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Pictures and Polemics
Muslim Veiling Practices in Contemporary Art

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Even for me such things as the veil, which I use a lot in my work, remains exotic. It is a charged and provocative stereotype. The first time I put it in a work, everyone reacted strongly. Why? It is not a question of what kind of meaning the image is transmitting but what kind of image the viewer is projecting.

Shazia Sikander (Bhabha 1999, p. 20)

Introduction

The Muslim hijab and niqab remain firmly entrenched in Euro-American discourses and debates around Islam, immigration, feminism, and Western identity. The two textile artifacts possess a long history as reified symbols of often stereotypical perceptions of Islam, Muslims, and the Muslim world. This chapter frames Muslim veiling practices as they appear in Euro-American visual culture as Western constructs and briefly probes their symbolism and continued power, before examining their portrayals in art produced by artists originally hailing from Muslim-majority countries. Analyzing visual deployments of Muslim veiling inflected by non-Euro-American cultural imaginaries offers up, I argue, different perspectives by repositioning veiling in its wider cultural contexts and consciously challenging the Euro-American sign of *the* veil, a category encompassing both facial and head coverings.

No other textile artifacts have provoked as much debate and often vitriol in Western public and media discussions than Muslim women's veils. Despite having become a common visual element of Euro-American urban – and sometimes rural – landscapes, they continue to form signs of otherness, repeatedly framed as threats to Western cultural and national identities. The many contemporary laws restricting Muslim

A Companion to Textile Culture, First Edition. Edited by Jennifer Harris.

veiling evince the depth of resistance to the garments' normalization, suggesting that the onus of the Muslim nonintegration narrative lies largely on the host societies. Identitarian anxieties resulting from social transformations brought upon by immigration and globalization, as well as economic uncertainties, partially explain the unease toward visibly Muslim garments. However, neither the Sikh turban, nor the Jewish yarmulke has similarly enflamed anti-multicultural, public sentiment, raising the question of what historical, social, political, and ideological factors account for the attitudinal discrepancy. My aim here is, therefore, neither to support nor condemn hijabs and niqabs, but rather to understand their particular associations and how these have been produced and, more significantly, deconstructed. After all, the politics of representation demand that "we … know how, in each particular setting, images of women's dress are understood to have originated, how they are used, in what contexts, to persuade which audiences of what political advantages, and why?" (Lindisfarne-Tapper and Ingham 1997, p. 16). This chapter limits the discussion to the Euro-American essentialization of the veil; treating the garment's sister reification in certain modern Islamic religious and political discourses or polities would require another chapter.

Postcolonial research traces Western reification of Muslim female veiling practices into *the* veil back to the colonial era (Kahf 1999; Bullock 2002). Locating the sign within the centuries-old complex, cultural competition of Europe and North America with Islam, scholars agree that the veil, whose evocations exceed by far questions of gender and dress, serves to communicate widespread perceptions of Islam's retrogressive nature, misogyny, violence and incompatibility with Western ideals and modernity. Helen Watson's statement that, "(t)he image of a veiled Muslim woman constitutes one of the most popular ways of representing the 'problems of Islam'" (Watson 1994, p. 153) neatly sums up the veil's spectrum of meanings. In recent decades, the sign has come to also symbolize terrorism and the feared Islamization of the West. The veil therefore functions both as a predetermined reductive sign, and as a social construction "held to indicate virtually anything informants and the analyst want" (Lindisfarne-Tapper and Ingham 1997, p. 16).

That the sign continues to denote the antithesis of Euro-American modernity, despite staggering numbers of productive, integrated Muslim citizens living in the West, demonstrates its imbrication with Western self-identity, whose conflation of (Western) modernity with normativity and universality has necessitated casting the Other as inferior. In a landmark book on Orientalism, Meyda Yeğenoğlu (1998, p. 48) describes the image of the veil and the Muslim woman, more generally, as "an overdetermined totality … in the unconscious of the subject [of the gaze]." Recognizing mainstream definitions of the hijab and niqab as externally imposed thus forms the first step in dismantling the us-and-them worldview that the representational use of the garments continues to sustain. Although nationalist discourses and global politics certainly undergird the Euro-American sign's tenacity, its longevity testifies, more interestingly, to the difficulties of moving beyond a modernist binary worldview. From this perspective, images of veiling that do not comfort an East–West antagonism engender new conceptions of individual and collective self-identities that better reflect the pluralism of contemporary Euro-American selves and societies and transcend an exclusionary modernist paradigm.

The Veil in Context

One cannot imagine transforming blue jeans or another garment associated with Euro-America into a homogenizing, yet all-encompassing sign of the West. Similarly, singling out specific elements of female dress as sites of Muslim alterity is also theoretically untenable. In this section, I want to reposition the veil within its sociocultural environment(s) because the sign has been constructed by artificially divorcing the garment from its original milieus. There exist several ways of contextualizing the veil to deconstruct monolithic views. El Guindi (1999), in a book intended to redress Euro-American views of the veil, lists a whole array. The anthropologist proposes exploring the garment within the larger context of the study of dress, a discipline still relatively unexplored in anthropology. Dress then and, in this particular case, the veil is understood as a code of communication marking "individual and group identity, social status, economic position, political power, gender, and religious role" (p. 66). Veiling practices convey all the latter – with the exception of political power in most contexts – through their size, material, style, and decoration. El Guindi also devotes a section of *Veil: Modesty, Privacy and Resistance* to much less discussed Muslim male "veiling" and various headcovers, the best-known being the large keffiyeh scarf or the small kufi cap.

