united by the fact that they are three renowned non-Western intellectuals who work/ed in large urban western centers raising the question of the 'location' of postcolonialism or its pertinence to the 'Third World.' Scholars residing outside of Euro-America often criticize postcolonial critics living in the west of being too theoretical and apolitical.

<sup>381</sup> As Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard remark, "The first casualty of poststructuralist gender studies was the possibility of women's agency." Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard. 2005. "Introduction :Reclaiming Female Agency." In Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (eds.) *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History After Postmodernism*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 1.

<sup>382</sup> B. Ashcroft. *Op. cit.* p. 24.

interdependence. While influenced by poststructuralist thought, Said's political and humanist positions allowed him to obviate this theoretical ambiguity. Spivak and Bhabha on the other hand have devised alternative conceptions of individual agency that consider these new theorizations. These divergent definitions of the subject and of the colonizer-colonized encounter shape the critics' proposed strategies of empowerment for the postcolonial subject and delineate the considerations of the chapter's following three subsections.

Edward Said upholds the capacity of the individual subject to counter, and reinscribe Orientalist discourse despite its ubiquitous underwriting of Euro-American "aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, and philological texts."<sup>383</sup> Said prescribes as deconstructive method what he calls "contrapuntal reading," by which he means a particular rereading of texts that makes their latent entrenchment in colonialism and imperialism manifest. The works broached in the chapter's first section in effect expose, through the process of rereading, and consequently reinscribing, the colonial and neo-colonial subtext(s) of Euro-American culture and discourse, although the three artists diverge in their choice of 'text.' Jananne al-Ani targets the European painting tradition and its image of the Muslim woman. The artist, with the simple gesture of adding an additional layer of image/text to Ingres' *Le bain turc* interrupts the viewer's reading of the 'masterpiece' and comments on the nexus between, culture, power, and patriarchy. Iranian painter Khosrow Hassanzadeh, in *Terrorist: Nadjibeh*, a large-scale portrait of his mother, challenges the stereotypical evocations of the specific term, "terrorist." The displacement operated by the intentional discrepancy between the term/title and the image of a veiled elderly woman equally posits that between Euro-American discourse and perceptions and Iranian reality. Rasheed Araeen's *Jouissance* equally targets western discourse but does so in a more overtly oppositional fashion. Appropriating the codes of advertising, news images, and modernist artistic idioms, it claims in the most biting fashion a contradiction between Euro-America's benevolent discourse and its political, economic and military

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<sup>383</sup> Edward Said. *Op. cit.* p. 12.

interventions in the Muslim world. The artist's postulate is summarized in the central image of the grid-based work, depicting with great irony stereotypes of both the western and the metonymic veiled Muslim woman.

Although advocating deconstruction, Spivak articulates the necessity of moving beyond counter discourse and the exposure of the problematic underpinnings of Euro-American discourse. Arguing that confrontation sustains colonial binarism, the critic proposes in its place, the strategy of reproducing master narratives in order to alter them from within. The distance inherent to her proposed method of "resistant mimicry" provides a space in which the "subaltern" subject can emerge and undertake a critique of both western and eastern representations and discourse. The second section examines works, which displace the trope of the veil by its subversive reenactment. Zineb Sedira's *Silent Witness* and Shadifarin Ghadirian's *Qajar* series re-inflect historical imagery, and deconstruct the veil through the performance of mimicry. The feminist reversal of the gaze operated in both probes simultaneously western and Middle Eastern confining definitions of the Muslim woman, while the fact that both posit resistance in terms of an embodied subjectivity located essentially outside the image challenges the stable codes of representation more generally. Spivak's notion of the "resisting subject," with which she replaced the idea of the cohesive centered self, best describes the agency permeating Sedira's and Ghadirian's works, both more concerned with targeting the power of representation than engaging in an affirmation of subjective identity.

The third section treats contemporary representations of the veil that reflect one of two salient aspects of Bhabha's thought, namely the notion of the subject produced through discourse and the concept of hybridity. If Spivak, despite her acceptance of the idea of a subject produced by discourse, nonetheless held to the idea of a "resisting subject," Bhabha came to fully endorse (at least early on) the poststructuralist idea of the subject produced wholly through language, discourse, and ideology. Mitra Tabrizian's *Surveillance* reveals the mechanism of representation and its role in producing and reproducing both discourse and

subjects. In the elaborately staged panoramic photograph, the woman's body, the veiled Iranian woman's body in particular, is put forth as a site or social text constructed by the disciplinary power of cultural ideologies and discourses.

Bhabha is best known however for his articulation of hybridity as a practicable strategy for the postcolonial subject to transcend and shift the binarism integral to colonial and neocolonial discourse, because, entailing a mixture of several traditions, it simultaneously privileges none and creates new forms of expression in which the critic sees the possibility of transculturality. The space carved out by hybridity, the "interstitial passage between fixed identifications"<sup>384</sup> that Bhabha identifies as the "Third Space," is of particular importance as it provides the postcolonial subject a site of possible enunciation and constitutes more generally the locus of meaning and hence intersubjectivity. Shahzia Sikander's *Uprooted Order I*, embracing, mixing and fracturing Hindu and Indo-Muslim painting traditions as well as western artistic idioms, exhibits hybridity and more particularly its deconstructive possibilities. The painting's dizzying layering of signs and references, because offering no single stable image or subject matter, identifies, as shall be deduced, the third space as the matrix of both the production and reception of art. The two veiled figures it depicts are themselves hybridized both stylistically and imagistically, thus unpacking the trope in the simplest of manners. The *burqa*-clad figures in Aisha Khalid's *Chandan Pani* equally demonstrate the displacing capacities of hybridity; seated upon and in fact merged with the Hindu lotus, they remediate and transform the veil. If in Sikander's work the veil is portrayed in a playful fashion, in Khalid's, it forms an ambiguous symbol, linked concurrently to erasure, silence, beauty, the impossibility of representation, and even I contend, to spiritual presence. Also particularly noteworthy is that *Chandan Pani* translates Bhabha's concept of the third space into actual spatial terms, plotted between two modes of representation, perspectival depth associated with the west, and the surface plane associated with the Islamic miniature tradition.

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<sup>384</sup> Homi Bhabha. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, p. 4.

#### 4:1 Deconstructing Through Contrapuntal Reading and Counter Discourse

Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) established how Orientalist discourse informed the production of knowledge in Euro-America and succeeded in othering the orient "whose very difference from the Occident helps establish that binary opposition by which Europe's own identity and cultural dominance can be shaped."<sup>385</sup> I have already conferred at some length on the role the east played in the formation of Euro-American self-identity. More significant for the present discussion, is that the seminal text formulated the intrinsic linkage between culture and power. The power relations that have afforded global authority to Euro-American discourse evidently underwrite consciously or not its representations of others and possess real repercussions because as Bill Ashcroft and his colleagues appositely argue, "to know, to name, to fix the other in discourse is to maintain a far-reaching political control."<sup>386</sup>

Sentient of the fact that cultural discourse circulates "not [the] "truth" but representations"<sup>387</sup> of "Orientals," Said prescribes, in *Culture and Imperialism*, as a means of deconstructing "the cultural archive," a strategy he calls "contrapuntal reading," by which he means a critical rereading of texts that reveal their imperial and colonial subtexts.<sup>388</sup> Elsewhere and similarly, he speaks of "the voyage in" that he describes as a deliberate attempt to "enter into the discourse of Europe and the West, ... to make it acknowledge marginalized or suppressed or forgotten histories."<sup>389</sup> The present section focuses in effect on works that, by bringing in another voice/"I," expose and therefore counter the hidden narratives and assumptions of Euro-American discourse and its cultural screen as a method of resistance to being the externally-defined object, as opposed to the subject, of representation. The confrontational –or counter discourse- aspect present in the work presumes, in varying degrees, the power

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<sup>385</sup> B. Ashcroft. *Op. cit.* p. 38.

<sup>386</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. 2000. *Post-colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. London; New York: Routledge, p. 169.

<sup>387</sup> E. Said. *Op. cit.* p. 21.

<sup>388</sup> See E. Said. 1993. *Culture and Imperialism*. London & Windus, p. 59.

<sup>389</sup> *Ibid.* p. 261. Quoted in B. Ashcroft. *Op. cit.* p. 48.

of individual agency.<sup>390</sup> While Said drew from poststructuralist thought, his conception of self remains beholden to the western humanist tradition as he himself acknowledges,

Yet unlike Michel Foucault, to whose work I am greatly indebted, I do believe in the determining imprint of individual writers upon the otherwise anonymous collective body of texts constituting a discursive formation like Orientalism.<sup>391</sup>

It is the dialectical opposition to hegemony inherent to the strategy of contrapuntal reading and imbuing the three works examined below that distinguishes them from those of the other two sections. In the examples chosen here, although this is not always the case in this type of deconstruction, the inscription of the othered “I” into the body of the text/representation and the exposure of subtexts constitute a single act. Stated differently, the artists’ imprint occurs more as an existential artistic act rather than as a manifest set of individualized visual signs.<sup>392</sup> The strategy permits Al Ani, Hassanzadeh and Araeen to concentrate on unraveling Euro-American discourse and its fixed representations of the Muslim subject, rather than on the assertion of self. If the last two works examined in the section employ the image of the veiled woman as a deconstructive mechanism, the first one unpacks the ‘artistic’ representation of Muslim women and involves the veil in a more indirect fashion as it concerns more essentially European artists’ musings behind the veil.

The work of Jananne al Ani (b. 1966), a half-English and half-Iraqi artist who resides in Britain, is informed by the process of living and negotiating biculturalism and addresses the issues of gender, identity, and historical representations. Her early photographic montage reproduced here, *Untitled* (1989) (fig. 30), transposes an image of a fruit market over the languorous

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<sup>390</sup> As postcolonial scholar, Moore-Gilbert explains counter discourse implies that power -and reactions to it- is not an “anonymous network of relations,” but “a conscious and purposive process governed by the will and intentions of individuals,” and “institutional imperatives.” Bart Gilbert-Moore. 1997. *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics*. London: Verso, p. 37.

<sup>391</sup> E. Said. *Orientalism*. *Op. cit.* p. 23.

<sup>392</sup> In many ways, Al-Ani’s and Araeen’s manner of answering back is in line with Spivak’s “resisting subject” or Bhabha’s produced subject discussed in the following sections, thus highlighting the interrelatedness of the various deconstructive strategies.



nudes in a reproduction of Ingres' *Le bain turc* or *The Turkish Bath* (1863). The visual metaphor is obvious, especially in the bottom left corner where grapefruit morph so entirely with the bathers that it is difficult for the viewer to distinguish whether the scene depicts deformed fruit or piecemeal bodies. The sign announcing the fruit and price covers the face of a reclining bather in the foreground while a bunch of grapes conceals the body of the central bather who is having her hair perfumed. Al-Ani has chosen to portray the painting backwards, marking another way she admits, of deconstructing an untouchable icon of European art.<sup>393</sup> The artist's simple insertion of an additional layer of image entirely interrupts the viewer's reading of the famous French painting and by extension western perceptions of the orient, Muslim women, and even art. Stated differently, the artist, by bringing in another voice challenging the author/painter and his assumptions, engages in a contrapuntal reading of *The Turkish Bath* that, as shall be revealed below, renders evident the beliefs structuring both the production and the reception of the painting. I will however, first examine the selection of the image.

Al Ani's choice of painting, the most renowned *hammam* scene in European art, is not anodyne. Combining "sapphism and voyeurism,"<sup>394</sup> *The Turkish Bath* shows over twenty women mostly seated or reclining, and although they are naked, enough are depicted in various types of headdresses to identify the picture as a supposed vignette of the Muslim world as does of course the bath setting that carries a particular importance. The women's baths because of the collective nudity were conflated in the west with the harem and therefore with sex, and that both were perceived ambiguously provoking both fascination and condemnation confirm as the study has already put forth, western perceptions of 'Muslim' sexuality were key to maintaining the Euro-American sense of

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<sup>393</sup> Personal communication, email from Al-Ani, May 14th 2008. Al-Ani informed me that originally the piece was part of a larger intallation with a willed kitsch aesthetic targeting famous female nudes and which sought to "evoke the supermarket in an art gallery setting." If the Ingres image was reversed to convey its reflection in a shop front window, the artist acknowledges that "the reversal was originally intended as an additional layer of deconstruction."

<sup>394</sup> Lynne Thornton. 1985. *Women as Portrayed in Orientalist Painting*. Paris: ACR Édition, p.74.

cultural and ethical superiority.<sup>395</sup> El Guindi links these two privileged sites of cultural difference with the veil,

... the veil has come to replace the earlier obsession with “harems” and *hammams*. “Harems” and *hammams* then and the veil now evoke a public sexual energy that early Christianity, puritanist Western culture, and contemporary elements of fundamentalist Christianity have not been able to come to terms with, comprehend or tolerate. In the West *harem*, *veil*, *polygamy* invoke Islam and are synonymous with female weakness and oppression.<sup>396</sup>

One may disagree with El Guindi’s view of the veil evoking “a public sexual energy,” but one cannot dispute the claim that the harem, *hammam*, and veil have all constituted markers of otherness and signifiers to disparage Islam and its oppression of women. The fact that *The Turkish Bath* and other paintings of this genre are exotic and/or erotic provides historical credence to Shirazi’s postulate cited earlier in Chapter 2 that the veil and Muslim women are represented differently according to the gender of their anticipated audience. While both male and female viewers can appreciate the painting, there can be no doubt that the image is structured by and assumes the universality of the Euro-American male gaze and definition of art. When art historian John Connolly puts forth that “Ingres’ harems represent, in an Aristotelian sense, the variety of sensory experience,” and that only the ignorant consider “these images to be tastefully displayed erotic morsels,”<sup>397</sup> he may be correct in his assertion that the artist was seeking in part to represent the five senses. However, he disregards the fact that the paintings reinforce the “dominant scopic economy,”<sup>398</sup> pervading Euro-American culture in which women have played a passive role in both vision and sensuality. Moreover, Connolly ignores

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<sup>395</sup> Lynne Thornton observes in *Ibid.* p. 72 that *The Turkish Bath* was painted in the 1860s during the “high-water mark of nineteenth-century prudery,” confirming the previously suggested relationship between sexualized representations of the Muslim women and nineteenth century sexual repression in Europe.

<sup>396</sup> F. El Guindi. *Op. cit.* p. 10.

<sup>397</sup> John L. Connolly. 1973. “Ingres and the Erotic Intellect.” In Thomas B. Hess and Linda Nochlin (eds.) *Woman as Sex Object: Studies in Erotic Art*. London: Allen Lane, pp. 23 and 25 respectively.

<sup>398</sup> Luce Irigaray. 1997. “This Sex Which Is Not One.” In Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina, and Sarah Stanbury (ed.) *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 250.

the fact that in these scenes the authority of the artist's gaze is granted not only by gender but also by race, religion and military and economic power.

Al Ani's humorous but incisive translation of the painting comments upon how both imperialism and patriarchy operate within and depend upon the same historically entrenched scopic economy. The additional layer of 'text' by drawing attention to the commodification of Muslim women evinces the patriarchy involved in the "worlding of the world" at work in the painting. The fruit overlaying the female Muslim bodies mark them as pleasurable but interchangeable commodities or in Rose Issa's terms, "*des biens disponibles et faciles à acquérir*,"<sup>399</sup> acerbically commenting on the colonizer-colonized relationship. Al-Ani's deconstruction of the image by underscoring how the painting and others like it have shaped western ideas of the east therefore acknowledges representation as a form of power and control. Shattering the image's confusion of fiction and fact, it stresses that the image depicts not a real scene, but rather Ingres' subjective projections and fantasies about the *hammam* and thereby about the world *behind the veil*. Lynne Thornton sets forth that during the time the aged artist was painting the scene, he "read and copied out" Lady Mary Montagu's description of women's baths in Turkey that emphatically stressed, "the fact that there was no impropriety amongst the large crowd of bathers," adding that "Ingres seems to have ignored this comment."<sup>400</sup> The anecdote bears out both Said's and Al-Ani's postulate that Orientalist representations of 'Orientals' are indeed to use Ziauddin Sardar's set of terms, "convenient fictions."

The clever transposition of a classical genre, the still life, over another genre, the nude, comments not only on the ploys of Orientalist imagery but also on the relationship between patriarchy and art. Women, like colonized subjects, are objects of the voyeuristic gaze. John Berger discussing the subtext of the female nude in western art expresses verbally what Al Ani has done visually, when he announces, "for Europe, ownership is primary. The painting's sexuality is

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<sup>399</sup> Rose Issa. 2003. "Les nouvelles Schéhérazade." In Patricia Almarcegui (ed.) *Fantaisies du harem et nouvelles Schéhérazade*. Paris: Somogy éditions d'art, p. 139.

<sup>400</sup> L. Thornton. *Op. cit.* p.72.

manifest not in what it shows but in the owner-spectator's (...) right to see her naked."<sup>401</sup> Linda Nochlin in fact uses the example of Ingres' painting to accentuate the fact that sexuality in nineteenth-century art was mapped by and for men, "Equally unthinkable would be such an egregiously unrealistic erotopia as the *Turkish Bath*, populated by sloe-eyed, close-pressed, languid youths, and painted by an octogenarian Mme Ingres."<sup>402</sup> By dislocating the gaze structuring the painting, Al Ani also unravels the assumed universality, objectivity, and definition of 'art' in the western historical tradition revealing how postcolonialism can, as Ashcroft *et al* contend, proffer, "quite new ways of thinking about the implications of the centrality of nudity in artistic traditions in Western Europe" by unpacking "the hidden codes and assumptions of the colonial powers and their traditions."<sup>403</sup>

Although the artist deconstructs a painting by means of a photograph, a medium often still more associated with objectivity than with subjectivity, *Untitled* does not only counter and comment upon macro-issues like history, politics, and gender. It also comprises a subjective aspect because in addition the piece aims at disentangling the artist's own self-perception and identity from the persistence of the neo-Orientalist gaze still cast upon her in twenty-first century Britain. In other words, the artist's 'speaking back' is reclaiming her own power as well, and not simply attempting to redress the stereotypes of Muslim women collectively. Al Ani's reinscription of an Orientalist painting articulates, as did Said so eloquently, that painting and other artistic *cum* fictional representations are not as innocuous and apolitical as they appear *prima facie*. As Sardar, in the same vein, asserts in his cogent book critiquing neo-Orientalist postmodern literature, "There is no vehicle more powerful for a

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<sup>401</sup> John Berger. 1972. "Past Seen from a Possible Future." In John Berger *Selected Essays and Articles*. London: Penguin, p. 215. Quoted in Linda Nochlin. 1973. "Eroticism and Female Imagery in Nineteenth-century Art." In Thomas B. Hess and Linda Nochlin (eds.) *Woman as Sex Object: Studies in Erotic Art*. London: Allen Lane, p. 14.

<sup>402</sup> Linda Nochlin. 1973. "Eroticism and Female Imagery in Nineteenth-century Art." In Thomas B. Hess and Linda Nochlin (eds.) *Op. cit.* pp. 10-11.

<sup>403</sup> B. Ashcroft *et al.* *Op. cit.* p. 185.

direct onslaught on the sacred territory of Other cultures than a work of fiction.”<sup>404</sup>

Khosrow Hassanzadeh’s *Terrorist* series (2004) also disrupts the automatic chain of significations but the silk-screened images on canvas target or ‘reread’ terminology rather than the painted image, although both *The Turkish Bath* and the term ‘terrorist’ evidently constitute representations deriving from Euro-American discourse informing art and the production of knowledge. Hassanzadeh (b. 1963) produced the series of larger than life-sized portraits of himself, his two sisters, and his mother to problematize the uncritical associations evoked by the word ‘terrorist,’ and more generally to counter the stereotypical largely neocolonial representations of Iran, Iranians and Muslims in the western media. The artist explains,

The series is the result of two years of thought, research and travel. It is a reflection of a world where the word ‘terrorist’ is thrown about thoughtlessly. What is a terrorist? What are the origins of a terrorist and in an international context who defines ‘terrorism’? The West, with its personal definition of terrorism, gives itself the right to take over a country, while in the Middle East the West is clearly accused of being a fully fledged terrorist.<sup>405</sup>

The images that seek to speak back, as Deborah Campbell writes, “by revealing the complex faces of real Iranians,” are accompanied not only by the title *Terrorist*, but also by “CIA-style ‘profiles’ that reject formulaic axis-of-evil labels,”<sup>406</sup> but nonetheless insist on the Muslim identity of the sitters. The counter-hegemonic aspect of the series renders them appropriate to discuss here, if other aspects exhibit characteristics broached in the following section. Additionally, because the female portraits, in order to displace a generalized term, present alternative visual narratives of the veiled Muslim woman, they may equally be mapped as part of the next trajectory and hence, they circumvent and transcend the binary thinking the series is exposing. That a portrait of a specific veiled Muslim woman subject actually constitutes the visual means of deconstructing neo-Orientalist discourse on Islam, is of

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<sup>404</sup> Ziauddin Sardar. *Op. cit.* p. 183.

<sup>405</sup> Khosrow Hassanzadeh. 2007. “How Did I Become a Painter?” In Mirjam Shatanawi (ed.) *Tehran Studio Works: The Art of Khosrow Hassanzadeh*. London: Saqi Books, p. 30.

<sup>406</sup> Deborah Campbell. 2005 (Oct.). “Unveiled: Can Iranian Artists Depict the Real Iran?” *Modern Painters*, p. 56.

particular importance for the study, an importance rendered more salient by the fact that as recent studies reveal, the terrorist stereotype is increasingly taking on feminine connotations. Only one of the portraits will be discussed, that of the artist's mother.

*Terrorist: Nadjibeh* (2004) (fig. 31) is a monumental painting of Hassanzadeh's mother, Nadjibeh. The elderly Iranian woman sits cross-legged on an Oriental carpet. She is wearing an Eastern European style of fringed floral patterned shawl over her head and everyday housedress made of fabric combining large floral and leopard skin motifs. A hint of her bare feet appears from underneath her dress. The hands resting on each knee are large and strong. Slightly hunched over, Nadjibeh nonetheless looks penetratingly at the viewer, neither friendly nor distant, but seemingly ready to both meet and assess him or her. The image grants the overall impression, heightened by the large dimension of the piece (320 x 220 cm), of an individual Iranian and female Muslim self, in effect starkly contrasting with the generic terrorist term and 'type.' Hassanzadeh has used the 'real' and the specific to undo western mainstream generalizations about Iran and Islam.

In the almost monotone background of the painting appears a host of signs and figures, which because they are disparate, each scaled differently, and rendered indistinctly like a photographic negative, evoke memory and identity. A robust man in a suit, striking an informal pose, stands on the woman's right, above him lies what appears to be a Qur'an or a religious inscription. Because the image constitutes a biography of sorts and the text accompanying the painting reproduced below emphasizes Nadjibeh's widowhood, the man who seems to be copied from an old photograph, is easily construed to be the woman's deceased husband. The other background elements consist of two images of bearded figures reminiscent of popular representations of Iranian pre-Islamic and Islamic *shi'i* heroes; one is a portrait adorning a type of recipient, the other, much larger, is an actual, albeit epic, figure riding a horse. If the background scenes afford additional context to Nadjibeh, they also play on essentialism; answering back to the terrorist charge, they nonetheless remain

couched in the terms of religious and national identity and as such are thus (re)claiming the right to self-representation. The artist, while depicting references to 'Islam' in order to challenge western views, is equally granting himself the right to operate within a system of cultural signs that possess different connotations within Iran and the Muslim world. The tag or text placed alongside the painting, evincing the same double-entendre, reads,

*Nationality:* Iranian

*Religion:* Muslim

*Age:* 84

*Profession:* Housewife

*Distinctive Traits:* Unusually tall for a Middle Eastern woman

*Personal History:* Widowhood at 50 years of age. Succeeded in raising six children alone and in difficult circumstances thanks to her deep religious beliefs. Lives in Tehran.<sup>407</sup>

The text bifurcates from mainstream narratives of *the* terrorist, and, although playing upon the related trope of Muslim religiosity, manages to narrate something of Nadjibeh's story within the anonymous format of official descriptions of the 'most wanted.'

Hassanzadeh offsets the erasure of the Muslim subject operated by the equation of Islam, Iran, and the veiled Muslim woman with terrorism, with the portrait of his elderly mother. The artist, by wittily but also poignantly interrupting the space between a textual signifier and its signified by means of a powerful image, draws attention to the often unconscious and uncritical ideas filtering Euro-American mainstream perceptions. In order to displace these, Hassanzadeh purposely appropriates in part artistic idioms of the Iranian Revolution (1979). The scale and silkscreen medium of the portrait, and the religious references hearken back to Iranian revolutionary art and aesthetics. However, Hassanzadeh cuts through both regimes of discourse and representation. He dislocates the ideologically constructed gaze not only by portraying, but also by monumentalizing individual subjectivity. The scale of the image forms in effect a significant aspect of the artist's strategy. Because it stands in stark contrast with the image's subject matter and manner of

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<sup>407</sup> Mirjam Shatanawi (ed.) 2007. *Tehran Studio Works: The Art of Khosrow Hassanzadeh*. London: Saqi Books, p. 126.

representation, it underscores the fact that the sitter's humanity and strength, conveyed essentially through her eyes and their unflinching gaze, do not stem from any ideological affiliation but from surmounting the existential challenges of life and survival physically inscribed on her face and body. Consequently, unlike the rewriting of *The Turkish Bath, Terrorist: Nadjibeh* moves beyond counter hegemonic deconstruction by imaging and proposing in lieu of the archetypal terrorist (or martyred hero), an-*other* self. In other words, the piece presaging the discussion on Spivak and the next chapter, is not purely deconstructive, reactive, and oppositional. Hassanzadeh states, "In Europe and America, people have simplistic notions about terrorism, no one talks about human beings,"<sup>408</sup> and indeed the artist's strategy in the series is to counteract the former by means of the latter. The artist set out to portray "the essence and humanity"<sup>409</sup> of his mother, and it is her larger than life embodied subjectivity that ultimately succeeds in displacing geopolitically-based binarism. Hassanzadeh puts forth the subject, the quotidian, and the familial, as sites of resistance. Like Sedira's *La maison de ma mère* introduced in the last chapter, the compassionate and sensitive -and again filial- eye/I constitutes a persuasive weapon in displacing stereotypes, revealing how subjectivity and positive intent (love) remain radical despite having been so often theoretically deconstructed and discounted.

While obviously appreciating both the painting and the artist, art critic Sohrab Mahdavi maintains that because *Terrorist: Nadjibeh*, unlike the artist's earlier works (fig. 40), is conscious of the western gaze, the self-representation apparent in the image is self-defeating as "the work can only become 'independent' if the artist's intended viewer is Western."<sup>410</sup> I admit that the

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<sup>408</sup> D. Campbell. *Op. cit.*, p. 56.

<sup>409</sup> K. Hassanzadeh. *Op. cit.*, p. 30.

<sup>410</sup> Sohrab Mahdavi. 2007. "Terrorist." In M. Shatanawi (ed.) *Tehran Studio Works: The Art of Khosrow Hassanzadeh*. London: Saqi Books, p. 124. Some might equally be tempted to accuse Hassanzadeh of falling into the colonialist trap by attempting to counter its discourse with the 'traditional,' which of course only winds up confirming western views of the unchanging non-modern east. However, I would argue that the painter is depicting his mother as she is, and not in order to produce a quaint scene of local customs. In other words it distinguishes Hassanzadeh's work from many twentieth-century Middle Eastern paintings of veiled Bedouin women, village scenes, *etc.*, centered on the concept and ideal of the "authentic."



strategy of escaping the western gaze by speaking to it (and in its language) often constitutes the problematic paradox of postcolonial critique and art. However, I submit that the artist has managed, in his aim at displacing the discursive authority of the west, to circumvent the pitfall through an affirmative voice/subjectivity, and in a sense autobiography, opening up, through the power of the real, an alternative way between competing hegemonic discourses, suggesting that *Terrorist Nadjibeh* can speak to a global, and not only a western, audience.

Rasheed Araeen's *Jouissance* (1993-94, 1, 80 x 2,20 cm) (fig. 32) is a more mordant work, and like Al-Ani's *Untitled*, relies on deconstructive irony. Cultural theorist Ziauddin Sardar best describes the set of images making up the piece,

...five photographs arranged in the form of a cross are combined with four 'minimalist' green panels. The cross and the colour green, which has strong association with Islam, represent the relationship between Islam and the west, the 'civilising' and the Other. Four photographs, taken from television footage, show a city being bombarded and destroyed. The centre photograph has a Muslim woman in complete purdah [*hijab* and *niqab*], but as her eye movement shows, quite modern for all that, being offered a cigarette by a glamorous white woman.<sup>411</sup>

The central colour photograph depicting both the metonymic veiled and western woman constitutes the cipher of the piece and is evidently the chief element of interest to the study. I offered a first analysis of it assuming that the image with its flagrant colonialism was a parody, a tongue in cheek montage Araeen (b. 1935) had produced, appropriating the stereotypes of media and advertising codes to comment upon western discourse and neocolonialism. However, much to my astonishment, the artist informed me that the image is an actual billboard advertisement that he came across in Cologne, Germany.<sup>412</sup> As noted above, it shows two women. The shorthaired smiling woman wearing a black dress or top symbolizes the west. She is leaning over in a seemingly friendly manner inviting the veiled woman to take a cigarette. The latter's thickly kohl-rimmed eyes and dark head and face veil clearly announces to the viewer that she

<sup>411</sup> Z. Sardar. *Op. cit.* pp. 199-200. Sardar does not mention that the grid system underlying the work/series emerged from the minimalist aesthetic of Araeen's earlier sculpture and production.

