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The Politics of Exposure and Concealment in Post-colonial Discourse

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"Your gazes behind which to hide myself"1

Introduction

The question of the veil has come to involve many areas of post-colonial discourse and thus unavoidably enters the realms of religious debates, cultural theory and literary criticism. The elusive forms that are attached to the literal and actual veil suggest its cryptic nature; to the point that once critics and theorists attempt to contain it, they inescapably enter a labyrinth of enclosures and concealment only to find that they are threatened with performing the role of the onlooker, the voyeur attempting to unveil the "essence" of their subject, never able to find their way out.

In this paper we have chosen well known writers and critics who have discussed the issue of the veil and its relationship to the politics of opposing powers. This has been done in an attempt to show how the writers themselves get involved in this debate and may try, unsuccessfully or successfully, to change the understanding of the veil. Do these writers emerge as observers? Or are they by their very discourse entering into the dialects of exposure and enclosure, where the tension between these opposing forces is reenacted in the discourse at hand. The veil, as we shall see, takes on various functions and meanings both on the theoretical and the literal level. One of the intentions of this article thus is to explore the implications of discussing the veil, and to raise questions about this rather than to supply answers.

The first question to be posed, then, is what are we to do with the issue of the veil? To what extent can we really talk about its importance and its uses/disuses?

Is the veil still a symbol of the Islamic patriarchy and the oppression of women? Is the veil the ultimate triumph of religion, where man sees God in place of woman? Is the veil an anti-westernization stance? A political move? How many of the original uses/excuses (symbol of honour/chastity/shame) still apply, how many of the newer uses (fight against westernization) still hold? Can an anti-colonial application apply in a post-colonial reality?

Choice itself has recently become an event situated around the issue of the veil. To veil or not to veil is often now seen as something personal; this is true to a certain extent and is not only confined to the women who seek expensive western education and even a western existence. It is often an issue of attire, and so to speak that of taking cover. What part of our bodies to cover and how to cover are all now issues that are strongly debated and thus consequently can be strongly contested. To speak of a politics of dress is to address something that is beyond the realms of social responsibility, yet by terming it a politics do we ultimately seek to bring back dress as something that should be placed under control? Should it have a function other than that of the personal identification/differentiation? In other words, do we seek to make dress "political" by speaking of a politics of dress? Within this frame, how do we interpret the woman who does not want to wear the veil because of the oppressive significance it represents to her and simultaneously, how do we understand the modern woman who wears the veil and gives no reason other than that of choice? One can contest this evoked sense of "choice" if one was to draw from the long tradition of psychoanalysis and western feminist theory and how it would question the very notion of "choice" as put forward here. From within that discourse one could argue the internalisation of the collective ideal and of patriarchal effect. We thus have recourse to say that "choice" is not really a convincing argument because we have a history of psychoanalysis and the acceptance of the unconscious to draw from and thereby create a theoretical framework for the psychology of the veil.2 However, how do we try and explain the women who evoke this "choice" and the freedom of it, as something uncontestable, even when our own instinct as women from the Middle

East is to pose the question "Why are you still in the throws of patriarchy? Why do you allow yourself to be subjected like this? How can you choose to cover your face and thereby give in?"

Veling and the colonial discourse

Let us revisit the colonial period in North Africa and use it as an example for understanding the issues and implications of veiling that may have carried over; where the tensions between east and west begin to formulate the discourse that we have come to term Orientalism.3

The representation of these very tensions between the east and west are depicted in Malek Alloula's The Colonial Harem. This book is a well known compilation of photographed veiled and non veiled women of Algiers during the French occupation. It is also a book that points a finger to the west and its conception of the veil as a threatening signifier. Alloula, who sees himself as a representative of his people, takes it upon himself to return the postcard to its sender, i.e. to the colonial persona who had already taken the photographs in the first place, thus

> … in the absence of confrontation of opposed gazes, I attempt here, lagging far behind History, to return this immense postcard to its sender. (Alloula 1986: 5)

This gazing back or re-appropriation of the gaze, the "sending back" and "writing back" has become a very common theme in east/west discourse. One must ask oneself then in engaging in this reciprocation of gazes what is the author attempting? A dialogue or an enclosure? An unveiling or a veiling? The importance of this book to our discussion is that it contains the two aspects of "enclosure" and "exposure," a dialogue with the west as the author implies.

