

The New Veiling Phenomenon—is it an Anorexic Equivalent? A Polemic

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ABSTRACT

The paper deals with the *new veiling phenomenon* that initially began two decades ago in countries like Egypt and was taken up in increasing numbers by young educated and working women. The new veiling, however, is no longer restricted to the Middle East. This form of dress is now being adopted by many young Moslem women of various national backgrounds all over the world. The new veiling is an individual choice made by those women and therefore requires a deeper analysis beyond the apparent Islamic revival or the simple re-activation of tradition.

An analogy is drawn here between the Western anorexic position and this new veiling. The psychological similarities between both situations are illustrated using the social predicament model. The paper argues that both respond to a number of pressures that are now placed upon women globally including conflicting cultural messages and contradictory cultural expectations. These global social changes have their impact on women's sense of their 'self' and 'body' and therefore need to be seen in terms of women's pursuit of self-definition, development and power negotiations within the progressive differentiation of society under change. Copyright © 1999 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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INTRODUCTION

Historical accounts suggest that in time past, anorexia nervosa had various other analogues. These historical equivalents were meant to fit the modern description of the anorexic syndrome. In the zealous search of history for anorexic similarities, analysts appeared to have failed to see that the changing meaning of the anorexic presentation, whether religious, political or medical is purely determined by the changing nature of the socio-cultural perceptions. Di Nicola (1990) referred to anorexia nervosa as a *cultural chameleon* that is shaped by the prevailing social and cultural conditions.

At certain times however a collision between history and culture will inevitably take place, ultimately producing forms that may appear distant from the familiar anorexic presentation and yet share with it the same socio-cultural substrate.

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The notion of the social predicament was therefore advanced as a possible model for understanding the changing nature of a particular phenomenon or set of symptoms over time. Predicaments, 'are painful social situations or circumstances, complex, unstable, morally charged and varying in their import in time and place' (Taylor, 1985). In this way the social predicament model could in theory enable us to better understand the diversity of cultural experiences and the significance of the 'context' as fundamental to their meaning. It could also help us unpack the metaphors within the anorexic symptoms to read their cultural connections and perhaps their possible parallelism (Di Nicola, 1990).

In anorexia, the cultural ideal of thinness was seen as a metaphor of woman's struggle against conflicting social definitions of femininity, combining desirable qualities of the new woman namely control with the qualities required from the traditional woman, i.e. attractiveness, weakness and helplessness (see e.g. Orbach, 1986; Gordon, 1990). The same metaphor is used here as a framework towards understanding this 'new veiling', arguing that it could in fact be a contemporary *anorexic equivalent*.

The communicative nature of the anorexic syndrome as means of control over one's body, is extended here to the act of veiling. Similar to anorexia, the new veiling is discussed as a possible method to help women cope with forces of change and contradictory sets of social conditions. The new veiling may appear at its face value as completely different, if not alien from the anorexic position. However in order to see its complex meaning, there is a need to go beyond the traditional Orientalist definition and perception of the veil and to depart from the Western static vision of women of the Orient. Macleod (1991) argued that the reversion to the veil was not simply a reactionary gesture, but indeed a new form of social action.

The significance of the veil as worthy of analysis is further strengthened by the fact that it is no longer restricted to the Middle East. The enthusiasm of young Moslem women of various national backgrounds all over the world to adopt this style of dress show that the phenomenon has acquired a global perspective (Nasser, 1997).

Both anorexia and the new veil are viewed here as forming 'systems of messages' conveyed through the *body*. In this analysis an attempt is made to de-code these messages and illustrate aspects of comparability between the two situations. The following three metaphors are discussed:

- (1) Obedience and protest/rebellion through conformity;
- (2) Moral discipline/moral quest;
- (3) Women's ambivalence about development/progress refusal.

The argument touches on the socio-dynamics of both positions with a view of elucidating the relationship between gender, societal forces and the impact of this on women's experience and the presentation of their distress.

