

## Visible Veil Dressing & the Gender Geopolitics of 'What Not To Wear'

### Introduction: For or Against?

In the wake of 9/11, the plight of women in Afghanistan under Taliban rule - forced to wear the *burka*, denied schooling, and subjected to other repressive measures - was a major theme in western news media and academe. I recall countless email-based petitions alongside page-length calls in the newspapers for women in the west to voice their opposition to these measures; thereby lending support to the *global war on terrorism* efforts. Given the mood at the time, you were "either for or against", not signing up was tantamount to a dereliction of feminist political duty.

In the ensuing decade, the burka along with other forms of Muslim veil dressing has become a bone of contention in western societies. The 'appearance' of 'more' visibly veiled women in public places has been greeted with hostility; public opinion polls and news reports backing up these sentiments despite the relatively small proportion of women in these countries who dress this way (see Moors 2009, Fassin & Hajjat 2010, Khiabany & Williamson 2008). Several European Union countries have passed legislation banning the burka, a synecdoche for all forms of Muslim face-veil, in public places; France, the Netherlands, and Belgium leading the way. Whilst at the national level, public controversy over the legitimacy if not efficacy of 'Burka-Ban' legislation unfolds along distinct judicial, political and cultural lines, as a EU-wide trend it exemplifies how the "vexed relationship between 'Islam' and 'the West'" (Mondal 2010: 17) has become a 'home-grown' issue for these societies.

Its symbolic connections to Taliban-ruled Afghanistan notwithstanding, on the streets of Brussels, Amsterdam, or Paris veil dressing that covers the whole body - head to toe, face, and hands - has become the focus for an uneasiness about Muslim women "expressing cultural difference" (Smits 2010: 7) in such a visible way. Burka-Ban legislation is the latest wave of measures targeting Muslim populations as overt anti-Muslim/immigrant sentiment becomes normalised in media and political debates; a core element of right-wing, populist political programs across the EU. Muslim women's bodies and attire now bear the brunt of a more generalised anxiety about the viability of the larger European Union project as one of cultural as well as economic integration. As veiled Muslim women come to represent the

“forbidden modern” (Göle 2002: 189) making herself at home in the heartland of secularly Christian Europe they are seen as the incarnation, mosque minarets the architectural evidence of the limits to multiculturalism. Veils, religious (viz. Islamic) fundamentalism, and terrorist acts have become inseparable from one another in the popular imaginary, liquefiers of the larger European “project” of modernity, posing a palpable threat to public order and the cultural integrity of respective EU member-states in particular.

More acutely, at the right-wing end of the spectrum, visibly Muslim women represent what populist politicians call the ‘Islamification’ of Europe; ban the burka, impose more restrictive immigration policies and this cultural liquefaction can be held in check. Where opinions then part company is whether *ipso facto* all of Islam is oppressive to women (see Ali & van Gogh 2004, Ahmed 2011, El Guindi 2003), whether other forms of veil dressing - the head-scarf (*hijab*), face-veil (*niqab*), or head-body covering (*chador* or *abaya*) - are *as* oppressive as the burka, or whether women might be exercising their ‘right to choose’ or ‘liberating’ themselves by voluntarily veil dressing. Conversely, are women opting to wear the hijab in contexts where it is already *not* permitted - as is the case in Turkey - a progressive or reactionary act (see Göle 2002)?

Caught in the middle of these polarising debates as they intensify, if not sitting uncomfortably on the fence, are feminists; younger and older, of varying cultural, political and religious backgrounds. To complicate matters further, feminists from the Global North and Global South, Muslim and non-Muslim, activists and academics, are divided on the personal and geopolitics of veil dressing. Are these practices evidence of coercion or an act of free will; a form of “imagining self-emancipation and becoming public” (Göle 2002: 188) or “misogynist practices justified in the name of culture and religion”? (Eltahamy 2010: 12)? Can veil dressing be regarded in sartorial terms or is it a traditional cultural practice and so occurring outside the realms of conscious if not commercial design, style, and body adornment (see Barnard 2002, Crane 2000, Lewis 2007, Tarlo 2010)? As a feminist, are you “for or against” veil dressing?

### **Argument and Rationale**

In this essay I argue that there are comparable issues at stake for critical and reflexive responses to anti-veil dressing legislation (here on in referred to as the ‘Burka-Ban’) on the one hand and, on the other, the coercive power

exerted on young - and not so young - women (and men) by the partnership of popular television and the “desiring machine” of the global beauty and fashion industries. Women’s bodies are in the firing line in both domains despite their treatment as ontologically and analytically distinct areas in feminist and gender studies literatures. Considering what these two domains have in common and where they diverge for critical and feminist scholarship throws into relief ongoing tensions for interdisciplinary and cross-cultural feminist praxis. Both create a paradoxical situation for western feminist politics based on furthering opportunities for women’s liberation, empowerment, and right to choose at the individual and social level.

These philosophical and practical issues are more openly debated in theory and research, from cultural and media studies in particular, into the implications of an increasingly interventionist beauty and fashion industry on girls and young women. Spearheaded in recent years by the popularity of TV makeover shows and rise in elective plastic surgery, feminist scholars have critiqued a trend towards the ‘pornification’ of increasingly younger female bodies. Fashion fads notwithstanding, these concerns intersect those about the pairing of consumerism and political disengagement in a “post-feminist” age (McRobbie 2004a, Gill 2007). I would argue that there are several reasons to bring this set of debates into the same field of vision as those emerging around veil dressing. Feminists here have quite diverging views on the rights and wrongs of veil dressing within liberal paradigms of subjectivity and liberation on the one hand and, on the other, the political viability of Burka-Ban legislation within human/women’s rights paradigms.

First, historically; as veiled Muslim women generate “tremendous media attention [as] face-veiling has become ... a heated topic of public debate” (Moors 2009: 393) in western Europe, the way these women dress comes under intense public and media scrutiny. Second, post 9/11 many feminists share others’ concerns about how Burka-Ban sentiments epitomise the racist undertones of increasingly virulent anti-Muslim, anti-immigration attitudes in the heart of Europe (Williamson & Khiabany 2010, Scott 2007, McRobbie 2011). Yet even as they condemn enforced veil dressing in other parts of the world - Iran, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia for instance, many feminists find themselves concurring with Burka-Ban arguments for women living in the West.

Third, exploring how these two scenarios in which what (not) to wear is a public affair challenge feminist scholars and activists, concerned with

examining and overturning women's oppression in whatever form it takes, to reconsider the form and substance of agency, empowerment, and consciousness in a historical moment that is markedly different from the one in which Second Wave and postcolonial feminists came of age. In both cases the longstanding ideological and ontological fissures of liberal feminism and her critics coupled with respective differences about human nature are laid bare at the intersection of debates about veil dressing and post-feminist consumerism. If the personal is political in both cases then how 'we' dress, how we look, and what those who matter to us think about how we look, let alone those who have the power to dictate the where and when of our 'looking good', becomes a feminist issue with geopolitical and intergenerational dimensions of a different magnitude to those based on establishing women's suffrage, sexual liberation, and economic autonomy<sup>1</sup>.

Western feminists are caught in a paradoxical time-loop I would argue in both scenarios as more trenchant forces take control of the terms and locus of debates around the rights and wrongs of (re)fashioning (women's) bodies. In both cases success, cultural integration and social mobility respectively, appear to rest on a docile (female) subject acquiescing to - if not embracing - a particular set of cultural practices, dress-codes and behavioural norms in order to 'belong'. Yet, here too, agency also resides. Depending on the geographical and cultural context, assertion if not transgression takes place by subjects either refusing to 'dress-up' or 'dress-down' as ordered. Or by insisting on doing the reverse of what is expected or decreed by law or custom<sup>2</sup>. The sub-text however in both cases is that we see one set of cultural codes looking to enforce its norms and values on another through overt and covert forms of coercion and persuasion to get women to (un)dress in order to keep up with the times.

