

HIJAB: FEMININE ALLURE AND CHARM TO MEN IN TUNIS



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This article examines a group of men in Tunis's old city, and the ways they watch and interact with women. It focuses on the complicated relationship between hijab and desire. Contrary to common assumptions, hijab does not necessarily reduce sexual desire in men, which takes many forms. Which women the men find attractive depends on context and the men's social identity. What appears as a common expression of desire, calling to women on the street, is oriented toward reinforcing homosocial bonds. While they may not call out to women in hijab, many young Tunisian men flirt with them because they interpret hijab as a sign the young women are interested in marriage. (Tunisia, hijab, gender, desire, sexuality)

Returning to Tunis in 2006, after doing doctoral field work there seven years earlier, the vast increase of women in *hijab*¹ in downtown Tunis was striking. They previously had been unusual, but now were common. This was sufficiently interesting that I asked friends and informants about the transformation. One young man who sold crafts to tourists explained, "It's quite simple, they are looking for husbands. They think that it will be easier to find a good husband if they demonstrate good character (*'aql*). The girls don't really care that much about religion." I asked if young men really wanted to marry women in hijab. "Oh, yes," he said, but added that he himself did not. When asked about a friend who had a serious girl friend who does not wear hijab, he responded with a smile. "We will marry bad girls." The term "bad girls" was an inside joke. A couple of days earlier he had seen a young European woman wearing a tight t-shirt that read "bad girl." He raised his eyebrow and asked me, "Is she really a bad girl?"

The category of "bad girl" does not simply connote sexual promiscuity. His imagined marriage contrasts with that of another young man, a silversmith who was part of a social group that met regularly in the evenings during Ramadan. One evening, when asked whether he would marry a woman in hijab, he quickly replied, "Oh yes, I want to marry a woman who wears hijab, prays, and reads the Qur'an." I protested that he did none of those things. "True," he said, but "I would like to in the future."

The danger of these examples is that they suggest a simple dichotomy between good and bad girls, good being associated with purity and bad with sexuality. However, the way the young men view women is more complex. Women marked as "bad" may not be the most sexually desirable, and hijab may

not mark a woman as particularly modest. The man who sold crafts boasted of seducing a woman in hijab, and some of the more actively religious young men I knew stated that they wanted a woman who behaved properly, and that hijab had little to do with this. While hijab is commonly seen as a marker of modesty, in practice it is read in different ways depending on the form of the hijab, the age and social identity of the wearer, her behavior, the context in which it is worn, and the social identity of the viewer. Hijab is a polysemous sign that is interpreted differently by different observers, and it is reasonable to suppose that those wearing hijab experience it in multiple ways.

As this article demonstrates, for the young men in Tunis, wearing hijab does not mark a woman as undesirable. Other factors besides the display of female flesh arouse male desire. The criteria for a desirable woman are not clearly defined, as the nature of desire depends on both the specific social aspirations of the individual young man and the broader social context in which desire might be elicited. A woman who might be desirable to a certain man in one context might be less desirable in another. When young men gather in groups to watch women, they focus on different kinds of women than when, as individuals, they flirt with women. Indeed, a group that catcalls at women, while seeming to display desire, must also be seen as building homosociality. While women in hijab may be ignored by such groups, they are not ignored by individual men, who view hijab as indicating a wish for marriage, rather than as a religious indicator. How men react to hijab depends on their thoughts about marriage and possible marriage partners.

The different contexts associated with desire demand different conceptions of, and theories about, desire. The men in groups watching women in the passing stream of pedestrians resemble a scopophilic audience, in which “pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure” (Mulvey 2000:39). In this context, the men focus on the display of the woman’s body. However, this audience is not an atomized collection of individuals, but a socially cohesive group, and their gazing at women is as much about establishing the group’s male identity as projecting a fantasy onto them. The active displays of male heterosexual desire often play a key role in homosocial bonding (Allison 1994, Grazian 2008). In contrast to this are the individual flirtations, in which group cohesion is lost as the woman becomes a comparatively more active subject. As Simmel (1984) suggested, in flirtation it is not the display of the body but its concealment that excites desire, which is fueled by interaction rather than passivity. If the homosocial gaze on the passing women is impersonal, the interactive glances in flirtation are experienced as powerfully personal.

While these different examples might each indicate “desire,” to lump such different practices under the same heading becomes problematic. The disparate behaviors described here are put into one category, because this reflects conversational practice among the young men I worked with. When talking about women they were attracted to, they did not distinguish between ogling from afar and engaged flirting. They generally use the same verb, *hubb* (love or like), when talking about an attractive woman (“I hubb her”) as they do to describe their relation to a serious girlfriend. The commonality between these different emotions is an attraction that has a sexual component, but the nature of the attraction varies widely. As this article will show, young men in the old city (the *medina*) in Tunis distinguish between different forms of attraction when describing women, referring to women who are regarded as displaying sexuality as *leqleq* (a local slang term) while referring to modest yet possibly flirtatious women as *hisham*.