<sup>412</sup> Personal communication, email from Araeen, July 16<sup>th</sup>, 2008.

typifies the Muslim woman and by extension, the Muslim world. Sardar is accurate in observing the sense of contemporaneity the veiled woman's surprised gaze and informal stance conveys. At first glance, the photo in and of itself may appear to be of two women conversing and enjoying themselves. However, Araeen's appropriation and hence reframing of the photograph clearly exposes the fact that advertising images are never what they seem. Further observation of the image reveals "the brand name of the cigarette with which the woman in *purdah* [full veil] is being seduced...: 'West.'"<sup>413</sup> If the advertising agency somewhat unbelievably and in all seriousness produced the campaign image for *West* cigarettes, Araeen repositions and thus reinscribes the photograph rendering simultaneously both its subtext and the counter discourse proffered by *Jouissance* unequivocally overt. The discrepancy between the ostensibly benign gesture and the noxious nature and effect of cigarettes parallels the one Araeen posits between Euro-American discourse and its actions and effects on the Muslim World. The cigarettes connote not only the hegemonic aspects of Euro-American modernity and culture but also refer to, perhaps especially, the domain of foreign policy, political meddling, and military action, as evinced by the adjacent images of bombing reproduced from the evening news. Araeen's position on the contradiction between the west's discourse and its violent interventions in the Muslim world concurring with those articulated by Euro-American scholars generally associated with the political left are here not the concern. Rather it is the artist's use of the veil sign. Araeen has reproduced the trope of the veiled Muslim woman but displaces it by revealing its political underpinnings; both the adjacent pictures of real bombing and the French title hinting at the pleasure involved assert that western benevolent discourse often serves as a cover to justify aggression. The artist has appropriated a representation of the metonymic veil but only to unpack its constructed nature and the geopolitical interests it serves. *Jouissance* clearly exposes how as Said notes, "the will to exercise control on society and history has also discovered a way to clothe, disguise, rarefy, and wrap itself

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<sup>413</sup> Z. Sardar. *Op. cit.* p. 200.

systematically in the language of truth, discipline, rationality, utilitarian value, and knowledge.”<sup>414</sup> That both the east and the west are personified as women equally comments upon how, as has been reiterated throughout the study, woman and her body/dress have unfortunately constituted and continue to constitute the symbolic linchpin of competing ideologies and/or modernities. *Jouissance* like al-Ani’s *Untitled*, targets the power of the image and, more importantly, its subtexts and fiction(s). Because they both inherently recognize the role the image plays in shaping discourse and hence of the subject, they can equally be mapped as part of the chapter’s third section. Additionally, if the oppositional nature of *Jouissance* places the work squarely in the frame of the present discussion, the fact that the artist and editor of *Third Text* mimics the veil trope as a strategy of deconstructive subversion anticipates the next section, highlighting the coterminousness of the postcolonial trajectory’s sections or maps.

The analysis of the works above exhibits the wide parameters offered by Said’s method of contrapuntal reading revealing the variety of ‘texts’ it can address and the many ways it can effectively displace mainstream perceptions of the veil and of Muslim women. While there are other paths of entry into the works, the focus has been on their capacity to expose the subtexts of Euro-American discourse, thereby evincing how its authority can be challenged by individual agency. Al-Ani veils Ingres’ *The Turkish Bath* to uncover the codes constructing a canonized work of art’s representations of Muslim women, some still veiled despite their nakedness. Hassanzadeh and Araeen on the other hand, make use of the image of the veiled woman to expose the ideological thrust driving western discourse on Islam and the Muslim world. If the latter reinscribes Euro-American imagery subversively, the former answers back not only by deconstructing the trope but also by proposing in lieu of a faceless stereotype, the image of a real Iranian woman. That Nadjibeh’s presence

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<sup>414</sup> Edward Said. 1984. *The World, the Text and the Critic*. London: Faber, p. 216. Quoted in Benita Perry. 2004. “The Institutionalization of Postcolonial Studies.” In Neil Lazarus (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 69.

succeeds in dismantling the present day polarization existing between the west and Iran reveals the possibility of an oppositional model to transcend binarism. This is particularly important in light of the fact that critics have attacked the strategy of counter discourse, and Said's theory of Orientalism more generally, for replacing one dualistic model with another, thus further entrenching (neo)colonial binarism. The transformative possibilities of the strategy have also been construed as limited because oppositional resistance often repeats a similar notion of self-identity built on exclusion and assumes, as Ashcroft stipulates, that the "process of negation" of Orientalist constructions is sufficient for people "to become selves as opposed to the identity of mere others that they inherit."<sup>415</sup> While these criticisms are apt and constitute legitimate theoretical and philosophical concerns, they sometimes form part of a conscious and strategic attempt to depoliticize postcolonial theory.<sup>416</sup> I also submit that problematic culturally constructed perceptions must be exposed and acknowledged before being reassessed and transcended. More significantly, artists who in their work seek to oppose and disengage themselves from identities projected onto them from without, are producing work having emerged, in large part, from experience and not solely, if at all, from postcolonial theory. Araeen, to cite just one example, moved to Britain in the 1960s, where he continued to make modernist minimalist sculpture, hoping that England would be more open to his art than his native Pakistan. However, he soon realized that in the British art world non-western and modern/ist were mutually exclusive epithets, and thus Araeen, as he states, remained ignored, "my own work received no recognition, in spite of the fact that it was an

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<sup>415</sup> B. Ashcroft. *Op. cit.* p. 48.

<sup>416</sup> Some see in these attacks, especially vociferous against Said, a political agenda. After all, if all recognition or acknowledgement of antagonisms were to dissolve, the oppressed could/would no longer attempt to throw off the yoke of the oppressors (*i.e.* Algeria would not have gained its independence). In other words, the depoliticization of postcolonialism can be seen as conveniently dismissing the justification of resistance against very real exploitative regimes, colonization, and/or economic policies. My own view is that as long as north-south and east-west relations exist in their current state and imperialist discourse and representations persist, maintaining binary paradigms for purposes of analysis and redress remains necessary.

historically important British achievement.”<sup>417</sup> The point is that it is often the restrictive nature of the western gaze that provides the impetus for the emergence of postcolonial artistic counter discourse.<sup>418</sup> Therefore, while I am aware that this deconstructive method possesses limitations, I recognize the significance of, and cannot disregard this type of work often born from the very real experience of marginalization.

#### **4:2 Speaking (Back) From Within Master Narratives**

While Said accepts a conception of self in line with liberal humanism, Spivak disputes the premise of an undivided subject, considering the subject as postcolonial scholar Bart Moore-Gilbert specifies, “not innate or given, but rather as constructed discursively and therefore as inevitably ‘decentered,’”<sup>419</sup> although it is important to note in light of the works discussed below, that the Indian scholar nonetheless subscribes to the notion of a “resisting subject.” To resolve the theoretical difficulty posed by believing in a subject constituted through discourse while recognizing the postcolonial necessity of action that inevitably presumes individual agency, the critic devised the notion of “strategic essentialism” that equally sheds light on her concept of the “resisting subject.” Spivak explains, “even when we might believe that such things as “consciousness” or “will” are fictions, we will need –in order to undo the wrongs of history- to posit the actuality of their existence provisionally.”<sup>420</sup> Spivak’s notion of the subject is relevant in so far as it shapes her preoccupations with and ideas on the possibilities of representation and the

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<sup>417</sup> Rasheed Araeen. n.d. “From Innovation to Deconstruction: My Own Story.” [www.undo.net/cgi-bin/openframe.pl?x=Pinto/Eng/earaeen.htm](http://www.undo.net/cgi-bin/openframe.pl?x=Pinto/Eng/earaeen.htm).

<sup>418</sup> *Ibid.* Araeen admits this exclusion led to “a crisis in self-confidence,” and to the feeling that the formalism of minimalism could no longer “incorporate and express my lived social experience,” confirming again how counter discourse often emerges from real experience.

<sup>419</sup> B. Gilbert-Moore. *Op. cit.* p. 85. Moore-Gilbert adds, on p. 81, that Spivak’s theory of the subject is influenced by “the classical Marxist model of the ‘divided and dislocated subject’ (at the level of both individual and class identity) and on Althusser (in whose work the decentred subject is only held together, and given the illusion of free subjectivity, by the interpellation of ideology).”

<sup>420</sup> Spivak defines it as, “strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest.” G. C. Spivak. 1988. “Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography.” In Ranajit Guha and G. C. Spivak (eds.) *Selected Subaltern Studies*. London: Oxford University Press, p. 13. Quoted in Priyamvada Gopal. 2004. “Reading Subaltern History.” In N. Lazarus (ed). *Op. cit.* p. 147.

accessing of voice of those, especially female, subjects historically, discursively, and economically marginalized, or in her words, the subaltern.

If the subject is perceived as unfixed and fragmentary, so to is the ideology producing him/her, consequently preventing a stark dualistic understanding of the power relationships traced by colonialism and/or imperialism. Without denying the latter's negative impact and violence,<sup>421</sup> Spivak challenges, the clear-cut hierarchical divide between power holders and their subjects. From her perspective, the colonial legacy forms a part of the colonial subject and therefore cannot be separated from him/her, the colonizer forming a part of the colonized psyche and culture and vice versa. She emphasizes instead the cross-fertilization and cross-contamination that occurs/ed explicating why the critic, while advocating deconstruction as a vital postcolonial tool, insists it move beyond opposition and "the exposure of error."<sup>422</sup> Instead, the scholar proposes the strategy of "resistant mimicry," putting forth that the postcolonial subject reproduce and speak "from within master narratives," while simultaneously, Spivak insists, "taking a distance from them,"<sup>423</sup> in order to avert the circularity created by reactive strategies: "Without this supplementary distancing, a position and its counter-position... will keep legitimizing each other."<sup>424</sup> The act of mimicry implies and opens up a space between the mimicking subject and the

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<sup>421</sup> As Moore-Gilbert, while discussing Spivak, writes, in *op. cit.* p. 86, "To ignore the 'epistemic violence' involved in constituting the (post)colonial subject is simply to efface, in a naively utopian way, the long and violent history of the effectiveness of (neo-)colonial power."

<sup>422</sup> G. C. Spivak. 1996. "Bonding in Difference." In *The Spivak Reader*. New York: Routledge, pp. 27-8. Quoted in B. Moore-Gilbert. *Op. cit.* p.112. Moore-Gilbert distinguishes two types of deconstruction in Spivak. See *Ibid.* pp. 83-5. mg Spivak also argues, in line with Ashcroft cited in the previous section, that a critique of imperialism does not suffice to make the 'Other' into a self, because the discourse of imperialism always positions the colonized as 'Other'." See G. Doy. *Op. cit.* p. 208.

<sup>423</sup> G. C. Spivak. 2003. "Who Claims Alterity?" In Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds.) *Art in Theory 1900-1990*. Oxford: Blackwell, p. 1123. Spivak does suggest that an effective subversion of imperial hegemonic narratives is to "'plot a story' by using deconstructive methods (learned from European sources) to read texts 'against the grain'," a method that could be said to characterize Al Ani's *Untitled* described above.

<sup>424</sup> G. C. Spivak. 1988. "A Literary Representation of the Subaltern: A Woman's Text from the Third World." In G. C. Spivak *In Other Worlds*. London: Routledge, p.250. Quoted in B. Moore-Gilbert. *Op. cit.* p. 85. This position is confirmed by the history of the veil. As has been demonstrated, many Muslim regions or movements reacted to the west's insistence on unveiling Muslim women by overemphasizing or enforcing the veil, thereby allowing the west to confirm and maintain the trope and its evocations. In other words, that the veil became a symbol of resistance to the west further its role in signifying east-west polarization.

ironically referenced or mimicked representation, and therefore posits, like the aesthetics of veiling, albeit framed differently, the interstice as the locus of the subject and meaning. Betterton appositely notes how the interstitial space carved out by mimicry enables double vision, setting forth that for Spivak, the artist and therefore the subject intervenes, “in the space between the ‘gendered subaltern’ (...) and master narrative (the western tradition of art making) using the particularity of her own experience as a means of interrogating both.”<sup>425</sup> Spivak’s strategy for resolving the postcolonial and/or feminist struggle over (self-)representation offers the most effective analytical frame through which to examine and understand the process and method of resistance enacted in the works by Zineb Sedira and Shadafarin Ghadirian broached below.

From the 1990s until quite recently, the work of Zineb Sedira (b.1963) revolved around the theme of the veil, both literally and figuratively.<sup>426</sup> Sedira conceives of the notion of the veil and veiling in its widest sense. Echoing El Saadawi’s terminology but not necessarily the Egyptian feminist’s narrower ideas on the veil; the artist speaks of the concept of “‘veiling-the-mind.’”<sup>427</sup> Sedira’s conception of the veil transcends the sartorial to encompass the invisible veils we all wear, and that are manifest in our collective and subjective mediations of the world. If Sedira’s work confronts the Euro-American gaze with the veil it projects onto its Muslim others, it also involves a questioning of her own gaze and its cultural and subjective shaping.

*Silent Witness* (1995, 40 x 180 cm) (fig. 33) is a series of large black and white photographs mounted on white mat boards that the artist has sewn together. The piece sits like an accordion-type book on a glass shelf attached to the gallery wall at eye level. The images depict only the artist’s closely cropped and much enlarged eyes. They look upward and then downward, to the right and to the left, and then gaze straight at the spectator, before closing or blinking.

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<sup>425</sup> Rosemary Betterton.1996. *An Intimate Distance: Women, Artists, and the Body*. London; New York: Routledge, pp. 168-9.

<sup>426</sup> Sedira stated in a recent interview that she is no longer interested in working with the veil. See J. McGonagle. *Op. cit.* p. 625.

<sup>427</sup> See Zineb Sedira. 2003. “Mapping the Illusive.” In D. A. Bailey and G. Tawadros (eds.) *Op.cit.* p. 58.

The white mats deliberately frame the images as “an invisible veil,” evoking the white Algerian *haïk* in particular, or other forms of full veiling more generally. The veil is there only by inference; it is rendered precisely in what De Lauretis has termed the “space-off” of the representation that she describes as “the space not visible in the frame but inferable from what the frame makes visible.”<sup>428</sup> In *Silent Witness*, the photographs are not only framed in such a way as to suggest the veil, but the white mats situated in the space-off actually become the veil and thus part of the image, confirming De Lauretis’ idea that the space-off exists “concurrently” to “the represented space.”<sup>429</sup> Sedira’s rendering of the veil in the space-off accomplishes two things. First, it *visually* enables the strategy of resistance through mimicry as shall be explained further below. Second, it conveys that the artist is indeed commenting on “invisible” veils, those situated in the realm of discourse and (inter)subjectivity. In *Silent Witness*, a piece essentially concerned with the possibility of self-representation, the inferred veil is a double signifier standing in for the fixed perception and erasure of the western gaze as well as the internalization of circumscribing codes linked to her French Algerian upbringing.

For De Lauretis, the notion of the space-off is wide enough to include “the spectator,” meaning, “the point where the image is received, re-constructed, and reproduced in/as subjectivity.”<sup>430</sup> Considering the veil in *Silent Witness* from this vantage point, one can deduce that the veil’s location in the space-off is meant to further substantiate what has already been amply suggested, that the veil sign resides largely in the eye of the viewer when viewing Muslim women, veiled or not. If Sedira were not an Arab and/or of Muslim descent, and if the trope were not so ingrained, the viewer would not necessarily read it as such. Sedira has rendered and acted out the effect of the western gaze upon her, revealing to the viewer its confining nature, making him or her aware of his or her role in producing otherness and of the symbols through which it is specified and produced. That the veil in the work will effectively be read as a *contested*

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<sup>428</sup> T. de Lauretis. *Op. cit.* p. 26.

<sup>429</sup> *Ibid.* p. 26.

<sup>430</sup> *Ibid.* p. 26.



enactment of Euro-American othering will obviously depend upon the viewer's perception of and relationship to the veil sign, and/or the degree to which he/she integrates the discourse surrounding the work into the act of looking. However, *Silent Witness* equally criticizes the gender expectations affiliated with Algerian Muslim culture. Sedira has framed the photos in such a way that the veil seems to be physically preventing her from speech and therefore self-expression. As the artist, who discusses the 'veil' in terms of issues of both "censorship and self censorship," explains, "I never had to wear the physical veil, but I definitely wore the mental veil."<sup>431</sup> The veil censoring her and reducing her to a 'silent witness,' is therefore at the same time the one imposed from without dealt with at length in the second chapter, and the one imposed from within by the gendered expectations of being and behaviour learnt in her French Algerian Muslim family and community.

Sedira manages to simultaneously reproduce and resist the veils filtering perception and self-perception with the only means at her disposal, her eyes; not only by what Fran Lloyd calls their "public scale," but also, and especially, by their activity or more precisely their performance constituting a type of narrative. The contrast between the static flat white backdrop(s), and the sequence of eye movements as well as the three-dimensionality of the visible parts of Sedira's face displaces the imaged expectation(s) of *the* veiled Muslim woman by its incongruity and produces the productive distance or interstice afforded by mimicry in which the feminist postcolonial resisting subject signalled in large part by the gaze/eye movements appears. Sedira has managed the incredible feat of affirmation and resistance through the suggested small peephole of the *haïk*. The gaze's performance foregrounds the artist as subject/body, sending the veil(s) back into the space-off. It challenges the viewer's gaze by visually declaring that the Muslim woman is not simply the object of his/her gaze but a subject who can look back at the spectator as

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<sup>431</sup> Fran Lloyd. 2006. "Re-making Ourselves: Art, Memories and Materialities." In Fran Lloyd (ed.) *Displacement and Difference: Contemporary Arab Visual Culture in the Diaspora*. London: Saffron Books, p. 148.

spectacle.<sup>432</sup> Sedira's feminist and postcolonial appropriation and reversal of the gaze unmask and refutes externally and internally imposed self-definitions, and, more significantly, evinces the dislocating potential of the resisting subject. Worded differently, the artist, taking a distance and extracting herself from two cultural discourses having exercised power over her, is (re)claiming her self on the terms of neither by means of a bodily performance. Sedira, in *Silent Witness*, is in fact speaking back with her body, even though the only parts visible to the viewer are her eyes and their surrounding area.

The distance made manifest by mimicry between the veil/space-off and the subject/ photograph coupled with its performative nature also inflect the viewer's reading of the artist's body as subject. I submit that Sedira's eyes and their performance stand in for her entire body/self in a second parallel space-off. Here the fragment serves to symbolize the whole, corroborating De Lauretis' thesis of the space-off which, probing the difficulties of women's self-representation, maintains as Jayne Wark explains that, "women can represent themselves from within the chinks, cracks, blind spots, and marginal spaces of hegemonic discourses."<sup>433</sup> *Silent Witness* intimates that both embodiment and self are situated beyond the 'masquerade' of representation. It alludes to them without fully representing them, therefore implying that the female, here Arab-Muslim, self is located outside the image which, because of its gendered and colonial history makes the latter unrepresentable. The artist deconstructs entrenched regimes of cultural, social and artistic representation of and projection unto (Muslim) women. Astoundingly, it accomplishes this, thanks to the veil and the aesthetics of veiling which stress the non-locatable and intangible nature of the self, and which in addition prevent the scopic re-appropriation of the female subject. However, the idea transmitted by *Silent*

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<sup>432</sup> Lloyd writes, "In the context of the gallery (a space designed for the looking at objects) *Silent Witness* refers directly to the performative act of looking and being seen, and the accompanying contradictory play of subject and object." F. Lloyd. 2001. "Arab Women Artists: Issues of Representation and Gender in Contemporary British Visual Culture." *Visual Culture in Britain* 2(2), p. 7.

<sup>433</sup> Jayne Wark. 2006. *Radical Gestures: Feminism and Performance Art in North America*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, p. 181. Wark is referring to T. de Lauretis. *Op. cit.* p. 20.

*Witness* of Arab/Muslim female subjectivity transcending the various patriarchal regimes of representations is operated through a subversive repetition or re-enactment of them denoted by the referenced image or trope of the oppressed veiled Muslim woman.

The discussion above substantiates the important feminist and deconstructive possibilities of mimicry, whose role is, as Luce Irigaray suggests, “to make “visible,” by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: recovering a possible operation of the feminine in language.”<sup>434</sup> Here the language is visual, and *Silent Witness* in effect “recovers” the possibility of self-representation for the female non-western self, but the means by which it realizes this possesses additional deconstructive implications. The gaze, by revealing the artist’s status as subject rather than object dislocates the authority of the individual and collective “I”/eye that not only constructs the trope of the Muslim woman but equally defines the nature of the self and that of the art object. The artist’s eyes in *Silent Witness* are engaged in a bodily performance both producing and performing subjectivity recalling Amelia Jones who in her work on body art persuasively argues that work “produced through an enactment of the artist’s body” <sup>435</sup> unpacks the Enlightenment-based self, because it establishes “the subject as *intersubjective*,”<sup>436</sup> not self-sufficient but positioned in a system of relationships to/with other subjects/bodies. Sedira, by substituting in lieu of the art object another subject seals the displacement of the ocularcentrism of the modern self by shifting the emphasis from the subject and object paradigm based on sight to that of the experiential intersubjectivity of subject-to-subject relationships which eludes vision. The modernist viewer, whose sovereign self-identity is challenged, is thus himself/herself interpellated as a site of embodied subjectivity, the non-hierarchical spaces opened up between subjects suggesting “that the subject “means” always in relationship to

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<sup>434</sup> Luce Irigaray. 1985. *This Sex Which Is Not One* (trans. by Catherine Porter with Carolyne Burke). Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, p.7. Quoted in J. Wark. *Op. cit.* p. 159. Irigaray uses the term mimesis rather than mimicry.

<sup>435</sup> Amelia Jones. 1998. *Body Art: Performing the Subject*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 13.

<sup>436</sup> *Ibid.* p.10.

others and [that] the locus of identity is elsewhere.”<sup>437</sup> The dissolution of the traditional hierarchy between the viewer and the art object possesses obvious advantages for the postcolonial artist in general, and for Sedira in particular as both female and Arab-Muslim other. Jones’ idea on the effects of the resistance procured by the intersubjectivity implicit to embodiment deepens the understanding of the performative mechanism of mimicry, and confers an additional and relevant interpretive layer to Sedira’s *Silent Witness*. Even if the work, because of the veil and unlike most of the body art Jones discusses, does not involve spectatorial desire, it nonetheless points to the body as the site of a redefined resisting subject and posits the mediative space it opens up as the locus of the subject, intersubjectivity, and art.<sup>438</sup>

Iranian Shadafarin Ghadirian’s (b. 1974) studio photographs all portray women as the artist has up until now specifically addressed gender related issues, and lives and works in Iran. All of the sitters are veiled in part because of the country’s strictures,<sup>439</sup> and in part because it makes sense within the inner logic of the work such as the *Qajar* series (1998) which recreates Qajar era style photographs of Iranian women. The technology of photography penetrated Iran in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by means of European travellers, and thus the early photographs she mimics are already hybrid artefacts, revealing how cross-cultural interactions have always constituted an intrinsic reality of cultural productions. Ghadirian, who discovered the early photographic portraits in a historical archive while working at a photography museum in Teheran, was fascinated by the early images because up until the Qajar dynasty (1779/96-1925), “portraits were forbidden in Iran for religious reasons, so the impact of

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<sup>437</sup> *Ibid.* p.14.

<sup>438</sup> As Jones writes, “Body art confirms what phenomenology and psychoanalysis have taught us: that the subject “means” always in relationship to others and the locus of identity is elsewhere.” *Ibid.* p.14.

<sup>439</sup> See Louise Baring. 2007 (April 28<sup>th</sup>). “Confusion in Sharp Focus.” *The Daily Telegraph*. [www.telgraph.co.uk/core/Content/displayPrintable.jhtml;jsessionid=4](http://www.telgraph.co.uk/core/Content/displayPrintable.jhtml;jsessionid=4).

While it is true that these involve not showing “a woman’s hair, let alone physical contact with a man,” the artist has stated elsewhere that working with women is a choice, “I just work much better with women. Especially seeing as I invite them home to my studio, I’m more at ease.” M.S. (no name indicated). 2000 (13 May). “Interview with Photographer Shadafarin Ghadirian.” *Bad Jans: Iranian Feminist Newsletter*. [www.badjens.com/secondedition/shadi.htm](http://www.badjens.com/secondedition/shadi.htm)

these photographs on 19<sup>th</sup>-century Iranians was enormous.”<sup>440</sup> The plate-glass visual documents inspired the artist. Seeking to appropriate their imagery and aesthetic, she recreated a Qajar photography studio by painting a period-style backdrop in her Teheran home and by borrowing or making the appropriate costumes.<sup>441</sup> The humorous black and white images depict one or more female sitters in Qajar dress and pose. However, Ghadirian introduces into each seemingly authentic historical image produced in actual Qajar era photographic technique, a modern artefact, a vacuum cleaner, a ghetto blaster, a can of Pepsi, a mountain bike, or a contemporary intellectual Iranian newspaper. The photographs contrast and draw parallels between past and present, and east and west in order to highlight, as Bailey and Tawadros contend, “the latest stage of cultural and technological exchange in the new global economy,”<sup>442</sup> and in the words of the artist, “the confusion of Iranian women, many of whom can’t say to which era they belong.”<sup>443</sup> Although Ghadirian’s statement is problematic in so far as it reproduces the geographic chronology established by western discourse, I submit that the images, because they engage in a double critique by means of subversive mimicry, rise above the problems associated with the sole reproduction of Euro-American discourse, outlined in the second chapter.

One of the images, *Untitled* (1998, 75 cm x 50cm) (all the images in the *Qajar* series are untitled) (Fig. 34) portrays a woman seated in a French-style armchair placed atop a traditional *kilim*. The painted backdrop shows a section of a *trompe l’oeil* painting of patterned fringed drapes opening onto a window overlooking a landscape with a white-flowered plant in the foreground. The woman is wearing puffy satin pants, drawn in at the ankles, covered from above the knee by a tunic type top bearing a paisley pattern. A plain white *hijab* pinned under the chin hides her hair and falls over the woman’s shoulders and chest. She is holding the Teheran newspaper, *Hamshari*, open on her lap as if to

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<sup>440</sup> Shadafarin Ghadirian quoted in L. Baring. *Op. cit.* This is not quite true as portraiture was already practised during the Iranian Safavid dynasty (1501-1722/36) and even earlier, although the question and history of portraiture in the Islamic arts remain beyond the scope of the study.

<sup>441</sup> D. A. Bailey and G. Tawadros. *Op. cit.* p. 27.

<sup>442</sup> *Ibid.* p. 27.

<sup>443</sup> Ghadirian quoted in L. Baring. *Op. cit.*

read it, and yet the sitter looks into the camera and thus at the viewer in a direct and sustained manner. The added artefact in this case, if an insignia of modernity, is not as directly linked to the west as for example, a can of Pepsi. In fact, only historical examples of the east-west global exchange are present in the image. The art and taste of the Qajar dynasty, akin to the neighbouring Ottoman and Mughal dynasties, were very much influenced by Europe explaining the rococo style of wall painting and the European style of armchair (printing like photography also penetrated from Europe). However, if here, the newspaper's Farsi print can locate the image, it is the woman's veil, as throughout the whole *Qajar* series, that unmistakably declares its geographical and religious affiliation. The jarring combination of an apparently historical photograph and Muslim female sitter with a modern-day artefact disrupts a straightforward reading of the image revealing its uncanniness and disclosing that it is not what it initially appears to be. The disjuncture, forcing the viewer to scrutinize the image more carefully, points to and accentuates the space (and time) opened up by mimicry and masquerade. The distance/space situated between the sitter's presence/body and her appropriated representation is further underscored by the aesthetic quality and historical technique of the image, as shall be further articulated below.

Ghadirian produced the incongruous juxtaposition to transmit, as she states above, the competing ideologies/chronologies experienced by contemporary Iranian women. If the artist's recourse to the veil emerged out of her specific context, and signifies (along with the other references to the past) a symbol of reactionary laws and norms regarding women in Iran, the women's dress can equally be interpreted, when viewed in a Euro-American context, as reproducing western perceptions and representations of Muslim women as static and non-modern. As in *Silent Witness*, the trope of the veiled woman can reference her reification in both western and Muslim geographies. Focusing solely on the visual references to the past, of which the veil is indubitably a central part, would lead one to conclude, like Carly Butler, that, "these works serve as a reminder of the oppression of the past and its close proximity to the

present.”<sup>444</sup> However, this reading restricts the piece to counter discourse, whereas I argue that *Untitled*, like *Silent Witness*, portrays and enacts female resistance to oppression through the reversal of the gaze, what Ashcroft and his co-authors describe as “the displacing gaze of the disciplined, where the observer becomes the observed.”<sup>445</sup> The uncanny quality created by the veiled woman’s unusual role as active subject rather than passive object of the gaze and representation is further stressed by the modern artefact; the woman ‘despite’ her dress often associated with backwardness and illiteracy, is not only literate, but reading the avant-garde pro-Khatami newspaper of the 1990s started by Tehran mayor Qolamhosein Karbaschi.<sup>446</sup>

Ghadirian reverses the scopic economy informing eastern and western representations of women in general and of Muslim women in particular and, equally like Sedira, accomplishes this visually through the performative process of mimicry. The sitter’s gaze, by its intensity and the photographic medium, proffers to the viewer the feeling of being looked at, drawing the viewer into the image and further stressing its incongruity remarked upon above. The defiant expression heightens the image’s discrepant chronologies and strategically identifies for the viewer the sitter’s alignment with the newspaper in the domain or category of the ‘modern.’ The configuration is further developed visually, and again in a similar manner to *Silent Witness*. The whiteness of the *hijab* in the Qajar-style image constitutes a seemingly flat plane paralleling the flatness of the *trompe l’oeil* backdrop and even the one conveyed in the lower half of the image by its darkness and lack of contrast.<sup>447</sup> The flatness of the veil is produced not only by its colour but also by the contrast set up between it and the three-dimensionality of the sitter’s face, and between the apparent flatness of the image as a whole and the newspaper seemingly placed perpendicular to it. From this perspective, the power of mimicry becomes fully perceptible, and the

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<sup>444</sup> Carly Butler. 2001 (Feb. 1). “Transplanting: Iranian Women’s Increasingly Sought after Art.” *The Iranian*. [www.Iranian.com/arts/2001/Feruary/Toronto](http://www.Iranian.com/arts/2001/Feruary/Toronto).

