

## WHAT IS VEILING?

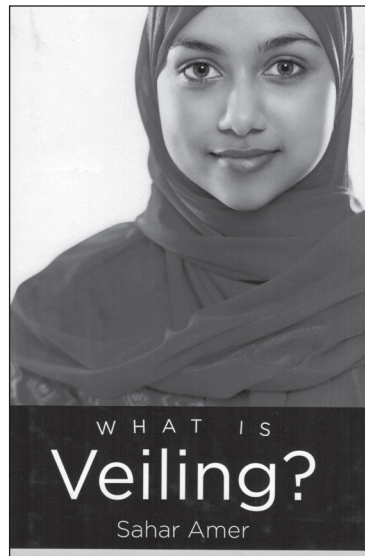
Sahar Amer  
Chapel Hill, NC: The University of  
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I'd like to begin with several images personal to me (a non-Muslim) but also, I think, relevant to anyone who has ever pondered the increasingly vital question "What is Veiling?," so conscientiously and sensibly addressed in this book. The first covered women I encountered were the nuns of my early education who epitomized mystery and severity. They continued to inspire fear and resentment until a couple of them finally humanized through their passion for literature, which became my joy.

As an adult, on the occasion of my first visit to Egypt in the early '90s where the pyramids and the Valley of the Kings left indelible impressions on me, what also struck were certain visuals of veiled women. Admittedly these were not numerous during Mubarak's era, which is why they stood out. I remember being in a taxi, traffic swarming around, when suddenly and imperiously from the car ahead, thrust a black-gloved arm (rings on fingers) indicating a turn. The woman behind the wheel was covered completely in black but her gesture was assertive, a strong combination of aggression and anonymity.

Considering the completeness of her covering, she was probably from Saudi Arabia, Iraq or the one of the Gulf States. Author Sahar Amer supplies a complete glossary of the names of garments worn by Muslims worldwide that runs to 9 pages, attesting to the complexity of this subject that is at once sartorial, cultural, religious, social, historical and artistic.



In 2011, when invited to teach and share my own poetry at Ain Shams University in Egypt, I was intrigued, during a leisurely country house party, to hear an older female academic dressed casually in slacks and a blouse gently chastise her students for wearing hijab, despite the fact that they seemed to compensate with heavy eye make-up and bright colours. The term *hijab*, Amer declares, is "the generic term for veiling used by all Muslims regardless of background." She comments how, when watching Egyptian films from the 1940s to the 1960s, she is struck by the European dress and lifestyle of the women they portray. And how her mother's wedding pictures from the early '60s display the same western influences, this, as she points out, "thirty years before they all began wearing *hijab*."

In Turkey recently I watched a veiled woman at breakfast with her family in an Istanbul hotel. Young daughters and husband enthusiastically tucked into the food while she delicately lifted her face cover and precariously balanced a piece of boiled egg on a spoon in order to get it into her mouth. She looked uncomfortable and sedately resigned.

Amer reminds us that for the democratic reformer, Atatürk in Turkey in the 1920s, *hijab* was an obstacle to progress and secularization.

In the 2014 Anniversary edition of *Canadian Woman Studies*, my own prose poem "Out of Iran" deals with how I felt in 2011 being constrained to wear the headscarf (I have particularly unruly hair) and a myriad number of contradictory impressions around the situation of women and girls in that far-reaching, richly-endowed culture. Again we remember that before the Iranian revolution of 1979, Iran was a largely secular society. After it, "Iranian women who had demonstrated for their right to *choose* to wear the *chador* unexpectedly found themselves *forced* to wear it."

My favourite incident occurred at the end of a course I teach at York University called *Women in Literature*. Several of my students had worn full hijab, that is, complete covering all year. All I ever saw were eyes. At the very last class, they came forward as a unit and removed their veils, smiling, with the words, "We thought you might like to see our faces." We laughed. It was a moment of communion and trust. I felt honoured.

The first sentence in Sahar Amer's book is "Islam did not invent veiling." The thoroughness of her research is evident in the subject matter of each title, such as "Understanding Veiling in Islamic Sacred Texts," or "What Do Progressive Muslims Say About Veiling?" Especially revealing is a chapter called "Veils, Harems and the Mission to Civilize" in which Amer takes us from the erotically charged Orientalist paintings of Delacroix and Ingres to early twentieth century photographs and postcards whose Algerian subjects were often non-Muslim prostitutes or