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El Guindi, F.

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Veiling

FADWA EL GUINDI

Research on the contemporary Islamic movement that emerged in Egypt in the 1970s, after the Ramadan war, revealed a centrality of the dress code adopted by the *Islamiyyin* (Islamic activists), which has spread throughout the Arabic-speaking and Islamic region. The newly constructed dress form was visible and dramatic. Too much focus, however, was on the fact that previously secularly dressed college women had adopted conservative clothing, which includes veiling.

'The veil' had become problematized in the 1970s – not the conservative dress code. And gradually there was an avalanche of discourse and publications on 'women's Islamic veiling'. Most used a 'women's studies approach' which confined the issue to women's clothing and behaviour, invariably presenting it as reflecting women's invisibility and anonymity, linking veiling to seclusion and seclusion to institutions such as 'the harem'. Reductionist explanations ranged from female subordination to patriarchal ideology to women's nature. Ethnographic evidence challenged these observations and claims.

Upon close examination it was revealed that the code underlying the dress should be the focus and not the dress form per se. Indeed the disproportional focus on women's veiling is misleading, and once this was re-framed it became evident that men (college youth) were also 'veiling' as it were. In one sense they materially veiled by wearing the *kufiyya* as head cover. But they also used it on specific occasions to partially cover their face.

In the course of my fieldwork, I personally observed one such incident which occurred on the university campus in Cairo. This turned out to be ethnographically and analytically revealing:

It was during the semester when college lectures were in session, and I was engaged in fieldwork, that is, spending time on campus observing and talking with students in and outside the movement. While I was with women students in the women's lounge, a man knocked on the door.

The women scrambled for their hijabs and *qina's*. Moments of confusion and tension passed, after which the man knocked again on the door. Finally, although still unsettled, the women leaders among them invited him in. I looked out of the door and saw a man in a *galabiyya* (an ankle-length white, unfitted gown with long sleeves). He pulled his *kufiyya* (head shawl) over his face and

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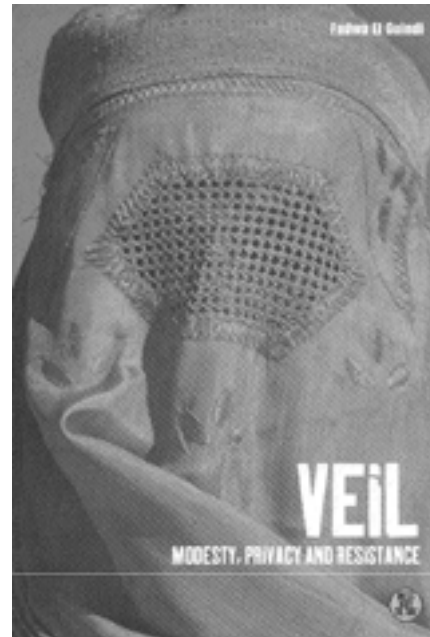
entered very cautiously, literally rubbing against the wall trying not to look in the direction of the women until he reached a curtain diagonally hung in the corner of the room. He went behind it and sat facing the women from behind the curtain. That is, it was the man who both face-veiled when with women and sat behind the hijab (curtain). His shadow showed him lifting the *kufiyya* off his face and letting it down to his shoulders, but keeping it on his head.

He proceeded to discuss Qur'anic suras, particularly those pertaining to the hijab, according to the interpretation by Mawdudi (1972, 1985; see note 119). The women asked him questions, and mildly challenged some of his comments, but all in all did not seem to be awed by or subservient to his performance. They were abiding by their own self-imposed rules of ritualized cross-sex encounters in public space. After about thirty-five minutes, he excused himself, and went through a ritualized exit, similar to his entry.

Veil: Modesty, Privacy and Resistance, p. 118.

Through both this incident and additional observations, and also after examining text and ethnography, it became evident that in order to understand the phenomenon of veiling, the study cannot be restricted to the superficially obvious or the obviously visible (women veiling). It must, rather, extend to intangible spheres and hidden codes. The 'dress' movement, as it turned out, was carried out by men and by women, and was similar in manifestation among both.

The empirical inference that men do 'veil' opened the research exploration further and led to findings on men's veiling in various Arabo-Islamic contexts. This challenged single gender explanations for veiling. And it was not a matter of 'add men and stir'. The overall approach was to be reconsidered.



