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Undoing the Claim of Objectivity: Contradictions at the Heart of Bergtji van der Haak, Saudi Solutions (2005)

Anisa Saeed Mohammed Nasser
Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdellah University, nakhlani.anisa@gmail.com

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Abstract
This paper is a study of Bergtji van der Haak, Saudi Solutions (2005). It attempts to question Bergtji van der Haak’s claim of “objective” depiction of Saudi women’s “reality,” as well as the claim of portraying Saudi women through their perspectives as stated in the opening scene. The premise is that the editing strives to undercut the very views of the women that the film is claiming to present, and in the process it duplicates some of the very mechanisms of oppression that the film is denouncing. The documentary’s attempt at ‘subalternizing’ and diminishing Saudi women discloses the subjectivity of the documentarist and shows how she contradicts her claims. The essay has two parts: the first addresses the undermining of Saudi women’s perspectives through artistic organizing and sequencing of auditory and visual elements, so as to impose the documentarist’s different perspective. The second addresses a situation in which the documentarist cannot undermine appearances despite her refusal to portray them as they are meant to be viewed by Saudi women. This leads to the conclusion that in the end none of documentarist’s critique is useful; they just undo her claimed aims.

Keywords
Documentary film, objectivity, reality, film language, Muslim women, Islam, veil

Author Notes
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Introduction

Documentary film is often viewed to be grounded on and containing “facts.” What makes documentary seem to be distinguished from fiction is the impression of authenticity which results, notes Bill Nichols, in its kinship with “the discourses of sobriety” such as science, economics, politics, foreign policy and education.\(^1\) Hence, like scientific discourses, documentary claims direct and firsthand connection to “reality” and gains its influential power in society. However, as Bill Nichols stresses, documentary is “but another part of cinema,” which “presents us with images of things which are mimetic distractions and counterfeiting; they cannot engage our reason nor nourish our hunger for truth.”\(^2\) Nichols further argues that in documentary “reference to the real no longer has the ring of sobriety that separates it from fiction. Such reference now is a fiction.”\(^3\)

Furthermore, film theorists and critics aptly argue that documentary film is a construction, a representation of certain selected aspects of reality that are mediated by film language.\(^4\) Film language, as defined by Constantine Santas, is “a combination of visual imagery, written or oral discourse, and natural or artificial sound.”\(^5\) Jill Nelmes develops this point when explaining that a documentarist selects certain aspects of reality that appeal to his/her interests or purposes, then s/he through editing mediates reality rather than simply reveals it. Nelmes stresses that reality is a means, or as she puts it “a material,” used to
construct the documentary film, but it is not necessarily recorded in it. In other words, reality is a means but not the end in documentary. It is useful to quote Nelmes as she writes,

It is often the case that documentary is believed to be to the recording of ‘actuality’ - raw footage of real events as they happen, real people as they speak, real life as it occurs, spontaneous and unmediated. While this is often the case in producing the material for a documentary, it rarely constitutes a documentary in itself, because such material has to be ordered, reshaped and placed in sequential form. Even in the shooting of the material, choices have to be made in regard to shot selection, point of view, lighting etc., which anticipate a certain presentation of the material in the final film.6

This leads to the point that in documentary subjectivity is unavoidable even if the filmmaker claims to be objective seeking balanced or neutral representation. Some documentarists claim to be objective, meaning that their films are based on facts and reality. However, as Renov stresses, “Reality can never be reproduced objectively in documentary;” but it is “filtered through the flux of subjectivity.” 7 Indeed, documentary can never be neutral. Rather, according to Nichols, by dint of organizing sound and shots, documentary provides ‘metaphorical’ representations of social practices. By means of these ‘metaphors,’ documentary gives meanings to social practices and values deploying different rhetorical strategies that are “deliberative, judicial, and panegyric.” 8 In this way, documentary rhetorically solidifies and enhances its perspective and argument. Stressing this, Nichols contends that facts, objects and situations that documentary deploys as evidence exist “within a discursive or
interpretive frame.”

