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Notes on the Discursive Deployment of Parda

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The archival dignity, institutional authority and patriarchal longevity of Orientalism should be taken seriously because in the aggregate these traits function as a worldview *with considerable political force* not easily brushed away as so much epistemology. Thus Orientalism in my view is a structure erected in the thick of an imperial contest whose dominant wing it represented and elaborated, not only as scholarship but also as partisan ideology. Yet Orientalism hid the contest beneath its scholarly and aesthetic idioms. (Edward Said 1989)[i]

The veil, which since the nineteenth century has symbolized for the West the inferiority of Muslim cultures, *remains a powerful symbol both for the West and for Muslim societies*. (Homa Hoodfar 1989)[ii]

In Muslim contexts of modernity, women's corporal visibility and citizenship rights constitute the political stakes around which the public sphere is defined. (Niloufer Gole 1997)[iii]

Introduction

In the first passage quoted above, Edward Said urges scholars to trace connections between a purportedly 'neutral' and 'objective' zone of knowledge production and the more mundane and self-interested domain of politics, in this case imperialist policies and goals in the Middle East. Said did not espouse a narrowly instrumentalist theory of knowledge and power. Rather, he called for excavating and mapping the relationship between entrenched structures of knowledge/discourse/worldviews and everyday political

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considerations. Although he wrote on the US and the Middle East, Said's work resonates more widely, not least among feminists and others involved in writing about Muslim women today. Especially after September 11th, the specter of Orientalism haunts productions of knowledge about women in Muslim societies. Indeed, it would be irresponsible as well as intellectually incomplete to discuss parda, stereotyping and globalization without acknowledging the cultural legacies of imperialism and their continuities with current global politics. That is, without an interrogation of the "archival dignity, institutional authority and patriarchal longevity" of contemporary forms of Orientalism, or without unpacking the cumulative effect of "those traits that construct a worldview [in this case a particular construct of Muslim women's lives] with considerable political force," any discussion of parda, stereotyping and globalization would be flawed.

The hegemonic worldview in question – in which veiling signifies the patriarchal oppression and cultural inferiority of Islam – boasts an impressive genealogy. It is echoed in, elaborated on and reconstituted in contemporary western scholarship, media and popular culture. The cumulative effects of these representations, their political force, tend to be naturalized or taken for granted.

At the same time, as Homa Hoodfar indicates in the second epigraph, the veil as symbol has become equally important for many Muslims themselves. Some Muslim men and women embrace the veil as a symbol of cultural identity, others as religious purity, duty and authenticity. Alternately, many Muslims see the continued viability of the veil as a sign of cultural inferiority and of the lack of secularism in Muslim societies. That is, for some groups the veil indexes anti-secular, non-modern religio-cultural sensibilities, while for others, it can signal religiosity, cultural identity and even freedom (from the commodified world of western capitalism). Yet, whether the veil is defended or condemned, the highly polarized terms of debate remain constant; the terms are predetermined by a dominant discourse that constructs Islam in opposition to modernity, secularism and progress.

I do not mean to suggest that we are all trapped in the discursive universe of Orientalist or Western imagery. Not all social realities are responses to or products of Western economic and political domination. By the same token, the meanings and uses of the veil are not limited to resistance to or embrace of Orientalist readings of Islam and women. Certainly it would be inadequate to see all contemporary Muslim subjectivities as derivations of or reactions to the Western/Liberal secular subject. [iv] The point remains that most discussions of veiling – Western, Islamist and "Secular" Muslim – rely on interpretive frameworks derived from prevailing cultural presumptions about Islam, modernity and secularism. This dominant discourse then informs the kinds of questions that are asked and those that are suppressed or elided by such formulations. Questions of whether Islam is compatible with modernity and democracy, or whether the Quran mandates full veiling are easily accommodated within such a framework. In contrast, there is little scope to ask why and in whose interest such questions emerge in the first place.

Moreover, while the meanings and significance of veiling (or any other cultural practice) must be contextualized inside the history, politics and cultural flows of specific communities and territories, any critical reflection today on globalization and *parda* must be located in the context of Western responses to the September 11th bombings. The so-called War on Terror has rendered more transparent and *more respectable* a heretofore-subterranean demonization of Islam, which has now surfaced without apologies. At the same time, the imbrication of scholarly practices and empire making is increasingly evident and even flaunted. [v]

This paper traces some of the historical and contemporary processes that have transformed the veil into a profoundly symbolic and deeply emotive object of contestation, not just of Muslim women's identity, but also of a society's secular credentials or lack thereof. It asks why the veil has come to acquire such 'excess' or 'surplus' of meaning today. The final epigraph from Niloufer Gole indicates the possible relationships between Muslim women's visibility in the public sphere and postcolonial Muslim societies' anxieties with respect to secularism and modernity.

Part I presents a brief historical overview of the politics of veiling. Part II examines the inadvertent complicities of global feminist and human rights discourses in contemporary imperialist endeavors. Part III sketches the relationship between modernity and women's public visibility in postcolonial, Muslim societies, touching on debates in Europe over citizen's rights to wear the veil or headscarf in public institutionalized spaces. I end by asking what other meanings of veiling exist than those authorized by hegemonic interpretive frameworks, Western and Islamist. Who loses, who gains, and which conversations are silenced?

A note on terminology is required at this point. Strictly speaking, *parda* or seclusion and veiling are not the same thing, although I have used them somewhat interchangeably in this paper. P*arda* can refer to spatial practices of segregation, that is, actual physical segregation of the sexes. Seclusion may or may not be combined with veiling. Veiling, in contrast, denotes a variety of covers for the face and body such as the headscarf, the chador and the *borkha*. It is, among other things, a visual phenomenon, -- one that declares visibly its function of hiding or shielding from view. I would argue that the visual aspect of veiling takes on much more symbolism in the context of globalization. In this paper, therefore, I will talk about the veil as a visible cultural artifact rather than as *parda* or seclusion in the broader sense.

