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## Visible under the Veil: Dissimulation, performance and agency in an Islamic public space

Julie Billaud<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This paper seeks to characterize new meanings attached to women's veiling in an Islamic public space, drawing from observations, interviews and field notes collected among various women's groups in Afghanistan. It is argued that while the *chadari* - or *burqa*, as the Western press miscalled it, using the Urdu denomination- has become the ultimate symbol of women's oppression for Western audiences, it is necessary to take a closer look at its multiple and often contradictory uses and to contextualise the reasons for its maintenance, despite the downfall of the Taliban regime. Ethnographic research demonstrates that women who are attempting to access public spaces have developed creative strategies of dissimulation to get public recognition. They have become visible under the veil and have sometimes been able to challenge gender hierarchies behind the appearance of compliance and conformity. These findings challenge liberal ideas according to which women's visibility in public spaces is a necessary guarantee for their emancipation and their agency. In the context of foreign military occupation and increased insecurity, control by the state of women's appearance in public settings is to be understood as a means to assert sovereignty and to preserve a sense of national autonomy. As in earlier colonial encounters, an area of cultural resistance has developed around women's bodies that constrain the modalities of women's re-entry in the public sphere. As a result, women have been left with no other choice but to adapt and find alternative ways to make their voice heard. This means, in practice, that veiling and bodywork in general are to be read as feminine performances destined to manage others' impressions and not as mere acts of obedience to religious prescriptions.

*Key words:* veil, power, gender

*Khâ I na-shawi raswâ amrang-ejamâ'at bâsh*  
*Not to be considered strange, conform to the crowd*  
- Persian proverb

I came for the second time to Afghanistan in 2007, four years after my first journey in 2003-2004, in order to study the modalities and conditions of women's re-entry in the public domain. Since my first journey, the political situation had dramatically worsened with the insurgency gaining in strength all over the country. As a result, I was not surprised to discover that not only the *chadari*<sup>2</sup> had not disappeared from the streets

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<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I consistently use the word *chadari* instead of *burqa* since it is the term that Afghan women themselves use to refer to this all-enveloping robe. *Chadari* is an Afghan term. *Burqa* is a word hardly ever used by Afghans.

of Kabul, but also that women, in certain districts of the city, tended to veil more. This trend was perceived as problematic and worrying for Western constituencies, since it challenged the scenario that had been designed prior to the military intervention. In this scenario, women, once liberated, would naturally throw away their 'mobile prisons' and enjoy their newly acquired freedom by venturing *burqa*-free outside of their homes.

Indeed, after 9/11, the West has been bombarded with images of Afghan women covered from head to toe under their blue *chadari*. The *chadari* suddenly became the symbol of women's oppression, making Afghan women's bodies markers of their absolute 'otherness'. As a result of these discourses, the necessity to 'lift the veil'<sup>3</sup> was an argument used to gather public support for the military intervention. Seven years after the intervention of the coalition forces, as security continues to worsen and the Karzai government is attempting to bring the insurgents/Taliban to the negotiations table, women have tended to re-veil and use dissimulation instead of exposure as a safer strategy to reach the public.

In the West, visibility and power have been defined as synonymous terms rather than as historically related positions. This is because, as Silverstein (2008, 119) puts it, "the institutionalization of a distinction between the public and the private is considered central to the functioning of liberal political culture, as is the situating of religion in the private." Social scientists (Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974; Ortner 1996) have tended to analyse gender relations in other societies through the prism of the public/domestic divide and to explain the 'universal subordination of women' through women's relegation to the domestic domain and their 'invisibility' in the public realm. However, as much as these categories might be useful to describe women's situation in Western societies, they largely misrepresent and ignore the position of women living in Muslim societies. In Afghanistan, masculine and feminine spheres of influence are segregated and oftentimes, complementary<sup>4</sup> and religion is not alienated from other spheres of life. Of course, the state-imposed compulsory veiling of women, under the *mujjahedin* regime and later on, the Taliban, has made of the *chadari* an instrument for controlling women's presence in the public domain together with a symbol of masculine domination. But normatively, women's veiling is a religious sign of modesty, the marker of gender segregation and it should not be systematically read as a sign of women's oppression.

In this paper, I discuss the different and contradictory meanings attached to women's veiling practices and dissimulation strategies: Where and when are women using *chadari* and for what purposes? Who are the women who are not wearing it? How are these signs read and interpreted in public spaces? Through an analysis of women's self-presentation, I underline the complex ways in which women are attempting to become legitimate actors in the public sphere.

Scholars working on gender in Islam have often interpreted the various styles of veiling available in Muslim societies as embodied markers of particular ways of practicing piety or producing pious selves through body discipline (Mahmood 2005) or as

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<sup>3</sup> In December 2001, *Time Magazine* featured a photo spread of Afghan women without veils, followed by a short article claiming that the US victory was the "greatest pageant of mass liberation since the fight for suffrage".