<sup>445</sup> B. Ashcroft *et al.* *Op. cit.* pp. 228-9. Here the authors are in fact discussing Bhabha’s conception of mimicry.

<sup>446</sup> V. Porter. *Op. cit.* p. 106.

<sup>447</sup> This was pointed out to me by Dr. Christine Ross during a conversation on April 17<sup>th</sup>, 2008.

space it opens clearly distinct; the sitter suddenly appears to be peering out from one of those painted images found in bygone city fairs depicting different personages but leaving holes for the sitter's face and hands, although here holding a 'real' newspaper. The sitter, at least her face and hands -as her body is in effect rendered in a space-off here located behind rather than beyond the image- and the newspaper convey through their three-dimensionality and hence material reality, both their location in the contemporary and the women's agency. As in *Silent Witness*, the performed and resisting subject refers to a largely hidden but implied embodied subjectivity, but in Ghadirian's image not only is the evoked embodiment/body put forth as a site of resistance but also the intellectual acts of which it is capable.

Sedira's *Silent Witness* and Ghadirian's *Untitled* not only demonstrate the tremendous possibilities of transforming dominant discourses from within by means of resistant mimicry, they in fact further develop and inform the strategy, the visual medium allowing the artists to fully challenge the viewer and exploit the deconstructive possibilities of charting both representation and the subject as process and performance. In both works, the Muslim female subject signalled by her veil finds a place for representation within the "marginal spaces of hegemonic discourses" and systems of representation, a particularly enabling space for the feminist postcolonial subject. With only her eyes -and in the case of Ghadirian also the face and hands- imaged, the resisting subject remains somewhat -at least visually- elusive, situated in a space-off or interstice between "the gendered subaltern" she replaces and "the master narrative" she reproduces. The image of the veil in the two works somewhat paradoxically, but as articulated in the preceding chapter, actually assists in locating the subject, because un-representable, beyond the frame, in the elsewhere of the image. Additionally, if reified and used as a sign to engage in critique, the artists obviate reproducing *the* veil by the critical distance from hegemonic discourses afforded by the strategy of mimicry.

Before proceeding to the next section, it must be set forth that if the danger of the postcolonial strategy outlined in the chapter's first section lies in its



reactive polarizing nature, the risk here is that the subtle double irony may be missed by viewers due to the blinding nature of the metonymic veil. For example, if Ghadirian is of her own admission, not specifically targeting the veil, her work, because its representation of the sign can be construed as a symbol of critique, has sometimes been censored in Iran (although not the *Qajar* series). The same reductive misunderstanding of her work (and of Sedira's) also occurs in Euro-America, viewers often reading the images as examples of the contemporary dress of Iranian woman. Even more confirmatory of the synecdochic power of the veil and the problem of translation lying at the heart of this enquiry is the remark a spectator made looking at one of the *Qajar* images in Toronto's A Space Gallery. Oblivious to their feminist subversion, he blurted out, "Wow, what irony. It's not fair. Just not fair. They're not even allowed to go to school over there are they?"<sup>448</sup> Nonetheless, putting forward that difficulties in translation affects the arts *intra*-culturally and not only interculturality, I argue that both Ghadirian and Sedira, in the works examined above, have succeeded in subverting master narratives from within in order to claim a space for the postcolonial female Muslim subject, historically and contemporaneously othered both within the Muslim world and Euro-America.

#### **4:3 The *Produced* Subject and the Novel Space(s) of Hybridity**

Homi Bhabha also sought to dismantle the binarism contained in colonialist, anti-colonialist, and often, postcolonial discourse while equally avoiding reproducing the western humanist notion of the sovereign subject. If Bhabha later, as Moore-Gilbert puts forth, "rereads Lacan through Slavoj Žižek to suggest that there is, in fact an irreducible element to identity,"<sup>449</sup> the idea of the produced, rather than innate, subject permeates his work. The concept of the subject as a site shaped by dominant discourse(s) and ideology if troublesome when espoused too exclusively<sup>450</sup> remains very useful for understanding and

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<sup>448</sup> C. Butler. *Op. cit.* This one-dimensional type of reading also occurs in the case of Sedira's work.

<sup>449</sup> B. Moore-Gilbert. *Op. cit.* p. 126.

<sup>450</sup> Ashcroft and co-authors draw attention to the theoretical difficulties, noting that if the subject is purely produced then it calls into question the efficacy of "the deconstructive critic," and more significantly, point out that, "the process of subject construction through discourse can be

thereby unpacking the ways in which discourses mold subjects and exercise power over them. The issue here is obviously not to broach the strengths and weaknesses of the idea, which would necessitate an entire separate study, but to recognize how it has, because of the existing interrelationship between power, discourse, and the image, served many contemporary artists and informed their work. If I have included such a discussion here, it is because it imparts insight into, and supplies a framework of analysis for a number of representations of the veil in contemporary art. The chapter will examine but one work structured upon the notion of the discursively produced subject. Mitra Tabrizian's panoramic photograph, *Surveillance*, depicts the veiled woman as a subject constructed by Iranian revolutionary discourse, and very appropriately, in light of the present section, the pedestal on which she stands bears a quote from Bhabha that will be cited further below. The image enacts, in order to deconstruct, the mechanisms and reproductive power not only of discourse but also of photography, thereby underscoring their vital intersection.

Bhabha is indubitably best known for the concept of hybridity which, obviously referring to the mixture of cultural traditions, possesses a host of considerable implications. Put forth as a means of problematizing the binary framework in which the colonizer-colonized relationship is generally conceived, hybridity privileges instead their encounter and cross-fertilization. The space(s) opened up in the contact zone, at the meeting points of different traditions and cultural affiliations, what Bhabha refers to as the "in-between" or the "Third Space," notions obviously enmeshed with and integral to that of hybridity, carry particular significance.<sup>451</sup> For the critic who considers that the postcolonial and/or bicultural subject is constantly produced in the interstitial space(s) of his/her multiple identities, the third space forms the site of enunciation, meaning, intersubjectivity, and even transcultural communication. Bhabha sets

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recognized and therefore contested." Bill Ashcroft *et al.* *Op. cit.*, p. 225. And indeed for Bhabha, as for Spivak, accounting for or theorizing agency proved difficult. It must however be noted that Bhabha, like Spivak, sought alternative articulations of agency outside the frame of the humanist subject. I am of the opinion is that acknowledging both the innateness and the production of the subject is a perfectly tenable position.

<sup>451</sup> As B. Ashcroft *et al* put forth Bhabha argues that "the production of meaning in the relations of two systems requires a 'Third Space.'" *Ibid.* p. 61.

up the heterogeneity of subjects and cultures, not only because it reflects the protean reality of the postcolonial subject, but also because it collapses the artificial divisions propped up between cultures enabling difference to operate, unlike in colonial and neocolonial discourse, non-hierarchically.<sup>452</sup> Stated differently, Bhabha postulates that hybridity, by dissolving the ‘west and the rest’ paradigm, destabilizes the authority afforded by geopolitics to Euro-American discourse and culture, and offers the possibility of new transcultural forms of expression, which, because belonging to no one specific tradition in particular, can speak to several.<sup>453</sup> The notions of hybridity and its implicit third space are here important because they provide a lens through which to read a certain type of *re*-presentation of the veil in contemporary art. In Shahzia Sikander’s *Uprooted Order I* and Aisha Khalid’s *Chandan Pani*, both identifying, by means of their stylistic hybridity, the third space as the locus of meaning, the veil is itself hybridized. I will engage in an analysis of these works in an attempt to articulate the relationship of the veil sign to both hybridity and the third space. First, however, I will turn to a work putting forth the veiled woman as a subject produced through discourse.

Mitra Tabrizian’s *Surveillance* (1988-90, 300 x 120 cm) (fig. 12) is an elaborate mise en scène tracing, through three main scenes, the history and advent of the Iranian Revolution. The large panoramic photograph, as put forward by Bailey and Tawadros, “engages with the icon of the veiled woman ... but this time from the vantage point of post-revolutionary Iran where she is emblematic not of ‘despised difference’ but of victory of Islamic values over Western values.”<sup>454</sup> The central scene depicts in effect a veiled woman standing on a pedestal on which is carved a somewhat elliptical citation from Bhabha on the religiously justified and patriarchal violence of history. The citation that sets the scene reads, “In His name, memory is mute. History speaks in the

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<sup>452</sup> B. Ashcroft *et al.* *Op. cit.* p. 118.

<sup>453</sup> Bhabha is not only concerned with the colonizer/zed binary but also “the exoticism of cultural diversity” and the ghettoization effect of multicultural policies prevalent in Euro-American metropolitan centers. *Ibid.* p. 118.

<sup>454</sup> D. A. Bailey and G. Tawadros. *Op. cit.* p. 26.

quickenings of the dead.”<sup>455</sup> The middle-aged woman, designated as the protagonist by the pedestal and text, is devoid of make-up or any other artifice, and is wearing the plain black *chador* associated with the revolution, as is the pre-adolescent girl on her right looking up at her. On her left, figures a young couple. The late adolescent boy/man, dressed in army fatigues and a headband, has Khomeini’s portrait pinned to his chest, as did so many of the fighters during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88). The woman wears a long transparent white veil overtop her black dress, the rectangular black strip covering her eyes no doubt denoting that she represents a heavenly rather than earthly bride. In the foreground, a woman lies dead, her hair and dress communicating to the viewer that she is a metonymic sign of the west. The image could be construed at first glance to be a pro-revolutionary image because it employs many of the themes and tropes popular in the vast production of Iranian revolutionary art, such as opposition to the west, the veiled woman, the young soldier, the portrait of Khomeini, as well as the legitimizing masses. However, the viewer is given a first set of indices –the quote, the presence of westerners shaking hands with clerics, and especially the Euro-American artistic references underwriting the image’s composition that clearly announce that the image is, akin to the works discussed in the previous section, a deconstructive *re*-production. The ambiguity entices the viewer, and incites him/her to engage further with the image in an attempt to decipher its codes and meanings.

The most salient characteristic of, and indeed a central interpretive key to *Surveillance* is its theatricality, produced and brought to the fore by the piece’s style of composition associated with European history painting replete with pedestal, that stands in striking contrast with both the photographic tradition and Tabrizian’s non-western and non-historical subject. The meticulously staged and self-conscious hieratic poses of the figures convey effectively to the viewer that they are (stereo)types rather than individuals, and are thus, to borrow Abigail Solomon-Godeau’s turn of phrase, constructed not “by an individual

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<sup>455</sup> D. A. Bailey and G. Tawadros (eds.). *Op. cit.* p. 154. No source however is given for the quote.

sensibility (or psychology) but only by the culture at large.”<sup>456</sup> The backdrop, consisting of a real scene of pro-revolutionary Iranian masses, additionally heightens, by the stark contrast it poses, the awareness of the manufactured nature of the piece’s and its personages’ ‘performing’ of the discursive apparatus of the Iranian Revolution. The incongruous visual mix of western historical artistic references, the photographic medium, photojournalistic imagery, and the subject of the Iranian Revolution imparts to the viewer a sense of the artifice of representation, yet as in a Brechtian drama, the admitted fictional nature of art forms an integral part of the play. *Surveillance* enacts or rather exposes the mechanism of the photographic image in order to deconstruct its power of authority as mirror of the real, repositioning it as mediative interface between cultural discourse and the subjects it seeks to shape.<sup>457</sup> In this sense, I concur with Bailey and Tawadros who submit that Tabrizian is here concerned with “the role of photography in mediating and, not infrequently, manipulating lived experiences.”<sup>458</sup> The particular visual and conceptual strength of *Surveillance* however resides in the fact that it parallels the constructed apparatus of representation with that of power and dominant discourses. Tabrizian, by plotting representation as an enactment of discourse and asserting the produced nature of both, is simultaneously claiming the subject as produced by discourse, and professing the role of the image in this process. Therefore, if Tabrizian here stages Iranian revolutionary visual themes that have also come to constitute those of feared Islamic otherness in Euro-America, including the trope of the veiled woman, she is interested in the means of their production and the effects of their reproduction. In order to further explore *Surveillance*, I will examine the image through the lens of its contextualizing discourse. Like the history painting it mimics, the photograph

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<sup>456</sup> Abigail Solomon-Godeau. 1995. “Representing Women: The Politics of Self-Representation” in *Reframings: New American Feminist Photographies*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, p.303. Quoted in Michelle Meagher. 2002. “Would the Real Cindy Sherman Please Stand Up? Encounters Between Cindy Sherman and Feminist Art Theory.” *Women: A Cultural Review* 13(1), p. 32.

<sup>457</sup> Or as Bailey and Tawadros contend, “to take on the authority of historical authenticity and documentary evidence.” D. A. Bailey and G. Tawadros. *Op. cit.* p. 26.

<sup>458</sup> *Ibid.* p. 26.

requires of the viewer who desires full access to the image, a specific body of knowledge.

Tabrizian writes in *Correct Distance* that she based the panoramic photograph on Foucault's metaphoric use of the image of the 'panopticon,' an eighteenth-century circular prison design in which all the individual cells were arranged around a central watchtower. The design's effectiveness was due to the internalization of the imagined constant surveillance, inmates, believing they were under continuous watch, always behaved due to their self-policing. Foucault used the image to illustrate the process by which a culture's dominant discourse(s) covertly exerts disciplinary power over, and hence shapes and produces, its subjects/citizens.<sup>459</sup> Considering *Surveillance* from the perspective of the panopticon squarely places the viewer in the prison structure's strategic centre. The panorama format and the fact that the crowd and the figures on stage are looking at him/her clearly position the viewer as the *producer* of Iranian revolutionary discourse, and concurrently, and more significantly, as the *observer* of the apparatus of its (re)productive power. The figures of the central scene can thus be construed as subjects embodying as well as complying to, and produced by revolutionary discourse; Tabrizian underscores the process by enacting it visually within the actual image in the figure of the *chador*-clad young girl who gazing up admiringly at the *muhajjabat* on the pedestal *cum* role model, has adopted the same dress. The older woman underscores how ideological discourse underwrites representation and the construction of self, while the girl testifies to the role of representation in their reproduction, thus performing for the viewer the very act of discursive internalization. If the central scene constitutes a visual translation and performance of Iranian revolutionary discourse, the crowd in the background may be interpreted as the subjects it seeks to shape. Tabrizian juxtaposes the two scenes to transmit the

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<sup>459</sup> M. Foucault. 1977. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (trans. Alan Sheridan). New York: Vintage. See Chapter 3, "Panopticism," pp. 195-228. On p. 205, Foucault describes how the structure articulates the linkage between power, space and the gaze,

...the Panopticon ...is the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form; its functioning, abstracted from any obstacle, resistance or friction, must be represented as a pure architectural and optical system: it is in fact a figure of political technology that may and must be detached from any specific use.

idea of the image or representation as interface and disciplinary tool of discourse and power, but the contrast is not only set up by divergent modes of representation, it is also spatial. The stage on which the figures in the foreground strike their poses is clearly positioned as the median space between the viewer and/or discourse, and the masses. Particularly important is that, if Tabrizian has chosen as signifiers for this system and *obedience to it* several visual themes central to the Iranian Revolution, she sets forth the veiled woman as its most prominent and potent symbol or text. The main veiled figure evidently denotes the very embodiment of revolutionary discourse, dominating the image as she does by her central location and her podium. She and her younger counterpart represent the constructed revolutionary ideal of Muslim womanhood. However, the sign of the veiled woman, if usually connoting the modest mother, spouse, or sister, carries metaphysical undertones in the case of the young couple where the disciplinary power of the veil lies in its promise of paradisiacal love for the young soldier, assuaging the normal human fear of war and death.

By emphasizing the trope of the veiled woman, repeated in effect three times, Tabrizian is identifying the woman's body as a site upon which the rules and disciplinary effects of discourse and ideology are more forcefully or visually inscribed. Claiming the veil as a gendered disciplinary tool of revolutionary discourse through which the Muslim female subject is produced, she is positing the gendering at work in discourse, in Iranian revolutionary discourse in particular, as well as underscoring the symbolic and visual role of women in modern competing cultural scripts. However, if the artist by staging a critique of Iranian revolutionary symbols equally reproduces Euro-American mainstream cultural perceptions of the veil, she avoids, despite her recourse to stereotypes, buttressing the authority of colonialist and neocolonialist discourse through the strategy of subversive mimicry and historical and political contextualization. *Surveillance* exposes the operational aspect and constructed nature of the image and discourse therefore pointing to the possibilities of subversion (if one can recognize their constructed nature, it follows that they

can be deconstructed), and clearly specifies that it is referring to a precise historical moment and geographical context. In fact the image rewrites the events of 1979 by inscribing within the image, in the two scenes flanking the centre, the role of western involvement in modern Iranian history including the Revolution. The scene on the left represents the fight between Britain and the United States, symbolized by the two suit-clad men, their respective flags in their pockets, over political influence and Iranian resources. Behind the Briton, who holds a picture of the popular Iranian Prime Minister Mossadegh (r. 1951-53), stands a cleric given that the clergy backed the British, while behind the American stands a mobster, because the C.I.A., Tabrizian maintains, “literally paid people to protest against Mossadegh,” and “were backed by the paid mob.”<sup>460</sup> The scene specifically refers to an infamous 1953 covert American operation, Operation Ajax, which overthrew Iran’s democratically elected government <sup>461</sup> to institute both the American-backed Shah and the United States as the major influence in the region, enabling it to secure for itself cheap oil. The far right featuring an American shaking hands with an Iranian cleric signals the role of the United States in bringing Khomeini to power. If they had once supported the Shah and his ‘White Revolution,’ his increasing unpopularity and brutality causing national unrest threatened their interests, and by 1979, the United States were negotiating his demise with the clergy. In short, if Tabrizian employs the symbols polarizing Iran/Islam and the west to proffer a critique of post-revolutionary Iran, she simultaneously diffuses or reinscribes them by divulging the role western powers had in bringing about the Iranian Revolution thereby revealing the fictionality of historical narratives and representation, and the power of dominant discourses in masking real historical events. The artist thus manages to criticize Iran and the veil without blindly duplicating Euro-American discourse by visually demonstrating the produced nature of discourse, representation, the subject, and history. Tabrizian equally

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<sup>460</sup> Personal communication, email from Tabrizian, January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2008.

<sup>461</sup> The story is even more complex. Mossadegh who wanted to wrestle the oil revenues from the hands of the British, asked the United States for help, but so did Britain who sought Mossadegh’s downfall. The United States managed to divest both of their power.



renders her critique of Iran ambiguous by the aesthetic appeal of the image, the western style of composition and narrative she reproduces, and the way she positions the viewer as both producing and deconstructing the image. By applying Foucault's notion of the 'panopticon' devised to describe the effects of dominant discourse of modern western societies to post-revolutionary Iran, *Surveillance* deconstructs both.

Both Shahzia Sikander (b.1969) and Aisha Khalid (b.1972) are graduates of the miniature painting department at the National College of Arts in Lahore. If the institution was originally established by the British in the nineteenth century, the idea that the art of the miniature is a fine, as opposed to an applied, art -miniatures were essentially book illustrations- equally evinces past colonial and western influence. If Khalid's hybridity, because of its homogeneity, displays more the characteristics of an alternative modernity, Sikander's "mixture of styles and iconography"<sup>462</sup> is far more explicit due to its context of production. Khalid lives in Pakistan while Sikander moved to the United States where she experienced, as Daftari explains, "for the first time ... a perception of herself that confined her within a framework: the "Muslim woman,""<sup>463</sup> provoking a reflection that is evident in her work on the role of culture(s) in the conception, production and reception of art works. As Naazish Ata-Ullah, similarly relates, "After she went west and started living there the debate about how the east has been received in the west became an issue."<sup>464</sup> Sikander often depicts the veil (the *burqa*) which, if it emerged from the encounter with the Euro-American cultural screen and can be interpreted as sometimes referring to cultural (mis)translation, simultaneously functions, as the analysis of *Uprooted Order I* will reveal, simply as part of her complex pictorial vocabulary of signs.

*Uprooted Order I* (1996-97, miniature format but no data on size) (fig. 35) is characteristic of Sikander's work in its layering of visual planes and stylistic heterogeneity. The first layer of image is rendered in the meticulous manner of a

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<sup>462</sup> Faisal Devji. 1999. "Translated Pleasures." In Shahzia Sikander *Shahzia Sikander, The Renaissance Society, March 8- April 19, 1998*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, p.11.

<sup>463</sup> F. Daftari. *Op. cit.* p. 181.

<sup>464</sup> Gayatri Sinha. 2003. "Across the Border: A Dialogue with Naazish Ata-Ullah." *n. Paradoxa* 11, p. 82.

miniature, a sparse landscape out of which rises a large pink lotus upon which stands the central figure, a bejeweled courtly woman appearing straight out of a Mughal era (1526-1857) painting, the viewer realizing or not that the lotus is a Hindu reference and thus the 'eastern image' is itself hybrid. The woman's face depicted in profile is fully visible, as are her arms, the outer part of her skirt and her feet. However, merging with the figure, and lying both atop and beneath her courtly dress, is a simplified female figure that, like the veil, forms an oft-recurring motif in Sikander's work. The brown silhouette outlining the breasts, waist, hips, and legs, bears in lieu of feet, four sets of 'roots' passing from one ankle to the other suggesting an uprooted but self-sustaining presence, hinting at, as the title suggests, both tradition's and the artist's dislocation. Overtop, figures, again on an ambiguous picture plane, another woman, this one rendered somewhat more distinctly. She sits in fetal position with one arm actually disappearing into the uprooted figure, while off to the left appears one of Sikander's dancing female leitmotifs. The central figure is holding a griffin also painted as a flat dark silhouette. The mythological figure that entered South Asia with Alexander the Great signifies in the Punjab, where it is called the *Chillava*, as the artist explains, "somebody who is coming and going so fast you can't pin down who they are."<sup>465</sup> For Sikander the creature possessing "multiple identities," is a metaphor for the "rhetoric or categories" confronting her in the U.S., "Are you Muslim, Pakistani, artist, painter, Asian, Asian-American or what?"<sup>466</sup> The *Chillava* is wearing Sikander's signature loosely painted fringed *burqa*, added, she explains, in an attempt to "pin ...down" its identity, paralleling how the Euro-American cultural screen boxes in the Muslim woman. However, if the viewer cannot know the intended meaning of the griffin or its veil by simple observation, he/she does notice the oddity of the hybrid figure as well as the discrepancy between the charged associations attached to the *burqa* and the light humorous way in which Sikander depicts the garment. *Uprooted Order I* portrays another veiled figure, albeit just as peculiar. The spectral

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<sup>465</sup> Shahzia Sikander quoted in Homi Bhabha. *Op. cit.* p. 19.

<sup>466</sup> *Ibid.* p. 19.

*burqa*-donning figure hovers behind the central figure so closely, that despite her one wing, she seems somewhat foreboding. At the top of the painting, Sikander has drawn two large hands appearing from the sky. If the image is reminiscent of Christian iconography, the two red nails turn out to be not a reference to Jesus but the toe pieces of a pair of women's (non-western) sandals rendered with feet. *Uprooted Order I* possesses one more layer of image, this one abstract. Largish segments of a set of concentric circles in the bottom left corner as well as ochre, yellow, white, or red dots in the lower half of the painting sit on or atop the very surface of the image.

The description of *Uprooted Order I* clearly communicates the image's complex layering of picture planes and stylistic references, in short its cultural hybridity, which is not neutralized, played down or, to use Bhabha's term, "homogenized."<sup>467</sup> The multiplicity and layering of references destabilize the standard idea of what constitutes a two-dimensional image by providing no one static focal point or specific subject, offering in their place an undefined constellation of the various juxtapositions of signs and images, and therefore of the spaces opened up in-between. By emphasizing the relationship between elements rather than the elements themselves, *Uprooted Order I* demonstrates the link between hybridity and the third space, and elucidates how the former can produce novel forms of art and how the latter can be construed as the space of intersubjectivity, as the incongruous combinations needing to be pieced together call attention to the viewer's role in producing the image.

If the work on paper is visually plural, it nonetheless distinctly divides itself in two stylistically, the two modes of representation possessing both geographical and chronological connotations. Sikander contrasts the patient style of the miniature with a more spontaneous and abstract manner generally associated, rightly or wrongly, with western modernity and modern art. By bringing in modernist modes and references within the frame of the miniature (the artist continues to work within the miniature format), the artist redefines both, confirming Bhabha's ideas on the transcultural possibilities of hybridity

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<sup>467</sup> *Ibid*, p. 19.

and the third space. Sikander herself appreciates that, “it’s the simultaneous existence of two forms of exploration within a single space that charges a work.”<sup>468</sup> Reading the work stylistically, one gleans that *Uprooted Order I*’s two veils, depicted in what Daftari describes as an “almost graffiti-like mode of mark making,”<sup>469</sup> therefore constitute modern and/or western signs. They then strangely enough can be seen to integrate the modern, from which the veil is generally excluded, into the miniature, therefore pointing out the narrow and purist intimations of the modern category and the political potential of the hybrid capable of dissolving the strictures of such categories. However, the *burqa*-like headdresses are not only stylistically eclectic; they are also hybrid in terms of imagery, veiling a mythological creature in one case, and a winged presence in the other. As stated earlier, for Sikander the griffin’s veil forms a symbol of an externally defined and fixed identity whose limiting nature is underscored by the creature’s mythologically posited multiple identities.<sup>470</sup> If the artist’s subjective intent is not necessarily evident visually, the uninformed viewer nonetheless remarks the veil’s strange non-human context, its mask-like quality, and its humorous rendering, all of which suffice to displace the veil trope, whether referring to Euro-American mainstream perceptions or connoting over zealous patriarchal interpretations of Islam. The veiled griffin bearing out the creative potential of hybridity, unpacks the sign by its radical transformation. The veil’s visual playfulness dismantles western stereotypes in a manner that, because no longer, as Daftari explains, “filtered through the Islamic religion,”<sup>471</sup> also de-Islamicizes the garment. The one-winged *burqa* threateningly close to and ostensibly ready to engulf or harm the central ‘traditional’ figure equally deconstructs the veil by its strange hybridity. Portrayed as a ghost or presence whose wing references western religious iconography in particular, and the religious tradition more generally, allows the viewer to infer that the veil, as in the case of the griffin, can refer to the western

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<sup>468</sup> *Ibid.* p. 20.

<sup>469</sup> F. Daftari. *Op. cit.* p. 181.

<sup>470</sup> The fixedness of the modern is further stressed by the symbol of the griffin, a witness to the historical openness to and acceptance of hybridity and cross-cultural contamination.

<sup>471</sup> *Ibid.* p. 183.

or Islamist trope of the veil, here both appearing to vie for control of the Indo-Muslim woman.<sup>472</sup> The oddity of the *burqa*-clad figures highlights or gains from the paradoxical aesthetics of veiling discussed at length in the previous chapter, the painter having rendered the veils as visual signifiers of an unidentified signified. By denoting something without naming/representing it, or termed differently, by transforming the known *-the veil-* into an interrogative unknown, *Uprooted Order I* further deconstructs the trope, stressing the intersubjective interstices opened up by hybridity and locating their ultimate configuration in the act of mediation. However, as hybridity, especially Sikander's marked form of it, enables polyvocality, *Uprooted Order I* and its veils offer up several interpretations.

Faisal Devji interprets Sikander's heterogeneous hybridity as claiming "the failure of translation," and "the failure to find a universal language."<sup>473</sup> Agreeing in part with the professor at the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London, I nonetheless propose that the artist, while she acknowledges, even sometimes dwells upon the issue of (mis)translation, is not seeking to find a "universal [homogenous] language." Rather, I put forward that the third space(s) opened up by the painting's hybrid intersections, and hence corroborating Bhabha's postulate, is 'universal' because it essentially designates the intersubjective realm, possessing transcultural possibilities by its very nature. Moreover, I argue that the hybridity *Uprooted Order I* evinces cannot be limited to the issues of cultural location and dislocation; it involves but is not restricted to either the political and existential dimensions of cultural affiliations and taxonomies. I am suggesting in fact that Sikander in her work is attempting to resolve the difficulty of rendering and/or finding the appropriate visual vocabulary for, especially in a two-dimensional static medium, the multiplicity of experience.<sup>474</sup> *Uprooted Order I* is at its core a portrait of a woman from the

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<sup>472</sup> As in the work of Sedira, Ghadirian and others, the *burqa* can be read as *the veil* and as an essentialist modern Islamist trope equally as reductive of Islamic historical and contemporary arts and practices.

<sup>473</sup> F. Devji. *Op. cit.* p. 15.

<sup>474</sup> S. Sikander explains, "If the work is about anything, it's about lived experience and how to claim that experience." H. Bhabha. *Op. cit.* p. 21.

Mughal dynasty no doubt drawn from the Mughal visual repertoire, but while the question of translation elucidates the choice of image and the reason the painting was not finished as a miniature as it began,<sup>475</sup> it does not fully explain the layers and symbols Sikander adds to the figure. I submit that the artist begins with a particular image or theme, and then visually delineates the various associations the image or theme possesses for her, the process aimed at making both the signifier and its various 'signified' manifest. From this vantage point, if one counts the lotus and the griffin, the painting's main figure possesses six layers of inflections or acknowledged identities. The two veiled figures considered as aspects of the central figure or the artist's relationship to her, only further highlight their enigmatic quality.