The veil, in Alloula's representation of it, inspires a desire to make one want to see beyond the veil (whether as a voluntary act or not, it is impossible to decide); to take off this item, to see what? A face, a body, unveiled in the photos, to what

end? The postcard then becomes an erotic fulfilment through a recourse to the representation of signs. Does the onlooker care? If the unveiling itself is saturated with meaning and expectation then the veil is always burdened and defined by its removal. In this dialectic of enclosure/removal the women are always almost naked; justified under the pretext of the anthropological/ethnographical interest in the object of the colonial gaze. The colonial gaze gains access under the guise of "academic" interest. The desire for erotica conceals itself and can thus be seen as veiled behind the acknowledged desire for academic involvement.

On another level, in some ways, Alloula himself is propagating this image under the pretext of returning the postcards back to the owners. Hence, the postcards in Alloula's book play on the alluring qualities of concealment, where they "start with the veiled woman and end with the naked" (Coombes & Edwards 1989: 511). Strategically, this is the evolution we are supposed to notice, this is the "strip-tease" that teases out of us knowledge mixed with expectancy. It is cleverly done and plays with our preconceived ideas of what is allowed and what is not, what is erotica and what goes beyond this into the realms of pornography.4

In telling about the photos themselves we find that in fact these photos are un-erotic in a conventional sense, since, as Alloula points out the women portrayed as harem dwellers are in reality models, probably paid. The action that makes the taking off of the veil insignificant, is that the photographer is not in the seraglio, not in the women's quarters, he has not crossed the bars, he has not seen behind the long shrouds, yet he represents his photos as if he had. Ultimately then the colonial gaze, even when it succeeds in exposing its subject, still stands outside, (since the exposure is not "real"), gazing in on the colonized, waiting to see.

In addition, although it would be a comfortable ground, we cannot assume that the women/models in Alloula's "text" are as motionless and victimized as the author might lead us to believe. For, contrary to what the text suggests, that Algeria is a woman silently waiting to be "seen," we could argue that there is indeed a powerful dialogue, albeit engineered by the reader/watcher (for whom

the photograph is intended), between the photographer (in whom Alloula invests multiple signs such as colonizer, westerner, voyeur) and the photographed (colonized, easterner, voyee). Even then this dialogue may not overcome the dialectics involved and reach a homogenous ending, even if there does arise an exchange of sorts, an exchange of a possible knowledge .

The question to be posed is what kind of knowledge? As one might note, the voyeur/photographer who is "raping" the land, trying to "unveil the dark continent" lives a fantasy of being able to acquire such knowledge. The question to be posed then becomes, is it possible to see behind the veil, can the gaze ever penetrate? One answer would be that ultimately the face of the model who always poses as an Algerian woman of the harem, who unveils, is doing precisely that, posing. In a certain sense then, the voyeuristic eye of the gazer is that which creates the veil. Through its own fantasy this kind of veil can either be in the form of an external and visible adornment or in a more subtle symbolic representation of a curtain that divides the public from the private space.5

