

Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal Archive)

Volume 0 *Special Volume 2 (2009)*
*AESTHETICS AND RACE: NEW PHILOSOPHICAL
PERSPECTIVES*

Article 9

2009

The Hijab and the Sari: The Strange and the Sexy between Colonialism and Global Capitalism

Falguni A. Sheth
Hampshire College, fsheth@hampshire.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/liberalarts_contempaesthetics



Part of the [Aesthetics Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sheth, Falguni A. (2009) "The Hijab and the Sari: The Strange and the Sexy between Colonialism and Global Capitalism," *Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal Archive)*: Vol. 0 , Article 9.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/liberalarts_contempaesthetics/vol0/iss2/9

This IV. The Global and the Cosmopolitan is brought to you for free and open access by the Liberal Arts Division at DigitalCommons@RISD. It has been accepted for inclusion in Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal Archive) by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@RISD. For more information, please contact mpompeli@risd.edu.

[About CA](#)

[Journal](#)

[Contact CA](#)

[Links](#)

[Submissions](#)

[Search Journal](#)

[Editorial Board](#)

[Permission to Reprint](#)

[Privacy](#)

[Site Map](#)

[Publisher](#)

[Webmaster](#)

The Hijab and the Sari: The Strange and the Sexy between Colonialism and Global Capitalism

Falguni A. Sheth

Abstract

By exploring the “Western” reception of the sari in comparison to the hijab, I hope to illuminate the racial aesthetic that is at work in vilifying the latter while glorifying the former. The history of colonialism and the forced domestication of the sari help to facilitate its reception as an acceptably “sexy” garment. By contrast, the hijab has not been subjected to colonial modification. It has remained unmodified, and is still experienced as culturally, racially, and aesthetically strange by observers. In order to explore the role that political and cultural authority plays in shaping “acceptable” and “unacceptable” racial aesthetics as linked to the hijab and the sari, I will explore the regulation of the sari and explore the sartorial strategies enacted by Mohandas Gandhi in his political resistance to British rule over India. Finally, I will draw on the prior analysis to highlight the contrast between the acceptability of the colonially domesticated sari in contemporary society and the hostility that the as-yet still undomesticated hijab incurs in contemporary society.

Key Words

colonialism, concealment, couture, domestication, Gandhi, hijab, racial aesthetic, sari, sartorial, veil

1. Introduction

In recent years, a number of Western nations have found themselves in the midst of controversies about the hijab, a practice that is engaged in by a portion of the female Muslim population around the world. Many of the controversies have been waged on the grounds that the veil conceals too much of the women who wear them, or that it is oppressive in that it requires women to conceal their sexuality and that it serves the purpose of keeping women hidden from the larger world. In contrast, the sari, which has been in existence for thousands of years, has historically been viewed as immodest at its worst and “sexy” at its best. Today, the sari conceals much more of the body than moderate forms of the hijab, although it is considered risqué and glamorous. Also, it is more acceptable as an exotic form of dress than the hijab. The sari is seen as an example of charming, quaint, or cutting-edge couture worn by Indian peasants and transnational figures alike; whereas, at least in much of the “Western” world, the hijab is considered strange and worn by women under coercion from patriarchal or religious authorities.

Although the practices may be more qualitatively than quantitatively different, my purpose here is not to evaluate the hijab itself but rather the range of “Western” receptions of the sari in comparison to the hijab. By doing so, I hope to illuminate the racial aesthetic that is at work in vilifying the latter while glorifying the former. By the “racial aesthetic,” I refer here to signals and messages involved in the visual, cultural, and political reception of each practice, as expressed by those who perceive themselves as standing apart culturally, religiously, sexually, and

geopolitically from both forms of dress.

In both practices, the racial regulation of a practice, namely the entitlement of European/North American colonial and (post)-colonial superiority to pronounce whether or how much or what kind of concealment is acceptable, remains intact. In the contemporary context, women from a variety of national, ethnic, and religious backgrounds wear the sari for a range of reasons, with the exception of religious affiliation, similar to those offered by women who wear the hijab. The sari, though conventionally worn by Hindu women in India, does not have an expressly religious referent and is also worn by Muslim and Christian women in India.

In what follows, I will explore the role that political and cultural authority plays in shaping “acceptable” and “unacceptable” racial aesthetics linked to the hijab and the sari. Beginning with a brief review of the controversies over the hijab, I will then explore the sartorial strategies enacted by Mohandas Gandhi during the evolution of his political role in the resistance to British rule over India in the early decades of the twentieth century. For Gandhi, clothing played a key role in consolidating certain political impulses and symbolizing a culturally and racially specific political worldview that also doubled as an activist stance in anti-colonial struggles. His sartorial interventions, as expressed through his clothes and the *khadi* movement, reflected a resistance to the encroaching hegemony of a British imperial ethos, which was linked to Britain’s pretensions to economic, modernist and liberal superiority. While his strategy lasted only briefly in the struggles against British imperial presence in India, it was nevertheless a successful moment. I will link Gandhi’s perceptive strategy to a historical review of the evolution of the sari as part of the site of struggles over political and cultural recognition between a local indigenous population and the colonizing authority. Finally, I will draw on this analysis to highlight the contrast between the current acceptability of the colonially domesticated sari and the hostility that the still undomesticated hijab incurs in contemporary society.

By exploring the aesthetic status of certain kinds of couture in terms of the history of colonialism, we are better able to see how garments such as the sari were subject to “domestication,” which has helped to facilitate its reception as an acceptably “sexy” and “glamorous” garment. By contrast, the hijab has not been subjected to colonial modification (although of late it has been the focus of “liberal” and “feminist” interventions). It has remained unmodified, and is still experienced as culturally, racially —and aesthetically strange by observers.

