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## **Homenagem a *Da Imperfeição*: A estesia do véu**

### **Homage to *De L'imperfection*: The esthesis of the veil**

**Resumo:** Este trabalho explora a perspectiva estética do ato de cobrir-se, pelo uso do *niqab* – uma vestimenta Islâmica que cobre a face completamente, à exceção dos olhos. Com o objetivo de homenagear a última obra individual de Greimas, *Da Imperfeição*, investigamos o tema da emoção estética contida no ato de vestir o véu, as sensações causadas pelo mesmo, e a ação das roupas sobre os corpos femininos. Por meio da análise de depoimentos de mulheres Muçulmanas vivendo nas metrópoles ocidentais, as quais optaram pelo uso do véu, mas igualmente observando a cultura popular, textos importantes da Semiótica standard e finalmente, experimentando o *niqab*, proponho uma abordagem sociosemiótica da vestimenta Islâmica que busca o entendimento do véu a partir do ponto de vista do sujeito que é vestido.

**Palavras-Chave:** Estesia. Emoção estética. Niqab.Véu. Sociosemiótica.

**Abstract:** This paper addresses the esthetic perspective of the act of veiling, through the use of the *niqab* – an Islamic garment that covers the face completely, except for the eyes. With the view to homage Greimas' last individual work, *De L'imperfection*, the research investigates the aesthetic emotion contained in the act of veiling, the sensations caused by the veil, and the action of clothes over the feminine body. Analysing testimonials of Muslim women living in the West who chose to veil in their daily lives, popular culture, traditional semiotical theory, and also by experimenting with wearing a *niqab*, I propose a socio-semiotical approach to Islamic wear with the purpose of understanding the veil from within.

**Keywords:** Esthesis. Aesthetic emotion. Niqab. Veil. Socio-semiotics.

In 1987 Greimas published his last individual work, *De L'imperfection*<sup>1</sup>, not yet translated into English. After his extensive academic production developing a Semiotics of the language and the narrative, *De L'imperfection* inaugurated what Ana Claudia de Oliveira defined as "[...] the reflection on the aesthetic modes of presence in the human

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<sup>1</sup> GREIMAS, A. J. *Da Imperfeição*. São Paulo: Hacker, 2002, our translation.

life, or in everyday life."<sup>2</sup> A book describing fractures and escapes, *De l'imperfection* explores in its first parts the impact of the aesthetic accidents in passages from Literature, Poetry and the Arts: the fractions of seconds in which time stops, or even reverses, so that it can accommodate the volume of emotions and semantic value generated by one instant in which we are so overwhelmed by surprise and shock we are physically affected. In the second part, the author explores the need to pursue such instants in our daily lives, through a practice of "expecting the unexpected"<sup>3</sup> in everyday life.

*De l'imperfection* was a fracture by itself in the study of Semiotics, which until then was interested in an approach that didn't consider the accident or the passions. This last individual work of Greimas opened the paths to Eric Landowski's study of the interactions<sup>4</sup> and represented the first steps into the developing of a tensive Semiotics, whose first work was written by Greimas in collaboration with Jacques Fontanille, the *Semiotics of Passions*<sup>5</sup>. In this work, the idea of esthesis and the aesthetic emotion is further elaborated, making it explicit that the experience of the aesthetic emotion cannot be binarised in an opposition between euphoria and dysphoria, but it permits the subject to feel in a level anterior to the phoric oppositions<sup>6</sup>.

As much as the aesthetic emotion extensively explored in *De l'imperfection*, the corpus of the present paper, the *niqab* or face veil, is also anterior, or perhaps beyond the efforts of binarisation and opposition. As Robinson's drop that refused to fall, creating an infinite instant of aesthetic apprehension in Michel Tournier's book, my first vision of a veiled woman in 2014 placed me in an estate of apprehension felt as an "[...] inversion of the course of the time [...]"<sup>7</sup>.

In my personal path as a researcher and semiotician, *De l'imperfection* and the veil are two halves of the same whole, both complex, polemic, at times misunderstood, but mainly: addressing a level of the human experience that is neglected by academic studies in several fields – the sensibility. Continuing my anterior efforts to study the

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<sup>2</sup> Idem, p. 9

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem, p. 83-90

<sup>4</sup> Cf. LANDOWSKI, E. *Les interactions risquées*. Limoges: PULIM, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> GREIMAS, A. J.; FONTANILLE, J. *Sémiotique des passions. Des états de choses aux états d'âme*. Paris: Seuil, 1991.

<sup>6</sup> Idem, p. 30-31

<sup>7</sup> GREIMAS, A.J. *Op. cit.*, 2002, p. 30, our translation.

corset<sup>8</sup> likewise, this paper addresses the problem of dress from an angle still considered unorthodox in academia, one that takes into consideration that the things, as much as people, are capable of acting and making do other subjects. Such path is not a discovery of mine, as it was suggested in *De l'imperfection*<sup>9</sup> and affirmed in *Semiotics of Passions*: that the aesthetic emotion is one capable of turning the aesthetic object into a subject of action, and the subject who experiences the emotion into the object of its action<sup>10</sup>.

