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## Of Veils, Feminisms and Contemporary Art by Valerie Behiery

<http://esse.ca/en/feminisms>



Many well-known artists in the mainstream art world have referenced veiled Muslim women.<sup>3</sup> This plurality of representations is born of the artists' culturescapes, plural identities, or conscious will to counter stereotypes. Although several exhibitions on the veil have circulated and a few studies have addressed the topic in the last decade, the danger is—as in this essay—that these largely postcolonial endeavours may result in a further consolidation of the problematic trope. Moreover, focusing on the Muslim veil, like focusing on artefacts in a museum, decontextualizes the garment from its culture(s), in which veiling is ever present as an aesthetic element and metaphor in literature, art, architecture, home décor, and even male fashion. Interestingly, although artists who happen to wear a hijab, such as Zahra Hussain, Safaa Erruas, Sabah Naim, and, in Canada, Soheila Esfahani are increasingly present in the mainstream Western art apparatus, those whose work showcases hijabs, with extremely few exceptions (such as Asma Shikoh and Nuha Asad), do not.

If feminism is to really mean equality and social justice for all, it must be anti-hegemonic and refuse to dehumanize any woman, regardless of whether or not her lifestyle or clothing choices reflect the majority view. Images of veiled Muslim women that resuture veiling and subjectivity are thus inherently feminist, as testified to by the work of Ghazel, Arwa Abouon, and Maimouna Guerresi. These artists have consciously adopted a bicultural, bifocal vision that blurs binarism and its accompanying "clash of civilizations" discourse.

Iranian artist Ghazel, who lives in Paris and Tehran, is best known internationally for her ongoing autobiographical series *Me* (1997—), now numbering over 750 episodes. The mostly black-and-white video self-portraits, exhibited on old TV sets, feature the artist in a black chador undertaking activities such as water-skiing, sunbathing, riding a motorbike, commenting on the world, and dreaming of being a Botticelli Venus. The uncanny juxtapositions of the garment and the actions enact Ghazel's experience of living between cultures and being the perpetual outsider; yet, their expression of modern nomadism also collapses the cultural borders usually traced by the veil. The embodied performance of the *Me* "heroine" whose voice is conveyed via the English or French text appearing at the bottom of the frame communicates the agency of a desubjected figure in Euro-American visual culture.

<sup>4</sup> The humour of the scenes, which allows spectators to laugh with and not at the other, further de-ates the notion of the passive, selfless, oppressed Muslim woman. Accessible and funny, *Me* decolonizes perceptions by clearing a space for marginalized subjectivity to be sensed and heard, something that Ghazel continues in her video and performance work with and around undocumented migrants, such as *Road Movie* (2010 and 2012) and *Home (stories)* (2008).

Canadian artist of Libyan Amazigh descent Arwa Abouon also takes plural identity as a subject. Although she shares several concerns and strategies with Ghazel, her work, with its purposeful deployment of beauty, is diametrically opposed to Ghazel's aesthetic philosophy of the *mal fait*. For Abouon, art is a means of exploring the genealogy of and producing knowledge about her familial and cultural lineage. *I'm Sorry / I Forgive You* (2012), a photographic diptych, features the artist's middle-aged parents; in one image, Abouon's veiled mother kisses her husband on the forehead; in the other, he kisses his wife. Made at the trying time of Abouon's father's terminal cancer, the piece celebrates the couple's reconciled relationship. The universal gesture of the kiss connotes the woman's (and the man's) agency and, more significantly, injects the absent theme of love into discussions on and representations of Muslims. The geometric patterns evoking Islamic art that overlay the couple and the surrounding space, with their cross-culturally readable, op art-like visuality, are Abouon's way of enshrining love and human life. *Mirror Mirror / Allah Allah* (2012) also maps veiled subjectivity, albeit here as part of the artist's structuring imaginary unseen by the public—Abouon, unlike her mother, does not wear the hijab—and the humorous reference to the famous fairy tale enables the translation of and identification with Abouon and her probing of her identities.

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**3** — Among the best known in Europe and North America are Zineb Sedira, Shadi Ghadirian, Sara Rahbar, Sama Alshaibi, Khosrow Hassanzadeh, Samta Benyahia, Lalla Essaydi, Helen Zughaib, Boushra Almutawakel, Farheen Haq, and Sylvat Aziz.

**4** — Like much culturally hybrid art, *Me* acts as a double critique, targeting both Western and Iranian restrictive conceptions of Muslim women.

**5** — See Ghazel, "Interview" (with Valerie Behiery), *Mea Culpa*, exh. cat. (Dubai: Carbon 12 Gallery, 2016).