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A Scrap of Cloth

John Borneman

- *The Veil: Women Writers on Its History, Lore and Politics* by Jennifer Heath. California, 346 pp., £12.95, April, ISBN 978 0 520 25518 0

We are fascinated by the veiling of women. From Morocco to Iran to Indonesia, as well as in Europe and North America, the veil has come to signify the unbreachable difference between the West and Islam. In the post-Cold War imagination it stands for so many things in so many different cultural contexts – Muslims, women's rights, women's oppression, tradition, beauty – that talk about the veil cannot be contained, because each domain of life and action seemingly implicates every other. Rarely is the veil worn innocuously. In some places, wearing it carries the same connotations as wearing a cross or carrying a flag. Today, it is most closely identified with the issue of women's status in a politicised Islam. Veiling was briefly abolished in Iran by Reza Shah in 1936, but made compulsory under the revolutionary Islamic regime in 1979. Various political regimes have since followed suit in making it compulsory for Muslim women to wear, or (in the case of French schoolgirls) not to wear, the veil.

Reducing the veil's significance to a particular conjunction between religion and gender betrays the rich history of veiling and the wide variation in its meaning. The women who have contributed histories, memoirs, ethnographies and critical essays to *The Veil* make it plain that veiling can be motivated by a range of aesthetic goals, political ideologies, economic constraints, personal choices and opportunities. Yet their insistence on pluralism and sociopolitical context, necessary though it is, elides important questions: why has the veil become iconic? What explains its present

power and its appeal to Muslims in particular?

Most women who wear the veil do so in order to enter the public sphere on particular terms, though these terms may be difficult to discern. They remove the veil in private, in the company of intimates. Men veil themselves, too: the Berber-speaking Tuareg of West Africa, and resistance fighters in Mexico and Palestine, for example. Tuareg men are reported to veil even when asleep, leaving only their eyes uncovered – it is considered most important to cover the mouth and nose. The reasons are both ecological (protection from desert sandstorms) and symbolic (to ward off evil in encounters with strangers). Resistance fighters veil only in public, in order to hide their identity. Neither variety of male veiling provokes much controversy.

As Jennifer Heath writes in her introduction, veiling attracts attention to women's faces, to the eyes, the mouth and the hair. Veils don't hide the face so much as frame it. They illuminate one part of the face by setting it in relief to the part they conceal. At the same time, of course, concealment draws attention to the veiled object, awakening curiosity as to what might lie behind. Only the black burqa (in Syria women who wear them are sometimes called 'walking tents') tries to prevent looking altogether. It makes the face and other parts of the body invisible and indivisible, as if making any part of the woman distinct would provoke the unthinkable. The many other sorts of veil – headscarf, tagelmust, parandja, niqaab, muhapatti, bridal veil, sari, hijab, chadri, batula, abaya, kufiyya – make it possible to see and be seen. That said, a woman can see out from inside a burqa, though with darkened vision. In this respect, the burqa functions like sunglasses. By contrast, most veils highlight and minimally reveal the eyes, while covering other parts of the face and body.

In countries where women can choose whether or not to veil – veiling is compulsory in Saudi Arabia as well as Iran – the reason many give for doing so is their wish to escape visual objectification: the male gaze, leer or stare. 'I did not want to be judged by my body, my beauty, or the lack thereof,' Pamela Taylor, who wears the hijab, explains, 'but as an individual, for my personality, my character and my accomplishments.' Many Saudi women, Maliha Masood writes, are aware that the veil denies 'men their usual privilege of discerning whomever they desire. By default, the women are in command.' Jasbir Jain explains that Indian purdah as a face covering offers women anonymity and defence against sexual harassment. It also provides them with an unobserved observer's position. 'A girl who dresses modestly is making a significant statement,' Miriam Grossman says apropos Hasidic fashion. 'She's sending out a message which says: "My body is important, but it is only the vessel for the real me – my soul. I think of myself that way, and I want people to

relate to me with that in mind."' By dressing 'modestly in public' and focusing 'primarily on internal work and spiritual development', Eve Grubin writes, the Jewish woman can experience her own 'internal richness'. In many cultures outer form is understood as the expression of inner beauty, but the desire to be appreciated for their inner selves has been one strain in the thinking of modern feminists. Focus on outer form makes women's bodies commodities in a market in which men determine the value of women according to the way they look. By wearing the veil, women seek to remove themselves from the public gaze, especially from an economy of objectification and exchange controlled by men.