REBELLION THROUGH CONFORMITY

In a profound and elegant social analysis of the 'new veiling' in Egypt, Macleod (1991) referred to it as an *accommodating protest*. A deliberate act of choice that makes a personal statement in response to conflicting pressures and competing cultural values. She described those women as being caught between a drive towards modernity, ambitious economic goals and traditional female identity, a similar analysis perhaps to that made of the anorexic position.

The new veiling in this context serves as a kind of problem solving in the face of global social forces including urbanization, global markets, the threat to national identity, the experience of discontinuity and the disappearance of traditional cultural idioms for articulating personal distress. The same forces have also been discussed in connection to the global spread of eating pathology (for detailed discussion refer to Nasser, 1997).

The gender specific nature of the veil clearly signifies division and sexual difference. By so doing it emphasizes gender boundaries and encourages beliefs and stereotypes in this respect. However, the adoption of this revised form of traditional dress is not meant to be an automatic revival of tradition, it clearly conveys a public message/statement, both about the wearer and about the relationship between the wearer and potential viewers. It defines the self in relation to the needs of others, thus substituting self-control for effective control of the world in which women exist. It therefore needs to be seen as a tactic of accommodation, albeit being of ambiguous symbolism.

Foucault (1977) saw individuals as the vehicles of power and the body as site where dissent is articulated. The anorexic position was taken as a form of body control assumed by women in the absence of real control or power in other areas of their life (Lawrence, 1984). Orbach (1986) described the anorexic dissent as finally leading to body rejection, so the dissenting gesture ends up being a coopted defeat!

In times of change women have consistently preferred individualized tactics of resistance of communicative nature rather than confrontational ones (Macleod, 1991). In response to conflicting gender roles against a backdrop of erosion of power, the act of veiling appears to be an individual choice within women's control which remains symbolic of their constraints as well.

Both veiling and anorexia are choices made by women with inherent contradiction, as both are individual/voluntary but also responsive to social pressures/dictates. Another curious aspect is the social contractability/transmission of both conditions, which was seen to be behind the concept of 'me-too-anorexics' (Bruch, 1985) and was also proposed as a possible explanation for the wide spread of veiling (Nasser, 1997). Despite the wish to hide behind anorexia or the veil, the girls in both situations are paradoxically conspicuous in any group setting. This is arguably thought to generate among the non-anorexic/the non-veiled spectators a sense of anxiety resulting from non-recognition ('I don't fit in') which is often translated into identification ('I want to be like that') motivated by a need for attention and more importantly group affiliation (Becker and Hamburg, 1996).

Both anorexia and the veil reflect inner conflict and convey distress, symbolic of struggle that looks like resignation, rebellion that takes the shape of conformity and resistance that is dressed in complicity. Despite different forms or guises, they still impart the same message of women's ambivalence and societal ambivalence about women's place and roles, an item that still dominates the cultural agenda world-wide and remains the subject of continuing debate.

THE MORAL QUEST

According to Lacan (1982), femininity, does not arise from the real of the body but from the way in which the female body is *signified* within a symbolic order. He argued

that the psychological evolution of femaleness into femininity, entails an act of *masquerading*. For it seems that the struggle to become a woman in a *psychological sense*, requires either hiding or camouflaging, aimed at covering the *anatomical femaleness* (for a critique of the Lacanian theory in this respect, refer to Malson, 1998).

Resonant to this is the anorexic ultra-thinness, which was viewed as a form of desexualization (Selvini-Pallazoli, 1974). The non-fertile look of extreme thinness also states a kind of non-reproductive sexuality (Bennet and Gurin, 1982)—referred to as a purge of femaleness (Gordon, 1990). In the same vein Lawrence (1979) advocated the concept of the 'anorexic shell' and Orbach (1986) referred to it as an extreme form of 'invisibility' that screams out.

If the 'Lacanian coverage' is considered instrumental to achieving femininity, it is nonetheless integral to both the anorexic dress and the veil, which clearly denies 'external femaleness'. The anorexics, 'appear to need to separate themselves from the environment. They need to define their own limits and set boundaries around themselves . . . being very thin seems to say to the world, I have sharp contours, I am not soft . . . I do not merge with you' (Lawrence, 1979).

