

HUMILITY AND IDENTITY: FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF THE *HIJAB* PRESENCE IN LONDON

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Abstract: *In global cities, where the flow of immigrations and migrations increases year after year, fashion is possibly the first place where the marks of hybridisation and miscegenation can be apprehended. In the given context, and resorting to the scope of Socio-semiotics, this paper purposes a first regard of the matter of "modest wear" in London and other European capitals, where the use of the hijab - the head veiling worn by some Muslim women - awakens mixed feelings that vary from relative acceptance to the banning, by law, of such dress codes. All those manners of "dealing" with the hijab, though, fail to consider it, simply and yet not evidently, as a manifestation of fashion and personal style, based not exclusively on religion, but on individual choice likewise. That will be the purpose of this work: an attempt to address the hijab through the lenses of feminine identity, rather than religious convention.*

Keywords: *Muslim fashion; modest wear; feminine identity; niqab; hijab; Socio-semiotics.*

1. Introduction

When the word "Muslim" comes to one's mind, it's not difficult to imagine that the correspondent image representation of it will be a veiled woman. Perhaps consequence of the liberationist waves that started to rise after the 9/11 events, but that existed since the 19th-century colonialist movements, when the entire Western world seemed concerned about "freeing Middle-Eastern women" from their *burqas*, the exhaustive exposition of the image of women in veils was enough, over the last 15 years, to establish the role of the *niqab* as a sort of metonymic representative of the Middle Eastern world, and especially of the Islamic religion.

It was not, though, until I was 29 years old that I saw my first veiled woman: it was in London, in 2014, as I left my first English train, exiting at Edgware Road Station, in the West End. The profusion of women in *hijab* and *niqab* in that city, though, was not the main surprise: from the newspaper articles I had read, I was well aware of the large Muslim population in the UK, both from Asian, African, and Middle Eastern Origin, some of them immigrants arising from the conflicts in the Middle-East, but also an entire generation of British-born Muslims that have always lived here, though without abandoning the allegedly Muslim dress code. What caused me to fall into great and grave thought, however, was the fact that those women didn't seem to represent at all the narratives of oppression and sexism the media insistently displayed, when addressing the subject of "Muslim Women". To my eyes, the very first veiled women I saw didn't seem humble, oppressed, or victimised: they appeared to me, on the contrary, as dressy, elegant, glamorous... beautiful.

As I permanently moved my residence to London by the end of the same year, my life in the East End - first in Stratford, then in the Isle of Dogs, areas with a dense concentration of "Muslim communities" - comprised a daily, constant coexistence with veiled women. Some Middle Eastern looking, speaking languages still incomprehensible to me, but some clearly British born, and some even European converts, what unites them all is the sense of fashion, despite the modesty preached by their religion: their wonderfully draped and folded veils, always decorated, sometimes printed and colourful, sometimes black and embroidered, always framing their beautiful faces carefully painted (even the *niqab* wearers always have their eyes densely outlined), accessorised with glasses, jewellery, and bags.

Many explain such dress code, the veiling of the hair, head, neck and, sometimes, the face, as *part of their religion*, something commanded by the Qur'an. This simplistic justification seems enough in most cases, to both explain the reasons for the veil, and to immediately classify those

women as belonging to some sort of *fundamentalist/terrorist* background: it is assumed that they are *forced* into covering their heads like that, which places them in the category of radicals, backward, oppressed women. Which means one thing, and one thing alone: this lifestyle, represented mainly by the veil, doesn't belong *here*; more than that: it's not just unfamiliar, but a *threat* to the worshiped Western-European way of life, that preaches *freedom* among all things. And that is a threat that must be fought, as Saint-Just's timeless quote goes: "there's no freedom for the enemies of freedom."

Tracking the origins of such conceptions is not the objective of this paper - although we can imagine that the efforts of the media in selling such images of the Islamic religion are paying off, after almost twenty years hitting the same notes. Nonetheless, I will not have as my main concern the production of any statement pro or con the head or face veiling. Nor will I try to navigate the stormy waters of the debate pro or con religion in society. The purpose here is to expose that such judgements are not only uninformed assumptions that purpose to take the less than 2% of radicals as the whole of the Islamic World and Religion but mostly, they leave no room to handle the exceptional diversity of "Muslim dress code" that one can apprehend in a city like London.