<sup>4</sup> The complementary nature of men and women's relationships is not based on notions of gender equality, even though equity is the guiding value behind these arrangements. For further analysis of the sexual division of labour in Afghan rural communities, see Lindisfarne-Tapper 1991, 100-131.

an expression of opposition to Western definitions of modernity (Mernissi 1992; Göle 1996). If all these explanations are contextually valid, my research among women MPs in Afghanistan suggests that the performative and strategic dimensions of veiling are the dominant motives that guide women's gestures. The women I interviewed and observed during my fieldwork were more invested in expressing pious identities via clothing than in cultivating virtuous selves. Veiling and clothing were part of intricate strategies aiming at managing others' impressions in the context of public interactions where the presence of women was broadly considered as 'abnormal'. Issues of religion and faith were not the main centres of their attention, even though all of these women were undeniably strong believers.

In the first section of this paper, I place the veil in its cultural and social context, in an attempt to shed light on the variety of interpretations of male-female relations existing among the different ethnic and social groups populating the area. I also demonstrate that the use of the veil is context-specific, related to notions of private/public spaces and therefore entangled in broader communicative patterns that impose restraints on both men and women who are unrelated to each other. In the second section, I locate the debates around the 'veiling/revealing' of women's bodies that have emerged following the fall of the Taliban in the specific context of the military occupation. I compare the current situation with earlier colonial encounters during which women's bodies became part of political struggles over national identity and sovereignty. I then move on to analyse the public performances and personal experiences of women MPs (Members of Parliament) who have entered the National Assembly in 2005. I distinguish between 'nationalist/*jihadis*' women whose strict veiling is a sign of opposition to western influence in internal affairs and 'liberal' women whose veiling practices are less consistent and more context-specific. By looking at these public gestures, I aim to illustrate the ordinary ways in which women struggle daily with cultural ideas about the female body and highlight the political and performative dimension of women's clothing.

### **Honour, Veiling and Etiquette.**

It is difficult to generalize about the meaning of the veil in Afghanistan, since veiling practices widely vary from one region, ethnic or social group to another. I do not intend here to give an exhaustive overview of the 'language of the veil' since it would necessitate a detailed cross-geographic examination that a single article cannot achieve. I however wish to underline how veiling is central to the Afghan etiquette and how its use is entangled in broader social relations defined by gendered rules of politeness.

The veil is tightly connected to notions of honour (*izzat*). A woman shows her adherence to the honour system by doing *pardah*<sup>5</sup>, i.e covering her head and avoiding contacts with unrelated men. By doing so, she ensures that the honour of her male relatives (*namus*) is preserved. The veil therefore operates as a mediator of male-female relations in a society that puts high value on a social order maintained through human efforts at disciplining 'natural inclinations' (*nafs*). However, the gamut of interpretations remains quite broad, as the variety of veils worn by women ranges from *chadari* of various colours, to long black *hijab* in the Western provinces running alongside Iran, to long colourful veils resting on the top of the head in the central highlands of Hazarajat.

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<sup>5</sup> '*Pardah*' literally means 'curtain'. Women are encouraged to 'do *pardah*' after puberty, when they reach a marriageable age.

Despite these variations, it can be said that the veil is an instrument aiming to accommodate the segregation of unrelated men and women, i.e. individuals not belonging to the same *korwal* or 'inhabitants sharing a household' (Anderson 1982). The Afghan society, like many other honour-based societies, distinguishes between *dakhili* (the private sphere, the household, what should remain hidden) and *biruni* (the street, literally, the 'outside'). Men's honour (*namus*) is maintained through their capacity to control women and restrict their movements outside of the household. I often heard men saying: '*Zan namus e ma's*' ('The woman is our honour'). Soldiers will also say: '*Watan namus e ma's*' ('The nation is our honour'). Women stepping outside of their houses are traditionally veiled and accompanied by a *mahram*, that is a male relative with whom sexual intercourse is virtually impossible because it would be considered incestuous. The role of the *mahram* is to protect women's honour.

*Namus* can be defined as that which is defended by men for honour to be upheld, instead of acted upon to achieve honour (such as hospitality). If someone offends the rules of the gendered order, then there is reason to act in defence of one's *namus*. *Namus* is thus an important institution for maintaining the gender segregated order of the society. For instance, women will 'do *pardah*' to maintain the reputation of their family: their veil is a sign of their modesty and more generally, of their adherence to the honour system.

These rules defined in the *Pashtunwali* ('the way of the Pashtuns', the tribal code of honour, a conceptual body of rules passed on by oral tradition) are what make up most of the Afghan etiquette. Even though Pashtuns represent the largest ethnic group in the country (40% of the total population), other ethnic groups such as Uzbek, Tajik, Hazara, etc. do abide by a code of honour that presents many similarities with the Pashtun one. It can be said that *Pashtunwali* is applied all over the country, even though with various degrees according to the different tribes, religious affiliations and social backgrounds.

Women's veiling, in particular under the full covering *chadari*, is to be understood as a means to maintain gender boundaries, a central component of the honour code. The *chadari* is mostly worn by married women living in urban areas. It operates as a 'mobile home' (Abu-Lughod 2002, 785), as a means to maintain women's separation from unrelated men. In Papanek's words (1982) the *chadari* is a form of 'portable seclusion'. 'Everywhere, such veiling signifies belonging to a particular community and participating in a moral way of life in which families are paramount in the organization of communities and the home is associated with the sanctity of women' (Abu-Lughod 2002: p785).

