

Me in a Niqab

by Theodore Dalrymple



You would not normally expect pointed social commentary in cartoon form in the Bahraini English-language daily newspaper, but I was pleasantly surprised to find precisely such a cartoon when, on a recent visit to that small kingdom, I opened the newspaper (the *Gulf Daily News*).

A man at a funeral was taking a selfie with an idiotic smile on his face beside the corpse whose coffin was open, the rest of the mourners in the background.

These days, you see people taking pictures of themselves almost everywhere you go. Generally their expressions are those of deep self-satisfaction. Me and the Eiffel Tower, me and the Houses of Parliament, me and the Capitol, me and someone famous. The emphasis, of course, is on the *me* rather than the thing or person associated with me. Everything redounds to the selfie-taker's credit or glory.

But people take selfies even in the most banal of circumstances: me having breakfast, me in the grocery shop, me

walking down the street, etc. It is as if everything I do ought be recorded for posterity: for, as the great German historian, Leopold von Ranke, said, history should be written as that which actually happened. And is it not true that I had bread and hummus for breakfast, which is therefore part of what actually happened today and thus the proper concern of future historians?

On the other hand, the resort to selfies on every possible occasion might be interpreted as a mass outbreak of narcissism. The question is whether the narcissism was always there, waiting for its opportunity to be expressed, or whether the ease of taking selfies has itself stimulated the narcissism and called it into being (it was always possible to take self-portraits with cameras, indeed there was recently an exhibition in Paris of such portraits, but it was previously somewhat difficult to arrange them).

It was in a Lebanese restaurant in Bahrain that I saw an immense and hitherto unnoticed advantage of the niqab. Although most of the women the restaurant wore this garment, they all had smartphones with which they communicated, more or less continually, with absent friends. However, being in the niqab, they did not take selfies, for one photograph of a woman in a niqab looks rather like that of every other woman in a niqab. So the niqab suppresses the urge to take selfies, which is a very desirable end.

Of course, it also makes eating in public rather difficult and cumbersome, but there is no gain in this world without loss.

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