### *Organization and Objectives*

The essay unpacks this paradox, treats it as a particularly feminist conundrum in six ways. The first is to situate the issue of what (not) to wear in a historical discursive context. The second looks at the legislative trend in anti-veil dressing in the EU; the ebb and flow of public chastisements and now outlawing of visibly Muslim dressing by women living in these societies, their mirror image being those parts of the Muslim world where veil dressing (the hijab, abaya, or the burka) are imposed by law. The third is a theoretical reflection; considering from a postcolonial perspective ways of conceptualising and studying the veil on its own terms and from the 'other

side' . The fourth examines how dressing and un-dressing are enacted in popular television 'makeover' shows where mainly, though not exclusively female participants undergo physical, emotional, and social transformations. The hugely popular and now globally syndicated show *What Not to Wear* (UK and USA), and successor on British television, *How to Look Good Naked* and other spin-offs are cases in point<sup>3</sup>. As media scholars note these shows, the latest in a long line of beauty and fashion advice-shows on prime-time television underscore how an increasingly globalised and syndicated media is "a key site for defining codes of sexual conduct. It casts judgement and establishes the rules of play" (McRobbie 2004a: 258).

The feminist politics of (veil) dressing and Muslim fashion is the next aspect; a research focus in its own right within cultural studies and anthropology as successive generations of Muslim consumers and European citizens exercise their economic autonomy, incorporating culturally specific and western-style sartorial elements in their veil dressing. As the hijab and burka become synonymous in the eyes of their opponents, ostensibly fashionable head-scarves become indistinguishable from the overtly political implications of the 'ugly' and 'disgusting' burka, or chador. Where these garments are illegal, wearers are punishable by fine, refused entry (to buses or workplaces), forced to remove the offending garment, or sent home.

Here we see a sexual politics of dressing as a form of counter-hegemonic resistance (in European settings) as well as a product of changing fashions for these women who are also consumers of media, fashion, and beauty trends from more than one cultural source. At the same time these practices see women of different faiths shopping together for attire that is fashionable but also suitably modest at the same - online and offline - outlets (see Tarlo 2010, Lewis 2007, Brydon & Niessen 1998). Here there is evidence of a convergence rather than a 'clash' of cultures. These insights bring us to the final consideration; what is at stake for feminist considerations of 'Burka-Ban' debates, particularly when even a qualified disapproval of fuller veil dressing practices effectively sees feminist unease resonating with those of right-wing demagogues?

### *Caveats and Links*

This analytical juxtaposition is neither straightforward nor uncontroversial in political or disciplinary terms as the respective debates proceed along discontinuous paths. I would argue that not only do these interconnections

require some concerted theoretical consideration but also that to explore the implications of this juxtaposition is not to commit an error in analytical equivalence (see Gill 2007). Rather it is to start coming to terms with the ways in which Burka-Ban controversies in Europe, together with their antonyms in parts of the Muslim world, are imbricated in the inter-subjective and inter-cultural tensions of postcolonial and post-9/11 body politics. These in turn are enmeshed in successive generations of consumption practices in tandem with commercialised media representations of beauty, body aesthetics, and fashion; with or without veiling.

This consideration of the gender geopolitics of what (not) to wear from a more ecumenical and inter-generational vantage-point draws on feminist scholars working in postcolonial, and race and ethnic studies, who theorise the veil from a historical and cross-cultural perspectives. It also means looking at ongoing debates in feminist media and cultural studies about the future of the feminist political project as late-capitalist consumerism and 'hyper-feminine' tropes around beauty, fashion, and body-image take the place of the 'Our Bodies Ourselves' and anti-beauty aesthetic of Second Wave feminism. The way scholars and activists line up for or against these latter-day practices is just as marked in the case of 'makeover' TV as it is in veil dressing debates.

The main continuity device linking these aspects is a dramatic one; excerpts from Oscar Wilde's *Salomé*. This play throws into melodramatic relief the complex meta-narratives of sexuality, embodiment, womanhood, and nationhood that link the visceral body - eyes, face, skin, legs, belly - with the symbolic of community, body-politic, and propriety during and since the Age of Empire . These age-old tropes also reach far back and forwards; into the holy books of Judeo-Christendom, (early) modern Europe and Enlightenment thought, and decolonisation. They now finger newer ones at the intersection of public/private lives, global media cultures, and consumer societies where modern woman, *femina economicus* (May 2002. Lewis 2007), flexes her purchasing-power muscles from behind as well as beyond the veil.

## 1: Historical Scenarios

[5] ... every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head—it is the same as if her head were shaven. [6] ... since it is disgraceful for a woman to be shorn or shaven, let her be covered. (Paul's Letter to the Corinthians, II: verses 4-6)

We cannot allow someone to claim the right to look at others without being seen. ... Wearing the burka in public is not compatible with an open, liberal, tolerant society. (Daniel Bacquelaire, cited in Traynor, 2010)

You can tell she is the outdoors type who doesn't pay much attention to make-up and grooming. Her Brillo pad hair looks like it's been done with pinking shears - it has no shine or shape. ... (Trinny Woodall in Power 2011)

Two millennia separate the three citations above; St Paul, founding father of the early Christian church on the one hand and, on the other, the Belgian politician Daniel Bacquelaire and Trinny Woodall, co-host of the globally syndicated British makeover TV Show, *What Not to Wear*. What connects all three is their focus on what women (should) wear; what can or cannot be covered or revealed, and how<sup>4</sup>.

### *Two Steps Forward, Six Steps Back*

As all sorts of 'makeover' shows (houses, home-contents, bodies, wardrobes) and their consumer-based aspirations transformed popular television programming, part of the rise of Reality TV as a global phenomenon over the last decade, another one was also emerging. Already evident before the events of 9/11 and gathering momentum in the last decade there has been increased political attention to regulating Muslim women's veil dressing, in all its forms. Protagonists in these debates vacillate between whether this form of dress is a private or public matter and thereby an affair of state or a matter of personal conscience.

Extreme right-wing parties in Belgium, France, the Netherlands, the UK, and elsewhere, have become particularly adept exponents in exploiting the sharper modulations of this unease and accompanying modes of "affective discourse" (Moors 2009) that mixes Enlightenment, liberal notions of secularism and individual freedom with xenophobic sentiment and copious helpings of women's movement rhetoric<sup>5</sup>. As the political spectrum swings to the right in many parts of Europe moves to regulate what Muslim women (should or should not) wear have raised the ante for these parties' opponents in the middle and left-side of the spectrum.

These moves have not come from nowhere. They endorse pre-existing clothing-based criteria for citizenship applications; e.g. in France government agencies have rejected applications for naturalization on the basis that the degree of a woman's veiled-ness is consummate to a lack of commitment on

her part - or that of her spouse - to fully “integrate” in French society<sup>6</sup>. However it has been the political centre-right governments passing legislation expressly forbidding a particular group of (female) citizens from dressing a certain way. This confluence of cultural intent and focus on a particular social group, despite sharp ideological differences amongst political actors, public intellectuals, and scholars about Burka-Ban legislation, has created a dilemma for critical voices concerned about the ramifications of both veil dressing practices and bans on women.

## **2: Muslim Embodiments, Consumption, & Citizenship**

[Iokanaan - The Prophet] Who is this woman who is looking at me? I will not have her look at me. ... I know not who she is. I do not desire to know who she is..  
[Salomé, Oscar Wilde, 6/22; ...)

