

“Un/Veiled: Feminist Art from the Arab/Muslim Diaspora”

■ Rachel Epp Buller

Independent Scholar in Art History

Shrouded with exoticism and stereotype, the physical veil reveals the instinctive voyeuristic aspect of what is strange or other. It is this ambiguity of meaning that parallels the concept of veiling and exposes an exaggerated drama, a script of how the West reads Arabic culture (Zineb Sedira, as cited in Pasquier, 1999, p. 217).

Images of Muslim women in global popular culture convey ideas of restriction and oppression: to many in the West, the covered Arab woman appears a victim, unable to express herself in word and deed. Artists and writers from within Arab cultures have challenged such simplistic readings, some offering alternative readings of living behind the veil, others offering the possibility of a feminist existence within an apparently oppressive society, all challenging the Orientalist mindset implied by such assumptions. Zineb Sedira, as quoted above, pinpoints the Western fascination with veiling and the degree to which this has informed cultural stereotypes and misrepresentations. This article will investigate the work of four artists living in the Arab diaspora — Emily Jacir, Lalla Essaydi, Zineb Sedira, and Shirin Neshat — each of whom examines her own culture and produces feminist art about women's spheres and roles. As artists address issues of veiling and bodily representation with Islamic

culture, it becomes readily apparent that veiling has not one singular meaning, either in the West or in the East, but that its meanings are varied and shifting. As Sedira says, the veil is “a puzzling emblem of progress, then of backwardness; a badge now of status, then of domination; a symbol of purity and a sign of feminine silence and constraint” (Pasquier, 1999, p. 216).

While female artists have differing homelands, from Iran and Palestine to Morocco and Algeria, each attempts in her work to negotiate two parts of her identity: how to claim her heritage within the diasporic situation, and how to read and critique the place of women in that heritage—within Islam, and within the stereotypical perceptions of Islam as perpetrated by the West. Through her appearance, veiled or not, the Arab woman is seen as a purveyor of Oriental exoticism, though also, in recent years, as a potential threat of irrational violence. Living in the diaspora, whether by choice or by exile, each artist confronts her status as “Other” in relation to dominant cultural images, a difference that has a lengthy history. As Edward Said (1978) first argued in *Orientalism*, Western writers from the South Asian and the Indian subcontinent sought to create differences between East and West, inevitably portraying the East as a weak, irrational, feminized

“Other” to the strong rational masculine West. Simultaneously, each artist addresses the status of women within Islam. Part of the colonial narrative has been to portray Islam as a culture oppressive to women, and thus an inferior one that needs to be liberated by the West. This is not to deny the oppression of women; patriarchal Islamic societies subordinate women as do patriarchal Western societies. Colonialists, however, employed their vague understandings of Muslim societies to a political and circumspect end. As Leila Ahmed (1992) argues, “The idea that “Other” men, men in colonized societies or societies beyond the borders of the civilized West, oppressed women was used, in the rhetoric of colonialism, to render morally justifiable its project of undermining or eradicating the cultures of colonized peoples” (p. 151).

The Arab woman was problematic for Orientalists and colonialists in the nineteenth century, for she resisted representation through her veiling. Appropriating the language of feminism, colonialists denounced the practice of veiling as degrading to women. Meyda Yegenoglu (1998) suggests that the colonizers sought to unveil Arab women, as they sought to unveil knowledge of the region, as a means of making visible and asserting control over a potential threat: “It was only by rendering Muslim women’s bodies visible that they became capable of being recodified, redefined, and reformulated according to new Western codes. The regime and control involved in colonial power needs the creation of docile, obedient subjects” (p. 116). Indeed, some embraced the unveiling, even in the nineteenth century. *Tahrir Al-Mar’a* (The Liberation of Woman), written by Qassim Amin and published in 1899, targeted veiling as a barrier to women’s liberation. The text, however, as Ahmed (1992) details, is mere rhetoric, an ultimately conservative replication of colonialist thought that proclaimed the inherent superiority of the West and the backwardness of the East. In the early twentieth century, the Iranian ruler Reza Shah, hoping to portray himself and his people as modernized and westernized, issued a proclamation banning the veil, a move that testified again to the assimilation of colonialist perception in assuming the inferiority of the East.