The dramatisation of this dialectics of exposure/enclosure is played out in the object of the photograph . It becomes what Assia Djebar describes as "the gaze behind which to hide [herself]" (Djebar 1991 :72). For in the same manner that the dialectics of the veil is reinforced through the object of the photograph, language also becomes involved in the issues of exposure and concealment. There are several dimensions to Djebar's use of language as a device for concealment and revealment. Therefore on one level language is used as a device of covering up from the gaze, however in the dialectics of revealing and concealing, this veiling in itself becomes a reason for the voyeuristic gaze. On yet another level, language is also used by the writer to hide behind and is used actively against her onlookers (to stare back or to stare from behind the veil so to speak). Language becomes an enclosure behind which the author can comment and yet remain unseen. Writing for Djebar has always been a very empowering physical activity; in contrast perhaps to the very restrictive qualities of the veil. However it is writing in the colonizer's language that brings in a different dimension to the

question of the veil. If the French language allows Djebar to write back to the colonizer, (as Alloula claims to send back the postcard to its sender) as much as this may cause her pain, in a similar way the veil functions to force the issue of difference with the west.

At times Djebar compares the "text" to a "body" that can be covered up by the woven fabric of language. Thus in using the extended metaphor of language Djebar explores the various possibilities entailed in the act of veiling and its renditions in language. One reading of Djebar's work is through her usage of the language of her former colonizer that functions "to blind the peeping-tombs" thus functioning as a form of veil: a protective fabric that has positive connotations. Language here is literally "lending her eyes" to be used by the author to "gaze back" both at her former colonizer and at the patriarchal society that is stifling her. However this very same language that enables her liberation, also violates her, in doing that the female writer is forced into a dialectics of gaze: that of a double enclosure (colonizer-patriarchal gaze) and a public exposure of the self/body/text. The language now is referred to as a script which is different from language in that it carries within it the social politics of both ancient and modern taboos. This language-as-script becomes 'flowers of death' (Djebar 1989: 181). By referring to language as a "script," Djebar makes language an almost religious entity, a "scrip[ture]" of social taboos that is an ornament of death and enshrouds her just as a veil would. The veil here is prohibiting and thus is a negative force, Djebar in the passage below explains this dialectics of disclosures:

> As if the French language suddenly had eyes, and lent them to me to see me into liberty; as if the French language blinded the peeping-toms of my clan and at this price, I could move freely, ... Derision! I know that every language is a dark depository for piled-up corpses, refuse, sewage, but faced with the language of the former conqueror, which offers me its ornaments, its jewels, its flowers, I find they are the flowers of death--chrysanthemums on tombs!

> Its script is a public unveiling in front of sniggering onlookers.
> (Djebar 1989: 181)

For Djebar, the gaze that seeks to dominate, is a threatening one, since it solicits the subjectification of the female and confines her to the capacity of a receiver. Thus when Djebar enables her women to gaze back it is as if "the whole body were to begin to look around" (Djebar 1992: 139); and is able to 'cast off "the other eye" the eye-that-is-sex" (Djebar 1992: 140). In casting off the voyeur's gaze, Djebar's women are able to reappropriate both the colonizer's gaze and the masculine gaze thus giving the female body (and the text itself) a freedom of movement it was deprived from before.

Within this context then, Djebar portrays language as the ultimate power to unveil. Here the pen, has the penetrative value to cast-off and return back the gaze. However, this power of penetration that liberates, has an unavoidable link to both pain and violence. Djebar ends Fantasia as she "seize[s] on this living hand, hand of mutilation and of memory, and... attempt[s] to bring it the qalam." (Djebar 1989: 226) This highly evocative and almost phallic seizure of the qalam, by the living hand, suggests an inevitable act of violence against those who are withholding the qalam from the author. The act of the woman author taking power from her usurper is double folded, for her, the usurper is both the coloniser and the patriarchal power of male domination. Thus, the choice of the word qalam in Arabic suggests that "the memory and mutilation" spoken of are not only that of the external coloniser but even more are the result of the internal stifling patriarchal system that seeks to enforce the enclosure of the female within the society.6

The violent shredding off of the veil (be it an actual veil or a symbolic veil) thus has a profound consequence on the writer, as it is both a painful and a liberating experience at the same time. She describes this experience in the following text:

> The body moves forward out of the house and is, for the first time, felt as being exposed to every look: the gait becomes stiff, the step hasty, the facial expression tightens... the woman who casts off her sheet will say, "I go out undressed, or even denuded." The veil that shielded her from the looks of strangers is in fact experienced as a 'piece of clothing in itself,' and to no longer have it means to be totally exposed. (Djebar 1992: 139).