When it comes to the veil, the *niqab* more specifically, the possibility of such analysis is always suggested across all discourses that address this "object", from the testimonials of women in specific literature<sup>11</sup> to the isotopic Islamophobia and xenophobic appeals of European medias: the veil is never a lifeless piece of cloth, but a *companion*, a *guardian*, or a *threat* to our way of life; a *commandment*, something that *assists* the act of piety and worship to Allah, or what can make a dozen police officers surround a disarmed woman to force her to uncover.

The veil is, likewise, the place of imagination and separation between the one who wears and the one who looks, distancing those two actants of the discourse even more than regular clothes do. If a dress is what disguises the naked body from the gaze of the one who apprehends the one who wears, the *niqab* disguises everything but the gaze, which becomes amplified: both the gaze through slit; and the gaze of the ones who dare to look into a veiled figure.

There is a great deal of attention to the matter of the veil in Europe those days, but to discuss such aspects of the *niqab* is not the objective of the present work. In this occasion, the focus goes in the opposite way: rather than caring about the macro, this paper purposes to investigate the *niqab* from within, from what it does to the body that wears and the body that apprehends, adopting the perspective of the passions, the aesthetic emotion, and the difficulty in binarising the *niqab* into euphoric or dysphoric. As a consequence, this paper also purposes to avoid the phoric analysis of the attitude of women who make a choice of donning *niqab* in their lives. I will not "analyse" whether

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<sup>8</sup> JARDIM, M. *O Corset na Moda Ocidental: um estudo sociosemiótico sobre a constrição do torso feminino do século XVIII ao XXI*. São Paulo: PUCSP, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> GREIMAS, A.J. *Op. cit.*, 2002.

<sup>10</sup> GREIMAS, A.J.; FONTANILLE, J. *Op. cit.*, 1991.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. ROBERT, N.B. *From My Sisters' Lips*. London: Bantam Books, 2005 and TARLO, E. *Visibly Muslim: Fashion, Politics, Faith*. Oxford: Berg, 2010.

veiling is good or bad for women, if it should be banned or encouraged, if it's a threat to the West or not. I will simply try to understand, by reading testimonials and donning *niqab* myself, how does it feel, what it makes feel, what it makes do. This effort, perhaps, may open the path into discussing how to rise beyond the phoric binarism, both when it comes to the veil and the theory itself.

An homage to Greimas in the occasion of his 100th birthday, the research is supported by the attempt of a method described in the *Structural Semantics*, following the three principles established for the analysis of a *corpus*: that it should be representative, exhaustive, and homogeneous<sup>12</sup>. Is it evident that this paper is still an attempt at an analysis, therefore the time to ensure the exhaustivity of my *corpus* is too short. But it is important, to defend its homogeneity, to disclose that not once I will attempt to discuss, in this particular work, the problem of faith. My interest is merely the action of a garment, which allows my own experience in *niqab* to count as a valid sample: it is not my objective to understand the effects of worshipping Allah but to understand how a garment associated with that particular worship *functions*.

The study was performed from the review of secondary data, collected by authors who already explored the feminine perspective on the veil<sup>13</sup>, with emphasis on the adoption of Islamic dress *as an option*. The *corpus* is formed by a substantial amount of converts, some of them from European origin, and the focus of those works and mine is the women living in the West. Therefore, in this paper, I will not address the problem of Islamic dress in Muslim majority countries. The second part of the research addresses my own experience wearing a Islamic garment, purchased in a shop in Whitechapel – one of the areas with the largest Muslim populations in London. I donned the *niqab* for short periods of time, all of them in London and during winter time, which already expose the need for extending this experiment to other seasons and, perhaps, other locations – such efforts and its results, however, will be addressed in future occasions.

## 1 The aesthetics of the veil by Muslim women

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<sup>12</sup> GREIMAS, A.J. *Sémantique Structurale. Recherche de Méthode*. Paris: PUF, 1986, p. 142-145

<sup>13</sup> ROBERT, N.B. *Op. cit.* 2005, especially p. 177-227; and TARLO, E. *Op. cit.* 2010.

Although since the 1970s the veil has been a common object of doctoral theses<sup>14</sup>, it was not until the 2000s that the perspective of women on the matter of veiling was taken into consideration. This shift in the methodological approach, from a masculine, and normally Western angle, with the purpose to analyse mainly whether the act of veiling is right or wrong; to a style of investigation featuring mainly feminine authors talking to Muslim women about the motives to donning *hijab* and *niqab*, and their personal perspectives changed completely the tone of the discussion of Islamic dress, marking the passage from literature which validates stereotypes to works trying to understand individuals. Icons from the later are certainly the works of Emma Tarlo<sup>15</sup> and Na'ima B. Robert<sup>16</sup>, in which broad investigations are performed, not only in Islamic dress but also a deeper understanding of what makes a woman fully embrace the Islam.