Moves to do away with the veil were not wholeheartedly embraced by the popular classes, however. As Guity Nashat observes, for most Iranians the veil was not a symbol of oppression but “a sign of propriety and a means of protection against the menacing eyes of male strangers” (as cited in Ahmed, 1992, p. 165). Similarly, resistance to colonialism and to the imperialism of the West has occasioned affirmation of the veil, veiling even as a symbol of national identity. During the Algerian War of the 1950s, French officials forced Algerian women to unveil themselves publicly in an act of mandatory liberation (Hélie-

Lucas, 1990). Algerians then embraced the veil as a way to affirm their own culture and resist that of the occupier. Veiling, then, becomes layered with meanings, not simply a possible sign of the oppression of women, but one of national identity, resistance to colonialism and imperialism, and a rejection of Western values.

Amidst the multivalence of veiling, Arab feminists continue to debate the issue. In *Women and Gender in Islam*, Leila Ahmed situates veiling within an historical framework of colonial legacies and argues against an uncritical embrace of Western feminism that necessitates a rejection of one’s own culture (1992). Moroccan writer Fatima Mernissi, in *Beyond the Veil* and *The Veil and the Male Elite*, asserts that the spirit of Islam was not to restrict women but to secure their equality and therefore argues against veiling (1975; 1987). As Reina Lewis (2003) points out, “For many women the requirement to veil is often the least of their problems in the face of economic and social deprivation. In other instances, women’s veiling is strategic, providing an alibi for behaviors outside the home that would otherwise be deemed gender subversive” (p. 14). Azar Nafisi’s recent memoir (2003), *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, includes many instances of such gender subversion, hidden beneath the veil, as her students gather to read forbidden novels.

It is within these contexts that artists in the Arab/Muslim diaspora address the status and the bodily representation of women in Islam. Emily Jacir is a Palestinian-American artist who grew up in Saudi Arabia and now divides her time between New York City and the West Bank town of Ramallah. Many of her photographs, videos, and installations explore geographical and colonialist concepts of boundaries and homelands, examining ideas of exchange and conditions of exile and displacement. In *From Paris to Riyadh* (Drawings for my Mother), 1999-2001, Jacir identifies the diasporic experience of women moving across borders. The work, a series of drawings in black ink on white vellum, isolates body parts in silhouette — arms, legs, and parts of torsos. The forms stem from Jacir’s memories of watching her mother use a felt pen to black out forbidden elements in *Vogue* magazines, such as exposed bodies, as they flew home from trips abroad. Jacir isolates these illicit images to form the basis of her drawings, inverting her mother’s self-censorship by calling attention to the prohibited display of flesh from Western mass media culture. As John Menick (2004) suggests, “like all fig leaves, the black forms comically call attention to what should be hidden, and force one to imagine what is supposedly so hazardous to see” (p. 29).

Jacir’s installation plays on the binaries of good and bad, West and East, liberal and censorious, that occupy much mainstream thinking, where the Arab veiled woman is

inevitably oppressed and can only be unveiled by Western liberation. In stating her intentions for the work, Jacir (2004) underscores these perceived binaries yet disrupts them to point out a commonality on the social status of women: "Most people kept interpreting [that] it was about the repression of Middle Eastern women when it wasn't. It was about my discomfort with being in a society whose women were completely commodified. Being back and forth between these two spaces — one of commodification and the other of banning the image of the female body — which [sic] was equally repressing and equally discomfoting" (p. 19).

Through Jacir's methods, the female body ceases to have coherent significance, for it is fragmented to such an extent as to be barely recognizable. Using semi-transparent paper, Jacir traces the exposed parts of women's bodies from magazine pages, filling them in with black marker in a recreation of her mother's actions. Some pages are filled with multiple appendages while others have only the tiniest of markings, indicating the disparities in women's representation from page to page in the original source. Jacir's methods recall those of 1920s photomontage, by Dadaists and others, where bodies were appropriated, fragmented, then recombined, often for a wider cultural critique. By fragmenting the commercial exhibition of women's bodies, Jacir effectively erases the original display of sexuality, combining the fragments instead to level a critique of the ways in which the representations of women's bodies are controlled — whether commodified and objectified in the West or banned in the East.