Veiled Histories

Veiling is neither static nor unitary as cultural practice or as prescription. There are many forms of covering – the *chador*, the *hijab*, the *borkha* – that go under the name of the veil. Each has specific local meaning(s) in its context of use, through space and time.[vi] There are examples of societies where men rather than women conventionally cover their faces.[vii] Moreover, ideologies of veiling and parda have never been exclusive to Muslim societies.[viii] Historically, veiling and seclusion were signs of status practiced by the elite in the ancient Greco-Roman, pre-Islamic Iranian and Byzantine empires. In fact, the earliest known reference to veiling, an Assyrian legal text dating from the thirteenth century BC,

restricted the practice to 'respectable' women and forbade prostitutes from veiling.[ix] It was not until the Saffavid (1501-1722), the Ottoman (1357-1924) and the Mughal (1556-1857) empires that the veil appears to have emerged as a widespread symbol of status among Muslim ruling classes and the urban elite in North Africa, the Middle East and South Asia. Indeed, until the nineteenth century, the veil was deployed primarily as a marker of class rather than of religious identity, as attested by its prevalence amongst Rajput and Persian women in the Mughal courts. That is, veiling was an elite cultural practice that did not derive legitimacy primarily from religious prescriptions.

It is not until the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century that the veil emerged as a significant symbol of Muslim community identity or as an object of European curiosity/obsession. According to some scholars, this shift corresponds to shifts in forms of European imperial domination, with the consolidation of colonial power and the collapse of local, especially Ottoman, resistance. As is well known by now, European imperial plunder and conquest was frequently presented in the guise of a civilizing mission, a storyline in which women played a critical role. Feminist historians and anthropologists have documented quite persuasively the ways in the rhetoric of 'saving native women' acted as an alibi or excuse for colonial interventions and policies at critical political moments.[x] A common justification for British and French rule in the India subcontinent, North Africa and elsewhere was that native women, Hindu and Muslim, needed to be saved from patriarchal customs and rituals such as child marriage, veiling and sati. Region and caste-specific customs such as widow immolation were generalized and taken out of context, made to stand for the barbarism of the whole community and the religion. In other words, the colonial narrative of rescue, in which "white men save brown women from brown men" as Gayatri Spivak so memorably put it many years ago, was a highly selective undertaking.[xi] Legal interventions were also typified by double standards. In North Africa, for instance there was much ado about de-veiling but very little on women's education or employment. British representatives in Egypt championed Egyptian

women's right to not be veiled but vigorously opposed giving women the right to vote in Britain.[xii]

A number of factors, including the emergence of Victorian ideologies of femininity and morality in Europe, converged to make women – in both colonized and colonizing societies – 'authentic' symbols of cultural identity in the nineteenth century. By extension, women's place in society and their bodies became metaphorical signs of civility and modernity. In the hierarchy of Empire, the status of women came to mark a nation or culture's place as civilized or barbaric. White European women were at the top of the rankings, not surprisingly. Most nationalists and 'native' orthodox groups also subscribed to such notions, even if they did not necessarily concur with the actual ranking. In the process, women and the cultural formations with which they were associated came to chart or represent a series of dichotomies:

East	: West
Tradition	: Modernity
Barbarism	: Civility
Superstitious	: Scientific
Religious	: Secular

Hegemonic interpretations of the veil as quintessentially Islamic and oppressive also emerge during this period. Homa Hoodfar notes that the representation of the Muslim Orient by the West went through a fundamental change as the Ottoman Empire's power diminished. She writes that by the nineteenth century the focus of representation had changed from the male barbarian to the uncivilized ignorant male *whose masculinity relied on the mistreatment of women.*[xiii] Certainly, contemporary depictions of Muslim 'fundamentalist' men as eager to control women and their bodies echo these earlier images. This new imagery of the Orient, with the oppressed Muslim woman *and* oppressive Muslim man as centerpiece, was intrinsically tied to the hegemony of western imperialism, as Edward Said and others have shown. Western fascination with and Orientalist interpretations of the veil and the harem (as places where Muslim men imprisoned their wives) flowered in full force at this time. The woman behind the veil (often behind the harem) is a passive victim, a prisoner of

her culture/religion. Images of secluded and "unfree" Egyptian women contrasted with and reinforced the image of the publicly visible and "free" European woman. The association between the veil and unfreedom became increasingly reinforced through the seemingly natural dichotomies of:

Muslim/Veiled/Hidden/Unfree/: European/Unveiled/Visible/Free

European women had every reason to collude in the production of such images. As Antoinette Burton notes in the case of India, middle class Victorian feminists viewed 'native' women both as passive subjects and as examples against which to gauge their own progress and superiority.[xiv] In a similar vein, Mervat Hatem argues that by thinking of themselves as all powerful and free vis a vis Egyptian women, European women could avoid confronting their own powerlessness and gender oppression at home.[xv]

Periodic attempts by Muslim leaders in the early 20th century to discourage or ban veiling attest to the enduring power of a worldview in which the veil signified Muslim inferiority, backwardness and 'non-modern' status. The desire to step out of this putatively regressive cultural space into the time of modernity was certainly a major factor propelling institutionalized interventions in female deportment and dress codes. The production of appropriate female subjects -- unveiled and visible, therefore free and modern – was to function as a visual declaration of entry into the (secularized) space of modernity. Kemal Ataturk's Turkey provides the best-known example of attempts to 'modernize' a Muslim society by authorizing a particular dress code for men and for women. In 1936, Reza Shah of Iran passed legislation making it illegal for women to be in the street wearing the veil or any other kind of head covering except a European hat.[xvi] A decade earlier, as part of his agenda to emancipate women, the Afghan king Amanullah launched an all out effort in 1928 against the institution of *parda* that "hid half the Afghan nation."[xvii] Needless to say, during this period many others argued with equal force that the veil was a fundamental feature of Muslim women's identity and religious obligation.

