VEILING AND WOMEN'S INTELLIGIBILITY

John Borneman[*]

CONTEMPORARY IMAGININGS

We are fascinated by the veiling of women. From Morocco to Iran to Indonesia, as well as in Europe and North America, veiling has come to signify unbreachable differences between the West and Islam, achieving the status of an icon similar to the Christian cross or the national flag. In the post-Cold War imagination, the veil stands for so many things in so many different cultural contexts—Muslims, women's rights, women's oppression, tradition, beauty—that it has become a classic social fact, simultaneously indexing economic, political, cultural, and religious currents. At the same time, the icon and the word have come to closely mirror each other, especially in English, leading to a further veiling of the multitude of social forms the veil takes. Rarely is it worn innocuously. In some places, wearing a veil carries the same connotations as bearing a cross or carrying a flag—grave, involuntary belonging. Today, it is most closely identified with the issue of women's status in a politicized Islam. Experiences in Iran are modular for this politicized identification, as veiling was briefly abolished by Reza Shah in 1936, only to be made compulsory under the revolutionary Islamic regime in 1980. Various political regimes have since followed suit in making it compulsory for Muslim women to wear the veil (most famously, the Afghan Taliban and the Saudi Arabian monarchy) or to not wear the veil (as in the case of schoolgirls in republican France).[1]

Reducing the veil's significance to a particular conjunction of

* Department of Anthropology, Princeton University. Professor Borneman received his Ph.D. from Harvard University in 1989, and has taught and lectured widely in Europe and the Levant, where he has also conducted field research. He was also Senior Fulbright Professor at Humboldt University in 1995, and at the University of Aleppo, Syria, in 2004. He has written widely on kinship and the state in Germany, working until 1989 in the context of the political division of Germany, and after on unification processes.

1 For feminist works on the veil and gender politics in the Middle East, see FATIMA MERNISSI ET AL., THE VALE AND THE MALE ELITE: A FEMINIST INTERPRETATION OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN ISLAM (1992); LEILA AHMED, WOMEN AND GENDER IN ISLAM: HISTORICAL ROOTS OF A MODERN DEBATE (1998); DAVID BAILEY & GILANE TAWADROS, VEIL: VEILING, REPRESENTATION, AND CONTEMPORARY ART (2003).

religion and gender, or to a particular conflict between religious and secular authorities, betrays a rich history of veiling and the wide variation in its meaning. When this conjunction is used to frame contemporary issues of constitutional and legal order, it presents the veil and its regulation as a problem in need of a solution rather than asking how this symbol comes to be regarded as a problem. What makes the issue of veiling a problem for women and men, and for religion and the law?

The understanding of the veil, or veiling, as a problem relies, at minimum, on three plausible but ultimately misleading assumptions that do not take into account what goes on at a less conscious and rationalized level before the symbols and their representations are understood as public problems.

First, it is assumed that the religious revivals of today are a problem resulting from pluralism, specifically from religious diversity. This assumption holds that formerly stable religious communities whose members now live in diasporas experience a dislocation between their religious loyalties and socio-political identities, which in turn provides the motivation for religious revivals and counter-reactions from the communities in which these "new" residents now reside. While the influence of religious revivals on current conflicts may arguably be greater than at many times in the past, the movement of peoples and ideas, including highly contentious and conflict-producing religious ideas, is in itself nothing new in human history. The Levant, in particular, from the Axial Age to the present, has been a site of constant movement and confrontation of peoples, resulting in often radical displacements but always in pluralist configurations of culture, religion, and politics. The cultural diversity of the Levant is a longstanding empirical fact. It has not always been experienced as a problem, however, and that is the point: religious diversity becomes so only when framed in certain ways. Perhaps there is something today about the particular way in which the experience of pluralism—specifically in the registers of religion and gender—is framed by actors in the legal-political and religious fields that makes it a problem. It might be more productive, then, to think of law and religion as not merely reacting to (or solving) problems associated with pluralism and global dislocation, but to ask how they frame the experience of this diversity and dislocation in ways that create or reinforce this experience as a problem.

