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Subjectivity


Shiera S el-Malik



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CRITICAL IMAGINATIONS IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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SUBJECTIVITY

Shiera S. el-Mallik

A scholar's story

More than a decade ago, political theorist Norma Claire Moruzzi explained how she struggled to understand the representation of women in the Iranian film *Two Women* (Moruzzi 2001). Made by one of the few Iranian women filmmakers who is a self-identified feminist, the film depicts a woman whose stalker by the film's end kills her dominating, jealous husband. For Moruzzi, this film reproduced Orientalist stereotypes of Iranian women's subjugation. In her notes from the field, she expressed surprise that a large number of professional, articulate, urban women in Iran – women for whom Moruzzi expected the female lead's lack of agency would have been a problem – expressed an emotional attachment to the film. In responding to the fact that the film was heralded in Iran and internationally as a feminist achievement she asked, '[w]hat kind of feminist message was being conveyed by a film that depicted a woman who could be saved from her own passive victimisation only by the unexpected (violent) actions of a (crazily) devoted man?' (ibid.: 93). But rather than place the perceived disconnect between her response to the film and the response of women in Iran down to their false consciousness, Moruzzi kept trying to understand what was going on. She found her answer in subjectivities that were constituted in the events of a particular historical moment, the Iranian Revolution of 1979.

Women in Iran have become active participants in what can be understood as the public sphere. Their literacy levels, education levels and general rates of public participation mirror men's (ibid.: 93–94). Thus, the traditional explanations of Muslim women's subjugation or feminist emancipation did not fit the situation Moruzzi was trying to understand. She kept asking questions while she was in Iran. After extensive listening to how people discussed the film, she realised that the film spoke to a set of experiences related to the Revolution, the war with Iraq and the

development of the Islamic Republic that she could not have understood without having been there or without her continued inquiries. She learned that the film as seen by women in Iran was not an ahistorical drama of gender oppression as it had been read/viewed/experienced by her and other viewers outside the Iranian national context. Instead, it was understood as an 'accurate emotional representation of their own experience under the specific historical, cultural, and political conditions of the early years of the Islamic Republic' (ibid.: 95). The answer, then, turned out to be a uniquely Iranian perception of the political changes that had taken place in that country, during the decades prior to Moruzzi's 2001 query. Without reference to the context that created specific (and contested) Iranian women's subject positions, and from her own specifically constituted subject position, Moruzzi had struggled to understand the representation of women in the film. By continuing to ask questions that helped her to attend to the complexly located subjectivities of the film's Iranian protagonists and viewers, Moruzzi was able to move beyond the initial limits of her own subjective interpretation. In writing about that process, she made clear that the recognition of constituted subjectivities – and the engagement with the details of their constitution – was crucial to the doing of the research itself.

This story represents an example of a scholar trying to make sense of the world and recognising that her own contextual embeddedness inhibited her in that task. In this case, the researcher's own subjectivity rendered an explanation, but one that yielded a misunderstanding. Moruzzi recognised the limitation and used her understanding of subjectivity to critically imagine how this misunderstanding occurred and to try to explain it. Underlying Moruzzi's struggle are ethico-political commitments that made her likely to observe the subject as both *contextually embedded* and *historically contingent*, and simultaneously *remain cognisant of her own subjectivity*. Moruzzi's story exposes the critical potential of the concept of subjectivity. Her recognition of how widely subjectivities can vary led her to continue to ask questions rather than to retreat to easy explanation. The important point is that she refused to apply to her observations, her own, arguably internationally dominant, form of sense-making.

Subjectivity represents a situatedness in power dynamics that yields variable forms, the contours of which are formed by sometimes very localised contextual relations, dynamics and ideologies. Subjectivities, then, are layered over time by experiences, practices and other historical contingencies. As a result, the concept of subjectivity can facilitate analyses of world politics and in particular a retheorising of the notion of 'the political' (Jenkins et al. 1999) that is both *wifred* and *relational*. This makes the notion of subjectivity useful for analysing how people and communities are embedded in specific contexts and how they perform in those contexts (Biehl et al. 2007). Subjectivity is also useful, as Moruzzi illustrates, in thinking about how people's interactions with the world can produce that world through daily instances of micro-power dynamics (de Certeau 1984). The small, interpersonal, and seemingly inconsequential dynamics between Moruzzi and her Iranian interlocutors emerged as quite consequential after all for answering the

question Moruzzi was seeking to answer. In the Iranian context, viewers of the film did not 'make sense' of the film as anti-feminist. Instead, the film was read as an allegorical acknowledgement of women's personal and political experiences as women in (post)revolutionary Iran.