In a traditional sense the veil is also nothing but a mobile curtain that automatically removes reminders of gender (even if ironically it still meant gender distinction). In both anorexia and the veil the focus is very much on 'appearance, which serves as a stand in for the "invisible" and acts as a form of communication between the wearer and the viewer' (Thompson, 1994).

However, anorexia as a denial of sexuality essentially begins with a denial of appetite and everything which appetite implies (Lawrence, 1984). It has been argued that Christian vigil against sin was also a vigil against fat (Schwartz, 1986).

At times of stress and confused cultural frameworks women were noted to search for spiritual references and were also found to readily engage in rather extreme religious rituals, and sometimes ceremonies that clearly reflect the concretization of the soul into the possessed body. These rituals may serve as tactics to help women resolve inner conflicts and achieve some sort of illusory peace (Lewis, 1971).

Turner (1984) called anorexia a form of *secular asceticism*, not dissimilar from the moral rebellion of the holy anorexic (Bell, 1985). The moral crusade of the anorexic and her strive for purity, are mirrored in the young woman's voluntary return to the veil. Each pursues her externally different but psychologically analogous and culturally approved objective with fanatical and compulsive devotion. Both are symbolic of woman's self-denial, self-control as well as her search for self-validation. The moral elevation and the sense of superiority the anorexic feels about her position are also echoed in the privileged motif of the veil which sets its wearer above the other non-wearers and demonstrates her capacity for self-discipline.

PROGRESS REFUSAL

In her own analysis of anorexia, Chernin (1986) put forward the idea of collective refusal of self-development ' . . . these echoes from history endure, perhaps they have extended so deeply into the fabric of our mind and being that they sound in our ears today . . . the silent background to the silent question about the legitimacy of female development'.

The voluntary choice of the veil clearly questions this legitimacy too. Both anorexia and the veil demonstrate women's confusion about the seriousness of society's intention towards their progress and the truly available opportunities for their development. These doubts are commonly highlighted during times of change when women's part in power relations becomes questionable and the possibility of either alterations or reproductions of inequality could be potential outcomes. However, the 'enveloping' nature of the anorexic cloak as well as the veil tend to impose constraints on imagination, thought and discussion ultimately leading to the 'reproduction of tradition'.

The contradictory parts played by women in fostering the reproduction of traditional social structures is sometimes seen as a manifestation of their alleged inability to cope with their own liberation or equality, where their supposed increased freedom is paradoxically experienced as a hardship. Notwithstanding the debate about whether anorexia or the veil are consequences of feminism (which women are not prepared for) or continued gender inequality, the fact remains that both gestures are derived from tradition and affirmative of it. Both represent an oscillation between development and regression. By so doing women unwittingly obstruct the potential for real change particularly with reference to proper revisions of gender, contributing therefore towards the continued reinforcement of the same gender inequality.

CONCLUSION

This brief analysis argued the similarities that do exist between anorexia and the new veil. In the wake of cultural changes world-wide, both situations do represent body politics and convey similar messages. They are forms of veiled resistance adopted by women who are torn between tradition and modernity. The reason however as why a young woman would choose the veil instead of the anorexic look is likely to be bound by a set of circumstances namely class and economic structures. In contrast to anorexia the veil was commonly seen as a choice made by women from lower middle class backgrounds, a mode of protest that is perhaps used by a subordinate group in response to inequalities of both class and gender (Macleod, 1991). However, it is important to acknowledge the difficulties encountered in determining socio-economic class and its relationship to level of education and personal wealth. This difficulty is more evident in societies that are currently undergoing major economic changes particularly those that are moving from State controlled to a free market economy (Nasser, 1997).

The paper also intended to point to the possible cultural variations on the anorexic theme and the role played by the global cultural forces, be it social, economic or political or altering the expression of distress and its relief, and in shaping social morbidity in general. It is also an attempt to integrate the cultural and the feminist perspectives, highlighting the predicament of other women who seem to face as well the same conflicts of modernity like their Western counterparts.

It is hoped, however, that this cultural confusion/cultural lag (symbolized in gestures like anorexia or the veil) would finally lead to a proper formulation of gender roles and a better development of a new identity for women that is more reconciled with itself and society.

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