Second, it is assumed that the larger role played by religion today in the public sphere is leading to a blurring of the distinction between public and private spheres. This assumption holds true only if this distinction was in fact at some time unambiguous, distinct, and empirically ascertainable. However, the distinction between public and

private is an analytical and not empirical one. The line between these spheres has always been difficult to identify because it is empirically in flux, a site of struggle with changing ideational content. An alternative way to understand this distinction is to compare its Cold War framing with its contemporary one. If the complaint in the secular West during the Cold War, especially against totalitarian governments, was that there was too much government interference in the private sphere, then the post-Cold War debate is all about calling on the government to regulate the public sphere. This public sphere is empirically enlarged and integrated into wider networks increasingly evaluated in terms of norms of inclusion and participation that have become part of a global discourse on equality. The analytical question, then, must begin with an understanding of this enlarged public sphere and the reciprocal demands it and the private sphere place on each other. These demands often lead not to a blurring but to a hardening of the boundaries between the two spheres. In this context, there are different gendered and religio-political investments in the two spheres, and in where the line between them should be drawn. Problems arise in the attempt to regulate this public sphere not only because of boundary issues between the secular and religious, however, but primarily because both religious and secular authorities are asked to respond to the new demands for inclusion and participation, and to offer solutions and regulations that at the same time reshape the private sphere in unintended ways.

Third, it is assumed that religious revivals, or religion generally, challenges the "dictates of reason" and the Enlightenment project. To be sure, "reason" and this project have been subject to serious critique, especially following the publication of Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.[2] Most religious critiques of this project do not differ substantially from secular-liberal ones, though they tend to propose different solutions. Only a few of the current religious critiques, like earlier Marxist ones, are revolutionary, in the sense that they seek to overturn the entire order of things and thus reject any need for rational legitimation (precisely because the old regime lacks legitimacy). The larger challenge today, irrespective of the source of criticism, is not to the dictates of reason but to finding forms of legitimation that no longer rely on a narrative of progress.

Both secular and religious critiques of the Enlightenment, including those of most forms of "religious fundamentalisms," rely on reason to formulate their goals. Reason itself dictates nothing, however, nor does it rule anything. Reason rationalizes values, which are constitutive of any cultural group. It submits values to certain thought processes. Secular thinkers, such as myself, for example, are not always

[2] MAX HORKHEIMER & THEODOR ADORNO, DIALECTIC OF ENLIGHTENMENT (Continuum International Publishing Group 2002) (1944).

paragons of reason, even when using it. We are not always rational, and never only rational, but also emotional and driven by dictates about which we are not conscious and over which reason has minimal or no control. Law, also, does not follow reason as a dictate, but is only the result of a deliberative method that requires the use of reason. The framing here is key, because neither law nor religion as activities are necessarily more deliberative than the other, and they do not necessarily exclude each other; historical examples where both have used reason, or even faulty reason, to pursue rational ends are legion. It might therefore be more productive not to oppose the rational and irrational, and not to assign the former to secular constitutional scholars and the latter to religious ones, but to understand the values proposed by each as well as the rational and irrational investments in these values.

With these three reframings in mind, the focus of this article will be quite narrow: to analyze one symbol or practice—the veil or veiling—that has been invested with great value by both constitutional and religious authorities. What is at stake in these investments? It will focus on the contributions of twenty women in a recent book, *The Veil: Women Writers on its History, Lore, and Politics*, edited by Jennifer Heath.[3] It hopes to make clear the nature of cultural conflicts around this symbol, and the place of the registers of law and religion in current conflicts about the shape of public spheres.

WOMEN'S DRESS AND FACE

The women who have contributed histories, memoirs, ethnographies, and critical essays to *The Veil* make it plain that veiling can be motivated by a range of aesthetic goals, political ideologies, economic constraints, personal choices, and opportunities. Their insistence on pluralism and sociopolitical context, necessary though it is, elides important questions: why has the veil become iconic? What explains its present power and its appeal to Muslims in particular?

