Daftar Isi

Image and the Veil[1]: A Barthesian Reading of Veiled Muslim Women

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to examine images of veiled women from the Barthesian point of views. In Roland Barthes' view based on his last book Camera Lucida, an image of a veiled woman constructs not only her religious identity based on her choice of clothing (fashion) but also her subjectivity. As a Muslim woman a veiled woman receives numerous perceptions from the ways she performs herself in the public discourse. It is indeed necessary to examine images of veiled women from various stand points in order to open up more possibilities especially when such images are conjectured from socio-cultural, political and subjectivity realms.

***Key words**: image, veil, subjectivity, stadium, punctum*

Camera Lucida is Roland Barthes' last writing before his death. This book, although many have considered engaging in Photography, it significantly problematizes images and the way images are perceived, which in this case are photographs. It also challenges the conventional notion of subjectivity as Barthes proposes that subjectivity is not fixed once and for all. Accordingly, this paper attempts to discuss the way an image of veiled Muslim women are read, perceived and translated in Barthesian terms, related to the paradigm of feminism in the Islamic context. The veil that these women are wearing – covering their hair and necks - does not only constitute an image of fashion – a form of clothing, it indeed encompasses beyond a personal choice of clothing as it functions as a marker of socio-cultural, and political significance, and subjectivity. Parallel to Barthes's argument that subjectivity is problematic, as is the veil. The perception captured from an image of veiled women does not rest on one signification, one symbol, or one meaning. The perception produced by such image indeed is not reducible to a particular system of signification alone. It is various and continually multiplied, depending on the dynamics of its contexts.

A photograph of the veiled women with various styles.
(Courtesy of Maimunah, Lina Puryanti and Layli Hamidah)

[1] In Indonesia, vei, veiling and don veiling are used interchangeably. Generally, it is known as *jilbab*.

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Studium and Punctum

Barthes dedicates *Camera Lucida* for Sartre's *L'Imaginaire*. It is worth noting to view of Sartre's relationship between the sign and the image, "[i]n a photographic image, according to Sartre, the resemblance is "prior to interpretation" (Payne, 1997: 81), inviting the spectator "to make a perceptual synthesis that enables the portrait photograph" to stand for the object in person, if the object is a person. Sartre himself posits:

> As meaning, a word is but a beacon: it presents itself, awakens a meaning, and this meaning never returns to the word but goes out to the thing and the word is dropped. In the case of the physical image, however, the intentionality constantly returns to the image-portrait (Payne, 1997: 82).

It is from this point that Barthes alludes his idea of two elements what he calls as *studium* and *punctum*. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes views Photography (photographs) by simultaneously engaging himself in *studium* and *punctum*. In a much simple explanation, *studium* is the general, while *punctum* is the detailed. Although these two terms seem to be in opposition, the relationship between the two is not easy, as Barthes writes "[i]t is not possible to posit a rule of connection between *studium* and *punctum* (when it happens to be there). It is a matter of co-presence" (Barthes,, 2000: 42). Seemingly in exploring Photography Barthes puts more emphasis on *punctum* than *studium*. However, *studium* is still a point of reference. *Studium* for Barthes carries a broader signification crossing over the boundaries of personal attachment of the viewer of the photograph, or the Spectator as Barthes names it. It is a general perception of a Spectator to an image that can be coded culturally, losing a subjective effect. It can be said as "the historical interest," an interest that cannot be separated from the historical realities where it is a part of, or belongs to. Barthes writes:

> The *studium* is that very wide field of unconcerned desire, of various interest, of inconsequential taste... it mobillizes a half desire, a demi-volition; it is the same sort of vague, slippery, irresponsible interest one takes in the people, the entertainments, the books, the clothes one finds "all right."... The *studium* is a kind of education (knowledge and civility, "politeness") which allows me to discover the Operator, to experience the intentions which establish and animate his practices, but to experience them "in reverse," according to my will as a Spectator (Barthes, 2000: 27–28).

Thr Operator for Barthes is the photographer. Studium also authorizes Barthes to be the Spectator without getting into "his delight" or "his pain, his subjective response. Hence, as the Spectator is related to History, it can be extended to include the socio-cultural and political signification that an image contributes. In *studium*, a photograph *speaks* of a larger social background of those portrayed in the pictures. For an example, when viewing a photograph of a black American family, Barthes's *studium* reads that the photograph "utters respectability, family life, conformism, Sunday best, an effort of social advancement in order to assume the White Man's attributes" (Barthes, 2000: 43).

