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Fantasies of Unveiling Flesh and Freedom: Post-9/11 Desires for Truth and Security

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Ghumkhor, Sahar. *The Political Psychology of the Veil: The Impossible Body*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. 274 pages. ISBN 978-3-030-32060-7. Pbk. €90.94.

There are few matters as controversial and heatedly debated as the practice of veiling in the Global North—exerting pressure on an author willing to contribute to this widely researched phenomenon as well as raising the expectations of the reader. Sahar Ghumkhor's *The Political Psychology of the Veil* is not an exception to texts accompanied by this strained anticipation. As the author's first monograph, published in 2020 as part of The Palgrave Studies in Political Psychology series, it sets out the goal to generate discussion on current issues and perspectives concerning world politics, local and international conflicts, and fluctuating political movements and ideologies.

The cover presents a sketchy drawing of a woman holding her own quasi-mirror image made out of her own flowing hair in her hands. The focal point of the illustration is the two faces—a strikingly white and a shadowy black—of the same body staring at one another, which depiction sets the ground for Ghumkhor's in-depth analysis of a desire for bodily wholeness and the intense need to see and know the disturbingly (familiar yet) unknown other. As a lecturer at the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Melbourne, Australia and a journalist at *Al Jazeera*, Ghumkhor integrates areas of psychoanalysis, social sciences, and Islamophobia into her research. She intends to enrich the already extensive literature on the veil, even though she does not seek to answer questions such as what the veil is or why women veil, rather, she proposes to investigate why and how these questions themselves transpire in western societies. Her motivation lies in her position as a Muslim having grown up and studied in New Zealand and Australia, as well as in the increasingly hypersensitive post-9/11 environment. As a result, she thoroughly analyzes the west's fixation on the veil and the western fantasy of freedom that foregrounds the visibility of the subject's body thus further othering the veiled (Muslim) woman. Positioned at the intersection of psychoanalysis and postcolonialism, the concepts of knowledge, freedom, and truth gain considerable attention in Ghumkhor's

exploration of what she refers to as the west's "unveiling imaginary"—"the hypnotic belief in the revealed flesh as a signature of freedom" (ix).

For the most part, the seven chapters of the volume neatly build on each other, beginning with the comprehensive introduction, "Bodies Without Shadows," which effectively delineates the book's objective "to identify the imagery of the veiled-veil*ing*-unveil*ing*-unveiled as powerful metaphorical expressions and coordinates of agency, autonomy and freedom in the post-9/11 and postcolonial world of national security, multiculturalism, human rights and women's rights" (7, emphasis in the original). The author recognizes the obsessive preoccupation with the veil as a form of preoccupation with the body that is imagined possessing and, significantly, revealing knowledge about the subject. The introduction approaches this imagery through a *Times* cover from 2010 depicting an Afghan girl, Aisha, whose face is disfigured by her maimed nose, and argues that the picture exemplifies the power of images through linking violence (specifically that of Islam) with the veil as its symbol par excellence for the western secular audience. Ghumkhor applies Wendy S. Hesford's term "ocular epistemology," a seeing-is-believing paradigm that proposes (only) the visible as validated truth claiming that "this is what happened here" (185). This notion is carried on in the subsequent chapters to undergird the capability of images to secure the western subject's position as a witness to social injustice, which grounds human rights campaigns and—by the repeated circulation of certain images—has the power to construct and sustain the Muslim woman imperiled by Brown men and, at the same time, imperiling for the west's integrity (75).

The second chapter, "The Unveiling Body" dives into the desire to see the body uncovered, to expose its naked truth in a cultural landscape where seeing has also come to signify knowing. Being the first truly analytical chapter, perhaps this is the most illuminating of the author's goal, and the concepts discussed here are pivotal to the understanding of the oncoming chapters. It reads the veil as a shadow on the body obscuring what could be known, hence the unrecognizability of the subject generates anxiety in the western subject. The chapter goes on to dissect the body tackling the problematic notion of the pre-discursive, natural body stripped of its symbolic meanings, giving way to a universal body that is "naturally" unveiled. However, a body that could be placed beyond culture shall then also be unmarked by race or sex, as no body is less substantial than another in the making of the subject. Borrowing Giorgio Agamben's terminology, Ghumkhor points out the threat of this universalizing tendency to reduce

bios (social and political life) to zoe (natural or biological life), while a propensity for progress pinpoints western civilization as the "apotheosis of human development" (56)—the example to be followed—and recognizes the secular body (evolving from the natural) as more authentic, desirable, and free. By securing hierarchies of cultures and ideologies, unveiling becomes a means of perfecting humans and grants the body its rightful desires and freedom.