Jacir's fragmentations further speak to the anonymity of women. Women living behind the veil have little in the way of outwardly visible identities, and/or, the veil may allow them greater freedoms because of this anonymity. At the same time, Jacir's drawings imply that, through their commodification, Western women are made equally anonymous. By fragmenting their bodies to bits and pieces, Jacir removes any sense of identification and ensures their anonymity.

French-Algerian artist Zineb Sedira counters the anonymity of the veil in her photographic installation, *Don't Do To Her What You Did To Me*, No.2, (1996). Through a sequential series of photographs, Sedira makes visible the veiling process, showing herself in various angles in states of partial veiling. Using herself as the photographic subject, Sedira asserts through her series the individual identities of women despite their veils, which in turn combats Western mythologies about veiled women. As the artist herself asserts, "The unveiled woman is seen as an individual and civilized subject, a far cry from the over-represented and culturally constructed veiled woman, who is

considered anonymous, passive and exotic" (as cited in Pasquier, 1999, p. 70).

Sedira's installation also confronts the viewers about their own voyeuristic expectations. The veiling process is a private one, so already we are intruders on this ritual. While Sedira makes visible this private moment, however, never does she meet the viewers' gaze. Sedira's series makes explicit the voyeurism that has surrounded the Arab woman's body in cultural discourse. While it is easy to gaze on someone unseen, it becomes less comfortable to have our voyeurism implicitly acknowledged in this way. By exposing the act of veiling, Sedira attempts to broaden the concept to include the idea of mental veils as well. In much of her work, Sedira uses the physical veil as a metaphor for the "veiling of the mind", which she reads as censorship and self-censorship in Western and Muslim cultures. In Sedira's view, the mental veil "is not about a forced Muslim enclosure but rather about an awareness of the cultural paradigms that inform our ideas around sexuality, gender and emotional space" (as cited in Pasquier, 1999, p. 58). In particular, Sedira focuses on how we metaphorically veil ourselves from potentially uncomfortable situations. She asks, "How often do we choose not to notice — or not to read — our surroundings, because doing so would make us feel uncomfortable?" (Pasquier, 1999, p. 58). It is precisely this sense of discomfort that is elicited from the viewer regarding her photographs.

The photographs of Lalla Essaydi, a Moroccan-born artist now living abroad, address veiling and the progression of age. Though Essaydi asserts that veiling is a largely abandoned practice in Morocco, traditionally, Moroccan girls began veiling as young as the age of ten. In her photographs, Essaydi speaks of veiling in part as an historical referent and in part as a psychological symbol. Essaydi's photographs, shot in a house in Morocco, have as their basis the artist's childhood memories of transgression. The house, owned by Essaydi's family, was the site of punishment. When a young woman of the family flouted expectations, she was sent to this house to spend a month in silence, accompanied only by a servant. As an adult, Essaydi returns to confront this space with other women, the women and girls who populate her photographs. Of her collaborators, Essaydi (2005) says, "The women participate because they feel that they are contributing to the greater emancipation of Arab women, and at the same time conveying to a Western audience their very rich traditions, often misunderstood in the West" (p. 26).

In a series of photographs entitled *Converging Territories*, 2005, Essaydi maps a terrain of women and fabric, where seemingly endless bolts of cloth veil the women to vary-

ing degrees, sometimes completely. Not merely an instrument of veiling, however, the cloth also doubles as a writing surface. For weeks before she begins photographing, Essaydi fills the cloth with complex, diaristic narratives. As is her intent, Essaydi's actions blur the boundaries of gendered segregation regarding specific cultural practices. Essaydi (2005) says, "In employing calligraphic writing, I am practicing a sacred Islamic art that is usually inaccessible to women. To apply this writing in henna, an adornment worn and applied only by women, adds a further subversive twist" (p. 27). Henna is a critical element in the life of a Moroccan woman, applied at times of puberty, marriage, and after the birth of a woman's first child. To employ henna for calligraphic writing is to disrupt the binaries of male/female, public/private, language/decoration.

