

## **It's Not About the Veil, It's About Us**

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Austrian writer Peter Turrini explored the issue of xenophobia in many essays, interviews, poems, and dramas. An acerbic critic of contemporary society, he invariably concluded that e.g. the Austrians often hate that which is foreign because due to their multiethnic history they have foreignness within themselves. In other words: we humans have more potential for hatred when the object of our hatred is part of our own identity. Similarly, in his last novel, *The Castle in the Forest* (2007), Norman Mailer made one more and final attempt at understanding Hitler's anti-Semitism.

French philosopher Julia Kristeva takes up the same theme in her book *Strangers to Ourselves* (1991). In her feminist analysis of Occidental cultural history, she posits that the first foreigners in antiquity were women: the Danaides, who escaped from the patriarchy in Egypt and came to Argos – out of the proverbial frying pan and into the fire. Drawing on the insights of Sigmund Freud, she also establishes a link between the foreign in the unconscious and the repressed. Not until we recognize that the foreign is always a part of ourselves can we overcome negative repulsion responses and constructively encounter the foreign as part of the ego.

This exhibition is about more than the veil. It presents various artistic positions on a theme that is part of a long tradition of misunderstandings. And when a "Western" institution, in this case the Austrian Cultural Forum New York, puts on an exhibition on the veil, it is less about the veil and its significance in the Muslim world than about our own perspective of it. It is about our construction of the foreign, then, our response to the foreign – us as the "Occident" and our definition of the "Orient." The two terms are both effective and problematic because they are common, simplistic fictions that already contain the seed of misunderstanding and conflict in their very definition.

From a superficial perspective, the topic of the veil and its various manifestations, be it a headscarf, a veil, or a burka, is already highly complex. This is so even though in the USA and in Austria the veil itself is not the crux of the problem. In Austria, Islam has been firmly anchored as an officially recognized religion since 1912, and veiled women are part of everyday life, including in the guise of Catholic nuns and rural women who wear headscarves. In the USA, on the other hand, the biggest nation of immigrants in the world, there are so many different ethnicities, languages, and clothing styles that we could hardly seriously discuss a rejection of this piece of clothing. In the course of preparing this exhibition I heard of only one failed legislative initiative in Oklahoma aimed at prohibiting women from wearing a veil on ID cards and driver's licenses.

While in Austria and even here – despite 9/11 – the veil is viewed with a relaxed attitude, in Turkey the discussion of this publicly displayed religious symbol is at the center of a constitutional debate. The secular members of Turkish society, referring to Atatürk, are vehemently opposed to the headscarf as a symbol of Islamification. Still, in recent years the Muslim democratic movement - also by advocating the scarf - has gained ground. A growing number of young women in Turkey and around the world are consciously and actively in favor of covering their neck, head, and face with cloth. In France, meanwhile, there is a strict rejection of the headscarf in public places, including schools, and the same goes for several German states.

On the whole, then, a piece of clothing that has a shared tradition going back thousands of years has become a visual symbol of a cultural conflict between the imagined perceptions of the Islamic and Judeo-Christian worlds, of the "Orient" and the "Occident."

## The veil in history

If we use the veil as a collective term for all fabric used to cover either just the head and the hair or the neck and the face as well, its history dates back to antiquity. In ancient Greece and in Rome, women wore veils as part of their dress and a symbol of propriety. Often, it was primarily reserved for upper-class women, who were able to set themselves apart from common folk because of the cost of the cloth.

In the Old Testament, which is part of both the Torah and the Bible, we find many references to the veil in connection with women. And both the veil and the headscarf are important topics in Rabbinical literature. In Christianity, the Apostle Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians prohibited women from entering a church without a veil:

*"Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonours his head. And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head - it is just as though her head were shaved. If a woman does not cover her head, she should have her hair cut off; and if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut off or shaved off, she should cover her head. A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. For this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head" (1 Corinthians 11:3-10).*

So for centuries the veil remained a central element in patriarchal, monotheistic religions, and looking back we can say it almost went unnoticed. It was not until the social revolution and colonialism that it became a distinguishing feature between Orient and Occident. While upper-class Western European women became increasingly prominent visually, the veil acquired the status of an important, even sexually charged device. Starting in the 19th century, veiled women and fantasies of harems began to define the Western concept of the Orient.