I will, thus, prioritise the discussing of this topic from authors, such as Emma Tarlo and Shabana Ebrahem, who prefer to understand the *hijab* and *niqab* "phenomenon" as a manifestation of fashion, and not exclusively as a *religious garment*. And fashion is identity: the manner one chooses to dress, that is capable of revealing "who I am," my appearance to the world. This subtle, but essential transfer of scope, though, is not enough to eliminate all the prejudice and fear of certain concepts that the *hijab* and the *niqab* are still capable of evoking - some of those values, according to researcher and professor Leila Ahmed, invested in the object by Western culture, more than by the Qu'ran or the Islamic religion themselves (Ahmed, 2011). In the West, the veil is the garment of the Other - with the capital O, to evoke the ideas of Jacques Lacan (*passim*) - *par excellence*, and an undesirable other, even if a UK or EU citizen. The veil is perceived almost as a synonym of oppression, radicalism, sexism, and Oriental male cruelty, not to mention the commonplace lack of agency attributed to Muslim women; but also, nowadays, the mark of the refugee and the terrorist, the ones that had to run away from totalitarian societies, but also a manifestation of those societies and the danger they represent, as a source of conflict and violence, and in their reluctance to accept the *Western secular values*.

Unquestionably a mark of personal identity, more than the identity of a nation or religion, the *hijab* and the *niqab* are also a flag that signals a person as *the Other*, the *non-us*. But if transposed to its roots, the original, pre-Islamic dress code from countries like Saudi Arabia, Iraq or Syria, the *hijab* and *niqab* worn in London is also a sign of Otherness. The *hijab* and *niqab* wearers in the West, thus, are doomed to eternal alterity: their identity is neither the one of their place of origin, or their parent's place of origin; nor the one in the European cities where they chose to live.

Bringing the subject to the light of Socio-semiotics, our purpose is to conduct a brief analysis of those first, and somehow informal and exploratory observations, transposing the limits of pro or con the use of the *hijab*, or the simplistic addressing of the topic as a *religious matter*. This paper purposes to discuss the *hijab* and the *niqab* in London from the point of view of feminine identity: to what extent the almost emotional attachment to the use of the *hijab*, especially in environments where its use is not encouraged (or even restricted, banned), is connected to the construction of a personal, feminine identity, rather than a national or religious one?

This first approach is a perhaps shy attempt to cast a unique regard to such a complex problem of an identity that is essentially alterity, hoping to begin a discussion in which Muslim women will finally be perceived as subjects of volition (Greimas, 1983), or, to use the trending word, subjects invested with *agency*. Despite the will of the men or God, throughout this paper, the wearing of a *hijab* will be addressed as a religious, perhaps, but equally personal and, why not, political *choice*.

2. Challenging definitions: the *Hijab* and The Qur'an

hijab ► **noun** a head covering worn in public by some Muslim women. the religious code which governs the wearing of such clothing. Origin from Persian, from Arabic *hajaba* 'to veil'. (Stevenson, 2010)

HIDJAB ► n.m. - 1989; *hijab* 1984 - mot arabe, de *hajaba*, "cacher, voiler". Voile qui couvre les cheveux, les oreilles et le cou, porté par de nombreuses musulmanes. - On écrit aussi *hijab*.¹ (Robert, 2015)

Though acknowledgedly a synonym of "veil," *hijab* is defined, since the dictionaries, as a *religious garment*. Both in English and French - the languages of the two European Countries with the strongest Muslim presence today - the meaning of *hijab* is attached to the word *Muslim* [*Musulmane*].

In French, the definition is limited to the function of the object - to cover the hair, ears and neck - while, in English, a broader understanding is displayed, by including in the definition that *hijab* can also be the religious code that requires the wearing of a veil. From this simple difference between two definitions, we can extract a larger significance, relating to the degree of acceptance of the garment in England and France: while in the UK, more specifically in London, the veiled women seem to blend more with the Westerns, in France the *niqab* was banned in public spaces, and it is harder to see women wearing a *hijab* in the central areas of Paris. The degree of elaboration of the definitions can be read as a higher (UK) or lower (France) concern about the understanding of the traditions and beliefs of *the Other*.

