

Simone Heidbrink, Nadja Miczek (Eds.)

Aesthetics



and the Dimensions of the Senses

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CHALLENGING STEREOTYPES

MUSLIM WOMEN'S PHOTOGRAPHIC SELF-REPRESENTATIONS

ON THE INTERNET

ANNA PIELA

Introduction

Islam is, in many ways, a religion that acknowledges and embraces embodiment and aesthetics of its followers through numerous Qur'anic verses and Prophetic traditions that address bodily aspects (ritual practices, cleanliness, healthy lifestyle, attractiveness to one's spouse, sexual desires).¹ These considerations are, however, strongly saturated with the awareness of a religious modesty requirement that applies to both men and women. Believers of both genders are required to dress and behave modestly, but there is no consensus on what constitutes modesty and whether women must wear the *hijab*; verses addressing modesty are interpreted and used by both its advocates and opponents.² However, due to greater emphasis of female modesty,³ controversy regarding self-disclosures of Muslim women on the Web is more intense.⁴ This is additionally intensified by the opinion voiced by radical traditionalist Islamic sects, such as the Salafi, that believers should not engage in production or publishing of images of human beings.⁵ Traditionally, human form was absent from public settings in Islam; instead, Islamic art involved intricate geometric patterns and representations of plants.⁶ Thus, research on photos of produced and published by Muslim women is bound to juxtapose the concepts of identity and self-representation on the one hand, and different understandings of modesty on the other.

¹ See Hoffman 1995, 37.

² See Piel 2009: 168-176.

³ See Mahmood 2001, 213.

⁴ See Amir-Ebrahimi 2008, 239.

⁵ See Naumkin 2005, 3.

⁶ See Canby 2005, 32.

At the moment European politics is fixated with dress code of a small minority of Muslim women. Bills banning veiling of the face (known as the so-called ‘burka bans’) have been passed in Belgium in March 2010, and in France in September 2010, despite the fact that only a very small number of women actually wear face veils.⁷ For example, according to the French Direction ‘Centrale du Renseignement Intérieur’ (DCRI) only 367 women wear a face veil in France.⁸ Societies in other European countries debate whether veiling should be banned.⁹ Why this obsession with a garment worn by relatively few Muslim women? Explanations of the veil-banning laws range from the wish to protect the general public from the ‘terrorist threat’ to the intention to curb patriarchal oppression within Muslim communities.¹⁰ Linking of terrorism to *niqab* was particularly strong in the Swiss poster promoting a ban on minarets – a woman wearing a *niqab* was shown against a background of minarets looking like missiles planted on the Swiss flag.¹¹ Media reports detailing these developments are flooded by images of black-clad women, supposedly in order to explain to audiences what a *niqab* (a face veil) is. Such reports sometimes include testimonies from *niqab* wearers who explain their choice regarding veiling of the face;¹² however, this is infrequent.¹³ As bloggers point out, ‘serious’ news outlets, including the ‘New York Times’, ‘Washington Post’, and the ‘Los Angeles Times’ “managed to cover the story [on the pending *niqab* ban in France] without seeking commentary from a single Muslim woman.”¹⁴ Depending on the political affiliation of the offline and online media outlets discussing the matter, mainstream articles about *niqab* tend to fall into the category of more or less Orientalist representation in that they build an essentialist image of ‘Muslim women’ and ‘others’. This is illustrated by a statement from a director of an MA programme in investigative journalism at a London university who writes in her article in ‘The Independent: Education’:

I was particularly disturbed by the sight of Muslim female students wearing the *niqab*, a dress statement I find offensive and threatening. Don't they value the rights and freedoms they enjoy in Britain?¹⁵

⁷ See Khiabany & Williamson 2008.

⁸ See Pinet 2010: 957.

⁹ See Cassidy 2010.

¹⁰ See Fautré 2010.

¹¹ See BBC 2009.

¹² See BBC 2010.

¹³ In the UK, “The Guardian” remains a notable exception.

¹⁴ See Figueroa 2010.

¹⁵ See Waterhouse 2010.