More germane to our discussion is the parallel El Guindi (p. 66) draws between women's veils and the embroidered cloth covering of the Ka'ba known as the *kiswa*, a term derived from an Arabic root meaning to "cover." Although the Egyptian scholar keeps the argument framed within the anthropology of dress, I want to push the idea further and locate the veil within the wider notion of veiling, a culturally central concept determining Islam-inflected notions of vision, art, and representation. Probing the veil's relationship to Islamic aesthetics couches the discussion in references to history, religion, and metaphysics that appear tangential to the topic of veiling as a dress practice. I must stress, however, that the purpose here is to dress a portrait of veiling mediated through a cultural lens shaped by the culture(s) that emerged out of Islam and describe a representational strategy employed today to address issues of identity, gender, geopolitics, and the production of knowledge, more generally.

Many art historians acknowledge the distinctive intersection of textiles, veiling, and art in Islamic culture. Dominique Clévenot (1994), for example, titled her introductory work on Islamic art, *Une Esthétique du voile*. Robert Hillenbrand (1994, p. 405) has suggested studying the ways in which textile-related terms were employed in both Islamic art and architecture as a means to discern meaning. Lisa Golombek's "textile metaphor," however, comes closest to articulating what I term the veiling metaphor in her reformulation of a notion dating back to the European "discovery" of Islamic art. Because "textiles penetrated so deeply into all aspects of life," she proposes that Islamic society's " 'textile mentality' was responsible for the development of certain characteristic idioms in Islamic art." (Golombek 1988, p. 34). Like the study's veiling metaphor, Golombek's "textile metaphor" is both literal and figurative, referring to both the preeminence of textiles in Muslim-based cultures, and to the emergence, out of this preeminence, of veiling as a significant artistic strategy.

The fact that the Ka'ba is veiled would mean little for the present study if it did not portend the characteristics of Islamic art and, consequently, a culturally specific regime of representation still relevant to contemporary art. The richly embroidered *kiswa*

foretells the primacy in Islamic cultures of both textiles and the aesthetics of veiling, that tendency to beautify and bestow meaning upon, often, humble structures, artifacts, and materials by draping them, literally or figuratively. Muslims consider the Ka'ba, Islam's holiest site, a unique site where Divine Presence manifests itself. The simple cubic brick structure underneath the *kiswa* cannot be said to denote the latter. Instead, such presence, unrepresentable in the Islamic worldview, is symbolized by the *kiswa* veil and the attendant motif of the void. The veil always constitutes an ambiguous symbol. It both reveals and conceals, indicating the presence of something that remains partially or totally unseen. The Ka'ba is empty, suggesting that it is effectively space that signals invisible presence, rendered communicable only through veiling. The coupling of veiling and void to visually designate that which lies beyond representation, or the grasp of the human imagination and intellect, permeates Islamic art and architecture.

The veiling metaphor thus implies that representation encompasses both the optically visible and that which escapes it; the blind spots mapped by veiling, because obviously undetermined, also incorporate the reality of subjective mediation into the very notion of art and vision. Islamic aesthetics recognizes and accepts the existence of gaps in image, vision and self, explaining why, paralleling contemporary ideas and concerns – for example, reception theory – its idioms offer much to present-day artists. If veiling in Islamic art emerged from historical, spiritual, and artistic practices, it became a central part of Islamic urban culture shaping all cultural productions (poetry, dress, architecture, etc.). Furthermore, veiling as metaphor remains active in an Islam-based cultural screen, continuing to inform, in varying degrees, present-day experiences and definitions of vision, materiality, representation, and even beauty. Vision and representation are, after all, culturally constructed and not universal. In stark contrast to Euro-American mainstream perceptions, veiling, when anchored in a non-ocularcentric culture, rather than signify concealment understood as lack or threat, denotes presence and therefore carries a positive potentiality.

Many contemporary artists from the Muslim world and diaspora have produced work structured through the veiling metaphor, as I have also addressed elsewhere (Behiery 2012a, b). The discussion here is limited to Zineb Sedira's *La maison de ma mère, Algérie* (2002) (see Figure 14.1), which exemplifies the interrelation of veiling as dress practice and representational strategy. The British artist, who grew up in France, made the piece for the City of Leicester Gallery's exhibit, *Fold*, while visiting her parents' homeland of Algeria with her family. The 12-piece photographic portrait of her mother's house inscribes itself within an autobiographical body of work often featuring the veil. If the premise of the exhibit was "folds in draperies and cloth," (McGonagle 2006, p. 623) Sedira has broached these through the adjacent concept of veiling. It is effectively the veiling, in various tones of white, central to each image that imparts visual and conceptual cohesiveness to the work. *La maison de ma mère* is a grid of square color photographs with small spaces between them, arranged into three rows of four images. Each row treats a particular subject. The bottom one focuses on curtains. The images frame, in diverse ways, curtains that display an array of designs and textures draping different doors and windows. Parted drapes open up onto the French doors' seemingly black windowpanes. A translucent lace curtain with all-over patterning hangs in front of a dark window. A zoom-in of a slightly parted drape is seen through a small windowpane from outside, and the folds of an embroidered curtain are overlaid with a repetitive pattern of shadow. All the images

