

Veiled Constellations: The Veil, Critical Theory, Politics, and Contemporary Society

The “Veiled Constellations: The Veil, Critical Theory, Politics, and Contemporary Society” conference took place at York University’s Keele Campus and at the University of Toronto on 3-5 June 2010. Sponsors included the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Toronto Initiative for Iranian Studies, the Noor Cultural Centre, the Canadian Council of Muslim Women, the Canadian Council on American-Islamic Relations, and multiple departments and associations at both universities. The two grad-

uate students who co-organized the conference, Melissa Finn and Arshavez Mozafari, did an excellent job in choosing papers that highlighted the veil's multi-faceted appearances both in contemporary society and academic discourses as something that is under-theorized and overlooked at the same time.

The event's advertising and signage played with the tropes of overwritten and overlooked, suggesting that veiled women can be both silenced and subjected to "therapeutic, punitive attention" (Edward Said, *Covering Islam*, xxxv-vi). For example, www.veiledconstellations.com shows two faceless women veiled in black, a torrent of water flooding the scene and pouring over them and through the ovals where their faces should be. This serves as a kind of natural disaster or Armageddon trope on the body of Muslim women. A prominent poster pictured a profiled woman wearing hijab, her face overwritten with overlapping Arabic words, while alternating pink lines radiate from behind her face, as if it were giving off light. A third poster offers the common image of the exotic woman behind-the-veil, a partial photo of a woman wearing niqab, her perfectly arched eyebrows perhaps challenging the viewer to respond with the intrigued gaze, the desire to unveil her. While these posters meant to undo tired images of Muslim women, their ambiguous nature sometimes reinforced those very stereotypes.

This conference was originally conceived as a one-day workshop highlighting the veil generally and, more specifically, in terms of psychoanalytic discourses and the veil. Many of the first day's presentations revealed this preoccupation with psychoanalysis, particularly with Lacan, that more often than not revealed more about Lacanian discourses than about veiling. The papers were grouped together thematically to encourage discussion and foster a workshop atmosphere. Given the limited amount of space, I will deal with only several panels, papers, and discussions.

In his "Lispector, the Time of the Veil" ("Literature" panel), Cory Stockwell (University of Minnesota) revealed Clarice Lispector's obsession with the visible and the invisible in her novel *The Hour of the Star*. His compelling reading problematized the veil as metaphor, where he concludes that in a novel about no one, perhaps there is nothing at all behind the veil: the body itself is a myth, and the veil then becomes a metaphor for time itself. Amber Fatima Riaz (University of Western Ontario) presented "Veiled Interstitialities: Re-Imagining the Muslim Veil" ("Postcolonial Interventions" panel), where she argued that Pakistani women have "bigger fish to fry" than whether or not to veil, in the context of their struggle for political rights.

The "Sacrifice, Dislocation, and the Scientific Establishment" panel resulted in a sometimes heated, though lively, discussion about terminology and the political nature of word choice, specifically around "apostate." When

one paper suggested that some women experience wearing hijab as a kind of “suffocation,” veiled women in the audience quickly disagreed. A practice of negation then emerged – the personal confronting the theoretical – as multiple audience members claimed that “hijab is not...” this or that. As an aside, some comments on the conference’s Facebook page argued that more “veiled” women should have presented papers. Mahdi Tourage (University of Western Ontario), who presented “The (Veiled) Phallus and the Erotics of Sacrifice in the Qur’anic Tale of Abel and Cain” on the same panel, argued that postmodern theory is a useful conceptual tool for reading Islamic narratives, that language itself is a veil, and that the Qur’anic language reveals as it conceals.

On the panel “Strictly Lacan ... with Hegel,” one speaker theorized that a “non-Islamic” and “western veil” could be constructed through various beauty practices, where “The Woman” (the Lacanian fantasy) slices or subtracts by peeling off skin layers, losing weight, and surgical subtraction. Given the suggestion that veils exist in all cultures, though not always visibly, we might ask what is at stake in asserting that veils are everywhere and that we are all complicit with them, and if this detracts from the political implications of specifically Islamic veiling practices?

Keynote speaker Ellie Ragland’s (University of Missouri-Columbia) “The Masquerade, the Veil, and the Phallic Mask” brought to a fine point the day’s sometimes overt Lacanian focus. Steering the audience toward symptomatic questions that the veil produces, she asked: “What is a woman? What is a man?” The psychoanalytic theme of the first day’s panels led some participants to ask how/why must the veil be tethered to the logic of the phallus or a specifically masculinist discourse, and whether this baseline assumed arrangement can be exited?

On “The Study of Muslim Female Artists” panel, Valerie Behiery’s (Concordia University) “Alternative Narratives of the Veil in Contemporary Art” interrogated the veil in contemporary art as recontextualized via culturally constructed gazes, as a “postcolonial veil” that consciously challenges stereotypes via subversive mimicry, and as a veil representing subjecthoods through documentary elements in artworks traveling between Europe and elsewhere. In the latter, the veiled woman becomes “accented” in the scopic regime, thus challenging normalized visions of what citizenship looks like.

On a panel specific to Iran and the Post-Election Crisis, Anicee Van Engeland (University of Bedfordshire) posited in her “Chador Passport and the Empowerment of Iranian Women under the Islamic Republic,” from an international and Islamic law perspective, that Iranian women agree to wear the chador to use it as a tradeoff: giving up individual rights to gain as a com-

munity of women. Dr. Nima Naghibi's (Ryerson University) "Compassionate Subjects, Objects of Compassion: The Unveiling of Neda and the Post-Election Protests in Iran" looked at the "Neda phenomenon" as seen in the West, the politics of compassion, and the social transmission of affect via news media and social networks.

On the "Music and Architecture" panel, audience members were shown architectural and design plans for reinvigorating an old souk in Sharjah, U.A.E., illustrating thereby how veils work in architecture and create public and private living spaces. A paper on the Muslim punk movement in the United States explored fictional and actual accounts of veiling as resistance through punk appropriation, where "American" and "Other" are constantly shifting.

Plenary speaker Reina Lewis (London College of Fashion; University of the Arts London) used her "Between Conscience and Commodity: Young Women, Hijab, and the Fashion Industry" to focus on notions of capital and modesty in the workplace. She discussed her fieldwork and theory related to veiled women working in fashion retail in London and how dress codes, religious practices, and fashion trends are negotiated in that space. Continuing with commodities, the "Marketing Piety as Commodity" panel included papers on Islam and Barbie, as well as Islamic swimsuits.

The final panel was followed by the play "Across the Veil," a lively piece based on firsthand accounts of racism, hate crimes, and Islamophobia in Canada. It was performed by the MT Space theatre group from Kitchener, Ontario. The last event before the final banquet was a Closing Roundtable on Bill 94, which establishes the conditions under which social services can be provided in Quebec. Panelists critiqued the continuing discourse of gender equality and a dominant set of values about what gender equality is. The general feeling was that the media portrayed widespread support for the bill, which would essentially ban the niqab in Quebec without any evidence of input from women who wear it. Additionally, there is an absence of media opposition to the bill, even though various groups in Quebec and across Canada oppose it.

A selection of the papers presented will appear in a forthcoming special edition of the *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* journal.

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