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To cite this article: Myra Macdonald (2006) Muslim Women and the Veil, *Feminist Media Studies*, 6:1, 7-23, DOI: [10.1080/14680770500471004](https://doi.org/10.1080/14680770500471004)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14680770500471004>



Published online: 16 Aug 2006.



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MUSLIM WOMEN AND THE VEIL

Problems of image and voice in media representations

Myra Macdonald

Introduction

In February 2003, a digitally-produced image of the Statue of Liberty, draped in a *burqa* and carrying a copy of the Qur'an, was banned by a city council in the English Midlands from a touring exhibition of "The Veil." A year and a half later, the screening on Dutch television of *Submission*, a short film directed by Theo Van Gogh and written by Ayaan Hirsi Ali, stimulated sufficient controversy to act as the alleged trigger for the assassination of Van Gogh in Amsterdam in November 2004.¹ Depicting four women appealing to Allah for explanations of their experiences of male violence, it drew hostile comment from several Islamic commentators, not for its content, but for breaching Muslim codes of modesty of dress and for blasphemously inscribing verses from the Qur'an on women's partially revealed and abused bodies.

The capacity of images of the veiled Muslim female body to provoke intense reactions, both from Muslims and non-Muslims, and to eclipse Muslim women's own diversity of voice and self-definition², raises significant issues for feminist debate. Analysis of the social, economic, and political positioning of Muslim women within very different regimes is inhibited by a fixation on veiling. In a manner characteristic of any stereotype, the veil refuses "the play of difference," (Homi Bhabha 1994, p. 75) while also exemplifying the fragility of "something that must be anxiously repeated" (Bhabha 1994, p. 66). This article considers the residual influence of colonial discourses of veiling and unveiling, especially within a Western cultural context that privileges "ocular-centric or vision-based" epistemology (Barbie Zelizer 2001, p. 1). In addition, it explores how Western post-feminist equations between women's sexuality and bodily self-expression reinforce assumptions about the veil's abnegation of sexual desire that ignore Islamic thinking about female sexuality. Following 9/11, an apparent openness to a plurality of Muslim women's voices became manifest in at least the more liberal areas of the media, but the opportunity this offered for diversity of perspective was repeatedly undermined by the continuing obsession with veiling/unveiling. In selecting specific texts for discussion, I have chosen to focus on those that are attempting in differing ways to open up understanding of Muslim femininity, because it is in these that the challenge of evading the continuing discursive power of forms of representation with a long and pernicious history is most acutely visible.

Feminist Media Studies, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2006

ISSN 1468-0777 print/ISSN 1471-5902 online/06/010007-23

© 2006 Taylor & Francis DOI: 10.1080/14680770500471004

Myths of the Veil

There is nothing new in Western preoccupation with the image of the veiled Muslim woman, yet veiling neither originated in, nor is unique to, Islam. The veil had been adopted in pre-Islamic Arabia, Greece, Assyria, the Balkans, and Byzantium (Leila Ahmed 1992, p. 55; Fadwa El Guindi 1999, p. 149; Sarah Graham-Brown 1988, p. 134), and featured in particular Jewish and Christian communities (El Guindi 1999, pp. 149–150). In Christianity, St. Paul instructed women to cover their heads in the presence of God (1 Corinthians 11), and veiling in church has been a longstanding practice in Roman Catholicism. There is no explicit exhortation in the Qur'an that women should veil (Ahmed 1992, p. 55). Instead, the Qur'anic injunction (for both men and women) is for modesty (Surah 24.30, 24.31). Women are specifically asked to draw their veils (sometimes translated as "head-covering") over their bosoms to conceal their sexual appeal from all except those forbidden by incest rules from having sexual relations with them. While veiling is generally associated with women, it has historically been observed, if to unequal extents, by both sexes (the prophet Muhammad reputedly veiled when visiting his wife while her father was present) (El Guindi 1999, p. 128). Amongst Tuareg men (a Muslim Berber group in Saharan Africa) the practice continues even now (El Guindi 1999, p. 121).

In Muhammad's time, his wives were the only women required to veil (Ahmed 1992, p. 55). Despite many historical gaps, current knowledge about practices of head- and face-covering suggests a trajectory characterised by differences of class and ranking (Fadwa El Guindi 1999, p. 127; Reina Lewis 2004, p. 79), and constant disruptions and revisions (El Guindi 1999, p. 3). The single item of clothing identified as "the veil" obscures diversity in body-covering practices and brings both the loose head-scarf and the all-encompassing *burqa* into a singular discursive frame. The Egyptian feminist, Fadwa El Guindi (1999, pp. xi, 7), observes that there is no one Arabic term equivalent to the English "veil." Yet media discourse and debates are fixated on "veiling" and "unveiling" and rarely differentiate between styles of Muslim clothing. As El Guindi indicates (1999, p. 10), the veil has marketable and even "sexy" qualities lacking from more culturally specific terminology.³ The singularity of the veil also elides a crucial distinction between coercion and freedom of choice in women's adoption of the variety of head- and/or face-coverings so defined. "The veil" becomes an all-encompassing symbol of repression, and in its dominant association with Islam (with equivalent Jewish, Christian, or Hindu practices written out of the script) reinforces the monocular representation of that religion.