Naturally, because the veil is the most visible aspect of the Islam, what turns veiled Muslim women into the flag-bearers of the religion<sup>17</sup>, or simply a “badge of belonging”<sup>18</sup>, it is not a surprise that such works dedicate a generous space to discussing the topic of covering one's beauty. The testimonials of women reunited in *Visibly Muslim*<sup>19</sup> and *From my sisters' lips*<sup>20</sup> may shock the Western reader, more familiar with the stereotypes perpetuated by our medias, and for sensationalist literature about the Middle East and the Islam such as Mona Eltahawy's *Headscarves and Hymens*<sup>21</sup>: for the audience used to the images of identical women in *burqas* in Afghanistan, very common in the post-9/11 era<sup>22</sup>, or it's favoured variation in Europe, the facial close up with sad eyes full of tears behind the *niqab*'s slit, it may come as a surprise that some women do decide to embrace a religion and fully veil by their own reasoning, and not

<sup>14</sup> Cf AHMED, L. *A Quiet Revolution. The Veil's Resurgence, from the Middle East to America*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011 and also BROWN, M. D. “Multiple Meanings of the ‘Hijab’ in Contemporary France”. In: KEENAN, W. *Dressed to Impress. Looking the Part*. Oxford, New York: Berg, 2001. p. 105-121.

<sup>15</sup> TARLO, E. *Op. cit.* 2010

<sup>16</sup> ROBERT, N.B. *Op. cit.* 2005

<sup>17</sup> The topic is broadly discussed from a political perspective in AHMED, L. *Op. cit.* 2001, and from personal experiences in TARLO, E. *Op. cit.* 2010.

<sup>18</sup> ROBERT, N.B. *Op. cit.* 2005

<sup>19</sup> TARLO, E. *Op. cit.* 2010

<sup>20</sup> ROBERT, N.B. *Op. cit.* 2005

<sup>21</sup> ELTAHAWY, M. *Headscarves and Hymens: why the Middle East needs a sexual revolution*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2015.

<sup>22</sup> AHMED, L. *Op. cit.* 2011

by pressure or demand of a husband, a father, or any other “oppressor” that the Western mind likes to imagine. Leila Ahmed, in *A Quiet Revolution* is very emphatic when addressing the imperialist argument of “[...] bringing civilisation for backward peoples but also saving local women from the oppression and degradation imposed on them by native men”, or, as coined by Gayatri Spivak, “white men saving brown women from brown men”<sup>23</sup>.

So literature such as *Headscarves and Hymens*<sup>24</sup>, written by a Western woman for Western women, plays a similar part to the one of the Western medias, which is the one of generalising “the Islam” as one monolithic religion – although we are always talking about a religion of 1.6 billion people – with Muslim men and Muslim women all fitting perfectly into one stereotype, that matches the one described by Edward Said in “Orientalism”: the generic “Oriental”, which is always addressed as “the Other” in a binary opposition “us” (West) versus “them” (East)<sup>25</sup>. As a consequence, such uninformed, generic definitions and delimitations of a culture condemn “the Others” to forever recognise themselves not by who they are, but by the idea Westerns have of their cultures<sup>26</sup>.

But what idea is that? When it comes to the *Muslimwoman*<sup>27</sup>, she is the place in which the West recognises its opposite: as sexually frigid, dominated by men, inferior, deprived of opportunities and ambitions, and most importantly, destitute of agency. The *Muslimwoman* is the one who cannot leave the house unless she's fully covered, who cannot speak, who doesn't have sexual desires or opinions, who must stay home and look after the children, and walks two steps behind the husband.

“[...]it is not stereotypes, as an aspect of human thought and representation, that are wrong, but who controls and defines them, what interests they serve.”<sup>28</sup> For media theorist Richard Dyer, stereotypes are not “wrong” or “false”, as “[...] partial knowledge

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<sup>23</sup> Idem, p.23

<sup>24</sup> ELTAHAWY, M. *Op. cit.* 2015

<sup>25</sup> SAID, E. *Orientalism*. London: Penguin, 2003.

<sup>26</sup> BHABHA, H.K. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1993.

<sup>27</sup> The neologism *Muslimwoman* started to be seen lately on the internet, as a form to separate “Muslim women” and the idea Westerners have of what Muslim women are. A good place to understand the independent Muslim feminist voices emerging especially in the West is the Medium channel “Muslim Women Speak”, available at <https://medium.com/muslim-women-speak> [last access 18th February 2017].

