

SUBJECTIVITY UNVEILED

Reviewed by Emily Schmall

*Nine Parts of Desire:
The Hidden World of Islamic Women*
by Geraldine Brooks

Anchor Books/1995/\$14

272 pp.

In 1923, the dusty Cairo streets were filled with the air of change. From the ledge of a railway station after returning from a summit in Rome, pioneering suffragists Huda Shawari and Saiza Nabarawi threw their veils to the wind. So it confused Geraldine Brooks when, in the mid-1990s, she saw her colleague Sahar put hers back on. “It just seemed to me that I was dressing that way because it was Western. Why imitate everything Western? Why not try something of our own?” the young Egyptian woman explained to the Australian journalist. While rebelling against a modern form of repression, the imposition of Western dress, Muslim women have reclaimed what is for the Western world the pejorative symbol of Islam, and in so doing have redefined its meaning. “She wore it like a flag,” Brooks says of another Egyptian woman, her veiled Iranian interpreter. The streak of nationalism that has colored modern feminist theory in many Arab countries disconcerted the *Wall Street Journal* correspondent stationed in Cairo. With the question of the veil as premise of a new novel, Brooks began a six-year Joycian odyssey in a state of abhorrence and disbelief.

“The Islamic dress—*hijab*—that Sahar had opted to wear in Egypt’s tormenting heat signified her acceptance of a legal code that valued her testimony at half the worth of a man’s, an inheritance system that allotted her half the legacy of her brother, a future domestic life in which her husband could beat her if she disobeyed him, make her share his attentions with three more wives, divorce her at whim and get absolute custody of her children,” she writes. Ultimately, Brooks succeeds at disentwining religious fundamentalism from cultural practice. She responds to Raba Kabbani, a progressive writer from Damascus, who complains in *A Letter to Christendom*: “I am always pained by Western misconceptions about the lives of Muslim women. Western ignorance is not

inseparable from a patronizing view that insists on seeing us as helpless victims, while hardly distinguishing between the very different cultures we come from.”

Attempting to unveil a new perspective on Arab Muslim women, Brooks flirts with the identity she has avowedly set to discredit. Slipping into a chador, she becomes like any other Muslim woman and inadvertently discovers the liberating power of a veil in the Middle East. Through it, she humbles herself to cultural tradition, and is able to converse with women whose interpretations of Islam are varied and valuable to her narrative: royalty, cadets in the United Arab Emirates military academy, the widow of Ayatollah Khomeini, and peasants living in camps in the Gaza Strip.

Her first book is an organic evolution from the story that most interested her as a news reporter: the complexities of living as a modern woman in a somewhat archaic society tinged with the historical stains of repressive and violent anti-femininity. *Nine Parts of Desire* is a condensed version of a six-year intellectual venture; over the course of the pages, the author both becomes and departs from the identity of which she writes.

The coupling of fundamentalism and feminism is nothing novel. In seventeenth century Spain, the poet Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz and the mystic and writer Santa Teresa de Ávila both found intellectual freedom clothed in habits. Brooks speaks to academics and scholars at Iranian universities, who express gratitude that they may be judged for their minds instead of merely their bodies. Brooks is critical. A perhaps disenchanted feminist, she expresses disappointment at hearing what seems to her an appropriation of old, unworkable ideologies that are further bludgeoned by the heavy hand of religion. “There are no opinions in Islam,” says Majida Anan, a University of Gaza administrator. Expecting lively debate to indicate a newfound equality at Middle East institutions experimenting with secularism, Brooks dismisses university discourse as “a kind of queer echoing of the Western feminist thought.” The movement, she concludes, has run out of steam.

Admittedly, the success of Arab feminism has been slight. Instead of fighting for integration into the politics and culture of their countries, women have sequestered themselves in segregated universities and taken respite under the protective layers of a veil. Consequently the amount of liberation these women have achieved is questionable.

Even women in protest are obedient to their paradoxical position protecting a premodern sense of feminine virtue as a radical political act.

Nine Parts of Desire invokes words spoken by the creator of the Sunni faith, Ali ibn Abu Taleb, husband of the Prophet’s well beloved daughter Fatima. The Koran says that women bear nine of the ten parts of sexual desire, which makes their seduction irresistible. The pronouncement of veiling was to protect the chastity of Muslim men. Although this use of *hijab*, the Arabic word for veil, is clearly spurious and antiquated, by providing accounts of the continued practices of mutilation, abuse, and inequality, Brooks provides compelling reasons why Muslim women might put a barrier between themselves and their male counterparts.

Honor killings, *falaq*, the archaic divorce by a husband pronouncing “I divorce you” three times, and female circumcision are all representative of the repression women continue to experience, and the obligation of women to account for society’s (and par-

ticularly men's) moral weakness. "To lessen or destroy sexual pleasure is to lessen temptation; a fallback in case the religious injunctions on veiling and seclusion somehow fail to do the job," Brooks writes plainly.

It has been said that journalists make lousy poets. In her first book, Geraldine Brooks is neither a journalist nor a poet. She becomes entranced with a culture that inspires her to write, abandoning dispassionate objectivity for the sake of saying something new. She gracefully illustrates the ambiguity that characterizes Islam, and her own ambivalence about a religion that extols art and beauty while systematically denying its cultural wealth to one half of its population.

Her ability to draw fiction from history carries well into her delineation of the origins of Islam. She paints gilded portraits of the Prophet and the many women in his life: "Muhammed tried to keep to the Koran's instruction that a man must treat all his wives equally. His practice was to see each of them, every afternoon, in a brief private meeting, but to have his dinner and spend the night with one at a time, in strict rotation."

This literary approach has instigated some chastisement from Islamic scholars, who find the brevity of it ingratiating and the amateur analysis inept. However, Brooks admits to the novel's shortcomings, to its sporadic nature, to its sense of inconclusiveness, and in that candid admission is the honesty and the intimacy that separate it from the shelves of recent similarly-themed successors.

Brooks' impartiality is questionable. She openly questions Arab forms of feminism and subsequently rejects them with the same enthusiasm as Arab feminists discard Western cultural imperialism. "In some ways I think impartiality is a bit overrated," she admits in a recent interview. Compared to a host of Western writers that have attempted to analyze the intricate patterns of Islam, the author is humble, starting from the presumptions of most of her readers and reaching a realistically amateur state of understanding. Unlike competitive synopses, permission should be granted to Brooks for some of her omissions. The journalist courageously embodied a view opposite from her own, effectively unveiling not simply another side of Islamic women, but, more importantly, the deficiencies of the Western perspective.

Emily Schmall is a student at Bard College and an editor of Bard Politik. She has produced stories for National Public Radio and written for the Financial Times, where she interned during the BGIA program.