The events of 9/11 intensified this association, but did not initiate it. As Helen Watson had already indicated, "[t]he image of a veiled Muslim woman seems to be one of the most popular Western ways of representing the 'problems of Islam'" (1994, p. 153). The predominance of this visual trope is seen as a dangerous distraction by many feminist commentators, especially from the Arab world. As they indicate, debates about veiling and unveiling have both hi-jacked and belittled more thorough investigation of the political and economic sources of women's oppression (see, for example, Nawal El Saadawi 1980). Ahdaf Soueif ([2001] 2003, p. 113) traces disquiet about an obsession with the veil back to the pioneering Egyptian feminist, Malak Hifni Nasif, who commented in 1906 that the veil had become central in debates about women's position only because colonial patriarchs had made it so. The Muslim veil's potency as a magnet for discussions about Islam and women's position arises from its capacity to evoke mixed emotions of fear, hostility, derision, curiosity, and fascination: a capacity already in evidence in colonial discourses.

Colonial Obsessions with “Unveiling”

The metaphoric desire to “unveil” alien cultures, by “laying them bare” and bringing them into conformity with the ideological norms of the dominating power has a long discursive history amongst Western colonialists and imperialists. As so frequently happens, contests for power were played out across the bodies of women. Even travellers reproduced the analogy of sexual possession. As Jananne Al-Ani remarks, “[a]pproaching Egypt for the first time, Edward W. Lane confessed to feeling like a bridegroom ‘about to lift the veil off his bride’” (2003, p. 100). This metaphoric notion of “unveiling” slipped unobtrusively into a pathological antipathy to the actual adoption of the veil by Muslim women, especially when this included facial concealment. Meyda Yeğenoğlu (1998) relates the intensity of fascination with uncovering the veiled woman to the Western conceptualisation of the Orient as feminine mystery. Commenting on the lack of attention to fantasy in Edward Said’s seminal account of Orientalism ([1978] 1991), Yeğenoğlu presents the Orient as intrinsically “feminine, always veiled, seductive, and dangerous” (1998, p. 11). The desire to penetrate behind the veil was intensified by the “scopic regime of modernity” that privileged seeing as the primary route to knowledge. It was “characterized by a desire to master, control, and reshape the body of the subjects by making them visible” (Yeğenoğlu 1998, p. 12).

Frantz Fanon underlines the synergy between colonial and sexual penetration in French-controlled Algeria. Each successful unveiling helped to convince the authorities

that the Algerian woman would support Western penetration into the native society. Every rejected veil disclosed to the eyes of the colonialists horizons until then forbidden, and revealed to them, piece by piece, the flesh of Algeria laid bare. (Fanon [1959] 1965, p. 42)

Yet, this was not an easy conquest. As Fanon also recognised, the veiled woman “frustrates the colonizer. There is no reciprocity. She does not yield herself...” ([1959] 1965, p. 44). Malek Alloula, writing about the postcards of Algerian women circulating amongst French soldiers in the 1920s, similarly remarks on the threat posed by the veiled woman’s ability to see without being seen. Her gaze defies voyeurism, and even mimics the photographer’s power: “concentrated by the tiny orifice made for the eye, this womanly gaze is a little like the eye of the camera, like the photographic lens that takes aim at everything” (Alloula cited in Graham-Brown 1988, p. 135). The danger posed by veiling was intensified by its success as a mask, effectively concealing weapons or other sources of subversion. But, as Yeğenoğlu stresses, this danger would not have exercised colonial minds so energetically had it not also possessed a sexual charge. Around the metaphoric linking of control of territory and control over the woman’s body hovered unspoken connotations of rape.

One of the most successful, if devious, means of repressing any acknowledgement of rapacious intent was to construct colonial or imperial interventions as missions to rescue women from the brutality and oppression signified by the veil. Most recently evident in the West’s interventions in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003–), this justification for aggressive action has been a repeated feature of colonial discourse from the nineteenth century onwards (Leila Ahmed 1992, p. 151; Haideh Moghissi 1999, p. 16). In addition to legitimating violence, it enables Western powers to “sanitize Western history” (Ella Shohat & Robert Stam 1994, p. 3) by implying the exemplary freedoms of women within their own societies. Lord Cromer (British consul-general in Egypt from 1883 until 1907) provides an early illustration

of the acute hypocrisy this entails: posing in Egypt as an advocate of women's rights, and hostile to veiling because of its stifling of women's freedoms, in Britain he was a leading member of the Men's League for Opposing Women's Suffrage (Ahmed 1992, pp. 152–153).

In the run-up to both the Afghanistan and Iraq invasions of this century, the Western media again used women's bowed and veiled bodies to confirm the urgency of rescuing them from their fate. Without historical enquiry into the reasons for women's poverty and misery, or the role of Western powers in enabling these conditions to prevail, the popular press graphically depicted the plight of female and child victims.⁴ In the autumn of 2001, Afghanistan's blue *burqa* became a suddenly familiar trope of oppressed womanhood, with only rare questioning of the reasons for its newly pronounced visibility. This prominent attention to the *burqa* was not, however, matched by any equivalent interest in women's rights, as Elisabeth Klaus and Susanne Kassel (2005, pp. 344–345) demonstrate in their analysis of German news magazines' coverage of Afghanistan between 9/11 and September 2002. In discussions of the *burqa*, metaphors of "shroud" and death-like mask prevailed, and not just in the popular media. Polly Toynbee, writing in *The Guardian*, begins a feature in the following terms: "Something horrible flits across the background in scenes from Afghanistan, scuttling out of sight. There it is, a brief blue or black flash, a grotesque Scream 1, 2 and 3 personified—a woman" (2001, p. 21).