The *Pashtunwali* is built on various principles, including strict gender boundaries. *Pashtunwali* is integral to Pashtun identity. By adhering to *Pashtunwali* a Pashtun possesses honour (*izzat*); without honor s/he is no longer considered a Pashtun, and is not given the rights, protection, and support of the Pashtun community.

In Pashtun expressions it is recommended that both men and women conceptually apply *pardah*, and doing so is a sign of dignity for both men and women. According to anthropologist Jon Anderson (1982) who observed various situations in which the veil is used among Ghilzai Pashtuns, the veil is less a means to separate men and women than, on the contrary, a device that brings them together by regulating the terms by which they are socially present. It is part of a broader pattern of comportment called '*haya*' or 'extreme politeness' by which persons who could be legitimately married to each other are prevented from direct contact and interaction. Indeed, it can be said that men wear a

'veil' too since their interactions with other marriageable women are accompanied by a constellation of behaviours which are equivalents to veiling. For instance, when a man and a woman encounter each other outside the *kor* (household-inhabitants), restraint applies equally to both. The man will divert his gaze or act as if the woman was absent. He may additionally cover his face and turn away. He may also cover his mouth and avoid eye contact. This myriad of disengaging actions is to be understood as a form of respect on a man's part. "Put another way, the veil is part of a pattern of comportment in which both sexes participate with slightly different but overlapping inflections" (Anderson 1982, 402).

A parallel can be drawn between the privacy maintained through the use of *chadari* and the traditional Afghan home, surrounded by its undistinguished compound walls, where the secrets of the family are kept. Indeed, indigenous domestic architecture is inward-looking and exteriors present anonymous surfaces to outsiders. Dislike of ostentation, another prominent characteristic, is evident in architectural patterns (Dupree-Hatch 2002). The traditional architectural ideals promote the hidden nature of the intimate to the outside world. Within compound walls, the protection against outsiders is complete. Unrelated men are never brought inside without a warning call. "A male visitor will never enter a room without knocking or coughing to announce his presence" (Dupree-Hatch 1998, 52).

Women, as central pillars of the family, are closely associated with this intimate and secret world. By wearing *chadari*, women symbolically carry the walls of their compound with them (Papanek 1973, 35). The sexual excitement, which is believed to exist when a man and a woman unknown to each other meet face to face, is prevented within the compound. Metonymically, the veil or *chadari* operates as a form of "symbolic shelter" (Papanek 1973) and announces that a woman is behaving in a proper manner and has dismissed the possibility of sexual desire and interaction. However, veiling can have other meanings and women are particularly creative in clouding their public performances. Indeed, the typical symbolic associations of the veil are sometimes manipulated and reversed by individual women.

Stories of illicit sexual adventures, for instance, had mythic qualities in Kabul and women themselves criticized other women for using the *chadari* to conduct illicit sexual adventures or escape from the control of their relatives. One story was told of women walking Chicken and Flower streets in Kabul city centre, fully covered under their *chadari*, and stopping men in an attempt to sell sexual services. I never witnessed such activities myself, but I always wondered about the logistics of sex work in Afghanistan when hearing about the issue. Nevertheless, the anonymity provided by the veil means that a woman's identity cannot be revealed and the situation can remain secret. Ironically, the veil which primary aims is to prevent adultery can be used in adultery's cause.

In the same way, many women's rights activists, while opposing the compulsory veiling of women under *chadari*, used it to enjoy freedom of movement while carrying out their work. For them, the *chadari* was a symbol of women's oppression but by complying to cultural norms, they were able to work within the system to bring about change. The *chadari* was a guarantee of protection, particularly necessary when travelling to remote areas where security was often hectic. The example of the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan provides a good illustration of the instrumental nature of the *chadari* among politically engaged women. Indeed, their

documentation of human and women's rights abuses under the Taliban was entirely realized 'under the *chadari*' (Anon. 2007d). During my fieldwork, I met a great number of women's rights activists who continued wearing the *chadari*, not only for security reasons but also to gain people's respect and trust when working in rural areas, where people tended to be suspicious towards anyone coming from the 'outside'. This was, for instance, a strategy adopted by Rahela<sup>6</sup>, a member of the Afghan Women's Network, when she lobbied mullahs on women's rights in rural areas:

At first, it was difficult for us, women, to approach mullahs. They were reluctant to talk to us. But they gradually got used to us. By wearing *chadari*, we eventually gained their respect. (Anon. 2007e).

Finally, unlike in Turkey or Egypt where the State has initiated prolonged efforts to secularize society, wearing the veil in Afghanistan cannot be read as a way for women to assert their faith or their Muslim identity, even though most women would say that it is a Muslim woman's duty to cover. But since the majority of Afghans are religious and religion is deeply ingrained in the everyday, veiling has become for most women part of the 'habitus', something women just do when they leave their house or when they are in the presence of strangers. More subtle uses of the veil, such as decisions to cover one's face to demonstrate respect for an older man or on the contrary, refusals to do so, are practices that reveal the potential power of women in challenging the gendered order (Abu-Lughod 1986). In the same way, the multiplicity of veils available especially in urban areas where some level of diversity is authorized, provide women with a relatively wide range of options that involve both judgements of taste and religious thinking. As a communicative device that conveys meanings, the veil is one among the many other tools women use to convey messages to their audience in public settings.

