

# THE DRAPED UNIVERSE: THE VEIL

Jennifer Tremblay

The following discussion demonstrates the richness of meaning to be found in the veiled figures depicted in Lalla Essaydi's photographs of Muslim Arab women.

Essaydi, who is herself both a Muslim and an Arab, frequently depicts women wearing coverings that fall under the category of veil. This essay highlights the history of the veil and different terms that are associated with its use, and points out that the use of veiling is not unique to Islam but has been found in other cultures and religions. This essay also highlights non-Muslim associations between the veil and Islam that stem from the Colonial period, when veiling was associated with restriction of women's rights and the "backwardness" of cultures that veiled in an attempt to justify colonization.

The field of Orientalism was born during the Colonial Period, and its depictions of women in Oriental cultures and how these images still affect both contemporary art and current thinking on Islam and veil. The myriad purposes of the veil in contemporary culture contrast sharply with the non-Muslim association of the veil as being simply a symbol of Islam or a means of women's oppression. Contemporary artists like Essaydi use both the history of Orientalism and different readings of the veil to challenge both bias against the veil and assumptions about the necessity of the veil; to tell a fuller story about Islam and Arab identity that is offered in art historical works; and seek to reshape the dialogue around Islam and veiling.

## **The Veil and Islam Today**

Today the veil as worn by women has become synonymous with Islam in the Western mind. Veil is an English word that does little to accurately describe the diverse character of coverings worn by women and occasionally men in Islam. Guindi, in her book "Veil", suggests that Islamic veils could be separated into three categories: head covers, face covers, and body covers; however, these further categorizations do little to show the differences in what is worn, how, by whom, and who it is worn in front of. Regional and cultural differences, fabric types, and uses have led to a multitude of Arab words to describe the garment in question. A veil might cover the head only, or the head and shoulders; may be drawn across the face to veil the mouth, may consist of multiple pieces, or may cover the entire body.

There are several common terms relating to veils that have entered the English vernacular. The Hijab, which also means modesty, is a veil that covers head and neck, or sometimes just the head. The Niqaab also covers face with either mesh over the eyes or eye-holes, and the Afghan Burka covers the entire body with only mesh over the eyes to see through (Ahmadiyya Muslim Community). However, even these terms have been co-opted from a specific use within specific cultures to more general use, and run the risk of lumping vast regional and cultural differences together under one definition.

It is important to note that the use of shawls, veils, headscarves and other coverings is not restricted to Islam, and did not originate within Islam; rather, various types of cultures have used various types of head, face, and body coverings for numerous reasons for thousands of years. Modern examples that a Western viewer would be

familiar with include the Habits of Catholic nuns, modern Western brides, and head coverings worn by Jewish women during prayer. Historically, veiling has been used to denote status, for religious reasons, and for modesty.

### **Orientalism and the Western Gaze**

During the Colonial Period, when western nations were controlling or attempting to control Arab and Islamic countries (among others), the veil came to be used as a symbol of women's oppression and Islamic "backwardness" that Western Colonial powers used as justification for colonization efforts, despite similar unequal treatment of women in Europe and the Islam's long history of learning and exploration. Members of countries under colonial rule who benefited from the Colonial presence or had affinity for Colonial culture often became advocates for change that involved efforts to have women unveil or to banish the veil altogether. Both Egypt and Iran banned or least frowned upon the veil in the early and mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, and similar rules or cultural shifts were enacted in other Middle Eastern countries and territories.

Another product of European Colonialism was Orientalism, a Western construction of the "Orient" (Asia, India, Middle East and North Africa) based only partially on fact. Seen as exotic, and often backward, Orientalism spawned an Academic field of study as well as a genre of Art (and plenty of lingering misconceptions and ideas in modern Western thoughts and ideas regarding any land or people associated with the Orient). Orientalist artwork, especially painting, showed the veil and Oriental women's bodies as sexualized, mysterious, erotic and exotic; the perception was often of women sequestered in the Haram, where Haram became a sexual place, with women existing

only for their husband's pleasure, and being painted by Orientalists for the pleasure of Western male gaze.

Modern Western views still tend to see the veil through a lens of oppression and backwardness. Thanks in part to mainstream media and the post 9/11 engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan, the veil has become strongly associated with the loss of women's rights in these countries, and stories of rape and abuse by male members of society. Stories from countries like Iran, where going without the veil is illegal and can result in arrest, further exacerbate this association. Rarely do we hear positive stories of women living within Islamic countries to whom the veil is a positive symbol rather than a negative one.

### **Meanings of the Veil Within Islam**

While the West may view the veil as oppressive, it also has a history within Islamic countries as a symbol of revolution and a rejection of Western values like consumerism that were themselves deemed to be negative. For example, during the French colonization of Algeria, the French attempt to convert the population to a version of the French culture became centered around women and the removal of the veil. However, this strategy backfired; the population of Algeria, including women reacted not by unveiling but instead using the veil as a symbol of their culture during a revolution against the French occupiers (El Guindi, 1999).

The veil also became symbolic in Iran in the 60's and 70's, leading up to Iranian revolution. Once an offense punishable by arrest, revolutionaries protesting the Westernization of Iran began wearing the veil as symbol of faith and commitment to the

Islamic revolution. In fact, the more covered and conservative a woman was, the more knowledgeable she was about Islam and the higher up she was in activist groups (Guindi). In many cultures, the veil became or has become a part of a woman's identity, and government suppression is seen as suppression of that identity.

