

An Embellishment: Purdah

For *An Embellishment: Purdah*,ⁱ a two-part text installation for an exhibition, *Spatial Imagination* (2006), I selected twelve short extracts from 'To Miss the Desert' and rewrote them as 'scenes' of equal length, laid out in the catalogue as a grid, three squares wide by four high, to match the twelve panes of glass in the west-facing window of the gallery looking onto the street. Here, across the glass, I repeatedly wrote the word '*purdah*' in black kohl in the script of Afghanistan's official languages – Dari and Pashto.ⁱⁱ

The term *purdah* means curtain in Persian and describes the cultural practice of separating and hiding women through clothing and architecture – veils, screens and walls – from the public male gaze. The fabric veil has been compared to its architectural equivalent – the *mashrabiyya* – an ornate wooden screen and feature of traditional North African domestic architecture, which also 'demarcates the line between public and private space'.ⁱⁱⁱ The origins of *purdah*, culturally, religiously and geographically, are highly debated,^{iv} and connected to class as well as gender.^v The current manifestation of this gendered spatial practice varies according to location and involves covering different combinations of hair, face, eyes and body.

In Afghanistan, for example, under the Taliban, when in public, women were required to wear what has been termed a *burqa*, a word of Pakistani origin. In Afghanistan the full-length veil is more commonly known as the *chadoree* or *chadari*, a variation of the Persian *chador*, meaning tent.^{vi} This loose garment, usually sky-blue, covers the body from head to foot. The only part of the woman to be seen are her eyes, the rims outlined with black kohl (perhaps only in a Westerner's imagination) looking out through the window of an embroidered screen.

Although in 1959 the Prime Minister of Afghanistan, Muhammad Daoud, had abolished veiling and seclusion for women, when the Taliban took over Kabul

in September 1996 they issued edicts prohibiting women from working outside the home, attending school, or leaving the home unless accompanied by a close male relative as chaperone – *mahram* (husband, brother, father or son). In public women had to cover themselves in a *chadari* – a body-length covering with only a mesh opening through which to see and breathe. Women were not permitted to wear white shoes or socks – the colour of the Taliban flag – nor shoes that made a sound when they walked. Houses and buildings with women present in public view were to have their windows painted.^{vii}

It is understandable, then, that discussions around the veil provoke much controversy, especially in feminism, and it is worth briefly outlining the issues at stake.^{viii} In an account of arguments for and against the veil raised in early twentieth-century Egypt in response to the publication in 1899 of Qassim Amin's *Tahrir Al-Mar'a* (The Liberation of Woman), Leila Ahmed argues that in identifying the veil as a tool of female oppression, feminism has, perhaps unwittingly, along with anthropology, played the role of 'handmaid' to colonialism.^{ix} In using the veil to represent Muslim culture as backward, the aim of unveiling women in order to liberate them from repression has operated as the mode of justification for one patriarchal culture to possess another. This is an attitude and practice witnessed historically, for example, in the French colonization of Algeria, where, as Ahmed quotes from Franz Fanon's *A Dying Colonialism* (1967), '*the occupier was bent on unveiling Algeria*'.^x More recently unveiling was given as one of the reasons to justify the invasion of Afghanistan by today's crusaders – the United States, the United Kingdom and their allies – to depose a regime, which, as well as supporting terrorists, also oppressed women through its use of the veil.

The repression of woman has been used as a reason for colonizers to invade countries, especially Muslim ones, repeatedly. An interest in acts of colonial and neo-colonial oppression returns in my autobiography through an acknowledgement of how my own childhood involvement in colonialism has

been repressed. Repetition is the acting out of that which has been repressed in the unconscious. Artist Sharon Kivland has pointed out that:

Repetition, for Freud, is the incessant exposure to horrible or upsetting events and circumstances, the compulsion to repeat an act when its origins are forgotten. Unless one remembers the past, if events are suppressed, something is returned in one's actions.^{xi}

