

How to Do Things with Headscarves: A Discursive and Meta-Discursive Analysis¹

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I thank Sharon Todd for the opportunity to discuss the important topic of sartorial censorship and, more specifically, the censorship of the wearing of *khimars*, *jilbabs*, *niqabs*, *chadors*, and *burqas* by Muslim girls and women in educational contexts. I generally agree with Todd's arguments that gender is not merely an additional feature, but integral to the debate over religious symbols in the public sphere, and that this debate ought to be approached from an understanding of culture as gendered, ambiguous, unstable, and multiple. The focus of my response, therefore, will be the metadiscourse in which Todd's paper participates: the discourse *about* the sartorial discourse of Muslim girls and women in educational contexts.

Todd considers gender a cultural construct and positions herself in discursive theories of gender put forward by theorists such as Judith Butler. I will stay within that discursive theoretical perspective, and consider the wearing of head, face, and body covers such as the *khimar*, *niqab*, and *burqa* as discursive acts. Where the wearing of clothing and symbols on the body is perhaps not a language in the narrow sense, it certainly is discourse, where discourse is understood as speech, writing, and other semiotic practices that do not merely represent the world, but also produce effects in the world. A law that makes wearing a *khimar*, *burqa*, or other form of head, face, or body cover illegal in the context of public schools is thus a law that makes certain discursive acts illegal in the context of public schools: it is a form of censorship in educational contexts.

A range of cogent arguments can be lodged against various forms of censorship in educational contexts. In this case, a particularly important argument is that the banning of certain (sartorial) discursive acts prevents further strategic, even subversive, iterations of this discourse, thus limiting the agency of those who are purportedly protected by the ban.² This, furthermore, makes the ban on *khimars*, *niqabs*, *burqas*, *chadors*, and *jilbabs* miseducative: it takes away the possibility of teaching students that they are not merely cast by, subjected to, texts, but also subjects with agency who can dislodge and resignify texts. Seyla Benhabib echoes this warning when she writes about the three young women who were involved in the original "*affaire du foulard*" or "headscarf affair" in France in 1989: "To assume that the meaning of their actions is purely one of religious defiance of the secular state constrains these women's own capacity to write the meaning of their own actions and, ironically, reimprisons them within the walls of patriarchal meaning from which they are trying to escape."³

As this censorship is discussed in the public arena, however, something else happens: a metadiscourse arises; a way of speaking and writing that does not merely represent the acts of wearing particular head, face, and/or body covers, but that also

produces effects of its own. There is no innocent discourse; all terms used to conduct this debate are already historically, culturally, and politically marked. The French sociologist and philosopher Edgar Morin illustrated this poignantly when he said: “The word ‘scarf’ trivializes: it is nothing but a piece of cloth. The word ‘chador’ ayatollizes. The word ‘hijab’ maghrebizes, or even folklorizes. The word ‘veil’ religionizes and infers a prohibition against seeing women.”⁴

One striking feature of the metadiscourse has been the common and interchangeable use of the terms “veil” and “headscarf.” You may have noticed that I have, thus far, avoided these general terms as much as possible. This has been a deliberate avoidance. Todd acknowledges in a note that *burqa*, *chador*, *niqab*, *jilbab*, and *hijab* refer to different veiling practices. Nevertheless, presumably to make the text more palatable for Western eyes and ears, she has chosen to use “the terms veiling, headscarves and *hijab* interchangeably.” This discursive collapsing of *burqa*, *chador*, *hijab*, *jilbab*, and *niqab* into the general descriptors of “veil,” “headscarf,” and “*hijab*,” and the use of these three terms as interchangeable, are problematic.