If the multiplicity of experience, broached in the painting, emerges tangentially in the various and numerous points of contact between the heterogeneous juxtapositions, an underlying subjectivity underwrites them all. In other terms, while Sikander's work comments on divergent discourses of art, cultural othering, and translation, the creative agency at the heart of the exploration of multiplicity upholds the viewer's interest through a pure and complex visuality whose signs and their interstices underscore, like the veiling metaphor, the difficulty of representation and the importance of the *ex-imago* realm of intersubjectivity in mediation. It is in fact the intersections that the artist traces between the political, cultural and the subjective that proffer to the artist's work its significant interest. Daftari argues that the artist's appropriation of various aesthetic traditions succeeds in "erasing their boundaries and affirming the undesirability of hierarchies, limits, and polarized separations,"<sup>476</sup> yet I posit that it also enables the artist to visually articulate the subject –self or other- while avoiding the disciplinary power of dominant discourses, confirming yet again the resistance proffered by both individual agency and the liminality of the third space(s). The veil appears in a variety of guises and

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<sup>475</sup> Sikander all too aware of the west's oblivion to and exotic views of her medium and origin, builds up the miniature only to undo it, or in her words, "I put in all this time, and then I substract it through a violation of that space...." *Ibid.* p. 20.

<sup>476</sup> F. Daftari. *Op. cit.* p. 180.

manners throughout Sikander's work often, as stated above, as a sign of an unknown signified (fig. 36).<sup>477</sup> While it signals that Sikander is aware that the sign is mediated as she states by "what kind of image the viewer is projecting,"<sup>478</sup> and that as Dafatari notes she "is no accomplice to the exotic vision of a woman excluded, dismissed, and banished under a veil"<sup>479</sup> I conclude that the veil in the artist's work has equally simply taken on a visual life of its own.

Aisha Khalid has also reinvented the miniature but has done so by remaining faithful to the strictures of the medium and pushing its boundaries fully from within. Her meticulously crafted work has revolved entirely until very recently around the metaphor of veiling and the *burqa* in particular, generally understood as a symbol of the cultural confinement and conditioning of women. If in Khalid's work, it often serves in effect to portray, at least in part, social and spatial constraints on women, I am arguing, through the examination of a particular work, that limiting Khalid's use of the sign to a critique of gender segregation and female invisibility constitutes, as shall be demonstrated below, too reductive a reading of her work where it carries a variety of meanings often even within the same image.

The first thing the viewer notices about Khalid's work on paper, *Chandan Pani* (2000, 26 x 35 cm) (fig. 37), are the two competing picture planes, the allover argyle pattern stretching out over the surface plane of the image and the perspectival lines delineating a room and hence spatial depth. If in the first case the eye is led beyond the borders of all four sides of the painting, in the second one, it is oriented to a vanishing point situated within or rather behind the image. Because perspective is not commonly associated with the miniature

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<sup>477</sup> She depicts in on a multi-armed Hindu goddess, in a rewriting of Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, on herself in photographic self-portraits, and on the various small figures recurring in her work such as the little girl usually dressed in a striped leotard, or the tiny flat female figures dancing freely over the images. Sometimes, it appears as an abstract painterly form such as the one-eyed fringed *burqa* floating over the beautifully drawn jumping gazelle in *Spaces In Between* (1995) (fig. 36), which, if the painting by its title directly references Bhabha, its veil exists simultaneously and simply as an arena of painterly pleasure.

<sup>478</sup> In H. Bhabha. *Op. cit.* p. 20.

<sup>479</sup> F. Daftari. *Op. cit.* p. 183.

tradition,<sup>480</sup> Anna Sloan, discussing a spatially similar painting, *One Point Perspective 1* (2001), perceives in the contrasting picture planes a cross-cultural intention and submits that the artist uses “representational strategies as a metaphor for exchanges between two cultural systems.”<sup>481</sup> In effect, the particular significance of *Chandan Pani* for the study resides in the fact that the image, like *One Point Perspective 1*, provides a *visual and spatial transcription of the third space* traced by hybridity. Khalid has visually articulated the interstitial space Bhabha charts between the cultures of the colonizers and the colonized where as he claims, “identity and difference are neither One nor the Other but something else, besides, in-between.”<sup>482</sup> The intersection of pictorial planes thus not only proffers a meaningful tension to the image; it opens up a third space that multiplies reading positions and constitutes the liminal plane in which the veiled figures appear.

*Chandan Pani*’s female figure motif is repeated across the painting’s surface in the manner of a textile. She is depicted from the back, covered in a white *burqa* outlining her upper body and head and kneeling or sitting, on a pink and white multi-petalled lotus blossom. That the figures are rendered with partial but not full three-dimensionality locates them in the interstitial space created by and in the contact zone between the room and the flat grid-like pattern, thereby enacting *spatially* Bhabha’s *metaphorical* third space. One of the ten repeated veiled figures sits facing the back wall of the room although somewhat ambiguously as the floor line is actually drawn on top of the lotus upon which she sits. The painting confuses the eye oscillating between a continuity created by depth or surface before provoking its surrender to the space in between in which the veiled female figures, having escaped the grid-like confinement of both, appear to float, although it must be noted that the allover pattern also

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<sup>480</sup> Although European drawing techniques including the rules of perspective penetrated the Muslim world in the pre- modern or early modern period and impacted painting in varying degrees.

<sup>481</sup> Anna Sloan. 2006. “Embodied Space: The Miniature as Attitude.” In Anita Dawood and Hammad Nasar (eds.) *Beyond the Page: Contemporary Art from Pakistan*. Manchester; London: Manchester Art Gallery and Shisha; Green Cardamom and Asia House, p. 41.

<sup>482</sup> H. Bhabha. 1996. “Postmodernism/Postcolonialism.” In Richard S. Nelson and Robert Shiff (eds.) *Critical Terms for Art History*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, p. 311.



serves to highlight, as explained in the last chapter, tangential spaces and planes. The viewer, having now 'entered' the painting, realizes that the illustrative style of the image is not the objective of the painting but only its means and hence sees beyond it.

The veiled figures are themselves hybrid but their Hindu and Muslim elements merge and co-exist harmoniously.<sup>483</sup> The Hindu spiritual symbol of the lotus inflects the motif of the veiled woman who, because of her shape, can be read as the flower's pistil and hence reproductive power or conversely the lotus can be construed as a type of nimbus accentuating the spiritual nature of the figure or presence beneath the white *burqa*. Both readings and their spiritual connotations, substantiating the deconstructive possibilities of hybridity, displace the trope of the veil. The spiritual evocations are further consolidated by the brightness of the figures that strewn across the image are reminiscent of stars or lights, and by the aesthetics of veiling and the unstated interiority to which it points. The viewer knows nothing of the figure except for her presumed gender and ethereal aura. Khalid has recourse to the metaphorical power of veiling to transmit the spiritual or metaphysical nature of the figure(s), as it clearly communicates, as delineated in the previous chapter, that the referent is beyond the confines of the image or representation.<sup>484</sup> However in *Chandan Pani*, she has employed veiling to convey a feminist or feminine dimension to spirituality often written out of mainstream interpretations of organized religions, including those of Islam, and of art. The miniature visually articulates a gendered metaphysical dimension to being and/or experience. Interestingly, if the notions of veiling and hybridity overlap in the image so do those of veiling and the third space. The latter, because it is visually configured

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<sup>483</sup> That Sikander and Khalid are both conscious of their appropriations of Hindu imagery is also born of adopting of western ideology of nationalism and its 'imagined [monolithic] community.' Historically Indo-Muslim painting unconsciously shared many features with Hindu painting and vice versa "without considering the distinction between Hindu and Islamic art." G.Sinha. *Op. cit.* p. 82.

<sup>484</sup> The fact that she is entirely concealed, further intimates, in light of the Islamic pictorial tradition, a certain sanctity as the Prophet Muhammad, his family or other prophets are generally (with some exceptions) portrayed with veils covering their faces declaring their status above or beyond the capacities of visual representation.

through a layering of picture planes, translates as an interstitial spatial zone referring like the veil to something intangible, while the veiled figures located therein underscore, by their hybridity, their repetition, and their inscrutability the potentiality of the interstice for denoting the un-representable.<sup>485</sup> Through the strategies of hybridity, veiling, and even mimesis –the painting re-enacts the argument of the woman’s preciousness often used in Islamic pro-veiling discourse and the image of the spatially constrained woman- and drawing upon the miniature’s tradition of beauty, Khalid has rewritten the veil, proposing in lieu of *the* veil, *an-other* veil.

The examination of Sikander’s *Uprooted Order I* and Khalid’s *Chandan Pani* has revealed how hybridity and its concomitant third space can deconstruct mainstream perceptions of the veil and offer alternative narratives of the garment, in the one case transforming it through playful appropriation into a subjective pictorial sign, and in the other emphasizing on the contrary the noumenal qualities integral to the veiling metaphor. It has equally exposed how the spaces mapped by hybrid images and modes of representation possess, because they delineate a terrain beyond ‘representational’ dominant discourses, evident political and feminist implications, while equally offering a representational arena for subjective postcolonial expression. If the concept of hybridity is often criticized for entertaining, because founded upon, binarism and/or for running the risk of being formulaic, I maintain that artistic hybridity,

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<sup>485</sup> It is important to note that in Khalid’s iconography the veil is intimately related to the notion of veiling and representation in Islamic aesthetics outlined in the last chapter. In light of this idea, it is interesting to note that the motif in the artist’s work was linked from the start to the issues of both gender and representation. The veil emerged in 2000 in the guise of a curtain in a series of work broaching “the death of a cousin who, being childless, had taken her own life.” Salima Hashmi. 2002. *Unveiling the Visible: Lives and Works of Women Artists of Pakistan*. Islamabad: Action Aid Pakistan, p. 156. The paintings “portrayed a seated figure with a lap of fruit, with a curtain in the background” or “alternately, the setting without the figure and only a fruit bowl with the curtain.” The curtain traditionally hung to gender space signifies societal definitions of and pressures on women emphasizing fertility and reproduction and at the same time the border between the phenomenal and noumenal worlds. If the spatial veil has consumed the sitter, it also, appropriating a strategy of Islamic aesthetics, signifies a presence or reality beyond the dimension of the visible and/or the capacities of representation as evinced by the piece, *Behind the Curtain* (2000) (fig. 38). The series lead to other works revolving around the curtain motif or the *burqa*-wearing figure, many of which integrate references to both western and Indian artistic traditions although the hybridity remains less apparent than in Sikander’s work, as Khalid fully translates all her references through the miniature medium.

at least with regards to the veil and as in the case of counter discourse, evolved from the reality of being defined externally by hegemonic discourse(s) and of straddling several geographies rather than from theory (although postcolonial theory is also originally rooted in experience).<sup>486</sup> I argue that both Sikander's and Khalid's work, have managed to avoid up until now an essentialist hybridity; this is particularly true in the case of Khalid where it is much less self-conscious as she is not in a context provoking a *culturally* oriented speaking back. Moreover, the richness of the two painters' work, grounded in lived experience, resides not only in its simultaneous espousal of different aesthetic traditions, but rather in its representation, within the confines of two-dimensionality, of the multiple fluctuating subjective experiences of the - particularly female- self. Both Sikander's and Khalid's work, corroborating the basic premise of the study, establishes how the veil is indeed as Dafatari declares "multifaceted," and "a sign and metaphor for fluctuating meanings,"<sup>487</sup> capable of both shaping and being shaped by cross-cultural contamination.

What transpires from the chapter is that not only can the strategies of contrapuntal reading, mimicry, and hybridity, all successfully unpack Euro-American mainstream perceptions of the veil and the Muslim woman, but also that they, because all three are deconstructive, overlap and hence cannot be considered as diametrically opposed to one other. The works presented throughout the chapter, whether they oppose dominant discourse and representations or appropriate them, confirm the potency of postcolonial strategies and underscore how the postcolonial and the feminist subject intersect as both occupy an outsider position capable of recognizing and critiquing hegemonic discourses. While demonstrating the veil's polysemy, they also evince in many cases, the sign's unique relationship with representation, actually abetting the process of deconstruction, thereby uncovering the interrelated nature of the study's various trajectories. If the artists are engaged in deconstruction, actually often using the veil as the deconstructive mechanism,

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<sup>486</sup> The concept of hybridity has been much criticized, and while valid issues are raised, these remain beyond the scope of the present study.

<sup>487</sup> F. Daftari. *Op. cit.* p. 183.

they all implicitly or explicitly re-inflect the image of the veil, the Muslim, and/or Islam. The next chapter and last trajectory will turn to contemporary representations of the veil that for various reasons simply bypass the step of countering the heavily and historically entrenched Euro-American perceptions of the veil, to proffer in a direct manner alternative visions of the veil.

## **Chapter 5: Subject-ive Displacement: Location, Autobiography, and the Documentary**

Where you start makes a great deal of difference. If you start from the subjectivity of a woman who wears a headscarf, then you are likely to understand its meaning to be that which she bestows on it as she positions herself with respect to her environment. You then end up more likely to agree with the woman's own account, which will emphasize personal choice and commitment.<sup>488</sup>

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Therefore, the unveiled body is no less marked or inscribed; rather a whole battery of disciplinary techniques and practices have produced Western women's bodies and therefore not-to-veil needs to be seen as one among many practices of corporeal inscriptions.<sup>489</sup>

Meyda Yeğenoğlu

The chapter "*Subject-ive Displacement*" involves an examination of representations of the veil that displace Euro-American mainstream perceptions by portraying veiled Muslim women as subjects. The notion that the subject possesses the capacity to deconstruct ideologically constructed discourse and representations, if encountered in some of the works previously discussed, here constitutes the chapter's central premise and thus characterizes the images addressed therein. Representations of what I am calling the *subject-ive* veil, like those identified as the postcolonial veil, are intimately linked to the phenomenon of globalization in that their recent visibility in Euro-America is due both to artists looking and working through another gaze/cultural screen and to a shift in the western art apparatus that now exhibits their work. If they relate to those of the first and second trajectories in that they implicitly involve both a contextualization of the veil and a disarticulation of the trope, they nonetheless differ in that they neither depend on the aesthetics of veiling (with the exception of Kourush Adim), nor address the stereotype of the veil and the veiled woman directly and the concomitant issues of representation and translation. Rather, rooted in daily life and/or memory, depictions of the *subject-ive* veil offer a *re*-presentation of the veiled woman that foregoes the western construction of the sign yet speaks in a pictorial language not alien to Euro-America. If the veil sign generally operates to deny veiled and unveiled Muslim women their status as

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<sup>488</sup> J. Bowen. *Op. cit.* p. 230.

<sup>489</sup> M. Yeğenoğlu. *Op. cit.* p. 115.

subject or subjecthood,<sup>490</sup> the works the chapter sets forth engender a different vision replacing, and hence displacing, generic stereotypes by means of depictions of actual subjects. They therefore accentuate Muslim women's individual as opposed to collective identity and thus by extension their, and the veil's diversity, a plurality hopefully suggested by the term *subject-ive*.

The chapter rests upon three postulates. First, like the study as a whole, it posits the transformative potential of the image, acknowledging its capacity to alter dominant discourses and viewer's perceptions. Second, it proposes that *representations of subjects* can nonetheless engage the viewer in a *subject-to-subject relationship* in the sense that they provide the viewer with the opportunity to identify with the subject/s represented, thus necessarily recognizing its/their equal status as self/ves. This recognition is, as the study has established, of particular importance for marginalized figures such as the veiled Muslim woman elucidating why, like Silverman, I am arguing for the increased production and circulation of "aesthetic works," which allow us "to identify with bodies we would otherwise repudiate."<sup>491</sup> Third, it entertains that a western conferral of selfhood onto the visibly marked Muslim female other is radical in its subtextual implications in that it requires moving beyond Euro-American discourse and its definitions of collective and individual self-identity. Yeğenoğlu akin to many other scholars, in fact puts forth the experience and acknowledgment of alterity as the condition necessary for the dismantlement of Eurocentric discourse, knowledge, and hence perceptions to transpire,

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<sup>490</sup> I must reiterate that the veil as a perceptual filter mediates perception of both veiled and unveiled women alike explaining why the women artists of Muslim origin cited in the last chapter, none of whom veil, have felt compelled to address and deconstruct the sign. Non-veiled Muslim women equally experience religious and/or ethnic discrimination in Euro-America and are thus affected by the symbols of and stereotypes about Islam including the veil. If this particular study focuses on the veil and on the image of the veiled Muslim woman, some exhibits and texts have attempted to separate the erroneous equation of the Muslim woman with the veil, for example *Not Given: Talking of and Around Photographs of Arab Women* (March 1-May 26, 2007) at SF Camerawork, a multimedia installation based on 20<sup>th</sup> century studio photographs gleaned from the Arab Image Foundation in Beirut and curated by Dore Bowen and Isabelle Massu. See the 2007 Spring/Summer issue of *Camerawork: A Journal of Photographic Art*.

<sup>491</sup> K. Silverman. 1995. *The Threshold of the Visible World*. New York: Routledge, p. 2.

The aim of shaking the structure itself is possible only when the other and otherness is located in the heart of the subject. In other words, displacement is the move by which the desire for a sovereign, possessive, and unitary position is itself interrupted.<sup>492</sup>

The author stresses the necessary relinquishment of a widespread conception of self, in favour of a plural subjectivity reconfigured through alterity that she posits as a site operative of displacement.<sup>493</sup> Reformulating the idea in the simplest terms, it might be said that a subject, in order to resist and disrupt the views culturally imposed and expected of him/her must leave behind all claims of exclusivity to recognize in him/herself other ways of being. Positioning and integrating as equal rather than excluding *other* subjects penetrates to the heart of the study, which has demonstrated how the veil in mainstream discourse and imagery generally constitutes a form of erasure and ‘de-subjectification’ of the Muslim woman and how the refusal of (Muslim) alterity has been integral to the construction of Euro-American identity. It also touches the very core of the present trajectory whose specificity lies in considering and representing otherness as “located in the heart of the subject,” yet without denying difference.

The above discussion reminds us that if to use Silverman’s terms, “visual texts have the power to re-educate the look,”<sup>494</sup> it is a dialectical process involving both image and viewer. While the representations presented here have all been produced by artists for whom the veil and the veiled Muslim women are not alien or exotic tropes, they, analogous to those of the other trajectories, cannot fully escape the fact that the sign regardless of its *re*-presentation is an entrenched signifier often filtered through a given set of assumptions. If by depicting the veiled Muslim woman as subject, they clearly disrupt an established culturally constructed connection between signifier and signified, one cannot however, indubitably presuppose that viewers will *see* a subject rather than *project* onto the image mainstream perceptions of the veil and the

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<sup>492</sup> M. Yeğenoğlu. *Op. cit.* p. 8.

<sup>493</sup> Silverman voices a similar idea when she writes, “It thereby indicates that the renegotiation of the ego/other axis may often necessitate a psychic and cultural displacement, an estrangement from one’s self, and from national coordinates.” K. Silverman. *Op. cit.* p. 192.

<sup>494</sup> *Ibid.* p. 5.

veiled Muslim woman. In other words, although the images were produced through a different cultural screen, the Euro-American viewer must be willing and/or able to see beyond the master narratives imbuing his or her own screen in order to look through another. The hypothesis here is nonetheless that the subject-to-subject relationship offered by images of the *subject-ive* veil and the viewer identification it begets encourages this transmutation.<sup>495</sup>

I have distinguished three types of representations of the *subject-ive* veil, while recognizing that the borders between them are somewhat indistinct. The chapter's first section will examine the factor of location in producing alternative images of the veil, thereby highlighting the continuing relationship between place, culture and perception. The idea of the veil as an integral part of certain 'culturescapes' is straightforward and evidently relates to the ideas sketched out in the third chapter. In the works brought forth, the representations of the veiled Muslim subject stem from and constitute reflections of the artists' surroundings.<sup>496</sup> Khosrow Hassanzadeh's *Mother*, an earlier portrait than the one treated in the last chapter, depicts the artist's elderly mother whose *hijab* is clearly not marking a political position or making an ideological claim. Rather, it is rendered as what it is, an aspect or item of the sitter's dress that neither adds to or subtracts from the woman's status as subject. Hicham Benohoud's *La salle de classe* is from a photographic series bearing the same title that documents his young Moroccan students' interventions produced within the classroom space, the improvised acts of resistance intended to constitute a form of social and/or existential critique. The photograph in which students have upset the order of the classroom by rearranging the furniture 'vertically' is playful, yet the visual incongruity produced by the disruption both encourages new ways of looking and somewhat paradoxically intensifies observation of the real and the real life setting. If the veils that some of the young school girls are wearing locate the

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<sup>495</sup> Silverman renders the same idea but in a more succinct and articulate fashion, in *Ibid.* p. 223, 'The normative aspects of the screen may indeed be so deeply rooted within our psyches, and so deeply imbricated with our desires and identifications, that they generally determine what we see at the first moment of looking at a particular object. Fortunately, however, no look ever takes place once and for all.'

<sup>496</sup> This method of working can sometimes form a conscious even political choice or strategy.



image for the viewer, the photograph makes clear that the *hijabs* form, because of the geographical context, part of the girls' daily reality and are therefore not central to its proposed critique. More significantly, the participatory and collective nature of the work claims the agency and thus the selfhood of all the actors evidently including the *muhajjabat* thus proffering an alternative to mainstream perceptions. Iranian artist Kourush Adim's *Le voile* is also a series of black and white photographs but one in which the veil -here the indoor *chador*- is purposely integrated into and represented as part of an Iranian landscape, its apparition poetically repositioning the veil by articulating the nexus between location and the imaginary. If in some of the images the veil, having become but a fluttering cloth, serves as a representational device of abstraction and metaphor, I have chosen to consider a photograph more germane to the topic clearly revealing a woman wearing a white *chador*. However, the poetic image puts forth the veiled woman as an idealized figure therefore pointing to the existence of trajectories of the veil beyond those mapped by the study. Including it under the rubric of the *subject-ive* veil affords a discussion on the role of idealization in the perception, representation and translation of the veil.

The second section focuses on depictions of the veil rooted in autobiography or more specifically female matrilineal lineage. I postulate that the two works examined proffer, because of their rootedness in personal narrative and lived experience and their privileging of intersubjectivity, alternative visions of the veil and of the veiled Muslim woman. I will read Sedira's *Mother, Daughter and I* portraying the artist within three generations of women as both mother and daughter through Luce Irigaray's ideas on female genealogy as a means of uncovering and exploring the latter's function in the work, and more precisely the meaning of the veil worn by the artist's Algerian-born mother. The garment takes on new connotations not only because the mother is shown as an individual and not as a representation or confirmation of a trope, but also because it is plotted within a narrative of female filiation. Sedira's work, *Mum's Veil*, consists of one of her mother's face veils that the artist has framed and

exhibited. By presenting a tangible piece of memory as art, the artist integrates the marginalized other into the gallery space and, although playing with the veil's fetishization, dislocates through context, language, and memory the fictions woven around (neo)colonial constructions of the sign. If both works make the viewer cognizant that the veil possesses different evocations when it forms part of one's lived experience, their documentary aspect and aesthetic presage and overlap with the chapter's next and final section.

The third section revolves around documentary photography that was produced with the specific intent of documenting contemporary Muslims. The documentary approach to re-envisioning Muslims has been espoused both individually and institutionally and I will cover instances of each with an obvious focus on veiled women. The impetus for Shekaiba Wakili's *Muslim Women in London* series of photographs of veiled Londoners emerged from her perception that *muhajjabat* seem, as compared to the United States where she lives, better integrated into British society.<sup>497</sup> The image of a woman exiting a café reproduces the prevalent trope of the woman shopper/consumer. The theme, the young woman's clothing and manner, and the setting allow viewers to identify with the image and its veiled subject, while the *hijab* maintaining and asserting the latter's alterity is asking viewers to redefine what visually constitutes the normative Euro-American subject. Zohra Bensemra's *Algerian Women*, contrary to Wakili's photograph, depicts *muhajjabat* living within the Muslim world, albeit only the title and not the image itself makes this apparent. The colour photograph, part of a series documenting the diversity and diverse conditions of Algerian woman, depicts the interaction between two veiled women. It engages the viewer and hence provokes viewer identification by simultaneously capturing a moment of daily human drama -the women are thus

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<sup>497</sup> Other photographers, for example the British Sabera Bham and Clement Cooper (b. 1965) have undertaken similar laudable projects, although Bham's is unique in that she sought to demystify Muslim women who chose to cover their face as well with the *niqab*. For an excellent article on Bham's exhibit, see Paul O'Kane. 1990. "Concealed Visions, Veiled Sisters." *Third Text* 43: 101-3. Cooper's project was a book of black and white photographs of Muslim school girls whose dramatic high contrast works in some of the images better than others. See Clement Cooper. 2004. *Sisters: A Celebration of British Female Muslim Identity*. Manchester: Khadija Productions.

subjects and not tropes- and evoking the compositions and aesthetic of the European tradition of painting. The last photographs that I will treat in this section were part of the 2004 Parisian exhibit at the Musée de La Villette, *Musulmanes, musulmans, au Caire, à Téhéran, Istanbul, Paris, Dakar* whose specific objective was, by documenting the urban life of Muslims in the five major urban centers, to dismantle stereotypes of Muslims, Islam, and the Muslim world in an attempt to better acquaint the viewer with all three.<sup>498</sup> The images depicting contemporary Muslim urbanites obviously comprise photographs of *muhajjabat*. The importance of the two photographs of present-day Tehrani women evoked here resides in the fact that, as in the second chapter that briefly alluded to them, the women engaging in sports or social rebellion provide alternative texts of the Muslim woman that stand in blatant contradistinction to mainstream fixed representations. This is obviously all the more significant in the context of Iran a country which, because of its enforcement of the veil usually serves and reinforces stereotypes of Islam often by means of images of sad-looking masses of women donning the black traditional *chador* generally associated with the Revolution.

Before proceeding to the analysis of works, two further hypotheses deserve mention in order to provide a larger context to the discussion. First, I consider an increase in representations of the *subject-ive* veil in Euro-America and elsewhere inevitable due to new technologies, contemporary demographics, and shifts in the global geo-political environment.<sup>499</sup> This type of image has in fact begun, albeit extremely slowly and rarely, to surface even in the Euro-American media.<sup>500</sup> The first example encountered in a Canadian newspaper is a large -for

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<sup>498</sup> The show also included an exhibit of contemporary art by artists of Muslim origin that included both Sedira and Hassanzadeh.

<sup>499</sup> Sometimes it occurs in paradoxical and horrible circumstances. U.S. military attacks on Iraq, have led to the daily bloody images on television in which the viewer is confronted with Iraqi hospital scenes showing veiled women doctors treating the wounded, and thus contradicting the presupposed norm of the Muslim woman, prevented from higher education and forced to stay at home.

<sup>500</sup> It should be noted that this type of representation obviously constitutes part of Muslim media both in Euro-America and the Muslim World, for example, the American progressive Muslim woman's magazine, *Aziza* whose covers generally feature a veiled woman. See website [www.azizahmagazine.com](http://www.azizahmagazine.com).

print news (10.5 x 23 cm) - colour photograph of Egyptian doctor, Dr. Heba Kotb (fig. 39) accompanying an article about her, in a 2006 issue of Toronto's well-known *The Globe and Mail*. Kotb's veil is neither the topic of discussion of the article nor meant to serve as an insignia of religious victimization or violence and yet the author nonetheless begins the text by describing Kotb as "a conservative Muslim, who wears an Islamic headscarf."<sup>501</sup> It must also be noted that the interest shown towards Kotb is not due to her work as a professor of forensic medicine at Cairo University, but to her successful sex education television show, a first in the Arab World. Nonetheless, despite the fact that the article feels it necessary to comment on the veil and clearly reproduces the colonial interest in Middle Eastern sexuality, Dr. Kotb has been granted agency and voice normally forbidden to visibly marked Muslim women and thus her veil clearly falls under the category of the *subject-ive* veil. Even more capital and exhibiting the implications of this type of representation, is that her veil as a sign is now referencing a new signified, a contemporary Muslim articulate and active female self.<sup>502</sup>

Second, and in seeming contradiction to the above, I contend that this type of representation will meet much opposition in the mainstream public arenas of media, advertising, and/or the art apparatus because of the recognized tremendous power of images in delineating political positions and shaping the collective I/eye. Culture, and this obviously includes visual culture, is used as and constitutes in part a form of power, which as Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron maintain, "manages to impose meanings and to impose them as legitimate," while it simultaneously "conceals the power relations which are

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<sup>501</sup> Nadia Abou El-Magd. 2006. "Egyptian Sexologist Tackles Age-old Taboo." *The Globe and Mail* (Monday, December 4, 2006), p. A18. Dr. Kotb would probably not mind the description. The point is that the author felt nonetheless compelled to begin her article with a reference to the veil and Islam.

<sup>502</sup> Another example appears in *Ms. Magazine* in a one-page article on an American woman, Sharla Musabih, who opened up a woman's shelter in the U.A.E. where she now lives. The accompanying photograph shows Musabih talking on a cell phone wearing the traditional Emirati black 'abaya and hijab. Alasdair Soussi. 2007 (Spring). "Sharla's City of Hope." *Ms.* p. 29.

at the basis of its force.”<sup>503</sup> Similarly, Immanuel Wallerstein speaks of the “cultural trap in which we are caught...overlain by much protective shrubbery which hides its outline and its ferocity from us.”<sup>504</sup> Recognizing culture as “the key ideological battleground,”<sup>505</sup> Wallerstein claims it obfuscates both its ideological subtext and its link to the present-day global economic system and its inequities. The point is not to engage in conspiracy theories but to acknowledge the reality that ideology defines consciously or not which texts, narratives and subjects a culture puts forth as normative or abject. The resistance to the idea and representation of the Muslim subject generally, and the veiled Muslim subject specifically is attributable to, as has been consistently reiterated throughout the study, the present day geopolitical environment and also the very premises of Euro-American modern self-identity. The penetration of representations of the *subject-ive* veil into western visual culture thus unintentionally exposes and dislocates the presumed normative “I/we” whose identity characterized by ethnic, religious and/or national boundaries is hinged on distinction from, amongst other things, the constructed trope of the visible Muslim other.<sup>506</sup> Recognition of Muslim female veiled subjectivity in discursive

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<sup>503</sup> Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron. 1979. *The Inheritors: French Students and Their Relation to Culture* (trans. by Richard Nice). Chicago: Chicago University Press, p. 4. Cited in T. D. Keaton. *Op. cit.* p.18.