Hence, Nichols emphasizes that “rhetoric remains at work, even in the domain of the most intensely scientific discourse. Propaganda is not as far away as one might think; ideology is always in the air.”

Indeed, the deployment of evidence and the language of persuasion in documentary show that ideology is always in the air and subjectivity is the filter through which documentary becomes a discursive text. This makes objectivity in documentary an unattainable ideal, or rather a myth.

Before moving to examine the VPRO documentary film *Saudi Solutions*, I deem it important to note that the film’s form and content are considered. This twofold way of analyzing this filmic text helps in understanding its meaning and implications. As Andre Bazin suggests “as good a way as any towards understanding what a film is trying to say to us is to know how it is saying it.”

Further, following this method helps in considering the different elements of the filmic text which enables bringing to view its instability. As Sara Mills argues, while some elements may be dominant, there are sections of the texts which temper a straightforward position being offered.

**General Overview of Saudi Solutions**

*Saudi Solutions* is a 77-minute documentary directed by Bergtji van der Haak, a political scientist, journalist and documentary filmmaker and produced by VPRO, a Dutch public broadcasting organization, in 2005. *Saudi Solutions* cannot be
dissociated from the anti-Muslim tendencies in Holland. Like Theo van Gogh’s controversial 10-minutes film *Submission* which was broadcast for the first time on VPRO in 2004, *Saudi Solutions* constructs the message that Muslim women are oppressed by Islam. In its construction of Islam as a “misogynist” religion, *Saudi Solutions* (mis)represents Muslim women as inherently caught between passivity and violence. However, unlike *Submission*, this film disguises its message with the mask of documentary reality, focusing on the status of working women in Saudi Arabia. *Saudi Solutions* is a representative of the type of documentary film that implicitly embeds an anti-Islamic discourse through employing film language.

Despite the fact that the film is nearly 10 years old, it has not yet been explored by film critics. Furthermore, the film is very popular; it was released in a number of documentary film festivals, among them: the BANFF World Television Festival (where it was a world Television award nominee), 2006 Rotterdam International Film Festival, 2006 Independent Film Festival in Paris and 2006 Pärnu International Film Festival.

What is important to note in this documentary is its explicit claim of “objectivity”. The journalist Suzan Zawawi, who is featured as a main subject in the film, writes in *The Saudi Gazette* that the documentary’s crew is “on a mission to shed light on the truth of Saudi working women and the reality of their lives.”

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The director, Bergtji van der Haak, announces that *Saudi Solutions* is truthful and factual; she said to *The Saudi Gazette* that the documentary’s goal is to “present the real image of Saudi working women;” therefore it will “break the stereotypical image of Saudi women and show the progressive change of Arab women’s positions as workers.”  

Hence, as Zawawi writes, the Saudi government welcomed the documentary’s goal and the Ministry of Information offered to pay the film’s expenses. Yet, stressing the film’s claim of objectivity the documentarist “declined gratefully” such offer, saying: “we are independent; we pay our own costs, because we want to present an objective journalist program.”

However, this paper will attempt to show how Bergtji van der Haak’s *Saudi Solutions* does not present viewers with an objective “reality.” Rather, it strives to insidiously enhance the director’s stereotypical Orientalist perceptions of Islam and Muslim women under the mask of objectivity and documentary “discourse of sobriety.” In doing so, the film’s claimed truth and objectivity are destroyed. This will be demonstrated by exposing the different layers of contradictions that seep deeply to the heart of the film.

