

Engaging the Gender Divide in Morocco

In 2009 I boarded a ferry that sails from Algeciras, Spain's Southern Harbor to Tangiers, a hard scrabble port city at the Northern tip of Morocco. Other than a small cluster of American students who were studying at the University of Granada, the ship was teaming with Moroccans returning to their homeland. I'd never before travelled in an Arab country; suddenly I was surrounded by adult women who were covered in hijabs, burkas and veils. While Morocco is certainly a modern country and a woman's choice to wear such coverings is individual, nonetheless the preponderance of silky bright pink, lavender and aquamarine generated an alluring visual shield. This first moment of culture shock made me want to photograph it all—I'd hang over the deck railings pretending I was focusing on the distant port and then train my lens on the dark eyes peering out of a burka. I feared getting caught; sensing that my moment of utter astonishment was all part of the day-to-day ordinary. Mostly I photographed Tangiers as its proximity filled more and more of my lens.

As I'd read in Elizabeth Fernea's piece, "Behind the Veil," the coverings donned in Muslim society serve many purposes. There are utilitarian benefits to covering one's head, as I came to note while weathering a Sahara Desert dust storm, but in the thick of the city, the benefits are more social and political. A woman can leave her compound unescorted and incognito, accomplishing personal and business tasks without being subject to harassment. A man might even don a veil to engage in private-not-to-be questioned activities. Ultimately veiling separates women from unwanted attention from men and the vulgarity of public life.

In many world cultures female locks are considered especially erotic. When a woman runs her fingers through a tousele of her own hair, it's often seen as a seduction signal. Orthodox Jewish women shave their heads and wear scarves or wigs in public, which generates a separation between the sacred and the profane, prohibiting such flirtation. In my Western world the women I most often see wearing headscarves are cancer victims whose locks have fallen out following chemotherapy treatments. And thus my visceral response is typically one of pity, sadness and loss.

When the ferry landed in Tangiers I walked through a dusty field to a customs office where my passport was stamped and then almost immediately a taxi driver appeared and I was taken to the central train station. I noted that it would have been a relatively short walk, but knowing so little about Moroccan society, I figured that a cab ride was in order. I purchased a one-way ticket to Casablanca where I would be meeting up with my tour group. I've rarely taken organized tours, but without a travel companion, I'd been advised that there would be no other way to safely see the country. Nonetheless the six-hour train ride offered me some unfettered

access to the contemporary Moroccan psyche. Fortunately many of my coach companions spoke French (as opposed to solely Arabic and/or Berber) and thus much chatter occurred. At one moment I was seated near a woman whose olive skin seemed almost green; she kept hiking up her itchy pink burka to scratch herself. I watched all of the regions she scratched and how very uncomfortable she looked. There was something exquisitely private in being witness to how she was handling her body and the layers of cloth surrounding it. I slyly photographed her. I captured a pathos in her face; sensing I had taken an award winning photograph. Her accompanying husband saw what I had done and requested that I erase the photo. I knew that I had no right to steal such an uncomfortable looking image. It really was private and reluctantly I erased it and handed him my camera, proving that it was gone.

That interaction portrayed the essence of the Morocco I spent my next several weeks trying to understand. Was that uncomfortable-looking-woman scratching herself because of a condition brought on by living in a veiled society? Had her husband protected her dignity by asking me to erase the photo? During the next several weeks I saw many veiled women and from the fleeting privacy of my tour bus, occasionally images would be distilled in my far-reaching camera lens. At a small marketplace my eyes gazed on a woman wearing a full black burka with only a hole for an eye. She was too close to photograph and thus I just looked and wondered. What was life under the veil really about? Was she safe? Was she uncomfortably restricted? Did she yearn to show more skin in public? I really wanted to know.

One afternoon in a Marrakesh Internet shop I received a bit of answer. After paying for an hour to post photos to my blog and answer some emails, I began chatting with the attendant who was not wearing a veil. She explained that being young and unmarried (she was about 17), it was acceptable to dress as she did. Meanwhile her slightly older girlfriend began to describe what had led her to start wearing a veil. My ears quickly trained on the story that had led to this most pivotal decision. Following her marriage she had decided on her own that a veil would offer her the protection and privacy she sought. Being a bit of a provocateur, I asked if she would be comfortable removing the veil for me. She did and I gazed on her perfectly healthy, though slightly uncombed head of hair. She smiled sweetly and then after I'd had a good look, she recovered her head. I allowed that moment to be just as it was, without attempting to photograph it.

During my two week visit to Morocco there was just one instance in which I was permitted to photograph local women. My tour group was taken to an Argon oil processing workshop. Here I witnessed hard-working (veiled) women painstakingly extract precious oils from tough brown seeds. In that the women were engaged in an activity (and not just being veiled curiosities), we invited to have at them with our cameras. They neither posed, smiled nor grimaced. They simply cranked out argon butter and argon oil and allowed our shutters to click away.

The day after my tour ended I found my way over to a regional epidemiology conference. In that many of the papers were presented in French, I was able to follow along. The paper that intrigued me the most described how Moroccan women were generally overweight and unconcerned with physical fitness. Relative to the men who are out and about, the women being confined to private spaces had less opportunity for exercise. Moreover, the privacy afforded by a willowy caftan or burka reduced the necessity to appear fit and trim in public spaces. The statistics offered in the presentation certainly conferred that a lot of fat can be concealed under all of those delicate pink and aquamarine veils. As a westerner who has always worn shape-revealing clothes, I wondered how much more I might weigh if I, too, could completely cover up in public!

Perhaps the watershed moment for me and my quest for access to the worlds beneath veils and hijabs was when I spent an afternoon in a Hamam, a public bath. Being Morocco, such baths are gender segregated; I purchased a scrubbing in addition to the standard bath to better understand the scene. I'd never had my skin scrubbed so hard (many tanned layers were removed leaving me an abraded rosy pink) and had never felt my eyes pop so wide. Suddenly I was in the world of the veil-less. Everyone was naked except for thin little panties. And these otherwise visually protected women were in private space and the energy was amazing. They yelled and screamed and giggled. They poked each other roughly and basked in a kind of naked ease I'd never before witnessed amongst Western world nudists. At one moment my bathing attendant roughly pounded on me and I lunged over to attack her back. It led to a high-spirited water fight wherein we hurled buckets of water over each other's heads. I glowed not so much for the layers of removed skin as from being able to access this otherwise private private world.