The quote above comes from *Salomé*, which retells the biblical tale of the death of John the Baptist. The visual centrepiece of this short play (one act, barely twenty pages, and about an hour in duration) is Salomé performing the ‘Dance of the Seven Veils’. The historical context of the play’s conception and staging, its Victorian setting and sexual undertones along with the furor around Oscar Wilde himself (imprisoned for being homosexual), goes together with its biblical speech-rhythms and Arabian Nights-style Orientalism as it depicts a story redolent with illicit emotions; incestuous desire, necrophilia, sexual lust itself. With the veil as the erotic visual centre of the play Wilde accentuates his protagonists’ (and Victorian discomfort) with exotic “decadence”.

The dramatic climax comes when Salomé kisses the severed head of John the Baptist presented to her on a platter; her revenge for rejecting her amorous advances was exacting his execution by dancing for her step-father/uncle. The tension between permissiveness and restrictions around degrees of (female) nakedness is played out in the first half as Wilde’s Prophet, Herodias (her mother), and King Herod struggle with Salomé’s determination to do as she pleases; the violence of her desire and the permissiveness, erotic charge of her act that links veils, dance, sexual desire, and death.

‘Fast-forward’ to circa 2010, we see a comparably anxious paternalism in European legislatures as they seek to ban, if not restrict modes of veil dressing in public spaces, if not in the workplace. In both scenarios, the women in question claim their right to follow their own conscience. As

France, Belgium, and the Netherlands passed laws in 2010-2011 forbidding the *niqab* and *burka* in public places, the unconstitutionality as well as the enforceability of these bans were contested<sup>7</sup>. Nonetheless, having the ban on the statute books in these countries will suffice for Burka-Ban advocates. They are the culmination of a gradually hardening of public and political attitudes towards veil dressing in general.

Precedents in France, the Netherlands, and Germany (see Moors 2009, Lenard 2010, Scott 2007) in the previous decade saw schools and local governments embroiled in rows over whether they could prescribe where and when pupils or employees could wear the *hijab* (head-scarf). The most well-known case prior to these latest initiatives is in France; where high-school pupils mounted a protest to being forbidden from wearing the hijab to school on the grounds of religious freedom. Two Dutch high-school pupils won their case to the Anti-Discrimination Commission on being refused access to class if they did not unveil on these grounds in 2003.

In each case albeit in different measures, media debates and court settlements focused on the way these head-coverings could be deemed as an refusal by the wearer to culturally integrate, or as a barrier to communication in the workplace - if worn by an office worker, or teacher for example<sup>8</sup> - or, as in the French case, a breach of the constitutional separation of church and state (*laïcité*) in all affairs public. So prior to the latest Burka-Ban rhetoric, women wearing head-scarves were already being singled out in these countries as examples of how Muslim residents and citizens were *refusing* to integrate. In countries where cultural similitude rather than difference is considered the *sine qua non* of the good society outward signs of being a Muslim is intolerable (see Smits 2010, Tarlo 2010, Moors 2009, Lenard 2010).

The effectiveness of both localised and national prohibitions rest on whether women insisting on their right to wear a veil can be deemed a political, rather than a religious or cultural act; on whether their veil dressing is in a public or private space. If a political act, then this would endorse a ban. If an act of religious conviction, punitive measures would be a violation of the wearer's human rights. It is at this point that the inconsistencies and non-enforceability of these prohibitions have been thrown into relief; under the terms of the European Human Rights Covenant, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and these countries' own constitutions<sup>9</sup>. Nonetheless the political classes in Belgium, France, and the Netherlands, and Germany with other EU countries monitoring things carefully have all managed to achieve a

modicum of public consensus that veil dressing is “undesirable”, to be actively discouraged at the very least. Even critics of Burka-Ban legislation make this distinction; “we mustn’t threaten these women with prosecution but make it clear to them that they mustn’t let themselves be locked up in a burka” (Wagendorp 2011, 2, my translation).

### 3: Fashioning Bodies Past and Present: Whose Gaze Matters

[Herod] The moon has a strange look to-night. ... She is naked too. She is quite naked. *The clouds are seeking to clothe her nakedness, but she will not let them.* She shows herself naked in the sky. (*Salomé*, Oscar Wilde: 9/22; emphasis added)

In Wilde’s rendition, the veil features in the act of undressing, playing on the flipside to western negative perceptions of the veil; its erotic charge. As Yeğenoğlu notes, the “veil is one of those tropes through which Western fantasies of penetration into the mysteries of the Orient and access to the interiority of the other are fantasmatically achieved” (1998: 39). It is thereby not only a particular item of clothing, part of a cultural practice of dressing, but since modern, colonial times a particular “tropology” (op cit: 40-41). Non-western veiled women come across as foreign, even a “monstrous” (Ahmed 2002) to fe/male western eyes. One reason is that the “veil” is not simply a signifier of a cultural habit or identity that can be liked or disliked, be good or bad, but ...for the European subject in our case, it signifies the production of an “exteriority”, a “target or threat” (Yeğenoğlu op cit: 41).

#### *Coverings & Gazes*

Whilst Wilde sets up an allegory for the way Victorian society exacted its own revenge for his own, illicit and socially unacceptable love for Lord Alfred Douglas, the staging underscores the colonial era’s mixture of fascination and fear of the eastern/female Other as a sexual agent who registers alternating degrees of desirability and sexual potency that troubles the western fe/male onlooker. If “conquest and desire” (Ling 2003) are inter-dependent then in this scenario it is Salomé who conquers what she desires.

How she gets what she wants is by unveiling before her sovereign/father, defying her mother and facing down her object of desire as she does so. For, despite his own self-imposed abjection, what unsettles the Prophet, speaking for the audience too I would suggest, is that Salomé looks at him. The directness of her gaze and her intentions towards him are experienced as an intrusion, a challenge that must be resisted: “I will not have her look at me.

... I do not desire to know who she is." (Wilde, op cit). Liken this to the sorts of sentiments expressed by Burka-Ban advocates in Europe; "we cannot allow someone to claim the right to look at others without being seen" (Bacquelaine in Traynor op cit).

### *Skins & Spaces*

If we focus on the role the veil plays in this play, the push and pull between Salomé and those around her who would tell her what to do is a theatrical rendition of another push and pull in sociocultural encounters. As Sara Ahmed argues, bodies (gendered, raced, and classed) and social space meet in both physical and symbolic terms:

As bodies move towards and away from each other, in relationships of proximity and distance, both bodily space (the shape of the skin) and social space (the skin of the community) expand and contract. The bodily encounters we have with others who are assimilable (close) and unassimilable (distant) involve the reforming of both bodily and social space. .... (Ahmed 2002: 61)

This means to say that the "shape of the skin" and the "skin of the community" are neither *a priori* exclusive nor in a straightforward isomorphic relationship. What clothes, or disrobes this "shape of the skin" at the individual level and that of a community adds more complex layers to an interplay of mutuality and disconnection, familiarity and foreignness in ways that are intuitive and repressed; inchoate and forcefully expressed in emotionally charged words or deeds. For instance, if a skin is covered - shaped - in a certain way, then this covering also seems to indicate something about the community to which it belongs, or seeks to belong; the removal of a covering as well. The slippage is assuming that the "shaping" that is veil dressing is always synonymous with domination; reversing it synonymous with freedom. Veil wearing may be both.

### *Sameness and Difference*

Veil dressing for women, and male attire (head-coverings included) have many variations within and across societies comprising the Muslim world; various terminologies for items of clothing as well. In Anglo/American public debates four terms predominate; the *hijab* (headscarf), the *jilbab* or *chador* (longer head-to-foot veil), the *niqab* (the face-mask, also worn by Michael Jackson), and the *burka* (where face and head and body are covered). These distinctions - visual, material, and physical - and differences in how

veils are worn have become blurred as the terms of the Burka-Ban debates shift according to which headline in which debate. An earlier focus on the hijab (head-scarf) and face-veil (niqab) has, in the Netherlands but also in France and Belgium, shifted to the burka (Moors 2009: 398, 401).