In re-writing the word *purdah* across the glass, the embellishment of the window surface is an act of repetition. It is also one of separation and connection. Calligraphy has been used as a screening device by artists such as Mona Hatoum in her *Measures of Distance* (1988), where video images of the artist's mother are overlaid with the Arabic text of the letters she sent to her daughter from Beirut. This image is accompanied by a two-part soundtrack, in which the artist reads a clear translation of the letters in English, while in the background a playful but indistinguishable interchange takes place in Arabic between two women.^{xii} In her photographs of women covered with calligraphy, Lalla Essaydi focuses on how this Islamic art form has been made inaccessible to women, whereas the use of henna as a form of adornment is considered 'women's work'.^{xiii} Describing how under the Taliban regime, in Shia areas such as Herat, in western Afghanistan, women's lives were the most oppressed, Christina Lamb's *The Sewing Circles of Heart* discovers how, in order for women writers to read, share ideas and study banned foreign literature, they had to meet under the guise of sewing groups, such as the Golden Needle Sewing Circle.^{xiv}

In taking the form of an embellishment, repetition, as a kind of remembering, can also be linked to reminiscence. For *An Embellishment: Purdah*, in repeatedly writing the same word, focusing on its precise formation, again and again, I recalled my school days writing out sentences, aiming to make my handwriting as small as possible so that, as a left-hander, I did not smudge the ink. In trying not to spoil the perfect letters

formed of liquid kohl, I realized that I was writing from left to right, writing against the flow of an Arabic or Persian text.

Kivland's account of repetition continues:

And while the analytic process may not aim at reliving past experience, at feeling the same emotions of the past, this still happens. In reminiscing, stories are embellished, made better or worse, and so occupy a register of the imaginary.^{xv}

I imagined that for *An Embellishment: Purdah* when the sun set the writing would, like a rug, form a pattern on the gallery floor, where the viewer's shadow, facing west (away from Mecca), would be cast behind him/her. In early January, the time of year that the work was installed, the sun was too low in the sky to create the intended shadow, yet other unexpected effects were produced which resonated with the concerns of the piece. To perform the writing I had to stand in the window, my face screened by my writing, occupying a position behind a veil that I had not imagined. As night fell, light from the inside gallery illuminated my body.

Iranian director Moshen Makhmalbaf's film *Kandahar* (2001) tells the story of an Afghan woman journalist living in Canada, who travels back to Afghanistan when her sister writes from Kandahar to say she is going to kill herself before the next solar eclipse. The female protagonist's journey is at times filmed from behind the *burqa* she is wearing, offering western audiences a view out from the inside of the veil, so reversing the usual media representation of the camera imaging a covered faceless figure.^{xvi} And it is the disguise offered by the veil in Yasmina Khadra's *The Swallows of Kabul* that allows the central characters – two Afghan women – to change positions unnoticed and dramatically alter the narrative as agents of their own history.^{xvii}

The rise in interest in the veil through cultural forms – film and literature – has increased dramatically since the western invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq.^{xviii} But these stories told from 'behind the veil' are often authored by those who have not experienced this reality directly, extending the problem of the western-dominated representation of the veil in the media, which, in Christina Noelle-Karimi's opinion, has rendered Afghan women faceless and voiceless:^{xix} the veil obscures their faces, while others tell their stories. The author of *Swallows*, for example, is a male Algerian army officer, Mohammed Moulessehouli, who took a feminine pseudonym to avoid submitting his manuscripts for army approval. Khaled Hosseini, author of another story that focuses on an allegiance forged between two very different Afghan women, left Kabul in the 1970s.^{xx} *Beneath the Veil* (2001), a documentary famous for showing the execution of a woman under the Taliban regime, was made by Saira Shah, a woman of Afghan descent, but raised in the United Kingdom,^{xxi} while *The Kabul Beauty School* (2004) and *Afghan Ladies' Driving School* (2006), both documentaries showing women's lives in Kabul, have also been made by those from the west.^{xxii}

An Embellishment: Purdah does not make a judgement on the veil; rather it wishes to show how things seem quite different depending on where you are. From inside the gallery and outside on the street – by day and by night – the work changes according to the position occupied. Sometimes transparent, at other times opaque, revealing then concealing, this embellishment or decorative covering invites the viewer to imagine beyond the places s/he can see.