To understand how young men in Tunis perceive young women, whether Tunisian or foreign, requires knowing the social significance of clothing options available to women and men. While much has been written about hijab, fashion, sexuality, marriage, and desire in the Arab Middle East, the overwhelming majority of it has been drawn from historical, literary, and theological sources (Bouhdiba 1985, El Guindi 1999, Mernissi 1991:44), or ethnographies that focus on women (Abu-Lughod 1986, Ghannam 2002, Macleod 1991, Mahmoud 2005, Ossman 2002). Much of this work has examined and analyzed the complex experiences and social systems of gender, but there has been comparatively little ethnographic work on how men in the Middle East think about women. This article helps to fill that gap, if only for a very specific population. It may not necessarily be generalizable to the broader Islamic Arab world, but it does suggest some useful avenues of inquiry for understanding the complex ways in which men make sense of hijab.

Hijab in Tunisia is less common than in much of the Muslim Arab world, and it has been a complicated symbol in Tunisian history. During the 1930s, nationalist leader Habib Bourguiba defended the right of women to wear hijab as a mark of their national identity and culture (Hopwood 1992). However, as president he championed legislation in 1981 that banned hijab in public buildings, arguing that the practice retarded development and limited the freedom of women. He linked his position on hijab to changes in the personal status code that outlawed polygyny and guaranteed equal rights for women, setting hijab in opposition to modernity. Because of the clothing’s officially proscribed status, it is difficult to make accurate estimates of how many women wore or now wear hijab. Yet, over the past decade there has been a noticeable “return of the veil” (Chouikha 2007).

In the 1990s it was unusual to see women wearing forms of hijab in Tunis. While it may not now be the dominant mode of dress for women, it has become common. Still, women may be barred from schools, universities, or government employment for wearing hijab. Periodically, the government cracks down on wearing hijab in official institutions, but at other times will be lax. It is not always clear what form of hijab is proscribed. A young lycee student who wanted to wear hijab told of conflicting advice that she received. One person told her that any kind of head scarf would be banned, while another said that a scarf that covered the hair and ears would be permitted, but not something that encircled the face. Some women wear modest clothing that is not marked as hijab, so as not to cause trouble in an office. For example, a loose outfit with long pants, long sleeves, a turtleneck, and a turban might satisfy religious dictates for appropriately modest clothing, but would not indicate hijab to a casual observer.² When the Tunisian media show women in hijab, they are invariably elderly, and quite frequently rural, thus constructing hijab as a marker of tradition that may not fit in a modern world.

However, defining clothing as either modern or traditional lacks nuance. Sonbol (1994) suggests distinguishing between modern (i.e., Western) and traditional women's clothing in Islamic society, and certainly some forms of clothing in Tunis are marked as modern (e.g., jeans and t-shirts) while others are read as traditional (a long white cloth, *safsari*, wrapped around the head and body). But the categories quickly meld into each other with actual practice, as with a woman wearing a *safsari* over a t-shirt. The identities Tunisians construct through clothing are multivocal and ambiguous. It is not clear, for example, if hijab fashioned from clothing imported from Europe would be categorized as modern or traditional. Jeans, a long sleeved t-shirt, and a scarf around the head may be read as hijab. Similarly, a woman wearing a long skirt and a flowing long-sleeved shirt can be regarded as modest, even though the components of her clothing are "modern," as they derive from contemporary European fashion. It is impossible to use categories such as modern or traditional, or even hijab, for these garments without placing them in the fuller context of clothing options available to young urban Tunisian women (Mamoun 1998). Although there is debate over what constitutes proper hijab, there is general agreement with what constitutes an attempt at hijab. Hijab must cover the legs to the ankles, arms to the wrists, with a scarf or some other covering over the hair. In Tunisia, forms of hijab that cover the hands or parts of the face are fairly uncommon.

RESEARCH IN THE ORIENTALIST BAZAAR

Fieldwork was conducted in the plaza at Zeituna mosque in the medina during the summer of 2006 and the late summer and fall of 2007, which included the Ramadan of 2007. This location is the geographic center of the medina and the symbolic heart of the city. As such, it has a flow of foot traffic, tourists, worshippers, foreign and Tunisian shoppers, and people passing through. One side of the plaza is lined with shops that mostly cater to tourists. During the summer, a coffeehouse sets tables in the plaza in the afternoon, where people sit until evening or night. With colder weather, the tables are not put out, but reappear during Ramadan, when the plaza fills almost exclusively with men smoking *chicha* (tobacco infused with various flavors smoked in water pipes) and drinking coffee, tea, or sodas.

I spent my days with the workers in the stores and was a regular at the coffee house in the evenings. Eventually, I became a regular at a table which held an important role in the plaza social structure. The hierarchy that elevates the older men at this table plays an important part in the thinking and actions of some of the young men. My gender gave me access to the joking of the young men, while my identity as a married man gave me sufficient gravitas to sit with the more prominent men. Conversation was usually in Arabic, with some French and occasionally English thrown in.

Given the common popular Western stereotype of Arab men consumed by lust, any paper that examines how Arab men watch and discuss women must be treated with suspicion. Many of the assumptions about the relation of men and women in the Arab world turn on the stereotypical notion of an Arab man whose lust will be aroused at the sight of exposed female flesh. “The image of the insolent, penetrating glare attached to Arabs as a group; they were ‘obscene,’ that is excessively and unacceptably sexual” (Scott 2007:52). To discuss how some Tunisian men watch women runs the risk of reinforcing this stereotype. Yet sexuality should not be simply ignored. There has been insightful work examining the creation of racial minorities and colonial subjects as problematically sexualized beings in a complex power relationship with the West (Alloula 1986, Massad 2007, Stoler 1995). However, those texts tend to emphasize the discourses in the West, along with their reverberations in the post-colonial world, that construct the fantasies and paranoias regarding sexuality, rather than examining local discourses about desire. Having examined French colonial postcards from Algeria, Alloula (1986:14) discusses how “the photographer’s studio will become, then, a pacified microcosm where his desire, his scopie instinct, can find satisfaction.” Stoler (1995) demonstrates how sexual

ideologies analyzed by Foucault were formed by and dependent on colonial experiences.