Punctum is for Barthes more attractive than *studium*. In fact, it is an element, which he continuously associates himself with. *Punctum* engages his personal self, his subjective response to a photograph or an image. *Punctum*, for it punctuates, is the centre of Photography. It works on personal level rather than a social one:

> In order to perceive the *punctum*, no analysis would be of any use to me (but perhaps memory sometimes would, as we shall see): it suffices that the image be large enough, that I do not have to study it (this would be of no help at all), that, given right there on the page, I should receive it right here in my eyes (Barthes, 2000: 42–43).

For Barthes, the *punctum* passes the *studium* for it is an active engagement with an image not only that it animates the Spectator, but largely the Spectator animates it (Barthes, 2000: 20). An *animation*, as Barthes names it, thus exists between the image and the Spectator. The Spectator is no longer signifying a photograph because he likes or dislikes it, more importantly because he loves it (Barthes, 2000: 27).

Barthes's unconventional way of making meanings out of Photography/a photograph/ an image is crucial. He offers an alternative of the traditional opposition between "science and subjectivity." Perhaps, what he suggests is the middle passage, of what may be regarded as "subjective science", "scientific subjectivity", or "the science of subjectivity", appropriating subjectivity as a science of itself, "a new science of each object".

The image of the veiled Muslim women is discussed in the Barthesian terms of *studium* and *punctum*. *Studium* is applied when the perception of the image reflects the social, cultural and political

significations, while *punctum* is used when it comes into the subjectivity of these women.

Studium

Studium is closely associated with historical realities of an image. It is part of a larger social perception that is generally perceived, referring to an already prior perception. It is a satisfaction of "historical curiosity," facilitating a cultural participation in the subject matter of an image (Payne, 1997: 88), as Barthes posits, "[it] requires the rational intermediary of an ethical political culture" (Barthes, 2000: 26). A photograph, or rather an image, cannot therefore be distinguished from its referent:

> A specific photograph, in effect, is never distinguished from its referent (from what it represents), or at least it is not *immediately* or *generally* distinguished from its referent (as in the case of every other image, encumbered – from the start, and because of its status – by way in which the object is simulated) (Barthes, 2000: 26).

An image and what it represents reflect a frame and a freeze, then projecting it as a whole. Women, just like men, by outsiders are easily turned into images, serving as emblems of their culture. The image of Muslim women as homogenously oppressed and subjugated have become the popular perception of the outsiders, especially of the Western perception. An image of veiled women commonly typifies Islam. Miriam Cooke writes:

> Such images fit into and exacerbate our preconceptions. All of these women represent something other than themselves. On the one hand, the domestic prisoners stand for the local patriarchy with its accoutrements of privilege dependent on the control of women; they are the empty vessels through which notions of honor and shame. On the hand, fierce and faceless, these women confront us with the total mobilization of a nation on behalf of its beliefs. (Cooke, 2001: 131–132).

Under the Western eye, the veil for Muslim women symbolizes sex segregation, oppression and subjugation of women under a patriarchal system that ostracises them from public participation. Accordingly, within a Western framework, the veil becomes the most prominent symbol of "both the oppression of women (or, in the language of the day, Islam's degradation of women) and the backwardness of Islam." It is used as "the open target of colonial attack and the spearhead of the assault on Muslim societies" (Ahmed, 1992: 152), an assault which insists that, therefore, unveiling is necessarily "the essential first step in the struggle for female liberation" (Ahmed, 1992: 154).

Referring an image to a particular referent is not a matter of easiness. For Barthes, it is a discomfort, since his desire to write on Photography is to resist "any reductive system" by creating a novelty between science and subjectivity. The reading of an image should be then placed within the similar consideration. An image does not solely represents a universal, it is "a *mathesis singularis* (and no longer universalis) (Barthes, 2000: 8)?" The universality of an image perhaps no longer exists. Veiled Muslim women seen as oppressed for being restricted to show some parts of their bodies (their hair and necks) should be confronted and challenged. Contemporary studies have shown that the image of veil Muslim women does not rest on a single meaning. Just as the veil comes with various meanings, so does its forms. The multiplicity of meanings and forms are given by the diversity of Muslim societies where these wearers are part of. The perception of the image is indeed dynamic, for it is not only seen from the outsider's perspective, but from the insider's as well. These veiled women define their own images and constantly contest what others see them and what they see themselves. Another view of the veil is grounded on the framework of Western colonial narrative. Within such framework, the veil is generally a symbol of oppression. To resist the colonial domination, the return to the veil becomes an antithesis that signifies the anti-colonial resistance to the Western domination. Paradoxically, it is the colonial discourse that gives rise to the new meaning of the veil, as "a symbol of resistance" or as a part of "discourses of resistance" (Ahmed, 1992: 164).[3] Giving a single meaning to the veil as merely an oppressive symbol for Muslim women is indeed inappropriate. The image of the veil occupies a more complex position. Identifying the veil as an oppressive symbol is a misconception of Islam,