A discursive approach requires a careful consideration of the histories of performative force that discursive acts carry, as well as of the current cultural contexts that may reinforce certain performative effects while hindering others. Fadwa El Guindi notes that the English word “‘veil’ has no single Arabic linguistic referent” and that “the absence of a single, monolithic term in the language(s) of the people who at present most visibly practice ‘veiling’ suggests a significance to this diversity that cannot be captured in one term.”⁵ But here we are, two non-Muslim women of European descent, born and raised in countries whose dominant traditions are deeply marked by Christianity, engaged in this metadiscourse. When either one of us uses the word “veil,” how can we not activate a history of uses marked by a Euro-Christian perspective, an iterative chain in which “veiling” is linked to “seclusion” and “shame” and the kind of concealment that stands in opposition to “bringing things out in the open?” El Guindi contends that interpreting veiling practices through the notions of modesty, shame, and seclusion “represents an ethnocentric imposition on Arabo-Islamic culture.” Instead, she proposes, the wearing of head, face, and/or body covers should be read through the “cultural code of sanctity-reserve-respect.”⁶ The Western uses of veils, for example in marriage, in the ordination of nuns, and in erotic exoticized dances, indicates that the signifier “veil” has become deeply inscribed with cultural ideas about purity and sexual restraint; these ideas become part of the interpretive framework for the sartorial discursive acts of Muslim women when those acts are referred to as “veiling.”⁷

As philosophers and educators we should object to the generalization of women with a great variety of ethnic backgrounds. We should also object to metadiscourse that dehistoricizes and decontextualizes a whole range of discursive acts by referring to them collectively as “veiling.” Discursive acts cannot be understood in isolation, but only in their cultural, historical, and political contexts. When an Algerian Muslim woman in France wears *hijab* in public, this discursive act cannot be understood outside of the iterative chain that includes the wearing of *hijab* in

Algeria, several decades prior, as deliberate act of resistance against French colonization.⁸ The metadiscourse, moreover, needs to take into account the history of significations of *hijab* in Arabo-Islamic culture. Although, as Todd writes, the word *hijab* today is commonly used to describe the wearing of any kind of headscarf or modest clothing by Muslim women, in the Qur'an the word *hijab* is *not* primarily used in reference to women's clothing; for that, there are more specific terms such as *khimar* (head cover) and *niqab* (face cover). The dominant meaning of *hijab* in the *Qur'an* is one of separation and partition "between two worlds or two spaces: deity and mortals, good and evil, light and dark, believers and nonbelievers, or aristocracy and commoners."⁹ The point of *hijab*, El Guindi contends, is not that women should be secluded, hidden, or made to feel inferior, but rather that they have a portable screen or partition which allows them to take the sanctity (*haram*) of women's private space (*harim*) into public space.¹⁰

The reason I raise these meanings and effects of Muslim women's sartorial discourse is that they have been largely absent from the metadiscourse. My point is not that El Guindi is right and that all Western objections to head, face, and body covers are wrong; to arrive at that conclusion a much more detailed analysis would be required. My point is, rather, that education ought to foster the critical questioning of assumptions based on external appearances, and of imperialist and ethnocentric readings of discourse; that education ought to pay attention to the ways in which language works and carries a past of meanings and uses that trouble its apparent clarity and that produce meaning beyond the intentions of any author; that education must allow students the opportunity to understand how historical, cultural, and political ideas become sedimented in language; and that education ought to include a critical examination of the discursive lenses through which we read the world, leading to an understanding that the ways in which we think, speak, and write about the world affect the world about which we think, speak, and write.¹¹

1. The title "How to Do Things with Headscarves" is a variation on J.L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

2. Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

3. Seyla Benhabib, *The Rights of Others: Aliens, Residents, and Citizens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 192.

4. Edgar Morin, *Libération*, November 25, 1989

5. Fadwa El Guindi, *Veil: Modesty, Privacy and Resistance* (New York: Berg, 1999), xi, 7.

6. *Ibid.*, 83.

7. *Ibid.*, 31.

8. See Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1967).

9. El Guindi, *Veil*, 157.

10. *Ibid.*, 95.

11. Salman Rushdie, *Step Across This Line: Collected Non-Fiction, 1992–2002* (Toronto: Alfred Knopf, 2002), 375.