As the Dutch colonial bureaucracy grew . . . civil servants . . . took over as the new scientific, administrative, and cultural arbitrators on hygiene, education, morality and sex. This transformation not only instilled a more explicitly bourgeois morality, it also made the formalization of racial categories contingent on the management of sex. (Stoler 1995:44)

Colonial judgments were taken up by Arab elites. “Arab intellectuals also internalized the epistemology by which Europeans came to judge civilizations and cultures along the vector of something called ‘sex’ as well as its later derivative, ‘sexuality’” (Massad 2007:6). The present article is not meant to critique those works, but there is a need to examine how desire plays out in the daily life of a group, such as the men working in the plaza. Gutmann (1996) notes that “facile expectations of Mexican male gender identities” were largely driven by observers “capriciously glossing over significant differences among men based on class, generation, region, and ethnicity, among other factors” (Gutmann 1996:3). Similarly, in Tunisia there are important differences driven by relations to social structures in the Tunisian men’s expressions of sexual desire. But as Gutmann also notes, individuals often display seemingly contradictory behavior patterns.

Much of the work on sexuality and desire in relation to the colonial or post-colonial Other turns on the assumption and construction of the racial Other. As quoted above, Stoler (1995) linked the creation of racial categories to the management of sex. As a revolutionary, Fanon (1968) described a Manichean world in which the native gazes at the settler’s realm with “a look of lust, a look of envy; it expresses his dreams of possession—all manner of possession: to sit at the settler’s table, to sleep in the settler’s bed, with his wife if possible” (Fanon 1968:39). In conversations with me, Tunisians saw the world in racial terms, but they did not see themselves as being the racial Other to Europe. Rather, there was a tendency to view Tunisia as ethnically and racially linked to the northern shores of the Mediterranean and distinct from a sub-Saharan Africa. While seeing themselves as different from black Africans, Tunisians posited a continuum of difference with Europe. Italians may be similar to the Tunisians, but the Germans are not, and the Spanish fit somewhere in between. The desire that a Tunisian man may feel for a European woman cannot, therefore, necessarily be seen as transgressing a boundary or a playing out of a Fanonian fantasy of revenge. Such categorizations are relevant on occasion, but not in all instances, as the levels of difference and relations of power are complex. Certainly the men in the plaza experience resentment, but it is as likely to be directed at elite

Tunisians as at foreign tourists. In the plaza, race and ethnicity are not highlighted as much as economic status.

LEQLEQ AND SKIN

Pay is low for work selling in the medina. The young men I knew lived at home, unable to afford moving out. The hours are long, and there are long stretches each day with no customers. Their chores include cleaning and rearranging the merchandise, sorting and unpacking deliveries, but most of the day remains unoccupied. Individual salesmen will run personal errands, window shop, go to the barber, and the like, but much of each day is spent sitting on or near the steps of the mosque and chatting with friends who stop by. Cigarettes are borrowed and lent, jokes are told, the passing throng is observed, and the young men³ particularly like to watch the women. This pastime invites a discussion of desire, for it is here that they display their own desires.

There is a strong current of thought that links desire to the exposure of flesh. Indeed, this is one of the justifications given by some Tunisians for hijab, that it reduces male desire. Whether or not this is the most important function of hijab is debatable, but what this debate fails to question is the extent to which desire and flesh are linked. The example of the men in the plaza suggests not so much that the linkage is incorrect as that it is inadequate. Yes, the display of flesh stimulates desire among the men, but not always, and covering flesh did not necessarily reduce desire. The case for desire and skin can be made quite easily. The men made no secret of how much they liked looking at scantily clad women, frequently calling out to such women and nudging others around them to take a look. The community developed its own term, *leqleq*, to describe particularly desirable women. *Leqleq* functions as both a noun and an adjective (roughly translatable as “sex” and “sexy” respectively), such that one could say one liked leqleq, but also describe a woman as leqleq. While there was much debate on the steps as to what constituted a leqleq woman, the common denominator was clothing that revealed the body and could be interpreted as conveying sexuality rather than simply trying to keep cool in hot weather. Exposed women’s skin and leqleq went together.

A slightly older and religiously observant man who worked in the mosque was explicit about the link between desire and skin. He was trying to think pure thoughts during Ramadan, but found it hard with all the women passing by in revealing clothing. He said that it prompts “excitation” and this is why hijab is so beneficial. Covering the body would prevent men’s passion from being inflamed. Yet, while the young men would whistle and call out to women in revealing clothing, these were not necessarily the women with whom they would

flirt or pursue. For all the sexuality that these bodies were assumed to display, there was little attempt made to engage that sexuality in any kind of reciprocal fashion.