The symbolic use of this victim narrative was most powerfully embodied in video footage of the execution of the woman known as Zarmina in Kabul's football stadium. Secretly filmed in November 1999 by a member of RAWA (Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan) who concealed a digital camera beneath her *burqa*, this footage was initially ignored by the Western news media. Once incorporated in Saira Shah's award-winning documentary "Beneath the Veil" (broadcast in Britain in June 2001 and on CNN in August 2001), it gained some initial attention. It was, however, only with its re-screenings on CNN in the autumn of 2001, and the repeated reproduction of still images in newspapers and magazines during this period that it became a central trope of the atrocities committed by the Taliban on Afghan women. With its relevance rating increased dramatically by the events of 9/11, the footage dovetailed into the narrative of barbarity inscribed on the bodies of women. What fitted less well into this discourse was the provenance of these images, taken with considerable courage and subterfuge, and readily available for distribution through RAWA's internet site (itself an affront to the "pre-modern" characterisation of Islam). The process that enabled Western audiences to see these images was either elided, or relegated to footnotes or brief mentions. A long account of "Zarmina's Story" in the *Mirror* (Anton Antonowicz 2002) devotes only one short paragraph to the method of the film's recording, but provides gruesome and elaborate detail about the brutality and desperation she experienced. In its editorial column on the same day, the paper concludes: "Now we understand everything that happened to her—and countless other Afghani women—we realise why the Taliban had to be defeated" (*Mirror* 2002).

The anticipated conclusion to this narrative trajectory was that freedom resulting from the Allied campaign would be accompanied by a process of joyful unveiling. In the aftermath of the "liberation" of Kabul on November 13, 2001, the British and American media alternately celebrated evidence of women throwing off their *burqas* or expressed puzzlement about many Afghan women's reluctance to do so, despite the widely available information that the intimidation of women by the Northern Alliance was at least as severe as it had been under Taliban rule (for further discussion of this, see Carol Stabile & Deepa Kumar 2005). Indeed, as Eric Louw (2003) observes, the Pentagon's PR strategy of

emphasising the rescue of oppressed women was dropped very quickly once Afghan women's retention of the *burqa* became clear. A content analysis of the archive of Associated Press photographs taken immediately before and after the "fall of Kabul" indicates the bias in the media's selection of images of women throwing off their *burqas*. In both sets of archive pictures, Shahira Fahmy discovered, "approximately 60 percent of women . . . were completely covered up" (2004, p. 99). But the media were so obsessed with unveiling as a symbol of the success of Western interventionism that this commanded headlines and images even when the accompanying text queried its significance. On November 16, 2001, *The Guardian*, under a heading "Unveiled: the secret life of women," devotes half a page to a picture of a 17-year-old woman without a *burqa*, although the text underneath begins:

The burka, said Sediqa Sharifi, was not the point. Yes, three days after the Taliban left the capital, almost all women were still too unsure of themselves to remove the head to toe tent concealing their bodies and faces when they left the house. But there were more important things about the post-Taliban world. (James Meek 2001, p. 3)

The article proceeds to discuss some of these "more important things," such as women's rights to employment, education, and the vote, but even in this newspaper it is the absence of the veil that captures primary attention.

Veiling, Sexuality and the Female Body

The colonised body, as Bhabha observes, "is always simultaneously (if conflictually) inscribed in both the economy of pleasure and desire and the economy of discourse, domination and power" (1994, p. 67). Associations between unveiling and sexual fantasy were brought vividly to life in Western representations of the *harem*, in a tradition stretching from the nineteenth-century paintings of Delacroix and Ingres through to twentieth-century advertising and film.⁵ The transformation of the biblical story of Salomé dancing for King Herod into the striptease "dance of the seven veils" in theatrical and cinematic performances, from Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* (1893) onwards, confirmed the centrality of the veil in constructions of the Oriental *femme fatale*. Even although the enticement of the shimmering diaphanous veil of screen representations may seem at the opposite end of any spectrum from the total obscurity of the *burqa*, the *harem* of the Western imaginary has left a legacy of mystique and sexual anticipation that still contributes to the veil's fascination. Hamid Naficy comments that the system of looking encouraged by the veil paradoxically tends "to turn the objects of the look into eroticised subjects" (2003, p. 141).

As a woman-only space, the *harem* both repelled and fascinated Western commentators. Read through Western colonial eyes, the *harem* functioned as evidence of the barbaric, pre-modern exclusion of women from social interchange with men, and of the subordination of women to men's gratification. Yet out of this latter assumption flowed the lure of a sybaritic world where women could be imagined through the male voyeur's eyes as seductive, languorous and available for sexual fantasies, including those of lesbian dalliance. Any contradictoriness in this duality was masked through a process of exoticisation that rendered the *harem* distinctly "distant," both temporally and spatially. The "making visible" of the *harem*, on the part of male artists and writers, was always filtered through a fantasy of sexual ecstasy disavowed by the official prudery of the colonial bourgeoisie. As Graham-Brown indicates, even photographs of Middle Eastern women

in the *harem* were more inventions of the studio photographer's imagination than naturalistic depictions of their lives:

the photograph, like the painting or engraving, was a figment of imagination, which assumed the privileged position of the voyeur entering this closed and private space, and allowing the viewer to do likewise. (Graham-Brown 1988, p. 74)

The archetypal male construction bore little relation to how the *harem* was perceived and functioned in Islamic cultural practice. Despite its evident restrictiveness, feminist critics have traced its diverse operation, in addition, as a safe feminine space, offering an opportunity for exchange of ideas, training women in household governance, and even, occasionally, supporting individual women to resist male authority (Graham-Brown 1988, pp. 79–80; El Guindi 1999, pp. 26–36). Segregation within Islamic discourse did not automatically imply servitude, submission, or even second-class status, but was based on Islamic tenets of the distinctive roles of men and women. Women in the *harem* were not, on these readings, at men's beck-and-call, whether for household chores or sexual gratification, and few *harems*, apart from those of the highest classes, included more than a single wife (typical Western representations implied polygamy and the presence of concubines) (Lewis 2004, p. 97). While some women bitterly resented their seclusion from public spaces, others regarded the space of the *harem* as index of their incorporation into respectable society (Graham-Brown 1988, p. 83).