The concept of subjectivity has great radical potential, particularly when the power dynamics that constitute the subject are centred in research questions such as that Moruzzi depicts. From this angle, subjectivity points to the broader power dynamics that are the conditions of its specific possibilities. As Parnian writes, 'For power to act there has to be a subject, but that does not make the subject into the origin of power' (Parnian 1999: 171). The embodied subject, in this case the Iranian woman of a certain age, can act as a site or nodal point in which dynamics of power can be made visible (see Abrahamson in this book). This approach both highlights the limitations of a state-centric approach to the study of world politics and answers Himadeep Muppidi's provocation for such studies to recognise bodies – their stench, their pain, their utterances – as evidence of ripples of power in the world, as global power dynamics (Muppidi 2012: 3–7). In other words, people matter to explanations of world politics and subjectivity helps to unpack *how* people matter.

This chapter utilises a theory of constituted subjectivities as a lens to analyse macrological and micrological features of power through the discussion of several parallel discursive examples of controversies over Muslim women's (lack of) agency. Leila Ahmed's classic analysis of the historical debate on veiling in colonial Egypt is linked to two more contemporary eruptions of similar arguments on Islamic veiling: the academic 'Galeotti/Moruzzi' conversation that took place in the journal *Political Theory* (1993–1994), and Femen's social media arguments over Topless Jihad. I suggest that the critical potential of subjectivity in (re)thinking IR is that it can account for how *macrological power* – systemic forces, authority and governance – and *micrological power* – everyday negotiations and navigations – simultaneously represent the subject and are represented by subjects. Veiling or not veiling is an especially apposite practice for examining subjectivity because the discussions of the practice reveal the 'colonial signs of international relations' (Muppidi 2012). Discourses and other relational configurations are important, but the degree to which we can ever 'study' them is beholden to the centring of people's everyday practices.

For the purpose of this analysis, I consider the veil a social signifier – which like the brassiere is an item of clothing generally worn by females – that is neither necessarily oppressive nor necessarily a political statement (although available for politicisation in certain contexts). For the sake of simplicity, I use the term 'veil' to cover the gamut of coverings that Muslim women use. Considered together, these examples of arguments over veiling demonstrate how subjectivity can illuminate the functions of power, not only in controversies over gender and Islam, but within the relations between subjects and objects – which are themselves subjects – within the research and analytic process.

Unveiling a discourse on women

An early debate on veiling

Leila Ahmed's historiographical account of the first major debate on women and veiling in Egypt is illustrative of how an essentially new discourse on women emerges, 'in which issues of culture and class, and imperialism and nationalism, became vitally entangled with the issue of women' (Ahmed 1992: 6).¹ Her depiction of this new discourse on women is particularly important for its framing of every political discussion of the veil since the nineteenth century, including the two examples that follow.

The Egyptian ruler Mohammed Ali's (r. 1805–1848) desire for modernisation resulted in substantial policy changes during his tenure (ibid.: 130–135). While these changes impacted citizens unequally, they were framed as prerequisites for the development of a strong nation, which was then perceived as the European model and based on developing industrial technologies and production. One important policy change related to education. In the early nineteenth century, demands for girls' education were frequently justified with the argument that 'modern' countries educate females.² Despite this, female education remained fairly exceptional and the government was less successful with extending it to public primary and secondary schools. However, many private girls' schools opened during the mid-nineteenth century: European missionary schools, but also Coptic, Greek and Jewish schools. Upper- and middle-class Muslim girls were frequently home schooled (ibid.: 135). By the 1870s, the government opened girls' public primary and secondary schools.

The arrival of the British (in 1882) had a distinctly negative impact on girls' education as the British either closed girls' schools or raised fees to such an extent that a family had to choose which child would be educated. Yet, the British Consul Lord Cromer and the imperial establishment used ideas of gender relations and roles to legitimise and justify the colonisation of Egypt in the late nineteenth century. Ahmed summarises Cromer as follows:

Whereas Christianity teaches respect for women, and European men 'elevated' women because of the teachings of their religion, Islam degraded them, Cromer wrote, and it was to this degradation, most evident in the practices of veiling and segregation, that the inferiority of Muslim men could be traced. Nor could it be doubted that the practices of veiling and seclusion exercised 'a baneful effect on Eastern society. The arguments in the case are, indeed, so commonplace that it is unnecessary to dwell on them.' (Cromer in Ahmed 1992: 153)

It was essential that Egyptians 'be persuaded or forced into imbibing the true spirit of western civilisation' (ibid.). Cromer stated, and to achieve this it was essential to change the position of women in Islam, for it was Islam's degradation of women, expressed in the practices of veiling and seclusion, that was 'the fatal obstacle' to

the Egyptian's 'attainment of that elevation of thought and character which should accompany the introduction of Western civilisation' (ibid.), only by abandoning those practices might they attain 'the mental and moral development which he [Cromer] desired for them' (Guerville in Ahmed 1992: 153; Ahmed 1992: 152-153).