**Contradictions at the Heart of Saudi Solutions**

By ‘contradictions,’ I do not simply mean the contradicting beliefs and images that the film provides, nor only the contradictions that emerge between the viewpoints of the film’s director and her subjects, but, most importantly, the
contradictions that occur within the director’s own narrative. Instead of adhering to her claim of being objective in presenting the changing position of Saudi working women according to these women’s perspectives, the filmmaker—as it will be shown below—strives to present the status of these women according to her own perspective. Based on the filmmaker’s perspective, another contradiction emerges i.e. the contradiction between these women’s self-perception and the “reality” of their situation. However, it could be argued that, this contradiction exists in the film due to the documentarist’s subjective way of seeing these women’s reality through her Eurocentric eye which is impotent to see these women’s “difference,” or what Homi Bhabha calls the “cultural difference.” That is to say, she sees these women’s reality through her Western norms, or to use Stuart Hall’s words “cultural maps of meaning;” and thereby she does not understand and agree to the Saudi women’s self-perceptions as not oppressed. In other words, she purports to show these women’s self-perceptions to be just self-perceptions, which are very different from their lived “reality,” as the filmmaker understands it. Thus, this is not a lived contradiction on the part of these women as the filmmaker tries to show, but the documentarist’s imposed contradiction.

In the film’s opening scene, the documentarist states that Saudi women’s lives are changing and her aim is “to explore the change from the perspective of
Saudi working women.” I will disclose the extent to which the film attempts to show the changing status of Saudi working women according to their viewpoints.

Right from its very beginning, the film drops obvious hints that Saudi women face discrimination and suffer from the oppression of an imposed veil. The introductory night scene opens by the sound effect of a natural dark environment (indicated by the annoying sound of hooting owls) mixed with contrasting sounds of the urban environment (suggested by the street soundscape created by the sound of cars). These conflicting auditory codes are superimposed on a dark screen creating a sense of tension and mystery and they continue to accompany the first shot that shows an image of a veiled woman. In this dimly-lit medium shot the woman is displayed in a car. The camera, then, cuts to a shot of a street with colorful night lights and a crowd of cars. As the woman explains to a male driver her aimed destination, the camera alternates her image in the back seat of the car with the image of the car’s male driver. Sequencing shots in this way suggests that although the Saudi kingdom is modernizing, women in Saudi society can never be completely modernized due to the incorrigibility of the Islamic culture that is described in the opening scene as “fundamentalist.” In this way, sound effects are produced to convey the binary of “the traditional versus the modern” and the sequenced shots do not only continue to emphasize this meaning, but further stress that it is the Saudi women, not men, who are forced to live a traditional way of life out of the process of modernity.
Figure 1: Sequenced shots in the introductory scene establish the message that although the Saudi kingdom is modernizing, Saudi women are not.

A similar contrast is accentuated in the film’s opening scene; in this scene, sequenced shots of images of the modern city and completely veiled woman operate in the following way: an initial establishing shot of the modern city of Riyadh is displayed; this is succeeded by a long shot of a veiled woman with her back turned to the camera. The woman looks at the modern scene from a distance which indicates that she seems outside of the process of modernity. It is also important to note that the English music imposed on the shot that displays the image of the veiled woman is as significant as visual editing in highlighting the modernity/tradition conflict.
In the same scene, the camera displays the veiled woman in a long take shot, zooming in on her back in a medium shot, before zooming in more closely to show a medium close-up of her covered hand. This focus of the camera heightens the exoticism and invisibility created by this woman’s dress code. Employing such film language, the film says to the viewer, look how this woman is oppressed by her veil which makes her an invisible and shapeless figure. Furthermore, the tight frame of the image in the third shot, that shows this silent anonymous woman holding a bar and looking at the outside space, creates a sense of confinement; it produces the meaning that she is forced to stay in a closed space, a prison, and cannot get through the open modern space she looks at.
Figure 3: The camera movement invites the spectator to gaze at a woman’s veil which is constructed to epitomize the oppression of Saudi women.