Today, Muslim women wear some form of the veil for a variety of reasons: modesty, the adherence to a religious precept, and a symbol of religion similar to the cross, for Christians, or the Star of David for Jews. Many women feel that the veil conceals them from the gaze and sexual advances of men, making them feel more comfortable in public. For many women, whether in an Arab, Islamic, or Western nation, the veil may be a cultural norm, much like jeans in the US, and can also be an essential part of the female/feminine identity, as well as imparting a sense of community within and between women from different families or ages. The veil can also impart a sense of privacy within public spaces, and distance a woman from the dictates of consumerism or fashion and from stereotypical views of what a woman should look like.

### **The Veil in Contemporary Art**

The veil in art is often still situated within Western discourse. Contemporary artists using the veil within their work often challenge colonial images of veil, and engage in Western debates about veil; less so do they engage in dialogue solely about the Islamic use and meanings of the veil, although some artists challenge and question the veil in Islam as well as its Western meanings. Thanks to the Colonial era and Orientalism, veiled women in Western eyes are often still seen as subservient, suppressed, and with no sense of agency or individual identity. Contemporary Muslim and Arab artists, both

male and female, aim to give women back their sense of equality and agency while still retaining the presence of the veil.

The Post-colonial veil displaces “mainstream master narratives woven around the veil and the Muslim woman” (Behiery, 2012). One method of doing this is by demonstrating that the veil is subjective, with different meanings in different contexts; by showing the veil in geographic locations not typically associated with veil with an everyday context to image. An example is the work of Shekaiba Wakill’s photographs, showing Muslim women in major Western metropolitan areas, often engaged in everyday activities. A second method is the use of autobiographic narratives where the personal meaning of the veil comes through. This allows for different narratives and points of view of the veil. Ghazel’s *Me* series, which consist of short films and stills all starring her wearing a chador makes the veil banal as it is seen over and over, often in everyday situations. Her work challenges assumptions about veil and the idea that women who wear the veil must automatically be passive. For example, her film still *I Try to be a Feminist* shows her lifting weights, ie engaged in an something active rather than passive, and challenges assumptions about what can be done in a chador, as well as associating feminism and the veil. Often addressed to a Western, English speaking audience, she pokes fun at Western assumptions as well as Islamic ones (does anyone work out alone, inside, while wearing a chador?).

### **The Veil and Essaydi’s Work**

Western audiences viewing Essaydi’s photographs of (sometimes) veiled Muslim women will likely bring with them preconceived notions of the veil and what it means to their interpretation of the works. Essaydi, educated in both France and the United

States, is no doubt highly aware of the Western gaze, both its history in Orientalist works as demonstrated by her reuse of classic Orientalist images, and the current trends in Western thoughts regarding Islam and the veil. But she is also a Muslim woman born to an Arab family, operating in both the Western world and the world of her birth, and is such, is also aware that the Western view and Western audience is not the only interpretation available. It is important for the viewer to bring both the negative stereotype of the veil, and to step away from it as well.

While the veil can be read as a symbol of repression, a wiping away of women's identities, it can also be read as having given back to the women their sense of modesty and a sense of themselves as Muslim women. The use of multiple veiled figures can imply a sense of community with other women, a natural progression within a cultural from unveiled to veiled, and a sense of a certain historical accuracy that is missing in the clichéd Haram paintings made by Western Orientalists where the veil often shows more than it covers.

The veil has become a potent, laden symbol that tries to encapsulate too many meanings; a sign of repression and of revolution; of self-identity and lack of identity; one who's wearer is both passive and active; and a single symbol of both a religion and a people while simultaneously representing a huge amount of cultural diversity, types, and styles, and forms. Depictions of and thoughts about the veil are still colored by the Orientalist tradition in art, as well as the constructed identity of the "Orient" that this school of belief is responsible for. Stereotypical and often negative views of the veil are often reinforced by the news and popular culture. Contemporary artists attempt to bring to light these assumptions, as well as show both the broader and specific views of

the veil in all of its meanings and associations, and more importantly to uncover, while not necessarily uncovering, the women who wear it.

## Suggestions for Further Reading

- Bailey, David A., and Gilane Tawadros. *Veil: veiling, representation and contemporary art*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press; London, 2003.
- Batur, Ayşe Lucie. "The Mythology of the Veil in Europe: A Brief History of a Debate". *Comparative Studies Of South Asia, Africa And The Middle East* 32, no. 1 (2012): 156-168.
- Behiery, Valerie. "Alternative Narratives of the Veil in Contemporary Art". *Comparative Studies Of South Asia, Africa And The Middle East* 32, no. 1 (2012): 130-146.
- El Guindi, Fadwa. *Veil: modesty, privacy and resistance*. New York, NY: Berg, 1999.
- Galadari, Abdulla. "Behind the Veil: Inner Meanings of Women's Islamic Dress Code". *International Journal Of Interdisciplinary Social Sciences* 6, no. 11 (2012): 115-125.
- Hasan, Usama. "The Veil: between tradition and reason, culture and context." In *Islam and the Veil*, 65-80. London: Continuum, 2011.
- Ahmadiyya Muslim Community. "Islamic FAQ: the Veil." *Islamic FAQ*.  
<http://www.islamicfaq.org/veil/>
- Lazreg, Marnia. *Questioning the Veil: open letters to Muslim women*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009.
- Stillman, Yedida Kalfon, and Norman A. Stillman. *Arab Dress: a short history: from the dawn of Islam to modern time*. Boston: Brill, 2003.