Whether or not one really *believes* this is Cromer's motivation, colonisation on the pretext of female emancipation is discursively powerful. The idea that one conception of the social subject, distinct from the Victorian Christian moral subject, served to hinder the development of 'civilised' people, places a great burden on the colonisers to work for the salvation of others. Colonisation was essentially an economic mission, but the Orientalist notion of a civilising mission neutralised the ethical problems of restructuring whole economies (so that they became based on the needs of Europe). Colonialism became the white man's burden. This is part of the discursive context within which particular subjectivities are produced (Mitchell 1993).

Ironically, Cromer co-opted the language of imperial feminism in order to legitimise the process of colonisation, while concomitantly implementing policies curtailing women's educational opportunities in Egypt. He raised school fees, which limited general enrolment, and restricted the women's medical school to midwifery, for example (Ahmed 1992: 153). Ahmed notes this irony when she writes, as imperial Britain 'contest[ed] the claims of feminism, and decided and rejected the ideas of feminism and the notion of men's oppressing women with respect to itself, it captured the language of feminism and redirected it, in the service of colonialism' (ibid.: 151). Thus, using feminist rhetoric, Cromer argued that women were oppressed by men in Egypt. He claimed imperial Britain's burden was in part to spread enlightened ideals and emancipate the women. These conflicting articulations of gendered modernity impacted Egyptian nationalism and yielded a bifurcated response represented by two Egyptian men.

Qasim Amin and Muhammad 'Abdu represent the Western-oriented response and the Islamist-oriented response to British colonialism respectively. These positions directly influenced the two strands of Egyptian feminism. Qasim Amin published his book, *Tahrir al-Mar'a* (*The Liberation of Women*) in 1899. He argued for women's primary education and for reforming laws on polygamy and divorce, ideas that were neither new nor extremely controversial. Amin further argued for cultural and social transformation, proposing the abolition of the veil as a way to accomplish such a goal. His discursive foundations are no different than Cromer's. In his reviews regarding veiling, however, Amin courted controversy. He writes:

[W]hen [the colonisers] encounter savages they eliminate them or drive them from the land, as happened in America ... and is happening now in Africa ... When they encounter a nation like ours, with a degree of civilisation, with a past, and a religion ... and customs and ... institutions ... they deal with its inhabitants kindly. But they do soon acquire its most valuable resources, because they have greater wealth and intellect and knowledge and force.

(quoted in Ahmed 1992: 155-156)

Amin implies that countries can be categorised on a scale from savage to civilised with the argument that unless Egypt attempts to achieve a greater degree of civilisation, the colonisers will take all its resources. For Amin, as for Cromer, this civilising scale is directly correlated with versions of womanhood and femininity. Amin suggests that men are nothing but what their mothers make them and women require liberation so that they can raise capable men. Since he reserved contempt for all save the British, Amin's book was controversial. Yet, according to Ahmed, Amin reserved his greatest contempt for Egyptian women:

Most Egyptian women are not in the habit of combing their hair everyday ... nor do they bathe more than once a week. They do not know how to use a toothbrush and do not attend to what is attractive in clothing, though their attractiveness and cleanliness strongly influence men's inclinations. They do not know how to rouse desire in their husband, nor how to retain his desire or to increase it ... This is because the poor ignorant woman does not understand inner feelings and the promptings of attraction and aversion ... If she tries to rouse a man, she will usually have the opposite effect.

(Amin quoted in Ahmed 1992: 157)

This diatribe on women is noteworthy in that Amin draws from modern ideas of national progress, the discourse of evolution and conceptions of femininity, and locates them in an embodied subject position. Elsewhere, he also draws from modern conceptions of masculinity when he discusses Egyptian laziness and the value of a man who works hard and reads to inform himself (Ahmed 1992: 155-165). Yet, because of his emphasis on unveiling and primary education for women, Amin is positioned as a feminist and a father of Egyptian feminism, or, rather, the Westernised strand of Egyptian feminism.