One such encounter highlights how the sexuality was rendered passive. A tall blond Spanish woman wearing a tight t-shirt over her large breasts was waiting in a shop while her friend made a purchase. Dangling around her neck was an electronic device with earbuds. An unengaged salesman came up to her and asked (in English, even though he spoke reasonably good Spanish) "What is? Telephone?" "No," she replied, "music." "Music!" he said in apparent surprise, although he was familiar with such players, and then mimed wearing earbuds. She smiled and gave them to him, which placed his head next to her chest. He smiled appreciatively and gave her a thumbs up of approval about the music. He even began to dance a bit, thrusting his pelvis quite close to, but not touching, her leg. He looked up at me, watching him from a short distance, and gave a big wink. When her friend finished, the woman said she had to go, and the salesman politely returned the earbuds.

As soon as she was out of sight, he rushed to the shop next door to relate what had happened. The significance of this interaction is that it was not in the least flirtatious, as he did not try to encourage her interest in him. Rather, he tricked her, even if this meant making himself seem ignorant and slightly foolish in her eyes. His sexual behavior was tolerated rather than admired. He even downplayed his own language skills, a mark of status and pride among salesmen, in order to draw close to her. In the encounter, she is passive, apparently unaware of what is happening. While her body is constructed as a highly sexualized object, there is no hint of sexual assertiveness or desire on her part. Indeed, her perceived obliviousness was a crucial part of the encounter and a source of much of his pleasure. Although he came physically close to her, she remained socially distant. More socially intimate encounters, whether flirtatious or not, included some level of reciprocity, whether through shared laughter, exchanges of personal information, or other mutual experiences. There was no reciprocity in this exchange. As his wink to me and his rush to retell the incident to his friends suggest, the encounter may have more to do with homosociality than with satisfying desire as an end in itself.

A more active female sexuality that was threatening to the men contrasts with this example. Late one afternoon, an Italian woman in shorts and a short-sleeved shirt sat alone on the steps to the mosque. The fact that she sat there was not unusual. Many people, Tunisians and foreigners alike, use it as a convenient resting place. Nor was her choice of clothing remarkable. A Tunisian woman would not wear shorts in the medina, but the Italian's clothing was not as revealing as what some tourists wear. What made her stand out was that she was

alone and unmoving. She leaned back on the marble stairs and did nothing—as though she were sunbathing, but the steps were in shade. Most tourists sit for a while before moving on, or take an active interest in the people in the plaza, but not this woman. While it was impossible to know her intentions (without asking), the men in the plaza were sure that she was there for sex. However, none approached her. I asked various young men why no one was talking to her, but only received evasive answers—perhaps so-and-so would talk to her a bit, but no one did. While the men discussed her body as they might a woman passing through, their comments were rather desultory and without enthusiasm. Indeed, when asked about her, the men seemed uncomfortable with the topic. Masculine homosociality demands that a woman who displays her sexuality be the object of attention, but this norm is predicated on the woman quickly moving through the space and leaving. That she might stay and openly accept the group's gaze was destabilizing. What is more, by taking her place on the steps, the men's favored position for watching women, it was as if she had occupied their auditorium. The "illicit voyeurism" (Mulvey 2000:45) of the young men was overturned. Like the women they had gazed at, they could not return her gaze but could only examine her from marginal positions, the metaphoric wings to the stage of the pedestrian street. While the sexuality of the body was coded as desirable, the presumed assertiveness of the woman was not. Control over sexuality was very important in male desire.

Being in control appears in examples of contrasting encounters with potential customers. In one, Abdsalem was trying to sell a small chicha pipe to a blond woman in short shorts and a tank top. With negotiations deadlocked, she left. Another salesman watching her go told Abdsalem that he should have accepted her offer if she would have kissed him. This was meant as a joke and a comment on her attractiveness, but this proposal would require him to take the initiative. In another case, two British women, also in skimpy clothing, walked by carrying a birdcage they had bought. Abdsalem asked what price they had paid, a standard way of starting a conversation and also keeping track of what prices other stores were getting. When he heard the price he said it was a "gift price," meaning that the price was so low the object was almost a gift. This was not true, but it is a common ploy to compliment customers on their haggling powers. The woman in question smiled and pointed at her cleavage, saying "I think it's because of that." The British tourists asked the price of things in the store and complained in simpering voices that the prices were too high. Saying that the goods should sell for less is usually treated by salesmen as an invitation to justify the prices or discuss possible reductions, but Abdsalem did not reply. Nor did he flirt with them, which was an anomaly for him. Instead he paid them little attention, and they left. In this case, Abdsalem began the interaction by asking about the

birdcage, but when the women used their sexuality as a means of bargaining, he appeared to lose interest. At issue is not so much whether sexual banter might be used in lowering a price, but who controls the sexuality.

HISHAM AND MODESTY

These examples illustrate a wish for control in sexually charged situations, but this does not mean that the men want passive women who accept their control. While assertive female sexuality is threatening and a passive body can be admired, the most desirable woman for the young Tunisian men is one who balances the two, who is not assertive but participates, and is modest but not to the point of reticence. For all their ogling of scantily clad tourists, the young men expressed greater desire for different kinds of women. To illustrate, a pair of European college girls studying Arabic, Olga and Amelie, were frequent visitors to one of the shops. Both wore long skirts with loose t-shirts in an effort to be respectful of local norms. Olga came for help with her homework, and her earnest demeanor made most of the young men bored with her. Amelie was less concerned with academics, but because she spoke little Arabic, conversation was difficult and she did not join in the group discussions. Some salesmen would talk with her in halting conversations. She frequently blushed and looked away with a half-smile. This behavior captivated a couple of salesmen, who remarked on her beautiful smile. They approvingly described her as *hisham*, which in this usage means shy or bashful.