The persistence of the attachment between *hijab* and the Islam took me to search straight in the source, The Qur'an, for the particular parts concerning the wearing of the veil. In the sacred book, there are four rules of women's dress code (Abdel Haleem, 2001; Ali, 2001), and surprisingly or not, none of them clearly states that a veil must be worn to cover the hair, ears and neck. The four rules are: to cover the intimate parts ("your nakedness") (7:26); to cover the bosom (or the cleavage) (24:31); not to reveal the beauty (24:31); and to lengthen the garment (33:59) (Abdel Haleem, 2011; Ali, 2001).

It goes without saying that those rules leave more room for interpretation than absolute certainties - one of the many possible explanations for the multifarious degrees of veiling one can observe among Muslim women, from no veiling at all to the *burqa* - the black garment that covers the body completely, head, face, and even the eyes, normally identified with the dressing tradition in Afghanistan.

In the website *True Islam* - a project dedicated to expose extremism by seeking information in the original versions of the Qur'an - it is brought to our attention that the *surahs* 24:31 and 33:59 are the ones normally used to justify the feminine veiling as a Quranic commandment, and thus, the ones who are more subject to corruption and manipulation. The website's interpretation of both *surahs* focuses on the absence of a clear statement that commands women to cover their heads with a veil, or simply the mere mention of the words *hair*, *ears*, and *face*. For the authors - though no names are cited, throughout the text it is clear that it was written by believers - the vagueness of God's word should be taken as God understanding that women should decide for themselves what is acceptable to reveal (when it comes to 24:31), and that God knew believers would live in different places and communities, making it difficult to state an absolute standard of length to the garments (addressing 33:59)².

In my research, resorting only to translations of the Qur'an to English, I came to realise it's hard to make different variations of the text agree. I will expose two versions of each of the *surahs*, and rather than accepting common sense or the ideas exposed at *True Islam*, I will conduct my own analysis of the text:

And tell believing women that they should lower their eyes, guard their private parts, and not display their charms beyond what [it is acceptable] to reveal; they should draw their coverings over their necklines and not reveal their charms except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' fathers, their sons, their husband's sons, their brothers, their brothers' sons, their sisters' sons, their womenfolk, their slaves, such men as attend them who have no desire, or children who are not yet aware of women's nakedness; they should not stamp their feet so as to

¹ "Arabic word, from *hajaba*, "to hide, to veil". Veil that covers the hair, the ears, and the neck, worn by numerous Muslim [females]. Also written *hijab*." [our translation]

² <http://www.quran-islam.org/> last access in 21 December 2015.

draw attention to any hidden charms. Believers, all of you, turn to God so that you may prosper. (24:31 Abdel Haleem, 2011, p.222)

And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (but ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' [sic] father, their sons, their husband's sons, their brothers or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women, or the slaves whom their right hands possess, or male servants free of physical needs, or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex; and that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments. And O you Believers! you turn all together toward Allah, that you may attain Bliss. (24:31 Ali, 2001)

Prophet, tell your wives, your daughters, and women believers to make their outer garments hang low over them so as to be recognized and not insulted: God is most forgiving, most merciful. (33:59 Abdel Haleem, 2011, p.271)

O Prophet! Tell your wives and daughters, and the believing women, that they should cast their outer garments over their persons (when abroad): that is most convenient, that they should be known (as such) and not molested. And Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful. (33:59 Ali, 2001)

As acknowledged at *True Islam*, none of the two *surahs*, consulted in two different translations, mentions the words *hair*, *ears* and *face*, but rather vague words that may, or may not be interpreted as covering the head and the face: *charms*, *beauty*, *person* - this is probably the one that allows the most to justify the use of the *niqab* or the *burqa*. It is also surprising, in 24:31, the amount of exceptions to the rule of dress code, clearly stating that all the family circle - the parents, brothers, in laws, sons and daughters, nephews and nieces - and all the people in a woman's service - the *womenfolk*, the *slaves* (men included) - are allowed to see a woman outside her dress code. It is revealed, thus, that the dress code, whatever it is (not clear to be comprehended taking into account those two translations), is intended to protect women from strangers (i.e. outsiders from the family circle and those at their service, on 24:31) and non-believers (33:59).