Although men were the primary definers of the *harem*, Western women travellers added their own insights. Granted partial access to this segregated space, women's accounts possessed greater authority than those of their male counterparts, although they were by no means immune from contamination by colonial ideologies (Lewis 2004, pp. 12–13). As aware of the *harem's* "sex appeal" and marketing potential as any male commentator, they nevertheless acknowledged the potential benefits of *harem* life.⁶ In their willingness to reflect on comparisons with their own lives, they also drew attention to the limited freedoms of women in the West; a perspective totally absent from the implicit opposition in male accounts between Oriental oppressions and Western liberties. During her visit to Turkish baths in the early eighteenth century, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's fresh perception of the constraints of her own elaborate corsetry (seen through the amazed reactions of Turkish women onlookers) led her to re-evaluate the oppressiveness of the veil (El Guindi 1999, pp. 34–35).

In all but these occasional female accounts, however, *harem* women were silent, or silenced, readily inscribed within Western fantasies, and co-opted into a model of complicit passivity. By constructing veiling as an aberrant practice, Western commentators imply that *unveiling* marks a return to a "natural" and "normal" body, but *unveiling*, as Yeğenoğlu points out, is as much a discursive act as veiling: "the body that is not veiled is taken as the norm for specifying a general, cross-culturally valid notion of what a feminine body is and must be" (1998, p. 115). The legacy of the *harem's* version of *unveiling* has gained fresh sustenance from more contemporary constructions of the links between bodily display and sexual expressivity. Current post-feminist discourses assume female sexual agency and desire to be inscribed in the visibility and openness to view of the body. While feminism addressed the struggles women face in formulating their sexual desires and decolonising their sexuality from the "immense verbosity" of patriarchal discourses⁷, consumerism eagerly capitalised on a simplistic equation between sexual expressiveness and bodily display. *Sex and the City* has been a frequently cited example of the constructed synergy

between the open visibility of glamorous, white, youthful female bodies, and facility in talking about sexual desire and sexual self-assertion (for further discussion of this, see Kim Akass & Janet McCabe 2004; Rachel Moseley & Jacinda Read 2002). That this “natural,” “open,” and “unveiled” body is constructed through regimes of internalised management (diet, exercise, plastic surgery) as stringent as those imposed from without by Victorian corsetry, is masked by a fetishisation of “choice” as the confirmation of liberation and self-determining agency.

Within Western traditions that read both sexual availability and (more recently) sexual self-expression against display of the body, veiling has operated as a primary signifier of the widely publicised suppression of female Muslim sexuality. Yet, feminist Muslim critics have drawn attention to the differing constructions of female sexuality in Islamic and Christian traditions, despite the proximity in belief structures between these religions (El Saadawi 1980, pp. 94–98). Where the Christian tradition emphasises the illegitimacy of female sexual desire, and circumscribes sexuality with anxiety about the “sins of the flesh,” Islam, at least in its Qur’anic origins, stresses the appropriateness of sexual fulfilment for both sexes. El Guindi comments that, in Islam, “there is no contradiction between being religious and being sexual” (1999, p. 136). Taking Freud as symptomatic of the Western Christian way of thinking, Fatima Mernissi comments that he “viewed civilization as a war against sexuality,” whereas “Muslim theory views civilization as the outcome of satisfied sexual energy” ([1975] 1985, p. 44). While Moghissi (1999, pp. 21–22) typifies this difference by commenting on the celebration of celibacy in Christianity, and its repudiation by Islam, Mernissi attributes the fear of over-active and non-family-directed sexuality on the part of Muslim women to the discursive construction in Arab literature of women’s promiscuous sexuality in pre-Islamic times. The prospect of Western-style “women’s liberation” fuelled anti-Western sentiment, but, more significantly, triggered deep-seated male anxieties about a return to this threat to male supremacy (Mernissi [1975] 1985, p. 166).

The enshrining of these male anxieties in *shari’a* law (the Islamic legal code privileged in several Muslim countries) has ensured that expression of Muslim women’s sexuality in regimes where this prevails is strictly controlled, limited to the confines of heterosexual marriage, and often violently repressed. But necessary analysis and discussion of the gap between feminist readings of the Qur’an and fundamentalist adherence to the letter of *shari’a* law is not encouraged by media rehearsals of Islamic barbarity that tell only parts of the story. By aligning accounts of abuses against women with images of veiled women, often opportunistically and with scant regard for the longer-term implications for women’s rights (Stabile & Kumar 2005), the media attribute generic qualities to the veil that belong primarily to specific misogynistic patriarchal structures responsible for moulding the contours of daily life. In Islamic law, Mernissi concludes “what is attacked and debased is not sexuality but women” ([1975] 1985, p. 44). Moghissi puts this even more forcibly: “we would see more clearly the sorry state of women’s lives in Islamic societies if we stopped identifying as ‘cultural practices’ various forms of traditional or state-enforced gender violence... These are *legally sanctioned* gender crimes” (1999, p. 83). Privileging the veil, and its capacity to act as an apparent metonym for *shari’a* practices, additionally obscures how *all* forms of religious fundamentalism are profoundly inimical to women’s rights (Nawal El Saadawi 1997, pp. 93–99; Nira Yuval-Davis [1991] 1992).