“Hisham” has shifting meanings. Abu-Lughod (1986) describes it as reflecting modesty among the Bedouin of Egypt. In Tunis, its usage is different and describes a reticence that can be overcome—a modest rejection but not an outright refusal. The eyes avert, but the mouth smiles. The desire invoked by the *hisham* woman is hardly that of the sexualized body (although they are not necessarily exclusive), as the allure of the *hisham* woman is predicated on interaction. Her desirable qualities are manifest during her engagement with another figure. Her charm is in her actions but she remains passive, as her charm can only be expressed in response to the actions of another.

The differences between the two forms of desire described here are similar to the distinction between pornography and the desire between individuals having a mutual attraction. Both include erotic desire, but while the latter is intimate and personal, pornography is addressed to no specific person but to the anonymous public (Cameron and Kulick 2003:116–17). This distinction appears between the men’s flirtation with *hisham* women, which is specific and individual, and their reaction to the display of women’s flesh, which is assumed to be displayed for the public. The Italian tourist on the steps of the mosque, therefore, becomes

quasi-pornographic. It is fine to view this eroticism from afar, but to flirt with its representation is not the point. To win the favor of such a figure is devalued, as she is perceived as offering herself to all, as opposed to the hisham woman whose charms are directed to an individual. Erotic imaginings are involved in both cases, but are of different kinds.

Hisham goes beyond interactions with potential sexual/romantic partners. An 11-year-old girl who regularly visited the mosque on her way to and from school was also described as hisham, and her example extends its meaning. Her family had just moved to Tunis from the South and on the first days of school, being unfamiliar with the rhythms and mores of the big city, she went into the mosque as a refuge. A bit short and slender for her age, she seemed physically fragile, a trait emphasized by her hesitant demeanor. She sometimes wore a headscarf, although the school discouraged even this form of hijab. She spoke little and then usually with her eyes on the ground. She quickly made friends with the female guides at the mosque and with one of the male caretakers, and as she got to know them better, her personality blossomed. She smiled frequently and listened with enthusiasm to everything that was said, often asking questions or making little jokes. Still, she kept a sense of reserve, often averting her eyes, particularly when talking with men. She asked questions about me to the caretaker, who would gently chide her, saying that she could ask me herself. Despite his urging, she rarely spoke to me. The caretaker, however, was taken with her behavior, describing her approvingly as hisham. He often gave her small presents of money, which she would, appropriately, try to refuse.

While there was no hint of sexual impropriety in their interactions, the nature of their relationship does help illustrate some forms of male desire. The caretaker's affection for the girl was two-fold. She won the affection of all who met her. Beyond that, there was a moral component to his attraction for her. The caretaker regarded the women who walked by in scanty clothing with disapproval, while the girl was a model of decorum and virtue. Yet, while this relationship was innocent, it does suggest some facets about the desirability of hisham that are potentially not innocent. The attributes that made the young girl attractive have the same function for women.

As suggested above, hisham is multi-faceted. While it addresses the girl's formal reserve, it also allows for her gregariousness. Although shy and often diffident, she made several adult friends. Although serious and subdued, when the mosque employees helped her with her homework, she would soon be laughing with them. A country mouse in the big city, she showed courage and independence in navigating her way and charmed the workers in the mosque. While Amelie and the little girl appear dependent, in many ways they controlled social interactions. Both needed help, one not knowing the area and the other not

knowing the language, but they had control in the relationships, coming and going as they felt to be appropriate. They demonstrated both dependence and independence. It is this ambivalence and shifting between “having and not having,” “assent and dissent,” “accommodation and denial,” that Simmel (1984:134) describes as distinctive of flirtation. The men felt in control of these instances, but it was never complete.

But what of Abdsalem, who wanted a “bad girl?” Hisham embraces many ambiguities, but excludes a “bad girl.” In fact, Abdsalem was not attracted to hisham women. He had little interest in Amelie, preferring the studious Olga and women he had met during his time in college, who sometimes stopped by to talk. Unlike the hisham women, they tended to make eye contact and did not completely relinquish control of the conversation to him. Unlike the hisham women, there was no sense of their dependence on Abdsalem.

Abdsalem told me of his seduction of a religious young woman in hijab. She was his neighbor and the daughter of a very conservative family. The men all had beards and her mother wore hijab that covered her face. The daughter’s hijab hid her body, but her face was beautiful and Abdsalem suspected that the hidden body was as well. Two of Abdsalem’s female friends were also friends of hers, so he asked them to give her his phone number. She called and he asked her out for coffee. She said that such a thing was forbidden by her family. He persisted and invited her to visit his house, as he was a neighbor. This was permissible, and she came. He described her as totally sheltered by her family, watching only the news and the religion channels—no movies, no television series, no DVDs. But she knew about such things from her friends, and wanted to experience them. She fell in love with him, but he had to break it off, as he feared that if her family found out, the men would come for him with knives.

The desirability of hisham women includes their modesty. Abdsalem described the modesty of the girl he seduced as forced upon her by her family, and therefore a sign not of being raised well but of being repressed. Rather than protecting her innocence, he found pleasure in seeking to introduce her to the modern world. Having done so, he then abandoned her. There is no way of telling whether his story is true, but its veracity is not as important as the way in which it illustrates his desires and imaginings.