But the veil doesn't prevent objectification, though it may slow the pace of exchange. It could equally be said that women wear the veil in order to enter into public exchange, not to avoid it. Aisha Lee Fox Shaheed writes about her Muslim grandmother, who started wearing a veil when she moved to Pakistan after Partition, to 'facilitate her access to public space'. But while veiling limits women's visibility, it also encourages men to take a second look. It 'does little to discourage male lust', Sherifa Zuhur concludes, 'nor does it dampen flirting from the female side'. In the course of my own ethnographic research several years ago in the old souk in Aleppo, I found that young men's gaze was indiscriminately directed towards all veiled women, but only to some of those who went unveiled. The men showed an automatic interest in the bodies of all veiled women, even though – and perhaps because – they couldn't immediately discern their shape.

There are many kinds of veil, only a few of which hide everything. Take the hijab, which in the Koran refers not to an item of clothing but to a special curtain used to protect privacy. As a verb it means 'to veil, cover, screen, shelter'. In Arabic, the word has come to denote modest dress for women; most forms of hijab leave the face uncovered but hide the hair and the rest of the body except for the hands (which men are not supposed to touch). Whatever form it takes, the veil unavoidably signifies that its wearer is a woman, and so achieves the opposite of what many women want: to control the way they are seen, and to be seen as individuals, not as a type. In the late 1960s, some Catholic nuns rejected their traditional clothing – the veil had been worn by nuns for hundreds of years – on the grounds that it set them apart. 'Adopting modern clothing demystified the often mysterious presence,' Laurene Lafontaine writes, 'allowing outsiders to see the actual woman behind the habit, thus allowing for more personal interaction whereby a sister could express and experience the wholeness of her humanity.'

Not all women want to be seen in public as individuals. Some want to be seen as married, others as available; some want the anonymity conferred by belonging to a

group. In all-female settings, the veil functions like a uniform, to create equality and erase outer distinctions. Full veiling – the burqa, for example – can be useful as a way of avoiding surveillance in Middle Eastern states with authoritarian governments. In Iran and Syria, female sex workers sometimes cover themselves completely in public to hide their identities. Ashraf Zahedi reports that in Iran under the shah compulsory unveiling met with outrage and resistance from clerics and secular conservatives, but there was widespread agreement that an exception should be made for prostitutes. Since the authorities did not want prostitutes to be indistinguishable from other women, they argued that they should be allowed to remove their veils only if they married.

Today, young middle-class girls all over the world seek to look 'adult' and 'attractive': they wear make-up, super-tight jeans, miniskirts and push-up bras. In Princeton, where I live, the sexualisation of young girls' dress is extreme, but I see the same thing in Aleppo and Damascus and Beirut, except that sometimes the girls also wear the hijab and cover their hair. When the enhanced visibility of the body is accompanied by a head covering, I suspect that many men project, consciously or not, an image of a glamorous Western woman onto the woman behind the veil. The veil, in short, heightens men's fantasies about women, making it easier to perceive them as a generic category of desirable object. The more that is hidden or concealed, the greater the spur to the imagination of the viewer.

What was at stake, in 2004, when France banned the wearing of 'conspicuous signs' of religious affiliation in state schools? The proponents of the ban insisted they were upholding the values of secular republicanism, specifically the protection of the individual from the claims of religion, and of the state from ethnic or religious separatism. In reality, though, the law was aimed only at Muslim girls wearing headscarves. If the hijab is supposed to prohibit the viewing of some parts of women (particularly their hair), why prohibit this prohibition unless there is some disturbing power in the image of the veiled woman? That image has little to do with what is hidden behind the veil; with the religious ideas inside women's heads, for example. Slavoj Zizek has argued that, within Islam, 'there is, in a woman's exposure, an erectile protuberance, an obscenely intrusive quality' since she 'stands for the "undecidability" of truth, for a succession of veils beneath which there is no ultimate hidden core'. Plenty has been written about church steeples or the minarets of mosques as aggressively phallic symbols of power, much less about the way that when a woman's hair is tightly wrapped in a scarf which blends into clothing extending smoothly down to the feet, her body has the look of a vertical column with a protuberance on top. Western anxiety about the veil might have something to do with the notion that by veiling, women occupy the position of the phallus, allowing

them to exercise power while remaining partially hidden.