2. The Hijab

The technical meaning of the hijab is under contestation, and can refer to a range of practices that manifest the Qu’ran’s injunction to observe modesty. This obligation can be expressed through the covering of the body or through a cover or screen (such as those of the *zenana*, in which women spent their days but through which they were able to see visitors or outsiders without themselves being seen). In contemporary usage, it refers to some form of covering of a woman’s person, usually the hair, whether by a loose scarf or a complete covering, leaving only the face showing.^[1] Many Muslim women do not engage in the practice of wearing the hijab; and those who do, do so to different degrees:

from covering one's hair loosely, or completely concealing one's hair or covering some portion or all of one's face (niqab).[2] These practices have different names, many of which indicate veiling, shielding, or guarding.[3] Here, I shall use "hijab" as a generic term to refer to the range of coverings that can be worn, since that is how the term is often deployed.

Women who wear different forms of the hijab have become more conspicuous over the last two decades, especially in the years since the events of September 11, 2001. The "veil" is worn by different women in markedly distinct ways. Women from a range of geographic regions, different class backgrounds, educational achievement, marital status, and even differing religious, social, and political commitments have engaged in the practice (see Figure 1).[4]



Figure 1-Two Women Wearing Hijab. Photo courtesy of Green Left Weekly, www.greenleft.org.au.

Yet these differences have converged into a general practice that appears to have no subtle differences and is understood primarily as offensive, oppressive, or illiberal in Western European and North American contexts.

It is well-known, for example, that the French response to the hijab has been to prohibit it in public (secular) institutions on the grounds that public expressions of religion are antithetical to "French" secular citizenship as well as to "progressive/feminist" culture, even though analogous symbols such as the Catholic nun's habit or the Sikh male's turban have not been prohibited except when the French state has been under duress to be consistent.[5] Among other reasons given for the prohibition by the French government was that they were anxious to relieve young girls from the coercion to wear the hijab.[6] And yet, it is less well-known, though well-documented, that women who wear the hijab do so for a variety of reasons, ranging from family or cultural expectations, to the intention of expressing publicly one's religious stance, personal preference, or political statement. Some women also document that the decision to wear the hijab is a trade-off in negotiations with family for greater trust and greater social and personal autonomy.[7]

These controversies over the hijab have fascinated scholars in a range of fields, including history, anthropology, political science,

philosophy, and cultural studies.^[8] The literature has been primarily concerned with questions of individual freedom, political harmony, secularism, oppression, and the tensions between religious commitments and political citizenship even as it has explored the common themes of veiling, masking, and hiding. Why is the hijab so markedly offensive in Western contexts? In the context of political liberalism, it offends because its function is to conceal—or less generously—to hide. Hiding violates a celebrated principle of transparency which is thought to characterize an ideal political liberalism. As I've written elsewhere,

"In hiding the body and the visage of its wearer, the veil becomes troublingly conspicuous, since one appears to be guilty or have something to hide. In the cultural and psychological contexts of Western public comportment, one cloaks or masks for a range of reasons, but very few of them have positive connotations." ^[9]

This principle extends to men as well as women. It also extends, although not always consistently, to a "Western" liberal feminist sexuality: to conceal one's body is to reflect an unliberated attitude. To wear sleeveless, strapless, tops or short shorts—on the beach, outside of the office, in the park—is thought to indicate a comforting unselfconsciousness of the body. But it is not the degree of concealment alone that governs the Western perceptions of "sexual liberation;" the location of the concealment, its context, and the ethos of the person (un)concealing is also salient. To unconceal one's waist, shoulders, cleavage, and arms is more acceptable when done by a Western woman on a beach than at the office or when standing in front of a classroom. And yet—at least in the late twentieth-early twenty-first century, an Indian woman who does so would be more accepted, when wearing a sari, than a non-Indian woman. An Indian woman wearing a sari in the classroom would also be more accepted than a North American woman (of any background) wearing a short skirt and halter top (in a classroom) and revealing her cleavage, waist, and shoulders. Similarly, concealing one's hair is also acceptable when donning a cap as protection from intemperate climates or in a church or synagogue. It is less acceptable—clearly—when done by women who appear to be Middle Eastern or Arab or Muslim, and more acceptable when done in the context of certain religious referents. Subscribing to these complex rules of dress suggests evidence of a shared culture, a shared fashion-and political-context, and perhaps also a shared rationality and, if not, then at the very least an acquiescence to the rules of the dominant context.

The hijab and niqab are dependent neither on a fashion-specific context nor on a shared assumption of liberal cultural values. The hijab is perceived to violate the norms of a sexually and politically liberated society, as well as the aesthetic norms that correspond to such a world. Dress that shrouds tends to be taken by a liberal and liberal feminist public as a sign of a gratuitous modesty or external duress from illegitimate sources, even when "Western" (or "non-Muslim" but not necessarily secular) equivalents such as the Sikh woman's turban (see Figure 2), the Indian woman's headcover (see Figures 3-5), the Orthodox Jewish woman's wig, the Amish woman's scarf, the Catholic nun's habit, or the Nigerian woman's headwrap perform the same function, even if

for a seemingly different purpose.



Figure 2-Sikh Women in Turbans. Photo courtesy of RealSikhism.com.



Figure 3-Laborers outside City Palace, Jaipur, India. Photo by Falguni A. Sheth, 2008.



