4. That Veil of Desire

As Derrida pointed out, fear makes the sovereign, but as Laclau shows the sovereign needs confrontation; the variable missing from this equation is desire. The sovereign needs the confrontation to generate fear, but the underlying drive for both is the desire for power and control. In the Canadian election context (an election being the formally recognized democratic quest for power), ISIS and Baghdadi as external enemies could not adequately generate enough fear to swing voters outside the Conservative base. In response, Harper and the Conservatives shone the spotlight on potential internal enemies by instituting a ban on veils during citizenship ceremonies. This ban reflects the sovereign ban of Agamben; the election for Harper, in essence, consisted of his desire for the permission of the electorate to redraw the juridico-cultural boundaries of Canadian society and make outlaws the (Muslim) women of the veil.

So far in my argument, the discussion of desire has focused on early representations of Muslim women as seductresses prone to the animal desires who in turn stoke immoral desires of Western men. In this sense, desire is gendered along the lines of women producing sexual desire in men. In the medieval and early modern era “this particular form of veiling [veiling with only eyes showing] was not seen as a token of modesty but instead was criticized as seductive, mysterious and rebellious” (Burghatz) while in the colonial era and at the height of Orientalism the veil conveyed a desire to be conquered: “This highly aestheticized treatment sustains a nineteenth-century photographic convention depicting the eroticized, unattainable, and exotic “Oriental” woman. Imprisoned behind the veil, she became the central ﬁgure in a romantic fantasy of conquest and possession. Removing the veil marks the ultimate form of colonization” (Gula 277). Yet in the twenty-first century, this image of veiled Muslim women has somewhat fallen out of favour in response to the use of the veil in terrorist or political activities: “Hence what was once familiar and recognizable as concealment, mask, masquerading, has now become unfamiliar, disturbing, and uncanny” (Yegenoglu 560). As a result of the cracks in the idea of a sexual desirable woman underneath the veil, the desire for power and control becomes apparent: “*the veiled woman can see without being seen*” (Yegenoglu 546). She mirrors the surveillance of the state[[1]](#footnote-1). Yet, this situation reflects Slavoj Zizek’s point that “there is more truth in the mask we wear” (92). The niqab does not disguise what the modern sovereign or colonizer seeks, it is what they seek.

In his essay “Courtly Love, or, Woman as Thing,” Zizek’s explanation of the dynamics between the Knight and his Lady love of medieval romances oddly reflect the dynamics in the Canadian niqab debate. For instance, Zizek’s very first point argues that the women of these romances do not evince a real person. He quotes Lacan when he says that Dante’s sublime mistress Beatrice could easily be the same woman that all other poets of the time addressed: “[W]riters have noted that all the poets seem to be addressing the same person” (89). Thus, this woman loses all concrete features much like the woman (or man) underneath the veil lose all defining features. As a consequence, “the lady is never characterized for any of her real concrete virtues … She functions as an inhuman partner in the sense of a radical Otherness which is wholly incommensurable with our needs and desires; she is simultaneously a kind of automaton, a machine which utters meaningless demands at random.. this confers on the lady her uncanny, monstrous character—the Lady as the Other which is not our fellow creature” (89) just like the veiled woman who represents a threat to Western society: a breakdown of values and possible terrorist action. She is no longer human after centuries of dehumanization. Western society reduces the her to radical alterity, to a medieval, animal-Otherness. She enters into a “traumatic Otherness is what Lacan designates by means of the Freudian term *das Ding*, the Thing” (90). She becomes the niqab[[2]](#footnote-2); the thing itself that removes the gendered identity. However, as previously mentioned, by reducing and banning the niqab to the status of *homo sacer*, the same power the sovereign holds enters the niqab in potentiality. Consequently, this elevation to ideal or degradation to thing is “a strictly secondary phenomenon: it is a narcissistic projection whose function is to render her traumatic dimension invisible” (90). This traumatic dimension in the political sphere is the loss of the political which comes about in two ways: the loss of power to the competing sovereign or the gaining of absolute power[[3]](#footnote-3). The niqab thus acts as the perfect blank canvas upon which the desire of the Western sovereign act out. This desire as previously alluded to is power and control. In the broadest sense, it is the power to control and shape society. In the very specific context of the Canadian debate, the power materializes in the control over women’s bodies. While Conservatives argued that their measures ensured that women would no longer be oppressed and could choose what to wear, this idea contradicts itself. In the Harper government’s Canada, woman can wear anything they want, as long as it is not the niqab and the government gives consent.

When the sovereign creates the opposing force and then desires more of the power created in the division and in the opposition, it attacks but always in a feigned way: “Furthermore violence is never carried out, brought to its conclusion; it always remains suspended, as the endless repeating of interrupted gesture” (92). Without the culmination of the violence leading to absolute power, the sovereign and the opposing force enter into a feedback loop that draws ever closer to absolute power without ever arriving at it. Zizek compares this situation to a case of domestic abuse that recalls our experience with terrorism: “[T]he brutal act upon the victim retroactively legitimizes the act: I set out to beat a woman and when, at the very point where I think I thoroughly dominate her, I notice that I am actually her slave —since she wants the beating and provoked me to deliver it— I get mad and really beat her” (93-4). The Imperialist sets out to save the world through imperialism, but continued terrorism forces the Imperialist to come to the conclusion that the world requires more measures to make it safe. The West attacks ISIS but every attack that bleeds into other Muslim nations radicalizes more people which in turn require more attacks against ISIS and more security measures. Western feminism desires to free Muslim women from patriacrhial oppression but for every attack on Muslim culture more women don the veil which prompts more radical attacks (e.g. FEMEN’s protests).

This relation creates a dance in which the sovereign while feigning weakness and claiming victimization edges closer to absolute power and more control without ever arriving at its destination. Zizek call this the “paradox of detour” (96): “our official desire is that we want to sleep with the lady [consummation of sovereign absolute power]; whereas in truth, there is nothing we fear more than a Lady who might yield” To see its desire, the power must observe it without aiming directly at it or as Zizek puts more accurately, “*the Object of desire itself coincides with the force that prevents its attainment*” (96). It forms its own limitation, it acts as the sovereign ban. So in the Canadian debate, the Conservative government’s ban on the niqab which would establish a juridico-cultural order would never actually remove the threat of terrorism because they do not want an end to the terrorist threat. The terrorist threat supports their power and the niqab is the current image of that threat without it, as we have seen in the current election, their power disappears.

1. This relation of surveillance individual to surveillance state suggests that Foucault’s theory of the panoptic society and the Guy Debord’s *Society of Spectacle* might be useful avenues for study. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. At this point in my essay, I will use the term niqab or veil to convey the genderless, abyssal, and Otherness quality at play in the relations. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A third way exists in the reduction to the spectral enemy (Schmitt’s fear); however in this present case, the sovereign has decided and created the enemy. In a sense, the sovereign has given substance to the spectre. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)