To begin with, the veil is about women's dress in public. Most women who veil do so in order to enter the public sphere on particular terms, though these terms may be difficult to discern. Who authorizes those terms is a major point of contention. Women who veil remove it in private, in the company of intimates. Men veil themselves too: the Berber-speaking Tuareg of West Africa, and modern resistance-fighters in Mexico and Palestine, for example. Tuareg men are reported to veil

[3] THE VEIL: WOMEN WRITERS ON ITS HISTORY, LORE, AND POLITICS (Jennifer Heath, ed. 2008). A shorter version of this article, focused solely on this book, was published in the London Review of Books. See John Borneman, *A Scrap of Cloth*, LONDON REV. OF BOOKS, Dec. 18 2008, at 13. I thank them for the permission to reprint this material.

even when asleep, leaving only their eyes uncovered—it is most important to cover the mouth and nose. Explanations are both ecological (protection from desert sands) and symbolic (to ward off evil in encounters with strangers). Resistance fighters veil only in public, to hide or mask their identity. Masks distort and disguise identities, and are more likely to frighten (as in North American Kwakiutl ceremonial masks or in south Indian Kathakali dance) than to seduce (as in the masks of Zorro or Batman). Neither variety of male veiling provokes much comment or controversy.

As Jennifer Heath writes in her comprehensive introduction, veiling attracts attention to women's faces, to the eyes, the mouth, and the hair. Veils do not hide the face but frame it. They illuminate one part of the face by setting it in relief to the part they conceal. They change the perspective for the viewers from both behind and in front of the veil. At the same time, of course, concealment draws attention to the veiled object, creating a puzzle that awakens curiosity as to what might lie behind.

Only the most extreme type and most politicized of veils, the black *burqa* (my young friends in Syria call women who wear them "walking tents"), tries to prevent sight altogether.[4] It makes the face and other parts of the body invisible and indivisible. In one sense, it tries to remove all clues to the mysterious, as if making part of the woman distinct would provoke the unthinkable. Viewers must be radically protected from something. The many other sorts of veil—head scarf, *tagelmust*, *parandja*, *niqaab*, *muhapatti*, bridal veil, *sari*, *hijab*, *chadri*, *batula*, *abaya*, *kufiyya*—still make it possible to see and be seen. That said, a woman can see out from inside a *burqa*, though with darkened vision. In this respect, the *burqa* functions like modern sunglasses, worn prominently by movie stars and tyrannical political leaders, which aggressively foil the sight of the other. To be sure, sunglasses prevent only the eyes from being seen, and even nudists can wear sunglasses. By contrast, most veils highlight and minimally reveal the eyes, while covering other parts of the face and body.

Understanding how the eyes and the face signify today, then, may be the key to the singular passions aroused by veiling. Why is the visibility of women such a politicized issue in so many cultural contexts? Veils work solely by altering vision. They do not fundamentally affect the other senses. One sees the veiled woman, in public, and the veil frames how she is seen. The sound of her voice may be muzzled; in humid climates she may sweat a bit more. But neither effect inflames the passions. Whether veiled or unveiled, an

[4] For more detailed descriptions of some male reactions to veiled and unveiled women, see JOHN BORNEMAN, SYRIAN EPISODES: SONS, FATHERS, AND AN ANTHROPOLOGIST IN ALEPPO (2007).

image results from a visual objectification. When veiled, however, and depending on how fully veiled, a woman's intelligibility is initially determined by the dynamics of vision alone. These phenomenological effects are at odds with what most women want, or at least what they say they want.

OBJECTIFICATION AND LUST

Only in Saudi Arabia, Iran, and among the Afghan Taliban is veiling compulsory. In the rest of the world, women can choose whether or not to veil. The reason many give for doing so is their wish to escape visual objectification: the male gaze, gawk, leer, or stare. "I did not want to be judged by my body, my beauty, or the lack thereof," Pamela Taylor, who wears the *hijab*, explains, "but as an individual, for my personality, my character, and my accomplishments."[5] Many Saudi women, Maliha Masood writes, are aware that the veil denies "men their usual privilege of discerning whomever they desire. By default, the women are in command."[6] Jasbir Jain explains that the Indian "[p]urdah as a face covering offers women anonymity and defense against sexual harassment. It also provides them with an unobserved observer's position."[7] "A girl who dresses modestly is making a significant statement," Miriam Grossman says apropos Hasidic fashion. "She's sending out a message which says: 'My body is important, but it is only the vessel for the real me—my soul. I think of myself that way, and I want people to relate to me with that in mind.'"[8] By dressing "modestly in public" and focusing "primarily on internal work and spiritual development," Eve Grubin writes, the Jewish woman can experience her own "internal richness."[9]

The desire to be appreciated for their inner selves has been a dominant strain in the thinking of modern feminists, but in many cultures outer form is understood as the expression of inner beauty. While Western feminists may not make the link between inner and outer beauty, certainly the worldwide popularity of the cosmetics industry testifies to the importance many women place on outer appearance. The argument goes, however, that the focus on outer form makes women's

[5] Pamela K. Taylor, *I Just Want to Be Me: Issues in Identity for One American Muslim Woman*, *in* THE VEIL, supra note 3, at 120.