Figure 4-Hindu Women outside Karni Mata Temple, Bikaner, India. Photo by Falguni A. Sheth, 2008.



Figure 5-Laborer outside City Palace, Jaipur. Photo by Falguni A. Sheth, 2008.

Perhaps this is because of the perception that the former dress is worn in response to a religious imperative or the expectations of a patriarchal system, and thus thought to control women's sexuality. [10] So the perception that one dresses in response to a patriarchal or (Islamic) religious system is received with hostility by a "liberal/feminist" audience, and the perception that Muslim women might dress in such ways out of personal preferences is also received with hostility on the grounds that women who were "rational" would not select such outfits voluntarily. As importantly, the hostility to the burqa and niqab

merge with the hostility to “Muslim” or Arab non-Western contexts that have been harshly scrutinized for their “oppressive” or “illiberal” tendencies, a hostility that has been conspicuously missing from formerly colonized non-Western liberal democracies such as India.[11]

As scholars and journalists alike have pointed out, over the last few years many young women have begun to wear the hijab as a public expression of piety as well as an expression of political resistance to the Western battles against Muslim religiosity, including the now international “war on terror.”[12] But decades before the attempts by European states to resist the public expressions of Muslim faith, women had begun to veil in solidarity with other women (as during the 1970s Iranian revolution) and in resistance to “secular” national governments (as in the 1970s Islamic movement in Egypt).[13] In the series of battles that have been waged over the hijab, we can find another dimension to the public expression of the hijab and its equally forceful counter-response by a non-Muslim public: it is yet another example of how clothing becomes a deceptively localized medium for much larger political battles over authority, domination, and colonization. In this regard, it has had many notable precursors, including those over the sari, and the *khadi* movement popularized by Mohandas Gandhi.

3. Gandhi and His Chadar

Gandhi’s image as a short brown man in a dhoti and *chadar* (see Figure 6)[14] leading the battle against the British administration in India and in favor of self-rule has been ensconced in our collective consciousness.



Figure 6-Mohandas K. Gandhi in a dhoti and chadar. Photo courtesy

of National Gandhi Museum.

While the story of Gandhi's political entreaties to reduce India's dependence on foreign (British) textiles is well-known as the *khadi* movement, the details of the story might be relevant here.

Gandhi began his career as a lawyer in Durban, South Africa, fully imbued with a sense of Western couture, although it was executed with a few stylistic changes. He appeared in court for the first time in a suit and an "imitation Bengali" turban (see Figures 7 and 8), and was instructed by the judge to remove the turban.



Figure 7-Gandhi in South Africa. Photo courtesy of National Gandhi Museum.



Figure 8-Gandhi and Kasturba in Johannesburg, South Africa. Photo courtesy of National Gandhi Museum.

Removing one's headgarb, as Emma Tarlo explains, was "a gesture of humiliation" in India; an order to do so was an insult. Although he did remove it, he wrote about the incident, which appears to have been in line with Gandhi's lifelong awareness

regarding the cultural and political symbolism of clothing.^[15] Sure enough, Gandhi's embrace of *swaraj* (self-rule), his corresponding exhortation to fellow Indians to show their patriotism and commitment to Indian self-rule by spinning and wearing *khadi* (simple homespun rough cloth), was steeped in a consciousness of clothing as a medium of political symbolism directed in resistance to the British. The *khadi* movement was spurred by the resistance to British control over the Indian economy, including forced purchases by Indians of British-imported cloth and other goods, especially in light of the hunger and poverty Indians were facing. One of Gandhi's responses was to exhort his fellow Indians to wear locally woven cloth. This exhortation gradually extended to his learning to spin cloth, pressuring his wife to wear *khadi*, and chastising his colleagues and neighbors for their selective wearing of *khadi*, for example, during political rallies when Gandhi himself was the invited speaker or when he was traveling through their communities. For Gandhi, wearing *khadi* was not an occasional or ceremonial form of dress but one that was to be embraced as a full-time uniform. Wearing *khadi* enabled Gandhi and others to illustrate vividly their commitment to a nationalist politics, a politics of home-rule and, ultimately, a stance of resistance to a colonial government and forced international trade.

Gandhi's awareness of the political and cultural importance of clothing was also embedded in a self- and culturally-conscious concern about offending Hindus and Muslims with his exposed corporeal self. In part, this self-consciousness emerged from the clear pre-Victorian British influence over "native" couture and culture, one which figures into other, later examples of clothing that is politically and culturally influenced, which I will discuss below.

Gandhi's awareness of the symbolism of his public appearance emerged from an intricate symbolic taxonomy of dress that had long been embedded in the Indian context (and which, I would argue, exists in every cultural context). What one wears, how one wears it, in front of whom one wears it already mattered in the Indian context before the British arrived. Here is one example, from Travancore (Kerala), on the southwestern tip of India:

There was a highly specified code of respect and avoidance behavior enforced by the state. Caste status was marked by fixed distances to which a low-caste person could approach a Brahman: the Nadars were supposed to remain thirty-six paces from the person of a Nambudri Brahman. They were also prohibited from carrying umbrellas and wearing shoes or golden ornaments. Their houses had to be only one story high, and they could not milk cows. Nadar women could not carry pots on their hips nor could they cover the upper part of their bodies. Nair women were allowed to wear a light scarf around their shoulders, which at times would be draped over their breasts. However, they were expected to be bare-breasted in the presence of brahmins and other high-status people as a sign of respect. In addition, all castes below the rank of Nair could wear only a single cloth of rough texture, which was worn by both men and women and which could come no lower than the knee nor higher than the waist."^[16]

