
Symposia on Gender, Race and Philosophy

Volume 9, number 1. Spring 2013

<http://web.mit.edu/sgrp>

Commentary on Alia Al-Saji's "The Racialization of Muslim Veils"

Yael Sherman

Department of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies
Emory University
550 Asbury Circle
Atlanta, Georgia 30322

In "The Racialization of Muslim veils: A philosophical analysis," Alia Al-Saji turns her analytical gaze back onto the French (and Western) representational schemas that make the veil hypervisible and Muslim women "invisible" and "desubjectified." While anti-veil activists appropriate the language of feminism, seeking to "free" women from the oppression of the veil, Al-Saji persuasively argues that it is not the veil itself that delimits and demobilizes women, but precisely Western responses to the veil. Carefully bracketing the question of actual veiled Muslim women and their experiences, Al-Saji peels off the pseudo-feminist wrapping of anti-veil activists to reveal the colonialist, racist, and sexist gaze that motivates representations of the veil (and Islam) as inherently oppressive. Al-Saji contends that such representations serve as a "negative foil" to the West, enabling the West to constitute itself as progressive, free, and gender-equal in contrast to an imagined monolithic Islam, closed, oppressive, and inherently sexist. In effect, the West abjects and projects its own sexism onto Islam, thereby using the veil to "whitewash" (gender-equality wash?) itself. The veil serves as a point of symbolic condensation, marking veiled Muslim women as incomprehensibly

Other, racialized and gendered as oppressed and "voiceless" Muslim women, indicting Islam while rendering the West "feminist" and just.

In response to Al-Saji's thoughtful, well-argued article, I take up the question of why and how veiled women are "desubjectified" in Western representations. I extend and deepen her analysis of the "arrogant" male gaze by examining how it shapes Western expectations of feminine subjectivity. Finally, I show that a different kind of gaze—the panoptic gaze—provides an alternative explanation of Western reactions to the veil.

Al-Saji argues that the West views veiled women as having already been "de-subjectif(ied) in Islam," (Al-Saji 2010, 891)¹ while the veil serves as the marker and instrument of this de-subjectification. As Al-Saji writes, "What seems unimaginable is veiled, Muslim female *subjectivity*—an active sense of self that may be constituted through veiling practices. The oppressive function of the veil (whether adopted or imposed) is equated with a passivity so complete that it is de-subjectifying" (892.) Not only is the veil itself seen as a material prison, but veiling is also seen as the erasure of the subject, its total compliance with and capitulation to an imagined inherently oppressive religion, Islam. For Al-Saji, this way of viewing both Islam and veiling is the product of cultural racism.

Al-Saji explains how this cultural racism shapes vision by drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty. For Merleau-Ponty, vision is conditioned by sedimented schemas: we see what we expect to see. In this case, racist vision is invested in seeing what will support its ideology. This results in a tautology: veiled women are seen as "voiceless victims" ... because the veil has come to mean oppression and sexual repression. Al-Saji explains that "Racialized bodies are not only seen as naturally inferior, they *cannot be seen otherwise*. The veiled body is not merely seen as oppressed, but cannot be seen as a subject who takes up and constitutes itself through that oppression." (885) While this may be how such modes of vision sustain themselves, it does not explain why and how racist vision comes to perceive the veil as a prison, as a sign of capitulation to oppression, as the marker and mode of desubjectification in the first place. Why does the veil make it so difficult for the West to see the active, feeling, speaking subject?

¹ Page references to this article appear in parentheses below.

