
This book asks insightful questions about the versatility of the veil, and its multiple meanings in many diverse cultural contexts. The author has collected a wide range of textual and visual material as the “raw data” for her project of “unveiling the veil”. It is unfortunately marked by major methodological and theoretical weaknesses that reduce immensely its potential contribution to its stated aim.

The Introduction self-poses the author as a naïve visitor going home to Iran and being alternately annoyed and surprised, and finally becoming “aware that this unassuming piece of cloth has a history that antedates the Islamic Republic of Iran by thousands of years” (p. 3). Shirazi swiftly moves to the present-day “near-omnipresence of the veil” (p. 4). From advertisements in the United States and Saudi Arabia to the uses of the veil in American erotica, Hindi and Iranian cinema, posters and stamps, and finally the military and literary uses of the veil — the book covers these diverse domains, asking why and how one “unassuming piece of cloth” does so much and so varied cultural work? This is an important question and Shirazi has done an immense amount of work bringing to our attention the various ways in which the veil is invoked and put to cultural work “far beyond the borders and religious context of the Islamic Republic of Iran and even the Muslim world itself” (p. 4).

Despite the initial nod to history, however, historical grounding is not a strength of this book, and its theoretical underpinning consists of a one-way impact theory of symbolics of culture. By this I mean advertisers, rulers, filmmakers, poets intend a particular meaning and use of a cultural sign — in this case the veil — and they produce the intended goal with no space of counter or resistant reading: products get sold, women become sexual objects, and are restricted, political stereotypes are produced, etc. Consumers are victims of false consciousness: “Now, advertisers probe deep into the recesses of the subconscious minds of potential consumers and then construct ad campaigns that goad the unconscious mind and the body under its control into buying products that the conscious mind neither needs nor wants” (pp. 10–11). How do these omnipotent advertisers succeed? What are these unconscious workings of the mind that they read and manipulate so effectively? What can we learn about ourselves, our cultures, and other selves and cultures from these successful symbolic works? Shirazi grapples with these questions through
a “show and tell” transparent reading of images. From advertisements for Jeep Cherokees, IBM computers, and Virginia Slim cigarettes, to those for Bijan perfumes and the President’s Choice Instance Vegetable Couscous Soup, we are given the author’s speculation about which segment of the population is targeted for each product ad and how this target’s cultural sentiments determine the usage the advertisers make of symbolics of the veil who in turn then succeed in selling their products.

Some of the readings are puzzling: we are told, for instance: “By presenting the veil as emblem of Middle Eastern culture, the designers of the label [for the President’s Choice Instance Vegetable Couscous Soup] target consumers of Middle Eastern origin” (p. 20). Yet previously, Shirazi had argued that similar uses of the veil had targeted variously American middle-class working men, the elderly, and American women. It isn’t clear why in the case of this soup, the usage of veiled women’s face has become a sign of “authenticity” (p. 20) and intended to attract authentic Middle Easterners as opposed to a sign of exoticism and attempting to sell to North American public an exotic soup? Or perhaps both and many others. My point is that to attempt to offer one reading as the reading of a given image and from that make assumptions about intention as well as the working of that image impoverishes our possibility of understanding the power of these visual media — which is the projected goal of this book.

At times Shirazi seems concerned about the accuracy of information conveyed by these advertisements. But why should advertisements be “accurate” symbolically? Legally, they are expected to be accurate about product information, but otherwise they work on fantasy not accuracy. That this fantastic work may also circulate and in fact work because of the circulation of “wrong” and objectionable (mis) information about a different culture is the kind of question that needs critical attention. Shirazi’s repeated answer to the question of how these images work is that they appeal to stereotypes (of exoticism and submission) held by Americans about Middle Eastern Muslim women.

