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Colonizations and … Veils

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19-15-11

“Creatures of the Half-Light”

In January 2014, Iranian journalist Masih Alinejad posted a picture of herself on social media, unveiled, to show a head of hair that “had been a hostage of the Iranian government for thirty years.”[1] A year later, after thousands of women uploaded, unveiled pictures in solidarity, she is slated to receive Geneva Summit Women’s Rights Award for “Giving a voice to the voiceless.”[2] Alinejad explains the backlash she has received from the Iranian government, writing:

They're scared of our hair; they're scared of our singing; they're scared of our voice, the main image of the Islamic Republic is hijab. They want to show the world that they are the Islamic Republic.[1]

Clearly there is a lot more than just hair wrapped up in these veils. Alinejad, the Geneva Summit, and the Iranian government agree that the veil is as sign of something much greater than a fashion, although it is unclear - and unstated in media coverage- what this significance is. The concrete history provided by Ahmed, the literary analysis done by Milani, and the modern connections drawn by Scott, reveal the complex, colonial, iconography of the veil, and how it became a dual signal of voice and of silence.

One of the fundamental laws of style is that it changes, and this law was no less true in 1805 than it is in 2015. Using Egypt as a (debatable) microcosm of changes happening in other colonized, ‘veiled’ Islamic societies, Ahmed details how for men and women, as elite, urban centers came under British rule, clothing habits changed drastically [3]. To discover why women’s ‘peculiar garments’ became so much more ideologically laden then men’s, one must look one level deeper at the discourses surrounding what *Islam* meant to the colonizers, and thus what attacks they made against their conception of *Muslim-ness*.

Veiling- to western eyes, the most visible marker of the differentness and inferiority of Islamic societies- became the symbol now of both the oppression 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. [4]

And because the British targeted women’s clothing, the hijab became a way of signaling resistance and anti-colonialism, thus imbuing the fabric with a significance, which has not faded. In this way, backlash becomes inextricably linked with its originary offense, feminism becomes a language against Muslim women, and resistance, unintentionally, is grounded in ‘the premise of the colonial thesis.’[5]

Against this discursive backdrop, with postcolonial governments using veiling/antiveilng as either a Western import or an Islamic buttress, Milani’s insightful essay on the murky nature of revealing and concealing, traces the impact of Iranian poet, Parvin E’tessami. E’tessami was conspicuously obscure. While other female poets wrote to secure a marriage, Parvin used her education to publish her great work- *Divan*. The critical insight Milani brings to the story is how the treatment of E’tessami’s legacy is intertwined with the treatment of veiling. Ahmad Karimi Hakkak, when examining the silence of E’tessami on matters of (in his view) feminist importance reminded readers that the poet product and a producer of culture

Change is a process rather than an exertion of individual will- the result of constant cultural interactions between the pet and the culture that surrounds him or her. [6]

Ironically, Milani shows that the interactions between society and the writer are not limited to authorial subjects such as Parvin but also pertain their biographers, reviewers, and readers. For example, early criticisms, rooted in patriarchal norms, doubted her authorship, since “a woman’s art is making an artist out of a man."[7] But those who trusted her signature imposed upon her further constrains. This is double bind of the era. If Parvin E’tessami is a woman, than her poetry is fraud, and if she is a poet she is stripped of femininity.

Later criticism was caught in its own impossible duality, either an author is vocally feminist, or she is oppressed. Once again the answer is forced to adopt the colonial thesis of the question- all the while the mysterious and authentic author evades easy understanding. Milani, careful reader, locates E’tessami’s femininity and feminism in her writing.

She used the mundane, the insignificant everyday details of domestic life as metaphors and allegories in her poems, deliberately breaking down the rigid separation of important and unimportant as defined by literary tradition.

In this way we see that the debate around E’tessami falls into the same traps as the discourse of the veil. The assumptions of the question presume the answer, and force backed decrees and ordinances rarely grasp their presumed ends. Arguing about how a woman looks, her exteriority, is still elevating that exteriority above the secret universe she holds within. Thus the answer will never be satisfying

We reject and cling to the veil simultaneously. We cast aside one veil only to save it anew in a different and more complex form… There is indeed always another veil to rend parallel in concealing the body from male gaze and concealing the authorial identity.”[112]

Etessami, unfettered by her art of the harsh binaries of politics, wisely regarded education as far more important than unveiling- as many Muslim feminists do today.

All three authors take the view, as Joan Scott puts it, that "A worldview organized in terms of… binary oppositions, is one we inhabit at our risk.”[8] But where Milani and Ahmed were examining the danger of dichotomy in the colonized world, Scott reflects on colonialism’s throwback- the Muslim diaspora and its discontents. Scott notes in anecdotes the ‘special remedial attention’ paid to the Muslim woman in France. The West’s curious obsession with veiling is understandable when we remember Ahmed’s analysis of feminist language being used to justify crippling the Egyptian pre-colonial authorities. In France with the modern diaspora, veiling discourse serves yet another purpose: the construction of a community from what is really a vast diversity of African, Arab, and Asian diaspora. In a way, veiling becomes the principle component along which all other dimensions of culture and origin are projected. Scott sees the veil “as a way of addressing broad issues of ethnicity and integration... in Western Europe.” [5] Symbols and buzzwords are easier to understand and politicize than histories, and thus ideology revolving around the veil creates policy that shares its myopic focus. When the veil was banned in France, “[it] seemed as if it could wipe away the challenges of integration posed for policymakers by former colonial subjects”[9] Once the imaginary Muslim community had been created using the simplification of the veil, and problems of integration had been identified in this community, policymakers deluded themselves into thinking they could solve the social issues of this ‘community’ by combatting the symbol for it. And therein lies the irony. In trying to combat a community of their imagination, French policymakers created this community by oppressing one faction of society, veil bearers, who were previously only united in the minds of those who most feared them. “By refusing to accept and respect the difference of these others we turn them into enemies, producing that which we most feared about them in the first place.”[11]

Veils are mysterious objects, obscuring and identifying, elevating and denigrating their wearers. They serve a strangely pivotal symbolic purpose in deploying and combatting colonialist rule, and speaking about veils on behalf of the women wearing them strategically avoids including them in the conversation. Politicizing the veil as a proxy for women and for the East-West binary obscures more than it reveals. “While the veil might be proclaimed illegal or obligatory by force, the gestures, behavior, and worldview attached to it cannot be transformed overnight.”[11] The answer is always more complex.

Sources

[1] Hayden, Sally. "Iranian Women Are Taking to Facebook to Protest Against Compulsory Hijabs | VICE News." *VICE News*. N.p., n.d. Web. 19 Nov. 2015.

[2] "Media." *Geneva Summit for Human Rights and Democracy*. N.p., 22 Feb. 2015. Web. 19 Nov. 2015.

[3] Ahmed, Leila. *Women and gender in Islam: Historical roots of a modern debate*. Yale University Press, 1992. p.124.

[4] Ahmed, Leila. *Women and gender in Islam: Historical roots of a modern debate*. Yale University Press, 1992. p.150.

[5] ibid. p. 166.

[6] Milani, Farzaneh. *Veils and words: The emerging voices of Iranian women writers*. Syracuse University Press, 1992. p. 114

[7] *ibid* p. 112.

[8] Scott, Joan Wallach. *The politics of the veil*. Princeton University Press, 2009. p. 19.

[9] ibid. p 7.

[10] ibid. p 17

[11] Milani, Farzaneh. *Veils and words: The emerging voices of Iranian women writers*. Syracuse University Press, 1992. p. 118.