### **The legacy of fear and the occupation**

The short period of relative liberalism that marked the three or four years after the eviction of the Taliban gave opportunities for individuals to experiment with the way they appeared in public. During my first journey in 2003-2004, one could see in the streets of Kabul, especially in the city centre where stores selling bright coloured clothes imported from neighbouring countries had re-opened, young men with blue jeans and long hair or girls wearing colourful veils over semi-long blouses. These street scenes had become more rare in 2007. An increased level of insecurity, with regular suicide attacks, robberies and kidnappings, had initiated a reversed return to physical conformity in public spaces.

The necessity to remain anonymous in public is closely related to the increasing level of public violence that women have experienced over the past decades. However, despite the West's promises to 'liberate Afghan women', and in spite of the presence of International troops on its soil, the State has been unable to protect women in their transition from the private to the public sphere. In conflict-affected areas, women continue to face sexual violence, abduction, or forced or underage marriage (Azerbaijani-Moghaddam 2009, 67). However, the perpetrators remain immune from prosecution since sexual violence is a taboo and the justice system is weak and corrupt.<sup>7</sup> The

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<sup>6</sup> To preserve confidentiality and for security reasons, her name has been changed.

<sup>7</sup> Because sexual violence is a crime that diminishes the honour of a woman and her family, victims have often been reluctant to report it to the authorities. However, in recent years, some reports have underlined a

explanations I often heard from women wearing *chadari* was that it allowed some privacy and created a sense of security, when the outside world, beyond the compounds' walls of the house was seen as threatening, chaotic and oppressive. For many women, the *chadari* increased their mobility while guaranteeing their anonymity, a precious asset in a volatile security environment.

In the meantime, the foreign occupation<sup>8</sup> of the country and the International Community's insistence on the necessity to carry out important and rapid social reforms has created tensions at different levels of the Afghan society. The current preoccupation of the Afghan government with controlling women's appearance in public is to be understood in the light of this external pressure. With the return of conservative elements within the political arena, an area of cultural resistance has emerged around women and the family.

Similar developments have been observed at other moments of the Afghan history when foreign powers have attempted to impose their domination over the country. During the USSR-sponsored Communist regime, for instance, Kabul began to be perceived as the capital of sin and corruption with women's new visibility considered as a sign of cultural pollution (Dupree-Hatch 2001, 150; Ahmed-Ghosh 2003, 7). The national project, which materialized after the withdrawal of the Red Army, during the civil war and reached its extreme with the emergence of the Taliban, was predicated on a rejection of modernity, a return to an essentialized rural and mythical tradition (Olesen 1996, 279). The consequences were enormous for women who were erased from the professional and intellectual life of the country.

In her book *Women and Gender in Islam* (1992), social historian Leila Ahmed has underlined the relation between colonial encounters and the emergence of specific discourses on the veil in the Muslim world. In Egypt under British rule or in Algeria under French domination, foreign political elites used the veil as a symbol of Muslim women's oppression to justify the colonial enterprise. Veiling, under such circumstances, turned into an act of resistance against the modernizing elite co-opted by the colonial establishment (Ahmed 1992, 152).

It is certainly possible to draw a parallel between the current situation in Afghanistan and earlier colonial periods during which discourses on women and the veil first emerged. After years of total disregard for Afghan people, the sudden interest of the West in the plight of Afghan women and the focus on the *burqa* confirms that old colonial narratives on the veil have been reactivated in order to gather public support for the military intervention. At once urged to take back their 'freedom' and unveil by the West and pressured to remain faithful to Afghan 'culture' by the new regime, women in occupied Afghanistan have become a 'figment in someone's else dream', as Azar Nafisi (2003) puts it in her memoir *Reading Lolita in Teheran*. This renewed public attention to women's bodies and the use of 'colonial feminism' (Ahmed 1992) as an imperialist tool

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behavioural shift, with families (probably encouraged by the media and human rights organizations) beginning to go public and threatening to commit mass suicide if the perpetrators were not brought to justice (IRIN-News 2008; Nagpal 2009; Muahid 2008).

<sup>8</sup> It is not the purpose of this paper to discuss the nature of the neo-colonial state. Other authors, however, have used the 'post-colonial' framework to explain the nature of the power dynamics at stake in contemporary Afghanistan. See (Rostami-Povey 2007; Lindisfarne 2008; Suhrke 2007a; 2007b).



to assert domination, has trapped the struggle for women's rights in struggles over culture. Various political developments that have taken place in recent years confirm this vision.

