

## Veiling and the Construction of Gender

*Reading:* Alia Al-Saji. 2010. "The Racialization of Muslim Veils: A Philosophical Analysis." *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 36: 875-902

### 1. Semiotics

Semiotics is the study of signs and symbols and their use in communicative action. It is a key concept in cultural studies and usually concerns meanings other than linguistic meanings.

In the context of semiotics, what might seem to be an individual choice or a matter of identity is situated in a context of cultural meaning.

Attempts to subvert this structure of representation require both awareness of its hold in the imagination- its role in defining notions of identity that rely on a dichotomous construction of the 'other' - and attention to the invisibility of this structure, an invisibility that sustains the 'naturalness' of the notions of identity in question.

...understanding the ways in which images of the veil participate in the construction of gendered, 'western' identities is crucial for feminist theory. In speaking of and for other 'oppressed' women, specifically Muslim women, feminist theory needs to be aware of the ways in which it enters a discursive field mapped in advance. If it is to destabilize rather than reinforce dichotomies such as Islamic-western or oppressive-free, a certain hesitation with respect to feminism's own position in this field, its blind spots and exclusions and its potential for cooption, is called for.

### 2. Synopsis

My purpose in this article is to understand the mechanism that sustains these representations in the 'western' imaginary. My argument is that western representations of veiled Muslim women are not simply about Muslim women themselves. Rather than representing Muslim women, these images fulfill a different function: they provide the foil or negative mirror in which western constructions of identity and gender can be positively rejected.

The naturalization of gender oppression to veiled Muslim women thus permits the norm of western womanhood to be constituted as 'free' of such oppression, as the only imaginable mode of female subjectivity.

These representations put Muslim women in positions scripted in advance, where veiling is constituted as the equivalent of de-subjectification - a lack of subjectivity, a victimhood or voicelessness, that these images in turn work to enforce.

### 3. Veiling

Why is the choice to wear a veil not a matter of conscience, protected by freedoms of speech, religion, etc? Because matters of equality (and freedom of oppression) are taken to override matters of conscience. So to prohibit the veil, the state must make the case that veiling is a form of gender oppression. (880)

If Islam signifies gender oppression and veiling signifies Islam, then in order to defend French secularism (and equity), the French state must ban veiling. (880)

Moreover, since veiling is assumed to be a practice of gender subordination that "de-subjectifies" women, the Muslim women most directly affected were denied a voice in the debate.

The notability ("conspicuousness") of the veil as a "sign" (in contrast to a cross on a necklace) is further evidence that the state is not, in fact, secular. Its absorption of Christian signs and resistance to Muslim signs shows both implicit religious commitments, and a symbolic association between Islam and gender injustice.

This move, I believe, is due to the inscription of gender oppression as an essential feature of the representation of the Muslim veil. Parallel to this move, the invisible structure of secular space was reconfigured through a further dimension of sense, that of the presumed gender equality of French society (conceived as continuous with and even an outcome of secularism). Against this complex ground, veiling was doubly adumbrated and came to appear as an over-determined figure- not merely visible in belonging to a different religion but hypervisible as the symbol of gender oppression of that religion. Through the lens of gender, what is conspicuous is what does not fit the gender practice accepted as norm (and posited as most egalitarian). Other practices are perceived not as another

gendering that generates different subjects, nor as another kind of sexism, but as the principal form of sexism that needs to be eradicated.

#### **4. Othering, Racialization and the Veil**

Al-Saji relies on Beauvoir and Fanon to make the case that the discussion of veiling in France is a process of racialization.

In this process of othering, both 'white' and 'black' identities are constructed, and though they are constituted relative to one another, these identities are taken to be mutually exclusive. Excluded from the 'white' self are any perceived impurities, undesirable incongruities and differences that may trouble its univocity, stability and sameness. These qualities are projected onto the 'other', now seen in these terms. Only through this exclusion, which operates to essentialize both black and white identities, can whiteness be seen as pure and unified, as a stable identity. The abjection of 'blackness' functions to define the borders of the 'white' self. The essentialist logic of racist society thus sees the relative constructs of 'black' and 'white' in absolute terms.

