

This groundbreaking volume, written entirely by women, examines the vastly misunderstood and multilayered world of the veil. Veiling—of women, of men, and of sacred places and objects—has existed in countless cultures and religions for centuries. Today, veiling is a globally polarizing issue, a locus for the struggle between Islam and the West and between contemporary and traditional interpretations of Islam. But veiling was a practice long before Islam and extends far beyond the Middle East. This book explores and examines the cultures, politics, and histories of veiling. Twenty-one gifted writers and scholars, representing a wide range of societies, religions, ages, locations, races, and accomplishments, here elucidate, challenge, and/or praise the practice.

The twenty-one essays here, all by women, provide an exciting, firsthand account of the significance of veiling, past and present, in various countries, religions, and cultures. The editor's introduction is a wonderful exposition of the current scholarship regarding the sacred, sensual, and sociopolitical connotations of the veil. This book should be compulsory reading for policy makers all over the world."

—SHYAMALA A. NARAYAN, Jamia Millia Islamia University

A refreshingly three-dimensional portrait of the veil in history and in our contemporary world. This collection of essays turns the veil into a mirror, reflecting back upon us our own presumptions and prejudices. You will learn something about yourself in these pages." —ASIFA QURAISHI

JENNIFER HEATH is the author of seven books of fiction and nonfiction, including *The Scimitar and the Veil: Extraordinary Women of Islam*, and her writing has appeared in numerous anthologies. She has traveled extensively throughout the Muslim world and is the founder of Seeds for Afghanistan and International Midwife Assistance.

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS
BERKELEY 94704 WWW.UCPRESS.EDU

ISBN 978-0-520-25518-0



9 780520 255180

COVER ILLUSTRATION: VIRGINIA MAITLAND, FINDING THE PERFECT PARTNER. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST. COVER DESIGN: NOLA BURGER.

HEATH

THE VEIL

WOMEN
WRITERS
ON ITS
HISTORY,
LORE,
AND
POLITICS

THE VEIL

Women Writers on Its History, Lore, and Politics

EDITED BY JENNIFER HEATH



and lesbian shul in San Francisco, where all my learning paid off. This belief of hers (which I share) is a mix of my parents raising me and my raising her.

I was on the ritual committee of this synagogue and I led services. Certainly there was no mechitzah. There were men in leather yarmulkes and chaps, women in hand-painted prayer shawls, and a rabbi who would say, "We come from a diverse and eclectic tradition." All of our backgrounds were honored. One of the congregants, who acted as cantor, was of Spanish ancestry and chanted in Ladino, not what most of us were used to. Some of us were very observant and led traditional services with a lot of Hebrew. Some were very mellow with guitar and meditating. I found that the commandment to cover my head in prayer, as both men and women are supposed to do, became very important to me when I had an organic reason to consider it. Because of leading services, I was already wearing a *tallis*, the prayer shawl reserved in traditional communities for men, a very plain one that almost every man in Orthodox synagogues wears, off-white with black stripes (not like the silk painted ones I see on many women) (figure 13.1). I did not want my head uncovered when I led services and held the Torah. Once I found it had nothing to do with gender and everything to do with respect, I was free. So I bought a hat.

NOTE

1. Haviva Ner-David, *Life on the Fringes: A Feminist Journey Toward Traditional Rabbinic Ordination* (Needham, MA: JSL Books, 2000).

On the Road

Travels with My Hijab

MALIHA MASOOD

At first, it felt like a bandage wrapped around my skull. I had trouble hearing people speak unless I faced them head-on and watched their lips move (figure 14.1).

But what a difference it made. Two plus meters of snow-white georgette embossed with little stars. It was a present from my landlady in Cairo.

"You must wear the *hijab*," she admonished in a high-pitched shrill. "It is right thing for Muslim girl. You will feel more comfortable here."