[6] Jasbir Jain, *Purdah, Patriarchy, and the Tropical Sun: Womanhood in India*, *in* THE VEIL, supra note 3, at 226.

[7] *Id.* at 242.

[8] Barbara Goldman Carrel, *Shattered Vessels That Contain Divine Sparks: Unveiling Hasidic Women's Dress Code*, *in* THE VEIL, *supra* note 3, at 46.

[9] Eve Grubin, *After Eden: The Veil as a Conduit to the Internal*, *in* THE VEIL, *supra* note 3, at 178, 187.

bodies commodities in a market in which men determine the value of women according to the way they look. By wearing the veil, women seek to remove themselves from the public gaze, especially from an economy of objectification and exchange controlled by men. But does the veil accomplish this removal? There are many reasons to expect frustration.

The veil doesn't prevent objectification, though it may slow the pace of exchange. It could equally be said that women wear the veil in order to enter into public exchange, not to avoid it. Aisha Lee Fox Shaheed writes that her Muslim grandmother started wearing a veil when she moved to Pakistan after Partition to "facilitate her access to public space."[10] But while the veil may limit women's visibility, it also encourages men to take a second look. It "does little to discourage male lust," Sherifa Zuhur concludes, "[n]or does it dampen flirting from the female side."[11] In my own ethnographic research several years ago in the old souq in Aleppo, young men's gazes were indiscriminately directed towards all veiled women but only to some unveiled women—perhaps precisely because they could not immediately discern the veiled woman's shape.

There are many kinds of veils, only a few of which hide everything. Take the *hijab*, which in the Koran refers not to an item of clothing but to a special curtain used to protect privacy. As a verb it means "to veil, cover, screen, shelter." In Arabic, the word has come to denote modest dress for women; most forms of *hijab* leave the face uncovered but hide the hair and the rest of the body except for the hands (which men are also not supposed to touch). Whatever form it takes, the veil tends to invariably signify that its wearer is a woman, and so achieves the opposite of what many women want: to control the way they are seen, and to be seen as individuals, not as a type. Moreover, what is behind the veil is left to male fantasy, that is, left largely to a projection of what men want. In the late 1960s, some Catholic nuns, who had for centuries submitted to wearing the veil, rejected their traditional clothing on the grounds that it set them apart. "Adopting modern clothing demystifed the often mysterious presence," Laurene Lafontaine writes, permitting "outsiders to see the actual woman behind the habit, thus allowing for more personal interaction whereby a sister could express and experience the wholeness of her humanity."[12]

Not all women want to be seen in public as individuals. Some

---

[10] Aisha Lee Fox Shaheed, *Dress Codes and Modes: How Islamic Is the Veil?*, *in* THE VEIL, *supra* note 3, at 302.

[11] Sherifa Zuhur, *From Veil to Veil: "What's in a woman's head is a lot more important than what's on it," in* THE VEIL, *supra* note 3, at 317.

[12] Laurene M. Lafontaine, *Out of the Cloister: Unveiling to Better Serve the Gospel*, *in* THE VEIL, *supra* note 3, at 84.

want to be seen as married, others as available; some want the anonymity conferred by belonging to a group. If all women veil the same way, then in public any single woman may feel relatively invisible as a woman. In all-female settings, the veil functions like a uniform, creating equality and erasing outer distinctions. Full veiling—the *burqa*, for example—provides the most anonymity in public, something that can be useful in all sorts of ways, especially to avoid surveillance in Middle Eastern states with authoritarian governments. I was told in Lebanon and Syria that most female sex workers cover themselves completely in public to keep their identities secret. Ashraf Zahedi reports that in Iran under the shah, compulsory unveiling met with outrage and resistance from clerics and secular conservatives, but there was widespread agreement to make an exception for prostitutes. Since the authorities did not want prostitutes to be indistinguishable from other women, they argued that they should be allowed to remove their veils only if they married.[13]