In order to preserve an illusion of political autonomy and resist Western influence, for instance, conservative MPs have submitted various draft laws aiming at preserving patriarchal authority. These draft laws proposed the reinstatement of the religious police, the reopening of the Ministry for the Elimination of Vice and the Promotion of Virtue, and a ban on Western clothes such as jeans, long hair for men, cosmetics and makeup for women (Heikkila 2008). More recently in April 2009, Karzai signed a personal status law for Shias legalizing the rape of a wife by her husband and forbidding Shia women to leave their house without their husbands' permission<sup>9</sup>. These legal proposals, even though not yet approved, are already announcing a return to an orthodox interpretation of shariah after a brief period of legal diversity, associated with anarchy and loose morals.

Afghan women are immensely aware of the conditions in which they have to negotiate their entry in the public domain. This knowledge is an embodied knowledge. It is the product of long years of war during which women have suffered from officially sanctioned discrimination. Visibility, over these past three decades, has found new meanings. In Western societies, the visibility of people brings about public security in urban spaces. Public figures are expected to reveal their private life and expose it to public scrutiny. For Afghan women, public visibility has become equal to insecurity and to being subjected to constant control by others (the police, religious leaders, community and neighbours). Even though the moral police have disappeared in most cities, the new Islamic Republic still expects people to conform to Islamic prescriptions.

This controlling gaze is the same apparatus that Foucault (1977) referred to in *Discipline and Punish* in his description of the architecture of Bentham's Panopticon, the huge prison with only a single jailor. As described by Foucault, the concept of the design is to allow an observer to observe all prisoners without the prisoners being able to tell whether they are being watched, thereby conveying the sentiment of an invisible omniscience. Thus the visibility of an individual and his awareness of the existence of authority and the possible presence of a surveyor result in his/her constant obligation to observe discipline. The efficiency of the system lies in the fact that the individual "assumes responsibility for the constraints of power," making himself "the principle of his own subjection" (Foucault 1977, 202-203). A feeling of insecurity results from the prisoner's constant visibility. This fear constitutes the central motor of self-discipline. In the case of Afghanistan, the fear of punishments has resulted in the production of 'docile bodies' that have internalized power hierarchies to the extent that they have become almost natural. The reluctance of women to remove their *chadari* is a good illustration of the long lasting psychological effects of the Mujahideen's and Taliban's "technologies of power".

As Afghan sociologist Nasrine Gross (Gross 2007) argues, the Taliban rule has been particularly traumatic for Afghans because for the first time, their faith, a fundamental component of their identity, has been radically questioned. If before the Taliban, rarely did people interrogate the depth of their own "Muslimhood," the harsh

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<sup>9</sup> The new and redrafted law was signed in mid July 2009. The new version omits original provisions that allowed men to demand sex from their wives and that required women to ask their husbands' permission to leave their home. However, the law still includes a provision that states a man does not have to provide financial support for his wife unless he has 'access to her.'

rules and punishments imposed by the religious students contributed to spread a general feeling of guilt regarding religion. Indeed, under the constant control of the religious police, men and women, especially in the cities, were persistently reminded of their inherent “sinning” nature. According to my observations, the long-term effect of such a trauma is noticeable in people’s obsessive urge to justify the way they physically present themselves or to make comments on the ways other people look. Of course, in any society, people are always expressing something with clothing, sending out intentional or unintentional signals about themselves. Clothing is an important visual aspect of performance, part of the expressive equipment identified with the performer. In the case of Afghanistan, as clothing has become the centre of political attention, physical displays that do not strictly conform with the norm are perceived as potentially threatening to the social order.

During the civil war (Mujahideen era, 1992-1996) and until the Taliban era (1996-2001), Afghan women have lived with the same feeling of continual but secret and unverifiable control. Thus, the experience of wearing *chadari* has become in fact the paradoxical experience of some kind of freedom along with an acceptance of enclosure and discipline. To be disciplined and similar to others allowed women to be less subjected to others’ sight and consequently be freer in their movements. This dissimulation and social invisibility in terms of appearances and behaviours is constantly shifting, according to the status, gender and age of individual actors. To maintain their security and right of presence in social spaces, individuals must obey assorted codes that are particular to each space or vis-à-vis the others. While such codes existed in Afghanistan well before the Taliban, the Taliban regime has refashioned them, forcing individuals to play roles and to adopt new appearances according to their moral system. In the new Islamic Republic, even though such rules are no longer officially sanctioned, they remain an unwritten law. As a result, dissimulation through conformism constitutes the dominant strategy to access public spaces.

Women have adopted strategies of dissimulation and invisibility that have become part of a process of social inclusion and negotiation. For instance, women continue to wear the full covering *chadari* in order to go to work, attend public meetings and demonstrations. In June 2007, for example, hundreds of women organized a collective peace prayer at the sacred Shrine of the Prophet (Kherqa Sharif) in Kandahar, a mosque that is normally barred to women. The mullah even allowed the women to broadcast their prayers from the shrine loudspeaker (AdvocacyNet 2007). A few months later, in January 2008, 600 women rallied in Kandahar in order to protest against the kidnapping of an American female aid worker (BBC 2008). This public event was even more surprising in that it took place in one of the most conservative areas of the Pashtun South where women are rarely seen in public spaces. Women’s demonstrations of this type were not isolated occurrences. In May 2005, hundreds of widows marched in Kabul in protest against the kidnapping of Clementina Cantoni, an Italian aid worker from CARE International. A river of blue *chadari* suddenly flooded Kabul city’s centre, displaying photographs of Clementina and carrying banners requesting her immediate release. Under the Taliban regime, women protested on several occasions, for instance, against an edict that closed public baths and against the rise of the price of bread. Protected from external gazes, able to see without being seen, women could feel safe to occupy the public arena and make their voices heard. Their ‘absent presence’, to use Amir-Ebrahimi’s words

(2006), under the disciplinary monotony of the *chadari*, enabled women to step in spaces reserved to men.