But it starts to come closer to the topic we are willing to discuss in this paper - the Alterity as the main trait of an Identity - when it comes to 33:59, and the statement that believers should use their garments to be recognised as such (believers) and not molested/insulted. Though with subtle differences in the translation - in Abdel Haleem the chosen word is *recognised*, while in Ali is *known* - both translations agree that the function of a garment can be, as well as the one of an adornment or coverage, to *signal difference* - or, in the words of Landowski, to *make sign* of something (Landowski, 2004), in that case, their *faith*. This would agree with Ahmed's statement that the *hijab* and *niqab* wearers make themselves the most visible Muslims (Ahmed, 2011), which is discussed, in the documentary *Islam in Women* (2015), as the responsibility that comes with wearing a *hijab*, leading many women to postpone that step throughout their religious path.

This brief reflection allows us to return to the problem in analysis, the one of the wearing of the *hijab*, *niqab* and *burqa* in Western cities. Rather than accepting that the wearing of a veil is mere following a code (not clearly) commanded by the Qur'an, I will prefer to understand the *hijab* as a *sign* of something: despite any religious meaning the garment may contain, the *hijab* is the *expression of an identity*, which is partially related to the political statement of a *faith*.

Ahmed (2011), Ebrahim (2015), and Tarlo (2010) agree that the "resurgence" of the veil has a lot to do with the backlash against Muslims and the Islam after the events of 9/11: nowadays, the number of women in *hijab* and *niqab* is growing - and not diminishing, as it would be expected in a scenario of intense migration to the West, where no fundamentalist state has the jurisdiction to impose restrictive dress codes - as well as the number of converts to the Islam, even among European women. Thereof, the choice to wear a *hijab* appears as the will to signal something more than the religion, but the belonging to a minority and, as much as the Afro/Black Power movement in the 1970's, the *hijab* is also a form of activism and pride (Ahmed, 2011). For

Ebrahem, the need of reaffirming a Muslim identity is essential in a scenario where hostility and prejudice against any person from Middle Eastern origins are abundant (Ebrahem, 2015): the *hijab* shifts, thus, from *oppression* to *protest against oppression* - not the one inflicted by "brown men against brown women" (Ahmed, 2011), but the one inflicted by the West against everything that contradicts their idea of what freedom should look like. To choose to follow a dress code viewed as radical and backward, when women are being judged and even antagonised by doing so, is the strongest manifestation of a desire to maintain one's identity, despite all the opposition such action may arouse.



Figure 1: Amur V Ruma is a famous USA based Bangladeshi blogger that constantly posts photos displaying her looks of the day, always wearing the *hijab* in an extremely fashionable manner, combining the veil with Western outfits. In this image, holding a poster that says "Covered in Freedom", Amur V Ruma repeats the gesture of many Muslim women, trying to expose to the West that what they call "modest wear" is not a synonym of oppression or repression of women, but a matter of freedom of choice of the own appearance. Source: <http://amurvruma.tumblr.com> (last access in 21 December 2015).

That activist and undoubtedly political persistence manifests, in London, in several different ways. From the extreme humility - the one-piece black *niqab* - to high fashion - the so-called *Mipsterz*, a über-chic sub-culture of Muslim fashionistas (Ebrahem, 2015) - the veil's presence in London is marked by the blend. Throughout all the degrees of piety and humility, the message stays the same: not only the opposition to what is sexism and oppression according to *their* culture and ideals - the hyper exposure of women to the delight of men's gaze - but the constant, yet silent (re)affirmation of the right to be free to wear what one wants.

Such freedom, however, contradicts the *surah* 24:31 from time to time. The covering of the hair is justified as a means to veil the beauty, to hide the charms. And yet, the complexity of the veils, the accessories, the colours and prints, the extremely chic designer goods are, frequently, artifices that do, indeed, arouse admiration. In a fashion scene like the Londoner one, the religious meaning of the *hijab* is almost completely diluted, and even banalised - to mention the most evident, and even funny example, some widespread supermarket and pharmacy chains

provide *hijabs* printed with the company's logo, as part of their "modest uniform", shifting the veil's meaning from expression of modesty to a canvas where brands can be displayed.

The other downside of modest wear in Western cities lies, again, in a cultural meaning shift. If, for Muslim men, the *hijab* is associated with modesty, the same may not be true to a Western man, that may see in the veil the erotic, the fetish of the different and exotic, as extensively explored by controversial French author Michel Houellebecq (2005, 2015). Again, it is important to recall Ahmed's claims that a lot of the meaning invested in the *hijab* is done so by Western cultures (2011), which kidnapped this visibility of a faith as a metonymic manifestation of "Islam": for Western eyes, a modest wearer may be perceived as submissive and bent to male's desire, which is certainly appealing to a still extremely sexist society (our society, in that case), that regards feminism as an excess of liberties that ruined the ideal relation between male and female.

