

Veils and Mirrors¹

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Reading: Excerpts from *Scheherazade Goes West* by Fatema Mernissi²

In the [Middle East], men use space to dominate women; Imam Khomeini, for example, ordered women to veil when stepping into public space. But in the [West], men dominate women by unveiling what beauty ought to be. And if you don't look like the picture they unveil, you are doomed.

...These Western attitudes, I thought, are even more dangerous and cunning than the Muslim ones because the weapon used against women is time. Time is less visible, more fluid than space. The Western man uses images and spotlights to freeze female beauty within an idealized childhood, and forces women to perceive aging—that normal unfolding of the years—as a shameful devaluation. ... By putting the spotlight on the prepubescent female, the Western man veils the older, more mature woman, wrapping her in shrouds of ugliness.

This idea gives me the chills because it tattoos the invisible harem directly onto a woman's skin. ...in the Western world, I was expected to shrink my hips into a size 6 if I wanted to find a decent skirt tailored for a beautiful woman. We Muslim women have only one month of fasting, Ramadan, but the poor Western woman who diets has to fast twelve months out of the year. ...Framing youth as beauty and condemning maturity is the weapon used against women in the West, just as limiting access to public space is the weapon used in the East. The objective remains identical in both cultures: to make women feel unwelcome, inadequate, and ugly.

Sermon:

We are soon approaching the days when we can go swimming in the beautiful ocean and lakes of Maine. My love affair with swimming began early in life, with my mother's insistence that all of her children take swimming lessons at the lake in our town. My mother also loved to swim, and had been in synchronized water ballet during her high school years. I can still remember her showing us some of the graceful and challenging moves as we watched in admiration.

Sadly, my mother no longer goes in the water, because she feels too unattractive in a bathing suit at her current age and heavier weight. She was always skinny as a girl and young woman, but gradually got heavier in midlife. What did I learn from my mother about beauty? I remember her always putting on makeup before going out into the world. She would say, "I have to put on my face." She still does. She also once said, probably in response to our complaints about some beauty procedure, "You have to suffer to be beautiful."

Personally, I never really fit the role of a beautiful girl, and always felt awkward in that realm. So perhaps that was part of my relief when, in my young adulthood, the second wave of feminism sparked a movement to reclaim our bodies' natural look. Some feminists were refusing to wear makeup or high heels or to shave their body hair. Instead, they opted for comfortable shoes and comfortable clothing. They asked, "Why should we have to change who we are to be considered beautiful?"

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² *Scheherazade Goes West: Different Cultures, Different Harems*, (New York: Washington Square Press, 2001), pp. 112, 214-5, 216.

I remember how scary it was even to experiment with such radical ideas. Wouldn't I be ridiculed if I didn't shave my legs? How could anyone find me attractive? But when I was around these free-spirited women, my sense of beauty expanded. I began to look at myself and other women differently and I began to really see each one of us as truly beautiful in our own way. I feel lucky to have had such role models. And my first love was a man who embraced the real me without makeup or other accoutrements.

These feminist ideas didn't take off in the mainstream, however, or even in my own family, where my sisters were rather dismayed by my alternative beauty notions. For my part, once my time was freed up, I found myself astonished at how many hours they spent on makeup, hair, and other "feminine" pastimes. Since eventually I came out as a lesbian, perhaps they dismissed me on that regard. But when I became middle-aged and like my mother started putting more weight on my previously skinny frame, I was also surprised by how much harder it was to feel good about my natural body. It was also harder to find clothes I liked in larger sizes.

What is beauty, and why does it matter? There was an old song, over a hundred years ago now, that went, "I Want a Girl, (Just like the Girl That Married Dear Old Dad.)"³ Mothers used to be the model of beauty for their children. Now, the mass market offers up images of Hollywood stars and fashion models that tend to weigh 27% less than the average woman. Women are bombarded with messages that we don't measure up.

The Broadway musical and film *Dreamgirls*, loosely drawn from the girl bands of Motown, illustrated the dilemma. Effie was the girl with the strongest voice, but she was seen as too black and too fat to be the lead singer in the trio. It was the thin girl with more Caucasian features who was turned into the star—her image was more important than her voice. And that was not merely an indictment of their manager—in fact, image is more marketable in our culture. Research has shown that so called "beautiful" people have an easier time getting jobs, promotions, votes, and spouses, and not just in Hollywood.

Sometimes we can only really see ourselves when we see through the mirror of another culture. Our own culture is so close to us that we don't perceive how it affects us. But an outsider can see things that are invisible to us. This is why I was so intrigued with Fatema Mernissi's book, *Scheherazade Goes West*. Mernissi is a feminist Muslim scholar from Morocco, and has written several best-selling books about women in Islam. But *Scheherazade Goes West* is about her experience of Western culture.