Western assumptions about the female body and sexuality conscript Muslim women into two potential forms of sexual silencing. Denied sexual agency in the “shroud-like” representations of their veiled state, their “natural,” unveiled bodies are also circumscribed

by codes of modesty that confirm their apparent exclusion from post-feminist forms of sexual liberation. The implicit boundaries between veiled/unnatural, unveiled/natural, and sexualised/unnatural constructions of the Muslim female body are played through in *Yasmin*, Kenny Glenaan's 2004 film about a Muslim community in the north of England coping with the aftermath of 9/11. As a mark of her (naturalised) incorporation into British culture, Yasmin (Archie Panjabi) is repeatedly filmed throwing off her drab *shalwar kameez* and headscarf on her way to work. While tight-fitting jeans and fashionable tops are constructed as "normal" dress, Yasmin's adoption (for a night out on the town) of overtly sexualised dress codes, in defiance of her Muslim upbringing, coincides with her humiliation in front of her colleagues. "Unveiling" for the Muslim woman still requires, this film suggests, an abnegation of her sexuality, as this has become defined in contemporary Western discourse. Yasmin's eventual accommodation to Islam, presented as a reaction to the consequences of 9/11, is codified through her adoption of a fashionable *shalwar kameez* that connotes a compromise between her emerging Muslim faith and her previous lifestyle.

In the mapping on to Muslim women's bodies of narratives of either "resistance" against, or "liberation" from, extreme versions of Islam, Western discourses repeat the connotations of a hidden and mysterious beauty previously evoked by the *harem*. The co-opting of painted nails and lipstick as signs of political rebellion suggests the privileging of liberal modernity over pre-modern constraints (simultaneously by-passing feminist and post-feminist debates about the politics of bodily adornment and appearance). In the process, other possible readings of women's engagement in beauty rituals within oppressively patriarchal cultures are marginalised. The underground beauty parlours that existed within Taliban-controlled Kabul did indeed signal women's defiance against that regime, but the highly risky act of meeting there was at least as strong an expression of protest as any cultivation of Western-style femininity. Saira Shah's comment as she enters Taliban-controlled Afghanistan that "I've entered a world where I'm no longer allowed to paint my nails, to fly a kite, or to go to the cinema, where women have become invisible" ("Beneath the Veil" 2001) offers a reductively consumerist summary of the brutal oppression that characterises women's daily existence. Despite her subsequent extensive documentation of the violence, misery, and abuse inflicted on Afghan women, it is the underground beauty parlour she visits in Kabul that is elevated into "the most subversive place of all"; more subversive even than the girls' school of the documentary's preceding sequence. The triumph of the "liberation" of Kabul was widely heralded by bodily signs, as in the heading, "Afghan lipstick liberation," given to the BBC's account of the establishment of a beauty school (funded by American money) in post-Taliban Afghanistan.⁸

Within a cultural tradition of segregation, attention to bodily adornment and beauty offers women potential opportunities for mutual support and shared pleasures, reminiscent of the *harem* at its most benign. Beauty rituals, seen from this perspective, become expressive more of solidarity than of any desire to emulate a post-feminist bodily ideal. In the Iranian film *Kandahar* (2001), the temptation is strong, for the Western viewer, to perceive lyrical shots of women painting each other's nails, children eagerly jostling for multi-coloured bangles, and wives complicitly aiding each other to apply lipstick beneath their *burqas*, as subscribing to Western discourses of suppressed "natural" femininity. Yet what is stressed as resistive in these scenes is the women's attachment to collective female pleasure and their insistence on time for this kind of sharing. The central character, Nafas (Nilofar Pazira), who is travelling, disguised by a *burqa*, on an urgent but frustrated

mission to Kandahar to save her sister from suicide, is rebuked by the women, during a break in their journeying, for seeking to hurry them away from their moment of enjoyment.⁹ Framing emphasises the collaborative nature of their activity. Zooming in on hands and choreographing these in co-operative movements, even in the case of the girls scrabbling for their bangles, Makhmalbaf creates a sense of the comradeship of resistance. The two *burqa*-clad women who co-operate to ensure the deft application of lipstick support each other not as close friends but as potentially competitive “shared” wives. Visual nuances become the only means of articulating women’s subjectivities in a film that provides its own testimony to the variety of ways in which women remain silenced within Afghanistan.

Denial of Voice

Muslim women, rigidly and defensively essentialised by the Western media in their veiled representation, are rarely heard to speak, and hardly ever in their own words. In the wake of 9/11, Muslim women did, however, become much sought-after media interviewees, as the Islamic world became an object of intensified fascination and fear. In the words of diasporic or British and American Muslim women, the veil was reconstructed, variously, as a form of resistance to Western ideology and secularism; as a fashion accessory; or as evidence of Muslim women’s agency and freedom of choice. Incorporated within discourses of Western-style freedoms and lifestyle choices, it was resurrected as feminist- and consumer-friendly accoutrement. As a consequence, the veil was reaffirmed as the pivotal definer of Muslim women’s socio-cultural positioning, impeding investigations into other, more crucial, indicators of their oppression or agency. As Alison Donnell (2003, p. 124) points out, even journalism and books that attempted to articulate a wider range of views reiterated tropes of veiling in their titles or illustrations.

Just as we mistake negative readings of the veil as universally applicable, we may equally hear new liberal voices as granting insight into *all* Muslim women’s subjectivities. As Moghissi warns, “voice” is always contingent, and always situated:

My concern . . . is that in the name of validating women’s “self-perceptions” and “hearing women’s own voices”, only the voices of particular groups of women are heard and that then these voices are broadcast as the unanimous expression of “women in Islamic societies.” (1999, p. 42)

If the newly audible voices are mainly those of diasporic or Western Muslims, and the shrouded, silenced images those of women in Afghanistan, Iran, or Saudi Arabia, the Orientalist polarity between “liberating” Western Islam and “repressive” Eastern Islam is accentuated.