From meanings of sexism and oppression, to sign of resistance and opposition to Western objectification of women, the *hijab* becomes more and more distant of the media narratives we are normally exposed to. When combined with the enigmatic messages in the Qur'an, it gets more evident that, when it comes to veiling, the commandments of the Prophet are the least of the problems. Fashion and personal Identity, on the other hand, appear more and more like a decisive factor in the adoption of *modest wear* when living in cities away from home.

3. Identity vs. Alterity, Identity-Alterity?

In his work *Presences de l'autre*, Eric Landowski elaborates the Identity vs. Alterity opposition - an old problem of Standard Semiotics (Greimas & Courtés, 2012) - by exploring the possible forms of processing *the otherness of the other* in relation to the identity of a *we* (Landowski, 1997). For the author, the principle of Identity lies in the resemblance, the similarities that form the *I plus we*, while Alterity is the essence of what makes the other other, and thus, not part of the *we* (Landowski, 1997). On a similar fashion, François Jullien, in *The L'être au vivre*, reminds us that the origin of the word *identity* remits to *idem* and *entity* - or *same plus existence* - which creates the feeling of homogeneity and stability, from where notions such as resistance to change, and a "pure" European culture derive (Jullien, 2015). Those are useful notions, when considering the problem of the *hijab* regarded through the eyes of the West: the vision of covered women is a clear statement of *Otherness*, that flags more than a cultural (or national) identity that is distant from ours, but an extremely undesirable alterity, that brings in itself so many meanings of feminine oppression, religious fundamentalism, backwardness. For some, the idea of a "Muslim invasion" of Western Europe - another topic explored by Houellebecq's literature (2015) - appears as a true threat to an *European identity*, an argument that serves the interests of conservative citizens that are explicitly anti-immigration, and claim for the tightening of the borders and harsher anti-refugee politics all over Europe.

Though impossible to argue that the *hijab* produces - and perhaps will never cease to produce - the effect of *Otherness* in the West, it is useful to ask, regarding the question from another angle, if the veils we observe in the streets of London are capable of producing an effect of *sameness* in the country of geographical or cultural origin of the same women. It doesn't take extensive research to understand that this is also not true: a Muslim Londoner, if landed in Saudi Arabia or Syria, will produce the same effect of otherness in their "own" culture. It is so because sameness with a remote location, nationality, or culture, is hard, if not impossible to produce, regardless the efforts employed, and the resources available to accomplish such task.

Despite the endeavour of more rigid Muslims to wear "exactly" as they are supposed - East London is rich environment to explore "Muslim Fashion" shops, able to fit any purchase power, as well as all degrees of modesty - the very fact of being in another locality makes it impossible for one to stay the same. Even if one can find *hijabs*, *niqabs*, and other items of apparel imported from their home countries, the accomplishment of the syntagmatic chain that is *the look* is conditioned to other products: shoes, socks, gloves, handbags or backpacks. Not to mention that, in the UK specifically, the weather forces a dramatic change of attire, no matter if you're Middle-Eastern, Asian, African, American or European: the constant rain invites fabrics such as nylon to our wardrobes; the windy and humid fall obliges the wearing of raincoats and jackets made of felt, faux, leather; in the winter, boots and tights are mandatory.

The combination of strict Muslim garments - that can be identified with choices governed both by volition, by the desire of wearing in a particular manner; or by prescription, as in following a code determined by religion, or the will of the family and friends - and properly English garments - forced by necessity, such as the weather, or other factors, like work or school uniform; but also by volition: it is possible to choose one particular jacket, among all available jackets, to keep yourself warm - creates a new *fashion syntagma*. And this manifestation can no longer be categorised as "Muslim Fashion" or "English Fashion" or "Syrian/Pakistani/Saudi/Turkish/etc. Fashion": it's a unique manifestation, the expression of a personal style that combines pieces carefully chosen to compose a visual identity that is exclusive to its owner, the woman who wears it.