Concomitantly, Muhammad 'Abdu influenced what would become the Islamist strand of Egyptian feminism. While Amin argued for modernising Islam, 'Abdu argued that the problem was not Islam; it was cultural (ibid.: 138-143). The essence of 'Abdu's argument was that existing regulation of women's behaviour resulted not from the Qur'an, but from corruptions and misinterpretations of the Qur'an. He argued for a rejection of the backwardness that prevailed when women could not choose whom to marry, did not have access to education, were not allowed to hold a job and could be one of a number of wives. This backwardness, he argued, has no basis in Islam, but was based instead in the patriarchal cultural traditions of Egypt. 'Abdu suggests that the best move for Egypt, as an Islamic nation, is based on a progressive interpretation of the essentials of Islam. He was a student of the influential Islamic scholar, al-Sayyid Jamal Al-Din al-Afghani. Al-Afghani stressed the necessity of 'reforming Islam from within and adapting it to the modern world as a way of protecting Muslim societies against western aggression and exploitation' (ibid.: 138). Similarly, 'Abdu 'deplored ... the facile, unthinking imitation of Western ways ... instead of the pursuit of a genuine transfer of knowledge and real social reform' (ibid.: 140). He argued for the

continued veiling of women under the aegis that Westernisation was dangerously eroding cultural norms and values. As we shall see, the debate resulted in politically formalising the connection between the veil and culture in a way that does not occur when women politicised bra-wearing, for example, perhaps because of the way that the veil has been exoticised.

These two sets of arguments are discursively powerful. They represent a form of macrological power that partially contours the context within which women choose to veil or to not veil. Subjectivity places this context at the centre of the analysis. And, attendance to the notion of subjectivity makes it easier to see the spaces within which people conduct themselves. The next section will show how subjectivity and its insistence on context helps to prevent foreclosures of imaginative possibilities that potentially yield misreadings of people's action.

The Headscarf Affair (1989)

In a French example, known as 'the Headscarf Affair', three North African-descended young women decided to cover their heads, which meant that they would be wearing veils at all times outside their homes, including at school. A scholarly analysis of this event can be found in a four-part conversation between Anna Elisabetta Galeotti and Norma Claire Moruzzi in the journal *Political Theory*. Galeotti used the Headscarf Affair as an entry point into a discussion of the need for totality to be considered a political virtue (Galeotti 1993: 588). To the extent that Galeotti 'reads' the teenagers' action, she did so from a liberal multiculturalist standpoint that evidences an essentialised notion of identity. She suggested that the teenagers declared 'I want to be what I am and I am proud of it' (ibid.: 596). Galeotti further represented this position when she stated that 'when Muslim girls became students, the equal treatment they received as *students* was unequal to them as *Islamic students*' (ibid.: 599; emphasis in original). Here, Islamic was understood as (an essentialist) religious identity rather than a complex and contested, relational component of the context within which the students were constituted.

In utilising the trope of the veil as a manifestation of religious identity, Galeotti homogenised the meaning of the veil in separate events. For example, she refers to the hijab the young women chose to wear in France as a 'chador', which is a specifically Iranian form of covering that women were required to wear after the Revolution. From an analytic perspective, her approach to veiling as a singular practice equates it in as disparate contexts as late 1980s France and late 1970s Iran. However, these practices of veiling are not necessarily equivalent. In the first instance, young women made a decision in a specific context to present themselves with covered heads, the meaning of which would require unpacking within the French context. In the second instance, a government made legal requirements of some of its citizens thereby limiting their own decision-making capacity in a very different context. Placing meaning in the veil (in the fabric and in the practice of wearing it) flattens context to meaningless background, thereby impairing conceptual capacities for evaluating agency as decision-making (and political stand-making)

with resultant political implications. It makes it hard to examine veiling as a varied and grounded practice undertaken by actual people.