The significance of clothing was amplified in cross-cultural contexts. Indian attire was shaped much more dramatically than British couture, not surprisingly, reflecting the power dynamic of a British colonial administration. Under the British administration, "Indian" attire could become the grounds to refuse entry into British institutions, while British attire could become the grounds for ridicule for Indian men if worn in their communities or in the home. In addition, certain points of "etiquette" or decency were key factors in shaping Indian couture. For the British, the uncovering of one's head indoors or in private social contexts indicated respect, whereas precisely the opposite was the case for Indians. The same was true for one's feet. Whereas it is customary to be shod in Western contexts, whether in an office or in one's home, it is offensive if not ultimately transgressive to wear shoes in an Indian's home or in a temple or mosque.^[17]

Under Gandhi's leadership clothing became a signification of political ideology and control on Gandhi's part, as well, and one that was often received badly, not only by the British but also by other Indians. Indian men negotiated these intricate spaces carefully, often revising their attire to conform to certain European fashions while retaining certain Indian customs. In time, as the Indian resistance to British rule became stronger, choosing between Indian and British dress became an expression of one's ideological commitments, as well. Much of the records account for the garb of Indian men, since they were in public spaces much more frequently than were Indian women. Indian women had fewer and narrower spaces in which to negotiate their clothing decisions, in part because of their "less public" position, and because their choices would have been judged according to different standards under patriarchy. As Tarlo points out, women whose spouses adopted European dress styles were less likely to do the same, since "these contravened ideas of female modesty and respect too grossly."^[18] Nevertheless, their outfits did change and adapt in certain ways to European sensibilities in fabric, prints, and design. But they also became reshaped by British and Christian sensibilities of modesty and decency, which required recognition and conformity in order to signify one's acceptance of the norms of the colonial powers, and by extension, recognition and acceptance of the colonial government itself. A non-conformity to either European dress or appropriate modifications of Indian dress suggested an allegiance or preference for the familiar styles of one's community, but it also implied a disagreement with the "superiority" of colonial style. In this dissent lay the threat of rejection of the authority of colonial power.

4. The Sari

The sari is no exception to this story of colonial influence and modification. It has been in existence throughout the known history of the region now known as India. Sari, according to one source, "is the [A]nglicised version of *sadi* which existed in Prakrit as *sadia* and derives itself from the sanskrit word *sati*, meaning a strip of cloth." The use of *sati* (*sic*) has been mentioned in the *Mahabharata* and can probably be traced back even farther."^[19] Predominantly worn by women in India, the sari as a dress has extended to Malaysia, Burma, Indonesia, and Singapore and to the so-called "Western" world as well. It was, up until three decades ago, a predominant form of dress for both unmarried and married women. In England and the United States, South

and Southeast Asian women do wear the sari often for special occasions or functions, as do distinctly non-South or Southeast Asian women. Cherie Blair, an attorney and spouse of the former British Prime Minister, and others, has been seen wearing the sari as a cosmopolitan fashion statement.[\[20\]](#)

Like the hijab, the contexts and purposes of wearing the sari vary by region, community, caste, class, and other factors, as well (in contemporary times, marital status among certain classes and castes defines when women should wear the sari). We can see a striking example of multiple styles of the sari in a late nineteenth century painting by Indian artist Raja Ravi Varma, entitled, *The Orchestra* (late nineteenth century).[\[21\]](#) Still, unlike the hijab, which has often been viewed as a fundamentally offensive practice by pundits, scholars, and politicians in the “Western world,” in recent decades, the sari has received little negative attention in contemporary society. If anything, the multicultural popular consumption of Bollywood movies and conspicuous transition to Western films of Bollywood actresses such as Aishwarya Rai, has rendered the sari even more of a glamorous affair than ever before. And yet, in many ways, the function of the sari is analogous to the practice of the hijab. I am not necessarily discussing the concealing function here—although that is certainly part of the story that I want to explore. Rather, at least in the case of non-Western women who wear one or the other of these garments, they are both conspicuous expressions of certain cultural or religious allegiances.

The current version of the sari has been familiar in Western (mostly British) contexts for at least 200 years. Prior to that, women wore the sari without the petticoat and the blouse which, depending upon how it was worn (around the waist alone) might have left their breasts uncovered, their waists exposed, and a semi-opaque cover over their hips, as we can see in another 19th century painting by Varma, of two figures, Shantanu and Matsyasughandi, from an Indian myth.[\[22\]](#) Still another of Varma’s paintings, *Here Comes Papa*, shows a different version of the sari, worn without blouse or petticoat.[\[23\]](#) Since then, it has seen a series of changes that have rendered it more suitable to the “Western” gaze. In its present form—a 5.5 meter by 1 meter length of cloth worn over a long petticoat and blouse--the sari was modified under British rule to help increase the “modesty,” and by correlation, to “reduce” the sexual promiscuity of the women who wore saris by fashioning various auxiliary garments that would help conceal, veil, and shroud the bodies of these women. Today, despite the voluminous amount of material and the complexity of affixing it to the body, the sari is now seen as sexy, primarily because of its exposure of the waist and the upper back, and the subtle enhancement of the breasts through the cut of the matching blouse often worn with it. Moreover, although it has been questioned for its suitability in twentieth century professional contexts, as diasporic South Asian women have entered various internationalized and professional markets, it has rarely seen the kind of censorship that the hijab has.