Much later, in a changed political landscape, the Iranian Revolution powerfully foregrounded the accumulated paradoxes and context-specific meanings of the veil. In stark contrast to earlier and unsuccessful state-sponsored efforts to ban veiling, during anti-Shah agitations in the late 1970's many Leftist secular women voluntarily donned the black *chador* as a sign of solidarity with their veiled sisters-in-revolution and, equally important, as a visible rejection of the Shah's pro-rich, pro-western policies. Once Khomeini came to power, the demonstration of solidarity and rejection of all things 'western' became obligatory, with very nasty results for those who refused to comply.[xviii] In a discussion of the significance of the *chador* for Khomeini's regime, Minoo Moallem contends that it would be a mistake to read the regime's encouragement [as opposed to legal coercion] of women to wear the *chador* either as a sign of passivity or of religiosity. Rather, it represented a gendered invitation to participate in political activity, and signified membership in a specific ethno-religious community. [xix] Locally, the *chador* created a unified identity that transcended class, ethnic and other potential fault lines, in opposition to the identity of the westernized local elite. Globally, it invoked a transnational Muslim femininity in opposition to the West. At the same time, "the veil signified an Islamic femininity that patrolled feminine bodily comportment and generated a restricted spatiality."[xx]

Between the Borkha and the Bomb:
Or How Not to Save Afghan Women

In the post-Cold War order of things, culture and gender have emerged as fundamental sites of global and local contestation.[xxi] The asymmetrical effects of economic globalization, resulting socio-economic disparities, the related rise of religious extremisms, and the 'supremacy' of the western capitalist model of democracy have converged to create a situation in which political and economic conflicts are increasingly displaced on to cultural arenas. In places like Bangladesh, the emphasis on women's development by government and donors alike, as well as the highly visible participation of women in the labor force, has destabilized social hierarchies and marginalized hegemonic male identities. In addition,

new forms of print and visual media circulating ever more rapidly through technologies of globalization have opened up new ways of imagining selves and futures; migration, or its possibility, to more affluent locations has had similar effects.

Among other things, the situation has produced a "crisis" of masculinity, femininity and community identities.[xxii] Since gender and gender relations are fundamental to the formation of community and individual identity, cultural understandings of women's place have come under increasing scrutiny and contestation. In South Asia, the battle lines are unambiguous, at least on the surface. Right wing Hindu and Muslim extremists call for protecting women and 'indigenous' culture from the corrosive dangers of the 'West,' from satellite television, beauty pageants or working in the public/male sphere, as the case may be. The standard response to such rhetoric is to affirm the superiority of 'western' models of secularism, democracy and feminism. In this environment, relatively fluid boundaries of gender, culture and religion have hardened into apparently intractable walls of difference. Consequently, battle lines between feminists and religious extremists such as the BJP and the Shiv Sena in India and the Jamaat-i-Islami in Bangladesh are more visible and pronounced, and aggravated by the perception that feminism is a western imperialist import.

The situation has produced what Moallem calls a war of representation between advocates of 'fundamentalist' and 'feminist' worldviews. As she notes, the increasingly polarized struggles that are played out in global and local sites construct new forms of global oppositions and reproduce older colonial divisions between a barbaric, oppressive and patriarchal Muslim world and a civilized, tolerant and liberated West.[xxiii] It seems to me that there is no obvious or preordained reason why such oppositions should turn on 'Islamic culture and practices,' to the exclusion of other 'dangers.' However, since the end of the Cold War and increasing fears of 'Islamic fundamentalism,' Islam and the veil have emerged as central villains in the war over women's 'proper' place.

Moallem leaves out an important aspect of the current political landscape, one that confers tremendous moral force on global feminist rhetoric. The emergence of a transnational and elite discourse of human rights-- especially in relation to gender equality -- has greatly influenced global debates on women's rights. Constructed explicitly in opposition to religion, culture and tradition, it feeds directly into prevailing stereotypes of Muslim women as victimized by their religion (here equated with their culture) and bolsters colonial tropes of cultural inferiority, barbarism and oppressive Islamic dictates, in opposition to the enlightened modernity (one that is above or beyond culture and religion) and secularism of the West.[xxiv] Underwritten by the same policy makers who espouse liberalization and capitalist democratization, this United Nations style of human rights feminism has a captive audience.

My objective here is not to impugn the character or motivations of individuals but to problematize the categories of culture and gender deployed in conventional feminist and human rights discourse. Within this framework, dominant understandings of culture refer to a dehistoricized and static phenomenon, one that stands in the way of change, especially where women are concerned.[xxv] If by definition culture is monolithic, anti-women and resistant to change, then cultural transformations must always have external sources. This makes it easy to justify externally imposed changes and interventions. Moreover, if culture is understood to possess a singular essence, where one feature seamlessly stands for and explicates the whole, then it is easy to extend particularized meanings to entire cultural formations. Given its problematic genealogy in Western discursive systems, it is not difficult to see why the *borkha* came to be understood by many feminists and human rights activists as a relic from the past that by its very constitution violated women's human rights.

It is equally important to interrogate the uses of gender in this context. For only by assuming a shared understanding of what it means to be a woman, of homogenous female subjectivity and experience, can unilateral actions to 'save' women or stamp out

'barbaric' cultural practices be undertaken. By assuming there is a 'natural' female subjectivity (which happens to be western, upper class/ caste, etc.) it is possible to uncritically equate all veiling with restrictions or oppression. In other words, if the natural or essential woman is unveiled, it follows that veiling is a violation of that natural subjectivity. [xxvi] The need for critical conversations and analyses never arises.