<sup>28</sup> DYER, R. *The Matter of Images: essays on representations*. London: Routledge, 2002.

is not false knowledge, it is simply not absolute knowledge"<sup>29</sup>. So the *Muslimwoman* is not a lie, as she might exist in countries where tribal practices and misogynous laws get mixed up with “the Islam” or an “Islamic way of life”, especially when the information arrives in Europe and America. However, we must recognise that as we, Westerners, are so proud of our individuality and uniqueness, it is important to understand that “Muslims” are not a homogeneous block. It is equally important to remind that the Western stereotype of freedom and equality is as partial and incomplete as the *Muslimwoman*, especially today, as women march in the UK and the US for basic rights such as equal pay.

To better delimit the scope of this paper, it is time to reinforce I am addressing the group of women in the West, who chose to fully veil, donning *niqab* and *jilbab*<sup>30</sup> equally by their choice. It is imperative to pay attention to this particularity, as choice is precisely one of the most recurrent words in the testimonials forming the *corpus* of this paper. The generation of veiled women we see nowadays in London, but also in Egypt, Syria and Iran, are perhaps the first of their families to wear a veil<sup>31</sup>. For most of those families, no matter if they lived in Egypt or Iran or Pakistan or India, or in the United Kingdom, the United States or France, “true Islam” used to be unveiled Islam: since the colonial occupation of the Orient by France and Great Britain, the Westernisation of manners and dress became the vogue, and that included unveiling women, a process that took place in different countries throughout the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th<sup>32</sup>. The veil we see nowadays, thus, is not a “return to the origins”, but a new form of Islamic dress, with no reference to the veil once worn by Muslim women<sup>33</sup>.

Different authors explain the phenomenon from different perspectives. For some, such as Leila Ahmed, the “resurgence of the veil” is credited mainly to the backlash suffered by Muslims, in the Middle East and the West, after the political turmoil of the late 1990s and early 2000s, 9/11 being the main event which propelled

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<sup>29</sup> Idem, p. 12

<sup>30</sup> Islamic garment that covers the head and torso, and sometimes is full length, covering the legs and feet as well.

<sup>31</sup> AHMED, L. *Op. cit.* 2011

<sup>32</sup> Idem, and EL GUINDI, F. “Hijab”. In: STEELE, V. *Encyclopedia of Clothing and Fashion*, vol. 2. New York: Scribner/Thomson, 2005. p. 209-213.

<sup>33</sup> BAKER, P. L. “Middle East: History of Islamic Dress”. In: STEELE, V. *Encyclopedia of Clothing and Fashion*, vol 2. New York: Scribner/Thomson, 2005. p. 402-409.

the adoption of veiling in Western countries<sup>34</sup>. For the author, the veil appears less like the following of a vague qur'anic commandment<sup>35</sup>, and more as a way to visibly display a religious, ethnic, and national identity – a phenomenon Ahmed pairs with the displays of Black Power hair style in the 1970's United States<sup>36</sup>. It is then "Muslim pride", but also, again, a visible manifestation that can be read as anti-West, and everything that comes with it: the foreign policies, the exploitation of Middle Eastern countries, the suspiciousness of the Israeli issue, and ultimately, capitalism itself<sup>37</sup>.

Although present to a smaller extent in the feminine testimonials collected by Tarlo and Roberts, such values appear as secondary in the interviews with Muslim women living in the West. Although many of the interviewees voiced concerns relating their ethnical and national identities, the main selling point of veiling related to issues of another order: the problem of beauty. For a shocking number of women present in those books, among them, Na'ima B. Roberts herself – an English-born revert<sup>38</sup> – veiling relates less to following the Qur'an than it does to a rejection of the Western idea of empowerment through beauty, which is an object of polemic among Western feminists likewise. Those testimonials display another interesting isotopy in their discourse, which is the ambivalence of the concept of “freedom”. The adoption of the veil never appears as an easy choice, but as a deep, inner struggle between fully embracing the faith, and giving away their “freedom”<sup>39</sup>. In the same testimonials, however, the acceptance of the veil comes likewise as the discovery of a new freedom, in the sense of being freed from the constrains of beauty standards.

For Roberts, it was the testimonial of a Muslim woman in Egypt that sparked her interest in the Islam which culminated in her conversion: after asking the woman why would she cover herself, she received the answer "Because I want to be judged for what I say and what I do, not for what I look like."<sup>40</sup> For several other women, covering

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<sup>34</sup> AHMED, L. *Op. cit.* 2011.

<sup>35</sup> The most popular surahs of the Qur'an addressing feminine attire are 24:31 and 33:59.

<sup>36</sup> AHMED, L. *Op. cit.* 2001.

<sup>37</sup> It is important to disclose that most Islamist movements today possess a certain “socialist” tone, with the exception of Saudi Wahhabi Islam, which approves capitalism and exploitation.