ⁱ See Jane Rendell, *An Embellishment: Purdah* (2006), in *Spatial Imagination*, domoBaal contemporary art, London with an associated catalogue essay Jane Rendell, 'An Embellishment', Peg Rawes and Jane Rendell (eds), *Spatial Imagination* (London: The Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL, 2005), pp. 34–5. In 2005–06 I directed a research cluster called *Spatial Imagination in Design*, which involved artists, architects and writers exploring the spatial imagination through the production of artefacts for an exhibition at domoBaal contemporary art, London. See www.spatialimagination.org.uk. (accessed 8 July 2008). This text was first published in this form in Jane Rendell, *Site-Writing: The Architecture of Art Criticism* (London: IB

Tauris, 2010). See also 'Site-Writing: Enigma and Embellishment', Jane Rendell, Jonathan Hill, Murray Fraser and Mark Dorrian (eds) *Critical Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 150–162.

ⁱⁱ Afghanistan's official languages Dari, a version of Persian, and Pashto are written primarily in the Arabic alphabet. One report states that Dari is spoken by the Tajiks (25–30 per cent of the Afghan population) and Pashto by the Pashtuns (45–50 per cent of the Afghan population). See Physicians for Human Rights, *Women's Health and Human Rights in Afghanistan: A Population-Based Assessment* (31 December 2001), p. 17. However, another source holds that 'according to recent US government estimates, approximately 35 percent of the Afghan population speaks Pashto, and about 50 percent speaks Dari'. <http://www.afghan-web.com/language/> (accessed 14 May 2008).

ⁱⁱⁱ Quoting Malek Alloula, David A. Bailey and Gilane Tawadros describe how the veil marks the closure of private space and its extension to public space where the viewer is to be found. See David A. Bailey and Gilane Tawadros, 'Introduction', Bailey and Tawadros (eds), *Veil*, pp. 16–39, pp. 22–3. Referring to the writings of Hamid Naficy on the poetics and politics of the veil in revolutionary Iranian cinema, Bailey and Tawadros suggest that veiling is not fixed or unidirectional, but that it is rather 'a dynamic practice in which both men and women are implicated', and that the relation between veiling and unveiling is dialectical.

^{iv} See for example Leila Ahmed, 'The Discourse on the Veil', *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1993), pp. 144–68.

^v For example Ahdaf Soueif in a discussion of the differing practices and terms for the veil in Muslim cultures across the world including Arab countries, focuses on the history of its use in Cairo, Egypt. He explains how in the early twentieth century the *tarha*, a thin material to cover the hair in white or black, and *yashmak*, a white veil worn across the face under eyes, were adopted by women of the aristocracy, while the *burqu'*, a rectangle of fishnet which hung under the eyes fastened over the nose with a small decorative gold or brass cylinder – an *aroussa* – was worn by working-class women, and the *bisha*, which covered the whole face, was neutral in class terms. Between the 1920s and the 1960s, as part of the move to accept western culture, the veil was rejected, except the *bisha*, which continued to be worn by working-class women and more traditional women of all classes aged over fifty. The veil was taken up again as the *hijab* and the full *niqab* in the 1970s and more recently as a sign of resistance to the west. See Ahdaf Soueif, 'The Language of the Veil', first published in *The Guardian*, weekend supplement (8 December 2001), pp. 29–32, and reprinted in Bailey and Tawadros (eds), *Veil*, pp. 110–19.

^{vi} Christina Noelle-Karimi discusses how the *chadari* was originally a town fashion, worn by middle-class women to show they did not work with their hands, and as a sign of distinction by women whose husbands has secured government employment. Rural women wore a head scarf or *chadar*, and reserved the *chadari* for trips to town. See Christina Noelle-Karimi, 'History Lessons: In Afghanistan's Decades of Confrontation with Modernity, Women have always been the Focus of Conflict' (April 2002). See <http://www.wellesley.edu/womensreview/archive/2002/04/highlt.html> (accessed 14 May 2008).

^{vii} See Physicians for Human Rights, *Women's Health and Human Rights*, p. 19 and p. 23. The reports states in a rather contradictory manner that the dress code of the *chadari* was particularly strict in Kabul, but less rigorously enforced in rural or non-Pashtun areas, see p. 19, n. 53, but also that there were more severe restrictions enforced in non-Pashtun areas, see p. 23.

^{viii} Ahmed, 'The Discourse on the Veil', pp. 144–68.

^{ix} Ahmed, 'The Discourse on the Veil', p. 155.