As is well known, once the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan, North American and European feminists launched a massive and unprecedented campaign to "free" their Afghan sisters from the brutalities of the regime. Among other things, the campaign was globalized through the internet, in the form of an email petition circulated widely and frequently. This feminist mission carried echoes of an earlier era but deployed the more modern – ostensibly unassailable – vocabulary of human rights. It called on the responsibility of all states to protect women's rights everywhere. Most of the women involved in the campaign to remove the Taliban also supported the (indiscriminate) bombing of Afghanistan, since the end result would be to save Afghan women from the brutalities of 'extreme Islam.' It would be facile to dismiss this feminist concern as entirely misplaced, for Taliban policies were extremely repressive, especially toward women. No one doubts the sincerity of Northern feminist concerns. I shall elaborate on this point later. Suffice it to say, a sharp divide quickly emerged between feminists who felt the Taliban had to be removed at all costs, including exposing all Afghans to a devastating war, and those who were unwilling to demonize one particular group or to sanction what they saw to be imperialist violence and adventure in the name of saving women. Predictably, the fault lines between these two groups were racialized to a great degree.

Long before the September 11th bombings, then, the stage was set for a war of representation between dominant western feminist and human rights lobbies and the 'forces of Islamic fundamentalism.' The subsequent collusion – implicit and direct – of certain US feminist groups with a flagrantly imperialist agenda does not appear surprising when viewed from this perspective. I should add here that

the near complete capitulation of the US news media to the imperatives of US foreign policy made the task of Euro-American feminists much easier. Unlike events under other regimes in Afghanistan, the transgressions of the Taliban were highly publicized. As preparations to bomb Afghanistan were being made in late September, the visual coverage of Afghan and/or Muslim women marked a steep increase in the print media. Overnight, women in borkhas were everywhere. The front page of the influential New York Times regularly featured photographs of women veiled from head to toe. The faceless, nameless, and most definitely voiceless women behind veils were clearly meant to represent 'she who needed to be saved from the clutches of the Taliban/Islam.'

In an astonishingly naked replay of older imperial discursive strategies, the so-called War on Terror was recast as a war to save Afghan women from their men and their religion. The *borkha* played a critical role in legitimating the new imperial narrative of rescue. Essentialized, taken out of context, and stripped of both history and politics, it embodied all that was oppressive about Islam. Needless to say, Pashtun tribal culture was generalized to stand for all Muslim cultures, and Afghan women's predicament became iconic of the possible futures of all Muslim women, unless of course some well-meaning power intervened. Culture and Religion were the villains in the unfolding narrative of righteous war; faced with the brutal violation of women's human rights, feminists felt little need to understand or contextualize the geo-political structures or corporate considerations that created such a lamentable situation in the first place.[xxvii] Arguably, the borkha became a proxy for political analysis. It was as though understanding the garb would allow the reader/viewer to understand the war itself.

The often-seductive visual power of the *borkha* seemed not to require much in the way of verbal elaboration. The *borkha* could speak for itself, or so it appeared, as the ultimate sign of a woman's subjugation, underscoring at the same time the vast gap between Euro-Americans and Others. During the bombing campaign in Afghanistan, a student brought to my attention an advertisement for a

perfume called American Origins. A picture of a young and carefree Caucasian woman, relaxing outdoors, hair flying in the wind, was accompanied by the following slogans: "You have the right to be free, you have the right to fly, you have the right to laugh, you have the right to flirt." Here patriotism, sexuality and commerce fuse to remind American woman of their privileged status as citizens of the most powerful nation on earth. Without any explicit reference, US femininity and autonomy are contrasted with the 'unfreedom' of women elsewhere. If during colonialism, European women's self-image as free and superior was constructed in opposition to a colonized Other, western women's self-image today derives as much from the construction of the Muslim (and/or African and Asian, depending on the context) Other as inferior.

It would be unfair to dismiss out of hand the actions and interventions of groups such as the Feminist Majority to help Afghan women. Should Euro-American feminists have remained silent in the face of verified and continued reports of Taliban brutality? This was a question routinely asked of those who refused to accept the wholesale demonization of the Taliban to the exclusion of all other factors, and who opposed the bombing of Afghanistan. Indeed, what difference should knowledge of larger political and historical landscapes have made to the strategies of feminists -- especially since there was no question of the tremendous suffering of Afghan women? The difference, I would argue, is that it might have enabled those feminists to interrogate the deeply flawed interpretive framework through which they understood the roots of Muslim women's oppression. It might have opened up a whole set of questions that had been suppressed. Why did feminists focus on Afghanistan, why at that particular moment? Why not Palestine or Rwanda? What issues were displaced or obscured by the obsessive focus on the *borkha* as the central fact of Afghan women's oppression? What counts as basic human rights and who sets the agenda prioritizing these rights? What are the political conditions that render enforced veiling a more important violation of human rights than mass hunger or the structural conditions of violence and inequality?

Afghan women had been suffering from war, famine and misogyny for years. The Mujahidin, whom the Taliban replaced in 1996, were equally cruel, explicitly anti-feminist, and openly nurtured by the US.[xxviii] Yet, international feminists, especially the so-called Feminist Majority, were curiously silent during the 1980s and early 1990s. As it happened, most Afghan women couldn't go to school or travel long before the Taliban came to power. Only a handful of women in urban areas had access to education or health care. The selectivity and timing of Northern feminist outrage over the *borkha* but apparent lack of concern with the terrors of cluster bombing or incipient famine experienced by the women they wished to save, could not help but generate skepticism.