[3] See also Azza Karam in 'Veiling, Unveiling and Meanings of the "veil"' in *Thamyris: Mythmaking From Past to Present* 3 (2) Autumn 1996. Karam addresses the similar issue as Ahmed. Based on her research of narrative discourses of immigrant Muslim women in Europe, she concludes that "veiling is part of ongoing power dynamic of competing discourse, especially discourses of resistance either to state interpretations or to hegemonic ideas" (p. 234).

ignoring the political assumptions the veil embodies. Ahmed suggests:

> It was incorrect in its broad assumptions that Muslim women needed to abandon native ways and adopt those of the West to improve their status.... The feminist agenda as defined by Europeans was also incorrect in its particularities, including its focus on the veil. Because the history of struggle around it, the veil is now pregnant with meanings. As an item of clothing, however, the veil itself and whether it is worn are about as relevant to substantive matters of women's rights as the social prescription of one or another item of clothing is to Western women's struggles over substantive issues (Ahmed, 1992: 166).

Ahmed's argument undeniably acknowledges the diverse implications of veiling. The veil even goes beyond being merely clothing, becoming an articulation of to a substantive matter of women's rights. Furthermore, the veil becomes a social prescription for important issues in women's struggles. The meaning of the veil is not static as it changes through its contexts and subtexts within which it is the women themselves denoting its meaning.

The multiple meanings of the veil show the diversity and complexity of Muslim societies. Such meanings are also grounded in different levels of class, social, political and economic position, where various reasons to veil or unveil are stated. Haideh Moghissi in *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism* identifies various meanings of veiling from several Islamic feminists such as Abu-Odeh, El Guindi, and Hoodfar (Moghissi, 1999). Moghissi posits that as an item of clothing, veiling is the exclusive property of the domestic sphere, even where that domesticity extends to include the market place and other restricted public arenas. According to Hoodfar, however, the veil is merely clothing that "may be worn to beautify the wearer," in the same way that Western women choose to wear make up (Moghissi, 1999: 41). However, both Abu-Odeh and El Guindi identify veiling as being related to woman's sexual body. For Abu-Odeh, veiling, for young women, serves as a "remedy" for discomfort that women experience in their daily life, protecting them against sexual harassment. El Guindi sees veiling as a means for Muslim women to control their own bodies, "to sexual space and moral privacy" (Moghissi, 1999: 41). This control conversely results in the increase of their participations in public sphere, at the same time signifying an act of anti-consumerism symbolising women's return to modesty (Moghissi, 1999: 41). Within this framework, veiling grants women's security and protects them against men's lust. However, such functions of veiling still imprison women for it implies that the women are victims that should protect themselves against men. The so-called lustful men, on the other hand, are not obliged to censure their own behaviour in anyway. From this perspective, it is indeed the patriarchal domination that ironically allows veiling to become a means of liberating women.

As a symbolic clothing which is no longer attached just to a woman's body, the veil is moving out of women's private sphere as it enters the public domain: social and political spheres. Not only does the veil relate to a woman's body, it then also embodies social and political statements. As Gole writes, "Islamic veiling is a political issue in both Muslim and Western European countries," functioning as "a challenge to Western modernity" confronting the opposing realms "between religion and secularism, the private and public spheres, [and] particularism and universalism,.. self and society, Western and Islamist" (Gole, 1996: 3–4). Gole explains further that politically the veil reaffirms women's own active appropriation symbolizing their commitment to the way of life defined under Islamic religiosity. At the same time, the veil rejects the determination of already "established traditions." It is then no longer perceived as an association of traditionalism (Ahmed, 1992: 41), rather as a signification of modernity. It is a transition "signalling entrance into, [and a] determination to move forward in[to], modernity." Echoing Ahmed's argument that the veil is a symbol of resistance against Western colonial domination, Abu-Odeh believes that it is a defiant act against "the social corruption of a Western-oriented market economy and... consumerism" (Moghissi, 1999: 41). Positing veiling as an affirmation of women's acts, Moghissi proposes viewing the veil as a tool to empower women. Yet, she calls attention to the diverse and changing of its meanings, and insists that veiling (the practice of wearing the veil) must be a choice and not an imposition upon women. In the case of Islamic fundamentalism, Moghissi notes that the practice of veiling embodies different connotations, enforcing mandatory rule to which she is opposed. The oversimplified perception that the veil carries just a one-sided meaning-such as being simply a tool of empowerment-should be avoided. Ideological, political and philosophical emblems that underline the veil must not then be overlooked.