<sup>504</sup> Immanuel Wallerstein. 1991. “Culture as the Ideological Battleground of the Modern World-system.” *Geopolitics and Geoculture: Essays on the Changing World System*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 182-3.

<sup>505</sup> *Ibid.* p. 166.

<sup>506</sup> The fact that representation is enmeshed with ideology and identity explains the irrational persistence of the veil being viewed as a “threat.” Two concrete examples should suffice to prove the point. The first is an incident that occurred recently in Holland. A large department store, HEMA, advertised a sale on sweaters by depicting a woman in a headscarf wearing the sale item, leading a Rotterdam city council member to react adversely and post on the *Nieuw Rechts* website,

You’re trying to get customers this way, but you are also pushing customers away. It’s a big leap in the wrong direction when the Dutch should adapt to the Turkish and the Moroccans in the Netherlands. This islamisation has gone way too far and should be stopped. It won’t be long before we have *halal* sausages. Stop this madness!

Quoted in Linda Duits and Liesbet van Zoonen. 2006. “Headscarves and Porno-Chic: ‘Disciplining Girls’ Bodies in the European Multicultural Society.” *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 13(2), p. 110. The authors do not provide the web address of the ultra-nationalist New Right blog, nor do they say if the ad was pulled. The incident nonetheless clearly reveals the xenophobia that allows for one image of a visibly Muslim woman, and more so than a woman from any other visible minority, to be construed as the first step of an all out Islamicization of the country, and yet the Dutch scenario is not unique. The view above voiced

and visual texts would not only concede the equality of difference but also confirm the modernity of the veil and the diversity within the category of '(veiled) Muslim women,' rendering both the veil and the Muslim woman as classificatory tropes, and therefore the study itself, redundant. However, this acknowledgment will only ensue when Euro-American societies (and certain Muslim-majority countries) collectively solve the deep, and partially understandable, identity crises they are presently undergoing. I remain optimistic despite the pervasive Islamophobia of much western media and discourse, and put forth that the challenge of alterity presents an opportunity, as alterity always does, to reconfigure the self and the (cultural) screen in a manner positively inflecting both individual and collective life. That a shift is already occurring is evinced by the fact that a number of artists of Muslim origin who produce work proffering new meanings to the veil and providing the opportunity to redefine ourselves as both self and other are now exhibited and often positively received in Euro-America.

### **5:1 The Power of Place: Location and the Veil**

The simplicity of the idea underlying the section on location renders it extraordinarily straightforward especially as the images brought forth, although in many ways complex, are so self-evident in their exposition of the continuing relevance of place on perception and representation and thus on identity and self. Artist and critic Allan de Souza sums up the link clearly, when he observes that, "the self is constructed from where one is and from where one sees, and

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by a Rotterdam city council member, even if influenced by "white" ultra-nationalism, nonetheless reflects public debates and perceptions throughout Euro-America, testifying to the fact that Islamophobia remains the last socially acceptable bastion of racism. The Québécois populist francophone media that has been clamouring for the last year or more about how society is losing its identity by accommodating immigrants' or non-secularists' cultural and religious norms often puts forth the *hijab* as the spectre of a forced Islamicization of the nation. The anglophone press is not immune from such views as witnessed by an excerpt from one of the letters to Montreal newspaper, *The Gazette*, congratulating a small village for adopting a code of behaviour forbidding the stoning of women, the burning of women with acid, and the wearing of the *niqab*, "Where is the mea-culpa going to lead us? Once the Islamic minority becomes the majority- and that could be sooner than we think- we will all be wearing the hijab. That will be the end of us and our inferiority complex. We deserve that, but our children don't." The letter is signed Clara Groulx from the borough of Rosemère, *The Gazette*, Wednesday, January 31, 2007, p. A18. It must be noted that the Muslim population of Québec is estimated at 1 or 1.5 percent and that 85 percent of Québécois Muslim women do not veil!

also from where one is not and what one fails to see.”<sup>507</sup> If the author is discussing location in its widest sense and referring essentially to the site of the diasporic body, I am in the present section limiting myself to a geographical definition of the term. The three works I analyze therefore evince the diverse manifestations of the veil as a sign linked to culture as a sited phenomenon.

Khosrow Hassanzadeh’s body of work known as *Early Paintings* (1988-1998), depicts as Mahdavi explains the artist’s “immediate relatives in their unassuming surrounddngs.”<sup>508</sup> Produced before he began exhibiting in the west and early on in his career at a time when he was selling fruit by day and painting by night, the works display, unlike his *Terrorist* series discussed in the last chapter, no confrontation with or refutation of the western gaze.<sup>509</sup> *Mother* (1988, 170 x 110 cm) (fig. 40), executed in pastel on sheets of paper pieced together is a portrait of the artist’s mother rendered in (neo)modernist painterly idiom as evinced by the flatness, the emphasis on surface, and the little concern for perspective. While the piece may be considered autobiographical, I am discussing the drawing under the rubric of location because I consider the artist’s focus in the series as a whole, to be on mapping his environment and reality, which includes family, rather than on genealogy and filiation.

The large drawing now part of the British Museum’s collection depicts the artist’s mother seated frontally from the hips up. Her black dress bears a simplified repetitive motif, as does the wallpaper in the background. The woman’s *hijab* however is a monochrome bluish white. Hassanzadeh sought to capture a sense of his late middle-aged mother without artifice tracing the effects of time on her face and body. She looks out at the viewer, with a sad expression that curator Venetia Porter links to the tragedy of the long and

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<sup>507</sup> Allan de Souza. 2003. “Name Calling.” In Laurie Ann Farrell and Valentijn Byvanck (eds.) *Looking Both Ways: Art of the African Diaspora*. New York: Museum of African Art; Gent: Snoeck, p. 20.

<sup>508</sup> S. Mahdavi. *Op. cit.* p. 124.

<sup>509</sup> Oddly enough, many works from this series were bought by western rather than Iranian institutions, leading to the artist’s exposure to the Euro-American art world and its entrenched perception of Iran and Iranian artists. Many of his subsequent series including *Chador* (2000), *Ashura* (2000), and *Terrorist* (2004) are direct reflections or challenges of the latter, and are premised on the notion that “all artists working in non-Western countries have to position themselves in relation to this gaze.” S. Mahdavi. *Op. cit.* p. 124.

bloody Iran-Iraq war (1980-88) in which Hassanzadeh served for a short while as a volunteer.<sup>510</sup> If the image obviously grounded in the notion of a centred self, asserts the relevance of neo-modernist painting and/or its cross-culturality, what is significant for the study is that Hassanzadeh presents the viewer with a portrait of a Muslim veiled subject, his mother, and not one of the veil sign. The *hijab* in *Mother* remains unrelated, positively or negatively to the sitter's status as subject. Divested of any reification, the drawing exposes how the veil can form part of a different system of signification, and can be, in certain geographical contexts, even in ones where it is legally required, a freely chosen item of dress as the artist's mother could have chosen not to wear one when sitting for her son.

That the veil constitutes a common element of the visual landscape and of daily contemporary life in certain locations is equally evident in a very different kind of work, Hicham Benohoud's *La salle de classe* (fig. 41) from a series of black and white photographs (1994-2001) carrying the same name.<sup>511</sup> Benohoud (b.1968), who used to work as an art teacher in Marrakech, intermittently offered his young students a space and time of freedom in class and documented their improvised acts of resistance produced within the classroom space. If the images were generated by asking one or two students to strike an original pose using as props only objects found inside the classroom, many of them are troubling evoking oppression even internment, students inventing cardboard prostheses, prisons of paper, leading the viewer to question the extent of Benohoud's role in directing the interventions. The photograph *La salle de classe* reproduced here, is however more humorous and playful than strange. A student has undermined the order of the classroom spatially by reorganizing the furniture in a manner imparting to the photograph an absurd or surrealistic dimension. It shows a typical public school classroom, in its corner stands the metallic supply cabinet with rolls of large paper lying on top. That the shutters

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<sup>510</sup> Venetia Porter describes most of the sitters of these early paintings as sad, "They are posed, unsmiling, their faces –particularly that of his mother- lined and etched with pain." Khosrow-hassanzadeh.com/articles.php?id=3.

<sup>511</sup> The series was also published as a book. See Hicham Benohoud and Christian Caujolle. 2001. *La salle de classe : photographies 1994-2001*. Montreuil : Tarik; Editions de l'œil.



are closed and the light is turned on indicates it must be high noon and/or that the class embodies a closed system. The class is furnished with old wooden table type desks for two with attached benches. Male and female pupils, all around twelve years old, are leaning over them and concentrating on their assignment. However, a large table has been mounted onto the desks in the foreground and serves as a support for the desk placed atop it at which two boys sit apparently studying, although a very subtle facial expression seems to betray their joy at the situation.

Fatima Mazmouz, who has written about the prominence and tendencies of contemporary photography in the Arab world, situates Benohoud's work with those artists "*en quête de la mémoire à visage contemporain*,"<sup>512</sup> and, more importantly from her perspective, with those contesting the social and political order of their respective societies. She interprets *La salle de classe* as a commentary on the repressive nature of and the lack of freedom of expression in Moroccan society,

*Mettant en scène ses élèves dans des postures extravagantes de surréalisme, il tente de décrire le climat d'oppression qu'il vit au quotidien. La classe représentant un ordre, parmi les autres, il se permet d'y mettre le désordre à travers son autorité de professeur, pour témoigner d'un monde clos où la liberté d'expression reste problématique, d'autant plus pour des artistes. Ainsi la remise en question d'un ordre politique revient souvent dans ces travaux.*<sup>513</sup>

Mazmouz has tersely and precisely identified key aspects of the series noting the existential, metaphorical and contestatory dimensions. I agree that the artist is expressing through the student's interventions his own dissatisfaction, that the series is premised on the reversal or subversion of order represented microcosmically by the class, and that the artist's and/or the youth's enactments claim both freedom and freedom of expression especially in the images explicitly evoking confinement. However, I am arguing that the denunciatory aspect is less overt visually in the image discussed here because of its lighthearted rather than menacing character, and consequently the photograph

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<sup>512</sup> Fatima Mazmouz. 2006. "Tendances de la photographie contemporaine dans le monde arabe." In Jocelyne Dakhli (ed.) *Op. cit.* p. 262.

<sup>513</sup> *Ibid.* p. 263.

brings to the fore other important facets of the series. Because the image is structured upon incongruity, produced by the juxtaposition of order and disorder, and/or reality and fiction, it possesses the multivalence of the uncanny and begs a redefining of the political. I will first deliberate on the function of incongruity in *La salle de classe* as a essential forerunner to precisely qualifying the meaning and depiction of the veil(s) in the photograph.

Disruption constitutes necessarily a method of contestation, but it can be construed in less literal and explicitly socio-political terms than Mazmouz does above. In a press release for the Dutch Noordelicht Photofestival, the Agence Vu describes the intention behind the series of photographs, putting forth that Benohoud's aim is "to show that one can come to new insights which break through established patterns."<sup>514</sup> Although the agency equates "established patterns" with "the religious dogmas in his [Benohoud's] country," the idea if taken more generally best describes the operative quality of the overturning of order in the photograph treated here for the artist, the schoolchildren and the viewer. *La salle de classe* is indeed about new ways of seeing. Echoing a strategy that has already been encountered in the study, incongruity induces the viewer to scrutinize the image more than he/she normally would, the introduction of the absurd or uncanny into the real heightening in fact awareness and observation of the latter. While the real signified by the image can be understood as referring to social mores, the system of education and/or the strictures of modern working life, in my own reading the intensification of the real instigated by its playful subversion, draws attention to the socio-economic dimension of the represented scene. The plain nature of the classroom and its furnishings as well as the children's apparel inform the viewer that the setting is not an elite Moroccan school but rather quite the opposite. The politics of disruption can thus be interpreted as a commentary on, or contestation of the socio-economic realities and difficulties of certain sectors of Moroccan society

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<sup>514</sup> Agence Vu. 2004. *Hicham Benohoud : La salle de classe*. Noorderlicht Photofestival 2004 website. [www.noorderlicht.com/eng/fest04/friesmuseum/benohoud/index.html](http://www.noorderlicht.com/eng/fest04/friesmuseum/benohoud/index.html).

including those of schoolteachers, a reality that renders the students' act of freedom all the more significant.

The image possesses a poignancy because of the setting and because its actors are so young. Even if the viewer is incognizant of the fact that a student or students enacted the subversion of the space, *La salle de classe* nonetheless makes clear their indispensable complicity in the production of the image and therefore asserts their agency. That the intervention affirms the subjecthood of children or pre-teenagers adds another social even radical dimension to the collective work especially as neither the classroom nor the student are common or usual themes in contemporary art. In addition, the overall anti-aesthetic or aesthetic of the mundane visibly communicates that the image and its setting are essentially real and not staged, underscoring both the performance aspect of the image and the intersection of life and art it plots. If the slippage between reality and fiction or between sense and nonsense evident in the photograph is a frequent theme of contemporary artistic production, the incongruous nature of Benohoud's piece is professing neither the absence of reality nor the loss of meaning. Rather the act of contestation constructing the image is inherently idealistic as it is premised upon the existence of something better; it therefore pronounces the possibility of meaningful alternative individual and collective systems while putting forth that these are ignored or stymied by institutions and social and subjective realities.

*La salle de classe* remediates in order to accentuate, resist, and transform reality evincing how reference to the real and daily life does not automatically denote, as is often assumed an apolitical position. As Marc Jimenez equally affirms, the everyday (*la quotidienneté*) in the visual arts is erroneously considered antithetical to political engagement<sup>515</sup> as the notion of political need not be, as feminists and other minoritized groups have long argued, considered diametrically opposed to lived experience or existential and aesthetic concerns. Benohoud's work in fact demonstrates how the personal and the political can

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<sup>515</sup> Marc Jimenez. 2005. *La querelle de l'art contemporain*. Paris: Gallimard, p. 275. Quoted in F. Mazmouz. *Op. cit.* p. 266.

successfully overlap and its strength lies in the proximity and interpenetration it maps between the social, the political, the every day and art. In addition, *La salle de classe*'s incongruity coupled with its moving subject matter and its aesthetic confer to the image a poetic dimension. The work *re*-presents daily life to highlight problems therein but has done so by poeticizing the social rather than politicizing the poetic.

Benohoud exercised his agency/authority in his former classroom to encourage his students to exercise theirs, and then documented the results of his and his students' refashioning or disruption of order, thereby assuming the transformational capacities not only of the image but also of human agency. Consequently, while the artist's critical views on Islam are well known, the four *muhajjabat* are, like all the other students, marked as subjects because of the piece's democratic and inclusionary process of production. If the veiled girls in the class locate the image for the viewer culturally and geographically, the photograph nonetheless contextualizes them by elucidating their link to place, and therefore they neither play a significant role in, nor constitute the target of the projected message. They are simply subjects amongst other subjects.

The veil and the veiled woman constitute recurring themes for Iranian photographer Kourush Adim (b. 1971). However, Adim most often portrays the veiled woman as a subject of his imagination rather than as a specific individual. Because in his work the poetic imagination trumps the real, his representations of veiled Muslim subjects intimate the existence of a trajectory of the veil left uncharted by the present study. I am nonetheless including one of his photographs from the series, *Le voile* (1999-2000) in the discussion not only because it exposes so unambiguously how location inflects the veil but also because it provides the opportunity to examine the veiled woman as an idealized artistic subject, thus raising issues not addressed thus far and unmistakably bringing forth an alternative vision to Euro-American mainstream perceptions. In addition, the image poses in clear visual terms the intrinsic relationship of the veil to veiling. In many of the photographs of *Le voile*, a series purposely plotting parallels between landscape, culture and subjectivity, the abstract

aesthetics of veiling override the veil (fig. 42). These images nonetheless implying the presence of a Muslim female subject dissimulated under the *chador* or situated outside the image in a “space-off,” would therefore be more appropriately mapped as part of the trajectory of the contextualized veil outlined in Chapter 3. However, the one I will examine in the present section depicts a more stable and hence more readable image of a veiled figure.

The black and white photograph shows a veiled woman set in a lush forest (fig. 43, 38.1 x 43.2 cm). The trees’ dense foliage that covers the top half of the image shades the whole underbrush except for an illuminated longish irregularly shaped patch of grass in the foreground whose stark contrast with the shade makes it seemingly glow. A slight woman donning a white *chador* stands in its center, her back facing the viewer. The intense light renders the veil translucent adding to the ethereal character the luminosity bestows upon the entire scene. The overall impression created is one of quietude, stillness and even otherworldliness heightened by the hieratic quality and the formal beauty of the image. While the veiled figure is evidently a real person, the poetic nature of the photograph makes it clear that the image is the enactment of a subjective vision rather than a documentation of reality, and thus the (veiled) subjectivity put forth may be construed as essentially that of the artist.

The photograph leaves much up to the imagination because of the idyllic setting and more particularly, because, as the viewer sees nothing of the woman’s person, it underscores the veiling metaphor implicit to the veil. The veil as it doubles as veiling, which as the study has determined constitutes a visual symbol for suggesting or signifying that which defies representation, thus partakes in and in fact produces the enigmatic nature of the scene depicting a lone woman in a wood. That the veil/veiling, as in Islamic aesthetics, alludes to the fine boundary between the phenomenal and the noumenal or more precisely their interpenetration is suggested by the fact that the veiled figure is depicted as situated within the material world and is not disembodied. Because she is associated not only with nature but also more particularly with light, she evokes the theophanic aspect of the former rather than a hermetic separate imaginary or

spiritual realm. Adim's photograph corroborates as did Aisha Khalid's *Chandan Pani* how the image of the veiled woman, envisioned through another screen can possess spiritual connotations (that of the spiritual feminine) easily communicated through its/her inherent veiling metaphor.<sup>516</sup> The photograph equally educes how the strategy of veiling as set forth in the third chapter not only denotes a presence or reality defying representation but also recognizes by *visually* signifying the non-represented, the polysemous because subjective nature of mediation. I maintain that veiling's implicit acknowledgment of the multivalent because undetermined interpretive space renders the image –and therefore much of Adim's work– capable of cross-cultural translation. This is particularly true in this specific case as the photograph because of its lack of explicit denominational references can simultaneously evoke the theme of the veiled female figure also ensconced in Judeo-Christian historical, religious and iconographic traditions. If Adim's portrayal of the veiled Muslim woman might be judged as problematic by some because entailing an idealized representation of 'woman' or because perceived as buttressing dominant discourses of another cultural screen, its specific interest for the study is twofold. In effect, I will call attention to only two additional salient characteristics of the image, first elucidating at some length the alternative spiritual narrative of the veil it brings forth and second broaching the relationship of the veil to idealization and identification it posits, maintaining that both not only proffer new visions of the veil but equally abet the photograph's openness to translation.

If Adim's image consists of an idealized vision of the veiled woman, I want to first consider it from the angle of veiling and the interiority it communicates because the spiritual narrative it puts forth both adduces that the veiling metaphor is integral to the sartorial veil and echoes many Muslim women's discourse on the veil and that of Islamic traditions more generally. The woman

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<sup>516</sup> For elaborations on the feminine aspects of Islam and Islamic spirituality, see for example, Annemarie Schimmel. 1997. *My Soul is a Woman: The Feminine in Islam* (trans. Susan H. Ray). New York: Continuum. Saadia Khawar Khan Chisti. 1987. "Female Spirituality in Islam." In Seyyed Hossein Nasr (ed.) *Islamic Spirituality: Foundations*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, pp. 199-219. Or Jamal Elias. 1988. "Female and Feminine in Islamic Mysticism." *Muslim World* 78(3):209-224.

in the photograph constitutes the chosen enshrined object of the gaze, yet the veil prevents any scopic appropriation of the figure thereby exemplifying the veil's purpose as defined by Islam. Islamic scholarship, more particularly Islamic feminism, describes in effect the veil in terms of freeing the woman from the sexualized gaze, thus reversing the scopic economy structuring many societies and empowering the woman by rendering her the subject as opposed to the object of the gaze.<sup>517</sup> It must nonetheless be noted however that rigid past and present overemphasis on veiling and covering the body can obviously be both stultifying and objectifying. The objective of the discussion is not to defend the veil but to foreground that the discourse surrounding the veil in Euro-America generally omits that some Muslim women may choose the veil as Trinh Minh-ha suggests, "to reappropriate their space."<sup>518</sup> Similarly, Daphne Grace who ultimately concludes in her work on the veil that the garment is more repressive than emancipatory, nonetheless, drawing upon Irigaray's concept of the lost state of female spirituality *la mystérique*,<sup>519</sup> puts forth that it may

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<sup>517</sup> Somewhat surprisingly, this can even be the case for women with the *niqab*. Sabera Bham's exhibit of colour photographs of *munaqqiba* included a soundtrack with women explaining why they wear the face veil and many of the testimonies abide in this sense, *i.e.* "Islam is a feminist option," "Modesty is important in Islam...something which a woman keeps about her soul and consciousness." The sole serious review of the unique exhibit is not unsurprisingly found in the forward-looking art journal, *Third Text*. The "deceptively simple show," prompted the reviewer, Paul O'Kane, to consummate non-judgement towards the British women who chose to don the *niqab* or full face cover,

Covering the body in this extreme manner eliminates the visual references by which we make instant judgements of others and provides an opportunity to give deeper consideration to a person described by little more than a formidable, yet gracious, autonomy. Only the 'windows of the soul' are visible and even these are sometimes covered by a thin, transparent material making us aware of the sacred quality of eye-contact.

Paul O'Kane. *Op. cit.* p. 101. Rather than fixate on what he cannot see, O'Kane probes what is (mostly) visible, the gaze of the women that meets the viewer's, forcefully and directly. He interprets the artist's message as suggesting "that 'Girl Power' isn't only accessed through unrestrained attitudes and unleashed suppression."

<sup>518</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha. *Op. cit.* p.73. She adds, "...or to claim a new difference in defiance of genderless, hegemonic, centered standardization."

<sup>519</sup> D. Grace. *Op. cit.* p. 209. Irigaray's *la mystérique* is a specifically female and non-rational spiritual reality, a place in which "the source of light that has been logically repressed" emerges and woman's lost sense of unity of being is experienced. See Luce Irigaray. 1985. *Speculum of the Other Woman*, (trans. G. C. Gill). Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, pp. 191-202. Grace also offers a feminist interpretation of the veil by alluding to Elaine Showalter's idea of an all-women's space, the "wild zone," based on an affirmative collectivity and emphasizing the interpersonal. Grace elucidates "If we view the location of veiled women (outside male space) as equivalent to a 'wild zone', then through veiling women may gain access to an area of inner

provide a “female space not only empowering but also strategic in the renegotiating of women’s identity in terms of feminine spirituality.” She elaborates adding that it is in “this metaphorical space that the veil may have the effect of turning the woman inward towards a ‘core self’ that is not defined by appearance- such as an inner sense of consciousness itself,”<sup>520</sup> again evoking (and relying on) Islamic ideas and traditions. The notion that the veil may help some women, because of its articulation of the un-represented or un-representable, reconnect with their spiritual and ontological centre is a view put forth by many present day *muhajjabat* and not only by Muslim women claiming a space of modernity for themselves in the west and/or associated with Islamic feminism. For example, Zahra Rahnavard, Iranian author, professor, and ardent defender of the Iranian Revolution, describes the effects of the *hijab* that she refers to as *purdah*, in spiritual rather than in the state’s ideological and largely patriarchal terms, calling the veil a “prologue to gnosis” and comparing it to the plain gate of a beautiful garden.<sup>521</sup> Her words attest to and reiterate how women’s own diverse experiences of the veil have been and often remain occulted, not only by western discourse, but equally and more surprisingly by regimes that encourage or impose the garment. In addition, they accentuate the oft-ignored aspect of the veil, namely that women who veil do not necessarily see it as marking their inferiority to men or as clamouring their religious identity in public but rather as a means of assisting the development of spiritual consciousness. It thus becomes clear how the obdurate global campaign against

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experience that is a psychological life force for women, a prerequisite for regaining rather than losing self-identity.” D. Grace. *Op. cit.* pp. 24-25.

<sup>520</sup> *Ibid.* p. 209. dg

<sup>521</sup> Zahra Rahnavard. 1990. *The Message of Hijab*. London: Routledge, p.18. The full quote is as follows,

Purdah is like a gate of a green garden, a wooden gate whose colour has faded, which is not so pretty that whenever you open it you may come across a pleasant garden of spring on whose branches you would find the illumination of divine light. In this respect, purdah is a prologue to gnosis. If you dare come close to this gate and open it, enter its threshold, you shall explore that green and pleasant garden of spring and that eternal light. ... A woman who accepts purdah and surrenders her heart to its hidden laws succeeds gradually in exploring the spiritual garden, and becomes so much habituated to it that whenever she is away from that garden her heart starts singing sad songs like a nightingale (away from its flower).

Grace has read Rahnavard as she lists the work in her bibliography.



the veil can be construed, because steeped in (neo)colonial binarism, as not truly advocating female empowerment as it claims. Rather, it may be deemed as part of an overarching patriarchal (and/or capitalist) system (the same one that often co-opts western feminism and feminist views) leading women unfortunately further and further away from *la mystérique*. And yet the view of the veil as oppressive and therefore divorced from any spiritual significance it might possess for its wearers is so entrenched in the Euro-American psyche, that renowned psychoanalyst, Julia Kristeva, who suggests in *Les nouvelles maladies de l'âme* that spirituality may indeed constitute the natural outcome of both feminism and sexual liberation in what she perceives to be an increasingly genderless world,<sup>522</sup> signed one of the many petitions in France calling for the legal banning of the veil in French public institutions. If I have extrapolated at some length, the purpose of evoking spiritual narratives woven around the veil, is not to 'Islamicize' Adim's representation of the veiled woman but rather to contextualize such representations emphasizing how location and culture are intertwined with the imaginary and its symbolism and to reiterate how the visual and here poetic metaphor of veiling facilitates translation.

Adim's idealization of the veiled woman also, I argue, abets cross-culturality. I am not however, suggesting that visual articulations of the ideal are necessarily universal but I am proposing that the ideal functions as a meta-narrative assisting or enabling cross-cultural visual literacy, an idea of particular importance regarding representations of the marginalized figure of the veiled Muslim woman. It is equally relevant to the chapter's postulate of the transformative potential of the image because idealization in representation like

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<sup>522</sup> Julia Kristeva. 1993. *Les nouvelles maladies de l'âme*. Paris: Fayard, p. 329. Kristeva voices an idea central to many spiritual traditions and of course, to modern psychoanalytic theory, namely that alterity is a phenomenon internal to the self, a notion that is relevant to the topic of the present study. She describes in *Ibid.* pp. 329-30 how she envisions this return to spirituality in terms both poetic and characteristic of her profession,

Que celui-ci tourne à l'évasion ne devrait pas cacher la radicalité de sa démarche. On pourrait la résumer comme une *intériorisation de la séparation qui fonde le contrat social et symbolique*. Désormais, l'autre n'est pas un mal étranger à moi, bouc émissaire extérieur : autre sexe, autre classe, autre race, autre nation. *Je suis victime-et-bourreau, même et autre, identique et étranger*. Il ne me reste qu'à analyser indéfiniment la séparation fondatrice de ma propre et intenable identité.

the subject-to-subject relationship provokes viewer identification thus necessarily involving recognition of the other. Because in Adim's photograph veiling is correlative to idealization, it is important to flesh out their interrelationship, especially as the concept and importance of the ideal/ized has been, as Silverman points out, essentially dismissed, even condemned in the scholarship on difference. In *The Threshold of the Visible World*, the American scholar reclaims idealization defining it, aptly in my view, as the "psychic activity at the heart of love," and recommends in lieu of reproval, "imagining the new uses to which it might be put."<sup>523</sup> Recognizing the remarkable power of idealization that "restricts ideality to certain subjects, while rendering others unworthy of love,"<sup>524</sup> Silverman calls for "visual texts which activate in us the capacity to idealize bodies which diverge as widely as possible from ourselves and from the cultural norm," but without creating a new set of "reified ideals."<sup>525</sup> If idealization implicitly provokes identification, the author insists upon forms of representation that while allowing identification with devalued bodies and beings, uphold their alterity. In a discussion on film grounded in Walter Benjamin's concept of "distance," she proposes a set of necessary conditions for art works to enable identification "*at a distance from the self*" or what she terms "heteropathic identification." Silverman argues a work must maintain the viewer's cognizance of the "representational frame," privilege the particular over the general, and finally frustrate subjective possessive appropriation of the image "at the level of image, sound, narrative."<sup>526</sup> The Brechtian first trait was encountered last chapter in Tabrizian's *Surveillance* and the second one describes all the images mapped under the rubric of the *subject-ive* veil with the exception of Adim's. In fact, none of the characteristics the author sets forth to ensure a non-appropriable form of identification is present in the black and white photograph. On the contrary, the latter accepts even stresses the artifice and illusion of representation, favours the general, and encourages a symbiotic

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<sup>523</sup> K. Silverman. *Op. cit.* p. 2.

<sup>524</sup> *Ibid.* p. 37.

<sup>525</sup> *Ibid.* p. 37.

<sup>526</sup> *Ibid.* p. 103.

relationship with the viewer. However, I contend that the visual strategy of veiling because it constantly sends the viewer into a 'space-off' ceaselessly privileging the intersubjective or interpretive space over the image posits a distance between representation and the viewer and hence maintains the alterity of the represented subject.