FIGURE 14.1 Zineb Sedira (France), b. 1963. *La maison de ma mère*, *Algérie* 2002. Installation of 12 color photographs. Overall dimensions: 90 x 120 cm (28.5 x 28.5 cm each). © Zineb Sedira. All Rights Reserved, DACS/Artimage 2019. Source: Image courtesy kamel mennour, Paris. Photograph: Zineb Sedira.

play with the optical dimension of veiling as a screen between the seeing in and the seeing out. Interestingly, in all four photographs, veiling, even when translucent, never allows the seeing through, and when, as in two of the photographs, the veil is lifted, the viewer is faced with a "void" in the form of windows darkened either by night or daytime reflection.

The photographs of the middle row all depict the artist's mother. The images, again visual fragments, show glimpses of the mother's body: a shaded profile, a wrist, neck, or cheek emerging from beneath her headscarf and semitransparent white lace housedress, the veiling simultaneously dematerializing the body and intensifying the awareness of its materiality and presence. Two of the photographs suggest that the woman is standing, the other two that she is lying down. Close-ups of different facets – perhaps different rooms – of the house's interior compose the top row. The lower half of a glass vase sits on a lace doily itself layered over a patterned cloth. A decorated, polychrome china serving dish rests on a shelf draped in white lace. Flower-patterned bedsheets, witness to sleep, sit crumpled, and a set of colorful embroidered and fringed cushions are neatly piled up one on top of the other. The photographs speak of "woman's work," of the role of textiles in transforming a house into a home, and of a particular silence and pale light imbuing the home and many women's lives. The images of the top row are more diverse than in the other rows, and veiling is less pronounced.

La maison de ma mère, which Sedira aptly describes as "a kind of kaleidoscope," (McGonagle 2006, p. 623) cannot be described as a narrative artwork. The sequence of images does not plot a story using figuration or movements in time like a film. The strategy of veiling nonetheless weaves the disparate fragments together into a type of portrait. Along with the use of multiple perspectives and partial views, it constitutes a powerful means to map the emotionally charged subject of the mother's harmonious relationship with her home in her native Algeria. The artist's mother lived and raised her children in France far from "home"; Sedira temporarily suspends her exile by imaging her belonging in her home country through the aesthetics of veiling. In order to eschew the limiting approximations of representation and its difficulty in expressing the intangible, she avoids fixity of image and perspective. The total image does not, in this case, equal the sum of its parts. The fragments demand assembly, not *into* a single-point perspectival image, but *by* the subjective references and meanings their interstices provoke. The gaps inherent to the veiling paradigm embrace translation and therefore locate meaning outside of the image, confining by nature, in the realm of the experiential, the subjective, and the mnemic. They also designate intersubjectivity as space rather than image, but one in which both the image and subject are produced. In *La maison de ma mère*, intersubjectivity concerns not only the relationship between the viewer and the artist and the viewer and the theme of the work but also between the artist and her mother. Sedira's art is rooted in autobiography, and from this perspective, the piece addresses and embraces her matrilineal and cultural lineage, both historically marginalized in Euro-American art.

If the portrait is purposely composite and not optically rational and linear, a process of unveiling, a movement from the external to the internal, is nonetheless apparent when reading the image from bottom to top. The bottom photographs provide the frame and setting. They enunciate the liminality of the house, stating its boundary position between inside and outside. The central photographs announce and depict the core subject, the artist's mother. Although these are actual portraits of the mother, the upper images allude to her presence indirectly by witnessing and capturing her gestures. There is little to see in these visual traces of Sedira's mother except for what is most crucial to the piece, namely the sensitivity of the artist's gaze upon her. Enacting the veiling aesthetic, the trajectory from form to absence of form and the subtle evocations of images of seemingly "nothing" best reveal the heart of an image's intent.

The photographic mosaic illustrates the veiling aesthetic on the most literal level as well. Traditionally, in many Muslim homes, textiles provided not only the décor but actually constituted the sole "furniture" in the form of rugs, carpets, cushions, and various other textile artifacts, and textiles continue to predominate in furnished settings such as in Sedira's mother's house. The unity veiling imparts to the photographic mosaic, linking the images of the artist's mother to those of the home, bears out in the clearest, because visual, terms how the veil relates to a much larger overall, cultural aesthetic. The fact that veiling here relates to the female aesthetic of the home – as opposed to the patriarchal structures of society – raises important questions regarding gender and aesthetics. Islamic art in its most urban and sophisticated expressions never severed itself from what are called the minor or decorative arts, explaining why, despite the fact that Muslim women historically did not have access to all artistic media, it was never as gendered as Euro-American art and thus women-made artifacts coexisted harmoniously with those made by men. That a split in the

arts into "fine" and "applied" never occurred equally clarifies why Islamic art rarely viewed the image or art object as the outcome of an encounter between a male subject and female object of his gaze, thus avoiding the patriarchal appropriation and definition of visual expression that occurred in post-Renaissance European art.