Maybe she had a point. From the minute I arrived in my new neighborhood of al-Demerdash, I was conscious of the staring mafia. They just couldn't help themselves. Men, women, and children glued their eyeballs on me or, more precisely, my bare head. Maybe it was the novelty of a stranger's arrival. A Muslim stranger who could barely speak five words of Arabic. I willed the stares to go away. But they assaulted me every waking day, every minute of public appearance. I didn't have the thick skin to ignore them. And I certainly didn't want to remain confined within the

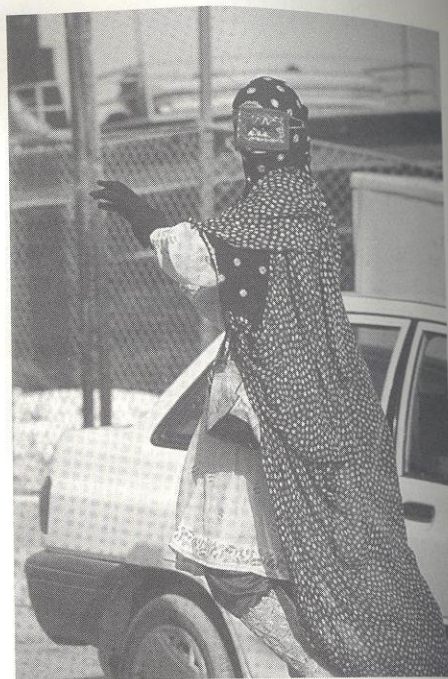


Figure 14.1. A woman wearing a batula or burgu appears to be hailing a cab, 2004. Photo by Sheryl B. Shapiro.

walls of my apartment. So I reached for the georgette and the headband. The five-minute walk from my tenth-floor high rise to the nearby subway station transformed into a stare-free zone. I rode toward downtown Cairo celebrating my invisibility.

The gleaming tiled floors of the Sadat subway station astound me. They compete for my attention with a trio of giggly Egyptian debutantes in hip-hugging jeans, black Spandex tops with matching lacy head scarves. My eyes gravitate toward the girls. One of them greets a friend who looks like she has just come from a photo session with French *Vogue*. Stiletto boots, side-slit skirt grazing the knees, fitted leather jacket, and a knockoff Hermès scarf as a head cover. Her face is an airbrushed Lancôme ad. Creamy beige skin, dark glossy lips, and gobs of mascara paired with pearly gray shadow. We lock eyes. She breaks into a smirk and elbows her cohorts. Here we go again. Stares and more stares. This time, it's not that I lack a

hijab. The fashionistas are in shock about my baggy, celery green linen trousers, potato-sack jacket, and those fraying old Tevas. My scarf knots underneath the chin with two long ends dangling on my chest like seaweed. I cannot be bothered with hairpins and makeup or the plain white georgette. After all, I didn't come all the way to Cairo to win a beauty contest.

It's a beautiful station, as far as subway stations go. Clean, bright, and shiny. No one but me seems to notice, much less care. Commuters make a beeline for turnstiles and jam the escalators. The ticket window swarms with human traffic. I stride toward the exit. My ticket slides into a little slot. The turnstile refuses to budge.

I panic and throw my weight against the metal rod. It remains stuck. I try again and again. The only thing moving is my weak little body. No one is behind me, but as I look back, I see a small platoon of witnesses. The sexy hijabis are among them. Their smirks grow bigger along with the requisite stares. A security official watches my predicament and signals me to step into the stationmaster's office near the platform. The inspector volleys heated accusations at me in Arabic that no one bothers to translate. His sidekick squats on his haunches with a look that says, *I know what you're up to*.

"But you don't understand," I plead in English. "I am new in Cairo and made a mistake."

The stationmaster glowers and another stream of rapid-fire Arabic spews forth. The last guttural syllable of his tirade unleashes a wad of spit, the size of a dime, landing squarely on my right jaw. I wipe off the spittle with the back of my sleeve and catch a glimpse of my reflection in the streaky window behind his desk. A petite woman in a white head scarf blinks back. She has big scared eyes the color of espresso and charcoal-thick eyebrows. Her pale complexion contrasts with stray wisps of jet black hair poking from the sides of her veil. It seems to complement the gold pendant on her chain stenciled with the word Allah in stylized Arabic.

Oh no, oh no. A sinking feeling at the pit of my stomach. I know what this is all about. It's about my chameleon face, the kind that morphs into any society's gene pool, bestowing me the dubious honor of "You look so familiar, haven't I seen you someplace before?" It happens everywhere I

travel. France, Spain, Italy. And now Cairo. So that's why the stationmaster has been raving like a lunatic. My appearance deceives him into believing the opposite of who I am. In that hijab, I look so, so *local*, for lack of a better word. I cannot possibly be a novice foreign tourist fresh off a transatlantic flight. It's a bit unnerving, the way a piece of fabric on my head erases the American in me. Strange consequences abound. I can't get away with cultural blunders or the failure to understand the intricacies of subway ticketing rules. If I happen to use a wrong token that jams the turnstile, then I must be an Egyptian smart aleck trying to cheat the system.

