Partial Femininities: Vexed Feelings, Troublesome Recognition

Amal Treacher Kabesh

Acknowledgement: *This article was originally given as part of the ESRC funded seminar series entitled Utopian Practices and Practical Utopias, held September 2008 in Bristol UK*

Over the past year or so I have been a part of some troubling incidents. I use the word 'incident' as there is no other available but it does not capture what occurred, which cannot be described as conversation or especially dialogue. This is what took place – a number of women [staff and students] have walked into my office on their own, without knocking or indeed a greeting and launch into declaring their views about women who wear the niqab or the hejab. Their speech always focuses on the face, their difficulty in communicating with the covered face, and they declare with confidence and in a manner that brooks no discussion 'I respect other cultures' and/or 'of course I am tolerant of others'. The speech is oddly rational and devoid of feeling. I am silenced. The women smile [a smile which I cannot interpret] and leave as they arrive leaving me bewildered, empty and alienated. Something is being demanded of me and I am at a loss as to understand, or even know, the demand. This paper is an attempt to explore the demand in order to understand it more closely.

Frankly, I do not know what I think about the hejab. I grew up in Cairo at a socio-political time and in a household in which the hejab did not feature, indeed my father was vehemently opposed to the wearing of the hejab especially for middle class and professional women. I also suspect that I do not see the hejab in the same way as many Western women – there are times when I literally do not see it - and despite this paper I am not so preoccupied or I suspect emotionally invested. Spivak is preoccupied with the question of how am I naming her and in this paper I am much more concerned with how am I naming *and* looking at her. I need, though, to state at the outset that the 'her' is ambiguous for me - is it the woman who wears the hejab as in the example above or the white/western woman?

My father and partner are Egyptian/Muslim and my mother is English/Christian. I straddle

Egypt and England both historically and more pertinently in the present. I have difficulty most of the time recognising who is being spoken about, who is being represented – the ever sexual, hedonistic, individualistic Western woman, or the oppressed, veiled, dependent Arab woman. Within my confusion, otherness is simultaneously constituted and deconstructed. And while I know men and women in both countries who, with varying degrees of success, hope, and disappointment, are intent on forging a life, I also know that acts of recognition risk the *illusion* of self-other psychic equilibrium and rest on mutual interdependence – a shared chain of recognition, misrecognition, identification and misidentification.

To trace through matters of subjectivity relies on stringent thought and a melancholic awareness that recognition and knowledge are troublesome processes which have embedded within them failure, indifference, obliteration, hatred and fascination. Recognition and identification are essential for human relatedness and they also stave off the absorption of self into the other, just as they can prevent the other from being colonised by the self (Frosh & Baraitser 2003 p. 778/9). Critically, the other is an other who is not the same as the self, but this does not mean a lack of connection but rather that this connection can only be a bridge between self and other. It is no easy matter to know the other, let alone the self with all our impulses, irrationalities, pulsing emotions, contradictory motivations, but the question remains important for - how can we know the other - not as a way of stabilising or bolstering the precarious self, or as a means to project hatred, vulnerability, anxiety and human fragility but rather as an imaginative endeavour? The other demands, moreover, they want *and* always too much and always in excess of what we can offer. They are frequently in a different mood, have different preoccupations, different feelings and understandings but, and this is an important but, for while we are undone by the other, we are made by the other. In short, we cannot live without the other.

A dominant view within psychoanalysis, especially British object relations, is that an ethical stance is predicated on the knowledge of the difference between self and other. We have to hold in mind, and internalise, a profound contradiction that to be human we are separate from the other while, simultaneously, we are nothing without the other. Barry Richards, in a careful exploration of Freud's reflections on the nature of being human, poignantly expresses it thus: our first duty is to acknowledge the other human being so that 'to endure life is to endure the existence of others, which is also to endure oneself as a separate, conflicted individual' (Richards, 1998, p. 45).

Alongside this view, which focuses on knowing our separateness and our profound connectedness, there are the demanding ethical stances of

Hannah Arendt and Emmanuel Levinas who both assert and demand that we know that we are for the other before we can even be a self. The matter of responsibility is critical for Arendt and Levinas for they assert that we have to know that "I am responsible for the other before myself". There is no escape from our responsibility to the other and nor should there be. Levinas insists that ethics must structure our relationships and demands that we rethink our relationship with others with whom we share our world. There is no self without the other, no self prior to or beyond responsibility, but more radical and perhaps more worrying, within this Levinasian frame the move to know the other is inevitably the attempt to colonise the other. As soon as we know the other, Levinas argues, we return the other to being the same. What we have to know is that the other is absolutely that - the other. Knowledge of alterity is the only ethical place to be.