Postcolonial Veils: Speaking Back

Sedira's *La maison de ma mère* rewrites the sign of the veil circuitously by relocating it in its original cultural and aesthetic environment. However, most representations of the veil in global contemporary art confront Euro-American stereotypes directly, although they too sometimes remain linked to autobiography or indebted to the veiling aesthetic. Best described as postcolonial, these target colonial and Orientalist views of non-Westerners and non-Western cultures – in this case, Muslims and the Islamic world – which "constructed them as the other half of binary oppositions, for example white/black, civilized/native, here/there" (Doy 2000, p. 205). Postcolonial critique, as Bill Ashcroft (Ashcroft 2001, pp. 5 and 40) notes, therefore involves the "struggle over representation" (and self-representation), and the strategies devised to contest "the representation of the dominated by the dominant." Visual culture has formed a critical cornerstone of the production and reproduction of colonial and neocolonial xenophobic and racist views and has exerted tremendous power on the self-perception of postcolonial subjects; it follows that contemporary art, because visual, constitutes a vital, rich arena in which to unpack neo-Orientalist views of Muslim women and Islam. Akin to artistic contextualizations of the veil, artists employ a number of visual and conceptual means to deconstruct the reified tropes of the veil and veiled Muslim woman. I examine two works that call upon different strategies in order to hint at the wide spectrum of postcolonial approaches possible.

The first work is Iranian artist Khosrow Hassanzadeh's *Terrorist*: *Nadjibeh* (2004) (see Figure 14.2), a large-scale portrait of the artist's mother who is wearing a hijab, a normal part of her everyday attire. The work's importance resides in its simultaneous highlighting and critique of the conflation between the image of the veiled woman and the term terrorist in Euro-American discourse, as well as in its rewriting of the stereotyped image of the visibly Muslim woman, more generally. *Terrorist*: *Nadjibeh* forms part of Hassanzadeh's *Terrorist* series of larger than life-sized portraits of himself, his two sisters, and his mother that problematizes the uncritical associations evoked by the word "terrorist" and counters stereotypical and neocolonial representations of Iran, Iranians, and Muslims and Islam, more widely. Hassanzadeh (2007, p. 30) explains:

> The series is the result of two years of thought, research and travel. It is a reflection of a world where the word "terrorist" is thrown about thoughtlessly. What is a terrorist? What are the origins of a terrorist and in an international context who defines "terrorism"? The West, with its personal definition of terrorism, gives itself the right to take over a country, while in the Middle East, the West is clearly accused of being a fully-fledged terrorist. In exploring these questions, I portrayed the people in whom I have the most faith: my mothers and sisters.

The series disputes the usual Muslim connotations of the "terrorist" by juxtaposing the visual and the textual and rendering their incongruity obvious. The silkscreened

FIGURE 14.2 Khosrow Hassanzadeh (Iran), b. 1963. *Terrorist: Nadjibeh*, 2004. Silkscreen and acrylic on canvas. 320 x 200 cm. Work in the collection of the Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam. © The artist.

works displaying Muslim subjects contrast starkly with the text on the labels accompanying them. These carry not only the title *Terrorist*, but also "CIA-style 'profiles' that reject formulaic axis-of-evil labels" (Campbell 2005, p. 56).

Terrorist: *Nadjibeh* shows Nadjibeh, an elderly Iranian woman, sitting cross-legged on a patterned carpet. She is wearing a fringed shawl of Eastern European-style, floral-patterned fabric over her head and an everyday housedress made of cloth combining large floral and leopard skin motifs. A hint of one bare foot appears from underneath her dress. The hands resting on each knee are large and strong. Slightly hunched over, Nadjibeh looks at the viewer penetratingly; the gaze of her eyes reveals a person who has surmounted hardship, while her mouth, partially open, appears ready to speak. The artistic strategy of having minoritized subjects meet the viewer's gaze directly precludes their depersonalization on sexual, racial, or religious grounds by claiming their agency and right to self-representation. The performative act of looking back "where the observer becomes the observed" (Ashcroft et al. 2000, p. 187) forms an effective means in art to undo the erasure of otherized selves.

In the almost monotone background of *Terrorist*: *Nadjibeh* appears a host of signs and figures, which, because they are disparate, scaled differently, and somewhat indistinct like old, faded photographs, evoke memory and identity. A robust man in a suit,

striking an informal pose, stands on the woman's right, in front of a Qur'anic religious inscription. Because the image constitutes a biography of sorts and the text accompanying the painting stresses Nadjibeh's widowhood, the man, who seems to have been copied from a family photograph, is easily construed to be the woman's deceased husband. The other background elements consist of two images of turbaned, bearded figures drawn from popular Iranian *shi'i* iconography; one is a portrait adorning a bottle, while the other, much larger, is an actual, albeit epic, figure riding a horse. The background scenes afford additional personal and cultural context to Nadjibeh. However, talking back to the terrorist meme, they nonetheless refer to religious and national signs associated with it, and, as such, are also positing the right to self-representation and, consequently, to religious Muslim subjectivity. By depicting references to "Islam" and "Iran" in order to challenge Western stereotypes, Hassanzadeh grants himself the right to operate within a system of cultural signs that possess different connotations within his country and the Muslim world, more widely.