To clarify more fully how veiling allows articulations of the ideal that incite "heteropathic" as opposed to "incorporatory identification," I will briefly turn to a photograph from Adim's series, *Revelations* (n.d., 19.5 x 29.25"). The black and white image portrays a veiled Muslim subject (fig. 44) -the viewer is able to contemplate the sitter's face- sitting in a room beside an open window. The wind blows the white translucent central curtain bearing a floral pattern into the room; it billows into a form reminiscent of a fully veiled figure, its void clearly evoking an invisible and signifying presence. If the veiling metaphor is implicit to the veil as I suggest above, Adim foregrounds the former by rendering and reiterating it separately from the veiled woman.

The drape does not only relate *visually* to the woman's indoor white *chador* veil. Because it equally enacts the veiling metaphor, the void it articulates signalling the intangible nature of being and reality and connoting the realm of intersubjectivity, simultaneously confers ideality on the sitter and upholds her distance from the viewer. What I want to point out is that the image by accentuating veiling makes it indubitably apparent that it embodies the mediative filter through which the viewer perceives the woman. As put forth in the trajectory of the contextualized veil, the aesthetics of veiling and the paradigm of vision and representation it posits is not based on the presumed stability of materiality or of the optical frame but on the fluctuating spaces of intersubjectivity and the conception of the world as revelation. Agreeing with Silverman that identification possesses "potential importance as an agency of psychic change,"<sup>527</sup> I have nonetheless postulated in contradistinction to her that the visual strategy of veiling because not premised on ocularcentrism permits the idealization of non-normative bodies while maintaining their difference.

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<sup>527</sup> *Ibid.* p. 85.

Adim's representations of the veil indubitably bring forth alternative visions and are, as Bailey and Tawadros submit, "far removed from a simplistic, anthropological representation of the veil that all too often presents the veil as a cipher for female oppression," plotting instead "the veil as an integral part of the physical and psychological landscape."<sup>528</sup>

The three works examined confirm how geography can displace and reconfigure the veil and demonstrate how location inflects representations of the veil in diverse manners. Hassanzadeh's *Mother* frames the veil as an integral part of his personal and familial reality; Benohoud's *La salle de classe* reveals it as part of a collective social environment, while Adim's photograph situates the garment in the subjective poetic realm of the imaginary. While the latter is the only piece in which 'the image of the veiled woman' constitutes the actual subject, all three works transmit in clear visual terms how physical emplacement in a cultural environment shapes perception and by extrapolation memory and identity. Geography or location is therefore not only territorial or spatial but also forms part of the "psychological landscape." If in the following section, I consider autobiographical works depicting the veil that chart matrilineal descent as a postcolonial and feminist strategy, the veils represented remain nevertheless linked to location, although here it refers to what Irit Rogoff calls the "unhomed geographies" of many contemporary artists.<sup>529</sup>

### **5:2 The Power of Autobiography: Female Lineage and the Veil**

Autobiography is deemed an important genre for minoritized artists, put forth as a powerful strategy for restituting power and resolving if only in part, the exclusion of their experience from the disciplines of art and art history and the occlusion of their status as subjects by Euro-American dominant discourse. The idea is that narrations of lived experience allow, as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson submit, "the coming to voice of previously silenced subjects,"<sup>530</sup> and offer a territory in which marginalized heterogeneous subjects can emerge and

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<sup>528</sup> D. Bailey and G. Tawadros. *Op. cit.* p.20.

<sup>529</sup> Irit Rogoff. 2001. *Terra Infirma: Geography's Visual Culture*. London: Routledge.

<sup>530</sup> Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. 1998. "Introduction: Subjectivity in Women's Autobiographical Practices." In Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (eds.) *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, p. 27.

assert themselves while circumventing the restraints of patriarchal and/or ethnocentric systems of representation. While autobiographical narrative has positioned itself prominently in feminist and postcolonial theory and art as a strategy of empowerment, it is not without its critics. Sara Suleri for instance, in her famous essay, *Woman Skin Deep: Feminism and the Postcolonial Condition*, scathingly scorns the proclivity towards lived experience in feminist postcolonial discourse. She argues that it can neither replace theory nor constitute “an alternative mode of radical subjectivity,” attacking the idea that “personal narrative is the only salve to the rude abrasions that Western feminist theory has inflicted on the body of ethnicity.”<sup>531</sup> While sharing some of the overarching concerns Suleri articulates in the essay such as the problems intrinsic to semantic categorization (*i.e.* woman, postcolonial woman, *etc.*), I nonetheless insist that personal narrative need not be posited as the antithesis of theory. In addition, I maintain that autobiographical visual texts must be examined individually as autobiography itself forms a heterogeneous and not a homogeneous category, and can in fact propose alternative conceptions of self. Zineb Sedira’s *Mother, Daughter and I* and *Mum’s Veil* both intrinsically autobiographical rather confirm Smith and Watson who in contrast to Suleri postulate that if recent discourse on difference has led to redefinitions of subjectivity, “autobiographical discourse” has formed “a central site” of its reformulation.<sup>532</sup> In fact, the two works portraying or alluding to the veiled Muslim woman, because rooted in lived experience or more specifically matrilineal descent proffer alternative views of her. In order to investigate and contextualize these, I will succinctly probe in each case the notion of subjectivity underwriting the works. More specifically, I will examine *Mother, Daughter and I* in light of Irigaray’s ideas on mother-daughter relationships and *Mum’s Veil* considering how context, language and memory inflect the viewer’s reception of the veil.

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<sup>531</sup> Sara Suleri. 1998. “*Woman Skin Deep: Feminism and the Postcolonial Condition*.” In S. Smith and J. Watson (eds.). *Op. cit.* p. 119. If scholars like Suleri warn against terms like ‘the postcolonial woman,’ it is because they erase in each case the specific historical, political, and personal context.

<sup>532</sup> S. Smith and J. Watson. *Op. cit.* p. 27.

*Mother, Daughter and I* (2003, top row: 120 cm x 120 cm, bottom: 90 cm x 26 cm,) (fig. 45) is a photographic triptych consisting of three pairs of colour photographs set against a white neutral background, showing from left to right, Sedira with her mother, her daughter with her grandmother, and the artist with her own daughter. Each pair of images represents one scene. The upper and major part of each image bears a standard square format, and portrays the women's upper torsos and faces but more importantly their interactions through the gaze. The lower part consisting of an elongated horizontal oval shape frames those of their hands. The exchanges between the subjects differ from frame to frame. If Sedira and her mother are looking at each other, Sedira appears to be offering herself through her gaze and smiles at her mother while the latter returns the gaze with some hesitancy and reticence. In the central image, the late middle-aged woman is smiling openly at her granddaughter who responds although with a slight timidity or self-consciousness the viewer might ascribe to youth or the generation gap.<sup>533</sup> In the photograph on the viewer's right, the artist's daughter is looking at her mother with a faintly pleading expression. Sedira however is not looking back at her. Rather she is looking down at the young girl's hand that she is holding with both hands and contemplating. The reflective mood she conveys evinces the artist is not refusing contact but rather engaging in a different mode or sense of communication, although the fact that she answers 'sight' with 'touch' coupled with the teenager's look of expectation may evoke the challenges of intersubjective interaction. The portrait *Mother, Daughter and I* paints of the matrilineal relationships is not over idealized as it transmits the interactions between the women while acknowledging the gaps therein.

If Sedira expresses the proximity and distance interwoven between the three generations of women, she also conveys through the visual effects of colour and

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<sup>533</sup> Sedira produced a video on the same theme that focuses on the issue of translation in its literal sense. *Mother Tongue* (2002) shows Sedira and her mother speaking Arabic, and she and her daughter speaking French. If the problem of language is already apparent in these scenes, it is most evident in the sequences showing the artist's daughter with her grandmother; the former speaking English, the latter speaking Arabic and neither understanding the other's mother tongue.

dress the leitmotif of continuity and change apparent in lineage. The artist's Algerian born mother who moved to France after the Algerian War of Independence (1954-62) is wearing a traditional style housedress made up of white material strewn with red flowers bearing a three tiered lace yoke over which she wears a white sweater. The scarf tied around her head<sup>534</sup> shows hints of her freshly and brightly hennaed hair. Sedira is wearing a blue Indian embroidered top and skirt, the kind of apparel popular in the 1960s and 1970s and that has recently resurfaced globally in everyday fashion wear. The blue outfit she describes as "pseudo-Oriental" indicates how filiation, because it involves a passage through time and here also place, encompasses an aspect of translation. Sedira does not wear a veil and yet if her dress can be linked to clothing trends in Britain where she now lives, it can also be read as related to tastes shaped by her familial North African culture. The daughter is wearing the globally ubiquitous t-shirt and casual pants. Her clothes like her grandmothers are essentially white with a touch of red; the pants are white as is the tee shirt with the exception of a branch of red blooms printed down the front. The clothing provides a visual symmetry to the photographs while also suggesting the pattern of constants and variables often observed in genealogical descent.

Photographs always imply in varying degrees the reality of the pose and the images making up *Mother, Daughter and I* clearly reference the tradition of portraiture. However, if these have been carefully framed and the clothing carefully chosen, they nonetheless simultaneously evoke the unstructured realism of the everyday through their documentary aspect and autobiographical subject matter. In fact, if Sedira has appropriated the tradition of portraiture, she transforms it both visually and conceptually. As the title of the work indicates, the work is a portrait of herself, her mother and her daughter but the fact that the artist has not simply presented one photograph portraying the three subjects possesses several significant implications. By multiplying the images and portraying the sitters in pairs and looking at each other rather than at the viewer,

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<sup>534</sup> This type of veil tied around the head only, leaving the neck exposed is different from what is generally evoked by the term *hijab*. This style of wearing the veil is linked to North Africa and closely associated with cultural tradition and the housewife role.

the work foregrounds the *interaction between* rather than the *image of* subjects revealing a conception of subjectivity that counters the notion of an ego-based sovereign “I.” *Mother, Daughter and I* posits the idea much circulated in feminist studies since the 1980s that a woman’s identity comes about “as a relational rather than individuating process.”<sup>535</sup> The notion has also figured prominently in other disciplines such as postcolonialism, minority studies, or cross-cultural psychiatry. If the idea in its feminist application has often been criticized as essentialist because presumptive of a homogeneous subject ‘woman,’ its interest for the study lies in the fact that this understanding of the subject underwriting *Mother, Daughter and I* privileges the intersubjective and challenges the assumed self-sufficiency if not linearity of self emphasizing instead its aspects of interdependence and multiplicity. As elaborated in the former chapter, the representation and self-representation of women, in particular those of non-European descent living in Euro-America is particularly fraught with difficulty and one way of healing the disjuncture between being and representation and between self and the projected image as other is to visually reinscribe embodiment by highlighting the subject’s intangibility. By representing and positioning women essentially through their relationships with one another, Sedira has found a way in *Mother, Daughter and I* to escape historically entrenched projections by accentuating the invisible spaces of intersubjectivity and hence the alterity/ies upon which the self founds itself. Stressing the unrepresentability of subjectivity visually through a focus on the gaze and touch, Sedira reinvests the body as a site of being/subjectivity rather than representation/image. However, that the artist has chosen to map the intersubjective spaces of her matrilineal line not only further underscores that the subject is, as Judith Butler articulates, “produced in and as a gendered matrix of relations.,”<sup>536</sup> but also confirms the artist’s claim of the centrality of

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<sup>535</sup> S. Smith and J. Watson. *Op. cit.* p. 8.

<sup>536</sup> Judith Butler. 1998. “Introduction to *Bodies that Matter*.” In Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (eds.). *Op. cit.* p. 371. This is a reprint of the first part of the introduction of Judith Butler. 1993. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex.”* New York; London: Routledge.



matrilineal lineage to her work.<sup>537</sup> I will explore this aspect of *Mother, Daughter and I* by briefly turning to Luce Irigaray's ideas regarding mother-daughter relationships.

Irigaray persuasively argues that one of the means by which patriarchy established itself, retains it hold on power and reproduces itself was/is to disrupt these vital relationships therefore preventing woman from both fully being and becoming.<sup>538</sup> The woman/mother because alienated from herself goes on to reproduce "the oppression to which she is subject."<sup>539</sup> The French scholar however maintains that if the mother can nonetheless manage to "find her identity as a woman," she will enable or "give an identity to her daughter."<sup>540</sup> The strategies of empowerment she proposes are stark in their simplicity: the establishment of loving relationships between women and, recognizing the influence of images, the production and circulation of positive images of mothers and daughters in public space. While the last suggestion has been deemed somewhat naïve, Irigaray is cognizant of the need to find or develop a new female/feminist language and system of representation because she considers woman to be as Hilary Robinson points out, a subject that "has not yet become," and as "a space of potentiality rather than a pre-existing ontological category."<sup>541</sup> The important point to retain in light of Sedira's triptych is that Irigaray considers matrilineal relationships and their representation "an essential condition for the constitution of female identity"<sup>542</sup> or subjecthood.

In *Mother, Daughter and I*, Sedira not only foregrounds mother-daughter relationships; she equally, by intimating their synonymy with portraiture, suggests as does Irigaray, that they are constitutive of female subjecthood and

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<sup>537</sup> Z. Sedira. *Op. cit.* p. 58.

<sup>538</sup> She writes, "Patriarchy has disrupted mother-daughter relationships through an act of matricide." Elaine Hoffman Baruch, Lucienne J. Serrano, and Luce Irigaray. 1988. "Luce Irigaray: Paris, Summer, 1980." In Elaine Hoffman Baruch and Lucienne J. Serrano (eds.) *Women Analyze Women: in France, England, and the United States*. New York: New York University Press, p. 156.

<sup>539</sup> *Ibid.* p. 156.

<sup>540</sup> *Ibid.* p. 157.

<sup>541</sup> Hilary Robinson. 2006. *Reading Art, Reading Irigaray*. London: I. B. Tauris, p. 191.

<sup>542</sup> Luce Irigaray. 1990. *Je, tu, nous: pour une culture de la différence*. Paris: Grasset et Fasquelle, pp. 53-4. Translated by and quoted in H. Robinson. *Op. cit.* p. 180.

identity. The piece proposes as an antidote to patriarchal and neocolonial erasure the re-establishment of these female genealogies whose power is here unmistakably conveyed in visual terms. That the women look at each other and ignore the viewer and that the white backgrounds of the larger images are in essence borderless and without referent render the notion of lineage and transmission almost palpable. If the top row employs the strategy of the void and the space-off to signify the spaces and realities of intersubjectivity, the bottom one zeroes in on the body reinforcing the strength the relationships confer and emphasizing their embedment in the body and touch. In addition, because the artist frames the sitters' holding hands as separate portraits, she is proposing akin to Irigaray an alternative language to/of specularity. As a way of obviating the difficulties of representation linked to gender and ethnicity, Sedira has positioned herself within her female lineage reinstating the disrupted line of transmission, a reinstatement Irigaray considers "equivalent to shaking the foundations of the patriarchal order."<sup>543</sup> Interestingly and paralleling *Silent Witness*, the work affirming, restoring and rewriting female subjectivity can be deemed to address the elisions and dislocations of both western and Middle Eastern societies. So while Suleri refutes the idea that "'life" remains the ultimate answer to "discourse,""<sup>544</sup> I argue that *Mother, Daughter and I* evinces the problematic bases of the discourse that opposed them in the first place. Additionally in distinction to Suleri, I maintain that the work corroborates the capacity of lived experience to provide alternative definitions of selfhood or "radical subjectivity" that do not fall as she contends, into "a low-grade romanticism."<sup>545</sup> Without engaging in over-idealization, the work reveals how personal narrative offers possibilities to recast subjectivity. Sedira casts not only herself as subject but also her daughter and her mother. The elderly woman is the only woman who wears a veil, a fact which might be seen as implying that the veil is linked to tradition and hence the past. However, I am arguing that

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<sup>543</sup> Luce Irigaray. 1991. "Women-Mothers, the Silent Substratum of the Social Order." In Margaret Whitford (ed.) *The Irigaray Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell, p.50.

<sup>544</sup> Sara Suleri. *Op. cit.* p. 120.

<sup>545</sup> *Ibid.* p. 119.

*Mother, Daughter and I* rewrites the image of the veil and the veiled Muslim woman beyond the discourse of tradition. Not only because it depicts the visibly marked Muslim woman in the role of subject, but equally because the intersubjectively constituted conception of self it delineates also intimates her role in the formation of the identity of the other sitters, more particularly that of the artist. Sedira's obvious centrality to the piece as both producer and subject allow the viewer to perceive the veil as mediated through Sedira's experience. Participating in this mediation, he/she comes to understand that the veil and the veiled *subject* form part of the artist's familial reality and are thus intertwined with fact, sentiment, and memory. This is the full meaning of the artist's statement regarding the representation of the veil in her video, *Silent Sight* (2000), "What I am trying to say is that the veil, for me, is part of my parents' tradition."<sup>546</sup> *Mother, Daughter and I* is compelling in its honesty and compassion. Sedira has brought the abject/object into the spaces of Euro-American culture endowing her/it with the full status of subject and recognizing the active part she plays/ed in the foundation of her own subjectivity.

*Mum's Veil* (1999) consists of as the title indicates an actual veil once belonging to and worn by Sedira's mother although here the term refers to the veil or *voilette* that covers the lower part of the face.<sup>547</sup> Typical of a certain epoch in Algeria, it is made of plain white cotton cloth with a crocheted decorative bottom band and two ties that do up behind the head. The work like an *objet trouvé* hinges on the transformation brought about by its recontextualization within a museum or art gallery space. However, unlike the latter, *Mum's Veil* is not engaged in the modernist quest of defining art and/or expanding its parameters; on the contrary the work in essence an enactment of memory, exposes what Jones calls "the hidden logic of exclusionism underlying modernist art history and criticism."<sup>548</sup>

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<sup>546</sup> J. McGonagle. *Op. cit.* p. 624. The video describes the artist's anxiety as a child watching her mother put on the *haïk* at the Algerian airport during holidays and made the statement discussing the last sentence of the film, "It's my home, her home, and I just accepted it."

<sup>547</sup> The piece is not reproduced in the present study but one can see it in F. Lloyd. *Op. cit.* p. 11.

<sup>548</sup> A. Jones. *Op. cit.* p.9.

*Mum's Veil* re-presents the veil. While both the content and the generic display recall the artefacts and exhibition modes of ethnographic museums, Sedira unmask the colonialism and/or ethnocentrism underwriting the 'objectivity' of ethnography, not only by repositioning the artefact through context but also through language demonstrating the force of inflection it possesses. Visually the framed veil could be any veil, and it thus resembles the anonymous objects put forth to represent and signify the Muslim other. However, the title, *Mum's Veil* dislocates the veil's otherness for the Euro-American viewer by specifying and claiming its direct and familial relationship to the artist. The viewer thus perceives the garment through the lens of Sedira's personal narrative and memory. If the work unpacks colonial representations, it also deconstructs more contemporary stereotypes. As the study has determined, the face veil is a site particularly associated in Euro-America with the oppression of Muslim women, Islamic fundamentalism, and the alleged threat posed by Islam to the west. *Mum's Veil* jars with these mainstream representations and produces a set of different evocations because positioned within an autobiographical narrative. The work situates the veil, albeit a material artefact, in the realm of memory, which indeed constitutes a location. Memory is not only central to a subject's psychological location, but also to the construction of his/her identity especially in, as Anne-Marie Fortier remarks, "diaspora cultures."<sup>549</sup>

Memory however admits more instability than geography because the reality of mediation is clearly encompassed by the term. Since it concerns the present as much as the past, and the person who remembers as much as that remembered, it can be considered an unbounded and intersubjective terrain. Sedira puts forth a tangible piece of memory to materialize and witness the intangible ongoing experience and reality of the mother-daughter relationship.

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<sup>549</sup> Anne-Marie Fortier. 2005. "Diaspora." In David Atkinson *et al* (eds.) *A Critical Dictionary of Key Concepts*. New York: I. B. Tauris, p. 184. She puts forth that memory, "rather than territory, is the principle ground of identity formation in diaspora cultures." Quoted in Marie-Aude Baronian, Stephan Besser, and Yolande Jansen. 2007. "Introduction: Diaspora and Memory." In Marie-Aude Baronian, Stephan Besser, and Yolande Jansen (eds.). *Diaspora and Memory: Figures of Displacement in Contemporary Literature, Arts and Politics*. Amsterdam; New York: Editions Rodopi, p. 12.

This type of “testimonial object” as Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer observe “emerges in an encounter between subjects,”<sup>550</sup> revealing that the notion of subjectivity underwriting *Mum’s Veil* is akin to *Mother, Daughter, and I*, premised on interdependence and intersubjectivity. The object by privileging the relationship between subjects -its continuities and discontinuities- diffuses the boundaries normally defining the latter and leaves the viewer to decipher if *Mum’s Veil*, although clearly evoking memory, is more of a portrait of Sedira or of her mother. Perhaps even more relevant is the fact that the interstitial space(s) of the mother-daughter relationship symbolized by the artefact stands in for the subjecthood of and grants the status of subject to the veiled mother and the unveiled daughter offering an alternative discourse of both subjectivity and the veil. Akin to the previous work, the veil is equally inscribed as part of an unveiled subjectivity.

One last point requires elucidation and it entails probing why out of all the possible objects that might signify mother-daughter filiation, Sedira choses the veil. The most obvious hypothesis is that it constitutes a public and private acknowledgement of the Algerian and Muslim dimensions of her biculturalism, which as recent scholarship demonstrates involves a constant negotiation of the plural self. In addition, as intimated above, the artist by ‘subjectifying’ such an overlaid trope is unpacking both Euro-American representations of the veil and assumed definitions of the normative subject. *Mum’s Veil* clearly asserts the artist’s location by means of the veil, but uses the symbol of exclusion to solicit the viewer’s recognition of a Muslim-based subjectivity. However, the veil may also carry a more personal significance for Sedira. In her video *Silent Sight* (2000), the artist tells of the anxiety she experienced as a little girl watching her mum don the *haïk* and face veil as they arrived at the Algiers airport on holidays from France where she grew up, testifying that the veil for Sedira also constituted a symbol of difference. Her act of appropriating the veil and

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<sup>550</sup> Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer. 2007. “Testimonial Objects: Memory, Gender and Transmission.” In Marie-Aude Baronian *et al. Op. cit.* p. 141.

claiming it as part of her identity can thus be construed as part of her own coming to terms with the distance biculturalism created from her own otherness.

*Mother, Daughter, and I* and *Mum's Veil* demonstrate how personal narrative and lived experience can effect displacement and assert the power of subjectivity, albeit redefined. They reveal the capacity of autobiography to mediate the veil for the viewer and confirm that the former when presented through the lens of lived experience –here specifically matrilineal lineage - plots the Muslim woman, veiled or not, as subject. Both reveal how the real and its concomitant memory can posit the veil as a possible modality of bodily inscription and offer the viewer the possibility of identifying with subjects he/she might otherwise reject.

### **5:3 The Power of the Documentary: Veils in the Urban Landscape**

The last section of the chapter centers on three photographic projects all of which, if related to the notions of location and lived experience, possess and emerge from the precise intent of proffering alternative representations of Muslim women or Muslim subjects in general. The endeavour consisting of documenting contemporary Muslims to articulate visually their status as subjects can therefore constitute a conscious and clear postcolonial strategy although the challenge to dominant discourse occurs not through the deconstruction of mainstream representations but by the presentation of urban landscapes proposing a different and more nuanced vision of Muslims. I will evidently in the context of the present study treat only images of *muhajjabat*. The individual and institutional documentary projects that I have opted to bring forth are all in essence photojournalistic, although this is not always the case, such as Clement Cooper's book of staged high contrast and sometimes dramatic portraits (fig. 46) of veiled Muslim British school girls whose specific aim is also to submit images diverging from the stereotyped norm.<sup>551</sup>

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<sup>551</sup> C. Cooper. *Op. cit.*

If much of the theoretical debate over the nature and definition of the documentary remains beyond the scope of the study,<sup>552</sup> the images brought forth in the section can and should be contextualized within the general and increasing tendency to erase the boundaries between documentation and art.<sup>553</sup> Documentary images have in fact since the late 1980s or early 1990s circulated freely in the art circuit and all those presented in the section have been exhibited within it.<sup>554</sup> This blurring of visual taxonomies is of particular interest to the study because western publics tend to view all works with 'Muslim' content sociologically and hence as documentary.<sup>555</sup> More significantly, documentary photography provides a site in which as Ine Gevers declares, "aesthetics and ethics meet each other again," due to its capacity to show "that which exists beyond the stereotype or the already known."<sup>556</sup> Shekaiba Wakili's photographs of veiled Muslim women in London, Zohra Bensemra's of Algerian women, and the many images of women presented in the *Musulmanes, musulmans* exhibition indeed afford in lieu of the mainstream perceptions of Muslim women as backward, oppressed and/or fanatical, portraits of modern subjects in a variety of contexts and engaged in a variety of activities. These documents provide rare visual counterparts to (some) recent feminist scholarship now acknowledging that Middle Eastern and/or Muslim women are, as Saba

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<sup>552</sup> The documentary also underwent deconstructionist analysis as summed up pithily by Frits Gierstberg,

Not only was the alleged objectivity of the photographic image being undermined, but the tradition of documenting itself was attacked, being seen as culturally determined, politically biased and principally serving the Western, colonial, male gaze. What's more, reality itself had become definitively fragmented in the postmodern condition, every image and every picture referred mainly to other images and no longer to a 'reality' beyond them-...

Frits Gierstberg. 2005. "From Realism to Reality? Documentary Photography in the Age of 'Post-media.'" In Frits Gierstberg, Maartje van den Heuvel, Hans Scholten, and Martijn Verhoeven (eds.) *Documentary Now!: Contemporary Strategies in Photography, Film and the Visual Arts*. Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, p. 125.

<sup>553</sup> J. Dakhli. *Op.cit.* p. 39. See also Ine Gevers. 2005. "Images that Demand Consummation: Post-documentary, Photography, Art and Ethics." In F. Gierstberg, *et al. Op. cit.* p. 83.

<sup>554</sup> Frits Gierstberg putting forth that the "interest in documentary photography grows enormously in the international art circuit" in the 1990s distinguishes two types of work that "rooted in theory" and that of "'traditional' documentary photographers." The projects here are of the latter category. F. Gierstberg. *Op. cit.* pp. 127 and 128.

<sup>555</sup> J. Dakhli. *Op.cit.* p. 39.

<sup>556</sup> I. Gevers. *Op. cit.* p. 83.

Mahmood states, “active agents whose lives are far richer and more complex than past narratives had suggested.”<sup>557</sup> However, articulating the subjectivity and agency of the marked Muslim female other visually, because of the influence, directness, and accessibility of the image, reveals more clearly and forcefully the deconstructive capability of the subject and subjectivity.

All three projects dispute the “worlding of the word” premised upon the equation of modernity with western norms and subjects and the assumed non-modernity of those of the rest of the world, with the subtext that subjectivity was/is a prerogative exclusive to the Euro-American. The photographs analyzed below by evincing the existence of and obvious interrelationship between Muslim modernity/ies and Muslim subjectivities, confront the west’s presumption of constituting the sole prototype, norm, and frame of reference, as does Barbara Cooper in her compelling article on Hausa women’s song,

It seems inadequate to see Muslim subjectivities of the contemporary moment as being primarily or initially emanations of or reactions to the Western secular subject- we must break free of the solipsism that reduces all discourses to the response to the West (...). We must ask ourselves whether there are modernities outside the reflexive/reactive ‘alternatives’ to the West, modernities that emerge out of global phenomena and postcolonial histories but that engage different kinds of understanding of wealth, personhood, and the public sphere that are commonly taken for granted in much work on modernity and globalization.<sup>558</sup>

Alec Balasescu for his part specifically addresses the assumed opposition of the veil to modernity and hence subjectivity and elucidates why classifying women along the lines of dress -as veiled/non-modern or unveiled/modern- is not a benign act,

By simply pointing out the exterior appearance of clothing, one may, and does, deny the freedom of others, or create a comfortable mirror of the self. This mirror reflects images in a simplified binomial manner, in which the veil is equated with the religion and thus with the negation of what constitutes the modern subject. It thus creates a loop in which any veiling practice marks unfreedom, and any use of fashion in a certain location is nothing but mimetic reflex. A difference in genus (modern versus non-modern) is established, and justifies sometimes brutal interventions in the name of freedom. A more profound analysis will point out to differences in kind, the kind of fashion that people use, and the kind of modernity they inhabit.<sup>559</sup>

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<sup>557</sup> S. Mahmood. 2005. *Op. cit.* p.6.

<sup>558</sup> Barbara M. Cooper. 2001. “The Strength in the Song: Muslim Personhood, Audible Capital, and Hausa Women’s Performance of the Hajj.” In D. L. Hodgson (ed.). *Op. cit.* p. 94.

<sup>559</sup> A. H. Balasescu. *Op. cit.* p. 53.



Cooper and Balasescu both emphasize the fact, of which there is now a certain scholarly consensus, that modernity is neither monolithic nor merely western or secular, and that in fact there exists a number of modern modes of subjectivity, thus implying a multitude of speaking –and hence “dressing”– locations. However, the latter’s specific caution against using the veil as synecdoche and his intimations of the dangers of the de-subjectification/ dehumanization that ensues clarifies more precisely the transformative nature or potential of the seemingly simple images that follow. Representations of veiled subjects because they inevitably unpack (neo)colonial binarism and diffuse stereotypes are concurrently subversive and ethical.