Women who have broken into the political apparatus share this common-sense understanding of the possible physical and social dangers associated with visibility. In the section that follows, I look more precisely at political women's public performances in a space where their presence remains highly contested: the Afghan National Assembly. Indeed, the new Constitution ratified in 2004 foresaw a 25 percent quota for women in the Parliament, a political move initiated with the view of repairing past injustices. This legislation was passed thanks to the pressure of women's groups and the international community, but *jihadi* leaders who occupied the majority at the seats in the Assembly broadly perceived women's presence on their side as 'abnormal' and as a result of exogenous forces, with little or no endogenous legitimacy at all.

Even though adding women in politics can never be a guarantee for gender equality in the broader society, the presence of women in the parliament has undeniably been a positive step. It remains that the women who have joined the legislative apparatus are not only divided along political, class and ethnic lines, but their room of manoeuvre within such a conservative environment is extremely low. As a result, many female MPs have had to develop subtle strategies in order to gain political recognition and validation from their male counterparts. This included, among other techniques of body-discipline, a constant attention to the way they looked and veiled in public.

### **Veiled Politics**

An observation of clothing and veiling practices among women involved in politics in Afghanistan reveals the central and contested place of Islam as a political category in the new Islamic Republic. It also sheds light on the values women should comply with in order to reach out to the public. In this respect, the comparison between parliamentary women and female university student is very telling. Female university students with whom I spent time at the beginning of my fieldwork struggled to veil as little as possible in order to display a modern yet Muslim persona. In contrast, women MPs had to some extent to renounce to women's issues and veil more strictly if they wanted to gain entry into mainstream politics. Different social positions involved contrasting uses of the body.

In general, women sitting in the parliament could be divided into two categories<sup>10</sup>: Conservative/nationalist women who defended a formalist approach to Koran and liberal women who supported an interpretive approach. While the majority of them belonged to the first group and had been co-opted by various *mujahedin* factions, women from both tendencies agreed that Islam provided them with a means of being involved in the public sphere. However, their fashion statements mirrored their political inclinations and to some extent, their different understanding of Islam and the place of women in society.

Generally, political women's veiling practices was informed by the geographic location of their respective constituencies. Women MPs originating from rural areas felt more compelled to veil in a more conservative manner than their female colleagues who came from urban areas.

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<sup>10</sup> The Wolesi Jirga is mainly composed of Pashtuns (118 seats), Tajiks/Aimaqs (53 seats), Hazaras/Shias (41 seats) and Uzbeks (20 seats). For further details on the ethnic and political composition of the parliament, see (Wilder 2005)

For Shukria Barakzai (MP for Kabul province), it does not matter if she wears small veils because people who vote for her are educated...they come from the city. For me it is different. My people did not go to school. My people are illiterate and conservative. So I have to pay attention to the veils I wear, an MP from Takhar, explained to me (Anon. 2007b).

Women who were affiliated with *jihadi* groups tended to dress more traditionally than women who belonged to more liberal groups. Their veils were longer and less colourful (black, white or light beige) and their interpretation of women's rights was based on a belief in the inherently different nature of men and women. Many of them wore *chadari* or long veils when returning to their province of origin but abandoned it as soon as they returned to Kabul. Their public performances conveyed monolithic nationalist meanings about the primary role of women as mothers and family carers.

For female MPs who affiliated themselves with more liberal groups, choices of veils' colours and length were a matter of perpetual arrangements and meticulously weighted decisions. Veils and clothes changed according to the audience they faced and the context in which they navigated. Their decision to wear *chadari* when travelling to the provinces was mostly influenced by the security situation or the individual dressing practices of their female colleagues. Their performances were more contradictory and less consistent than conservative women and involved constant negotiations and calculations. 'If I don't wear *chadari* when I go back to Takhar and my colleague Bilqhis (another female MP from Takhar province) does, then she appears as the modest one and I appear as the amoral one' (Anon. 2007b), an MP from Takhar province noted to underline the necessity to embody strict Muslim norms in order to reach out to more 'traditional' or rural audiences.