Al-Saji seeks to explain this perception of veiled women by way of Frantz Fanon and Marilyn Frye. For Fanon, the French perception of the veil in Algeria is the product of French colonization in Algeria: the veil stands out to the gaze of the colonizer. Al-Saji supplements our understanding of this gaze through Frye's "arrogant vision," arguing that the veil serves as the limit to a colonialist, patriarchal gaze that wants to see. In a moment of transference, "[t]he obstacle that the veil constitutes for the colonial male gaze is naturalized to the veil as *itself* limiting to the women wearing it." (887) This constitutes a failure to imagine veiled women's subjectivity, for women's experience of the veil can only be seen as constricted, a mirror to the colonizer's frustrated desire to see. Veiled women are seen as sexually repressed and oppressed because the colonialist, patriarchal gaze is blocked: "For this vision, veiling constitutes an obstacle to desire and hence an object of frustration and aggressiveness." (886) Again, Western man abjects his own experience of the limitation of desire and projects it onto the veil and the veiled woman as herself sexually limited. Finally, Al-Saji argues that "Women who continue to veil seem to place themselves beyond (colonial male) recognition. They have no place within this heterosocial and scopic economy." (886) From the perspective of this vision, women are not women unless they are objects of the Western man's sight: since they are outside of the definition of women, they are not imaginable as subjects.

It is this last point that I want to press on, extending Al-Saji's analysis from the male gaze to the feminine subject. Just as Al-Saji shows that the French conception of secular space is in fact not neutral, but bears the imprint of Catholicism, so too must we investigate the Western feminine subject—see how it is constructed—in order to fully grasp the "de-subjectification" of the veiled woman. Al-Saji makes the first move toward this when she comments that gender is never neutral but is always already raced and that the co-educational classroom (mixete) already presumes certain ways of dressing and acting. Yet Al-Saji does not follow this provocative line of questioning. How, exactly, do "we" expect normative feminine subjects to act? What Western expectations do veiled women violate?

If, in the West, the man wants to see and thereby possess the woman (much as Laura Mulvey describes), then the corresponding feminine position is to *want* to be seen and found desirable. This is the non-choice that undergirds the free choice of women in the West to clothe

and groom themselves however they "want" (as long as they want to appear normatively feminine, within western expectations of what the desirable woman looks like.) Western women's "freedom" is grounded in the normatively feminine desire to be seen and desired by men. The Western feminine subject constructs herself in relation to the male gaze: surveyed, she surveys and constructs herself as a woman. If, from the Western perspective, veiled women take themselves out of this relationship of surveying themselves, then they cannot be understood as feminine subjects.

A contrast might prove useful. While Modern Orthodox Jewish women, for very similar reasons, wear wigs (veiling their sexually provocative hair), the wig is often not visible as a wig. Orthodox Jewish women can hide their hair without appearing to violate the contract that men are allowed to see/possess women and that women want to be looked at. The wig maintains the letter of the religious law while violating its spirit. As a result, Orthodox Jewish women are not visibly different: they appear to meet the requirements for Western feminine subjectivity.

But if a woman is veiled—apparently hiding herself from the gaze, creating a zone of privacy or seclusion—she has seemingly taken herself out of this dyad of seer and seen. The veil not only blocks the arrogant gaze, but, to the Western viewer, it appears to announce the woman's intention and desire to *not* be seen. This imagined desire is fundamentally at odds with the Western feminine subject, for it is through surveying herself and constructing herself to be seen that the Western feminine subject constitutes herself as a woman. Veiled women's choices and desires are ungrounded and therefore incomprehensible. Since veiled women seem to refuse the foundational desire to be seen, they cannot be understood to have any desire. If Muslim women do not construct their subjectivity through this fundamental non-choice, they must lack subjectivity or possess only limited, restricted, or oppressed subjectivity. They cannot be understood as free subjects, because the "free" choices that Western feminine subjects make is based on a desire that they seemingly have rejected. This analysis reveals the limiting conditions of Western feminine subjectivity (as also exemplified in the treatment of butch lesbians and other "masculine" women). Thus, the cultural racism that shapes the Western perception of the veil as a prison is grounded in the West's sexism and heterosexism, which condition its model of feminine subjectivity. The West's failure to recognize veiled

women as subjects is not based in the sexism of Islam, but in the sexism of the West.

However, this is not the only possibility: the panoptic gaze provides an alternative explanation for the Western failure to recognize the veiled woman as a subject. Where the male gaze is a gendered dynamic of power concerned with women's sexual attractiveness and availability, the panoptic gaze is not necessarily gendered and is concerned with norms and discipline more broadly. In the panopticon, the inmate, knowing that he or she may be watched, watches him/herself. For Foucault, "[v]isibility is a trap" (Foucault 1995, 200), as visibility mandates self-discipline and leads the individual to exercise power over him/herself. In the Western imaginary, visibility—knowing that one may be seen and watch—is tied to the self-governing, self-disciplining subject.