Responsibility in this account is different to recognition as a cognitive act for it involves the act of alterity, which is giving one's self over to the other and this is characterised by humility and sensibility. For Levinas, the self is that which is, has to be, given over to the other completely. In short, the self is responsibility to the other. Hannah Arendt's account of the ethical self is less radical than Levinas but is demanding nonetheless. For Arendt, promise and obligation are what make us human - for it is our promises to others that are essential to our sense of self. For Arendt and Levinas, the other is profoundly a part of us but that phrasing remains inadequate as it still maintains a boundary between self and other.

To think is never an easy task, especially when thinking has to occur in a psychosocial environment in which 'there are both internal and external forces conducive to dissipation and destruction' (Frosh & Baraitser 2003 p. 776) and moreover a 'deadening indifference to the complexity of cultures' (Dyson 2006 p26) but it is essential and part of thinking is to recognize the inextricable links of subjectivities. In the case of Egypt and the West, subjectivities are not so easily differentiated from one another, within this post-colonial nexus subjectivities are intertwined – to live in the West is to have Arab societies as a reference point and to live in the Arab region is to engage inexorably with the West. Arab and Western subjectivities are replete with shifting desires, split fantasies, vulnerable uncertainties that move through and across ambivalence, ambiguity, denigration and fascination. Crudely and deliberately without nuance I am arguing that subjectivities in Western and Arab societies are bound together and operate across the wish to be the same while simultaneously wanting to be separate and different. It has to be stated strongly that these intertwined relationships are not equal for they are formed, and perpetuated, within profoundly imbalanced power relations, economic wealth and political authority. There is though an

important theoretical and political matter, which focuses on how to recognise the pervasive power of the West but without reinforcing the West as the only reference point thereby reinforcing the West's over-inflated sense of its own importance.

Within this complex what does the veil represent? What is the veil a symbol for? What is fought through and across the female body? Interlinked with the matter of recognition, is the issue of responsibility that focuses on how to represent self and other, for as Wassef argues there is always a gap between representations and identities - representations can remain fixed, while identities are fluid (Wassef 2001). There is perhaps no arena more determined than the West's rigid responses to the veil and the fixed univocal responses to women who hejab. Concrete representations and perceptions prevail so that it can be thorny to conduct a discussion in which the variety of reasons why women wear the veil can be explored. As Sayyid has argued with much commitment, underpinning many of the representations is a response that is based on a Western view that femininity is essential only when it is unveiled. Ironically, or not, Western women are located within the realm of essential femininity, and veiling is thereby positioned as a violation of that natural subjectivity (Sayyid 1997). Crucially, we end up in an all-too-familiar place in which it is western women who are the real women, and the rest of us something lesser, not quite real, not quite the right thing. For as Sayyid asserts those on the left and on the right of the Western political spectrum deny Muslims an identity and an intricate subjectivity so that Muslims and Arabs are rendered as non-existent. The responses and representations work within a peculiar paradox of 'absence as well as a distorted presence' (Sayyid 1997 p. 3), in which a colonisation of the spirit still takes place and a peculiar reproduction of colonisation and superiority endures.

Superiority, contempt and disdain operate powerfully from both Western and Muslim/Arab women. There is a tendency for all women across the political spectrum – secular feminists from Arab and Western societies, religious feminists, and women who would not define themselves as feminist – to resort to the ideology of, and belief in, freedom. There is an absence of the painful awareness, which perhaps should be a melancholic awareness, that none of us are free or have choice — we are all bound within ideologies. We can navigate and negotiate the socio-political spheres but on the whole we are complicit with the social order.

As Joan Scott points out in her careful exploration of 'The Politics of the Veil' (2007), that it is frequently asserted that a woman hejabed is a member of a community while a woman in Western dress is expressing her individuality and freedom. The argument continues implicitly to emphasize that women who hejab are not individuals, rather the veil is a visible sign that they are members of a community

and that the community is more important for them (p82) and indeed, "they are not like us" for they are encumbered selves" (p. 125). The opposition between individual autonomy and cultural compulsion is untenable. The knowledge that the self is not constituted by its own self but rather by cultural, social and religious norms is an assault to a powerful and dominant Western belief system. Individualism, after all, is a form of faith.