Such equivalences, read from visuals within particular sorts of media frames (e.g. minarets/burka-wearing women) are quite effective lightning rods in the current climate. This is because “the marking out of the boundary lines between bodies involves social practices and techniques of differentiation” (Ahmed 2002: 60). History shows how individual women, and groups, have resisted as well as reproduced all manner of state-driven programs codifying their role and appearance in nation-building projects, registering protest or non-conformity to either the established or imposed order in ways that shift the significance of the respective veiling/unveiling accordingly. For instance, despite the punitive impositions of the Iranian Islamic Republic’s dress-code, women appear in public wearing “their scarf in such a way that their protest [to compulsory veiling] is obvious” (Sreberny and Khiabany 2010: 94<sup>10</sup>).

The *outlawing* of this form of dressing creates a more prosaic form of daily ‘clothing crisis’ as well as a moment of defiance for Muslim women in parts of western Europe when and where they have been forced to remove headscarves, face-veils, and burkas (if relevant) for basic activities such as taking a bus, job interviews or the workplace. That these moves are effectively the flipside of women being forced to wear the hijab, burka or niqab in Afghanistan, parts of Algeria, Saudi Arabia, or Iran sometimes on pain of death or prison does not little to alleviate this discomfort from a western/feminist perspective. Issues around the gender power relations of ‘what not to wear’ and *how* not to wear something become quickly subsumed under the broad sweep of geocultural mistrust; the agency and countermanding struggles of the women in question are thereby elided or dismissed as a form of false consciousness. Personal body politics, embodied cultural politics, and the meaning imputed to forms of dress - and undress - have been crystallising not only about the perceived increase in veiled women in western societies but also around expressions of suspicion about the underlying *intentions* of women opting for increasing degrees of bodily coverage.

All these convolutions around the significance of veil dressing and ‘intentionality’ overlay older tropes based on two responses from the western viewer; the veil as something that attracts attention (Yeğenoğlu 1998:

44, Moors 2008: 404-5) as well as masks as its wearer. In both respects the conclusion is that the veil is an immovable “curtain that conceals and reveals; it conceals the Orient’s truth and at the same time reveals its mode of existence [in a ] ... disguised and deceptive manner” (Yeğenoğlu 1998: 48). For women growing up in western societies, taking up the full veil, if not adopting the headscarf is currently occurring in a multiplex and conflicted “mode of existence”. These women appeal to western (their home too) notions of transparency, and selfhood yet find themselves cast in the role of the pre-modern Other even as they look to assert their contemporary Self. The agency and choice exercised by these women are positioned differently than the agency and choice exercised by those undergoing televised or private makeovers; one is cultural - tradition. The other is not.

It is not only political ideologues who are making political capital out of the “embodied challenge” presented by (variously) veiled Muslim women living in western Europe with feelings of “dislike and discomfort, but also feelings of resentment and anger” (Moors 2009: 407). Academic and public debates about the rights and wrongs of veil dressing, the constitutional and moral implications of legislation forbidding the wearing of certain forms of dress, cover a range of in-between positions in these countries, as elsewhere (see Moors 2009: 395, Lenard 2010: 312-313). Comparably, feminists have been debating what it means to the women’s movement and feminist ideals in general as younger women appear to repudiate the feminist project, for some evidenced by popular makeover shows where women voluntarily subject themselves to “various forms of denigration ... done with a degree of self-conscious irony” (McRobbie 2004a: 100). In this context, thoroughly modern womanhood is premised on institutions and practices of “visibility and transparency ... which refuses to tolerate areas of darkness” (Yeğenoğlu, referring to Foucault, 1998: 40).

The paradox, for many second-wave feminist sensibilities is that in both cases a key moment in women’s liberation, in Anglo-American settings at least, where women deliberately un-dressed to mark their repudiation of patriarchy and prudery, has become caricatured. Younger women adopting fuller or partial veiling along with the return of corsets, push-up bras, and impossibly high heels are for some critics not a sign of “women doing it for themselves” but a retrograde step.

#### 4: Undressing in Public: *What Not to Wear and How to Look Good Naked*

[Susannah] The right bra is absolutely essential for a big-busted woman like Diana. Wearing a strong, underwired bra really hoicks up your boobs and lengthens your tummy, which is brilliant if you are short-waisted like her. <sup>11</sup>

Exhortations about what (younger) women should or should not wear (read; reveal) in public let alone religious settings is nothing new; the quote above exemplifies contemporary body (under)fashion in Anglo-Euro-American popular culture; from Oprah Winfrey to primetime television in the UK and the Netherlands, women's magazines and fashion blogs. These norms and/as trends - and their subversion - permeate the history and cultural politics of fashion, as an industry and everyday practice as fashions are taken up by successive generations, frowned upon respectively by figures of authority and guardians of public taste. Dress-codes are not only imposed (by force and persuasion) from outside but also closer to home; more powerful (male and female, cultural, and institutional) others and individuals themselves who impose rules and judgments about clothing and bodies. Many women do this with each other, and themselves all the time.

As cultural theorists note, everyday dress is not a one-dimensional practice. Neither is fashion just about *haute couture* (see Crane 2000, Barnard 2002, Byrdon and Niesson 1998). Both are forms of (visual) communication and social 'distinction' that cut across, accentuate, and deliberately play with race, gender, and class lines. Even under the aegis of global (anti-)fashion trends whether these are manufactured or spontaneous, at a more prosaic level, everyday people make decisions about "the social status and role of the people we meet based on what they are wearing; we treat their clothes as 'social hieroglyphics' which conceal, even as they communicate the social position of the wearer" (Barnard 2002: 9). As these social positions and their respective spaces and skins (*pace* Ahmed op cit) shift according to recalibrations of sociocultural and political economic power veiling and unveiling/dressing and undressing cannot be read as simply an act of volition, function of coercive patriarchal power, or the 'false consciousness' of religiosity.

All parts of the body are at stake here; from head to toe, from ankles to knees, from the mini-skirt, to hot-pants, to exposed mid-riffs, to accentuated or (accidentally) exposed or accentuated nipples (from Madonna to Janet Jackson to Lady Gaga). Stronger still, as being and looking fashionable moves from its original sartorial level - clothing the outer body - to cutting

into, filling out, or tucking in undesirable parts of the corporeal body through surgical interventions that now encompass the sexual organs, any exploration of the gender geopolitics of (veil) dressing has to negotiate quite divergent literatures, terms of reference, and normative positions. As Rosalind Gill notes in her debate with Linda Duits and Liesbeth van Zoonen (2007) about the feminist politics of agency and 'choice' exercised, or not by young women in recent years, all commentators are "enmeshed in these matrices of power" (Gill 2007: 77).

### *What to wear – or not*

Angela McRobbie's critique of the forms of class antagonism that are so effectively and seductively perpetuated by shows such as *What Not to Wear* (BBC Television, 2001-2006; 2006 - 2007) is apt. She notes how the manner and language used by Trinny and Susannah marked a change in the language and comportment of participants in popular television; language that what would have once been considered "offensive, discriminatory, or prejudicial" (op cit: 100) now part of its formula for success. Hosted by self-appointed makeover gurus, Susannah Constantine and Trinny Woodall, participants in this show agree to be stood in front of 360° mirrors in their underwear, admonished on their poor choice of style for their body-shape, out-of-date or unglamorous wardrobes, and then followed by cameras as they embark on shopping expeditions in order to exercise their newly acquired fashion-sense. Viewers see participants watching videos of partners, family, and friends evaluating their dress-sense before they enter the metamorphosis phase. Recidivism is put to right on the spot with Trinny and Susannah jumping out from behind clothes-racks at the sniff of an inappropriate choice.