<sup>38</sup> Some Muslims who embraced the faith later in their lives use the term "revert" instead of "convert" as part of the belief that we're all born Muslims; so embracing the faith is a return to the normal path, and not a change or transformation.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. AHMED, L. *Op. cit.* 2011; ROBERT, N.B. *Op. cit.* 2005; TARLO, E. *Op. cit.* 2010

<sup>40</sup> ROBERT, N.B. *Op. cit.* 2005

plays a similar role, from going fully incognito to avoiding unwanted male attention and, finally, for distancing oneself to the constraining standards of face, hair and body beauty established by the Western Fashion and Beauty Industry<sup>41</sup>. Since then, it is possible to map the contradictory meanings of “freedom” and “oppression” involved in such testimonials: *freedom* can be both to dress as one pleases, with revealing clothes, or to fully cover and not have to cope with the strict standards of beauty in the West; while *oppression* can be the submission to a highly regulated system of values such as the Islam, or the submission to an equally regulated order, our beauty and fashion systems. Therefore, through this simple observation, it is possible to see how freedom is not absolute euphoria, and oppression is not absolute dysphoria, and the opposite is equally false: we have to either understand such values according to the context of a given system (do we mean freedom according to Western society or the Islam, and vice versa?), or we must accept those values belong beyond the oppositions we know.

As the difficulty in approaching the veil from a binary perspective starts to become evident, we approach another important issue, the one of feminism versus Islam. Western feminists have been voicing ferociously against veiling, always under the stereotyping argument of “freeing those women” – a clear Western perspective placing the submission to religion as synonym of oppression against women. This approach follows the dominant idea that the Western system of values and beliefs is superior, and that “freedom” in the Western way is the only freedom. However, it is also inside Western feminism that we find voices such as Naomi Wolf, and her already classic *The Beauty Myth*. The epic about the "Beauty Backlash" – or the response of the Beauty Industry to the 1960's and 70's feminist revolution – discusses, topic after topic, the problems of the Beauty ideals in circulation in our time and age, and how those are used against women, to disunite them and stop their progress, through the spreading of unattainable standards of facial appearance, size, and youth<sup>42</sup>. After extensive analysis of the images of beauty and their role in the lives of women, Wolf coins the term "The Church of Beauty", with its rites and sacred writings (such as magazines), which

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<sup>41</sup> TARLO, E. *Op. cit.* 2010

<sup>42</sup> WOLF, N. *The Beauty Myth: how images of beauty are used against women*. London: Vintage: 1991.

constitute a "[...] belief system as powerful as that of any of the churches whose hold on them has so rapidly loosened."<sup>43</sup>

For Wolf, the Beauty Myth is the main perpetrator of competition among women, which discourages sorority and any other collaboration between women, which is a strong mark of feminine Western behaviour present in popular culture and literature. That is certainly the third isotopy found in the testimonials of veiled women: the feeling of sisterhood built by the veil, which promotes the recognition of women belonging to the same faith, allowing them to feel united and part of a whole. The feeling of community surpasses the religious spaces, such as the Mosque, and extends to a feeling of union with strangers – all sisters belonging to the same religion, who greet each other in the streets with *assalaamu alaikum*<sup>44</sup>.

Although the testimonials I analysed in this section were collected from women belonging to different ethnicities, nationalities and age groups, three aspects reappeared in their speech repeatedly: choice, freedom, and the problem of beauty. This first section of the text allowed the better understanding of the reasons beyond the faith which lead Muslim women to adopt the veil, opening the path to further discuss the idea of the veil afar the role of object, but to understand its role of subject of making and how its action supports the achievement of the values women aspire when turning to this practice.

## 2 The esthesis of the veil in praxis

Until now, the effort of this research consisted in comparing testimonials and secondary resources relating to the use of veil, which leads to another problem of methodological nature. Is it possible to understand the action of an actant over other subjects by merely "hearing" about it? Surely the analysis of testimonials is a useful tool when comparing and interposing different discourses – the media discourse versus the individual, perhaps? However, such approach is not the goal

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<sup>43</sup> Idem, p. 86

<sup>44</sup> The arabic greeting means "Peace be upon you", to be replied with *waalaikumssalam*, meaning "And unto you [be] peace".

of this study. Rather than understanding the why women veil, I am concerned with what the veil makes one *feel*.

It became clearer to me that the only way to understand the veil from the point of view I wished to address was to experience it myself. This approach may seem almost experimental, even when compared to Francesco Marsciani's Ethno-semiotics<sup>45</sup>: is it possible for me, a white, Westerner, atheist woman, to *really* understand the feeling of the *niqab* without converting to Islam first? For such reasons, I decided to leave the problem of faith outside the scope of this research. It is not about the devotion to Allah or to the “Church of Beauty”, as coined by Naomi Wolf<sup>46</sup>, but about what a garment can make do a subject.