This imaging also establishes dominant and subordinate relations of looking. Showing this anonymous woman fixed in her place from behind testifies to a tenuous, non-reciprocal link between the observer (the documentarist) and the observed (the veiled woman). In addition, this shot of the anonymous woman suggests that the presented situation reflects the everyday lives of Saudi women; this anonymous woman appears standing aloof from the modern scene of the city of Riyadh which suggests that Saudi women are imprisoned by the veil which hinders them from entering into the modern scene and forming a part of it. The woman is presented thus as typical of the universal “oppressed Saudi woman.” Through this power of surveillance, the documentarist constructs her subject who is unaware of the camera’s gaze, its panopticon, in negative term; she appears immobile, not modern, invisible and hence oppressed. Such power of surveillance—such power of judgment—privileges the documentarist’s
perception and reminds us of Michel Foucault’s theorization of the “panopticon” which he describes as “a technology of power” designed for the purpose of surveillance. \(^{17}\) The observed, Foucault suggests, is always “the object of information, never a subject in communication.”\(^{18}\) Foucault notes also that the panopticon does not necessarily mean that subjects are to be seen without their recognition of the panoptic vision. Another important quality of the panoptic vision, Foucault notes, is the process of constructing its subjects in negative terms.\(^{19}\)

In the light of these points, it could be argued that such a vision is apparent in many scenes in the film. As it will be demonstrated, on the surface, Saudi working women appear as speaking subjects; but in fact their voices are muted by the film language. Therefore, they are presented as objects of information and not subjects in communication. They are pictured in negative terms: those poor who are oppressed, docile, and unable to bring any change in society to advance their position. They are even presented as mentally aberrant for their ignorance of their subjugation.

In the following scene, the film tries to configure the veil as a sign of what the documentarist calls “a fundamentalist Islam.” The documentarist’s voice-over, which is juxtaposed on her image as she wears headscarf, states: “I have come to the most closed and conservative country in the Middle East. Here,
fundamentalist Islam has more influence on society than anywhere else in the Arab world.” Later, the surveillance camera presents different shots of veiled women unaware of the panoptic vision in different public spaces while the documentarist explains how they are oppressed by an imposed veil: she comments that the women must wear the *abaya* according to a dress code which she observes as “enforced by the religious police.” What is important to note here is that the film does not show Saudi working women’s opinion about their practice of veiling, but only the documentarist’s. In other words, the film begins by presenting these women’s practice of veiling according to the documentarist’s perspective and not the Saudi working women’s.

In another scene, the film pictures a news broadcaster, Salma, in her house. Expressing her self-perception, Salma says that “the women in our society are not marginalized anymore.” “Being a Muslim woman, means being modern,” Salma continues. She stresses that Islam does not oppress women or relegate them to backwardness; but rather, that Islam is the first religion that accords women their rights. She states that “Islam came first as far as women’s rights are concerned.” However, this statement is superimposed, in English subtitles, on her image as she wears her *abaya* before leaving the house. Then, the camera cuts to show in long take shot many cars with only male drivers. The director’s voice-over is superimposed on this shot, stating: “looking at all men driving their cars, I find it hard to understand how Salma can see Islam as friendly to women.”
statement connects the ban on women driving and Islam without giving any explanation about what driving has to do with Islam. Most importantly, in this scene, the way sounds and visuals are orchestrated implicitly say that Islam is a misogynist religion; Salma’s speech and the documentarist’s voice-over narration are superimposed on the images of men driving cars and Salma wearing her veil. She selects such images to be presented as raw material and mediates them by her statement that connects the practice of veiling and the ban on women driving with Islam’s relation to women as not friendly. She does not give Salma’s opinions about her practice of veiling and the ban on women driving and whether Saudi laws perfectly reflect her understanding of Islam; in this sense, she only tries to oppose Salma’s belief that Islam liberates women.