In an untitled photograph from the *Converging Territories* series, Essaydi features a woman and child subsumed by cloth. The adult woman, presumably the mother, is fully veiled save for her eyes and forehead. The girl on her lap is only partially covered, her head and hair are fully visible and her bare feet emerge from beneath the cloth. With the progression of age comes increased veiling. A bowl of henna sits before them and every surface, even the visible skin of their faces and feet, is covered in calligraphy. Set in a childhood house of silence, the photographs are filled with Essaydi's silent words. Her writing gives voice to that little girl exiled to the house of transgression just as it gives voice to those women pictured, who seem metaphorically silenced by the veil. At the same time, Essaydi's words bestow another form of silence: silence for the viewer who cannot read her words. Since Essaydi posits an autobiographical basis for much of her work, one might even imagine the little girl pictured here as a young Essaydi, accompanied by a housekeeper, but forced to keep silent for the duration of her punishment.

Shirin Neshat is an Iranian artist and filmmaker who moved to the United States after high school to study art. Absent for the Iranian Revolution of 1979, she first returned to visit her homeland in 1990 and was shocked by the changed cultural landscape. The practice of veiling, banned early in the century by Reza Shah, was reinstated following the revolution. Shortly after that first return visit, Neshat began a photographic series entitled *Women of Allah*, 1993-97, in which she constructed narratives of militant Muslim women. The photographs each contain references to veiling and to armament, and like Essaydi, Neshat covers some of her surfaces with writing, this time in Farsi.

In the *Women of Allah* series, Neshat poses visual questions regarding the roles of women in the violence and martyrdom of revolution and challenges Western precon-

ceptions of Oriental women. "I see my work," Neshat says, "as a visual discourse on the subjects of feminism and contemporary Islam — a discourse that puts certain myths and realities to the test, claiming that they are far more complex than most of us have imagined" (Matt, 2000, p. 13). Through her photographs, it becomes apparent that she sees stark contradictions surrounding women's roles in Islamic revolution. In *Rebellious Silence*, of 1994, a woman fully veiled except for the oval of her face stands with the long barrel of a rifle upright in front of her. The discrepancy is immediate: while women are once again veiled and barred from participation in most public spheres, they are compelled to participate in revolution and war. Women, too, must be willing to martyr themselves in the name of Allah. Hence, the striking juxtaposition of an armed but veiled woman is an image that struck Neshat when she returned to visit her homeland. Through her recreation of the contrast, Neshat implicitly challenges the Orientalist (mis)perception of Muslim women as passive and subordinate, substituting instead proud militant women whose visible flesh pressed against weapons of death alludes to the figure of the *femme fatale* (Sherwell, 1999).

Hamid Dabashi (2002) writes of Neshat "performing" the veil. The artist often uses herself as model and employs the veil as a tool in constructing photographs with shifting and manifold meanings. John Ravenal (2005) argues that the *Women of Allah* photographs reflect an intensified Orientalist view of Muslim women in recent years as fanatical and violent, shifting from earlier assumptions of erotic submissiveness. Simultaneously, however, Alison Donnell (2003) asserts that in the post-9/11 era, Western media perpetuate Orientalist assumptions of veiled women as victims, choosing to ignore instances of women's resistance and agency. Neshat's photographic series of veil-as-performance, then, reinforces the complexities she asserts in our understandings of feminism and contemporary Islam. Indeed, her series is as much about a westernized audience as about Iranian women living behind the veil. Jacqueline Larson (1997) suggests that the photographs "are also about America's gaze [...] and what America expects to see" (p. 7).

Like Essaydi, Neshat makes use of handwritten text within her photographs. For each work in the series, Neshat's point of departure is a verse of Iranian feminist poetry. The verse inspires each particular set-up; Neshat then brings it full circle, ending with the poem by writing it in pen-and-ink on the surface of the photograph. The verses, many on the theme of love, establish yet another contradiction within the images, with notions of love removed from other apparent themes of veiling and martyrdom. At the same time, the poems function metaphorically to give voice to the women pictured. Neshat says,

"The written text is the voice of the photograph. It breaks the silence of the still woman in the portrait" (Goldberg, 2002, p. 67). In *Rebellious Silence*, the woman pictured is doubly silenced — through her veil, and through the gun that seals her lips, barring them from speech. As Neshat's title suggests, however, her silence is rebellious: while she may not be allowed to speak freely, her potential for violent actions would speak louder than words. Simultaneously, she rebels against her Western viewers' expectations, subverting assumptions of aggression and instead proffering verses on love that themselves remain silent, unreadable to many of her viewers.