She begins by exploring the Western male fantasies about the harem which she encountered on her book tours. She was surprised to find that men in the West imagine a harem as a place where women are subservient, passive, silent, and sexually available. She encountered this fantasy in writers, in paintings, in the ballet—images of nearly nude females in revealing positions and costumes, just waiting to please the master of the harem.

But, Mernissi points out, Muslim men never had those images of women. She writes, Ironically, in the Orient—land of harems, polygamy, and veils—Muslim men have always fantasized, in both literature and painting, about self-assertive, strong-minded, uncontrollable, and mobile women. The Arabs fantasized about Scheherazade of *The Thousand and One*

³ Words by William Dillon, Music by Harry Von Tilzer (1911)

Nights; the Persians painted adventurous princesses like Shirin, who hunted wild animals across continents on horseback; and the Mughals...gave the Muslim world wonderful erotic paintings filled with strong, independent-looking women and fragile, insecure-looking men.⁴

Scheherazade, the storyteller of *The Thousand and One Nights* was a hero because of her intellectual capacity to engage the king. He had beheaded every beautiful bride before her, but she was able to use her vast knowledge and story-telling skills to save her life. Mernissi sees Muslim women, even those inside harems, as feisty, intellectual, argumentative, and resourceful.

I happened to be reading at the same time a novel by Nuruddin Farah, a Somali author and a Muslim man, which corroborated her position. The hero of his book, *Knots*, is a Somali woman who is strong, intelligent, strategic, forceful, and fearless, as she pursues her goals in the civil war torn capital, Mogadishu.⁵ Mernissi writes that for Muslim men, intelligence in a woman is part of what makes her interesting and sexually desirable. She had a hard time understanding why Westerners seem to divide intelligence from sexuality. A European friend introduced her to the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, so-called “chief luminary of the German Enlightenment.”⁶

She writes:

Kant’s message is quite basic: Femininity is the beautiful, masculinity is the sublime. The sublime is of course the capacity to think, to rise higher than the animal and the physical world. And you’d better keep the distinction straight, because a woman who dares to be intelligent is punished on the spot: She is ugly. The tone in Kant’s book is as cutting as that of a Muslim Imam. ...What a terrible choice Kant’s woman has to face, I thought—beauty or intelligence. It is as cruel a choice as the fundamentalists’ threat: veiled and safe, or unveiled and assaulted.⁷

Many Americans are quick to point at the oppression of women under Muslim rule. They see a symbol of that oppression in the *hijab*, the veil and body coverings that Muslim women may wear, especially in fundamentalist ruled countries where women’s faces are also covered. Mernissi does not deny that Muslim women are oppressed. But she holds a mirror to her Western friends asking them to look more honestly at the oppression of women in their own cultures.

Leila Ahmed, an Egyptian-born Harvard Divinity scholar, wonders why the predominant Western views of women in Islam are based only on the images of heavily veiled women from Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan.⁸ She points out that 90% of the Muslim world does not wear any of this stuff. Most modern Muslim women do not wear a veil. “Why is it,” she asked in 2006, “that I am constantly called by journalists who ask why Islam oppresses women, and never called and asked why Islam has produced seven women prime ministers or heads of state, and Europe only two or three.”

She looks at the symbolism of the veil in the context of history and politics: One hundred years ago, there were also British leaders condemning the veil as oppressive to women. Wherever the British

⁴ Mernissi, p. 164.

⁵ Nuruddin Farah, *Knots*, (New York: Riverhead Book, 2007)

⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, translated by John T. Goldthwait, (University of California Press, 1991) as quoted in Mernissi.

⁷ Mernissi, pp. 91, 90.

⁸ In an interview with Krista Tippett, on *Speaking of Faith*, “Muslim Women and Other Misunderstandings,” sponsored by American Public Media, http://download.publicradio.org/podcast/speakingoffaith/20061207_muslimwomen.mp3

Empire was, they tried to change the clothing of the women. In Africa they said the women did not wear enough clothing, and in the Middle East, too much. Women's clothing became the emblem of the "uncivilized" world.

She points out that in Arabic cultures head covering was the norm for both women and men. The attempt to change women's clothing was primarily meant to "civilize" the men of the country. It was not meant to improve women's lives. So, in other words, it was used politically. Today, too, she believes the focus on changing the veil is used politically by the West, to say that Islam is an inferior civilization, and we are a superior civilization.