If *Terrorist*: *Nadjibeh* challenges stereotypes in its visuality alone, its full postcolonial dimension is operated by its contradistinction to the text placed alongside it that forms an integral part of the piece and evinces humorous double-entendre. The text reads (Shatanawi 2007, p. 126), in both Farsi and English:

> "Terrorist"
> Nadjibeh Hassanzadeh
> *Nationality*: Iranian
> *Religion*: Muslim
> *Age*: 84
> *Profession*: Housewife
> *Distinctive Traits*: Unusually tall for a Middle Eastern woman
> *Personal History*: Widowhood at 50 years of age. Succeeded in raising six children alone and in difficult circumstances thanks to her deep religious beliefs. Lives in Tehran.

The text bifurcates from mainstream narratives of *the* terrorist and, although playing upon the related trope of Muslim religiosity in the Western imaginary, manages to narrate key points of Nadjibeh's story within the anonymous format of official descriptions of the "most wanted." It equally recasts Islam as a source of solace rather than vector for violence. Hassanzadeh offsets the dehumanization of the Muslim female subject accomplished by her synonymy with Islam, Iran, and terrorism both visually and textually. The artist, by wittily, but also poignantly, interrupting the space between a textual signifier and its usual associations by means of a powerful image and imposing presence, exposes the often unconscious and unquestioned ideas filtering the Euro-American mainstream gaze. Hassanzadeh also purposely appropriates *shi'i* artistic imagery that also informed the prolific visual culture of the Iranian Revolution (1978–1979). The silkscreen medium of the portrait, and the religious references effectively hark back to Iranian revolutionary art and aesthetics (Chelkowski and Dabashi 2000). However, Hassanzadeh cuts through both Euro-American and Iranian regimes of discourse and representation, dislocating the ideologically constructed gaze not only by portraying but also monumentalizing, individual subjectivity.

The scale of *Terrorist*: *Nadjibeh* effectively forms a key aspect of the artist's strategy. Its 320×220 cm size communicates the possibility and presence of an individual

Iranian and female Muslim self, who is generally plotted as a non-self; only her desubjectification allows her to act as a screen upon which to project collective negative perceptions of Islam and Muslims. Because the work's monumentality contrasts with the quotidian subject matter and style, it better conveys the sitter's humanity and strength, expressed essentially through her eyes, their unflinching gaze unrelated to any ideological affiliation but rather to the universal, existential challenges of life and survival, physically inscribed on her face and body. Nadjibeh's grand old age also abets viewer identification with a visibly Muslim woman. *Terrorist: Nadjibeh* therefore moves beyond antihegemonic deconstruction by imaging and proposing, in lieu of the generic terrorist trope, an-*other* self. Stated differently, the piece is not solely reactive, nor solely oppositional because of its emphasis on subjecthood. Hassanzadeh avers, "In Europe and America, people have simplistic notions about terrorism, no one talks about human beings" (Campbell 2005, p. 56), and indeed the artist's *modus operandi* in the *Terrorist* series is to counteract the former by means of the latter. The artist set out to portray "the essence and humanity" (Hassanzadeh 2007, p. 30) of his mother, and it is the image of her embodied subjectivity that ultimately succeeds in displacing geopolitically based binarism. Hassanzadeh proposes subjecthood, daily life, and the familial as sites of resistance. Like Sedira's *La maison de ma mère*, the compassionate and sensitive filial eye or "I" constitutes a persuasive weapon in dismantling stereotypes, revealing how subjectivity and positive intent (love) remain radical despite having been so often theoretically discounted. Hassanzadeh has used the "real" and the specific to undo Western mainstream generalizations about Iran, Islam, and Muslim women. The displacing discrepancy between the title and the image of a veiled elderly woman mirrors that between Euro-American and Iranian discourses and perceptions, while equally rewriting the image and attendant associations of the veil.

Art critic Sohrab Mahdavi appreciates both the work and the artist but criticizes the fact that *Terrorist: Nadjibeh*, unlike Hassanzadeh's early works, is conscious of the Western gaze. Mahdavi perceives the self-representation apparent in the image as self-defeating because "the work can only become 'independent' if the artist's intended viewer is Western" (Mahdavi 2007, p. 124). I admit that the strategy of escaping the Western gaze by speaking back to it, and often in its own language, constitutes the problematic paradox of postcolonial critique and art. However, I submit that Hassanzadeh, in his attempt at dethroning the discursive authority of the West, has managed to circumvent the pitfall. Subjectivity and autobiography open up, through the power of the real, an alternative way between hegemonic discourses. The image of an elderly Iranian woman on its own is in no way confrontational, suggesting that *Terrorist: Nadjibeh* can speak to a global audience, and, more significantly, point a way forward beyond an "us-and-them" paradigm.