By invoking a highly particularized notion of human rights and disguising it as the universally acknowledged form – a 'bottom-line' beyond which tolerance and non-action were unacceptable – Euro-American feminists captured the high moral ground. By virtue of this, they displaced and dispensed with the political altogether. That is, the focus on an exclusionary version of women's rights, one beholden to earlier histories of domination, precluded any analysis of practices of power or the selectivity of dominant human rights discourse.

The complicity of Orientalist and feminist discourses cannot be "brushed away as so much epistemology." These are issues that must be confronted if we, as feminists and as producers of knowledge, are to avoid colluding with forces that oppress women. Among other things, the situation calls for rethinking the epistemological bases for the categories of gender, culture and human rights. Reflecting on similar issues, Lila Abu-Lughod writes:

> I do not know how many feminists who felt good about saving Afghan women from the Taliban are also asking for a global redistribution of wealth or contemplating sacrificing their own consumption radically so that African or Afghan women could have some chance of what I do believe should be a universal human right – the right to freedom from the structural violence of global inequality and from the ravages of war, the every day

> rights of having enough to eat, having homes for their families in which to live and thrive, having ways to make decent livings so their children can grow, and having the strength and security to work out, *within their communities and with whatever alliances they want, how to live a good life, which might very well include changing the ways those communities are organized*
>
> (Abu-Lughod, 2002: 786 & 787, emphasis added.)[xxix]

Abu-Lughod opens up answers to some rather vexed questions about women, culture and human rights. Getting away from debates over the merits of cultural relativism versus universalism, she points to a much broader vision of freedom and universal human rights. These rights are not universalized versions of the priorities and practices of those who happen to wield the power to decide what constitutes human rights. By extension, they do not rest on assumptions of a 'natural' or essential female subjectivity.[xxx] Abu-Lughod also avoids narrowly individualized concerns that turn exclusively or primarily on the individual woman as wholly autonomous and self-contained. She locates universal human rights squarely in the realm of the political and the structural – without erasing the individual from the analysis. Notably, she avoids making any value judgments – positive or negative – about Afghan cultural practices, stating instead that it should be up to community members to determine the direction of changes, if any, required in community life.

By no means should the argument here be read as an endorsement of cultural relativism. The point is not that one cannot ever take a moral stance. Quite the contrary, especially since arguments for tolerance and non-intervention are often justifications for preserving the status quo or absolving oneself of responsibility. Taking a moral stand demands critical reflection and the recognition that culture and human rights are both informed by practices of power. This requires both broadening the notion of culture[xxxi] and critically examining the processes through which some cultural practices are classified as barbaric or intolerable while others are benignly ignored or even embraced. To acknowledge history and power relations is not to submit to 'tolerance without limits' but to account for the conditions

under which particularities are transformed into universals. It follows that any informed and responsible intervention must take into account the implications of asymmetrical locations and subject positions. A genuinely international feminism would require conversations and dialogues rather than the righteous imposition of particularities dressed up as universals.

At Home in the Veil?

In this section, I examine the implications of globalization, migration and mobility as they impinge on practices and understandings of the veil. The excessive interest in Muslim women and their clothing in the West and elsewhere derives not only from a more explicit and acceptable anti-Islamist sentiment but also from specific processes of globalization. For one thing, the mass migration of formerly colonized peoples into Europe and North America no longer allows for discrete Self/Other divisions to be sustained, at least along spatial and geographical lines. The Other (the migrant, the third world woman, the veiled Muslim) is no longer safely at a distance; she is here and must be confronted, especially when she claims her rights as a citizen of a western democracy.

At the same time, almost as a double to the neo-Orientalists of today, Islamist movements have embraced the identity between Muslim women and the veil. Indeed, everyone in the battle fray seems to have accepted this equation between being a good Muslim woman and wearing the veil. In the process, veiling becomes incompatible with being secular or even inhabiting a secular public space. This at least seems to be the situation of young Muslim women who are turned away from schools in France for wearing the headscarf. In 2004, the French parliament passed a law prohibiting "ostentatious signs of religious belonging" in state run primary and secondary schools.[xxxii] Although the law also forbids Sikh turbans and Jewish skullcaps in the classroom, there is general acknowledgement that it is aimed specifically at the headscarf. Indeed, the move came after a growing debate in the country over the purported threat to secularism posed by France's Muslim population, a disruption to the order most visibly marked on and through Muslim women's bodies, in the form of the headscarf. The argument goes that the headscarf disrupts or

violates the secular atmosphere of the school, the latter being an integral part of the public space the state must preserve as secular. Those who argue for the ban contend that the headscarf discourages assimilation, segregating Muslim students from non-Muslims. Yet others feel wearing a headscarf violates the rights of Muslim girls, on the assumption that patriarchal community and family norms force the latter into veiling.

While it is true that North African and Turkish migrants have had a difficult time 'assimilating' into France and Germany respectively, the headscarf is hardly the cause of their woes. However, in times of economic distress and high levels of unemployment, displacing pubic anger on to immigrant populations is a time-honored political strategy. Politicians in France, not only from the avowedly right wing Le Pen, have been very good at whipping up anti-immigrant hysteria at moments of crisis. Moreover, that some individuals might practice veiling of their own volition does not appear to be a concern for those who support its prohibition from the 'sacred' spaces symbolic of the French republic.