The documentarist’s voice-over commentary, which reflects her biased opinion against Islam and Muslim women, is made to be more effective and powerful than Salma’s remarks, since it is supported by images that are presented to undermine Salma’s viewpoints. Salma is silenced by a filmic language that arranges visual and audio elements to support the documentarist’s view. Most importantly, such a depiction may lead the viewer to believe that Salma supports the ban on women driving as intrinsic to Islam. Consequently, Salma’s perception of her own reality is falsified and it is the documentarist (not Salma) who is presented as the one who understands and represents Salma’s reality.
A similar example is conspicuous in a scene set in a hospital where a female Saudi physician, named Zaynab, works. In this scene, before presenting Zaynab as she says “in a hospital such as this there is no segregation,” the film shows in a close-up a panel that states “male waiting area” and cuts to display a close-up of another panel stating “women waiting area.” Then, in a high angle shot the camera shows Zaynab’s image from behind walking in a hospital’s passageway before cutting to show another close-up of a panel. This panel says “males are not allowed to enter without permission.” Here, it is clear how the director’s Eurocentric eye (camera) attempts to decode Saudi women’s situation. The director employs the voice of the image to contradict and undermine Zaynab’s speech. It is important to see, then, how it is the documentarist’s perspective that is meant to be given an authority—contradicting, therefore, the “objective” purpose of the documentary claimed in its opening scene. The documentarist does not give Zaynab an opportunity to explain, or show how such segregation is broken down in the hospital where she works. She does not provide the viewer with important background information that contextualizes Zaynab’s statement, but she provides images that disprove Zaynab’s statement. In doing so, the documentarist invokes the Orientalist image of Muslim women as oppressed and unprogressive which reflects her perspective and undercuts Zaynab’s perspective that there is a progressive change in her society. The documentarist’s
and Zaynab’s perspectives do not coalesce into some synthetic voice; rather, the film imposes the documentarist’s voice.

Figure 4: The camera focuses on the panels that show how the hospital where Zaynab works is gendered, undercutting Zaynab’s words.

In the above discussed scenes, it is very obvious that the selected images do not faithfully capture “reality” and that editing manipulates the meaning of the presented “reality”—the ordering of shots and cutting is meant by the documentarist to undercut the very views of the working women that the film is claiming to present. For instance, the images of panels are arranged in a way that serves the documentarist’s intention to create the effect of blatant denial of these women’s self-portrayals. Through the sequencing of shots, the documentarist attempts to impose her viewpoint that these women are suffering from different forms of oppression. It seems useful here to invoke Andre Bazin...
when he writes about some documentarists’ use of montage: “undoubtedly they derived at least the greater part of the constituent elements from reality they were describing but the final significance of the film was found to reside in the ordering of these elements much more than in their objective content.” Bazin emphasizes that “through the contents of the image and the resources of montage, the cinema has at its disposal a whole arsenal of means whereby to impose its interpretation of an event on the spectator.” At this point, it becomes clear how through such a process of montage the documentarist constructs the impression that these women’s self-perceptions do not correspond to their social reality and how in constructing this impression, the documentarist implicitly conveys her reflection of her interviewees as suffering mental subjugation. In other words, that they are so oppressed that they don’t even realize it. In this sense, the film seems to echo Karl Marx’s words, “they cannot represent themselves, they must be represented.”

The documentarist’s self-contradiction also appears in the sequences that portray the working women in the holding company and in the royal palace of Prince Al-Waleed Bin Talal. In the palace sequence, it is depicted in such a way as to resemble to some degree the old stereotypical royal harem; Van der Haak celebrates her success to enter the royal palace of Prince Al-Waleed to which access is very controlled. Entering such restricted space, she expresses her excitement to see “modern Muslims” working in the palace and points out that
these working women are the subject of many rumors. The sense of suspense is heightened by the dimly lit atmosphere and the slow movement of the camera filming the palace’s gate opening to let the car of the film’s crew enter the palace.

In the palace scene, the working women are not depicted as free agents, but instead as the harem servants who are hand-picked by the royal master for his service. Stressing this meaning, the film presents an interview with Prince Al-Waleed through which the viewer knows that the prince personally chooses his female employees and that one of the criteria used in selecting the female employee is that she should not be fat, or to put it in other words she must be ‘beautiful.’ Following this, the film presents a group of women who are filmed standing and walking next to each other in a line. These women do not introduce themselves; it is the general manager of the palace, Dina, who introduces them. In this scene, the documentarist asks Dina whether the prince selected these female employees personally and Dina affirms that they are selected by the prince personally. In this portrayal, the film rehearses the stereotype of the old royal harem where there was a large group of hand-picked beautiful women catering to the Sultan.
Furthermore, the documentarist expresses her feeling of “mystery” for seeing the rules of sex-segregation not applied to the working women. She further points out that she tries to discover from Dina the reason behind that, but as she comments, “Dina only smiles.” In this way, the viewer gets the meaning that the life in this royal palace resembles the life in the old royal harem where sexual servitude played an essential role and the rules of sex-segregation are not applied to such servants. In other words, the film tries to show that like the serving women in the old royal harem, these women appear as slaves, although in their case they choose to work in this royal palace.