Quite often they are bundled together with terrorism and abusive patriarchy through ‘related articles’ listed next to or below their articles about the *niqab*, and to a lesser extent, the *hijab* (headscarf).¹⁶ Such views are particularly alarming, as they come from influential academics who should consider embracing cultural diversity as their duty. However, many other academics should be given credit for conducting studies tackling the problem of media misrepresentation of Muslim women. Through balanced discussion that brings to the fore Muslim women’s voices they unpack and challenge stereotypical notions and outright racism present in reporting.¹⁷

The *hijab* is much more common than the *niqab*, and it is perceived as less controversial; there are no initiatives to ban it.¹⁸ However, it is a focus of social debate as it is a source of similar connotations to the *niqab*. There are a large number of feminist studies analyzing the meaning of the *hijab* and women’s motivations to wear it. It has been reframed as a sign of resistance,¹⁹ religious obligation,²⁰ a concept interlinked with ethnicity,²¹ a cultural artefact,²² a symbol of identity,²³ a human right,²⁴ and a concept related to gender relations.²⁵ However, in their intention to dispel stereotypes and offset veiling-related misrepresentations, some researchers may have glossed over the fact that head-covering is not the only concern in Muslim women’s lives, and, subsequently, many other issues related to Muslim women have been largely passed over by academic research. In my PhD thesis I discussed a number of topics selected due to frequency of their occurrence in Muslim women’s online newsgroups, including education, marriage, sexuality, employment and mobility.²⁶ Head-covering was by no means the only or the main topic of conversation. The relative prominence of the ‘*hijab* discourse’ in certain online spaces, such as the ‘Hijablog’²⁷ may be a reaction to the media-fuelled *hijab/niqab* craze as well as exceptionally severe racist abuse widely experienced in Muslim-minority contexts by Muslim women who cover

¹⁶ See Blomfield 2010.

¹⁷ See Abu-Lughod 2002; Wing & Smith 2005; Afshar 2008; Sahffi 2009.

¹⁸ Nevertheless, there is discrimination against covered women; for example, in Turkey they are banned from undertaking employment in state institutions.

¹⁹ See El Guindi 1999.

²⁰ See Karam 1998.

²¹ See Franks 2000.

²² See Barlas 2006.

²³ See Wadud 2006, 176.

²⁴ See Afshar 2008.

²⁵ See Yaqoob 2004.

²⁶ See Piela 2009.

²⁷ See Akou 2010.

their heads and faces.²⁸ This is indicated by many online videos, articles and blogs created by Muslim women who specifically mention that they feel the need to defend the *niqab* and the *hijab*, wearing of which is to them an inalienable human right.²⁹

The literature discussing Muslim women in online contexts, similarly to that on Muslim women ‘offline’, seems to be focused on head and face covering,³⁰ adding to the existing body of themes some new ones, notably reflections on Islamic dress from marketing and fashion design perspectives.³¹ Rantanen discusses the potential of the burqa as a garment that can become a powerful metaphor in non-documentary art projects on the Internet.³² A different offshoot of the ‘*hijab* discourse’ is formed by studies of media representations of the burqini – modest beachwear mostly (but not only) worn by Muslim women – as well as its cultural meanings revolving around the contrast between a revealed and a concealed body.³³

MacDonald argues that the fixation with images of veiled Muslim women raises significant issues for the feminist debate, as it has stolen the attention from their own voices and self-definitions.³⁴ Poole writes that “the heavy black hijab dominates the representations of Muslim women internationally.”³⁵ The focus of these representations is on the garment (in its variations, often depending on the recent political developments) and its imprinted connotations, while the importance of the person, the background and the context of the photograph is diminished (unless it is the context of a political demonstration which corresponds to the connotations of threat). Whilst Poole’s argument is focused on exploring the nature of *hijab* representations as signifiers, I propose to ask subversively: if representations of Muslim women are *dominated* by the ‘heavy, black *hijab*’, what do these representations ignore? What is concealed, or omitted, that would provide a ‘balance’ in these representations? As the *hijab* fulfils the handy role of a symbol encompassing all kinds of threat, it is unlikely that media representations, especially photographs and video, will resort to representations not *dominated* by it, indeed the symbol must remain one-dimensional and easy to understand.