There is no one reason why Muslim women and girls may choose to wear the headscarf in France. The social meanings of the headscarf are never unitary. For some, religious considerations may be of paramount importance. Others may do so out of deference to tradition and custom, or simply out of habit. Yet others may be coerced into wearing the headscarf by elders. Notably, for many young women, the headscarf has come to carry profound political significance. Rather than representing a symbol of their oppression, Muslim women may wear the headscarf to signify their resistance to a culture that refuses to acknowledge them on their own terms. Confronted with racism and anti-Islamism, many second-generation Muslim migrants have taken on the *hijab* as a sign of their religious distinctiveness and community identity. This is true in Europe and North America as well. Writing about Canada, Homa Hoodfar notes that since it is the most significant visible symbol of Muslim identity, many Muslim women have taken up the veil, not only out of personal conviction but to assert the existence of a confident Muslim community and to demand fuller social and political recognition.[xxxiii]

In other words, the headscarf operates as a site of resistance in certain contexts. Paradoxically, the women in question reinforce the symbolic valence of the veil as they simultaneously challenge its dominant meanings.

Overt racism and displacement aside, the veil in the classroom presents profound anxieties and disruptions for a certain 'secular' mode of being. Many feminists and leftists in France endorse the ban on the headscarf, whose very visuality – as difference marked on the body – appears to be an affront to and disruption of their secular (and implicitly christianized) sensibilities. Their visceral reaction, and a determined refusal to consider the veil as a site of resistance in some instances, comes through clearly in conversations as well as in writing. In this social imaginary, it is impossible to conceive of freedom and of the veil as going together. Yet that is exactly what girls who voluntarily wear the hijab insist upon, thereby interrupting an entrenched and nationalized vision of secular cultural practices.

A similar 'dilemma of democracy' is at play in Turkey. For instance, the state's refusal to allow an elected Member of Parliament from entering Parliamentary premises on the first day of her tenure because she refused to take off her headscarf reopened vexing questions about received notions of democracy and secularism. In the official view, by insisting on wearing the veil inside Parliament, the MP failed to respect authorized codes of secularism as manifested in dress.[xxxiv] Paradoxically, the state's commitment to protect secularism resulted in a rather undemocratic action in that most symbolic of democratic spaces, the Parliament. The furor over this incident revealed ambivalences at the heart of Turkish national identity, especially the state's desire to present itself as European rather than Asian, secular rather than Muslim. It also underscored a fundamentally problematic understanding of secularism, and its relationship to democratic practice and citizenship.

Nilofer Gole suggests that the vehemence of the Turkish state's response turns on the significance of women as a pivotal sign or site

in the making of a postcolonial modern public sphere. In this context, she writes that,

> [I]t is possible to speak of an excess of secularism, when secularism becomes a fetish of modernity. In non-western contexts, modernity's manifestations are overemphasized, as are the performances of belonging to modernity. The public sphere becomes a site for modern and secular performances. Women as public citizens and women's rights are more salient than citizenship and civil rights in the Turkish modern imaginary.[xxxv]

An understanding of secularism as a fetish of postcolonial modernity, and women's bodies as critical markers of that modernity, throws light on the obsession with the veil by both Islamists and secularists. Gole's observations may be extended profitably not only to other postcolonial Muslim states but also to the French state which exhibits its own version of 'an excess of secularism,' making a fetish of its 'secular' identity even if that means rejecting Muslim girls' rights as citizens to wear the headscarf. Gole does not interrogate received notions of citizenship and the limits of liberal democracies. The French and Turkish examples foreground the exclusionary potential of Liberal citizenship and the myth of the universal liberal subject in the face of 'difference.' For it is not only that in certain contexts "women's rights are more salient than citizenship and civil rights." Both the French and the Turkish situations point to the context-specific and selective nature of apparently universal categories such as citizenship. They open up questions of who can be the 'proper' object of citizenship rights. In this case, only those who are 'proper' citizens by the standards of French secularism are qualified to exercise democratic rights such as freedom of religious expression.

Finally, some brief thoughts on Bangladesh, where globalization has certainly left its mark on practices of parda. To begin with, one cannot help but be struck by the increasing numbers of women in Dhaka and elsewhere who are covered from head to foot in public. More striking is the great variety of these forms of covering, most of which seem alien to the cultural landscape. Their emergence in the

public sphere marks a considerable shift in veiling practices from 20 or 30 years ago. If billboard advertising can be taken as any indicator, the *borkha* is currently big business. A stroll down the roads of old Dhaka will alert the observer to the existence of rows of stores catering to the fashion and religion conscious, financially able female customer. Indeed, the stores are arranged by nationality, for clients who can discriminate between fashions in Kuwait and those in Iran.

One can assume that the increased popularity of veiling, and the expansion of 'foreign' *borkhas*, is related to labor migration as well as to the globalization of political Islam. The stores are arranged by nationality, indicating some relationship to migration patterns. It is quite likely that Bangladeshi men who live and work for long periods in other Muslim spaces pick up, consciously or consciously, new ways of being and acting like Muslims. They may return with new stereotypes about what it means to be a good, authentic Muslim, including ideas about proper dress for women. Such items of clothing are generally expensive, so that the wearer exhibits wealth (of the male) in addition to piety. The circulation of media images of Muslim women in other settings, another aspect of globalization, also informs demands and desires for specific types of covering. According to a shopkeeper in old Dhaka, the availability of 'fashionable' borkhas is responsible for the item's rising popularity among women.[xxxvi]

At a more prosaic level, globalization has brought more and more poor women out of their homes and into the workplace. Generally, these are not the women who can afford expensive borkhas. Garment workers, for instance, routinely cover their heads with large *ornas* when they are in public spaces. Few of the workers would claim that their head coverings are signs of piety as such.[xxxvii] Rather, their *ornas* and *chadors* are meant to signify respectability despite their presence on the public/male space of the street, and thereby provide some measure of social protection. Whether this does protect women in public spaces is an empirical issue.

