1. History Unveiled

In his book *The New Orientalists*, Ian Almond basically makes the case that many of the famous continental thinkers of the twentieth century engage in the same Orientalists practices that Said criticized. Friedrich Nietzsche and Foucault fall under particular scrutiny for exoticizing the Middle East, but he also criticizes Derrida and Zizek among others in his book of doing the same. He charges these theorists with using the Orient as a place from which to criticize Western culture, but the Orient that appears in there texts does not necessarily reflect any sort of reality within the Middle East. Put basically, they are the other half to the Orientalists who derided and infantalized the Orient in Said’s book:

[I]n attempting to write about the Other, we invariably end up writing about ourselves has become a cliché of Orientalist studies – ‘extending the Empire of the Same’, as Levinas called it; what remains surprising is that so many of the ﬁgures responsible for delineating and demonstrating this situation of epistemological ﬁnitude so visibly fail to escape it in their own work. (203)

His criticisms are fair and as this paper uses these theorists in its analysis of an Orientalist practice, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the difficulties in analyzing cultures distinct from one’s own. In that spirit, I do not intend to make any judgments about Islamic cultures rather I want to interrogate Western conceptions of Muslims. However, his criticism of Western thinkers often takes its cues from the comparison of contemporary Islamic culture to that of the medieval. He quotes Salman Sayyid as saying “that Europe sees Islam as a return of the medieval” (49). In relation to head scarves and veil, the medieval serves as an important starting point.

Discussions around the veil and its depiction as “medieval” in western media have already occurred. In her essay *Time Behind the Veil*, Kathleen Davis already presents a focused criticism on the “the significations so violently imposed upon women in contemporary political and cultural struggles” (Davis 117). In her analysis, Davis first “interrogates the gendered temporalities of Orientalist discourses such as *Behind the Veil* [an ABC-TV news special]” (107). To do so, she draws on the work of Homi Bhabha and Julia Kristeva to show that medeivalism has become conflated with “these struggles over veiling and unveiling women involv[ing] constellated national and multinational agendas” (109). Secondly, Davis “traces the logic and implications of the medievalism in Said’s *Orientalism*” (107) to show that he over-generalizes in discussions of medieval Orientalism but more importantly that his dichotomy between Orient and Occident reinforces contemporary Orientalism:

[I]t [his dichotomy] instates a core “reality” that privileges and solidifies the very discourse he critiques. If we grant with Said that me- dieval Europe’s system of representing Islam is purely antiempirical, based not on any experience with Islam but only on a fully closed, self-generated tradition, then we privilege Europe as an absolutely self-constituting object. (113)

In the third portion of her analysis, Davis reads Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Man of Law’s Tale* under Orientalist methodology. In this section, she mainly shows how Said’s arguments concerning the genesis of Orientalist study is wrong and that women play an important role in signifying the difference between East and West. In her estimation, Said is wrong because medieval Orientalism did not spring from an isolated experience; rather, medieval Europe engaged in significant trade and warfare with the East and therefore the “real” Orient runs through the formation of the European identity. Her critique of Chaucer shows how authors retroactively made distinctions between Islam and Christianity: European and Turk in early European history based on contemporary struggles (e.g. the Crusades, growing Turkish power, etc.). While I do not generally agree with Davis’s critique of Said, her positioning of women in the formation of Orient and Occident foreshadows how the veil will eventually mark the Western and Eastern temporal divide.

