

'HIJAB' AS A SITE OF IDEOLOGICAL CONTESTATION

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Victoria Cattoni's engagement with 'hijab' (veil) may remind one of the blurring distinctions between the sacred and the profane in today's age of consumerist global culture, media spectacle, viral as well as coercive marketing. Using her own experience in Malaysia and Indonesia as a starting point, Victoria simulates a safe, secure and non-confrontational environment for her audience to engage with 'hijab'. In Victoria's highly inclusive and audience-centred work, multi-dimensional patterns of perception determine multiple, if not contesting notions of hijab.

Through a highly organic methodology and interactive workshops in several major cities in Malaysia, Australia, and Singapore, Victoria indirectly hints on the sometimes awkward relationship between the practice of wearing a 'hijab' with rapid urbanization, popular mass cultures, advertising, branding, and propagation of consumerist lifestyle. In fact, the whole idea of expanding consumerist agendas through control of capital and market flow may have also been 'unveiled', so to speak. As trans-national brand names influence one's choice of a lifestyle, they are sometimes subscribed, practiced and ritualized even more faithful than traditional religions. Ironically, the practice of wearing certain brand names in a certain secular posture may even be guarded more piously than wearing a hijab. Hijab, through Victoria's scheme, has become a site of ideological contestation.

Where does one place the act of wearing a hijab in the whole spectrum of fragmented contemporary urban experience and hyper-view living? Where does hijab stand in a rapidly changing pluralistic and multicultural urban society? Who and what defines cultural, national, religious or spiritual identity in today's age of ideological contestation? Who represents who? Who creates meanings? Who creates contexts? Who creates values? Who's meanings, contexts and values should one uphold or subscribe to?

In such a contestation, lifestyle and identity as implied by the practice of wearing a hijab can be spiritually-rooted as much as artificially constructed and hyped to feed the sentiment of targeted mass and market. Interestingly, the work may also reflect the notion that we are increasingly living in a permanently deconstructed, and densely saturated image-oriented global society. It is a society in which singularity of meaning is impossible to attain. For some, we are living in an increasingly networked world where meanings are never static, but always in a state of flux. What is the meaning of wearing hijab in today's age of cultural fragmentation and loss of centrality?

Through her work, Victoria further unveils the unstable semiotic interplay between a signifier (the image of hijab in many versions and names) and signified (what it means). By allowing her audience (Muslims and non-Muslims) to be active participants, readers and producers of meanings, one may find oneself swimming in an ocean of schizophrenic, multi-textual and contradictory readings of hijab. Through the work, Victoria seems to teasingly suggest that meaning of the signifier (hijab or its wearer or both) is simply a matter of its relationship to other signifiers (perhaps, non-hijab wearing women or the so-called 'secular' dressing). In the midst of media spectacle, hijab as a form of expressive language of choice or image may have no natural connection at all to its actual, intrinsic and spiritual meaning.

The result is a sense of permanent deconstruction and deferred meaning, leaving one without any hint of a clear or definitive reading. One may be drowned by a sea of endless possibilities in reading and constructing the meaning of hijab. In her work, images of different hijab-wearing women function as interwoven signifiers in a field of deferred meanings; a multidimensional space in which a variety of hijab images, readings and interpretations blend and clash. The burden is placed on the viewers (or readers of images and interpretations) to engage with them and put them to work. Interestingly, instead of unveiling or undressing the hijab, Victoria is actually unveiling the viewers' very own reading, interpretation, sentiment and attitude towards hijab. In short, it is the audience members who are being 'unveiled', instead of the 'veil' or hijab and its usual wearer.

Victoria also seems to suggest that meaning about hijab can be constructed (be it spiritually, or secularly, through the mass media for example) as a system of thinking to a point that the thought system be taken as natural, habitual or inevitable. For some Muslims, it may appear culturally natural for adult Muslim women to wear hijab, as much as for some non-Muslims, it may appear natural to assume that hijab represents suppression of women's freedom. Victoria's inclusive strategy may open a Pandora box of criticism, if not contempt towards the practice of wearing hijab as much as it may also reveal negative stereotypical readings of hijab as constructed by the mainstream Western mass-media (often taken uncritically as natural by numbed Western media consumers).

In this case, non-Muslims' stereotypical negative readings of hijab may be exposed as mythologies conjured by the mainstream Western media with the intention of demonizing anything Islam. Islam (as well as Muslims and their codes of living or practice including wearing a hijab) may thus be taken as a global threat that one has to be wary of. Creating a fictional demon by the way, is a good way to attract as much as to distract or divert attention. Controversy sells.

Victoria's work also seems to affirm the postmodernist's notion that we live within the sway of mythology conjured for us by the mass media, movies and advertisements. Not everyone can agree with this though, especially those firmly rooted in the monolithic meta-narrative of modernist ethos. Her work may also unveil that in the effort of making hijab an inclusive subject of concern, a deeper and comprehensive concept of hijab may be relegated to a mere object of an open field of discourse (if not contempt), devoid of what can be claimed as values intrinsic to Islam. Complicated by the imperatives of globalization, Victoria may further expound that the notion of wearing hijab may continue to be mentally, economically and culturally imperialized by the ebb and flow of free market capitalism and its impinging consumerist agendas.

Victoria's audience may re-use, re-fuse, fuse and even confuse our habitual reading of hijab to unveil possibilities of new readings. In some combinations of texts and images, we may be jolted to confront our own preconceived readings of hijab. Such a work may reveal the fact that we are living in a multidimensional world of overlapping contexts. If we are lucky, these contexts may compliment each other to give us a coherent reality. Often times, especially in today's age of globalization and information implosion, they may contradict, cancel, mock, satirize, and deconstruct each other to eventually re-construct a new (if not absurd) reality. Established contexts that were previously employed to stabilize our fixed and given notion of political and cultural reality of hijab are continuously being shackled and shifted, freely appropriated, interrupted, broken, fragmented, or even crashed for good by Victoria's audience-centred strategy and inclusive method. In doing so, our own thought pattern and emotional response towards hijab may be at stake. We are forced to forsake grand narrative, singular and monolithic view of a fixed reading of hijab for a more flexible, impermanent, multi-textual and multifaceted mental perceptions on the notion of self, identity, culture, politics or even our present reality at large.

Victoria's work further reiterates our fragmented postmodern stance and reaffirms an exploded hyperview of multiple narratives that are defining our contemporary experience. It reflects a society where images (and texts) have become sites of contestation in which culture, lifestyle, identity and political consciousness can be constructed, and deconstructed. The question perhaps is how adaptive we are in engaging with such contestation?

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