Galeotti argues in favour of the students being allowed to cover their heads in school. While in agreement with Galeotti's conclusion, Moruzzi argued that 'the significance of *P'affaire du foulard* [the Headscarf Affair] was precisely that it exposed the limitations of a metadiscourse based on political rights, and the structural predispositions of liberal ideology that led, as often as not, to a position opposed to toleration' (Moruzzi 1994a: 654). Moruzzi charged Galeotti with inserting a dangerous ideological platform into her liberal multiculturalist analysis, which is evidenced by the latter's ahistorical take on veiling as a cultural practice of identity. For Moruzzi, the Headscarf Affair was unique insofar as 'it provided a remarkably apt constellation of complications through which to trace, if not unravel, some of the more urgent tangles of contemporary political identity' (ibid.: 656). Moruzzi (ibid.) goes on to develop a rich analysis of 'The Affair', the anxieties it raised in the French Left and Right, and the irresolvable tensions it revealed in a particular historical moment. All the while, Galeotti (1993) avoided contextualising the teenagers' decision and so presupposed that the teenagers were communicating an ahistorical identity, rather than any number of communiqués female teenagers might have expressed in a Parisian industrial suburb in 1989. Moreover, in privileging a dominant discourse regarding veiling – that of cultural identity – Galeotti participated in drawing the academic debate, and scholarly explanations of the social, away from other potential explanations of the practice. Moruzzi offers an explanation of how this happens:

Without a fixed ideological compass, we stumble through political terrain made unfamiliar, relying on theoretical interpretations that may obscure more than they enlighten. Unfortunately, the response to this aporia is often a retreat to a revised form of the old East/West binary opposition in which the Eastern threat is no longer communist but Islamic, and Western values are still democratic but are also emphatically, ostensibly secular. (Moruzzi 1994a: 666)

In other words, a tension exists between people's action on (perhaps unfamiliar to the researcher) political terrain and the available theoretical interpretations of that action. Responses to this tension are not extra-ideological, as Moruzzi displays in her own experience of managing such a tension. Hence, it is precisely the evidence of Galeotti's liberal multiculturalist position that Moruzzi targets. For her part, Galeotti (1994) misunderstands Moruzzi's concerns in her rebuttal and continues to argue for a pluralistic view of toleration, to which Moruzzi suggests a 'fear of a homogeneous Islamic threat is what created the affair of the headscarves as a national issue' (Moruzzi 1994b: 679). A reading of this case through a lens provided by the notion of subjectivity would have kept the students, their utterances, families, local context, etc., front and centre in explanations or analyses of it. But Moruzzi notes, and despite her own efforts to keep them in focus, the different

attitudes, backgrounds and nationalities [the subjectivities] of the students and their families, differences which shaped the local incident, disappeared in the national debate' (ibid.).

The topless jihad

In March 2013, nineteen-year-old Tunisian, Amna Tyler, posted online topless photos of herself on Facebook and added to a public debate about Muslim women's veiling (Greenhouse 2013). In one picture, she had written on her torso, 'My body is my own and not the source of anyone's honor'. In another picture, she'd written 'Fuck your morals' across her chest. As a challenge to dominant forms of sexual differentiation that she viewed as regulating women's bodies with notions of honour and morality, Tyler intended to start up a chapter of Femen (a Ukrainian-based international women's movement that uses breast-baring as a tactic of resistance) in Tunisia. In what seems like a serious overreaction, she was quickly disowned by her family and institutionalised. She was physical, assaulted and received death threats. Exacerbating the event, an Islamist cleric was reported to have said that 'Amna's action could cause "epidemics and disasters" and "could be contagious and give ideas to other women"' (Tyler 2013b). And, Femen launched a 'Topless Jihad' in support of Tyler. In response, a Muslim Woman Facebook page has as its cover photo a woman carrying a poster that says 'Nudity DOES NOT liberate me and I DO NOT need saving #muslimpride #Femen' (www.facebook.com/MuslimWomenAgainstFemen).

Placing social meaning in the veil, Femen leader Inna Shevchenko said in conversation with blogger Laila Alawa, 'How can you wear your scarf with so much pride ... like it's the hat of Che Guevara? It symbolises blood and all the crimes that are based on your religion, even if you don't support them ... If you're a feminist, if you're for liberation, then be brave [enough] to say that we are against that and take off your scarf until the moment that your scarf will not be a symbol of crime' (Tyler 2013a). Further, she posited that 'the idea of a Muslim feminist is oxymoronic' (ibid.). Journalist Jeffrey Tyler argued that 'Femen has courageously broken rules and enlivened the debate over religion's role in our world' (Tyler 2013b). Others argue that by equating the veil with oppression, Femen's platform universalised and decontextualised the *practice of veiling* in the process of 'imposing their brand of feminism' (Daher and Daher 2013).³ Arguably, while assertive responses to the violent reactions to Amna Tyler are politically and ethically appropriate, simultaneously reading the veil as essentially oppressive discerns practices of veiling (as well as practices of baring one's head) from their specific contexts.