While Davis touches on the veil’s role in the temporal divide, she ignores its history between the two regions. Fadwa El Guindi survey’s examines a portion of the veil’s history in her book *Veil: Modesty, Privacy and Resistance* which generally focuses on its use in Islamic culture; however, she does provide a comparative analysis of its use in other cultures. In her examination, she splits veiling into 5 different functions: “(1) complementary, as in Sumeria; (2) exclusionary and privileging as in the Persian-Mesopotamian case; (3) egalitarian, as in Egypt; (4) hierarchical, as in Hellenic culture; and (5) seclusionary, as in Byzantine culture” (“The Veil in Comparative Tradition”). As she demonstrates, the ancient cultures of the Mediterranean area used the veil frequently and for different measures. For example, early Church father Tertullian who wrote in Carthage around 208 CE mentions that “Arabia’s heathen females will be your judges, who cover not only the head, but the face also, so entirely, that they are content, with one eye free, to enjoy rather half the light than to prostitute the entire face” (“An Appeal to the Married Women”). Clearly, the practice of veiling in niqab fashion precedes the birth of Muhammad; however, Tertullian’s point on Arab women means to convince Christian women to do the same: “[W]e admonish you, too, women of the second (degree of) modesty, who have fallen into wedlock, not to outgrow so far the discipline of the veil” (“Married Women”). Right up until the late medieval era in Europe women’s “[h]air was generally covered with a linen veil, and in the twelfth century the neck and chin were also covered by a cloth called a barbet.The two cloths were later joined to form a single head covering, the wimple” (Steele 21). Désirée G. Koslin speculates that “[i]deas for this style may have come from the East and southern Europe during the Crusades and the intensiﬁed contacts with sophisticated cultures where veiling of all women was routinely observed” (168).

The possibility that Northern Europeans drew inspiration from Oriental traditions has important consequences for the different connotations or concepts surrounding the veil. While the veil functioned differently in these societies, it did not necessarily serve as the point of cultural identification that we see today. Between the Middle East and the West, the veil has come to function most prominently as a point of cultural identification rather than in its traditional senses. Susanna Burghartz reiterates the nineteenth-century encyclopedia writer Johann Georg Krünitz’s entry on the veil: “two different treatments of women’s head-dress are proposed: the general (and ‘permanent’) enforcement of veiling in Oriental societies is contrasted with the Western rule of fashion, with its changing vogue for concealment and exposure” (“Introduction”). However, while this statement has a degree of truth to it now, it also strikingly recalls Said and Almond’s critique of Orientalism: the Orient does not change, it remains in a kind of permanent medievalism or time warp.

By abandoning the Orientalist answer of permanence (the Orient) versus change (the Occident), the question still remains about why the current split in veil use between the East and West. Burghartz rejects the idea of cultural identification being an a significant cause in the widening split:

His ‘true history’ of the Arabic tapado in Spain claimed that Moorish, and following them Spanish women had employed this form of veiling with such successfully seductive effect that the distinction between the two groups had entirely dissolved, making the ban issued in 1586 essential. This discourse of the veil mixed a critique of fashion with a critique of modernization and an attempt to draw boundaries establishing different religious identities, yet in practice it was not successful in enforcing the ban on Spanish women. ("Critique of the Veil")

For Burghartz, the unstable significations of the veil throughout modern, Western discourse prevents an easily established dichotomy; yet, the difference remains between Western and Eastern fashions has considerably widened today. So while I agree with Burghatz that the veil has not had a consistent meaning in Western society, her conclusion suggests that it has a stable meaning in Islamic society. Certainly the environmental, technological, and economic conditions impact fashion considerations (the veil protects against the sun, wind, and sand) which may account for the continuing use of the veil in Islamic countries in the Middle East and North Africa, but this 1586 ban in Spain reflects two important additional considerations: fashion constituted enough of a cultural signifier (i.e. Muslim versus Christian) that it was subject to controversy and religion played a prominent role in the veil’s meaning.

The significance of religion to the veil is in the construction of its social meaning. Because the veil appeared in the cultures that gave birth to both Christianity and Islam, critics in the mainstream media and scholars have argued that the veil represents a cultural appropriation by religion. This explanation unfortunately reduces the complexity of the situation. The veil may have emerged in earlier cultures, it takes on its own religious meaning as it grows in conjunction with its respective religious societies. El Guindi argues:

There is a tradition of gender segregation and public seclusion of women in the Judaic and Christian traditions that is rooted in conceptions of the purity and impurity of women and connections between womanhood and nature. These conceptions have a bearing on individual self-image and the public and religious sense of self...these notions do not have an Arabo-Islamic basis. Gender separations in Arabo-Islamic societies must be examined in a different framework. A subtle and nuanced divide, but one that makes a difference, exists between religious cultures. ("The Sacred in the Veil: 'Hijab'")

In essence, religion and veiling form a scaffolding-building relationship where one dissolves into the other: where they structure one another. The veil serves as the dividing line between culture and religion, neither one or the other but separating the two. As a result of this scaffolding relationship, the divide and conflict between theologies and the divide between social groupings grafts onto the symbolism of the veil. So what represented an unarticulated sacredness in both religions or undefined separation in the social sphere comes to “be read as a sign of the ‘Other’ – of lust, disorder and seduction – and carry correspondingly negative connotations” (Burghatz “Ambivalent Coding”).