In what follows, I offer a short digression into some of the different understandings and motives behind the sari. As Emma Tarlo suggests, “clothing matters” significantly in the Indian context (and many others, also). What is worn, how it is worn, how shiny, plain, simple, complicated a particular outfit is, how one’s outfit is adorned or augmented with jewelry, sends signals

to a receiving public about the respect that the wearer has for others. As Tarlo points out, these signals are true for women's outfits—regardless of the outfit in question. However, this explanation might suffice to show that the sari is not an incidental garment that is thrown on casually; neither are, for that matter, a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. Rather, both are worn to express certain messages in a function analogous to that of the hijab. A t-shirt and jeans are the expression of a certain social or material status, a certain political privilege, and a response to certain political, social, and cultural contexts--which can indicate a racial, cultural, and class aesthetic. All of these sartorial forms signify or recognize a certain authority by which to "speak" or be heard sartorially. [24]

In part, for the sari at least, this significance emerges from complex caste strata, read silently through outward appearances that signify one's social and religious status. One need only look at length of one's *dhoti* [25] or the way in which the sari is wrapped to induce the general region, class, political position, and relative "urbaneness" of the wearer. As Bernard Cohn suggests,

"[t]his substantial nature of authority in the Indic world is crucial for any understanding of the widespread significance of cloth and clothes, as they are a medium through which substances can be transferred. Clothes are not just body coverings and matters of adornment, nor can they be understood only as metaphors of power and authority, nor as symbols; in many contexts, clothes literally *are* authority. The constitution of authoritative relationships, of rulership, or hierarchy in India cannot be reduced to the sociological construction of leaders and followers, patrons and clients, subordination and superordination alone. Authority is literally part of the body of those who possess it. It can be transferred from person to person through acts of incorporation, which not only create followers or subordinates, but a body of companions of the ruler who have shared some of his substance." [26]

Of course these signals can be easily manipulated to send certain signals. Indira Gandhi, when campaigning or give public speeches, would always wear a sari in the handloom fabric of the region in which she was speaking, in order to signify solidarity with the local population and to popularize the fabrics that they produced. [27] However, the relationship between garments and a complex nexus of authority reveals an important aspect of clothing that tends to be eclipsed in many, especially Western contexts. If clothing signifies power, authority, or some lack thereof, then it is also a conduit by which the authority of those in power can be exhibited.

We see this vividly in the stories of the *khadi* movement and of the exercise of power over the Nadar women in *Travancore* (Kerala) under the British colonial administration. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the British colonial authorities, working in concert with Christian missionaries, would significantly change the set of norms and significations surrounding the sari. Missionaries, especially, recorded the absence of covered breasts as a sign of sexual promiscuity and indulgence:

Hear, readers. The Shudra women of Malayalam on

attaining sexual maturity receive cloth from many and become the wives of many, bearing many children. Even the mother cannot know the paternity of her many children . . . Due to such an evil practice, there is absolutely no faithfulness between husband and wife or love for one's father or children except out of the desire for material gain . . . Women, in order to make a living, give up their honour, and like offering bait to fish, cast off their upper-cloth and display their breasts in order to grab wealth.[28]

Christian missionaries and British administrators worked in (unintentional) concert to urge Nadar women to wear longer clothes, and for women converted to Christianity to conceal their breasts.[29] In 1813, the British government in Kerala, working in concert with British missionaries, "grant[ed] permission to women converted to Christianity to cover their bosoms as obtains among Christians in other countries." [30] This mandate created havoc. Because it was seen as transgressing the carefully choreographed taxonomy of caste, purity, and pollution, the order was quickly rescinded, "forbidding the Nadar women to wear the Nair loose scarf, but allowing them to wear ...the jacket worn by Syrian Christians and Moplahs." Clearly, the outcome, regardless of the stated intention of the policy-maker was to exert some form of control in accordance with certain urgent priorities of the policy-maker. This is true not only for the Keralans but also for the British administration and the missionaries.

The work of the missionaries was not completed. The spouses of missionaries had created a "loose jacket that met their criteria for modest clothing that befitted Christian women," but Nadar women continued to wear the breast cloth, without or without the jacket.[31] And havoc continued: The upper castes of Kerala punished Nadar women for wearing the breast-cloth by attacking, stripping and beating them, and burning their chapels and schools. And in turn, the Travancore government (1828) managed the violence by "restating the ...policy of forbidding the Nadar women to wear the Nair-style cloth, but allowing the jacket." [32] It is not clear whether such choreography was ubiquitous among all castes, but it is an example of the remarkable place that clothing had in terms of recognizing and signifying authority.

Advancing and retreating, until the end of the nineteenth century, the British in concert with missionaries tried to impose new standards of "modesty" and "decency" on Keralan women. In 1858, for example, they promised to refrain from interference with caste, and granted permission to the Keralan government to observe caste rules by forbidding the breast cloth, only to issue a new contradictory dictum one year later: "The government of Madras, under pressure from missionaries in England and in India, instructed Cullen in no uncertain terms that they were a Christian government and 'the whole civilized world would cry shame on us, if we did not take a firm stand' against the king of Travancore." [33] They tried to negotiate between their relations with the raja of Kerala and their ideals of modesty, but were alternately met by violence, resistance, and finally imposed their will absolutely, until the "modest" version of the sari, which concealed according to Christian and colonial standards, gained widespread acceptance.

There are some important lessons that can be learned here. For example, we see that the reading of the normative implications of a garment is intrinsically linked to the racial lens through which the population is read. In this case the reading of the sexual mores and (un)civilized status of a group was shaped and facilitated or diminished by the success of the emissaries of the colonial authorities to intervene and regulate the clothing practices of the local population. We also see that the political, social, and cultural importance of the regulating authority is established by the (coerced) establishment of the dress codes and modifications of the garments or practices in question. It could be argued that these political dynamics are in evidence in any institutional hierarchy, as is evidenced, for example, by student dress codes in public grammar schools, and that these dynamics are not necessarily racial.