²⁸ See Franks 2000; Poynting & Noble 2004; Ameli & Merali 2006, 23.

²⁹ See for example Youtube (2010a), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q1kVomQErcA>. Retrieved 23 July 2010; Youtube (2010b), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GWjYYYgDwoU>. Retrieved 23 July 2010; Youtube (2010c), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NaE7BMMw12k>. Retrieved 23 July 2010.

³⁰ See Sands 2010, 153.

³¹ See Akou 2010; Tarlo 2010.

³² See Rantanen 2005.

³³ See Fitzpatrick 2009.

³⁴ See MacDonald 2006: 7.

³⁵ See Poole 2002, 111.

Muslim women's self-definitions, largely neglected by the media, are expressed both in textual/discursive and visual modes. Whilst the former has been addressed by research,³⁶ the latter has not yet attracted much research attention. Thus, I propose to look at aesthetics, focus and context of Muslim women's self-portraits and other photographs they use to define and describe themselves.

Methodology

There is a wealth of visual data relating to Muslim women on the Web, but it is sometimes difficult to identify what is representation (as they are seen by others) and what is self-representation (as Muslim women see and present themselves visually). Through images they interpret the world and present it in a particular way. This research project focuses on the way Muslim women see themselves and the world that surrounds them, as displayed by the photographs that they design, produce and publish online. By analyzing and interpreting these photos, insight may be gained, at least partly, into their perspectives and foci, thus reversing the power dynamic of the Orientalist gaze that asserts itself through framing and contextualizing the *object*.³⁷ It can only be a partial insight, as the relationships between the image and the author, as well as the image and the observer (in this case, the researcher) is different.

Through visual representations Muslim women have been stereotyped and made uniform, acontextual and ahistorical by journalists, artists and researchers alike,³⁸ and this tendency has been acknowledged since Edward Said published his seminal work *Orientalism*.³⁹ In addition, the label of the 'Muslim woman' has been stuck on women who have links, however remote, to Muslim cultures. This includes, for example, Middle-Eastern secular women who reject Islam as a religion.⁴⁰ In order to avoid accidental ascribing of identity, I selected photographs exclusively from websites and blogs which specifically mention that their authors and owners are Muslim women.

³⁶ See Afshar, Aitken & Franks 2005; Karim 2008; Shaffi 2009.

³⁷ See Abdo 2007.

³⁸ See Watt 2008.

³⁹ See Said 1979.

⁴⁰ See Klausen 2005, 214.

Method and data

The photographs I have selected for analysis have been obtained from a photography-sharing website enabling individuals to upload their photos, create profiles and join groups of interest. They constitute a specific, purposeful sample, as they are all self-portraits of Muslim women. I have used a range of search terms whilst searching for websites and blogs. These included 'Muslim woman/women', 'Islamic woman/women', 'women/woman and/in Islam', 'female Muslims', 'female Muslim believers'. The searches were fairly unproblematic as it was possible to search for combinations of tags (photograph 'descriptors' that could only be included by authors of the photographs), such as 'Muslim', 'woman/female/girl', and 'selfportrait'. In most cases the ownership of photographs was clear, as many photos were captioned and an explanation was included, or the tag clouds were self-explanatory in regard to the identity of the authors. It was also possible to look up profiles of authors where they sometimes disclosed their gender and faith. In some cases the ownership was ambiguous, as tags 'muslim' seemed to be occasionally used in relation to the 'Muslim look' some female photographers tried to achieve, especially when trying on the *hijab*. In cases where there was doubt, I decided not to include the photographs in the final selection. Eventually, I selected 42 photos from 16 women representing diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, which I was able to discern from most profiles or tags that were attached to the self-portraits.

The most recent internet research ethics guidelines postulate a departure from the conceptualisation of Internet spaces as either public or private and treating publicly accessible online data as possible to use in research without participants' consent.⁴¹ Instead, acknowledging the participants' autonomy,⁴² I requested permission to use their images in research. Although I could access the images freely, and did not have to be a member of any password-protected groups, I considered that using images for purposes different than the authors' original intention (research rather than looking and commenting) rendered requesting permission necessary. I have been able to obtain permission from all participants through the photo-sharing website messaging system. Acknowledging the principle of confidentiality in online research, I have stored the data securely and offered the participants that I would change their names and remove details that would allow their identification. One participant preferred that her profile name be retained as she wished to

⁴¹ See Paccagnella 1997.