Indeed, today the look of "the prostitute" and the look of the "glamorous Western woman" are not always easily distinguished. Modesty is out. Today, young middle-class girls all over the world seek to look "adult" and "attractive"; they wear makeup, super-tight jeans that show the navel, miniskirts that reveal the upper thigh, and push-up bras. In the Middle East, this look can be accompanied by a discrete veiling of the face. In Princeton, where I live, the sexualization of young girls' dress is extreme; they remind me of what Berliners in the 90s called "Natasha," the look of the "Russian prostitute." But I see the same sort of thing in Aleppo and Damascus and Beirut, except that sometimes the girls also wear the *hijab* and cover their hair. Through omnipresent advertising and media attention, and the distribution of Western blockbuster films, a standardized image of the desirable woman now circulates between different cultural worlds. This does not, of course, eliminate cultural emphases—larger or smaller hips, breasts, lips, or eyes, for instance. When the enhanced visibility of the body is accompanied by a head covering, I suspect many men project, consciously or not, an image of the glamorous Western woman onto the woman behind the veil. The veil, in short, heightens men's fantasies about women, making it easier to perceive them as a generic category of desirable objects. The more that is hidden or concealed, the greater the spur to the imagination of the viewer.

[13] Ashraf Zahedi, *Concealing and Revealing Female Hair: Veiling Dynamics in Contemporary Iran*, *in* THE VEIL, *supra* note 3, at 255.

VALUE AND CIRCULATION

Where does this imagination come from? For one, it comes from the headscarf as an archetype, which covers, at minimum, the hair. What was at stake, in 2004, when France banned the wearing of "conspicuous signs" of religious affiliation in state schools? The proponents of the ban insisted they were upholding the values of secular republicanism, specifically the protection of the individual from the claims of religion, and of the state from ethnic or religious separatism. In reality, though, the law was aimed only at Muslim girls wearing headscarves.[14] If the *hijab* is supposed to prohibit the viewing of some parts of women (particularly their hair), why prohibit this prohibition unless there is some disturbing power in the image of the veiled woman? That image has little to do with what is hidden behind the veil—with the religious ideas inside women's heads, for example. Rather, as I will elaborate below, it has primarily to do with a challenge to ideas of transparency in the field of vision.

Within Islam, the desire on the part of some to make veiling compulsory draws on an imagination invested in the prohibition of the image itself, one that revolves around issues with sex and its power within different Islamicized cultures. For this imagination, Slavoj Zizek argues that within Islam, "there is, in a woman's exposure, an erectile protuberance, an obscenely intrusive quality . . . [as she] stands for the 'undecidability' of truth, for a succession of veils beneath which there is no ultimate hidden core."[15] Plenty has been written about church steeples or minarets of mosques as aggressively phallic symbols of power; much less has been written about the way that when a woman's hair is tightly wrapped in a scarf which blends into clothing extending smoothly down to the feet, her body has the look of a vertical column with a protuberance on top. Does this look mockingly create women as the phallus, as what Zizek coyly terms "the organ of paternal insemination?"[16] Western anxiety about the veil may have something to do with the notion that by veiling, women occupy the position of the phallus, allowing them to exercise power while remaining partially hidden.

The fact that veiled women draw attention to themselves as women stands in a dialectical relation to the desire to remove themselves from visual circulation. Theoretically, women who remove themselves from

[14] For an analysis of contemporary debates around the politics of the veil in France, see JOAN SCOTT, THE POLITICS OF THE VEIL (2007).

[15] Slavoj Zizek, *A Glance into the Archives of Islam*, http://www.lacan.com/zizarchives.htm (last visited June 3, 2009).

[16] *Id.*

circulation by wearing the veil should increase their value. Sacred objects are those set aside from normal circulation. Objects in unimpeded circulation become more profane the more they circulate; they become commodities with discernable exchange value.[17] Commodity exchange rests on both putting things in circulation and removing them, temporarily, from exchange, until they can attain new value in new contexts. Vinyl records, for example, are a case in point.[18] Now that music can be downloaded in digital files, such records are no longer being produced. Anticipated scarcity makes them collector's items. Collectors withhold them from exchange for some period of time, with the expectation that value will increase once they are re-released as fetish objects.[19] Movie stars and performance artists often work with the same principle—their value increases if they withdraw from circulation for a while and later reenter the public sphere to make selective appearances. What happens to the value of women who remove themselves from visual circulation by veiling?