"Pay this amount." The stationmaster thrusts a form in squiggly Arabic handwriting and draws a big circle in red ink around some cryptic numerals.

Congratulating myself for passing as a local troublemaker, I fork over 120 Egyptian pounds (about \$30), assuming it is the bribe for my freedom. The stationmaster orders me to sit back down. I am already twenty minutes late for my first class at the Fajr Arabic Language Institute. Desperation mounts as I rifle through my bag and unearth my U.S. passport and the name of the Arabic school printed on a torn page of the weekly *Al-Ahram's* English edition. The stationmaster stares at them as if hallucinating.

"You *Amrikeyi*? You no look *Amrikeyi*!"

A speck of light dares to invade his eyes.

"*Merhaba! Merhaba!* Welcome, welcome to Egypt!"

The scowling face gives way to profuse handshakes.

"You come to office every day. I teach you Arabic and you teach me your English, yes?"

He beams like a proud papa.

"You want taxi, yes? Go with Yusuf. He get you nice clean taxi. Very cheap. You pay like Egyptian, not tourist, understand?"

I glance at Yusuf, the sidekick who treated me like a criminal fifteen minutes earlier. He is asleep on the floor, snoring loudly, his gaping mouth an open invitation to buzzing flies.

"You will share with me some *chai*, yes?"

My newfound friend pushes a button under his desk. A minute later, a little barefooted boy in a worn orange sweatshirt produces two chipped

glasses of steaming black tea. I sip the heavily sugared brew and straighten out the folds of my crumpled georgette.

We all know that appearances are deceiving. Despite this knowledge, we still judge based on appearances. It is difficult not to when what we see on the outside is initially the only piece of available information about a person. It's not like we can get inside that person's head and figure out where she comes from, why she behaves the way she does, and what makes her tick in general. Appearances are our only clue.

Once when I was pounding away on my laptop at a Seattle public library, I overheard a conversation between two elderly women at a side table. It was about a six-year-old girl whom one of them had seen wearing the hijab.

"Why do they have to wear those things?" The voice sounded horrified.

Her friend responded. "It has to do with their Muslim religion. I hear it's very strict."

I thought of moving to a different part of the library so I wouldn't have to hear about Muslim rhymed with muslin once more. But I was in a lazy mood so I just stayed in my place, pretending to be deaf and ignoring something inside me that wanted to speak out and address those women. The longer I sat, the more conflicted I felt until I finally pushed back my chair and approached the adjoining table.

"Excuse me?"

"Why, hello, dear! Do sit down and join us. What a cute little dress you're wearing. Wherever did you get it?"

"It's from India."

"Ah, India! I just love Indian food. Don't you?" The silver-haired woman elbowed her companion.

"Umm. I wanted to say something."

"Yes?"

"Well, I don't really know how to say this. But I heard what you were talking about that little girl in her hijab. Well, I just . . ."

"To cover up a small child. What an awful thing to do!"

"Yes, it's not an easy thing to understand. I have a hard time understanding it myself. You see, I'm also a Muslim."

"No, you're not!"

"You cannot be!"

"But I am!"

Both women scrutinized my knee-length batik sundress, my hijab-less head, my strappy kitten-heeled sandals.

"Well, you may be a Muslim. But at least you're not fundamental like that little girl."

I winced. And not just because of that mispronunciation again. I am all too familiar with their attitude, and the sadness and anger it evokes in me. As a Pakistani, born and raised Muslim, reared in Seattle for twenty-three years, I have never gotten used to misplaced labels about Islam—not only the fable that wearing hijab automatically equals oppression, but the misapprehension that all Muslim men must be depraved polygamists and that the harsh austerity of our faith condones violence. Not that we Muslims have it all figured out. Some of us are downright allergic to questions and self-examination. But I don't recall a time when I did not feel immense pride in and open-ended curiosity about my cultural and religious heritage. As a teenager, I nearly drove my mother mad with whys.

One of my favorites was the why of veiling. Whenever I raised the issue with Ammi, she pointed me to the verse in the Qur'an advising women to cover their bosoms and hide their adornments.