⁴² See Ess et al 2002; Wiles et al 2008.

increase publicity for her work. Finally, as the analysed images are not reproduced in the paper, they do not require copyright clearance.

Authors of the analysed self-portraits are as much photographers, designers of the set, art directors and publishers as objects of the photograph. They have control over the technical settings, techniques of photographing, angles, accessories, colours, background, objects, people and animals in the photographs, their position, face expression, and finally, where the photographs are published for others to see. It is then reasonable to say self-portraits are an expression of authority over one's self-representation.⁴³ The Muslim women who produced these self-portraits are both their authors and subjects. In order to acknowledge this fact I refer to them throughout this article as 'authors-subjects'. The 42 images that I selected 'speak' for themselves, but also speak through the tags they have been given by their authors, and a number of cultural codes, sometimes used subversively; thus, they become intertextual.

It is a common finding of research projects focusing on differences in perception that what one sees and how one prefers to see oneself depends on social positioning.⁴⁴ Self-portraits may be both representations and constructions of the self.⁴⁵ They can have both documentary and experimental functions. Self may appear as one sees it, or as one would like to see it. While reading photographs literally may undermine their complexity, it may sometimes be difficult to discern between the author's perception, projection and vision. Hence, all participants have been sent a draft of this paper to offer them a chance to point out potential 'gross' misinterpretations of their photographs.

Codes

In order to give the reader a picture of how I approached the data, I include the codes I used in the preliminary analysis of the content. Authors-subjects appear in the self-portraits in a range of poses and shoot from different angles. In 29 self-portraits the entire face is visible, in 12 a part of the face is obscured; out of those 12, in 5 only eyes are visible, in 3 the face is invisible. Of those 3, 1 self-portrait is a rear view of the author-subject, in 1 the body silhouette appears from the neck down, and in one, only the top of the head is visible. In 19 images one can see the hands; in 5 the entire body shape is visible. In 40 the author-subject is positioned centrally. In 23 the author-subject looks

⁴³ See Meyer 1993, 377.

⁴⁴ See Emmison & Smith 2007, 36-38.

⁴⁵ See Dykstra 1995.

directly at the lens/viewer, in 20 she looks away (including profiles and half-profiles). 5 self-portraits were taken from unusual angles (three used the dogs-eye view, two – bird's eye view). 12 self-portraits are black and white, and 3 have unusual colouring (for example, a green face).

In 33 photos the authors-subjects are wearing a head-covering (including 2 with an additional face-covering), in 2 it is impossible to see as the head or top of head are invisible, in 6 the authors-subjects are not wearing a head-covering. Head-coverings include a traditionally wrapped headscarf that thoroughly conceals the hair and the neck (26), a tight hat and a hood concealing the hair and the neck (3), an African-style head-wrap concealing hair but not the neck (3), a loose jumper hood partly concealing the hair (1), a loose scarf partly concealing the hair (1), and a wooly hat concealing the hair (1). In 3 photos jewellery is worn, and 4 makeup is visible. In 12 authors-subjects wear glasses and in one self-portrait a rose adorns the hair.

Such a number of codes and coded content allows identifying regularities, patterns and exceptions. In the next sections of this paper I consider characteristic features emerging in creative work of selected individuals, as well as the entirety of the dataset. I also place these features in their contexts which enables a better understanding of the images.

Aspects of the analysis

Analysis of images is multidimensional; Rose lists several aspects that may be considered in interpretations of photographs: technological (what is the technology used to produce it?), compositional (colours, content, spatial organization), and, perhaps the most relevant to this project, social (what is the image's cultural and social context?).⁴⁶ She also differentiates between the site of production (where, how and under what circumstances was the photo taken?), the image itself (the compositionality of an image), and the site of display (where was the photo published and who is its audience?). All these factors and modalities create a complex framework that allows interpretation of photographs from different perspectives.