That is true. The racial aesthetic dimension of the clothing enters the analysis when we read the norms of acceptable dress as they are applied to stylized production of the "good" savage or sub-humanoid entity.^[34] In order for Indian women to be viewed as "good" women, at least sartorially, their form of dress must resonate as familiar to white women who act within the frame of colonial authority. This requires the concealment of the breasts, waist, backs in a mode that echoes pre-Victorian expatriate British women's fashions. The introduction of the long-sleeved and long blouses and the petticoats to the sari enables the proper colonial modification of the sari so that it passes the test of "modest" wear, and its wearer indicates her recognition of and, by extension, her acquiescence in the colonial authority (even if this is done through local legislation).

As Cohn and Tarlo both point out, clothing matters and is the site of authority and resistance to authority. As such, we can understand not only the colonial events of the nineteenth century, but also the ability to resist and circumvent authority through couture via political statements such as those made by Gandhi and by the encroaching tendencies of economic hegemony such as those of multicultural, cosmopolitan, and global fashion trends. In the contemporary context, the colonially-reshaped sari's longevity is extended through the multicultural and consumer rubrics of "global capitalism." Beyond the multiculturalist appreciation fantasies that justify the consumption tendencies of "ethnic" commodities and culture, such as Bollywood films and "Indian" or what passes for Indian food outside of India, the colonialist domestication of the sari renders it rife for adaptation to a global capitalist culture. Current versions of the sari are popularized by cross-over Bollywood actresses and by Western notables alike; but even outside of India, ensuing generations of diasporic South Asian women have adopted (and adapted) the sari to express an ethnic hipness that resonates with Bollywood and Hollywood aspirations for an "apolitical," "cosmopolitan," and "ethnically chic" glamour; we see this as fashion magazines and celebrity media cover Elizabeth Hurley in her ornate sari-like gear on the occasion of her marriage in Texas to the Arun Nayar, son of a famous Indian tycoon, and new chic and glossy Diasporic Indian fashion magazines (like *Bibi*) promulgate new varying styles of the sari.^[35] And so in the midst of colonialism and global capitalism, we find the sari to be no longer a source of scandal or transgression but rather catapulted into the realm of cutting-edge haute couture, perhaps because it has already been vetted and shaped for a "Western" sensibility, which then opens a

space to re-shape it for sex appeal and glamor.

5. Differences and Commonalities

I now want to consider some reasons behind the markedly different treatment between the hijab and the sari. The hijab, unlike the sari, still has the widespread public perception of being “strange” rather than sexy. There are several reasons that may account for the disparity: As I explained in the last section, even though the sari has been in existence for thousands of years, it has been influenced significantly by British colonialism in a way that the hijab has remarkably escaped. The hijab has not had a chance to be domesticated by colonial powers, although there are examples of “Westernized” forms of the veil, which appear to be more acceptable in urbane contexts. By “domestication” of the sari, I mean the ability to transform the sari, with its regional, stylistic, and hierarchical signaling, into a “uniform,” “cosmopolitan” mode of dress that indicates its appropriateness in formal, (geographically and culturally) Western, urbane settings. The veil has not been domesticated so as to be able to serve a similar function, unless we count the “glamorous” compolitanization of the hijab, as seen for example, through the work of Myriam Abdelaziz. [36]

Moreover, whereas the sari could be compared to Western women’s skirts and tight-bodied jackets, the hijab has no counterpart among Western women’s fashions, except in the case of religious or ceremonial garb, such as the Catholic nun’s habit or the Christian bride’s wedding veil. We do not have to work too hard to see how and why the double standard between the habit and the hijab would emerge. In the tradition of true fashion, the veil appears to be more offensive, more transgressive, because it has not received the “papal” blessing, as it were, or the kiss of approval from a colonial, now imperial, authority. Moreover, it does not follow a set of implicit stylized procedures about how, where, or when to conceal or reveal, as does the sari with regard to a stylized accentuation of a woman’s breasts, exposed waist, and covered hips.

The tendency to cover one’s face and head through a form of veil has for some time been a part of Hindu women’s couture. In Gujarat and in South India, both of which have Hindu and Muslim populations living closely together, and especially in rural regions, veiling with the *pallu* (end) of one’s sari is an important signifying function of modesty for women of all strata.

And yet during earlier moments and in places in the South and in Gujarat, “Muslim” clothing habits in India appear to have been understood as an imperative to conceal that is, at least by some Hindu communities, considered antithetical to “Hindu” couturier imperatives of purity and chastity. This idea is predicated on the premise that covering or partially concealing oneself is a form of sexual allure. One example comes from an anecdote of the spouse of an early twentieth-century Kerala reformer, who wished to integrate the blouse into her sari, enhancing her sexual appeal, which was thought to be diminished by wearing the sari without the blouse. Her husband approved. Her mother berated and beat her for behaving like a “Muslim” and a promiscuous “dancing girl.” [37] One way to read this story is to understand that the act of covering her chest with a blouse is to become more seductive by a form of allure through opacity, which is associated (in the part of the region from where the story

originates) with the sexually promiscuous practices of Muslims and not Hindus. Some aspects of the salwar kameez and the blouse have been adopted, gradually, by Hindu communities, and elsewhere have become standard fashion for younger and older women in urban and rural locales. And whereas in Kerala, Muslim women do wear saris, most wear headscarves and long loose blouses that match their saris. In essence, the form of dress is not by itself the sole site of controversy. Rather, the political, geographical, social, and discursive context matters to the status of the sartorial form.

