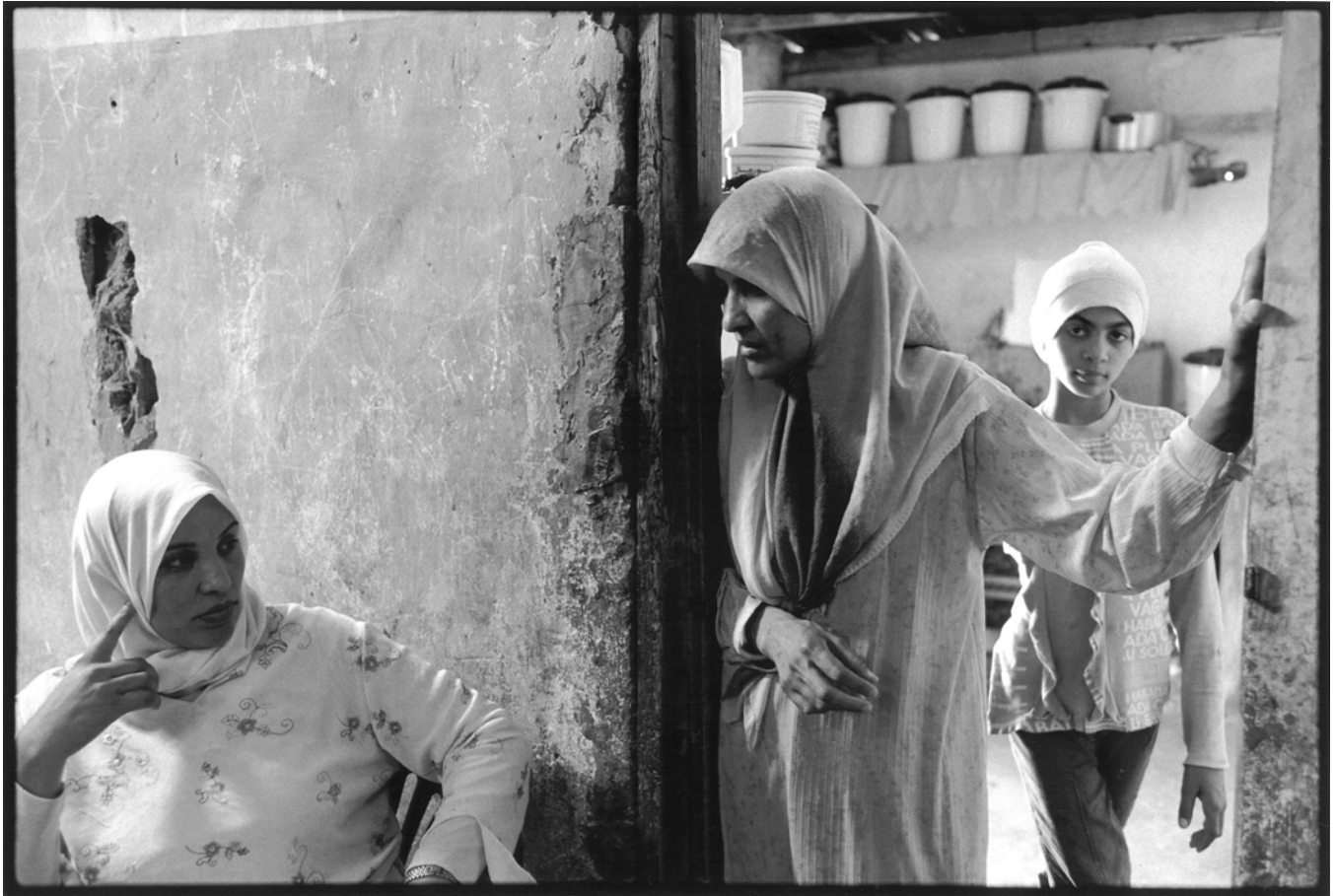




(top) *Reading the Koran, Beirut 2005*, (bottom) *A Passage from the Koran, Beirut 2005*, (opposite) *Three Generations, Tyre, Beirut 2005*

Rania Matar

The Veil: Modesty, Fashion, Religious Devotion or Political Statement?



THE VEIL HAS MANY MEANINGS AND SYMBOLS IN THE Middle East. While often perceived in the West as a symbol of female oppression and submission to male authority, it takes on a very different meaning in the Arab world. In this photo essay, I will be focusing on the spread of the veil amongst women in Lebanon and the different interpretations the veil takes on.

Lebanon is a small Middle Eastern country wedged between the West and the Moslem world, where Christians and Moslems have lived together for centuries, and where one would witness blends of the West and the Arab world, of Christianity and Islam, and ostentatious displays of wealth and extreme poverty. After 15 years of brutal civil war that ended with no clear winner and no real solution, life in Lebanon goes on in a surreal way with a mosaic of co-existing religions.

The Moslem population is growing larger due to a higher birth rate. It is highly politicized and seething with anger at the news coming from Iraq and Israel/Palestine. In addition, it feels threatened in a world looking at any Islamic piety with suspicion, with a resulting retreat into more religious consciousness. While many Moslems, especially the upper class, look westward in their dress and lifestyle, and are not antagonistic to the Christian presence, many feel the need of belonging to the larger Moslem community. The female veil which was almost non-existent in Lebanon a decade ago is making a comeback, even among the younger generation. There is now an increased social pressure among Moslem women of all ages to wear a veil.

While wearing the veil among Moslem women is becoming more common in Lebanon, the different ways of wearing it are

often misunderstood by the West. Women who are wearing the veil are mostly doing it by choice, even though their motives and the extent to which they are covered vary. Older, traditional Moslem women wear the headscarf because of religious devotion and modesty. They only take it off inside the home and only in the presence of other women or close male relatives. Upper class Moslem women, who often dress in a Western style, now wear the headscarf as an instrument of fashion and an added accessory: the scarf has to match the clothes, the sunglasses and the handbag. Some women wear it as a political statement of resistance to the West and a symbol of solidarity with Moslem countries at odds with the West. Pubescent girls who are now succumbing to social expectations are wearing the veil *by choice* as a symbol of growing up. Some spend hours fixing their headscarf in front of the mirror. They wear it layered, braided, or plain, but always color-coordinated with their clothes.

What makes this project interesting to me is that it provides a microcosm of what is going on in the world today, in terms of the growing differences, but also the existing inter-dependencies, between the West and the Arab world, and Christianity and Islam. Lebanon is a Westernized country, home to a growing Moslem society, but also to a very Western Christian population. The veil, as a result, takes on different meanings and interpretations: it can be seen worn as a chador or a fashionable headscarf. It is not uncommon in Beirut to see veiled women walking next to women in mini skirts or tank tops, or under posters of beautiful supermodels, or eating at McDonalds or having coffee at Starbucks.