For both 'nationalist' and 'liberal' women, clothing was linked to different conceptions of the place of Islam in politics. For nationalist women, wearing long veils and occasionally *chadari* was partly a means to conform to proper religious and cultural practices. But most importantly, it was about honouring the work achieved by the *mujahedin* during the *jihad* and opposing the hegemonic influence of the West in internal affairs. On February, 23<sup>rd</sup> 2007, in a public gathering organized by *jihadi* leaders in Kabul National Stadium, Shakila Hachemi, MP of Logar province, took the microphone and harangued the crowd, denouncing the blasphemy committed by her fellow MP Malalai Joya who had accused some *mujahedin* sitting in the Parliament of being war criminals (Islah-e Milli 2007). The rally had been organized in order to gain public support for a legal proposal preventing the state from independently prosecuting people for war crimes committed during conflicts in recent decades<sup>11</sup>.

That Hachemi was given the opportunity to talk in a conservative assembly of prominent political leaders, not particularly renowned for their progressive approach to women's issues, was in itself very telling. It showed that far from being united, women from different political and ethnic backgrounds, tended to engage in identity politics and put forward the specific political agenda of their own ethnic or religious groups, while dismissing or ignoring the ones of their gender. Vice President, Mohammad Karim Khalili, Lower House Speaker, Mohammad Yunus Qanooni, former Jihadi Leaders,

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<sup>11</sup> The lower house of parliament, the Wolesi Jirga, approved the bill after President Hamid Karzai revised an initial bill that had been approved by both chambers of parliament that gave amnesty to all Afghans involved in war crimes during the last three decades of fighting.

commanders and a number of MPs took part in the gathering. Surrounded by heavily armed men, raising an accusative finger to the sky, her speech suddenly reached a climax: 'Death to Malalai Joya! Death to Human Rights!' (Anon. 2007a) she screamed while receiving an overwhelming round of applause.

The association of Joya with Human Rights and therefore, with the West, was typical of conservative/nationalist discourses. Indeed, Joya was regularly accused by her detractors of being sponsored by Western leftist groups and as a result, of being an infidel, a Communist and therefore, disrespectful of national values. During her campaign in Farah for the legislative elections, Joya's enemies circulated pamphlets on which she appeared bareheaded. The pamphlets called her a 'prostitute' sold to the West and attacked her for her lack of modesty: 'If Joya removes her veil now, soon she will remove her pants too', commented one of these pamphlets (Mulvad 2007). Joya's fearless interventions in parliamentary sessions unfailingly provoked sexual insults, physical attacks and death threats. A secularist at heart, Joya regularly appeared unveiled on foreign TV stations and newspapers, western journalists being particularly fond of her outspoken and charismatic character. The outburst of resentment against the values she defended (women's rights, human rights and secularism), ironically forced her to constantly wear *chadari* while travelling in the country.

In such a conservative atmosphere, women MPs with a liberal agenda for women had as a primary goal to keep the support of their own constituencies while lobbying potentially supportive men within the parliament. If some of them admitted supporting Joya behind closed doors, they paid attention not to be associated too closely with her<sup>12</sup>. The way they looked in public was a fundamental issue of attention, many of them preferring not to talk to the media at all or appearing on TV in order to have free hands for back stage negotiations. In the same way, many 'liberal' female candidates to the legislative elections conducted their campaign under the *chadari* and gradually removed it once elected.

Younger female MPs who had lived abroad during the war were less eager to compromise and less reluctant to openly support Joya. This was for instance the case of a 27-years-old female representative of Kabul province, Maryam Sohrat<sup>13</sup>, who had returned from her exile in Iran especially to run for the elections. At first glance, the poster she had printed for her campaign resembled an ad for a Bollywood blockbuster. It showed her smiling face, her hair covered under a bright canary yellow veil over a background of a similar color, an image that wanted to transmit hope and change to Afghanistan's youth. But the image gave rise to severe critics from conservative clerics and political leaders. "Her posters are driving our youth towards sin," thundered the Dari language *Cheragh* newspaper supported by Rabbani, former President of Afghanistan and now head of the major opposition party, the United National Front. "It is a political weapon against true Islamic voters" (Walsh 2005). Sitting in UNIFEM resource centre for women in Parliament, with her lipstick, fluent English and matching Nike trainers and headscarf, Sohrat undeniably brought a touch of glamour to Afghan politics. She recalled:

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<sup>12</sup> Some women's rights activists also disagreed with Joya's insistence on secularism as a means to enhance women's rights. They perceived her approach as disconnected with the political reality and political sensitivities of the country. In their view, gender equality was embedded in Islam. Joya's desire to disconnect politics from religion was, in their opinion, a dangerous path to advance the cause of women.

<sup>13</sup> For security reasons, her real name has been changed.

I got several telephone calls during my campaign. Once, an old man told me: ‘What is this colour? What is this poster? We are Muslim people! This is an Islamic country!’”. And I told him: ‘What is wrong with Islam? I have my scarf on and if you are talking about the colour, this is my favourite colour, I like it. And if you are talking about my smile, it is one of my features. This is not abnormal to smile. I wanted to show what the wish of the young generation in Afghanistan is. You know, young people are tired of darkness.’ (Anon. 2007c)

Sohrat’s response to her critics was to a great extent the product of her lack of political experience and her second-hand knowledge of the power relations at stake in the political apparatus. She envisioned Islam as a religion that promoted gender equality and granted many freedoms to women. She was inspired by Islamic feminism and its achievements in Iran, Malaysia and elsewhere. Devoutly Muslim, she called herself a feminist but avoided using this term in the parliament, for fear of receiving the same treatments as Joya and losing her already fragile credibility due to her young age and her ‘modern’ physical appearance.