THE VALUE OF WOMEN

The value of women as women has traditionally been determined through marital systems, in which women serve as tokens in a wider system of exchange.[20] Anthropologists have long documented the universality and diversity of these marital, kinship-based systems, and have witnessed their transformations under the pressures of capitalism and legal centralism within modern states. Historically, only particular categories of women could be exchanged: first cousins for first cousins, for example. Value, then, was not abstract but relative and contextual. The most valuable women—usually determined by their proximity to power—were exchanged for the most valuable women of other groups. Women's desirability was based less on the shape of their bodies than on their social status and fecundity.

These systems of kin exchange, though still integral to human culture everywhere, have largely broken down and been transformed

[17] See the foundational analysis of exchange by MARCEL MAUSS, THE GIFT: THE FORM AND REASON FOR EXCHANGE IN ARCHAIC SOCIETIES (2000). For a reanalysis of Mauss's work on exchange, see MAURICE GODELIER, THE ENIGMA OF THE GIFT 171-199 (1999).

[18] On the influence of the digital revolution on the music industry, see DAVID KUSEK ET AL., THE FUTURE OF MUSIC (2005).

[19] For an analysis of how value is accrued through periodic withholding, see Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process," *in* THE SOCIAL LIFE OF THINGS: COMMODITIES IN CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE 64-91 (Arjun Appardurai ed., 1986).

[20] See the foundational work on the universality of marital exchange, published initially in 1949, CLAUDE LÉVI-STRAUSS, THE ELEMENTARY STRUCTURES OF KINSHIP (Beacon Press, 1969) (1949).

into something less systematized and less bounded. For one, as the numbers of men and women who designate themselves as "singles" has grown, the capacity to bear children has lost its central value in many places. For another, men everywhere have lost much of their control over marriage systems, and women have lost much of their control over such things as choosing suitable partners for relatives. Increasingly people locate partners through disinterested means, such as through the invisible hand of a more generalized exchange offered by Internet forums such as Craigslist. Above all, what has come to matter most in determining the value of women, and increasingly of men, is sexual attractiveness. The transformation is, of course, incomplete and uneven, but it is crucial to the passions ignited by the veiling of women.

Within Europe, one of the occasions in which modern veiling takes on iconic meaning is the so-called "honor killing," most often of a sister by her brother, sometimes by someone contracted by her brother or father. Such killings are rare but symbolically significant, as they bring into focus differences between systems of value. From a Eurocentric perspective, such killings are shocking, abhorrent, barbarian acts; they recall archaic emotions that appear incompatible with modern conceptions of the integrity and dignity of the person. I have six sisters, and the idea that my own integrity or that of my family is at stake in protecting their honor would never occur to me. Three of my sisters were local homecoming queens where I grew up, in a nondescript town in middle-western America. Homecoming queens tended to be those girls whom young boys found most desirable. Did I ever think my own honor or my family's was at stake in the kind of intercourse my sisters had with their boyfriends they dated? The question here is what has happened to limit my imagination so that I experience the killing of someone else's sisters by their brothers as a personal affront. Why, on the other hand, is dignity for some men unimaginable after one of their sisters or daughters has been compromised—i.e., had sex outside of a situation controlled by her male relatives, usually meaning outside marriage?

For men who feel their honor is at stake in the behavior of women, their sisters or daughters do not have a sexuality that is theirs to control. They are tokens in a system of marital exchange, and this system imposes on male relatives obligations to other kin or neighbors. There are duties to fulfill, such as protecting the chastity of one's sisters, enforcing codes of modesty, and reproducing the lineage or clan or tribe through controlled procreation. While a sister or daughter might have a say in what kind of alliance is arranged for her, that arrangement is traditionally predicated on her virginity. Today the veil often enters here as a symbol of resistance to the sirens of Western sexuality, with its generalized exchange and incitement to sex. It is a rational

resistance to the sexualization of women and young girls in the global media. Men are positioned ambivalently to these sirens, both incited in their own desire to have sex with any generalized other, yet wanting to control or limit the desire of others, specifically as their sisters and daughters become its object.