Abdsalem represents not only a different expression of desire, but a different vision of the future. While many of the salesmen felt frustration with the lack of opportunities available to them, they did not seek to leave the structured order in which they lived and worked. Abdsalem, however, having more cosmopolitan interests, searched for ways not just to get out of the plaza or the medina, but out of the country. As will be shown below, the various futures that the salesmen

imagined for themselves played an important role in the symbolic value they placed on the kinds of wives they imagined.

HIJAB AND MARRIAGE

While there is a common argument from both the West and from Arab Muslims that hijab marks a woman's purity and dampens desire in the men who interact with her, the evidence suggests that hijab should not necessarily be seen as a barrier to desire. Certainly the gaze on women in hijab is not the same as the gaze on women in revealing clothing, but both can elicit desire, albeit in different forms. In short, different groups react to hijab in different ways. When professionals who were married or divorced were asked about the surge in hijab over the past years, their answers included the increase in satellite dishes that brought proper Islamic education, changing fashion trends, political statements, improved religious education in state schools, and a weak central government. The young men in the plaza, however, all gave a different answer: young women wear hijab because they want to get married.

To the young men in the plaza, hijab on a young woman is not a sign of moral or religious purity. On one occasion, when I expressed surprise that they had been flirting with some women in hijab, the men said, "that wasn't real hijab." It is not the physical form of the hijab but the behavior of the wearer that makes the hijab "not real," and makes the behavior of most young women suspect. The young men consider any young woman in hijab to be in search of a husband. And if hijab is worn to get a husband, then it is a display of modesty for public consumption. This implies a contradiction. Men want to marry a woman in hijab because it is a sign of her good character ('aql). However, if hijab on a young woman is suspect, then it is not clear whether it represents "real" 'aql or something else. Given this, why do young men want women who wear hijab?

The case of the silversmith described in the beginning of this article suggests an explanation. He and his friends worked near the plaza, dividing their time between working behind a counter and smithing. This was more steady, reputable work than that of a salesman. It was harder, more skilled, and left little time during the day for leisure activities. I knew these men from evenings in the coffee house. The coffee house, with a large regular clientele that sat at particular tables, had its own routines and organization. The silversmiths' position in this milieu illustrates their position in the larger social structure. Of particular importance in the coffee house was the anchoring group composed of leaders in the small community, such as the owner of the coffee house and several other stores, an official in the mosque, the most dedicated and recognizable coffee-house regulars, and prestigious visitors such as a judo champion of Africa, a wealthy

Tunisian businessman visiting from France, and secret-police officers. This group sat in the most desirable location, at the intersection of two walkways, allowing the members to see and greet everyone who passed. Not all the members of this group were religiously observant, but all could exhibit gravitas towards religious issues, while at other times they would tease and joke.

The two silversmiths were on the periphery of this group. They were known, liked, and welcomed, but would sit by themselves or with other young men. When they sometimes joined the group, they would fully participate in the teasing and joking. If one of the visitors needed a favor, a senior member of the group would call on one of the young men to oblige. The young men happily did so and there was no hint of a quid pro quo. The young men were establishing themselves as decent, helpful, respectful members of the community. They were on the periphery of the group, but their trajectory would probably bring them more fully into the center, and it is in this context that one can understand their marriage goals. One evening in conversation with them, the silversmiths revealed that they wanted to marry women in hijab. More specifically, they said they wanted wives who wore hijab, prayed, and read the Qur'an. This was surprising, given that neither of them do any of that, even during Ramadan. "Ah," one of them said, "I do not do so now, but I would like to in the future. That is a good path."

On the one hand, one can view this path in religious terms, but one should also see its social component in the symbolic meaning of their planned trajectory. Marrying a devout wife will be evidence of their settling down, shifting from young men on the periphery to fully incorporated members of the group, and hence to mature adulthood. They are halfway there already, as they have real jobs and established joking relationships with the regulars in the group. By contrast, none of the salesmen are in such a position. Some of them, notably Abdsalem, reject this path altogether, but for others the destination is so distant that it is not yet imaginable. Nadir provides an example.

In the summer of 2006, Nadir was a helper in a shop and was paid only a daily rate. Later, he was elevated to salesman and his pay shifted to a commission on sales. However, he was raw and not very good. By the summer of 2007 he had improved, but was still the weakest member of the shop and had the lowest social standing. But unlike Abdsalem, he was a participant in the plaza evening culture, and unlike the silversmiths who sat at a peripheral table or sometimes at the central table, Nadir was more likely to perch on a ledge with a cigarette and a coffee. At busy times he would help the coffee house staff, and members of the central table might summon him for a quick task, such as getting more coals for the water pipes, but little more. Nadir was unable to speculate on what kind of wife he would like. The prospect of having enough money and social standing to marry was so remote and unthinkable, that to raise the question was absurd.

However, given his commitment to the social order of the plaza and his possession of a little social capital, it is possible that in a few years his status will have changed, and the question of marriage could be entertained. This would require his becoming a store manager, which in turn would require either superb skills or real capital, both of which he lacked.