While photographs remain the main type of data in this analysis, it must be acknowledged that they do not exist in a contextual vacuum. Firstly, they exist within a particular space (the Internet) and its particular interlinked locations (websites). This is an element of what is called by Rose the 'site of audiencing'. The technological site where images are located also determines the way

⁴⁶ See Rose 2007, 19-22.

audiences make sense of them. Locations of image display are also likely to attract particular types of viewers. Secondly, textual content of these websites constitutes a specific context for the photographs, and it is likely to provide information helpful in analysis of the photos, therefore references to the text are occasionally made. Thirdly, aesthetics of contexts is expressed in the photographs themselves – through showing the background, other people, animals or objects. Finally, context is constituted by the social and political circumstances in which photographs are looked at and interpreted.

In order to acknowledge both individuality and cross-cutting themes in the selection, I address the data in two ways: firstly, I consider creative activity of three Muslim women photographers whose photo-galleries include from 600 to 4300 images and whose self-portraits have been included in the dataset; secondly, I identify common themes in the dataset.

Author-subjects

Eve Rivera

Eve, based in the United States, is one of the most productive Muslim female photographers on Flickr.com, where she publishes her work. She works as a freelance photographer and her photo gallery contains over 3500 images, including 180 self-portraits. She tags her self-portraits with ‘muslim’, ‘self-portrait’, ‘me’, and ‘*hijab*’ as well as many other specific tags. Her photographs attract many comments, to which she sometimes responds, providing insight into her creative work and her self-definitions. An exchange under one of Eve’s self-portrait aptly illustrates the problem that this article focuses on:

US-based user: I may be off, but she [Eve] looks Muslim. You usually don't equate this expression for a Muslim women [sic] -very powerful and self-confident with direct eye contact. Nice change.

Eve: yes, it is me and I am Muslim...also powerful and self confident! ;)

Clearly, Eve’s self-portraits cause consternation for users who, on the one hand, are able to discern her face expressions – indeed powerful and self-confident, and on the other hand, are bombarded with images and discourses representing Muslim women as voiceless, meek, and submissive. The quoted commentator indicates that she sees Eve’s self-portraits as different, that

they are a *change* – a change from victimising images of Muslim women saturating the mainstream media. This is a very poignant contrast between self-representation and representation.

I have selected 10 of Eve's self-portraits that are different in terms of techniques, settings, focus and colour. Her self-portraiture is simple, bold and almost austere – there is no discernible background, and she rarely smiles at the camera. This is reinforced by lack of jewellery; instead she poses wearing dark-rimmed glasses and a *hijab*. Most of these photographs are black-and white, with contrast set high, and the effect is almost unreal, that of a comic-strip character, as her face appears white and her eyes are dark and huge.

There are exceptions to this regularity: in one photograph corners of Eve's mouth are up, giving her expression a mischievous quality; one photograph shows only her full smile with visible teeth; and in another, there is a focus on an unusual pattern of colourful flowers on her electric-blue *hijab*. Eve's self-portraits are taken close-up and from a variety of perspectives, and often show only a part of her face – eyes, cheeks or mouth, as if she was trying to say: there are many ways of looking at me; I am made up of different things. Her *hijab* provides an excellent frame for her face and creates a border between it and the photograph background that has the same hue. While many of her self-portraits are as-a-matter-of fact, she sometimes makes references to her religion; a dramatic photograph in red hue in which she looks down, face half-turned, is titled "Lowered Gaze" – an expression that appears in the "Qur'an (Surah An-Nur, 30-31)" in a verse that praises modesty (a lowered gaze in contrast to sexualised gazing at the other sex) in both believing men and women.

However, "Lowered Gaze" is accompanied by "Up There: That's what I'm focused on!", the second in the pair of self-portraits, in which Eve looks up. "Up There" is an opposition not only literally, but seems to be an instant reminder that 'looking down' figuratively (remaining modest) does not preclude metaphoric looking up that could be understood as aspiring or working towards a goal. There is subtle interplay between the two images that represent two different concepts, which yet appear in conjunction, feeding into each other.