From religious to national, from national to personal, the path traced by the garment identity apprehended in a city like London slowly shatters the idea of a fashion syntagma governed solely by religious codes, or even the fidelity to a *national dress*, and starts to leave room for understanding the *hijab* as a personal choice that relates to the subjectivity and sensibility of the ones who wears it. More than identity to the origins and alterity to the country of residence, the "modest wear" of the streets of London can be interpreted as a complex term (Greimas & Coutes, 2012; Greimas, 1983) conjoining *Identity and Alterity*.

Such perception can be extended to any manifestation of street fashion, especially in global cities like London, where elements of a national dress get mixed and remixed with the mass market, fast fashion items, luxury goods, accessories manufactured by street artisans, vintage pieces collected from variety shops, and even items belonging to other national dresses in vogue. In a city whose foundations are the multiplicity of national identities, the *personal style* will necessarily be a carefully balanced combination of Identity - *your* national identity, the place you came from, or the place your ancestors came from - and Alterity - the otherness that makes you unique. And that includes modest (and un-modest) wearers.

Under such perspective, the *hijab* can start to be freed from its statute of *religious garment*, a *sine qua non* of Muslim wear, to become a part of a wardrobe that can serve both the expression of a faith - the sameness of a Muslim woman with other Muslim women, the connection between her and a community based on a religion - and one of the many expressions of a personal style - the otherness with the rest of the people, that ensures the sameness of the self, as well as the otherness with values rejected by one's conviction, such as the Western decadence and sexism.

4. Conclusion

To finish this brief reflection about the *hijab*, it is imperative to remember the meaning of being *from elsewhere*, even when you are European born. In her 2014 TED Talk, the writer and photographer Taiye Selasi discusses the fiction of countries and how the answer to the question "Where are you from?" is simultaneously a manifestation of power - if you are from a wealthy country this manifests more power, if you are from emerging countries, less power - and an implicit justification for the question "What are you doing here?"³ The speaker reflects about how one's identity lies less in what is said in a passport, and more in the personal experience: the places where you are "a local", where you perform your rituals, maintain relationships, and deal with restrictions.

Jullien will also remind us that, as it happens with languages, a culture that ceases to go through transformations becomes dead, and belongs only in the museum (Jullien, 2015). Therefore, the resistance to the manifestations in fashion that remit to the idea of Muslim - and this resistance is manifested, nowadays, especially in the myth of uncovering all Muslim women in order to save them from oppression - proposes a more retrograde approach than the very idea of women deciding to cover themselves: it is a belief rooted in the wish of staying same, attached to a culture that never changes, or an European identity that stays unaltered throughout the time.

The racial and cultural mix, on the other hand, are not only marks of immigrations and migrations - the unavoidable side effects of Globalisation and Glocalisation of our societies - but the natural course of a culture that is developing by welcoming what comes from the outside.

³ https://www.ted.com/talks/taiye_selasi_don_t_ask_where_i_m_from_ask_where_i_m_a_local?language=en last access in 21 December 2015.

And one of the possible manifestations of this blend, perhaps the most evident one, lies in fashion: as it has always been, the shock of different cultures produces influences and appropriations that become figures apprehended, most of the time, first in the apparel. Fashion has always been a privileged place of understanding the culture and values of a society, observing the ways the apparel chooses to form the body (Kunzle, 2003), or how the colours, patterns and prints in vogue among a generation reflect the advances of science throughout the centuries (Boucher, 2010). In the 2010's it is not different, and it is our jobs, as Fashion Researchers - but also as Social Scientists and Ethnographers - to use the manifestations of Fashion right before our eyes as a means to understand our time and society.

In the 2010's, in Europe, the presence of the *hijab* is a fact, more than a possibility, as much as the necessary blend that this presence denounces. Instead of banned or resisted, the *hijab* should be celebrated, on the side of the courage and true agency of the women wearing it, as the veil speaks of a culture that is alive - not a Muslim culture, or a European culture, but a culture simply, which is a privileged place to understand how different nationalities and religions and *people* are going to manage to live together - to co-exist - in a Global Metropolis, and which new values and meanings are going to emerge from this shock. Therefore, it is not the role of fashion researchers or social scientists to cling to the pro or con the veiling of women dilemma, nonetheless to wave flags for Muslim women's "liberation". I believe that in times like ours, our field has more to gain by solely asking: what does this presence, on the side of the reactions and passions it awakens, has to say about our time and our society? Why are we so afraid of the veil?

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