With such delimitations in mind, I went back to my old London Borough, to walk around the streets of Whitechapel and chose myself a proper covering. After walking up and down Whitechapel Road, in Tower Hamlets, a black *abaya*<sup>47</sup> picked me. It was made of a heavy and dense synthetic fabric, with some application of fake crystals in the neckline, sleeves, and the central front. The *abaya* came with a light headscarf, also in black, with applications of fake yellow crystals in one of the extremities, which I completed with a black *niqab*, the separate face piece, also decorated with fake crystals.

Figure 1 – 30th January 2017 selfie



Selfie wearing a complete Islamic garment formed of *abaya* (the dress), *hijab* (the headscarf) and *niqab* (the facial veil) before leaving fully covered for the first time.

Photo taken with my mobile phone, 2017, London, UK.

The act of purchase was not particularly easy. Before going to Whitechapel, I tried to buy a garment online, probably out of fear to disrespect the beliefs of others. But I also feared to look like a white girl in a costume, which made me decide for a purchase on a shop. I took my garment home, ironed it carefully and tried it, without the intention of leaving the house, as it was already evening when I arrived. I tied my hair up and my fringe back, wore the *abaya* first, then started placing the headscarf in the way I had seen girls doing on youtube videos, using the same cloth to make several turns around the head, covering half my forehead, ears, neck just below the chin, and all my hair, and finally pinning it in one of the temples. Then the *niqab* is placed over it, fastened in the back of the head with velcro, covering the remaining forehead and the entire face, falling over the neck and chest, leaving only a small slit around the eyes.

Before seeing "myself", some impressions, of the tactile order, were already evident. The sounds of my flat were slightly filtered through the many layers of fabric over my ears, and there was a persistent pressure around the eyes. The *niqab* got tangled with my long lashes when I blinked, so I had to cut the small string meant to keep the slit closed. That improved the tangling, but the presence of the *niqab* around the eyes is something always present. I finally raised my eyes to the mirror to stare at that shocking sight: I was completely erased, turned from Marilia to a gaze framed in black. That made me aware of the power of a gaze: the potency of my eyes was amplified to an unimaginable level, which immediately made me look down.

In the Qur'an, women are urged to "lower their gaze"<sup>48</sup>, so that they can turn their eyes away from temptations or anything that is *haram*<sup>49</sup>. The *niqab*, with

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<sup>48</sup> See surah 24:31 "And tell believing women that they should lower their eyes [...]", which is interpreted as looking away from anything that is not correct. ABDEL HALEEM, M.A.S. *The Qur'an. A New Translation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

the emphasis in the eye and the power it attributes to it, not only assists, but almost forces the eyes to the ground. The second sensation I observed was the suppression of my peripheral sight: with only a slit open in the garment, the field of vision is dramatically reduced, and to move around my flat proved to be a tough task. I had to look down to find my way without bumping into furniture and corners and, at the same time, the flowing garment made my figure bigger in space than it normally would be, so that I had to make myself twice more careful when in motion – my pessimistic mind already worrying about crossing the roads...

Finally, after a few minutes inside veils, I started becoming aware of the temperature, and the difficulty of breathing through the synthetic fabric of the face veil. The strength of those feelings and sensations helped me understand parts of the testimonials which identified the *niqab* as an act of profound worship: the covering of the face is *not* clearly commanded in the Qur'an; rather, the sacred book advises modesty, which was historically and geographically interpreted differently<sup>50</sup>.

When experienced over my skin, the *niqab* make me think about the Christian idea of "sacrifice" likewise, something done to place oneself closer to God, and the general belief of our society that great accomplishments come through suffering – or the popular saying "no pain, no gain." I also thought, ironically, about claustrophobic beauty treatments, such as facial masks, or constraining outfits to shape one's figure, thermic garments to help to lose weight, and so on. Through veiling myself for 15 minutes only, and inside my house, I understood that compulsory suffering and devotion – it doesn't matter to which God or which Church – is something that unites women from all nationalities, creeds and colours.

The day after, a Monday, I decided to finally venture myself outside. To complete the outfit, as the *abaya* is supposed to be an outer garment, I wore a black turtleneck with long sleeves, tights and leggings, flat black shoes, and a winter jacket on the top of it – the temperature was 4°C, with 92% humidity. As I

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<sup>49</sup> Forbidden or unlawful, as opposed to *halal*, which is lawful.

<sup>50</sup> BAKER, P.L. *Op. cit.* 2005

was tying my headscarf, I looked at my face all framed in black and decided to wear some eyeliner this time, as the beautiful Muslim women I see all the time in London<sup>51</sup>. When I placed the *niqab*, my painted eyes had a completely different feel as they did the night before: they were still a super-gaze, but now there was an aura of mystery and seduction in my person that was new to me, exotic, even.