The constitutions of most Western states define the basic unit of society as the individualized citizen but in the Middle East the basic unit of the society is the family and as Suad Joseph points out Middle Eastern cultures embed people in familial relationships; for '[P]ersonhood is understood in terms of relationships woven into one's sense of self, identity and place in the world. One is never without family, without relationships, outside the social body' (Joseph 1999 p. 54). Saba Mahmood in her important work Politics of Piety (2005) explores how for many religious women who hejab there is no distinction between an inner and outer self. For some women, the veil is a means both of being and becoming a certain kind of person, one who is moral and virtuous, indeed a person who is self-governing but not autonomous. There may not be a necessary contradiction between the veil as family pressure **and** a statement of individual autonomy and an acceptance of codes of modesty. As Mahmood so carefully explores, the self is produced differently through a series of ethical practices and is predicated on a different 'architecture of the self'. Mahmood explores that while the ego is abandoned and not asserted the 'self is very much at the centre of how they conceive what they do' (Mahmood 2005)

We have to be careful not to polarize the Middle East and the West and thereby reinforcing every stereotype that ever existed. For people in the West are also formed within relationships (psychoanalysis teaches us that if nothing else); affection, obligations and bonds also tie people together in the West as well as the Middle East. Individuality, however, is a powerful myth in the West but we all (whatever our heritage) inhabit the 'dynamics of relationality and autonomy, role and personhood, obligation and freedom, family and self, society and self' (Joseph 1999). We are all encumbered selves.

These beliefs, assertions and powerful feelings and imaginings take place across the female body and matters of sexuality. The female body has always been used in colonial imaginations and discourses. The colonial invasions often use the trope of the female body and words such as 'penetration', 'to unveil', 'to disrobe' abound. Women are positioned differently through inhabiting Western or Middle Eastern societies. While, in the West it can be asserted that an injunction for women is to be sexual, in the Middle East the issue of virtue is of primary significance. Women have to be virtuous and hold the moral order, while men are

represented in contrast as easily corruptible especially in regard to sexuality. Sexual relations, within the law, are there to be enjoyed and celebrated, and the injunction is to procreate. As an aside, Muhammad is said to have enjoyed sexual relations and his many marriages (whether they were political or not), and this is used as evidence to endorse marital sexual activity and to score a raunchy point over the celibate Jesus. The primary reason for segregation in the mosques is that the female body will distract men. It is men's predilection to be diverted that leads some clerics to argue for the wearing of the hejab (veil), the chador (the total covering of the female body) or as in Afghanistan – the burqa (in which the body is completely covered including the face). The absolute imperative is that women have to be modest in manner, dress and action.

Women have to protect their honour and shield men from rampant desires. There is much concern, not just about the female form as that which may taint both men and women, but there is also a continual anxiety that Western consumption has led to the corrupted body. Corrupted as women as we are forced into being sexual objects, but also into an individualistic consumption of clothes and life styles. For Islamic feminists, Western women under contemporary capitalism are exploited 'as cheap workers, oppressed as sex objects and robbed of their identity of femininity' (Povey 1999 p: 4). Unlike western women, they say, Muslim women do not have the double burden of equality – work and home - that has been counterproductive. Further, Western feminism has not produced true liberation for women *as* women but rather has forced them to become like men. The continual message is that the path to integrity is by following the honourable path of Islam, which is the true liberating force. Islamic feminists are active and thoughtful and belie the usual representation of Muslim women as simplistic, limited and as totally repressed by religion. In the West, and indeed amongst Arab secularists, Islam is positioned only as repressive and believed in through coercion and not choice. While, in a liberal seemingly tolerant stance, it is asserted that 'of course the women are free to choose', pulsing away is the view that the real choice would be not to wear the hejab.