Eve plays with associations and expectations; in some self-portraits she is wearing a huge wooly hat and the lower part of her face is wrapped in a thick scarf. Although she does not veil her face in her other pictures, this stylisation is a reference to the *niqab*; one of these self-portraits is titled "WinterNiqabi". In it, she achieves the effect of '*niqabi*' veiling by juxtaposing two common, mundane accessories. As a result, the *niqab* becomes surprisingly demystified – it is a garment that obscures the face, just as the hat and scarf may do. Perhaps Eve is showing through this simple trick

that it is not the obscured face itself that is so feared and criticised by Western societies,⁴⁷ but what they choose to associate with the *niqab* – ‘otherness’ of Muslim women.

Umma

Umma is an East European convert to Islam living in the UK. She is a prolific photographer with over 600 uploaded images, including 10 self-portraits. In her profile she describes herself as a ‘proud Shia’, indicating that she belongs to a minority sect in Islam that is most populous in Iran. She tags her photographs meticulously, always including the tag ‘muslim’; she often uses related tags, such as ‘moslem’, ‘muslimah’, ‘islam’.

Her self-portraits are lyrical, with focus on her face and a soft, blurry background; except one black and white image, they are either in pastels or deep blues and black. These photographs convey a strong sense of serenity and thoughtfulness; they seem to exemplify the statement that pictures first emerge in the creator’s mind.⁴⁸ Umma experiments with different angles and her self-portraits include profiles and half-profiles; her camera appears in three images as she explains that she is very proud and excited as the camera is a big upgrade from her old one.

One of Umma’s self-portraits, in which she appears reflected in the mirror, wearing a black veil and holding the camera, is captioned with a Qur’anic verse: “So she took a veil (to screen herself) from them; then We sent to her Our spirit, and there appeared to her a well-made man.”⁴⁹ The most obvious connection between the photograph and the caption is the veil, which Umma may be understood to wear following the example of Maryam, mother of Jesus. Another connection is related to one of the differences between Islam and Christianity; the quoted verse is part of the story of the birth of Jesus, who in Christianity is believed to have been the son of God; in Islam he is considered to have been a prophet of God. Hence, converts from Christianity to Islam confess to reject the divine origins of Jesus; Umma’s juxtaposition of her veiled self and this verse may be understood as her declaration of belonging to Islam.

While 8 of her photographs are almost classical self-portraits, showing her from the shoulders up, two images are unusual in that they are panels consisting of multiple smaller shots that appear to

⁴⁷ See Cassidy 2010.

⁴⁸ See Dluhosch & Svácha 1999: 341.

⁴⁹ See Surah Maryam, 17.

have been taken in series. In one of them there is Umma by herself, and in the second one she is with her daughter. They seem to provide a glimpse into another side of her personality, and are in a strong contrast to the poetic self-portraits; here, Umma is having fun with photography. Photography is play; she makes funny faces, looks comically scared, bares her teeth and roars at the camera pretending to be a wild animal, pulls her hood over her head in a jokingly ominous manner. She and her daughter appear with toys: a ball and a doll that serve as props to be interacted with. These panels of self-portraits are not merely documenting usual household scenes; they are posed, constructed in a creative way, revealing the multitude of ways of looking at people, scenes and mundane objects. Whilst the multitude of expressions and poses displayed by Umma may bring to mind associations with multiple identities of Muslim women,⁵⁰ these self-portraits can be read in many other ways. There is an element of subversion here, as laughing and having fun are not typical of representations of Muslim women.⁵¹ These relaxed and humorous self-portraits are probably as unexpected as the powerful and direct gaze of Eve's that attracted surprised comments.

Lina

Lina is a 28-old Muslim woman based in Brunei Darussalam. She has over 4300 images in her online gallery; she photographs people, sports events, still nature, landscape and animals. Two of her self-portraits are Ramadan-themed,⁵² visualising her reflections and ideas about this religious celebration. Both these self-portraits are dreamlike due to soft colours, blurring around the edges, and surreal background. One of them is symbolic, showing her holding a plastic container with food in her hand, arm outstretched and away from the body. She looks in the opposite direction, holding her hand over her mouth, indicating abstaining from food during the day. The background is a sepia uneven surface with a simple sketch of a wheat plant stem. In this photograph Lina is wearing a short sleeved dress over jeans; her hair seems to be freely flowing in the wind. In her second Ramadan-tagged self-portrait she is reading a book on a bed with her cat beside her. In the photo caption she writes: "first day of Ramadan is a holiday so I spent the day reading", which possibly means that she declares that Ramadan is not only the time of fasting, but also spiritual reflection. It is unclear what book she is reading, though; it may be a religious book read in the spirit of

⁵⁰ See Dwyer 1999.