Postcolonial Veils: Mimicry and Double Critique

If Hassanzadeh's *Terrorist: Nadjibeh* transcends binarism through imaged subjectivity, the work nonetheless references binarism in order to deconstruct it. Other contemporary artists adopt different means to rewrite the otherized flatness of visibly Muslim women. Many women artists, for example, engage in mimicry to effectuate a double critique that bypasses binarism. Artists like Shirin Neshat, Shadi Ghadirian, or Lalla Essaydi, to name only a few, unpack the trope of the veil through its subversive

reenactment. The sign that is reified in both the Western and Muslim world is thus particularly well suited to reproduce master narratives with the purpose of altering them from within. For reasons of length alone, I examine only one work, another photographic piece by Zineb Sedira, this one addressing the niqab. *Silent Witness* (1995), akin to *Terrorist: Nadjibeh*, posits resistance through the reversal of the gaze and embodied subjectivity, although here the resisting subject lies largely beyond the image, thus challenging the assumed stable codes of representation, and contests Western and Middle Eastern confining definitions of Muslim women.

Zineb Sedira, whose work in the 1990s revolved around the veil, understands the term as both literal and figurative. Conceiving it in its widest definition and echoing feminist Nawal El Saadawi's terminology, the artist speaks of "veiling-the-mind," (Sedira 2003, p. 58) a concept that transcends the sartorial to encompass the invisible veils we all wear and manifest in our subjective and collective mediations of the world. *Silent Witness* confronts the Euro-American gaze with the veil it projects onto its Muslim female others, including those who do not cover like Sedira, but it equally questions the artist's gaze and familial cultural traditions. The impetus for the work was, effectively, the fear and alienation that Sedira, raised in France, experienced as a child when her mother put on the full facial veil as soon as they arrived in Algeria. In *Silent Sight* (2000), a video based on the same memory, the artist says in voiceover, "I remember as soon as we arrived, she would get it out, change into it, become it," adding "She was very at ease … she felt protected by it. It was her home, my home." Sedira's words cast the niqab as foreign, as they also convey her understanding of her mother's viewpoint, a position exemplifying the possibilities opened up by plural identity and the cross-culturality it begets.

Silent Witness (40×180 cm) is a series of large black and white photographs mounted on white mat boards that the artist has sewn together. The piece sits like an accordion-type book on a glass shelf attached to the gallery wall at eye level. The images depict only the artist's closely cropped, and much enlarged eyes. They look upward and then downward, to the right and to the left, and then gaze straight at the spectator, before closing or blinking. The mat boards deliberately frame the images as "an invisible veil," in this case the niqab, although the whiteness also evokes the white Algerian haïk. The veil is present only by inference, rendered precisely in what film theorist Teresa de Lauretis calls the "space-off" of the image that she describes as "the space not visible in the frame but inferable from what the frame makes visible." (de Lauretis 1987, p. 26) In *Silent Witness*, the photographs are not only framed in such a way as to suggest the veil, but the white mats situated in the space-off actually become the veil and thus part of the image, confirming the film theorist's idea that the space-off exists "concurrently" to "the represented space" (de Lauretis 1987, p. 26). Sedira's rendering of the veil in the space-off accomplishes two things. First, it visually enables the strategy of resistance through mimicry; Sedira is performing the veil, rather than actually wearing it. Second, it conveys that the artist is indeed equally commenting on "invisible" veils, those situated in the realm of discourse and (inter) subjectivity. In *Silent Witness*, a piece essentially concerned with identity and the possibility of self-representation, the inferred veil is a double signifier standing in for the fixed perception and erasure of the Western gaze, as well as circumscribing codes linked to the artist's French Algerian upbringing. *Silent Sight*, mentioned previously, shares the same theme and, more importantly, the same aesthetic strategy as *Silent Witness*, using the frame to clearly evoke the face veil. However, the complete

performance of the gaze is immediately visible and thus appears, in some ways, more articulate in the three-dimensional artwork. It should be noted that because *Silent Witness*, reproduced in Fran Lloyd's *Displacement and Difference: Contemporary Arab Visual Culture in the Diaspora* (Lloyd 2006, p. 109), no longer exists, the images included here (see Figures 14.3 and 14.4) are stills from *Silent Sight*.

De Lauretis plots the space-off as wide enough to include "the spectator," meaning, "the point where the image is received, re-constructed, and reproduced in/as subjectivity" (de Lauretis 1987, p. 26). Considering the veil in *Silent Witness* from this vantage point, one can deduce that the veil's location in the space-off is meant to further substantiate what has already been amply suggested, that the veil sign resides largely in the eye of the viewer when viewing Muslim women, veiled or not. If Sedira were neither North African, nor of Muslim descent, and if the trope of the veil were not so ingrained, the viewer would not necessarily instantaneously read the mat board as a niqab. The artist has acted out the effect of the Western gaze upon her, revealing

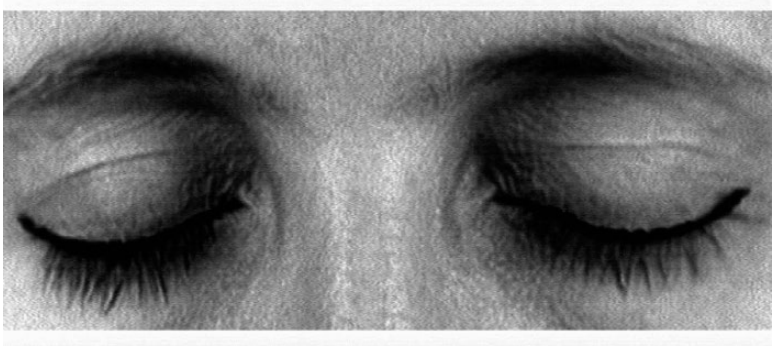

FIGURE 14.3 Zineb Sedira (France), b. 1963. *Silent Sight*, 2000. Video projection (black and white, sound). Film 16 mm. Soundtrack by Edith Marie Pasquier. 11 min 10 s. 4:3 format. © Zineb Sedira. All Rights Reserved, DACS/Artimage 2019. Source: Image courtesy kamel mennour, Paris.