"But it says nothing about covering the hair!" I challenged her.

"Isn't hair an adornment?" she countered.

"Well I suppose so. But it doesn't clearly say so."

My hijab-clad mother smiled and said, "It is clear enough to me."

That was nearly twenty years ago. Today, Ammi's eyes are just as radiant with faith. Her face continues to glow with *noor*, the sheen of inner light. She still makes it impossible for me to argue with the power of this much belief.

So I had a hard time explaining the significance of veiling to my new-found acquaintances at the library. As our discussion continued, I tried to hammer in the point that wearing the hijab is not an outright sign of the backwardness of Muslim females. It may have to do with cultural values or community peer pressure or at best a personal expression of faith.

The old ladies weren't so convinced. "Then why don't *you* wear it?" one of them asked.

I told her that I didn't think the head cover was religiously mandatory, but many Muslims, including my own mother, considered it otherwise. "How can any religion be so wishy-washy?" they wondered. Either something is required or it isn't. So which is it? I sighed and fumbled for a short answer, which of course does not exist.

The Muslim veil is full of meaning. At any given period of history, time or place, the idea and practice of veiling have led to clashing viewpoints—inclusion, exclusion; progressive, regressive; emancipating, humiliating; erotic, vulgar; trendy—the list goes on and on. One of the most contentious debates in some analytical circles underlies the assumption that feminists oppose the veil and antifeminists don't. That is to say, a covered Muslim woman cannot possibly have a mind of her own, that in order to improve her status and move forward, she has to reject Islamic traditions and adopt Western ways. According to the Egyptian scholar Leila Ahmed, this type of logic is not only ethnocentric and misguided, but it also overemphasizes the wearing or not wearing of the veil as the sole determinant of Muslim women's freedom and mobility or lack thereof. So pervasive is this fascination with the hijab that it inevitably dominates most discussions of women and Islam as if no other factors matter. Ahmed's argument does not negate the importance of the veil. But she compares it to Western women's struggles over gender justice where items of clothing such as bras were briefly in focus as symbols of contention yet did not take over the entire discourse on women's lib.¹

Another outcome of the veil's hegemony in the public imagination is the idea, whether overtly or covertly expressed, of Islam as oppressor of women and the West as liberator. This idea was also internalized by Muslim rulers who introduced westernizing reforms that forcibly banned the veil, not because of what veiling said about women, but how it reflected on the *men*.

As an instrument wielding the gender politics of identity, the veil may have no equal. Whether enforced or forbidden, obsessive to the point of ridicule, the dialectics of a Muslim woman's head (covered or un-) are not

without controversy. But it would be too simplistic to presume that veiling, in and of itself, renders passive submission. "Static" is the one word the veil refutes time and again.

A case in point is the colonial narrative of Algeria. In the initial phase, women wore the veil as a symbol of resistance against French occupation. The veil stood for the dignity and validity of all native customs under fiercest attack, particularly customs pertaining to women, ones the occupier was determined to control. The question of who ultimately controls how women look and dress was in many ways a pivotal battleground. As the Algerian struggle for liberation intensified, the veil was consciously abandoned during the course of revolutionary action in which women actively participated.

The Battle of Algiers (1965) is a film documenting their participation as attractive secret agents, carrying briefcases of false papers and huge sums of money, slinking through the Europeanized city streets where men, young and old, appraise the slim, brunette, bare-legged revolutionaries. When the French authorities discovered this form of militant female subterfuge, it marked a turning point in the Algerian war of independence.

Covert missions became increasingly suspect. As illustrated by the filmmaker Gillo Pontecorvo, in order to conceal packages, women were obliged to alter their body image. They became slouchy and shapeless and took back the protective cover of the veils under which they carried revolvers, bombs, and hand grenades. Enemy raids continued and it was not uncommon for these now-veiled revolutionaries to be shoved against walls to have their bodies passed over with magnetic detectors.

This is not to equate the struggles of Algerian women exclusively with the veil, then or now. The point is that veiling is a dynamic process, and during the Algerian revolution, women themselves dictated their appearances for strategic resistance. In a certain sense, the hard-won independence from France caused a turning back in society, wrestling with values already outmoded. Whereas the veil had been largely eschewed in the prerevolutionary era, it was resumed by many after the revolution and stripped of its traditional dimension. Interestingly, interaction with Western culture, in the form of colonization, also shaped the language of the veil as a distinct by-product of both East and West.

