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Whence Muslim Women? A Response to Alia Al-Saji's "The Racialization of Muslim Veils: A Philosophical Analysis"

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Whence these recurrent representations of, and this obsession with, Muslim veils? (Al-Saji 2010, 876)¹

Because, I'll answer slowly, there are no women in the third world. (Suleri 1991, 20)

In this essay, I respond to Alia Al-Saji's compelling phenomenological analysis of debates surrounding the veil that took place in France between 1989-2004. These debates led to the banning of Muslim veils (a category that dismally failed to countenance even the diversity of the "veil") in public spaces under the guise of defense of French national secularism (*laïcité*) and women's rights. The saving of brown women from brown men is an age-old story told by white men and women to justify old-fashioned colonialism as well as neo-imperial cultural racism. The ability of power, however, to determine the

frame of discussion of the putatively contentious tradition at hand leaves philosophy, feminism, postcolonial, and critical race theory in complex and paradoxical binds. Perennially shuttling between subject- and object-status, the woman bearing the contentious object or engaging in the contentious practice is nowhere to be found.² Spivak examines how *sati* (widow-burning) was transformed from an obscure and uncommon (Hindu) ritual into a representative (secular) crime in order to transform colonialism from exploitation, murder, and theft into the benevolent gift of "modern" India to its people. Similarly, Al-Saji delineates how the "stereotypical schemata" (893) of western perception of Muslim women led to a definition/reconsolidation of public secular space (i.e. France) as the negation of Islam (i.e. the veil) by way of women. As a result, as Al-Saji notes, white (Christian) women are (yet again) pitted against brown (Muslim) women such that Muslim women have no subject-position from which to articulate the mutual compatibility of veiling and feminism. (881)

Recognizing such compatibility, of course, would require challenging hegemonic histories of feminism that regard feminism as the western woman's prerogative and hallmark of her political maturity. Understanding the compatibility of veiling and feminism (in one instantiation of historically complex and diverse non-western feminisms) would also demonstrate how de-subjectification and exclusion (881) prevent Muslim women from being seen as women. Given the pitfalls of this over-determined terrain, which leads well-intentioned liberalism to uphold neo-imperial cultural racism, I begin where Al-Saji concludes her nuanced interdisciplinary analysis. Al-Saji seeks to "insert hesitation into habitual western perception of Muslim women, so as to critically deflect the desire to look and represent, commencing instead the effort of speaking with and listening." (893) As we remain ineluctably caught between logic and vision, structure and sight, and reason and racism, I regard this task "of speaking with and listening" as the philosophical and *postcolonial* move of her analysis.³ Al-Saji states, "[F]eminist theory needs to be

² See "Can the Subaltern Speak?" and *Critique of Postcolonial Reason: A History of the Vanishing Present*.

³ Al-Saji does not describe her project as a postcolonial endeavor. I deploy this term, however, to argue that a truly philosophical project must be postcolonial rather than Eurocentric. In some ways, I am using the philosophical synonymously with postcolonial.

¹ Page references to this article appear in parentheses below.

aware of the ways in which it enters a discursive field mapped in advance." (877) The very invisibility of the structure of racist vision, which in fact creates a form of blindness, and the complex ways in which racism, sexism, and Eurocentrism, etc. are mutually implicated, demands "certain hesitation with respect to feminism's own position in this field, its blind spots and exclusions and its potential for cooption." (877) If the colonial project is repeated in postcolonial crisis management, such that a new law was required, which required discrimination against citizens to be seen as secularism/women's equality in postcolonial France, then where exactly are we to locate Muslim women such that we can speak with and listen to them?

The French *postcolonial* rewriting of alterity into the (exotic) veil/body that is officially French but from the suburbs is bereft of historical analysis—of just about anything: French colonialism, Islam, sacred texts, the veil, Muslim feminism. In addition to continuing the colonial project of obviating history, the so-called French debates of 1989-2004 render upholding colonial metonymies between Islam, Women, The Veil, and Oppression (similar to the British equation of India, Hindu, Women, and *Suttee*)⁴ the duty of every French citizen. This remarkable postcolonial turning of the law of colonial agency within, to internally colonize French men, women, and children, by retroactively casting France as the finished product of history, forecloses the interdependent history that led to immigration (from all over the Muslim world) and a suburban Muslim presence in the first place. Fighting an atavistic and retrograde enemy-within as the national task at hand precludes this history and its complexity from having any real significance or meaning in French public life and its citizenry.