The commonly produced linkage of *harim* with seclusion and sex derives from a perspective that embeds the phenomenon of the veil (and its assumed environment, the harem) in the sphere of gender, rather than in the broader contexts of society and culture. First, the ethnographic evidence explored in this study shows that veiling occurs without seclusion and seclusion occurs without veiling. Analysis of historical records reveals that seclusion of women more accurately describes Christian (Mediterranean/Balkan) culture than it does Muslim society. And in the Christian culture seclusion is more associated with religion and religious concepts of purity which are absent in Islam. Finally, there is a need to fill the historical gap in the scholarly coverage of women's roles.

The veil is clearly a complex phenomenon. The research which led to the publication of *Veil: Modesty, Privacy and Resistance* comprised a journey into history, scriptures, ethnography, poetry, and even photography. A search was conducted through different bodies of data and across national borders. How far back does the evidence for this practice go? Who practised it? Is it everywhere the same phenomenon? Does it have the same meaning across eras, empires, and religions? The quest for answers became a voyage of discovery.

Accordingly, the veil was examined in many contexts in a synthesis of many sources of data. In addition to ethnography and historical materials, the study consulted Arabic Islamic-textual sources as well as contemporary and historical materials to produce a new understanding. The procedure I used in exploring text was contextual and relational. Segments of text relevant to my subject were examined against other segments in the same source. That is, a relevant concept that is located in a particular *ayah* in a *sura* was examined against its presence in other *ayahs* in the same *sura* and also in other *suras*. Information in the Qur'an was examined against *tafsir* and in *hadith*. This procedure had to be systematic to yield the observations and meanings I was able to derive. These are then examined against ethnography.

Drawing upon these various bodies of knowledge, the analysis of the veil reveals a fundamental code underlying many aspects of Arabo-Islamic culture, which embodies related concepts that are meaningful in textual and social contexts. I contend that the modesty-based code (modesty-shame-seclusion) represents an ethnocentric imposition on Arabo-Islamic culture. Clustering these notions obscures the nuanced difference that is characteristic of Arabo-Islamic culture. The modesty-honour gendered opposition is equally inappropriate.

In the course of this anthropological exploration it became evident that veiling consists in a language that communicates social and cultural messages, a practice that has been present in tangible form since ancient times, a symbol ideologically fundamental to the Christian, and particularly the Catholic, vision of womanhood and piety, and a vehicle for resistance in Islamic societies.

The veil is currently the centre of scholarly debate on gender and women in the Islamic East. In movements of Islamic activism, the veil occupies centre stage as a symbol of both identity and resistance. The veil, veiling patterns and veiling behaviour are therefore, according to my analysis of Arab culture, about sacred privacy, sanctity and the rhythmic interweaving of patterns of worldly and sacred life, linking women as the guardians of family sanctuaries and the realm of the sacred in this world. I argue for the centrality of the cultural notion of privacy, as one that embodies the qualities of reserve, respect and restraint as these are played out in fluid transformational birhythmic space. Dress in general, but particularly veiling, is privacy's visual metaphor.

My argument (developed in Part II of the book) is that veiling in contemporary Arab culture is largely about identity, largely about privacy – of space and body. I contend that the two qualities, modesty and seclusion, are not adequate characterizations of the phenomenon as it is expressed in the Middle East. In their social setting, veiling proxemics communicate exclusivity of rank and nuances in kinship status and behaviour. Veiling also symbolizes an element of power and autonomy and functions as a vehicle for resistance. It was no accident that colonizing powers and authoritarian local states both consistently used the veiling of women (and dress form for men as in Iran and Turkey) as their theatre of control. ◆

Fieldwork for the book was conducted in Egypt and was complemented by observations from research trips to the Arab East, South Asia, and Andalusian Spain. Support was provided by the UCLA African Studies Center, the Ford Foundation, and the Fulbright Fellowship programme.

*Fadwa El Guindi is adjunct full professor of anthropology at the University of Southern California, USA. She is the author of the newly published monograph Veil: Modesty, Privacy and Resistance. Oxford: Berg Publishers.
E-mail: elguindi@bcf.edu
http://www-bcf.usc.edu/~elguindi*