An approach that centres subjectivity alternatively insists on specific contexts and on listening to utterances as we saw in earlier sections. Such an approach might start with questions that not only interrogate the Tunisian context in which Tyler posted her photos, but the local context from which Femen and Shevchenko's interpretive positions emerged. Such questions might include: Who is Femen? What are the conditions that make Femen possible? What is the context that gives

form to the particular stance on breast-baring, a practice that could vary widely in comparative significance and consequence? Reportage of the 'Topless Jihad' includes some clues that help make sense of the organisation. Preliminary analyses might point to the following: Femen's emergence out of resistance to local sex-trafficking sheds different light on the tactic of breast-baring (Salem 2012); and its emergence in post-Soviet Ukraine, a place where liberal multiculturalism has few roots, seems to explain its disregard for political correctness (Tyler 2013a). Shevchenko's attitudes to 'religious symbols' like the cross and the veil reveal new contours when one learns that she is facing charges of 'offending religious sentiment' for destroying a cross and fleeing to France (ibid.). An interesting question might ask how Shevchenko understands Eastern Orthodox religious symbols like the cross and what are the mechanisms by which she reads an 'Islamic' practice of veiling as a symbol through those grounded forms of sense-making.

Shevchenko's attitude toward veiling reflects a direct lineage to the terms of the ideologically driven debate that were established in late nineteenth-century Egypt on the foundations of conversations that came before it. Contemporary theorists still have to negotiate this legacy and its politics in their analyses of everyday decisions such as that of veiling or not veiling. The acts of listening and questioning are active and participatory processes that incorporate the subjective positions of the listener. Subjective positions, whether of interpretation or as interpreter, are constituted within a particular context, the making of which is an act of discursive power. Here, the notion of subjectivity facilitates relational analyses that work against discursive closures and de-centre the totalised subject (a fixed subject rather than relational subjective positions). These include the relations of power that led to a young Amna Tyler to present her body in the way that she did, the practices that led to her maltreatment and that give form to the practices that situated Femen as a widely recognised respondent and spokesperson for this case. Shevchenko's sweeping comments about veiling and Galeotti's (mis)conception of the individual (in reference to the French teenagers) as 'extra-ideological', makes it hard to sense how people constitute their own actions, and reveals more about the speakers themselves than the supposed subjects of their analysis.

Subjectivity and epistemic violence

An episteme is a recurring discourse 'characteristic of the way of thinking or the state of knowledge at any one time, appearing across a range of texts, and as forms of conduct, at a number of different institutional sites within society' (Hall 2001: 73). In other words, an episteme is a system of understanding that gives form to the contours of knowledge. Silences, marginality and discursive closures at this systemic level are forms of epistemic violence. Foucault (1988) presents this idea of epistemic violence using as an example the redefinition of sanity in eighteenth-century Europe. Acknowledging him and his focus on Europe, Spivak later asks 'what if that particular redefinition was only part of a vast two-handed engine?' (Spivak 1988: 17). What if it was a two-handed engine that reconfigured the knowledge

landscape of Europe and the colonies by creating a new form of social order? Given Aimé Césaire's dismissal of the geographic or cultural divide between the colonisers and the colonised, Spivak's question is on point. Césaire argued that epistemic violence in Europe and its working in the colonies were part and parcel of the same social disease (Césaire 2000). Edward Said developed a similar position in *Orientalism*, which he argued was a discourse of power in a Foucauldian sense. I have argued elsewhere that less attention is paid to his analysis of knowledge practices, which get embodied in ways that can be understood as subjectivity (el-Mallik 2015: 508–510). I have shown that far from being an historical text about colonialism, *Orientalism* (1978) is addressed to a contemporary audience in the context of growing American hegemony and expanding networks of capital, media and globally intelligible norms. Thus, the relationship between Orientalism and everyday decision-making is one that connects discourse and representation and hegemonic knowledge practices through social norms, media and other processes of socialisation.