American photographer Shekaiba Wakili (b. 1965), introduced in the second chapter, was born in Afghanistan but was raised in New Jersey in a largely secular household. It is only in early adulthood upon becoming cognizant that others viewed her as both other and Muslim, that her hitherto unacknowledged ‘Muslimness’ slowly became, although often uncomfortably, part of her self-identity and a major impetus of her photographic work that has since centered upon Muslim women and their representation. The series *Self-portrait* (1997) explores the discrepancy between her own self-image and the way others often perceive her, *Gaze* (2002) counters these same stereotypes by portraying Muslim women answering back through their direct gaze at the viewer, while *Unveiled* (2002) evoked previously deals with the fall of the Taliban and the ethnic diversity of Afghan women. The photograph examined here is from the series, *Muslim Women in London* (1998), which came about from a trip to the English capital where she felt that, unlike in America, the *muhajjabat* she observed on the city streets formed an accepted presence in, or integral part of London’s public space and civic life. It therefore tenders several instances of the *subject-ive* veil. The image that I have chosen to discuss (fig. 47) shows a café shop front; on the left a sign announcing the type of food stuffs found therein is affixed to the external wall and on the right sits a table whose chequered tablecloth echoes those on the tables seen inside. A young woman is exiting the café, an elderly woman, a relative one presumes because of her proximity,

behind her. The central figure's attire, a longish light coloured and well cut tunic top, her interiorized demeanour, the large bags she is holding testifying to school, work, or shopping as well as the snapshot aesthetic of the image render the scene a typical London street scene. It is only the two women's *hijabs* that make the photograph "accented" to use Hamid Naficy's term. Although there are no other Londoners present in this particular image, its title, the English script and even the bits of the café's décor visible convey to the viewer that this is a scene of Euro-American urban life. The young woman is like any other subject simply performing the tasks of and experiencing daily life. Wakili, who does not see the veil as a Qur'anic precept, expresses the same idea in her description of the woman, "She looks fabulous, a modern Muslim woman- to be part of society but not an issue. That was the pose that I wanted."<sup>560</sup> The completely spontaneous utterance nonetheless sums up the significance of representations of the *subject-ive* veil. Moving beyond what the great Afro-American scholar W.E.B. Du Bois famously called being "defined as a problem,"<sup>561</sup> they reshape others' perceptions of Muslims. They also impact Muslim perception of themselves, allowing them to transcend "double consciousness" by which Du Bois meant the alienation from the self instigated by seeing oneself through as T. D. Keaton explains "the contemptuous eyes of others."<sup>562</sup>

In Wakili's photograph, the woman's status as subject is conveyed not through the gaze but through the woman's reflective even melancholic expression, her familiar context, but especially her implied movement and the various bags witnessing some kind of activity and hence agency. Like in the strategy of the gaze however, subjectivity is expressed through bodily performance. Wakili's unobtrusive image that could have been shot in any western capital is radical as it brings into the realm of visual representation a

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<sup>560</sup> D. D. Ali. *Op. cit.*

<sup>561</sup> William Edward Burghardt Du Bois. 1903. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Chicago: A. C. McClurg. Quoted in R. D. Keaton. *Op. cit.* p. 5. Because the expression is so well known and has been much discussed in postcolonial and black studies, the author does not provide a page number.

<sup>562</sup> T. D. Keaton. *Op. cit.* p.5.

new cultural text, the figure of the veiled Muslim woman as subject both modern and part of the Euro-American landscape. The viewer may nonetheless perceive the photograph, in particular the young veiled woman's obvious comfort and familiarity with her environment, through the trope of the metonymic veil and the lens of anti-Muslim sentiment therefore evoking the fear incessantly rehashed in western media of the alleged Islamicization of the west. Helen Watson remarking that the "global spread of migration and cross-cultural mobility has resulted in the presence of veiled women in the streets of Western cities," nonetheless cautions against assuming that "a sensitive, pluralist conception of the veil has developed in popular Western imagination."<sup>563</sup> However, I am arguing that the unremarkable normalcy of the scene depicting daily life, the central figure's denoted agency and her essentially visual conformity –except for the *hijab*– with the expectations of modernity allow the Euro-American viewer to identify with the veiled Londoner, thereby displacing mainstream dominant discourse(s) and acknowledging the Muslim other as a subject/self. Wakili's act of documenting *what is* evinces and substantiates the possible moral dimension of the real. Silverman maintains that it is an "ethical duty to struggle with the snares of the self to see the world as it is and less as a pre-given spectacle,"<sup>564</sup> and the British *muhajjabat* captured by Wakili does not confirm the "pre-given spectacle" of the veil.

The image from *Muslim Women in London* is of distinctive import because it is the sole example in the section related to the questions of Muslims' citizenship in and sense of belonging to Europe. Its European setting provides and provokes the opportunity to stretch and remap the Euro-American 'we' as well as rethink the religiously, ethnically and/or nationalistically circumscribed bases of its self-identity and definitions of normativeness. The veiled subject by destabilizing and/or reconfiguring the notion of the individual and collective modern western self, suggests in lieu of their assumed exclusivity and fixedness,

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<sup>563</sup> H. Watson. *Op. cit.* p. 142.

<sup>564</sup> K. Silverman. *Op. cit.* p. 19.

their plurality and unboundedness. Peter Stupples, underscoring the transformation of memory alterity entails, speaks of the capacity of images “to open up our ego to transformation by the ‘not me’, to transform our own visual residues, and hopefully those of Others, to attempt acts of heteropathic reconstruction.”<sup>565</sup> Wakili’s photograph despite the title in which ‘Muslim’ and ‘London’ remain somewhat antinomic, redefines in heteropathic terms what (visually) constitutes a present-day Londoner or Euro-American.

The last point I want to raise again concerns the woman’s dress. That it could be identified and associated with teenagers and young adults in many locations and largely fulfills the criteria of Euro-American modernity, contradicts the widely held notion that veiling is antithetical to modernity. The photograph by dissipating the idea that the set of terms ‘modern Muslim’ is an oxymoron visually asserts the existence of alternative modernities. It also probes the idea held by most states defining themselves as liberal democracies that the modern subject is necessarily secular. While as delineated in the first chapter, the decision to veil may be due to a variety of factors and hence the viewer cannot know in all certainty why the woman in Wakili’s photograph is wearing a headscarf, the type of veil she is wearing is nonetheless culturally or religiously related to Islam. Moreover, the fact that the subject’s dress evinces cross-fertilization reveals the mutable and multiple meanings of the veil. Reina Lewis in an article on veiled British retail workers rightly notes that the garment must often be positioned within both local and transnational contexts of dress and fashion,

In postcolonial Britain women who veil (for any reason) operate within overlapping spatialities and competing but mutually constituting dress systems, including international *tesettür* [Islamic fashion although the term refers to a specific middle-class tend in Turkey], UK diaspora dress conventions, and the “mainstream” fashion system.<sup>566</sup>

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<sup>565</sup> Peter Stupples. 2003. “Visual Culture, Synthetic Memory and the Construction of National Identity.” *Third Text* 17(2), p. 138. Stupples also intimates the dialogical process of alterity – both self and other are transformed- a dimension that I unfortunately cannot address in the present study focusing solely on the Euro-American perspective.

<sup>566</sup> Reina Lewis. 2007. “Veils and Sales: Muslims and the Spaces of Postcolonial Fashion Retail.” *Fashion Theory* 11(4), p. 436.

The point is that modern demographics and the realities of globalization have given rise to new plural identities and modes of dress that are not encompassed by and therefore test the precepts of Euro-American modernity and its political counterpart, the nation state. The young woman's hybrid simple but nonetheless attractive dress also raises the issue of Islamic fashion in which the forces of consumption, transnationalism, and neo-liberalism meet. If the topic remains outside the traced parameters of the study, its examination would indubitably offer visions of the veil divergent from mainstream perspectives.

The second image I want to bring forth is from *Women by Women: 8 Women Photographers from the Arab World*, an exhibit of Arab women photographers held in Frankfurt, at the Fotografie Forum international (FFi).<sup>567</sup> If the show brings together art and documentary photography, thereby rendering their distinction redundant, all the work with the exception of Al-Ani's possesses a documentary element. For reasons of length, I will discuss only one image, albeit the most aesthetically pleasing representation of the section. *Algerian Women* (1997) (fig. 48) was taken by Zohra Bensemra (b. 1968), a Reuters' photojournalist who has spent much time documenting the diversity, various social roles and conditions of contemporary Algerian women. The colour photograph portraying young veiled women must therefore be contextualized as the image is placed alongside images of women who have adopted other 'regimes of dress,' thereby evincing the heterogeneity of many Muslim-majority countries. It depicts two *muhajjabat* against a backdrop of a rather arid looking area of trees set before a large white institutional building such as a library or university. Both women appear to be in their early twenties. The woman on the right is seated sideways on the top of a stone wall reading the newspaper or large book open on her lap. She is wearing a white headscarf, and a long black and white tunic top bearing carpet like interlace motifs over a black skirt or

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<sup>567</sup> The exhibit that ran from October 9 until November 14, 2004 was curated by Paris-based Michket Krifa and comprised works of the other following artists, Jananne Al-Ani, Reem Al Faisal (b. 1968), Jihan Ammar (b.1970), Lara Baladi (b.1969), Rana El Nemr (b. 1974), Rula Halawani (b. 1964), and Zineb Sedira. See Fotografie Forum international. 2004. *Women by Women: 8 Women Photographers from the Arab World*. Frankfurt: Fotografie Forum international.

trousers. Her expression denotes that she is concentrating and does not want to be disturbed although its slightly hardened quality may indicate impatience with the woman on her left. This second figure taking up over a third of the photograph is wearing a plain muted blue *jilbab* and a long mauve scarf, the outfit from which new veiling emerged and seen on western and especially Middle Eastern streets. She is standing facing the viewer leaning against the wall, but her head is turned sideways towards the other figure indicating that she is waiting or trying to speak to her. The image clearly communicates the difference in mood and perhaps temperament of the two women, the tension it creates constituting the photograph's very subject. Bensemra has captured a moment of the human drama composing daily life and yet unlike Wakili's *Muslim Women in London*, it is the universal human narrative of desire, expectation and rejection that simultaneously conveys the subjecthood of the sitters and permits western viewers to identify with the scene -for some in spite of the women's apparel. Moreover, the flowing garments including the headscarves and the overall composition are reminiscent of the European painting tradition thus creating a rich tension between aesthetics and geography and further engaging the Euro-American viewer. The parallels with the western historical traditions of art add to the image's beauty but do not obfuscate the sitters' obvious contemporary location communicated through the image's medium, and the women's physical attitudes and even clothing.<sup>568</sup>

*Algerian Women* further validates how representations of the real and real subjects can initiate viewer identification, and more significantly shift and transform his/her gaze, while the veil nonetheless maintains the represented subjects' alterity. This is especially remarkable in the Bensemra image. Not only because the viewer realizes from the title that the setting is Algeria, a country associated until very recently with terrible strife and violence framed by the media in religious terms, but also because the outfit worn by the woman on

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<sup>568</sup> Bensemra has managed to connote subjectivity and rewrite the veil by recourse to aesthetic harmony and beauty. This remains a leitmotif, although unexplored, of the study that merits further exploration.

the left is less global or westernized than that of the woman in Wakili's image and is often associated with orthodoxy, and/or political Islam.

Expanding on but also concluding with the same theme, I will succinctly revisit two images cited also briefly in the second chapter from the exhibit, *Musulmanes, musulmans, au Caire, à Téhéran, Istanbul, Paris, Dakar*. I have opted for representations of Iranian women because Iran is particularly vilified in the current western political climate and because the country's legal enforcement of the veil generally assists the garment's continued metonymy in Euro-America. Both photographs because they deconstruct the strongly entrenched image of *the* Iranian woman by means of veiled subjectivity again adduce the possibility of subjectivity and the image to displace dominant texts.

Reza Moattarian has captured a moment of modern urban Iranian life. *Téhéran* (2002) (fig. 16) depicts an informal soccer game in what appears to be a city parking lot. Although it is unclear whether all five people portrayed are involved in the game, the black and white photograph makes evident that at least the two women and the young boy kicking the ball are all playing. The former are wearing tracksuits (Adidas) with Iranian-style loose headscarves showing the front part of the hair; the central figure is jumping with arms and legs extended in an attempt to take hold of the ball from the boy or prevent it from passing. The scene showing veiled Muslim women engaged in sports dissipates the synonymy of the veil with disembodiment and the lack of mobility and leisurely fun, and more particularly diverges from the preconceptions and representations of the hapless lives of Iranian women. The women's quasi-global activity and cross-cultural clothing both denoting their modernity, substitute a representation of two individual subjects for that of the fixed trope of the Iranian woman.

If by revealing the spatial and physical mobility of two Iranian women, Moattarian adds considerable nuances to the western stereotype of Iranian women generally solely defined by the restrictions placed upon them by the state, Hasan Sarbakshian (b. 1968) addresses and unpacks not their assumed lack of freedom of movement but that of their freedom of expression. His colour

photograph, *Manifestations étudiantes* (1999) (fig. 17), depicting the 1999 student demonstrations in Tehran zooms in on a group of four women. The two in the front are each carrying the same newspaper and are both wearing tape over their mouths to protest government silencing and censorship. If many Tehrani women have now developed quite a fashion sense and scene within the limits of the decreed dress codes, the protesters are not wearing colourful branded scarves and fashionably cut jackets but black scarves and black overcoats associated with traditional families and/or the Islamic Revolution. Only one of the women is fully visible, her scarf covers her hair and neck. She looks indomitably into the camera, her young face and resolute expression conveying a strong sense of self to the viewer. As encountered several times already in the study, it is the gaze, that unique visible locus of subjectivity that successfully challenges western dominant discourse and constructions of the Muslim woman. Like *Téhéran*, *Manifestations étudiantes* the women's modernity is suggested by their activity; and like sport, the act of collective anti-government contestation facilitates the cross-culturality of the image. Again, I feel it necessary to dispel any misunderstanding. By bringing forth Sarbakshian's image, I am not suggesting that the demonstrations countered the global norm and took place without the intervention of Iranian police. The objective is to underscore how cultural texts are chosen and to demystify the sweeping stereotypes such ideological choices engender.

The two images from the groundbreaking Paris exhibit further establish the power of the documentary. They deconstruct by means of the real and the representation of veiled subjectivity, an overloaded trope, putting forth the existence of Iranian women, instead of the stereotypical image of the Iranian woman. Their significance lies in the fact that they acknowledge the women's specificity and agency regardless not only of the veil but of its legal enforcement. If the viewer cannot know whether these same women would veil if given the choice, he/she has been presented with images of Iranian and/or Muslim women that transcend and rewrite the veil sign even in the particular context.



Representations of the *subject-ive* veil evince three principal characteristics. They are produced by documenting what exists, they posit female Muslim veiled subjectivity, and they position the veiled woman within the precincts of modernity with all the displacement of present-day Euro-American discourse these distinguishing features imply. The alternative visions they articulate recast the veil and its myriad (neo)colonial subtexts. Deconstructing and re-inscribing the sign prompts a reconsideration of modernity and of western identity and possesses philosophical, ideological but also concrete implications and applications. For example, had the French government been capable of such rethinking, they would have understood that the veils like those worn by the French *muhajjabat* who demonstrated wrapped in French flags, demanding their right to claim both their French and Muslim identity/ties, may in fact have constituted signs of integration and not of a rejection of French values and society. The women obviously felt comfortable enough in France and in themselves to accept their multiple identities.<sup>569</sup> In other terms, the *subject-ive* veil amongst other contemporary phenomena induces Euro-Americans to reconfigure their own identity/ies in light of the realities of globalization. Bowen has obviously heeded the necessary call sooner rather than later. He effectively concludes his book on the veil in France by redefining the self and the nation for a changed world to which all should or perhaps must aspire,

The Republic is based not on a shared faith, but on a faith in the possibilities of sharing a life together, despite the vast differences in appearance, history, and religious ideas. That faith is worth retaining. Properly understood, it liberates citizens to explore their differences, not to conceal them.<sup>570</sup>

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<sup>569</sup> Assimilationist models for “immigrants” and their progeny, once the norm, have long been denounced by cross-cultural psychologists and social scientists. See, just to name a few examples, S. Bhatia and A. Ram. 2001. “Rethinking Acculturation in Relation in Relation to Diasporic Cultures and Postcolonial Identities.” *Human Development* 44(1): 1-18. David Lackland Sam. 2000. “Psychological Adaptation of Adolescents with Immigrant Backgrounds.” *The Journal of Social Psychology* 140 (1): 5-26. And Miriam Potocky. 1997. “Multicultural Social Work in the United States: A Review and Critique.” *International Social Work* 40: 315-26.

<sup>570</sup> J. Bowen. *Op. cit.* p. 249.

If Bowen's views like my own are undeniably animated by the traditions of humanism and political idealism, they are not purely quixotic as they are equally grounded in pragmatic realism.

## Conclusion

Alone our look can make a difference within the ethical domain of intersubjective relations. This difference is not inconsequential: those subjects who are accustomed to having an unflattering set of visual coordinates projected onto them depend for their psychic survival upon the loving look of their intimates, which (as Barthes suggests) can at least temporarily erase the terrible effects of that projection. But if the look acts in concert with enough other looks, it can reterritorialize the screen, bringing new elements into cultural prominence, and casting into darkness those which presently constitute normative representation.<sup>571</sup>

Kaja Silverman

Consciousness is a multidimensional field in which gaps and elisions constitute much of the perceived world. Indeed, like the tonal and temporal intervals in music, they *are* the world. The unsaid is the common ground of social relations, communication, and ethnography. It is also the domain of the image.<sup>572</sup>

David MacDougall

As I sit and write these lines in North America or more precisely Québec where I live a week cannot pass without encountering in the media, most especially but not exclusively in that geared to a francophone populist audience, the trope of the veil as defined in the thesis, thereby testifying to the unremitting shaping and consolidation of the Euro-American cultural screen's perception of the Muslim other. That the veil sign is so tenaciously embedded in the collective mediating gaze as a visual readily communicable shorthand for the oppressed non-modern non-white Muslim woman, and/or the violence and barbarism of Islam elucidates why I felt it indispensable to dress the complex portrait of the veil and its production in Euro-American discourse and visual culture before delineating different narratives of the veil put forward in contemporary artistic practice. The first chapter traced the history of the veil simultaneously revealing it to be an essentially artificial site constructed by colonial, neocolonial (and anti-colonial) interests and exposing its polysemy by alluding to the diversity of actual practices and meanings of veiling. In the second chapter, I further explored and expanded on the sign's subtexts, analyzing instances of the metonymic veil in visual culture in order to substantiate my argument that the Samuel Huntington style binarism undergirding it prevents any *effective* use of

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<sup>571</sup> K. Silverman. *Op. cit.* p. 223.

<sup>572</sup> David MacDougall. 1998. *Transcultural Cinema*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, p. 274.

the trope in contemporary art even to proffer valid subjective critiques of the veil. The latter employed as a symbol of critique only ends up retracing the world mapped by western master narratives and thus actually perpetuates the sign's mechanism of silencing and impeding Muslim female subjectivities even those opposing veiling. The aim of dissecting the anatomy of the sign was to unpack and liberate the gaze of cultural accretions often internalized more unconsciously than reflectively in order to render more perceptible the nature and critical importance of the three -there are obviously others- alternative readings of the sign evident in contemporary art that I chart in the subsequent chapters or trajectories.

If the analysis of the metonymic veil revealed how the trope is produced through decontextualization, the first trajectory contextualizes the garment by repositioning it within its cultural matrix where it evidently possesses a different set of associations. Shifting the emphasis from the veil to the wider concept of veiling and its key role in Islamic aesthetics, I demonstrate how the aesthetic metaphor of veiling permeating Islamic art (and spirituality) offers a rich potentiality to contemporary artists and one well suited to contemporary concerns. Privileging the gaps in vision and representation and situating meaning in the unstable realm of mediation, it constitutes a particularly potent aesthetic strategy for the marginalized, the feminist and/or Muslim female subject in particular, enabling a circumvention of the limitations of imposed cultural regimes of representation/ideology from which they have been excluded. The works examined also suggest that the space(s) opened up by the veiling metaphor allow for transcultural communication; their focus on the elsewhere of the image, on the intangible realm of mediation and thus on intersubjectivity abets cultural translation without the dissolution (or reification) of difference or the problems intrinsic to a plotted category of the universal.

The second trajectory broached work directly challenging visual and discursive stereotypes of the veil, the Muslim woman or Muslims more generally as in the case of Hassanzadeh. I grouped the work according to three essentially deconstructive methods of speaking back paralleling those proposed

in postcolonial theory by Said, Spivak and Bhabha. Interestingly akin to the veiling metaphor, although in varying degrees, and calming criticism that postcolonial thought and art only reinforce colonial binarism, the art works discussed point consciously or not by their implicit polyphony to the displacing capability of the space(s) opened up between cultures, genders or individuals. While the majority of the works addressed refuse an east-west categorization by speaking from the outsider position of gender historically marginalized from both, one of the few pieces premised on a stark binarism and thus purportedly reproducing a colonial model, Hassanzadeh's *Terrorist Nadjibeh* evinced how even straightforward oppositional deconstruction is capable of transcending what Betterton refers to as "negative aesthetics,"<sup>573</sup> not only unpacking dominant discourse but also proposing something in its place. I must nonetheless reiterate that as long as *the* veil predominates in the Euro-American cultural landscape, I consider deconstruction in all modes, even fully cognizant of the dangers of exoticism and increasing ghettoization inherent to postcolonial critique, as not only a valid but also a vital method of acceding voice and redressing history.

The third and last trajectory revolved around works that rewrite the veil by (re)presenting the veiled Muslim woman not as an overarching anonymous signifier but as an individual subject. Representations that acknowledge Muslim female veiled subjectivity evidently stand in blatant contrast to its erasure usually operated by the veil sign; they thereby simultaneously subvert the trope and expose one of its important covert subtexts. Another salient factor transpiring from representations of the *subject-ive* veil is that through their documentary dimension - the artists have captured instances of veiled Muslim subjectivity surrounding them-, they exhibit how the depiction of actual Muslim subjects intensifies viewer identification with the Muslim female other through the subject-to-subject relationship they proffer.

In the thesis, I set out to prove that contemporary artistic practice evinces alternative narratives of the veil and thus displaces dominant discourse, and the

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<sup>573</sup> R. Betterton. *Op. cit.* p. 11.

works analyzed in all three trajectories substantiate the hypothesis. Obviously underwriting the study is the belief in the transformative potential of art and the image and the works proposing different readings of the veil corroborate Silverman who considers “the aesthetic work ... a privileged domain for displacing us from the geometral point, for encouraging us to see in ways not dictated in advance by the dominant fiction.”<sup>574</sup> The image indeed forms, as I have stressed in the study, a major instrument in the production and reproduction of collective and self identity whose power is such that African-American author Bobby Wright judges stereotypical images capable of “mentacide.”<sup>575</sup> It therefore follows that radical or new images must possess a constructive as opposed to destructive effect. Professing the possibility of images to shift fixed attitudes presumes the existence and capacity of individual agency (of both producer and viewer) and underscores the ethical function of both art and the subject.

The problem of individual agency so central in the present-day geopolitical, economic and philosophical environment is neatly summed up by Araeen in the epilogue of *The Third Text Reader* where he asks if it is indeed “enough to provide agency?,” further querying whether “this individualism [is] not based on the bourgeois myth of the autonomous self?”<sup>576</sup> While obviously the subject and subjectivity cannot effect major concrete change alone and is obviously circumscribed by a whole host of factors, throughout the thesis I have emphasized how many of the works claim the need to redefine and do redefine the self/selves. The self no longer “autonomous,” sovereign and built on the exclusion and/or denigration of the other is reframed as interdependent thereby intimating that other forms of the alterity structuring the self exist. Sardar asserts that “it is the ego that ultimately leads ... to the demonization of the

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<sup>574</sup> K. Silverman. *Op. cit.* p. 184.

<sup>575</sup> Bobby Wright. ca. 1979. “Mentacide: The Ultimate Threat to the Black Race.” Unpublished paper. Quoted in M. Harris. *Op. cit.* p. 14.

<sup>576</sup> R. Araeen. 2002. “A New Beginning: Beyond Postcolonial Cultural Theory and Identity Politics.” In Rasheed Araeen, Sean Cubitt, and Ziauddin Sardar (eds.) *The Third Text Reader on Art, Culture and Theory*. London; New York: Continuum, p. 344.

Other and the ensuing conflict.”<sup>577</sup> If Sardar, by denouncing a purely ego-based conception of self, is pleading for the persistence and revival of an authentic non-western self <sup>578</sup> as a successful means of resisting global *cum* western postmodernism and its drive to annihilate otherness, I submit that the Euro-American self can equally seize the vast opportunities a shrinking world offers for enlarging and collectively redefining the self and in particular its relationship to/with others.

This intersubjective voyage to the other was undertaken in all three trajectories where the works required seeing from the vantage point of the Muslim other and thus entailed a certain degree of identification. However, the radical nature of the act of recognizing an-*other* (veiled) self was most *visible* in representations of actual Muslim women subjects that demand of the viewer a subject-to-subject relationship. Spivak who like Silverman considers identification a persuasive agent of change equally relates it to ethical responsibility, writes: “it is not possible for us as ethical agents to imagine otherness or alterity maximally. We have to turn the other into something like the self in order to be ethical.” <sup>579</sup> The implicit shift in paradigm from ‘you *or* me’ to ‘you *and* me’ equally recalls art critic Lucy Lippard’s notion of the “expanding self” <sup>580</sup> whose accepted multiplicity emerges from recognizing sameness in others and otherness in the self thereby also rewriting alterity intersubjectively.

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<sup>577</sup> Z. Sardar. *Op. cit.* p. 274. He is discussing a poem by famous Pakistani poet Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938).

<sup>578</sup> Sardar is not suggesting a naïve or reactionary return to the past. The author distinguishes between tradition and traditionalism. He writes in *Ibid.* p. 273,

There is a cultural resistance that does not go forward and is coming perilously, indeed fatally, close to being a dead weight, submerging Other cultures in illusory pasts instead of anchoring them to the continuous flow of history. Non-western cultures must distinguish between tradition and traditionalism. Tradition is the summation of the absolute frame of reference provided by the values and axioms of a civilization that remain enduringly relevant and the conventions that have developed in history into its own distinctive ‘gaze’: patterns of organisation, ideas, lifeways, techniques and products.

<sup>579</sup> G. C. Spivak. “The Politics of Translation.” In G. C. Spivak *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, p. 183. Quoted in B. Moore-Gilbert. *Op. cit.* p. 103.

<sup>580</sup> Lucy Lippard. 1980. “Issue and Taboo.” In *Issue: Social Strategies by Women Artists*. London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, n.p.

The alternative representations of the veil examined in the study adduce how the recognition of difference at the level of subjectivity deconstructs binarism (and how claiming the death of the subject can serve its perpetuation). The displacement enacted by rewriting the intersubjective spaces of alterity between self/me and other/you is resisted because, as stated previously, it undermines and requires the rethinking of historical narratives, the taxonomy of knowledge, and collective and self-identity. Foucault was expressing this anxiety when he postulated that moving “beyond familiar territory” would lead to “a blank, indifferent space, lacking in both interiority and promise.”<sup>581</sup> I however conclude in light of the alternative narratives of the veil and veiled Muslim women brought forth, that such a loss of sovereignty and/or mastery only leads to the uncertainty necessary for keeping as Torping writes “the discursive field of ethical and moral revision and negotiation open.”<sup>582</sup> Such revision is required on a grand scale with regard to the production of knowledge, and yet it proves itself no less radical on an individual level obliging us to come to terms with the daunting reality described by Žižek, that “‘subject’ is the name for that unfathomable X.”<sup>583</sup> If only Alidousti, Houshiary, Khalid and Adim unequivocally address the unknown nature of the self to itself, the dislocation of mainstream Euro-American discourse provoked by the visual reinscriptions of the veil and ‘the Muslim woman’ has demonstrated how “a blank, indifferent space” lacks neither in “interiority and promise,”<sup>584</sup> but rather provides a virtual and protean rich arena of possible intrasubjective, intersubjective and transnational relationships and communication.

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<sup>581</sup> M. Foucault. *Op. cit.* p. 37. Quoted in P. Yaeger. 1996. *Op. cit.* p. 3.

<sup>582</sup> J. Torping. *Op. cit.* p. 282.

<sup>583</sup> S. Žižek. 1991. *For They Know not what They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*. London: Verso, p. 189. He continues, “suddenly made accountable, thrown into a position of responsibility, into the urgency of decision in such a moment of undecidability.” Quoted in J. Torping. *Op. cit.* p. 284.

<sup>584</sup> Michel Foucault. *Op. cit.* p. 37. Quoted in P. Yaeger. *Op. cit.* p. 3.



## **List of Plates**

### **Chapter 2: Envisioning the Veil Through the Euro-American Cultural Screen**

1. *Mauresque chez elle*, Colonial postcard, no data. M. Alloula. *Op. cit.* p. 19.
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Portrait of a young man in a white uniform, looking out from a window with a metal grille.