Beyond a perceived but dubious "cultural" imperative to conceal, another reason that the hijab escapes "Western" influence might be because Muslim women, especially within Mughal kingdoms under British colonial rule, remained in purdah or in a zenana, that is, behind closed doors such that neither the colonial administration nor Christian missionaries would have had a chance to weigh in or opine changes to the hijab. That particular form of purdah is changing, and might be another reason that the hijab has gained in popularity as a portable, self-contained purdah. While the essence of the hijab, chador, and other variants have remained unchanged and "uncosmopolitan," in general, unlike the sari, the hijab itself has been adapted to various capitalistic and cosmopolitan fashion whims, which may be why there are more "urbane" hijab fashions in nations as diverse as France, Egypt, and Iran, where women of different backgrounds and strata tend to combine their expressions of piety with their zeal for a more Westernized urbane look. The latter trend is an interesting phenomenon that appears to be in tension with the argument drawn here about the colonialism production of the Westernized sari. However, I think it may be consistent with a parallel trend of economic global colonialism to "be more acceptable" or "to blend in" in order to avoid and appease the more stringent elements who oppose the hijab.

But the net result has been that the hijab has become, as the sari was under the British colonial administration, the site of struggles for power. Through the prohibitions on the hijab in various Western countries, along with official pronouncements of resistance, often from imams and mullahs as well as from the women whose persons are the center of these struggles, the battle to control the sites of women's bodies remains alive and well, couched in arguments for the political liberation of women, or an insistence for publicity and transparency, or even in arguments for their sexual liberation, as if this were really the concern of men in power. And because the hijab had proved itself to be much more resistant to colonialism, Christianity, and capitalism in the past than the sari was, it seems to make sense that its time to be dominated, or at least to be the subject of domination, has now emerged in contemporary times. It is susceptible to the charges of strangeness, with all of its insinuations of noncompliance, unwillingness, intolerance, aloofness, and general "unneighborliness." In the context of Western American imperialism, "unneighborliness" is as ugly a charge that one can be subjected to, next to being "undemocratic," "aggression-loving," and "anti-capitalist," as our hijab-wearing sisters in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Iran, have come to know all too well.[\[38\]](#)

Falguni A. Sheth, Hampshire College

fsheth@hampshire.edu

Published July 29, 2009

Endnotes

[1] For examples of the hijab (a covering of the hair) and the abaya (a full-length body covering), see images at hijabstyle.blogspot.com.

[2] For an example of the niqab, see image at www.uttorshuri.net/Religion.html#farida.

[3] Other terms include niqab, khimar, chador, burqa, abayah, chador, although in this article I will use the term "hijab," which signifies a range of such practices. Fadwa El Guindi, *Veil: Modesty, Privacy and Resistance* (New York: Berg, Oxford International Publishers, 1999), pp. 88, 59.

[4] See also Nelly Elayoubi, "Soccer girl no quitter: Asmahan eyes future as voice for Muslim sportswomen," cnews.canoe.ca/CNEWS/Canada/2007/03/05/3699040-sun.html, for an article and accompanying image of Asmahan Mansour, the 11 year old Canadian girl who was banned from playing in a soccer tournament on the grounds that her hijab constituted a "safety violation."

[5] For an image of a French Catholic nun and Muslim woman, and its accompanying story of a 2004 protest against the French hijab, see inminds.co.uk/hijab-protest.html.

[6] As Anne Hidalgo, who in 2004 was the deputy mayor of Paris said, "We've been very perturbed about the veil. To see those very young girls veiled . . . The 'evolution' of the veil here isn't about choice, or religion. Perhaps the veil once said something religious, but now it's a sign of oppression. It isn't God, it's men who want it." In Jane Kramer, "Taking the Veil: How France's Public Schools Became the Battleground in a Culture War," *The New Yorker*, November 22, 2004.

[7] Hoodfar, Homa. "The Veil in Their Minds and on Our Heads: The Persistence of Colonial Images of Muslim Women," in *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital*, ed. David Lloyd and Lisa Lowe (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1997). To survey a range of reasons that Muslim women might wear the hijab, see the following literature: Homa Hoodfar, "More than Clothing: Veiling as an Adaptive Strategy," in Sajida Sultana Alvi, Homa Hoodfar, and Sheila McDonough, *The Muslim Veil in North America: Issues and Debates* (Toronto: Women's Press, 2003); Faegheh Shirazi, *The Veil Unveiled: The Hijab in Modern Culture* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001). Fadwa El Guindi, *Veil: Modesty, Privacy and Resistance*; Jane Kramer, "Taking the Veil;" Saba Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Andrea Useem, "Loving and Leaving the Head Scarf: What Hijab's Revolving Door Says About the Religious Mobility of American Muslims," *Slate*, May 12, 2008.

[8] Some representative literature includes the following works: Alia Al-Saji, "Muslim women and the rhetoric of freedom," in *Constructing the Nation: A Race and Nationalism Reader*, ed. Linda Martín Alcoff and Mariana Ortega (State University of New York Press, forthcoming 2009); Cecile Laborde, "Secular

Philosophy and Muslim Headscarves in Schools," *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 13, no. 3 (2005), 305-29; Saba Mahmood *The Politics of Piety*; Joan Scott, *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton University Press, 2007); Faegheh Shirazi, *The Veil Unveiled*.