Although the image of the veiled woman is represented as a limitation to vision, in being posed this limit also constitutes the possibility of transgression. Thus it is in terms of the representation of the veil as obstacle that a totalizing and transgressive vision, one that seeks to expose and possess colonized society (and women's bodies in general), can define itself. While colonizing vision takes veiling (and the society to which it belongs) as other, I would argue that veiling is constitutive of this vision, serving both as a concrete point of application for this vision and as a negative mirror for the norms of womanhood and gender that this vision assumes. At the same time, the representation of the veil as obstacle or limit allows the general desirability of unveiling to be posited - a move that normalizes the availability of women's bodies to the colonial gaze. The project of unveiling is then not an accidental aspect of French colonialism, but belongs to the structure of colonial vision itself.

This situates the "veiled women" in a paradoxical position.

First, while the veil is hypervisible as oppressive and repressive barrier, Muslim women 'behind the veil' are not merely invisible to the western gaze, but are made invisible as subjects....They have no place within this heterosocial and scopic economy.

Second, in the colonial attack on the veil, it is not only Muslim women who are othered, but also Muslim men, family life, and culture. The veil becomes a focal point in the othering of Islam. This is because the oppression of Muslim women (visually identified with veiling practices) is attributed uniquely to gender relations within Islam or Muslim culture.

Third, the constitutive role of the image of the veil, as anchor for the othering and totalizing form of vision that colonialism requires, remains a blind spot. Not only does the image of the veil justify the aggressivity that colonialism operates towards Muslim women and their society as a whole, it also serves as a foil to colonial self-representations and gender relations. Thus, while the veil is only too visible as material barrier, its role in sustaining western notions of identity and gender remains invisible.

#### **5. Feminism and the Veil**

Al-Saji argues that Western feminism is complicit.

At stake is not merely the addition of two dimensions of identity, race and gender, but an understanding of how they rely on and function through one another. While we could say that the abjection of the 'veiled woman' permits the identity of 'western woman' to be constituted as a desirable ideal, we should not forget that this identity represents the feminine 'other' within a patriarchal system of gender relations. Projected onto the 'veiled woman' are not simply those qualities that are excluded from the western norm of femininity, but also, I would argue, the mechanism of gender oppression of that western patriarchal system itself.

Focus on the veil, its hypervisibility, deflects attention away from the patriarchal structures of western or colonial society itself, which become invisible in contrast. More so, this mechanism fosters the impression that women within western social orders are neither oppressed nor bounded by gender norms, i.e. that western woman is 'free'.

Extending their analyses, my point is not only that the image of the veiled woman reduces the complex difference of Muslim women to the sole dimension of gender, but that the projection of gender oppression onto the veil is the means by which racialization takes place in this case. Discourses on the veil thus present themselves as overtly feminist while their racism remains hidden. (888)

#### **6. Cultural Racism**

For in cultural racism, culture becomes nature. Bodies are not only perceived as belonging to a different culture, they are also seen to be culturally determined and inferior as a result. Thus, the veil is seen as both a marker of

Muslim culture and an explanation of its inferiority, just as skin color is seen as the site of racial difference and biological determinism. (890)

Cultural racism is not merely intolerance of the 'spirit' of another culture, it is directed at bodies, which this racist vision materially inscribes and perceives as culturally different. This racism naturalizes cultural difference to visible features of the body, including clothing.

Ultimately, it is not only clothing as an envelope of the body but the body as a whole that is racialized in cultural racism. In western representations of veiled women, the veiled body is over-determined as an 'oppressed' body. Because of the rigidity of this racist vision- because it is structured such that it cannot see otherwise (as argued in section 2) - Islamic gender oppression becomes the sole dimension through which veiled women are seen.

## **7. Invisibilization of Muslim Women?**

Because the veil is not inherently meaningful, its meanings can be contested both within Islam and without.

The veil is not merely perceived as a mode of gender oppression in Islam, one that could be reconfigured, reappropriated, or subverted; rather oppression is taken to belong to the materiality of the veil itself, molding the veiled body in ways that exclude its subjectivity or agency. These two seemingly contradictory operations go together: the hypervisibility of Muslim veils in western perceptions and the assumed invisibility of veiled women, what I am calling their de-subjectification. It is by means of the naturalization of oppression to the veil that the veiled woman is at once hypervisible as oppressed and invisible as subject. (891)

By pointing to the multiplicity of meanings which veiling can take and its implication in subject formation in different Muslim and western contexts, my aim is to indicate the complexity of the question without assigning any one meaning, liberatory or oppressive, to veiling. There is neither an essence to Muslim veils, nor is veiling easily reducible to any one dimension of sense. (893)

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