



Beneath the Veil

*By: Nicole Sadighi

<https://trcs.wikispaces.com>

“One contemplates if Islam would consider that instead of draping women in veils, men’s eyes should be covered, but of course that would never happen since Islamic lawmakers are all men.”

“We have to free half of the human race, the women, so that they can help free the other half. Trust in God – She will provide”. Emily Pankhurst; 1858 – 1928

What springs to mind when we refer to women’s rights? How much of the Women’s Rights Movement is taught in schools? Why are little girls not familiar with Emily Pankhurst, Susan Brownell Anthony, Florence Nightingale, Joan

of Ark, Queen Elizabeth I or even Margaret Thatcher? Few people realize what was involved in the grass roots of the Women’s Rights Movement. They do not know of the agony the suffragettes underwent to obtain the women’s right to vote and the sufferings they endured on the frontlines of this great revolution. Emmeline (Emily) Pankhurst (British, 1858-1928) led the Woman’s Suffrage Movement in the late 19th century. One of the most militant of suffragettes, Emily was instrumental in leading women to the right to vote.

Pankhurst’s tactics for drawing attention to the movement lead to her being imprisoned sev-

eral times and her approach to the campaign did not endear her to everyone, nonetheless her following of suffragettes grew and they were a dedicated legion of women who fought tooth and nail and sacrificed, perhaps at times died for, the cause of freeing enslaved women. These women marched, lobbied, paraded, lectured, wrote, they went door to door in towns to speak about the issues or to collect signatures for endless petitions, which were ridiculed out of the legislative assemblies. Back then the modest funds that kept the women’s suffrage movement going were not from wealthy male donors, but were the pennies of housewives and matrons, and it was due to this toil and labor that soon more and more women became aware of their own state of slavery. Sexual discrimination still exists but its occurrence has been drastically reduced. Or has it?

In the western world subtle discrimination is still quite prevalent. Paid salary is one aspect of this discrimination, as a vast majority of women employed in the work force today receive less of a pay check for the same amount of hours for the same jobs as men. And unfortunately on the other side of the world, namely in the Islamic states, women are still confined to 16th century regimes where millions of Muslim females, are restricted under rigid and inexorable Islamic laws and have been deprived of their fundamental rights.

The play “Beneath the Veil” written by Mary Apick and Ginger Perkins is a provocative and spine chilling portrayal of the true lives of women in the 21st century who have been forced to cover their faces in public along with those who freely choose to wear the veil. It begins with the story of Melody,

a young schoolgirl in Iran, who is continuously chastised by her father for showing her friends a picture of Michael Jackson. He fiercely reminds her that such pictures are against the teachings of Islam and soon the poor girl, depressed by her shackled life tragically commits suicide. Then there is the story of the Afghani woman who is a trained gynecologist. She and her husband talk of the suffering in Afghanistan, in particular of the women. She despondently explains that women in Afghanistan are forbidden to be doctors and because of this she can no longer work as a physician although she does practice in secret. She continues to explain that women in Afghanistan are not allowed to be examined by male doctors unless they are a relative and she goes on to harrowingly recall an incident when two young girls had knocked on her door begging her to help them. The two girls had been raped and mutilated by the rapists and had no one to turn to.

There is also the story of a prostitute and her baby in Iran. Under Islamic law, men are allowed to “marry” a woman for one hour. The young prostitute tells of her heartbreaking life of not having any means to support her baby, except through prostitution. In the scenario she has to tend to her crying baby, but she is hassled by another customer who refuses to wait and threatens her with taking her baby to an orphanage, so painfully and under duress she agrees to his demands. One contemplates if Islam would consider that instead of draping women in veils, men’s eyes should be covered, but of course that would never happen since Is-

lamic lawmakers are all men.

A third character is the “Dior” lady who is the wife of a rich sultan. She tells of her rich and gilded life where she spends all her time shopping. She talks of the veil she has to wear in public so as not to tempt other men with her “curves” but depicts it as something quite inviting to the curious male mind and boasts of the fun and frolics she experiences regardless. Such as the escapades she has “beneath the veil” with her driver, or the time when staying at a hotel in Las Vegas, out of boredom she decided to go out with nothing on beneath the veil, only to walk down the hotel corridor and flash the passing bell



boy and defiantly run back to her room. So much for the veil blinding men from temptation!

Then there were two stories of American women who had chosen to embrace Islam and the wearing of the veil. One of them explains that although she respects those who do not, it is her fundamental right to choose to wear a headscarf or whatever else she pleases. The second is the farcical portrayal of the lady who needs to have a photograph taken at the DMV in order to issue her a driver’s license. She is kindly asked to lift her veil for the picture whereby she abruptly responds by explaining that it is against her religion to do so and rationalizes that if she were to be stopped by the police she would not be able to lift her veil for identification anyway...therefore could the picture not be taken with the veil?

However, the story that struck a note with the audience was that of the famous and heartbreaking case of the gutless and unlawful killing of Zahra Kazemi, the Canadian photojournalist who made an ultimate sacrifice in the pursuit of her work, that has touched the hearts of the international community. The play graphically depicts her last days in Evin Prison in Iran and the agony and affliction she excessively underwent that lead to her ultimate death. It was a weighty and sobering moment in the theatre. The play is powerful and one should praise the cast and in particular Apick and legendary thespian Dariush Iran-Nejad. The message of the play in its entirety is about “choice and freedom”; which is the birthright of every human being and how half the world is still struggling for those rights.

The play depicts the paradoxes that exist in the world today; of persons who are made to suffer in silence as a result of complex and idiosyncratic decrees and those others who live in a boundless land where they are free to articulate and express their desire to embrace those very same idiosyncrasies. It is painfully apparent that women’s campaign for the struggle for freedom is still glaringly real in much of the world; however campaigning for freedom is worthless without the preliminary raising of consciousness necessary to utilize these freedoms fully. So what will we be telling our little girls from now on and curiously what would 19th century suffragettes make of 21st century women beneath the veil?

*Nicole Sadighi is a researcher for the Center for the Promotion of Democracy and Human Rights.