The new phenomenon of veiling has unleashed a torrent of debate among feminists and others not only over what constitutes proper Islamic dress but also what a citizen's rights are in a secular society. The poem below captures some of the questions and dilemmas involved, complicating any understanding that relies on simple identities between veiling and modesty for men and women:

O Lord, my girlfriend does not wear a burkha
She tells me, those who are faithful
They never look at a woman's body with evil eyes
They gaze only with Allah's pure eyes
Only the lechers and unfaithful shout for burkha.
Let Allah put a black blindfold on their impure sight.
What is your judgment?
Look, the tailor eagerly awaits your answer
Crafty business plans: he waits with scissors and cloth
Waiting to turn on the sewing machine at your order.
Think it over, not bad - this idea of mine
Men wearing sharp clothes, all the airs
Even a prayer cap.
But the imbecile walks with a black blindfold
In the streets, not a burkha in sight
But people easily see
Who is the lecher and who is the faithful.[xxxviii]

When the terms of discourse are limited to religion versus secularism, certain conversations are invariably silenced. So it is that some secularists will defend the increasing commodification and sexualization of women's bodies in the commercial sphere on the grounds that the exposure of women's bodies provides an effective counter to right wing fundamentalist thought. Complicity with structures of exploitation and the production of female subjectivities through consumer capitalist practices are hardly a matter of concern here. Capitalist critique can have no place in a world in which beauty pageants are understood to be steps toward emancipation.

Conclusion

Over the years, the veil has acquired a surplus or excess of meaning, most explicitly in relation to Islam's place in (western) modernity and secular political practices. Indeed, the cycle of veiling and de-

veiling "from above" reveals a profound anxiety about a place in the 'modern' that is symptomatic of colonial and postcolonial societies.

Characteristic of our age perhaps, we now have a day devoted to protecting the right to veil. September 3 is marked across the world as International Hijab Solidarity Day. In 2005, the Protect Hijab Society in Britain marked the day by inviting all Muslims and non-Muslims to attend a gathering to celebrate the Hijab, and to express their support for freedom of dress and religion. In Bangladesh, the local chapter of the Assembly for the Protection of Hijab organized a seminar on the occasion. The then Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs Minister spoke at the forum. Among other things, the Minister declared that "Wearing decent clothes strengthens women's empowerment."[xxxix] The statement is deeply troubling for it highlights an implied relationship between decency and veiling, as well as between non-veiling and immodesty, that increasingly dominates mainstream discourses on the subject.

Yet the veil is more than stereotype or icon, some thing to condemn or glorify, depending on one's ideological stance. To appreciate the social meanings of the veil, we must always ask what is at stake and for whom. Veiling should not be conflated with a lack of agency or women's oppression. Nor should its absence be automatically interpreted as an indicator of freedom. Its meanings, functions and deployment are fluid and context-specific. The veil can empower in some cases: it may constitute a site of resistance; serve as a marker of minority community identity and, on occasion, it may even protect women from street harassment. Veiling can be a sign of elite status, of respectability, a marker of class and sexual boundaries. Other meanings and contexts arise from Islamic revival movements which are not exclusively reactions to western cultural and political domination, in which veiling is one way through which Muslim women cultivate moral virtue and closeness to God.[xl]

As with any other cultural practice, when enforced from above, whether by the state or other patriarchal structures, the veil is the source of considerable oppression. The Taliban may have provided the most spectacular example in this regard. Separatist war zones appear to be prolific breeding grounds for religious ideologies in

which men seek to control women's identity and sexuality through seclusion and/or enforced veiling. For instance, in Kashmir, a fringe group that proclaimed all Muslim women in the area should be covered from head to toe threw acid at those women who dared to defy their orders. Closer to home, reports suggest that the notorious vigilante forces of *Bangla Bhai*, in their efforts to stamp out other underground parties and establish domination in northern Bangladesh, are claiming they will establish 'real' Islam. A primary means of establishing their Islamic credentials has been to enforce 'Taliban like' measures on women in the areas under their control.

To talk about parda and stereotyping, especially in a globalizing context, is to talk about constructing the Self and Other, about inequalities and hierarchies, about contests over what counts as secular and what counts as Muslim. There are many ruptures as well as continuities between the old empire and the new. There are also new forms of feminist collusions, complicities and resistance. Unfortunately, it appears that for all sides, Muslim women's bodies function as ciphers for the cultural and political possibilities of 'Muslim society' as a whole. As long as feminists are trapped in this dichotomous universe, questions of equality and justice will always be trumped by the urgent need to 'save' Muslim women.

Notes

This paper is a revised version of a lecture presented at a national workshop on *Women, Purdah and Diversity* organized by the Forum on Women and Security in Asia (Fowsia) in Dhaka in 2003.

[i] Edward W. Said "Representing the Colonized: Anthropology's Interlocutors" in *Critical Inquiry*, Volume 15:2, 2002. pp 205-225. p. 211, emphasis added.

[ii] Homa Hoodfar "The Veil in Their Minds and On Our Heads: The Persistence of Colonial Images of Muslim Women" in *Resources for Feminist Research*, Volume 22 Number ¾, 1989. pp. 5-17. p. 5, emphasis added.

[iii] Niloufer Gole "The Gendered Nature of the Public Sphere" in *Public Culture*. Vol. 10: 1. 1997. pp. 61-81. p. 61

[iv] See Barbara Cooper "The Strength in the Song: Muslim Personhood, Audible Capital and Hausa Women's Performance of the Hajj" in *Social Text* 60, Vol. 17, No. 3, Fall 1999. pp. 87-109

[v] For a comprehensive analysis, see Mahmood Mamdani *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, The Cold War and the Roots of Terror*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2004.

[vi] See for instance, Lila Abu-Lughod *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 1986.

[vii] For instance, among the nomadic Tuareg communities of the Sahara.