Compelling viewing, at least early on, precisely *because* of the direct language and no-nonsense instructions of the hosts. Here I would beg to differ with McRobbie; Trinny and Susannah's irreverence after years of slightly pompous and staid advice injected a degree of self-deprecating humour to an issue and media genre that leaves very few women unaffected<sup>12</sup>. In later series, and here I agree with McRobbie, the tongue-in-cheek "bossy hockey coach" tone got more insistent, less endearing; the line between 'straight-talking' and "discriminatory" (McRobbie op cit) harder to draw as the hosts started to take themselves and the aspirations of their 'willing victims' too seriously. An increasingly hyper-sexualised text took over; accentuated bust-lines and a seemingly never-ending quest for flat tummies (Susannah's in

particular) an incessant refrain. Ordinary bodies, ordinary fashions, and ordinary people needed to be remodelled; “glammed up” in the idiom of the times. For many feminist understandings this is a step backwards; the wolf of symbolic violence in the sheep’s clothing of agency and choice as the purchasing power of young women, and girls becomes intrinsic to the viability of the ‘High Street’ in debt-driven consumer societies.

As *What Not to Wear* went global after Trinny and Susannah’s appearance on the Oprah Winfrey Show, their fortunes changing as they moved from the BBC to ITV in 2006, resurfacing in 2011 on the European continent on Dutch television as street-level ‘fashion flying squad’, another show emerged; *How to Look Good Naked*, hosted by British-Chinese presenter, Gok Wan<sup>13</sup>. From undressing in the mirror room this show is premised on getting women to un-dress in public, and be proud of it. ‘Darling’, ‘absolutely fabulous’, ‘how do you *feel?!*’, ‘what do you all think, doesn’t she look absolutely *gorgeous?!*’ have become hallmark terms of address in Gok’s case, coupled with copious amounts of hugging and kissing. This affectionateness differentiates Gok from Trinny and Susannah. Irony is replaced by earnestness, cajoling and admonition gives way to persuasion and pragmatism where the script includes participants setting their own limits of nakedness.

That most participants are “full-bodied” and the level of class antagonism flagged in McRobbie’s analysis is muted, if not entirely absent (Gok is every woman’s best boyfriend) also makes for compelling and ambiguous viewing in equal measure. Nakedness and self-confidence become synonymous; agency equated with disrobing, being photographed by professionals and then put on display. The climax is the public unveiling (quite literally) of their photos on a magnified screen in front of the TV/live audience. This moment of revelation, awe and tears packaged as empowerment and self-affirmation is a potent mix of women’s liberation, consumerist hocus-pocus, and visual re-branding techniques. In its own PR, the objective is to free ordinary women from the “body-fascist myths of perfection perpetrated by the fashion, beauty and advertising industries”<sup>14</sup>. In *Reality TV*-speak, women need to *learn* to ‘to look good’ naked. Nakedness itself requires intervention.

Gok’s ethnicity, trans-gender appearance and mannerisms are a corrective to the imperiousness of Trinny and Susannah’s white and upper-class personae. What Not To Wear led to more than one spin-off differentiating between British viewing publics. Targeting a working-class demographic *Snog, Marry, or Avoid?* and *Hotter than my Daughter* are varieties on the *makeunder*; aiming

to get participants to return to their 'natural beauty' in the first case and 'age-appropriate dressing' in the second. The heterosexual normativities and working-class cultures that are both lampooned and reproduced in these shows require their own analysis. The point here is that all beg the question of whether they are simply reruns of the "post-feminist symbolic violence" (McRobbie 2004a: 99) of the *What Not To Wear* genre. However, as critical media scholars point out and noted by McRobbie, there is more than one response to media messages, more than one way to engage with, ignore or take on board the manifest content. Imputing one reading of the content with one intent, one sort of audience with one sort of effect is a model of communication in which the sender/message is active and the receiver passive; unable to draw their own conclusions.

The infinitudes of these debates cannot be rehearsed here suffice it to say that as such makeover shows go global, notions of audience/consumer response, cultural ramifications, and longer-term 'media effects' become overlaid with transnational homogenising tropes, behavioural norms, and values (e.g. about what counts as 'looking good') that are also not negligible (see Abu-Lughod 2002). My point is that in the current trend of makeover and lifestyle enhancing infotainment, women's bodies are being dressed and undressed all the time.

### **5: The Fashion Politics of (Modest) Dressing: "I Define My Own Identity"<sup>15</sup>**

As veiled women, symbolically and also quite literally, are folded into meta-narratives about belonging and community in societies claiming custodianship of the larger global good, intracultural contentions and intergenerational changes in how women veil dress, voluntarily or not, are relatively under-researched by scholars of world politics. This is made more difficult in the current climate because of the appropriation of the use of "affective discourse" (Moors op cit) as well as classic propaganda techniques in Burka-Ban debates. The upshot is that all forms of veil dressing are framed as identical to the burka, then folded into a wider xenophobic rhetoric<sup>16</sup>. This occludes, as is the case with popular culture content, the variety of meanings attributable to various sorts of head/face covering by those discomfited or offended by Muslim versions of this apparel. These discomforts vary from place to place in the EU; e.g. in the Netherlands a veiled face is considered a form of miscommunication if not deception; Muslim men not wishing to shake hands with women, public figures in particular, a cause for much

mediatized moral indignation in the Netherlands, and Germany; the (pro-Republican) Australian Prime-Minister not wearing a hat to greet the British Queen in October 2011 an affront to royal protocol.

In these heated debates, academic and popular, there is little room for the nuances offered by closer examination of the intricacies of veil dressing or comparative analysis between practices and settings. As anthropologists show, the veil as part of 'modest dressing' is a practice shared by all Abrahamic religions; by women and men (see Al-Ali 2000, El Guidi 2003). In other contexts, second and third generation Muslim women are adopting a variety of "ensembles" (Tarlo 2010) that see skinny jeans, high-heeled shoes, and head-veil "mixed and matched" in any number of ways. These styles, and a burgeoning market in modest fashion lines, are also infused with local economies and the micropolitics of style, subcultures, patterns of ethnic diversity and `community. They also bear the burden of gender geopolitics around Muslim veil dressing.

Yet as (western-based) Muslim women go shopping they too are engaging the commodities and representational power of these industries along with/alongside their own veil dressing. Incorporating the sartorial practices of (younger) women, some of whom may wear the burka or niqab, some may not requires attention to these practices in ways that do not reduce them to orientalist tropes, nor flattens out the way they negotiate or resist the mores and prescriptions of their mothers, aunts, grandmothers, and communities. For critical, particularly feminist discussions, as the public debates continue to harden, what often is overlooked is how the

sartorial strategies of any given individual are framed and shaped by 'local and global religious and political forces', such as those aligned to conservative politico-religious interpretations of Islamic sartorial norms, and the *normative pressures in the West on covered women to uncover. .... the collusion between these opposing camps flattens out the real diversity of meanings Muslim women invest in their outfits.* (Mondal 2010, citing Tarlo 2010).

Like all young women, what (not) to wear is part of one's upbringing and culture; moves away from these codes can be a moment of liberation as well as conformity. Living and shopping in the west in liberally construed public spaces is superimposed on private ones; "you're not going out dressed like *that!*" in that respect straddles cultures and dress-codes. That Muslim women and their veil dressing vis-à-vis Muslim women who do not adopt the veil in any form differ markedly in the stand they take on the Burka-Ban moves in

Europe is crucial to breaking open the debate amongst feminists at large. Second, women differ between themselves, also dress according to intricate and peer-based fashion codes *within* veil dressing but also as a sort of cultural cross-dressing that need examination on their own terms. Some of this research talks to women themselves face to face but in the digital age, we can also see many articulations of these issues amongst women from veil dressing cultures, and belief systems. That these women also differ vehemently with one another about Burka Ban moves in their parents' adopted homes - countries of which they are fully-fledged citizens is often overlooked as all Muslim women and their dressing practices are reduced to undifferentiated stereotyping, from critical liberals and right-wing quarters.