FIGURE 14.4 Zineb Sedira (France), b. 1963. *Silent Sight*, 2000. Video projection (black and white, sound). Film 16 mm. Soundtrack by Edith Marie Pasquier. 11 min 10 s. 4:3 format. © Zineb Sedira. All Rights Reserved, DACS/Artimage 2019. Source: Image courtesy kamel mennour, Paris.

to viewers its restrictive nature, making them aware of their role in producing otherness and the symbols through which it is constructed. That the veil in the work will effectively be read as a *contested* enactment of Euro-American othering will obviously depend upon the viewer's perception of, and relationship to, the veil sign, as well as the degree to which the viewer integrates the discourse surrounding the work into the act of looking. However, *Silent Witness* equally criticizes the gender expectations affiliated with Algerian Muslim culture. Sedira has cropped the photos in such a way that the veil seems to be physically preventing her from speech and, therefore, self-expression. As the artist, who discusses the "veil" in terms of the issues of both "censorship and self censorship" explains, "I never had to wear the physical veil, but I definitely wore the mental veil." (Lloyd 2006, p. 148) The veil censoring her and reducing her to a "silent witness," is therefore both the one imposed from without and the one imposed from within by the gendered expectations of being and behavior learnt in her French Algerian Muslim family and community.

Sedira simultaneously reproduces and deconstructs the veil(s)' filtering perception and self-perception with the only means at her disposal, her eyes; not only by what Fran Lloyd calls their "public scale," but also, and especially, by their activity or, more precisely, their performance. The contrast between the static, flat white backdrops and the sequence of eye movements coupled with the three-dimensionality of the visible parts of Sedira's face creates dissonance and a space in which minoritized subjectivity can emerge. Sedira has managed the incredible feat of affirmation and resistance through her eyes alone. The gaze's performance foregrounds the artist as subject/body, sending the veil(s) back into the space-off, and challenges the viewer's gaze by visually declaring that the Muslim woman is not simply the object of his or her gaze, but a subject who can look back at the spectator as spectacle (Lloyd 2001, p. 7). Sedira's feminist and postcolonial appropriation and reversal of the gaze unmasks and refutes externally and internally imposed self-definitions, again confirming the dislocating potential of the resisting subject. The artist takes a distance and extracts herself from two cultural discourses having exercised power to reappropriate her self on the terms of neither by means of a bodily performance. Sedira is, effectively, speaking back with her embodied self, even though the only visible parts of the body are her eyes and their surrounding area.

The mimicry of Sedira's symbolic donning of the veil opens up productive spaces between the subject/photograph and the veil/space-off. These, coupled with the work's performative aspect, inflect the viewer's reading of the artist's body as subject. I submit that Sedira's eyes and their performance stand in for her entire body/self in a second parallel space-off. The fragment serves to symbolize the whole, further corroborating de Lauretis' thesis of the space-off that, probing the difficulties of women's self-representation, maintains, as Jayne Wark observes, that "women can represent themselves from within the chinks, cracks, blind spots, and marginal spaces of hegemonic discourses" (Wark 2006, p. 181). *Silent Witness* intimates that both embodiment and self are situated beyond the "masquerade" of representation. Alluding to them without fully representing them therefore implies that the female – here Algerian-Muslim – self is located outside the image which, because of its gendered and colonial history, makes the latter unrepresentable. The artist dismantles entrenched regimes of cultural, social, and artistic representation of, and projection unto, (Muslim) women; astoundingly, it accomplishes this thanks to the veil and the aesthetics of veiling, which stress the non-fixity and intangible nature of the self,

and, in addition, prevent the scopic reappropriation of the female subject. However, *Silent Witness'* communication of female subjectivity as transcending various patriarchal regimes of representations is operated through a subversive reenactment of them, via the referenced image of the veiled Muslim woman.