Emily Jacir, Lalla Essaydi, Zineb Sedira, and Shirin Neshat are not the only artists living in the Arab/Muslim diaspora to confront the cultural perceptions of veiling and bodily representation within Islam. Jananne Al-Ani, Ghazel,

Samta Benyahia, and Majida Khattari are all diaspora artists who examine political, social, and cultural dynamics of veiling through performances, photographic installations, and videos. Shadafarin Ghadirian, an artist still working in Iran, reformulates historical images of veiling within her photographic studio. Recent scholarship by David Bailey (2003) and Fran Lloyd (1999) testify to the diversity of contemporary Arab women's art while also underscoring the recurrent theme of veiling. For too many years, the Arab woman's body, hidden beneath the veil, has been the object of the colonialist gaze — eroticized, passive, and silent. Reclaiming this body from a continuing history of misunderstanding and misrepresentation, these artists set forth insightful critiques that address the contradictions and complexities of feminism within Islamic cultures. And this time they will not be silenced.

References

- Ahmed, L. (1992). *Women and gender in Islam: Historical roots of a modern debate*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Bailey, D. A. & Tawadros, G. (2003). *Veil: Veiling, representation and contemporary art*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Dabashi, H. (2002). Bordercrossings: Shirin Neshat's body of evidence. In *Shirin Neshat* (pp. 36-59). Milan: Edizioni Charta.
- Donnell, A. (2003). Visibility, violence and voice? Attitudes to veiling post-11 September. In Bailey & Tawadros (Eds.), *Veil* (pp. 120-135). Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Essaydi, L. (2005). *Converging territories*. New York: PowerHouse Books & Laurence Miller Gallery.
- Goldberg, R. (2002). Shirin Neshat: Material witness. In *Shirin Neshat* (pp. 66-69). Milan: Edizioni Charta.
- Hélie-Lucas, M.-A. (1990). Women, nationalism and religion in the Algerian liberation struggle. In M. Badan & M. Cooke (Eds.), *Opening the gates: A century of Arab feminist writing*, Indiana: Indiana University Press.
- Jacir, E. (2003). *Emily Jacir belongings: Arbeiten/Works 1998-2003*, Linz: O.K. Center for Contemporary Art Upper Austria.
- Larson, J. (1997). What If the Object Should Shoot?—"Women of Allah" As Veiled Criticism." In *Shirin Neshat "Women of Allah"* (pp. 5-25). Vancouver: Artspeak Gallery.
- Lewis, R. (2003). Preface to Bailey & Tawadros (Eds.), *Veil* (pp. 8-15). Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Lloyd, F. (1999). *Contemporary Arab women's art: Dialogues of the present*, London: Women's Art Library.
- Matt, G. (2000). In conversation with Shirin Neshat. In *Shirin Neshat* (pp. 12-29). Vienna: Kunsthalle Wien and London: Serpentine Gallery.
- Menick, J. (2003). Undiminished returns: The work of Emily Jacir 1998-2002. In *Emily Jacir belongings* (pp. 20-45). Linz: O.K. Center for Contemporary Art Upper Austria.
- Mernissi, F. (1975). *Beyond the veil: Male-female dynamics in modern Muslim society*. Cambridge: Schenkman Publishing Company, Inc.
- Mernissi, F. (1987). *The veil and the male elite: A feminist interpretation of women's rights in Islam*, (M. J. Lakeland, Trans.). Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.
- Nafisi, A. (2003). *Reading Lolita in Tehran. A memoir in books*. New York: Random House.
- Pasquier, E. M. (1999). Zineb Sedira: The oblique gaze. In F. Lloyd (Ed.), *Contemporary Arab women's art* (pp. 214-218). London: Women's Art Library.
- Ravenal, J. B. (2005). Shirin Neshat: Double Vision. In N. Broude & M. D. Garrard (Eds.), *Reclaiming female agency: Feminist art history after postmodernism* (pp. 447-458). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Rollig, S. (2003). Interview with Emily Jacir. In *Emily Jacir belongings* (pp. 7-19). Linz: O.K. Center for Contemporary Art Upper Austria.
- Said, E. (1978). *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Sherwell, T. (1999). Bodies in representation: Contemporary Arab women's art. In F. Lloyd (Ed.), *Contemporary Arab women's art* (pp. 58-69). London: Women's Art Library.
- Yegenoglu, M. (1998). *Colonial fantasies: Towards a feminist reading of Orientalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.