TRANSPARENCY, CHOICE, AND DEMOCRATIC FORM

Veiling practices no longer operate within traditional, kinship-based worlds, but in a modern political environment shaped by the pressures of democratic public life. Democracy is predicated on a particular conception of individuality and autonomy, on freedom from the constraints of social groups such as kin, and on a degree of transparency in the workings of its institutions. Democracy requires periodic visibility, specifically of the face: when you go to vote, for example, or to pass through airport security. There is talk of fingerprints and eye scans being used instead, but these new modes of identification are unlikely to replace facial recognition, which remains integral to the negotiation of modern life. Veiling, which blocks recognition to a lesser or greater degree, would seem to be in tension with democratic transparency. Accordingly, in the contemporary contexts within which veils signify, visuality has become central to the intelligibility of women—despite the wish of many women to be seen for qualities that are spiritual, non-visible, or just inside their heads.

In The Veil, each of the contributors argue, to one degree or another, that they alone should be able to choose when and how to veil, and hence control their own intelligibility. "When women receive equal rights," Heath writes in her conclusion to the volume, "veils will fall away or they will stay as simple matters of *choice*. What a woman *chooses* to wear on her head should be trivial to anyone other than that woman herself."[21] This seems straightforward and reasonable. Why not let women make personal decisions about whether to veil or not? Why not settle the matter by simply letting them choose? Because the long feminist struggle for the "right to choose" builds on assumptions that are not anchored in the legal frameworks of many modern political systems. There is little worldwide agreement about equality before the law, for example, which would be a precondition for the establishment of a general right to choose. Moreover, framing equality in the language of "choice" ignores the fact that choices are already socially structured before they are made. Women's decisions about dress are rarely free of the coercion of kinship. Nor should all choices about

[21] Jennifer Heath, *Epilogue*, *in* THE VEIL, supra note 3, at 320.

veiling be left to the individual or her kin. Schools might require visibility for those sitting for exams, or in Physical Education lessons, and a career such as medicine may require specific kinds of clothing to be worn.

Furthermore, framing veiling practices in terms of the notion of choice can be highly misleading. Amish, Hasidic, Islamic or Catholic veiling may be represented as a personal choice, but this coincides with these groups' interest in differentiating themselves from others. Women may be powerful within these groups, but they do not act alone nor are they an isolable group. Fights about veiling are common in families, and the divisions are not always along gender lines: it may be that a mother who unveiled in the 1970s opposes her daughter's decision to wear the veil today, or children may insist that their mothers veil themselves. Moreover, the right to choose is usually exercised only after one has left a family. What of this choice within families? Who is authorized to intervene in families in order to assert, or protect, a "woman's right to choose?"

None of the contributors to The Veil writes about a personal decision to veil that hadn't already been authorised by one social group or another. They don't give any instances of women who veil idiosyncratically, in order to assert their autonomy. It isn't enough to argue that for some women autonomy means conformity to the group, or that freedom can be understood as the choice to fulfill socially prescribed duties. In social groups where veiling is dominant, the decision not to veil differs fundamentally from the decision to veil precisely in its resistance to social pressure. Michelle Auerbach illustrates this in an entertaining essay about her rebellion against Jewish "modesty commandments" (including covering the head) as she struggles with religious orthodoxy.[22] She claims to have resolved the conflict by deciding to wear a prayer shawl only after she attains equal authority with men, which is to say only after she is allowed to lead the ritual services in her local synagogue. To be sure, every individual should be able to opt in or out of traditional structures, but it is an illusion to think this "choice" is not highly contingent on external factors. Coercive mechanisms are brought to bear unequally on all decisions. The choice between fidelity to a kinship role and exercise of sexuality, as in the case of the honor killings discussed above, is clearly one where the coercive force of kinship and the social can be overwhelming. Auerbach appeals, as a feminist, not to her right to choose but to the importance of restructuring the social conditions in which choices are made.

Restructured social conditions will not, of course, stop men from

[22] Michelle Auerbach, *Drawing the Line at Modesty: My Place in the Order of Things*, *in* THE VEIL, *supra* note 3, at 202-212.

continuing to see the veil in ways that are independent of women's intentions. The veil, in whatever form, is not and will never be "just a scrap of cloth," as Taylor wishes the hijab to be thought of, because it is worn in order to symbolize something, or many things.[23] Veiling practices often create their own phenomenal reality, have their own set of effects, unrelated to the material world. Hence veils are not, as many of the contributors to The Veil want to think, merely a diversion or distraction from issues of more substance to more women, such as poverty, the distribution of rights, the allocation of resources, sociopolitical disenfranchisement, and violence. Attending to these issues, important as they are, will not necessarily change the veil's contemporary iconic status.