This form of exposure is also apparent in Alloula's photographs where the female body is enshrouded in an excessive use of veils and jewelry, that in essence should conceal but in fact, is partially exposed; where the onlooker is invited to take a teasing peep into the "piece of clothing," her "sheet." The object of the photograph with its juxtaposition of monochrome colours (sepia and white and/or black and white) further enhances and dramatizes the polemics of enclosure and concealment of veil and non-veil.



As Anne-Emmanuelle Berger notes in her essay, the question has also become the "relation between desire and the veil" rather than with the veil and oppression. It is important to point out here that whereas the heavily veiled women in Alloula's collection are usually always standing upright, the semi exposed ones are almost always reclining in a seductive position. This reclining position inherently fluidizes cloth. This strategy is thus in a sense successful in achieving disclosure. The fluidity of cloth (which takes on a life of its own) can be paralleled to Djebar's text in its play with disclosures.

Post-colonial discourse and the politics of dress

The modern preoccupation with the outside attire, the dress: veil and non-veil could be seen as a means to promote 'an industry of wrapping'. Drawing on Irigaray's reading of this industry, fabric and/or jewelry are functions that contribute towards the commodification of the female "goods." 'The veil in this sense is shown to be [that] which turns women into generic objects of consumption.' (Berger 1998: 101) Value thus is given to the physical quantity and /or quality of the material used to wrap the female body. Berger argues that the veil thus becomes a device that both commodifies and abstracts the object. This line of argument infers that the image of "abstraction" or symbol suggests "the veiling of a void" where the veil functions "as both a mask and supplement, [and] seems to stage or posit the spectral presence of the 'phallus.'" (Berger 1998: 101) In one reading of the photograph shown earlier, it could thus be suggested that this upright veiled woman represents just that: a spectral presence of the "phallus" and is therefore in continuous juxtaposition to the reclining semi exposed woman. The feminine mystery is being enhanced by her material invisibility through the abundance of material and adornments.



From Alloula 1986: 81)

In a traditional psychoanalytical understanding of sexuality, the act of veiling would be an act of hiding, or the concealing of nothingness; which for western conceptualisation, for example, would explain the modern western excessive preoccupation with fashion as a modern form of wrapping up the body and by doing that increasing its marketing value. The uniformity of the North African veil or (hiak), for example, could be argued to have the same function of the containing of the commodity. But as the Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi argues, the female in the Islamic world is regarded, not as an object that lacks something, but rather as a being that is overly adorned with sexuality (fitna), and as such, has to be covered up and hidden. In this case, the reclining and the upright female in Alloula's collection would complement each other rather than be juxtaposed. Following this argument then, and within this frame of reference, according to Mernissi, the "female" in the Islamic ideology, conceals herself to protect "man" from his own desires. Here Mernissi points out that this would imply a shared knowledge of a certain weakness that men face when confronted with the phantasmic image that they share of the feminine.7 If we were to further this line of argument it would be tempting to explain the covering up of the

feminine by claiming that it is done to suspend the desire of the masculine, at the same time amplifying the desire of this masculine by aggrandising the sexual power of the feminine.

The politics of dress thus becomes that of opposing dialectics of east versus west where the veil becomes the central focus of the post-colonial political discourse. The veil thus moves from the realms of tradition into that of the symbol where the newly attained modern hijab functions as an enclosure bestowing an identity as a Muslim culture that stands in direct opposition to the west. What makes the veil "modern" or "contemporary" is that it is now being re-used in a different context from the traditional way. The fight for unveiling has been seen by the east as a form of invasion by western culture. Anti-veil advocates from the east have to argue from within their culture and constantly negate western intervention which often proves to be a very hard task given the effects of globalization and the human tendency to compare.