Completely taken and frozen by fear – not a month before this experiment, a white man stabbed a Muslim man in a train in Forest Hill, a couple of stations from where I live<sup>52</sup> – I decided to leave. The first thing I see is two men in the building's door, and that causes me to run back into my flat. I still didn't understand if that was due to an awareness of my fragile condition, or fear of suffering race/religion oriented violence in my very residence, or fear of being recognised. Nonetheless, I waited some minutes inside, and then convinced myself to go out again. Initially, I committed myself to a small journey to the store in Selhurst, an 18 minute, down the hill walk from my place, which could be backed by the bus 468 on my way back. But as soon as I started to walk, I already knew I would not be capable of doing it, so I just walked around my neighbourhood, trying to keep a steady pace and avoiding the use of my “super-gaze”.

As I walked, the fear dissolved bit by bit, and I realised I was wearing an invisibility cape. I passed by road workers, and they didn't even notice. Cars, bikes, motorcycles, and other pedestrians too passed by me without looking, not even trying-too-hard-not-to-look. Although *niqabs* are common in London, they are far from not inspiring curiosity or attracting the eyes of those who are outside of it. From within, there was an inherent fear – not just of suffering an attack or listening to insults, but from being hit by a car, as my sense of sight and hearing were dramatically reduced. After sometime of walking, I decided to resume my way back home taking a different route, as I was starting to feel tired. Although I

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<sup>51</sup> The urban legend of the Muslim who's a stunning beauty under the niqab, broadly explored in Michel Houellebecq's *Soumission*, is not at all false. In the testimonials analysed in this paper, women did voice the habit of pampering themselves for their husbands. The veil, thus, serves to conceal this beauty from strangers, safeguarding it for the ones who are *halal*, the husband and the immediate family.

<sup>52</sup> RAWLINSON, K. Man shouted 'I am going to kill a Muslim', says wife of Forest Hill victim. *The guardian*. London, 15th December 2016 20.36 GMT available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/dec/15/man-shouted-i-am-going-to-kill-a-muslim-says-wife-of-forest-hill-victim> [last access: 18th February 2017]

am an exemplary walker, the veil was harming my ability to breathe and, regardless of the winter temperatures, my head and face felt incredibly warm, which made me constantly feel on the edge of fainting, especially when walking up the hill.

Back to the house, I was anxious to change back into my yoga pants and a jumper. Still with my hair tied up and my eyeliner, I went out again, to the store, back to my Western presentation of self. And that change was the moment of the true insight. Living in London after living in São Paulo my entire life, I thought unwanted male attention didn't exist in Britain, because it was substantially smaller than it is in South America or even in Continental Europe. However, in this brief walk towards Crystal Palace station, I was suddenly too aware of my looks, and how people stared at me, at my face and my body. After 45 minutes walking in invisibility, the following 45 minutes in which I walked unveiled made me constantly wonder why people would look at me so much.

My non-religious veiling made me think of an example from literature, David Foster Wallace's Joelle van Dyne from *Infinite Jest*. A drug addict attempting at recovery through participating in several support groups, Joelle wears a *niqab* due to her affiliation to the "Union of the Hideously and Improbably Deformed" (U.H.I.D.). In the plot, the U.H.I.D. use of the veil appears as serving the purpose to hide the "Hideous, Improbable Deformity", but mainly, as a form of displaying belonging and sisterhood between all U.H.I.D. members. Joelle, however, is not physically deformed – at least not in the sense we normally understand physical deformity. As a matter of fact, previously in the narrative, Joelle is referred to as "PGOAT" – "Prettiest Girl of All Time". When confronted about what kind of deformity she was hiding under her veil, Joelle surprises us with the answer:

"I'm perfect. [...] I am so beautiful I am deformed. I am deformed with beauty."<sup>53</sup>

Although belonging to the realm of fiction, Joelle van Dyne is probably the figure who better embraces the dilemma of the veil in the West, and equally, our

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<sup>53</sup> WALLACE, D. F. *Infinite Jest*. London: Abacus, 1997.

persistence in state that the values put in circulation by face veiling cannot be understood within the binary oppositions we know. This ambiguity, however, cannot be apprehended in the de-sematisation of the daily life. On the contrary: as theorised by Greimas, it is in the fractures that such meanings can be experienced<sup>54</sup>, in this particular case, in between veiling and not veiling.

Nevertheless, it is possible to predict my experiment allowed me to experience not one, but two fractures: from not veiling to veiling, in which I felt the oppression of fear – which can be separated in fears from different orders, from personal anxieties about my looks to the broader social fear that is present in the lives of most Muslims living away from home – combined with the pleasure to not being looked at. And from veiling back to not veiling, in which I was back to the physical freedom, but felt the oppression of the gaze of the others, and the fear of being apprehended solely by my appearance.

Both emotions share the same fundamental level when it comes to the problem of phoria: they were not purely or completely euphoric or dysphoric, and definitely not aphoric, but belonged to the same place Greimas found in the fractures, and discussed in the Semiotics of Passions: it is perhaps a place anterior to the phoric binarisms, which also sends the subject of such emotions back to a state of prototypical configuration, an almost-subject, which is, as a matter of fact, an object of the action of the aesthetic object which becomes, on its turn, subject of making<sup>55</sup>.