As a result, to render Muslim women invisible and force (white) French women to choose between anti-racism and anti-sexism is to (once again) pretend as if this complex history never actually happened. The debates took place in a vacuum where, as Al-Saji demonstrates, the perspectives are already predefined. Thus, the severe ontological anxiety generated by the veil "so that a law was called for to exclude it from public schools" (879) remains unseen. This ontological anxiety remains unseen because of the pathological

projection, self-delusion, and scapegoating that is the privilege of white supremacy. White privilege precludes the object of fear and contempt from destroying the frame of discussion of the putatively contentious tradition at hand. The end-result of all possible arguments (for or against The Veil) is the explicit or implicit inferiority of Islam/Muslim Culture/Non-Western Civilization. These *postcolonial* "debates" provided no space-clearing gestures for articulations of the mutual compatibility of feminism and veiling (i.e. for reality) because The Veil is simply the pretext for discrimination and homogenization.

Because the frame of the "debates" was already pre- and over-determined, no classically learned radical questions, such as whether the subaltern can be seen or heard, were possible. Such questions might provide an opening for genuine solidarity. These results-oriented "debates" pitted French women against each other such that feminism became equivalent to white supremacy and nationalism. To reject the law was to reject gender equality for all French citizens, and to reject the frame by not participating was to reject a role in shaping national culture and identity. In other words, the false choice between racism and sexism upheld white privilege, that is, the ability to determine what gender equality looks like and creating laws. In spite of an influential French feminist philosophical tradition, white women's agency was foreclosed, and, as a result, the laughable claim of gender equality, as a French Republican value (879), could not be challenged. Such foreclosure served to reinforce "racist habits of seeing" (885), in spite of influential and dialogical critiques of this very French feminist philosophical tradition from western and non-western feminists alike. Being decidedly behind the times, as it ostensibly worked to bring *all* of its citizenry up to date, French exceptionalism exhibited precisely that simultaneous rigidity and malleability that is the hallmark of all prejudice.

French exceptionalism demanded that French citizens inculcate ignorance about the complex heterogeneous world in which they have always lived. And, French exceptionalism enshrined as law a self-righteous ("narcissistic and self-justifying" [885]) lack of socialization among its citizens in terms of the diversity already in their midst. Thus, perhaps we ought to name this ignorance and lack of socialization what it looks like (to us): French secularism. In other words, what we (the west's others) see are white people telling white lies. As a result, due to the power difference created by white

⁴ The British transcribed *sati* as *suttee*. This transcription demonstrates how little they were actually interested in the practice per se.

privilege and white supremacy, we are all condemned to a form of blindness. Any possibility of entering the game, and having the ability to change its terms, requires playing along, that is, requires reassuring (white) French culture of its innate exceptionalism. The “distinctive intransigence and de-humanization of racist vision” (885), therefore, creates a radically impoverished world in which rejecting the heterogeneous possibilities already present in our midst becomes the condition of possibly being seen (or heard).

This simultaneous rigidity *and* malleability perhaps explains the intransigence of stereotypes because such constructions/invocations of French identity are inherently results-oriented. As Al-Saji demonstrates, these “debates” were not genuine attempts at building real relationships among France’s diverse citizenry or changing national culture, but about deploying “positions scripted in advance” to reinforce what *already* has a “hold in the imagination.” (877) Because prejudice is immune to empirical reality and counter-examples (877), philosophy, feminism, postcolonial, and critical race theory are left in complex and paradoxical binds. Showing the structure of racist vision does not seem to ameliorate prejudice – even when rendered a national narrative. Thus, to make visible the invisible field of vision, and to demonstrate the constitutive maneuvers of what remains tacit or pre-reflective (885), seems to risk faith in the very (absent) reason that we are marking in silhouette. In other words, barring aside the issues associated with the metaphysics of presence, or the possible loss of the disruptive power of absence, what I emphasize here is that prejudice is not rational. And yet, we can only fight prejudice by demonstrating its illogic – or so it seems. Also, by necessarily taking the bait, and entering into the fray, are we reinforcing the fetishism of the veil? By not participating in this “debate,” French women would be acquiescing to their irrelevance in creating national law and identity. But, their very participation also reinforces the metonymic and simultaneously invisible/hypervisible status of the veil. If cultural racism as a French national value is to be undermined, given that prejudice is the innate nature of all forms of exceptionalism, how do we change the frame of the discussion? What more can we show them when the very existence of Muslim immigrants is what makes them conspicuous (*ostensible*) and the only satisfactory response of the Muslim community would be to disappear (altogether)?