[viii] For examples of the practice of veiling among different communities, castes and classes in South Asia, see Hanna Papanek and Gail Minault (eds.) *Separate Worlds*. Columbus, MO: South Asia Books. 1982.

[ix] Hoodfar, op. cit. p. 6. Clothing has been a significant marker of class and community boundaries in many societies. In Kerala, for instance, lower caste women were prohibited by custom from wearing breast cloths, which was reserved exclusively as an upper caste practice. As opportunities for social mobility opened up in the nineteenth century, this customary prohibition was increasingly challenged. See Robert Hardgrave "The Breast-Cloth Controversy: Caste Consciousness and Social Change in Southern Travancore" in *The Indian Social and Economic History Review*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 1968.

[x] There is a huge literature on the subject. For one of the seminal works in this line, see Lata Mani "Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India." In Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds.) *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press. Pp. 88-126. See also Mrinalini Sinha *Colonial Masculinity: The "manly Englishman" and the "effeminate Bengali" in the Late Nineteenth Century*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995.

[xi] Gayatri Spivak "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (editors.) *Marxism and the Interpretation of Cultures*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press. 1988. pp. 271-313

[xii] Leila Ahmed *Women and Gender in Islam: The Historical Roots of a Contemporary Debate*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994.

[xiii] Hoodfar op. cit. p. 8, emphasis added.

[xiv] Antoinette Burton "The White Woman's Burden" in Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Stroebel (editors) *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance*. Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1992. pp. 137-157

[xv] Mervat Hatem "Through Each Other's Eyes" in *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance*. Op. cit. pp. 35-60

[xvi] The impact of the ban on women's lives varied by class and social standing. Women from the urban elite certainly benefited. Poor women who tended not to veil and who lived in rural areas, where the state's hold was weak, were not especially affected one way or the other. Lower middle class urban women, those who supported families and observed some form of veiling, were the ones who suffered the most. Many gave up their much-needed livelihoods rather than go out 'naked.' For details, see Hoodfar, op. cit.

[xvii] Valentine Moghadam "Reform, Revolution and Reaction: the Trajectory of the Woman Question in Afghanistan" in Valentine Moghadam (edited) *Gender and*

National Identity: Women and Politics in Muslim Societies. London: Zed Books, 1994. pp. 81-109. p. 92.

[xviii] For a sophisticated analysis, see Afsaheh Najmabadi "Power, Morality and the New Muslim Womanhood" in Ali Banuazizi and Myron Weiner (editors) *The Politics of Social Transformation in Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1994.

[xix] Minoo Moallem "Transnationalism, Feminism and Fundamentalism" in Caren Kaplan et al. (editors) *Between Woman and Nation: Nationalisms, Transnational Feminisms and the State*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1999. pp. 320-348. p. 333

[xx] For an elaboration of this point, see Moallem op. cit. p. 332.

[xxi] The analysis in this section draws on earlier essay. See Dina Siddiqi *Religion, Rights and the Politics of Transnational Feminism in Bangladesh*. CENISEAS Papers 2. Guwahati: Centre for Northeast India, South and Southeast Asia Studies, 2003. pp. 10-15.

[xxii] See Moallem op. cit. p. 320.

[xxiii] Moallem refers specifically to what she calls Western egalitarian feminism. She argues, quite persuasively, that this kind of feminism possesses features in common with fundamentalism.

[xxiv] Here I draw on Sally Merry's analysis of UN women's rights documents and discourses. See Sally Merry "Human Rights Law and the Demonization of Culture" in *Polar: Political and Legal Anthropology Review*. Vol. 26:1, 2003. pp 55-77.

[xxv] Ibid

[xxvi] Bobby Sayyid *A Fundamental Fear: Eurocentrism and the Emergence of Islamism*. London: Zed Books, 1997. p. 9

[xxvii] This could be interpreted as an unfair characterization of the Feminist Majority, which played a critical role in preventing the US oil company UNOCAL from completing a pipeline deal with the Taliban. Clearly, these feminists were perfectly aware of the relationship between foreign policy and women's rights elsewhere. It is the *consequences* of the selective nature of their concerns to which I wish to draw attention.

[xxviii] For details on Afghan women's socio-economic conditions before the Taliban take-over, see Valentine Moghadam "Patriarchy, The Taleban and Politics of Public Space in Afghanistan" *Women's Studies International Forum*. Volume 25: 1, 2002. pp. 19-31.

[xxix] Lila Abu-Lughod "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?" in *American Anthropologist*. September 2002, Volume 104:3. Pp. 783-790.

[xxx] Bobby Sayyid op. cit. p. 9

[xxxi] See Sally Merry op. cit.

[xxxii] Joel Ruet "Veiled in France" in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Bombay. Vol. 39: 17, April 24-30, 2004. pp. 1664-1665.

[xxxiii] Hoodfar, op. cit. p. 15.

[xxxiv] For details see Niloufer Gole "Islam in Public: New Visibilities and New Imaginaries" in *Public Culture*. Vol. 14: 1, 2002. pp. 173-190

[xxxv] Ibid. p. 184.

[xxxvi] Sabrina Karim Murshed "Burkah Sale in Slump" in *The Daily Star*, June 27, 2004. p. 18.

[xxxvii] See Dina M. Siddiqi *Women in Question: Gender and Labor in Bangladeshi Factories*. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1996.

[xxxviii] *Burkha* by Farhad Mazhar
http://www.arts.yorku.ca/sosc/sasia/poetry/mazhar.html accessed November, 2005.

[xxxix] The Daily Star, Sunday September 4, 2005. Front page.

[xl] For an excellent analysis, see Saba Mahmood "Feminist Theory, Embodiment and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival" in *Cultural Anthropology* Vol. 6:2, 2001. pp. 202-235.

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