[9] Falguni A. Sheth, "Unruly Women, 'Muslim Culture,' and Threats to Liberal Culture." *Peace Review. Special edition on Race, Violence, and Law* 18, no. 4 (2006), 455-63.

[10] *Ibid.* And yet even though there may be important reasons why women may want to wear the hijab, these are neither widely known nor considered, as Lila Abu-Lughod points out in "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?" *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (2002), p. 785ff.

[11] See John Rawls, *Law of Peoples* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999) for an example of an "illiberal people," who resemble an Arab/Muslim nation, Kazanistan. A range of North Atlantic nations has either passed legislation or endorsed "codes of conduct" that discourage "practices" associated with "Islam," often extending to (if not primarily identified with) the hijab. See Sheth, "Unruly Women, 'Muslim Culture,' and Threats to Liberal Culture" for more details.

[12] See Jane Kramer, "Taking the Veil." See also Scott, *The Politics of the Veil* and Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety*. It is difficult to characterize these battles as battles for secularism, since certain religions are not only tolerated but accommodated and even welcomed, whereas others, like Islam, are rejected and shunned altogether by national governments and political institutions.

[13] El Guindi, *The Veil: Modesty, Privacy, and Resistance*, ch. 8, "How the Veil Becomes a Movement."

[14] A chadar is a sheet. In the case of Gandhi's attire, he wraps it around his shoulders. Note the similarity of this term and its function to the observant (Iranian) Muslim woman's chador, which is covering for women from head to toe.

[15] Or at least to have transformed what appears to have been an unusual interest in clothing into a deployment of sartorial weaponry in support of political causes. Cf. the following commentary on Gandhi's public appearance in England in 1890: "He was wearing a silk top hat, burnished and bright, a Gladstonian collar, stiff and starched, a rather flashy tie displaying almost all the colours of the rainbow, under which there was a fine, striped silk shirt. He wore as his outer clothes a morning coat, a double-breasted vest, and dark striped trousers to match and not only patent leather boots but spats over them. He carried leather gloves, and a silver mounted stick, but wore no spectacles. He was, to use the contemporary slang, a nut, a masher, a blood—a student more interested in fashion and frivolities than in his studies." Cited in B.R. Nanda, *Mahatma Gandhi: A Biography* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 28.

[16] Bernard S. Cohn, "Cloth, Clothes, and Colonialism," in *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 139. See Varma's painting of Santhanu and Matsyasugandhi for an approximation of this garment (n. 22).

[17] But under the British, Indian men included shoes as part of their attire, as eventually Indian women did.

[18] Emma Tarlo, *Clothing Matters: Dress and Identity in India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 46.

[19] www.aponline.gov.in/Quick%20links/HIST-CULT/arts_sarees.html.

[20] For images of Cherie Blair, Elizabeth Hurley, and other non-Indian (as well as famous Indian) celebrities wearing saris, see stores.shop.ebay.in/Sabria-in/Celebs-in-sari-How-to-wear-a-sari.html.

[21] This painting shows these musicians wearing saris, each in the style of a distinct region in India
www.kamat.com/kalranga/art/raviverma/2566.htm.

[22] An image of the painting can be seen in the following link (translated spelling is slightly different):
www.kamat.com/kalranga/art/raviverma/11084.htm.

[23] Known alternatively as *Lady with a Child and a Dog*:
www.kamat.com/database/content/paintings/11039.htm.

[24] For example, anecdotal evidence suggests that working or lower middle-class students are more likely to dress “up” to attend college, eschewing jeans and t-shirts in favor of skirts or pants, than are upper-class students at the same college.

[25] The “loincloth” that was worn frequently by men in various regions of India.

[26] See Cohn, *op. cit.*, p. 114. In this case, Cohn appears to suggest that the “substance” that can be transferred is a kind of authority.

[27] Tarlo, *Clothing Matters*, pp. 123, 322.

[28] As cited in J. Devika, “The Aesthetic Woman: Re-Forming Female Bodies and Minds in Early 20th Century Kerala,” *Modern Asian Studies* 39, no. 2 (2005), p. 475.

[29] Although the latter, which was initially done by Colonel John Munro, the British prime minister in Travancore (1813), required a modification in policy from a concealing scarf to a concealing jacket, in response to complaints that the scarf, which would elide the differences among castes and “everything would become polluted in the state.” See Cohn, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

[30] R.N. Yesudas, as cited in Cohn, *op. cit.*, p. 140, n. 73.

[31] Cohn, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

[32] *Ibid.*, p. 141.

[33] *Ibid.*, p. 141.

[34] As Charles Mills describes how people of color were understood under the system of white supremacy. See Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), ch. 2.

[35] See n. 20.

[36] See www.myriamabdelaziz.com. Click link to Portfolio to see Egyptian photographer Myriam Abdelaziz's photos of models representing glamorous Egyptian women in "The Veil in Fashion." Abdelaziz's short essay, which accompanies the online portfolio, describes the change in "the Egyptian social landscape" as the "re-emergence of the veil" for women from a range of social and economic strata.

[37] J. Devika, "The Aesthetic Woman," p. 479.

[38] This paper was originally presented at a panel discussion organized by Monique Roelofs entitled, "Aesthetic Imaginaries of Race: Cosmopolitanism, Beauty, and the Colonial Encounter," at the American Society of Aesthetics Annual Meetings, Los Angeles, CA (November 8, 2007). I would like to thank Monique Roelofs, Barbara Yngvesson, and Robert Prasch for their invaluable comments, feedback, and assistance during various stages of this paper. Thanks also to Shezrae Aziz for her timely and cheerful research assistance.