The hejab is laden with meanings – it is over-determined and has many functions. As Wassef contends, '[T]he veil moves from being a piece of material with a plurality of symbolic meanings to, in some cases, becoming just a piece of fabric' (Wassef 2001 p. 119). One important aspect of the responses to the hejab is that it can function as a symbol that the other is precisely that *the other*. Drawing on Butler and Levinas, I would like to explore in the final section of this article, how the face of the other comes to me/you/us from outside. The woman who wears the hejab at some profound level interrupts a narcissism and punctures a fantasy of sameness and liberal tolerance. Her face reminds me/

you/us that the other is precisely that – resolutely other – and cannot be understood or known no matter what fictions we hold dear. A frequent complaint about the veil is that it allows the woman to see without being seen and as Fanon points out without regret, '[T]his woman who sees without being seen frustrates the coloniser ... There is no reciprocity. She does not yield herself, does not give herself, does not offer herself' (in Scott 2007 p. 66).

As Judith Butler poignantly explores '[T]o respond to the face, to understand its meaning, means to be awake to what is precarious in another life, or, rather, the precariousness of life itself'. Critically, this has to be based 'on an understanding of the precariousness of the Other' (Butler 2004 p. 134). Embedded within this paper is a question, which centres on "what is it about the other that makes me want to kill the other?" And kill we do, not just physically but through contempt, indifference, lack of engagement, and through claiming and colonizing the other. There are some important questions – political, social and emotional – that focus on why the other should provoke the desire to obliterate and indeed to kill. For Levinas and psychoanalysis we are always in conflict, indeed at war within ourselves as we battle with our anxieties — we are anxious for our own lives and anxious that we might have to kill to survive.

The Levinasian notion of the face, of what he calls the other, makes an ethical demand on me/you/us and importantly we do not which demand it makes. Critically for Levinas the face of the other cannot be read for a secret meaning as the face is not translatable – is in fact unreadable. The face demands – demands we give ourselves over, give ourselves up. There are multiple responses to the woman who does not give of herself, refuses to give herself over, who resolutely refuses to yield. I want to point to the aggression felt when face is not available to be read and when a conscious and unconscious fantasy is punctured that there is reciprocity, moreover, should be reciprocity. The hejabed woman punctures and lets us know that the other is not available and indeed, is never as we would wish them to be.

While most of us [at least in some academic and left leaning circles] understand that we cannot take at face value the simple oppositions offered – traditional v modern, fundamentalism v secularism, self v other, autonomy v dependence, we know that these dichotomies do not capture the complexities of who we are and how we are positioned but, but these divisions persist, despite our best intentions. It is a profound difficulty to know that we are all subject to the unconscious and that our fantasies are riven with laden and ugly feelings. I end, though, with where I began – I do not know what I think, despite or maybe because of the above explorations. I feel riven with questions — am I romanticizing the woman who veils locating in her resistance and agency which she does not have? Am I placing

too much responsibility on the white/Western woman and thereby letting Arab/Muslim off the socio-political-emotional hook? Except I do know that women like me who are either the other or have a touch of the other are frequently at the end of the mad making injunction to 'become like us, but remember you will never be like us'. I would like to remind us of the enduring issue of how we imagine ourselves otherwise? In addition, the task remains how to move towards an understanding and a knowledge that focuses on the question how do we imagine ourselves through the other? And that demand is pertinent for all of us, no matter our political, social and emotional affiliations.

Further Reading

Butler, Judith. Precarious Lives: The Power of Mourning and Violence. Verso Books: 2004, London.

Dyson, Michael E. Pride. Oxford University Press: 2006, Oxford.

Frosh, Stephen and Baraitser, Lisa. Thinking, Recognition, Otherness, The Psychoanalytic Review, 2003; 90 (6): 771-789

Joseph, Suad. Intimate Selving in Arab Families: Gender, Self, and Identity. Syracuse University Press: 1999, Syracuse.

Mahmood, Saba. Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject. Princeton University Press: 2005, Princeton & Oxford.

Maryam, Poya. Women, Work and Islamism: Ideology and Resistance in Iran. Zed Books: 1999, London.

Sayyid, Bobby. A Fundamental Fear: Eurocentrism & the Emergence of Islamism. Zed Books: 1997, London.

Scott, Joan. The Politics of Veil. Princeton University Press: 2007, Princeton & Oxford.

Richards, Barry. Images of Freud: Cultural Responses to Psychoanalysis. Dent: 1989, London.

Wasset, Nadia. On Selective Consumerism: Egyptian Women & Ethnographic Representations, in Middle Eastern Women in Social and Political Spaces, A. Treacher & H. Shukrallah (Eds), Feminist Review 2001, No. 69

Amal Treacher Kabesh is Associate Professor in Cultural Sociology in the School of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Nottingham.