The veil as indelibly *there*, that is, as (a part of) French (public) life and culture with a presence that has changed the very fabric of French identity, is precisely the empirical reality that is denied by these “debates.” Paradoxically, the diversity of the veil and Muslim culture only serves to render the attempt at de-subjectification and the invisibility of Muslim women all the more adamant and self-righteous. According to the terms of these “debates,” if white women were to refuse the false choice between racism and sexism, they would either align themselves with Muslim men and, hence, betray their French sisters, or they would betray their own culture that has granted them the privilege to participate in national culture (in the first place). As Al-Saji argues, “Other practices are perceived not as another gendering that generates different subjects, nor as another kind of sexism, but as *the* principal form of sexism that needs to be eradicated.” (882) If the body, moreover, serves as transparent testimony for lived experience, that is, wearing the veil shows that Muslim women do not have “freedom of conscience, since their agency or subjectivity has been mutilated by familial or communal forms of gender oppression,” (880) then even any counter-argument about voluntary veiling sounds hollow. Voluntary and involuntary veiling become specious categories that essentially *mean* the same thing: a pure form of gender oppression that must be eradicated for the sake of Secularism/Women’s Equality/France/Western Culture and Civilization.

This slippage between Islam as religion and Islam as inherent oppression, and the false dilemma between anti-sexism and anti-racism (880), creates the simultaneous invisibility and hyper-visibility of Muslim women (the something “more” and “less” of racist vision [885]). The framing of these “debates” is a form of discriminatory postcolonial crisis management that names the de-subjectification and exclusion of veiled Muslim women secularism/women’s equality per se precisely because “in cultural racism, culture becomes nature.” (890) Given that dismantling this framing is not simply a matter of asking Muslim women what they want, where exactly are we to locate Muslim women such that we can speak with and listen to them? Having run up against the constitutive mechanisms of (post-)colonializing and racist vision, philosophers, feminists, critical race, and postcolonial theorists encounter the challenge of ensuring that the “unmediated quality of a local voice [does not] serve [...] as a substitute for any theoretical agenda that can make more than a

cursory connection between the condition of postcolonialism and gendered race.” (Suleri 1992, 764) This challenge necessarily leads to questions regarding the role of phenomenology in social theory or in postcoloniality at large. For example, is phenomenology, like postcolonial, critical race, and feminist theory, doomed to anchor itself on this “local voice”? This response, therefore, foregrounds the challenges that Al-Saji and I have in common in order to forge an *interdisciplinary* solidarity that can break through the frame of culture—in philosophy or otherwise.

If we are to undermine constructions that render (us all) women skin deep, we cannot uphold theoretical frameworks that create slippages between lived experience and epistemology—even when that lived experience is pitted against dominant frameworks (766). As we rightly and scrupulously “turn scrutiny back onto the vision” (893), we must also resist raising the racially gendered female voice into a de facto representation of the “good.” (Suleri 1992, 759) As Sara Suleri reminds us, such approaches grant the racially gendered female voice an “iconicity that is altogether too good to be true” (Suleri 1992, 758). Thus, I began this response where Al-Saji ends not because she falls into these traps (she doesn’t). Instead, I hope to listen and speak with her by foregrounding our common struggle: how do we stage interventions in over-determined (and rather predictable) discourses surrounding veiling and *sati* that are meaningful?

Asking this question is important in order to resist the pitfalls Suleri describes such that the body is not objectified (yet again) by a theoretical framework and methodology that seeks not invisibility and silence but radical subjectivity. (Suleri 1992, 760) Over- and pre-determined silence and invisibility can lead to what Suleri terms a will to subjectivity, which (once again) renders the category of Muslim women a mere placeholder for the theoretical processes at hand. How do we articulate the innate intersectionality of gender and race except through demonstrating their deployment in racist logic, which risks evacuating historical, social, cultural, and economic contexts? Examining context and logic enables us to sidestep the danger of implicit romanticization of Muslim women that paradoxically emerges from their ontological marginality and stands in stark contrast to the reality, pain, and death of actual marginalization. How do we create an idiom of real life that can negotiate the abstractions of theory and the impressionism and literalism of experience? (Suleri 1992, 762) The generation of another

discourse, which does not render disenfranchised others subjects who are always mediated, is the task at hand. I believe that this task requires recognition of our own ignorance and lack of socialization, which lead not only to culturally limited intuitions but fundamentally dishonest and unfair ways of framing the discussion at hand. After all, to have the capacity to begin with our own ignorance and lack of socialization is to be a subject that matters.

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