The discussion substantiates the important feminist and deconstructive possibilities of mimicry, whose role is, as French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray suggests, "to make 'visible,' by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: recovering a possible operation of the feminine in language" (Irigaray 1985, p. 7). Here the language is visual, and *Silent Witness*, in effect, "recovers" the possibility of self-representation for the female non-Western self. The means by which it realizes this, however, possesses additional deconstructive implications. The gaze, by revealing the artist's status as subject rather than object, dislocates the authority of the spectator "I"/eye that not only produces the trope of the Muslim woman but also defines the nature of the art object. In *Silent Witness*, the eyes are engaged in a bodily performance of subjectivity, suggesting the possibility of an art "subject" rather than object. British art theorist Amelia Jones (1998, p. 13), in her work on body art, persuasively argues that work "produced through an enactment of the artist's body," unpacks the Enlightenment-based self or "Cartesian I," because it establishes "the subject as *intersubjective*" (p. 10), positing that selfhood is not self-sufficient but rather positioned in a system of relationships to and with other subjects. By substituting, in lieu of an art object, another embodied subject that therefore anticipates a subject-to-subject relationship "confirms … that the subject 'means' always in relationship to others and [that] the locus of identity is elsewhere." (Jones 1998, p. 14) Modernism continues to inform the Euro-American regime of vision and so the contemporary Euro-American viewer of *Silent Witness*, whose sovereign self-identity is challenged by the "subjectified" art object, is thus himself or herself interpellated as a site of embodied subjectivity; the viewing experience thus opens up nonhierarchical space between subjects and reveals a possible intersubjective relationship with the Other. The dissolution of the traditional hierarchy between the viewer and the art object possesses obvious advantages for the postcolonial artist in general, and for Sedira, in particular, as both female and Arab-Muslim other. Jones' idea about the effects of resistance procured by the intersubjectivity implicit in embodiment deepens the understanding of the performative mechanism of mimicry and confers an additional and relevant interpretive layer to *Silent Witness*. Even if the work, because of the veil and unlike most of the body art Jones discusses, does not involve spectatorial desire, it nonetheless points to the body as the site of a redefined resisting subject and posits the mediative space it opens up as the generator of the subject, intersubjectivity, and art.

Conclusion

Muslim veiling practices continue to haunt the Euro-American imagination, as witnessed by continued laws, heated public debates, and media culture's generous use of images of veiled Muslim women when discussing problems of immigration, crime, or national identity, or framing, more bluntly, Western Muslim populations as a fifth column. That the sign of the veil constitutes a blanket condemnation of all Muslims, regardless of gender or degree of religiosity, explains why the number of contemporary artists interested in deconstructing it can be male or unveiled artists of Muslim, and

sometimes non-Muslim, origin. The three artworks analyzed here highlight the diversity of strategies that artists employ to dismantle and rewrite the problematic trope.

Sedira's *La maison de ma mère* is critically important in that it relocates veiling in its original cultural and aesthetic environment. The piece thus offers up a complete rereading of the contentious garment as well as illuminates the contemporaneity and potential of the veiling aesthetic that abets the reading of many other artworks. Hassanzadeh's *Terrorist: Nadjibeh* exposes the ideological thrust driving Western discourse on Islam by replacing the terrorist trope and the desubjectified stereotype of the veiled Muslim woman with the image and story of a real Iranian woman. That Nadjibeh's human presence succeeds in dismantling the present-day polarization existing between the West and the Muslim world demonstrates the possibility of a deconstructive model to transcend binarism. This is particularly important in light of the fact that critics have attacked the strategy of counterdiscourse – and Said's theory of Orientalism more generally – for replacing one dualistic model with another, thus further entrenching neocolonial binarism. Although these criticisms constitute legitimate theoretical and philosophical concerns, they sometimes form part of a conscious and strategic attempt to depoliticize postcolonial theory, a depoliticization that can be dangerous in so far as it can conveniently dismiss the justification of resistance against very real exploitative regimes, colonization, and/or economic policies. My own view is that as long as North–South and East–West relations exist in their current state and imperialist discourse and representations persist, maintaining binary paradigms for purposes of analysis and redress remains necessary. Moreover, dubitable culturally constructed perceptions must be revealed and acknowledged before being reassessed and transcended.

Veiled subjectivity in *Terrorist: Nadjibeh* does not rest on the simplistic assumption that the "process of negation" of Orientalist constructions is sufficient for people "to become selves as opposed to the identity of mere others that they inherit" (Ashcroft 2001, p. 48). Nadjibeh's embodied presence and story, and the honesty of her portrayal simply depict what is, therefore, obviating binarism. Imaging the subjecthood of Muslim women also forms the strategy of resistance underlying Sedira's *Silent Witness*, suggesting its potency and potential for other marginalized and, therefore, often dehumanized, peoples and communities. *Silent Witness*, however, differs from *Terrorist: Nadjibeh* by its more emphatic double critique aimed at both Euro-American and Middle Eastern discourses around women.

The belief in the transformative potential of art and the image obviously underlies this study, and I therefore agree with Kaja Silverman (1995, p. 184) who considers "the aesthetic work … a privileged domain for displacing us from the geometral point, for encouraging us to see in ways not dictated in advance by the dominant fiction." The three artworks analyzed demystify Muslim veiling practices and propose alternative representations of the garments, thereby revealing the invalidity of *the* veil as a taxonomic category. All equally share a rootedness in autobiography and thus memory, further corroborating the practicability of asserted selfhood to combat the dehumanization intrinsic to all stereotypes. More significantly, such works, by de-otherizing others and presenting them as the subjects, challenge viewers to rethink collective and individual self-identities in ways that no longer require an inferior Other, whether sexual, cultural, racial, or religious. The radicality of such an event cannot be exaggerated. Replacing the us-and-them paradigm with a novel we-and-we one could revolutionize, not only subjectivities, but also collective political and geopolitical identities and relationships.

Although such a proposal may indeed appear overly idealistic, increasing world conflicts and the scary sophistication of the technology created to hurt one another make such a paradigm shift critical and necessary.

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