The conflict encountered here is further elaborated on and is best clarified by looking at the history of the unveiling imaginary going back to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which appears rather belatedly in chapter six, "The Confessional Body." The author here outlines the genealogy of modernity, along which she contends that the world is flattened into "a singular narrative across time, culture and space" (209) exalting the acquisition of knowledge and pursuit of universal truths by a dynamic and secular agent. The idea(l) of social and political progress is interlocked with this accumulative knowledge and promises a greater freedom. Therefore, inasmuch as the rejection of "the veil of tradition" (204), that is, non-secular beliefs and practices are associated with the expression of all modern values, the possibilities of attaining freedom are delimited for the unveiled.

The impossible promise of a natural body seems to be at the heart of the remaining text, especially in chapter three and four. The former, "The 'Pure Defence of the Innocent' and Innocence Lost" gives a psychoanalytic reading of the human rights discourse depicting the western free subject already endowed with human rights, yet endlessly desiring more. Images through their ocular epistemology are fundamental for disclosing a lack (of rights, freedom, truth, enjoyment) and inciting a desire to fix it and to restore wholeness; as such, the overrepresented Muslim woman wearing a veil is conceptualized as injured and fragmented. Ghumkhor turns to the critique of human rights discourse for endorsing pity instead of empathy, which establishes an unbalanced power dynamics favoring the progressive, secular body. "The Woman Question" revisits the age-old query of who a "Woman" is and what she desires, by building on the previously delineated universalizing tendencies and the western desire for unveiling. It narrows its focus on feminist perspectives providing the veil's interpretations in feminist discourses and examining Jacques Lacan's emotional assertion that "Woman does not exist" (qtd. in Ghumkor 136). The previous chapters defining "the west as the agent of secularism, modernity and freedom" (118) prepare the ground for the argumentation that in western discourses only the secular body can provide the necessary foundation for the real Woman who is free

in her desire, thus instantly excluding the veiled female subject. Nevertheless, the ontological crisis of the essential "Woman"—the fear of not existing and being the other to Man due to the lack of the phallus—propels the line of reasoning that western women's concern for the other (veiled) women functions as a way to overcome the inexistence of Woman by projecting their lack onto the non-white and non-secular veiled other.

The volume's contribution to the postcolonial and post-9/11 discourse is the most evident in chapters five and six, which take the most careful look at the postcolonial legacy and the exchange of power and knowledge. The former achieves it by describing a crisis of knowledge stemming from the postcolonial condition and giving way to a paranoia over the desire for knowledge that is driven by a conscious and unconscious desire for mastery. The author draws on Neil Macmaster's and Toni Lewis's notion of "hyperveiling," according to which Islamophobia is understood as the hysterical or hypochondriac imagining of ways to locate "other" bodies that imperil "us." In the period of this heightened need for security, a western hysterical demand is satisfied by the confessional narratives of women of Muslim women.

Chapter six investigates the rhetoric of these declarations and labels the confessors as native informants confirming western preconceptions about Islam, this way performing the unveiling of the truth of "unfreedom" (209) and complying with the preconditions of becoming "good Muslims" (217). Ghumkhor calls attention to how these testimonies are imbued with the language of the war on terror engaging the western reader's anxieties and ensuring the authenticity of the natural body. In addition, this chapter also includes a short inquiry into the unveiled-veiled woman or "the hijab-wearing Muslim 'cool girl'" (237) in the west, "whose sole preoccupation is not with disclosing the horrors of Islam and her community, but with redeeming the hijab for a western audience by verifying its liberating qualities" (237). The expression of individualism through the immersion of consumer culture, fashion, modernity, and exercising a dynamic agency render these women more relatable or—in Ghumkhor's phrasing—consumable for a western secular and unquestionably consumerist audience (238). A profoundly engrossing argument as it is, the undeniable shortcoming of the text is precisely the lack of elaboration on this part, leaving the reader on the edge of their seat.

Nevertheless, *The Political Psychology of the Veil* accomplishes its designated mission and sheds light on the dynamics of western fantasies and anxieties over Islam embodied by the veil. Ghumkhor puts forward

convincing arguments supported by ample sources from numerous scholars and theorists of diverse cultural backgrounds. As such, the volume certainly makes a valuable analysis of the existing literature on Islamophobia, body and sexual politics, as well as psychoanalytic, postcolonial, and feminist criticism, which is the work's primary merit. For the same reason, as can be expected, it is extremely loaded theoretically, but it surely provides an indispensable perspective on the entrenched conflict between Muslim and secular values for any researcher in the field of postcolonial feminism.

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