Shirazi makes the usual, yet no less objectionable, generalizations that slide effortlessly between Middle Eastern, Eastern, Muslim, as if these categories could just be switched about: there seems to be no non-Muslims in “the East”, and no Muslims in “the West”. This becomes particularly evident in the second section of the first chapter, discussing advertisements in a Saudi Arabian journal for women, Sayyidati. Here the author invokes arguments based on essential differences about concepts of female body and sexuality in Judeo-Christian traditions versus Islamic ones (pp. 24–26) to explain the difference between advertisements for Kotex sanitary napkins in the US versus
in Saudi Arabia. Not only does Shirazi seem oblivious to critical arguments raised over the past two decades about these essentializing ahistorical conceptions. By re-circulating these notions as explanations for the different advertising strategies companies take in different cultural contexts, she in effect reproduces essential differences between “East” and “West”. Sometimes as an explicit proposition: “There are substantial cultural differences between East and West in conceptions not only of woman’s body and its functions but also of woman’s sexuality” (p. 28). The East becomes Middle East and then Muslim a few lines later on p. 29. On p. 33, we read: “In the lunar calendar, the moon is full on the fourteenth day. In Middle Eastern culture, fourteen is also the age when a girl is most beautiful and desirable. It is the age to get married”. This is to explain the effect of a veiled face next to a moon crescent with hints of the circle of the full moon! Never mind that the face in this ad looks anything but fourteen. And how has Shirazi come to this grand generalization of fourteen being the most desirable age for women in the Middle East? We have no idea, since what follows is a selection of verses and proverbs about beautiful women’s face as full moon. While the fourteen-year-old woman’s desirability is presumably a man’s point of view (the book throughout assumes heterosexual men and women, one of the few mentions to the contrary is a reference to male homosexual practices and bonds as a “temporary necessity” (p. 170), Shirazi implies that women have so internalized this view that they will go and buy the advertised product (watches costing between $13,900 to $57,000 each (p. 37), so that they become desirable like fourteen-year-old women. The symbolics of these advertisements “enable her to give her dreams [presumably romantic marriage, see pp. 30–31] a concrete shape in the form of a Concord watch” (p. 37).

A similar approach informs the arguments of the second chapter on “Veiled Images in American Erotica”. In this chapter we go from the obvious — “Penthouse, Playboy, and Hustler . . . exploit this semantic flexibility of the veil in order to sell sex” (p. 39) — to the implausible: “The messages of the cartoons vary . . . depending on the nature of US relations with the Middle East”. The cartoons reproduced or discussed in support of this proposition simply do not bear this conclusion. A cartoon from October issue of Penthouse is described and interpreted to be insulting to the Arab Abdullah [’Abd All âh], one of the figures depicted. We are then told that this cartoon appeared “about six months after US planes under the order of President Reagan had bombed the cities of Tripoli and Benghazi in Libya . . . . We may, therefore, assume that the depicted Abdullah is most likely Muammar al-Qaddafi” (p. 56). Nor is it clear why a bearded turbaned male figure must be read as an ayatollah, and “most likely” Ayatollah Khomeini (p. 57). Yet this level of analysis is what
supports the author’s conclusion that “The veil as symbol of Oriental licentiousness changed into a symbol of woman’s victimization whenever the United States had an enemy in the Middle East whose dark shadow had reached American shores” (p. 61).

In chapter three, “The Cinematics of the Veil”, the author tells us that she chose the Indian films discussed on the basis of two criteria: first, popularity of the film, and second, that they “rely on the veil to create sexual tension”. Yet she seems oblivious to the fact that this choice makes the argument of this chapter — that Indian films “rely on the eroticism associated with the veil in order to create sexual tension” — rather tautological, as she had chosen those films that do precisely that. Although there is a theoretically rich literature available on film and melodrama, including feminist contributions to both, the author’s analysis is informed by little of it (the exception is Laura Mulvey’s earliest ground-breaking essay). Shirazi suggests that the difference between the uses of the veil in Indian and post-1979 Iranian film is that the former directs the male gaze “to titillate the audience” (p. 79), whereas the latter “revolve around rules and regulations whose purpose is to deny the spectator’s gaze” (p. 71). But there can be no cinema with “denying” the gaze. The “rules of looking”, from which Iranian cinematic regulations were derived, are as productive in their disciplinary work, though differently so, as cinematic semantics that work “to titillate”. The spectators do their own phantasmatic reading beyond and behind the veil.

Transparent reading of texts also informs Shirazi’s approach to literary works. In chapter six, “Literary Dynamics of the Veil”, poems are reproduced and followed by the author’s repetition of the poems’ themes with little attempt at analyzing the rhetorical structure of a poem, what work it does and how it does its work.