In the 20th century the veil became an important symbol of anti-colonialism, among other things when its leading proponent, the French Algerian Frantz Fanon, denounced the battle against the veil: "Every rejected veil disclosed to the eyes of the colonialists' horizons until then forbidden... The occupier's aggressiveness... multiplied tenfold each time a new face was uncovered. Every new Algerian woman unveiled announced to the occupier an Algerian society whose systems of defense were in the process of dislocation, open and breached. Every veil that fell... was a negative expression of the fact that Algeria... was accepting the rape of the colonizer."<sup>1</sup>

## Fundamentalism as a culturalization of political-economic conflicts between "Orient" and "Occident"

But above all in the Arabic world, Frantz Fanon's manifesto against colonialism was still influenced by nationalist Marxist ideas of modernization. Starting in the 1950s, the generation of Gamal Abdul Nasser and Ben Bella was caught between the millstones of Soviet Communism and Anglo-American hegemony in the fight for a form of development that was autonomous and ultimately Western in nature. When subsequent generations increasingly headed in the direction of Islamic fundamentalism, it may well have been in response to the many defeats and disappointments that entire generations of Arabic social revolutionaries experienced with both the capitalist and socialist models of modernization. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 should definitely be seen as an attempt to find an entirely independent path beyond Western ideas – regardless whether left or right.

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<sup>1</sup> Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, Grove Press, 1994.

At this point, if not earlier with the growing explosiveness of the Palestine/Israel problem beginning in the 1970s, the "Orient" acquired two visual logos: Arafat's Palestinian scarf became a hip symbol for the fighting spirit of a guerilla movement while the veil became a symbol of backwardness and the patriarchal suppression of women in Islam.

Undoubtedly, the collapse of Communism in 1989 allowed the West to bask in the euphoria of being the winner in a historic battle. But only for a fleeting moment. The volatility of the ceaseless conflict in the Middle East, and the first Iraq War in 1990/91, soon silenced the rhetoric of the "end of history." And several Islamic totalitarian regimes in Africa and Asia established themselves on the wave of the Third World rhetoric against the unfair world economic order. Islamic fundamentalism gained worldwide prominence as a new opponent of the Western model of capitalism.

From today's perspective, the consequences of 9/11 make it painfully clear that "we in the West" have too readily thrown out the baby with the bath water. We have rejected all things Islamic as "fundamentalist" phenomena, including the veil and religious traditions.

The return of identitarian politics in the USA and Europe at the turn of the millennium, less out of a concern for representing interests than as an expression of symbolic, ideological, even religiously embellished lifestyles, demonstrates that fundamentalism is a human and social issue, not a geographically delimited problem of the "Orient" alone.

### **Respect instead of cultural war**

When we recall today how the democratic revolutions swept aside the Communist dictatorships twenty years ago, we should also acknowledge the complex causality of this development. Of course the arms race and the economic failure of the planned economy were central factors. But we should not underestimate the many cultural processes that began to have an effect in the 1970s.

The simple fact that the West demonstrated a degree of understanding and respect, instead of solely presenting itself as an enemy, diffused many arguments by radical communist hawks in Eastern Europe. And the expectation of coexistence helped to ease the tense East West relations.

How does this relate to our theme? As early as the late seventies, intellectuals like Michel Foucault not only saw the negative in the Islamic Revolution. The veil was also stylized as a shield against capitalist hegemony and its consequences, including the flood of images, overstimulation, advertising, propaganda, and mass culture. And when we encounter nudity everywhere today, especially naked women, as visual bearers of commercial messages, we have to ask ourselves whether this purely profit-oriented instrumentalization of the body still represents the liberation that the generation of 1968 once dreamed of.

### **Women's rights and human rights**

Even though women's rights and human rights may well have become more important than ever in international relations, we still live in a disturbing world. We are witnesses of forced marriages, honor killings, marital and family violence, female genital mutilation, and sex slavery. The veil can no longer be condoned as a forced covering imposed by governments, societies, or cultures.

But we also have to admit that international sex tourism and sex slavery have grown at an alarming rate in the Occidental countries. The real condition of women, and even more so the condition of human rights, needs to be improved both in the West and in the Arabic-Islamic world.

But if self-confident and independent women choose a certain form of covering their bodies out of their free will, we should accept it with respect and not reject it as backwards or even generate hostility toward it. The same applies to the many forms of dress that we encounter everywhere in Europe and the USA – including exposure and nudity.

This is why we are giving a voice to various artistic positions in this exhibition. We want to promote a serious dialog and take advantage of the opportunity that a new era in the USA is opening up for relations between the Orient and the Occident.