The political characters represented by Malalai Joya and Maryam Sohrat, in spite of their differences, present common distinctive features that help us delineate the boundaries of women’s political participation and public visibility in contemporary Afghanistan. Both MPs are young and educated and both display a physical appearance that does not strictly conform to traditional standards of Islamic dressing. In addition, both speak fluent English and take their political inspiration from ‘abroad’. Joya looks at western secularism while Sohrat draws her political views from models of Islamic feminism that have emerged in other Muslim countries. However, neither of them benefit from a strong social base of support outside of their limited constituencies: a few RAWA<sup>14</sup>/Maoist supporters for Joya and a few University students for Sohrat.

The reasons behind Joya’s and Sohrat’s political marginality are varied but undeniably, the outward looking political postures they embody cannot receive a strong echo in the context of the occupation. Of course, neither Joya’s nor Sohrat’s political projects aim to target Islam or Afghan culture, but those laws and customs to be found in society that express androcentric interests, indifference to women, or misogyny. Such a discourse, as seductive as it may be for the urban and educated person’s consciousness, has currently no place in the Afghan political landscape. Without nationalist/Islamic veils to ideas of reforms related to women’s issues, the persuasiveness of Joya’s and Sohrat’s discourses remains absolutely marginal.

### **Veiling as performance**

So what do we learn from political women’s public performances? What does their veiling and clothing practices teach us about the nature of power relations in contemporary Afghanistan? Why are women who have made their ways into the highest political circles still reluctant to completely abandon the *chadari*? What emerges from the ethnographic material I have presented above, is that in a context of foreign occupation where women’s bodies have become the symbolic markers of the broader social body, veiling represents the privileged medium of expression of one’s nationalist endeavours

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<sup>14</sup> Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan  
<http://www.rawa.org/index.php>

and resistance against external influences. The veil ensures the cohesion of the collectivity and provides a sense of national continuity when society is threatened by fragmentation through the presence of an external 'enemy'. By strictly conforming to gendered norms, nationalist women strengthen their integration within their own political groups. 'Liberal' women, i.e. women who are more radically inclined to advance women's rights through an interpretive approach of shariah, cannot simply avoid the nationalist/Islamic narrative for this would lead, as the case of Joya demonstrates, to their total marginalization. The groups to which they belong are too weak already in the political landscape and cannot afford a radical rejection of the nationalist narrative. In short, in public settings, women from both tendencies have to adjust their performance in order to conform with gendered norms of appropriate behaviours in order to maintain their public presence.

In these circumstances, displaying a respectful Muslim persona through proper veiling and clothing amounts to affirming one's patriotic allegiances and a certain form of recognition for the historical heritage of the *jihad*. With a parliament dominated by *jihadi* factions for whom women's rights are certainly not the priority, women are left with little choice but to conform in order to gain men's recognition. The 'emotional glue' (Mayer 2000, 3) conveyed by nationalist ideas and symbols, despite their systematic reproduction of gender stereotypes, cannot simply be ignored because they also participate in the reproduction of a moral code and a collective imaginary. Nationalist/conservative women, and to some extent, liberal women too are participating in defending the 'moral code'. Through their dress codes, women compete to embody the perfect model of the 'pure' and dedicated Muslim mother/sister/sister-in-law/daughter. But liberal women's indirect or direct participation in the reinforcement of this discourse allows them to gain credit and support in their own political groups when women's rights issues are put on the negotiation table.

I qualify these strategies of 'performance' in the sense of Goffman (Goffman 1956), not because I assume that women's veiling practices are mere cynical or alienated responses to a dominant discourse, but in order to highlight their acknowledgement of and participation in a moral system in which their bodies are constant centres of attention. Performance designates the use of any of the ways of speaking available to a speaker, in their appropriate context. As Goffman puts it, 'the rules of conduct which bind the actor and the recipient together are the bindings of society' (1956: 25). In Afghanistan, the use of the veil is part of a broader set of rules that define proper gender behaviours in public settings. These rules apply to both men and women and vary according to variables such as age, ethnic affiliations and social status. To some extent, men do wear veils too and abide by these rules in their daily interactions with members of the opposite sex. In the context of a military occupation, showing respect for these rules, as instrumental as it may appear, has become all the more significant that it provides a sense of continuity and collective belonging.

My aim in this paper was not to diminish or question the religious endeavours of the women I observed, but rather to underline the possibilities that were enabled through the reiteration of these feminine ceremonials. As it would be erroneous to reduce the veil to its instrumental functions, it is also inappropriate to see in it a pure religious expression. Deference and dissimulation under the veil were indeed political gestures that worked as the necessary social make-up for women to break through the 'public'. A deeper analysis

of their motives and actions showed that women were able to strategize and adapt to their audience, displaying different layers of their multiple selves, according to the different audiences they wished to address.

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