^x Ahmed, 'The Discourse on the Veil', p. 164.

^{xi} Sharon Kivland, 'Memoirs', in Rendell, Hill, Fraser and Dorrian (eds), *Critical Architecture*, pp. 143–9, p. 145.

^{xii} For a fascinating commentary on this work see Marsha Meskimmon, *Women Making Art: History, Subjectivity, Aesthetics* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 141–7. The exhibition *Veil*, co-curated by Al-Ani, Sedira, Bailey and Tawadros, included a number of works which critique the practice and representation of veiling. See for example Faisal Abdu'Allah, *The Last Supper* (1995); Kourush Adim, *Le Voile* (The Veil) (1999–2000); Shadafarin Ghadirian, *Qajar* series (1998); Majida Khattari, *Les Mille et Une Souffrances de Tchadiri, (1001 Sufferings of Tchadiri) no 7* (2001); Shirin Neshat, *Rapture* (1999); and Zineb Sedira, *Self-Portraits of the Virgin Mary* (2000) – all shown in Bailey and Tawadros (eds), *Veil*.

^{xiii} See Lalla Essaydi and Amanda Carlson, *Converging Territories* (New York: powerHouse Books, 2005). *Veil* also included works which connect screening to pattern-making such as Henna Nadeem, *Screen* (1997) and Samta Benyahia, *Nuit du Destin* (2000), as well as writing, drawing and veiling, for example Ghada Amer, *Majnun* (1997); Ramesh Kalkur, *Untitled* (1996); and Shirin Neshat, *Allegiance with Wakefulness* (1994). See Bailey and Tawadros (eds), *Veil*. See also the work of Pakistani artist Aisha Khalid, *Ongoing Conversation* (2008), Pump House Gallery, London.

^{xiv} Christina Lamb, *The Sewing Circles of Heart: My Afghan Years* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2002), pp. 156–60.

^{xv} Kivland, 'Memoirs', p. 145.

^{xvi} Samira's Makhmalbaf's *At Five in the Afternoon* (2003), made by Moshen Makhmalbaf's daughter, also focuses on the life of women in Afghanistan.

^{xvii} Yasmina Khadra's *The Swallows of Kabul* (London: Vintage, 2005) was first published in French as *Les Hirondelles de Kaboul* (Paris: Julliard, 2002).

^{xviii} Alison Donnell has drawn attention to the number of books that feature an image of a veiled woman on the cover. See Alison Donnell, 'Visibility, Violence and Voice? Attitudes to Veiling Post-11 September', Bailey and Tawadros (eds), *Veil*, pp. 122–35.

^{xix} Noelle-Karimi, 'History Lessons'.

^{xx} See Khaled Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007). This is Hosseini's second novel; his first was *The Kite Runner* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003).

^{xxi} See Saira Shah, *Beneath the Veil* (2001), shown in the UK on Channel 4 on 26 June 2001. See for example <http://www.channel4.com/life/microsites/A/afghanistan/> (accessed 3 June 2009). Her novel *The Storyteller's Daughter: One Woman's Return to Her Lost Homeland* traces her journey back to her family's lost homeland in Paghman. See Saira Shah, *The Storyteller's Daughter: One Woman's Return to Her Lost Homeland* (London: Michael Joseph, 2002). Both *Beneath the Veil* and *Kandahar* have been harshly critiqued by Martin Kramer, who states that Shah does not take into account, for example, the fact that the woman executed had murdered her husband, and that the same executionary practice occurs in Saudi Arabia today without comment. See Martin Kramer, 'The Camera and the *Burqa*', *Middle East Quarterly* (Spring 2002), pp. 69–76.

^{xxii} See the documentary Liz Mermin, *The Beauty Academy of Kabul* (2004), shown in the UK on BBC4 on 23 January 2006. See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcfour/documentaries/storyville/beauty-academy-kabul.shtml>

(accessed 14 May 2008). See also Deborah Rodriguez, *The Kabul Beauty School: The Art of Friendship and Freedom* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2007). Sean Langan's *Afghan Ladies Driving School* was shown in the UK on BBC4 on 23 January 2006 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcfour/documentaries/features/afghan-driving-school.shtml> (accessed 14 May 2008).