Given Abdsalem's claim of seeking a "bad girl" to wed, it is no surprise that he did not participate in the plaza's evening community. His goal was not integration but emigration, and his aspirations reflect this. While his expressed desire to marry a "bad girl" was a joke, it did reflect his rejection of the local community and his preference for a wife who would also reject it. It is not coincidental that the woman who prompted the allusion to "bad girls" was European. It was not his aim to marry a European woman (although he would not object to it), but to wed a woman who was oriented toward the world outside of Tunis. So the "bad" part of the "bad girl" is not strictly sexual, but is more a rejection of the local culture. He spoke approvingly, for example, of the fact that his friend was dating a woman who taught English, thereby indicating that she was oriented toward the world beyond Tunis. Rather than marry as a means to enhance his local status, he would marry as a means for leaving the country or as a step along that path.

HIJAB, FLIRTING, AND HOMOSOCIALITY

The relationship of desire to hijab is complicated, and the literature examining the relationship is contentious. The chief area of dispute is whether hijab subjugates women. Underlying most such analyses is the idea that hijab dominates, confines, and degrades females. By so doing, hijab can be interpreted as a symbol revealing a collective fantasy of the Muslim community—to make women disappear, to eliminate them from communal life, to relegate them to an easily controllable terrain, the home, to prevent them from moving about, and to highlight their illegal position on male territory (Mernissi 1982:189).

This repression is explicitly linked to sexual morality. "Every man continues to insult his mother, daughter, wife, and sister, suspiciously accusing them of bad morals and keeping them confined to a cage (Zain al-Din 2004:275)." A response to such claims argues that, far from degrading women, practices such as veiling honor them. "Privacy is sacred and carefully guarded. For women it is both a right and an exclusive privilege, and is reflected in dress, space, architecture, and proxemic behavior" (El-Guindi 1999:82). Between these extreme positions are analyses that examine how women may use hijab to resist other pressures and gain control of their lives (Macleod 1991), or complicate the notion of repression and liberty, arguing that the conviction to follow a restricted course of religious

behavior must be taken seriously (Mahmoud 2005). However, there is a broader pattern of focusing on hijab disproportionately and ignoring larger social issues (Abu-Lughod 2002). The forms of clothing worn by Muslim women do not mark the presence or absence of male domination, nor is one form necessarily more sexually alluring to male viewers than another (Sonbol 1994). As this article shows, young men in Tunis could look on women in hijab as objects of desire.

Veiled women as erotic objects is hardly new and, as noted above, much of the discussion of the erotics of veiled women focuses on images of women in hijab (c.f. Alloula 1986) rather than interactions with real Muslim women in modest dress. This presents a two-dimensional vision of desire (focusing on form rather than behavior) while emphasizing hijab by itself, rather than examining hijab in its multiple forms in a wider range of clothing options (Abu-Lughod 2002). The accounts of women in Tunisia (Charrad 1998) and Turkey (Secor 2002) being more harassed when they wear Western clothing than when in hijab may suggest that hijab dampens male desire.⁴ But harassment is not the same as desire.

As indicated above, the plaza hassling is associated with homosocial behavior. The practice of harassment can vary from location to location, and both Tunisian and European women have told me that the hassling they experience outside of the medina is worse. Still, to assume that such hassling is simply a result of men's desire is questionable. Clothing that exposes the body is associated with upper-middle class women, so hassling them may be linked to social-class cleavage and power struggles. However, to say that hassling is about power rather than sex also is misleading. The two are intertwined.

The intent here is not to portray male desire as a universal and biologically determined, but it is instructive to examine discussions of male desire away from the Orientalized realm of hijab. For example, in strip clubs, in which the women talk with the men after they dance, the conversations are between clothed men and naked women. However, a fair number of men request that the women wear clothing for these interactions. Frank (2002:182) suggests that the men want to be seen as "not like other guys," that when the woman is clothed, the emphasis shifts from her body *per se* to the interaction itself. And as Simmel (1984) notes, the interaction itself fuels the desire.

In a different vein, Simmel (1984:136) asserts that clothes awaken desire, by "exercising sexual attraction by means of concealment." His description of flirting could also well be used in discussing hisham, the charm of modesty and decorum. He argues that the power of flirtation is in the conflict between possessing and not possessing, and that once love is fully declared, the passionate power of the flirtation is lost. Although flirtation is discussed in terms of pursuing a goal, in practice the flirtation becomes an end in itself.

Young men trying to pick up women in Philadelphia night clubs are almost always unsuccessful, but while they hope for sexual conquest, pleasure comes from the pursuit itself—the “girl hunt,” as they call it (Grazian 2008). Grazian attributes this in part to the homosociality of the group, but Simmel’s point further suggests erotic pleasure in the pursuit itself. The interaction between potential future sexual partners can be as powerful in creating desire as the display of flesh.

With hostess bars in Tokyo, the chief pleasure for men comes in the interactions with the women and not through displays of flesh or physical sexual interactions, which are hinted at but never realized. The pleasure is not exclusive, as men may move from such clubs to ones where they may watch (but not touch) exposed female flesh, or eventually to places where they may pay for sex (Allison 1994). While in all these examples desire is sexually charged, it is not simply about sex, insofar as sex is not the normal outcome, however much the men may talk about it among themselves. The interaction among the men is equally important in giving meaning to the heterosexual flirtations, for the homosociality of the social environments in which flirting occurs is crucial to the experience.