Similarly, the documentary tries to show in the scenes of Al-Waleed’s holding company that the female employees are not empowered by the prince. They appear as a means used to make propaganda for Al-Waleed who, as the documentarist says, “presents himself as a bridge between East and West.” The
camera captures different shots of these employees, but they are always pictured in the foreground of the prince’s office when he talks about himself as a promoter of women’s rights. The documentarist portrays these women as merely a décor or models that are ‘used’ by the prince as propaganda. There is not a single shot that shows one of them working in her office. The camera displays them as objects manipulated by Al-Waleed, an exhibition in Al-Waleed’s company’s corridors, standing to be captured by the camera. By projecting them this way, the film tries implicitly to produce the message that these women are not empowered. Yet, in doing so, the film replicates the very strategy it strives to expose.

However, this way of portraying Saudi working women reflects the failure of the interpretation rather than of the articulation. In fact, these women ‘speak,’ but since their views do not conform to the Orientalist ideology of the documentary, they are not heard by the documentarist who, then, tries to undermine their speech with her perspective. In effect, these women are made to be “subaltern.” As Spivak argues in the case of female as subaltern,

It is not so much that subaltern women did not speak, but rather that others did not know how to listen, how to enter into a transaction between speaker and listener. The subaltern cannot speak because their words cannot be properly interpreted. Hence, the silence of the female as subaltern is the result of a failure of interpretation and not a failure of articulation.23

In the light of this view, we can say that the documentary shows the documentarist’s failure to interpret and understand these Muslim women. The
documentarist does not picture them objectively; her effort to “subalternize” them is noticeable. It is clearly seen how when they represent themselves, but the voice of the documentarist is superimposed to be ‘louder,’ or to put it otherwise, more influential, so as to supersede the Saudi women’s voices. However, the voices of these women can be retrieved and their agency relocated by a critical reading of the documentary that reveals the limits of the documentarist’s perspective, bringing forth another image of Saudi women— one that goes against the grain of the filmmaker’s intentions.

Resistance to the Panopticon

Although the film pictures Saudi women occupying jobs in public spaces, working as journalists, physicians, TV announcers, photographers, and pilots, the film (by imposing the documentarist’s perspective) tries to place them in a subservient position. Saudi working women seem to appear in a position that Foucault identifies as a “heterotopia of deviation”—a position in which individuals whose behavior appears deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed. Yet, heterotopia, Foucault stresses, is not a space of deviation that lacks any sign of power. It can be a space invested with the complexities of power and knowledge. Thus, heteretopia can be a space of resistance, a space that “exerts a sort of counteraction.” In the film, a clear case of this is seen in the portrayal of the veiled women; given the filmmaker’s Dutch culture where the
revealing or displaying of the female body is a norm, these women’s practice of veiling appears as a deviation. However, this is not to say that the women placed in this position are not able to counteract the filmmaker’s vision.

Despite the presence of the panoptic power, the possibility of tracing resistance to the panoptic power from within the space of “heterotopia” has not been overridden. In its attempts to show the inaccessibility of Saudi women, the film simultaneously shows that Saudi women’s resistance to the Western camera limits its power. The film’s director is frustrated very early when she starts filming. She indicates that she has failed to fix a single appointment for interviewing Saudi veiled women because “they” have refused to be filmed, suspecting the film’s intention, for they have had a lot of bad experiences with western media. This means that they intentionally aim at suppressing the Western gaze of the camera and preventing its panoptic vision. Through this voice-over narration, Saudi women are represented as controlling the situation, and, hence, some of the film’s visuals and narrative structure.