POSTSCRIPT: THE AUTHORITY OF MEN AND THE LAW

This article has focused on how the veil and the practice of veiling signifies the (un)intelligibility of women generally, and under what conditions the veil has achieved an iconic status today. In this postscript I would like to suggest why this icon has become so important for male authority and the law today, specifically in the Arab Middle East. Needless to say, many men with either religious or political authority have taken a direct interest in whether women veil or unveil in public. The issue of honor killings presents an extreme case of what is at stake in private life, which can and sometimes does lead to the murder of women. The men who engage in such murders also bring about a kind of social death for themselves. Initially they may acquire the status of the martyr who sacrificed himself for the sake of a social norm. This temporary status most frequently gives way, however, to longer-term punishments, such as imprisonment, monetary fines, the end of a normatively approved and "normal" lifecourse, social ostracism, recriminations against other kin, and an immeasurable psychological toll in ambivalence and guilt resulting from having murdered someone whom one loved. Other male relatives may share in some or many of these punishments. For such men, the issue is who has public responsibility and control over how women signify? Do they act in the name of the father, kin, tradition, and justice? Or do they defer to the authority of secular law? The conflict about women's intelligibility, then, is not usually between religious and secular authorities but between norms of kinship and the autonomy of women as proposed in written state laws.

For men who live under authoritarian governments—which

[23] Taylor, *supra* note 5, at 128.

includes, to a large degree, the entire Arab Middle East—the law is merely exercised over subjects and hence nearly always experienced by men as submission and castration. The state rules over but does not necessarily represent him. Even if the legal system exacts just retribution for injuries to his honor, the man has difficulty experiencing this as a redress for his lost authority. From the Egyptian novelist Naguib Mafouz to the Tunisian filmmaker Nouri Bouzid, many intellectuals and artists have represented in their work this acute crisis in male authority in both secular and religious registers. In the last four decades especially, many novels and films have sought to represent the castrated man and the waning power of the father.

As a final example, take the film "Couscous" ("La Graine et le Mule") directed by the Tunisian-born filmmaker Abdellatif Kechiche, the 2007 winner of the César, France's most prestigious film prize.[24] It takes place in France, in the Mediterranean port of Setebut. The sixty-year-old Arab immigrant, Slimane Beiji, who has worked in a ship repair yard for 35 years, is having his workload reduced and fears unemployment. Slimane's conundrum is introduced via a scene of his son, who takes time out from his work as commentator on a tourist boat to have sex with a passenger, later revealed as the wife of a powerful member of the local French elite. Slimane's family is of North African origin (one daughter has a non-Arab French husband), and the film is generally concerned to show how all members struggle with being French. But the focus is on the Slimane, the father, who in response to his impending unemployment opens a restaurant that serves couscous.

In the film, couscous becomes the symbol for an Arab cultural experience of warmth, intimacy, and belonging, and at the same time a means to seduce non-Arabs into entering into a relationship of respect and wonder with the resident Arabs. Tired, weak, and visibly aging, Slimane's investment in this restaurant—in couscous as Arab tradition—is a final effort to redeem himself. Although he sees himself as a failure, he still longs to leave behind an inheritance for his sons and daughters when he dies. But in this aim he is frustrated, and ultimately sacrificed sadistically, primarily due to the failure of his useless sons who, conspiring together in their narcissism and incompetence, abandon him in the evening that inaugurates the restaurant. Any possibility for an inheritance ultimately rests with the ability of the women in the family, especially Slimane's ex-wife and current partner, along with her daughter, to make the restaurant work.

Many other films or novels repeat this representation of contemporary perceptions of the location of the father: how his waning authority has been decoupled from secular law, which in any case does

[24] "Couscous" (Pathé Renn Productions 2007).

little to provide him opportunity or protect him from the overreach of religion or other kinds of authority, including that of the global market; how he is unable to leave an inheritance for his children; how he is dependent on the women in his life. In "Couscous," kinship and the father are betrayed by the sexual behavior of an irresponsible son; women present the only redemptive possibility. In a structural sense, then, men, because they have lost their public authority, are heavily invested in how women enter into the public sphere and whether they assume phallic authority. It should not surprise us that men resent the authority women accrue through this entry in part because they are totally dependent on their success.