In the disparate examples of Philadelphia nightclubs and Tokyo hostess bars, groups of men perform their masculinity through standardized interactions that ostensibly focus on male-female sexual interactions. While the stated emphasis of the activities may be the pursuit of sexual pleasure, the actual focus of the activities is not male-female, but male-male. Groups of men cement their bonds with each other through the course of their activities pursuing women. Homosociality and desire are also important in the Tunis plaza. When young men call out to passing women, this is almost always a group activity. A man may well try to flirt with a woman on his own, but he will rarely call out to one on his own. When calling occurs, it is usually in the context of the men talking together about the women, comparing their relative merits, and drawing each other’s attention to particularly striking women. In these instances the men focus on the displays of female flesh, rather than on interactions with women. The men call, and the women do not respond. There is no attempt to actually engage the women, but rather to examine them from a distance. There is also a strong sense of power and domination involved. While flirting involves drawing the woman out, the calling silences her, forcing her to lower her head, quicken her steps, and hurry by.

There are, however, boundaries that must not be crossed. On occasion a young man may be too loud or obnoxious and is reprimanded by others in the group. This may be largely pragmatic. If too many people feel too uncomfortable, valuable customers may be discouraged from coming to the space. If there is a sense that Tunisians are hassling tourists, the police will intervene and clear the steps. Beyond these practical concerns is a sense of masculine identity. The

young men who violate the standards tend to be younger and less experienced, and are seen by their slightly older peers as unsophisticated. These older peers define masculinity through their performance and through their censure of those who are unable to show proper control. Flirting with a woman is more individual and can on occasion threaten the tenets of homosociality. For example, a man who leaves the group to pursue a woman may be reprimanded by his peers.

CONCLUSION

The stereotype of the Arab man gazing with lust at scantily clad women has long been held in Western culture. While the excesses of the racist stereotype may easily be repudiated, the core construct that his passion is easily excited by the sight of sexual objects remains strong (Massad 2007). This belief makes it easy to construct an argument in which hijab is held to be an Oriental practice developed to protect men from being overcome with desire and unable to function effectively in daily life. One implication of this argument is that modest dress is not necessary in the West, where women can more freely express their sexuality because men can control their passions. The idea that hijab covers the body to repress the desires of men whose obsession with sex is pathological fits well with Foucault's (1990) analysis of bourgeois discourse in which sexuality is seen as a biological phenomenon that must be managed for proper health. This undercurrent of biological determinism runs throughout the idea that the display of female flesh automatically activates male desire and that therefore hijab restricts desire. Further, it replicates the common pattern in which male desire is discussed and made visible, while women are given the task of controlling male desire, effectively silencing the expression of any form of female desire (Tolman 1994).⁵

To argue that the young men in the plaza can desire women in hijab is not to suggest that these men do not look lustfully at other women. They note with relish those women who expose more of their bodies to the public's gaze. But these practices constitute only one form of desire, and are often about homosociality as much as anything else. Their desires in all their multiplicity focus on different attributes, are enacted in different forms, have different socially constructed meanings, and have different goals. While important work has focused on the social construction of beauty and how the category varies from culture to culture (Constable 2003, Popenoe 2004), the model of the causal relationship between beauty and desire can limit understandings of desire. Someone who is not beautiful by the standards of a society might still be found desirable. The French phrase "*une belle laide*" (a beautiful ugly woman) conveys the idea of a

desirable woman who is not conventionally beautiful. The meaning of “desirable” is itself multifaceted and culturally, as well as historically, contingent.

A young Tunisian man in the plaza may desire one of the scantily clad tourists passing through, while also desiring a flirtatious hisham woman in hijab, but even this distinction can shift depending on context. While the dominant model discussed here is the desire for women in hijab arising through interaction, hijab can also be part of a voyeuristic spectacle, calling attention to that which it (purportedly) hides (Krips 2008). What an individual considers desirable, along with the steps taken to pursue that desire, helps construct that person within a meaningful social context. So, for example, Abdsalem was entranced by a woman in hijab because he wanted to see her body. By contrast, the silversmiths find women in hijab desirable as potential marriage partners.

In Tunisia, the social meaning of hijab is related to assumptions about male desire. But as this article has shown, male desire takes many forms and is context specific. Similarly the symbolic meanings of hijab can never be taken simply from the articles of clothing, but depend on the context, including the social identities of wearer and observer. To suggest that hijab reduces male desire reduces the complexity of both and ignores the extent to which their meaning is contextually determined. Tunisian men may watch women passing in front of them, but what they see depends on what they are looking for.

NOTES

1. “Veil,” the closest English equivalent to hijab, is potentially misleading.
2. There are parallels to the position of hijab in Turkey; but while Turkey’s constitution established a secular state, the Tunisian constitution asserts an Islamic identity.
3. All of the workers on the plaza are men. While women do work in a range of stores in the medina, only rarely do they work outside a shop calling out to tourists. The shops on the plaza are small and all employees must actively solicit clients, making the space overwhelmingly male.
4. This may reflect assumptions rather than experience. Research in Cairo shows that while many subjects believed that women in hijab were not harassed, they were harassed almost as frequently as women in other forms of clothing (Shoukry and Hassan 2008).
5. Rather than passive agents caught between the pressures of boyfriends to have sex and the social and familial pressures to remain a virgin until marriage, young Tunisian women are actively concerned about the restrictions on sexuality and seek ways, without much guidance, to satisfy their own desires (Foster 2002).

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