If both emotions sent me back to the objectal state – in one case, object of the action of the *niqab* over my body, forcing me to look down and deciding how much I could see and feel from the outer world, how much I could breathe, how fast I could walk, and so on; and in the other case, object of the gaze of others, and ultimately, object of my own beauty – this small, yet powerful experiment opened up the path to ask a difficult question: is it then possible to affirm that the nature of clothes, no matter the cultural system from which they are extracted, will always be the one of objectifying women? And even further: is it inherent to the feminine

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<sup>54</sup> GREIMAS, A.J. *Op. cit.* 2002

<sup>55</sup> GREIMAS, A.J.; FONTANILLE, J. *Op. cit.* 1991

condition to always play the role of object, in the semiotical relations established in the social discourses?

## Conclusion

This was not the first occasion in which I had the opportunity to study the role of subject performed by clothes: my 2014 work *The Corset in Western Fashion*<sup>56</sup> explored a similar phenomenon through the careful study of five centuries of feminine shapewear, exploring the role of sartorial devices in a completely different system of values. This previous study showed that not only the performance of the corset attributes a role of object to the feminine body, but the silhouettes constructed in Western fashion perpetuate this idea, by always emphasizing the parts of the body considered sexual, such as the waist, the breasts, and the hips. In that sense, Joelle van Dyne's statement, of being "deformed by beauty", can be read in a quite literal way: when we de-form our bodies through the use of shapewear or exercise or even plastic surgery to attain an ideal considered beautiful, aren't we all becoming deformed by beauty?

Looking back at this work helps us to create an interesting parallel which allows us to unite sartorial devices from different cultural and social systems, to conclude that, although we like to "blame" the veil and Islamic culture for an oppression and objectification of their women, we should not forget that our social and cultural system possesses similar mechanisms of sexualising and objectifying the body. In other words: the role of the clothes as agents that make do the body, especially the feminine one, are somehow universal and can be mapped in many different cultures, religions and societies.

Likewise, the problem of beauty and its role in the feminine narrative will be very similar in different cultural systems. Although ideas of beauty may vary – not only through the centuries, as our work about the corset revealed<sup>57</sup>, but from one ethnicity to the other, from one country to the other, and so forth – the role

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<sup>56</sup> JARDIM, M. *Op. cit.* 2014

<sup>57</sup> Idem

and fundamental value of beauty remain more or less unchanged. It is possible, thus, to dare to affirm that it doesn't matter if in one system the beauty should be completely revealed, and in the other completely concealed, beauty is equally important for men and women of both systems. To cover one's beauty completely is an equal obsession with beauty.

Taking beauty, then, as a value being analysed, it is possible to understand that faith, religion and worship are not the only reasons for a woman to veil. That becomes evident among new converts and women in transit from their home countries to the West: it is the West that inspires them to veil, to cover up, marking their denial of the system in place, but also purposing to "protect" themselves against such system. The most meaningful event of such narrative path, thus, is not the veiled day by day, which is as de-semantised as the unveiled day by day. It is the moment of deciding to veil and the first experiences, as well as the possibility of being unveiled – as it is happening with women in France on a constant basis those days – that carries the strongest semantic charge. It is the expectation of the unexpected<sup>58</sup>, the introduction of fractures in the daily life that reconstruct the meaning of the garments, reminding us of what they make do and how they act over us. In my personal experience with the *niqab*, this insight didn't come from being veiled, but from the return to unveiling and being seen by others. The *niqab* was the agent which re-semantised my daily experience with the gaze of others, beauty, and walking uncovered.

As I prepare to end this text, there is one last statement worth being made. Until now, I opted for using the theory as it is written, resorting to the idea of es-thesis to approach the emotions and aesthetic experiences of clothes in the daily life, in a Western European context. It is important to remark, however, that Greimas' invite to look at things beyond the binary categories we know can also be read in a more comprehensive manner. To not just break with the binarism of euphoria and dysphoria by accepting that the aesthetic emotion is a surplus of meaning<sup>59</sup>, but a challenge to understand such issues beyond the categories we know,

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<sup>58</sup> GREIMAS, A.J. *Op. cit.* 2002

<sup>59</sup> GREIMAS, A.J.; FONTANILLE, J. *Op. cit.* 1991

which includes, perhaps, abandoning the dichotomy “Freedom versus Oppression”, and even “West versus East”. After all, aren’t those categories from an Orientalising nature, one that assumes the values cultivated in a Western environment are somehow superior to any other? Isn’t it time to step out of stereotypical assumptions, to finally find a new form of understanding phenomena, from a Fashion perspective or not, opening up to the surplus of significance we’ve been missing all along?

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