As my hijab and I ventured deeper into the Middle East, we encountered more contradictions. Traveling beyond Cairo in the winter of 2001, I still insisted on wearing the head scarf out of respect for the cultures I encountered, though the preponderance of high-society Arab girls flaunting their you-know-whats in people's faces was rather disconcerting. Don't get me wrong. I would have gladly cheered their right to wear skintight Spandex. But while Spandex paired with veils may appear to be a creative spin on Islamic modesty, my mind couldn't go beyond the hypocrisy.

In the Jordanian capital of Amman, I once saw a woman in full *niqab*, a thick black veil covering her entire face with a six-inch open strip around the eyes. She wore black from head to toe. But there was something odd about her, as she stood alone on a street corner, teetering on stilettos. After a while, a car drove by, screeched its tires, and stopped. A man got out, yelling profanities at the woman who was apparently his sister. She yelled back in defiance, protesting loudly as he clutched her wrist and dragged her toward the waiting car. She refused to get inside and her voice climbed decibels, occasionally breaking midsentence from hoarseness. There was a strange disconnect between the fury coming out of her mouth and her black-cloaked obscurity. Suddenly, she whipped out a cell phone from somewhere underneath her voluminous garments and furiously punched the numbers with a black-gloved finger. She spoke into it through her face veil, which fluttered with the movement of her hidden lips.

The brother went ballistic. He grabbed his sister's hand, yanked away the mobile, and smashed it with his feet. Then he tightened his grip, twisting her hand behind her back. The girl howled and kicked him in the shins with her spiky heels. He smacked her head and tried to push her to the ground. As their fighting continued, another car approached. A sleek white Mercedes with tinted windows. The passenger door opened and a tall, gray-haired man in a double-breasted suit stepped out and gestured to the woman with a curt angling of his head.

She was squatting on her haunches, a whimpering black huddle with teary eyes. The well-dressed stranger helped her up and led the still crying woman into the backseat of his car. Then he went up to the disgruntled brother, who was pummeling his fists on the car's roof. A lengthy speech followed. The older man took a wad of bills from his wallet, slipped

them in the brother's front shirt pocket, and patted his cheek in a there, there kind of way.

The brother laughed sarcastically and hurled one final insult at his sister waiting inside the car. The one word I made out was *sharmuta*, Arabic for whore.

The next evening, I returned to the same street corner at the exact same time but there was no more drama. I waited at that spot for five consecutive nights but she never came back. Even if she was a prostitute, I wondered what drove her to it and why she was so heavily veiled. Maybe it was a way of ensuring her protection and anonymity. But that hadn't deterred her brother from recognizing her. Or did her niqab mean that she was in fact a pious woman, forced by circumstances to her current profession? Maybe, maybe not. After that incident, I was less and less sure of the real motives for veiling.

In the old city of Damascus, I was the star entertainment among the flared denims, boot-clad fashionistas snickering at my sensible Birkenstocks and navy *abaya* with cross-stitched embroidery that labeled me a local country hick instead of the American city slicker I wanted them to befriend. What I really wanted was to take pictures of these Damascene hipsters and show them to my American friends back home, who thought of themselves as the epitome of hipster style in Capri pants and tight midriff tops, without the slightest inkling of hipster competition in Syria. Yes, Syria, where I felt like a dork for the sake of Islamic modesty (figure 14.2).

Speaking of modesty, when I lived in Beirut, I had this roommate, Najma, a struggling architecture student, who sat in her room from dawn to dusk, fiddling with straight edges and blueprints. Whenever Najma was stuck on a problem, she would sing. I could have listened to her all day when she belted out classics by the Lebanese diva Fairuz, in a voice as clear as a bell.