In another scene, the documentarist is permitted to enter a gathering of Saudi business women without the film’s male crew and cameras. However, she enters with her own camera. Yet, she is frustrated again because her camera is limited and hence turns out to be useless; it is the women’s refusal, and not some mechanical failure of the camera that prevents her from filming. That is to say,
these veiled women are the agents behind this failure. The documentarist’s failure of filming and hence controlling and exoticizing these women shows how these veiled Muslim women play a role in controlling the process of filming. “No single woman agrees to appear on film,” the documentarist says in a frustrated tone. By disallowing her to film them, Saudi women appear to have agency, denying her the power to capture them. Therefore, it could be said that, the documentarist is no longer the sovereign subject who has all the right and power to determine what is to be filmed or photographed and what is not.

In the process, another face of the veil can be detected undermining the documentarist’s view that Muslim women in this country are oppressed by an imposed veil. This can be exemplified by the scene that shows Zawawi at her home. Because she is on video, Zawawi deliberately covers herself at home. When the documentarist asks her why she is veiled though she is at home, Zawawi responds that “I am on video and do not want to be exposed to the world.” Clearly, then, Zawawi ‘chooses’ to wear the veil; she is no longer the oppressed victim whose veil is imposed on her; if the veil is imposed on her by the religious police, she will not keep wearing it as long as this force is absent. Rather, she willingly wears the veil to ‘protect’ herself from the Western gaze/camera. It is useful to evoke here Trinh Minh-ha’s thought-provoking words that “if the act of unveiling has a liberating potential, so does the act of veiling.”26
Indeed, in this scene Zawawi’s act of choosing to be veiled liberates her from the negative construction created in the film’s opening scene that shows her as subjugated by the practice of veiling. In other words, her act of veiling proves her resistance to the “epistemic violence” exerted by the film’s opening scene’s representation of her as oppressed, rather than her subjugation to the practice of veiling.

Further, seeing but not seen, Zawawi is suggestive of the impenetrability and forbiddance that frustrate the documentarist. Indeed, this Saudi veiled woman reminds us of the Algerian woman whose veil, as Malik Allula explains, indirectly conveys a “refusal” to the intruding gaze of the western eye/camera. Though Zawawi accepts to appear in the film at her home, she is still wearing the veil. Thus, turned back upon herself, upon her own impotence in the situation, the documentarist “undergoes an initial experience of disappointment and rejection,” to use Malik Allula’s words.

To demonstrate further, as the camera follows the Saudi physician Zaynab who walks in a hospital corridor, we see a woman deny the camera even a glimpse of her eyes. When she discovers the camera’s presence, she covers her face with a notebook. In this sense, Saudi women see the documentary’s camera as intrusive and therefore resist and deny it the ability to gaze at them.
Figure 6: A Saudi woman puts a notebook on her eyes, resisting the gaze of the Western camera.

Thus, whilst the women’s voices are silenced by the film language, their agency and resistance to the film’s Orientalist ideology cannot be canceled. The filmmaker and her crew are quite controlled by the veiled Saudi women. Their desires and demands are denied. Therefore, their role or freedom of representation is limited and bounded by the veiled Saudi women. In this situation, the documentarist’s position in representation is not all powerful. Rather, the veiled Saudi women here have agency and a power that enables them to exert some control over how they are represented. Indeed, this reflects the slippage of imperial authority and problematizes the strategy of representation. This also reflects the paradoxical nature of the documentary’s imperial discourse which
produces an ‘Other’ that fractures and dismantles its unity. Mary Louis Pratt points to this mode of representation when she writes, “while the imperial metropolis tends to understand itself as determining the periphery […] it habitually blinds itself to the ways in which the periphery determines the metropolis […]”  

**Conclusions**

Although veiled Muslim women are presented as occupying a subservient position in the film’s narrative space where their voices are muted by the filmmaker’s loud and strong voice, they can resist the film’s representation of them as oppressed by the imposed veil. As a result, they are able to achieve control over the film’s narrative structure and representation. Therefore, it is hard to simply argue that the imperialist discourse of this documentary is unified and coherent, but one can trace a counter discourse that emerges from within the dominant discourse that attempts to ‘Other’ and diminish these veiled women. Such inconsistencies help to disclose the documentary’s subjectivity. In addition, when considering the two positions of the filmmaker’s panoptic vision and the counteraction of the veiled women it is manifest that power relations are complex. It is clear how the filmmaker exerts her panoptic power on the veiled Saudi women, and how the latter affirm their own agency and resistance to that power.
Indeed, power does not flow only from the more to the less powerful, but also “comes from below.”