The author’s use of primary sources, if her usage of Persian-language sources is any indication, is very problematic. Here is one example: In chapter four, “Iranian Politics and the Hijab”, Shirazi draws on what she calls “two documents” containing “correspondences of Reza Shah between 1924 and 1933” (p. 89). For Shirazi, these documents “prove” that upon his return from a visit to Turkey (in 1934) he embarked on compulsory unveiling of Iranian women. Shirazi then provides the reader with a quote, what Reza Shah had told his cabinet members on this issue. The reference for this quote, a few lines later, guides the reader to pages 21–22 of one the “two documents”. I have to admit that I was quite shocked by this quote, for no other reason than that I had read those “two documents” cover to cover and had no recollection of any minutes of cabinet meetings with Reza Shah, especially of a meeting of this significance. So I went back and checked. First, I must mention that these
“two documents” are in fact two documentary collections, not of Reza Shah’s correspondences, but of correspondences between various ministries in Tehran and provincial towns. Neither it contains minutes of cabinet meetings, nor any pronouncements by Reza Shah. Nor do the dates match what Shirazi has noted. One set, *Khushūnāt va Farhang* (Tehran: Sāzmān-i Asnād-i Millī-i Irān, 1992), covers documents between 1935 to 1943. The other set, *Vaqī‘āb-‘i kashf-i hijāb* (Tehran: Sāzmān-i Madārīk-ī Farhangī-ī Inqilāb-i Islāmī, 1992), covers documents from 1924 through 1943 and includes some of the regulations issued concerning dress codes for men and women in addition to correspondence between various ministries and government organizations.

The quote attributed to Reza Shah does not come from the documentary sections of either collection, but from the preface to the second volume and its original source is the 1976 memoirs of ʿAlī Ṣaghar Ḥikmat, Minister of Education at the time of the unveiling campaign in 1935–36 (*Si khāṭirah az ‘Asr-i Farkhundah-‘ī Pahlavī* (Tehran: Vahid, 1976). There is no way for the reader of this book to know that the quote is not from governmental documents of the period and it is from memoirs of a politician some forty years later.

Unsupported statements and assumptions pervade this book. Shirazi repeats the by now challenged cliché that, “Women’s status in Iranian society was changed little” during the Pahlavi period (pp. 92, 106, 151, 160). The Soviet Union, on the other hand, is unsuccessful on p. 151 in improving the plight of Uzbek women, but on p. 149 these women are said to have benefited “greatly from the legal changes”. The Islamic Republic of Iran is said to have conducted the war with Iraq as a Shi‘ī war against Sunni Iraq (pp. 94–97); the Soviet Union is said to have funded the joint forces of the Mujāhidin-ī Khālq and Ayatollah Khomeini in their efforts to overthrow the Shah (135). *‘Arīfnāmah*, a long personal-social poem by Iraj Mirzā, is speculated to have gotten its title by possible allusion to Firdawsī’s *Shāhnāmah* or the use of *‘Arif* from its Arabic meaning “the one who knows” (p. 196). Yet a minimal familiarity with the literary history of the period would indicate that the title came from the name of Iraj Mirzā’s contemporary poet and very close friend, Abū al-Qāsim ʿArisī Qazvīnī (1882/3–1934), to whom the poem is addressed on the occasion of the latter’s visit to Iraj Mirzā’s city of residence when he chose not to go straight to Iraj Mirzā’s residence and stay with him. We are told that in the period when male literary figures such as Iraj Mirzā and ʿIshqā were writing critical poems about women’s veil, Iranian women with few exceptions, were illiterate (p. 160). Yet early twentieth century was a period of immense literary and political output by Iranian women and among the themes that they debated and wrote about was the pros and cons of unveiling.
Shirazi calls Parvin I’tişāmī (1907–1941) “one of the first female poets in Persian poetry” (p. 166), despite a literary tradition that predates her and is recorded, among other places in I’timād al-Salṭanah’s biographical dictionary, Khayārāt-i Hisān (three volumes, published in Tehran, 1887–89). Her suggestion that Ghālib in nineteenth-century India “lived in a social and religious milieu that was similar to that of the two medieval poets [Ḥāfiz (14th century) and Rūmī (13th century)]” (p. 170) is hard to sustain by any standard.

The book, in short, is significant for putting at the centre of our attention a significant cultural query; it offers a rich array of images to pose this query forcefully. Yet its richness is frustrated by theoretical and methodological weaknesses and at the end it is disappointing for the answers it provides.

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This is a very interesting and consciously revisionist study of modern Egyptian history, one which certainly fits the evident intention of the series in which it is published, “Middle East Studies Beyond Dominant Paradigms”. The dominant paradigm, as the author presents it, sees the Egyptian people as extremely conservative in culture, ruled over by “Oriental despots” who from time to time bring new ideas. The major historical break for modernity comes with the brief invasion of Napoleon (d. 1821) followed by the rule of Muhammad ‘Alī (d. 1265/1849), a despot who begins the process of imposing modernization and Westernization from the top down. This process has continued to the present, whether under foreign or native rule. The author contests this paradigm in two major ways. She emphasizes the continuity in Egyptian history from the 18th century to the present and she emphasizes the active role of the people and popular culture.

While the standard view represents the late Mamluk period (18th century) as one of cultural decline and political chaos, Sonbol presents evidence of a vibrant economic, social and intellectual life during this period. More