S. 2 - No. 11 - MEXICO, 1911

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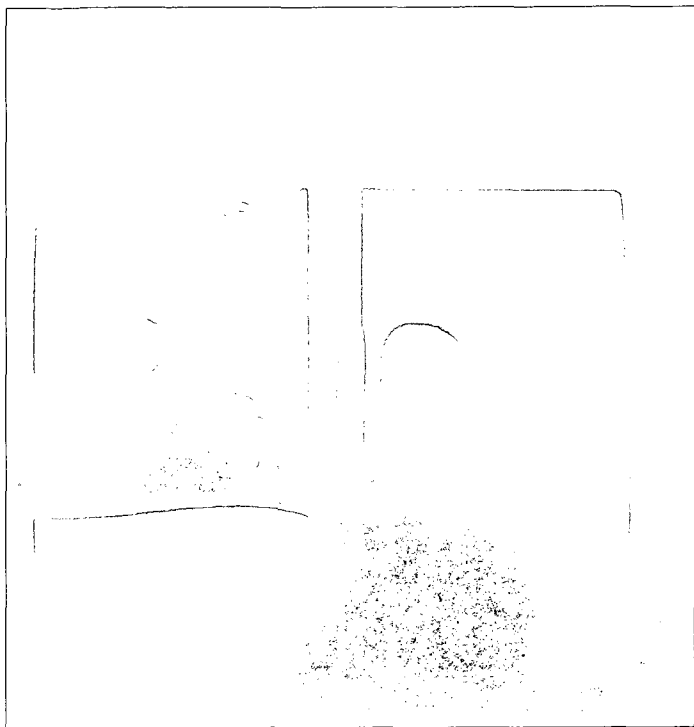


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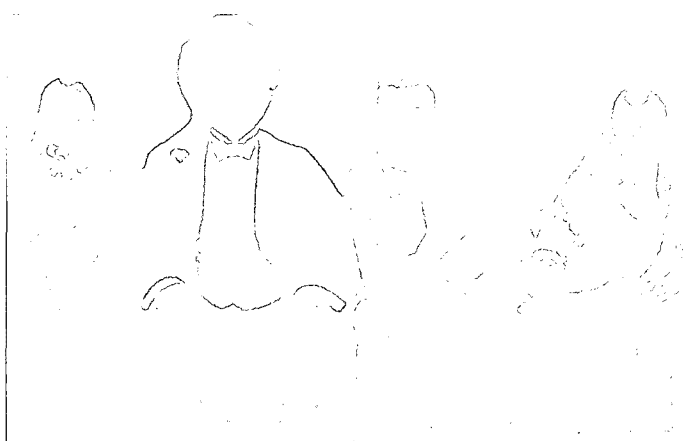




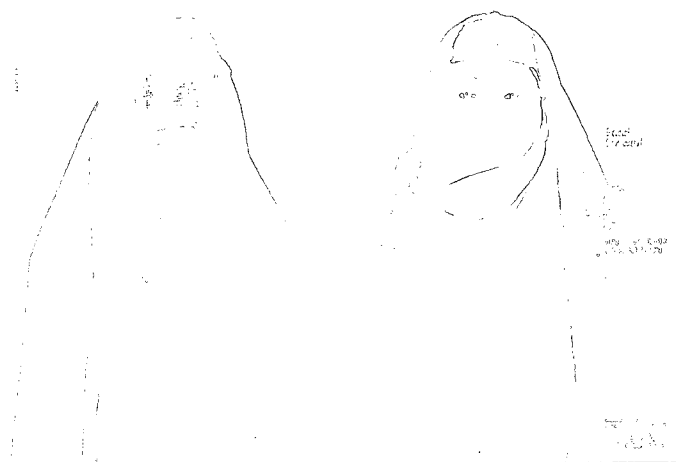
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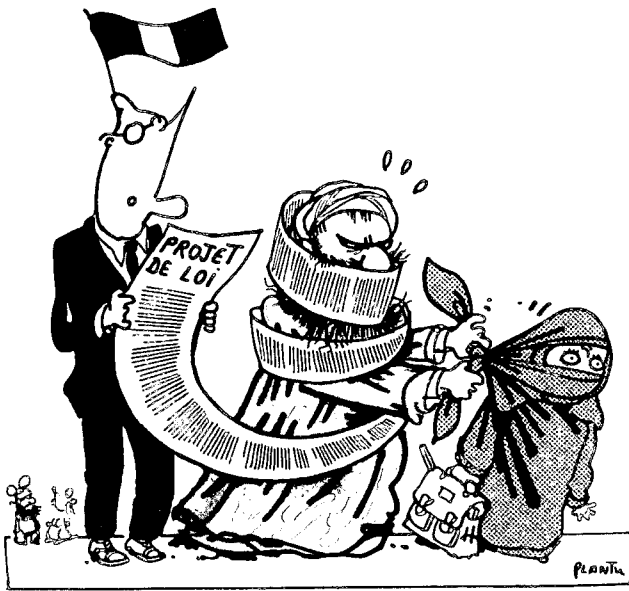
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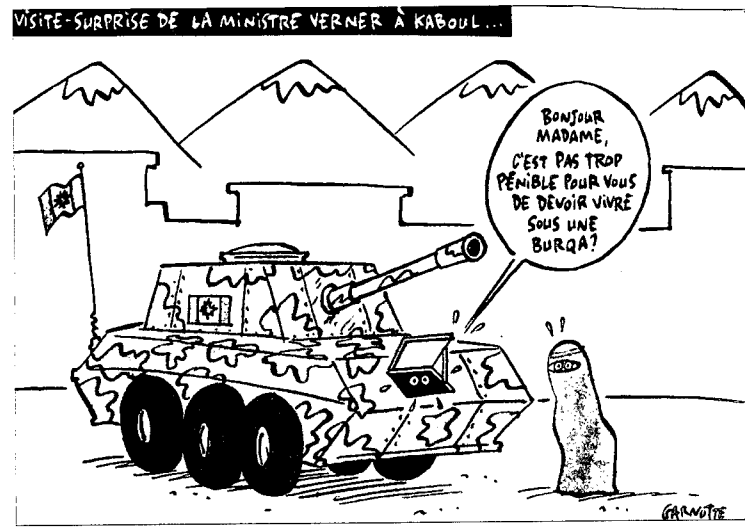
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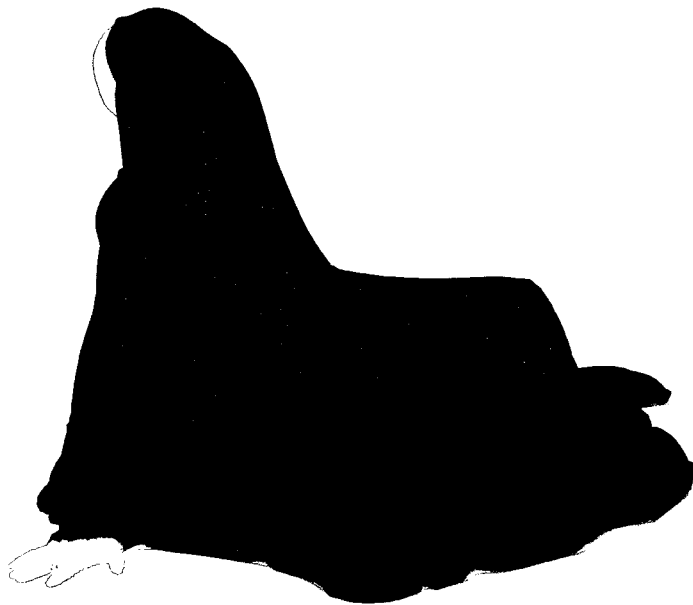
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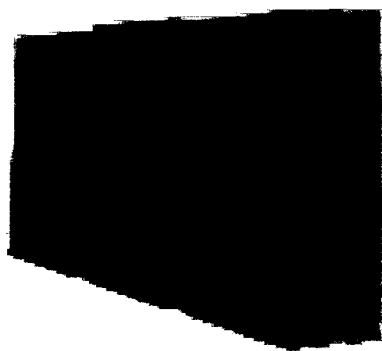
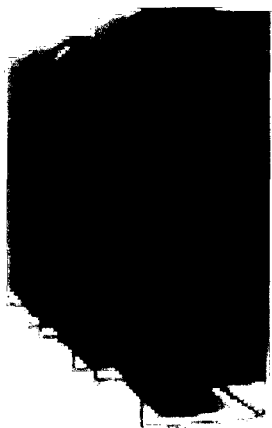
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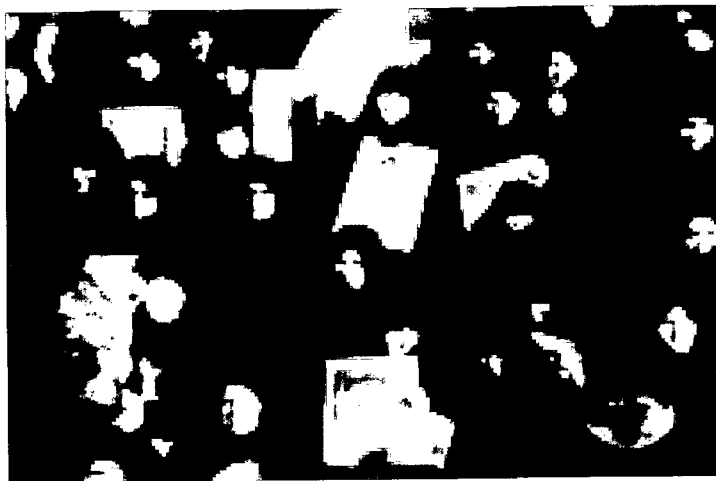
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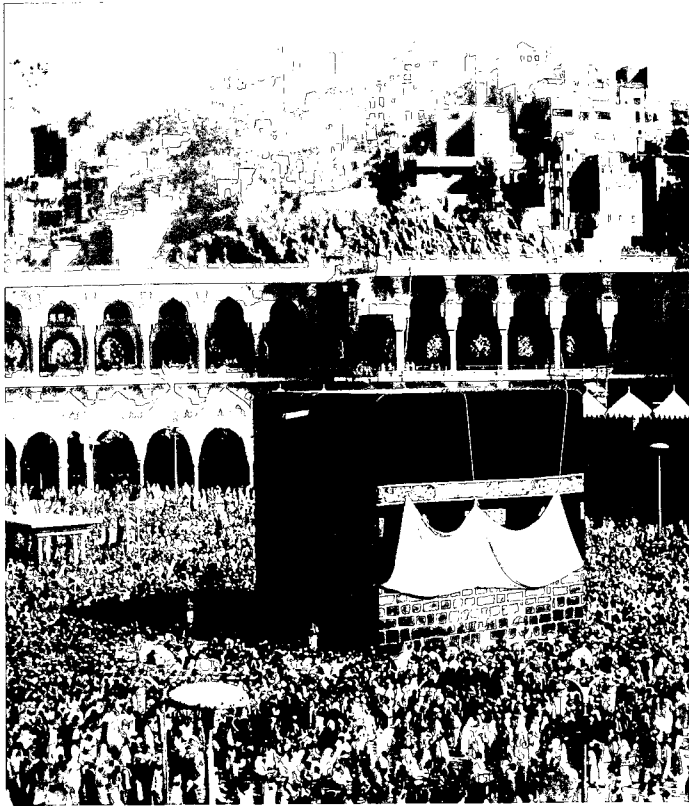
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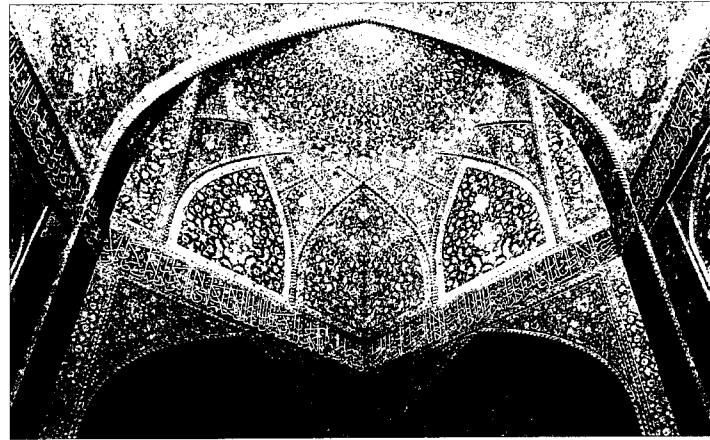
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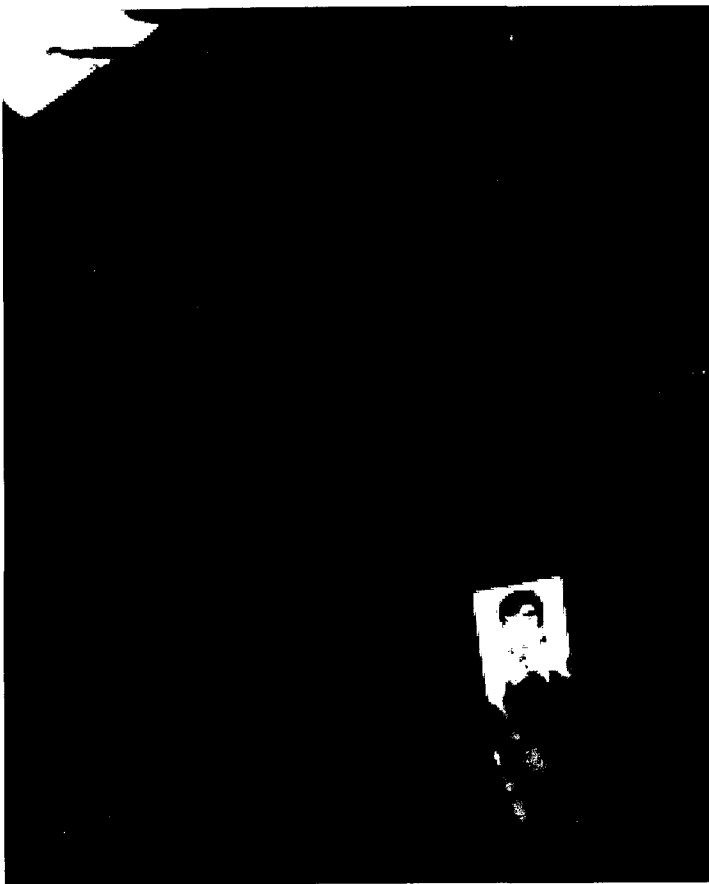
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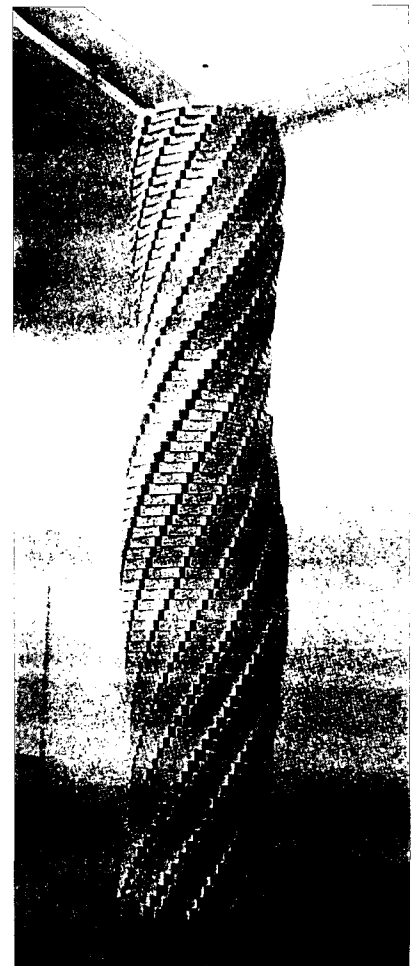
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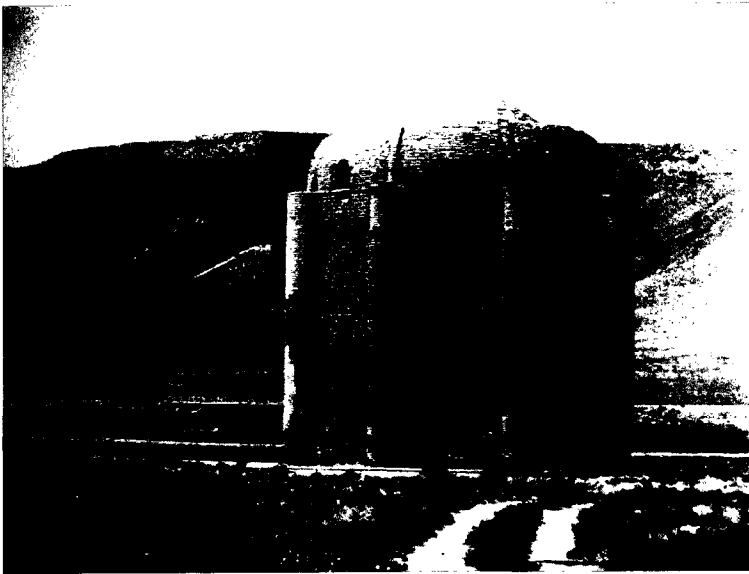
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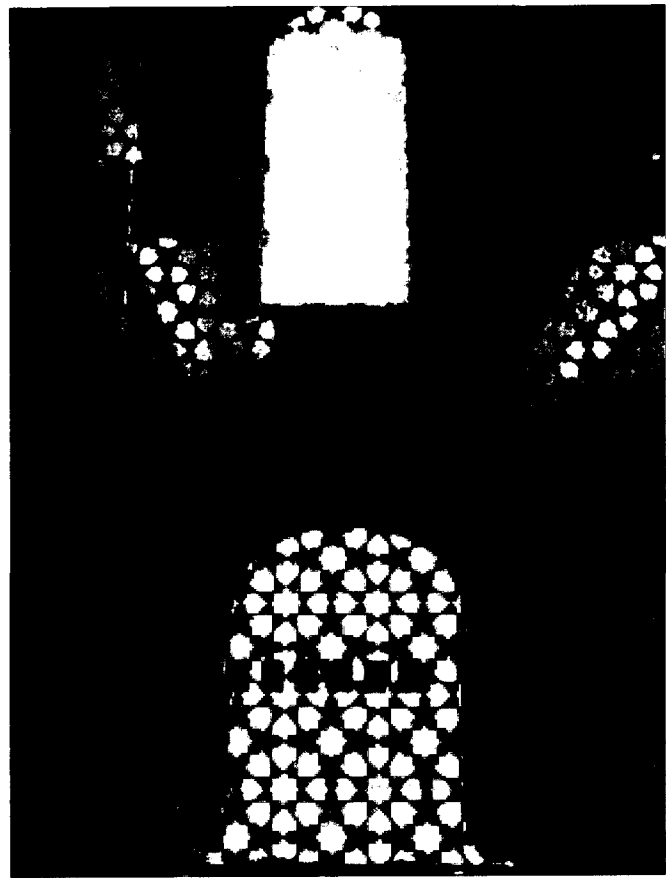
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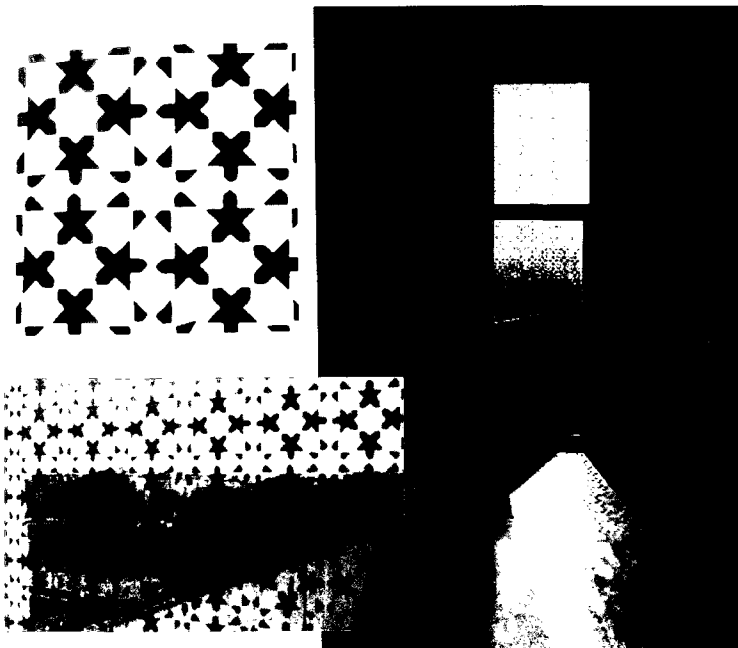
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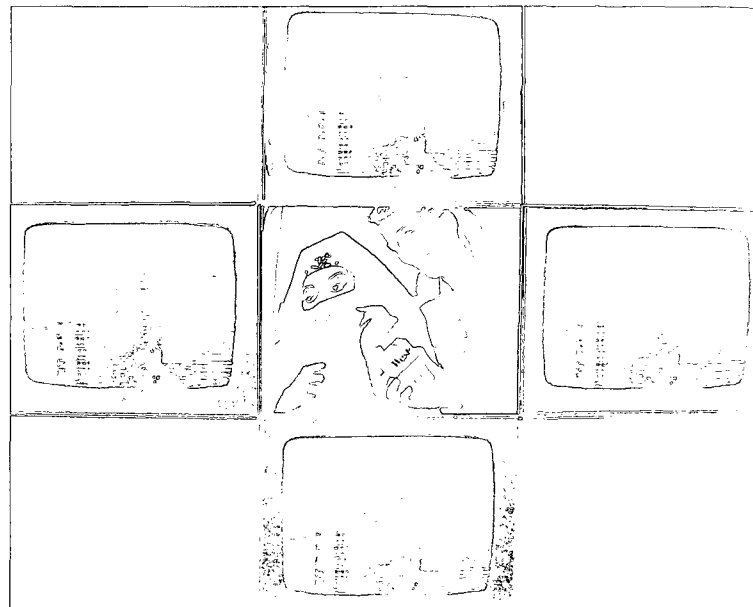
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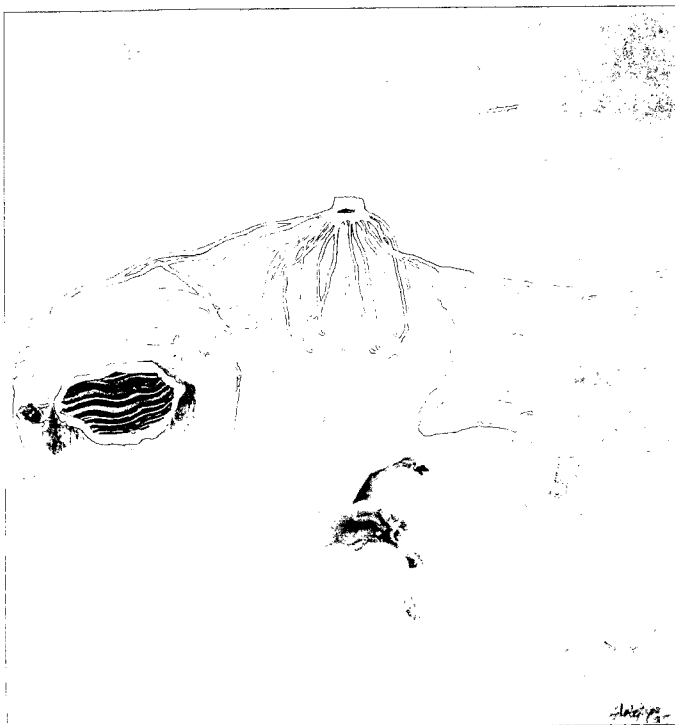




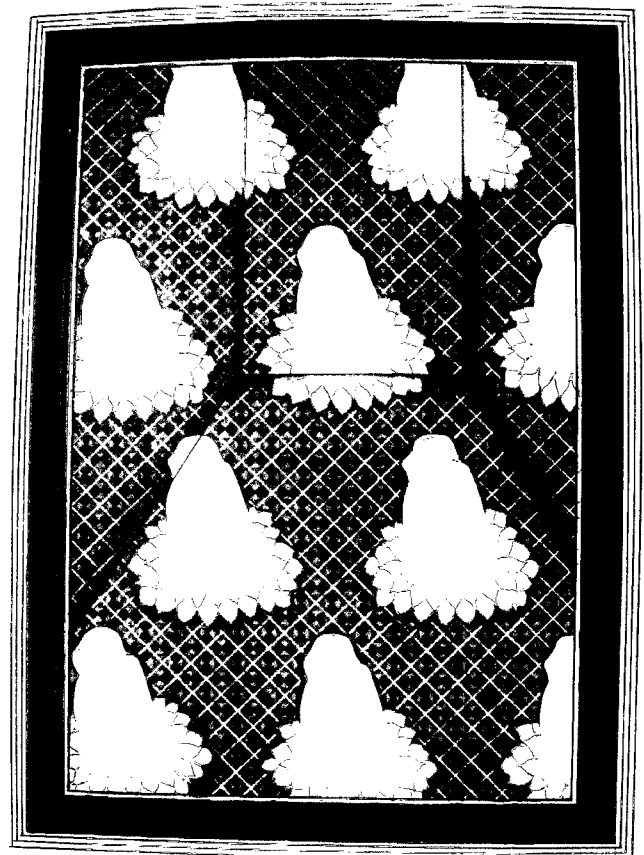
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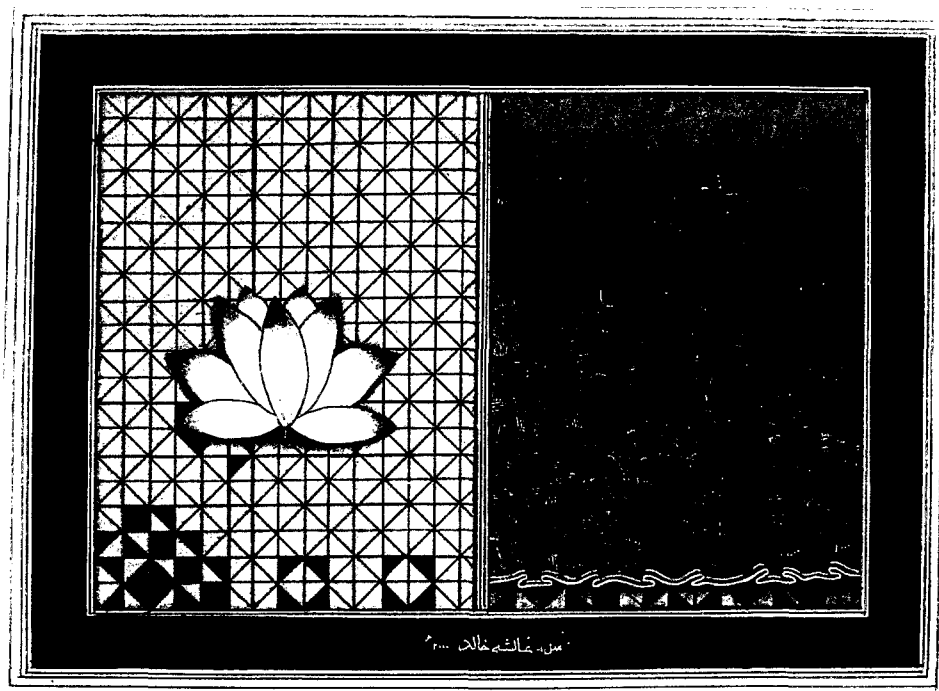
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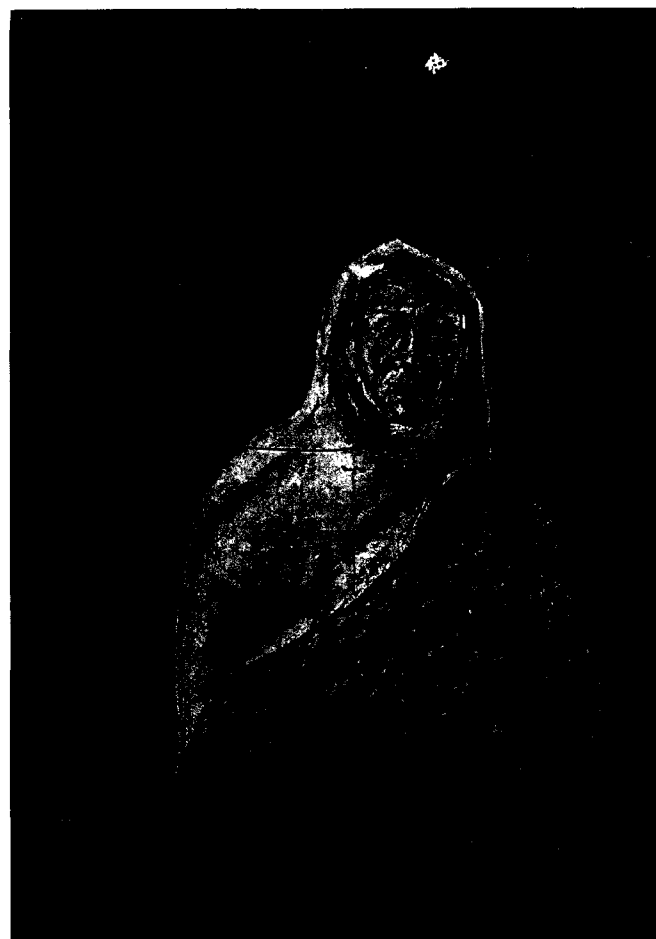
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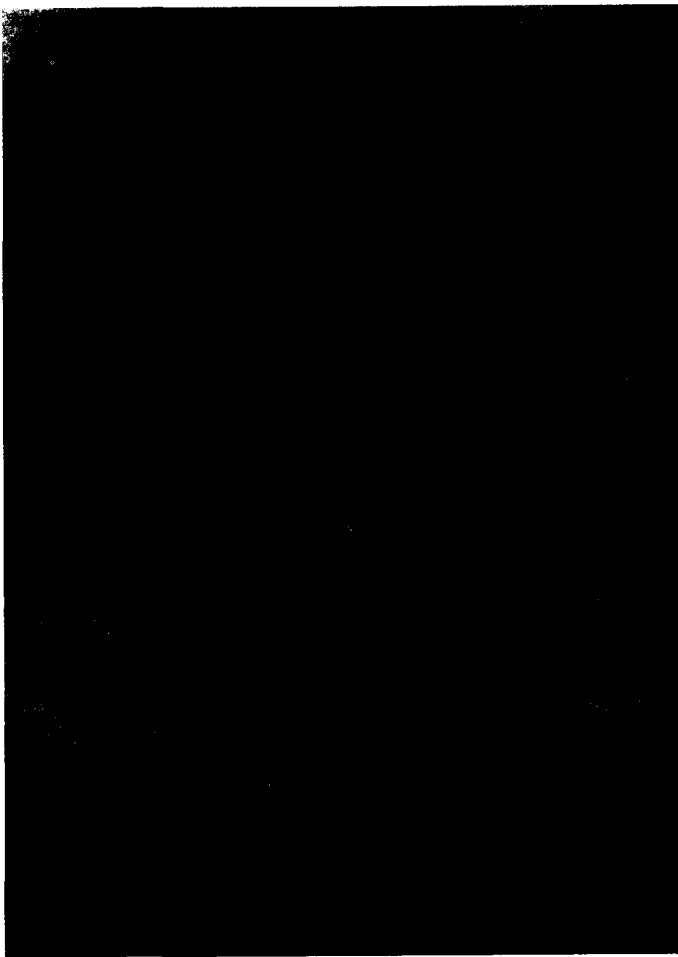
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