Punctum

Punctum is the detailed that gives rise to the particularity or *singularis*. Reading the *punctum* of the veiled women's image is an active participation of the Spectator, "the reading of the *punctum* is at once brief and active" (Barthes, 2000: 47). Consequently, such reading suggests an emphasis that it (the reading) is "placed on the *active* participation of the viewer in producing the meaning/affect of the photograph" (Burgin, 1986: 88). As an unveiled Muslim person, looking at the punctum of veiled Muslim women, I perceive a strong personal affect. The presence of an unveiled woman among veiled women arises an observation coming from the juxtaposition between the presence and absence of the veil. Withstanding such absence-presence, a commonality that we all share is the subjectivity process. These veiled women undeniably undergo a further contesting presence and absence of the veil that they are wearing. For those Muslim women who veil themselves, the veil is not worn all the time. In the presence of women, children and men whom they cannot get married with (their *muhrim*), they can unveil themselves. Yet, in front of *non-muhrim*, those allowed to marry them, the veil must be donned.

Seemingly Barthes's *Camera Lucida* is the author's appropriation of Sartre's conception on the multiple subjectivity. Payne posits, "Sartre's general project in the *Psychology of Imagination* was to investigate the intentional structure of the image and thus implicitly to challenge Hegel's conception of a unified self as a multiplicity of physical structures" (Payne, 1987: 81). For Barthes, then, consciousness is multiple, so is subjectivity. Subjectivity is a matter of difficulty. It never rests on one settling position, and is fixed once and for all. Barthes posits:

> I have always suffered from: the uneasiness of being a subject torn between two languages, one expressive, the other critical; and at the heart of this critical language, between several discourses, those of sociology, of semiology, and of psychoanalysis (Barthes, 2000: 8).

The *punctum* of a veiled woman's image viewed by the Spectator is parallel to Barthes's discomfort with his subjectivity, moving between the presence and absence of the veil, "the divided self," "a divided subject... never to acknowledge his simple contradictions, his double postulations, etc.; it is a *diffraction* which is intended, a dispersion of energy in which there remains neither a central core nor a structure of meaning: I am not contradictory, I am dispersed" (Barthes, 1977: 143).

The presence of the veil is pivotal to veiled women's subjectivity. The veil is not just an article of clothing attached to a woman's body signifying nothing. It, as Cooke suggests, more or less signals an affirmation of a woman's identity, not only for herself but also for others who see her. Veiling doubles up the construction of women in terms of their body, their subjectivity and, of course, their image. Cooke writes:

> [I]t is an item of clothing that each woman daily engages, aware of the symbolic baggage it carries. As she looks at her reflection in the morning to hide her hair and adjust the cloth, this veiled woman daily reaffirms the fact that her body marks her out morally and sexually-in other words, as a religious and as a female person. Daily this veiled women has a multiple consciousness of herself, as she sees herself, as her community sees her, and as outsider men and women see her. She must continually negotiate the symbolism of this piece of cloth that is so saturated with patriarchal meaning that it is difficult to appropriate for feminist purposes. She must constantly remember how the veil functions in constructing her image (Cooke, 2001: 135–136).

Every time a veil is attached to a female body, she transforms into an image just like when one is posing in front of a camera. One takes another body and transforms oneself into an image (Barthes, 2000: 10).

As a construction of a woman's image, the veil stands as a crucial marker through which a woman is identified, recognized and perceived. Yet, the multiple meanings of the veil should be situated to explain the different realities of the wearers. Narratives of meanings of the veil, including the hegemonic meanings, such as veiling as a "mechanism of seclusion", are accepted as long as such meanings are voiced by the wearers themselves. Therefore, veiling should be therefore understood as "a function of the diverse social, political, cultural and economic activism" (Karam, 1996: 235). The variation of the meanings of the veil indicates the development of the achieved status rather than the ascribed status of the wearer. Where veiling is voluntarily donned, its meaning marks the shift of the boundaries between self and other, increasing female own agency. As veiling used to be the symbol of man's control over

woman, the justification and reappropriation of the contemporary return-to-veil movement and its discursive practices "emphasize female self control and independence in ways, by and large, challenging the traditional and the orthodox determined position (Ask and Tjomsland, 1998: 13). The significance of the veil conjures differences of the Muslim women in different circumstances. The symbolic veil is not reducible to a single meaning, but must be placed within the contexts, in which it appears.

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