By enhancing this différance between the cultures the east seems to be re-appropriating its gaze.8 Just as in Alloula's photographs, where the women are gazing back at their voyeur, the modern veil wearer is at once posing if not physically, then symbolically, and staring back at the neo- globalise/coloniser. It is thus that the role of the modern critic comes into play; what Alloula explains in the following passage:

> To track, then through the representations of Algerian women—the figures of a phantasm—is to attempt a double operation: first, to uncover the nature and the meaning of the colonialist gaze; then , to subvert the stereotype that is so tenaciously attached to the bodies of women. (Alloula 1986: 5)

This political stance evokes familiar fantasies of appropriation and domination. What initially seems to be a discourse allotted to colonialism proves to be a recurrent theme in post-colonialism and neo-colonialism.

Even though the main debate revolving around the veil is primarily concerned with women, it is of utmost importance here to point out that men in the modern Islamic world, in wearing a certain kind of dress (that is by choice also non western in appearance) are veiled. This particular form of dressing --as a formula-- hides certain parts of the face, head and genitals and thus should technically be considered also as a veil. Yet today as in the past it is mainly through women that the ideologies of submission and conflict are contended. It is women who are constantly seen as the representatives of the nation, the religion, honour and the faith. Thus as in the colonial period the same story is being repeated today where,

> [t]he search for identity is coupled by the search for new formulas to build the world of tomorrow, and it is the woman more than the man who incarnates the decisive changes taking place in the world of today. The sufferings and lacerations experienced in the process of transition to modernity are best represented by the many faces of Eve. (Mikhail 1979: 65).

The representation of contemporary North Africa has been primarily through the representation of the feminine; even though, as we have pointed out, men too "dress" to form a stance against the "other". However the west in its encounters with the east has surprisingly not labeled this as a kind of "dressing up", as it has for the woman, and called it "the veil". In addition as far as we are aware the politics of dress directed specifically to men's dress in a modern context has never been of debatable interest in the west. It is as if the west is only bothered by the female being wrapped up and concealed, and consequently feels the need to wonder, analyze understand and dissect the phenomena of veiling in the name of knowledge and academia.

Whereas the orientalist dream is associated with colonialism, we have now come to associate decolonization with "the fracturing" of this dream. (Lewis 1998: 122). If the dream was/is a dialectical one that requires a priori the voiceless colonized, could we then see the western preoccupation with the veil as a

preoccupation with the material symbol (literally, cloth) which functions as a constant reminder of an ideology. If the veil represents everything that the west now disagrees with in the context of Middle Eastern politics, and if the Middle East uses the veil to represent everything that it has chosen to negate of western politics, then to tear away this symbol or representation achieves nothing. The desire to continuously discuss the veil brings with it the desire to continuously negate Middle Eastern politics.

A neo-colonial thought process is at hand, the veil takes on too many projected functions. The material veil comes to act as a sign of either choice/religion/patriarchy/ etc. The politics of dress becomes just that, a politics. If we take Zizek's notion of politics as an empty signifier that promises fulfilment and change but often delivers neither, it remains to be seen whether the use of the veil as disclosed and promoted, will succeed.9 Will the Middle East continue to negate western interference? (How is this possible when western military aid is for example constantly requested and expected ?). Will the west continue to regard the veil as a symbol of female oppression while simultaneously promoting the advertising of western values in what continues to be termed a static religious and patriarchal Arab societal structure? (Thereby negating the scope and aim of advertising itself).

The dress is a symbol, a sign, and signifies much, it signifies primarily, difference, but also represents abstract thought which cannot as easily be torn off or removed. This is one of the main problems that the east and west face when discussing issues of the veil. The ultimate question then one must propose is exactly who is revealing and who is concealing and to what end ? Alloula's veiled photographs, returned to the sender, will always have the same erotic/orientalist affect whenever they are "sent back." In the same way the intricate weave of words Assia Djebar surrounds herself with, will always entice its reader to want/desire to reveal its fabric.