Post-colonial critics caution too that the autobiographical voice has limited ability to subvert entrenched presuppositions about the speaker. The documentary-maker and critic Trinh T. Minh-ha (1991, pp. 59–61) comments on the naivety of film-makers’ wistfulness in imagining that putting new faces and voices in front of cameras and microphones will automatically de-stabilise the power of the documentary-maker to determine how we listen and respond. In her contentiously-phrased question, “Can the subaltern speak?,” Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) takes issue with Western researchers who purport to speak *for* (or even who listen *to*) those who have been already constructed in discourse, but who have had no opportunity hitherto to define their own identities. In a lesson for media

representation, Spivak advocates the need to “speak to” those who have been marginalised or silenced in this way (1988, p. 295; italics mine), arguing that otherwise we will merely reproduce the “Other” as our own “Self’s shadow” (1988, p. 280). Drawing on Derridean philosophy, she argues that representation needs to break through the binary of “other”/“self” and attend to ways in which we are bound up with each other:

Derrida does not invoke “letting the other(s) speak for himself” but rather invokes an “appeal” to or “call” to the “quite-other” (*tout-autre* as opposed to a self-consolidating other), of “rendering *delirious* that interior voice that is the voice of the other in us.” (Spivak 1988, p. 294)

In similar vein, Trinh advocates rethinking difference. Instead of its dominant construction as an “apartheid-type” “tool of segregation,” exerting “power on the basis of racial and sexual essences,” difference needs to be reconfigured as “a tool of creativity—to question multiple forms of repression and dominance” (1991, p. 150).

In the mainstream media, obstacles to achieving this reconstruction of difference exist both structurally, in the commercial pressures on programme-makers and schedulers, and aesthetically, in visual and auditory conventions. In the search for marketability, the voice of the “other” is frequently appropriated for dramatic effect. In styles of filming, in the manner of translating non-English-speakers, or in adding Western soundtrack, “apartheid-type” difference is reinforced. Saira Shah’s documentaries from Afghanistan pre- and post-Taliban rule, despite their laudable attempts to bring this “othered” country to the closer scrutiny of Western audiences, fall into several of these traps. Shah’s appropriation of the RAWA video footage of the execution of Zarmina (referred to earlier in this article) is the first sign of what Spivak might term the “epistemic violence of imperialism” (1988, p. 289).

The pre-title sequence of “Beneath the Veil” (2001) replays this sequence, without acknowledging its origins, to demonstrate, in the words of Shah’s commentary, the “medieval barbarity the country’s rulers want to keep hidden.” In describing the documentary’s purpose as an attempt “to uncover the truth beneath Afghanistan’s veil of terror,” Shah repeats the metaphor of “unveiling” reminiscent of earlier colonial discourse. The viewer is transported into a world defined by temporal and spatial distance, where Afghan women are “othered” as victims, and where RAWA’s sophisticated, decidedly modern, and extremely risky campaigning methods are used instrumentally to reveal the misery of Afghan life, but not to underline the tenacity of women’s internal resistance. Shah does, later in the documentary, demonstrate RAWA’s use of secret filming (its “most powerful weapon”), but Zarmina’s execution footage is never attributed, leaving the viewer with the impression that it was secretly filmed by the Western documentary team.¹⁰

Erosion of the diverse voices of the people of Afghanistan is even more pronounced in this documentary’s sequel, “Unholy War” (2001). Stimulated by Shah’s desire to find and “do something for” three young girls she had discovered in the remote village of Mawmaii during her earlier journey, this documentary takes the form of a narrative quest. The Taliban had killed the girls’ mother in front of their eyes, and Shah (in “Beneath the Veil”) implies that the girls were then raped. Shah’s declared mission is the climax of her ambition to report what the war means for the “ordinary people” of Afghanistan. With repeated tableaux of the three girls, then and now, aesthetically framed and lit, and recurring refrains of a soundtrack redolent of mournful religiosity, the Westernised missionary discourse is amplified by Shah’s own commentary.

Finding a girls' school "only 20 kilometres" from Mawmaii (a formulation revealing colonial indifference to the hostility of the terrain, the perils of wartime, or the lack of transport infrastructure), Shah comments that the team "come across a miracle. It seems like the answer to our prayers." In a direct address to the camera, she talks of the possibility of "provid[ing] them with an education" that would "open up the path to a new life for them." The obstacle to these dreams lies in their father's refusal to travel such a distance ("one day walk to go there and come back"), or to abandon his home to wartime destruction and looting, to live near the school. Shah reflects sadly "it's utterly frustrating. I just wanted to help three little girls in this sea of misery. I couldn't even do that." The failure of her missionary quest has been prefigured in the presentation of the voice of a teacher at this girls' school. Filmed triumphantly relating the perseverance of her students in studying despite their atrocious living conditions, her upbeat non-verbal mannerisms and voice tone are belied by the morose and sorrowful enunciation of her translator. The teacher's final assertion that "Afghan women are courageous and cannot be beaten whatever the odds," delivered in exultant tones, is transformed into an admission of defeat rather than triumph by the translator's mournful and falling intonation.

Camera work, translation conventions, commentary, and soundtrack all conspire in this documentary to erode internal voices of defiance and indigenous strategies for combating the outrages perpetrated against Afghan women. Instead of plurality of Afghan women's voices, we are afforded the disillusion of the Western missionary, unable to contend with a "sea of misery." In the manner of the ethnographer of old, the viewer remains an intruder into someone else's "private zoo" (Trinh 1989, p. 82). Reconfiguring difference as "a tool of creativity—to question multiple forms of repression and dominance" (Trinh 1991, p. 150) may be easier to achieve in non-mainstream modes of representation.

In Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami's *Ten* (2002), set entirely in a car, and filmed by two digital cameras fixed to the dashboard, the driver (revealed at the end of the initial fifteen-minute sequence as a beautiful young woman, wearing a headscarf but minus *chador*) converses with a series of passengers, including her young son, her sister, a friend, a highly religious woman, and a prostitute. Despite the potential for stereotyping that such a cast suggests, the film avoids typecasting, and quietly challenges mainstream representations of Iranian women. Instead of the *chador*-clad, black shrouded figures, silently and warily gliding through public spaces, common in Western representation, the women in this film retain their individuality. In their dialogue with the driver (Mania Akbari), the nuanced relationship between their specific personal situations and universal issues for women gradually unfolds. We can neither forget that these are Iranian women, nor remain at a distance from the difficulties of relationships between parents and children or between women and men in (differently but also similarly) patriarchal cultures. In the initial scene's fractious exchanges between mother and son, for example, the mother's account of her reasons for divorcing his father (she is also, she says, entitled to "love herself") brings her into identification with women across cultures. But equally, in her riposte to her son's accusation that she fabricated an allegation of drug-taking against his father during the divorce proceedings, she defends this as a pretext necessitated by an Iranian system whose "rotten laws . . . give no rights to women."

The Derridean denial of a binary opposition between difference and similarity, by "rendering *delirious* that interior voice that is the voice of the other in us" (Spivak 1988, p. 294) is highlighted within the film itself. In her encounter with a prostitute, the driver is

drawn into an awareness of her own connection with the sexual exploitation that she initially criticises in her passenger's lifestyle. As the conversation develops, the differences between the two women become increasingly blurred as the prostitute universalises the sexual bartering presumed to be the distinctive hallmark of her own occupation. Asked whether she ever feels guilty, the prostitute querulously enquires, "Why don't you ask yourself the same question?" Prostitutes, she declares, know that they sell sex for commercial gain, whereas women like the driver imagine that they operate outside this debased relationship. In her final comment: "You're the wholesalers, we're the retailers" the prostitute discomfits her driver into recognising sameness within difference. The style of filming in this sequence also underlines the instability of appearances. With the driver initially in frame, and the prostitute out of frame, the visibility/invisibility distinction reduces as our ability to see the driver's face in this night-time scene depends on the fleeting illumination from passing street lights. From being the confident cross-examiner, the driver becomes the object of the prostitute's interrogation. Her responsiveness to this passenger's homily emerges in a subsequent scene with her sister where her disillusion over the permanency and reliability of heterosexual love is clearly enunciated, and where she echoes the prostitute's claims about the "idiocy" of over-dependence on men for personal happiness.

By offering dialogue between women, within the segregated space of the car, *Ten* enables an exploration of subjectivities that ranges across the aspirations and failures in everyday relationships, the attraction of religious belief (despite its institutional constraints), and women's survival techniques within an oppressive patriarchal regime. In building its narration of female identities through dialogue, *Ten* differs from the other representations of Muslim women considered in the course of this article. More typically, in television and film narratives, the segregation of Muslim women ensures their isolation not just from men, but from each other. The possibility of female companionship offered by the seclusion of the *harem* is consequently denied.

Despite the collective visualisation of women in Makhmalbaf's *Kandahar*, they remain almost entirely isolated from each other.¹¹ The central character, Nafas, is filmed in various forms of spatial proximity to other women but is denied any communicative contact. Incorporated in the tableau photograph of the family amongst whom, as fourth wife, she will be smuggled into Afghanistan, she comments that the mask of the *burqa* prevents her from establishing what her fellow wives think of her. Apart from the brief exchange on nail-painting referred to earlier, there is no communication between them as they proceed on their journey. Instead, Nafas utters her thoughts in a wistful tape-recording to her unseen sister: a monologue without a response. Later, coming upon women washing clothes at a well, Nafas remains on the periphery of the frame, an outsider and bystander, as the women engage in silent communal activity. Even when she joins an apparently all-female wedding-party that presents her final opportunity of reaching Kandahar, Nafas becomes an object of suspicion, revealed as only one of the group (which includes some men) using the party as camouflage for their own fantasies of escape. As they move silently in choreographed formations that prefigure their eventual entrapment by the authorities, the wedding group's mournful musical accompaniment appears more in tune with the predicament of Afghan women than their brightly-hued *burqas*, whose sudden burst of colour adds momentary vitality to the desert landscape. In contrast to the women's silence, men in *Kandahar* are vociferous in their wheedling demands for sympathy and support. Even the male land-mine victims move with more purpose and alacrity than the doomed wedding

party when, in a surreal scene, they surge expectantly towards prosthetic limbs raining down from the sky in parachutes.

In *Yasmin*, too, the central character's isolation from other women becomes more repressive than her easily tossed-aside Muslim dress. Locked in a loveless arranged marriage, Yasmin initially moves between two differently configured spaces: the confined "veiled" space of the street where she flits between her own and her father's houses, engaged in domestic labour; and the liberating "unveiled" space of her newly acquired car (described by her as "sex on wheels"). In the early scenes of the film, Yasmin traverses the countryside on her way to work with the joyful abandon of the road movie. But following 9/11, ostracised by her female colleagues, assaulted by her husband, and attacked as deceptive by her potential boyfriend, her silencing and the collapse of her capacity to cope are signified in a sharply contrasting scene. Her car is now transformed into a claustrophobic space of traumatic enclosure, and her intense psychological distress drives her literally off the road. From someone able to command a measure of her own space, and to assert her own resistive voice, she becomes the object of surveillance and disapproving eyes, whether of her female colleagues, her Pakistani neighbours, or the officer who locks her in a cell overnight on suspicion of terrorist complicity. Without close companions, the developments in her experience and subjectivity remain unarticulated. Her increasing attraction to a hitherto-discarded Muslim identity is visualised, but through signifiers (the Qur'an and Muslim dress codes) that re-emphasise her difference from the non-Muslim viewer.