Most days, Najma wore a purple paisley print head scarf folded into a triangle and knotted behind her nape. It kept a mass of thick corkscrew curls in check. She wasn't particularly religious. The only time we discussed Islam, Najma pointed out that she was an agnostic and we left it at that. I rarely got a chance to talk to her because she was so busy with

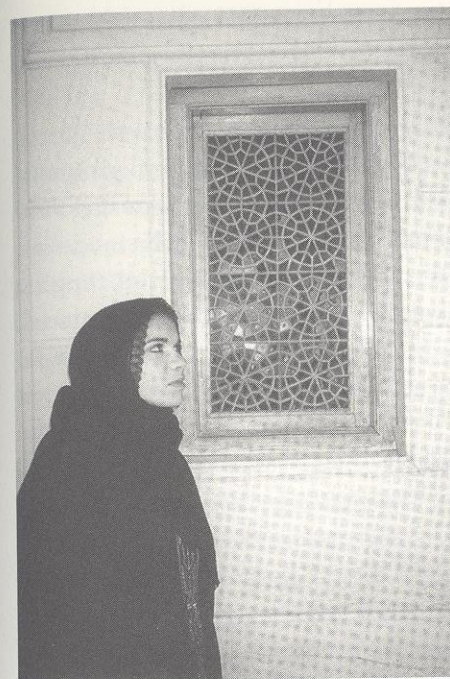


Figure 14.2. The author eschews hipster fashion in favor of traditional *hijab* in the old city of Damascus, Syria, 2001. Courtesy of Maliha Masood.

her studies, often not returning home until two or three in the morning. For my birthday, she gave me homemade tapes of the music she listened to—funky fusion beats with hints of Sufi trance. I liked dancing to them in the tiny living room we shared.

Najma watched my attempts to shimmy my shoulders and wiggle my hips like a real belly dancer.

"You're trying too hard," she said.

"This is impossible!" I was trying to isolate my abs and shake them like Jell-O.

Najma stifled a giggle. *La habibi, la!*

"What then? What am I doing wrong?"

"You must learn to find your center. *Yallah*, I show you."

We wore gym clothes and dressed them up in gauzy veils, doubling as sarongs and bandanas to keep off the sweat. Najma blew me away with her graceful moves. What really surprised me was the smoldering sen-

suality that oozed from her limbs like sap from a ripe rubber tree. When I asked her how she learned to dance so well, she whispered in my ear, "La Souke."

La Souke turned out to be a nightclub where Najma performed Thursday and Saturday nights. Men went wild over her in thigh-high boots, wriggling in a cage, Madonna style. But she was best in her arousing Arabic numbers, all decked out in sequined halters and hip belts made out of little silver coins. In one routine, she added a sheer black veil, flinging it in the air and letting it fall flat on her face as she swayed and fluttered. Najma's dancing veil reminded me of an untrimmed sail, taunting the wind that fueled its flight. It defied definition. It could be anything one wanted it to be—just like Najma.

Demure student by day and sexy dancer by night—it was not my business, nor anyone else's, to judge her. The club gig paid well and Najma needed the money for college and rent. She could have had a "safer" job, but dancing was so much more lucrative. Wasn't she bothered by all those leering men, total strangers who probably went home and jerked off fantasizing about her pretty, dancing image? Najma laughed and said she could not care less. She was having a good time on that stage, proud of her sculpted body, and it emboldened her confidence to dance in public, to let people have fun, but the real entertainment was for herself! In a way I guess she was calling the shots.

When I left Beirut and vacated the apartment, Najma's good-bye present was a postcard-sized bundle and she told me not to open it until I got home. Five years later, I still have that chiffon veil of hers. Sometimes, I press my face into its black softness just to breathe the lingering scent of sweet tobacco smoke and Chanel No. 5.

By the time I reached Turkey, I had flung away my hijab. Yet there I met Turkish women who were clamoring to wear the head scarf in universities and government institutions where veiling was banned by law, making it a contentious battleground between individual self-expression and government policy. In the eyes of Turkish women demanding the right to cover their heads, the issue at heart was a matter of free will to dress as they pleased. And they were demanding this right even as they studied to be doctors, lawyers, and diplomats. Given Turkey's campaign to get

into the European Union, the Turkish state has reinforced its anti-hijab laws, blatantly devoid of the concept of choice.²

If only choice could ever be simple. Back in the States, my traveling veils have converted to fashionable neck scarves and shawls. I have quite a collection in shades of burgundy, turquoise, and amethyst with patterns of polka dots and spiral chains. Most of them have been donated to my mother. We no longer argue about the whys of veiling. And she doesn't chide me for my uncovered head because she knows my faith is strong. Strong enough to muster the discipline to pray five times a day in a country where the *azan* or call to prayer does not blare from a neighborhood minaret but echoes inside the heart. What Ammi and I both resent are the judgment calls within our own Seattle community where an unveiled Muslim woman automatically earns the "secular" label, meaning she is nonobservant of practice. Is the presence of the hijab a surefire indicator of inner belief? Does the lack of hijab therefore signify none? Instead of an emphatic yes or no, my answer would be "it depends."