Said made two arguments in *Orientalism* that are particularly helpful for thinking about subjectivity. He argued that Orientalism is a discourse of power that mediates all representations of 'the Orient' regardless of where these representations emanate. Orientalism results in a set of lenses through which every discussion of, or interaction with, the Orient is negotiated. Arguments 'for' the Orient, 'against' the Orient and 'critical' approaches to examinations of the onto-epistemological space of the Middle East and North Africa must all negotiate Orientalism. Certainly, no analysis of the veil (as worn by Muslim women) can avoid Orientalist and counter-Orientalist readings of veiling. Arguably, the discourse of Orientalism mediates the discourse of identity itself. Contemplate, for example, the staying power of Orientalist tropes that a global consumer public easily recognises, from Mickey Rooney's Chinese character in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (2006), the genre in *I Dream of Jeannie* (1965–1970), to the Arab Terrorist in any number of films and television shows as noted in *Real Bad Arabs* (2006), or the character of the Arab woman consumer in *Sex and the City 2* (2010) in which the 'girls' go to Abu Dhabi. However, Said also argued that Orientalism is epistemic in that it carries certain properties that scholars have come to associate with hegemonic knowledge practices (for example, binary thinking, flattening context across time and space, and extracting the observer from observable phenomenon) (Said 1978: 116–119 and 149–156). Subjectivities are constituted within and in conjunction with these epistemic practices, as Moruzzi illustrates when she studies her own initial reading of the Iranian film *Two Women*. She shows her readers both how easily such readings can occur and how to interrupt them through practices of querying and listening.

The constitution of subjectivity

To examine the question of how everyday decision-making gets embodied, enacted and re-enacted, one might point to the idea of practice (e.g. dressing, waking, etc.) as subjectivities performed, experienced and resisted (de Certeau

1984). Often, questions of exploitation and dominance are discussed as macro-level questions. Yet, these workings of power are also micro-level in that people engage in action. Starkly juxtaposed answers might say the structure dictates agency or that agency rests in agents, or that the agent acts within a structure. These attempts centre a totalised or determined subject (again, a fixed rather than relational subjectivities). An alternate approach might start from the relationship; it might suggest that relationships reflect historically contingent and contextually embedded subjectivities. From this angle, the agent/structure divide is itself ideologically constituted, and thereby serves specific dynamics of power. In other words, the agency-structure divide comes to appear as just one outcome of sense-making. One might either focus on that specific way of making sense of the world, or on the processes by which sense-making takes place. I am suggesting the latter. By situating subjectivities in a specific context, the notion of subjectivity makes the constitution of structure and agency visible in that context.

Such a critical approach accounts for how macrological power and micrological power simultaneously represent the subject and considers how those power relations re-represent the subject in response to other representations such that the movement between representation and re-representation appears negligible (as in a tug of war between fairly equal sides) (Spivak 1988: 279). This approach would avoid centring a totalised subject and yet still attend to the macrological aspects of power (ibid.: 264). In other words, processes of identity-making involve acts of conferring and claiming positions. When these acts are obscured, the constitutive moment is similarly obscured and 'identity' appears complete. One might think about it like this: in contemporary parlance, identity is a commonsense term. Everyone has one. It might be used to make social or political claims. Or it might designate a community. But subjectivity might be used to examine 'identity' itself as a product of contemporary political debates.

Returning to the discussion in the introduction, Moruzzi's experience illustrates how, in presupposing a subject and variability of subjectivity, in privileging a complete a priori identity, it would be possible to flatten the specificity of experience. Articulations of the sovereign subject, already presuppose a subject, thus questions of ideology and representation are necessary in order to destabilise that subject, and to disengage from the apparently fixed positions. This is necessary because the 'subject' here is,

[C]uriously sewn together into a transparency by denegations, belongs to the exploiters' side of the international labour. It is impossible for French intellectuals to imagine the kind of Power and Desire that would inhabit the unnamed subject of the Other of Europe. It is not only that everything they read, critical or uncritical, is caught within the debate of the production of that Other, supporting or critiquing the constitution of the Subject as Europe. It is also that, in the constitution of that Other of Europe, great care was taken to obliterate the textual ingredients with which such a subject could cohere,

could occupy (invest?) its itinerary – not only by ideological and scientific production, but also by the institution of the law.

(Spivak 1988: 263–264)

The result of epistemic violence, then, is that the 'other' is rendered unknown, erased or delimited to only a very specific existence; the Other only exists as part of the colonised/coloniser relationship. In keeping with the focus on veiling, analyses of the veiled Muslim woman appear divested of the politics that are the very condition of possibility of her existence and her subjectivity.

Conclusion

This chapter explores a theory of subjectivity by theorising actual examples rather than presenting an overview of theorists. I suggest that the critical potential of subjectivity in (re)thinking IR is that it can account for how macrological power – systemic forces, authority and governance – and micrological power – everyday negotiations and navigations – simultaneously represent people as subjects and are represented by the people and their practices. This chapter presents this claim with a reading of three discussions of veiling: nineteenth-century colonial Egypt, the 1989 'Headscarf Affair', and the 2013 Femen breast baring campaign. Together, these three examples expose the practice of veiling as ideologically laden, and heavy with a powerful historical weight. The act of veiling can be considered a sign of gendered practice that is a consequence of a specific historical context. Further, people's decisions to cover their heads as Muslims or as a feminine practice in certain contexts can be shown to produce various and potentially contradictory meanings. This chapter brings to the fore the combination of these understandings of veiling in order to consider the creative potential of the concept of subjectivity.