Concluding Thoughts

The image of the veil continues to exercise discursive power over perceptions of Islam and Muslim women. Expressions of surprise, even in the twenty-first century, that veiled Muslim women can appear as Olympic athletes, "suicide bombers," feminists, politicians, musicians, or even comedians, underline the tenacity of beliefs that Islamic veiling is intrinsically incompatible with women's agency in the construction of their identities. Heated debates about the rights of Muslim women to wear the veil in public contexts in secular countries such as France and Turkey continue to erupt, most recently in the wake of the French government's decision to ban overt religious dress symbols in schools from September 2004. That so much can be invested in a symbol of religious adherence suggests the lingering potency of a trajectory of repeated imagery and narratives, and the efficacy of those modes of representation in silencing the diversity of Muslim women's voices. The increased visibility and apparent audibility of Muslim women in the media post-9/11 cannot, as post-colonial theory confirms, be read as an automatic sign that diversity has been achieved. As analysis of the texts discussed in this article suggests, voices are most readily muffled when they try to speak against the grain of already hegemonic modes of representation; and most particularly so when they remain in isolation from each other.

9/11 is often seen as a watershed in representations of veiling. Alison Donnell proposes that the events of that day replaced constructions of the veil as "an object of mystique, exoticism and eroticism" with a "xenophobic, more specifically Islamophobic, gaze through which the veil, or headscarf, is seen as a highly visible sign of a despised difference" (2003, p. 123). This simplifies, however, the complexity and ambivalences of a colonial discourse that, as Homi Bhabha (1994, p. 67) and Stuart Hall ([1988] 1992, p. 255)

recognise, has constantly intertwined and reinvented an appeal to fear or contempt with an, often unacknowledged, arousal of envy and desire. Erotic appeal may now be less overt and more nuanced than in nineteenth-century representations, but as the textual examples in this article demonstrate, it still informs tendencies to read the veiled body through fantasies of sexual possession or through evocations of hidden beauty and desirability.

The revival of colonial anxieties, post-9/11, continues to depend on an exoticisation of the “Muslim other,” fuelled in turn by an ongoing failure to “speak to” Muslim women in the terms that Spivak advocates. Openness of dialogue, both in fictional and non-fictional genres, would enable self-reflexive exploration of the differing frames of thinking that inform relations between femininity, human rights, the politics of the body and sexuality for Muslim and non-Muslim women in differing socio-political contexts. In the process, what El Saadawi refers to as the “unveiling of the mind” (1997, pp. 18–19) might make some headway. Writing in 2002, Annabelle Sreberny expressed guarded optimism that “a third space” was being opened up, “more problematic, ambivalent, complex,” inviting us to look beyond the veil to more pressing issues relating to Muslim women’s rights. Three years on at the time of writing, that space still needs development.

Acknowledgements

Earlier versions of this paper were presented to conferences at the University of Sunderland, and to the ICA Conference in San Diego in 2003. I am grateful to colleagues who offered feedback then or who have subsequently read drafts of this article, and to my anonymous readers, for their helpful and thought-provoking comments.

NOTES

1. Ayaan Hirsi Ali is a Somali-born refugee, elected to the Dutch parliament in 2003, and now under constant guard because of threats from Muslim fundamentalists.
2. Few of the commentaries I have seen on the *Submission* controversy draw attention to women’s voices in this film. Yet the much-discussed images of their partly exposed bodies co-exist with their spoken devotions to Allah, expressing disappointment at his silence in the face of the brutality they are experiencing.
3. El Guindi comments that she wanted to call her book *Hijab* to make more accurate reference to Arabic practices, but the publisher insisted on inserting “Veil” in the title to improve sales (1999, p. xi).
4. For further discussion of the hypocrisy informing concerns about the plight of Afghan women, see contributions to the “Commentary and Criticism” section of *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, March 2002, pp. 127–156, and Carol Stabile and Deepa Kumar’s article (2005).
5. Notably Eugene Delacroix’s *Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement*, 1834, and Ingres’ *Le Bain Turc*, 1862 (supposedly inspired by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s letters: see Yeğenoğlu 1998, p. 91).
6. Several Western women writers (including British journalist, Grace Ellison, who travelled extensively in Turkey in the early twentieth century) were happy to use the term *harem* in the titles of their books to improve sales, despite their ambivalence about the *harem* itself (Lewis 2004, pp. 12, 48).

7. See Rosalind Brunt's discussion of this in Rosalind Brunt and Caroline Rowan (1982).
8. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/low/world/south_asia/2336303.stm, October 17, 2002 (accessed April 1, 2005).
9. In real life, Nilofar Pazira, an Afghan exile in Canada, had previously failed to enter Afghanistan to reach a friend contemplating suicide. Her appeal to Makhmalbaf for help became the inspiration for this film.
10. Cassian Harrison directed "Beneath the Veil," and James Miller "Unholy War," (both made for the *Dispatches* series by Hardcash Productions). James Miller (later killed by the Israeli Defence Force while filming with Shah in Gaza in 2003) was also cameraman on both documentaries.
11. Pekka Rantanen, in a survey of documentary images of *burqa*-clad women on the internet, comments that they are also typically shown either "separated from others," or in groups that suggest their incapacity for action and control (2005, p. 335).

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