Theoretically, women who remove themselves from circulation by wearing the veil should increase in value. Sacred objects are those set aside from normal circulation. Objects in unimpeded circulation become more profane the more they circulate; they become commodities with discernible exchange value. The value of women as women has traditionally been determined through marriage, in which women serve as tokens in a wider system of exchange. Anthropologists have long documented the universality and diversity of marital, kinship-based systems, and have witnessed their transformation in modern states under the pressures of capitalism and legal centralism. Historically, only particular categories of women could be exchanged: first cousins for first cousins, for example. The most valuable women – usually determined by their proximity to power – were exchanged for the most valuable women in other groups. Women's desirability was based less on the shape of their bodies than on their social status and fecundity.

These systems of kin exchange, though still integral to human culture everywhere, have largely broken down. As the numbers of single men and women have grown, the capacity to bear children has lost its central value in many places. Men everywhere have lost much of their control over marriage systems, and women have lost much of their control over such things as the choice of suitable partners for relatives. Above all, what has come to matter most in determining the value of women, and increasingly of men, is sexual attractiveness. This transformation is incomplete and uneven, but it is crucial to the passions ignited by the veiling of women.

Veiling practices no longer operate within traditional, kinship-based worlds, but in a modern political environment shaped by the pressures of democratic public life. Democracy is predicated on a particular conception of individuality and autonomy, on freedom from the constraints of social groups such as kin, and on a degree of transparency in the workings of its institutions. Democracy requires periodic visibility, specifically of the face: when you go to vote, for example, or to pass through airport security. There is talk of fingerprints and eye scans being used instead, but facial recognition remains integral to the negotiation of modern life. Veiling, which blocks this recognition to a lesser or greater degree, would seem to be in tension with democratic transparency.

Each of the contributors to this collection argues, in one way or another, that they alone should be able to choose when and how to veil. 'When women receive equal rights,' Heath writes in her conclusion to the volume, 'veils will fall away *or* they will stay as simple matters of *choice*. What a woman *chooses* to wear on her head should

be trivial to anyone other than that woman herself.’ This seems straightforward and reasonable, but the fact is that the long feminist struggle for the ‘right to choose’ builds on assumptions that are not anchored in the legal frameworks of many modern political systems. There is little worldwide agreement about equality before the law, which would be a precondition for the establishment of a general right to choose. Moreover, framing equality in the language of ‘choice’ ignores the fact that choices are socially structured before they are made. Women’s decisions about dress are rarely free of the coercion of kinship. Nor are all choices about veiling left to the individual or her family. Schools might require visibility for those sitting exams, or in PE lessons, and a career such as medicine may require specific kinds of clothing to be worn.

Furthermore, the notion of choice can be highly misleading. Amish, Hasidic, Islamic or Catholic veiling may be represented as a personal choice, but this coincides with these groups’ interest in differentiating themselves from others. Fights about veiling are common in families, and the divisions are not always along gender lines: it may be that a mother who unveiled in the 1970s opposes her daughter’s decision to wear their veil today, or children may insist that their mothers veil themselves. None of the contributors to this book writes about a personal decision to veil that hasn’t already been authorised by one social group or another. They don’t give any instances of women who veil idiosyncratically, in order to assert their autonomy. It isn’t enough to argue that for some women autonomy means conformity to the group. In social groups where veiling is dominant, the decision not to veil differs fundamentally from the decision to veil precisely in its resistance to social pressure. Michelle Auerbach illustrates this in an entertaining essay about her rebellion against Jewish ‘modesty commandments’ (including covering the head). She claims to have resolved the conflict by deciding to wear a prayer shawl only after she attains equal authority with men, which is to say only after she is allowed to lead the ritual services in her local synagogue. Auerbach appeals, as a feminist, not to her right to choose but to the importance of restructuring the social conditions in which choices are made.

However, such attempts will not stop men from continuing to see the veil in ways that are independent of women’s intentions. The veil, in whatever form, is not and never will be just ‘a scrap of cloth’, as Taylor wishes the hijab to be thought of, because it is worn in order to symbolise something, or many things. Veils are not, as many of the contributors to *The Veil* want to think, merely a diversion or distraction from issues of more substance to more women, such as poverty, the distribution of rights, the allocation of resources, sociopolitical disenfranchisement and violence. Attending to these issues, important as they are, will not necessarily affect the ways

in which the veil’s meanings are made.

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