⁵¹ See Tarlo 2007.

⁵² Ramadan is the month of fasting in Islam; believers do not eat or drink between sunrise and sunset.

Ramadan, or a novel or a photography album. However, she chose to declare her religious belonging under this self-portrait, as she adds in the caption: “Happy Ramadan my fellow muslims! [sic]”.

Lina’s self-portraits poignantly fit into the debate on the blurring of boundaries between the public and the private, both from feminist and Islamist perspectives.⁵³ There is a large group of her self-portraits, in which her hair is covered with a tudung (a South-East Asian version of the headscarf), that show Lina at an office or with her boyfriend. This suggests that she follows the Islamic dress-code outside of home.

The pictures in which she photographs herself uncovered are usually taken within the four walls of home, or they are processed images with surreal backgrounds. Thus, she treats the personal space as both private (she does not cover her hair) and public (she offers the viewer glimpses into her personal space). Her self-representation is ambiguous, as she is religious, at the same time challenging the strict interpretation of dress-code that would require her to remain covered when photographing herself with the intention of making the self-portrait accessible online. Her uncovered hair indicates that her interpretation of the dress-code may include the meaning of *hijab*, a word with Arabic origins, as ‘modest dress’ or ‘screen’ rather than ‘headscarf’. According to some Qur’an interpreters, the former is the correct translation; however, no unanimous agreement on the matter has been reached amongst scholars.⁵⁴

Lina’s images contradict the usual representation of religious Muslim women as thoroughly covered. Her faith-themed photographs are constructed without the use of items that are religious symbols in their own right, such as the *hijab*, prayer books or a prayer pose. Because the religious dimension is created by a specific body alignment, tags and captions, the self-portraits are religious in an atypical way, demonstrating a personal, individual interpretation of not only the concept of Islamic fasting, but modesty as well. Her photographs are very different from ‘literal’ religious imagery pervading online Muslim spaces;⁵⁵ in contrast, Lina seems to play with viewers’ expectations and her self-portraiture has an element of subversion.

⁵³ See Göle 2003.

⁵⁴ See Piela 2009, 169-170.

⁵⁵ See Bunt 2003.

Cross-cutting themes emerging from the dataset

The mirror technique

The self-portraits in the selection were created using either a tripod, photographing one's reflection in the mirror or using the 'extended hand technique'. Looking at some self-portraits taken with the use of a mirror or any other reflecting surface, in particular where the camera is central in the photograph, the viewer has a strong impression that they are being photographed as they can see the lens of a camera (and sometimes the lamp flash) as they are reflected in the mirror. 9 photographs in the selection were taken using this technique. In two of those photographs the face is entirely or partly obscured by the camera while the hands are holding it; this invisibility of the photographer's face and the 'taking a photo' pose strengthens the impression of role inversion. We see that a woman's face can be obscured by means other than the face veil, and for other purposes.

These self-portraits reinforce the notion that one's relationship to oneself is bound to be mediated.⁵⁶ The gaze of the photographer through the lens of a camera, whilst directed at her own reflection, appears actively directed at the viewer, complicating the 'photographer-viewer-subject' relationship.⁵⁷ The viewer paradoxically becomes involved in the act of photography that happened before the act of viewing. This photographic technique undermines the traditional configuration in which Muslim women are shown as distant from the reality of the viewer; in contrast, the Muslim female photographer seems to be just inches away, almost creating a sense of intimacy; it also contradicts the common perception, rooted in the Orientalist imagery,⁵⁸ of a picturesque and exotic subject worthy of photographing. The viewer sees in the picture exactly what the author-object sees in the viewfinder, which introduces a much more egalitarian relationship in the photographer-subject-viewer triad.

⁵⁶ See Rich 2003, 33.