This process recalls the situation in which Davis criticizes Said. To her, Said argues that the West’s image of the Orient constitutes itself: “If we grant with Said that medieval Europe’s system of representing Islam is purely antiempirical, based not on any experience with Islam but only on a fully closed, self-generated tradition, then we privilege Europe as an absolutely self-constituting object” (113). While her criticisms are fair, Said’s monumental topic and the generalizations he sometimes employs fuel this criticism. Because Said’s original argument lacks nuance in medieval Orientalism, the described scaffolding relationship can somewhat provide an answer to Davis’s criticisms. Medieval Europe and Islam certainly had a relationship that prevents any claims of total antiempiricism; however, Said seems to argue that what the gets passed on in the tradition is the distortion of the experience. Outside of military and economic engagments with the East, the main written tradition was religious. Even before engaging with religious writing, a figure like Dante would have been always already under a Christian cosmology. A Christian upbringing would inevitably colour his view of Islam. Said writes, “It is perfectly possible to argue that some distinctive objects are made by the mind, and that these objects, while appearing to exist objectively, have only a fictional reality…To a certain extent modern and primitive societies seem thus to derive a sense of their identities negatively” (55). The Christian western tradition grew from the Greco-Roman tradition where “[a] fifth-century Athenian was very likely to feel himself to be nonbarbarian as much as he positively felt himself to be Athenian” (55). What occurs is a tradition in which the authors or scribes pass the fictions along and continue to distortion of the subject matter. Athenians become Greeks and Northern Europeans become barbarians; Europe becomes Christendom and the Middle East and North Africa become the Islamic Empire. When religion gets involved, otherness and backwardness shifts to evilness and wrong. Of course this shift also occurred during the ancient era, Herodotus wrote of the horror at seeing the *Callatiae* practice funerary cannibalism. However, Christianity as a system of thought has extended well into the modern era. While Chrisitanity’s influence has declined over time its forthright prejudices against Islam vilify the Otherness of the Orient. By the time Europeans arrive at the Englightenment, the Orientalists are born into a society already so thoroughly permeated with a distorted view of the Orient that their task to study the area requires them to break through the negative connotations (“In Western feminist discourse “veil” is politically charged with connotations of the inferior “other,” implying and assuming a subordination and inferiority of the Muslim woman” [El Guindi “The Sacred in the Veil: ‘Hijab’”]) What Said rails against in his book, is the sealed tradition that grows from religious rationality in which the Muslim cannot be right because they are not Christian. As the Enlightenment turns away from Christianity it still retains some of the vilification of the Other in Islam. The Orientalists that Said most hotly contests are those who use their experiences with the Orient to make sense of and justify the received picture instead of using it to examine and break down the prejudices.

With this gradual layering of thought upon thought, and polarization of identities, the gradual decline of the veil in Western fashion begins to make sense. Of course technical and economic changes impacted fashion, but they do not exclude the impact of identity conflicts. During the process of colonization and the more formal periods of Orientalism that Said examines, veil use in the West sharply declines. On one hand, the decline of the veil could have resulted from the Enlightenment and a desire to break with the Christian past. However, it also suggests that as Westerners access to Orientalist literature and costume books (books that described the latest fashions) increased, so did the changes in fashion. In this sense, the technical (i.e. the printing press) and the economic (i.e. affordable books and wide spread availability) work in tandem with the formation of identities and the resulting distinct trends in fashion. (The Ottoman Empire banned the use of the printing press until 1729.) In the twentieth-century when the world has reached the peak of traditional Western colonization and the Enlightement has embedded itself into the structures of modernity (while appropriating attitudes towards the East from previous doctrines), the veil as an Oriental, relic of the past crystallizes in the Western imagination.