The visual purpose of the veil, to block out or hide, has always been in there to cover up a possible "enticing" feature. To hide this feature presupposes its desirability. Both Djebar and Alloula are at pains to expose this desire to find the desired object, yet paradoxically seek to contain the mystery of this object, the veiled woman. The veil then, its purpose or project, is always concealed, an unknowable-- "though it continuously seeks to be known"-- entity. By doing that they are perpetuating the interest in the desired object; thus entering into the labyrinth of exposures and concealements.

End Notes

1 Assia Djebar, "Le risque d'écrire: Texte inedit," 72. This translation has been taken from Clarisse Zimra 833.

2 Other reasons for veiling have been brought up, see for example, Valentien M. Moghadam 428. Moghadam points out in her article that one reason for veiling as a choice is 'to avoid male harassment of women in western dress' she adds that when she was growing up in Tehran 'just waiting for a taxi or shopping downtown entailed major battles with men, who variously leered, touched, made sexual remarks or cursed.'

3 See Edward Said Orientalism.

4 See Roland Barthes Camera Lucida, Reflections on Photography.

5 See chapter 5 from Fatima Mernissi, Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in a Modern Muslim Society.

6 In a different and even maybe seemingly contradictory analysis of Djebar's ability to rehabilitate the feminine gaze, Huughe in an article entitled, '"Ecrire comme un voile": The Problematics of the Gaze in the Work of Assia Djebar', argues that by reversing the gaze, the woman's gaze becomes 'in turn a potential thief within the masculine gaze' (Huughe 869). Huughe, seems to feel that this is especially true in respect to Assia Djebar's film La nouba where,

"[t]hrough the camera's eye, the author will finally be able to see without being seen and to move through space anonymously" (Huughe 870). In one sense then language (and to some extent the camera) have taken veil. If we were to agree with the critic, then the argument would be that veil as a function is reversed and even subverted and thus the veil is never ripped off. Huughe adds that in using a language of "modesty," Djebar protects her characters from the gaze of voyeurs, "be they Algerians, Orientalists, or colonialists" (Huughe 872). The critic thus concludes that language in this respect has a concealing power and consequently veiling could be seen not only as a shield that protects from the violence but as an active force of concealment. This argument taken in itself would seriously limit the various levels and possibilities of the usage of language in Djebar's writing. We have nevertheless included Huughe's argument in this footnote since it is both a valid interpretation and because its argument would interestingly raise the same question, posed earlier by us, as to whether it is ever possible to penetrate the veil and see behind it.

7 For further discussions on this subject see also Mernissi, Women's Rebellion and Islamic Memory.

8 See Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology. Here we would like to acknowledge the fruitful discussion on the subject of the modern veil and the gaze we had with our colleagues in the department of post-colonial studies at The University of Kent at Canterbury on Monday the 19th of October at 3:30 PM; among whom where C. Rooney, J. Borossa and L. Innes.

9 See Judith Butler, 187-223.

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First Response

A subtle and wide-ranging paper, lucid and thought-provoking. The work of Malek Alloula and of Assia Djebar opens up a fascinating consideration of the multiple and contradictory meanings of the "veil" in the unstable and shifting spaces between Muslim and Western cultures. The paper is especially clear-headed in moving beyond the simplistic sort of oppositional thinking to be found in many post-colonial readings.

Derrida's work might be acknowledged as a huge presence here (on veiling and unveling, "truth as woman," critical mastery in Spurs). The authors use the term "différance" at once point in a way that might seem a bit obscure. This paper offers a form of deconstructive criticism in tracing out in thought, discourse, and

dress, the limits of the West and its representations. It ends in a kind of productive undecidablilty.

This is work of a high level.