⁵⁷ See Chadwick 1998.

⁵⁸ See Alloula 1986; Kahf 1999.

Objects and backgrounds

The authors-subjects often photographed themselves with objects, sometimes with other people and animals. The most frequent object that is shown (in 11 out of 43 images) is the camera in the 'mirror technique' self-portraits. It is poignant, as it is possible to produce self-portraits using this technique without the camera being captured. It is likely that the camera appears as an emphasis of the authors' status as photographers/artists as well as subjects. The person in the photograph is holding the camera, and there is no doubt that she is the author. This is again in contrast to the typical perception of Muslim women solely being objects, beings that are represented; these authors of self-portraits seem to be making a point that these images are a product of their artistic vision.

Other objects chosen to appear in these self-portraits are mundane, again introducing a sense of intimacy as we are offered a glimpse into the authors' private lives. A bowl of soup, nuts, a mug, a book, and a hairdryer present in the images – these are signifiers of everyday activities so familiar also to the viewer that again create a sense of intimacy.⁵⁹ This is emphasised by backgrounds displaying personal spaces –bathrooms, bedrooms and living-rooms.

Some photographs seem to be taken as a result of an impulse, documenting fleeting moments in parks and shops. Women took pictures of themselves with handbags, shopping bags, and purses in their hands, clearly engaged in some other activity, on their way to unknown destinations, yet still aware of their reflections in shop windows and paintwork on cars they walk past. They seem to enjoy photographing themselves in these varied surroundings; clearly photography, and in particular, self-portraits are important to them as means of self-expression and self-documentation.

In four self-portraits the authors-subjects appear with other people. These pictures (with the exception of one in which a passer-by appears as a hazy blob in the background), show the authors-subjects in their social context. They pose smiling, at ease with their relatives: a mother, a daughter, a cousin, as well as friends and a pet, clearly enjoying the interaction and conveying a sense of happiness and fun. Intimacy between them is evident in relaxed poses, physical proximity, and embraces.

⁵⁹ See Gordon 2006, 29.

Conclusions

The addressed self-portraits examine common assumptions about faith and gender present in representations of Muslim women. They are strikingly different from the paradigm of the ubiquitous paradigm of the de-contextualised, submissive women used as illustrations and metaphors in anti-Islamic discourses. By offering personal perspectives on religion, in particular religious identity and symbols, Eve, Umma and Lina challenge normalised codes and discourses created to define Muslim women. The surprise registered by one commentator under Eve's self-portrait demonstrates the extent to which prejudiced representations of Muslim women have become normalised. However, labels and associations constructing these representations: the Other, a stranger, a threat, a religious fundamentalist, a victim of patriarchy, in blunt terms – a misfit unequipped to function in a secular society, are effectively challenged in two ways: by visually constructing religious meanings with day-to-day objects and creating a sense of intimacy through interaction with objects and people in the photographs, as well as with the viewer.

It is important to note that challenging prejudiced representations and perceptions in the self-portraits is not achieved by rejecting Islam, but by embracing it. The Muslim identity present in the images is unambiguous and unapologetic, as the authors-subjects define it both visually and textually through tags, captions and comments. The analysed self-portraits constitute a variety of religious identity narratives: powerful, direct, serious, but also funny, poetic, subversive, and intimate ones, thus contradicting the essentialist and simplistic nature of labels stuck to Muslim women. The audiences, whose comments are visible under the self-portraits, appreciate these visual narratives exactly because of their complex, multilayered and personal character. This suggests that prejudiced representations of Muslim women do not satisfy those individuals who are willing to investigate both 'versions of the story'.

Shifting the focus of research interest from visual (mis)representations of Muslim women to ways in which Muslim women choose to represent themselves will bring to the fore their own understandings of their faith and identity. As the visual has particular educational significance in our image-saturated world,⁶⁰ Muslim women's self-portraits may also help non-Muslim audiences grasp and accept the diversity and complexity of this social group. The 43 self-portraits selected for this analysis constitute only a small dataset intended for use in an exploratory study. There is

⁶⁰ See Fischmann 2001.

certainly a lot more data on Muslim women's self-representations available both online and offline that merits close investigation.

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