There is individual choice in veil dressing, what to show and what to cover, and how much to expose of the eye and eyebrow and the area above and below the eye. These aspects of veiling definitely call for an expert proxemic analysis .. [of] ... the cultural significance of veil dressing and the extent to which it is fully integrated into *changing cultural notions of gender, femininity, lifestyle, social status, and more.*" (El Guindi 2006: 76, emphasis added).

In ostensibly more permissive societies such as the Netherlands, online blogs and websites abound with activity and agency within and for this mode of dressing that is understood as personal, cultural, and political<sup>17</sup>.

All together, these practices within the realm of *veil* fashion-sense, fashion understood here as not just a noun for 'high fashion' but also a verb for ways of doing things (see Barnard 2002: 9 *passim*), are occurring within and *despite* the growing trend to outlaw veil dressing in western Europe. These disconnects between the political rhetoric and everyday practices highlight how fashion, religion, and politics (writ large) are intertwined in an asynchronous way with micro-level contestations over the correct terms of (ad)dress in newly multicultural societies; those of the EU in particular. Here, we see a reversal of the anti-colonization struggles of (un)veiling women as women's bodies become once again re-inscriptions of larger narratives and their contestation.

Meanwhile, designers for and of Muslim women's clothing lines (such as sportswear and the highly publicised development of the *burkini*, a burka-inspired version of the bikini, in Australia<sup>18</sup>) have created commercial outlets for veils and veiling techniques practised by Muslim women everywhere; these techniques (clothing the shape of the skin to borrow from Ahmed) in themselves contestations as younger women "do" things with traditional

forms of veil dressing that their mothers, or grandmothers might not. In other words, veil dressing is not outside fashion, as an industry or as a way of clothing, performing identity in public and/or private.

Alongside these variations, it bears noting that within western high fashion the incorporation of 'exotic' clothing styles (from the kaftan to the turban) is hardly new. As global fashion houses such as Dior, designers such as Vivienne Westwood (2009), Tom Ford, and others create designer-veils in some of their recent collections, the stakes in political terms appear to be defused<sup>19</sup>. The difference is, however, that designers can pick and choose; they have significant economic and cultural power to influence without the need to legislate. Politicians on the other hand with anti-Muslim/anti-immigrant agendas along with their conservative counterparts in Iran, or Afghanistan who decree that women should cover up - head, face, body - see physical coercion as their primary weapon.

As in everyday life veil dressing practices bring with them their own prescriptions, norms, and changing notions of what looks good - how (not) to wear a veil. Any group, or community, subjected to external prohibitions will find ways of side-stepping, subverting the impositions of top-down power (Certeau 1997). As noted above, in the Iran case, women in one of the most exigent regimes for how to dress find ways to look good in public.

## **6: What is at Stake? Feminist Conundrums**

"While all clothing is adornment, not all adornments are fashionable. ... And it could be said that while all fashion is adornment, not all fashion is clothing."  
(Barnard 2002: 10)

[We] need to defamiliarize our gaze. ... go back and forth between micro- and macro-levels of analysis, between empirical practices and theoretical readings."  
(Göle 2002: 179).

Breaking out of a reductionist view of fashion as *haute couture*, trends and markets on the one hand and, on the other, all veil dressing as patriarchal oppression pure and simple requires not only a different analytical lens but also a leap of faith in debates that are based on polarizations rather than juxtapositions; traditional versus modern, oppressed versus liberated, young versus old, suitably versus unsuitably dressed. If any garment is indeed "both revealing and concealing at the same time" (Barnard 2002: 189), a tension that all fashion designers exploit in some way or another, all forms of

erotica make explicit in various ways, many churches, schools and families seek to contain to various degrees, then being 'for or against' veil dressing, or indeed the Burka-Ban needs to be repositioned within feminist debates from an interdisciplinary and intergenerational perspective.

First, if we take fashion, ways of dressing and practices of embodied adornment, as a rich vein of inquiry for scholars to engage crucial issues of our time and do so with the understanding that this is because such issues are infused with social, cultural, and aesthetic dimensions that reach, and get under the skin quite literally, then it is not so large a step to reflect on how these cross-currents around veil dressing present a particular set of scholarly and political challenges to critical feminist research of world politics. For instance, the different contexts in which women assert their rights to wear the veil, or indeed resist the enforcement of the same highlight the variety of ways that subaltern - gendered and racialised - subjects resist western, *Orientalist* and *masculinist* discourses; ways of living in the world that occur in more than a single register, emerge from multiple standpoints and emotional investments, as well as throw up any number of conflicting understandings of what constitutes (women's) oppression and its resistance.

Postcolonial/Third World feminists have argued these distinctions trenchantly in riposte to the reductionist, universalising tendencies of western, liberal feminist frameworks that work within understandings of liberal individualism, agency as personal choice, capitalism and market forces as the *sine qua non* of democracy and empowerment. When it comes to the gender geopolitics of veil dressing in a post-9/11 world, however, these divisions do not stop there. They also trace longstanding fissures amongst western feminist politics; liberal, Marxist, radical, postcolonial, These intersect directly with how critical researchers also have to grapple with the intellectually "chilling" effects of not only the *geopoliticisation* of all veil dressing but also how these effects intersect debates in feminist circles over the *apparent* de-politicisation of younger generations of women in western societies.

Several conundrums ensue; first where does this leave more nuanced critiques of the practice and politics of veil dressing, those that look to go beyond the well-rehearsed moral condemnations of the double-standards evident in these local and international stances towards women wearing the veil? For instance, can more macro-levels of analysis, say on how this issue highlights the longstanding tensions between theory and practice in

nominally secular societies, converse with those taking an intersubjective, embodied micro-view of veil dressing on its own terms? Does paying attention to the variations within and between different types of veil fashions depoliticise more macro-level analyses? I would argue that more close-up modes of inquiry actually provide a sharper critical focus; by observing veil dressing practices and listening to women's experiences and understandings of what is at stake, if not sartorially then in terms of the fine line some tread between veil dressing as personal identity-politics, a faith-based consumerism or a political act of resistance to (western) forms of symbolic violence that seek to undress veiled women.

Second; as the tone hardens, critical commentators - feminists in particular - are 'damned if they do, damned if they don't' when engaging these issues. This "trap, which is luring in front of all of us, who are reacting to and writing against ethnocentric and stereotypical depictions of Muslim women" (Al-Ali op 2000: 544) leads to a certain degree of self-censorship for non-Muslim feminists exploring this theme; of which I am one. It creates a particular psycho-emotional threshold to cross when considering whether Muslim women being told what to wear might have something in common with the ways in which women's bodies and dress-codes are constantly "made and re-made within texts of enjoyment and rituals of relaxation and abandonment" (McRobbie 2004a: 262) in everyday life; through makeover shows on popular television and the fashion industry in particular.

Even within traditionally understood nuances to head-scarves, face-veils and the full veil, evidence of the "often fluid and changing meaning of "the veil" depending on the context" (Al-Ali 2000: 543) becomes quickly positioned as disingenuousness, if not evidence of "the danger of glorifying existing cultural symbols and codes" (ibid) where they are oppressive and prescriptive. Yet here too, as feminists in the 1960's showed (Burn the Bra) clothes do not just dress the body. They can enclose it and expose it as attractive or unattractive, depending on who is looking and judging; what whale-bone corsets and mid-riffs do to a waistline is but one case in point. Countermanding views, those pointing out for instance cases where women consciously cover themselves, or dress modestly for personal, community, and religious reasons, if not in response to just these sorts of restrictions - in British and Dutch cities nowadays as in colonial Algeria for instance (Yeğenoğlu 1998), are quickly positioned as apologists for women's oppression. Post-9/11 this means Islamic oppression, not that of any other religion.