Recall the deceptiveness of appearances and our penchant to judge by them. In the United States, just as I discovered in the Middle East, appearance is everything. My ability to blend in has a reverse effect on my own home turf. Here, people have a hard time believing that I'm a Muslim just because I don't cover. They can tell by my funny sounding, hard-to-pronounce-name that I must be a "foreigner," but that's about it. The emphasis on image is so strong that if you don't look like a caricatured Muslim, you simply cannot be one.

A caricatured Muslim woman is undoubtedly veiled. But what are the implications behind that veiled image? Is she subservient, helpless, and weak? Feisty, determined, and ambitious? Not too long ago, I saw a PBS Frontline broadcast reissued from the 1980 film *Death of a Princess*. It is a dramatized documentary based on the true-life account of a Saudi princess, who was publicly executed for adultery. Justification for the punishment oscillated on the grounds of "Islamic law" and a violation of family tribal honor. The film suggested that the princess's murder was instigated by her own grandfather. Saudi uproar over the allegedly insensitive airing of their dirty laundry enflamed the controversy.

One unforgettable scene was especially criticized. The film describes how bored Saudi princesses cruise the desert highways in their chauffeured cars to pick up men. They could be married, young or old, beautiful or hideous. Black abayas and niqabs camouflage their identities, just as they did for that woman I had observed in Jordan, who may have been a prostitute. But unlike her, these rich royals are not at work. They are on a desert raid exploiting the anonymity of their covering for promiscuity. The car slows; the princess rolls down her window to eye a potential mate. Or she might sit inside a parked vehicle with a trio of others like her, silently observing men who are dancing for her pleasure with their swords, men wanting to please, men wanting to be chosen by the predatory veiled women who can see without being seen.

Much of the media attention and Saudi offensive centered on this scene's crudeness, which was said to be fiction and to have cheapened the film and insulted Saudi women, especially members of the royal family. Watching the scene unfold, I was struck by the image itself, for it made me think of how much power those Saudi royals wielded by virtue of being covered.

As a physical barrier, the veil denies men their usual privilege of discerning whomever they desire. By default, the women are in command. The female scrutinizes the male. Her gaze from behind the anonymity of her face veil or niqab is a kind of surveillance that casts her in the dominant position. It enables a woman to uncover with her eyes, to make visible that which is forbidden. So there seems to be an acute relationship between veiling and vision that undercuts the legacy of social, cultural, political, and religious meanings associated with the Muslim veil. It continues to fascinate me, the Rubik's cube of identities the hijab conceals and reveals.

A year of traveling alone in the Middle East and my upbringing as a Pakistani Muslim American have shown me that there is no formulaic way to describe the hijab. Even though I don't wear one as a rule, a part of me is stitched from its threads. Just because those threads are not always visible doesn't mean they don't count. The white georgette cloth that first felt like a bandage still floats in my eyes, sweeping layers of memory. We've had a long relationship, fraught with love, hate, confusion, and plenty of

surprises. We've journeyed together and served each other well as travel companions—for the most part. My hijab gave me refuge from prying stares and possibly averted more serious dangers. It adopted me at subway stations and rejected me in trendy cafés. It has kept me warm on cold winter nights, it has wowed, titillated, and amazed, and it has also made me laugh, dance, sulk, and complain. As with most relationships, my hijab and I have had our spats and dramas. These days, we're in a mellow groove, content to leave each other alone, but always on the lookout for a rousing debate.

NOTES

1. Leila Ahmed, "The Discourse of the Veil," in *Veil: Veiling, Representation and Contemporary Art*, ed. David Bailey and Gilane Tawadros (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).
2. In a noted case in 1999, politician and member of the Islamist Virtue Party Merve Kavakçı became the first veiled woman to be elected to the Turkish Parliament. She was prevented from making her parliamentary oath when she wore her head scarf to a swearing-in ceremony in defiance of the secular Turkish constitution. She was eventually stripped of her Turkish citizenship when it was discovered that she had earlier that year taken dual American citizenship.