A critical approach to IR might use 'subjectivity' to account for the ways in which subjectivities are constituted within a complex nexus of conditions of possibility that include questions of race, gender and class, but also, nationality, citizenship, religion, disposition, and so on, in specific moments in time and space. Yet, a critical approach to subjectivity in IR would also begin from the position that subjectivity is constituted in very messy ways that impact how people act in ways that are not necessarily predictable and *not only linked to visible categorical framings* of 'race', 'gender', 'nationality', and 'citizenship', etc. Attending to subjectivity in this way makes contestation explicable and reorients the researcher towards substantive and historicised contexts within which subjectivities are constituted. In other words, the notion of subjectivity centres specific practices, including the practice of devising and asking questions, that presents a challenge to the epistemic violence of knowledge practices. Future work might consider approaching events like those discussed here in ways that develop a complex account for how these positions and arguments come to be articulated in the ways that they do.

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Notes

- 1 This discussion did not occur outside the colonial experience, and hence the local response was caged within a particularly British Orientalist vision of Egyptian society.
- 2 One of the most successful results of this was the women's medical school in Cairo, which opened its doors in the early 1830s.
- 3 The branding point is interesting given that Shevchenko says 'Women's bodies are used for things like selling beer or fast cars all the time ... but we are using our own bodies to promote our own idea about our own freedom. There is no boss who is selling our bodies to earn money' (Tiwari 2013). Her comment points to practices related to a specific context, one that commodifies and consumes women's bodies.

Further reading

- Cullman, Patrick (2005) *Imaginative Travellers: Letters between Bessie Head, Patrick and Mphahlele Cullman, 1963–1977*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press. These letters reflect the thoughtful response of people living through (in very different ways) the violence of South African Apartheid. I find it to be illustrative of the variability of subjectivities. In particular, Bessie Head's writing evinces a unique recognition of the relationship between the complexities of the historical moment and people's sense of self in that context.
- Davies, C.B. (1994) *Black Women, Writing, and Identity: Migrations of the Subject*. London: Routledge. This volume presents a reading of subjectivity that centres on the position, role and utterances of the 'black female' subject in different locations. I find it useful for its focus on the people's engagement with their locale which is important for thinking about how subjectivities are embodied and variable in their embodiment.
- Hassan, S. (2013) *Muslims in Exile: A Visionary Modernist*. London: Tate Publishing. This volume represents the Tate Modern's first exhibition dedicated to African Modernism. Some threads of my thinking about subjectivity clicked for me as I wandered through the paintings of a Sudanese artist, ex-politician, past detainee of the Sudanese government. This exhibition and this publication are reminders of the different forms that critical theoretical interventions can take.
- Mansfield, N. (2000) *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway*. St. Leonards, New South Wales: Allen and Unwin. This volume traces the idea of 'I' and its connection to broader sets of shared ideas. Mansfield curates and presents a wide range of approaches in a format accessible for beginners in critical social theory.
- Martino, W. and Rezaei-Rashti, G. (2008) 'The Politics of Veiling, Gender, and the Muslim Subject: On the Limits and Possibilities of Anti-racist Education in the Afghani of September 11', *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 29(3): 417–431. This article connects with the analysis presented here in its focus on veiling and subjectivity. It is a creative analysis of how these practices/ideas intersect in post 9/11 discussions of the Muslim subject.

Mengestu, D. (2007) *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears*, New York: Riverhead Books. This is one of the most incredible presentations of the meeting of different subjectivities that I have ever read. The novel explores human agency and interactions within frames of immigration, gentrification, race and tenderness.

Said, E. (1983) *The World the Text and the Critic*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. This book offers much to students of social theory. I find it particularly helpful for contemplating how ideas 'travel' and transform in different contexts. This is also helpful for historicizing forms of subjectivity, performances and how people make claims.

Srozier, R. (2002) *Female, Subjectivity, and Identity: Historical Constructions of Subject and Self*, Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press. This book presents a helpful reading of the notion of subjectivity as related to the work of Michel Foucault. Foucault's careful historical analyses of discursive power offer a useful frame for thinking about how one might conceive of subjectivity as embedded within discursive power and yet also performed.

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