Whether identifying with or distancing oneself from consumer practices, the power of the latest trends to affect what you wear (see Gill 2007) at any age, the Burka-Ban controversies present feminists with another entanglement; women choosing to wear the hijab, niqab or burka as well as opting not to. Asking 'why?' they might do the first and applauding them when they do the second is a politically and personally charged balancing act. Placed outside time, place, and thereby fashion (namely design, trends, adornment, bodily aesthetic, '*souci de soi*' in Foucauldian terms), Muslim traditions *and* innovations in veil dressing as a visible presence in EU member-states have come to represent for their critics an obstinately visceral marker of difference; one that is, as Sara Ahmed argues, "established in the very marking out of boundaries between bodies, by the very ways in which bodies inhabit the world differently, or are touched by some others differently than other others." (2002: 61). Countering this would mean regarding women as agents and actors in these contestations. It means 'defamiliarizing' critical poles by seeing where and how veiled and un-veiled women are more than victims of structural violence, empty vessels for modernist tropes of liberation. It may well mean overcoming more visceral feelings of dislike, or distaste; fear or disapproval of that 'other' woman 'hiding' behind a veil/under a headscarf as if this was a personal affront to 'us'<sup>20</sup>.

Thinking through these tensions by juxtaposing critiques of makeover shows, premised on the collusion between audience, 'contestants', and fashion advisers who all have their tongues firmly in their cheeks on the one hand and, on the other, far more portentous and heart-felt interlocutions about the meaning and appropriateness of public dress-codes in western capitalist societies highlights more than one "double entanglement" for contemporary feminist praxis (McRobbie 2004: 255). I would argue that these entanglements are where further theory and research can begin; not a reason to desist or have them dissolve into the comfort of universalising rights-based or relativist freedom-to-choose discourses.

### **Summing up: Cover-Ups, Makeovers, Make-unders**

Whereas veils are material/s, the metaphorical cloak to which Salomé refers in her quasi-soliloquy as she kisses the lips of the Prophet's severed head is her retort to his refusal to meet her eye; Wilde's allegorical device as well.

[Salomé] Ah! wherefore didst thou not look at me, Iokanaan? *With the cloak of thine hands, and with the cloak of thy blasphemies thou didst hide thy face.* ... Well, thou hast

seen thy God, Iokanaan, but me, me, thou didst never see. If thou hadst seen me thou hadst loved me. ... (*Salomé*, Oscar Wilde: 21/22; emphasis added)

As the contentiousness of Burka-Bans and Makeover shows remind us, clothes are multiplex not simple containers; they cover the body and are thereby implicitly allayed to nakedness. As sociocultural and political signifiers both these bodily states have material consequences, particularly when enshrined in penal codes, acts of sexual revolution or political polarization. In that sense, and coming full circle to draw this discussion to a close, readers may well find themselves, as I do, in a strange place; the sexual politics of (un)reality TV meets 'Ban the Burka' debates, *modest fashion* outlets straddle the faith-divide whilst feminists line up on either side of the structure-agency debate over high-heels, Brazilian waxes, Botox treatments, vaginal surgery, and G-Strings as a form of women's liberation or subjugation. These gender power struggles in 'Real Life' and 'On-Screen' challenge the way feminists engage with veil dressing as something removed from fashion and beauty. It is not only Burka-Ban advocates and their counterparts in veil-prescriptive parts of the world that rely on coercive forms of power to get what they want. So do those who have the power to prescribe what looks good, or not in more prosaic settings (McRobbie 2004: 108)

So, to draw some conclusions, in a discussion that is far from over, I would like to underscore three empirico-interpretative points emerging from this inter-disciplinary, and inter-textual 'reading' of the gender geopolitics of what (not) to wear.

First, in politics and everyday life, looks have always mattered; here women are in the limelight (from Margaret Thatcher to Ayaan Hirsi Ali, to Michelle Obama), on the catwalk, screen, and stage (from Blondie to Lady Gaga). As bodies are refashioned through clothing, the surgeon's knife, or Photoshop tools by choice or decree, how they are worn, lived, and then perceived by others with power to decide how women and/as bodies may or may not move in public/private spaces need to be conceptualised as inscriptions of intercultural and intracultural tensions along gender power axes of class, race; and nowadays religion. For feminist thought relations of entitlement, aspiration, and exclusion proceed outwards from there. As visibly Muslim (viz. veiled) embodiments become folded into the "post traumatic stress syndrome" of post-9/11 western societies (see Derrida 2003), the clarity of macro-level explanatory paradigms need to be troubled with the nuances of

the micropolitics of everyday dressing and (re)fashioning as power and resistance in varying measures. Moreover both can be examined as serious pursuits with high economic and political stakes as well as instances of designers, and wearers having fun, experimenting, or bucking convention.

Second, as researchers are showing women do everyday, Muslim veil dressing and fashion, understood in the fuller sense of the term (see Barnard 2002, Crane 2000, Brydon and Niesson 2008), are not mutually exclusive. Third, any imposition of dress-codes in public places (by whichever authority) raises serious issues around the inner and outer limits of feminist solidarity as a given; as if dissension and disagreements about what (not) to wear is a sin rather than a virtue, beyond time and place. Even without the long arm of the law, as proposed in Europe, fashion and dress-codes (what your mother insists you wear before you can assert your own ideas for instance) can be as oppressive as they can be a form of escape; practices of sub-cultural, individual and group identity-formation. It is the intimate and wider contexts with all their gender power complexities that create their push and pull according to the context.

An undertow to all these sartorial and figurative reflections is another meta-narrative emerging around the veil; that of the 'good' veil (the *hijab*) and that of the 'bad' veil (the *burka*); a dichotomy that blithely superimposes itself over discourses about 'good' and 'bad' Islam. Other forms of religious dress pertaining to other communities and groups are on the whole excluded from mainstream coverage of Burka-Ban debates. Catholic nuns, Franciscan monks, Hare Krishna devotees, religious Jewish women who wear wigs, or Amish women are not considered part of this larger problematic for their head-coverings are deemed politically neutral. To posit that *Muslim* veil dressing - in all its varieties, monochromatic and multi-coloured textures - incorporates notions of fashion, or that 'modest dressing' across Christian, Jewish, and Muslim faith-communities have their own considerations of what counts as fashionably suitable is too easily overlooked in the essentializing heat of public and scholarly debates that ignore cultural and historical nuances of women choosing to wear the veil, or not wear the veil as an act of *defiance* (see Yeğenoğlu 1998, Göle 2002). Whose gaze has the power to impose a larger order on these recalcitrant women is as much a political as it is a historical question.

The "social hieroglyphics" of all dress, fashion-based or not, aside the multilayered dimensions to the "veil" and its meaning in both analytical and

social terms are sadly far removed from the clarity of purpose in European Burka-Ban legislation. The outcome is that now there are laws stigmatizing women in place that are not only close to unenforceable but also legitimize a form of symbolic violence targeting 'visibly Muslim' citizens. In light of equivalent yet not official codifications around what (not) to wear in popular culture, feminist will need to get around the "politics of discomfort" to borrow from Annelies Moors (2009) in order to be able to look more closely at veil dressing as both domination and resistance; personal and political. Then we can start examining exactly how, and where both subaltern and hegemonic gendered subjectivities are being interpolated into local-global political economies of the beauty, fashion, and war in particularly cross-cultural ways. Women who are 'modestly dressing' in ways that are visibly Muslim yet also 'hip' and fashionable are just as imbricated in the local-global cultural dynamics of the fashion industry, aspirational consumerism, and post-feminist embodiments. By the same token, sometimes a g-string is 'just' a pair of knickers, a *hijab* 'just' a headscarf.