She asserts that the meaning of the veil cannot be separated from its context. In her own growing up days in Egypt, it was associated with dogmatic or fundamentalist forms of Islam. No one in her own family wore the veil. But today, young American women may be wearing the *hijab*, and not for fundamentalist reasons. In fact, they may be feminist. In Western countries, if you are part of a minority religion or culture, you may wear the veil to make a statement about your beliefs, or to distinguish you from the majority.

In 2007, the Portland Press Herald featured the story of a young American convert to Islam who chose to wear the veil partly as a symbol of her right not to be judged by her appearance.⁹ Which brings us back to Mernissi's question: Are the beauty standards imposed by the fashion industry in America and Europe a kind of veil that is embedded in our flesh and psyche?

Naomi Wolf, author of *The Beauty Myth*, has explored this role of beauty as oppressor. She notes that as American women have gained economic power and freedom of opportunity, there has been a rise in anorexia, the cosmetics industry, cosmetic surgeries, and the diet industry. Women have deeply internalized the sense that our value is based on our image.¹⁰ Because we have internalized these standards, we do not even see the veil covering us. But it is not just internal—in many professions, beauty is considered a necessary part of the profession. Women have been fired for being too heavy, too old, pregnant, or otherwise not physically desirable.

When I first preached this sermon, about ten years ago, I had just attended a workshop at a UU Youth Conference at Ferry Beach. A few of the high school students led an exercise in naming expectations of gender for young people today. I was saddened to realize that they were facing the same myths about beauty, about femininity and masculinity, that I felt as a young person. They were facing the same pressures to meet certain standards of appearance. I was also impressed with their capacity to reflect on these issues and the hold they have over our lives.

So where am I going with all of this? To me there are two important lessons to be faced. One is that we should not judge another culture, without looking seriously at our own problems and issues as well. We should be wary of the politicians who point fingers at Arabic and Islamic cultures and claim to speak up for the rights of women there, when those same politicians don't stand up for the rights of women in our own country. We should seek to learn more from strong and intelligent Muslim women who can speak for themselves.

⁹ "Finding Islam" by Anna Fiorentino, *Portland Press Herald*, March 12, 2007, pp. D1-2.

¹⁰ Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*, (New York: Morrow, 1991)

The second important lesson is to ask how we can change our own appreciation of beauty. I believe we need deep personal and social healing from the wounds of the “beauty myth.” These wounds go deep. Women especially—but perhaps men too—are trained to see ourselves as flawed and ugly, rather than as human beings full of inherent worth and dignity. We judge ourselves by our adherence to fashion norms, rather than as sacred children of a creative divinity. Our UU principles nowhere support these judgments, and yet how many of us secretly feel less than worthy because of the size and shape of our bodies?

How have we bought into the idea that what is most important is how we look? Why do we not look instead at how we live our values, or how compassionate we are? Why can’t we appreciate ourselves for our talents and gifts? I am not blaming any of us for this issue—in fact, we need to forgive ourselves even for our tendency to blame ourselves. It is challenging to uphold a different set of values in the midst of an overpowering force in our society. Sometimes I wish we too had something like a veil as a symbol of our choice to value inner goodness over outer appearance.

The earth itself does not create forms that are identical. Each tree is unique, each spring flower. The hummingbirds only look sort of like the ones in the bird book. We are part of the creative diversity of the earth, and each one of us is unique in our appearance. How beautiful is that? How wonderful that when I see you, I can recognize you by your individual features? So why do we keep trying to look like other people?

This mother’s day, remind the women in your life of their true beauty. We need to help each other on this. Remind the mothers and daughters, and friends and lovers, and wives and sisters, and nieces and grandmothers and aunts; and women, don’t forget to remind yourself, every day, that you are a unique expression of the beauty of creation. Then, remind the men that they are beautiful too. We all need to hear it, and feel it.

In 1988, Libby Roderick wrote a song that was meant to help us reclaim our inner and outer beauty. I invite each of you to close your eyes and listen as I share it with you, and then after a time of silence, we will sing it all together. It goes like this:

How could anyone ever tell you, you were anything less than beautiful?
How could anyone ever tell you, you were less than whole?
How could anyone fail to notice that your loving is a miracle?
How deeply you’re connected to my soul.

*Closing Words, from the Dine People, whom we also know as the Navajo.*¹¹

Beauty is before me, and Beauty behind me,
above me and below me hovers the beautiful.
I am surrounded by it, I am immersed in it.
In my youth, I am aware of it, and in old age,
I shall walk quietly the beautiful trail.
In beauty, it is begun.
In beauty, it is ended.

¹¹ From our hymnal, *Singing the Living Tradition*, #682.