In the case of the veiled woman, the panoptic gaze is also denied. The veil creates a realm of privacy or seclusion that allows the Muslim woman to be seemingly invisible. If she is seemingly hidden from the panoptic gaze, then she is also perceived as avoiding the concomitant gaze of self-surveillance. The Western viewer presumes that the veiled woman feels herself unwatched and therefore imagines that she does not watch and discipline herself. If she is not subject to the panoptic gaze, then how can she be counted on to discipline herself? If she does not discipline herself, if she does not operate as a self-surveying subject, then perhaps she cannot be seen as a subject at all. In this understanding, all Western subjects are charged with the duty of monitoring themselves with reference to the panoptic eye: by seemingly to escape this duty, veiled women seem to escape all control, including self-control. Under this explanation, the Western distrust of the veil is due to the Western fear that the veil obstructs the Muslim woman's ability to exercise power over herself. From this perspective, the danger is not in the veiled woman's refusal to play the role of the feminine subject, but the danger she poses to the social order in her veiled seclusion.

Substituting the panoptic gaze for the male gaze also provides an alternative explanation for the recurrent Western desire to rip the veil off. Instead of a frustrated male gaze that wants to see and possess the woman, the de-veiling impulse can be understood as the desire of a surveillance society to monitor all of its subjects. As Al-Saji points out, veiled women have been useful as terrorists precisely because of

the zone of privacy created by the veil. The veil cloaks them and their purposes, enabling them to evade mechanisms of protection. Under this lens, the history of excluding veiled women from public spaces takes on a different tenor, as an attempt to force all subjects to be visible to surveillance. Within Western societies, the fear is that veiled women will confound surveillance systems and cheat the system, whether through voting illegally, taking tests for each other, or some other means. The perceived impossibility of monitoring and tracking veiled women translates into a fear that they will disrupt the social order. It is seemingly only through de-veiling observant Muslim women that security and stability can be assured.

The representation of the veil as a threat to public spaces makes sense under a panoptic gaze, for the veil seemingly enables veiled women to evade both surveillance and self-surveillance. From this perspective, the Western response to veiled women reveals how Western society fundamentally assumes and depends on surveillance in every aspect of public life, from election booths, to sports, to the street corner monitored by CCTV. Race and gender need not drop out of this explanation: the Western need to observe veiled women and for them to know they are observed may be heightened particularly because they are marked as raced/gendered others. We need not posit a male gaze to understand the Western desire to remove the veil and render Muslim women visible and governable.

While the panoptic gaze provides an alternative to understanding the Western portrayal of veiled women as dangerous Others, it is not at odds with the explanation put forward above. It may be the case that the panoptic gaze and the male gaze (and their corresponding expectations of a disciplined subject and a feminine subject) are both in play here, working to support each other. From the Western perspective, the veiled woman makes choices that cannot be understood as her own "free" choices, even as she poses a threat to public space in her radical, undisciplined alterity. The Western representation of veiled women is overdetermined from a number of directions: marked as other, she exceeds the limits of self-governing and feminine subjects. As Al-Saji argues, cultural racism provides the explanation for her incomprehensible difference: she is other, inferior, incapable of making "free" choices. Further, Al-Saji points out that racism is made palatable through pseudo-feminist calls for equality. As I have shown, the West's sexism and heterosexism play a fundamental role in the failure to recognize veiled women as

feminine subjects, providing an avenue for cultural racism. Rather than arguing that sexism precedes racialization, I want to emphasize that sexism, heterosexism and racism co-constitute perceptions of veiled women. While gender and race are given form and meaning through each other, racism, sexism, and heterosexism also take form through each other and through the production of figures like the “veiled woman” in the Western imaginary.

Works Cited

- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage Books, 1995.
- Mulvey, Laura. “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” In *Feminism and Film*, edited by E. Ann Kaplan, 34-47. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.