In short, the above demonstrated contradictions help in showing that the film, *Saudi Solutions*, does not fulfill its claims of objectively reflecting the “reality” of Saudi working women and of exploring their changing position on the basis of their perspectives. The film strives instead to impose the documentarist’s Orientalist imaging of the Saudi working women as the true “reality” of these women. Further, it falsifies these women’s perceptions of their own reality and shows them as ignorant of their reality. That is to say, the film does not reflect the different ways of seeing, but imposes the documentarist’s way of seeing as the reality of these women. However, contradictions and inconsistencies upset the serenity of the documentary’s Orientalist discourse and enable viewers to trace the track of subjectivity in the documentary. Certainly, the closer one looks at Orientalism in film the more likely one is to find contradictions as its basic characteristic; and thus “like all representational texts, Orientalist films sustain a measure of ideological contradiction and incoherence.”

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1 Bill Nichols uses the term “discourse of sobriety” when explaining that documentary film genre deploys seriousness in its production of information in a way similar to nonfictional systems such as science, economics, politics, and history discourses which show gravity and sober presentation of a particular subject, claiming to reveal truth, deal with facts and hence produce the “real.” In the light of this characteristic, documentary films are seen as socially engaged films that inform instead of sensationalize and exploit. Nichols, also, explains that the “[d]iscourses of sobriety are sobering because they regard their relation to the real as direct, immediate, [and] transparent.” Therefore, documentary works are seen to belong to the “discourses of sobriety.” See, Bill

2 Ibid.

3 Bill Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture* (United States: Library of Congress Cataloging, 1994), 54. Based on this view, Nichols makes the phrase, ‘Documentary: A Fiction (Un)Like Any Other’ as the title for a central section of his book *Representing Reality*. John Corner borrowed this title from Nichols entitled his article ‘“A Fiction (Un)Like Any Other’?” in which Corner objects to those who say that documentary is the film of “fact.”

4 Significantly, Stuart Hall defines “representation” as a process of producing meaning in relation to culture, arguing that culture consists of the “maps of meanings,” the framework of intelligibility and that meaning exists because of the “shared conceptual maps.” Hence, according to Hall, culture plays a central role in representation; things and events have no meaning in themselves but they are culturally constructed. This is why we do not make sense of things in the same way; each has a different conceptual world. See, Stuart Hall, “The Work of Representation,” in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: Sage Publication, 2003), 15, and “Representation and the Media,” a lecture shot at the Studios of the University of Westminster, accessed May 15, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aTzMsPqssOY.


6 Jill Nelmes, *An Introduction to Film Studies* (London: Routledge, 2003), 188.

7 Michael Renov, *The Subject of Documentary* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 70.


11 ‘Ideology’ is a theoretical term that comes from Marxism: “Marx and Engels first use it,” Kellner writes, “to attack ideas which legitimate ruling class hegemony and serve the interests of class domination.” Then the concept, Kellner notes, is made by cultural studies central to the study of culture and society. It is “extended to cover theories, ideas, texts, and representations that legitimate interests of ruling gender and race as well as class powers.” See, Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture: Cultural Studies between the Modern and the Postmodern* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 57-58. Ideology can be “broadly defined as the total system of beliefs, which selectively provides limited perceptions of reality.” see *Media Studies: Content, audiences, and production*, ed. Pieter Jacobus Fourie (Lansdowne: Juta, 2001), 225.


15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.


19 Ibid., 210.


21 Ibid.


25 Ibid., 4.


28 Ibid., 7. Emphasis is original.


Ibid.

References