Finally, what about feminist solidarity in the face of gender and sexual oppression around the world (from burka bans to homophobic legislation), the dilemma with which this essay began? From a bird's eye-view, particularly when viewed with a liberal feminist gender lens, impositions on women in those parts of the world (from Afghanistan to Sudan to Iran, Belgium to Saudi Arabia to France), where dress-codes are punishable by law are to be resisted from all fronts.

Yet, here lies the rub. As Sreberny and Khiabany point out, the point here is less about which modernity triumphs over which traditionalism. More to the point is recognising that because of the "travails of the female body in the public space of [in this case] the Islamic Republic" (2010: 116) the way women act and dress as fully fledged actors and agents in settings where despite appearances, the "balance of ... forces [are] constantly shifting" (op cit: 114). It is these dispositions of power that critical scholars need to be examining more closely rather than the fabric covering the 'shape of skin' itself. Fashion and the veil are not incompatible, not all forms of full body-covering are beyond the sexual charge, the erotic. As western fashion trends, and feminist responses to some of the less comfortable, more body-restricting items that have come and gone with every generation in the name of 'looking good' show, the significance imputed to any form of dress in terms of its role in reproducing or dismantling gender (in)equality is not a

god-given truth divorced from space and time. The demand for equality can only be born with the social awakening of women themselves, which is the result of certain social and material conditions and changes. ... (Sreberny & Khiabany op cit: 92).

To end with yet another question mark; what would happen to feminist discomfords with veil dressing today if the wealth of knowledge and more attuned, more accommodating gazes on the intricacies of veil dressing in its own right, to meet the gaze coming from "behind" the veil, could be brought to bear on legitimate concerns about the formative power of shows like *What Not To Wear*, and its spin-offs? Can the practices and fashions of veil dressing and/or modest dressing inform the (un)dressing aspirations of audiences religiously following the advice of fashion-arbiters like Trinny, Susannah, Gok Wan, 'Pod' (from *Snog, Marry, Avoid*), and (even) Oprah on primetime television? Should there be a law against these sorts of violent (un)dressings?

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Zeena Feldman, Louise O'Reilly, Jowan Mahmud, Anita Lacey, Jacqui True, and Gholam Khiabany for sharing their experience and insight on these issues with me. Without Andreas Behnke who organized the two inaugural 'Fashionista' Panels at the 2010 International Studies Association conference this paper would not have got off the ground. Thanks to him and my fellow-Fashionistas online and off for furthering these ideas since; Linda Bishai, Lily Ling, Hazel Clark, Rosemary Shinko, Geeta Chowdhry, Erica Dingman, Mary Hope Schwoebel, and Cecilie Neumann.

<sup>2</sup> My thanks to an audience member during a presentation of an earlier version of this article for this distinction; if I paraphrase her correctly, the veil at home is taken for granted and resisted as 'a cultural, not a religious practice'. However, when in non-veil wearing societies, re-adopting it becomes a countermanding practice to the dominant culture; the thing you took off to defy your mother/grandmother becomes the thing you put on to assert yourself.

<sup>3</sup> Home makeover shows have been around for some time as have shows about fashion and grooming; now merging with Reality TV as spectators become real-life as opposed to studio-based participants.

<sup>4</sup> In the case of other world religions, head covering is still widespread in Christianity and Judaism; the denominational and geocultural nuances of which are beyond the scope of this discussion. In terms of degrees of acceptable (un)covering, Piet Hein Donner, the Dutch Minister of Internal Affairs, made the following analogy during debates on the Dutch Burka-Ban Bill, passed in; if nakedness in public is illegal then, according to this logic, Muslim face-covering veils should be also.

<sup>5</sup> Since the mid-1990's Dutch, Belgian, and French right-wing populists have made political capital by an astute use of uncompromising language about the threat to respective 'indigenous' ways of life and identity from "Islamic fundamentalism", home-grown or imported. Right-wing parties, in the UK and Scandinavia have also taken up the 'burka ban' call.

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<sup>6</sup> 75% of naturalisation applications refused in France over past years have been women (Fassin & Abdellali 2010, Gresh 2010).

<sup>7</sup> In 2010, the French Council of State ruled such a bill unconstitutional; the law was passed nonetheless in the following year. There was controversy in the Netherlands early in 2011 when the Amsterdam Police Commissioner stated publicly that the Dutch version of the Burka-Ban was unenforceable; amounting to “symbolic politics, a solution to a problem that doesn’t exist” (in Terstall 2011, my translation).

<sup>8</sup> In Germany it is teachers who are banned from wearing the veil whilst pupils may do so.

<sup>9</sup> In early March 2011, an employee of the Dutch department store (*Hema*) was relegated to back-room duties in its Belgian affiliate for refusing to take off her head-scarf after customers had complained. She filed a complaint of discrimination on religious grounds.

<sup>10</sup> Sreberny and Khiabany note how Iranian women have longstanding ways of subverting the republic’s strict clothing code - *bad hejabi* (2010: 112); e.g. those public places where “manifest colourful and fashionable wear” is possible, or clothes shops that “probe the limits of acceptable ‘Islamic’ fashion” (op cit: 114). See Yeğenoğlu (2002) and El Guindi (2003).

<sup>11</sup> cited in Marion Power (op cit).

<sup>12</sup> As one person recalled to me; “my mother once told me I should be in that program [the US version of *What Not To Wear*]. When I asked her why she thought her mother might think this, she added; “I don’t think I fit her version of femininity.” In the debate between Rosalind Gill (2007) and Linda Duits and Liesbet van Zoonen(2007) this personal dimension is a key feature of arguments provided by both sides.

<sup>13</sup> The sequel was *Gok’s Clothes Roadshow*. Moving into shopping centres to bring the catwalk to the public it pits High Street with Designer Fashion in an astute form of televisual “up-streaming”. Gok’s third peak-time incarnation was about dressing fashionably for less.

<sup>14</sup> Publicity blurb for Series 1 of *How to Look Good Naked*, Channel 4; 2006; <http://www.channel4.com/programmes/how-to-look-good-naked/episode-guide/series-1> [accessed 21/02/2011]. My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for noting the historical role of the term “body-fascism” in Second Wave feminism..

<sup>15</sup> See ..... (2003)

<sup>16</sup> For example, figures of speech about war, the enemy, or deliberately playing to the emotions such as fear; e.g. “the best way for the Netherlands and Europe to protect itself against dangerous Islam is to restrict immigration from Muslim (‘Islamic’) countries and control our internal borders better” (Wilders cited in van der Geest 2011, my translation).

<sup>17</sup> One Dutch Muslim “Fashion Scene” website puts it this way; participants can “post pictures of head-veils you like or not, or ask questions about how to wear a head-scarf or

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combine it with other things...". Any "anti-veil, free-speech rhetoric" means that are "looking for trouble" ;  
[http://forum.fashionscene.nl/forum.php/Fashion/Hoofddoekjes/list\\_messages/149771?visitorId=a331544f5836c6233646df8fe61cc63f](http://forum.fashionscene.nl/forum.php/Fashion/Hoofddoekjes/list_messages/149771?visitorId=a331544f5836c6233646df8fe61cc63f), [accessed 21 October 2011]

<sup>18</sup> See <http://mens-en-samenleving.infonu.nl/diversen/17047-de-burqini-zwemkleding-voor-moslimvrouwen.html> (accessed 13 March, 2011)

<sup>19</sup> From Dior's 2011 collection featuring turbans and other head-coverings to Vivienne Westwood; see [http://wn.com/headscarves\\_veils\\_inspire\\_top\\_fashion\\_designers](http://wn.com/headscarves_veils_inspire_top_fashion_designers).

<sup>20</sup> For example; after the same presentation noted above, another participant said she was "disappointed" because I had not given clear reasons for "why" women would dress in such a "frightening" way.